



TIKVAH
ONLINE
ACADEMY

The Rebbe's Response to Reagan's Attempted Assassination

Mendel Jacobson

Wednesday, Aug. 25 at 7:00 PM EDT

Course Description:

What kind of education produces a virtuous, law-abiding citizen? Must moral or religious instruction be a part of this, and what happens when it's missing? When, in 1981, John Hinckley Jr. attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, argued that a lack of moral instruction in American schools was a contributing factor to this violence. In this seminar, we will explore the Rebbe's vision for American education and his belief in Jewish engagement with the broader world.

Guiding Questions:

1. What kind of education does the Rebbe claim most American children receive? How is it deficient?
2. Do you agree with the Rebbe's argument that education must be grounded in a moral or religious foundation in order for the child to be successful? Why or why not?
3. Does the Rebbe's proposal run afoul of the "separation between church and state" doctrine?

The Rebbe's Response to Reagan's Attempted Assassination

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson

Watch part of the speech here:

https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/695900/jewish/Reflections-on-an-Assassination-Attempt.htm

15 April 1981

Part I: What caused Reagan's attempted assassination?

[The Rebbe thanks President Reagan for sending him birthday wishes, and the Rebbe wishes Reagan good health after the attempt on the latter's life. The Rebbe calls on Reagan to double-down on his efforts to help all Americans and reminds his that faith in God is essential to carrying out his duties.]

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that a person must learn a lesson from everything he experiences. This trauma [of the attempted assassination] cannot be without a tangible lesson or action, and **our reflection must bring about some kind of change, or some type of practical action.**

How is it possible, that a person should commit such an act that is so incomprehensible, at odds with all reason and sensibility [referring to the attempted assassination]? In the past it has been argued that poverty is the root of all crime; it embitters the person, which, in turn, leads to feelings of revenge.

This is incorrect for several reasons: First of all, it contradicts the Talmud's teaching to the contrary: "Be vigilant with the poor children, for they will achieve Torah scholarship" – precisely because they are poor.

This carries over into the world in general: When the children of the poor receive a proper education, the fact that they are financially disadvantaged, on a lower level of the economic ladder relative to their peers, motivates them to strive and exert themselves even more, to do even better in all matters of kindness and compassion, outshining those who are not poor, those from a middle class or an affluent background.

When a person grows up in poverty, under normal conditions his conduct will differ from those around him, it will cause him to exert more of his energy – and enlist others to help him – not to descend into immorality. But more so, he strives to stand above it and reach true heights to prove that, notwithstanding the distractions of poverty, he overcame them, and achieved greater, higher, and farther-reaching accomplishments than those of his wealthy peers.

In fact, we see: The one who attempted the assassination did not grow up in poverty. To the contrary, he was raised amidst affluence. In the words of the verse: "His father never scolded him," and apparently he was denied nothing. So lest it be argued that poverty is the root of crime, this incident makes clear that the root-cause of bad behavior cannot be traced to poverty, but something else

Where can we find the cause? The present case points us toward education.

When education is viewed only as an accumulation of knowledge, and as long as one accumulates knowledge, he is “educated” – the perpetrator may have excelled in his studies, or perhaps he didn’t excel, so he added to his array of knowledge the skill of handling arms. He even mastered the subject.

His [Hinckley’s] accumulation of knowledge was not connected to a purpose – the ideal purpose being, to bring true good to oneself and one’s surroundings; rather the goal is to prove that “I am the only one that matters,” and therefore, “Why should I consider another person, never mind obey someone else?” And he was raised according to the philosophy of liberalism, that one may not interfere in a child’s life, he must be allowed to act as he wishes. As to the verse, “Man is born a wild donkey,” the argument goes, “If God created him that way, it’s no business of his father and mother to guide him.” They allow him to ‘pasture’ and behave as he sees fit.

His school was not permeated with the notion that its role is to form or create the child’s character – that he be a kind person; that he knows that although he is accumulating knowledge in school, his most important knowledge is how to do good around himself, and that this is the truest good for himself, as well – this doesn’t even enter the curriculum.

And certainly once he set foot in school, it was made clear to him that the school cannot get involved in his character and conduct; **he’s an independent person and the school merely offers the opportunity to accumulate knowledge which he can later use to whatever end he sees fit.**

And if he might hear God’s Name mentioned, it is with the explanation that there must be a separation between “education” and “faith” – not that both are necessary, only taught at separate times, but rather they are “separated,” Heaven forbid, such that no funding is given toward learning about belief in God; no time is allocated for prayer to the Creator and Director of the Universe.

