

JEWISH HISTORY

The tests of the Rebbe

Historian Immanuel Etkes has blazed a trail through the forest of Hasidic writings and biographical scholarship about the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, and produced a new sort of biography that gives a full picture of this spiritual giant and charismatic leader

Ba'al Hatanya:

Rabbi Shneur Zalman Meliady Vereshita Shel Hasidut Chabad (Ba'al Hatanya: Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and the Origins of Chabad Hasidism), by Immanuel Etkes. The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History (Hebrew), 495 pages, NIS 116

By David Assaf

Chabad, which next year will mark the bicentennial of the death of its founder, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, is the best-known branch of Hasidism, both in Israel and around the world. In their everyday lives, Chabad members, especially the emissaries who operate its centers around the globe, are typically welcoming to all kinds of Jews – the Orthodox as well as the non-observant – offering them an enticing Judaism that is comforting, tolerant, open-minded and relatively enlightened. This is the Hasidism that embraces serving God with joy, a Hasidism that is easy to embrace and be embraced by, and which may be placed, at least in its approach to the modern world, in the left wing of the moderate ultra-Orthodox community.

Seemingly paradoxically, when it comes to Israeli politics, Chabad Lubavitch is in fact right-wing and even ultra-nationalistic. This polarity, as well as the messianic fanaticism that has overtaken the latest generation of the less rational segments of Chabad, has prevented it from maintaining its place as the favorite ultra-Orthodox sect of Israeli society. It had this status in the 1960s and '70s, before the last Chabad rabbi, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), blatantly intervened in Israeli politics – in disputes about halakhic conversions and who is a Jew, as well as the issue of the territories and the occupation.



Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. Left behind a biographical gold mine.

The enormous interest in the latest rebe as one of the great charismatic leaders of Hasidism in the 20th century, and in his activities and messianic legacy, has overshadowed interest in the beginning and development of the movement as a whole. Nevertheless, Hasidim and scholars are familiar with the name of the founding father of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman Ben Baruch (the name Schneerson was given to his descendants only after his death), also known as the Rashaz (based on the Hebrew acronym of his name), the Alter Rebbe (the Old Rebbe) or Ba'al Hatanya, after the movement's foundational text, which he wrote. The story of his life, however, has never been told in full from a scholarly, historical point of view.

Not only was Shneur Zalman considered a paragon who reached out beyond the

boundaries of his religious sect and who holds a place of honor in the pantheon of great Hasidic rabbis, but he was an exceptional leader who left behind him a varied and wide-ranging body of sources, some by him and some about him. This corpus includes dozens of private and public missives, polemical and philosophical writings, books on Jewish law, reports about him made to the Russian government by informers, and the transcripts of his interrogations by the czarist police. They constitute a biographical gold mine that researchers of the history of Hasidism were aware of, but that was nonetheless never fully exploited to produce a well-rounded picture of one of the greatest creative and spiritual figures of the Jewish people.

Just how special Shneur Zalman was may be seen by the affectionate remarks lavished on him by historian Simon Dubnow, the founding father of scholarly research on Hasidism. In his "History of Hasidism" (1930), Dubnow did not spare his criticism of many Hasidic leaders, but when it came to Shneur Zalman's 1797 volume of Hasidic philosophy – the Tanya, which remains the central text of Chabad to this day – Dubnow wrote that going from reading the writings of other Hasidic leaders to reading the Tanya is like moving from a dark room into a well-lit one. The literature of the first Hasidic masters was argumentative and complicated, consisting of disorganized and unmethodical fragments of ideas, Dubnow wrote. The Tanya, by contrast, "is presented in orderly fashion...it is the first attempt to philosophize Hasidism, a dimension that had forbid even the smallest amount of philosophy."

Dynastic movement

"Ba'al Hatanya: Rabbi Shneur Zalman from Liadi, and the Origins of Chabad Hasidism" is Immanuel Etkes' fourth quasi-biography, in which he combines social-historical discussion with study of the religious philosophies of his subjects (the previous ones are on Rabbi Israel Salanter, the Vilna Gaon and the Ba'al Shem Tov). I use the term "quasi-biography" because these are not traditional biographies depicting the life stories of the subjects from birth until death, and making use of all available sources.

"This book does not purport to encompass Rashaz's entire legacy from all aspects," writes Etkes. And though it proceeds in chronological order, it does not pretend to be a systematic biography. So for example, there is not a word about Shneur Zalman's birth, childhood or adolescence, and almost nothing on his family life – such as his relationships with his father, wife and children, although these are intriguing parts of his life and there are quite a few sources about them. Nor does the book end with his death, but rather goes on with the battle to inherit his position as leader and his legacy, a power struggle fought by



The Rebbe's grave in Hadiach, Ukraine.

his son Dov Ber (sometimes referred to as "the Middle Admor") and his star student, Aharon Halevi of Strashelye. This struggle, which ended in the victory of his son and the departure from the sect of his student, determined the image of Chabad as a dynastic movement for generations.

Even if "Ba'al Hatanya" isn't a biography in the formal sense, it does provide a detailed description of the fateful crossroads in the subject's life, against the background of his time and place, using comparative and contextual methodologies of analysis. It is clearly a social history, but what does this term mean?

