

The Lubavitcher Rebbe Died 20 Years Ago Today. Who Was He?

Two new biographies attempt to describe the Chabad leader, but can we ever fathom his ultimate aloneness?

By [Susan Handelman](#) | July 1, 2014 12:00 AM



For those of us who were close to the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, it's hard to grasp that this July 1, 2014—the Hebrew date of 3 Tammuz—marks 20 years since his passing. I first encountered him when I was a graduate student in 1975, through the emissaries he was dispatching to college campuses all over America. I had just started my doctorate in English literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Arriving in town, I glimpsed a small Chabad House across from the campus in an odd little pagoda-style building. Two young Chabadniks had come a few years earlier, leased the space of a defunct Chinese restaurant, and replaced wonton, chow mein, and pork, with kugel, challah, and Torah.

I was somewhat wary, but curious about the place. After my years of adolescent philosophical and spiritual searching, I had emerged a benign Camus-style existentialist. But I had also just come

back from living on a secular kibbutz in Israel where I had gone after the Yom Kippur War. Being in Israel had deeply connected me to the Jewish people and my heritage. But I was still a religious skeptic from a Midwestern assimilated family. Cold, snowy, economically depressed Buffalo drew me back to the United States because the campus had one of the most innovative graduate programs in English literature. And it was time to pursue my chosen career as an English professor.

So, one Friday night, after a long week of struggling with the writings of Derrida and Lacan, I left the library and crossed the campus. Dragging my heavy book bag and dressed in my jeans, I apprehensively crossed the threshold of the former Chinese restaurant, where I was warmly greeted by a young man with blue eyes and a long beard, dressed in special long black silk Hasidic garb for the Sabbath. He asked my Hebrew name and invited me to stay for the communal dinner after the services, and that was the beginning of my 40-year connection to Chabad and the Rebbe. A year after that first visit, I wound up spending the spring semester studying Hasidic and Jewish thought in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, the center of the Chabad world. I was still a questioner but had been impressed with the depths of Hasidic philosophy and biblical interpretation I was learning one-on-one with the rabbis in Buffalo. And I had always kept close to my heart the words of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Letters to a Young Poet*:



I beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

So, I thought I would take a chance and go to Crown Heights for the semester and maybe live my way into some answers. Worse comes to worst, I said to myself, it would be a kind of anthropological experiment.

The danger for the anthropologist, of course, is "going native." A few months into my stay, I had to decide by mid-April whether to return to Buffalo and resume my fellowship. So, I wrote to the Rebbe. He encouraged me to return for my doctorate, and as my studies later continued, gave me excellent pragmatic advice about my thesis topic and academic politics. He himself had studied math, physics, and engineering at universities in Berlin and Paris in the 1930s and knew academic culture well. He read 10 languages and spoke seven, and later he even edited some of my writings in English, as an English professor would—refining ideas, correcting awkward sentence constructions, taking out redundant words, catching typos, adding more felicitous phrasings.

So, like so many who encountered the Rebbe, his emissaries, or his teachings, I have my own story. And like so many who were touched by him, when I heard the news on June 12, 1994, that he had **died** at age 92 two years after a debilitating stroke deprived him of speech and movement and after months of hospitalization in a coma, I felt that a great light in my life, and the life of the

Jewish people and world had been put out. Yet I felt it was also time to “allow him to leave” after all that suffering.

Each year, the day of passing of any dear one is a time of heightened love and longing, nostalgia and gratitude, contemplation and wonderment. So it is for me when I think of those gone from me: my parents, various dear friends and relatives, special former students and teachers. Each year, I feel once again the stab of loss; I ask myself in astonishment: How could it be all those years already? Where did the time go? Each year, I sense how I really didn't fully grasp that dear one at all, as close as we were. Yet each additional year I see them anew and appreciate more deeply the gifts I received. Each year they feel still so present, and yet so absent.

