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The Man behind the Messiah

By JOE BOBKER
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The biography of a man who was able to move and mesmerize masses of Jews

WHAT A MASTERFUL book-marketing ploy. Add the word “afterlife” to the title, sprinkle it with such incendiary chapter titles as “Death and Resurrection,” stir with a disproportionate focus on a reckless and irresponsible faction of misguided Chabad disciples who continue, 16 years after his death, to peddle the idea that their mortal leader is still immortal and voila! we have guaranteed attention and sales for a dry work that somehow reduces a man larger in life to smaller in death.

“The Rebbe: the life and afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson” is a mischievous biography of the life and death and life of the last admor or leader (1902-1994) that Chabad hasids will ever have. Samuel Heilman, a sociologist at City University, New York, and Menachem Friedman, a professor emeritus at Bar-Ilan University, Israel, have ensured that all future historians will unfairly dwell on Schneerson’s “failure” of only being an extraordinarily gifted Jewish leader and not a supernatural messiah.

He may not have been able to leap a New York skyscraper in a single bound, but here was a man who was able to move and mesmerize masses of Jews, old and young, religious or secular, rich or poor, a far greater accomplishment.

I don’t blame the authors. They have very cleverly tapped into a semantic thicket of Chabad’s own making. Yes, Judaism is a religion where the messiah is expected at any moment but there is no Judaic tradition that the messiah will live, die, be buried and then resurrected to complete his messianic mission.

Nevertheless, the authors have done a reasonably good job at portraying a very complicated subject. In fairness, this study of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe is not, as some Lubavitcher diehards would have us believe, “a rebbe-bashing hatchet job.” These highly emotional folks would be up in arms even if the book contained nothing but blank pages inside.

Why? Friedman will never be forgiven for having testified against the rebbe during the messy trials in the 1980s over the Chabad library.

The authors faced an insurmountable problem: Chabad do not allow researchers free access to their archives. Further, as non-hasidic modern-Orthodox Jews, they can no more write meaningfully about a rebbe than any well-intentioned hasid could write objectively about his own heilige tzaddik, or holy man.

It was an elderly Russian Chabadnik in Sydney that gave me my first experience of what it meant to be a hasid. In 1970, I was a young yeshiva student returning from Jerusalem to Down Under via New York. It was the eve of Pesah and some of my “Lubab” friends from Melbourne took me to see Schneerson (whom I met twice more over the next few decades). When he heard I was from Sydney, the rebbe gave me a small glass vial of red wine and asked me to deliver it to Rav Perlow, a shochet or ritual slaughterer, in Bondi Beach.

I wrapped it carefully in a white handkerchief but, alas, by the time I landed the vial had broken. Perlow was saddened but eagerly took the (now red) damp handkerchief to his lips, wrung it for a drop or two, and made a blessing.

I then understood the definition of a hasid.

THE BOOK EXCELS AND FAILS AT the same time. These two reputable scholars unfortunately play trivial pursuit (wondering why Lubavitchers use the term shluchim instead of shlichim for emissaries), present hearsay as facts from estranged sources (the rebbe's vindictive and bitter nephew, Barry Gourary), and sometimes wade into the cynical end of the research pool with tabloid-style innuendos and suppositions.

Their attempt to excite interest by painting young Schneerson, a scion of hasidic royalty, with the brush of secular flirtation is not very convincing. Does the newly-wed Menachem Mendel really prefer theaters to Talmud in Berlin? Bars over Bible studies in Paris? There is no doubt that the rebbe had an early independent streak. He donned modern instead of traditional hasidic clothing after his wedding and attended secular colleges (the University of Berlin and the Sorbonne) instead of yeshiva.

However, the authors ask us to assume that his intellectual curiosity for worldly matters (maths, engineering, philosophy) far away from home meant that the young newly-weds were covertly just another pair of budding yuppies attracted to smoke-filled intellectual Parisian cafés.

What I found strange was an absence of the linkage between the man and his undisputed scholarship, encyclopedic and photographic memory, and voluminous writings. Schneerson left behind a staggering quantity of material, so vast that it could easily carry Lubavitch forward a few hundred years.

But Heilman and Friedman do not mine the collective treasure chest of 39 sets of "Likkutei Sichot" containing thousands of hours of "talks," all given without notes, several hundred hasidic discourses (ma'amarim), five incisive diary journals, and a huge correspondence filling over 200 volumes.

The authors defend this inexplicable exclusion by saying their study is a sociological one, not an evaluation of his scholarship. This is nonsense. Writing a biography of the Lubavitcher Rebbe while overlooking his immersion in Torah and hasidic thought is akin to reviewing a play with eyes closed.

HERE ARE THE FACTS: THE seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe was a complicated multifaceted personality, a mosaic of opposites.

Although by nature a shy introvert, he had no objection to his image being posted everywhere, from full-page ads in The New York Times to posters on your local pizza store wall.

He had natural charisma and leadership qualities but during the 12 years he was in Paris and Berlin, from the time of his marriage in 1929 to Chaya Mushka, the 27-year-old middle daughter of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn (Rayyatz) until 1941, he so shunned the limelight that hardly anybody remembers him.

