***This document is not the whole book: just the two sample chapters to get an idea of the book’s contents, style, and format.***

*Chapter 1*

What Is a Holy Man?

Life as we see it is not all there is. There is more to existence than our physical and material concerns. When we reach above the mundane and seek to connect with a Transcendent Being – that is an act of holiness. Some of us are more holy than others, to be sure. The holy person may be an exalted figure or someone simple – possibly your grocer – but you may feel that he is connected with something “other,” that he is constantly thinking, feeling and experiencing a connection to something beyond our ordinary comprehension.

This is true even when the holy person, the saint, speaks of trivial matters. A great mathematician may talk to a layperson about the simplest elements of arithmetic. Still, the listener can sense – perhaps in the mathematician’s side remarks – that he has a vast amount of knowledge beyond this basic level. One senses it, one feels it. It is true of masters in almost any field of knowledge: a feeling that you experience in their company. A man who has had a full and very adventurous life may talk to us about crossing the street. Yet, if we are perceptive, we feel behind his words that he has crossed rivers and glaciers, climbed mountains and sailed seas.

So it is when a person is saintly. We sense that he or she is attached to a higher realm, or has some knowledge beyond what we can understand. Holiness lies in the connection, the continuation, into a realm beyond our familiar world.

Words such as “higher,” “above,” and “beyond,” are inadequate in this context, and demonstrate perhaps an unconquerable limitation of language. As we approach the ineffable and the mysterious, words become opaque. Whether all saintly people are connected to the same beyond, however, is a difficult question. It is enough for us to say here that they are connected to the beyond. We have at least the notion of something that is “elsewhere” – something essentially sacred.

The concept of holiness is not confined to traditional Jewish thought; nor are holy people only Jews. An entire book of the Bible tells the story of one such holy man who was not a Jew: Job. His conversation, as presented in Scripture, speaks of the spiritual realm, about a connection beyond the everyday world. Sigmund Freud is not known to have thought he was connected to something beyond the empirical world. Still, he understood that others could experience an “oceanic feeling” – an experience of being as one with a limitless external reality, an immense vastness, an intimation of infinity.1

I myself have met holy people, foremost among them the Rebbe. In these holy people, we see the connection with the beyond or hear it more in the spaces between sentences – more so than in their words. As they speak, we understand that there is more above the line and below the line, or in between the lines.

In Jewish thought, the holy person is known as a *tzaddik –* a word with many connotations. The Talmud2 describes one whose conduct is in accord with religious tradition as a *tzaddik.* Over time, the term has come to mean someone larger than life, a human being with a truly sublime presence. As the seminal work of Chabad *Chasidut*, the Tanya, tells us,3 for the *tzaddik*, spiritual and worldly desires are all connected with the divine.

We do not ask of a *tzaddik*, “What did he write?” He or she may not have written anything at all, yet still be a *tzaddik.* The question is also not “What did he say?” He may not have said anything worth repeating – and still be a *tzaddik.* The question is even not “What did he do?” Unconnected to a social or religious hierarchy, the essence of a *tzaddik* is in what he is. The essence of being a *tzaddik* is something primordial, like the essence of a precious stone. A precious stone does not have to do anything: it simply exists.

While each of us can strive to connect to holiness, not everyone can merit to be a *tzaddik*, as the Tanya defines the term. There are people who write important books, others who do great deeds and still others who produce pearls of wisdom – all possibly great people, each on his or her own level. But a *tzaddik*, specifically one who is “the foundation of the world,”4 is likely to have been born a *tzaddik?5* In secular terms, the same is true of the genius. Geniuses are born that way, but they nonetheless have to develop their talent. Not everyone born with this potential actually develops into an acclaimed genius. One may have an affinity for beauty and a gift for words, yet remain unrecognized, his contribution merely a stillbirth. As for the *tzaddikim*, perhaps the Almighty scatters all over the world some special “sparks,” people who, if they nurture this gift, evolve in strength and grow into *tzaddikim.6*

A group of students once asked the Rebbe the ultimately difficult question, “What does a rebbe do?” The Rebbe answered that the Jewish people are like the earth that contains nature’s treasures hidden underneath. The question is, where to dig? Freud dug in the human soul, and found trash. Adler found big, heavy stones. Contemporary psychiatry searches for ills and traumas that must be uprooted. But when a rebbe digs, he finds gold, silver and diamonds.7

Those of us who are not *tzaddikim* need not capitulate, need not give up on the quest for holiness. If we cannot access the saintly on our own, we can nevertheless be drawn toward it. In the holy person’s light, we are ourselves illuminated and discover our own capacity to illuminate others. A train has only one locomotive; the other cars are connected to it. Together with the locomotive, a car can move somewhere; without it, the car remains in the same place, not moving. For generations, individuals – both simple and sophisticated – have been drawn to chasidic rebbes in order to experience the connection with a different level of being: a higher spiritual world.

