

# HERE'S my STORY

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## A NUCLEAR RESPONSE

**RABBI DAVID LAPIN**



I am a descendent of an illustrious rabbinic family, and the son of a rabbi who served the South African Jewish community for most of his life. So it was clear to me from an early age that I, too, would become a rabbi. I was educated at the Gateshead Yeshivah in England, and also at Kfar Chassidim and Mir Yeshivah in Israel, where I received my rabbinic ordination.

However, as soon as I entered the rabbinate of South Africa, I became concerned about retaining my intellectual independence — something I am fiercely protective of — while serving as a community rabbi at the will of a synagogue's board of directors. Therefore, I believed that I also needed to secure an independent source of income. And so I first went to work for an international commodities trading company, and later I founded the leadership consulting firm that I currently lead.

At about that time, an opportunity arose to join a company of commodity traders in Johannesburg, and this is what I did, as well as establishing a Torah study

academy known as Beis Hamedrash Kesser Torah. This Torah academy along with Chabad and Kolel Yad Shaul became involved in the South African Baal Teshuva Movement — the movement for young people to return to their Jewish roots and Torah observance.

I held classes every Saturday night, when most young people usually went to the movies, yet these classes were attended weekly by hundreds of people. On other days of the week, I also conducted Talmudic studies, teaching advanced Talmudic methodology to bright young people, many of whom could barely read Hebrew. There were additional classes for men and for women in Chumash, Tanach, Halacha and Musar.

But I was not sure I was on the right track. Was I right to divide my time between my business and my rabbinic duties? It seemed as if I had two full-time jobs and my family was paying a heavy price as a result.

There came a time when I felt I needed the opinion of someone much wiser than me, someone who had a global perspective that embraced modernity, history and the future. I decided to seek the advice of the Rebbe — about whom I had heard so much from my Chabad colleagues and acquaintances.

In 1976 I came to New York but I had not realized that to see the Rebbe one had to make an appointment many months in advance and at first I was turned away. Only when I wrote a letter to the Rebbe in which I made the argument that my questions impacted the larger Jewish community — and which I insisted be presented to him — did he invite me to wait until he finished his appointments for the night when he would make time to see me.

I will never forget meeting the Rebbe. I recall that he got up from his chair as my wife and I came in, greeted us and insisted that we sit down. At that moment, I realized that we were going to have a real conversation — this was not going to be just a symbolic encounter.

*continued on reverse*

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 1,400 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@jemediia.org](mailto:mystory@jemediia.org)

continued from reverse

Indeed, the meeting lasted about fifteen minutes, during which time I felt that he was looking right inside me and communicating with me on a level that transcends the mind, getting straight to the heart and the essence of being. In addition, I sensed a kindness and warmth — all at once I was in the presence of a great man, an intellectual genius, a leader of the Jewish people, but also a grandfather who cared about me. In short, it was an amazing experience.

I asked him about the responsibilities that I faced and the limitations that I felt, which seemed overwhelming. How could I manage it all? What should I give up — my business or my Torah teaching? Where should I direct my energies?

His answer to me was that I should give up nothing and continue working in business while still teaching Torah. I do not remember his exact words, but the gist of it was that my being in business increased my ability to bring people closer to Judaism; my profession increased my influence and was a vehicle of *kiddush Hashem*, of sanctifying the name of G-d. He stressed that I would have greater impact if I was involved with both business and Torah.

I was still very young, and I couldn't imagine how I could continue to do both. So, I burst out with: "I don't think that this is realistic. I'm already up to here ... I feel very humbled and very honored that you would even talk to me this way, but it just isn't realistic!"

I remember clearly his response to my outburst. He said: "I'll tell you what your difficulty is — you think that human interaction is like a chemical reaction. But it isn't. In a chemical reaction, there are two elements which interact with each other, and they result in a third compound. But people aren't chemicals. When people interact, the result is a nuclear reaction. A nuclear reaction occurs at the core and then it radiates in a spherical, rather than a linear, way. As the outer rings of your sphere get bigger and bigger, the number of people you are touching gets bigger and bigger — indeed, there is no limit.

"When you touch the heart of one person, there is a nuclear reaction because that person in turn touches so many other people. So, each person you touch — even if it is a moment's interaction — represents a nuclear reaction in terms of impact. That's what it really is."

He was right of course, and way ahead of the research

לזכות הורינו  
הרה"ת ר' אהרן מרדכי  
וזוגתו מרת שרה מאשא שיחיו אבענד  
ר' זאב וואלף  
וזוגתו מרת ליבא יוספה שיחיו רודאלף  
נדפס ע"י צאצאיהם  
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that, since then, has proven his words to be true. For example, the Framingham Heart Study showed that people's mood affects others three times removed — that is, one's friend's friend's friends. We impact people not just with our words but with our moods and our energy.

I remembered this whenever I stood in front of a class of fifty people. I contemplated that these fifty could in turn be impacting at least one hundred and fifty others. This meant that, both in my work as a rabbi and as a business person, week after week I was affecting tens of thousands of people without realizing it. That's what the Rebbe tried to get across to me. He was talking about the huge amount of holiness that I had the potential to bring into the world.

I got it. Indeed, he changed my entire mindset when he said, "Don't underestimate what each person is capable of doing. Just remember that when you touch one person you are causing a nuclear reaction." And that's something that I've never forgotten.

*Rabbi David Lapin is a Torah teacher, rabbi, author, speaker and management consultant presently living in Los Angeles. He was interviewed on a visit to New York in June of 2015.*

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין  
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

## This week in...

> **5716-1955**, During a private audience, the Rebbe shared a discourse with Rabbi Efraim Eliezer Yolles of Philadelphia. It was the night before the *brit* of Rabbi Yolles's grandson, and the Rebbe described the greatness of the commandment of *brit* at length.<sup>1</sup> 26 *Cheshvan*

> **5745-1984**, The Rebbe spoke about the importance of printing the encyclopedia of Chasidic philosophy titled *Sefer Ha'erchim*. Several volumes of the encyclopedia had been printed and the Rebbe was disappointed that the writers were not making enough progress.<sup>2</sup> 26 *Cheshvan*

1. *Sefer Hamamarim Melukat* vol. 3 page 156 2. *Torat Menachem* 5745 vol. 1 page 564

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