Though born in the outback of Ukrainian Russian towns in Nikolayev, he somehow had an unusually sharp instinct as to what would and would not appeal to American Jewish teenagers. He went to university but discouraged his followers from doing the same. He was driven to transform his small group of disciples into a phenomenal global powerhouse of kiruv (outreach) but himself lived in comparative seclusion, not even visiting other Torah sages and hasidic rebbes.

With little English (he knew French after gaining an engineering degree in Paris), he led a stunning resurgence of interest in Judaism for thousands of disenchanting Jews but couldn't convince his younger

brother Yisrael Aryeh Leib and sister-in-law Regina to keep Shabbat.

He had no materialistic impulses nor (with the exception of the Chabad library) sought assets or personal gain, yet his organization accumulated significant holdings.

He was short in physical stature but a giant in presence. Often in private pain mainly because he had no children, he was stoic in public (“my husband is not scared of pain; he is scared of Rosh Hashana,” his wife was quoted as saying). He was inundated with visitors and surrounded by adulatory crowds but was perennially lonely without a single confidant or friend after his wife passed away in 1988. He is quoted incessantly but had no sense of humor nor ready one-line witticisms as did other rebbes.

He was a deep thinker and incredibly erudite yet communicated easily with the common Jew. He did nothing to undermine the Jews of Israel but refused to visit their state. Focused like a laser beam on his academic studies in Europe, he nevertheless made a transformative mid-life career change and took his father-in-law's place in January 1951. He was convinced the messiah's arrival was imminent but still wrote a will, just in case. He was a superb planner and organizer but failed to plan for his own demise and took no steps to name a successor.

And he was lucky.

The campaign to bring “Messiah Now!” differed from all his predecessors in that he had the luxury of conducting it in “peace time.”

Schneerson and his community faced no existential physical threats and were free to exercise their faith in their new land of freedom and liberty for all. Gone were the nights spent in fear of pogroms; gone was the grinding poverty; gone were the terrorist Cheka secret police.

And more: His leadership coincided with more than just a lack of official anti-Semitism (which is now changing). In a post-Hitlerian world of guilt, the Western powers welcomed opportunities to ease their consciences. This included supporting Chabad activities ranging from lighting Hanukka menoras at the White House to lobbying the US Congress to recognize him on their calendar.

The rebbe also had one weapon that none of his predecessors had: a technological revolution which allowed him to enter the world of virtual reality. A talk to Jews in Crown Heights simultaneously ignited enthusiasm from Cape Town to Coogee, Sydney. With his keen interest in the sciences, he immediately grasped the potential of radio, tape, fax machine, video conferencing, and Internet, which propelled Schneerson to become the most famous, influential, and controversial celebrity rebbe in hasidic history.

THE AUTHORS MENTION THE Third Reich (how could they not?) in passing but it is obvious that Schneerson's very being was scorched by this traumatic event.

The young Schneersons were forced to abandon their dreams of academia and living in Europe, and flee from Paris to Vichy to Nice and finally to Chaya Mushka's father's court in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. His grandmother and other family members were murdered by the Nazis. His younger brother (Dov Ber) was murdered in an institution and his body dumped into a mass grave at Dnepropetrovsk in the fall of 1941. His wife's younger sister (Sheina), her husband (Mendel Horenstein) and their adopted son were murdered in the gas chambers of Treblinka in 1942.

Schneerson was also profoundly affected by how his father-in-law, whom he revered and never contradicted, reacted to the abrupt end of European Jewry.

Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson was convinced that World War II was the actual apocalyptic messianism that the Torah warned about.

Perhaps it was not just the “birth pangs of the messiah (hevlei mashiah)” but the delivery itself? When he died in January 1950, debilitated by his time spent in Soviet prisons, his son-in-law never acknowledged that he had died in the conventional sense and believed his presence was still active among them. And herein lay the seeds of the “moshiach campaign” which grew in size and intensity in proportion to his successor’s astonishing successes in the Jewish world.

But neither the sixth nor the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbes were messiahs.

Redemption was trumped by reality.

By the time the former fled the Nazis from Warsaw, he was already extremely ill. Upon arrival in New York, in March 1940, the 60- year-old was wheeled off the boat suffering from multiple sclerosis, paralysis, and in still in pain from the tortures he endured in the Soviet prisons. He died on January 28, 1950.

His successor son-in-law later suffered a massive heart attack in 1977, was silenced and semi-paralyzed by a debilitating stroke in 1992, and died on June 12, 1994, at Beth Israel Medical Center, Manhattan. Both are buried at Montefiore Cemetery, Queens, New York.

Any potential heirs? Not as long as some believe Menachem Mendel is coming back soon. Seven is a mystical number in hasidism, and Lubavitch tradition believes that the “seventh” is the last before the advent of the messiah. More pragmatically, there is no one even remotely capable of taking his place. With his passing, the long line of wise and indefatigable Chabad-Lubavitch rebbes starting from the 18th century founder Rabbi Shneur Zalman Baruchovitch (der Alter Rebbe) has come to an end.

Yet Schneerson single-handedly counteracted secular American Jewish culture by creating a post-Holocaust Judaism suitable for a Western world. Those influenced by this man’s inspiration and uncanny ability to get Jews to do good deeds include thousands of non- Chabadniks, whether they admit it or not. • Joe Bobker is the author of the ‘Learning and Laughing’ series published by Gefen.

His study on ‘The Rabbis and the Holocaust’ will be published next year.

The Rebbe: the life and afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson

By Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman

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