

» **Michigan Mediates** Public service campaign promotes a better way to settle disputes. **See page 22.**

» **What To Wear?** The perfect outfits and accessories for summer soirees and weddings. **See page 35.**

» **Summer of Song** Former Detroiters Sam Woolf to tour with *American Idol* crew to 41 cities. **See page 45.**



Sam Woolf on *American Idol*

metro » cover story

# Rebbe Moments

## Twenty years after his death, the Lubavitch leader's legacy lives on.



A 15-year-old Yisrael Pinson receives a dollar and a precious moment with the Rebbe (the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson) in Brooklyn, 1991.

I am one of many thousands of people from all walks of life who were privileged to have had a personal encounter with the Rebbe.

My first personal audience was a few months before my third birthday, during which the Rebbe gifted me with a siddur that I still use. At 13, I was called to the Torah for my bar mitzvah in the Rebbe's personal minyan, the aliyah prior to his.

And since age 11 in 1987 until 1993, I spent four weeks a year with the Rebbe, from before Rosh Hashanah until after Simchas Torah.

Those moments with the Rebbe are unforgettable and have left a lifelong mark on me — and on the thousands who also experienced them.

As we approach the Rebbe's 20th *yahrzeit* on 3 Tammuz (July 1), we look back to those moments for inspiration to continue the Rebbe's legacy of love to every Jew.

A few of these stories from local residents are shared here; more will be shared at Chabad of Michigan's Vision, Song and Inspiration event on June 23; and even more are found in the pages of two new books.



Rabbi Yisrael Pinson

The Rebbe was a greater-than-life figure, yet he connected personally with every single person he met. Through his *shluchim* (emissaries) here and around the world, the Rebbe continues to reach out with love to every single Jew. I'm honored and privileged to be part of the Rebbe's army here in Michigan.

— Rabbi Yisrael Pinson, Chabad of Greater Downtown Detroit

**Inside:**

- Local recollections, page 8
- Books reviewed, page 12

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 8**

# Vaccine Express

Grieving mother arranges bus trips to Canada to guard against meningitis B.

Robin Schwartz | Contributing Writer

When Alicia Stillman of West Bloomfield recently held a tiny box containing the Bexsero meningitis B vaccine in her hands in Windsor, Ontario, she burst into tears. Her daughter, Emily, 19, a Kalamazoo College sophomore, died in February 2013 from meningitis B, an aggressive strain of the bacterial disease not currently covered by vaccines in the United States.

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 16**



Leading a vaccination drive to prevent others from dying from meningitis B, the disease that claimed their daughter Emily's life, are Alicia and Michael Stillman.



# Local Remembrances

Moments with the Rebbe last a lifetime.

**R**abbi Mendel Scharf of Oak Park was barely 8 years old when his father passed away just days before Yom Kippur in 1989. The eldest of three boys, Mendel lived in Brooklyn with his family who were followers of the Rebbe and regular attendees at his synagogue.

By then, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was already the revered leader of a worldwide movement and a man of tremendous influence. He was all those things to young Mendel as well, but after his father's passing, the Rebbe became something more — a watchful eye, a guardian, an encourager. He remembers well the first Sukkot after his father's passing. As was common on holidays, the synagogue was packed with thousands of people. Just before his much-anticipated talk, the Rebbe called Mendel over to sit near him.

"I sat near the Rebbe and he looked down at me, and it just uplifted me," Scharf says. "I had just lost my father, but from that time I never felt alone."

That included making sure Scharf and his brothers were always in attendance to recite *Kaddish* for their father and participate in the *davening* (praying), or personally handing them a piece of challah or cake during a *farbrengen* (Chasidic gathering). Mendel would write Rabbi Schneerson letters and would always get replies.

"I was a little kid of 8, 9, 10, and the Rebbe was extremely busy at that point, but [he] would sit down to answer my questions," Scharf says. "I would write him if I got a good report card or some other reward at school; he would always acknowledge it and thank me for the good report."

