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Did Schneerson reluctantly choose his life?

The Rebbe

By Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman | Princeton University Press | 382 pages | \$29.95

One doesn't know quite what to make of Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman's new biography of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. On the one hand, the book fills a considerable void in the nonexistence of any serious biography of one of the towering religious figures of the 20th century. On the other hand, as one reads the book one wonders whether the subject of the biography is the same rebbe whom the world came to know and admire for pioneering Jewish outreach in the modern age and being the figure most responsible for the global resurgence in Jewish affiliation.

Full disclosure, I consider myself a student and hassid of the rebbe, and thus cannot be completely objective about what is essentially a critical biography of a man whom I revere as a spiritual guide and teacher. But if this book is not for people like me – great admirers of the rebbe who are alienated by the almost divine veneration accorded him by some and welcome a humanizing portrait, then whom is it for?

Heilman and Friedman's central thesis can be summed up as follows. Schneerson, son of a renowned rabbinic scholar and scion of a distinguished hassidic family, was never completely engaged by his hassidic upbringing, preferring instead the modernizing and secularizing influences that made such significant inroads among young Jewish intellectuals in early 20th-century Russia and Europe. The rebbe's dream was to live the life of a bourgeois European intellectual and become an engineer. He yearned not for the hassidic study halls of Warsaw or Lubavitch but for the intellectual cafes of Berlin and Paris. As such, he chose, according to the authors, to trim his beard, wear modern suits and distance himself from the hassidic community in Paris where he and his wife, the daughter of the previous rebbe whose place Schneerson would eventually fill, lived after their marriage.

The rebbe's ultimate goal was to be a successful engineer. However, after fleeing Hitler to the US and the court of his father-in-law, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson, in New York, he gradually accepted the undeniable facts that he was a 40-something immigrant with bad English and little chance of making significant inroads as a successful engineer. Hence, after his father-in-law passed away in July 1950, he reluctantly accepted that a career as a hassidic rebbe would have to do.

I don't buy it.

I watched the rebbe lead Lubavitch since I was nine years old. It was a herculean undertaking with responsibilities that would boggle the mind. It meant keeping up with and responding to thousands of personal letters each week; overseeing a global empire of thousands of Chabad synagogues, schools, teaching colleges, orphanages and drug rehabilitation centers, most of which the rebbe, through his emissaries, built; meeting each week with dozens of people privately to discuss their most personal issues; giving a weekly (and sometimes twice weekly) public oration that lasted, on average, for four hours through which the rebbe gave masterful scholarly discourses without a single written note or book; and then standing on his feet, well into his late 80s, every Sunday for hours on end giving thousands of pilgrims a dollar in order to meet them face to face and inspire them to do good deeds.

Are we really to believe that a man who utterly transformed the face of Judaism worldwide and who, by the authors' own admission, changed Chabad from a small hassidic group that had been decimated by Hitler into a global powerhouse of Jewish outreach achieved all these things by reluctantly choosing this life because he couldn't be an engineer?

AND THEN there is the issue of the rebbe's scholarship. In an expert analysis that comes at the beginning of the book, Heilman and Friedman explain how the rebbe, rather than his much-favored brother-in-law, Shmaryahu Gurary, ended up as leader of Chabad. One of their principal arguments is that the rebbe, who was largely an unknown quantity to the hassidim, won them over through his considerable scholarship, both

of the great Jewish texts in general and Chabad Hassidism in particular. Indeed, during his lifetime the rebbe had many detractors in the yeshiva world who accused him of watering down Judaism by reaching out to the ignorant and to the unaffiliated.

I remember my encounters with many of these detractors when I would put tefillin on IDF soldiers on Rehov Ben-Yehuda in Jerusalem. They would shout at me that I was bringing holy Jewish articles into places where women were dressed for the beach. Even the rebbe's most inflamed critics agreed that he was a scholar of international standing with a photographic knowledge of the great Jewish texts. Yet the authors make no effort whatsoever to explain how he acquired that knowledge. On the contrary, in their portrayal he never attends any formal yeshiva and spends most of his time trying to get into various universities and polytechnics in Berlin and Paris.

In explaining the rebbe's vast erudition versus the authors' insistence that Torah study and Judaism never really engaged him in his youth, I am reminded of the famous Mark Twain quote about his father. "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

Clearly Heilman and Friedman believe that a similarly miraculous transformation gripped the rebbe when he reluctantly accepted that, as a failed architect with no career prospects, he would now be forced to simply emerge as one of the world's greatest Jewish scholars and most revolutionary leaders – by default. Indeed, this constitutes the biography's fatal flaw.

