Praise for *Turning Judaism Outward*

"Wonderfully written as well as intensely thought provoking, *Turning Judaism Outward* is the most in-depth treatment of the life of the Rebbe ever written. The author has managed to successfully reconstruct the history of one of the most important Jewish religious leaders of the 20th century, whose life has up to now been shrouded in mystery. A compassionate, engaging biography, this magnificent work will open up many new avenues of research."

—Dana Evan Kaplan, author, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal;* editor, *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*

"In contrast to other recent biographies of the Rebbe, Chaim Miller has availed himself of all the relevant textual sources and archival documents to recount the details of one of the more fascinating religious leaders of the twentieth century. Through the voice of the author, even the most seemingly trivial aspect of the Rebbe's life is teeming with interest.... I am confident that readers of Miller's book will derive great pleasure and receive much knowledge from this splendid and compelling portrait of the Rebbe."

—Elliot R. Wolfson, Abraham Lieberman Professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University

"Only truly great biographers have been able to accomplish what Chaim Miller has with this book... I am awed by his work, and am now even more awed than ever before by the Rebbe's personality and prodigious accomplishments."

—Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, Executive Vice President Emeritus, Orthodox Union; Editor-in-Chief, *Koren-Steinsaltz Talmud*

"A fascinating account of the life and legacy of a spiritual master. The author's meticulous scholarship is matched by his love of Torah. This book will inspire many who already know about the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe and many others who don't yet have that privilege."

—Daniel Matt, author of the multi-volume annotated translation of the Zohar, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*

"This well researched and thoroughly documented biography by a leading Chabad scholar presents an integrated account of the life and teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Innumerable details are integrated into an account that brings to life the Rebbe's teachings and influence, without hiding the paradoxes and controversies that were raised by his career. "

—Lawrence H. Schiffman, Edelman Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, New York University; Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Yeshiva University

"A masterful work of scholarship, beautifully written, with new insight into the life of an introverted, brilliant scholar who created the largest and most influential outreach program in Jewish history."

—Rabbi Menachem Genack, CEO Orthodox Union Kosher

"A masterful and erudite biography of the 'Rebbe'.... All who are interested in the life of this remarkable man and leader will profit and be captivated by the work of Rabbi Miller!"

—Chancellor David Ellenson, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion

"Though two decades have passed since the death of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, his messages of love of Torah and for his people continue to inspire so many in the Jewish world. Chaim Miller's meticulous and heartfelt examination of the "Rebbe's" indomitable quests and profound successes will be eagerly read by all those desirous of learning about the life, learning, leadership and legacy of this remarkable rabbinic figure."

—Jeffrey S. Gurock, Libby M. Klaperman Professor of Jewish History, Yeshiva University; author, *Orthodox Jews in America*

"A desperately needed framework that can help anyone who heard about the Rebbe but had too many wrong mental models (and too many literary hindrances) to approach him culturally and spiritually."

—Dr. Domenico Lepore, founder, *Intelligent Management*; author, *Sechel: Logic, Language and Tools to Manage any Organization as a Network*

"There are *tzadikim* whose lives are like the *Song of Songs.* The words and events are explicit and clear, but the mystery, the secret remains unsolved. Rabbi Chaim Miller has written a masterpiece depicting the remarkable life and times of the Lubavitcher Rebbe *z'ya*. While honest and bold, it respects the *sod*, the secret of the towering *tzadik* whose life's song changed the world."

—Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, Congregation Aish Kodesh, Woodmere, NY;
mashpia at Yeshiva University

"Chaim Miller's biography *Turning Judaism Outward*... is not afraid to engage the more complex and difficult questions about "the Rebbe's" life. Using hundreds, perhaps thousands, of documents carefully footnoted, including sermons, official records, and letters, some only published in the past few years, Miller reconstructs the life of a somewhat iconoclastic Hasidic master.... In lucid, loving (but not overly apologetic) prose, Miller tells the very compelling story of a complicated life. I highly recommend it even for those who know little or nothing about the person or the world it describes."

—Shaul Magid, Jay and Jeannie Schottenstein Chair in
Jewish Studies, Indiana University/Bloomington

"An important contribution about an individual who inspired an extremely great number of people. This volume should be widely read."

—Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet, Professor of Rabbinic Literature, Yeshiva University;
author, *The Rav—the World of Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik*

"Miller's new biography of the Rebbe combines several methods of description, testimony, and analysis. He offers a nuanced view of a complex and unique phenomenon in the Jewish religious world."

—Dov Schwartz, Chair, the Interdisciplinary Unit and the
department of Jewish Philosophy, Bar-Ilan University;
author, *Habad's Thought: From Beginning to End*

Also by Chaim Miller

The Kol Menachem Chumash – Gutnick Edition

Rambam: Principles of Faith – Slager Edition

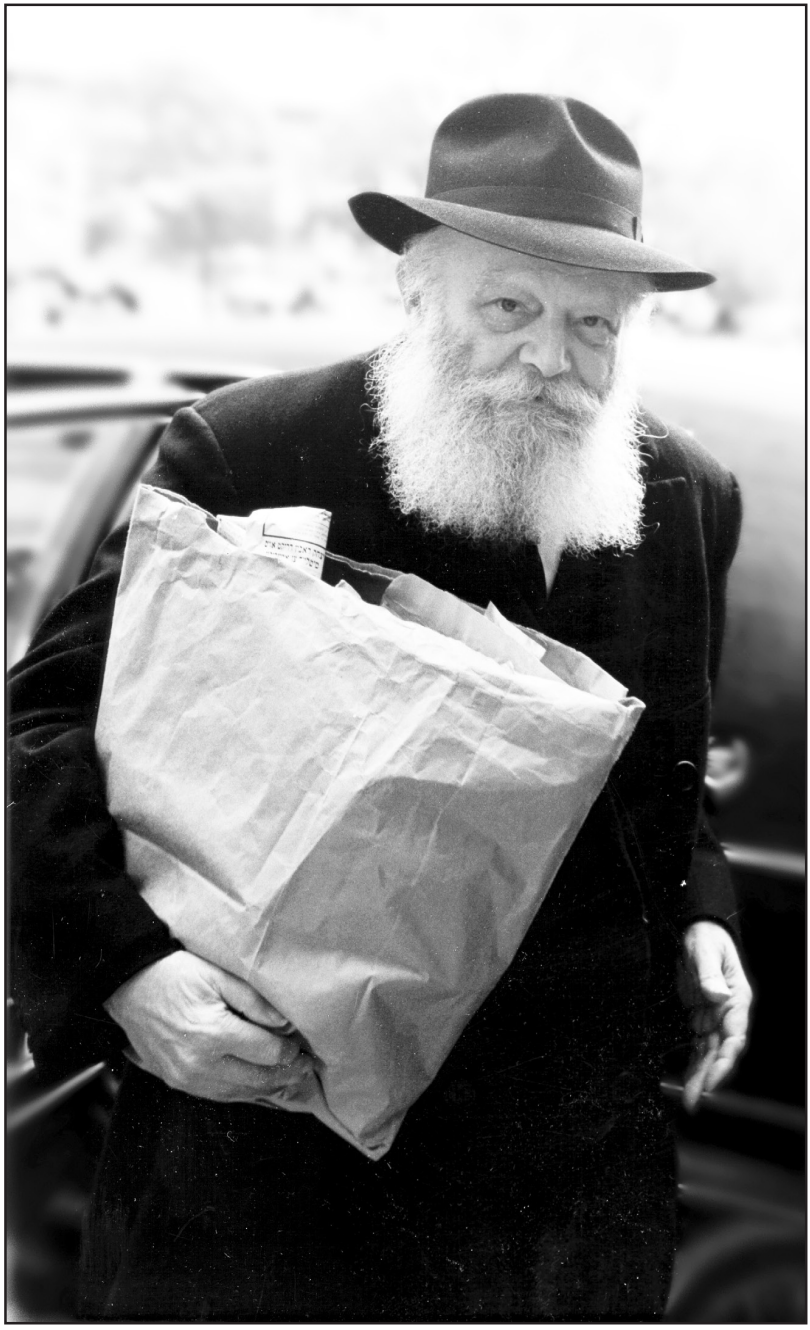
The Kol Menachem Haggadah – Slager Edition

