

# Menachem Mendel Schneerson – “the Lubavitcher Rebbe”

By Joe Spier

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Hasidism had its beginnings in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, a philosophy that moved away from the primacy of Torah study, but without veering from a commitment to Torah, creating a way of Jewish life that emphasized the ability of Jews to move closer to G-d via everything that we do, say and think. In this way, the average observant Jew could feel equal to the scholarly elite. The approach was one of inclusion not exclusion. Over time, a number of branches of Hasidism were established, each branch centered upon the teachings of a particular Rebbe (leader) and usually named after the Rebbe's town. One such movement is Chabad-Lubavitch. Lubavitch is the name of the Russian town in which the movement grew in its infancy and Chabad is a Hebrew acronym, translated into English as “Wisdom, Understanding and Knowledge.”

By the end of the Second World War, the Holocaust had decimated the ranks of Chabad and not many new Jews were drawn to their way of life. The situation was bleak. And then appeared Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Mendel was born in 1902 in Nikolaev, Russia, the son of a renowned Chabad Rabbi, Talmudic and Kabbalistic scholar. During his youth, he received mostly a private Jewish education. By the time of his Bar Mitzvah, Mendel was considered a Torah prodigy. During his teenage years, he immersed himself and conquered the intricacies of Torah study.

In 1928, Mendel married Chaya Mushka, the middle daughter of Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, a distant cousin, the revered sixth Rebbe of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. After their marriage, the couple moved to Berlin where Mendel took courses in mathematics and physics. Escaping the rise of Nazism, the couple left Germany for Paris in 1933. There Mendel became certified as an electrical engineer and then studied mathematics

at the Sorbonne all the while neither neglecting prayer nor religious study. Engagement in both the religious and secular worlds would play a large part in shaping the thinking of the man who would later become the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe.

On June 11, 1940, three days before the Nazis entered Paris, the Schneersons fled to the unoccupied zone in the south of France. They were safe for a while until the Vichy government began carrying out the same anti-Semitic policies as the Nazis. After months of attempting to obtain visas to emigrate to the United States they were able in 1941, with a little behind the scenes help from certain members of the U.S. State Department, to embark for America from Lisbon on one of the last ships to cross the Atlantic before the German U-boat blockade began.

A year earlier Mendel's father-in-law, Yosef Yitzchak, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, his wife, mother, eldest daughter and her husband living in Warsaw, had been rescued from the murderous brutality of the Nazis and sailed for New York. There in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe set up the new world headquarters of Chabad-Lubavitch.

Mendel joined the sixth Rebbe in Crown Heights where he became head of Chabad's educational arm, social service organization and publishing network. Mendel would remain in Crown Heights for the rest of his life.

Yosef Yitzchak died on January 28, 1950. He had no sons nor did he leave a will appointing a successor. There were two contenders to assume the mantle of leadership – the older son-in-law, Shemaryahu Gurary and the younger-son-in-law Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Mendel increasingly appeared to be the better candidate. One year after the death of the sixth Rebbe, Mendel became the seventh Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch. To his followers, he was simply and reverently “the Rebbe”.

It was a difficult time

for Chabad. Their numbers were numerically small. Hasidic Jews were marginalized, believed to be relics of the past who would fade away. The world was different from that of the Rebbe's predecessors in which Jews, hounded and discriminated, ghettoized themselves, to one in which a free society was open to Jews, who so comfortable in their environment would assimilate. The Rebbe would retrieve these Jews one mitzvah at a time.

To comprehend this, one must understand that at the core of Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidism is the messianic vision of the coming of the Moshiach (the Messiah) ushering in the era of redemption, the task of Chabad being to prepare the ground for his imminent arrival by making the world a more godly place. The Rebbe believed that the coming of the Moshiach could only be hastened by the doing of mitzvot (good deeds).

The mission the Rebbe put in place was to send shlichim (emissaries) to every corner of the world wherever Jews could be found, reaching out to minister to the religiously observant and to rehabilitate the non-observant by kindling spiritual consciousness. To engage Jews, urging them to perform one of the Torah mitzvot as simple as donning tefillin, affixing a mezuzah, lighting the Shabbat candles or kindness to others. The doing of just one good deed can usher in the era of the Moshiach. This was the teaching of the Rebbe. It was for the ultra-Orthodox, radical thinking. While other sects were inward looking, shunning the outside, Chabad under the leadership of the Rebbe, would reach out to the modern world to unite it with the teachings of religious Judaism.

So the Rebbe dispatched his shlichim, their number growing over time. They were couples, the men in their trademark snap-brim fedoras and unkempt beards and their modestly dressed wives, having shunned the kerchief to cover their hair, wearing instead attractive wigs that could pass for their own tresses. While else-

where in the Hasidic world, women take a back seat, not so with Chabad. Women are full-fledged emissaries, communal activists working in concert with their husbands, fortifying each other. The couples went out into the world to make new lives for themselves and to light the lamp of Judaism wherever Jews might be, the towns and the cities, students at universities, businesspeople in Shanghai, vacationers in the Virgin Islands, trekkers in Katmandu.

