



# **Habad: The Hasidism of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (Judaic Studies Series)**

*Abraham R. Foxbrunner*

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Hasidism evokes heated controversy among scholars trying to analyze the movement and its significance. The Hasidic thought of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813), known as Habad, has had a major influence of Jewish life throughout the world. Habad is an acronym of the initials for the Hebrew word Hokhmah, Binah, Da'at or wisdom, understanding, knowledge. This book, based on all the extant teachings of Shneur Zalman, systematically presents that thought and analyzes its underlying theological, philosophical, religious, and ethical concepts.

The focus is on axiology and on three broad questions: What were Shneur Zalman's criteria for religioethical perfection? What did he want his followers to believe, know, feel, and do in order to aspire toward that perfection? What were the attitudes and value he sought to inculcate with this end in mind? Because Shneur Zalman's Hasidism grew out of the Hasidism of Israel Baal Shem Tov and Dov Baer of Mezhibezh, their teachings are also examined and analyzed.

Foxbrunner concludes that although the outstanding features of Shneur Zalman's Hasidism are syncretism, tension, and paradox, some valid generalizations do emerge. Foremost among these is his belief that man was created to serve his Maker and that true, selfless, and joyous service is impossible without a love and fear of God grounded in comprehension and generated by intense contemplation. Shneur Zalman insisted that such service is within every man's grasp-provided he is willing to reach for it and taught how to do so. Inspiring that will and providing that training were the functions of all true leaders of Israel.

Shneur Zalman assimilated the teachings of Baal Shem Tov and Dov Baer and saw himself as the third of a single line of Hasidic masters. Combining great intellect, profound compassion, and mental discipline, Shneur Zalman devoted himself to inspiring selfless service to God. He was very much, and perhaps uniquely, a this-worldly mystic, devoted to raising funds to ease the plight of the poor and above all to educating men in a mysticism that was warm, concerned, vital, and sensitive.

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