

# Habad in the Twentieth Century

## Spirituality, Politics, Outreach

Edited by

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The Zalman Shazar Center for the Study of the History  
of the Jewish People

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## In Appreciation of Harry Triguboff

This book pays tribute to Harry Triguboff, a great lay leader of Australian Jewry, who is celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday. His magnanimity, which has been a key factor in myriad communal and Israeli projects over scores of years, and contribution to the strategic requirements of world Jewry, has been in the category of “*matan ba-seter*” (a gift given in secret). The Habad movement will certainly recall his immediate response to their urgent needs. This book is also in recognition of his long-standing support for the Zalman Shazar Center.

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## Preface

Efraim Halevy

The book you are now holding is in some ways an exceptional publication for The Zalman Shazar Center for the Study of the History of the Jewish People. Until now, the Center has produced very few English language historical works; moreover, not being actively involved in the Center's day-to-day operations, I have been an extremely rare contributor to the many books that have appeared over the course of my decade-long tenure as the Shazar Center's chairman. I now enter this thick woods of endeavor and recall a predicament I faced while serving in the Mossad and which involved a seemingly insoluble problem that arose at the juncture where the roles of Habad and the State of Israel, as the self-proclaimed guardians of the Jewish people, intersected. I believe this case in point highlights a key aspect, as well as the dilemma, of Israel's relationship with the Diaspora.

The phenomenon of a Jewish religious movement that survives beyond the life of its founder who dies without a successor is quite rare in the history of the Jewish people. Braslav Hasidism is one such example. This still vibrant movement continues to add new adherents to its ranks year after year. Yet, it differs from Habad which boasts a nucleus of leadership and a vision that has been translated into a massive web of "emissaries" spread across the globe, and where each emissary is devoted to a lifetime of service to the Jews in the city, town, or area to which he has been sent. This is Habad today and what it likely will continue to be for a very long time to come.

The Habad movement is unique in its world outreach and has no equal as an orthodox sect that extends a welcoming hand to every member of the Jewish faith regardless of their degree of personal fidelity to religious norms.

I had the privilege to be received by the venerable leader on a matter of

decisions of life and death with all the profound significance that this term implies. Though I am not an expert who can unravel the secret of Habad's success twenty plus years after the departure of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson from this world, I will suggest that our ninety minute conversation (which originally had been allotted a five to ten minute time slot sometime after two o'clock in the morning) produced deep insight into the way the Rebbe understood his mission in life and exposed a subsequent dilemma that stemmed from his approach, which has not been resolved to this day; it could well be that the issue I discussed with him back then remains unsolvable.

The year was 1982. Israel had just concluded its first war in Lebanon during which it assumed temporary control of the capital Beirut, along with large tracts of land to the south. Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and his entire command, which was expelled from Lebanon, had set up a temporary headquarters in Tunis. Tension was rife throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world, and there were indications that the small Jewish community in Tunis might be in danger. Since 1948 and the birth of the state, Israel has unilaterally assumed responsibility for rescuing imperiled Jewish communities, mounting extensive clandestine operations and undertaking grave risks to fulfill this sacred mission. In view of the assessment of the Israeli intelligence, we went ahead with planning an intricate operation to move the Jewish community to safety in Israel.

First, we dispatched a couple of operatives to Tunis in order to alert the community of our intentions and to establish contact procedures and gain their trust. Our efforts were met with fierce opposition, and it became clear that an unknown but nevertheless powerful presence was thwarting our moves and countering the notion that an evacuation was necessary. We decided that rather than enter a futile struggle on the ground, it would be better to try and make contact with the source of this inexplicable counter movement. The identity of our "opponent" quickly became clear: we were up against Habad. We decided to try and gain an audience with the leader, the venerable Rabbi Schneerson, who presided over his "empire" from New York.