*Tzaddikim* cannot be imitated. They are like a rose, or a star. What does a rose do? Or a star? They are there. Wherever they are, they shed a glow. It emanates from their presence: from their smiles, gestures and their very being. This definition of the *“tzaddik”* is perhaps the best introduction to the subject of this book: the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

1.  Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002), 11-13.

2.  See, for example, Kiddushin 40b.

3.  Chapter 10.

4.  Proverbs 10:25.

5.  See Tanya, chapter 14.

6.  SeeYoma 38b.

7.  Heard from Zalman Schachter, who witnessed this meeting.

*Chapter 4*

The Early Years

T**he Rebbe’s father.** The Rebbe’s father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, was a scion of the Schneerson family, a descendant of the third rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek. For several previous generations, the men on his father’s side had been rabbis, but mainly in small towns and villages, none of real importance. Known as Reb Levik, the Rebbe’s father served first as a rabbi in Nikolayev, where the Rebbe was born in 1902. In 1909, Reb Levik moved on to Yekaterinoslav – an important industrial city in the Ukraine, known today as Dnepropetrovsk – as its chief rabbi. This was a position he held for many years.

Gifted as a scholar and a speaker, Reb Levik was a courageous and outspoken leader, and involved in municipal affairs. The Jewish community was diverse and it was no small matter to gain its respect and to deal with its political and religious factions. From contemporary statements, it seems that he was loved and respected by Yekaterinoslav’s citizens.

Beyond his stature as an educator and religious guide, Reb Levik was known as a holy man – someone connected with a higher world. People came to be blessed by him and to seek his advice in their personal, spiritual and intimate affairs. His statements were sometimes seen as prophetic. My wife’s grandfather, who lived in Yekaterinoslav at the time, was very much attached to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. He considered Reb Levik to have the final word on all matters, and followed his direction without hesitation. The rabbi of a town does not usually carry this sort of stature.



Reb Levik in a KGB photo taken after his arrest, 1939



Rebbetzin Chana at a wedding in New York June 10,1954

Reb Levik was even seriously considered as a candidate for the role of the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, after Rabbi Sholom Dov Ber passed away in 1920. The position was eventually filled by Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak, who was the heir apparent and groomed for the position. The very fact that his name was raised, however, attests to his reputation as a successful rabbi and man of great spiritual qualities.

Reb Levik’s scholarship focused on pure Kabbala, the theoretical underpinnings of the Jewish mystical understanding of the world and humanity’s place within it and within God’s cosmos. His writings differed from traditional Chabad themes, which usually dealt with *Chasidut* and the application of Kabbala to everyday life. Reb Levik’s approach, however, seems to me to have reflected his inner person. While he was an effective leader in the world of the mundane, his inner striving seemed based far more on a wish to connect to the transcendent.

Only a small part of Reb Levik’s extensive writings survived, and those only through his wife’s heroic efforts. The rest were lost through the years of Communist exile and Nazi persecution. Later published as *Torat Levi Yitzchak* and *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak,1* they have become part of the Chabad canon. For over twenty years, from 1970 until 1991, his son Menachem Mendel, the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, dedicated part of each weekly talk to elucidating his father’s work.

**The Rebbe’s mother.** The Rebbe’s mother was known as the Rebbetzin Chana, the word rebbetzin meaning “wife of the rabbi.” Born in Nikolayev in 1880, Chana was the daughter of Rabbi Meir Shlomo Yanovsky and descended from a distinguished family of rabbis and authors, renowned particularly for their gift in transcribing, compiling and organizing research materials; the Rebbe later exhibited the same inclination and talent. Levi Yitzchak and Chana were married in Nikolayev in 1900, a suitable match based on family similarities and values.