Today Rabbi Scharf is a teacher at the Harry & Wanda Zekelman Campus of the Lubavitch Yeshiva-International School for Chabad Leadership in Oak Park, where he teaches 13- and 14-year-old boys a variety of Jewish subjects, but also takes the time to encourage and inspire them.

"The Rebbe is such an integral part of who I am and what I do," he says, "it's hard to do it justice with words."

— Jessica Naiman



The Rebbe took Mendel Scharf and his brothers under his wing when their father died in 1989 in Brooklyn. Scharf now lives and teaches in Oak Park.



Chabad supporters Jack and Miriam Shenkman and Norman Alan, with Rabbi Berel Shemtov (behind Alan), visit the Rebbe.

## Devoted Supporters

As key supporters of the Chabad Lubavitch campus in West Bloomfield, Jack and Miriam Shenkman had the privilege of meeting with the Rebbe on several occasions.

Jack Shenkman recalls one of the earlier meetings, where he provided the Rebbe with an update on the progress of the new center.

"You know Rabbi Berel Shemtov has a big appetite," Shenkman recalls the Rebbe telling them with a big smile, "but that is upon my instruction."

Shenkman assured the Rebbe he would do everything he could to fulfill his wishes, a promise he kept over the years through his continued generosity and support of the Lubavitch movement. The Shenkmans provided funding for the The Shul in West Bloomfield that bears their name.

After traveling extensively and visiting Chabad centers in Israel and other countries, Jack Shenkman joined an international group of benefactors devoted to raising funds for new Chabad facilities throughout the world. As a part of this group, they would travel often to Brooklyn for a special audience with the Rebbe before the holidays.

"We experienced all the wonderful things they did at the direction of the Rebbe," said Shenkman, who described the Rebbe as "the most impressive and awe-inspiring man I ever met."

Miriam Shenkman said spending time with the Rebbe was a privilege and an honor.

"He had beautiful blue eyes and the most beautiful smile anyone could have," she said. "It was a pleasure to be in his company, and I hope we can continue with the wonderful things he wanted us to do."

— Ronelle Grier

## Rebbe Tribute June 23

Chabad Lubavitch of Michigan will present "An Evening of Vision, Music and Inspiration" commemorating the 20th *yahrzeit* of the Rebbe at 6 p.m. Monday, June 23, at the Suburban Collection Showplace in Novi. Guest speaker is former U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut.

A tribute also will be given to the late Emma Lazaroff Schaver, known affectionately as the "Mother of Chabad in Michigan." The Chabad campus in West Bloomfield will be named after her in honor of her legacy.

Tickets start at \$36; call (248) 660-9060, or visit [lubavitchmi.com](http://lubavitchmi.com).



The Rebbe with Emma Lazaroff Schaver

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**Remembrances from page 8**

**Bringing Encouragement**

Today, Rabbi Berel Shemtov is director of Chabad Lubavitch of Michigan, but in 1956, he was a young man studying at Chabad headquarters in Brooklyn, soon to become an instrumental part of the Rebbe's response to a tragedy overseas.

On April 11, 1956, terrorists opened fire at a vocational school in the Israeli village of Kfar Chabad, killing four students, and one youth worker and injuring several others. The village was plunged into grief and shock. Parents came to remove their children from the school; others suggested disbanding the entire village.

The Rebbe's immediate response was to continue building the village and especially the school. A month later, on Shavuot, the Rebbe presented a new paradigm to his followers in Crown Heights — financial support for Kfar Chabad was not enough; what the village needed most was a group of people to go and bring encouragement. Within a day, young men were signing up to be part of a delegation to Israel. Berel

Shemtov was one of the 12 chosen by the Rebbe to take the trip, and one of three chosen to lead the group.

Before they embarked, the Rebbe presented Shemtov and the others with a pocket siddur and Tanya [a book on the fundamentals of Chabad]. On the way, the group visited Jewish communities in England, Belgium, France, Switzerland and Italy, eventually arriving in Israel.

