

Engaging the Essence
The Torah Philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe



Yosef Bronstein

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THE TORAH PHILOSOPHY
OF THE
LUBAVITCHER REBBE

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The Torah Philosophy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

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To the Rebbe,
זכותו יגן עלינו

George Rohr
New York City

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Introduction

When canons of great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century are compiled, the Lubavitcher Rebbe is often not on the list. His accomplishments are usually thought of in terms of his innovative initiatives that significantly impacted the face of world Jewry.

However, as Chabad Hasidim always knew and as many academics have come to realize, the notion that the Rebbe's achievements are limited to his social impact is a grave mistake. Rather, the Rebbe rightfully deserves a place in the elite cadre of expositors of a unique and creative Torah philosophy. Moreover, similar to figures such as Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik, the Rebbe's philosophy is simultaneously a timeless articulation of Torah and also filled with innovative timely messages geared toward those living in the tumultuous modern world.

This reservoir of intellectual sophistication and potential existential meaning, unfortunately, has largely remained untapped outside of the Chabad community. In many cases, this is simply due to a lack of exposure. But even those who do study the Rebbe's teachings often have difficulty understanding the philosophy as a whole. Instead of writing programmatic and organized monographs, the Rebbe mainly presented his philosophy in individual lectures and essays over the course of the forty years of his leadership. Thus, even after learning a sizable number

of *sihot* (literally, “talks”) one can still form the mistaken impression that the Rebbe’s Torah is a series of intricate, inspirational, but independent ruminations on different aspects of Torah and not appreciate that when integrated they form a total philosophy.

This book seeks to partially remedy the relative obscurity of the Rebbe’s philosophy. My goal is to systematically present the key themes of the Rebbe’s philosophy in a sophisticated but accessible fashion. For those who are not familiar with the Rebbe’s Torah, I hope this book serves as a general introduction. And for those who have studied the Rebbe’s Torah, I hope that this book aids in understanding the overall structure of the Rebbe’s system of thought.

Methodology

As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 1, the main body of the Rebbe’s voluminous corpus stems from his oral talks and tens of thousands of written letters over the course of his forty years of leadership. Each chapter in this book collates dozens of primary sources to demonstrate a consistent theme that emerges from the teachings as a whole.

Even as each chapter stands on its own as an independent study, the discerning reader will note the recurrence of certain key themes throughout the volume. Ultimately, this book attempts to demonstrate the holistic unity of the Rebbe’s thought despite the diverse array of topics and sources that he discussed. Over the course of the book, over one thousand primary sources will be marshaled to demonstrate how each theme of the Rebbe’s thought is part of a single but multifaceted project.

While this approach assists in developing an organized broader perspective on the Rebbe’s Torah, it inevitably means that much of the Rebbe’s textual analysis in individual talks that led to the development of these concepts will be de-emphasized. In effect, I will be focusing on creating a constellation of concepts as opposed to tracking the Rebbe’s hermeneutics. I am aware that extracting a concept from its textual web creates a danger of misappropriation and misunderstanding and I tried to carefully militate against such eventualities. The reader, though, should be aware that he or she is not receiving the full picture of any individual talk.

A related point that must be noted at the outset is the peril of analyzing the written transcripts of oral lectures. The Rebbe was not an ivory tower philosopher who developed his thought system in the abstract but was constantly communicating to an ever-growing group of living individuals. Scholars of Hasidism have noted the problematics of trying to grasp the full meaning of hasidic Torah when it is translated from a dynamic oral communication between two parties into a static written text. For this reason, I highly encourage the reader of this book to watch recordings of full-length *farbrengens* that are available online to better appreciate the context in which the Rebbe delivered his Torah.

