

**HERE'S
my
STORY**

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HAPPINESS: THE ALL-PURPOSE CURE

RABBI BARUCH WILHELM

As a three-year-old child, I fell while running down the stairs too quickly and I got hurt. But it took some time for my parents to realize that the fall had caused my hearing to become impaired. Once they knew, they took me to the best doctors they could find in Jerusalem, where we were living, and the various tests conducted by the doctors confirmed that I had suffered inner ear damage. In order to hear properly, I would have to wear hearing aids.

Because of my young age, the hearing impairment also hindered the development of my speech. I had to work with a speech therapist in order to learn correct pronunciation of words. But that therapist only spoke Hebrew, and my first language was Yiddish — the language my parents spoke at home, and the dominant language in the school I attended. So, she told my parents that I needed to speak Hebrew and that they should speak Hebrew to me at home. My father didn't like this idea, which would necessitate the whole family having to switch to Hebrew, and he decided to write to the Rebbe about this.

I was five when my father wrote to the Rebbe, explaining the reasons for the speech therapist's request and the challenges involved, and asking what was the right thing to do in such a situation. The Rebbe replied that "it isn't advisable to burden your son by changing his primary language, and therefore you should continue to speak with him and to learn with him in the same language which he has spoken and learned in until now."

The therapist accepted the Rebbe's verdict, and she eventually thanked my mother, who worked alongside her during my speech therapy sessions because, as a result of my case, she got to learn another language. As for me, I continued studying in Yiddish in my school, and eventually picked up Hebrew and some English as well.

At age fifteen I met the Rebbe for the first time, when my parents took me to New York so that we could spend the



High Holidays of 1979 at 770. I was very excited about this trip, as for several years I had been writing to the Rebbe and receiving his blessings and encouragement. The thought of seeing the Rebbe with my own eyes was very moving to me, and I also hoped to ask him for a blessing that I should be able to hear normally.

Before the first *farbrengen* at 770, my father was sure to come early in order to grab a good seat on the long benches where the *chasidim* sat. He secured seats in the second row, close to the Rebbe, and I sat next to him. But then the person who usually sat there showed up and he was none too pleased to see us. "I understand that an important person like you deserves a good seat," he said to my father, "but why should your young son get to sit up here? Let him go to the bleachers in the back together with the other boys."

My father tried to explain that this was my first time by the Rebbe, and that I was hard of hearing and would not be able to hear anything from the back, but I had to go up on the bleachers.

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 1,500 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.



continued from reverse

At a certain point after the *farbrengen* started, the Rebbe noticed my father and motioned to him, as if to ask, "Where is your son?" My father pointed up to the top of the bleachers. In response, the Rebbe gestured sharply downward indicating his displeasure. At the next *farbrengen* I sat next to my father in the front, and I enjoyed being able to hear the Rebbe, at least partially.

Subsequently, we had a private audience with the Rebbe. My parents entered first without me, and my mother told the Rebbe that I had taken off my hearing aids and was refusing to wear them. She requested that the Rebbe give me a blessing that I should hear.

The Rebbe responded, "I understand that he took off his hearing aids because he is embarrassed to wear them. But he needs to start wearing them again and to be happy. He will be successful and will go on to find a *shidduch* and get married."

My mother also told the Rebbe that I didn't want to return to Israel and planned on staying in America until I could hear on my own without the hearing aids.

The Rebbe ruled out this idea. "He doesn't belong in America," he said. "He does not know the language, and he doesn't have friends here. He needs to return to the Holy Land, and he will succeed."

The Rebbe wanted to know if my parents took me to specialists in the United States. My mother confirmed that they had done so but, just like the doctors in Israel, they all said that nothing could be done for me.

The Rebbe was not impressed by this and he said, "When you return, be in touch with the top professors in Israel, and tell them in my name that soon there will be a special electronic device available that will be implanted through surgery and connected to the internal auditory nerve."

This device was in its early implementation stages at the time. It was able to do what other hearing aids could not — that is, convert noises into electronic signals and thus enable deaf people to hear.

After we returned to Israel my father checked out this possibility with the doctors, and they said that this device was available but, for now, it was being implanted only in people who couldn't hear at all. Since my hearing loss was not absolute, they preferred not to perform this surgery, considering the risk of further hearing damage.

After my parents left, I met alone with the Rebbe. He began by asking, in a loud voice, whether I could hear him. When I confirmed that I could, he told me, "Continue

to wear your hearing aids, and conduct yourself with joy and happiness. Return to Israel and study Tractate *Kiddushin* of the Talmud. Find a study partner, and talk with your friends about what you are studying — this is how you will establish a connection with G-d."

"But I would like a blessing to hear well," I said, to which the Rebbe responded, "Be joyful, and you will succeed in all areas."

As I was leaving, I said to the Rebbe, "I am blessing the Rebbe that all the blessings that the Rebbe gives will be fulfilled."

"Amen!" the Rebbe replied.

Although I had been in the Rebbe's study for just a few minutes, I felt transformed by that encounter — I knew that I had to be happy and content, and through this, I would succeed.

Indeed, this is what happened. I got married and established a good Jewish home. I raised a family of healthy children, some of whom are already married and raising families of their own.

Whenever I come to New York, I make it a point to visit the Rebbe's study. I close my eyes, and hear the Rebbe telling me, "Be happy and you will be successful!"

Rabbi Baruch Wilhelm is an expert scribe, writing Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzot. His highly emotional interview, which was conducted in Hebrew, was recorded at his home in Nachlat Har Chabad, Kiryat Malachi, Israel, in July of 2016.

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ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחי

This week in....

> **5733 — 1972**, an individual from overseas wrote to the Rebbe that his son had been suffering from an eye infection for ten years. The Rebbe responded that a new treatment was discovered in the USA and, although one should normally rely on local doctors, in this case it is worth writing to an American expert.¹
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