A social historian is aware that social circumstances determine the behavior, thinking and worldview of the people who live in a particular time. In this spirit Etkes focuses mainly on the significant junctions and stations of his subjects' lives, examining such topics as how the rebbe ascended to the throne of leadership; his battle with opponents from within and without the movement; the way he dealt with crises such as the battle between Hasidim and *mitnagdim* (Orthodox Jews who opposed Hasidism and favored Torah study over spiritualism); the struggle against Hasidic leaders who disagreed with him; his arrest and interrogation; the Napoleonic Wars; and so on and so forth.

The first three of the book's 11 chapters deal with how Shneur Zalman became the leader of all the Hasidim in White Russia, how he established his leadership and how he maintained it. The Alter Rebbe neither inherited his role (on the contrary, his father apparently opposed his Hasidic bent), nor did he seek it. Rather, he achieved his

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high position early on and without having had any intention of becoming a leader. He became one anyway after his senior colleagues, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk, immigrated to Palestine in 1777 and failed in their effort to continue leading the followers who remained in Eastern Europe via letters and emissaries. Although he did not seek to inherit their place from the very first, he was apparently drawn into the vacuum that was created and took upon himself the role of shepherding the orphaned Hasidic flock. Despite early doubts and opposition among some Hasidim, once he acted, he did so decisively, and did not hesitate to fight his opponents.

In time, a serious disagreement arose between him and Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk, who was living in Tiberias. This conflict, based on spiritual matters (Rabbi Abraham sharply opposed the publication of the Tanya), as well as material ones (Rabbi Abraham accused him of cutting off the flow of funds to support the poor in Palestine), turned the former friends into bitter enemies. Etkes devotes an entire chapter to this complicated quarrel, recreating its origins and ultimately taking sides.

"Which one of these holy enemies was in the right?" he asks. "The critical reader will raise an eyebrow and be discomfited by the question itself. In the end each of them certainly was 'correct' from his own

point of view. ... And yet, since the versions are contradictory when it comes to the facts, there is a point in asking which one was speaking the truth and which one was lying." Etkes thus steps out of the traditional historian's role – remaining objective and attempting to relate the historical event "as it was" – and decides that Rabbi Abraham's anger drove him crazy, to the point that he was "forced to make up a story that he himself almost believed, but the historian cannot."

Three other important chapters in the book deal in depth with Shneur Zalman's public battles. These struggles were against the *mitnagdim*, whose opposition to Hasidism derived from religious reasons (the Vilna Gaon and his followers, for example, viewed it as heretical), social rea-

out with unequivocal, enthusiastic support for Czar Alexander I. His loyalty to his Russian homeland, including the recruitment of spies for Russian intelligence, put him in danger, and with the advance of the French army, he and his family had to abandon their home and escape eastward in a guarded convoy. The difficulties of the trek brought on the death of the Alter Rebbe, at the age of 65, in Pena, a remote village, and his burial in nearby Hadiach.

Immanuel Etkes is known among his colleagues and students – and I am one of them – as a master teacher whose lessons and lectures are models of clarity and method. This talent extends to his writing. His ability to examine seemingly familiar sources and use them to shed new light on the subject – and then express this at the

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sons (fear of changes in the accepted order) and personal ones (fear of losing one's livelihood should one dare to disagree with the religious authorities). There were far-reaching consequences to the militant opposition to Shneur Zalman, which led some of his enemies to inform on him to the czarist authorities. Twice, he was arrested in St. Petersburg and subjected to exhausting interrogations, which he withstood heroically. After a period of short detentions (six weeks in 1798 and a little over two in 1800), the rebbe was acquitted and released, and received as a hero by his followers. His arrests, interrogations and release created the myth within Chabad of the rebbe's heroism. (To this day, the 19th of Kislev, the date of Shneur Zalman's release from his first imprisonment, is a holiday among Lubavitch Hasidim.)

Etkes disrupts the chronological continuity of the book to devote two chapters to the rebbe's primary intellectual legacy. He explains for the lay reader the nature of the Tanya, its content and its target audience, and explains why it is so central to the religious world of Chabad.

The book also offers a fascinating discussion of the last public event in Shneur Zalman's life – the invasion of Russia by the French army led by Napoleon. This war forced the rebbe to take a position about what was interpreted as a threat to the preservation of Jewish tradition by the values of the Enlightenment. He came

reader's level, in handsome language and with originality – makes this book a valuable one to read.

The Alter Rebbe who emerges from Etkes' book is an impressive figure – a spiritual giant and a charismatic leader, an educator dedicated to leading his followers and incessantly striving to be a prodigy in the service of God. Like the Ba'al Shem Tov and like his own teacher, the Maggid of Mezerich, Shneur Zalman saw himself as an emissary of the Jewish people on earth and in heaven. He welcomed those near and far, but also knew how to employ his anger when the times demanded it. The rebbe worked during crises and withstood difficult personal tests – intellectual disagreements with great Torah scholars he admired, informers and slanderers from within and without, arrests and interrogations – though he was overcome by the miseries of war that caused him to abandon his home and wander on a difficult journey that led to his death.

In "Ba'al Hatanya," Etkes has contributed an important volume to the rapidly growing library of scholarly books about Chabad. His study sheds light on the founder, who may have been forgotten a bit, though his name is on everyone's lips.

David Assaf is a professor of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University. His forthcoming book "Beguiled by Knowledge: An Anatomy of a Hasidic Controversy" will be published this year by University of Haifa Press and Yedioth Ahronoth Books.



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