



ROSH HASHANAH ESSAYS - 5780

Shlomo M. Hamburger



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Shlomo M. Hamburger is a partner in a large international law firm. He is the author of numerous books and articles and a frequent speaker and teacher on employee benefit matters. He is also the author of *The Anochi Project: Seeking G-d's Identity* and *Unlocking the Code: The Letters of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson*. Shlomo is on the International Advisory Board for Chabad on Campus International and an active member of the Chabad Shul of Potomac, Maryland.

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BY SHLOMO M. HAMBURGER

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson was the father and teacher of Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. For about 25 years, the Rebbe lived, for the most part, in his parents' home where the Rebbe and his father developed a close personal bond. The Rebbe and his father last saw each other in the fall of 1927 (29 Tishrei 5688) and would never see each other again in the physical world. During 1928, and pending the Rebbe's wedding date, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak wrote a series of letters to his son all related to the Rebbe's upcoming wedding. Four of the letters were written on the eve of Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, and Sukkot. In each letter, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak tied the holiday to his son's upcoming wedding through explaining the Kabbalistic significance of each holiday and how it relates to different aspects of marriage. These letters show not just Torah insights but also very personal insights into the close connection between Rabbi Levi Yitzchak (the then 50-year old father) and the Rebbe (his then 26-year old son).

In her memoirs, Rebbetzin Chana, the Rebbe's mother, expressed her desperate wish that her husband's writing would be published:

Something ought to be published from such a personality, such a flowing "wellspring" of incessant Torah thought, never ceasing even a moment, who, when he had no one to address, would write down his thoughts on paper in installments.

Certainly I am entitled to hope for this, after all that I have witnessed in my life. In any event, it is something that ought to come about. I can do nothing to help it happen, but my desire for it is strong and I hope it will happen.¹

Similarly, the Rebbe wrote: "It is my obligation and great *zechus* to suggest, request, etc., that everyone study from {my father's} teachings..." From a letter of the Rebbe, *Motzaei Tisha B'Av* 5744 (1984).

In that spirit, the first two essays that follow address topics based on Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's letter from *Erev Rosh Hashanah* and *Erev Sukkot*, 1928 (5689). These essays are part of a larger publication entitled *Unlocking the Code: The Letters of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson* by Shlomo M. Hamburger. For more information on this publication, please contact Jewish Enrichment Press at info@rabbidalfin.com or smhpubs@gmail.com.

The two subsequent essays are two original Divrei Torah that are in keeping with the themes of Rosh Hashanah.

¹ Kehot Publication Society. *Memoirs of Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson*. Brooklyn, New York: 2011, installment 35.

HEEDING THE “SOUND” OF THE SHOFAR AND LISTENING TO THE “VOICE” OF YOUR CHILDREN

One key practical lesson we can learn from Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s letters on *Erev Rosh Hashanah* and *Erev Sukkot* relates to communication; specifically how we can communicate better with our children by considering the lessons of the shofar.²

As the letters explain, blowing the shofar is not simply about the mechanics and making the proper sounds. The key principle of the shofar relates to “hearing.” To have the sound of the shofar heard “on High,” the one who is blowing has to be properly prepared and understand the purpose of his act. Even assuming the sound ascends, the question to ask is whether it will send a message worthy of receipt.

These same concerns arise with regard to communicating with our children. When we speak, do we really have something to say worth hearing? Or do our children think of us like a “robocall” – something to listen to for as little time as possible and then add to a “do not call” list? Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s letters teach us some skills to help facilitate parent-child communication.

To maximize the communication opportunities, we need to consider several things:

1. *Do you have something to say?* The blessing for the shofar is לשמוע קול שופר /to hear the sound/voice of the shofar. We praise G-d as the one who commanded us to hear the “sound” of the shofar. The word “קול”/(kol) actually means both “voice” and “sound.” We can readily understand the use of “sound” as a translation. After all, through the mechanics of concentrated air forced through the lips and then into the small hole on one end of a shofar, a sound will be emitted from the other end. But does the shofar have a “voice?”

