

Response to Chaim Rapoport's Review

By Samuel Heilman & Menachem Friedman

We debated among ourselves for a long time whether or not to respond to what we view as the ad hominem attack on our work and our motives in writing *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton University Press: 2010). Our practice is not to respond to the many reviews and comments that our book has generated since we believe the volume is the best we can say about what we found and think. Nevertheless, many who have read Rabbi Rapoport's comments have urged us to respond and so reluctantly we do.

We continue to believe our book should stand on its own and that those who have only read Rabbi Rapoport's 45 page screed, which is filled with innuendo and characterizes our work based on his own view as a faithful hasid, would do best to read the book and judge for themselves to see if they are persuaded by our argument and facts or not. Rabbi Rapoport of course would rather you *read only his framing of it*. When reading Rabbi Rapoport's version of our book, we are reminded of the story of the psychiatric patient who when shown a series of Rorschach ink blots kept seeing sexual images. When asked by the doctor how this could be, the patient shot back: "Doctor, don't ask me; you're the one showing the dirty pictures." Are we responsible for Rabbi Rapoport's impressions of what he has read? Readers will have to judge after looking at the book.

We believe our account does not paint the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe as an "ego-centric" manipulative man, as Rabbi Rapoport suggests. We believe it shows him as *complex* man who developed and changed, grew from being one who was not concerned either with global matters or the social and spiritual situation of the Jews but had more personal interests, who in time and because of a variety of circumstances saw his life change and moved onto the world stage and a concern with the Jewish people in a remarkable way. We think our portrait humanizes and demystifies him. We base ourselves on facts that we document and describe. Did we look at his writings? Yes, but we do not present ourselves as students of his texts (many of which have been

emended and edited by others). We look at other events as sociologists do. And we do not look at the man as Hasidim do. Rabbi Rapoport cannot tolerate that, and he cannot get past being a hasid of the Rebbe. Unfortunately, he feels the need not just to see his Rebbe as sublime and all-knowing, always the favored son-in-law and destined to be Rebbe, but he must also malign us and our motives, often by ascribing to us words and ideas that are a distortion of what we wrote.

In his style of writing, Rabbi Rapoport is fond of criticizing us for what we did not write. "A good question, ... but a better question," as he puts it for example on p. 20. Let Rabbi Rapoport write the book that he would like written, one which he might call "Shivchei Ha Rebbe Mi Lubavitch." But let him not blame us for not writing that book.

Did we make mistakes? Of course, we did. No work as complex as ours can be without them. But do the mistakes invalidate our basic thesis? We think not and readers should judge us by what we wrote and not by what Rabbi Rapoport claims we wrote.

Now, because a general response which should be enough will not satisfy many blog readers, we will deal with just a few of Rabbi Rapoport's distortions. We can't cover them all because [1] they are really too numerous, and [2] readers must have better use of their time. But here are just a few points:

- ❖ In Fn 8, we are criticized for our not knowing that Chabad's custom opposes eulogies. Actually, we say nothing about either eulogies or tributes. We talk only about press reports.
- ❖ Much is made of the fact that we mention that prayers at the Ohel face the Rebbes' tomb. Does Rabbi Rabbi Rapoport deny that the worshippers face in the direction of the Tomb? (p. 4) An examination will demonstrate this to be the case. Indeed, a look at people inside the ohel will note that wherever they stand, all face toward the tombs while they recite prayers.
- ❖ The discussion of our interpretation of dirah b'tahtonim in the Rebbe's thinking is simply asserted to be "inaccurate." But where is the

justification for this assertion? We shall let our discussion stand on its own in the book.