In addition, it is important to state that there was another layer of translation in my understanding and explicating of these talks. Unfortunately, I am not proficient enough in Yiddish to study the Rebbe's Torah in its original language of delivery. Therefore, instead of making use of the original audio recordings of the Rebbe's talks or the majority of the volumes of *Likkutei Sihot* that were first published by the Rebbe in Yiddish, I had to make do with the Hebrew translations of the talks. This is particularly unfortunate due to the Rebbe's meticulous editing of *Likkutei Sihot*. In instances where a precise translation of the original Yiddish was necessary, I consulted with non-Chabad colleagues who are experienced Yiddish-English translators.

Another methodological reservation is that I am not a social scholar or an ethnographer. I have not spent significant time in Crown Heights or interviewed Chabad Hasidim who were close to the Rebbe. This volume is therefore not a study of how the Rebbe's teachings were received and applied by the living and breathing community of Hasidim. Rather, it is a conceptual overview of the teachings themselves.

Beyond the primary sources, my understanding of the Rebbe's philosophy has been much enriched by the two forms of secondary literature: internal Chabad works and academic studies. Each chapter concludes with references to the main secondary sources that I drew from when writing the chapter.

As Elliot Wolfson has noted, the Rebbe can be studied from multiple frames of reference. Already, only twenty-nine years after his passing, the Rebbe's philosophy has been analyzed through the lenses of

mystical studies, sociology, and educational theory. While each frame of reference highlights a certain aspect of the Rebbe's thought, I chose to retain the frame that is indigenous to the Rebbe's own talks: the intellectual history of Jewish mystical, philosophical, and halakhic thought. Therefore, most chapters begin with a brief introduction outlining previous Jewish perspectives on the topic at hand which helps highlight the Rebbe's unique contribution.

Continuing with this notion of following the Rebbe's own frame of reference, my goal in this book is to try to objectively and accurately record the Rebbe's teachings without adulation or criticism of the content of his ideas. I do not judge the accuracy of the Rebbe's understanding of talmudic passages, his diagnosis of his generation's needs, or the ethics of specific stances that he took. I tried as much as possible to keep an evenhanded tone regarding the content of the philosophy, preferring to allow the reader to form his or her own perspective.

This is especially true regarding the final chapters of the book which relate directly to the most controversial and sensitive issue discussed in the book: the Rebbe's messianism. My goal was, as much as possible, to present what the Rebbe said and, in some cases also how it was interpreted by leading Chabad Hasidim, in an objective fashion. I do not take the liberty to describe the Rebbe as being prescient or irresponsible, as a courageous leader or a dangerous demagogue. In the final pages of the book, I do make an interpretive suggestion to explain some of the contradictory statements the Rebbe made, but I deliberately avoid a moral judgment. Once again, such evaluations I leave to the reader.

I am familiar enough with modern philosophy and literary theory to realize that a wholly detached and objective viewpoint is impossible. In that vein, let me briefly self-disclose so the reader can be aware of my orientation. I am a proud product of Yeshiva University, beginning as a student in Yeshiva University's high school and currently an instructor of Jewish philosophy in Yeshiva University's Isaac Breuer College of Hebrew Studies. My formal educational training has mainly been in the tomes of the Talmud – traditional *beit midrash* learning under Rabbi Michael Rosensweig and academic talmudic studies under Professor Yaakov Elman *z"l*. I did not grow up with Hasidism and do not self-define as a Hasid.

However, I find that many of the ideas of Hasidism, and of the Rebbe in particular, resonate with me deeply, and I have tried to integrate them into my life. Other aspects of Chabad, though, remain foreign to me. My goal in writing was, as much as possible, to hide my personal preferences and present the Rebbe's philosophy on its own terms.

That being said, one motivating factor to write this book was the positive response that I received during my first forays into teaching this material in the Modern Orthodox community. Both in adult education programs and in Yeshiva University classrooms, I saw that many people were intellectually stimulated and, at times, existentially moved by aspects of the Rebbe's Torah. It is my prayer that this book serves as a source of Torah for all and existential meaning for some.

Finally, due to my own limitations and the scope of the project, the discerning reader might find mistakes in the book. While I tried to be careful in my checking and rechecking of the sources, there can be instances where I misunderstood a line in a talk and attributed words to the Rebbe that he never said. If the reader finds such occurrences, please reach out and inform me.

