

Celebrating the Rebbe's Birthday

Category: Tazria, Vayikra

The Rebbe was a very private person; when did the Rebbe's birthday become a public affair?

Trying to write a Biography

This week we are celebrating the Rebbe's birthday.

It sounds so natural and so unremarkable, but the truth is that it wasn't always so. Although the Rebbe was a public figure, known throughout the world, he was also a very private person. Aside for his wife, the Rebbetzin, he didn't share his personal life with anyone.

When I was a Yeshivah student 40 years ago, I had a friend who decided to write a biography about the Rebbe. This was no small task, and the greatest challenge was to decipher the story of the Rebbe's life before he assumed leadership of the Chabad movement.

The Rebbe was born in Ukraine. He was raised in the city today called Dnieper, where his father was the Chief Rabbi. When he was around 21, he came to Leningrad for the first time, where he met his future father-in-law, the sixth Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson.

From there, his life had many different stops. In 1927, the previous Rebbe left Russia and moved to Riga, and the Rebbe joined his entourage. In 1928, the Rebbe traveled to Germany and enrolled in the University of Berlin. In 1929, he married his wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka in Warsaw. In 1933, when the Nazis came to power, they moved from Berlin to Paris, where they lived until 1941. When the Nazis conquered France, they immigrated to the United States.

This was the period of time that my friend, Mordechai Menashe Laufer, needed to investigate and decipher and uncover to paint the full picture of the Rebbe's life. There were thousands of details and countless unknown details, and for a few years, he worked hard to piece together the Rebbe's story.

All this was written at a time where the Rebbe was in 770 every single day. With the Rebbe sitting in the next room, my friend was scouring the world, chasing leads, searching through libraries, interviewing people in other countries, trying to figure out details like, “Which university did the Rebbe attend while in Paris.” It should have seemed far easier to simply write a note to the Rebbe with the question, have one of his secretaries bring it to him, and resolve the question in a few easy minutes!

But that was exactly the problem. The Rebbe never spoke about himself, and never wanted to be the topic of conversation. If you need advice for your own personal life, the Rebbe would be happy to help you. If you have a question in Torah study or in another field, no problem. But a personal question?! .

It never even occurred to anyone to ask the Rebbe such a question. We knew that in the best-case scenario, you wouldn't receive an answer, but in the worst case scenario, the Rebbe would answer that he is not interested in a biography, and the entire project would shut down and there would be no book at all.

During the forty years of his leadership, the Rebbe gave speeches endlessly in public. Not hundreds of hours, but thousands of hours. But he almost never spoke about himself. He didn't tell personal stories, he didn't recount his own experiences—almost nothing.

When they combed carefully through all the Rebbe's talks, they found forty occasions where the Rebbe shared something personal, and even those were very brief and non-informative. That's how private a person the Rebbe was, and how carefully he seemed to have preserved this privacy.

So, the idea of celebrating the Rebbe's birthday seems almost impossible.

The 60 Initiative

The very date of the Rebbe's birthday was not always common knowledge. In 1947, the Rebbe came from New York to Paris to greet his mother, Rebbetzin Chana, who had just arrived from behind the iron curtain. He remained in France over Pesach, and a few days earlier, his mother said to a few chassidim that Yud Aleph Nissan is the Rebbe's birthday (at the time, he was still the son-in-law of the Rebbe) and that he could be asked to hold a farbrengen. That's how the date

became known.

In 1952, the Rebbe turned fifty. It was just over a year after he had assumed leadership of the Chabad movement, and to mark the day, he called ten chassidim into his office and delivered a maamar, a chassidic discourse, for a half-hour. The entire event was almost a secret. For the next ten years, his birthday wasn't marked at all.

In 1962, as the Rebbe's sixtieth birthday approached, there was a strong sense of anticipation and many felt that the date deserved a special initiative. But how were they to determine whether the Rebbe would be in favor of a celebration in his honor?

They came up with an idea. In those days, the Lubavitch Youth Organization had a custom to hold a monthly melavah malkah after every Shabbos Mevorchim. In the gathering that preceded Yud Alef Nissan, a proposal was made to send a letter to Chabad communities throughout the world encouraging them to make new resolutions in the number of 60. To study for 60 minutes, to donate \$60 to charity, or to reach out to 60 Jews.

The Secretary of Lubavitch Youth Organization was Rabbi Leibel Alevsky. He would submit a report to the Rebbe after every one of these gatherings, and in this gathering's report, the suggestion was duly noted, and the proposed letter was even attached. This was a way to test the waters; if the Rebbe wouldn't respond negatively, they would take it as a green light to go ahead.