While Rebbetzin Chana’s diaries2 are a primary source of information about the Rebbe’s childhood and her husband’s activities, we have few details about her own upbringing and education. As a girl, she was skilled in transcribing religious works; this required knowledge of Hebrew and an ability to decipher handwriting. Her friends described Chana as a striking personality. She was independent, with qualities that may have complemented those of her husband. The Rebbe’s father was an intellectual; it was his mother who had more personal charisma. A man who had known the Rebbe’s parents in Ukraine recalled Rabbi Levi Yitzchak as a conventional rabbinical personality, the rebbetzin was something else: “a great person.”3

**The Rebbe’s early years in the Ukraine.** Levi Yitzchak and Chana had three sons. Menachem Mendel, the future rebbe, was the eldest, born in Nikolayev on April 18, 1902. In her diaries, Rebbetzin Chana describes her son as “good-looking, skinny and gentle-faced.”4 He had two younger brothers, Dov Ber and Yisrael Aryeh Leib.

In his teen years, Dov Ber, the Schneersons’ middle son, was hospitalized for a “nervous breakdown,” as psychiatric conditions were then known. He remained in the hospital for decades, never well enough to be released, and was ultimately murdered by the Nazis.

Leibel, the youngest son, became a communist and left Russia illegally under the name Mark Gurary in 1930 – no exit permits were given then. He arrived in Berlin, suffering from typhus. The Rebbe and his wife, already there for study at the University of Berlin, cared for Leibel until he, too, was able to enroll at the university. He and the Rebbe were close, even as Leibel gradually lapsed from religious life. Leibel eventually moved to Israel and then to England. He died there in 1952 at the age of forty-five, leaving behind a daughter. She and her sons are the only surviving descendants of Reb Levik and Rebbetzin Chana.



Menachem Mendel, 1905, age 2

The Schneerson boys were bright. Reb Levik was modest about his sons’ intellectual accomplishments. Rebbetzin Chana, on the other hand, was quick to show them off and reveled in their respective achievements.5 The neighbors admired them; an acquaintance of mine once recalled that his father would send him to play with the Schneerson children because they had such beautiful toys. His father added, “Perhaps you will learn something from them.”

Tutors in the home and studies with their father supplemented the *cheder*, the traditional religious elementary school. Yiddish was the language of the home, but all the boys were fluent in Russian and studied French and other languages. They had a solid education in secular subjects. Each of the brothers had his own library and scientific interests; the Rebbe’s were physics and mathematics. The brothers were close to each other. They were all quick studies, very knowledgeable – ready to talk, and good at it. Even then, Menachem Mendel was the most serious and introspective of the three. He preferred to study on his own; the brothers enjoyed working with others. Leibel was especially social and energetic.6

At sixteen, Menachem Mendel took and passed the matriculation exam in mathematics.7 Students at the University of Yekaterinoslav would gather at the Schneerson home to discuss math and physics problems with him, even though he was not in their classes.8

Most unusually, Reb Levik taught his sons Kabbala when they were still very young.9 The young Rebbe absorbed his teachings and continued his father’s interest in the subject. When Menachem Mendel was sixteen, Reb Levik gave a complicated and abstruse kabbalistic lecture at the synagogue. Those in the audience complained that no one could understand him. Reb Levik pointed to his son and said, ‘He definitely does.’10

Menachem Mendel was equally gifted in the study of Talmud. He was able to focus on the Talmud page before him, without interruption, for hours at a time. When Menachem Mendel was fourteen, he sat with his father and a visitor from the Gerrer movement of Chasidim discussing a particularly difficult talmudic passage. Menachem Mendel solved the problem and the visitor, who was the son of the Gerrer Rebbe, said, “At this age? I never saw such a thing. We don’t have students like this in our community.”11

Menachem Mendel learned far more from his father than Talmud and Kabbala. Reb Levik’s courage and principles were to guide his son for the rest of his life. Many years after his father’s death, as he reminisced about his own youth, the Rebbe said, “I stick to my education as the firstborn son of the Rabbi of Yekaterinoslav…. When it comes to saving lives, I speak up whatever others may say.”12

The future rebbe received no training at a formal yeshiva. Mostly, he learned on his own. In 1923, he traveled to Rostov to meet the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak, who was much later to become his father-in-law. An extensive correspondence with Rabbi Yosef Rozin of Dvinsk, known as the Rogatchover,13 helped frame his talmudic thinking. A decade later, he was ordained by Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg, author of the *Seridei Eish*, in Berlin.14

As the young Rebbe was deepening his own Jewish knowledge and spiritual commitments, the future for Jewish religious life in Russia seemed bleak. The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of great upheaval for Eastern European Jewry. Doors opened to young Jews in the professions and in political life, and a steady stream began to head toward the cities and the universities. The ranks of Jewish doctors, Jewish pharmacists, Jewish actors, academicians and lawyers all began to grow. Haskalah, the enlightenment movement, threatened and ultimately helped destroy long-standing Jewish communities.