The biggest question about the rebbe pertains to his success. How did a man from Russia, with long beard and black coat, leading a small group of hassidic followers who had no secular education and the most pitiful of resources, create the single most influential movement in modern Jewish history and rescue Judaism from an inexorable decline? The book not only offers next to no insight into that most profound conundrum, but actually stymies the investigation by shockingly asserting that in his formative years the rebbe lacked any real passion for Judaism.

Indeed, in the same way that any honest reader of my review will have to conclude that I have something of an ax to grind against two authors who insinuate that the rebbe pretended to be something he was not, the same would have to be true of readers of the book. They would have to conclude that the authors started with an agenda for which they then sought facts to support, namely, that the rebbe was just a little bit fraudulent in portraying himself as a leader obsessed with Jewish observance when, in his own youth, he was not all that interested himself.

The facts they use to support the thesis seem tangential and inconsequential at best. There is the fact that the rebbe never had formal yeshiva training and that at his own wedding he changed out of his long black rabbi's jacket into a modern brown suit. There is also the fact that, according to the authors, he chose an apartment in Paris that was a few miles away from the hassidic community. Finally, there is the fact that he studied in university and sought to become an engineer. For the authors this is definitive proof that his interest in modernity by far outweighed his interest in Judaism.

But is that the only plausible explanation? Can one not equally posit that this great intellectual had a passion for both Jewish and secular learning? I know I do. And it was a passion that he would make much use of once he became the world's foremost rabbi, regularly meeting with secular Jewish intellectuals upon whom he made a profound impact because he was so well versed in both disciplines.

The wall that the authors build between a life of strict religious observance and the life of an engaged European intellectual is made not of brick but of Styrofoam, yet on that is built the entire premise of their book.

None of this means that Heilman and Friedman's biography is without merit (especially since they say such nice things about me and my 11 years as the rebbe's emissary at Oxford University).

On the contrary, I welcome their humanizing portrait of the rebbe. I was edified to discover the actual facts of his sojourn in Berlin and Paris and how he integrated himself into intellectual European life and saw profound merit in his engineering studies. This forward-looking embrace of modernity would later constitute the principal reason for Chabad's unparalleled success, a unique synthesis of uncompromising Jewish adherence matched with a passion to utilize all modern means by which to propagate a Jewish message. Whereas other Jewish religious groups – most notably Satmar – dismissed the modern, secular world as utterly devoid of redeeming merit, the rebbe saw its unqualified godly potential.

To be sure, there are members of Chabad who wish to deny the rebbe's modern

personality and wish to consign him to the Jewish insularity that they themselves embrace. There are likewise elements in Chabad that wish to almost deify the rebbe and raise him to a level of total human perfection. Chabad is not a monolithic movement. It certainly has its fanatics. But people like me followed the rebbe because of his thorough understanding of, and engagement with, the modern world. But Heilman and Friedman set up a straw man – that hassidic and modern life were in conflict in the rebbe's identity – one that most educated hassidim would completely reject.

WHERE HEILMAN and Friedman excel is in separating fact from fiction in the rebbe's life. I was never interested in him as great miracle-worker. Less so was I interested in him as messiah of Israel (he clearly was not since he died without fulfilling the messianic prophecies). Rather, my love for the rebbe, which remains unchanged and undiminished, stemmed from his consummate humanity: his total devotion to people in need, his abiding love for children, his availability to people like myself when we came to him with our shattered hearts. In inspiring me to give my life to my people he lent my existence purpose. If I am anything today, it is because I had before me his personal example of utter selflessness, which had me believe that I too could do battle with my ego.

Most of all I was moved by the rebbe's humility and utter lack of any materialistic impulse. He was the most famous and by far the most powerful rabbi in the world, able to create and bring down Israeli governments from across the Atlantic, but for the last years of his life, at the height of his power, he lived literally in his office. He never once, in 40 years of leadership, took a single vacation or day off. He insisted on meeting rich and poor alike every Sunday as he stood on his feet to make ordinary people feel like they mattered. And he did all this wearing shoes with holes in them because his work was never motivated by personal gain or impulse.

Does that mean he was perfect? Of course not. He was a human being like the rest of us. But it might explain why, as the authors seem to miss, he did not advertise his Jewish devotion and scholarship in his formative years, dressing down and seeking to be under the radar, until, by virtue of the very public role that he was forced to adopt as the global leader of Chabad, his sharp talents came into public focus.

In that sense I am grateful to the authors for a profoundly human biography that will hopefully spur a whole new literature on the rebbe as man rather than angel and as person rather than saint.

A version of this review was first published in the New York Jewish Week. The writer is author of 23 books, including his newest work, Renewal: A Guide to the Values-Filled Life which is being published this month by Basic Books. www.shmuley.com



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