

Undaunted

How the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe,
Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn,
Saved Russian Jewry, Reimagined American Judaism,
and Ignited a Global Jewish Renaissance





David Eliezrie

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In Loving Memory of

Yakova Tzvia Cleff

יקבה צביה קלף

יקבה צביה בת יהושע לייבל

Beloved wife, mother, and grandmother – a true אשת חיל.

May her memory be for a blessing.

Isadore and Roberta Schoen



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A Note to the Reader

There are moments when divine providence shines through like a bright sun. That occurred a few years ago when “Isadore Schoen” overheard a discussion between me and Rabbi Mendel Kalmenson at JLI’s National Jewish Retreat. We were discussing the need for a comprehensive biography of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. I told Kalmenson that I had long dreamed of writing such a book, but that I had been held back by the need for research funding. Standing nearby was Izzy, and to our surprise, he said, “That’s not a problem.” The generosity of Izzy and his gracious wife Roberta have made this book a reality.

Others also lent a hand to the project. I am deeply grateful for the support of Shmuel and Sharone Goodman and the friendship of Patricia Vienna, who each helped immensely.

One of the treasures of the Chabad community is JEM, Jewish Educational Media, under the direction of Rabbi Elkanah Shmotkin. This great reservoir of historical information contains thousands of interviews about the Rebbes of Chabad. The pages of this book have been greatly

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enriched by those memories. Thank you to Rabbis Elkanah Shmotkin, Yechiel Kagan, and Zalman Ceitlin.

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This book has been enhanced by the advice and insight of Rabbi Eliezer Zaklikowski; the vast knowledge of Rabbi Yossi Keller, author of *The History of the Lubavitcher Yeshivah in the United States*; and the research of Rabbis Aron Kastel, Yoel Shernofsky, and Nachum Zajac.

Along the way, many have helped with advice, insight, and inspiration. I offer my gratitude to Professors Glenn Dynner, David E. Fishman, Ilia Luria, Rafael Medoff, and Jonathan Sarna; Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet; JDC archivist Misha Mitsel; and Rabbi Dovid Kamenetsky. Special thanks to Rabbi Sholom DovBer Avtzon, author of the biography series on Chabad Rebbes. The Chabad community is blessed with many intellectually curious scholars and historians. Each in their own way have made important contributions to understanding the storied history of Chabad. Thank you to Rabbis Mendy Bronfman, Chaim Dalfin, Mordechai Dinerman, Zalman Hertz, Yosef Kaminetzky, Elyashiv Kaploun, Uri Kaploun, Dovid Margolin, Peretz Mochkin, Boruch Oberlander, Yossi Paltiel, Ari Raskin, Eli Rubin, Michoel Seligson, and Nissan Rupio.

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The research for this book brought me to Russia and Latvia, where the Rayatz lived. I am appreciative of the Chabad *shluchim* who soldier on in these communities and facilitated my visits. Thanks to Rabbis Berel Lazar, Dovid and Mendel Moonshine, and Mendy Wilensky in Moscow; Rabbi Chaim Danzinger in Rostov; Rabbi Gavriel Gordon in Lubavitch;

Rabbis Mendel Pewzner and Chaim Shaul Brook in St. Petersburg; and Rabbis Mordechai Glazman and Schneour Kot in Riga.

My thanks to Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky and Rabbi Manis Friedman, who have been a beacon of encouragement to me, initially with my first book, *The Secret of Chabad*, and again with this biography. A special thank you to Carolyn Starman Hessel, who has dedicated her life to Jewish authors, uplifting Jewish publishing to new heights, and who has been a pillar of support for my writing.

It is a pleasure to collaborate yet again with the phenomenal professionals at Koren/Toby Press. Their devotion to Judaism expresses itself in their commitment to bringing great Jewish content to the world. My thanks to publisher Matthew Miller, Rabbis Reuven Ziegler and David Silverstein, Shlomo Peterseil, Tali Simon, Meira Mintz, Taly Hahn, Tani Bayer, Marc Herman, and all the staff.

This book was made possible by the wealth of original historical sources that have been published in recent decades in the Chabad community. Seventeen volumes of letters of the Rayatz and many of his unpublished letters from private sources are the foundation of this book. The six volumes of the Rashab's letters and the thirty-three volumes of the letters of the seventh Rebbe were also integral. The vast majority of these letters are in Hebrew or Yiddish, and a few are in other languages. In his Hebrew and Yiddish letters, the Rebbe used the Hebrew date exclusively; in other languages, the Gregorian calendar date was sometimes included. In the endnotes of this book, the letters are cited using both dates.

The original research on Chabad in Rabbi Shalom Ber Levin's series on the history of Chabad in Russia, Europe, Israel, and the US has been invaluable. I thank him for repeatedly giving of his time and insight. Other historical sources, such as the collection of over six hundred letters of Rabbi Yechezkel Feigin, secretary to the Rayatz in Europe, provided a remarkable understanding of the day-to-day activities of the Rebbe's court. Family histories and historical material published in *teshurahs*, mementos from family celebrations, were another valuable resource. Additionally, the wealth of documents in the JDC archives provides a vital contemporary record of the efforts of US Jewry to help Jews around the world. The translations of the classic Jewish texts and of the Rebbe's

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talks and letters are my own. If there are any inaccuracies, they are not a reflection of the original sources.

This work does not attempt to document every moment of the Rebbe's life, as that would take many volumes. It does endeavor to identify the central events and challenges that the Rebbe faced and to give them historical context.

This work also does not explore the vast Torah teachings that the Rebbe has left as a rich intellectual legacy. Two hundred works of the Rebbe's *maamarim*, talks, and letters have been published, and I encourage readers to expand their appreciation of the unique contributions of the Rebbe by studying his Torah and teachings.

In recent decades, important historians have examined the history of Jews in Russia and the US. Unfortunately, some of these historians did not have access to or were not aware of many of the above-mentioned books and documents, as many of them were only published in recent years. Coming from secular academic backgrounds, they tend to view history from that context. While acknowledging the efforts of the Rayatz, they often fail to grasp the scope of his impact. Hopefully, this work will broaden the understanding of the historic role of the Rayatz for world Jewry.

Noted historian Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet says the mission of a historian is to examine the past and to accurately portray those events. I pray that this biography lives up to that aspiration.

It is the support of my family, good friends, and warm community at Chabad Beth Meir HaCohen in Yorba Linda, California, that has enabled me to write this book over the past few years.

My six children, Yoni, Chani, Yehoshua, Naomi, Yosef, and Dina and their spouses, as well as my grandchildren, have been an inspiration to me. Over the last few years, they have been a sounding board for this book, offering their wisdom and ideas. A special thanks to my three granddaughters, Chaya, Bassie, and Ita, who brainstormed the title for this book, "Undaunted."

I would like to dedicate this book in honor of my dear wife and life partner of over half a century, Stella. Stella has enabled me to author this book with her patience and insight. Our greatest life accomplishment is that together, we have created six families who aspire to strive for the

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values, lessons, and teachings of the Rayatz and the seventh Rebbe. As their children – our grandchildren – begin to marry and start their own families, it brings us immense joy to see them continue passing down these ideals to yet another generation. I give my heartfelt gratitude to Stella for building our tribe.

Rabbi David Eliezrie

12 Tamuz 5785/2025

Celebrating ninety-eight years
since the Rebbe's release from Soviet prison



Preface

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, stood at the apex of history. In his early years, he faced down the oppression of czarist Russia, and later, when he became Rebbe, the rise of the communist Soviet Union that sought to eradicate Jewish tradition. Forced out of Russia, he had to adapt Chabad Chasidism to Westernized Europe. Later, driven from Poland by the Nazis, he found a haven in America, where the Jewish community was racing down the highway of assimilation. There, he reimagined Jewish life, laying the foundation for a renaissance of tradition.

