

# HERE'S my STORY

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## HIGHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION

**MRS. RIVKA FELDMAN**

When my mother, Mrs. Miriam Popack, was growing up in Brooklyn in the 1920s and 1930s, there was no formal Jewish education for girls. While her brothers went to a *yeshivah*, she went to public school.

Most of the children in her public school were Jewish, and almost all of the staff members were as well, but when they got to school they wanted to fit in and be like everyone else. They celebrated the non-Jewish holidays and sang the non-Jewish songs; the mentality was that you don't talk about being Jewish when you're outside the home. One December, there was a very progressive Jewish teacher who decided that with all the trees decorating the school, she would bring in a menorah. But instead of being happy or excited, the students were embarrassed by it. That was what the atmosphere was like.

In her high school years, the Bais Yaakov girls' school came over from Poland, opening up a branch in Williamsburg, and my mom began going there after school. It began to instill in her a pride for Judaism.

After my mother married my father, she became fully introduced to Chabad. A few years after that, in the 1950s the Rebbe decided it was time to establish N'shei Chabad — the organization for Chabad women and girls — and my mother immediately became very active within it. Although she had her roots in Bais Yaakov, her closeness to Chabad gave her a new perspective on the role of Jewish women. She already



knew that the Jewish woman is the foundation of her home, but the Rebbe took it a step further.

He explained that women were supposed to be "*neirot l'ha'ir*" — luminaries, whose influence extends beyond their own homes. It's not enough if your candle is lit; you need to kindle the next person's light. The Rebbe brought this out in Jewish women across the globe, by establishing N'shei Chabad. My mother began arranging women's conventions, speaking publicly and teaching. "You wouldn't believe it," my mom would say, "but I used to be

shy!" This was the environment that I was born into.

In 1974, while attending Bais Rivkah high school in Brooklyn, I took my SAT exams for college and did very well. I received a scholarship offer, and I really wanted to go to college. But my parents were not happy; they did not think that an eighteen-year-old would fare well religiously on a college campus. I decided to try a compromise. As a second choice, I offered to go to a "modern" seminary in Jerusalem. But this was not up to my parents' standards either.

"You know what?" my parents proposed. "Write to the Rebbe for advice. Whatever he says, we'll be happy with."

So, while sitting in class — I guess it must have been boring that day — I wrote a handwritten letter to the Rebbe, in English, on two sides of a piece of lined notebook paper. I really expressed my feelings, explaining how I had wanted to go to college, but my

*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 1,700 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

parents didn't want me to. I wrote about how I had been to Israel and loved Jerusalem, and that since there was no Chabad seminary in Jerusalem at the time, I wanted to go to this particular seminary. I knew that the Rebbe would not be in favor of my going to college, but reasoned that he would of course agree that this more modern seminary was better than college — right?

At the end of my letter, I wrote that I would listen to whatever the Rebbe advised me, as long as it brought happiness in my life.

It was before Rosh Hashanah when I sent the letter off, and I didn't hear anything back that month, or the next, or the one after that. Then, one day I got a phone call. It was the Rebbe's secretary. "I have an answer from the Rebbe to your letter," he said.

"My letter?" I wondered. By then, I hardly remembered that I had written one. It was already Chanukah, and I had sent my letter over three months earlier.

"You don't remember?" asked the secretary. Normally, the Rebbe would write his brief responses, in shorthand, on the actual mail he received. This way, his secretaries would have the full context of the question when relaying an answer. But not in this case, as the secretary went on to tell me: "Interestingly, when the Rebbe gave out his answer to you, he just cut a tiny piece of paper from your note, where he had written a few words, and didn't give us the rest of the paper, so I don't know what the question was." (I later found out that this was the Rebbe's custom when he wanted to make sure that even his secretaries weren't privy to people's private business.) Once the secretary read me the answer, though, I knew exactly what he was referring to.

The Rebbe had written: "I'm replying to your letter on Chanukah because the answer to your question is found in one of the lessons of Chanukah."

In honor of an exemplary *eishes chayil* and mother,  
**Devorah Malka Sreter**

on the occasion of our 19th wedding anniversary.

Mazel Tov!

May we go from strength to strength and continue to raise our children to Torah, *chupah*, *maasim tovim* amongst Klal Yisroel giving the Rebbe *nachas ruach* and revealing Moshiach.

With much gratitude to Hashem,

**Dovid Sreter**

You can help us record more testimonies by dedicating future editions of *Here's My Story*

When we light the menorah, we start with one candle on the first night of the holiday, and then increase the number of candles each subsequent night. "The same is with everything you are going to do in your life," the Rebbe told me, "especially in your education. You always have to go to a higher level — or at least never go down to a level that is lower than your present one. Therefore, if you would specifically like to continue your studies in Jerusalem, I suggest that you go to the Bais Yaakov seminary there."

"Me? Bais Yaakov?" I wondered. That suggestion did not sit well with me, a true Chabad girl. Instead, I enrolled in the Bais Rivkah seminary in Kfar Chabad, Israel, where I remained for two impactful years. It was a decision that brought great happiness to my life.

Eventually, with the Rebbe's encouragement, I also became active in N'shei Chabad, just as my mother had been, and took over her job in planning the annual conventions of N'shei U'Bnos Chabad, which we would put on in a different city of the US or Canada each year. History repeats itself: Like my mother, I was quite shy as a child, but I worked on becoming more outgoing, more communally active — so that I could share some light with others.

*Mrs. Rivka Feldman is involved in Jewish outreach and gives Torah classes in New York and New Jersey. She resides with her husband Dovid in Crown Heights where she was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in June of 2020.*

## This week in....

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

- > **5737-1976**, the Rebbe handed out dollar bills for Chanukah *gelt*, wishing each individual, "a happy Chanukah and a bright year." 2 Tevet
- > **5747-1986**, after the evening prayers on Chanukah, the Rebbe turned around to face the crowd, giving the impression that he was going to deliver an address, as he had the night before. This caused onlookers to rush forward, but the Rebbe just called out: "Instead of pushing to hear what I have to say," go out and spread the Chanukah *mitzvot!* 30 Kislev

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