

Susan Handelman

## A Man Apart

*Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, the celebrated and world-beloved Lubavitcher Rebbe, died in New York last year at the age of ninety-two. It is impossible to summarize his achievement in revitalizing Chassidism and Jewish education, but many would say that his primary achievement was to make the Torah available to Jews today, regardless of their educational background.*

*Rabbi Schneerson was born in 1902 in Nicolaev, Russia, to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, a renowned kabbalist and Torah scholar, and Rebbetzin Chana, herself a gifted woman from a family of Rabbis. His brilliance was recognized at an early age; he later studied at the University of Berlin and distinguished himself in mathematics and the sciences at the Sorbonne. More than two hundred volumes of his writings have been published, many based on the lengthy talks he gave at Chassidic gatherings on Shabat and holidays.*

*The media made millions superficially familiar with this charismatic figure whom thousands would wait in line to see, to hear his response to their requests, and to receive a freshly printed dollar bill to be given to charity. *Cross Currents* readers, wanting to know more, will relish this brief portrait of the Rebbe (reprinted from *Wellsprings*, a quarterly journal expounding the inner dimensions of Torah and Jewish life) because it captures his special combination of genuine saintliness and reassuring down-to-earth compassion.*

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin 58a*) relates that when Rabbi Eliezer became critically ill and close to death, he took his two arms, folded them across

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his heart, and said to his disciples: "Woe is you. My two arms are like two scrolls of the Torah that are rolled and closed up. Much Torah I learned and much Torah I taught: much Torah I learned, and I did not absorb from my teachers even as much as a dog could lick from the sea. Much Torah I taught, and what my students absorbed from me was but as the drop of ink the quill takes from the ink well."

I begin with this story because of my feeling of utter inadequacy in trying to convey who and what the Lubavitcher Rebbe was, and what he meant for me. I would not be the Jewish woman I am today were it not for him. Yet all that I learned from the Lubavitcher Rebbe and everything I could say about him are only like those few small drops of water which convey nothing of the vastness and power and life of the sea. Yet water gives life, and even a few drops can revive a thirsty person. The Rebbe's life was dedicated to reviving the Jewish people, to giving them life and connecting them to the source of life...to G-d and Torah.

None of us, I think, can ever really grasp or describe his true greatness; he was another order of human being. On the one hand his life was entirely given over to the Jewish people; he was intimately involved in the lives of hundreds of thousands people who spoke and wrote to him for guidance about their most personal problems; yet he was also a man apart. I can only relate here a few personal stories of my connection to him in the hope that from these few fragments, the greater whole might be glimpsed.

I grew up in suburban Chicago in the 1950s, a typical third-generation assimilated American. Like many of my generation, I fled from Sunday School and the Temple to which my family belonged, and could see nothing true or compelling in what seemed to be the hollow rituals that most of the congregants hardly understood. Being Jewish in that milieu was a vaguely uncomfortable and perplexing experience, but not any obstacle to full immersion in the non-Jewish culture which surrounded us and swept us along with it.

What power took me out of the deep *galut* [exile] in which I lived — not just geographically, but intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally? Of course, the Torah promises that ultimately each and every Jew will be returned from exile and redeemed. But it was the Lubavitcher Rebbe who could not wait placidly for that redemption, who reached out to every Jew wherever she or he was found...to the furthest corner of the globe. Among other reasons, this was — I believe — because the Rebbe felt the pain of every Jew and of the Jewish people in every sec-

ond of *galut*. And because the Rebbe also saw the sparks of the divine everywhere, waiting to be uncovered.

And so, eventually, the Rebbe reached me, and helped take me out of my exile too. In the late 1960s, when many of my generation rebelled in extreme ways, the Rebbe understood us; he sensed that our restlessness came from a spiritual discontent. Instead of chastising us, he sent us his best Chasidim to found Chabad Houses, to teach us, to live with us, to love us. I think that was what was really behind the development under the Rebbe's leadership of the extraordinary international network of Chabad institutions from Hong Kong to Paris to Katmandu. He felt our pain, he intuited our yearning. And he saw us not just as products of late twentieth-century America, but under the light of Jewish eternity. We were princes and prophets and sages; each Jew was royalty; each Jew was precious; each Jew was the emissary and reflection of God in the world.

Perhaps that is what is meant when Jewish sources speak of the soul of a *tzaddik* (righteous, holy person) as an all-inclusive soul: the Rebbe had a soul that intuited and was connected to the pain and joy and greatness of the soul of every Jew. And that was what he taught his Chasidim. He made of each Chasid a Rebbe, made each Chasid feel that responsibility and love for every Jew, made each Chasid reach out beyond him- or herself, made each Jew sense her or his own greatness, her or his holiness. Those who were forgotten by everyone else, he remembered. He sent his emissaries to find and comfort and strengthen Jews in small forsaken towns from Alaska to Australia. Those who were abandoned by everyone else, he reached out to — drug addicts, prisoners, cult members.