"Our mission was to meet with the people," Shemtov says. "Of course, it was sad, we were grieving. But it was also exciting for everybody. Hundreds of people came to the airport to meet us."

The delegation spent nearly a month in Israel, where they met children, adults and community leaders. In Petach Tikvah, the Chief Rabbinate arranged a greeting at the city's largest synagogue. It filled to capacity and Shemtov brought regards to the crowd from American Jewry.

The trip was a great success, helping to expand the Lubavitch movement in Israel.

— **Jessica Naiman**

**'Worldwide Force For Good'**

Robert Aronson, now senior development adviser for the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, was working for Federation



**Robert Aronson**

in his hometown of Milwaukee when his dear friend, the late Marty Stein, asked him to go with him to visit the Rebbe.

"I was in my 30s and he took me to see the Rebbe for one of those chaotic meetings at his Brooklyn headquarters," Aronson recalled. "I was scared to death the building would collapse because there were so many people. There was so much pressure from people rocking and rolling that my galoshes came off my feet."

Aronson shook the Rebbe's hand

and received a dollar from him. "I still have that dollar," he says. "It was a real highlight for me of this Jewish business we are in. A man like the Rebbe comes along once in a lifetime.

"When his wife died, I wrote the Rebbe a letter of condolence. One day I got a knock on the door, and five Lubavitchers had come to deliver a handwritten thank-you note from the Rebbe. It was the one and only time anyone in Milwaukee had gotten a note from the Rebbe. They were bowled over.

"The Rebbe was obviously a sainted man and very smart," Aronson said. "He was very unusual; you could tell. There was a kindness about his face and his eyes were very penetrating. Very little happened without the Rebbe's knowledge in his world. He was a worldwide force for good."

— **Keri Guten Cohen**

# A Remarkable Life

Two new books examine the Rebbe's legacy 20 years after his death.

Diane Cole

Special to the Jewish News

Calling someone “larger than life” risks raising that person from the realm of the human to that of myth. Yet that claim may be an understatement for someone as personally charismatic and globally influential as Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh leader of the Lubavitch (or Chabad) Chasidic movement.

Rabbi Schneerson was (and still is) widely referred to as simply “the Rebbe,” but he was anything but simple. Over the course of his leadership from 1951 to his death in 1994, he succeeded, against the odds in assimilationist America, in both enlivening and enlarging the religious community whose European presence was nearly annihilated in the Holocaust. His counsel was sought out by government leaders across the political spectrum in the United States, Israel and elsewhere. He was beloved by his followers, but he also courted controversy.

During his lifetime and even afterward, at least some (and perhaps many) of Rabbi Schneerson's followers fervently believed he would help bring, or himself prove to be, the Messiah who would redeem and transform the world. Since his passing, there has been no successor to the Rebbe as the Lubavitch leader, and it's unlikely that there will be one anytime soon.

This month, as the 20th anniversary of the Rebbe's death approaches on 3 Tammuz (July 1), two new books, each by a noted rabbi, seek to put his legacy in perspective. Given the Rebbe's outsized reputation, that would seem a daunting task. Perhaps that is why both books take a personal approach in portraying the life and character of this commanding figure.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, author of *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History* (Harper Wave), is a well-known Orthodox rabbi in New York and a prolific writer of such widely read books as *The Book of Jewish Ethics* and *Jewish Literacy*. Although Telushkin is not a follower of Lubavitch, he has close ties to the movement

through his father, who was Schneerson's personal accountant for decades.

The other book is by celebrated Talmud scholar and author Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, a follower of Lubavitch as suggested by the book's title, *My Rebbe* (Sheffa Foundation Maggid Books).

Both authors clearly admire the Rebbe, their reverence evident even when they question or disagree with any of his views or actions. Given their common subject (as well as many common interview and archival sources), there is also an inevitable overlap between the two books, with a number of similar anecdotes and quotes appearing in both volumes. But because each book presents a slightly different slant, with divergent emphases, they also complement one another.

