

A Tribute to the Memory of Reb Zalman Serebryanski. On the Occasion of his First Yahrzeit, 3 Tammuz 5752 (1992)

What Makes a Chassid?

What makes a chassid? Who is a chassid? Definitions vary, but when once in a long while one encounters an individual whose personality vibrates with all the ideals of the various definers, one says with certainty, "Now, there is a chassid!"

Such a man was Reb Zalman Serebryanski, who passed away at 86 on the third of Tammuz, one long year ago.

For some people, a chassid is someone who matches the definition of the Rebbe Rashab: Chassid = Chesed (lovingkindness) plus the letter yud (which in chassidic writings signifies the component of wisdom in the soul).

For others, a chassid is a valiant soldier who carries out his Rebbe's directives consistently, but humbly.

For others again, a chassid is a maskil (in the chassidic usage of the word) – a man whose intellectual life is constantly nourished by the higher reaches of chassidic philosophy.

For yet others, a chassid is primarily an oved (in the chassidic usage of the word) – one who toils patiently year by year, chastening and tempering and refining every facet of his character.

Surely, moreover, a chassid has to be able to retell (and experience) a poignant chassidic story; to sing (and experience) a soulful chassidic melody; and to be an active participant in a comradesly farbrengen, the spontaneous gathering at which chassidim, engaged in the labours of self refinement, voice their expectations as if to each other, but in fact are addressing themselves.

Finally, it goes without saying that a true chassid is ready to sacrifice himself, even literally, for the sake of the body or the soul of any nameless brother Jew.

All of these possible sets of defining criteria, varied and idealised as they may sound, found radiant expression in Reb Zalman – all of these, as well as rare gifts of leadership without self-aggrandisement, organisation without fanfare, unflagging vision, and a magnetic personality.

A Man of Universal Spirit

Joshua is described in the Torah as "a man in whom there is spirit." On this phrase the Sifri comments that "he was able to meet the spirit of every man."

The fact is that the sheer range of people who turned to Reb Zalman at the Yeshiva or at his unpretentious home was amazing. They included rank-and-file chassidim who wanted to consult with an honest and mellow mashpia; despairing parents; married couples at moments of crisis; unobservant (or, as the Rebbe Shlita would say, "not-yet-observant") intellectuals who enjoyed contending with a strong brain; unfortunates who received with genuine sympathy and earnest encouragement; students whose speech and dress smacked of an alien culture; and veteran migrants whose first encounter with him, even before they had heard his calm and fatherly voice, reminded them, like the tantalising sweetness of a half-remembered melody, of a long-secret hankering for their more observant past in some European shtetl.



Moreover, each of his visitors was received with warm patience; Reb Zalman had time for everyone, and the serene smile of his noble and ever-supportive wife, Rebbitzin Berachah, of blessed memory, made every visitor feel welcome and at ease.

The catalyst for the instant chemistry was his Ahavas Yisrael, his unconditional love for his fellow Jew. Small wonder, then that the doubting academician left his encounter with a secret resolve to do a daily mitzvah; the deserted wife left with a new lease of patient hope; and the prosperous and complacent alrightnik left convinced that somewhere inside him, too there hid a little soul.

The Deed is what Counts

The saga has no doubt been recounted elsewhere of Reb Zalman's fearless path through the rigours of the Red Army; through an escape route to Samarkand; a postwar stay under Joint auspices in Paris; and his departure for Melbourne in 1949 as an emissary of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson. This took place after an involved wartime correspondence between the Rebbe and Australia's first Lubavitcher chassid, my late grandfather, Reb Moshe Zalman Feiglin, who warmly and actively supported Reb Zalman's efforts and those of his dedicated colleagues during the first two difficult years of the fledgling Yeshivah in Shepparton, as well as during the next two years in Burwood, and on through the big move into the heart of the Jewish community in East St. Kilda.

Those of us who were privileged to work at his side during the early years of his untiring labours in setting up the First Lubavitch institutions, will be forever grateful for the privilege, and forever fired by the recollection. He fled from honour, and honour pursued him. He was so embarrassed by publicity that I dare not describe how he was finally

convinced to briefly address an audience of admiring parents at one of the very first Speech Nights at the Samuel Meyers Hall. He was prepared to do - and did - any and every kind of work. He despised personal gain. For months on end, when the Yeshiva was sometimes unable to pay some of its teachers' salaries on time, he drew no salary for himself. Without any speech making, his unself-conscious example in these areas released endless resources of goodwill and volunteering in those around him, and this included the non-Jewish teaching staff.