The “voice” of the shofar actually comes from the soul of the person blowing the shofar. Preferably, the one who blows the shofar should be married. Why? Because the person can then have the “voice” of life experience come through the prayer expressed with the shofar.

A sound on its own can stir one to action.³ But a voice has something to say; there is a message being sent which is supposed to be communicated.⁴ When we communicate with our children we might just be making a sound or a command. “Work harder!” “Clean up your room!” These tend to be “sounds” that may (or may not) cause some reciprocal reaction; but are they likely to reach a level where true communication resides? Using a voice could mean talking with your

² Admittedly, the same lessons could apply to any type of communication. However, because the letters are written from a father to a son, the focus of these lessons is on how to apply the message to the father/son, parent/child relationship.

³ *Amos* 3:6 (“Can a shofar be blown in a city and the people not tremble?”).

⁴ Rambam, *Laws of Teshuvah*, 3:4 (“It is as if the shofar is saying ‘Arise from your slumber! Examine your actions, do *teshuvah*, and remember your Creator.’”).

child to find ways to work through these issues. Is your child really not working hard enough? Or, is your child not understanding the material and in need help or support? Talking through the issues can help identify and solve possible problems.

The lesson here is: when speaking with your children, make sure you have a message to convey and not just a sound to emit.

2. *Are we communicating at the child's level?* Rabbi Levi Yitzchak could write incredible and incredibly deep letters to his son, the Rebbe, because he knew his son's level. For years as he grew in his father's house and under his father's tutelage, the Rebbe was able to demonstrate the breadth and depth of his knowledge (and ability to recall that knowledge). So when it came time for Rabbi Levi Yitzchak to communicate to his son, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak knew exactly what level to reach. That is undoubtedly part of what made his letters so valuable and meaningful to the Rebbe. Similarly, we need to tailor our message to the age, education, and personality and/or temperament of our children if our message is to be meaningful to them.

3. *Are we communicating at the right time?* Rabbi Levi Yitzchak wrote the holiday letters specifically on “*erev chag*” (on the evening before each holiday). Evidently, this was the specific time that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak felt was important in order to tap into the spiritual energy behind the blessings he wanted to share with his son, the Rebbe. When it comes to communicating in a meaningful way with our children, it is important to find the right time.

In *Pirkei Avos*,⁵ Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar teaches “Do not try to appease your friend during a time of anger.” When our children are angry or upset, it is likely the time to listen with our ears open and our mouths shut. Separately, there are times when a child specifically wants to talk. It might be a regular daily time (e.g., on the way to or from school) or it might be a spontaneous opportunity. When those times come, take advantage of them, put aside whatever else is on your agenda, and have the conversation your child is looking for.

Remember, the time also has to be the right time for the parent. To follow up on the lesson from *Pirkei Avos*, when it is a time of anger *for the parent*, that is not the time to appease the child. Our words, however well-intentioned, can do real harm to our children if they are colored by our own anger or frustrations, having nothing to do with our children. If you aren't prepared for a proper conversation, explain why and find another time to communicate.

4. *Less can be more.* The shofar is a very simple “instrument” and we communicate via three very simple sounds – *Tekiah*, *Shevarim*, and *Teruah*. Yet, as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak wrote in his *Erev Rosh Hashanah* letter, these simple sounds when properly conveyed have the ability to impact the spiritual worlds and arouse mercy. When parents and children are nagging, yelling, interrupting, criticizing, threatening, demeaning, or being sarcastic, there is a lot of sound and fury but very little communication. In the book of *Melachim*,⁶ we read about the prophet *Eliyahu*. He encountered a great and mighty wind, an earthquake, and fire. Major natural events were taking place and G-d was nowhere to be found other than in the “still small voice”/קול דממה דקה. If our

⁵ *Pirkei Avos*, 4:18.