## Rebbe's Life Story

As both new books show, Rabbi Schneerson's life story was in itself a journey through the Jewish history of the 20th century. He was born into a well-known Lubavitch family in Russia in 1902, and from an early age intently pursued religious studies. While in his 20s and 30s, he also trained and worked as a scientist and engineer, living in Berlin and Paris before finding safe passage to New York at the outbreak of World War II.

Only then did he begin his ascent to Lubavitch leadership, accepting the role of Rebbe in 1951 after the death of his father-in-law, Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. And in that reinvention of his life, he found his life mission.

He was as inspiring as he was pragmatic. He mobilized at first hundreds and then thousands of enthusiastic young members in the Lubavitch community to participate in “Mitzvah campaigns” to encourage Jewish women to light Sabbath candles and Jewish men to don tefillin. Many of these youths subsequently volunteered as *shluchim* — emissaries — who would uproot themselves to settle in diverse locales around the world with the mission of deepening observance among Jews wherever they went.

Perhaps the most visible symbol of the Rebbe's impact in this country is the presence every winter of giant Chanukah menorahs erected in public spaces, including a “National

Menorah” on the White House grounds; the impetus to celebrate the holiday candle-lighting proudly in public, as well as the distinctive angular design of the menorah itself, came directly from Rabbi Schneerson. Many hailed the Rebbe's innovative outreach programs. Many others did not. The Chanukah menorahs spurred lawsuits on the grounds of separation of church and state, and the mitzvah campaigns struck many secular Jews as annoying or intrusive. Nor were his political opinions always popular or welcome: In regard to Israel, he vigorously opposed any negotiations that would trade land for peace, including the Camp David Accords.

## Telushkin's Rebbe

At 617 pages, Telushkin's book is the more comprehensive — and longer — of the two new books. Though it is billed as a biography, it comes across as a collage, with each chapter focusing on a different aspect of the various religious concerns, personal qualities, management skills and philosophical and spiritual wisdom that made Rabbi Schneerson so distinctive.

Telushkin's Rebbe is a man in constant motion, a nonstop whirlwind of faith-driven energy and action possessed of a spiritual calm at the center. By all accounts, the Rebbe's daily work and prayer schedule left virtually no time for sleep. His piety was remarkable: He would devote hours each week to private prayer at the tomb of his father-in-law and predecessor, invoking guidance and inspiration.

He also made himself unusually accessible to the public. For most of his decades of leadership, the Rebbe set aside two or three evenings each week to meet with anyone who cared to wait outside his personal office at Chabad headquarters in Brooklyn; those personal office hours would start at 8 p.m. and often extend until dawn.



The Rebbe, Brooklyn Lag b'Omer parade, May 20, 1984

Yossi Melamed/JEM Media

Telushkin recounts numerous accounts of such meetings, as remembered by a broad range of people of all ages and occupations who patiently sat and waited for the Rebbe. These tales illustrate the depth of the Rebbe's capacity for human connection as well as the breadth of his knowledge and curiosity, and the chapters that contain them are among the book's highlights.

Almost all these stories begin with descriptions of the Rebbe's intensely focused blue-eyed gaze and his uncanny ability to quickly distill, and then resolve with an incisive comment, whatever issue troubled his visitor, from marital decisions to job opportunities to religious vocation.

To his credit, Telushkin does not shy away from a range of opinions voiced by the Rebbe that sound dissonant and worse to our contemporary ears. Rabbi Schneerson's literal interpretation of the Bible led him to reject Darwin and the theory of evolution. His similarly literal reading of the Talmud also led him to maintain that the sun revolves around the Earth.

Further troubling, especially given Rabbi Schneerson's own erudition and education (not to mention the large number of Chabad houses on campuses across the country), was his general opposition to his followers' attending college or receiving university degrees. The reason: Exposure to and immersion in secular life during the impressionable years of adolescence and young adulthood could lure the observant away from traditional belief and practice.

The Rebbe's complexities abounded. But for him, faith and Torah trumped everything.