The Kol Menachem Megillah – Slager Edition

The Five Books of Moses, Lifestyle Books – Slager Edition

The Kol Menachem Tehillim – Schottenstein Edition

The Kol Menachem Chumash (Hebrew) – Leviev Edition



Turning Judaism Outward

a biography of rabbi

Menachem Mendel Schneerson

the seventh lubavitcher rebbe

by rabbi

Chaim Miller

Kol Menachem • Gutnick Library of Jewish Classics

ISBN-13: 978-1-934152-36-2
ISBN-10: 1-934152-36-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014906880

© Copyright 2014 by Chaim Miller

Available from:

Kol Menachem
827 Montgomery Street,
Brooklyn, NY 11213
1-888-580-1900
1-718-951-6328
1-718-953-3346 (Fax)

www.kolmenachem.com
info@kolmenachem.com

Contact the author at:
chaimmiller@gmail.com

First Edition — June 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the copyright holder, except in the case of brief quotations in reviews for inclusion in a magazine, newspaper or broadcast.

Picture of Heinrich Maier courtesy of: Atelier Balassa - ullstein bild / The Granger Collection.

to

David & Lara Slager

Contents

Foreword xiii

CHAPTER ONE
Life at Home, 1902–1922 1

CHAPTER TWO
Entering the Court, 1923 22

CHAPTER THREE
Scholar-in-Residence, 1924–1926 33

CHAPTER FOUR
Leaving Home, 1927 48

CHAPTER FIVE
New Beginnings, 1928 58

CHAPTER SIX
Straddling Worlds, 1929–1932 83

CHAPTER SEVEN
The Quiet Years, 1933–1939 109

CHAPTER EIGHT
Survival, 1939–1941 122

CHAPTER NINE
Coming to America, 1941–1949 141

CHAPTER TEN
Lubavitch Chooses a New Rebbe, 1950–1951 167

CHAPTER ELEVEN
At the Court of the 7th Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1951–1964 191

CHAPTER TWELVE
Riding the Counterculture, 1965–1977 262

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
The Rebbe's Army, 1978–1987 319

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
Future Visions, 1988–1994 375

Afterword 411

Works Cited 417

Notes 429

Index 525

Foreword

There is a reason why, twenty years after the passing of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, few have attempted to paint his full biographical portrait. Given the tremendous influence of the Rebbe, which continues to be potent and inspiring to a vast number of his admirers today, the omission seems bizarre. Rabbi Schneerson's life is unusual on so many accounts: the huge following he amassed after the Chabad movement was almost decimated by the Holocaust; the remarkable success of his devotees in building Jewish institutions around the world; his wide appeal beyond the ranks of the faithful, among politicians, academics, and intellectuals; his vast knowledge of Judaic texts alongside training in the sciences and a familiarity with Western thought; his deeply inclusive vision that embraced religious Jews and their secular brethren, Jews and non Jews, and sought to dismantle the barriers separating one race from another; his phenomenal energy and dedication to his goals, even into his ninth decade; his enigmatic, mystical personality, deeply influenced by Jewish esoteric wisdom; and his fascinating life history, beginning with the pogroms and the Russian Revolution, to the halls of academia in Berlin and Paris, to the escape from Nazi occupied France; and then the radical shift from a quiet, introverted intellectual to a global personality who could swing thousands into action with his mere word.

Such a man would seem to be an excellent subject for a biographical sketch. Why, then, is there such a paucity of material in this area?

The answer to this question is complex, but I will attempt to address briefly some of the obstacles in painting an authentic picture of the Rebbe's life, and how I have sought to navigate them. I do not claim, by any means, to have fully resolved these concerns, but I have grappled

with them—in an attempt to render a narrative which is at least a true portrait of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, although inevitably an inadequate one.

1. *Problems with primary sources*

During most of his lifetime, almost no information was available about the Rebbe's early life, before his arrival in the United States in 1941. By the time interest in the field began to gain momentum around a decade ago, there was almost no one alive who personally remembered the Rebbe from this period, except for a few individuals who were small children at the time.

What *has* emerged over the last two decades are many documents relating to his early life: his personal notebooks (*Reshimot*) from the period, extensive correspondence with his father-in-law and father, his academic records, his mother's personal diaries, his Russian passport, and some memoirs of Chasidim from this period who observed him closely. When this is all pieced together, along with numerous other fragments of documentary information, we can make a reasonable attempt to locate exactly where the Rebbe was and what he was doing for the first four decades of his life, the impressions that he made on others, as well as some of his inner thoughts.

Chronicling the latter fifty years of his life, in the U.S.A., poses its own set of challenges. The Rebbe was an extremely private person and did not share his inner world with anybody, except perhaps his wife. While he was an extremely public figure, corresponding and meeting with thousands of individuals personally each year and spending much time sharing his ideas in long sermons, information about his inner thoughts and struggles is sorely lacking. I have attempted to compensate for this by drawing on the many accounts of private, often candid, conversations with the Rebbe penned by visitors. Although, of course, these lack the reliability of documentary evidence, by drawing from a vast range of such testimonies, especially from sources outside of the Lubavitch movement, I hope that the contours of his temperament, charisma and humanity will come more closely into focus.

2. *Prevalence of Hagiography*

With internal accounts of Chasidic history crafted by followers

and devotees, hagiography is the norm, not the exception. Historian David Assaf has summed up the concerns of dealing with such accounts which are often "lost in their adulation and veneration....selective range of sources, deliberate concealment, obfuscation, and even distortion."[1] The hagiographic author blurs the line between testimony and interpretation, such that the text is rearranged according to the writer's own values. As Immanuel Etkes has similarly noted, "What all have in common is the effort to paint a picture of the past with which they can identify."[2]

In preparing this work I have been acutely aware of these pitfalls, and have sought to render the narrative with as much scrupulous objectivity as possible. While it is almost inevitable that personal bias will influence an author in some way or another, my goal has been to offer a detached and dispassionate account of events as they transpired. The reader, of course, will be the judge of how successful I have been.

Even with these concerns sharply in focus, the task of separating the man from the myth is fraught with difficulty. A historian who finds aggrandizement of the Rebbe distasteful may tend to overcompensate, deflating his image too much. Scholar Nehemia Polen has observed one recent attempt to view the Rebbe through the lens of secular historiography, that it is

> so intent on deflating Schneerson's aggrandized image, bringing him down to earth, that one is at a loss to understand how his followers were inspired to spread his message to every corner of the earth.... A hermeneutic of suspicion is called for, but one must know of what to be suspicious.[3]

In attempting to address this concern, I have aimed to render what Polen describes as "a robust portrait that takes seriously the imaginative reach of a great thinker," seeking to "capture both the possibilities and perils of religious leadership."

