

The Rebbe and Australian Jewry

Rabbi Elisha Greenbaum reflects on the exponential development of Chabad over the last two decades, especially across Australia.

THE Lubavitcher Rebbe never visited Australia, yet he transformed the face of Judaism in this country forever. Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson had not left New York for over 40 years, yet his impact on the entire Jewish world was immeasurable. Untold numbers of people, many of whom were born after his passing or who never met the Rebbe in person, proudly claim to be inspired by his teachings and example and, though he had no children, hundreds of thousands of Jews will observe his 20th *yahrzeit* next week.

In his decades of public life the Rebbe revealed almost nothing personal about himself, preferring to direct attention to the needs of others; yet within the space of the last few weeks alone, no fewer than three separate biographies about the Rebbe have been published to critical and public acclaim.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Rebbe*, makes the somewhat audacious claim that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was “inarguably the most well-known rabbi in the 800 years since Maimonides”, while Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz – himself a world-famous teacher and guide to thousands – describes the Rebbe in his *My Rebbe* as “the greatest man I ever met ... whose life work constitutes one of the most remarkable religious tasks every undertaken”.

From my perspective, as a follower of the Rebbe, I don’t feel the need to defend or debate these contentions; history, after all, is not a popularity contest. However, I would posit that the revolution that the Rebbe engendered in Jewish life and the attitudes to Judaism that he promulgated have permanently changed the way Jews relate to Judaism, and that Australian Jewry in particular has been positively transformed by his example and teachings.

The Rebbe reached out to the world. Having grown up in communist Ukraine, the Rebbe took personal responsibility for the maintenance of any semblance of organised religion behind the Iron Curtain, and it is his followers who now spearhead the effort to rebuild Judaism in the former Soviet Union.

Prime ministers and presidents of Israel would meet the Rebbe in New York; Tzahal chiefs of staff and Israeli diplomats would consult him regularly, soliciting his advice at crucial junctures of history.

Over 250 volumes of the Rebbe’s Torah teachings have been published to date, and the ideas he espoused, his original scholarship and his unique educational approach are transformative in nature and intellectually compelling.

The Rebbe, according to a third biographer, Chaim Miller, was the “man who turned Judaism outward” and the revolutionary concepts he pioneered are groundbreaking in their vision and reach. From worldwide public celebrations of



The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson holds a sefer Torah at a weekday service at Chabad headquarters, 770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York.

Chanukah menorah lightings and the “mitzvah tanks” that dot urban city streets, to ministering to Israeli tourists in the Far East, it was the Rebbe’s contention that every single Jew deserves a chance to be introduced to our common faith, and no locality is too physically distant to be abandoned or ignored.

Lubavitch has more than doubled in the years since the Rebbe’s passing and continues to grow exponentially. Currently over 4000 Chabad shlichim and shlichot couples have accepted life-long postings to spread the Rebbe’s approach to Torah and mitzvot in every corner of the world.

In Australia, Chabad is identifiably part of the mainstream Australian Jewish experience and Lubavitchers could almost be described as the unofficial “Jewish public servants” of the country. So many congregations Australia-wide are represented by rabbis who identify with Chabad. Many of these congrega-

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tions are Chabad Houses or explicitly Chabad-affiliated institutions, but even of the “establishment shuls”, a significant percentage have chosen to entrust their spiritual leadership to members of the Lubavitch movement.

In the 20 years since the Rebbe passed away, more than 30 new Chabad Houses and institutions have opened throughout Australia and New Zealand, while the 134 couples currently serving the community as shlichim minister to every conceivable demographic age group and segment of society. Chabad operates in every state capital, as well as in the ACT. Additionally, Chabad of Rural and Regional Australia (RARA) sponsors regular visits to small towns across Australia, also keeping in constant email contact with hundreds of relatively isolated families

Every full-time sofer (scribe) currently writing and checking mezuzot and Torah scrolls in Australia is a Chabadnik. A large majority of the mohelim who currently circumcise Jewish newborn boys are Lubavitchers. If you buy kosher meat anywhere in Australia the schochet (ritual slaughterer) is very likely to be a Lubavitcher. Chabadnikim act as hospital, prison and army chaplains, religious studies teachers and campus rabbis, and the kashrut authorities around Australia are staffed almost entirely by Lubavitcher chemists, administrators and rabbinical authorities.

What accounts for this willingness to serve? One factor is undoubtedly the attention paid by the Rebbe to the needs of Australian Jewry. In thousands of letters addressed to individuals and community organisations, and in hundreds of private meetings, the Rebbe demonstrated an almost obsessive interest in the state of Jewish life in this country. In many public talks he specifically referred to Australia as being geographically distant from major Jewish population centres, and consequently warranting an inversely proportional degree of consideration.

