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## BOOK REVIEW: Charting religious leader's faith

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**THE REBBE: THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON**

**By Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman**

Princeton University Press, \$29.95, 343 pages

From 1950 to his death in 1994, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh of the line of Lubavitcher rebbes, or grand rabbis, revived and transformed the almost moribund tiny group of Hasidim - mystical ultra-Orthodox Jews - that he inherited from his father-in-law, the sixth rebbe.

Against all odds and expectations, he became the most famous and influential Orthodox Jewish leader to non-Orthodox Jews in the world. He dispatched thousands of his representatives, or "shlichim" - the "sent ones" - to the most obscure corners of the world. Eventually, this led to a Lubavitch takeover of much of Jewish life in Russia and Britain.

The rebbe used a potent but notoriously unstable spiritual shortcut to motivate his followers and admirers. He was genuinely convinced the messiah - "moshiach" to Orthodox Jews - would come in his lifetime. He appears to have become increasingly convinced in his extreme old age that he was the moshiach himself.

His followers certainly thought so, and they made no secret of the fact. Many New York Lubavitchers set their telephone beepers to inform them immediately when the rebbe declared himself the messiah. The Lubavitch movement even built a meticulously exact replica of the rebbe's revered home at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in Kfar Chabad, the Lubavitch village in Israel near Tel Aviv, so that he would feel right at home when he flew to Israel in eternal triumph.

Even the rebbe's death in 1994 did not pop the bubble of messianic fervor. As noted religious scholars Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman write in this **superb new biography**, the rebbe's death was simply denied and transmogrified in a bizarre echo of the faith of the first Christians that Jesus had truly risen. So, they believed, had their rebbe. Many of them still do. Meanwhile, the Lubavitch movement continues to flourish in New York, Israel and around the world.

**Mr. Heilman and Mr. Friedman are the perfect guides to tell this story. Their book is a model of meticulous research and balanced, wise assessments.**

The authors document how when Rabbi Schneerson and his wife were in their 30s and 40s, they were devout Orthodox Jews but also lived cosmopolitan, cultured lives in Paris and Berlin. Indeed, it was Rabbi Schneerson's long experience of living in both worlds while remaining a devout, believing Lubavitch Hasid that filled him with the confidence that his followers could do the same thing. And he was right.

Mr. Heilman and Mr. Friedman explain how the rebbe was a master of spiritual judo. He was extraordinarily

adept at turning the catastrophic failures of his movements and his revered predecessor into astonishing successes. The sixth rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson's father-in-law, had fiercely opposed Zionism and the creation of the state of Israel. The seventh rebbe reversed both stands and claimed with remarkable chutzpah that Israel's victories were won by the prayers and religious observances of his followers rather than by the soldiers who actually fought the battles.

The sixth rebbe taught that the Communist persecutions of Judaism in the Soviet Union and the Holocaust were the birth pangs of the messiah who surely would come before the decade of the 1940s was out. When this didn't happen, the seventh rebbe simply proclaimed the messiah could only come when Jews became strictly Orthodox and when the spiritual precepts of Lubavitch were spread to the farthest corners of the world.

Mr. Heilman and Mr. Friedman note that the greatest skeptics of the rebbe's messianic teaching were the other ultra-Orthodox Jewish rabbinic leaders, mainly centered in Israel and Brooklyn. The Lubavitch movement, as the authors document, remains one of the smaller Hasidic groups. The dramatic revival of ultra-Orthodox, or haredi, Judaism in Israel and the United States would have occurred without Lubavitch. Lubavitch's prime impact was in proclaiming its version of ultra-Orthodox practice and messianic passion to the wider Jewish world.

The authors tell a riveting tale. No better account of this amazing saga of faith, hope, triumph and delusional madness can be imagined. To enjoy this book and learn its profound lessons, you don't have to be Jewish.

*Martin Sieff, chief global analyst for the Globalist, is the author of "The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Middle East" (Regnery, 2008). He is a blogger for Fox News Opinion Forum.*

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