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Book Review: The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menache

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Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton University Press, 2010) pp. 343, \$29.95

One should never begin a book review with a confession—and certainly not with two – but in fairness to my readers I must.

In 1990 when discussions of the Rebbe's role as Messiah were reaching a feverish pitch, I was in the middle of building the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I remarked to a young colleague who was having great difficulty finishing his doctorate that he should read an earlier work entitled *When Prophecy Fails*, the influential sociological study of what happens when a prediction that the world was coming to an end by a date certain fails to materialize. Sociologists had read a prediction by a religious leaders that on a certain date in 1956 the world was to go to end and decided to investigate. Their reasoning simple: either the world would end and therefore, they would be present at its end and have no need to write a book doctorate or if the world did not end, they would be present at the moment of acute disappointment and be able to study the dynamics of what happens when prophecy fails.

I told my would-be Ph.D. to become a fly on the wall at 770 Eastern Parkway. If the Rebbe is the Messiah, then he would witness his revelation. And if not – a scenario I deemed far more likely—than he would hear all of the justifications that will be offered to account for the unrealized prediction. My colleague did not follow my advice; it would neither be his first time nor his last. So even vicariously, I could not participate in one of the most interesting stories of late 20th century Jewish life.

When Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, the two most distinguished sociologists of contemporary Orthodox Judaism set out to write this book, I was green with envy. They would combine their considerable talents and learning to bear on arguably the most fascinating, perhaps even the most successful, late 20th century Jewish religious leader. Yet I also begin the book with trepidation wondering would they be equal to the task. Could they enter the inner courtyards of Chabad, would they be granted to the access? Would they be able to pierce the mysteries surrounding the Rebbe? Could they dare write history and not hagiography and could they as practicing Orthodox Jews withstand the pressure that such a controversial book would invite? My fears were unfounded. They have done an admirable job.

Heilman and Friedman devote almost half the book to the early life and to Menachem Mendel Schneerson ascent to office. A cousin of the previous Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson married the Rebbe's younger daughter Chaya Moussia and chose to keep his distance – physical as well as spiritual—from the world of Chabad, living in Germany before the rise of Hitler and in Paris during the 1930 where he studied engineering. He was not to be found in Chabad circles and apart from returning to his father-in-law's home for Passover and for the High Holidays he was little affiliated with the small Hasidic community either in Berlin or in Paris. Heilman and Friedman measure the distance between where the Schneerson's dwelled and the Hasidic worlds of Berlin and Paris, both literally to the tenth of a mile and figuratively. His wife wanted little part in the entourage of a Rebbe and would often described herself even in later years as Mrs. Schneerson of President Street, a reference to their private place of residence rather than the now famous capital of Chabad 770 Eastern Parkway. The secular religious divide, which so characterizes our age occurred within the family in the early decades of the previous century. It is interesting to note how tempting was such a choice even for scions of the most famous of Hasidic families.

Menchem Mendel was not expected to succeed his father-in-law. He had chosen a secular rather than a religious path. In retrospect Chabad speaks of his secret missions on behalf of previous Rebbe, stories are told, but they lack specificity but no documentation is offered and while Heilman and Friedman are too polite to say it directly, they remain skeptical.

As the direct male descendent, the Rebbe's grandson Shalom Dov Baer [later known as Barry] Ghourary was first in line, but having served his grandfather loyally early in his youth, he wanted no part of the Hasidic mantle and religiously disqualified himself from serving as Rebbe. Only later in life did he lay claim his familial inheritance much

to the chagrin of Chabad and his Uncle, the Rebbe, seeking with the support of his mother, the Rebbe's older daughter, to take possession of his grandfather's library which he regarded as a familial rather than an institutional legacy. The American Court sustained Chabad's institutional claims, perhaps not quite understanding that the distinction between personal and institutional property does not apply to charismatic religious leadership where person and institution are joined. In a not dissimilar case, Rev. Moon, who declared himself the Messiah, was found guilty of tax evasion.

Had Menachem Mendel – I mean no disrespect but he was not yet the Rebbe—been a more successful engineer or had the events of World War II not intervened forcing Chabad to relocate to the United States and Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, then the Rebbe, to flee with key members of his court, the Jewish people would have lost one of its major religious leaders. The escape of the Friediker [previous] Rebbe was implausible but it has been well documented by a secular historian Brian Mark Rigg. The Rebbe [Yosef Yitzhak] was rescued from German-occupied Warsaw by order of the head of German intelligence Admiral Canaris, who sent an intelligence officer of Jewish origin to drive him and key members of his entourage to Berlin and from there to his Riga, Lithuania, whose citizenship the Rebbe possessed and on to New York. Chabad Hasidim regard his rescue as miraculous. A secular historian who traced all of the documentation in German and American archives regards it as only a little less so. Menachem Mendel and the Rebbe's daughter were left behind in Paris. Herculean efforts were made to save Chaya Moussia and her husband who came to the United States in 1941. With his hope for success as an engineer dashed, Menachem Mendel was drawn in to the orbit of Chabad, which was desperately in need of reengineering in the New World. Heilman and Friedman come closer to describing it as a "career move" rather than as a religious response to the Jewish world's destruction that he had so all pervasive within his world.