3. *Complexity of Character*

By his own admission, the Rebbe was a man who fell into the category of those "for whom the central, overwhelming focus of their lives

is in the world of thought, the world of ideas, and their main activities... focused inwards, to *'the world set in their hearts'* (Ecc. 3:11), and not to the outside world surrounding them" (see p. 99). His sermons and discourses are evidence of an extremely rich inner life, a man who inhabited a universe of elevated patterns of thought. Even his mundane actions and other this-wordly activities were guided by the unrelenting application of rigorously deduced principles. An electrical engineer by training, whose profession was to check wiring against blueprint, the Rebbe spent his entire life clarifying what he understood to be the Torah's blueprint for our times, and implementing it with consistency.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson is therefore a person who cannot be grasped by anecdotes and glimpses from his interaction with people alone; there is a pressing need to see his activities in the context of the ideas that motivated him. Polen describes this as "the limits of a journalistic portrayal of a person of spirit that observes externals but vacates considerations of interiority."

Elliot Wolfson, too, has elaborated on the point:

> If we are honest, we must admit that any attempt to speak of the Seventh Rebbe will be fraught with the danger of providing a hermeneutical lens that is too narrow to view the many facets of the phenomenon at hand....
>
> When we attempt to gauge the life and impact of the Seventh Rebbe, we are indeed reaching for the Infinite; there is always a surplus that we cannot know and about which we cannot speak.... there is no manner of beholding him that is not beholding through a garment.[4]

I believe it is due to these formidable challenges, among others, that there has been so little effort towards producing a full biography of the late Rebbe, despite his extraordinary life and sustained interest in his teachings. No work, to my knowledge, recounts the story of the Rebbe's whole life in accurate detail, while at the same time demonstrating an intimate understanding of his published sermons and discourses. To be sure, there are many collections of anecdotes, personal reflections, and collages of his life and teachings; but if you will follow the narrative here from beginning to end, you can decide for yourself whether

my presumption has been correct: that there is an immeasurable advantage in seeing the *entire story* of the Rebbe's life amid the intricate world of ideas which he inhabited.

Whatever your existing views of the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, if any, I invite you to join me in the following pages on a journey of a man through historical turmoil, on an insatiable quest for knowledge; a story of immense personal tragedy, but of deep faith both in G-d and in humanity. It is the biography of a man who did much to reorientate his co-religionists in America from a defensive position to an expansive one—turning Judaism outwards.

Chaim Miller

28th *Nissan* 5774 / 28th April 2014

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I extend my gratitude to David and Lara Slager whose outstanding generosity has made this book possible, as well as most of my other works throughout the last decade. The Slager family have set a fine example to the Jewish community, both in their personal lives and with their outstanding philanthropic efforts towards an impressive array of causes across the globe. I wish David, Lara, and their precious children Hannah and Sara Malka, all the abundant blessings that they deserve.

I extend my heartfelt wishes to Rabbi Meyer Gutnick, co-founder and director of Kol Menachem publishing, who had the courage to invest in an unknown author, and since then has been an unfailing source of material support and moral encouragement for my work. Motivated by a great love for the Rebbe, and recognizing the urgency of spreading his Torah teachings, Rabbi Gutnick has chosen to invest his own natural talent at "getting things done" into a very worthy cause. In the merit of this, and all his many other impressive philanthropic efforts, may G–d bless him, together with his dear wife Shaindy, and all their wonderful children and grandchildren, with *chasidishe nachat* and only revealed and open goodness.

In particular, I extend my thanks to Rabbi Chaim Rapoport who dedicated much of his time to a careful review of the manuscript, offering many helpful emendations and suggestions; and to Rabbi Yisroel Newman for his helpful edits after reading the text, and for his ongoing assistance. I also thank Rabbi Michoel Seligson for answering my questions at short notice, and Rabbi Menachem Kirschenbaum for stimulating my interest in Chabad history.

My dear friend Eli Shear has been instrumental in this work for a number of reasons. He is the one who introduced me to the world of Chabad, without which this book, or any of my other works, would never had transpired. And through a meticulous edit he has immeasurably transformed the original manuscript of this book into something eminently more readable and enjoyable.

For assistance with proofreading I thank: Rebbetzin Sarah Nechama Yarmush, Chaya Sarah Cantor, Rochelle Ginsburg and Sara Shear.

And finally, to my greatest support, my wife Chani, who sees me through moments of despondence and self-doubt, and to my wonderful children: Leah, Mendel, Mushka, Levi, Esther Miriam, Ariella and Menucha, my greatest pride and joy.

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE AT HOME

1902–1922



Menachem Mendel Schneerson, aged 2

The tides of fortune turned against the Russian Jewish community in 1881, with the assassination of Czar Alexander II, as widescale pogroms were officially sanctioned. In less than a year, one hundred and sixty localities went up in flames, with Jews maimed and killed indiscriminately, and countless Jewish properties destroyed. These unrivaled episodes of ethnic violence, which continued sporadically over the next decades, resulted in a panic among the Jewish population, and they fled in huge numbers.[1]

It was at this time and place in history that Menachem Mendel Schneerson was born, on Friday 18th April (11th *Nissan*) 1902, in Nikolayev, Russia. Ostensibly he was named after his paternal ancestor, the Third Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1789–1866), but the name also connoted the pain and constraints of

the times. Menachem means "one who comforts," a derivative of the Biblical name Noah (Noach), whose birth gave humanity hope that "this one will comfort us (*yenachamenu*) from pain" (Gen. 5:29).

Already at the tender age of three, when he was exposed to brutal violence with the 1905 pogrom in his home town, Menachem Mendel's talents as a comforter began to emerge. As mobs roamed the streets shouting "kill the Jews," attacking innocent victims and setting Jewish homes and businesses on fire, the young Menachem Mendel huddled with his mother, Chana, along with other Jewish women and children at a hidden location in a local pharmacy. Due to the cramped conditions and palpable fear, many of the children began to cry loudly, endangering everybody's safety. Menachem Mendel instinctively shifted into "comforter" mode. The young boy circulated the room and, one by one, soothed each of the children until they had calmed down. The pharmacy owner, who obviously had been worried for his own safety, was taken aback.[2]

Unfortunately, much more comforting was going to be needed. In his childhood and youth alone, Menachem Mendel was to live through subsequent pogroms, blood libels, the First World War, a typhus epidemic, the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of Communism. "I had to look at things in a positive light," he recalled years later to confidante and Chasid, Rabbi Berel Junik (1927-2005), "otherwise I would have never been able to go on living."

His coping mechanism, it seems, was to stay aloof and immerse his head in books. He possessed natural genius and a penchant for study, and the detached, idealistic world of the mind must have offered some inner peace amid the external fear and turmoil. As his community faced constant violence, threatened and actual, the young boy dreamed of a time of undisturbed tranquility. In a rare autobiographical glimpse from this period, he later wrote, "from the day I went to *cheder* (primary school), and even before then, an image of the future redemption began to form in my imagination, the redemption of the Jewish people from this final exile, such a redemption that would explain the sufferings of exile, the harsh decrees and genocides... *'On that day you will say, "I will praise You, G-d, although You were angry with me"'* (Isaiah 12:1)."[3]

Even before the 1905 pogrom erupted, Menachem Mendel had

already absorbed the atmosphere of unrest. As anti-Czarist protests were taking place outside their home in the wake of the revolution, Menachem Mendel's mother found him on the balcony of their apartment, joining the demonstration. He was screaming out loud in Russian *daloy samadershzavye,* "An end to the autocracy!" Fearing for their safety, the family took the boy inside and quietened him.[4]

It is often repeated how, upon Menachem Mendel's birth, six telegrams were received by his parents from Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber Schneersohn (1860-1920), the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe; and how Menachem Mendel's mother was careful to ritually wash her infant's hands each time before he ate, a highly unusual practice for a child of that age.[5] The Schneerson name itself instantly brings to mind the long illustrious dynasty of Lubavitcher Rebbes.

