

# Imagining the Rebbe: Two Works in Progress

## TWO VERY DIFFERENT IMAGININGS OF RABBI

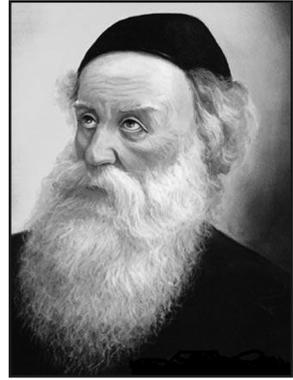
Shneur Zalman of Liadi inspired the two works in progress that follow.

Shneur Zalman, also known as the Alter Rebbe (1745-1812), was the founder of the Chabad movement, the Lubavitch branch of Hasidism. He was widely known not only for his leadership of the Hasidic movement in Lithuania during his lifetime, but also as the author of the *Tanya*, a master work of Hasidic philosophy and theology.

A great-grandson of the mystic and philosopher Rabbi Judah Loew, the “Maharal of Prague,” Shneur Zalman was a prominent disciple of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, the “Great Maggid,” who was in turn the successor of the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov. But Shneur Zalman sought a rational, intellectual basis for Kabbalah and Hasidism, with the “mind ruling over the heart.”

Shneur Zalman’s quarrels with the Mitnagdim (opponents of Hasidism) and the Gaon of Vilna (Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1797) were legendary. Starting in 1777, a series of excommunications (*herem*) were launched by the Mitnagdim against the Hasidim; in 1781, the Gaon of Vilna declared the Hasidim heretics and outlawed marriages with Hasidic families.

A year after the death of the Gaon in 1797, the leaders of the Vilna Jewish community accused the Hasidim of the subversive activity of supporting the Ottoman Empire. Rabbi Shneur Zalman, who had advocated sending charity to support Jews living in the Ottoman territory of Palestine, was arrested on suspicion of treason and brought to St. Petersburg. He was held in the



Petropavlovski fortress for 53 days and subjected to a secret examination, before ultimately being released by order of Paul I of Russia.

This episode forms the basis for the imaginative piece that follows, written by Menahem Boraisha and translated by Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. In it, the Alter Rebbe converses with the deceased Vilna Gaon and pleads for vindication. The piece is excerpted from Boraisha's prominent but difficult Yiddish work *Der Geyer*, which has never been translated into English.

In the second piece, poet Daniel Y. Harris pens an ode to the Alter Rebbe, whose presence is like a "signal fading /in winter, but never gone."

## Der Geyer

*Menahem Boraisha*

translated by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

*In 1774, Reb Shneur Zalman attempted to reach the Gaon of Vilna for a personal encounter in order to demonstrate to him that Hasidism was not a heresy. With him was his senior colleague Reb Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730-1788), an early leader of Hasidic Judaism, who was instrumental in spreading Hasidism throughout Belarus. The Gaon refused to see them. One of the results was that the persecution of the Hasidic movement increased, and in 1798 Reb Shneur Zalman was arrested and imprisoned in the Petropavlovski fortress in St. Petersburg. Following is an imaginative piece by Yiddish writer Menahem Boraisha in his panoramic epic, Der Geyer, envisioning how Reb Shneur Zalman might have protested his imprisonment to the Gaon, who at that time was no longer on this physical plane. More on Boraisha at the end of the piece.*

From his prison cell Reb Shneur Zalman  
addresses the Gaon of Vilna:

It is now the second time that the informers,  
with the permission granted by your *herem*,  
have brought me here.

The Holy One of Blessing released me the first time,  
and He will save me again.

But you, Reb Elijah,  
may the merit of your Torah protect you.

Call Reb Mendel of Horodok.

He, too, is with you up there in the world of truth.

Ask him: What was it that we wanted  
when we stood behind your door  
with meekness and humility  
and begged you to listen to our plea?

Empowered and encouraged  
by your decree and reputation,  
your emissaries traveled to many communities,  
proclaiming that *herem*  
and declaring the bread, the wine, and the daughters  
of kosher Jews unfit, unkosher!

They declared their possessions free to be looted.  
And the principal Satanic agent of defilement  
with his scythe, cutting down and harvesting,  
grabbing Jewish souls,  
immersing them in sin and bloodlust,  
goading them to ruthlessness and calumny,  
denouncing us to a cruel and heartless government.  
For two days we stood behind your door,  
our weakened lips repeated the fervent prayer:  
stop the destruction being wreaked on the house of Israel!  
And you, not even gracing to look at us,  
nor to listen to us,

fled the city.  
 May the merit of your Torah protect you.