I first encountered him through his emissaries at the Chabad House at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where I was attending graduate school. I then spent six months living in the Lubavitch center in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in close proximity to the Rebbe. By the time I came to Crown Heights in 1976, private audiences with the Rebbe had become very restricted. When he had been younger, he would meet with people all through the night. In my time, he was in his late seventies and would meet with people "only" until midnight or one in the morning. I never had an extended private audience with him, but I had many small encounters, and received answers to the letters I wrote, and comments about essays I published.

Everyone speaks about the Rebbe's eyes, the depth and penetration of his gaze. In his presence one felt immediately purer, truer, closer to

God. One knew what mattered and what was important in life. When my mother came to visit me in Brooklyn, perturbed about my affiliation with this group of Chasidim, I took her to the alcove by the Rebbe's office on the day she was to leave. People who were going on a trip would stand there and as the Rebbe would emerge to pray the afternoon prayer with the yeshiva students, he would give blessings to the travelers. He turned and looked at my mother and said softly in Yiddish in his mellifluous voice: "*fohr gezunterheit*" — "travel safely." All of a sudden my mother was crying, tears streaming down her face. "I don't know why . . . I don't know why I am crying," she said. "I'm not sad." Something in his glance and voice had penetrated to the depths of her soul.

Another friend came with me to one of the Rebbe's special gatherings for women — a secular, radical feminist. She passed closely by the Rebbe, and tears, too, came into her eyes, from some, unknown depth. "He looks like what I imagine Moses must have looked like," she said.

When I first came to study in Crown Heights, I struggled very hard with the issues of Judaism and feminism. To work these conflicts out, I wrote an article called "The Jewish Woman . . . Three Steps Behind?" and gave it to the editor of one of the Lubavitch women's magazines called *Di Yiddishe Heim* — *The Jewish Home*, which was a modest Yiddish-English publication. Before the article was published, I had occasion to write to the Rebbe for a blessing for a sick uncle. The Rebbe would receive — and personally read and answer — around four hundred letters a day. And probably equally as many telephone calls with questions and requests for blessings would come in each day from around the world. How, I wondered, did he find time and energy for all this . . . especially amidst all his other responsibilities?

The Rebbe's secretary called me back to read me the response the Rebbe had written on my letter: the Rebbe promised to say a special prayer for my uncle, and then the Rebbe added the words, "I enjoyed your article in the forthcoming *Yiddishe Heim*." I was surprised; how did the Rebbe know about an article which had not even been published? The editor told me that the Rebbe had such a deep desire to support the efforts of Lubavitch women, that he personally took the time to read and make his own notes and corrections on all the manuscripts for this journal. I subsequently wrote several articles for the magazine, and as a favor, the editor gave me back my typescripts with the Rebbe's notes and corrections.

As an English professor who has taught college writing, I was

amazed at the Rebbe's editing of my English. (He read and spoke many languages fluently.) He not only deepened the Torah concepts, he took out excess words, amended punctuation, spelling, and syntax, with careful attention to each detail. I wish I would give the same attention to correcting my own student's papers as he did to my manuscripts.

The Rebbe was a great supporter of Jewish women, and had a special relationship to them. He spoke often of the greatness of the Jewish woman; he held special gatherings to address them; he advocated depth and breadth in their Torah study; he sent them on missions around the world; he initiated several campaigns to encourage Jewish women to perform the special mitzvot pertaining to them. He created a stir in the Jewish world when he urged all women, even those who were not married, and all girls over the age of three, to light Sabbath candles.

As a woman engaged in intellectual and academic work, I received the greatest encouragement from the Rebbe — blessings to continue my Ph.D. in English, advice about possible dissertation topics, advice about how to negotiate the politics within the University. (The Rebbe himself had attended the Sorbonne and University of Berlin.) I sensed that he wanted me to employ to the full all my intellectual capacities, and all the secular knowledge I attained from my Ivy League education... to elevate all this and use it in the service of Torah and *Yiddishkeit*.

From the Rebbe's own personal example, I learned that there was nothing in the world a Jew need fear; that every place and every action and every moment called for a Jew to bring G-dliness into the world; and that no obstacle could ultimately stand in the face of a Jew's will to do so. That to be a Jew was the highest calling, a privilege and immense responsibility. Growing up in suburban Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, we Jews had kept a low profile. From the Rebbe, I learned not to be ashamed, not to be afraid... that the world, in fact, was yearning for the light of Torah.