In reality, though, Menachem Mendel was only a distant cousin of the prevailing Lubavitch dynasty—his paternal great-great-great grandfather had been the Rebbe—and there were hundreds of Schneersohn descendents scattered around Russia.[6] The five-generation gap since the last Rebbe in Menachem Mendel's family, represented a considerable ancestral distance from the Lubavitch dynasty.

Menachem Mendel was raised in the household of a Rav, an ordained, communal Rabbi, not a Rebbe. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak ("Levik") Schneerson (1878-1944) stemmed from a distinguished line of Rabbis, from both his mother and father's side, all of them Chabad Chasidim, but the office of Rebbe differs considerably from a traditional, congregational Rabbi. A Rebbe is perceived as the head of the community's organic hierarchy, a unique soul which contains a splinter of the soul of every Chasid (disciple). Through a Rebbe, energy is infused into the world and reaches his followers by means of their utter devotion (*bitul*) to his every word. From an exalted spiritual viewpoint, which cannot be reached by other souls, the Rebbe acts as a guide in the worship of G-d and offers a higher intuition even in worldly matters, such as finance, health and relationships. His word is accepted unquestioningly, forming an unbreakable bond (*hitkashrut*) between Rebbe and Chasid. "To question the Rebbe is worse than sin; it is absurd," wrote Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, "for it destroys the very relationship that binds you to him."[7] A Rebbe's blessing is considered to shatter heavenly decrees, heal the sick and, in the eyes of some, to work miracles. He will also

have a proclivity for saving souls and easing the path of repentance.[8]

A Rabbi (Rav), on the other hand, will be responsible for the traditional ecclesiastic duties of his congregation—to ensure that Jewish law is adhered to in the synagogue, in areas of *kashrut* (kosher food preparation) and in the construction of *mikvaot* (ritual baths). He will officiate at weddings and funerals and will be consulted by congregants on *halachic* issues. A more advanced Rabbi may also rule in financial disputes, conduct divorces and conversions, and will be consulted by junior colleagues about the finer points of Jewish law. Every city, even small towns, would typically have their own Rav, but in an entire movement of Chasidim, there would be just one Rebbe.

A further unique feature of Rebbehood is the phenomenon of a regal "court," a physical-social epicenter of activity. A court would consist of the Rebbe, his personal secretaries, administrators and other functionaries, a small group of close Chasidim (*mekuravim*) who accompanied the Rebbe everywhere; the "residents" (*yoshevim*), who would live close to the Rebbe and droves of other Chasidim who would visit for advice and pilgrimage. Physically, a court would usually have living quarters for the Rebbe and his immediate family, a synagogue/study hall, and, most importantly, an inner sanctum where the Rebbe would receive visitors for *yechidut* (private consultation). The court would be funded by a voluntary tax, *ma'amad,* given by all Chasidim to the Rebbe, according to their willingness and ability. For a Chasid, to be in the Rebbe's presence at his court would be an exhilarating experience; and from a typical pilgrimage, where the Chasid would pray several times in the Rebbe's synagogue and hear him deliver Torah thoughts, the Chasid would be energized for months, if not years.[9]

This experience of coming into personal contact with the stately and mystical persona of a Rebbe, and witnessing the passion at his court, was entirely absent from Menachem Mendel's childhood and youth. He never met the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose "reign" continued until 1920, nor did he see the celebrated court in Lubavitch (Lyubavichi), which ran from 1813 to 1915, the home of four successive generations of Chabad Rebbes. (As we shall see, he was only introduced to the Sixth Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950), when it was suggested in 1923 that he marry Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak's second daughter, Moussia.)

From a contemporary point of view, it seems bizarre that Menachem Mendel never visited Lubavitch or met the reigning Rebbe in his childhood and youth, because in recent decades Chasidim would fly to the Rebbe's court regularly, often one or more times in a year, and they would nearly always bring along their children at some point. But a century ago, such pilgrimages were less frequent, due to the difficulties and expenses of travel (railways in Russia were poorly developed before the Revolution). Menachem Mendel's father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, was an important figure: from 1909 onwards, the Rav of a major city with the largest Jewish population in southern Ukraine. With demanding Rabbinic duties, it would have been difficult for him to leave his home town for a five-hundred mile pilgrimage to Lubavitch, especially with young children. We also need to bear in mind the many years of social and political unrest in the area during the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, which would have ruled out many windows of opportunity for extended travel.[10]

Still, the omission is striking. The fact remains that Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who was later to become one of the most influential and celebrated Rebbes in the history of Chasidut, did not have a direct encounter with a Chabad Rebbe until the age of twenty-one.[11] In fact, his closest personal connection to a Rebbe up to that point was with his namesake and paternal ancestor five generations earlier, the Third Rebbe of Chabad, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (also known by the title of his voluminous responsa *Tzemach Tzedek*).[12]

Tzemach Tzedek had been one of the most successful of the Chabad Rebbes, transforming the movement from what was initially perceived by some outsiders as a deviant sect, to win widespread acceptance among the Orthodox community. During his long tenure as Rebbe, from 1831 to 1866, he attracted a huge following of a reputed one hundred-thousand Chasidim;[13] but after his passing, the movement splintered, and five of his six surviving sons each succeeded in setting up their own courts in different locations.[14] The only son of *Tzemach Tzedek* who did *not* become a Rebbe was the oldest son—and paternal ancestor of the Seventh Rebbe—Rabbi Baruch Shalom Schneerson (1806-1869).[15] Baruch Shalom did not establish a dynastic branch of Chabad, like his brothers, but he did compose his own Chasidic discourses, and left behind an ethical will which was found after his death.[16]

Baruch Shalom's oldest son, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak (1834-1878), was appointed as Rav in Podobranka and later Beshenkowitz, but tragically passed away at the tender age of forty-four.[17] His son, Baruch Shneur Zalman (d. 1926), married Zelda Rachel Chaikin, daughter of a wealthy Chasid from his home town, Podobranka.[18] We know that Baruch Shneur *was* a regular attendee at the court of the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, since his extensive journals of experiences there between 1911 and 1916 have survived.[19]

Baruch Shneur and Zelda Rachel's oldest son, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, was the father of the future Seventh Rebbe, Menachem Mendel.[20] "Reb Levik," as he was affectionately known, was born in 1878 in Podobranka, Russia, and studied under the tutelage of his great-uncle Yoel Chaikin, the town's Rabbi. Reb Levik earned a reputation as a brilliant Talmudic scholar, even outside the Chabad community. He was an extremely close devotee of the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber (*Rashab*), who later described Levik as one of just three disciples of whom he would be proud "in this world and the next." As early as 1896, when Reb Levik was just eighteen, he was sent by the Rebbe Rashab to Germany to perform a Rabbinic inspection of *mikvaot*, a task which demanded mastery of a highly complex area of Jewish law. Reb Levik probably studied in Rashab's *Tomchei Temimim,* the first Lubavitcher Yeshivah, as soon as it opened its doors in 1897;[21] and in the summer of 1900, following the suggestion of Rashab, he married Chana Yanovsky (b. 1880), daughter of Chabad Chasid Meir Shlomo Yanovsky, Chief Rabbi of Nikolayev.[22] (Yanovsky had inherited the position from his illustrious grandfather Rabbi Avraham David Lavut (1814-1890), a disciple of *Tzemach Tzedek* and author of a number of important Rabbinic texts).[23]

Supported by his father-in-law, who was extremely benevolent but not wealthy,[24] Reb Levik spent the next nine years of married life in his wife's childhood home, and was reputed to have been immersed in study for as much as eighteen hours a day. In 1901, tragedy hit the family when Chana's youngest and only brother, Yisrael Leib, contracted a fatal bout of typhus, and passed away at the tender age of fifteen. Her father, Meir Shlomo, slipped into a deep depression which paralyzed him from all activity, prompting a letter of consolation from Rashab, who advised studying certain inspirational passages of Chasidic texts together with his son-in-law, Levik.[25]

From 1902 onwards, Reb Levik conducted regular missions for Rashab, attending Rabbinic meetings on his behalf, and he organized the distribution of *matzah* to Jewish soldiers during the Russian-Japanese war of 1904-5. While they were residing at the Yanovsky's, three sons were born to Levik and Chana: Menachem Mendel, in 1902; Dov Ber (Berel) in 1904,[26] and Yisrael Aryeh Leib (Leibel) in May 1906.[27]

II.