Each era presented its own unique threat to the physical and spiritual welfare of Jewish life. And in each case, the Rebbe bucked conventional wisdom. Time and again he had to start anew in a different country, and each time he successfully adapted to the challenge. He faced these obstacles head-on, despite serious health issues, limited finances, and a Jewish community that did not always share his vision.

Through all of this, the Rebbe was first and foremost rooted in deep spiritual values. While he was an activist and organizer, his true joy stemmed from the study of Torah and the teachings of Chasidism. As

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he once said, “Without a yeshivah there is no life.” He left a rich legacy of over two hundred volumes of his profound *maamarim*, talks and writings.

We have been blessed with a glimpse into his inner world through thousands of letters, public addresses, and first-person accounts. The Rebbe’s rich legacy allows his own voice to resonate in this biography.

In the following pages, we encounter his broad range of emotions, from anguish to joy, as well as boundless compassion, devotion to faith, and a desire to connect with G-d. Above all is his sense of mission, instilled by his father, Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn. From the Rebbe’s courage facing down tyrants to his concern for the fate of Jews living in far-off Morocco, this biography helps us understand the remarkable life of one of the greatest Jewish leaders in an era of upheaval for world Jewry. His life reflects the trials of the Jewish people from the sunset of the oppressive rule of the Russian czars, to the totalitarianism of Communism, the struggle to implant a chasidic milieu in Western Europe, and the bounty of freedom offered by America. It is a story of determination, self-sacrifice, compassion, and vision.

With the perspective of history, it’s clear that the Rebbe was one of the most consequential figures of the modern Jewish era, a godly man who created a path for a bright Jewish future in the midst of unparalleled disruption and transformation. Through every challenge, he remained – “Undaunted.”

A NOTE ON TERMS:

In the chasidic community, it is common to refer to distinguished rabbis using a shortened version of their name composed of an acrostic of the letters. **Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn** is alternately referred to in three ways, reflecting different periods in his life.

- **Yosef Yitzchak:** From his birth until his bar mitzvah in 1893.
- **The Rayatz:** From his bar mitzvah until succeeding his father as Rebbe in 1920
- **The Rebbe:** From becoming Rebbe in 1920 until his passing in 1950. Chasidim commonly refer to the Rayatz at the Friediker Rebbe, Yiddish for “Previous Rebbe.”

Other notable family members:

- **The Rashab:** Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn, the fifth Rebbe, father of the Rayatz.
- **The Raza:** Rabbi Zalman Aharon, brother of the Rashab and uncle of the Rayatz.
- **The Rashag:** Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary, eldest son-in-law of the Rayatz.
- **The Ramash, the seventh Rebbe:** Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the second son-in-law and the successor of the Rayatz. Until 1950, he is called the Ramash; afterward he is referred to as the seventh Rebbe.

See appendix 1 for a list of the seven Lubavitcher Rebbes.



Chapter One

Lubavitch

It was a bright summer day in the town of Lubavitch, a village nestled in the rolling hills and forests of White Russia. From surrounding villages and farms, people streamed into Lubavitch, doubling its population of two thousand for *yarmarka*, the two-day market in late June of 1891.¹ The streets were festive, bustling with farmers, craftsmen, and other vendors, all vying for customers.

Young Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, just a few weeks shy of his eleventh birthday, made his way down Shielve Street with his friend Shimon Rabinowitz. It was midday. “I was walking from school to eat lunch,” he later wrote in his diary.² “The market was packed with farmers, horses, and buggies.” As the two boys navigated the busy street, they met Reb³ Dovid the butcher. “He was carrying a calf on his shoulders, a lamb in his arms, and a basket of chickens hanging in front of him. His face beamed as he exclaimed, ‘I hope G-d will give me a decent profit.’”

Yosef Yitzchak was well acquainted with Dovid. He had been staking the butcher with microloans from his fund so that Dovid could purchase livestock in nearby farms and resell it in town. Yosef Yitzchak had launched this loan fund after earning money from studying Mishnah.

“My father gave me five kopecks for every chapter I memorized. And every day I learned a new chapter, my mother used to give me five kopecks a day.” When he finally saved up one ruble, he began dreaming about buying a watch “so I could organize my day.” But his father suggested that he use the money for *chesed* (humanitarian assistance), and so young Yosef Yitzchak gave the money to Reb Saadia,⁴ a trustee of a free loan fund, to assist needy people. By the summer of 1891, Yosef Yitzchak had saved enough money to offer loans himself. “I had accumulated a sum of over thirty rubles (\$750 today) as a reward for the study of Mishnah by heart. Following my father’s suggestion, I would lend money in small amounts – from three to five rubles – to fellow Jews engaged in buying merchandise in the market and peddlers who would buy and sell bundles of flax, hides or leather, chicken, eggs, onions, and the like.” As the fund grew, he set up a system. “At the direction of my teacher Reb Nissan, I kept a detailed accounting of all the transactions, and the day before and after market day, I would be occupied with distributing and receiving sums borrowed from the fund.”

Among those who frequently borrowed and repaid was the butcher. “Reb Dovid was about fifty years old. He had a family of eight and he was poverty-stricken, earning a living only from the toil of his hands. No work in the world was too heavy for him to do, be it in the hot summer days or during the harsh winter snowstorms and rain. If he earned some coins for his efforts, he never complained about his bad situation and his poverty.” Reb Dovid was a simple person, having attended only *cheder* (elementary school). He knew only the daily prayers. “I loved figuring out the exact time on Erev Shabbat and holidays when Reb Dovid would go home from the public bathhouse, his face beaming, his children surrounding him and running to catch up to him. An hour later, he would walk pleasantly with his children to the big study hall where he would *daven*.”

The marketplace conversation between Yosef Yitzchak and Reb Dovid was brutally interrupted by a police sergeant. “Out of nowhere, the sergeant was on him, smacking Reb Dovid so hard that blood gushed from his nose. He accused him of stealing the calf [around his shoulders].” Yosef Yitzchak stepped up to his defense. “I screamed at the sergeant, called him a drunkard and a lowlife, and pushed him away.”

The sergeant ordered a nearby police officer to arrest Yosef Yitzchak. “He accused me of ripping off the copper badge from his uniform and preventing him from fulfilling his duty to enforce the law.” No one noticed the young Yosef Yitzchak being escorted by police down the busy streets. “There was a lot of commotion because of the crowds, wagons, horses, and livestock.” After crossing the plaza in the center of the marketplace, they came to the *volost*, the local police station. Inside, a second “officer greeted me with an angry expression, gave me a dirty look, smacked me in the face, and grabbed me by my ear.” He marched Yosef Yitzchak into the jail, “opened the doors of a dark cell, pushed me inside, and slammed the door on me.”

Sitting alone and hungry in the cell, Yosef Yitzchak’s first reaction was fright. “Great fear fell upon me.” But then an idea flashed in his mind: “I am like my holy ancestors,⁵ also sitting in prison! If so, I should occupy myself with words of Torah.” He began to review the two orders of Mishnah he had memorized. “I started reciting them by heart. And then, since I was sitting in the dark and I didn’t know the time, I hurriedly prayed *Minchah*.”

Immersed in darkness, he suddenly heard something thrashing around, making him even more fearful. “My knees were shaking.” He remembered that his friend Shimon had given him a box of matches earlier. “I struck a match and noticed that in the corner of the cell lay a bound calf with a muzzle on its mouth. I calmed down.”