And I, having written a small collection of sayings,  
 how a person might cleave to his Creator,  
 gathered it all in my little book,  
 and you allowed for this book to be burnt in public!  
 And again you send out your disciples,  
 from community to community,  
 to sow seeds of war, lawlessness, and murder.

Now you are already in the world of truth  
 (and know what the real truth is),  
 and still, your decree remains in force,  
 still potent to deliver Jewish souls drowned in sin  
 into the hands of the Prince of defilement  
 brutally spilling blood, libeling them.  
 May the merit of your Torah protect you.

If you saw me unworthy of the privilege  
 to debate with you in this world  
 — then — there, in the world of truth,  
 call my Rebbe Reb Ber for a dispute,  
 call the Baal Shem Tov, call the Ari,  
 call Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, call the prophet Elijah,  
 call Moses our teacher — and let there be issued a decree —  
*(and I know that we disagree about this point)*  
 if, as you say, only a dim and minor reflection of the Blessed Infinity  
 poured itself into the Sefirot,  
 and that there is no possibility of purification and cleaving  
 to bring to the holiest of souls  
 more than a weak reflection,  
 then let your *herem* hold in its legitimacy,  
 and in all submission we will accept deserved punishment.  
 But, if the Blessed Infinite One  
 shared His own light with the Sefirot,

and every soul is a drop of that light,  
 and the lowest person is capable of purification and cleaving,  
 and can connect himself fully with the Holy Blessed Source —  
 way beyond every wisdom and comprehension —  
 then I ask you to appear to your heirs, your disciples,  
 let them know with an omen, a sign, what the decision was  
 so that the devastation of the House of Israel be stopped!

I'm not asking this because of my own suffering,  
 I'm not asking this for my reputation.  
 God has redeemed me once and will redeem me again  
 because even right here within the walls of the prison  
 Divine Providence hovers over me.  
 I'm only asking that there should be peace  
 for the house of Israel.  
 And even for your reputation in the other world.  
 I stand before the door of the prison cell,  
 just as then behind your door,  
 which you locked for me now as you locked your door then,  
 and I pray: may the Shekhinah have compassion on you  
 so that you no longer be the cause that destroys the peace!  
 May the merit of your Torah protect you.

### **A Note on the Author, Menachem Boraisha:**

*Der Geyer (The Walker)* is a panoramic epic, a “*Bildungsroman*” in Yiddish verse. Written from September 1933 to June 1942, the book was published by Matones in 1943 and is taxing even to the average Yiddish reader. Boraisha knew this and in his notes he explained many historical elements that he had used in the novel.

Boraisha, born in 1888 in Brest Litowsk, was first known as Menachem Goldberg. His father, Noah Goldberg, was a *haskalah* Hebrew teacher who could have served Boraisha as a model. The insights portrayed, however, are autobiographical. Noah, the hero of *Der Geyer*, experiences the life of many a Jewish intellectual. It takes him through *heder* and *yeshivah* to an early

marriage, to confrontations with the new and the old and to tense relations with the establishment. Noah is not a reformer. He is a contemplative. In order to earn a living that will allow him to think, he becomes a night watchman. He wonders about Good and Evil.

*Der Geyer* is Boraisha's crowning achievement. In it he treats the themes he deals with in *Zamd, Zavl Riemer* (1923) and refines the poetic skill he exhibited in his *Ring un Keyt* and the epic form that entered into his *Der Gilgul* (1930) and *Pastukh Dovid*. *Der Geyer* won for Boraisha the Louis Lamed Fund Award.

A modern heir to the writers of Mussar literature, Boraisha wedded Jewish moral thought to the poetic muses. It takes a literature several generations to produce a writer of such scope and skill. With the exception of A. M. Klein, no one has done for Anglo-Jewish letters what Boraisha did for Yiddish. He died February 12, 1949.

The fragment which I have translated I offer to the reader as a dim reflection of Boraisha's original and hope that someone better endowed as a translator will offer us a complete translation of *Der Geyer*. — Z.S.-S.