- ❖ In Fn 13 Rabbi Rapoport comments about our mistaking two Rabbis Hecht are simply incorrect. If Rabbi Rapoport had read the final book, he would see that we did not make this error. He apparently worked from an uncorrected galley. But even had we made such an error, it is insignificant to our argument. Yet what Rabbi Rapoport tries to do here is to suggest that if one makes one mistake, then all the rest of the work is suspect. By that standard, his own work here then is no less suspect.
- ❖ The argument p. 5 that only the books that a person writes are the basis of a biography (using the example of Maimonides – we leave aside the hubris of suggesting MMS and Maimonides are parallel [indeed not only is the Rebbe compared to Maimonides but also to Moses and David p. 6] as Rabbi Rapoport suggests is an opinion we do not share, particularly if those books and publications leave out a whole section of a person's life and are subject to emendations by Hasidim. As we write at the outset of our work, our goal was not to plumb these writings. Moreover, as Elliot Wolfson and others have noted, the problem of the reliability of many of these sources stems from the fact that as Wolfson writes in *Open Secret*, “the social scientist will rely less to the texts ascribed to the Rebbe and will seek to assess his life by examining ethnographic evidence....” (p. 13). Moreover, he notes correctly in our judgment, these texts have been so edited at times (mugah and bilti mugah) that it becomes difficult to treat these with certainty (p. 15). Often the disciples ‘improve texts.’ We therefore preferred taking texts where we could from words we heard and saw MMS say on JEM recordings, an approach Rabbi Rapoport mocks.
- ❖ Rabbi Rapoport lambastes us for using JEM media videos but uses them when it suits his purposes. (cf p.18 and p. 26, for example)
- ❖ P.5 Rabbi Rapoport suggests we present an image of the Rebbe ‘warts and all.’ This is an example of a common device in this review.

In spite of the quotation marks, these are words we never used. But they are inflammatory, which is what this piece is meant to be.

- ❖ P. 5 In explaining MMS's quest for an engineering degree, Rabbi Rapoport writes: “Clearly a young man in the 1920's could hardly have been expected to earn a livelihood from the rabbinate,” but MMS's father did and many other Jews did. Moreover, the Lubavitchers tried to claim in MMS's visa application to US that he did support himself as a rabbi, a claim we show the State Department never accepted. But it was not because he thought he could not support himself as a rabbi financially that MMS chose engineering. To say that was why he did is to denigrate much of what he did, to deny that a career outside the domains of religion could ever be the aim of someone like MMS. We find that not only wrong but an effort to deny what MMS and his wife saw as their dream for many years. It is redolent of the haredi view that such goyim nachas could never be the desire of such a sublime individual as their Rebbe.
- ❖ Rabbi Rapoport gives credence to the date of Levi Yitzchak's arrival to RaSHaB over MMS own testimony in the affidavit in France, p. 6, fn 24!
- ❖ Rabi Rapoport takes us to task for calling MMS “Mendel” but this was what he called himself and how he signed his name. We use this to distinguish him from how he saw and presented himself after he became Rebbe.
- ❖ Fn 27 Our comment on the association of tefillin with commitment and prayer was to contrast it with the practice that Chabad encouraged of football fans using the putting on of tefillin as a way of improving the team's chances for a football victory! But Rabbi Rapoport conveniently avoids telling readers this, so he can simply use it to suggest we are ignorant of the point of the practice. Here is a perfect example of Rapoport's manipulation of his readers.
- ❖ P. 8 It is not we who claimed the Rebbe served in the army, it was the Rebbe himself in his affidavit, which Rabbi Rapoport either

did not read or did not understand – or chose to obscure.