After a while, Yosef Yitzchak heard someone approaching his cell. It was the policeman who had brutally welcomed him to the jail. “Forgive me,” said the officer. “I didn’t know that you are the nephew of the Raza” (Rabbi Zalman Aharon Schneersohn).” He told him that the bailiff had ordered his release. “Please have mercy on me and don’t tell your uncle that I smacked you and pulled you by your ear. I didn’t do it out of hatred but out of habit; you didn’t bleed from your nose, and your teeth didn’t get knocked out, so it’s not a big deal.” Later it was revealed that the sergeant who arrested Yosef Yitzchak had actually stolen a calf from a local store and stashed it in the jail cell. He had attacked Reb Dovid to cover up his crime. Dovid the butcher was exonerated, and the officer was fired.

Yosef Yitzchak’s father, Rabbi Shalom Dovber,⁶ was out of town during this episode. When he returned to Lubavitch, his praised his son.

“It was a good thing that you did, to protect a decent, upright Jew, and if you suffered for a few hours – so what?” Lauding him for the way he passed the time in jail, he said, “Those hours were used for Torah study and prayer. This is the advantage of a human over an animal.” He then awarded Yosef Yitzchak another ten rubles for his loan fund.⁷

Fearlessly standing up to others would become the motif of the life of Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, who, when he reached the age of forty, succeeded his father and became the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe. This was the first of seven arrests.⁸ There were four more under czarist rule and two during Communism, culminating with a death sentence at the notorious Shpalerka Prison in St. Petersburg in 1927.

Yosef Yitzchak was born in Lubavitch on 12 Tamuz 5640 (June 30, 1880) to Rabbi Shalom Dovber (known by the acronym of his name, Rashab) and Rebbetzin⁹ Shterna Sara Schneersohn.¹⁰ His father was the second son of the fourth Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel,¹¹ and his parents were cousins.¹² When they married in 1875, Rebbetzin Shterna Sara moved four hundred miles from her hometown of Ovruch, Ukraine, to Lubavitch.

After five years of marriage, Rebbetzin Shterna Sara was distressed.¹³ “I had not yet had a healthy child, and it bothered me. I was also quite young and distant from the home of my parents.” Those feelings were compounded on Simchat Torah in 1879, when her father-in-law, Rabbi Shmuel, blessed each member of the family and overlooked her.

“I went into my room and considered my situation, that I had not yet had a child, and also the loneliness and not receiving the blessing when it was bestowed upon everyone else, and I cried myself to sleep.” That night she had a vivid dream. “A Jew entered my room and asked me, ‘Why are you crying, my child?’ I told him all that was bothering me. He told me, ‘Don’t cry! I promise you that this year you will be blessed with a son.’”

The man instructed her to distribute eighteen rubles (an average monthly salary) to charity from her own money and to keep the story confidential. Then he appeared a second time. “A while later, the Jew returned with two more men, and he repeated for them what he promised me with the conditions that he stipulated, and they also agreed. All three of them blessed me and left.”

Later that evening, when her husband returned from the holiday celebration, she told him about her dream. He called his father, Rabbi Shmuel, who asked Shterna Sara what the three men looked like. After she described them, he told her that they were the first three Rebbes. “The first one was my father (Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the Tzemach Tzedek),¹⁴ and the other two were my grandfather (Rabbi Dovber, the Mitteler Rebbe)¹⁵ and my great-grandfather (Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the Alter Rebbe).”¹⁶

After the holiday, Shterna Sara sold a dress she owned and donated the profits to charity. Ten months later, she gave birth to her son, Yosef Yitzchak. Her father-in-law, Rabbi Shmuel, was given the honor of *sandek* (the one who holds the baby during the circumcision). When the baby started to cry, Rabbi Shmuel remarked, “Why are you crying? When you grow up, you will be a Rebbe and say *chasidut* (chasidic discourses) with clarity.”¹⁷

Lubavitch today is just ten miles from Russia’s western border with Belarus. By the time Yosef Yitzchak was born, a century of czarist rule was firmly entrenched. More than half of the town’s residents were Jewish.¹⁸ The town was founded¹⁹ by the holy mystic Rabbi Meir, renowned for his kindness to all, Jews and non-Jews. Some of its early residents were Jewish migrants from Poland in the fifteenth century, including refugees from the Spanish Inquisition. In centuries past, hidden *tzaddikim* (mystics) would frequent Lubavitch, its surrounding forests and rolling hills creating a sanctuary of sanctity.

The second Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Dovber, settled in Lubavitch in the summer of 1813. The previous year, his father, Chabad’s founder, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, known as the Alter Rebbe, passed away while fleeing from Napoleon’s invading army. Rabbi Dovber would be the first of four Chabad Rebbes to reside in Lubavitch. For 102 years, Lubavitch was the capital of the Chabad chasidic movement. Two Rebbes and the wives of the first four Rebbes are interred there. The town’s name was derived from the word “*luba*,” Russian for “love,” and it would come to symbolize the movement, with its message of love for every Jew. Its leaders would become known as the Lubavitcher Rebbes.

The World War I German invasion of Russia in 1915 prompted the fifth Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dovber, known as the Rashab, to leave Lubavitch.

With his departure, the sun set on Lubavitch as the capital of Chabad Chasidism.²⁰ After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, religious life continued in a subdued fashion. The town's last synagogue was shuttered in 1936.²¹ The Nazi invasion of World War II brought the Holocaust to Lubavitch, erasing the last Jewish presence there.²² With the fall of the Soviet Union, Jews did not return to live in Lubavitch, but it became a destination of religious pilgrimage. The historic cemetery has been restored, a museum established, and the *chatzer*, the courtyard of the Rebbes' synagogue, is being reclaimed under an ongoing project to restore the area to the grandeur of a century ago. Many come to visit, to pray at the graves of the Rebbes interred there, and to absorb the rich history of the storied town.²³

In its heyday, when the Rebbes resided there, Lubavitch was a spiritual mecca. Jews flocked there for inspiration, wisdom, and advice from each of the successive Rebbes. During Jewish holidays, the town was filled with prominent rabbis, scholars, and Chasidim from across Russia and nearby countries. Their visits to Lubavitch were an escape from the harshness of daily life under the czarist regime to an oasis of Torah and spirituality. As the Rebbe Rayatz (an acronym of his name, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak) once explained, "The township of Lubavitch transformed people's reality and revealed their quintessential spiritual core."²⁴

Professor Yehoshua Fishel Schneersohn²⁵ described the arrival of the chasidic pilgrims for the High Holidays in the mid-nineteenth century, during the era of the third Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel:

You can feel the chasidic joy. The roads to Lubavitch are filled with travelers from cities and towns, Jews of all kinds – ordinary Chasidim, distinguished philanthropists, well-dressed pious businessmen, shopkeepers, and simple hard-working tradesman. The celebration would begin on the road, as wagonloads of Chasidim joyfully made their way to Lubavitch, their numbers swelling as they passed through cities, towns, and villages. Some come on wagons; others walk. Elderly Chasidim push themselves to spend one more holiday in Lubavitch. They bring along their children to absorb the passion in Lubavitch.

Schneersohn wrote that they came primarily from White Russia, but there were also guests from other regions, including “Poland, *Eretz Yisrael*, Germany, and even America.” Yeshivah student Shmaryahu Sassonkin recalls the excitement he felt when he came to Lubavitch over a century ago. “As you got close to the edge of the town, you could see the rising structures of the *chatzer*, the Rebbe’s court, that reached up a few stories high.”

Until its days of spiritual glory were snuffed out by the First World War, Lubavitch remained a refuge of sanctity, removed from the hustle of regular life. When Russia began to build its railroad network in the mid-nineteenth century, Lubavitch was bypassed. Rabbi Menachem Mendel asked Samuel Polyakov,²⁶ the rail king of Russia, to change his original plans and detour around the town. “The Torah desires prayer, and a highway full of carriages will cause a distraction,” he explained.²⁷ Instead, a rail station was built in Rudnya, some ten miles north. Wagon drivers would wait for pilgrims there and take them on the last leg of their journey to Lubavitch.

