

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 126)

The Malach, Lubavitch, the Melachim, and His Son Reb Zalman

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Note: All quotes are from *Hasidic People, A Place in the New World*, Jerome R. Mintz Harvard University Press, 1998 unless otherwise indicated.

Last month's column outlined the life of Rav Chaim Avraham Dov Ber Levine Hakohen (1859/1860 - 1938), who was known as the Malach (Angel) and his influence on a number of students at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. The Malach was a most charismatic personality, and he convinced his young admirers to dress as Chasidim and shun secular studies, something common today, but unheard of in the 1920s and 1930s. These Chassidic practices eventually led to the expulsion of his followers from Yeshiva Torah Vodaath.

The Malach and the Fifth and Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbes

“In Europe the Malach had been held in high esteem by Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn (1860-1920), the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe. Rabbi Sholom Dovber had selected him to tutor his own son, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880-1950), who was destined to succeed his father as the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe.” However, at a certain point a break took place between the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe and the Malach. There are two versions about the reason for this break.

“A Lubavitcher version of the break hints at the misunderstanding that occurred. At a certain point the Malach told the previous Rebbe's father [Reb Sholom Dovber Schneersohn] something that the son [Reb Joseph Isaac Schneersohn] had done wrong, and his father didn't talk to his son for a couple of days. Then the Rebbe found out that it was a libel and he confronted the Malach and sent him away.”

“An account of the same circumstances by a [follower of the Malach who was a vitriolic opponent of Lubavitch] places the blame squarely on the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe and attempts to raise questions concerning the Rebbe's character.

[The break began when] the Malach dismissed Joseph Schneersohn as a pupil. He caught the Rebbe's son reading books on the Enlightenment and dismissed him as his student. He told his father why. Joseph then denied reading the books. He (the Malach) said, “He's [the Malach] a liar and I don't want to deal with him.

“Gradually the Malach's attachment to the memory of the fifth Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Dovber, withered much as did his relationship with Lubavitch. Although the Malach's ties with his Lubavitcher past seemed to be completely severed, he continued to feel the referred pain that often recurs after an amputation.

On one occasion, the Malach took down the one photograph [of Rabbi Shalom Dovber] which had adorned his walls for years, explaining to his son that for years he knew he was sinning by keeping this picture, but that he could not bring himself to take down the photo of ‘der alte Rebbe’ who had been his master. ‘But now,’ he said, ‘I’m older. I’ve learned more and understand more, and I must do it.’”

The Melachim

The followers of Rabbi Chaim Avraham were known as the Melachim. After his death in 1938 the Melachim continued to revere his memory and maintained themselves as a group of his disciples. “In 1940, just before the onset of war, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, arrived in the United States and settled in Crown Heights, in Brooklyn, where a place had been prepared for him by his followers. The Melachim, who felt bound to the earlier teachings of Lubavitch, nonetheless refused to attach themselves to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. They were too conscious of the Malach's sense of rejection from Lubavitch. Instead, new leadership of the Melachim came from within the group. Rabbi Yankey Schor, [a brother of Rabbi Gedalia Schor] one of the early students, was named as rabbi, but he shared the responsibilities of leadership with Rabbi Meyer Weberman. Both men, like the Malach before them, maintained that they were rabbis and not Rebbes.

“Before the new immigration of Hasidim following the war, the Malachim had established strict standards for the dietary laws, mitzvah observance, and religious study, their influence on others in the community, however, was slight. They insisted on separation from the rest of the community as the means to protect themselves from contamination by the less religious. When they married and had families they declined to teach their children English or any secular subject.

“Although they were out of step with their generation, they were attuned to the voice of Malach and they marched smartly to the pious rhythm he had instilled in them. Malachim attitudes and practices forecast what would be commonly accepted standards among Hasidim who would arrive later. At the time, however, it seemed bizarre to most observers that these young New Yorkers would dress and act as though they had been raised in an Eastern European shtetl.”

Rav Zalman Levin HaCohen: The Malach's Son

This section is based on an article titled *The Malach's Son, Rav Zalman Levin, ZT"l on his Fifteenth Yahrtzeit* by Professor Reuven Sugarman that appeared in the **Yated** on July 13, 2007.