By 1905, pressure was already mounting for Reb Levik to find his own source of income—the Schneersons were cramped together with their infants, parents-in-law, and Chana's two younger sisters, Miriam Gittel and Ettel, in one apartment—and Rashab began efforts to find Levik a rabbinic position.[28] In 1906 a job became available in another city, but it required a diploma equivalent to five years of college study. While prolonged secular study did not appeal to Reb Levik, for the sake of supporting his family he spent several months studying Russian, in preparation for examinations. After travelling three hundred miles to register in Kiev, he discovered that the curriculum required study of Old Church Slavonic and Christian scriptures, leading him to promptly abandon the entire project and return home without registering.

At the end of 1906, another Rabbinic position became available, and Rashab sent a letter to the community suggesting that they accept Reb Levik as their Rav.[29] The community insisted that for Reb Levik to be considered a candidate, he would have to obtain a prestigious *semicha* (Rabbinic ordination) from one of the leading non-Chasidic giants of the day, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk (1853-1918). Confident that Reb Levik would impress the Brisker Rav, Rashab advised Levik to make the trip, encouraging him that the Brisker was "genuinely G-d fearing."[30]

In a 1951 sermon, the Seventh Rebbe recalled what had transpired at the *semicha* test.

> Since my father dressed like a Chasid of those times, and Reb Chaim Brisker knew he was from the [Schneerson] family, he tested him painstakingly, hoping to find a justification not to give him *semicha*. After exhaustive testing, he was forced to award him *semicha,* lamenting, "Oh my goodness, Reb Levik! You have such a good mind,

> and look where you have placed it." He was referring to the fact that my father put his scholarly energies into Chasidut and Kabbalah.[31]

Despite a further letter of support from Rashab, shortly before the community's elections for Rav, the position did not materialize for Reb Levik.[32]

On 1st January (27th *Tevet*) 1908, the much loved Chabad Rabbi of Yekatrinoslav (now Dnipropetrovsk), a major center some two hundred miles north-east of Nikolayev, passed away. Rabbi Dov Zev ("Bere Volf") Kozevnikov (b. 1839), had been a disciple of the Third Chabad Rebbe, *Tzemach Tzedek*. He was a short man, extremely humble, and, like many Chasidim of that era, he preferred not to display his substantial Talmudic knowledge except when necessary. Well versed in Chasidut and Kabbalah, he was cherished by Chasidim as one of the *yechidei segulah* (unique individuals) of their times. Reb Volf would regularly be wrapped in *tallit* and *tefilin,* busy with prayer and study, until four o'clock in the afternoon. He gave so much of his money to the poor that the community was forced to pay his salary directly to his wife so as to ensure the family's livelihood. His passing left a huge void, and Rashab perceived Reb Levik as an ideal successor. The position was an extremely coveted one: Yekatrinoslav was one of the largest cities in Southern Ukraine, and was home to the largest Jewish populations in the district.[33]

During the same period, the community of Yekatrinoslav sustained two further losses: Baruch Zaslovsky, Rabbi of the industrial district, passed away two days before Passover; and then the young, energetic Rabbi Eliyahu Shmuel Levin passed away less than two months later, aged forty-two. (The doctor who had treated Kozevnikov, Zaslovsky and Levin vowed never to treat a Rabbi again!) The only remaining Rav was head of the Rabbinic court, the esteemed Rabbi Binyamin Zakheim, who was too old and frail to service the needs of such a large community.[34]

In the eyes of the community, Reb Levik had two huge drawbacks: he was too young, a mere thirty years old; and he was perceived as being "old-school," appealing only to elderly traditionalists. The candidate supported by the *mitnagdim, maskilim,* Zionists and the wealthy was Lithuanian-educated Rabbi Pinchas Gelman (1880-1921). A hand-

some, charismatic, well dressed man, Rabbi Gelman enjoyed much popularity. He was learned, gifted as a Hebrew writer and delivered fiery sermons in Russian.[35]

"The dispute escalated to the heavens," recalled Rabbi Yehudah Leib Levin (1894-1971), who was Rav in Yekatrinoslav (then Dnipropetrovsk) and Moscow after the Second World War. "There was fighting and *chilul Hashem* (desecration of G-d's name) in all the synagogues for several months." Even though it was against his nature, Reb Levik became embroiled in the dispute, since he had been instructed to seek the position by his Rebbe, Rashab.[36]

In her memoir of the period, Chana recalled the irony of Sergei Pavlovitch, a prominent non-religious Jew who was impressed with Reb Levik, rising to his cause. Amid the heat of the dispute, Pavlovitch "could be sitting on the boulevard on Shabbat afternoon, smoking a cigarette, while considering ways to get the Chasidic Rabbi appointed."[37]

Eventually, a compromise was decided, and both Rabbis were appointed over different parts of the town: Rabbi Gelman over the area close to the Dnieper River, which had been Rabbi Kozevnikov's province, and Rabbi Schneerson was assigned to the area which was previously presided over by Rabbi Eliyahu Shmuel Levin.[38]

So, in 1909, Reb Levik, his wife Chana and their three sons relocated to Yekatrinoslav, where Levik would commence what would be a perpetual struggle as the city's Rabbi. But it was these difficult years which would mold the personality of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the future Rebbe of Lubavitch, as a fiercely independent, unashamedly traditional but culturally aware Jew.

Even after the Schneerson's arrival in town, the political heat took a while to subside. In the press, *maskilim* denounced the new Rabbi, pointing to his descent from *Tzemach Tzedek*, who had been outspoken against intellectual "enlightenment."[39] Every Jew who cherished civilized culture was called upon to ensure that Schneerson should have no influence in the city, for he represented a danger to progress.[40]

When diplomatic methods failed, Reb Levik's opponents resorted to dubious methods. As the Seventh Rebbe himself recalled at a Purim gathering some seventy-five years later:

> One fine day the Police Chief showed up at our house and asked to speak with the Rabbi in a private place. It's not difficult to imagine how frightening this was for us all. In those days, under Czar Nicholas, a personal visit from the Chief of Police was no small matter.
>
> After he had left, we asked my father what had happened. He said that a complaint had been leveled against him with the authorities. My father was unfit to be Rav of an important city, the informants argued, since he had been seen drinking liquor, and dancing arm-in-arm with a shoemaker![41]

While the allegations might seem humorous, we need to bear in mind that the authorities, who were often deeply anti-Semitic, did not need much enticement to bring charges against a Rabbi. A number of the Chabad Rebbes had, in the past, been imprisoned for seemingly minor allegations, significantly endangering their lives, and this brush with the authorities must have been quite traumatic for the Schneerson family. Resorting to informing the police (*mesirah*) is an especially dirty act of foul-play in Jewish communal politics, and it gives us some sense of the deep factions that had developed.