With the passing of the third Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, in 1866, his youngest son, Rabbi Shmuel, became Rebbe in Lubavitch. His brothers set up rival Chabad courts in nearby towns: Rabbi Yehuda Leib (known as the Maharil) in Kopust, Rabbi Chaim Schneur Zalman in Liadi, and Rabbi Yisrael Noach in Nizhyn.²⁸ For the next half a century, Chasidim were divided between the different Chabad Rebbes.²⁹

Rabbi Shmuel, known as the Rebbe Maharash,³⁰ emerged as an important leader of Russian Jewry. Chasidim flocked to Lubavitch for inspiration, to hear his profound *maamarim* (discourses), and to seek his advice. Rabbi Shmuel exhibited strong leadership for Russian Jewry, intervening in the capital, St. Petersburg, to avert anti-Semitic decrees. His first wife died within months of their marriage. In 1850, he married his second wife, Rivkah, a cousin who had been orphaned of both her parents.³¹ They had seven children.³² On Erev Rosh HaShanah 1882, Rabbi Shmuel told his wife, “You will rise up thirty-two steps in a physical dimension and I will rise up thirty-two steps in a spiritual way.”³³ He had a chronic illness, and in the month leading up to the holidays he had become weaker. Realizing he was alluding to his own passing, Rebbetzin Rivkah burst out in tears. Two weeks later, three days after Yom Kippur

1882, Rabbi Shmuel passed away in Lubavitch at the age of forty-eight. His youngest daughter was just four years old. He had been Rebbe for a little more than sixteen years.

His passing was a shock to Chasidim, and the future of Chabad remained in doubt. There were sons, but they were still quite young, causing many to wonder if they would step into their father's place. Though still reeling from the loss, Chabad elders and rabbis convened in Lubavitch a few weeks after Rabbi Shmuel's passing.³⁴ They gathered in the home of Rebbetzin Rivkah with the hope that the two older sons, Rabbi Zalman Aharon, who was twenty-four, and Rabbi Shalom Dovber, almost twenty-two, would step forward to assume the leadership.

Three days later, one of the Chasidim wrote a dramatic account of the meeting.³⁵ Some of the most prominent rabbis had traveled to Lubavitch. They were seated at a table in the center of the room, surrounded by benches filled by Chasidim. "They prepared a place for the Rebbe's sons around that table and sent them an invitation to join the meeting." When Rabbi Zalman Aharon and his brother Rabbi Shalom Dovber arrived, they refused to join the rabbis around the table. "Instead, they sat on the edge of the crowd on benches." The message was clear: They were unwilling to take on the leadership. The mood was somber, with everyone wondering what the future of the movement would be. Then two of the senior Chasidim, Rabbis Pinsker and Kuptzar, stood up. Passionately, they spoke of the terrible loss of the Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel, at such a young age. Then they talked of the future. "Chabad needs to continue," they said, "and one of the brothers has to accept the leadership."³⁶

"Everyone began to cry – the rebbetzin, the sons of the Rebbe, and all who had gathered. There was a great sense of foreboding and darkness." Eventually the sobbing subsided, and the elder Chasidim once again implored the two sons to rise to the occasion. "They were asked to say *maamarim* and accept Chasidim for *yechidut* (private meetings for personal advice), but they refused."

The recitation of a *maamar* holds great significance in Chabad tradition. It is a deep intellectual exploration of the mystical teachings of the Torah, emanating from the tradition of Kabbalah and expanded in the teachings of Chasidism.³⁷ While a *maamar* is taught by anyone, an

original is imparted only by a Rebbe. It is the moment the Rebbe shares his wisdom with his Chasidim.

The conversation between the elder Chasidim and the brothers continued until finally, they relented. The meeting ended on a high note with their consent to recite *maamarim*, which seemed a tacit agreement that the brothers were, to a degree, stepping into their father's shoes.

Though the two brothers had a close relationship, they were very different. The older brother, the Raza, was an urbane businessman who spoke a few languages. Chasidic historian Rabbi Yossi Paltiel notes that the younger brother, the Rashab, did not speak Russian. "His whole life was *kedushah*, engaged in spiritual pursuits." For a while, both Rabbi Zalman Aharon and Rabbi Shalom Dovber taught *maamarim* and met with Chasidim at times, but neither fully accepted the position of Rebbe. When they did teach *maamarim*, it was privately, in small groups. Rabbi Zalman Aharon said *maamarim* only for a short time. After a while, it became clear that he did not want to be a Rebbe. He deferred to his younger brother, telling the Chasidim that Rabbi Shalom Dovber had unique spiritual qualities. "My brother, the Rashab, was born a Rebbe and is a Rebbe."³⁸ On another occasion, he said, "I detest falsehood, but my brother loves truth. He has to be a Rebbe."³⁹ Eventually, he chose to relocate to Vitebsk, just fifty miles from Lubavitch, possibly to stay out of the limelight, clearing the way for his brother to emerge as Rebbe.⁴⁰ He visited Lubavitch often, maintaining a close connection to his brother, and became a major influence over his nephew, Yosef Yitzchak. But it was over a decade before the Rashab fully accepted the position of Rebbe.

Rabbi Moshe Rosenblatt⁴¹ visited Lubavitch during this time. He met with the Rashab and presented a *tzetel*, a written request, as is customary when a Chasid has *yechidut*, a private meeting with a Rebbe. The Rashab read the note and told him, "For this, one needs a Rebbe. If there were a place where one could access a Rebbe, I would also travel there."⁴²

During the period that the Rashab demurred from fully accepting the position of Rebbe, he was faced with health challenges. Earlier, at age eighteen, the Rashab had been exempted from the army draft when the medical examiner discovered he had tuberculosis.⁴³ The doctor, Professor Zacharov, told the Rashab's younger brother Mendel that Rabbi Shalom Dovber had just two months to live, which proved incorrect.

After his father's passing, the Rashab was absent from Lubavitch for long stretches of time seeking medical treatment in Russia and abroad for repeated health issues.⁴⁴ He made one such trip in 1884. "When he finally came home, I did not recognize him," recalled Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak. "My grandmother, Rebbetzin Rivkah, told me, 'This is your father.'"⁴⁵

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak described these years as "the era of decline of Lubavitch after the passing of [my grandfather] the Rebbe Maharash and the period of my father's illness."⁴⁶ The number of Chasidim visiting Lubavitch reduced to a trickle; some shifted their loyalties to the other Chabad courts. Both the town and the Rebbe's family suffered economically; with fewer Chasidim visiting, there were fewer people paying for local food and lodging.

As the grandson and son of a Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak grew up in a rich chasidic milieu. One of his earliest memories⁴⁷ was watching the wedding of his uncle Mendel⁴⁸ from his room when he was almost two years old. "It's a joyous memory, people making motions with their hands on various instruments, and music arising from them. I was standing at the window, moving my feet, and dancing." At the time, he and his parents were living in three rooms in his grandmother's house, which was part of what was known as the *chatzer*, the courtyard. The *chatzer* contained the Rebbe's residence, a synagogue, and in later years, the yeshivah. The third Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, had purchased the original property, and slowly it was expanded to include a large synagogue established by Rabbi Shmuel, as well as study halls and a home for the Rebbe and other family members.

