

## **RABBI'S MESSAGE**

### **A Couple of Rebbes: Yesterday's Leadership Working Today and Tomorrow**

In America, we often acknowledge the memory of a great leader by remembering a birthday. The greatest leaders even have their birthdays changed to a Monday so we can enjoy the weekend. In Judaism, we more often acknowledge the *yahrtzeit*, or anniversary of someone's passing. Though we are sad that the person has died, we celebrate what was accomplished during a lifetime, rather than what happened before they lived.

The Gregorian year 2014 (the Hebrew year, 5774) marks the 20<sup>th</sup> *yahrtzeit* of **Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson**, the seventh leader of the Lubavitch Chasidic movement of Judaism. In the twenty years since his death, he has not been replaced, and his teachings continue to inspire Jewish people, including those who have embraced an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle as well as those who have less observant religious practices. Rabbi Schneerson is affectionately referred to simply as "the Rebbe." While "rabbi" means "teacher," the endearing title of "rebbe" is reserved for a leader of a philosophical movement.

Another influential rabbi, roughly twenty years younger than the Rebbe, passed away just short of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in July, 2014. **Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi**, as a young man, was a student of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel's father-in-law. When the sixth rebbe passed away in 1950, there was a period of time between his passing and the succession of a new rebbe. The two rabbis, one almost 30 and the other barely 50, shared a prayerful moment in which Menachem Mendel said to Zalman, "I hope what you pray for comes to be." Zalman responded that he prayed, "...that we should have a rebbe, and that the rebbe will be you."

As a young man, Reb Zalman (as he was later known) had been sent by the sixth rebbe, along with musician Shlomo Carlebach, to go to college campuses to bring young people back to Judaism. The Rebbe continued this tradition, and expanded the outreach into a worldwide movement by sending emissaries to places where Jewish people didn't have many teachers. CHABAD, the name the Lubavitch movement adopted, is an acronym for CHESED (kindness) – BINAH (understanding) – DA'AT (knowledge). Chabad emphasized helping Jewish people learn more about religious observance without judgment. "No Jew left behind" became their mantra, reaching out to those who might be forgotten by others in the Jewish community, like mentally challenged adults, prison inmates and those experiencing poverty.

Under the Rebbe's leadership, Chabad grew throughout the world. Meanwhile, in the 1960's and 70's, Reb Zalman began to develop a new "neo-Hasidic" way of looking at Jewish practice that became known as Jewish Renewal. This new group took elements of the joyous spirit that Chabad taught, and blended it with a more progressive attitude toward religious observance. A key difference between the two was the issue of equal responsibilities for men and women. Traditional Judaism separates gender roles more definitively; Renewal, along with Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism (and later Conservative) embraced women rabbis and equal participation. Reb Zalman ordained several women rabbis and later empowered Rabbi Marcia Prager to oversee Jewish Renewal's rabbinic program.

I have personally been intrigued with both Chasidic Judaism and Jewish Renewal, and I have studied with scholars from both. Recently, I've been looking more closely at the lives of these two influential leaders. One story stands out for me. Those who remember the Rebbe know that he would sit at the head of a long table and begin to teach. Often, his teachings would last all night long, the other scholars deeply engrossed in his teaching, never wanting it to end. When Reb Zalman taught, he would also sit at the head of the table to begin the lesson. But after twenty or thirty minutes, he would get out of his chair and move one seat over to the left. He would then invite the scholar seated next to him to take over the teaching. Reb Zalman modeled the famous saying, "Who is wise? Those who can learn from anyone." (Pirke Avot – Ethics of our Fathers – 4:1)

When I think of these the Rebbe and Reb Zalman, two words come to mind: **Empowerment** and **Humility**. The Rebbe empowered teachers and leaders by sending them out to faraway places to bring Judaism to those who were thirsting for it. Reb Zalman empowered others by finding creative and innovative rabbis who would bring a spiritual connection to Jews who had grown distant from tradition. Neither was someone who sought out leadership. Like Moses who said to G-D, “Who am I,” Zalman and Menachem Mendel both led by example.

Especially in America, Jewish people have many choices about how to practice our Judaism. Each year at Rosh Hashana, we hear the wake-up call of the *shofar*, reminding us we can start fresh. We can begin by embracing the joy of shared identity and learn how great leaders of the past can influence our future. There are different paths, and each of us can renew a personal relationship with G-D in order to find the personal path that fits for us. The tripod of Judaism is illustrated in another quote from Pirke Avot 1:2: “The world stands on three things: On Torah (learning), Sacred Service and on Deeds of Lovingkindness.”

Just like the three pillars of Judaism, I pray to stand together with each of you in the coming year.

L'shalom,

*Dan Gordon*