



The  
emerging  
story

# JEWISH Life

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Judging from recently published books and best-seller lists, we are fascinated by individual lives. Be they well-known figures from all walks of life, or ordinary individuals with more-than-ordinary stories, we read biographies, autobiographies and memoirs, valuing the lessons they may hold, or just the details of other people's lives.

Two more works in this genre have just been published.

**T**HE REBBE. That designation today is recognized in Jewish communities around the world, and by Jews of all denominations, as referring to Rabbi MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, head of the Chasidic Chabad-Lubavitch movement until his death in 1994.

His legacy and his vision live on in the activities of his emissaries, who are known for events that range from the world's largest Passover seders in Nepal, to giant outdoor Hanukkah menorahs, to kosher food welcoming travellers in far-flung destinations.

So wide-ranging is their presence that commentator and writer DENNIS PRAGER has quipped that the word "remote" means a place without a Chabad representative.

An admiring look at the man who shaped the Chabad movement in the last half of the 20th century and beyond, *Rebbe* by JOSEPH TELUSHKIN (Harper Wave, 619 pp., \$29.99) has just been published.

Its lengthy subtitle announces the gist of the author's perspective: "The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History".

An eminently readable mix of biography, anecdote, history, opinion and some speculation, *Rebbe* offers insight into

a once-small Chasidic movement whose leaders came to America in the 1940s, where they began rebuilding, and the

leader who set the movement on a growth trajectory that has continued into the 21st century and shows no signs of ending.

The 16-page photo section offers some wonderful glimpses of the movement's personalities.

Twenty years after his death, a leader has not been chosen to replace Rabbi Schneerson, the group's seventh Rebbe. His followers remain devoted to him, continuing to put his plans and ideas into action. Since his death, Telushkin writes, the size of the movement has more than doubled.

Rabbi Schneerson and his wife CHAYA MUSHKA arrived in New York from France in 1941, joining his father-in-law (the Rebbe at the time), who had arrived the previous year.

The movement's headquarters and their residences were in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, where they remain to this day.

Although Rabbi Schneerson was born in Ukraine in 1902, lived under Communism, was married in Warsaw, studied at the University of Berlin and in Paris (where he received a degree in mechanical and electrical engineering), and fled the Nazi occupation of the city, the great majority of this book takes place in America in the years 1951-1994, his decades as the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

In an unusual format for a biography, Telushkin has organized the book thematically rather than chronologically.

The last chapter is a narrative chronology, which is helpful to a reader looking for some context and history, particularly of the Rebbe's life before he came to this country. It is also useful to have a chronology of his activities here, which serves to tie together the diverse aspects of his leadership.

What was the essence of that leadership?

Telushkin writes that as Rebbe, he introduced "a new standard in Jewish life," which was the unconditional love of all Jews.

"Love your fellow, and not just those who agree with you," is how Telushkin puts it. Unconditional love of one's fellow, the Rebbe taught, will bring Redemption.

It was an openness, a non-judgmental approach to other Jews, that continues to have tremendous appeal and impact.

The Rebbe's influence went beyond the Jewish world, and he referred to America as a "government of kindness". He met with presidents, mayors and political leaders, taking Jewish life outside its usual bounds, as for example, in the public menorah lightings.

Telushkin makes the point that even in disagreement (as with Conservative, Reform and other non-Orthodox Jewish groups), his argument was never personal, and he offers several stories that demonstrate his attitude.

As for stories about the Rebbe, there are many here — some readers will find that there are too many.

Joseph Telushkin, a rabbi and author of 18 books, most about Judaism and Jewish life, is not a Chabadnik, but he has interesting ties to the movement. His father was the Rebbe's accountant, and his grandfather had a close relationship with both the Rebbe and his father-in-law.

He also notes that the five years he spent researching the life of the Rebbe has had a positive personal impact on him.

And yet a reader feels some dissatisfaction in Rabbi Telushkin's descriptions of Chabad controversies, and his rather forgiving explanations.

For example, the reasons (as described by Telushkin) behind the Rebbe's approach to science and to Chabad's decisions not to mark two widely-observed occasions on the contemporary Jewish calendar (Yom HaShoah and Israel Independence Day) are just not persuasive.

One of the movement's greatest controversies is the issue of followers who consider the Rebbe to be the Messiah, even after his death. After examining the matter, Telushkin concludes that — because this belief does not change the adherent's ritual or other Jewish behavior — it is "a big nonissue".

Telushkin's *Rebbe* is an enjoyable book to read, with insights and perspectives as well as details that inform and engage, shedding light on a towering, influential figure. At the same time, one cannot help but feel that the full story has not yet been written.

**A** MEMOIR that will be of notable interest to Jewish readers who grew up in Chicago, in particular in the 1950s and 1960s, and were part of the Orthodox community is *Teach Them Diligently* by BEREL WEIN (Maggid Books, 164 pp., \$24.95).

Berel Wein was born in Chicago in 1934, where his father, ZEV WEIN, served as a rabbi, first at Anshei Odessa on the city's West Side, then at Beis Medrash Hagadol Bnei Yaakov Anshei Luknik synagogue.

His maternal grandfather, Rabbi CHAIM ZVI RUBINSTEIN, was a founder of the Hebrew Theological College, where in due course Rabbi Wein would receive his rabbinic ordination.

Rabbi Wein also received a law degree from DePaul University, and practised law here for several years.