One final note regarding citations and translations. All citations from *Tanya* and primary Chabad sources refer to the standard editions of Kehot Publication Society. Translations of biblical verses are based on the Judaica Press edition, and quotes from *Mishneh Torah* are adapted from the Moznaim editions, both available on Chabad.org. Translations of talmudic passages are adapted from the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Acknowledgments

I always thought that writing a book would be a solitary experience. In truth, however, even as much of the work was done alone, it took a community of collaborators, partners, and supporters to produce the current volume. As such, I would like to acknowledge some of the main members of this community and express a little of the gratitude that they deserve.

My first thank you is to Rabbi Zalman Shmotkin, the director of Chabad.org and spokesperson for the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. How someone who has two more-than-full-time positions still has the time and energy for side projects is beyond me. But I was the beneficiary of his boundless energy and unflappable character. I do not know what drove him to trust a young product of Yeshiva University with a project such as this, but Rabbi Shmotkin was instrumental in securing the resources necessary for the researching and writing of this book. Without his leap of faith in me, this project would not have been launched.

My admiration of Rabbi Shmotkin grew as the project developed. As I began to write chapter drafts, Rabbi Shmotkin became my *havruta*. We spent hundreds of hours discussing the Rebbe's Torah, learning through texts, arguing over their meaning, and debating how

to best capture them in English. I was amazed to discover that someone so steeped in the world of organizational work was also a formidable scholar in his own right. The content and presentation of the book is more accurate due to these sessions.

However, as is the way of study partners, we did not always agree. I know that he does not throw his full support behind every sentence or even section of this book. But, more than any other *havruta* that I ever had, I feel that we fulfilled the Talmud's maxim regarding study partners: "They become enemies with each other [due to the intensity of their studies]. But they do not leave there until they love each other." Despite our debates (or perhaps precisely due to them), our friendship grew. I am honored to call this true Hasid of the Rebbe a mentor and a friend.

Early in the process, Rabbi Shmotkin introduced me to Mr. George Rohr. While Mr. Rohr's reputation precedes him, he is among the unique individuals whose sterling public name tells only a fraction of the truth. The more we interacted, the greater his stature grew for me. His generosity, refined character, and partnership were the essential catalysts for me to embark on this project.

In addition to Rabbi Shmotkin himself, I benefited greatly from the editorial comments of several other Chabad scholars. Their insights contributed to the accuracy and clarity of this volume, and I am very grateful to them for the time and energy that they individually and collectively invested into this project.

Rabbi Dovid Olidort is the senior editor of Kehot Publication Society and was a member of the unique group that memorized, transcribed, and edited the Rebbe's talks. His mastery of the entire Chabad corpus is legendary, as is his fine character and critical editorial eye. It was an honor to have Rabbi Olidort review many chapters of the book. His terse but important comments contributed to the accuracy of several key sections.

Rabbi Dr. Eli Rubin is a senior editor at Chabad.org. While he is a generation younger than Rabbi Olidort and did not merit to listen to the Rebbe himself, Rabbi Rubin is nonetheless a respected authority on the philosophy of Chabad. He is esteemed, both within Chabad and in academic circles, for the integration in his writings of the internal discourse of Chabad teachings and the best of academic methodology. The bearer of a hasidic heart, organized mind, and precise pen, Rabbi

Acknowledgments

Rubin's ever-growing collection of books and articles truly illuminates the extensive and at times overwhelming oeuvre of Chabad writings. It was an honor and a pleasure to spend so many hours corresponding over email, phone, and Zoom. Of all content consultants, Rabbi Rubin's insights have most impacted this volume, and I feel truly indebted to him.

Finally, Rabbi Levi Shmotkin was instrumental in helping me think through certain chapters of this volume. His passion for the truth, methodical approach, and impressive command of the relevant material are truly admirable. Several lengthy email correspondences, long phone conversations, and finally several in-person study sessions contributed to more precise formulations in several chapters.