So it is with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Yes, I have my story about him. But it's only a fragment of who he was. It's a story much deeper than the few sketchy remarks above. Each person who had a connection with him has another fragment—from his devout Hasidim all over the world, to the tens of thousands of people of all faiths and backgrounds who wrote him letters, confiding all the hopes and hurts of their hearts, and whom he always answered individually. And the thousands who stood in line each Sunday in his final years to personally receive a blessing and a dollar from him to give to charity, and to exchange a personal word. He instituted that practice in his late eighties, standing without a break for hours in the alcove outside his small, modest office, meeting each one close up, face-to-face, as they inched along the long line stretching out the door and down the blocks outside. There were really millions who were touched by him, one way or another, large or small, by the Chabad global outreach he inspired and directed, be it via the famous Chabad Passover Seder in Kathmandu, or a Chabad-sponsored drug rehabilitation center in California, or a Shabbat dinner on campus for a college student far away from home, or someone greeted on a street and given Shabbat candles in Alaska, or a chance to put on *tefillin* in Hong Kong. And there were so many affected by unpublicized, secret, and sometimes dangerous missions he sent his followers on in Communist Russia, Israel, and elsewhere.

I always wondered where he found the time for all that, let alone continuing his own deep studies of Torah. He had the same 24 hours of his day that I did—after all those activities, how was he also able to prepare for the frequent public gatherings in Crown Heights where he would speak for his followers for six hours without notes, expounding creatively and incisively on Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah, Hasidic thought, and current world events? I remember standing at those gatherings for several hours, my back aching in the crowded synagogue. Now I study their contents—from among the 200 printed volumes of his discourses, letters, and notes.

So, it is 20 years since he is gone, and he is so absent and still somehow so present. Hasidic philosophy teaches that each year, on the day of a person's passing, all the works he or she did in their life shine forth and the soul achieves a higher level. But who can really grasp the works of this extraordinary man, or who he really was? Who could assemble all those fragments?

To commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Rebbe's death, two major biographies have been published: One is titled simply *My Rebbe*, by the rabbinic scholar Rabbi Adin Even-Israel

Steinsaltz; the other is more grandly titled *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*, by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. These are not academic or intellectual biographies, but admiring works by two highly talented men who could be characterized as both insiders and outsiders to Chabad.

Steinsaltz is well-known as the Israeli scholar who translated the Talmud into modern Hebrew, a **project** that has taken him 45 years. He's written scores of books explaining Jewish thought, the Bible, Kabbalah, and Chabad philosophy; and he has built networks of schools in Israel and the former Soviet Union. He won my affection when I heard him respond after a lecture to a questioner who asked why he had become religious. With his characteristic ironic and impish smile, he answered: "Because I was a skeptic." He came originally from a secular home and studied physics and mathematics at Hebrew University, but he questioned everything.

Steinsaltz lives a few blocks from me in Jerusalem, and we have a passing acquaintance. I sometimes see him walking down the street, lost in thought, puffing on his pipe as he strolls past the restaurants and cafés that dot our mixed neighborhood. I've always wondered about his deep connection to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I could see that his life projects were a response to the urgent mandate of the Rebbe: to bring Torah to every Jew, no matter who, no matter where, to rebuild Jewish life after the devastations of the Holocaust in Europe; to reverse the Communist eradication of Judaism in Russia; and to combat widespread assimilation in the West. He writes in the acknowledgments that he conceived this book idea in 1994, right after the Rebbe's death, but it proved difficult for him to write and took him two decades, on and off, to complete. He hopes, nevertheless,

readers would see what I saw: a giant of a man, a giant of our time of history. Yet, this was not an easy book to write. On the one hand, the subject is vast: the Rebbe's accomplishments have transformed the Jewish world. On the other hand my feelings about this great spiritual figure were—and are—emotionally intimate.

On the first page of the preface he speaks a bit more about this:

The first time I met the Rebbe, I felt his intense personality—and his almost complete otherness. It seemed that he was attuned to a higher outlook: his intensity was exceptional and created the same burning passion within me that it had within thousands of others. Many who stood in the Rebbe's presence came away feeling that they had been branded, as a being that is marked by fire and set aside: so it was with me. Or, put another way, it was love at first sight.

