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Review Essay
**COVENANTS, MESSIAHS AND
RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES**

*For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter
between Judaism and Christianity*

BY IRVING GREENBERG

(Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2004)

Irving Greenberg has written an ambitious, stimulating, and profoundly problematic book providing a moving personal account of his struggle with the implications of the Holocaust along with a re-evaluation of Christianity that attempts nothing less than a penetration of the mind of God and His current plan for the evolution of humanity.

For Greenberg, the Holocaust is an event requiring a fundamental religious re-orientation comparable at least to the one triggered by the destruction of the Second Temple, when, in his understanding, God limited His presence so that the Jewish people facing the travails of exile would take a more active role in the long-range process of redemption. In the wake of the Holocaust, the next stage has arrived, and it is startling in its radicalism. God, says Greenberg, has lost the moral right to command the Jewish people to live in accordance with the high standard required by the covenant. After His failure to protect the covenantal people from the Nazi onslaught, any such demand would be “inherently abusive . . . illegitimate, and therefore null and void, because it [would] only expose the Jews to greater danger” (p. 26). Nonetheless, some Jews so love God that they have voluntarily chosen to maintain the covenantal relationship, which now constitutes the highest level of commitment precisely because it is the product of a free choice. At this mature stage of the covenant, the partnership between God and man is that of equals (p. 188).

One wonders if Greenberg, who is committed to a halakhic way of life, means all of this quite literally. He never descends from the heights of rhetoric to the level of discourse that would actually address the consequences of this position. What is the meaning of the commandment (or voluntary commitment) to fear God once He is our equal? What is the current status of the punishments listed by the Torah for certain transgressions? Is anyone, to take a specific example, *hanyav karet*? Has Greenberg, as a committed feminist, considered how the voluntary covenant might clear the way for women to lead religious services? After all, *everyone* now is *eino metsurveh ve-oseh*, and so we no longer face a situation in which one who is not obligated would be discharging an obligation on behalf of one who is. Perhaps this suggestion does not work because the voluntary commitment to persist in the covenant entails acting as if it is still binding in its original form despite awareness on the theological level that it is not. Whether or not Greenberg is entirely serious, even a rhetorical rejection of the binding authority of the Torah would be understood by any fair-minded observer as a *prima facie* abandonment of Orthodox Judaism, so that complaints of marginalization by the Orthodox establishment (which Greenberg describes on one occasion, though in a different context, as a form of quasi-martyrdom [p. 22]) ring hollow.¹

The thrust of this book, however, is not the voluntary nature of the covenant between God and Israel, but the existence of multiple (or at least two) covenants between God and humanity. At the very time when God called upon the Jewish people to undertake enhanced responsibility for the destiny of the world, He broadened the constituency of His covenantal love by sending a signal, or a group of signals, that launched Christianity. Greenberg's argument for this position is multifaceted: God's love is not limited to a single group; all human beings are created in His image; Maimonides pointed to a divinely guided eschatological purpose in the establishment of Christianity as a religion grounded in the Jewish scriptures; the inevitable moral, intellectual, and religious distortions that result from restricting election to a single group can be corrected by other groups with different emphases.

The first three of these points are fully valid, and there is considerable truth in the fourth as well. Since Maimonides regarded the establishment of any new religion as illegitimate and saw Christianity in particular as *avoda zara*, his assertion that it is part of a divine plan for spreading knowledge of Torah raises evident difficulties. But he did say this, so that there exists a precedent for maintaining that God wanted Christianity to

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develop (though probably not in the precise form that it has taken), and I see no principled objection to speculation that would broaden the range of divine motives beyond the one that Maimonides proposed.

To apply the language of covenant, however, is not consonant with biblical teaching or Jewish tradition. There is, of course, a Noahide covenant, but the Torah speaks of Israel as a special people in a manner that does not sit well with the notion that this is merely the first of a series of elections. (Even Amos, who compared Israelites to Cushites, Philistines, and Arameans, also said, albeit in a stern context, that God knows Israel above all other nations.) For Greenberg, Christians should be seen as a branch of the Jewish people (p. 95), as honorary members of the house of Israel (p. 96), even as members *tout court* (p. 233). Jews and Christians are “part of one people, the people of Israel” (p. 99). “When Jacob and his brother become Israel, a moment of redemption is at hand. This is our time and our mission” (p. 102). The Torah is one of “a variety of experiments to find right ways of covenantal living” (p. 58). Without the Christian complement, the Jewish community would be “hypocritical or confused” (p. 176). We should beseech God that we—and He!—be persuaded by Greenberg’s pluralistic model of the covenant:

If indeed we believe that our exclusivity is what God wants, we should be praying that that cup pass from our lips. Perhaps all humans should be praying for the courage and strength to argue with God, and to convince God that humanity will arrive at perfection faster if God follows through on the pluralist implications of the covenantal model (pp. 180-181).