To ensure that the book would be understandable to those who are not already familiar with Chabad ideas and jargon, I sought people who would be willing to read chapter drafts and provide feedback. In this context, I would like to thank Rabbi Marc Eichenbaum, who carefully read through several of the early chapters.

Mostly, though, my gratitude goes to my father, Rabbi Chaim Bronstein. My father read through every chapter with his expert editorial eye and provided invaluable feedback that greatly improved this book's clarity and style. In short, if anyone unfamiliar with Chabad parlance is able to understand this book, it is due to my father. It is needless to say that it was both very meaningful and a pleasure to work with my father, who is the living embodiment of modesty and *mentchlichkeit*.

Much of this book was written in an apartment in Ramat Bet Shemesh that is owned by Mr. and Mrs. Herb and Annette Klaver and is used as an office of Naaleh.com, which is directed by Mrs. Tzippy Klaver. My sincere gratitude goes to the Klavers who literally opened their home for a new *oleh* to Israel lacking a quiet space to work. The room that they provided was the perfect environment in which to sit, study, and write.

I have been privileged to teach aspects of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's thought in several higher education settings. My appreciation goes to the administrations of Yeshiva University, Nishmat, and Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim for trusting me to present this material. But, most of all, my gratitude is extended to those who attended my classes. Their challenging questions and insightful analysis have forced me to revisit texts and rethink ideas.

It was an honor to work together with Koren Publishers on the editing and publishing of this volume. Publisher Matthew Miller gracefully acted as a central organizing force, with a practical and goal-oriented mindset, to see this project through to fruition. Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, editorial director of Koren and Maggid, has been gracious with his time and supportive of the project. Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, the executive vice president emeritus of the OU, in his capacity as Koren's rabbinic advisor, provided counsel and perspective regarding how to structure certain topics to best capture the Rebbe's unique perspective. On the more granular level of editing, working with professional editors the likes of Ita Olesker, Debbie Ismailoff, and Nechama Unterman has been an amazing experience. They had the unenviable task of grappling with a large and unwieldy manuscript. Their attention to every detail while still keeping the global picture in mind was truly unique. Overall, their balance of patience and professionalism greatly enhanced my experience as an author and the quality of this volume.

While my family was less directly involved with the content of this book (with the exception of my father), they have played and play an equally important role in shaping who I am as a person. My parents, Rabbi Chaim and Brenda Bronstein, gave me a home that was warm, protective, and unpressured, but was simultaneously filled with intellectual stimulation and curiosity. My earliest memories include learning sessions with my father and trips to the library with my mother, which nurtured a love for learning and the confidence that with hard work I, too, could accomplish my academic goals. In addition, my parents practice much quiet kindness, the extent of which I did not fully appreciate as a child. Being raised in a home of learning and kindness set the stage for my interest in the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

My Bubby, Mrs. Florence Fleschner *z"l*, was an integral part of my life since childhood. Filled with zest and vitality, she was a constant model for how to take initiative and live every day to its fullest. Her love for and pride in her grandchildren knew no bounds, and I felt her support and confidence in me throughout this process. Unfortunately, she passed away during the final stages of editing this work. I hope and pray that she is looking down now with *nahat*.

Acknowledgments

Similar to my parents, my in-laws, Rabbi Heshy and Chasida Reichman, are paragons of wisdom and kindness. They embody the Rebbe's idea that one's true self can only emerge through acts of selfless dedication to others. They are living reminders to me and all who know them that scholarship and knowledge must be framed by a life of sensitivity to others: "The Torah begins and ends with acts of kindness."

It sounds trite, but *aharon aharon haviv* is my nuclear family. My children, Talya, Yehuda, Yonatan, and Ella are such blessings and sources of joy. Though they certainly competed with this project in terms of time and attention, I cannot imagine life without them. I am grateful that they are growing up in a home where the "Lubavitcher Rebbe" is a household name.

