



## BEHIND THE PICTURE

# Where is He Pointing To?

## The Rebbe, the Borough President and the Lawyer

DOVID ZAKLIKOWSKY

**R**obert (Bob) Abrams made history in 5730 when he became the youngest elected borough president of the Bronx. The mayor of New York at the time, John Lindsay, said that Mr. Abrams was “a man of conviction and terrific energy,” and would preside over the citizens “with compassion and decency.”

Yet, when you meet Mr. Abrams and his wife, Diane, they are modest and unassuming. Despite being top-ranking lawyers, when they married many years ago, they opted for a private ceremony, with only members of the immediate family and close friends in attendance. This is a quietude and subtlety that personifies them.

Following their engagement, a mentor of Mr. Abrams, Rabbi Israel Mowshowitz, suggested that the new couple seek the Rebbe’s blessing. Bob and Diane readily agreed, and an audience was arranged.

### MEETING THE REBBE

“I remember arriving at 770 at midnight for our scheduled appointment,” says Diane Abrams, “but we did not enter the Rebbe’s room until 3:00am.”

Mr. Abrams expected the Rebbe to be intimidating. “You know, someone with his intellect, who had been a child prodigy and was schooled in Berlin, and at the Sorbonne... someone who had written monumental scholarly works, who inspired so

many people among his own flock and beyond.... You would think that this awesome personality would be an intimidating force.”

However, Mr. Abrams found just the contrary. “When you were in the Rebbe’s presence, there was nothing but humility and warmth. There was a twinkle in his eyes, his penetrating blue eyes, and a smile that would come to his face when he wanted to make a point. That was enough to elevate your spirit and propel you to a higher and new level.”

The Abrams’ visits to 770 became more frequent, meeting the Rebbe privately many times, and a yearly tradition to receive *Lekach* distributed by the Rebbe before Yom Kippur or Hoshanah Rabbah. Mr. Abrams recalls, “The first appointment led to other opportunities to meet the Rebbe, to share blessings and life events, to give him reports of our travels, and news of the good work of his own Shluchim.”

Mrs. Diane Abrams said of the Rebbe, “He always had a way to make you feel comfortable, as if you were speaking to a friend. He inspired you, took great interest in you, and brought out the best in others, too. He had a very good sense of humor, and his sensitivity to others was heightened to an incredible degree.”

She recalled that during one meeting with the Rebbe, her husband, Bob, was describing

his recent communal activities, and requested the Rebbe’s guidance regarding a particular issue.

The Rebbe turned to Mrs. Abrams – an attorney specializing in women’s matrimonial law, and professor at the prestigious New York University Law School – and asked, “So, what about you? We are in the period of women’s liberation. You must have a view. What’s your opinion on the issue? What do you think? Why don’t you join this conversation?”

### WHOSE HONOR?

On the ninth of Shevat, 5735, thousands gathered in 770 for a *Farbrengen*. Many dignitaries, leaders and supporters arrived to mark the Rebbe’s 25th year of leadership. Mr. Abrams joined many high-ranking, New York City politicians at the gathering (as seen in the first picture). Of *Farbrengens*, Mr. Abrams said, “The Rebbe would speak for hours on end, spill out inspirational stories and commentary on the Torah and Talmud. You marveled at the *Farbrengen* going on for hours, with limited breaks and without the Rebbe using notes to convey his important messages.”

On that particular occasion, Mr. Abrams brought a proclamation honoring the Rebbe, which read:

Citation of Merit to Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson in recognition of his 25

Robert Abrams

President of the Borough of  
The Bronx

Presents this

Citation of Merit

to

Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

In recognition of his 25 extraordinary years as the beloved leader of the worldwide Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was a remarkable and highly gifted student of Torah from his earliest childhood and soon became a renowned scholar. Even before becoming the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson was considered a significant moral force in Jewish life.

Upon assuming the leadership of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement on the Tenth of Shevat, 5735, Rabbi Schneerson rapidly began infusing the worldwide Jewish community with a spirit of rededication to the ideals and commandments of Jewish law. Through his capacity for innovative and imaginative leadership, Rabbi Schneerson has sparked an astonishing expansion of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement around the world and has inspired many young Jews to understand and appreciate their glorious heritage.

