

From: <http://www.ascentofsafed.com> Story #1116 (year 22, #34) 24 Nissan 5779 (April 2019)
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Back from a Broken Back

I was raised in a religious home and educated in a *yeshiva*, where everything was taught with a slap and a hit. After that experience, I had more than my fill of Judaism. I stopped practicing Yiddishkeit except for Yom Kippur. When I got married, my wife kept a kosher house, but that was her desire, not mine. Generally, I had a very skeptical and negative attitude toward Jewish observance.

In the early 1970s, I was in my second year of law school at the University of Southern California when, one Friday night, I went with my wife to Westwood to see a movie. But it was sold out. In as much as we had already paid for parking, we wandered about and ended up at a Chabad House, where I met Rabbi Baruch Shlomo Cunin. Because of him, I became somewhat open to Judaism; I even put on *tefillin* a couple of times. I didn't make any major changes in my life, but I was a bit more receptive to it.

After I graduated law school, we took a trip to Europe, and while we were touring Greece, we were in a terrible car accident. My wife's back was broken, and she became semi-paralyzed as a consequence. When she was transferred to Cedars Hospital in LA, Rabbi Cunin was there waiting for us, and he urged my wife to write to the Rebbe. This she did. She got an immediate response and a blessing. The Rebbe said that lighting Shabbos candles was vital to her recovery, and she should be scrupulous in fulfilling this *mitzvah*. So my wife began lighting Shabbos candles.

Then there came a time when she was transferred to a rehabilitation facility and we forgot to bring the candles, so she didn't light them. Right after that, her right leg swelled terribly, and she suffered a setback. But she recovered, and she made sure never to miss lighting Shabbos candles again.

After six months, she finished her rehabilitation, and she was able to move about using long braces and crutches. She wanted very much to see the Rebbe in New York, and even though her doctors discouraged her from making the trip, we went. This was in 1973.

As we waited outside the Rebbe's office, someone told me that I should write a note to the Rebbe stating my request. "I have no requests," I replied. Indeed, there was nothing I wanted from the Rebbe. I was simply accompanying my wife, and other than that I would be a bystander, sitting in the back; there was no need for me to write anything.

But this person was very insistent that I couldn't go in unless I wrote something. So I wrote: "If G-d is so great, why does He insist on all these tiny details?"

I asked this question just because I was told to write something but, the truth is, it always bothered me that G-d seemed stuck on all this minutia. It seemed to upset Him if

you missed one little thing —like, if you used a meat spoon in cottage cheese. I was never able to understand why.

The Rebbe greeted us, asked us our names, and then turned to me and said: “I don’t understand your question.

”I thought it was pretty straight forward, so I started to repeat it in Yiddish, thinking that maybe he had difficulty with English. But he stopped me mid-sentence. He put his hand up and said: “It’s not for G-d; it’s for us. G-d wants us to be close to Him, and this is the path He gives us.”

As the Rebbe explained it, it suddenly became very clear to me that G-d wants the closeness of a relationship. For the first time, I understood. It’s not that G-d wants to intimidate and frighten us. He gives us a path to Him, saying: “If you follow this path, you’ll find Me.”

This was a very radical thought to me. I had never seen Judaism in that light. To me, the focus always seemed to be on what is forbidden. Judaism seemed to be saying that G-d wants subservience, not love — that I must conform my conduct in order to avoid G-d’s wrath and punishment. I had never seen it in a positive way — that G-d loves us and wants us to come close to Him. This way of looking at it really intrigued me. I felt as though I had been in a dark room and the Rebbe had turned on the light. I remember that I had the strongest impression that I had encountered one of the greatest men in the world.

After we left, I began an extensive correspondence with him because I so much wanted to know more, and he always responded to my questions.

A little less than a year later, my wife became pregnant. She wrote to the Rebbe, and the Rebbe answered with a blessing for a “normal and easy pregnancy and the delivery of a healthy child at an auspicious time.” Meanwhile, all the doctors she consulted were telling her to have an abortion because, with her injuries, she did not have the capacity to carry a baby to term. But she wouldn’t hear of it — she totally trusted the Rebbe’s blessing.

When she went into labor, things progressed very slowly at first. She had been in labor for thirteen or fourteen hours when the doctor said she’d have to have a Caesarean Section. But seeing her disappointment, he agreed to wait another fifteen minutes. When the doctor returned and examined my wife again, he said, “I don’t believe this. She’s fully dilated!”

He yelled to me, “Go, go, go and get the nurse. Everybody go!” We rushed into the delivery room, and all the doctor had to do was put his hands out and my son came out.

The doctor later asked me for a copy of the Rebbe’s blessing. He said, “You have no idea what a miracle we’ve just witnessed. You have no idea whatsoever because you’re not a

doctor and you can't appreciate all the difficulties. You don't know what happened in those fifteen minutes — it was an out-and-out miracle.”

We ultimately had three sons and two daughters. With each pregnancy the Rebbe sent the same blessing, and each time everything went well. But then my wife became pregnant for the sixth time, the Rebbe said nothing about delivery of a healthy offspring. My wife was very upset, and she wrote the Rebbe again and again about it.

When Sarah was born, she was already afflicted with many difficulties. She passed away only six months later. The death of this child was a very hard on us, and my wife and I ultimately got divorced as a consequence of it. But I was not bitter. I understood that G-d in His wisdom would only allow us to have this beautiful child for a limited time. As much as I wanted her to stay on, I appreciated the fact that I had her for the time that I did. I was able to see G-d as a loving G-d rather than a punishing G-d because of what the Rebbe had taught me.

Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from a mailing of "JEM - Here's My Story" ([//JEmedia.org](http://JEmedia.org)), as part of their *extraordinary* “My Encounter with the Rebbe” project, documenting the life of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi M. M. Schneerson of righteous memory, in one of the thousand plus videotaped interviews conducted to date .

Mr. David Stauber, an attorney practicing in Southern California, was involved in the founding of Chabad of North Hollywood. He was interviewed in September of 2011.

Connection: Weekly Reading (outside of Israel) of *Acharei Mot*. Mr. Stauber's story begins with a reference to Yom Kippur, a major theme of the Reading, and ends with an event akin to the meaning of the Reading's name.

Biographical note:

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe מנחם מנדל: [11 Nissan 5662 - 3 Tammuz 5754 (April 1902 – June 1994 C.E.)], became the seventh Rebbe of the Chabad dynasty after his father-in-law's passing on 10 Shvat 5710 (1950 C.E.). He is widely acknowledged as the greatest Jewish leader of the second half of the 20th century. Although a dominant scholar in both the revealed and hidden aspects of Torah and fluent in many languages and scientific subjects, the Rebbe is best known for his extraordinary love and concern for every Jew on the planet. His emissaries around the globe dedicated to strengthening Judaism number in the thousands. Hundreds of volumes of his teachings have been printed, as well as dozens of English renditions.