Yosef Yitzchak was a sensitive child. When he was two years old, his father, the Rashab, was in the year of mourning after his father's passing and led the prayers in his study. "The room was full of printed books and manuscripts. The writing table and the rest of the furniture was still arranged the way it was when my grandfather was physically alive in this world." Yosef Yitzchak's mother would bring him into the room during prayers. "She would sit me down in one of the big chairs and instruct me to sit quietly." He was deeply moved by his father's prayers. "It would make me cry, but I would be very careful that my father not hear me cry." Years later, his mother told him that he began to ask where his grandfather was and why his father cried. His mother noticed how deeply it

affected him and “from then on, she did not permit me to be there during the prayers.”

Yosef Yitzchak’s father, the Rebbe Rashab, took a serious interest in his son’s education. “When I was just starting to speak, my father told me, ‘Ask me anything you want.’” And so, when he grew a little older, he asked his father why he needed to place his hands together while reciting the morning *Modeh Ani* prayer. The Rashab told his son, “You should do it this way because you were instructed to do it this way.” But Yosef Yitzchak protested, “You told me to ask you anything!”

The Rashab then called over eighty-year-old Yosef Mordechai, who helped in the house, and asked him, “How do you say *Modeh Ani* in the morning?” Yosef Mordechai responded, “I place one hand on the other, lift up my head, and say *Modeh Ani*.” “Why?” asked the Rashab. Yosef Mordechai’s answer was simple: “Because when I was a young child, I was taught to do it this way.”

The Rashab turned to his son and said, “You see! He is doing it this way because his father taught him to do so, and his father learned it from his father, and so on, reaching back to Moshe and Avraham.” The Rashab was instilling in his son one of the essentials of Jewish belief: that Jewish observance is rooted in millennia of traditions reaching back to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The Rashab spent a lot of time with his son. “He would tell me stories from the Torah, *Ein Yaakov*, and *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and when I got a bit older, from the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid, and the first Chabad Rebbe.” The Rashab used the stories to inculcate values in his son. “My father would explain the inner messages of the stories, linking them to some lesson in *avodah* (service of G-d) and character refinement.”⁴⁹

At four years old, Yosef Yitzchak asked his father, “Why did G-d create two eyes? It would seem that one would have been enough, just like we have one mouth.” The Rashab responded by pointing out that the Hebrew letter *shin* has two forms: one with the dot on the left “eye” and the other, with the dot on the right. “There are things that you should look at with your right eye, with admiration and affection. And there are things we need to view with our left eye, with hesitancy and caution.” When it comes to another person, he explained, one should strive to look for good. “We need to look at our fellow Jew with our right eye.”

Yosef Yitzchak later wrote, “This embedded in my heart and mind the concept of *ahavas Yisrael*, that every Jew, no matter who he is, needs to be viewed in an affectionate way.”⁵⁰

That year, in 1884, Yosef Yitzchak began his formal education. On his first day of school, his father and his uncle Rabbi Zalman Aharon were there to celebrate, tossing candies and telling him that they were coming from the angel Mikhael⁵¹ – just as their grandfather, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, had done when they started *cheder*.⁵²

Yosef Yitzchak’s teacher, Rabbi Yekusiel Aizik, was a master educator. His father was a teacher and a Chasid of the first Chabad Rebbe, as was his grandfather.⁵³ “He taught two classes. The lower class was taught how to *daven*, and the higher class was taught *Chumash* with *Nevi’im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Scriptures).”⁵⁴

What Yosef Yitzchak most appreciated was his teacher’s storytelling. “He would tell us nice stories, which made us very excited. The children gathered around him like small sheep, all games were suspended, and any misbehavior between the students came to an end. He came alive with enthusiasm and passion as he told the story. He referred to the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe with a deep sense of reverence, recalling stories he heard from his grandfather. He left a profound impression on us students. He was seventy years old, educating hundreds of children and instilling in them deep spiritual values.”⁵⁵ He also taught the students chasidic melodies.⁵⁶

For two years, while Yosef Yitzchak was three and four years old, his parents were away from Lubavitch most of the time seeking medical care for his father.⁵⁷ That changed in the fall of 1885, when he was five years old. “I noticed that there was a lot of activity at home. My mother was packing up my belongings in a big box.” They were preparing to take their son with them to Yalta for six months. Almost one thousand miles south of Lubavitch, its warm climate would be beneficial to the Rashab. Yosef Yitzchak was apprehensive about the disruption in his life. “I loved my teacher Reb Yekusiel. I cried, ‘Who will teach me *Chumash*? Who will tell me beautiful stories?’ I was also going to miss out on playing games with my friends.”⁵⁸ His father assured Yosef Yitzchak, “Don’t worry. My cousin, Schneur Zalman Slonim,⁵⁹ will teach you.”⁶⁰ Rabbi

Schneur Zalman, an outstanding scholar, had come to Lubavitch from Hebron in *Eretz Yisrael* for an extended stay.

The family's time in Yalta was an idyllic period in Yosef Yitzchak's childhood, as it allowed him to spend a significant amount of time with his parents. "I used to go walking almost every day from 1:00 p.m. until 7:00 or even 8:00 together with my parents and Rabbi Schneur Zalman. My father would find a seat and study a scholarly book that he had brought with him while Rabbi Schneur taught me for an hour and then told me to review what I had learned. Afterward, he joined my father and they studied a book together." His mother spent her time on the mountain walks reading letters, sewing, and knitting.⁶¹

Six months later,⁶² on the way back to Lubavitch, they stopped in Kharkiv on Lag BaOmer. The local Chasidim organized a large dinner to welcome them. The Rayatz recalled, "Rabbis, prominent Chasidim, and many community members came. The room was full to the rafters. They sang soulful melodies and when my father taught a *maamar*, Chasidim crowded around to listen."

Despite the electric atmosphere, Yosef Yitzchak discovered his mother in tears in an adjacent room. When he asked her why she was crying, she responded, "You are still very young, and it's not important for you to know why."

As his father finished the *maamar*, Yosef Yitzchak made his way back through the crowd, sat next to his father, and whispered in his ear: "Mother is crying in the other room and when I asked why, she told me I am still a child and do not need to know everything."

The Rashab was taken aback and said to his son, "Go to your mother and tell her that I am feeling good, my headache is gone, and there is no pain in my heart. She can rest assured that I feel fine." The boy climbed back over the crowd, made his way to his mother, and gave her the message. "She kissed me and said, 'Wonderful!'"⁶³

When Yosef Yitzchak was around seven years old, he began to study with a new teacher, Rabbi Shimshon the *melamed*. "He taught us how to learn." But he was also very strict, telling the students, "I will hit you so you know I mean business. There are no special people in my class."⁶⁴ Being the son of the Rashab did not help Yosef Yitzchak; he too was

the target of his teacher's ire. Still, during the three years that he studied under him, he advanced academically. "I thrived in the study of Talmud, developed a good understanding of *Tanakh*, and during the time I studied with Reb Shimshon, I memorized two orders of Mishnah."⁶⁵

Those were difficult years for Yosef Yitzchak. His parents continued to be absent from Lubavitch for long periods of time. Between 1887 and 1889, from ages seven to nine, he rarely saw them. "Those three years were the most difficult of my childhood. Most of the time, except for brief interludes, my father was away in medical facilities."⁶⁶ My mother traveled with him, and I suffered tremendously." That was not the only reason for his anguish. "I did not have the best of friends. Also, Reb Shimshon was very tense and he would express his anxiety with beatings and whippings."⁶⁷

In 1888, when the Rashab was just twenty-seven and his son eight, the Rashab, deeply concerned about the state of his health, decided to write an ethical will.⁶⁸ In it, he outlined how he wished his wife to educate his son if he passed away.

Finally, in 1890, Yosef Yitzchak's parents returned. "That year was almost the first in my life that my father spent entirely at home, the greater part of previous years having been abroad."⁶⁹ But the Rashab was still in a precarious state. In December of 1890, "my father was ill with a high fever for about two months." This was heartbreaking for Yosef Yitzchak, just ten years old. "Most of the time, I sat in my room, read psalms, and cried. A dark dread fell over me. I had a father for a year and half, and now he was ill."