Barry's father, the Rebbe's faithful son-in-law Shamaryahu Gourary, who was constantly at the Rebbe's side, was the next logical successor. He had done his duty, paid his dues, served his master faithfully put in his time, he had married the eldest daughter and he had never been at a distance from Chabad. But he was less than charismatic. Perhaps the charisma of office would have in time overshadowed his lack of personal charisma. Heilman and Friedman trace in great detail the ascent of Menachem Mendel Schneerson to Rebbe and his consolidation of power, during the year after the previous Rebbe's death. He displayed his religious credentials, his understanding of the unique Torah of Chabad, he waited his time – there was a one year interval between Yosef Yitzhak's death and Menachem Mendel's ascent—and he had to assert continuity of mission – a messianic mission that seemed incredible in 1950s. The previous Rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak, had preached of the coming of the Messiah. In moving to assume leadership of Chabad, Menachem Mendel doubled down, he would succeed where his father-in-law had not.

Heilman and Friedman do not shy away from the Messianic claims of Chabad, which they portray neither as peripheral nor as personal idiosyncrasy of the Menachem Mendel but as essential to the teaching of his predecessor and to his own work. The Holocaust served to underscore the Messianic urgency because if it the battle of Gog and Magog, the apocalyptic struggle at the end of days, only then could it be understood and accepted as part of the divine plan for redemption.

The Rebbe had a rival for his Messianic claims, one so deeply attractive to the secular world and one with its own religious legitimation. Zionism was actually returning Jews to the Promised Land, redeeming the Jews and the Land, providing hope and inspiration. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook had described it as the "dawn of redemption," words incorporated into the prayer for the State of Israel. The authors are most persuasive when they depict the Rebbe skillful use of Zionism for his own religious ends. By meeting with Israeli leaders, who always travelled to Brooklyn, by sending commands for prayer and for fixing mezzuzot, he would lay claim religiously to the victories of 1967 and 1973, for the safety of Israel under attack from Saddam Hussein's Iraq, as his own, religious victories. Generals had not won the war, the Rebbe had. Saddam Hussein had not failed in his attacks on Israel; the Rebbe had protected Israel.

Though he never set foot in Israel, his impact there was significant and he fought vigorously on the "Who is a Jew issue" that threatened and continues to divide world Jewry. We can trace the hardening of the Who is a Jew issue within the Haredi community back to the Rebbe's staunch leadership.

The most poignant sections of the book are devoted to the Rebbe personal life, his relationship with his wife, perhaps the only one in his inner circle in the years before her death who related to him as a person, not a Rebbe and not as Messiah. They write of the Rebbe's relationship with his predecessor, his urgent visits to his grave and communion with the dead and of the debilitating stroke that felled him as his disciples would not interrupt him even as he tarried, thus deprived him of the immediate treatment required to overcome a stroke. They fault his medical care: the Messiah Rebbe did not go to the hospital but the hospital came to him until he was beyond treatment. And they see his deteriorating physical condition as invigorating his religious movement, who sought to make manifest his messianic mission before his physical end.

But they give deep respect to the work of the Rebbe's shulachim [emissaries] – male and female. The Shulachim go to even the most remote places on the globe where Jews are to be found to transform the Jewish world deed by deed, mitzvah by mitzvah. Were Heilman and Friedman to employ business terminology, which they scrupulously avoid, they could have described Chabad as a "name brand" and the emissaries as franchisees, taking root in their territories, providing services for the religiously observant but more importantly hoping to inspire the non-observant to repent. It is a formidable operation, surely, the most effective in the entire Jewish world. Heilman and Friedman do not comment on the role of non-Jews in the world of Chabad, in the theology of the Chabad. They do not mention except where they acknowledge the Rebbe's global significance and empower the mission of Chabad.

Still, one must wonder about those who change the world, yet seek to remain unchanged by the world they encounter. Even the Red Heifer, the Biblical offering that the Priest sacrificed to purify the impure, contaminated him until evening.

The authors are clear, but without quite saying it that succession in the United States is corporate rather than charismatic. They divide the two competing factions in Chabad not by their belief in whether the Rebbe was – and is – the Messiah but rather in how manifest they should make that claim, whether to proclaim it for all too hear in advertisements in the New York Times and elsewhere or keep it as a whisper campaign lest those who are skeptical of such an assertion actively oppose Chabad. They call this faction of Chabad restrained messianism. David Berger has written of the scandal of contemporary Orthodoxy, which tacitly ignores the messianic claims. And one wonders, if as Chabad learned how to conduct a business in the contemporary world, did they not subconsciously absorb some of the strategies of early Christians when an earlier Jewish Messianic figure failed to complete his mission. Is the strategy for dealing with an incomplete messianic mission something deeply rooted in Judaism or it is something subconsciously absorbed from Christianity. Chabad refuses to speak of the Rebbe in the past; his date of death – the third of Tammuz is regarded as a day of ascent. They pray at his tomb and ask for Divine intercession. Some sing of “our Master and our Teacher, our Rabbi, our Creator the King Messiah.” “Creator” is to say the least theologically problematic.

And what of the future? Chabad are now emissaries without a center. Should the Messiah tarry, it will become more difficult to Chabad to assert its messianic belief convincingly to others and perhaps even to themselves. If the contemporary age religious revival, which usually comes in waves, run its course then one wonders.

Right now the all seeing Rebbe guarantees the franchise’s brand. One wonders about its duration and its relationship over time with the rest of the Jewish people. But Heilman and Friedman tell a powerful story of the most unpredictable and religiously interesting Jewish phenomena of our day. They allow us all to be a fly on the wall.

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