The Rebbe returned the report with his comments on a variety of issues, but he made no comment on the birthday initiative. That was enough; Lubavitch Youth Organization immediately sent the letter out to the entire Chabad world asking them to make initiatives in the number of 60 and to send back a report. A collection of all the resolutions would be presented to the Rebbe on his sixtieth birthday.

Letters began to arrive from all over the world. By mistake, several of these letters arrived directly to the Rebbe's office; many of the Chabad communities in faraway lands didn't understand all the specific details of the initiative, and addressed their letters to the Rebbe instead of to the Lubavitch Youth Organization.

The Rebbe redirected the letters to the Lubavitch Youth Organization, and by the third time this happened, the Rebbe gave it a name; he earmarked the letter for “Keren Hashishim,” *the Fund of the 60th*. That was a very exciting development; if the Rebbe had given the initiative a name, it was clear that he was pleased with it.

On the Rebbe’s birthday, when the Rebbe returned from the Ohel, Rabbi Alevsky brought Rabbi Hodakov—the Rebbe’s secretary—two large manila envelopes. One was filled with the reports about Torah study and mitzvah observance that was adopted in honor of the Rebbe’s birthday, and the second held checks and cash that had been sent as donations, in the total of \$22,000—a very considerable sum in those days. Five minutes later, Rabbi Hodakov emerged from the Rebbe’s room and announced that there would be a farbrengen. The excitement was unimaginable.

During this very farbrengen, the Rebbe mentioned that there were famous Jewish leaders who held birthday celebrations only for round numbers, every decade, when they turned 50, 60, etcetera. I don’t know if people noticed it at the time, but that seemed to be an indication that there would be no more celebrations for the next decade. Nine years later, in 1971, the Rebbe delivered a maamar, but that was it. This was to be the only birthday celebration for the next 10 years.

The Yearly Farbrengens

In 1972, things changed. The Rebbe marked the 70th birthday with a grand farbrengen attended by thousands of chassidim, dignitaries and journalists. The topic of the Rebbe’s talk that evening was based on the verse, “Man was born to toil” (Iyov 5:7). Everyone immediately understood where this was going.

In one of the talks, the Rebbe noted that someone had asked him if he was thinking about retirement. “First of all,” the Rebbe said, “a person should not pay attention to the age on his passport; he needs to see how he feels.” But more importantly, the Rebbe said that a person must ensure that every day of his life is used in a meaningful way. Therefore, it’s not a time for retirement; to the contrary, it’s a time to work even harder than before.

The Rebbe turned to the Chassidim assembled there and challenged them to open

71 new institutions within that year. And if you establish 80 or even 100 new institutions, he said, "Aderaba!" (Toras Menachem 68:82).

This farbrengen was the first of a series. From his 70th birthday until his 83rd birthday, the Rebbe held a farbrengen every year. The Rebbe's birthday in 1985 was the last such occasion, and I remember an interesting talk he gave about the entire idea of his holding birthday farbrengens.

The Rebbe began speaking about Jewish tradition's attitude towards arrogance. It's obviously a very negative one; the Talmud writes that a person shouldn't even have an eighth of an eighth of arrogance; nothing at all. But that raises a question: how is it appropriate to have thousands of people gather to honor one individual person?

The answer, the Rebbe said, is very straightforward. The gathering is not to honor a specific individual, but to honor the Chabad movement which has existed for over 200 years. The Rebbe told the story about a famous rabbi of a large city who was very short and thin, and his opponents came with the argument that it was disrespectful for such a large city to have such a small rabbi. "Perhaps I am small," the rabbi replied, "but the chair is very large."

In other words, the Rebbe was trying to say, the people are not coming to him but to what he represents. The Rebbe proceeded to downplay his role even more: There is a need for someone to stand at the helm of the movement, the Rebbe said, being that his father-in-law was already in the Olam Haemes - World of Truth; the previous Rebbe needed "hands and feet" to carry out his vision. So, one person was appointed to that task, and who exactly was chosen for that task does not really make a difference. The birthday celebration was only a pretext to continue spreading Judaism; there were people who would come only in honor of such a birthday celebration, so that was being utilized to share Judaism with them (Toras Menachem 5745 3:1692)

This was the last time the Rebbe held a farbrengen on his birthday. A year later, in 5746, the Rebbe instead began his custom of distributing dollars, which continued every Sunday until 1992.

Be the Hands and Feet

From that final farbrengen in 1985, almost 40 years have passed. Today, we are the Rebbe's hands and feet. Every one of us here today, who has gathered in honor of the Rebbe's birthday, is tasked to carry out the Rebbe's vision.

Passover is only a few days away. Everyone here will be hosting a seder, and of course will be inviting guests. But we need to think in the Rebbe's mode; we need to think about the last Jew, the one who is perhaps unpopular and unwanted, or simply uneducated—and to make sure that they too have a seder to attend.

This would be the greatest birthday present.