- ❖ P. 9 No question that Rabbi Rapoport would have us see a mother's comments on the diligence of her son the Rebbe as a serious and unimpeachable source. We actually use the testimony of his cousins and friends.
- ❖ P. 10 Rabbi Rapoport says MMS received semikha and then says the Rebbe made no such claim – so which is it? We present all the options. Actually, when we wrote the book, Marc Shapiro still thought the Rebbe did not receive semikha from Weinberg. We never question whether the Rebbe was worthy of ordination and the implication that we do is an example of the innuendo that so characterizes this posting
- ❖ P. 12 accuses us of saying that MMS had gone to Berlin to “abandon” the Hasidic way of life. Never do we say that. Indeed, when we do use the word “abandon” in reference to MMS it is to suggest (p. 34) he wanted to abandon the life of secular studies and engineering in favor of Chabad. Again innuendo. MMS and his wife went to Berlin for specific reasons we delineate in detail in our book.
- ❖ We never “hypothesize” that the Rebbe was ‘into theatre and Parisian culture,’ p. 12. We tell where he chose to live, and we describe what went on that neighborhood. The Rebbe did not live in a low income district in Paris. He lived in a lovely somewhat bohemian one.
- ❖ The argument (p. 21) that MMS went to Berlin and Paris just so he could gain employment is ludicrous, because he never did gain employment in his chosen field and was actually living off money given by Hasidim for the support of their Rebbe Rayatz all the time. Our book meticulously demonstrates exactly why MMS went to these places using his own sworn testimony as well as an ethnographic account of his actions. Rabbi Rapoport would rather look at writings published after he was a Rebbe for the answer. We'll let readers of our book decide whose portrait is more convincing.
- ❖ Readers should see for themselves who lived where the young Schneersons did. Apparently

Rabbi Rapoport cannot imagine the Schneersons embraced the ambience of the neighborhood in which they chose to live. Why does Rabbi Rapoport think the Rebbe went to Berlin and Paris -- to be a better Hasid? Can anyone honestly believe that?

- ❖ Another example of Rabbi Rapoport's innuendo p. 19 is to take a phrase we use to describe Berlin and to add to it the word “lure” to suggest that we wrote that these were what brought MMS there. We say it was his pursuit of a university education as well as his wife's desires to live there. But we also point out that while this city was a place of all sorts of Jewish life that Rayatz opposed, this was apparently not enough to get them to avoid it. This is certainly not saying he was lured there by Reform. But when the goal or to impugn anything we have written, those distinctions do not matter, for Rabbi Rapoport only wants to correct the record.
- ❖ We never use the words “straight and narrow;” again innuendo. We never suggested the correspondence he received from his father were to keep the rebbe on the “straight and narrow” p. 13 Our explanations are far more nuanced. But in the black or white vision of Rabbi Rapoport, nuance is impossible to see.
- ❖ Posthumously published p. 13 diary notes do not mention anything but rebbe-like musings and aphorisms. Hmm? What a surprise. And nothing about secular pleasures? Why published posthumously and by whom?
- ❖ Rabbi Rapoport accuses (P. 15) us often of inferring matters about the rebbe based on no evidence; he of course does it all the time about us. So he infers that we “hoped innocent readers” would not check footnotes. That's of course why we copiously footnoted throughout the book. Occasionally a mistake creeps in. But if Rapoport had spent less time maligning our motives and more time reading the sources, he would have found the letter to which we refer in Mikhtavei hatunah, p. 16
- ❖ P. 16 The reference to vidui is “in passing” as Rabbi Rapoport suggests. Why in passing? Why mentioned? We ask. Rabbi Rapoport is secure that he knows that it is just in passing.

We are not sure why this line is in passing and the rest are not. We leave it to our readers to decide why the father put it in, and what Rabbi Rapoport means by “in passing.”