We begin to see, however, a pattern emerging in how Reb Levik defended himself from his critics. While "on paper" he was an "old-school" Rabbi with uncompromisingly traditional values, it seems that when secular Jews, and even the non-Jewish police, met Rabbi Schneerson they were impressed with his intelligence and humanity. Here, and on a number of subsequent occasions, Reb Levik was received positively by academics, intellectuals, and Jews from a diverse range of backgrounds.[42] We can imagine, then, the parental image in which Menachem Mendel was reared: a Rabbi deeply committed to Chasidic values and yet worldly enough to make an impression on the most secular Jews.

These were times when traditional edifices had already been crumbling for a generation, and there was a rapid hemorrhaging of Chasidic youth to competing ideologies. Nowhere was this more evident than in the story of Rebbetzin Chana's own first cousin, Tziporah (b. 1878)—daughter of Meir Yanovsky's younger sister, Chana—and her husband Tuvia Shlonsky. Tziporah, like thousands of others, was influenced by the strong intellectual currents of the times; already as a teenager, her

enthusiasm for observant Judaism had eroded as she became increasingly involved with the Social Democrat movement. She was attracted to Tuvia, who seemed to be an ideally "modern" Lubavitcher: well learned in Torah, but also secularly knowledgeable and polished; not at all sheltered from modern ideologies.

While Tziporah's emotional detachment from traditional Judaism was all but complete, Tuvia remained torn, and the issue plagued their marriage. Tuvia had been fascinated by the writings of the secular author Ahad Ha'am, who was popular among intellectuals of the day; but he remained, at heart, a Chabad Chasid and desired to educate his six children in that path. The spirit of their home ended up as a sort of compromise: proudly Jewish, Zionist, traditional but not particularly observant. On one wall hung a painting of Maimonides, and on another, a picture of Russian anarchist, Michael Bakunin (1814-1876).[43]

The Shlonskys moved to Yekatrinoslav in 1905, and as soon as their cousins, the Schneersons, arrived, the two families became extremely close, living next door to each other from around 1909 to 1913. While the adults would pass from one apartment to the next through the doorways, the children simply entered and left through the windows. The youngest of the six Shlonsky children, Verdina (1905-1990), later a prominent Israeli composer and pianist, recalled her memories of Levik and Chana Schneerson in an interview in 1977. "They were so beautiful, aesthetic, musical and pure. Really pure. Chana was a very beautiful woman, always dressed elegantly. She was very sociable. Reb Levik was a tall and handsome man with a striking beard, like Hertzl."[44] Verdina's older brother, Avraham (1900-1973), who later became a significant Israeli poet, recalled of the Schneerson household, "I was influenced by this peculiar climate: filled with stringency, fear, nuances and mystery. It was immensely charming to me."[45]

In addition to Chana's close friendship with her cousin and neighbor Tzipora, Reb Levik also shared a warm relationship with Tuvia. The two men would spend hours in conversation about religion, faith and even literature. Tuvia would sometimes lend Reb Levik some of his secular books, including volumes of *Hashiloach,* a journal of Hebrew literature influenced by Ahad Ha'am, and Reb Levik would read them in the only location sanctioned for a Chasidic Rabbi to read such material—the bathroom.[46]

III.

What education did Menachem Mendel receive in his childhood years? The popular form of Jewish education in that period was the *cheder metukan,* or "improved school," an attempt to modernize the traditional *cheder* to the prevailing conditions. The major emphasis of the *cheder metukan* was still Torah, but the curriculum was expanded to include some secular subjects and new pedagogic methods. Everything was taught in Hebrew.

In Yekatrinoslav a successful *cheder metukan* and *yeshivah* had been founded by the non-Chasidic Rabbi, Pinchas Gelman; but Reb Levik preferred that his children study according to traditional methods, in Yiddish, so he hired the services of a private *melamed* (teacher) for his sons and a handful of other local children.

The *melamed,* Menachem Mendel's only significant pedagogue besides his father, was Rabbi Zalman Vilenkin (1878-1963), a childhood friend of Reb Levik. In 1909 a possible job opportunity for a *shochet* had arisen in Yekatrinoslav and Reb Levik was instrumental in Reb Zalman's relocation to the city to take the position. When the job failed to materialize immediately, Reb Levik suggested that, in the meantime, Reb Zalman could teach his sons and a few other students.

For the next five years, from the age of seven until twelve, Menachem Mendel learned under Reb Zalman's tutelage along with his brothers Berel and Leibel, and a few other Yekatrinoslav boys. Reb Zalman was known to be a *masmid,* a person who devoted virtually all his available time to Torah study. He knew all Six Orders of the *Mishnah* by heart, and numerous Chasidic discourses. He was considered to be a clear, effective speaker and also gave classes for adults in the community.

Reb Zalman recalled in later years, that Menachem Mendel—or "Mekka" as he was known to his friends—was always engrossed in his studies; and that he was introverted, generally not mingling or socializing with the other children.[47] "He was quiet. He loved to think," Verdina Shlonsky recalled. "He didn't play children's games with us."[48]

Even at this young age, Menachem Mendel had broader interests, particularly in astronomy. On his bedroom walls hung charts of the skies.[49] He also devoured dictionaries in his spare time, and by the age of ten was busy acquiring a knowledge of Russian, English and Italian.[50] "He was interested in everything," Verdina remembered. "The

adults used to speak about the interest he showed in science."[51]

Avraham Shlonsky also attended the *cheder*, and soon became zealously observant, refusing to eat in his own mother's kitchen which was not sufficiently kosher. (He ate next door at the Schneersons' instead). On the fast of *Tisha B'Av*, Avraham even followed the pietistic practice of sleeping with a hard rock under his head.

"During the time we were in Yekatrinoslav," the Rebbe later wrote to Avraham, "you always sought out the audacious. You went against the grain."[52] After Avraham's bar mitzvah in 1915, his father, Tuvia wanted to send the boy to study in Lubavitch to continue in the path of a dedicated Chasid, but his mother, Tzipora, would hear nothing of it. She insisted that her son get a good secular education in a local Russian school. As a compromise, Avraham was sent to a Hebrew-speaking Gymnasium in Israel. While Avraham Shlonsky did not retain his orthodoxy, his poetry was later influenced by the Messianism and dreams for the future which he had absorbed in the Schneerson home.[53]

Reb Levik's *cheder* was also attended by the two younger Schneerson boys, who were known by their friends as "Belka" (Berel) and "Luba" (Leibel). Berel was a blonde boy, more lively than his older brother. (It is unclear whether the health condition which plagued him in later life affected him during his youth.[54]) The youngest son, Leibel, was described by Verdina Shlonsky as "an unusual child. In physical appearance he was very similar to his oldest brother."

Rabbi Yitzchak Goldshmidt, a Chernobeler Chasid and *shochet* from Yekatrinoslav who had been a strong supporter of Reb Levik's appointment, sent his son Nachum (1905-1976) to study in the *cheder* with the Schneerson boys. "Reb Levik was extremely dedicated to his sons' education," Nachum recalled, "but, as it turned out, he didn't have to toil too much with the three boys. Reb Levik's boys were studious by nature, not with an ordinary studiousness but an exceptional one. It was to such an extent that their mother had to tear them away from the pages of the Talmud to feed them.... They had phenomenal memories. They would look at something just once and recall it permanently."