**RABBI ZALMAN SCHACHTER-SHALOMI** is the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, and the co-author of 14 books, including *Jewish with Feeling* (with Joel Segel, 2005), *Integral Halachah* (with Daniel Siegel, 2007), *Ahron's Heart: The Prayers, Teachings and Letters of Ahrele Roth, a Hasidic Reformer* (with Yair Hillel Goelman, 2009); *A Heart Afire: Stories and Teaching of the Early Hasidic Masters* (with Netanel Miles-Yepez, 2009); and *A Hidden Light: Stories and Teachings of Early HaBaD and Bratzlav Hasidism* (with Netanel Miles-Yepez, 2011). He lives in Boulder, Colorado.

# Closure

*for the Alter Rebbe*

*Daniel Y. Harris*

I'll place a hedge around you,  
 the *Yahwic* hedge,  
     in *Yod* at the beginning of God  
 and in the final  
*Heh*, the engraver,  
     hunger-artist suffering  
 to live out predation.  
     I'll see you in the *Yod*

of *Yortsayt*, to candle the stillness  
 of the still small voice  
     we revere to stir the awe  
 of a firestorm  
 with old wit.  
     Is that you in a shard  
 of memory

come back? This is not death  
 but a parting of the air  
     on Thursday in East Sheol.  
 This is not a body  
 but the vista point of a *tselem*  
     transit, between  
 worlds, signal fading

in winter, but never gone.  
 I'll hear you then, ears  
       in the shul  
 of all places at once,  
 a synesthete with a pair  
       of black  
 leather boxes.

### **A Note by the Author of “Closure:”**

“Closure” is part of an emerging manuscript entitled *The Rabbi Code*, a collection of poems inspired by, and dedicated to, my personal canon of charismatic rabbis from across the centuries. They include the Gaon of Vilna, Nachman of Bratslav, Rashi, Moses de Leon, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Shem Klingberg of Zaloshitz, Kalonymous Shapira of Piasetzno, and will eventually include: Hillel, Akiva, Maimonides, Yehudah Halevi, Moses Cordovero, The Maharal of Prague, Moses Chaim Luzzatto, Aryeh Kaplan, Abraham Isaac Kook, Adin Steinsaltz, and Mordecai Kaplan.

“Closure,” inspired by the charismatic Shneur Zalman of Liadi, begins with the proverbial hedge, placed around the Rebbe as divine name. The poem proceeds with an homage to the Hebrew letters Yod and Heh. Yod is the minuscule brush stroke that begins the Tetragrammaton. Heh, at the end of the Tetragrammaton, is compared to an engraver, the one who removes, like the hunger artist who removes himself through the artistry of starvation. We, the reader, follow the “I” of the poem to the next “Yod” of the “Yortsayt,” where the Alter Rebbe continues to be seen in a kind of ritual of disappearance. We are then reminded that disappearance and “the still small voice” are linked by the synergy of a miniscule fire and a massive awe. The Alter Rebbe is at this point in the poem, a question of memory, rendered as a shard.

In the third stanza, a form of finality occurs. “This is not death,” says the first line, yet we are in “East Sheol,” the biblical place of darkness that represents the earliest concept of the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible. East Sheol is a farce. There is no such place; yet naming a place with either East or West enables that place to take on a quaint familiarity. One imagines a grocery store with fruit stand on Main Street in East Sheol. Here, the poem asks the

reader for a willing suspension of disbelief. To imagine the Alter Rebbe in East Sheol one requires a “*tselem* transit” (*tselem* reminding us of the image of God from Genesis 1), and the ability to travel between the worlds of the living and the worlds of the dead. Once again, we are faced with the concept of an uncanny closure that never really closes: We have become synesthetes, if we permit ourselves the sacrality of poetic belief. We are now able to hear the Alter Rebbe in the wind, see his glance in a ray of light, and find ourselves holding a pair of black leather tefillin filled with the secrets of creation.



**DANIEL Y. HARRIS** is the author of *Hyperlinks of Anxiety* (Cervena Barva Press, 2012); Paul Celan and the Messiah’s Broken Levered Tongue (with Adam Shechter, Cervena Barva Press, 2010, picked by The Jewish Forward as one of the five most important Jewish poetry books of 2010); and *Unio Mystica* (Cross-Cultural Communications, 2009). He is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Some of his poetry, experimental writing, art, and essays have been published in the Denver Quarterly, European Judaism, and The New York Quarterly. His website is [www.danielyharris.com](http://www.danielyharris.com).