Yet, as he notes, the Rebbe was very human and warm and had the ability to make everyone feel at ease. His book describes the Rebbe's personal history, the events and relationships that formed him, but it isn't a conventional biography. Steinsaltz's goal is to describe, rather, the movement the Rebbe built in order to "keep both the Rebbe and his vision alive in memory and deed. ... I want to re-create the person as he really lived and taught, and help him carry on his great mission." The result is a lucid and concise 250-page introduction to the history of the Chabad movement, warts and all, its key theological concepts, the major accomplishments of the Rebbe and his views,

including those that were controversial.

Aside from few hints in the preface and acknowledgments, though, we really don't learn much more about the contents of that "emotionally intimate relationship" that Steinsaltz had with the Rebbe. When and why did he become a follower? How did he find his way to Rabbi Schneerson? What did he find there that he had not found elsewhere? What did the two men talk about in their extensive private meetings? I understand his reticence—intimate relationships are intimate because they are especially private, precious and guarded—but I would love to know more.

By contrast, Joseph Telushkin portrays the Rebbe through an abundance of emotionally intimate stories that others tell about him. Telushkin's 600-page book took him five years to research and write. I have known Telushkin only by reputation, as the author of many best-selling popular books on Judaism and a sometime TV and film writer. While researching the book, he requested a personal meeting with me to check the accuracy of some pages he had written about me in the book. Why me? I had published several articles about the Rebbe, my relations with him, and especially about his unusually advanced approach to the issue of women in Judaism. The feminist movement had just taken off when I graduated Smith College in 1971; Gloria Steinem was our commencement speaker, and I cheered her on then (and still do).

Telushkin and I met in a café near my home in Jerusalem when he was visiting Israel. I was impressed by the scrupulous care he was taking with his research, which is reflected in the entire book. He'd worked extensively in the archives in Crown Heights, interviewed many people, and incorporated a lot of material from the massive online repository of personal stories and testimonies at chabad.org and therebbe.org.

The highlight of that evening for me was a personal story Telushkin shared about his father. We had wound up sitting in the café for a long time that evening, exchanging stories about the Rebbe in a mellow mood of appreciation, warmth and wonderment at the man. It happened to be the Hebrew date of 11 Nissan, two years ago, the 111th anniversary of the Rebbe's birth. I had inquired about his connection to Chabad because I knew he had not gone to Chabad schools; I had never identified him with Chabad, nor seen anything where he publicly identified himself with the movement. He told me he studied at Yeshiva University and became a modern Orthodox rabbi.

He went on to say that his father, Shlomo Telushkin, had been the accountant for both the Rebbe and the previous Rebbe, since the latter's arrival in America in 1940 as a war refugee, and his grandfather, Rabbi Nissen Telushkin, had been close to both Rebbes. At the beginning of the book he recounts the story he told me that night. But as he told it to me in person, I saw tears well up in his eyes. The tears told so much more than the words, about the Rebbe's way of reaching into the depths of souls.

I think it's an exemplary "Lubavitcher Rebbe story." In June 1986, Shlomo Telushkin suffered a serious stroke from which he never fully recovered. He lay for several days in the hospital in a coma. Twice a day the family received calls from the office of the Rebbe on the Rebbe's behalf, asking about Shlomo's condition. Joseph was with him when he finally awoke from the coma. A

few days later, Joseph received a call from the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, telling him that an accounting issue had come up and the Rebbe had directed: "Ask Shlomo."

Joseph protested that his father was still extremely sick and disoriented, and couldn't possibly answer. Krinsky said that they had tried to remind the Rebbe of that, but the Rebbe again insisted on asking. So, he went back to his father's room and posed the question. He writes that his father

looked at me, puzzled, said the answer was obvious and told me. At that moment, I realized what the Rebbe had done. He had made a calculation and asked my father a question that he knew he would be able to answer. Sitting in his Brooklyn office at 770 Eastern Parkway, dealing with macro issues confronting Jews in the world, he had the moral imagination to feel the pain of one individual, my father, lying in a hospital bed, partially paralyzed, and wondered if he would ever again be productive. And so the Rebbe asked him a question, and by doing so he reminded my father that he was still needed and could still be of service.

