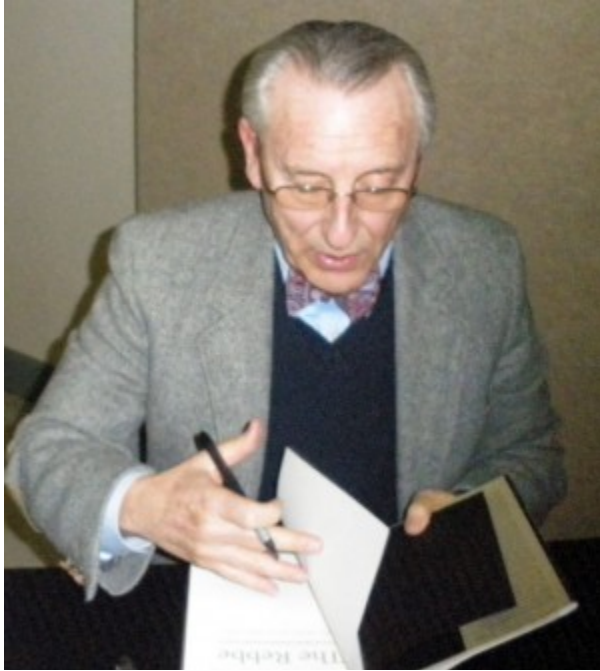


# Scholar explores legacy of late Chabad rebbe



Following his appearance at Rutgers University, Samuel Heilman signs a copy of his book on the life of the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe. Photo by Debra Rubin

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The late Chabad-Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, has played an even more central role as a messianic figure to his legions of followers in the years since his death in 1994.

“One of the things I predicted correctly was that when the Rebbe died, he will be in reruns,” said Samuel Heilman, distinguished professor of sociology at Queens College and the Harold Proshansky Chair in Jewish Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Heilman coauthored, with Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*. On Dec. 8 he spoke to large audience on the Douglass College campus in New Brunswick during a program sponsored by Rutgers University’s Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

Next month, he will discuss the biography of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe at The Jewish Center in Princeton.

Schneerson lives on, said Heilman, through the thousands of Chabad *shluchim*, emissaries, posted throughout the world and the pilgrims who visit “the Ohel,” the mausoleum in Queens that houses the graves of the Rebbe and his father-in-law and predecessor, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson (the two were related through the third Lubavitcher Rebbe). There the Rebbe’s message plays “in a continuous loop” in recordings, said Heilman, and hundreds of followers leave notes and pray daily at the headstone, which is etched in Hebrew with the words “the Messiah of God.”

(After Menachem Mendel’s death in 1994, Chabad-Lubavitch split into two, one group claiming that the Rebbe will return as “Moshiach,” the Messiah, the other taking a “wait and see” stance.)

Schneerson “is ‘syndicated,’ and many of his followers feel closer to him now than in life,” said Heilman. He presented an overview of the life of Schneerson, who went from being the son of a *hasid* in Russia, to living an assimilated life as an aspiring electrical engineer in Berlin and Paris, to filling the role as one of the world’s most venerated Jewish religious leaders.

The book, which has generated controversy over its depiction of Schneerson’s early life, a time in which he and his wife, Moussia, left the confining world of their youth for Paris. Heilman showed slides of a stylishly dressed couple, Schneerson sporting a neatly trimmed beard and smart suit.

Being the wife of the Rebbe was “a life Moussia never wanted,” Heilman said; she refused to be called rebbetzin, referring to herself to the day she died in 1988 as “Mrs. Schneerson of President Street.”

The couple’s life plan was changed by World War II and the Holocaust. Yosef Yitzchak was smuggled out of Poland, arriving in New York in 1940. The elder Schneerson became convinced the Holocaust marked “the birth” of the Messiah and, said Heilman, told American Jews the Shoa had occurred “because you were not good enough Jews.”

He came up with the idea that creating public displays of Jewish life and reaching Jews in the far corners of the world through an army of *shluchim*, practices carried on by his successor, would hasten the arrival of “king Moshiach.”

Menachem Mendel and Moussia arrived in New York in 1941. Unable to speak English, with few job prospects, feeling desperate, and undoubtedly suffering survivors’ guilt, the young Schneerson “turned to God for answers,” said Heilman. He transformed himself, and when the elder Schneerson died, he became the Rebbe in 1950.

As the number of emissaries grew into the tens of thousands, concern mounted about the ageing and childless Schneerson.

“As he grew older and older, they concluded they didn’t have to wait for Moshiach to come,” said Heilman. “Moshiach was already here.”

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