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Through the good offices of the Israeli Consul-General in New York Naftali Lavie, an audience was arranged with the Rebbe. The assumption was that the meeting would be short and to the point. The room I was directed to was filled with people who were also waiting to meet the Rebbe in private – individuals from various walks of life who had come to seek advice on mostly personal matters. One of them – an Israeli – was seeking advice on a proposed marriage proposition for his daughter; another was a senior attorney in the Israeli State Attorney's office who sought a blessing to advance his candidacy for a recently vacated, more senior position. After several others in the room had confided in me the reason for their visit, they expected me to do likewise. I was obviously not at liberty to divulge either my identity (a Mossad division chief in charge inter alia of commanding rescue efforts in diverse spots across the globe) or the nature of the immediate issue that had brought me to share the modest waiting area with them.

Rabbi Binyamin Klein, of blessed memory, the external secretary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, counseled me on the rules and etiquette I should follow upon meeting the Rebbe; we immediately became close friends and since then he made it his business to meet me every time he would come to Israel, while the Rebbe was alive and even after his death years later.

I waited patiently while two or three people were ushered in before me to see the Rebbe. Then, without warning, I was told to approach a side door, and within moments I found myself sitting at a small, bare table across from the Rebbe, from whom radiated immense power and a captivating personality. At his request I gave a concise but detailed description of the threats facing the Jewish community in Tunis and the clear conclusion that the members needed to be evacuated as soon as possible. In a nutshell, once Arafat and his cohorts had come to Tunis from Beirut, the Jews were in mortal danger and there was no means of protecting them where they were. His response was quick and unequivocal: there was no danger to the Jews in Tunis. They would be safe where they were. I countered with more detailed intelligence and the Rebbe told me that he had sources of his own, some that were very high up in the American administration, and he felt absolutely safe in counseling the Jews not to budge. I realized after a short

while that pursuing this argument would lead nowhere, so I tried a different tack.

I presented the case of Israel's ultimate responsibility to engage in rescue operations of Jewish communities in distress. In plain terms I advanced the concept that once Israel had become the sovereign state of the Jewish people, the government of Israel had assumed the ultimate responsibility for safeguarding Jewish lives in mortal jeopardy in hostile environments. This had become a sacred task performed by Israel through its appropriate clandestine services, and we had successfully saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews in enemy countries. I added that since we were entrusted with this task we were, by clear implication, armed with the ultimate authority in this delicate but vital field of action.

The Rebbe responded by challenging and rejecting my thesis. He knew of no force or authority that had entrusted the State of Israel with such a task, and he did not accept the notion that the State of Israel, which he loved and respected, had any authority in this field. The Jewish community of Tunis looked to him as their religious leader and expected him to guide them in every aspect of their lives. He had spoken to them through his emissary and instructed them to stay where they were and no evil would befall them.

I decided to make one last attempt to persuade the Rebbe to change his mind; I told him that if – God forbid – my analysis is proven right and Jews will suffer, even to loss of life, nobody would blame him but surely the blame would be placed on Israel. It would be said that with the arrival of Arafat in Tunisia it should have been clear to Israel that the Jewish community there had suddenly been placed in mortal danger and that Israel had failed to fulfill its obvious responsibility for the lives of the Jews in these circumstances. The Rebbe's reply was again adamant: there was no such danger, and as far as Israel's response to this or that accusation, "that would be your problem."

I had no more arguments in my sheath. I was preparing to bow before leaving my private audience with the Rebbe when he instructed me to sit down. He wanted to take advantage of the moment to delve into the DNA of the Mossad. In a methodical examination he led me through the basics of the art of intelligence, dwelt on the strengths and weaknesses of



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HUMINT (Human Intelligence) and SIGINT (Signal Intelligence), and quizzed me on a couple of major successes and failures that had become public knowledge. My interlocutor displayed an amazing grasp of both the essentials and the nuances that characterized the practice of the collection of information and its subsequent uses. At the end of this discussion, I was certain that our meeting, which had been a fascinating encounter the likes of which I had never experienced and would never again, was over. But, once more, I was wrong.

The Rebbe then turned to current affairs. Our meeting was taking place a short while after the Lebanon war of 1982 when Israel found itself deep inside Lebanese territory. An event that occurred near the end of the war had cast a shadow on the conduct of the IDF (Israel Defense Forces), when Lebanese Christian Falangist units entered Palestinian refugee camps and killed a large number of civilian non-combatants, including women and children. The complicity of the IDF in this chapter, which was quickly labeled an atrocity, became the subject of a judicial court of inquiry set up by the government of Israel led by Prime Minister Menachem Begin and chaired by the president of the Supreme Court of Israel Justice Kahan.

