

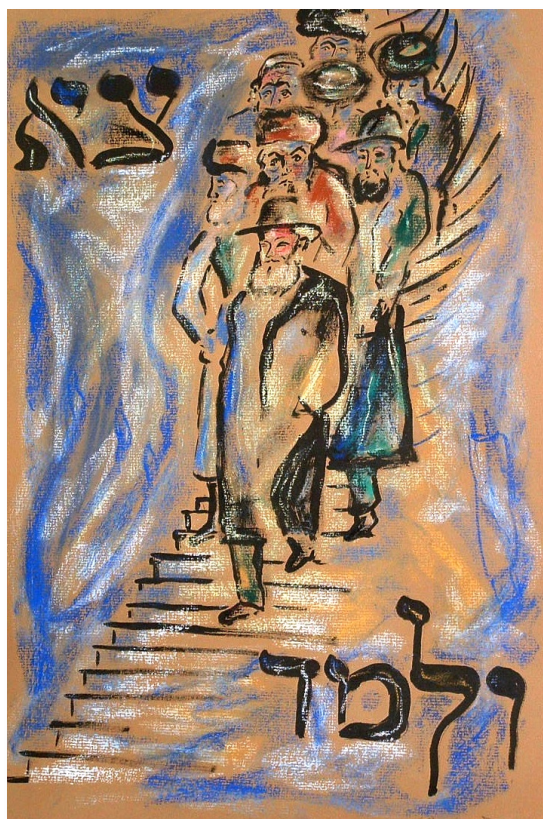
The same but different: Three portraits.

This column is written in honor of the Rebbe, who passed away on Gimel Tamuz, which is next week.

Few rabbis have been portrayed as frequently as Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, the famous Lubavitcher Rebbe. Many of these portraits are based on photographs and have a (hyper-)realistic style but there are also portraits in, for example, pop-art style, like Rabbi Yitzchok Mouilly's work. As you see from the samples in this article, I have painted the Rebbe several times as well, mostly in pastel and India ink and a few times in oil on canvas. In some cases I got a commission and in others I was inspired by something I read or heard about him. He was a great man, and a



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something else: the weather. This is how it happened. A decade ago, I had a tiny studio. I got a commission for a big work but did not have room for a large canvas. Friends offered me the use of their garage. That was very sweet, because now I did have enough room, but there was no heat and no window; daylight and fresh air came through the door, so I installed construction lights. It was winter. The small space heater I had been given as a present by a doctor who had commissioned a work and felt sorry when he saw how cold my studio was, I could use for



limited amounts of time only before the fuse popped, leaving my benefactors and me in the dark. All that is not enough to keep an artist from painting, but one day was exceptionally cold and it started snowing. I saw the branches of the tree near the garage bend down under their white load when I opened the door. That moment I remembered—for no particular reason—an old black and white photo in one of my books. It showed two rabbis, the Frierdiker (Previous) Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, aka the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe (1880-1950), and his son-in-law, the Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, his successor, 1902-1994), taking a stroll somewhere in pre-war Austria, with a few bare trees and an electricity pole in

the background. No snow.

In my mind, and later on canvas, I transformed that photo, which shows the two Rebbes only till their waste, into a full length walk in the woods, in the snow. I could feel the cold when I looked at the bluish shimmer of the frozen puddles on my canvas. I thought of the Yiddish poet Avraham Sutzkever, who wrote a cycle of poems about snow and ice in his *Sibir* (*Siberia*, 1953). I changed my usual phantasmagorical style for a more realistic approach to capture the shades of ice and wintry skies. People loved that portrait and it was sold quickly.

Fortunately, the weather improved—I hate the cold—and it became spring. Remembering my winter painting of the Rebbes, I decided to create a second work, based on the same composition, in a spring setting. This one reflected my usual style with kaleidoscopic fields reminiscent of stained glass windows, jumping perspectives, and my personal perception of light and color. I added letters and words—as I often do—and





wrote around the almond shaped field of sunlight between the branches one of Maimonides' *Thirteen Articles of Faith* which is especially dear to the Rebbe: *I believe with complete faith in the coming of Moshiach, and even though he tarries, I anticipate every day that he will come.* The Rebbe inspired many religious and even not so religious Jews to increase mitzvoth, do good deeds to hasten the final Redemption. Faces of (eastern-European) Jews are visible between the branches in the right side of the canvas. This portrait is the same but not the same as the winter painting simply because the weather transforms both the nature of the woods and the nature of the artist.





The French Impressionist artist Claude Monet (1840-1926) based many of his paintings on scenes or objects in different seasons or at different times of the day, like his series of haystacks, Reims Cathedral, or waterlilies. Once artists have found a theme to their hearts and liking they tend to explore it in different ways. So, I waited till summer to add yet another version of the two Rebbes from the photograph: the stroll in the woods at the beginning of summer, on one of the first warm days. This time, the forest is an explosion of colors, lines, and specks; the only dark (black) fields are the coats of the two rabbis. I added the same puddle in front of the trees that was covered with ice in the winter painting. But in the summer version it reflects the deep blue of the sky. The trees are sprouting leaves. The stems have warm red and deep brown shades. The scene is similar to the wintery forest but at the same time completely different.

Now, if people wonder how the same black and white photo that was used for all three paintings—winter, spring, and early summer—would look after it has been transformed into a painting of the rebbes in the golden, autumnal woods, they have to wait. That painting has not been made yet. Why not? Because many artist have more projects and ideas than they can handle, they are busy with different projects at the same time, and that means that some of their ideas are shelved till the time is ripe.

I will let you know when the autumnal painting will be ready. But first I want to enjoy summer.

Shoshannah Brombacher, PhD, Brooklyn,
June 2019