Nachum recalled how Menachem Mendel and Leibel were both unusually talented, but Leibel's more extroverted personality made him the more superficially impressive character. Menachem Mendel

was serious by nature and always had a preoccupied look on his face. Leibel, on the other hand, was "mischievous." He would talk effusively and joke around. "That's why his father and mother would say about the younger brother, Leibel, that he had the better talents," Nachum remembered, "because they were more on display. He would exhibit his talents to others."[55]

When Menachem Mendel reached the age of eleven, Reb Levik decided that his son needed some more advanced, personalized tutelage, and he enlisted the services of another *melamed* from Lithuania, who taught the boy privately. This arrangement, however, did not last too long, and within a year or so Menachem Mendel was sufficiently equipped to study on his own, a path he followed for the rest of his life.[56] "I studied without a *chavruta* (study partner)," he later told Rabbi Mordechai Ashkenazi (b. 1943), the Rav of Kfar Chabad, Israel.[57]

Over the next decade, Menachem Mendel would spend tens of thousands of hours in private study, poring over the Talmud, Midrash and a diverse selection of Jewish texts. His only teacher was his father, with whom he would often spend nights in study. Reb Levik introduced his son, in time, to his own specialized field of interests: the world of the Kabbalah and the teachings of Arizal (Rabbi Isaac Luria) in particular.

Of the thousands of pages of Torah thoughts which Reb Levik penned in his lifetime, only a fraction have reached us, from the very end of his life when he was exiled to Asia,[58] but from what remains, we get a picture of an extremely fertile mind, an exceptional memory, and somewhat eclectic interests. His writings are extremely dense and rich in sources, displaying more than a stroke of genius.[59]

All this was absorbed by Menachem Mendel from his father and we see its influence on the Seventh Rebbe's style of Torah discourse. In the Schneerson home there was a substantial library of Torah books, well beyond the basic texts of the Talmud and commentaries, and it was in this oasis that Menachem Mendel developed his love for research and bibliography. This was something also encouraged by Reb Levik, who, after sharing an original Torah discourse with listeners would often turn to his oldest son, inviting him to suggest the exact sources on which the lecture was based. Menachem Mendel would promptly rattle off a list of references. On one occasion, a listener was perplexed as to the point of this unusual exercise, and questioned why the Rab-

bi bothered with it. "It's helpful not only for him but for me, too," Reb Levik explained. "Sometimes my son comes up with a source which had not occurred to me."[60]

Menachem Mendel's fascination with sources continued throughout his entire life. As we shall see, during the 1930s he conducted a prolonged study of the sources for Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya;* in the 1940s he annotated the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe's discourses with references, and penned a new edition of the Passover Haggadah tracing the sources line by line;[61] and throughout all the tens of volumes of his edited *Likutei Sichot* (Collected Sermons)[62] and *Ma'amarim* (Chasidic Discourses),[63] the Seventh Rebbe's teachings are copiously footnoted and cross-referenced.

As the world outside was aflame—the pogroms, the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution—Menachem Mendel spent most of his time secluded at home in his room, standing in private study. Often, when he did not appear for meals, his mother would bring food to him. A brief biographical sketch of the Rebbe found in official Chabad publications (and edited by the Rebbe himself), has nothing to say of his youth except that, "he studied with intense diligence, and he succeeded."[64]

Reb Levik generally did not involve his oldest son with his communal duties, leaving him at home to study. When Nachum Goldshmidt would visit the house, he would often observe Leibel in prolonged discussion with his father, while Menachem Mendel was away in his room.[65]

At the age of fourteen, Menachem Mendel's advanced knowledge made a deep impression on Rabbi Moshe Betzalel Alter (1868-1943), the third son of the Gerer Rebbe (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the *Sefat Emet*), who was a refugee in Yekatrinoslav during the First World War. Nachum Goldshmidt recalled how Rabbi Alter was brought by Reb Levik to test the boys in Talmud. Menachem Mendel was tested on a passage in Tractate *Arachin*, one of the more obscure volumes of the Talmud which discusses complex laws of vows to the Temple. Rabbi Alter pointed to one of the comments of *Tosafot*, the critical glosses printed in the Talmud's margin, and asked the boy to read and explain the text. The particular comment of *Tosafot,* Nachum recalled, consisted of a single question followed by four suggested answers.

Menachem Mendel not only translated and explained the *Tosafot*, he also suggested a deficiency in *Tosafot's* first solution, which necessitated offering the second; a problem with the second solution which necessitated a third answer, and so on.[66] Rabbi Alter proceeded to test Menachem Mendel on other passages in the Talmud, until he could no longer contain himself, exclaiming out loud (in Yiddish): *A bochur'el fun fertzin yohr! Vu me'chapt im on in shas, zohgt er vayter oif oisveynik dem loshon fun gemora mit Rashi, vort ba vort!* ("A young lad of fourteen years! Whatever place you mention to him in the Talmud, he continues to rattle off the text of the Talmud with *Rashi* by heart, word by word!")[67]

IV.

What happened during Menachem Mendel's childhood and youth, when he was *not* studying? We know that at the end of each summer Rebbetzin Chana would take the boys to her parents, the Yanovskys, in Nikolayev. Her father, Meir Shlomo, was the city's Rabbi,[68] and over the course of several visits, he made a deep impression on Menachem Mendel.

In a 1989 sermon, the Rebbe recalled that his grandfather, Meir Shlomo, had been a *yoshev* ("resident") at the court of the Fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn (1834-1882). These were the days before Lubavitch had its own *Yeshivot* (academies), and to absorb Chasidic vibes, dedicated young men would take a six months to one-year "residency" at the Rebbe's court shortly after marriage. Obviously this involved a great sacrifice on the part of Meir Shlomo's wife, Rachel, but she consented willingly.

Meir Shlomo's subsequent position as Rav of Nikolayev was quite different to the spiritual oasis of Lubavitch. Nikolayev was a major business center, and much of Meir Shlomo's professional energies were spent settling financial disputes. He was also drawn into political issues as a contact between the government and the Jewish community.

His grandson, the future Rebbe, found the contrast striking: Meir Shlomo was obviously a spiritual man who had enjoyed an extended period of detachment from mundane life in Lubavitch, devoted to matters of transcendence; and yet he also had the business and po-

litical acumen to lead a large, diverse community. More importantly, the Rebbe noted how one experience had cross-fertilized the other: amid his often mundane work, Meir Shlomo could always conjure to mind his spiritual home in the "paradise" of Lubavitch, and those vivid memories would energize him and inspire him to carry out his allotted task with dedication.[69] It was this straddling of worlds, the ability to perfume even the spiritually dullest parts of life with "peak moments" from a different time and place, that became a hallmark of the Seventh Rebbe's outlook and teaching. We will see this later on, but it is significant that the Rebbe attributed this quality to his own grandfather, who was a memorable role model in his childhood.