The Rebbe emphasised that wherever possible a Chassid’s primary responsibility is to serve the local population. The Chabad educational system emphasises service to the community and this has produced motivated graduates, armed with the tools and training to make a positive difference to their surroundings.

Complementing the shlichim is the cadre of ideologically committed lay

members, who, feeling committed to the religious needs of their fellows, volunteer their time and donate generously to the cause. Additionally, many of those educated in the Chabad school system or inspired by the shlichim, though they don’t consider themselves Chabad, have absorbed the ethos of public service and the importance of every individual action, and add immeasurably to the common weal.

The Rebbe did not restrict his efforts to developing the Chabad institutions but evinced keen interest in the progress of many local schools, institutions and youth movements. Chabad Chassidim model themselves on the Rebbe’s sense of responsibility towards Jewish continuity, and the need to render material and spiritual assistance to all.

Another factor in the success of Chabad in Australia derives from the benefits of networking and sharing in the experiences of international colleagues. Programs and events that have been successful overseas can be copied and adapted for Australian conditions. Public menorah lightings on Chanukah, model matzah bakeries, shofar factories, Shavuot ice-cream parties and rallies and parades for children are just some examples of ideas first developed elsewhere that have been successfully transplanted to local conditions. In a welcome development, so receptive have Australians

been to events of this nature that similar functions are now staged by many other community organisations.

The positive influence Lubavitchers have had on the Australian Jewish community is out of all proportion to the number of actual Lubavitchers. I would estimate that at any one time there have probably never been more than 450 families in Australia who would consider themselves as being fully committed Chabad Chassidim, though many thousands of others had a relationship with the Rebbe or enjoy occasional to regular interaction with the movement.

At the urging of the Rebbe, over the last 65 years Lubavitch opened schools, yeshivot, rabbinical schools and institutions for higher learning for women. Much after-school programming for public school children is now organised by Chabad. The first kollel on Australian soil was established in 1979, attracting a stream of talented and motivated young men and women to the community. These kollel graduates contribute to the pool of religiously educated and engaged laymen, many of whom assist the community in various volunteer functions, while a significant percentage of the religious functionaries employed in Australia over the last 35 years were initially attracted to the country to study in kollel. Every night of the year sees hundreds of people attending dozens of adult-education classes, offered throughout the country, and it was the Rebbe who commissioned the first regular Torah periodical ever published in Australia (*Kovtzei Torah*, published by the Rabbinical College and highlighting original research and Torah thoughts).

The confident and open-minded nature of Australian society renders the approach of the Rebbe particularly attractive to local Jews. The Rebbe passionately believed that authentic Judaism belongs in the public sphere, and a believing Jew has nothing to apologise for when confidently demonstrating his faith to the world. The Rebbe called for public demonstrations of Jewish pride and urged his Chassidim to look past the narrow insularity of focusing only on one’s social group or dues-paying members of one’s own synagogue, and to think globally and demonstrate care and affection for all. In a fascinating letter to one of the Chabad pioneers to Australia, the Rebbe urged local Chabadniks to absorb and reflect Australian values, and not just blindly replicate the American experience.

It has been 20 years since the Lubavitcher Rebbe was taken from us, yet the positive ramifications of his leadership are felt more strongly today than ever before. You don’t have to be a Lubavitcher to recognise the benefits he brought to the entire community and for every individual. The Rebbe never sought credit nor demanded recognition for his efforts; his goal was Jewish unity and continuity. However, Jews throughout the world – and specifically those of us in Australia – owe a debt of gratitude to him, and now is an appropriate time to learn from his teachings, to strive to emulate his love for all and to thank God for giving us the Rebbe.

The Rebbe’s 20th *yahrzeit* will be on Tammuz 3, June 30/July 1, 2014. For details of public functions planned to honour the Rebbe and learn from his legacy go to: (Melbourne): timelessteachings.com.au; (Sydney): yeshiva.org.au.

Elisha Greenbaum is rabbi of Moorabbin Hebrew Congregation and L’Chaim Chabad – Kingston

Shabbat times

Friday, June 27
– Sivan 29
Candle-lighting
4.52pm

Sat, June 28
– Sivan 30
Shabbat ends
5.53pm

The three newly published biographies of the Rebbe are:

Telushkin, J., *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson*. (Harper Collins, 2014)

Steinsaltz, A., *My Rebbe*. (Maggid, 2014)

Miller, C., *Turning Judaism Outwards: A Biography of the Rebbe*. (Kol Menachem, 2014)