

How do you write a biography of the Messiah? That is the question that Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, two leading Jewish social scientists, have had to tackle in their groundbreaking study of Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Also known simply as "the Rebbe", Schneerson was the seventh leader of the Lubavitch Hasidic sect from 1951 until his death in 1994. In his last years, his followers were consumed by a frenzy of expectation – which Schneerson appeared to share – that he would be revealed as the Messiah ("Moshiach"). Although his death shocked his followers, they continue his work and have not appointed a successor. The more realistic among them quietly hope that he will declare himself Moshiach from the afterlife; the more passionate ones are convinced that he is not in fact dead and will return imminently.

The devotion shown to the Rebbe makes the disentangling of hagiography from reality an especially difficult task for any biographer. If Schneerson had just been another eschatologically obsessed cult leader, there would be little incentive to rise to the challenge. But he was and is an influential figure outside the sect of which he remains the head from beyond the grave.

Since its genesis in the latter part of the eighteenth century, Hasidism, a popular Orthodox Jewish movement emphasizing spirituality, mysticism and joy in worship, has been intimately connected to the charisma of particular rebbes. A rebbe is part guru, part living saint, part prince, and is often involved in the intimate details of his followers' lives.

Although the Holocaust decimated the Hasidic movement, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe and his court managed to escape to New York in 1940, and Schneerson himself escaped from Vichy France by the skin of his teeth in 1941. Where other Hasidic leaders preached retrenchment and isolation in the face of catastrophe, Schneerson took the Lubavitch sect on a profoundly different path. Both the Seventh Rebbe and his predecessor saw the Holocaust as marking the birth pangs of the Messianic age.

Looking at the rapidly assimilating Jewish American population, Schneerson concluded

After the end

KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

Samuel Heilman and
Menachem Friedman

THE REBBE

The life and afterlife of

Menachem Mendel Schneerson

382pp. Princeton University Press. £20.95

(US \$29.95).

978 0 691 13888 6

that it was vital to "save" this Jewish remnant if the Messiah was to come. His reading of Lubavitch messianic theology convinced him that the seventh Rebbe had a unique destiny to save the Jewish people and the world. Heilman and Friedman refute non-Lubavitch apologists for the Rebbe who see his Messianism as deriving from the undue exuberance of his supporters. On the contrary, his sense of his uniquely important vocation was hard-wired into the fabric of his being.

In the early 1960s, the Rebbe began sending his followers on missions to increase the religiosity of non-Hasidic Jews. Through "Mizvah campaigns", Lubavitcher Hasidim became a common sight in America, encouraging their less observant brethren to light Sabbath candles, put on phylacteries and perform the many *Mitzvot* (religious obligations) on which Jewish practice is based. The Rebbe's *shlichim* (emissaries) were sent all around the world to live (generally permanently) in places with no other Hasidim and often few other Jews to establish "Chabad houses" that would be centres of Jewish education and practice. There are today over 3,000 *shlichim*, in places as far afield as Kathmandu, where a Passover meal is held each year attracting hundreds of Israeli backpackers.

The public visibility and charisma of the Rebbe led him to take on a significant political role. He intervened regularly in Israeli and American politics, and politicians often

stemmed in part from his own history. Although the son of a senior Lubavitch rabbi in Ukraine, he sought a secular education as an engineer, studying in Leningrad, Berlin and Paris in the 1920s and 30s – highly unusual for a Hasid. *The Rebbe* has attracted the ire of Lubavitch supporters for claiming that Schneerson often had little contact with the local Jewish communities during those years, although he made regular journeys back to the court of his Rebbe. Still more unconventionally, his marriage to the sixth Rebbe's daughter was preceded by a lengthy courtship and produced no children.

The authors trace Schneerson's life as well as they can, but are impeded by a lack of reliable sources. While their biography emphasizes the unconventional aspects of Schneerson's pre-Rebbe life, Heilman and Friedman rarely manage to unearth anything that exposes their subject's private emotional world. They certainly do an excellent job of analysing and explaining the Rebbe's importance. Yet even if they can explain the aura that surrounded him, they cannot seem to penetrate it.

Perhaps recognizing this gap, the authors demonstrate, with a hint of pathos, how the Rebbe's mystique ultimately consumed him. His life ended with legions of followers but no children, no close family and no friends. Following a stroke in 1992, he was left helpless and without speech as his followers bickered over how and whether to treat him, and regular, agonized screams were heard from outside his residence.



Miguel Angel Belin, a Spanish artist, with his painting of Rabbi Menachem Schneerson on the bomb shelter entrance of the Chabad Center, Sderot, Israel, 2010

sought photo opportunities with him at his Brooklyn court. Such was his stature that President Reagan held a (kosher-catered) birthday celebration in his honour at the White House in 1983 – which the Rebbe had the chutzpah to attend only via video link.

As Heilman and Friedman show, the Rebbe's ability to reach out to the world

www.littman.co.uk

Littman

HERBERT A. DAVIDSON
**MAIMONIDES
THE RATIONALIST**

KEYMOUR FELDMAN
GERSONIDES
Judaism within the Limits of Reason

Jess at Home
The Desecration of Identity

LEWIS CULTURAL STUDIES
VOLUME TWO

BROADENING
JEWISH HISTORY