One night, before daybreak, as his father's fever reached its peak, ten-year-old Yosef Yitzchak decided he must act. He turned to Rabbi Zalman Lieblis, who maintained the Ohel, the gravesites of the Rebbes in the cemetery on the outskirts of Lubavitch. He convinced the man to allow him access to the cemetery, and together, they headed there to pray on his father's behalf. "It was bitterly cold and snowing heavily" as Yosef Yitzchak stumbled in the large snow drifts on the pathway to the cemetery.

When he entered the Ohel, "I saw the holy resting places covered over by fine snow." He was so overwhelmed that he could not even recite the traditional verses of Psalms. Instead, he blurted out, "My father is ill. My

father, a Chasid and *tzaddik*, is lying ill in bed. My father has only one son and he has been guiding me for only a year and a half, and he is ill.” Rabbi Zalman instructed Yosef Yitzchak to ask his holy forebearers to have pity and arouse Heaven’s mercy. “These words made me cry out in anguish, ‘*Zeides*, holy *tzaddikim*, my father is ill! Ask G-d to keep him alive and make him well, and let him guide me so that I will grow up to be an upright Jew.’” By the time they finished their prayers, the morning light had begun to shine and they made their way back to Lubavitch. As they approached the Rashab’s home, they were told the good news: The fever had broken. Yosef Yitzchak had told no one before he left the house, but later that day, he shared the secret with his father. “He said I had acted as I should.”⁷⁰

During the time that the Rashab was away, Yosef Yitzchak found solace in his interactions with elderly Chasidim, some of whom lived in Lubavitch and others who came to visit. He was living in his grandmother’s home, where some of them stayed while they were in town.

“During that time there were two Chasidim in our home, Reb Tzvi Chanoch Hendel and Reb Meir Mordechai,” he later wrote. Yosef Yitzchak enjoyed the time he spent with them. “Due to my personal distress, I became a regular visitor to the room of Reb Chanoch Hendel, many times sleeping on a bench.” He describes him as “a great scholar, with deep passion for prayer and reciting psalms.” He says that Reb Hendel studied chasidic texts “with enthusiasm” and that he “would cry when he recited *Tikkun Chatzot*,” the midnight prayer recalling the destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*. Yosef Yitzchak was inspired by him, and they became very close. When Chasidim visited Lubavitch, “they would gather at the room of Reb Chanoch Hendel for *farbrengens*.” Yosef Yitzchak joined them. “I began to pay attention to their *farbrengens*.” He would sit with the elder Chasidim throughout the night, “at times falling asleep and waking up in the room in the morning when it was time to go to school.”⁷¹

The Chasidim who visited Lubavitch told him stories of their past pilgrimages to his ancestors, Rabbi Shmuel and Rabbi Menachem Mendel. Many had met Chasidim who had encounters with the early chasidic masters reaching back to Chabad’s founder, the first Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman. This rich oral tradition of chasidic teachings,

wisdom, and lore provided the young Yosef Yitzchak with a personal link to generations past. The appreciation for chasidic lore and history was embedded in him from this young age.

Yosef Yitzchak began recording these stories at the encouragement of one of his teachers, Reb Nissan, who revealed to Yosef Yitzchak that he had been writing stories in his own journal for many years about the boy's ancestors. As a teenager, Reb Nissan had been inspired to keep a diary when he overheard Rabbi Menachem Mendel (the third Rebbe, known as the Tzemach Tzedek) telling his son Shmuel, "When I was ten, I heard from the Alter Rebbe that he would write all that he heard in Mezeritch [referring to the court of Rabbi Dov Ber,⁷² the successor of the Baal Shem Tov], not only his sacred teachings but also the stories he told and the stories he heard from other senior students. That is what the [Alter] Rebbe did and that is what I do."⁷³ When Yosef Yitzchak heard this was a tradition of his ancestors, he resolved to record the stories he heard from elder Chasidim.⁷⁴

Realizing that his writing skills were poor and that his handwriting was at times indecipherable, he decided to seek help. "I studied writing under Reb Hertzl *der schreiber* (the scribe). He would arrange all the affairs of the local *poritz* (landowner), having studied in the government school."⁷⁵ From then on, Yosef Yitzchak recorded stories, chasidic lore, and customs he heard from Chasidim and his father in a diary, rich with content from generations past.⁷⁶ In 1927, after leaving the Soviet Union, he began to publish his diary entries. In his public talks, he highlighted the stories that he had recorded decades earlier. In the early 1940s, the Rayatz published *The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Memoirs*, a serialized history of the origins of Chasidism, in a popular Yiddish newspaper, *Der Morgen Zhurnal*. The series was later translated into English, Hebrew, and other languages.⁷⁷

At the age of nine, Yosef Yitzchak writes,⁷⁸ he felt like he had begun to mature. "In the summer of 5649 (1889), I became a different boy. My father showed me such closeness that I felt all the warmth of a father." With his parents back in Lubavitch, "I went to sleep with the thought that now I too had a father and a mother to whom to say good night." It wiped away the sense of loneliness he had felt for so long. "I completely forgot the bitter conditions under which I had previously lived." He also

advanced in his studies. “Every Shabbat I would listen to the reading of the Torah while following attentively in the *Chumash*, and during the course of the day, I would study Rashi’s commentary.” Yosef Yitzchak began to comprehend the unique spiritual qualities of his father. “I was able to appreciate the great difference between my father and his brothers,” who were both businessmen. He would stand at attention and listen carefully to the chasidic discourses of his father. “For over a year now, I had been listening to *chasidut* [*maamarim*], standing behind my father as he delivered his talks.” This continued for years, but instead of remaining in the background, he would face his father, absorbing every word. When Rabbi Zalman Duchman came to Lubavitch to study in 1906, he witnessed the Rashab saying a *maamar*. He portrayed how Yosef Yitzchak stood opposite him: “In the middle of the *maamar*, the Rashab would stop, and they would look into each other’s eyes. It was like two souls talking to each other. Each pause lasted a while and was extraordinary.”⁷⁹

That year, at the age of nine, Yosef Yitzchak fully observed the traditions of Rosh HaShanah. “I did everything as an adult. On Erev Rosh HaShanah, after immersing in the *mikveh*, I visited the resting place of my grandfathers.⁸⁰ In the evening, I listened to my father as he prayed. In the morning, I read all the prayers in the *machzor* with due deliberation. From that day, I was grown up.”⁸¹

In April 1891, when Yosef Yitzchak was ten years old, the Rashab contracted pneumonia. He was sick for six weeks. “There were days that he was dangerously ill, yet his mind and speech were clear.” At one point, the doctors attending the Rashab gave a “fearful prognosis.”

A few days after the illness began, the Rashab spoke to Reb Nissan, Yosef Yitzchak’s teacher. “He told him that until he regained his health, he wanted me to remain at his side.” While he was sick, “my father related things that he had seen in the presence of his father, Rabbi Shmuel, and his father-in-law, my grandfather.” He shared with his young son “how he conducted his life before and after his bar mitzvah. Every anecdote served to teach a lesson in having a G-d-fearing spirit and refining one’s character.”