There are thousands of other stories that illustrate the Rebbe's uncanny ability to connect to the most intimate and unspoken inner needs of each person, while simultaneously managing and leading a global enterprise, and conducting an intensive scholarly career. He reached out to Shlomo Telushkin, a broken man in a hospital, whose sense of worth and power had been suddenly taken; he found a subtle and sensitive way to give him hope and strength; to restore his dignity and give him a way back to life. That, for me—in a nutshell—characterizes the mission of the Rebbe: He was reaching out to a broken Jewish people after World War II, indeed to a larger broken world, reaching for its healing and redemption on the deepest levels promised long ago by the prophets, a hope somehow sustained through thousands of years of exile and suffering.

In a letter to Israel's second president, Yitzhak Ben Zvi, in which he apologizes for not addressing him with the Hebrew title of *Nasi* (prince) because it is used in the Talmud for the Messiah, the Rebbe wrote:

From the time I was a child attending *cheder* [religious elementary school] and even before, the vision of the future Redemption began to take form in my imagination—the Redemption of the Jewish people from their final exile, the Redemption of such magnitude and grandeur through which the purpose of their suffering, the harsh decrees and annihilation of exile will be understood.

That sensitive young child was born in Ukraine at the end of the czarist era, lived through the pogroms, the turmoil of the Communist revolution, and the rise of Nazism, from which he and his own family personally and deeply suffered. But even when he was later living safely in postwar America—and until his final years as an elderly man—that vision of the future Redemption burned within him. For so many contemporary Jews, though, traditional notions of a Messiah (*Moshiach*) and future Redemption have become archaic and vaguely embarrassing notions, even though they are woven throughout the daily prayers, the Bible and rabbinic texts. As Steinsaltz puts it, the Rebbe's "greatest challenge" was the "apathy and skepticism about the possibility of salvation that afflicts our generation caught up so much in our material existence." Despite all the

criticism he endured, the Rebbe wanted to reanimate that idea, and make it urgent for our time as well—a time in which as he often put it, the “darkness is doubled and redoubled.” In such a time, one might not even be aware she or he is in darkness and mistake it for light.

The messianic idea indeed is one of the great gifts the Jews have given the world: an optimistic view of history; of the world, despite all its bloodshed and darkness, still moving forward toward a goal; of the human task as repair of the world in partnership with God. As Rabbi Léon Ashkenazi, a major postwar French Jewish thinker, put it: “Jewish history is dramatic, but not tragic.” But like all powerful ideas, messianism has also been twisted and distorted in dangerous ways.



Near the grave of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Queens, New York, 2004. (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

The Rebbe’s entire life, I think, was a cry to God to bring the Redemption. For him, it had already been too long; there had been too much pain. As he got older and felt his own personal end coming, he further intensified that call, and a messianic controversy swirled around him. Some of his followers tried to proclaim him the Messiah, which pained him personally, and which he tried to stop time after time. A few months before his stroke, a Chabad rabbi sent him a letter referring to him as “King Messiah.” The Rebbe’s secretary witnessed him looking at the letter, throwing it down in frustration and writing on it, “Tell him that when the Messiah comes, I will give him the letter.” After his stroke, and the diminution of his physical and cognitive abilities, he was not able to control those extremists anymore.