The last sentence once again raises questions about the genre of this book and whether it is meant to be read as rhetoric or as an argument to be engaged seriously. Since Greenberg repeatedly expresses his belief that God intentionally launched Christianity as an additional, alternative covenant, such a prayer at this juncture of history appears inexplicable. At least in this passage, we are confronted by a rhetorical exercise with little concern for ordinary canons of coherence.

Greenberg pronounces a *herem* (“a covenantal anathema”) on anyone who will assert that he is collapsing the distinctions between Judaism and Christianity (p. 98). At the same time, he is capable of moments that—despite his vehement protestations—can only be characterized as relativism. Here is the conclusion of the essay entitled, “The New Encounter of Judaism and Christianity” (pp. 122-123):

This open faith is dependent on a trust in God so complete that I do not demand an advance pledge that I am right and the other is wrong. The new situation requires a willingness to live under the judgment of God without the easy assurances of guaranteed righteousness and salvation. In a world where people are learning first hand the universal problems of humanity and consequently feel an urgent need to heal them, perhaps the new encounter can give us the possibility of Jew and Christian—and all people—working side by side in this encounter until the end of days.

Let me add: There are indeed people who are willing to live side by side until the end of days who do so because they are fully confident that the Messiah, when he comes, will confirm their rightness all along. Of course, it is a step forward to live together until that time. But even here, we may underrate the love and wonder of the Lord. I have often thought of this as a nice truism. Let us wait until the Messiah comes. Then we can ask him if this is his first coming or his second. Each of us could look forward to a final confirmation. Perhaps I was a bit too narrow in my trust in God with this initial conception. After entering the dialogue, I wrote a short story in which the Messiah comes at the end of days. Jews and Christians march out to greet him and establish his reign. Finally they ask if this is his first coming or his second coming—to which the Messiah smiles and replies, “No comment.” . . . Perhaps we will then truly realize that it was worth it all along for the kind of life we lived along the way.

Aside from the cavalier attitude toward a fundamental point of contention in the historic Jewish-Christian debate, this story ends too early. What if the Jews and Christians in this narrative would go on to ask the Messiah, “Are you the second person of the triune God?” “Is the New Testament sacred scripture on a par with the Torah?” One hopes—but unfortunately one cannot be sure—that Greenberg’s Messiah would not say, “No comment.”

Most of the chapters in this book are reprints of earlier essays, but the new material includes a powerful autobiographical piece describing Greenberg’s spiritual odyssey. One of the elements of this story recounts the controversy spawned by his coined “failed messiah” rather than “false messiah” to characterize Jesus. A false messiah, he wrote, teaches the wrong values; a failed messiah has the right ones, but does not achieve the final goal. Many Orthodox readers were, as Greenberg indicates, appalled by this, especially in light of his illustrat-

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ing “failure” by reference to the “failure” of Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah (p. 153). Standing alone, the term “failed messiah” did not offend me; it need not mean anything more than a messianic aspirant who failed. As to the question of values, R. Jacob Emden, whom no one has read out of Orthodoxy, also asserted that the ones promulgated by Jesus were proper.

Greenberg, however, goes further than this. He now tells us that he intended “failed messiah” as an honorific term describing a person of such achievements that some people could seriously consider him a universal redeemer (p. 32). Even this might not go beyond R. Jacob Emden’s position, but I do not think that he would have endorsed Greenberg’s next step, which is the assertion that if Christians repent and direct their religious energies properly, Jesus could even be described as an “unfinished messiah” (p. 231). Irrespective of religious evaluation, Greenberg’s discussions of this issue descend into analytical murkiness on several fronts. We recall that the criterion distinguishing a failed from a false messiah was that the former had the right values. But Greenberg occasionally asserts that evil behavior by Christians generations later can turn Jesus (despite his preaching of proper values) into a false messiah, while proper behavior can turn him into a failed one or even an unfinished one (pp. 177, 231). If later misuse of someone’s teachings can have such consequences, I am afraid that all the prophets of Israel may be vulnerable to posthumous reevaluation. Moreover, the analogy with the failures of Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah, aside from its emotional offensiveness to Jewish sensibilities, ignores a point central to the entire discussion. Everyone experiences failure. But *Mashi’ah ben David* is *defined* by his success in presiding over the redemption. The respective failures are entirely incommensurate.

Greenberg implicitly addresses this objection by pointing to Messiah son of Joseph as a failed but true messiah, who paves the way for Messiah son of David. Nonetheless, in light of the fact that Jesus’ disciples and all subsequent Christians saw him as the ultimate redeemer—and it may well be that this was his self-perception as well—the expansive use of the term messiah, especially unfinished messiah, to describe him and the equation of his failure with that of others who made no such claims, is both problematic and dangerous.