The great respect for Rabbi Schneerson's scholarship, dynamism and depth of understanding has made a personal audience with him among the most sought-after privileges in the Jewish community today. My wife and I consider ourselves to be indeed fortunate to have been accorded this honor and privilege on several occasions, thereby receiving the wisdom of his counsel and the bounty of his blessing. I am confident that I speak for multitudes when I acknowledge the great achievements of his first 25 years of leadership of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement and look forward to being with him for the celebration of his Golden Anniversary.



Robert Abrams

ROBERT ABRAMS  
PRESIDENT, BOROUGH OF THE BRONX

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When Abrams approached the Rebbe to present the proclamation, he said, "It's very nice to see you, and it's my pleasure to pre-

1. The Rebbe enters the Farbrengen, Mr. Robert Abrams is fifth from the left.

2. Mr. Abrams, as Bronx Borough President, presents the Rebbe with the proclamation.







3. Mr. Abrams points to his wife in the women's section.

sent to you this little token in appreciation for everything [you do].”

The Rebbe, reading the proclamation (as seen in the second picture) read his name at the head of the document, and said, “But it is for the movement, not for me.”

Gesturing to the Rebbe, Mr. Abrams smiled broadly, and said, “Okay!”

“The Rebbe was always focused on the other person,” says Mrs. Abrams, “his sensitivity to others heightened to an incredible degree.”

[Five years later, on 11 Nissan, 5740, the

Rebbe’s birthday, the then Bronx borough president, Stanley Simon, had learned a lesson. “Citation of Merit to the Lubavitch Movement,” read the award he offered to the Rebbe, “in public recognition of the contribution made by the Lubavitch movement to the people of the Borough of the Bronx, city and State of New York...”]

#### IS MRS. ABRAMS HERE?

The Rebbe then turned to Mr. Abrams and asked, “Is Mrs. Abrams also here?”

Mr. Abrams answered in the affirmative, and pointed to where she was sitting (as seen in the third picture). Mrs. Abrams, who was looking out, remembers watching this scene unfold from her perch in the women’s section of 770.

The Rebbe enthusiastically responded, “I am very happy! I am very happy!”

The Rebbe then told Abrams to say *L’chaim*, and said, “May G-d Al-mighty bless you to go from strength to strength!”

Mrs. Abrams greatly appreciated the gesture and said that she always walked away inspired by the *Farbrengen*. “There was a feeling of great unity,” she recalls. “It was spiritually uplifting.”

#### RUNNING FOR ATTORNEY GENERAL

In 1974, Mr. Abrams entered contentious political territory, when he was running against the incumbent Attorney General of New York, Mr. Louis Lefkowitz. “After nearly 18 years in office, four easy election victories and years of being regarded as an unbeatable institution,” wrote the New York

Times,

“Attorney General Louis J. Lefkowitz is faced with his most serious challenge in the Nov. 5 general election.”

However, many opined that Abrams would not win the election. The Rebbe, too, thought similarly, and suggested that Mr. Abrams abstain from running for this office until Mr. Lefkowitz retires. In time, Abrams lost the battle and continued his post as the Bronx Borough President. The Rebbe then told him, “Don’t be discouraged if I was right about our discussion. It will come in a good time, but you still have a big mission in the Bronx.”

“That’s true,” said Abrams.

The Rebbe continued, “You have probably one million [or] two million [people to care for]. You have enough work for the time being. G-d should bless you to go from strength to strength.”

In conclusion, the Rebbe said, “Thank you very much and my regards to your wife.”

Four years later, in 1978, after Mr. Lefkowitz retired, Mr. Abrams won the election for Attorney General of New York, a position he then held for fifteen years.

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This is an excerpt from his forthcoming book *Dear Rebbe, I have a story to tell you*.

Photos: Isaac Berez, Agudas Chasidei Chabad Library and Lubavitch Archives

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