After fourteen years of marriage I can say with certainty that every aspect of my life is enriched by my wife, Batya, but in the present forum I will highlight an item directly relevant to this volume. The process of writing and editing this book was, overall, an enjoyable and even thrilling experience, but it contained many unexpected twists and turns. Luckily, I am married to a psychologist who was supportive of me and this project every step of the way. In this sense, I wholeheartedly feel that this volume is a joint effort of the two of us.

It is always incumbent upon those of us who merit to live in the Land of Israel to feel and express gratitude to the soldiers and security forces that protect our country from our enemies. This indebtedness has exponentially increased since this cruel war has been thrust upon us on Simhat Torah. May Hashem protect our soldiers, free our captives, and help us gain total victory against those who rise to destroy us.

I conclude with gratitude to *Hashem*, who put all the pieces of this book together. I feel that every step of my journey into studying and writing about the Rebbe's teachings has been guided by providence and geared toward producing the current volume. Ultimately, it is my prayer that this book creates *nahat ruah* for God in this world.

Yosef Bronstein
December 2023 / Tevet 5784

List of Rebbes of Chabad

- 1745–1812 R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (The Alter Rebbe)
- 1773–1827 R. Dovber Schneuri (The Mittlerer Rebbe)
- 1789–1866 R. Menahem Mendel Schneersohn
(The *Tzemah Tzedek*)
- 1834–1882 R. Shmuel Schneersohn (The Maharash)
- 1860–1920 R. Shalom Dovber Schneersohn (The Rashab)
- 1880–1950 R. Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn (The Friediker Rebbe)
- 1902–1994 R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson (The Rebbe)

Part 1

Setting the Stage

Chapter 1

Who Was the Lubavitcher Rebbe?

On November 2, 1994, a few months after his passing, the Lubavitcher Rebbe was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor bestowed by the United States Congress. The text of the bill reads as follows:¹

The Congress hereby finds the following:

- (1) Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the leader of the Lubavitch movement for 40 years, has made outstanding and lasting contributions toward improvements in world education, morality, and acts of charity.
- (2) Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as a refugee first from Stalinist Russia and then from Nazi Germany, has made the headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in New York City a center of over 2,000 educational, social, and rehabilitative

1. www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-103hr4497rds/html/BILLS-103hr4497rds.htm.

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institutions touching millions of people from all walks of life in every corner of the globe.

(3) Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, throughout his 92 years of life, has exemplified the highest ideals of scholarship, teaching, ethics, and charity.

(4) Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson has interpreted with keen insight the miraculous events of our time and has inspired people to a renewal of individual values of spirituality, cooperation, and love of learning.

(5) Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson's extraordinary life and work have long been recognized by the Congress through the enactment of joint resolutions designating his birthday in each of the last 16 years as "Education and Sharing Day, U.S.A."

In this ceremony, the Lubavitcher Rebbe achieved a level of national gratitude and recognition merited by only a select few global religious leaders, including Mother Theresa and the Dalai Lama.

This bill is an embodiment of an unlikely life. In 1902, close to a century earlier, no one could have predicted that the little Ukrainian-hasidic baby, Menahem Mendel, would revolutionize the Jewish world from his headquarters in Brooklyn, New York, half a world away. And yet, revolutionize he did.

The Rebbe's colossal achievements in the service of world Jewry are well known. Over the course of forty years of leadership (1951–1994) he took a hasidic group that was decimated by the Holocaust and Soviet Communism and shepherded it into one of the most influential movements on the contemporary Jewish scene. From his office in 770 Eastern Parkway, he initiated some of the most successful and innovative programming that the Jewish world has ever seen: a global network of *sheluhim* (emissaries), Chabad Houses, mitzva campaigns, Torah lectures over radio and later satellite television, educational initiatives, and organizations for women, children, the elderly, and the disabled.

In addition, as is evident from his congressional award, he became a national religious figure as public advocate for the integration of biblical values, morality, and spirituality in American society and education.

Who Was the Lubavitcher Rebbe?