We know very little about Menachem Mendel's grandmother, Rachel Pushnitz of Dubrinka.[70] In 1990, near the end of his life, the Rebbe published a sermon in her memory, writing an unusual, touching note how she "cared for me for a number of weeks at the end of the summer, for several years."[71]

Despite his inclination to stay with his head in the books, away from action, there are a few isolated incidents from Menachem Mendel's youth where we see a willingness to help others in need, even at personal risk. At aged nine, on vacation in Balaklava, Menachem Mendel swam out into the Black Sea to save a boy who was drowning after his boat capsized.[72] At fourteen, as Yekatrinoslav filled with Polish and Lithuanian refugees from the First World War, Menachem Mendel was inspired by his mother's herculean efforts to provide aid, and joined her cause.[73] At twenty, when a typhus epidemic erupted in Yekatrinoslav, Menachem Mendel worked around the clock to provide support for the victims, exposing himself to a high risk of infection. He eventually contracted the disease—which had killed his uncle, and almost claimed the life of his grandfather—and burned with high fever for several days. In his delirium, he mumbled Chasidic jargon.[74]

Besides these few exceptional cases, the only time in the year when Menachem Mendel would "make an exception" and involve himself in something else besides Torah study was to raise money and prepare a festive meal for the annual *farbrengen* (gathering) for *Yud Tet Kislev* (the Chasidic "new year"), in Yekatrinoslav. The *farbrengen* was indeed a sight: Reb Levik would say a few *lechaims*, and expound upon the Kabbalistic significance of the day, as his three sons stood at his side, until the wee hours of the morning.[75]

In the years following the Bolshevik revolution, from the age of fifteen onwards, another communal position was forced upon Menachem Mendel: to communicate with the *Yevsektzia*, the Jewish section of the Communist party. "I grew up in the times of the *Yevsektzia,*" he later recalled in a sermon, "and I was educated not to be intimidated by them. This is despite the fact that they could threaten to send a person to Siberia—and actually carry out their threat."[76]

In an emotionally charged 1979 sermon, the Rebbe reflected on how these experiences with the *Yevsektzia* toughened him for later communal work—for those occasions when it would be necessary to take an unpopular position.

> G-d helped me that, not through my own choice or will, I was the firstborn of a father who later became the Chief Rabbi of Yekatrinoslav. In those days, in that country, there was sometimes the need for debates [with the authorities], or to respond to a question or an intimidation, and for this you had to speak Russian. Since I was the oldest son of the city's Chief Rabbi, the task fell on me. From that time on, sixty or sixty-five years ago, I was trained not to wait to be addressed with titles of honor.[77]

When Menachem Mendel was around sixteen, his parents hired him a private tutor in secular studies, so that he would be able to complete public examinations in the local secondary school as an external student—a task which he completed successfully.[78] The tutor, Yisrael Eidelson (1895-1965), was a teacher in the local secondary school as well as leader of the Zionist youth movement in Yekatrinoslav—for which he was eventually arrested by the Soviet authorities, in 1922, and sent to Siberia. Eidelson later became a prominent Israeli politician, known as Bar-Yehudah, acting as Minister of Internal Affairs and Minister of Transportation during the 1950s and 60s.[79]

Menachem Mendel's primary secular interests seem to have been astronomy and mathematics. He knew how to estimate the hour from looking at the skies,[80] and, on one occasion, predicted a solar eclipse. At the age of sixteen, he impressed a local high school teacher by solving a complicated mathematical problem with unusual speed, and, in general, all the Schneerson boys, as well as Reb Levik himself, had

a great love of mathematics and problem solving.[81] Israeli politician Yonah Kesse (1907-1985), who was a regular at the Schneerson home, recalled in a 1973 television interview that even though Menachem Mendel was self taught, students and even professors would visit him to discuss issues in physics and mathematics. Kesse also "witnessed his intense diligence in Torah study. I always found him learning in a standing position, never sitting down.... I remember him as an extremely private person, an introvert; his entire being, as I recall it, was Torah."[82]

Another firsthand account we have from the Schneerson home from the early 1920s is the memoir of Yekatrinoslav resident Yeshayahu Sher (b. 1907), a close friend of Leibel.[83] Sher was a student in the Yeshivah established by the town's non-Chasidic Rabbi, Pinchas Gelman, and also took classes in mathematics and physics. The Schneerson family became something of a legend in Sher's home, as his father, who deeply respected Torah scholarship, "was astounded by the talents of the Rabbi's three sons. In our house, he praised them all the time, saying that the Rabbi's three sons were geniuses, gems."

Menachem Mendel, Sher remembered, was known as the "young Rabbi." He was of medium height, and slender build. His complexion was white and fine, with a black beard all around. "I never saw him with friends," Sher recalled. "He was always alone, thinking."

"Berel's features were fuller, and his beard blonde. He was also talented and brilliant. The youngest, Leibel, was taller than his brothers, with a velvety beard which had not yet filled his entire face."

Leibel, had broader interests in secular literature than his brothers. While all the Schneerson boys each had his own set of Talmud and bookcase of *sefarim* (sacred texts) in their shared bedroom, Sher remembered that Leibel had an additional bookcase for his secular reading matter, which was covered with highlights and notes. Leibel was particularly interested in economics and wrote a number of essays on the topic in Russian. He was prone to show off his genius and would say, "Give me twenty-five days and I will learn a language."

Among Sher's other interests, he studied engineering in a local school under the tutelage of a Jewish teacher named Mr. Ostrovsky. On one occasion, Sher spoke enthusiastically about the Rabbi's three bril-

liant sons to Ostrovsky and how they had acquired considerable mathematical skills without attending high school. Intrigued, Ostrovsky wrote down a complex problem, and suggested that Sher present it to the Schneerson boys. Energized by the challenge, Menachem Mendel, Berel and Leibel sat down that night and, working independently, each devoted the evening to penning a solution. Ostrovksy was more than impressed that all three boys had managed to come to the correct answer.

Sher's relationship with the Schneerson boys ended after three years when Berel was arrested by the Soviets. "His parents suspected that I caused Berel to be arrested due to my activities with Zionism," Sher recalled. Arriving at the house one day, Chana opened the door looking extremely perturbed and said to him, "I am sorry, but it's better you don't come in. Berel has been arrested. Levik is crying."

A further blow came to the Schneersons when Leibel became captivated by Zionism, stepping away from the traditions of his family. Sher himself had carried out an unsuccessful mission, assigned to him by Mordechai Gruber of the Zionist Youth, to draw his friend Leibel to Zionism. Over the course of a few weeks, Sher casually left works by Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873-1934), Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875-1943) and Ahad Haam (1856-1927) in the boys' bedroom, as well as a volume entitled *The Destiny of the Jewish Nation,* by Zionist thinker, Dr. Daniel Pasmanik (1869-1930). Leibel, who devoured the material, was impressed by the idealism and the language, but remained unconvinced by the ideology. Sher soon despaired and gave up his mission. (Menachem Mendel, Sher recalled, took a brief look at the books but was disinterested).

The seeds, however, bore fruit later on when Leibel *did* join the Zionist cause through the influence of Menachem Emanuel Brustein, the *Rav Mitaam* (government-sanctioned Rabbi) of Yekatrinoslav. Chana and Levik were deeply disturbed, fearing that this might be a point of departure for Leibel from traditional Judaism. Levik instructed that all books of Modern Hebrew literature be removed from the house. Chana, who would often converse to members of the community in an eloquent modern *Ivrit*, decided from now onwards to speak only in Yiddish or Russian. Eventually, Zionism lost its appeal for Leibel and he was drawn to Marxism and Communism.[84]

With these developments, and Berel's troubling illness, Levik and Chana may have looked at Menachem Mendel as their future pride and joy—but they could not have imagined that he was to become one of the most celebrated Rabbis of the Twentieth Century. Reb Levik, tragically, would not live to see his oldest son's rise to acclaim, but he remained the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe's role model and mentor, indirectly influencing the following generations. The Schneerson's open home in Yekatrinoslav, at the heart of a cosmopolitan, very secularized Jewish community, was probably not altogether different from a contemporary Chabad House. Menachem Mendel Schneerson had not grown up in a gated, insular community, and the image of his parents, dedicated to a very traditional, Chasidic Judaism, yet surrounded by Jews who did not share their outlook, eventually served as a model for the future growth of Chabad in thousands of locations around the world.