

# HERE'S *my* STORY

## JEWISH SCIENCE

**DR. VELVL GREENE**

In 1960, I began working for NASA as part of the Planetary Quarantine Division, which was then charged with trying to find life on Mars. The Rebbe was very, very interested in the work I was doing. When we first met, he asked me if I knew what the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the *chasidic* movement, meant when he spoke of Divine Providence.

I said that I did. The principle of Divine Providence which the Baal Shem Tov taught is that nothing a Jew sees and hears is random. Rather, it is all designed by Heaven to bring you closer to Torah and to G-d. There is nothing wasted.

And the Rebbe said, "If this is true for everybody, how much more true is it for a person who is exploring the stratosphere, or searching for life on Mars, or working in a medical laboratory dealing with diseases, or traveling all over the world and meeting so many people."

He went on, "You must have a wealth of stories and anecdotes and events and impressions — each one of which demonstrates Divine Providence. You should keep a journal of these stories and events, and then try to analyze them to see what is the lesson you can learn from these things. And if you can't figure it out by yourself, then bring them to me and I'll help you."

I followed his advice. And today I have a journal with hundreds and hundreds of stories and events, and I plan, some day, to disseminate these stories to as many people as possible.

Back then — this was the early 1970s — when word got around that I was working with NASA and looking for life on Mars, some *chasidic* Jews would rebuke me. They said, "You mustn't do that. It's forbidden by Jewish law. You shouldn't be doing this kind of work." Since, at this point, I had already begun my journey to Jewish practice, their words caused me concern — was I doing something wrong? I didn't know what to make of these statements. Rabbi Feller suggested that the next time I would meet with the Rebbe, I should ask the Rebbe if that was, in fact, true.

The Rebbe didn't respond right away — it was one of those



special moments in time as he thought for a while. And then he said this:

"You should look for life on Mars, and you should *keep looking* for life on Mars. If you don't find it, then keep looking elsewhere, and do not stop looking, because to sit here in this world and say there is no life elsewhere is to put a limit around what G-d can do. And nobody can do that!"

And then he asked me if it would be possible for him to read some of my reports to NASA, and he was careful to add, "if they are not classified."

I told him that there were many unclassified documents that I could send him, but I asked, "Why should the Rebbe want to read this? I mean, most of it is preliminary — we haven't been to Mars yet, we're just doing experiments to plan for the Martian trip, and what we're doing is just normal bacteriology; it's not very exciting..."

He said, "Let me decide that."

So I promised him that I would do it, but several months went by, and I didn't send him anything. The next time I was in New York and stopped at Chabad Headquarters for

*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 the 800 videotaped interviews conducted to date. Please share your comments and suggestions. [mystory@jemedi.org](mailto:mystory@jemedi.org)

afternoon prayers, the Rebbe spotted me and called me over. He said, "You promised me something!"

"What did I forget?"

"You promised me the reports."

"Well, I thought the Rebbe is so busy..."

"Don't have pity on the Rebbe, send the reports."

I went home and assembled a pile of unclassified documents — three or four thick folders — and I sent them all to the Rebbe. Most of this material described what we

thought the Martian environment might be like, based on information from flybys. This was work from before the first landing on Mars which would not take place until July, 1976. In those early days, we were trying to develop a sampling device that could test the dust on Mars for the presence of living

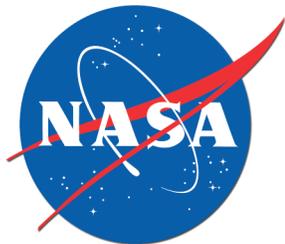
microbes. We were speculating what types of microbes might be there, so we could provide the proper nutrients to grow them when we got there.

It was straight laboratory work — I had a big group of microbiologists working for me, generating mounds and mounds of reports which we would send to NASA. But, until we actually landed on Mars and took samples, everything we were doing was speculation.

At the next audience I had with the Rebbe, he said to me, "There is something I'd like to bring up. Obviously, it's because I don't understand your work, but it seems to me that there is a disagreement between something you wrote in one place about bacteria on Mars and what you wrote in another report several years later that describes the same experiment." And he named the volume. "In the first place you say that these bacteria would grow there and in the second you say that they wouldn't."

I told him that I couldn't remember what he was referring to, but that I would look it up. And when I went home I dug out these dusty reports and read them, and of course, he was right. There was a discrepancy.

When I came to the Rebbe the next time, which was a year later, I told him, "With regard to the discrepancy, the Rebbe was right — what I said here I didn't say there simply because I made a typographical mistake. And I'm going to correct it."



He said, "Thank you. You make me feel better. I don't like contradictions in science. But if the difference between what you said here and there is because you made a simple mistake — well, that makes me feel better."

After that, every time I saw him he asked me for more reports. And, one time, I answered him in a flippant way. I said, "They say that the Rebbe has *Ruach HaKodesh*, Divine Vision. If that is true, why is the Rebbe asking me for a report? Doesn't he know what is going on?"

If any *chasidim* had been in the room, they would have slapped me. But the Rebbe just smiled and said, "*Vos men zogt, zol men zuggen* — what they say, let them say. From you, I want a report."

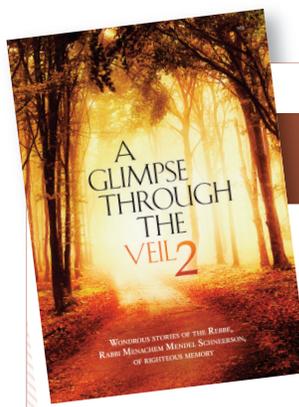
*The late Dr. Velvl Greene, a bacteriologist and professor emeritus at Ben-Gurion University as well as director of the Lord Jacobovits Center for Jewish Medical Ethics in Be'er Sheva, Israel, also worked for NASA's Planetary Quarantine Division, which was charged with trying to find life on Mars. He was interviewed in his home in Be'er Sheva in April, 2008.*

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

## This week in....

> **5697 — 1936**, while living in Paris, the Rebbe Rayatz assigned the Rebbe the task of editing a talk that the former was preparing for publication. This work of editing and preparing his father-in-law's work for print eventually evolved into the Rebbe's role as the chief editor of *Kehot*, the Chabad-Lubavitch publishing house.<sup>1</sup> 11 Kislev

1. Lipsker-Friedman Family memento p. 29



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Birthday, 9 Kislev

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