The tribunal was also charged with examining the performance or malfeasance of the executive branch at the ministerial level, including the prime minister himself, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, and other senior army commanders, including Chief of Staff Raphael Eitan. The government decision was taken on the background of massive public demonstrations demanding justice over the affair, and it became a subject of fierce dispute that split public opinion. In the wake of the commission's findings the prime minister was personally exonerated but he resigned not long after, a broken leader. Defense Minister Sharon, long revered in the eyes of the public, found guilty of certain aspects of the event, was forced to resign. Chief of Staff Raphael Eitan was severely criticized for his role in the affair. Regardless, he left his post after his term of office expired, while others of the most senior officers were censured in one manner or other.

My meeting with the Rebbe took place during the tribunal's deliberations, before it had reached any conclusions. The Rebbe remarked that this tribunal was an aberration from any perspective. "Muslims and Arabs had

killed Arabs, and the Jews had decided to seek who among the Jews was to blame for what had happened.” This must not be allowed to proceed and the tribunal dissolved, he told me, implying that the arm of the state that I was representing at the meeting should do the job. As he spoke, I remembered that the Rebbe had a very personal relationship with Ariel Sharon whom he had come to admire as a great hero of the Jewish people. His name was associated with Israel’s wars from the pre-state days until his service as Minister of Defense. The War of Independence, the Sinai campaign, the Six Day War, the War of Attrition, and the Yom Kippur War – all bore the heavy imprint of the crucial roles he had played on the battlefield. In the eyes and heart of the Rebbe, Sharon was not only a “man amongst men,” he was a man who had adorned the mantle of a historic hero in his own lifetime. The sin of a judicial decision staining the record of this man should be prevented by every possible means.

The Rebbe used his towering personality to impress on me the seriousness of the moment. I responded as best I could by explaining to him the impossibility of interfering in the process once a tribunal had begun its work. I do not recall all the arguments I used but, in any case, they were of no value in his eyes. An unrelated matter had brought me to him and he had decided to use the opportunity to press for action on an issue which had overriding immediate and historical significance for him. After some more exchanges, the content of which I do not remember, I turned to the Rebbe, half in awe of his superior intellect and half in exasperation, and said: “What do you want us to do?” And he immediately countered: “I am not in the Mossad – you are in the Mossad! Do I need to tell you what to do and how to do it?” Dumbstruck, I quickly gathered my thoughts and decided that it would be best to not pursue the matter any further. This was the moment to take my leave. I thanked the Rebbe for his time and he thanked me warmly for coming. Knowing that I was a direct descendant of the *Natsiv* of Volozhin (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin) and that members of our two families had “intermarried” in the past, and that the event had been approved by the senior rabbinic authorities on both sides, by the Hasidim from his side and by the Mitnagdim from my side, he sent his wishes and blessings to my family.

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As I left the waiting room, which was by then overflowing with men who were waiting their turn to meet with the Rebbe, I was bombarded by questions of “what did the Rebbe say?” “Who are you?” and “give me a ‘word’ of what you heard.”

This encounter was an experience of a lifetime. I had met a unique individual whose eyes were fixed equally on the historical past and the immediate present; a person with an unsurpassed command over the broad sweep and the smallest detail of world events; a leader who was attuned to the very latest developments in a variety of areas related to mass communication; who had seen leaders of Israel come and go but who himself had never traveled to the Holy Land because in his understanding, once he would be there he could not leave. He was at one and the same time above politics and involved in them, even to the point of influencing general election results. In short, he was an iconic Jewish leader who not only projected a unique brand of leadership but had also created a system that would promote his ethos and principles after he was gone.

As it happened, the Rebbe proved right in the matter regarding the Jewish community in Tunis. The people stayed where they were and no harm came to them. I have often thought about what would have happened if the Rebbe had been mistaken; who would have been blamed for the disastrous outcome? But I would also immediately remind myself that a “mistake is never an option” for the Rebbe.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Habad Rebbe, died in 1994, and no one has been elevated to his position to this day. He was a unique figure in Jewish history.