He corresponded with presidents² and was regularly visited by leading politicians and statesmen from all levels of government. His face adorned the cover of an issue of the *New York Times Magazine*³ and his insight and opinion were often cited in leading news outlets.⁴

His circle of admirers was similarly broad and eclectic. Elie Wiesel and R. Jonathan Sacks refer to private meetings (*yehidut*) with the Rebbe as significantly impacting the course of their lives. Israeli president Zalman Shazar and Prime Minister Menachem Begin closed themselves with him for hours at a time. Luis Lacelle, president of Uruguay, and Lech Walesa, president of Poland, both carried a dollar received from the Rebbe.⁵

In summary, this was a hasidic man who broke old paradigms. While many Jews in America either isolated themselves from modern society or assimilated into it, the Rebbe charted a unique path. He remained distinctly hasidic, while still engaging the world and trying to change it for the better.

WHAT MOTIVATED THE REBBE?

Care and Concern

What motivated his bold posture and innovative programming? What led the Rebbe to take an insular hasidic group and send them out into the world? In a 1994 eulogy, R. Aharon Lichtenstein, *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion and a leading Modern Orthodox thinker, reflected on the Rebbe's achievements:

The Rebbe's primary quality was caring. Not in the narrow sense of the word, i.e., concern for his own home, movement or *shtetl*, but seeing the big picture. This included the big geographical picture, with a movement with emissaries, men and women, on every continent, as well as the big cultural picture. Not only

2. A sampling of these correspondences is available at www.chabad.org/816636.

3. *New York Times Magazine*, March 15, 1992.

4. Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman (2010), 204–6.

5. See “The Rebbe and World Leaders,” available at www.chabad.org/992475.

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in the yeshiva world but in the university world; not only in the religious world but in the secular world, in places from which he should have ostensibly kept his distance. What did he have to do with the IDF? It was his concern that brought this about. He cared enough to see things on a historic and national scale. This is also part of Chabad's admirable tradition – concern for the Kingdom of Heaven in general.⁶

According to R. Lichtenstein, care and concern motivated the Rebbe. He saw Jews losing their way in the world and felt a responsibility to spiritually save them. He saw a general society that was becoming increasingly secularized and wanted to return it to its roots. This sense of care and concern for all aspects of God's world, coupled with tremendous organizational abilities and a willing army of Hasidim to carry out his vision, served as the basis for the Rebbe's grand projects and striking influence.

A Torah Philosophy

While R. Lichtenstein is certainly correct about the centrality of the Rebbe's empathy, his depiction is one facet of the whole picture. In addition to empathy, Chabad's approach and activism in the second half of the twentieth century are also direct applications of the Rebbe's highly sophisticated and nuanced Torah philosophy. While being deeply rooted in classical Chabad teachings, the Rebbe deepened the wells and expanded the frontiers of hasidic thought and developed strikingly innovative formulations and ideas. It was this synthesis of philosophy and passion that served as the substructure of Chabad life in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Rebbe's philosophy is all-encompassing and holistic. There is a single central concept – the nature of God's relationship to the world – which sustains every aspect of theoretical Torah and practical

6. For a transcription of the original Hebrew, www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture-data/745886/Hesped-for-the-Lubavitcher-Rebbe. The translation above is adapted from www.scribd.com/doc/111005773/Rav-Aharon-Lichtenstein-s-Hesped-for-the-Lubavitcher-Rebbe-English.

life.⁷ In the Rebbe's teachings, the *Sheluhim* program was intimately connected with the proper methodology for studying the Talmud's legal passages. His unique brand of hasidic feminism was vivified by the same principles that led him to proactively employ innovative technology in the service of God. Chabad's concern for the general American public was intricately intertwined with his understanding of the relationship between body and soul. And, as he emphasized time and time again, all these ideas and programs were uniquely apt for the sui generis historical moment of the post-World War II world.