⁶ 1 *Melachim* 19:12.

child is yelling, we cannot yell. If our child sees that we are not yelling, they can learn by example that this is not the way to communicate.

5. *Look at it from the child's perspective.* In the *Erev Rosh Hashanah* letter, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak explained what we can learn just from observing a shofar. According to *Halacha* (Jewish law), a shofar cannot be broken. At the same time, it sends a two-fold message of “brokenness” – the sounds are able to break through barriers in the spiritual worlds above and arouse Divine mercy and the sounds also express the cries of a broken heart.⁷ When it comes to communicating with our children, especially when they are in need of our help, it is important to remember that *they* are not broken. Our children might at times express brokenness and they might even feel broken or lost and just do not know how to fix their situation. But they are not broken.

Parents must heed their call and listen to their message to help the healing process. Teach them that they are not broken. Give them tools to help address their situation and if those tools don't work, help them find other ways to manage the issues.

I realize that communication is not always easy.⁸ In this respect, we are reminded of Psalm 135 which says, in reference to idols, that they have eyes but do not see and ears but do not hear. What is true of idols is often true of each of us. We indeed have eyes; but do we see each other the way we should? We have ears; but do we hear what the other is saying? Communication means smashing these idols and concentrating fully on the other person.

Interestingly, when we block out distractions and focus on what our children are saying, we grasp the message and are prone to saying something like: “Oh – Now I see what you are saying.” Actually, we heard what our child said; we didn't see anything. Yet through our concentration and understanding we could “see” quite clearly and our child's perspective comes through loud and clear.

Sometimes by listening very carefully, we can see things from a different perspective.

The author gratefully acknowledges the comments and edits to this essay provided by his son, Benjamin Hamburger, Psy.D. Dr. Hamburger is a clinical psychologist who is licensed in California and New York. Currently based out of Los Angeles, Dr. Hamburger provides therapy to children, adults, families, and couples.

⁷ See also Psalms 51:19 (לב נשבר ונדכה אלקים לא תבזה) / “G-d does not despise a broken heart.”

⁸ Also, there are times where professional help is needed to facilitate parent-child communication. In an appropriate situation, that is the best way to go for everyone.

Establishing a “*B’li G’vul*” Relationship With Your Children

In Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s letter from *Erev Sukkot*, he wished that the Rebbe would have a *chuppah* (wedding canopy) and a wedding “*b’li g’vul*” – without boundaries or limitations. What exactly does that mean? On the one hand, a *chuppah* clearly has physical boundaries or limitations. So, too, a marriage relationship has its boundaries and limitations. Does a “*b’li g’vul*” *chuppah* or marriage really mean that there are no boundaries at all?

Chassidus has a concept known as “*orot d’tohu b’keilim d’tikun*” (“the lights of *Tohu* in vessels of *Tikun*”). Stated simply, this idea refers to bringing the infinite (in the form of the intense G-dly lights in the world of *Tohu* (or “the world of void”), which was before creation of the physical world) into the finite (in the form of the defined vessels in this world of *Tikun* (the “world of repair”).

With this thought in mind, “*b’li g’vul*” means merging the finite with the infinite so the infinite potential does not overwhelm the boundaries or limitations and the boundaries or limitations do not otherwise interfere with the full expression of the infinite potential. Wishing someone to have a *chuppah* that is *b’li g’vul* is a wish for the infinite Divine presence to be drawn down into the *chuppah* at the time when bride and groom are present in that space. Similarly, a marriage that is *b’li g’vul* is not a marriage without boundaries, it is one where the third (infinite) partner, G-d, is an active part of the finite relationship.

