

FOREWORD

Rabbi Dr. Nehemia Polen

THE YEAR WAS 1978. I had just started a doctoral program at Boston University with Elie Wiesel and was looking for a dissertation topic relating to the areas of Hasidism and the Holocaust. During a discussion at Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Massachusetts, I asked Rabbi Zalman Schachter if he had any ideas for me. He immediately suggested the Piasezniker Rebbe and his *Aish Kodesh*. At the time, the master and his work were not well known; there was almost nothing written on him in English. Nevertheless, Reb Zalman knew the *Aish Kodesh* quite well. What impresses me now, thirty-six years and much work later, as I recall our initial conversation, is that Reb Zalman got it: he grasped the *Aish Kodesh*'s historical and theological significance; its spiritual and emotional power; and the light it shed on the Piasezniker and his greatness. The major themes I was to uncover, the soaring spiritual trajectory emerging in dramatic contrast to the relentless unfolding of catastrophe; the defiance and triumph of the soul—Reb Zalman saw them all and pointed the way for me at the very beginning.

A similar story can be told in many other related domains of Jewish life and creative encounter with tradition: *davvenen* as spiritual practice; the Four Worlds as a usable roadmap of the cosmos; fruitful engagement with the variety of humanity's great religious personalities and traditions; and so on. Many of his pioneering insights have now been adapted and adopted in the mainstream as the shared language of Jewish religious expression in our time. And whatever he gave, he gave *be-ayin yafeh*, with a 'good eye,' with a spirit of generosity and blessing, with no expectation other than the blessing be shared further—which it has. Reb Zalman saw it all and pointed the way from the beginning. He was blessed to live to see the flowering of much of his noble and far-reaching vision, and we who have benefitted from it, are eternally grateful and in his debt.

ONE GOD, MANY WORLDS

Teachings of a Renewed Hasidism

A Festschrift in Honor of
Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z"l

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Albion
Andalus
Boulder, Colorado
2015