At the time, Yosef Yitzchak wondered about his father’s request for him to take a hiatus from school. “My father valued the time I spent with my teacher very much, and he did not need me to assist him.” But years

later, he understood. “At the time, his condition was critical. This is why he risked his holy life by exerting himself to relay all those recollections – particularly all their moral lessons – in order to guide me along the path of righteousness.”⁸²

The Rashab’s personal mentoring of Yosef Yitzchak took on new depths when his son was eleven years old: He began to study chasidic philosophy with him. “A new world opened up before me.”⁸³ The teachings of *Chasidut* helped him understand how one can master his desires. The Rashab was following the tradition of the Chabad Rebbes to deliver certain *maamarim* in the presence of their children. This was a tradition reaching back to the Alter Rebbe, who repeated *maamarim* for his grandson, the Tzemach Tzedek, who in turn said certain *maamarim* to “my grandfather, and my grandfather delivered certain *maamarim* to my father.”

In 1893, several major events transformed Yosef Yitzchak’s life. First was his bar mitzvah in the summer; shortly afterward, his father fully assumed the position of Rebbe. Later that year, he was assigned a new teacher who left a lasting impression on him.

Preparations for his bar mitzvah began months before his birthday. “I had to memorize and master three *maamarim*.” Two of them were long; one was short. Two he repeated publicly as part of the bar mitzvah celebration, but at the time, “no one was to know of the third *maamar*.” The Rashab taught Yosef Yitzchak the three *maamarim* himself. Keeping the secret that he had mastered the third *maamar* was challenging for him. As chasidic historian Rabbi Yossi Keller points out, “Young people want to share their accomplishments with others.” But Yosef Yitzchak withstood the challenge, “even though it entailed a struggle with myself,” he wrote. The idea of self-control is a core value in chasidic teachings and was a large part of Yosef Yitzchak’s education. As he said many years later, “One should not crave the things that he spontaneously desires, and one should want things that he does not spontaneously desire.”⁸⁴

On Monday,⁸⁵ the day of his bar mitzvah, he woke at 6:00 a.m., immersed in the *mikveh*, and then, accompanied by his father, went to pray at the gravesites of Rabbi Menachem Mendel and Rabbi Shmuel. His father directed him to stand between the tombs and then declared, “Today, my son – your grandson and great-grandson – Yosef Yitzchak,

the son of Shterna Sara, becomes bar mitzvah. Invoke mercy for all of us and him.” Afterward, he instructed Yosef Yitzchak to recite the *maamar*, and in Yiddish he proclaimed, “Holy grandfathers, bless us.”

They returned to town, and there Yosef Yitzchak said a second *maamar* after services in the presence of many guests. The bar mitzvah was a weeklong celebration, with Chasidim convening from throughout Russia.⁸⁶ The Rashab instructed Yosef Yitzchak to spend some time with the great Chasidim who had flocked to Lubavitch. Throughout the week, he listened to their stories and absorbed the teachings that they had heard from the Rebbes of earlier generations.

On Thursday afternoon, philanthropist Yeshaya Berlin invited the guests to a gathering. Yosef Yitzchak was surrounded by chasidic greats who sang melodies and shared stories and words of Torah. Rabbi Asher Grossman from Nikolaev turned to Yosef Yitzchak and said, “I heard from your teacher, Reb Nissan, that you know a *maamar* other than the one you recited earlier this week. If you can say *chasidut*, we need to hear it.” Surrounded by a distinguished group of scholars, young Yosef Yitzchak repeated the *maamar* by heart. It took an hour. Three rabbis who were present recalled that they had heard Rabbi Shmuel teach the *maamar* the first time, “and they were deeply impressed, asking if I know any other *maamarim*. For a moment I thought of revealing that my father had taught me a third *maamar*, but I restrained myself. I sat and listened” as the gathering continued through the night.

In a private moment, the Rashab gave his son his personal blessing: “You should never be fearful of anything and serve G-d with love and awe. Your *gartel* should be strong like steel, you should be a Chasid with a G-d-fearing spirit, and a scholar.”⁸⁷ Then he quoted the words of King David to his son Shlomo prior to his demise: “Become a man.”⁸⁸ The commentaries explain this as a directive to act maturely and wisely, to be heroic, and to fear iniquity.⁸⁹ Then, remembers the Rayatz, “he kissed me on the forehead.”

On Shabbat, two days later, “my father called me and asked me to repeat the third *maamar*, which I did carefully and thoroughly. Later during Shabbat, my father called me again. He went to the closet where the manuscripts were stored and took the *maamar* of Rabbi Shmuel and gave it to me as a gift.” Then he blessed him again, saying, “The same blessing

my father gave me I bestow on you. May G-d give you wisdom, understanding, and knowledge to serve the One above with prayer, mitzvot, a good character, and a full heart.”⁹⁰ The bar mitzvah was a major turning point in the life of Yosef Yitzchak. His comprehension of concepts of chasidic philosophy reached a new level, and the blessings of his father left a lasting impression on him.

A few months later, on Rosh HaShanah in 1893, the Rashab, then thirty-two, fully accepted the position of Rebbe, becoming the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe. He walked into services, surprising the community when he took his father’s seat near the holy ark. It had remained vacant since Rabbi Shmuel’s passing eleven years earlier, a few days after Yom Kippur in 1882. Although, says the Rayatz, “in the course of those years, there were periods where he taught *Chasidut* publicly, and from the year 5650 (1890), he received Chasidim for *yechidut*,” the Rashab was not fully engaged in leading the movement. “He was still behind closed doors,” focusing on his own spiritual and intellectual development. “Throughout that period, my father could be termed a *mitboded*, one living in solitude.” That Rosh HaShanah was a turning point, says the Rayatz. “A new order began, a new path in the *avodah* of *hitgalut* (revelation).”⁹¹ The Rashab emerged as the most influential chasidic Rebbe in Russia at the time. With his acceptance of the position, Chasidim began to flock to Lubavitch in large numbers once again. The Rayatz described the period that followed as “the era of the rebirth of Lubavitch.”⁹²

The third change happened a few days after Rosh HaShanah when the Rashab appointed Rabbi Shmuel Betzalel Sheftel,⁹³ known by an acronym of his name, the Rashbatz, to teach his son.⁹⁴ The Rayatz described him in his diary as an “exceptional” Chasid of the third Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, and later the fourth Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel, who “drew him close with a deep internal bond.” A scholar and an intellectual, “he was a creative and intelligent person,” says Chabad historian Rabbi Yossi Paltiel. The Rashbatz had previously taught Yosef Yitzchak’s father at the behest of his grandfather, Rabbi Shmuel, “who shared with him his inner thoughts in regard to the education of his middle son [the Rashab].”⁹⁵

The Rashbatz was fully dedicated to his young protege and remained his teacher until 1900. “My teacher the Rashbatz had a particular talent

for clarifying and explaining a chasidic concept. For every subject he had a parable, and everything he uttered reflected a quick and clever mind.”⁹⁶ He was a Torah scholar and a vast reservoir of chasidic teachings, which he shared with Yosef Yitzchak. “He stood at a high level in his personal service of G-d. He was a great scholar with a remarkable ability to impart and explain what he had learned from Chasidim of generations earlier.”⁹⁷

At the age of fifteen, the Rayatz’s relationship with his father took on a deeper dimension. “In the summer of 1895, my father traveled to Bolivke.” He summered with his wife in the resort town located forty-five miles from the hustle and bustle of the chasidic court in Lubavitch. The official reason for the trip was his weakened health. “But the true motive was that my father wanted to spend time with me and dedicate himself to my personal development.” The Rashab devoted a large amount of time to his son. “For six years, from 5655 (1895) to 5660 (1901), from mid-Sivan (June) to mid-Elul (August), on weekdays, my father took me for walks for some two hours.” Once a week, “my father would travel to Lubavitch to visit his mother and to receive visitors who had come to Lubavitch.”