Telushkin and Steinsaltz both spend considerable time discussing the controversy, explaining traditional Jewish notions of the Messiah, the Rebbe’s pronouncements, and how they were interpreted and misinterpreted. The key is the text the Rebbe himself often cited to define the Jewish Messiah, Maimonides’ authoritative Code of Jewish Law at the end of his “Laws of Kings.” Maimonides defines “possible candidates” in every generation. Someone from the lineage of the House of David, of great piety, Torah scholarship and observance, who prevails on all Israel to follow the paths of Torah and battles their oppressors can be “presumed” to be the Messiah [*chezkat moshiach*]. Nothing supernatural is needed. But only if such a candidate succeeds, goes on to rebuild the Temple on its ancient site, and the Exiles are gathered in, can he be confirmed as beyond all doubt the Messiah [*moshiach vaddai*]. Any “presumed Messiah” can fail or die and then is simply considered, in Maimonides’ words, like all the “wholehearted and worthy kings of the House of David who died”—but he is not the Messiah.

In this context, I, like Steinsaltz and Telushkin, and many others in the Chabad and non-Chabad world, considered the Rebbe as good a “candidate” as any for our generation. But he died, the Exile continues, the world still suffers. He was not the Messiah.

The Rebbe’s messianic urgency often bewildered me as well. When the messianic controversy was at its peak I was living in Washington, D.C. It was late February and cold, winter, gray day. I suddenly saw about a half an inch shoot of a daffodil sprouting up from some dirt patch alongside

the pavement I had been treading. The winter had been so long and oppressive. When I saw that small yellow flash, I said to myself: “Ah, spring is here!” I knew that spring was not going to really be here for a long time yet; but yet with that tiny sprout it was also, in a sense, there already. Traditional sources often use that exact verb, *sprout*, when they describe Redemption. And I thought the Rebbe’s speaking about the closeness of Moshiach. Maybe that’s what he meant, I said to myself. He felt that sprout; he knew it would still be a long time; but he felt stirrings and the possibility. One has to “know the times.” That sprout can flourish or wilt and die if it gets hot too soon. It depends on the climate and conditions. He was trying to make people wake up and see the possibility in our time before it was lost. I don’t think it mattered to him who the exact identity of the Messiah was, but just that the Redemption should come, and the suffering and the brokenness of the world of the world be healed.

Steinsaltz and Telushkin explain more deeply the Rebbe’s inner longings for the Redemption of the world, combined with his own realism and pragmatism about how that could only occur through incremental actions of goodness, for which each of us is responsible. Nothing and nobody was unimportant, and every moment was critical. When he rebuilt the Chabad movement in postwar America, after it had been shattered by the Communist and Nazi persecutions, he used all the means available to him in an affluent, free, democratic and technologically advanced country to fulfill that vision he had as a young child. He did not withdraw his followers into a closed enclave that licked its wounds and feared contact with the new culture. He inspired them to reach out in love—and without fear—to all kinds of people, from the rebelling hippies of the ’60s, to the college students whose connection to Judaism had been lost, to the Jews in prison, to those swept away by drug addiction, to non-Jews, and so on and so on.

I especially cherish the personal stories about the non-Jews whom the Rebbe also touched. One of my favorites deals with Shirley Chisholm, whom I had remembered from the 1960s as a fiery street activist from Brooklyn. In 1968, she became the first African-American woman elected to Congress. I had no idea that the Rebbe was involved in her career, and she didn’t reveal it until her retirement in 1983. Conservative racist Southern congressmen tried to thwart the newly elected Chisholm by assigning her to the Agriculture Committee. What could this urban radical who wanted to work on education and labor issues possibly do on the Agriculture Committee? She was dejected and frustrated. She was also the representative from the Rebbe’s area of Brooklyn, and she received a call that he wished to see her. Telushkin recounts the story in his book as well, and describes how the Rebbe told her he recognized how upset she was. She acknowledged her frustration and feeling of being insulted, and asked him, “What should I do?”

“What a blessing God has given you,” the Rebbe answered. “This country has so much surplus food and there are so many hungry people and you can use this gift that God’s giving you to feed hungry people. Find a creative way to do it.”

