

# HERE'S my STORY

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## THERE IS NO POINT OF NO RETURN

**PROFESSOR REUVEN FEUERSTEIN**



help them change because they are human beings who have a divine spirit in them."

At the time I advanced this theory — that human beings are modifiable, that they are not necessarily limited by their genetics — it was considered heresy. People simply did not believe that the brain could change, although now it is an accepted fact that there is no part of the body as flexible and changeable as the brain.

The Rebbe knew about my work and totally supported it. He frequently sent children to me - some with developmental problems, some with Down syndrome, and some who were epileptic. Wherever I went, people were coming up to me, saying, "The Rebbe wants you to see our child." As well, I received letters from the Rebbe about particular children whom he wanted me to see.

Each time he sent me a referral it was accompanied by his blessing, "*Zayt matzliach* — May you be successful." With that blessing, I got a feeling of empowerment — that, no matter how very difficult the case, I could help this particular child. I saw that he believed that even people with genetic disorders could be turned into functioning individuals who could be brought close to Judaism, who could study Torah.

Indeed, it was from the Rebbe that I got the idea that such a thing could happen, and I have proof with my own grandson who has Down syndrome, yet he has learned in *yeshivah* and graduated high school passing the final examinations (which in Israel we call *bagrut*).

But, back then, it was considered daring to suggest such things, because people didn't believe such dramatic change was possible. And I was often asked: "How do you dare tell people that this child will ever be able to speak? How do you dare to say that this child will be able to read? To finish school? To go to *yeshivah*?"

I did dare to say these things because of my interactions with the Rebbe, whom I visited regularly. By 1980, my ideas had caught on everywhere. I had three books published and was frequently invited to lecture in universities — indeed, I was appointed visiting professor at Yale — and I continued to develop new training modalities demonstrating that you can create new synapses within the brain, new connections that didn't exist before, and in this way help children with

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**A**s a psychologist working in Israel during the 1940s, I worked with Holocaust survivors, many of them children, who were absolutely traumatized. For example, I saw a 17-year-old boy who only weighed 75 pounds, and who would look at every scrap of food as if he was starving; he would steal and hoard food every chance he got.

And, of course, people were asking, "Is there hope for children like this? Will they ever be able to build a future? Will they ever be able to forget what they've been through?" Many were of the opinion that there is nothing we can do to help these children because they'd seen too much of the world's evil.

But I thought, "We cannot afford to lose even one child."

Subsequently, I went to study at the University of Geneva under Jean Piaget and Carl Jung and others, and in 1954, I founded the International Center for the Enhancement of Learning Potential (ICELP) in Jerusalem, dedicated to a theory I developed, which I called the theory of malleability of intelligence.

Basically, I said, "Yes, we can help these children and *all* children, no matter their developmental problems. We can



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the most devastating conditions.

I would just like to give two examples.

There was a boy with a brain condition which made it very difficult for him to focus, and therefore to hear what somebody was saying to him - his ability to hear was very, very limited. But the Rebbe gave me his special blessing for him. And despite this brain condition, this boy started to learn and became much more focused in his behavior, and even became a part of the religious world.

Another case — which was the most difficult case of my entire career — also came to me through the Rebbe. I cannot reveal all the details because of patient privacy issues, but I will say this:

This boy was diagnosed as mentally defective in the country of his birth and was placed in a school for deficient children. There he lived among troubled non-Jews and was influenced by their behavior — consequently, he became a real problem, and nobody believed he would ever be able to function as a normal, independent human being.

At some point, his father went to see the Rebbe, and the Rebbe told him to bring his son to me, which is what he did.

The son came here to Israel and was placed with a Chabad family. He learned to read. And he would often sit by my door reading Psalms because the Rebbe told him to read the Book of Psalms, from beginning to end, every week. And he did this for the three years that he was with us.

Thank G-d, all went very well, and I felt that we had done what the Rebbe asked us to do and what he empowered us to do. We felt we had been successful.

But, after this boy left us, things happened, and he ended up in the greatest of danger. He went to a place from which few people return. He was involved with promiscuous people, who were taking drugs. Indeed, I would say that there was no sin in the world which they didn't commit.

When I heard what had happened, I contacted the Rebbe, who said, "Don't let him out of your hands. Send somebody to find him, bring him back and continue."

I did not believe that a rescue effort would succeed, but the Rebbe had instructed me to try, so I did. I sent somebody to take this young man away from these terrible people, and we successfully coached him back to a healthy and moral lifestyle. He was lost but he came back, and today he is the father of four children, two of them learning in *yeshivah*.

I just want to say that, as a psychologist, I could never have believed that such a turn-around could happen. Usually, in such cases, we just give up. But the Rebbe did not give up.

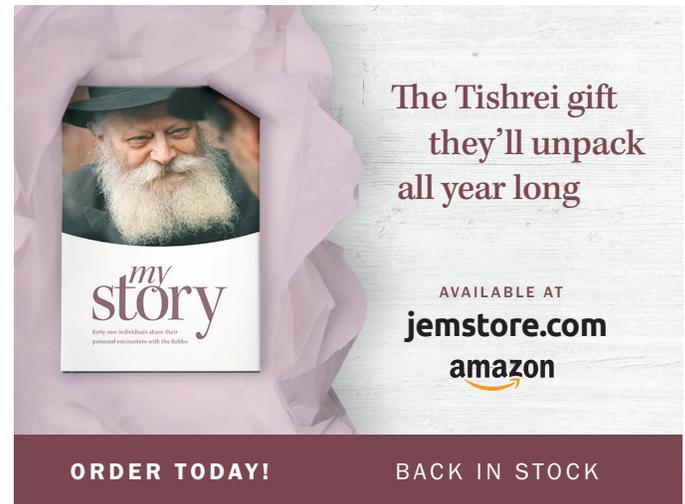
Clearly, psychology is very limited in its understanding of the other. It's very much affected, and related to,

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our understanding of ourselves. But the way the Rebbe understood the condition of the individual was altogether different. And this is why he said, "Yes, do it." His was a very different way of seeing the human being — not as a reflection of the self but as a spirit that comes from Above, from a G-dly source.

*Professor Reuven Feuerstein (1921-2014) was an Israeli developmental cognitive psychologist and founder of the International Center for the Enhancement of Learning Potential based in Jerusalem. His world-renowned applied systems of structural cognitive modifiability have been implemented in over 80 countries across the globe. He was interviewed in June of 2011.*



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## This week in....

- > **5728-1967**, the Rebbe sent a letter to IDF General Ariel Sharon, comforting him on the tragic loss of his young son, offering an explanation on the traditional Jewish statement of condolence, "May G d comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." The Rebbe went on to commend the general for the tremendous inspiration he aroused in the hearts of Jews across the world when he put on *tefillin* at the Western Wall during a well-publicized visit.<sup>1</sup> *13 Tishrei*

1. Igrot Kodesh vol. 25 page 3

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