“Raphael Zalman Levine, HaCohen, was known by virtually everyone who did not know him personally as the son of the *Malach* or Angel. Reb Zalman, however, was a *Talmid Chacham* in his own right. Reb Zalman was a prized student of Reb Baruch Ber, with whom he studied from 1919-1923. He received semicha from Reb Chaim of Brisk months before Reb Chaim died in 1919. However, he insisted on being called Reb Zalman and dispensed with the title of ‘Rabbi’ altogether. In 1923 he immigrated to America along with his illustrious father. He did so only after receiving a blessing, accompanied by admonitions about the materialism of America from the Chofetz Chaim.

“This extraordinary figure would remain in the shadow of his father throughout his life and even after his death. Reb Zalman was born in the little village of Ilya in Lithuania in 1900. He died on the ninth day of Tammuz in Albany, New York in 1992. In 1929, Zalman married the daughter of the Rav from Albany, NY, who wished to settle near her family. Zalman lived and worked in Albany for the rest of his life. His father suspected that living in Albany was just far enough away from his own residence in the Bronx to permit his fiercely independent son to live a ‘worldly’ life.”

His father took very seriously the *Maharal*’s admonition not to let a child proceed to the study of the Talmud without mastering the Mishna. At an age when his classmates had already gone on to begin the study of the *Gemara*, Zalman spent one entire year learning only Mishna. He attributed his mastery of the Talmud to that year devoted to the Mishna. From his father he also learned to appreciate the study of the works of the *Maharal*, who would become a life-long subject of his devotion in learning.

Zalman was a gifted teacher. Soon after arriving in the United States he tutored American rabbinical students at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. Shortly thereafter, at about the same time, Zalman served as a teacher in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath.

“Throughout his life, Rav Zalman kept a rigorous schedule of *limud haTorah*, rising each morning at 4:45 a.m. to begin his day of learning before going to work. He did not stop full-time work until the age of eighty-four when he retired from a position with the State of New York where he oversaw the disbursement of checks to state workers. This distinctive job called for a person of the highest degree of probity and integrity. In the early 1970s, according to his daughter, Chaya Rochel, Rav Zalman was escorted by state troopers to his work when government offices were closed due to severe snowstorms.

“Reb Zalman gave his all to Torah learning. I personally experienced it and was a beneficiary, one among a long chain of people who came to study with him. When I first met Reb Zalman, through his most devoted student, Reb Chuna Leib Boss, he was already in his mid-eighties. He was a tall man, especially for his generation, who had a keen eye, a hearty laugh, but who also exuded a gravity that immediately made one aware that here was a very serious and thoughtful person. Each night around seven o’clock he would conduct a private *shiur* on the works of the *Maharal*. If Zalman did not know the *Maharal* better than anyone else, he at least appreciated him as much as anyone had in our time.

“Zalman’s generosity, warmth, and kindness extended to virtually everyone. Aside from the arrogant and the insincere, he could bear almost anyone. In the fall of 1989, on the day before Yom Kippur, I was astonished to see Zalman pull into the driveway of the house that he had helped us find in Monsey, NY, driven by his close friend Yehuda Weberman. I said how happy I was to see him. He said, ‘Don’t worry; I’m not here to see you. I’m here to see how your wife and children are doing. Moving here can be a hard adjustment.’ He said, ‘I would stay and visit, but I’m on my way to see my older sister.’ His sister, I learned, was named Maasheh Feiga. She was, at the time, 103 and lived on her own in New York.

“In the early 1990’s, he observed *shiva* for his sister in Monsey. There was a continuing flow of *Bnei Torah* who came to console Reb Zalman. A prominent *Mechaneches* also came to express her condolences. She had trouble making her way through or around the crush of the Hasidim who were in the home. Zalman, always vigilant, noticed this and instructed the men to step aside. He treated his unusual guest with extraordinary graciousness and told her stories of the *Gedolim* that she would find especially meaningful.

“This was his way. He carried himself very lightly and simply, never looking for recognition or honors, or above all, publicity – which, like his father the *Malach*, he abhorred.

“Visitors came from everywhere to consult with him, to learn from him, to study with him. Students whom he influenced can be found in Monsey, Monroe, Baltimore, New York, Chicago, and throughout much of the Torah world. In his later years, he would frequently travel to Monsey and Monroe. He was welcomed not only as the *Malach*’s son, but as ‘Reb Zalman,’ a Torah sage in his own right.”