During those summers, the Rashab mentored the Rayatz. It had been a tradition amongst Chabad Rebbes to share with their sons and eventual successors profound teachings of Torah, Chasidism, and family traditions.⁹⁸ The Rashab now gave his son a *kiruv penimi*, a window into his own personal spiritual universe. They studied Talmud and chasidic *maamarim*. As the Rayatz describes, “It was solid and penetrating, and included commentaries by a number of *Rishonim* (talmudic scholars).”⁹⁹ The Rashab instructed his son on his *avodah*, his spiritual service. As the Rayatz explains, prayers and character development are a key pillar of Chabad philosophy. “*Avodah* signifies that one should work on himself, toiling until he becomes the definitive master over his own limbs, faculties, and senses, as well as the ‘garments’ of the soul: thought, speech, and action.”¹⁰⁰ The Rashab shared personal stories with his son – tales of his youth and spiritual struggles – as well as chasidic lore. He was not only trying to share his values with his son but preparing him for the future, when he would become a Rebbe.

Clearly, that was on the Rashab’s mind. In 1896, he was very ill and traveled with his wife to Moscow for medical care. According to the

seventh Rebbe, the doctors' prognosis was very bleak. "There is nothing that can be done anymore," they told the Rashab, predicting that he had just months to live. Returning to his hotel, he shared the ominous report with his wife and suggested, "I think we should travel to *Eretz Yisrael*," as he wanted to spend his last days in the Jewish homeland. Alarmed, she asked, "What will be with the Chasidim?" He responded, "Our son will remain here." Despite the fact that his son was just sixteen, the Rashab was sure that he could lead the Chabad movement. Rebbetzin Shterna Sara prevailed on her husband to remain in Lubavitch, and despite the doctors' dire predictions, he recovered, living another twenty-four years.¹⁰¹

It was a summer morning as the Rashab and his son walked down the path from Lubavitch through a marsh to the cemetery and the edge of town. Rows of stones, reminders of generations past, some with inscriptions weathered from hundreds of years of winter frost, stretched toward the forest. In the middle of it all was a small synagogue adjacent to the Ohel, the stone structure surrounding the graves of Rabbi Menachem Mendel and Rabbi Shmuel. It was the Rayatz's fifteenth birthday. The night before, his father had surprised him by telling him to wake up early the next day, immerse himself in the *mikveh*, and pray, after which they would head to Lubavitch from the resort town of Bolivke. As they made the four-hour wagon ride, the reason for the trip remained a mystery to the Rayatz. Earlier that week, the Rashab had made his weekly visit to see his mother and have private meetings with Chasidim; this second trip was very unusual. Puzzled, the Rayatz asked his father, "You were just here on Monday. My grandmother will be afraid that something is amiss." His father assured him, "She won't be afraid; she knows." After they arrived in Lubavitch, the Rashab went to speak privately with his mother as the Rayatz waited. When he returned, he told him that they were going to the Ohel, the resting place of the Rebbes. "My grandmother was in high spirits and sent us off with heartfelt blessings."

They made their way to the small synagogue. Once inside, they stood on the wooden floor, light beaming from the large windows that framed the *aron kodesh*. The purpose of their visit was still unknown to the Rayatz, but it soon became clear that this moment would be a turning point

in his life. “My father opened the *aron kodesh* and proclaimed: ‘Today I am bringing my son to the *akedah*.’”¹⁰² Referencing the biblical altar on which Avraham, following divine instruction, bound his only son, Yitzchak, the Rashab sought to inculcate his own son with the ideal of *mesirat nefesh*, that a Jew is willing to sacrifice his desires and even his life for the sake of Heaven. “For the *akedah*,” continued the Rashab, “there is one who binds and one who is bound. Avraham bound his son Yitzchak so that nothing would invalidate his offering, G-d forbid. In the same way, I want this *akedah* to be perfectly acceptable above.”

My father “wept profusely, and I, who still knew nothing of what was transpiring, wept with him.” Standing together with the ark still open, the Rashab began to review a section of *Igrot Kodesh*, a selection of letters from the first Rebbe, part of his magnum opus, the *Tanya*. The letter begins by quoting the verse in Proverbs, “*Chagrah be’oz motnehah* – She girds her loins with strength,”¹⁰³ exploring the concept of *kabbalat ol*, following the directives of the Torah without aberration. Finally, the Rashab turned to his son and said, “In the presence of our holy forbearers, I want to enter into a covenant with you.” The Rayatz described the emotional moment: “He placed his holy hands on my head and said, ‘As of this day, I transfer to you the sacred task of working for the public good in both material and spiritual matters.’” With that, the Rashab inducted his son as a Jewish leader, a role he a role that would culminate with him becoming the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe a quarter of a century later.

The Rashab selected that excerpt from the *Tanya* because of its powerful message, says Rabbi Paltiel. He foresaw that during his son’s leadership, the Rayatz would face many challenges and need to stand up for his principles. He was telling him that “*mesirat nefesh*, self-sacrifice for G-d and His Torah, is this way and no other way, no compromises, no matter what it costs.” As the Rayatz reflected fifty years later, “It was about resilience, that in matters of principle one stands firm.”

They remained in the synagogue for four hours as the Rashab explained his vision for his son and his new role as a leader. “My father outlined for me the 140 years of communal work that the Lubavitcher Rebbes had conducted in the past and the present.” The Rashab told his son about the first Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, who at the age of eleven, in 1756, urged refugees coming to Russia from Prague to become

farmers so as to earn a stable livelihood. That tradition of communal service continued through the five Lubavitcher Rebbes. “My father described to me the Alter Rebbe’s fifty years of communal work, the period of the Mittlerer Rebbe (Rabbi Dovber), and the period of the Tzemach Tzedek (Rabbi Menachem Mendel).” He described to his son how his father, Rabbi Shmuel, strove to alleviate the “bitter plight of Russian Jewry during the last ten years of the reign of Czar Alexander III.” At the core of this long account was ideal of the “superhuman sacrificing toil of the Lubavitcher Rebbes for the public good.”

After the long conversation, “my father rose and wished me *mazal tov*. My heart was aflame. I promised him that I would place myself at his disposal and that with every fiber of my life I would resolutely fulfill (with G-d’s help) whatever tasks were entrusted to me for the public good.”

Finally, they headed back to Bolivke, stopping once more to see the Rayatz’s grandmother, who gave him a blessing for this new stage in his life.¹⁰⁴

From that day on, the Rayatz stood by his father’s side in communal affairs, acting as his personal secretary and confidant. Historian Gershon Kranzler writes that as the secretary of his father, the Rayatz was able “to watch from the inside of this tremendous organization all tasks facing the leader of all these religious, communal, and diplomatic activities.”¹⁰⁵ A few months later, the Rashab dispatched the Rayatz to represent him at a rabbinic meeting. He asked the Rashbatz, the Rayatz’s teacher, who was now in his seventies, to accompany him, telling him that despite his son’s young age, he should allow him to begin to play a leadership role, and “you should mix in as little as possible.”¹⁰⁶

The day that father and son stood together in front of the ark on sacred ground was a turning point. Years later, the Rebbe reflected on it. “With G-d’s help and in the merit of my holy forebears, I have remained faithful, despite my shattered physical condition, to the principles governing communal activity that I was taught by my Rebbe, the great self-sacrificing leader and mentor, my father, of blessed memory. With self-sacrifice I fulfill his holy testament of disseminating Torah study inspired by the awe of Heaven, by furthering authentic Jewish education and working for the welfare of the public.”¹⁰⁷

Chapter One: Lubavitch

Says Paltiel, “This is one of the most important days in the history of Chabad.” The Rashab understood that as the twentieth century dawned, the Jewish community was undergoing revolutionary transformation: “The world was about to turn upside down.” The Rayatz’s new leadership role would demand immense personal sacrifice. “He never had a life for himself, and now at the young age of fifteen, his father thrust him into a position of leadership.”¹⁰⁸

