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 “rebbishe” 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.

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Touro College, New York
To Menachem
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I am indebted to the financial, intellectual, and moral support of Bryn Mawr College. Because I put off the publication of my dissertation for this project, I take the opportunity here to thank David Cast, Dale Kinney, my dissertation advisor Steven Z. Levine, and Lisa Saltzman. These scholars not only guided me in the process of research and writing but also taught me how to see what I was looking at.

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.

Two scholars stand out: Jeffrey Shandler and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett both generously guided me from the practical genesis of the project to my final draft, reviewed the manuscript in full, and made innumerable critical suggestions. Together they formed and run the Working Group on Jews, Media, and Religion at the Center for Religion and Media at New York University, a forum that has sustained me through my research and my professional development as well as my maternity leaves and hours of procrastination.

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,
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 Silviera, 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.

I would like to thank Touro College for the gift of time in the form of generous sabbaticals and reduced teaching loads. I am also very grateful to the Feinstein Center for American Jewish History for its support. Production of the book was seamlessly handled by the expert assistance of Brigitte Coulton of Aptara and copy editor Gail Chalew. At Cambridge University Press, the confidence of editor Lewis Bateman, together with his assistant Anne Lovering Rounds, transformed fleeting images into book form. In this volume I revisit some of the material I have published elsewhere and gratefully acknowledge the publishers for granting me permission to use this material. The original articles appeared as “Trademarks of Faith: Chabad and Chanukah,” Modern Judaism (May 2009): 239–67 and “On the Master-Disciple Relationship in Hasidic Visual Culture: The Life and Afterlife of Rebbe Portraits in Habad, 1798–2006,” Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture (Winter 2007): 55–79. I also included several excerpts from my article “An Occupational Neurosis: A Psychoanalytic Case History of a Rabbi,” AJS Review 34, no. 1 (April 2010): 1–31.

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
Acknowledgments

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

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

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.