We also see this idea with regard to Sukkot. A Sukkah has inherent finite boundaries. Yes, you can have a Sukkah at sea or on land. You can build one on a car, a bicycle, or an all-wheel drive vehicle. You can even put one on a camel. The Sukkah can be very small or large enough to include the entire Jewish people; but it will still have its boundaries. At the same time, the Sukkah has its *schach* (covering) which, as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak explained, represents the drawing down of the infinite surrounding presence of G-d into this world. The Sukkah represents *b’li g’vul* in that it allows the infinite to merge with the finite to achieve its purpose.

There is a commonly used truism that our children have infinite potential. In other words, the finite child is invested with infinite abilities. We as parents are supposed to raise our children in a way that we do not stifle that infinite potential. That is easy to say, but harder to do. Based on Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s *Erev Sukkot* letter, as well as some basic lessons about Sukkot, here are five specific actions we can take to help build a *b’li g’vul* relationship with our children and help them tap into that infinite potential within.⁹

1. Real Caring. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s letters are all about his love and caring for his son, the Rebbe. Each letter opens and closes with heartfelt expressions of the father’s love and desires for his son. These expressions form bookends around the content of the letters and make

⁹ Of course, these steps apply to almost any type of personal or business relationship. However, sticking with the theme of a father and son as reflected in Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s letters to his son, the Rebbe, this discussion focuses on the parent/child relationship.

it clear that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had only one interest in mind – that of his son. Here is the question for us – When we give advice or guidance to our children, is it 100% clear to them that the advice is solely for their benefit? Or do we really mean to steer them in the direction that we want them to go? Our children can tell the difference. When our children see that we really care only about their dreams and their goals, our words will have much more of a lasting impact.

2. Continued Investment in the Relationship. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak sent multiple letters to his son prior to and even subsequent to the wedding. The letters were meaningful letters filled with wisdom, advice, and caring. Building a relationship with our children means a continued investment of quality time. It means taking the time to think about the guidance you want to give and how it will help your child. It also means spending time even when there is nothing to talk about; just be there. A common investing principle would tell an investor to keep investing at regular intervals through up markets and down markets. This is one way to protect “downside risk.” Relationships are the same way; constant regular investment of time in the relationship (through the ups and downs) is a key to building a deeper bond.

3. Being Properly Pushy. Children always criticize parents for being too pushy. Often they are right. Pushing children to be what the parents want them to be is not helpful and will not bring out the child’s infinite potential. Here, Sukkot can teach a valuable lesson. We spend a lot of time and effort in building a Sukkah and putting together our lulavim so they are just right. Then along comes a big storm and the Sukkah collapses. Or we don’t keep the willows adequately moist and they dry out or the myrtle leaves fall off. Despite our best efforts, we might not fully succeed at all aspects of Sukkot. Being properly pushy means telling our children that it is OK to fail; it is just not OK to fail to try!

4. Help Them Find Their Passion. Sukkot is a time of passion. It is *z’man simchateinu* (the time of our happiness). The holiday period culminates with *Simchat Torah* where we pray with our feet. We celebrate the Torah not by reading it or studying it but by closing it up and dancing with it until the wee hours of the night. A successful holiday is not generated by our talent, credentials, education, or intellectual prowess. It is about our passion. So, too, when it comes to our children, the key element to their success will be found by them following their passions. Information can be learned and skills can be trained. But without passion, the skills and education will not lead to happiness and fulfillment. Parents need to help children find their passion and help them unleash their full potential.

5. Helping to Protect from “Harmful Winds.” In his letter, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak prayed for G-d’s protection from “harmful winds.” Part of training our children to achieve their potential is to provide them with tools to succeed in the face of obstacles. Consider these questions to see how you can empower your children to solve problems:

- a. When helping your child, is your goal to be right or to help?
- b. Are you providing your children with the answers or are you teaching them how to reason through and understand their issues?
- c. Are you just providing “cold” logical well-reasoned arguments or are you tempering your arguments with recognition of your child’s emotions and concerns?

- d. Are you only present at the beginning and the end of the problem or are you there through the entire process?