In an article for *Di Yiddishe Heim* which I based on one of the Rebbe's talks, I compared the truths found in secular philosophy and science to those of Torah. The Rebbe had discussed the ways in which secular forms of knowledge are all limited; yet these very limitations also give a person a sense of satisfaction because one can grasp a body of secular knowledge; "master a field." Torah, however, is unlimited and infinite, and I wrote the sentence: "Thus one can never contain Torah, master it." In editing this manuscript, the Rebbe amended the sentence to read: "Thus one can never contain all the content of even one *Dvar* (sentence of) Torah, master it."

Yet if there was a master of Torah in our generation, it was also surely the Rebbe. I remember standing at *farbrengens* — the public gatherings the Rebbe would hold. The large synagogue in Brooklyn would be packed with a thousand or more people. If it were a weekday, the Rebbe would start to speak at around 9 p.m. and often give several *sichot* or “talks,” each lasting about forty minutes. Without a note, he would speak into the early hours of the morning, for five or more hours, citing liberally from memory the whole corpus of Jewish literature — Bible, midrash, Talmud, the classic commentaries, Kabbalah, Jewish law, Chasidic philosophy. He would discuss the needs of the Jewish people, the political situation in Israel, and in between talks, the Chasidim would sing and drink L’Chaim.

When he spoke Torah, it was not just another lecture, a flow of words; there was something magnetic about the Rebbe’s presence. Each talk was complex but beautifully structured and full of startling insights. There are now about forty volumes of these edited talks. And scores more volumes of his letters. Yet indeed, in that emendation he made to my sentence, one also sees his great humility: “one can never contain the content of even a sentence of Torah.” There was a regality and elegance about the Rebbe, and yet there was also his great humility. In the few years before he became ill, when he was into his nineties, he would stand in the alcove by his office every Sunday to speak for a few moments personally and face-to-face with anyone who wanted to see him, and give out dollars to each person to be given for charity. How could a ninety-year-old man stand on his feet for hours and hours without taking a moment’s rest, or a drink? And how could he focus so intently and exclusively on each and every person who came through the line of thousands of people which stretched for blocks outside his office? I heard that when he had been urged to sit during these long sessions, he responded by asking how he could sit when people were coming to him with their problems and needs and pains?

And despite the crush of the crowds, and the pressure of all his responsibilities, the Rebbe never seemed to be in a hurry. But he also never wasted a moment; every movement of his body was exact and yet fluid — like a maestro conducting a symphony. There was a combination of intense energy and intense calm about him. Watching and listening to the Rebbe at his public gatherings, time and space dissolved. I would catch myself and think — “I am standing in the midst of some of the worst slums of New York City; how can it be that in this ‘heart of darkness’ there is so much light?” I said to a friend once, “It is

so paradoxical to find this great *tzaddik* in the midst of all the violence and squalor and despair of this broken down part of Brooklyn." And my friend responded, "And where else do you think you would find him; where else does he belong... the Plaza Hotel?"

The Rebbe refused to abandon Crown Heights as the neighborhood changed. It was consistent with his refusal to abandon any Jew, to leave anybody behind. And it was consistent with his refusal to give in to fear. It was also consistent with the principle of *mesirat nefesh*, self-sacrifice for love of the Jewish people that he embodied and that he taught his followers.

And it was an affirmation of one of the great principles of Chasidic philosophy that "every descent is for the purpose of an ascent"... that from overcoming the darkness ultimately comes the greatest light. As the Rebbe often said, we live in an era of "doubled and redoubled" darkness — that is, a darkness so deep we do not even know it is darkness anymore. He was the light in that darkness... and he remains so even after his passing.

The Talmud at the end of tractate *Brakhot* says that "There is no rest for *tzaddikim*, neither in this world nor in the next world" for "they go from strength to strength." Even in the next world, they strive and reach ever higher levels. In 1950, in the days and months just after his father-in-law, the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, passed away, the Rebbe gave many moving talks about the meaning of what had occurred. He cited the statement of the *Zohar*, the pre-eminent work of Jewish mysticism, that "when the *tzaddik* departs he is to be found in all worlds more than in his lifetime" (111:71b). In Chasidic philosophy, the life of a *tzaddik* is not viewed as a physical life, but a spiritual life consisting of faith, awe and love. And after his passing, his soul is no longer bound by the limitations of a physical body, but is connected to the world in new and different ways. The Rebbe also explained why he did not use the conventional expression "*zekher tzaddik l'vracha*" ("of blessed memory") about his father-in-law after the latter's passing: the activation of memory is relevant to distant matters about which there is a danger of forgetting; but in relation to his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, who was still close and still connected, there could be no forgetting at all, and therefore there was no need to invoke memory.

There is no forgetting the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The *Zohar* affirms that the *tzaddikim* shield the world, and after their death even more so than during their life. I am sure that even now, after his departure, the Rebbe continues to shield the world, and to yearn and work for its redemption.