And this is all supported by the claim that it is fundamental to the ethos of this country – when everybody knows the opposite to be true: **This country came into existence as a result of people who came here because they were disallowed from believing in the Creator and Director of the Universe as they saw fit; they were forced to flee their homeland, finding refuge here and establishing this country, a place where they could believe in, and serve, the Creator and Director of the Universe, and where each group could worship God as they wished.**

But now this has been twisted and contrived – and the education system established – such that education is not only separate from religion, but with the emphasis that religion is not allowed, God forbid, to be mentioned to children in school, because it violates the very foundations of the country.

For hours on end, all the child hears about is the greatness of man, and his own abilities. Certainly God's greatness is never mentioned – but even His existence is never mentioned. This leads to the aforementioned event; to this the unfortunate behavior.

But what are they focusing on? How to prevent the outcomes, the symptoms. We're not focusing on the underlying philosophy, the approach, which led to this outcome.

His warped education brought this. Warped, because it's based on the belief that one's own strength and power bring prosperity. The child is taught to focus on bolstering his or her own bodily strength through bodily exercise; then they're taught how to manipulate everything around them to serve their own desires.

When the education of our nation's youth is predicated upon, "I am the Lord your God" – there exists an entity that created everything around you and He is "your God," He gives you life in all places and at all times. Continuing on this foundation he is taught: "Do not steal; do not murder..." since he has already internalized his faith in God, he will certainly not steal nor kill.

And in order to help raise an upstanding and civilized generation of people who won't harm themselves or others, comes the second ingredient: give the child a knowledge of the world around him, enabling him to harness the world as a civilized person does, until he maximizes his own unique potential based on his personality, his character traits, his nationality, his family, and so on.

Part III: School prayer and Education Day

Every student should start the day with a prayer that is uniform for all students. This does not mean to introduce practices that lead to conflict and rifts between people, but a simple, brief mention of the existence of "One God," Who possesses "An Eye that sees and an Ear that hears." This means that God sees everything that is happening in this school, everything that happens in the lives of this boy or girl, and He provides the bread that they eat each and every day..

Today the circumstances are such that the principal education of boys and girls is not, as in times past, in the home, by the father and mother. Rather, as we see in the case of the would-be assassin, today one cannot rely on the parents; **the responsibility of a child's education rests entirely upon the school.**

The school's first and foremost responsibility is to transform each student from the wildness of youth, and develop him into an upstanding human being, by focusing on his own character, emphasizing it to the student.

And only afterwards do we explain that in order to be a productive person, you need to study the various other subjects taught later in the day.

In recent years, the presidents have signed proclamations declaring a specific day as “Education Day, USA” – a day dedicated to practical reflection on the topic of true education, an education that will produce an upright person.

A specific day is designated to reflect upon this, and with the emphasis that this does not mean undertaking a new resolution – the “resolution” was already made when the Bible, the Torah, was given and it was accepted fully, that “I am God, your Lord.” And He commands, “Honor your father and mother.” And He commands, “Do not steal.” “Do not murder.” And further: “Do not covet anything that belongs to your fellow,” because it belongs to someone else, no matter how small it is; how much more so must one respect another person’s health; how much more so his life.

Then it will never occur to him to seek weapons, even for self-protection, because he’s living with the awareness and assurance of the “Eye that sees and Ear that hears.” And it goes without saying that it will never occur to him to use a weapon to commit a crime.

Recovering Reagan Writes to the Rebbe

By Dovid Zaklikowski

On Monday, March 30th, 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot as he left a reception at the Washington, D.C., Hilton. "I felt a blow in my upper back that was unbelievably painful," the president wrote in his personal diary.

Reagan thought that he had merely broken a rib when his bodyguards pushed him to the ground. It was in the hospital that he was given the news, "It was then we learned I'd been shot and had a bullet in my lung," he wrote.

The sixth bullet out of the gun of John Hinckley, Jr., entered the president's armpit and lodged in his lung, just an inch away from his heart. In fact, the bullet was also loaded with a fatal lead azide explosive that should have exploded on contact; it failed to do so.

"Whatever happens now, I owe my life to G-d and will try to serve Him in every way I can," the president ended his entry that recounted the day's events.

The president returned to the White House on the twelfth of April. The next day he began to slowly return to work, starting with two-hour workdays.