Greenberg is well aware that the question missing from his eschatological tale, namely, the divinity of Jesus, presents an especially intractable obstacle to the sort of rapprochement that he advocates, and it is not surprising that his discussions of the incarnation reflect considerable

unease. He makes matters easier for himself by providing definitions of idolatry that do not evoke technical halakhic parameters. Thus, idolatry is the affirmation of “all human absolutes” (p.63); it is any human system—even if divinely revealed—whose believers extend it without limit so as to leave no room for the other, ultimately becoming sources of death (p. 210). If the election of Israel were understood as an end in itself, that would be idolatry (p. 190). Given the profound seriousness with which Judaism treats *avoda zara*, I have always been uneasy with the ubiquitous, almost promiscuous applications of the term idolatry (as in idolatry of the land, or idolatry of money and possessions) that cheapen its meaning and sometimes prevent people from recognizing genuine *avoda zara*. Though Greenberg’s theological definitions are more serious than most and decidedly deserve attention in their own terms, they help distract the reader from the need to apply traditional categories in evaluating Christian doctrine.

Still, Greenberg does address the issue frontally, if elusively and inconsistently, on a number of occasions. The slippery nature of his discussions makes it very difficult to summarize them, but I will do my best, essentially relying on direct quotations.

The resurrection and incarnation were not “putative facts to be argued over,” but signals for Christians (p. 45). This sentence does not tell us to what degree, if at all, these “signals” reflected any reality. Much later, we are informed that the early Christians “received [an] activating signal: an empty tomb” (p. 222). Though an alternative understanding is possible, the most straightforward reading of this sentence is that the tomb was really empty. We are not told what might have emptied it, but the signal itself is part of a divine plan.

As to the incarnation:

The claim that God became incarnated in a particular human being at a unique moment in history has been denied by faithful Jews as contradictory to God’s essence and unjustified in light of the human capacity to turn to God directly. . . . But one can uphold the presence of ultimates and, at the same time, honor limits. Why is it necessary for Jews (or other religions) to insist that the Truth of their historical experience with God extends into Christian communities and negates Christianity’s claims? It is sufficient for Jews to affirm that they have no interest in restricting God’s choice of tactics and methods of revelation. . . . They need only insist that as open as they were, God did not give them the Christian signal (pp. 67-68).

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Again:

One can argue that the incarnation is improbable and violative of other given biblical principles. . . . But one can hardly rule out the option totally, particularly if it was intended for gentiles and not intended for Jews (p. 156, and repeated on pp. 232-233).

Again, but pulling back:

It is not that Jews and Christians will accept each other's view on this issue, but they can come to realize that both positions grow out of strategies for achieving the goals of the covenant held in common (p. 166).

Again, but moving a bit forward:

One can conceive of a divine pathos that sent not only words across the gap, but life and body itself. I say this not as a Jew who accepts this claim, but as one who has come to see that it is not for me to prescribe to God how God communicates to others (p. 180).

Again, moving forward a bit more:

Did God then become incarnate to cross the covenantal divide in order to rescue humankind? Far be it from me as a Jew to prescribe to Christians or to God what happened in that religious experience. I can only suggest that the resurrection signal had to be so marginal, so subject to alternate interpretations, and the incarnation sign so subtle, as to be able to be heard in dramatically opposing fashions—one way by the band elected to start the new faith and another way by the majority of Jews called to continue the classical covenantal mission (p. 194).

It is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that Greenberg believes that it is at least possible that the incarnation as understood by Christians actually took place, except that Jews were not intended to see it. Near the end of the book, he even characterizes the Jewish position excluding one who adopts the belief in the incarnation from the community as part of a religious conception that belongs to the past (p. 206). Despite his assertion that Christians are part of a greater Israel, this characterization stands in such tension with his dominant affirmation of separate covenantal communities, that I am willing to assume that it results from careless formulation rather than considered judgment.

Though Greenberg must be serious about the belief that God has established a covenant with Christians, here again he fails to address the concrete implications of this position even in rudimentary fashion. What is the content of this covenant? Do his discussions of incarnation mean, as they appear to, that God wants Christians to believe that Jesus is God incarnate? Are Unitarians, then, straying from an important component of the covenant? Was the incarnation intended only as a catalytic signal but not as a permanent doctrine? If the content of the covenant devolves into nothing more than ethical behavior, how does it differ from an expansive understanding of the Noahide laws? Has the Holocaust rendered the Christian covenant and not just the Jewish one voluntary? On the one hand, if God, as Greenberg suggests, has lost the right to command Jews because of the special suffering that the covenant has imposed upon them, perhaps He retains the right to command Christians. On the other hand, Jews were killed by the Nazis irrespective of their commitment to their covenant, while Christians were victimized selectively in direct proportion to their degree of commitment to theirs; in light of this consideration, perhaps the Christian covenant too has imposed such suffering on its most devoted adherents that it is no longer binding.