These five basic steps are not intended to be an exhaustive list of how to establish a *b'li g'vul* relationship with your children. They are intended to promote thinking about the process based on the *Erev Sukkot* letter from Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. To continue your own take-away, consider one last piece of advice – take it one step at a time. Building a Sukkah takes preparation (take out your tools and the parts of the Sukkah), action (put up the walls, one at a time), and completion (add the *schach*). When it comes to building your relationship with your children, they deserve the same careful care and attention.

Guilty “With Explanation”

I always thought that the traffic ticket for a moving violation was inspired by Jewish sources. Why? Because when you get a ticket you are provided with three choices for a response: innocent, guilty, or (here’s the Jewish part) “guilty with explanation.”

In the Torah portion for Parshat Re’eh we read that G-d has set before us blessings and curses. Blessings come when we follow the law. You would think that the curses come when we do not follow the law – that is, the curse should be the opposite of the blessing. But it is not. Look at the language closely (it is actually even clearer in Hebrew). The articulation of the blessing and curse are identical except for the words in all caps (in the English below) which appear only in the curses:

כו ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה.

26. See/ behold, I have set before you today a blessing and a curse.

כו אֶת־הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם.

27. The blessing will come so that (or when) you observe the mitzvot of G-d, your G-d, that I am commanding you today.

כז וְהַקְלָלָה אִם־לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְסַרְתֶּם מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לָלֶכֶת אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַעְתֶּם.

28. And the curse will come if/when you do not observe the mitzvot of G-d, your G-d, AND TURN FROM THE PATH that I am commanding you today TO FOLLOW THE GODS OF OTHERS THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW.

This difference in wording is what prompted Rashi to remark that the curse comes about when someone excludes oneself from the community, rejects G-d in favor of idols and actually departs from the entire path of life outlined for B’nai Yisrael.

This understanding of the opening lines of Re’eh seems to leave a gap. Consider the traffic ticket. The Torah has set before us a blessing when we follow the law (we are innocent) and a curse when we do not follow the law and follow idolatry (we are guilty). But what about when we don’t follow the law but it is caused by non-idol worship reasons? What if we just make a mistake? What if we are guilty “with explanation”? In other words, yes we are guilty but our explanation is that we want to change and improve.

This level of non-compliance is what we call a “chet”. *Chet* is not “sin” as we commonly understand the word “sin.” A *chet* refers to “missing the mark.” Think about shooting an arrow at a target. We try, but we don’t always hit the bullseye. Sometimes we even miss the target altogether. We are still in the game, yet we are human and prone to make mistakes. We make a

lot of them and we make them for a lot of reasons. It is not that we are rejecting or turning away from our path; we simply “missed the mark.”

Although a *chet* is not a blessing, neither is it deserving of the consequences of a curse. Instead, correction, or *Teshuvah*, is what we need and what the month of Elul (the Hebrew month before Rosh Hashanah) is all about as we prepare for Rosh Hashanah. We undo a “*chet*” not by moving the target closer or making the bullseye bigger so it is easier to hit. Rather, we work on our skills and refine our capabilities to become better marksmen.

So if we consider the opening words of Re’eh to be simply a choice between a blessing or a curse, it becomes an impossible black and white zero sum game where we either win or lose. Instead, we need to see the opportunity that the Torah leaves up to us; we can admit that we are guilty but use our explanation as the opportunity for *Teshuvah*.

Life is not an Outcome – It's a Direction

אַתֶּם נִצְבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לְפָנַי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

Atem Nitzavim Hayom Kulchem Lif'ney Hashem Elokeichem.

You are all standing here today before G-d. The leaders of tribes, the elders, and everyone from the senior officer to the water carrier and wood chopper were all standing to hear G-d's message. Parshat Nitzavim then calls Heaven and Earth as witnesses to what is our ultimate choice "I have put before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; and [therefore] choose life!"