On April 15th, the Chabad-Lubavitch community was celebrating the 79th birthday of the Rebbe, or righteous memory. The president participated in the celebrations by sending a telegram.¹

April 15, 1981

Dear Rabbi Schneerson:

I am delighted to join with your many friends and followers in wishing you a very Happy Seventy-Ninth Birthday.

Your dedication and devotion to the spiritual and intellectual well-being of the Jewish people are an inspiration to all Americans.



President Reagan waves to crowd, as he leaves the Hilton Hotel, immediately before being shot in an assassination attempt. (The Reagan Library)



President Reagan working in his residence study on April 15th, the day he wrote the letter to the Rebbe. (The Reagan Library)

For more than two centuries, the Chabad-Lubavitch Movement has been a vital force in Jewish life and culture and a source of hope and sustenance during many difficult and tragic moments in Jewish history.

With your emphasis on moral and ethical values and your interest in education, you have contributed greatly to both the intellectual and spiritual development of our nation.

You have my deep-felt respect and admiration.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Ronald Reagan

That evening the Rebbe spoke about the president's birthday wishes:

To all those who offered their birthday wishes and blessings, along with those who will yet send their blessings: may each and every one of you be blessed.

In addition, we "pray for the welfare of the State" where, by divine providence, we reside—its government and the individual elected to lead it. He represents the entire nation.

As such, in addition to the thank you extended to everyone, it is all the more so appropriate to reciprocate the blessings extended by the President of the United States. Especially considering his recent injury.

The Rebbe then spoke of the importance of the President of the United States and the significance of his well wishes:

He is a person upon whom the public relies, and because "the hearts of kings and princes are in the hands of G-d," through him G-d's will is fulfilled for the public good—the good of the country's Jewish citizens and all the others who live here. He therefore deserves – according to the teachings of the Torah of Truth, the Torah of Life – a special and personal blessing.

In truth, his blessing was intended for the entire movement that was brought here by my father-in-law, the Rebbe, known as Lubavitch, or Chabad. But practically, it was extended to an individual who represents the movement.

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With best wishes,

Sincerely,

RONALD REAGAN

The Rebbe added:

The recent assassination attempt is incomprehensible... But this regretful event did occur, and due to the mercies of Heaven the injury is being treated, and the present recovery will be speedy and complete.

This part of the talk could be [seen here](#).

The Rebbe's Response

By the Grace of G-d

12 Nissan, 5741

(April 16, 1981)

Brooklyn, N.Y.

President Ronald Reagan

The White House

Washington

Greeting and Blessing:

Thank you very much, dear Mr. President, for your good wishes on the occasion of my birthday.

As I noted in my remarks at the annual celebration last night, your kind and thoughtful congratulatory message is doubly reassuring. While all of us are still under impact of the recent trying days for you and the Nation, in connection with the demented attempt on your life (Heaven forefend!), it is remarkable, and most gratifying, that the President has been able to give personal attention also to matters which, under the circumstances, might have justifiably been postponed, or overlooked.

Your message, particularly in reference to the importance of emphasizing moral and ethical values in education, is as meaningful as it is timely. It is heartening to know that you, Mr. President, and your administration are committed to upgrading the education of all the citizens of this country.

Please be assured that we in the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, along with all good citizens of this country, continue to pray for your rapid and complete recovery, and for your robust health consistently thereafter, so that you can carry out the awesome responsibilities of the President of this great and leading Nation in the world. In keeping with our basic belief that everything is by Divine Providence, how much more so being elected to the highest office in the land, we are convinced that G-d has endowed you with the capabilities and strength to carry out your G-d-given responsibilities in the fullest measure, with joy and gladness of heart.

There is no better way in which I can reciprocate your good wishes than by reiterating the Divine promise to our Patriarch Abraham, "I will bless them that bless thee" ([Gen. 12:3](#)). May you and the

First Lady and all your family be blessed with all good from the Source of all blessings.

With utmost esteem and blessing,

Cordially,

M. Schneerson

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ביום הולדתו ה-...
לרב מנחם מ. שניידר
ביום שישי
ב-...
בבני ברק

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With utmost esteem and blessing,

Cordially
M. Schneerson

FOOTNOTES

1. Yaakov Shapiro from Jewish Educational Media (JEM) shared the telegram with us.

By Dovid Zaklikowski



Dovid Zaklikowski is a freelance journalist living in Brooklyn. Dovid and his wife Chana Raizel are the proud parents of four: Motti, Meir, Shaina & Moshe Binyomin.

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