THE REBBE'S SCHOLARSHIP

The Rebbe as a Torah Scholar

The Rebbe was first and foremost a towering Torah scholar. While some have questioned the extent of his scholarly prowess,⁸ even a cursory glance at the Rebbe's vast output demonstrates an impressive mastery of the entire range of Torah disciplines. Without notes or books, the Rebbe would often speak for hours, weaving together hundreds of sources and citations from a wide array of halakhic, midrashic, philosophical, and mystical texts.⁹ In addition, he had complete command of the voluminous corpus of earlier Chabad literature, which included hundreds of extremely dense volumes of hasidic teachings.

In addition to breadth, the Rebbe's teachings also display a methodical, yet stunningly creative mind. The Rebbe would subject each major citation to a rigorous and detailed textual analysis before placing it in conversation with other sources, often across disciplinary lines. This synthesis of micro- and macro-analyses, together with his interdisciplinary approach, frequently led the Rebbe to innovative but well-reasoned readings of many often-used classical texts.

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7. The fact that the essence of an item permeates its entirety, even to the farthest peripheries, is a central theme in the Rebbe's philosophy. See chapter 8, section "Hasidism and *Mashiah*," and chapter 9, section "The Unifying Essence of Torah."
 8. Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman (2010), 112–13, 123.
 9. For a convincing argument that the Rebbe's charismatic leadership was largely due to his mastery of Torah, see Nehemia Polen (2014): 123–34. For a similar contention, though focusing more on the messages and lessons the Rebbe imparted as opposed to scholarship per se, see Yehiel Harari (2013), 19–21, 176.

Setting the Stage

As impressive as each talk is on its own, the Rebbe's real genius emerges after widening one's interpretive lens to encompass his entire corpus. Chabad and academic scholars alike have discerned an intricate method to the Rebbe's thought. As noted above, through the multitude of individual teachings he conveyed during his lifetime, the Rebbe presented a systematic philosophy revolving around a single core idea and several supporting themes. Once identified, these principles provide a framework in which to properly understand many of the Rebbe's teachings that might have otherwise appeared to be independent ruminations. A bird's-eye view of the total structure thus aids in understanding and contextualizing any individual talk and, conversely, the individual talks emerge as building blocks of a magnificent edifice.

The Rebbe's Corpus

The primary setting for the Rebbe's scholarly output were his talks at *farbrengens* (hasidic gatherings).¹⁰ Originally roughly a monthly occurrence and then slowly transitioning to a weekly or even more frequent activity, these events featured a traditional hasidic mix of singing, *lehayyims*,¹¹ and hearing Torah from the Rebbe. Each *farbrengen* had several *sihot* (literally, "talks") that spanned from a few minutes to a few hours. The talks often began with the *parasha* or holiday at hand and moved on to broader topics of Torah, Chabad activities, or current events.

An elite group of Hasidim would transcribe these talks (often from memory, as many *farbrengens* were held on Shabbat or a holiday) and translate them from the original Yiddish into Hebrew. These transcriptions were published as the *Torat Menahem* series, currently reaching 112 volumes (each several hundred pages long), which covers thirty-six years of his talks (5710–5734/1950–1974; 5742–5752/1982–1992). Transcriptions of the remaining years of talks (5735–5741/1974–1981) are

10. For the historical development of these *farbrengens*, see Ariel Roth (2017), 158–61.

11. For the restrictions that the Rebbe placed on drinking at a *farbrengen*, see *Torat Menahem* 5723: 2, 351–54. For a comprehensive overview of the Rebbe's repeated emphasis on limiting one's drinking at a *farbrengen* and a discussion about the proper approach to drinking on Purim, see *Kuntres Mashkeh HaMesame'ah: BeInyan Takkanat Shetiyat HaMashkeh* (2003), which collates material from over one hundred distinct occasions when the Rebbe spoke or wrote about this issue.

available in Yiddish under the title *Sihot Kodesh* and are currently being edited and translated into Hebrew. While the transcriptions in the *Torat Menahem* series are important sources, one should be cognizant that they are translations of transcriptions and were mostly unedited by the Rebbe.¹²

Some drafts were presented to the Rebbe for review and editing. The Rebbe reportedly invested many hours in carefully reviewing, editing, and footnoting these transcripts,¹³ resulting in the thirty-nine volumes of *Likkutei Sihot*. Each volume contains dozens of tightly organized talks that the Rebbe himself reviewed and sent to be published.