Of great concern to the Rebbe were the Jews locked behind the Communist Soviet Union. He tirelessly fought to keep Judaism alive in that atheistic nation. The Rebbe maintained a covert group of emissaries inside the country, sending them in the guise of tourists and business people. He delivered prayer books, tefillin and Passover matzo. After the fall of Communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Chabad shlichim spread throughout the Eastern bloc, in most places being the only Jewish religious presence. One became chief Rabbi of Russia. In Moscow's Red Square, where once paraded the forces of the evil empire, now is lit the massive distinctive Y shaped Lubavitch Chanukah menorah.

The Y shaped Chanukah menorah has become a symbol of Chabad-Lubavitch. In thousands of cities all over the globe, to celebrate the holiday and publicize the Chanukah miracle, Chabad, on the direction of the Rebbe, illuminates giant Y shaped menorahs during Chanukah in an annual public ceremony attended by dignitaries who are honoured with the actual lighting. Thus, the message of G-d's miracles and the manifestation of religious liberty are brought into the public sphere.

The Rebbe, though decrying secular Zionism advocating a more religious Zionism, was always pro-Israel. From Kfar Chabad (Chabad Village) in central Israel, shlichim go forth all over Israel to increase Torah awareness. Chabad schools operate throughout the country. The Rebbe has expressed overwhelming support for

the Jewish State's military endeavours and condemned consideration of transfers of land as part of any peace process. Scores of Chabadniks live in Israel where they vote and serve in the military. During many Chabad services throughout the world, a prayer for the safety of Israel is recited.

The Rebbe oversaw the building of schools, community centers (Chabad Houses) and youth camps, unthinkable before his leadership. There are 2,181 Chabad institutions in 79 countries around the world and growing. There are more than 200,000 adherents to the movement and many more supporters. Up to a million Jews attend a Chabad service at least once a year. The Rebbe would posthumously be awarded the U.S. Congressional Gold Medal for his “outstanding and enduring contributions



toward world education, morality and acts of charity.”

As his movement expanded and the Rebbe's fame and influence throughout the world grew, leaders in politics, business and religion turned to him for advice. Heads of State, including many of Israel's political leaders would seek him out on matters of national and international importance, attending on the Rebbe at his headquarters in Crown Heights where he rarely left.

Starting in 1986, at the age of 84, every Sunday the Rebbe would stand in front of his study for hours where indefatigably he would greet thousands of his followers; offer each a brief blessing and a crisp one-dollar bill to be donated to charity, a simple lesson in one's obligation to give tzedakah.

Chaya Mushka, the Rebbe's wife passed away in 1988. The couple was

childless. Following a stroke in 1992, the Rebbe's health deteriorated. He was left incapable of speech, only able to respond to questions through head and hand motions. The Rebbe died on June 12, 1994 at the age of 92 and was buried next to the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe at the “Ohel,” the religious shrine in Queens to which today tens of thousands of Jews visit annually, leaving prayers believing that the souls of the two Rebbes maintain a palpable presence there. During his lifetime, the Rebbe would often visit the Ohel seeking inspiration from his predecessor.

Even before the death of the Rebbe, numerous within the Chabad community began to believe that he is the Moshiach. It was said that the Moshiach would come within the seventh generation, that of the Rebbe. The fact that the Rebbe had no heir was evidence that one was not needed. The worldwide influence of Chabad-Lubavitch and the renown of the Rebbe all pointed to his messianic status. Within the movement, there are still many, some more vocal than others, who continue to believe that the Rebbe is the Moshiach, will be resurrected or is in “hiding”.

In any event, some eighteen years after the death of the Rebbe, no successor, no eighth Lubavitcher Rebbe has been anointed. Yet Chabad-Lubavitch is not leaderless. They are led and inspired by the “ruach” (spirit) and the teachings of the Rebbe.

The greatness of the Rebbe is that by matchless vigor, boundless optimism and love for all people, he brought, and through his teachings continues to bring, the light of Judaism into places it never shone before. His lasting legacy is the countless number of Jews that are touched by Chabad programs and outreach. A narrative goes that a businessman once returned from a trip in which he travelled to many places around the world. When asked about his trip he replied, “Wherever I went, I saw two things; Coca Cola and Chabad-Lubavitch.”

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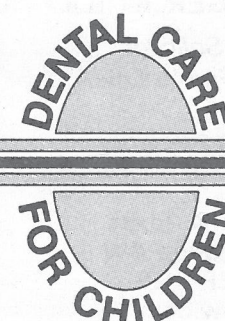
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