It was at this time that young men were leaving the yeshiva and observance. Young women felt free to marry outside the fold. Most of the members of the extreme Marxist groups were Jewish. Others joined the Bund, which combined socialism with a Jewish agenda. Zionism became a passion for many and skewed politically to socialism. Tempers ran high and disputes among factions and between secular and religious Jews could turn physical.

In speaking to a friend, Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak described how he had been beaten up as he left the *mikva;* he was in his early twenties at the time and many years from becoming a rebbe. A son of Birech, the shoemaker, was a member of a rival group. Birech’s son punched him in the side and tried to choke him. Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak retaliated and hit him in the stomach until his assailant fell to the ground.

Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak had to leave the Lubavitch community for six months, until things calmed down. After some time, the two assailants met. Birech’s son asked, “How’s your side doing?” Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak said, “It still hurts from time to time. How’s your stomach?” The latter admitted, “It still hurts me as well.”15 This kind of street fighting demonstrates the intensity of feelings in those days.

Assimilation was tempered only by anti-Semitism, which helped remind Jews that they were not wanted. In the larger cities of the Ukraine – cities like Yekaterinoslav where Reb Levik had his pulpit – Jewish society was crumbling. Political and cultural wars were symptomatic of generational as well as philosophical conflicts. Modernity called to young Eastern European Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It seemed that it was the best among the young who left religious life – a loss to Judaism that is still felt today.

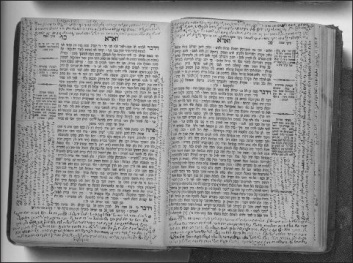
Russia was a savage place during the Russian civil war, between 1917 and 1919. Strategically situated, Yekaterinoslav saw significant fighting in and around the city. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak urged his followers not to be afraid. As he put it, every bullet has an address. ‘If the bullet is meant for you, it will get you. If it is not meant for you, it will not get you. Don’t hide; lead a normal life.’ My wife’s grandfather behaved accordingly.16 Rebbetzin Chana mostly followed her husband’s advice. Even so, she hid the children when she felt they were in danger. As for the future Rebbe, he organized a group of young men to defend the community against the warring factions.17

As a Schneerson, the Rebbe’s father was widely known to the Jews in Russia, and his name came to stand for a particular outlook and set of beliefs. The Communists had their Trotskyites. Observant Jews had their Schneerson-ites. Officially an atheist state, with no religion except for its own doctrines, the Communist regime was bent on eradicating Jewish practice and community. On paper, cultural activities – particularly in Yiddish – were allowed. Rabbis and teachers, *yeshivot* and synagogues, however, were harassed and intimidated. By 1920, children could study only in schools that were run by the Communist Party. Prayer services were “supervised” by Communist officials and congregants terrorized. In theory, one could keep a Jewish home – but there was no kosher food, no way to circumcise baby boys legally and no opportunity for Jewish weddings.

In Reb Levik’s view, a rabbi who was completely obedient to the government did nothing – and was worth nothing. He tried his best to keep Jewish life going in Yekaterinoslav. Reb Levik organized clandestine circumcisions and performed midnight wedding ceremonies in his home.18 He was outspoken on the pulpit, encouraging his followers to defy the Communists by holding fast to their beliefs. Because he was vocal, Reb Levik was accused of counterrevolutionary activities, of working against the government and of collaborating with people outside the country. In her diary, Rebbetzin Chana recounts the harrowing saga of matza baking in 1939. On the one hand, officially, matzot were permitted. On the other hand, matzot could be baked only in Communist-run ovens and handled by Communist functionaries – who were not necessarily Jewish and certainly did not care about halacha. As far as Reb Levik was concerned, these matzot were not kosher. Somehow, Reb Levik appealed successfully all the way up to Soviet President Mikhail Kalinin for special permission to supervise the government’s matza factory. Under his watch, the factory had to run as he dictated. That year, Reb Levik was able to supply most of the Ukraine with kosher matza.

