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## The Visual Culture of Chabad

This book presents the first full-length study of a vast and complex visual tradition produced, revered, preserved, banned, and destroyed by the Hasidic movement of Chabad. This rich repository of visual artifacts provides the archaeological data for an analysis of how the movement consolidated its influence during a period of political and economic transformation and survived its immigration to America in the wake of the Holocaust. Chabad is one of the most self-documented and media-preserved modern Jewish movements, and its rich material culture – including the hand-held portrait, the “rebbe’s” space, the printer’s mark, and the public menorah – affords scholars a wider range of interpretive strategies for understanding the movement and the role of the visual experience in religion.

Maya Balakirsky Katz is Associate Professor of art history at Touro College and on the faculty at Touro’s Graduate School of Jewish Studies. She specializes in the intersection of religious identity and the media, particularly surrounding public protest, such as the Dreyfus affair and the Soviet Jewry movement.

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MAYA BALAKIRSKY KATZ

*Touro College, New York*



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*To Menachem*

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I benefited from presenting my work at several conferences, including conferences of the Association for Jewish Studies; the First Congress of Jewish Art in Poland; the Colloquium on Looking Jewish: Photography, Memory, and the Sacred at New York University; Jewish Art in Context: The Role of Meaning of Artifacts and Visual Images at the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center in Tel Aviv; Visions of the Temple from Moses to the Messiah at Yeshiva College in New York; and the group on Hasidism at the Institute for Advanced Study at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. These learned audiences helped me articulate my ideas.

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Librarians provide writers with something to say. At Yeshiva University, Mary Ann Linahan filled my endless requests for books and articles from across the country for more than a decade. Also at Yeshiva University, librarian Zalman Alpert combined his indefatigable curiosity with an equal measure of discernment, providing me with innumerable sources and insights. Rabbi Sholom Dovber Levine, the Agudas Chasidei Chabad librarian and chronicler of Chabad institutional history, tolerated my presumptuous queries even when he turned me away. When Rabbi Levine abruptly ended an interview with me,

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he informed me that I had no right to the archives and that I was welcome only to the published material in the official library. I responded that the previous librarian Haim Lieberman had turned Gershom Scholem away and I was honored to be in such fine company. I believe Rabbi Levine involuntarily chuckled at my response. “You may ask any questions you like,” he told me in Hebrew. “If you don’t get tired of my rebuffs maybe you’ll even learn something.” I do not mean to be glib, but grateful. I understand that analytic reduction undermines awe, but postmodernism has taught me that, from the embers of deconstructed history, heroic men and women (with all their mortal flaws, fears, and passions) rise.

I have benefited immeasurably from the intellectual fellowship of friends and colleagues. Special thanks go to Steven Fine, Tova Friedman, Sharon Goldman, Samuel Heilman, Batsheva Ida Goldman, Nina Indig, Mark Katz, Miriam Katz, Brett Levi, David Levy, Vivian B. Mann, Elisheva Mochkin, Moshe Sherman, Elkanah Shmotkin, Esther Silverstein, Ana Daniela Silveira, Sara Trajkovska, and Jeremy Wieder. Here I need to single out Michael Popkin, who critically read these pages several times on short notice. Many others nurtured my understanding of Chabad’s visual culture, but acknowledging them here would cause them embarrassment. Although my training as an art historian taught me to frame the love-object in a historical time and place, my Chabad students at Touro College, Yeshiva University, and the no-longer-operational Bais Chaya Mushka in Baltimore persuaded me that simple truths need no commentary.

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I began this project after the passing of Rabbi Barry Gourary, the last direct heir of the Chabad-Lubavitch dynasty, as well as my neighbor and confidant. The revelation during the mourning cycle of *shiva* following his passing that “Mrs. Friedman’s papa” was a one-time candidate for the dynastic seat fundamentally shook my understanding of *history* and my work as a historian. I completed the majority of my research in the last years of my own mother’s life, but I shaped those thoughts into book form under the shadow of my mother’s

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departed soul. My continued relationship with my beloved mother, Dina bat Isak (1947–2008), partially mediated through my inheritance of her precious life objects and photo albums, helped me understand the complex (after) life of “things.”

Finally, to Menachem – The Code of Jewish Lovers dictates discretion, but every word I write is an act of Kiss-and-Tell.



Chart of Chabad Dynastic Leadership

Chabad Leaders	Known As	Dates	Genealogy	Portrait
Shneur Zalman of Liadi	Alter Rebbe (lit. “the old Rebbe,” Yid.); also known as “Baal HaTanya” (title of his magnum opus)	1745–1812	Founder of Chabad	
Dov Baer of Lyubavichi	Mitteler Rebbe (lit. “Middle Rebbe,” Yid.)	1773–1827	Son of Shneur Zalman	No known portrait
Menachem Mendel Schneersohn	Zemah Zedek (title of his legal responsa)	1789–1866	Grandson of Shneur Zalman and son-in-law of Dov Baer	
Shmuel Schneersohn	Rebbe MaHaRaSH (acronym for “our teacher the Rav Shmuel,” Heb.)	1834–1882	Son of Menachem Mendel	No known portrait
Shalom Dov Ber Schneersohn	Rebbe RaSHaB (acronym for “Rabbi Shalom Ber,” Heb.)	1860–1920	Son of Shmuel Schneersohn	
Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn	Rebbe RaYYaZ (acronym for Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, Heb.); also known as Der Frierdiker Rebbe (lit. “the previous Rebbe,” Yid.)	1880–1950	Son of Shalom Dov Ber	
Menachem Mendel Schneerson	The Rebbe	1902–1994	Son-in-law of Yosef Yitzchak	

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I deviated from standard guidelines for the romanization of Yiddish and Hebrew for proper names and key terms that are popularly used by Chabad in the United States. In citations, I retain the original spellings so the reader will invariably encounter more than one system of transliteration in this volume.