An inspiring story for your Shabbat table

HERE'S *my* STORY

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FOURTH TIME'S THE CHARM

DR. DAVID LAZERSON

I came to Chabad many years ago, but for me to say that is not accurate because, really, Chabad came to me.

In 1970, while studying at the University of Buffalo, I attended a class on Jewish mysticism being taught by Rabbi Noson Gurary. As a result of that class, I became interested in finding out more about my roots and, during my last semester at college, I had my first encounter with the Rebbe.

Rabbi Gurary had arranged for me and others like me to come to Crown Heights for a long weekend. At the time I was a typical alienated Jewish-American kid. I had very long curly hair, past my shoulders, and I vividly remember feeling like I was sticking out, sitting at that *farbrengen* listening to the Rebbe with a thousand Jews who looked like Rabbi Gurary. They all had long beards and they were wearing long black coats and big black hats. I felt like I had been transported to a different planet, to a different dimension. But it wasn't a negative feeling at all. It's just that I hadn't known that there were all these Jews living this kind of lifestyle in modern America. And while it boggled my mind, it also impressed me because these guys were bucking the system — in the melting pot of America, where assimilation ruled, they didn't care whether they blended in or not.

To make a long story short, this led me to enroll in the Morristown *yeshivah* for two weeks, which turned into three weeks, which turned into three years. I went from a college student who learned maybe ten hours per week, to a *yeshivah* student who learned ten hours per day, and I couldn't get enough. I was so happy there that I'd wake up in the middle of the night smiling! I loved it and wanted more.

While there, in 1973, I was offered an opportunity to have a private audience with the Rebbe. Beforehand, I wrote a letter with my questions, one of which was about getting married. But then I had second thoughts about it and, while waiting my turn, I got a new sheet of paper and quickly rewrote it all, removing that particular question about getting married.

But when I walked in, the Rebbe read my letter and asked, "What do you think about getting married?"

"Well, I do think about it," I said, feeling totally caught off guard by that question, as I had gone to such lengths to remove it from my letter, "but I don't know if I am ready."

The Rebbe responded with another question, "What do your parents think about it?"

This was another question that caught me off guard. My parents weren't even religious, so why should the Rebbe care about what they thought? But the Rebbe very much did care.

I said, "Knowing my parents, I think they would like me to have a source of income figured out first, before I got married."

After this exchange, the Rebbe went back to my letter and asked, "You write that you want to go back to university to get your Master's Degree in Judaic Studies. Why?"

I have to admit that I had this naïve notion that you go into the Rebbe with some requests, and the Rebbe responds with an "Amen" or two, and out you go. Bingo! Short and sweet. But here the Rebbe was asking me questions not only about what I thought, and how my parents felt, but also "why"!

After a long pause, I answered, "I would like to bring disenfranchised Jews back to Judaism. If I have a Master's Degree, it will give me more credibility. And, I do think that a lot of colleges are accepting credits from the Morristown

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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 1,400 videotaped interviews conducted to date. While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. **mystory@jemedia.org**

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yeshivah."

It seemed the Rebbe approved. The last thing he said to me was, "Find out exactly how many credits they'll accept."

With that I left, and I remember going back to the *yeshivah* in Morristown, along with all the guys who were on cloud nine. But I was just a ball of confusion. I had no idea how I was supposed to interpret the Rebbe's words. Should I look for a marriage match? Should I look for a job? Should I get a Master's Degree or maybe find out first how many credits a college will accept. I had no idea what to do, but little by little it became clear.

When in 1976, with the Rebbe's approval, I applied to Buffalo State College to study for a Master's Degree, I learned that the Speech and Language Disorders Department would require me to first earn 58 additional credits, a prerequisite which would take me a couple of years to fulfill. But the Learning and Behavioral Disabilities Department was willing to accept most of my credits from the Morristown *yeshivah*! This was the path I pursued, but it was not until years later that it hit me like a lightning bolt that this is exactly what had concerned the Rebbe when I first met with him. Indeed, the ability to transfer credits proved critical to my teaching career in special education, my occupation for the past forty years.

Another thing which was the result of that first meeting was that Rabbi Gurary set me up on a date, and eight weeks later I was engaged to be married.

Before the wedding, I came to see the Rebbe again, bringing along my future wife, Gittel, and Gittel's father. And it proved a most remarkable encounter.

My future father-in-law, Mr. Ruby Wolnez — who had been very athletic, on sports teams in college, playing basketball, hockey and golf — had been diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis (MS). This is a degenerative condition and three different doctors told him he wouldn't live more than five years. Gittel had written to the Rebbe about this some months before, and he recommended that her father check his *mezuzot* and his *tefillin*. Well, he couldn't check what he didn't have, so he ended up buying it all, affixing the *mezuzot* to all the doorposts and putting on the *tefillin* every weekday.

Now, in our meeting, the Rebbe asked him, "Do you put on *tefillin* every day?" When my father-in-law answered that he was, the Rebbe blessed him to have "tens of years of putting on *tefillin*."

לזכות

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Then they began speaking about MS and went into a long, scientific exchange, which neither I nor Gittel were able to follow. But it was clear that the Rebbe believed all the symptoms that my future father-in-law was exhibiting could be attributed to other things, not MS. I recall that during the course of the meeting the Rebbe stated three times, "I don't think you have MS ... go get a new diagnosis.". Before we left the Rebbe wished us all to share good news.

And we did because the Rebbe was absolutely right. Whatever my father-in-law had, it wasn't MS. About eighteen months after our audience with the Rebbe, he heard of a new diagnostic test for MS which was highly accurate. This test confirmed what the Rebbe had said — he did not have MS.

He lived sixteen more years and actually outlived two of the doctors who pronounced him dead within five years. And all those years, remembering his audience with the Rebbe, he always put on his *tefillin* with a smile on his face.

Dr. David Lazerson – also known as "Dr. Laz" – is an award-winning educator, author, musician, and conflict-resolution specialist. He has written five books including the best-seller Skullcaps 'N Switchblades, and Sharing Turf, which was turned into the film Crown Heights, starring Howie Mandel as Dr. Laz. He was interviewed in March, 2011.

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This week in....

> **5714-1954,** the Rebbe responded to an individual who had been praying at length and meditating on *chasidic* teachings, but was dissatisfied because he didn't sense that he was becoming more refined. The Rebbe pointed out that, if despite his efforts, he had not attained the desired result, surely without dedicating the time to prayer he'd be much worse off. It is clear, the Rebbe added, that meditative prayer improves and ultimately transforms a person for the better. As additional measures to achieve discernable progress, the Rebbe advised that he give charity before prayer, say the daily portion of Psalms after prayers and inspect his *tefillin*.[1] *16 Elul*

1. Igrot Kodesh vol. 9 page 294

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