Of course, this kind of courageous deed made Reb Levik a target, and it was only a matter of time before the Communists could no longer tolerate him. Just a week before Passover – before the matzot were actually to be eaten – he was arrested and accused of encouraging religious activity. He was interrogated and tortured for a year. According to the rebbetzin’s diaries, Reb Levik was asked how he had the nerve to produce matza for all the Ukraine. Reb Levik answered, “I bribed Kalinin,” thereby putting an end to that line of questioning.19

In 1940, Reb Levik was sent from prison to exile in Che’ely, a small town in Kazakhstan in Central Asia, far from Eastern Europe. The rebbetzin joined him after several months. Exile was worse than prison: at least prisoners were fed. Those in exile were left to starve slowly. Reb Levik survived only because his wife made it possible. She writes that she worked long hours to provide him with food and made it her job to find writing pen and paper; she even made the ink. A small group of other Jews gathered around Reb Levik. He was a leader, a rabbi, after all, even though no longer a young man and quite sick at this time.20



Reb Levik’s notes on the Zohar, written while in exile

In 1944, Reb Levik’s sentence of exile was completed. He and his wife moved to Alma Ata, a bigger city in Kazakhstan, where he died. The last time he saw Menachem Mendel was in 1927. Although the two corresponded, exile and the intervening war years made it impossible for them to meet.

A few Chasidim later arranged for Rebbetzin Chana to leave Russia, using a false passport, as most of the other émigrés did. She traveled to Poland, then to a displaced persons camp in Germany, and finally to France.

Rebbetzin Chana and Menachem Mendel were reunited in March 1947, after almost two decades apart. Then living in Brooklyn, the Rebbe traveled to Paris to escort his mother to the United States. She had become an old woman, broken by the suffering in exile in central Russia. Rebbetzin Chana moved to Crown Heights to live near her son. Until her death, the Rebbe visited her daily, and twice on Fridays. Even so, she never fully recovered from her husband’s death. As Rebbetzin Chana puts it in her diary, “My son, may he be well, does whatever he can, perhaps even more than he can, to improve all aspects of my life and to make me feel good. Nevertheless – and I make every effort to ensure he doesn’t sense this – all is not right…”21

In 1952, when Leibel, the Rebbe’s youngest brother, died, the Rebbe did everything he could to hide the news from their mother; the entire family cooperated. The Rebbe wrote letters and telegrams in Leibel’s name; Rebbetzin Chana never learned the truth. The Rebbe believed that her heart would be too broken and no good would be served by telling her.

Rebbetzin Chana died on September 9, 1964, at the age of eighty-four. To honor her memory, the Rebbe began to teach the works of Rashi (1040–1105), perhaps the foremost commentator on Judaism’s fundamental texts. Incorporating a lesson into each of his Shabbat talks, the Rebbe continued this practice until his last years.

**Marriage and the new extended family.** The sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, had three daughters. The eldest, Chana, became the wife of Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary, who later sought to be his father-in-law’s successor. The second daughter, Chaya Mushka, was to become the wife of the future rebbe. Sheina, the youngest, was married to Rabbi Menachem Mendel Horenstein.

The match between Menachem Mendel and Chaya Mushka was suggested many years before they met. The two were distant cousins and shared the same last name, which had been carried down through the Chabad dynasty. They even shared the same first names as their common forebears, the Tzemach Tzedek and his wife; whose names were also Menachem Mendel and Chaya Mushka.

Even when they were children, Chaya Mushka’s grandfather, the fifth rebbe, had raised the possibility of this marriage.22 In 1923, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak met Menachem Mendel and wrote to his daughter, “This week, I enthusiastically studied the ‘Laws of Mendel’” – meaning the personality and character of the prospective son-in-law. He continued, “We spent a few hours together, almost every day.”23

The future Rebbe joined Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak’s inner circle in 1924, while the family was living in Leningrad – now known as St. Petersburg. From time to time, he traveled back to Yekaterinoslav to see his parents. It was not announced at the time, but it was clearly understood that the future Rebbe and Chaya Mushka would marry.

After his arrest and imprisonment by the Yevsektsia in 1927 – and with expulsion order in hand – Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak had asked for permission to take Menachem Mendel with him as a family member. According to Rebbetzin Chana, the Communists balked at first, going so far as to suggest that the sixth rebbe could always find another son-in-law for Chaya Mushka. Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak retorted, “Such a son-in-law I will not find anywhere.”24

Once out of the Soviet Union, Menachem Mendel traveled to Germany to study at the world-famous Humboldt University, the University of Berlin.

For Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak, Riga was a good choice as a stopping-off point. A small country, Latvia had a relatively large number of Jews, some of them influential. The local Chabad community was a convenient and welcoming base. His real objective, however, was Poland, where there were more than 3.4 million Jews, of whom about one million were still observant. As far as Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak was concerned, Poland was clearly the new heartland. He and his family moved to Warsaw in 1933 and then to a smaller suburb the next year.