

Civil engineer, Jewish leader

Two biographies of the Lubavitcher Rebbe written by authors outside the fold attempt to give a fuller picture of his life

• ALAN JOTKOWITZ

The seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was one of the most important Jewish leaders of the 20th century. He took a relatively small hassidic group centered in Brooklyn and built a worldwide empire with influence far beyond its numbers. His followers were so devoted that many believed that he was, in fact, the Messiah and could not accept the fact that he died a natural death.

But it was not only his followers who were enamored of him. Former UK chief rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks is fond of recalling how, when he was a young college student at Cambridge, the Rebbe challenged him to be a Jewish leader and changed the trajectory of his life from an academic philosopher to an Orthodox rabbi. Author Elie Wiesel has written that his discussions with the Rebbe on the Holocaust were "a turning point in my writing." And former Israel chief rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau has written that his meetings with the Rebbe were "one of the highlights of my life."

In recent years, books on the Rebbe by Lubavitch "outsiders" have begun to appear. In 2010, professors Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman wrote a biography titled *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*, which met with much criticism from the Rebbe's followers for its portrayal of Schneerson as an almost accidental hassidic leader who was preparing for a quiet life as a civil engineer. Rabbi Chaim Rapoport, a well-known scholar and follower of the Rebbe, wrote a critical response to the book.

Two new books have now appeared, attempting to give us a fuller picture of the Rebbe's life. Dr. Yehiel Harari has written a new biography titled *The Secret of the Rebbe*, and Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz has written one titled *My Rebbe*, which is filled with personal insights and reminiscences.

Anyone attempting to write the story of the Rebbe's life has to deal with two questions that are shrouded in mystery: Why did Schneerson, who was obviously destined for rabbinic greatness, spend so much time pursuing a career in engineering? And how did this shy man, who preferred a life of quiet contemplation and study to personal interactions, become such an acute observer of contemporary life, with an almost miraculous understanding of human relationships, and thousands of people seeking his advice on a daily basis?

These questions are well framed by Harari, who meticulously documents



RABBI MENACHEM Mendel Schneerson was known to prefer solitude, but he spent many years in the spotlight. (Efraim Kilshtok)

Schneerson's early life and his clear preference for solitude and contemplation. Before he became the Rebbe, he was reluctant to speak publicly and apparently never studied for an extended period in a formal yeshiva setting, preferring to study alone under the guidance of his father or father-in-law, the previous Lubavitcher rebbe. He also put much effort into furthering his secular studies, concentrating on them for almost 10 years at institutions of higher learning in Berlin and Paris.

Harari suggests that Schneerson pursued higher education to make it easier to obtain future visas so he could emigrate if necessary, or because he followed the opinion of Maimonides that even a Torah scholar should acquire a profession so he does not need the community to support him. Another suggested reason is that, as

he was expected to gain prominence, he wanted to broaden his horizons.

Notwithstanding the above, it is difficult to understand why he invested so much time in the project if he was destined for a career serving the Jewish people. Harari points out that even after arriving in America, Schneerson worked for a time in the Brooklyn shipyards as an engineer. The author also goes to great lengths to detail the efforts Schneerson made to help his parents, who were trapped in Soviet Russia and living in exile before and after the war. His father eventually died in 1944, but Schneerson was reunited with his mother in Paris in 1947 after not seeing her for 19 years.

Steinsaltz also recounts the biography of the Rebbe, but adds his own personal vignettes.

THE SECRET OF THE REBBE

(In Hebrew)
By Yehiel Harari
Yedioth Ahronoth
and Chemed Books
334 pages; NIS 98



MY REBBE

By Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz
Maggid Books
246 pages; \$25



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“The first time I met the Rebbe, I felt his intense personality – and his almost complete otherness,” he writes. “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... the Rebbe was a great man, certainly the greatest man I have ever met.”

In a charming incident – and the book is full of these personal insights into the Rebbe – he relates how Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik rescued Schneerson from jail on Purim in Berlin. The young Schneerson, being somewhat tipsy, was spouting Torah on the university campus and was arrested for creating a public disturbance. Soloveitchik was called and bailed him out of jail, joking that now Schneerson could be the Rebbe, as all previous rebbes had been in jail.

In attempting to answer the second question – how Schneerson managed to relate and offer sage advice to every petitioner – Steinsaltz writes that “latent powers within his soul seemed to me – and to many others – to manifest themselves in these moments, and the words that issued from his mouth during the *yehiduyot* [private encounters with the Rebbe] were at the very least, I and others believe, ‘hidden prophecy’... I firmly believe that he possessed some sort of supernatural capability, and that he was in contact with another level of being – which I do not hesitate to call the divine.”

He further explains that he believes the Rebbe had *ruah ha-kodesh*, “the ability to know things in the present or future, through a personal bond with the world of the spiritual.”

For those inclined, this approach can help explain the Rebbe’s wisdom and uncanny knowledge of people, but for the more rational among us, the question remains and is perhaps unanswerable.

In one chapter, Steinsaltz discusses his sense of the Rebbe as a lonely man, particularly after the death of his wife, even though he was surrounded by thousands of followers, and the author notes the personal sacrifices Schneerson made to sustain the Lubavitch movement and, in a sense, the Jewish People.

“From the day I went to *cheder* [religious primary school] and even before, the picture of the final redemption started forming in my mind,” writes Steinsaltz – and indeed, bringing the Messiah was the primary goal of the Rebbe’s life, a goal that only strengthened after the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel.

Neither book shies away from the controversies that surrounded the Rebbe and his life: the power struggle over who should succeed his father-in-law as rebbe – Schneerson or his older brother-in-law Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary, who was apparently being groomed for the role and was the favorite of the previous rebbe’s wife; the conflict and subsequent civil lawsuit over the theft of a book from the Rebbe’s personal library by Gurary’s son, who left the world of hassidism; the Rebbe’s conflicts with other Orthodox leaders; and perhaps the most difficult of all, the controversy over some of his followers’ insistence that he was the Messiah.

In a nice touch at the end of the book, Steinsaltz does some preliminary work in trying to understand the Rebbe’s talmudic methodology. He attaches great importance to the influence of Rabbi Yosef Rozin (1858-1936), the Rogatchover Gaon, on Schneerson’s intellectual development as a talmudic scholar, which has been less widely discussed.

Both books add important information to our knowledge of this complex man who dedicated his life to the Jewish people, and this reader looks forward to the day when Steinsaltz’s book is translated into Hebrew and Harari’s into English. ■

The writer is director of the Jakobovits Center for Jewish Medical Ethics and associate director for academic affairs Ben-Gurion University of the Negev’s Medical School for International Health and Medicine. He is also a senior physician at Soroka University Medical Center in Beersheba.