- ❖ P. 17 It is accounts like that of the rebbe’s shomer that are always “found years later,” years after the person in question became a Hasid of a rebbe. This is precisely what we meant by hagiography. Notice how many of the sources cited in Rabbi Rapoport’s account are “unpublished” or published in the late 1990’s or 2000’s when desperate efforts were made to establish without doubt a legacy of the Rebbe (fn 76, 77 for example)
- ❖ P. 19 The distance between 7 Villa Lindet and the Pletzel (Rue Ferdinand Duval) is 4.25 miles, and round trip of eight and a half miles. The word *roundtrip* was dropped by accident from our text, and will be added in the next edition. But the fact that the place to which the Schneersons moved was now even further from the Jewish neighborhood is beyond dispute.
- ❖ Rabbi Rapoport p. 20 takes us to task for not mentioning that MMS spent time teaching his brother-in-law Torah in line with a request from his father-in-law, but cites this from an *unpublished letter* which of course we had no access to. Curious why this letter was not published. And of course, a request is not necessarily evidence of something fulfilled. The younger Menachem, Sheina’s husband, was not interested in such learning. So what evidence does Rabbi Rapoport have for his claims that this is what MMS did in Paris?
- ❖ Whatever (p. 21) the Rayatz said about his son-in-law’s accomplishments as an engineer, his grades and his inability to find employment as one speak for themselves. What the engineering abilities of the “saintly Tzemach Tzedek” as Rabbi Rapoport refers to MMS’s namesake, we cannot say. Rabbi Rapoport is obviously the expert on this.
- ❖ Here on p. 21 is an excellent example of Rabbi Rapoport’s insidious approach. He puts in quotation marks the words “selling out to the forces of modernity” or that we described MMS as “living it up” (p. 23) and that the “man preferred theatres to

synagogues” or that we see his life as one “cheap opportunism” – there are many more examples of this sort of language that seems to quote us but does not actually come from anything we wrote – as if to suggest this is what we said of MMS, and someone who only read Rabbi Rapoport’s so-called reasoned response might be forgiven for thinking we said this. He suggests we described MMS as “callous groom.” Let the reader decide if this loaded epithet accurately and honestly defines our description. But of course, we never did. Rabbi Rapoport’s goal is not to inform but to misinform and to disparage.

- ❖ On the matter of MMS ascetic fasting (p. 22), Rabbi Rapoport suggests that we contradict ourselves. How can one become an ascetic faster after marriage and not have been in a different place spiritually before? The reasons we offer for this are plainly spelled out in our book. We argue throughout that MMS was a complex person who was changing in many ways throughout his life, changing intellectually, socially and spiritually. This of course is the heart of our analysis and it is precisely what a hasid like Rabbi Rapoport can never accept. For him the Rebbe was always a sublime and holy individual, never a human being subject to change. Again, we urge readers to make up their own minds after reading our account and comparing it to Rabbi Rapoport’s explanations. Rabbi Rapoport intimates (p. 22) that anxiety about childlessness does not “kick in” after a few months of marriage. Actually, the work of one of us on haredi sexuality (see *Defenders of the Faith*) suggests that Rabbi Rapoport may not even be close to correct. Moreover at Moussia Schneerson’s age of 28/9, the question of pregnancy may indeed have been a concern. The fact remains, the couple had no children.
- ❖ Our reference to the four pairs of tefillin states clearly that this was a practice adopted by the rebbes of Lubavitch. Perhaps Rashag did it because he saw himself as a possible incumbent to such a position.
- ❖ It is not sufficient for Rabbi Rapoport to question our methods and approach, which he

cannot seem to wrap his head around. Even where he grants we may have done research, he cannot help but impugn it such as when he writes (p. 23) about “information *allegedly* gleaned.” We have to assume then that he accuses us of lying about interviews. We are, Rabbi Rapoport, sociologists. Interviewing is what we do all the time.