And she did, a short time later, when she met Robert Dole on her first day in Congress. He had just been elected to the Senate from Kansas, and spoke to her about the plight of Midwestern farmers who were producing more food than they could sell and losing money on their crops. Joining forces with him, and later on her own, she greatly expanded the food stamp program. By 1973, the

government ordered that food stamps become available in every jurisdiction in the United States. She also helped create and push through Congress the special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children, known as WIC. Today 8 million people receive WIC benefits each month. When she revealed this story at a retirement breakfast in her honor in 1983, she said: “A rabbi who was an optimist taught me that what you think is a challenge is a gift from God. And if poor babies have milk and poor children have food, it’s because this rabbi in Crown Heights had vision.”

The Rebbe ignited the latent powers he discerned so clearly in every one, Jew or non-Jew. Even more remarkable to me, was that he related to every Jew not as someone to be made into a follower, but as someone to be made into another Rebbe. A Canadian college student brought to meet him with a student group in the 1950s, once bluntly asked him: “What’s a Rebbe good for?” Not offended, the Rebbe responded:

I can’t speak about myself, but I can tell you about my own Rebbe [his father-in-law]. For me, my Rebbe was the geologist of the soul. You see, there are so many treasures in the earth. There is gold, there is silver, there are diamonds. But if you don’t know where to dig, you’ll only find dirt and rocks and mud. The Rebbe can tell you where to dig and what to dig for, but the digging you must do yourself.

Well, these stories are poignant, but they can only tell you so much. Neither of these books deal in depth with the extraordinary contributions of his Torah scholarship, or connects that to his social and political and personal projects; but it’s all of one piece and inseparable. In Chabad, the telling of stories about a Rebbe is only one mode of connection; a deeper level is the study of that Rebbe’s Torah discourses. And as the previous Rebbe once wrote, when one sings a melody composed by a Rebbe, one is bound to an even higher level of the Rebbe’s soul. It will take many more biographies, and, I think, many more generations to grasp who the Rebbe was and what his life in the world meant. And even then, will we ever “pluck out the heart of his mystery,” as Hamlet chides Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

Jascha Heifetz, while warming up for a recording of Bach’s Partita No. 2 in D Minor, one of his signature pieces, said: “We call Bach the Bible. As many years as I have played him, I don’t think I know him. I am discovering and rediscovering new things.” So it is with the Rebbe. As public a personality as he was, and as connected to hundreds of thousands of people as he was, and as much as we can study all the pages of his discourses and letters, I don’t think we know him; nor can we fathom his ultimate aloneness.

Finally, as I think about the Rebbe on this 20th year of his passing, a paradox forcefully strikes me: *It really wasn’t about him at all.* Telushkin relates the Rebbe’s response to Gordon Zacks, an American Jewish communal leader and philanthropist who met the Rebbe once in 1970 to discuss the state of Jewish education. Zacks did not meet or contact him again until 1987, when he was in the line for dollars one Sunday. When the Rebbe saw him coming through, he greeted Zacks, and immediately returned to the subject of the conversation he had had with him 17 years earlier. Zacks was incredulous that the Rebbe had remembered both him and the precise topic of their previous discussion from 17 years earlier. “You are amazing,” Zacks said. The Rebbe retorted:

“What will be the benefit for the community that ‘I am amazing?’” and extracted from Zacks a commitment to make a renewed effort to help Jewish education.

So, what might please the Rebbe about these books, and our efforts to remember him on this 20th year of his passing? Certainly not to know that “he was amazing.” The mission he took upon himself was not completed; the vision that formed in his imagination as a child has not been realized. In 1991, a year before the stroke that silenced him, he shocked all his followers by poignantly crying out in a public gathering, “I have done everything I can. What more can I do to motivate the entire Jewish people to cry out and demand the Messiah should come? ... From now on, you must do whatever you can.” He left it up to us. If reading these two new books would spur a reader to start to dig within her or himself; to feel a renewed connection to the divine spark within; to see that spark in others despite all the darkness; to constantly yearn, as the Rebbe did, for the world’s ultimate Redemption; and to perform concrete acts of kindness and goodness to hasten it, then he would, I think, appreciate them.

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