It is hard to imagine that he could have cared more about the education of his own children than he cared for the education of every single one of the children whose parents he had persuaded to put their trust in this unknown school. Every child mattered to him, at that time, and for decades thereafter. Reb Zalman never forgot a person he had once met. And no person who ever met Reb Zalman will ever forget him.

Every Man and Reb Zalman

Many of Australia's chassidim, veterans and newcomers alike, will remember Reb Zalman chiefly from the hundreds of farbrengens that he inspired. They will recall the fire in his eye as with gusto he sang a stirring march from his Red Army days. They will recall with what haunting beauty he sang the rich, meditative niggunim of Lubavitch. His stories and recollections allowed a new generation to come to know the past generation of giants who had defied Stalin. At these earnest and soul-searching gatherings, furthermore, he would often expound on specific concepts in the teachings of Chabad Chassidus.

Many of his townsmen will best remember Reb Zalman from the Yeshivah shul, where his davenen ("with avodah") was accompanied by private meditation on these same teachings, and by the occasional bitter tear of a man whose divine discontent made him his own severest critic. There, too, with all his innate bashfulness, he was the world's sincerest exponent of a cherished chassidic tradition - extending a hand in friendship to any and every insecure newcomer.

At the same time, he had a Kotz-like passion for uncompromising truth and integrity. He had little patience to spare for fellow-travellers whose fair phrases were not backed by solid work. In brief, a man of stature, and a man of many parts. The stern dynamism of the zealot on



the one hand, and the benign compassion of the saint on the other, have been respectively described by Jonathon Sheink and Rabbi Laibl Wolf, in warm and competent articles published last year in *The Australian Jewish News*.

The Yeshivah Gedolah

The above characteristics all found expression in the way Reb Zalman threw himself into the formidable task of founding a full-time and viable Yeshivah Gedolah, after a series of part-time attempts (such as the Kol HaYom program) had already been made in that direction. At its first modest premises in Meadow St., Reb Zalman's elder son shouldered a great share of the burden, entirely in a voluntary capacity, while his younger son focussed his gifts mainly on the day-school and on the distribution of educational literature.

I clearly recall the fiery farbrengen in the lunchroom at the Yeshiva College at which, when not even a dozen chassidim were left, Reb Zalman released the big news that he had received a letter in which the Rebbe Shlita expressed his vigorous encouragement of the plan to open a Yeshivah Gedolah. At a long weekend Yeshivah Youth (Tzeirei Chabad) camp immediately thereafter, a group of the first graduates of the Yeshivah College were involved in a night-long discussion, agonising over the vexed question of why one should further one's full-time post-secondary Torah studies in Australia, instead of travelling abroad as heretofore. Soon after, five of those young men

enrolled and constituted the pioneering class of the Yeshivah Gedolah. Finally, at the annual Yeshivah Dinner, Rabbi Groner proclaimed the news to the community (and began to accustom people to the need for such a novelty) by dramatically opening his memorable address with a Talmudic quotation; "What can be called a big city? One that supports ten full-time scholars!"

A Monument on Every Side

The architect responsible for the stately grandeur of London's skyline is commemorated by the simple epitaph: "If you require a monument look around you."

As they look around them at the Anniversary Dinner, many members of Melbourne's grateful community will probably like that epitaph. After all, could there be a livelier monument for Reb Zalman than themselves?

Uri Kaploun, Jerusalem

*Uri Kaploun was one of the initial part-time students of the Yeshivah when it first opened in Shepparton, and was actively involved in its growth throughout all its subsequent stages, first as a student, and later as a teacher of Jewish and secular subjects. He was one of the founding members of the Yeshivah Youth organisation. He now lives with his wife and family in Jerusalem, where he translates and edits chassidic classics, chiefly for *Sichos In English* and the *Kehot Publication Society*, and is often called upon to lecture on Chassidism and related subjects.*