But before all that, it was public school for the young Berel, at least until 1946, when, in 6th grade, his parents transferred him to the recently established Chicago Jewish Academy.

For high school, he went mornings to the yeshiva for his religious studies, and afternoons to the Academy, for secular subjects.

Rabbi Wein has nothing but fulsome praise for the teachers and students he encountered at the Hebrew Theological College, characterizing the years 1944-55 as the yeshiva's "golden age".

By the time it moved to Skokie in 1959, that era had ended and, he claims, was never replicated.

The Chicago Jewish community was also changing at this time, with the population shifting and moving to the suburbs, along with the rise of the Conservative movement and the decline of the Orthodox.

In 1955, Rabbi Wein married YOCHAVED (Jackie) LEVIN of Detroit. The couple settled in Chicago, where their four children were born.

While his law practice grew, he found himself unhappy in his profession. After a brief foray into the business world, in 1964 Rabbi Wein accepted a pulpit in Miami.

The family remained there until 1972, when the author took a position with the Orthodox Union and they moved to Monsey, New York. Rabbi Wein left the OU, and founded a synagogue and yeshiva high school in Monsey.

In 1997, the couple made aliyah, and Rabbi Wein notes that he quickly became involved in various aspects of life in Israel.

In 2006 his wife passed away, and he decided to remain in Israel. He has since remarried.

**F**ROM THE LATE 1970S, Rabbi Wein writes, Jewish history has been "almost an obsession". It is odd, therefore, that historical details remain elusive in the memoir of this teacher and author of books on Jewish history.

A case in point: Chapter One, the first sentence, describes a childhood memory in Chicago prior to his bar mitzvah. The author recalls going with his father to the airport to greet the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi ISAAC HALEVI HERZOG.

He writes that he then heard Rabbi Herzog speak at the yeshiva about the Chief Rabbi's visit with Pope Pius XII to seek the return of Jewish children who had been sheltered in Catholic institutions during the war.

Rabbi Herzog's words, the author says, had a tremendous influence on his life.

The author gives no date for the visit. Judging from newspaper reports at the time, it appears that he may have conflated two events, one occurring in 1941 and the other in 1949.

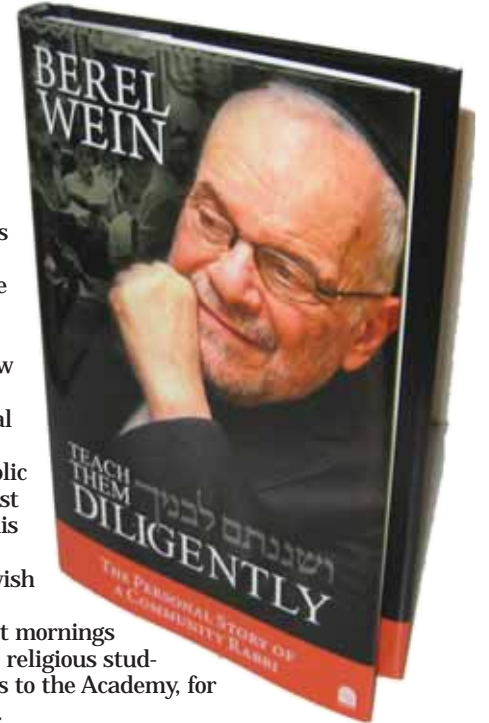
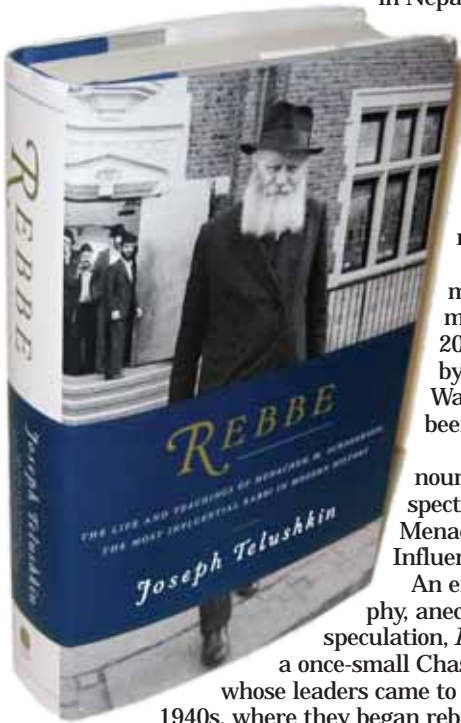
The *Chicago Tribune* on May 17, 1941, reported on Rabbi Herzog's arrival here by air, and on May 10, 1949, that he flew here for another visit.

It was in 1946, however, that Chief Rabbi Herzog met with the Pope and discussed the status of Jewish children, as the *Tribune* reported on March 11, 1946. Chicago newspapers do not appear to record a visit by Rabbi Herzog to Chicago in 1946.

The closest Rabbi Wein comes in his memoir to giving his own age when the visit took place is that he was not yet a bar mitzvah. In 1941 he was seven; in 1949 he was 15.

Another point for those who might wish to consult this memoir for historical purposes is that it would have been enhanced by an index. There is no obvious reason for omitting one.

Rabbi Wein writes that his autobiography is not intended to be a "tell-all" book. Rather, he notes that he was urged by his grandchildren to set down the story of his life. They will surely find this a meaningful gift. ☑



The  
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Lives of Our Times