

HERE'S my STORY

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THE REBBE ASKED FOR A FAVOR

MRS. RHODA FRIEDLAND

I was born in Crown Heights and I grew up there. Even after I left my parents' home and got married, I lived for a time in Crown Heights. So, I have a good memory of what Crown Heights was like in the 1940s, and I do recall vividly how it changed when the Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch came there.

When I say "the Rebbe" I mean the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak, who came to Crown Heights in 1940 when I was a teenager, and established the Chabad Headquarters in the former medical office at 770 Eastern Parkway.

Back then, Crown Heights was an upscale Jewish neighborhood, mostly not religious, and there was a great deal of consternation among the locals about how the neighborhood would change when the *chasidim* moved in. Because of all the talk, my father decided to walk over to 770 and see for himself what the Lubavitchers were all about. When he came back, he announced to the family, "This is the kind of Judaism I've been looking for all of my life. From this day forward, I am a Lubavitcher." And our lives were never the same.

My father came to religious observance late in life, and that's when he began to learn Torah and Chasidic teachings in earnest. He studied with Rabbi Meir Greenberg, and also studied together with Ramash — that is, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who was the son-in-law of Rebbe Rayatz, and who would later become the Rebbe.

Because of my father's involvement, we had the privilege to be a part of various campaigns that the Previous Rebbe launched, notably the National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education (NCFJE), an umbrella organization for a number of educational initiatives. These included summer camps, "Released Time" programs which provide Jewish education for public school students, and anti-missionary efforts to counter Christian activity aimed at the Jews. Having received my degree from NYU in English and Journalism, I volunteered as a writer working for Rabbi J.J. Hecht, who was the head of NCFJE.

Rabbi J. J. Hecht was one of the Previous Rebbe's right hand men, and at one point he arranged an audience for my husband and me. We were greatly distressed at the time because we had been told that we could not have children, and we were debating whether or not we should adopt.



Crown Heights, Brooklyn

Rabbi Hecht felt that we should consult the Rebbe before moving forward.

It was winter of 1950. I recall walking into the Rebbe's room — he was almost totally disabled from the tortures he had endured in Czarist Russia — and sensing the radiance around him. It was a very special experience, especially so because it proved to be from the last private audiences the Rebbe gave. Our meeting was on Thursday night, and the Rebbe passed away two days later on Shabbat.

As we anxiously waited, Rabbi Hecht spoke in the Rebbe's ear and explained our problem. "Did they go to doctors?" the Rebbe asked. Rabbi Hecht replied, "Yes, they went to doctors but the doctors said that they can't have children." At that, the Rebbe laughed. He threw back his head and he just burst out laughing. Then he said, "They will have children, and they will have healthy children."

After we left the room, Rabbi Hecht slapped my husband on the back and said, "You will have children and I will be the *sandek* (one who holds the baby during the *brit*)."

Over the next few years we continued to consult with various doctors, especially because I was experiencing health problems. All the doctors advised that I should

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MY ENCOUNTER
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1400 videotaped interviews conducted to date. These stories are based on the recollection of the individuals recounting them. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedia.org

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have a hysterectomy. However, such an operation would obviously end all hopes of my having children.

Each time I was told such bad news, I'd run to see the Rebbe — that is, Ramash, who had become the Rebbe after the Previous Rebbe's passing. In those days, it was possible to go to 770 and just knock on the Rebbe's door and see him. And each time he'd reply, "If my father-in-law said you will have children, you will have children. Don't have an operation. Get another opinion."

Finally, one time he instructed me to see his wife's doctor. So I went to see the Rebbetzin's doctor. But this doctor also advised me to have the operation! In fact, she was very adamant that, for my own safety, I must undergo this operation.

I reported this to the Rebbe. While I was in the Rebbe's office reporting to him on the doctor's instructions, the doctor called him and reiterated what she had said to me. In fact, she said to the Rebbe, "If you don't let this woman be operated on, you are going to kill her."

The Rebbe hung up the phone, looked at me, and said simply, "See another doctor."

This time I went to see a doctor in Manhattan, on Park Avenue, an important professor. After examining me, this doctor picked up the phone and booked an operating room for me at Mt. Sinai Hospital. He said to me, "I am not listening to any stories about any rebbes. In two weeks you are going to have an operation. And that's that."

I went in to see the Rebbe to thank him for his advice and caring, and to let him know that, unfortunately, I would be going through with the operation. When he heard me out, the Rebbe said, "Would you do me a favor?"

"Of course," I replied. "What would you like me to do?"

He said, "Go to see one last doctor."

My cousin, who had recently given birth, gave me the name of her doctor, and I went to him. This doctor examined me, as so many others had before him. I almost fell off my chair when he announced, "I have a suspicion that you might be pregnant."

He had a laboratory in his office and immediately performed a pregnancy test. He was right — I was pregnant. He instructed me to go home immediately, get in bed and stay there.

As soon as I got home, I called the Rebbe to tell him the good news. I stayed in bed throughout my pregnancy. However, the pregnancy was very difficult and at one point I had become very concerned. The Rebbe sent his doctor, a Dr. Seligson, to examine me. He told us there is a chance I had lost the baby, and went back to report this to the Rebbe.

A few hours later the Rebbe called our home and my husband answered. The Rebbe told him "I know you are having a hard time, but don't worry. You are going to have this baby and it will be a healthy baby."

I then gave birth to my oldest son — a healthy boy, Binyamin Mendel. And, of course, Rabbi Hecht was the *sandek*.

Mrs. Rhoda Friedland, mother of three, lives in Monsey, New York. She was interviewed at her home in August of 2015.



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This week in....

> **5733-1973**, in a public letter for the upcoming New Year, the Rebbe wrote of the lesson one could learn from the fact that Adam, the father of all mankind, was created alone. This highlights the tremendous impact that each unique individual can make in the world, affecting all his surroundings for the good.¹ 18 *Iul*

> **5748-1988**, the Rebbe participated in the groundbreaking for the expansion of Chabad World Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, New York. The Rebbe gave a talk, in which he expounded on the idea of "groundbreaking" in a person's life and the lessons one can learn from such an event.² 17 *Elul*

1. *Igros Melech*, Vol. 1 Page 100
2. *Toras Menachem* 5748, Vol. 4 Page 287

לזכות
שניאור זלמן בן חיענא
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