On a less frequent basis, the Rebbe delivered a *maamar*, or an in-depth discourse in Hasidism.¹⁴ These discourses, which often begin with a citation of a *maamar* of one of his predecessors, are the deepest and most esoteric of the Rebbe's talks. As per Chabad tradition, there was a distinct ceremonial aspect to the delivery of a *maamar*. The Rebbe would signal that he wanted to deliver a *maamar* and the Hasidim would sing a preparatory, wordless tune to ready themselves. They would then rise and stand in rapt attention while the Rebbe sat with his eyes closed and spoke in a distinctive melody reserved for such occasions. Historically referred to by the Hasidim as *divrei Elokim hayyim* ("the words of the living God"), it was assumed that the Rebbe delivered a *maamar* from a place of higher consciousness. The Rebbe also edited transcripts of many of these discourses, eventually creating the four volumes of *Sefer HaMaamarim Melukat*.¹⁵

Another major source of the Rebbe's teachings are his tens of thousands of letters. According to R. Leibel Groner, a member of the Rebbe's secretariat, the Rebbe would receive between 250 and 300 letters

12. R. Simon Jacobson describes the history and process of editing and publication of the Rebbe's teachings in an interview available at old2.ih.chabad.info/images/notimage/57211_he_1.pdf.

13. Chaim Miller (2014), 309.

14. According to Chaim Rapoport (2011), 11, the Rebbe delivered 1,558 *maamarim*.

15. For an academic description of the nature of a *maamar* in Chabad history, see Ariel Roth (2017), 68–86. For an internal Chabad description, see "What Is a *Maamar*?" available at www.chabad.org/290524.

Setting the Stage

a day¹⁶ asking him for blessings, advice, or for clarification of a Torah source, ranging from the simple to the scholarly. In 1987, a group of Hasidim began to gather the Rebbe's responses that contained advice or Torah expositions and published them as the *Iggerot Kodesh* series. This series currently consists of thirty-two volumes, containing 12,226 letters, which span the years 5688–5737/1928–1977. It is also a work in progress.

A conservative estimate of the volume of the Rebbe's talks and letters places his published output at approximately seventy thousand pages. While much of this is routine advice or "lighter" inspirational material, the majority of this corpus are heavily sourced and analytical talks. The sheer volume of this places the Rebbe as one of the greatest generators of published Torah in Jewish history. When one considers that he concurrently headed an ever-growing hasidic movement, personally met with tens of thousands of people from all walks of life, and eventually directed a global network of institutions, this is a truly remarkable feat.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The Early Years

Before launching into the Rebbe's teachings, a brief biographical sketch is in order.¹⁷ On 11 Nisan/April 18, 1902, R. Levi Yitzhak and Chana Schneerson of Nikolayev, Russia, were blessed with their oldest son, Menahem Mendel, named after the baby's great-great-grandfather, the *Tzemah Tzedek*, the third Rebbe of Chabad. (See list of Rebbes of Chabad, p. xxi.) R. Levi Yitzhak, a Hasid of the Rashab (the fifth Rebbe of Chabad), was known for his prodigious mastery of both classical talmudic scholarship (he received rabbinic ordination from R. Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk, the famed sage of Lithuanian Jewry) and mystical

16. Lecture available at www.torahcafe.com/rabbi-leibel-groner/the-rebbe-cares-for-all-video_873c613b4.html.

17. For more biographical details the reader is encouraged to see any of the biographies listed in the "For Further Research" section. The sketch below is common to all the major biographies and I added references only where a specific fact or statistic would be difficult to locate in the biographies or if it appeared in one biography but not the others.