Parshat Nitzavim reminds us that G-d is very concerned with the choices we make. Throughout the Torah, we are constantly confronted with the requirement to choose a way of life. Indeed, our first introduction to the covenant at Sinai was when G-d said "IF you listen to my voice, you will be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation." The choice is and always has been our own.

In making our choice, consider why G-d chose to tell us specifically to choose life. G-d set before us life and death, good and bad, the blessing and the curse. I can understand why we shouldn't choose death or bad or the curses. But why not choose "good"? Why not choose "blessing"?

In truth, we really have no ability to choose "good" or "blessing." What seems to be good today might turn out not to be so good once we know all the facts. What we think is cursing us today may really be a "blessing in disguise." If we were told to choose "good" or choose "blessing," the Torah would be presenting us with an impossible task. We cannot choose an outcome.

Life is not an outcome – it is a direction. To "choose life" means to choose to live your life a certain way with a certain path. How we exercise our choices in life will determine whether and how we bring G-d into this world.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, we contemplate the image of G-d sealing us in the Book of Life. Parshat Nitzavim with its dictate to "choose life" comes to remind us that being inscribed in the Book of Life is not an outcome, it is a direction. Sometimes we spend so much time debating the choice of life that we neglect to live it. When we are inscribed for Life, we are commanded to take action -- make a choice as to how we are going to live during the upcoming year.

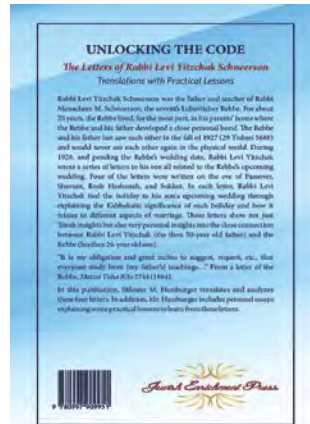
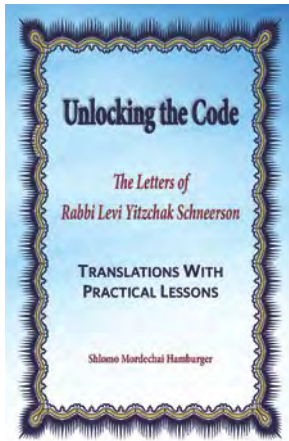
In that spirit, here are some interesting questions (based on questions I first saw published in 1996) that might help us consider our direction during this Rosh Hashanah and remind us of the importance of choosing the right direction in life.

Our children have seen us dance; have they seen us pray?
They have seen us play golf; have they seen us make Shabbat?
Our children have seen us lift a cocktail glass; have they seen us lift a Kiddush cup?
Our children have seen us read the latest novel; have they seen us read the Torah?

Our children have seen us shop; have they seen us give *Tzedakah*?
They have heard us gossip; have they seen us learn?
They know our politics; do they know our beliefs?
They will remember what they saw. Will they remember that they are Jews?

Unlocking the Code

The Letters of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson



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Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson was the father and teacher of Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. For about 25 years, the Rebbe lived, for the most part, in his parents' home where the Rebbe and his father developed a close personal bond. During 1928, and pending the Rebbe's wedding date, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak wrote a series of letters to his son all related to the Rebbe's upcoming wedding.

Four of the letters were written on the eve of Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, and Sukkot. In each letter, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak tied the holiday to his son's upcoming wedding through explaining the Kabbalistic significance of each holiday and how it relates to different aspects of marriage.

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"It is my obligation and great zechus to suggest, request, etc., that everyone study from {my father's} teachings..."
From a letter of the Rebbe, Motzoei Tisha B'Av 5744 (1984).

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About the author:

Shlomo M. Hamburger (smhpubs@gmail.com) is a practicing lawyer, frequent speaker, and the author of *The Anochi Project: Seeking G-d's Identity* and *Unlocking the Code: The Letters of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson*. He is on the International Advisory Board for Chabad on Campus International.

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