- ❖ As Lubavitchers attacked the Gourary son and mother in their lifetime, Rabbi Rapoport continues to do so after their death. What did they do to become the subjects of such enmity? We’ll let readers judge for themselves from what we present in our book.
- ❖ Rabbi Rapoport writes (24) “virtually all the unsavory stories about the Rebbe are based on interviews with the late Mr. Barry Gourary.” This is a very clever but dishonest way to put matters. Rabbi Rapoport never actually defines “unsavory stories. Since we really did not relate what we thought were “unsavory stories,” the reader of Rabbi Rapoport’s screed is forced to conclude that anything or everything drawn from the Sixth Rebbe’s grandson is unsavory. This of course is precisely what many in Chabad have argued since Didan Notzach, as we explained in our book. In fact, as we suggest in the book, Barry had a genuine admiration for his uncle and said that while he increasingly sought a life more like his engineer uncle’s, rather than the life of a rebbe that his grandfather seemed to have in mind for him, he discovered his uncle moving in the opposite direction. (see our p 33 and ff) All Rabbi Rapoport offers to undermine what we learned from Barry Gourary is his “considered opinion” that it is unreliable. Of course what that means is anyone’s guess. Apparently, it means anything that we said while having “grains of truth,” as he writes, is not “bona fide.” No reader can seriously see this other than an ad hominem attack on the grandson of whom the Sixth Rebbe said “in his veins flows holy blood that is bequeathed from a father to his son, to his grandson, and to his great-grandson.” (our p. 33) But for Rabbi Rapoport, this man is not bona fide. For him he is a vindictive mudslinger. This sort of name-calling alas is

Rabbi Rapoport’s style, and the seforim blog sadly has seen fit to offer him a forum as if his comments were serious and honest.

- ❖ The assertion that what Gourary said was hearsay since some events occurred when he was only 3 years old neglects that fact that Barry heard his parents repeat stories and facts over the years. An indictment of his veracity is, without doubt, an indictment of the truthfulness of the Sixth Rebbe’s oldest daughter and son-in-law who lived with him in the same house, cared for him, and were closest over the years to the Rayatz. It is an act of partisanship masquerading as serious criticism. Those who fail to see this and nearly everything written by Rabbi Rapoport as anything else are fooling themselves, by letting Rabbi Rapoport fool them.
- ❖ The matter of MMS’s beard seems to obsess many and have grown almost as long as the claims of Lubavitchers that MMS always had a long beard. Here, the pictures we provide say more than anything else. Readers should look at these (pictures the Lubavitchers have demanded we take down from the website accompanying the book www.therebbebook.com but which we have replaced with even more persuasive ones). Without those photos, Rabbi Rapoport’s claims might be credible. But one look and they fall away. And of course the clean shaven youngest son-in-law is not mentioned at all.
- ❖ The matter of the Rebbe’s signed will plays a large part in undermining what Rabbi Rapoport sees as our claim of the Rebbe’s seeing himself as immortal. No doubt that when his wife died, this event made him aware of his own mortality in a way that nothing before had. It was so strong, we are told, that during Shivah he met with his attorney and signed the will. But Rabbi Rapoport assumes that on the matter of his mortality the Rebbe was single minded and clear, as the will shows. We suggest the Rebbe’s attitude toward mortality and messianism was far more complex and ambivalent. The idea that a person – even a Rebbe – could be of more than one mind – especially when there is no one whom he can

talk to that is not a sycophant or hasid around him is not conceivable to Rabbi Rapoport or people like him. As we pointed out in the text, MMS was always testing himself, his ambivalences, and his convictions about messianism. Whether he thought he was actually the Messiah or a mortal man is not easily answered. We intimate, he may have thought both and was looking for a sign. But Rabbi Rapoport and his supporters have taken the very Rebbe they so revere and have reduced him to a simple rather than a complex figure. We prefer a far more complex explanation that suggests that the Rebbe was torn on the essential matter of what messianism meant, and what his role in it was.

- ❖ Finally, Rabbi Rapoport asserts with a kind of smarmy pridefulness (one we suspect his Rebbe would not have appreciated) that our mistakes come from a lack “of basic knowledge” of how “the Rebbe conducted his court.” Our response is that Rabbi Rapoport cannot see anything except a vision filtered through the experience of being in that court, being a hasid. As we admit at the outset and repeat here at the end, we are not Hasidim. Our view is necessarily not shaped by being a hasid or being in the Rebbe’s court. The reader’s view should not be either.