## Steinsaltz's Take

*My Rebbe*, at 223 pages, has the feel of a meditative memoir. In assessing the important role Rabbi Schneerson played in his own life, as mentor and model, Jerusalem-based Steinsaltz also takes care to place the Rebbe within the traditions of Lubavitch tradition and theology. He also presents the

Rebbe's life story with great empathy, starting with the ways in which the upheavals of history catapulted him from a hoped-for career in science in Europe to a new life in America within the Chabad movement, and extending to the personal anguish felt by the Rebbe and his wife at their childlessness.



**Rabbi Steinsaltz**

He summarizes with precision the Rebbe's spiritual — and life — mission.

"It was the Rebbe's absolutely unsparing commitment to bring redemption to the world through actions," Steinsaltz writes. "For the Rebbe, bringing the Mashiach was not a mystical or kabbalistic maneuver; it was supremely practical ... bringing the Mashiach would depend entirely on whole-hearted Torah study and observance of mitzvot. Toward this end, he organized the mitzvah campaigns so that his Chasidim could bring his message to Jews everywhere."

At the same time, Steinsaltz continues, the Rebbe viewed the tragedies of 20th-century history as "presaging a major event."

So: Did the Lubavitch community view the Rebbe as the Messiah? Did the Rebbe himself?

Rabbi Telushkin believes this is a "non-issue" because the question misunderstands the traditional Chasidic concept of there existing, in every generation, a potential candidate for Messiah. "It is this sense of 'Messiah' that many of the Lubavitchers intended" when they spoke of the Rebbe as the Messiah, Telushkin writes — as a potential Messiah, not the actual one.

Steinsaltz sees it this way: "The acceptance of the Rebbe as the Mashiach of his time was almost universal among the Lubavitchers of the late 20th century ... it was simply an article of faith. ... While he never said so outright, I think that the Rebbe considered it possible that he might be tapped to become the Mashiach — and that he could bring the Redemption. ... However, he never made the claim outright and tried to quash all speculation."

Now, two decades after the Rebbe's death, there still remain those who continue to believe that the Rebbe will be resurrected and revealed as the Messiah.

In the sense that the Rebbe's influence and example remain so vivid, then "yes, it can be said that the Rebbe is still here," Steinsaltz concludes.

Certainly the fullness of the Rebbe's personality is present in these well-drawn portraits by Rabbis Telushkin and Steinsaltz. □

## Scholarships Granted B'nai B'rith hands out four awards.

Less than one year ago, a group of B'nai B'rith leaders from Great Lakes Region looked at developing a signature program that would fill a need in the local Metro Detroit community. The New B'nai B'rith College Scholarship Program was conceived, with its mission to provide a local resource for students in the community looking for financial assistance with the high cost of college tuition.

The group, together with a devoted committee of volunteers, began the task of raising the much needed funds to make the dream a reality. After reviewing many online applications, four outstanding recipients were recognized for its inaugural year.

The 2014 awards were presented to four talented recipients: Alex Sitner, Danielle Keith, Mara Cranis, and Marisa Meyerson, by two of the committee members, Rick Sherline and Rachel Taubman, at the 32nd Annual Golf Classic Event at Tam O-Shanter Country Club in West Bloomfield. The scholarship



**Committee member Rick Sherline, scholarship winners Alex Sitner, Danielle Keith, Mara Cranis, Marisa Meyerson and committee member Rachel Taubman**

funds will be sent directly to the colleges the students are accepted to this fall.

The other members of the committee include David Lubin, Sid Roth Steve Zorn, Arline Bittker, Steven Kaplan, Ilene Lubin, Eric Adelman, Lila Zorn, Robert Stoler and Regional President Stuart Novick.

The committee is currently seeking endowments to sustain this fund for the future, welcomes anyone interested in serving on the committee and asks that calendars are marked for Oct. 25 when the next concert at the Berman Theater at the JCC will be held to benefit the College Scholarship Program. □

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