This work, then, is marked by powerful rhetoric not always matched by scholarly or analytical rigor. This weakness is exemplified in small ways—some intrinsically significant, others more marginal—throughout the book.

- “For both religions, the central metaphor of the divinely desired total triumph of life would be the promise of a universal resurrection” (p. 72). To restrict myself to Judaism, Maimonides and many other Jews believed that resurrection would be limited, and many of those who considered it universal saw the resurrection of the wicked as a vehicle for their eternal torment (Daniel 12:2).

- The description of Jesus as an intermediary between man and God (p. 81), while almost a commonplace in Jewish discourse regarding Christianity, is an oversimplification. Jesus is one of three equal persons in the triune God.

- “It has been estimated that more than six million Jews died during the course of various [Christian] persecutions in the Middle Ages” (p. 108). This number is, in my judgment, a great exaggeration, and we should at least have been provided with its source.

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- Judaism, we are told, provides a way to test its truth claims in this world. “If [redemption] does not happen, then the religion is revealed to be an illusion” (p. 147). But in the absence of a firm date for the redemption, Judaism has not really provided a criterion by which it could be falsified.²

- Both Judaism and Christianity, says Greenberg, affirm that “life is growing and becoming more and more like the God who is its ground” (p. 162). I am not sure that this has any clear meaning, but it certainly does not sit well with one strand of Jewish thought that speaks of the decline of the generations.

- Greenberg attributes to “the people of Israel” (and on another occasion to the Talmud, presumably based on the famous Mishna in *Sanhedrin* 4:5) the position that all human beings are equal (pp. 187, 199). While I identify with the impulse that produced this formulation, it is an oversimplification to attribute this position either to “the people of Israel” (who allegedly affirm it as a “self-evident” truth) or to the Talmud without qualification and serious discussion.

- “Jewry’s counter-self-definition to Christianity pushed Judaism toward its own breakdown forms: tribalism, legalism, asceticism, and denial of this world” (p. 195). How the last two items emerged out of a “counter-self-definition to Christianity” is, to put the matter moderately, unclear, and such an assertion surely requires explanation.

One of the unfortunate consequences of Greenberg’s radicalism is its potential for eliciting resistance among his readers to a Jewishly defensible version of the respectful approach toward Christianity that he wishes to encourage. On one occasion, he argues that classifying Christianity “as idolatry . . . means [that it is] a faith with no redeeming spiritual value” (p. 80). Much later, however, he notes that by following Maimonides, one could acknowledge religious value in Christianity while maintaining an uncompromising doctrinal position (pp. 231-232). Greenberg himself has little interest in developing this option further, but it is, I believe, precisely the direction in which we should move.

There is decidedly Jewish precedent for regarding Christianity as very different from paganism even though it remains *avoda zara*. (“Idolatry” in this context is a misleading and inappropriate term.) One can see it as a theology forbidden even to non-Jews while simultaneously valuing its recognition of the Creator of heaven and earth, its capacity for engendering piety, and its adherence to moral norms.³ We can even

learn Jewish lessons from Christian thinkers writing out of Christian convictions. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik's publications bear explicit testimony to this, as does R. Aharon Lichtenstein's recommendation that students read certain works of C. S. Lewis. R. Walter Wurzburger reported that R. Soloveitchik once persuaded a wavering Catholic doctor who was treating him not to leave the Church, even as R. Hershel Schachter testifies that the Rav rejected the view that Christian-style *shittuf* is permissible to Noahides.⁴ Apparently, this sort of forbidden *shittuf*, with its adherence to moral codes and recognition of the Creator of heaven and earth, is preferable to atheism and moral bankruptcy. Moreover, I can affirm from experience that when this nuanced position is presented sensitively to Christians of good will, it does not undermine cordial inter-faith relations; indeed, it sometimes even enhances them.



For two very different reasons, the writing of this review has caused me considerable internal anguish.

First, I admire Irving Greenberg for many reasons. My introduction to the study of history came in a survey course of his when I was a freshman in Yeshiva College. Not only do I remain grateful for his decision to ignore my creative spelling while defining monophysitism in an exam (“the belief that Jesus’ two natures are really won”); I retain vivid recollections of a gifted, inspiring teacher whose subsequent prominence came as no surprise. He was an animating force and role model during the early years of Yavneh. His goal of establishing cooperation across denominational and religious lines commands respect in principle if not always in practice. Despite thoroughly unjustified criticism from some circles, his advocacy for Israel has been exemplary. At a meeting arranged by a major Jewish organization involving several Jews and representatives of an important liberal Protestant church, the Christians expressed their moral revulsion at the humiliations and inconveniences generated by multiple Israeli checkpoints during the second intifada. When I saw that the Jewish representatives were not responding directly, I made a few remarks that engaged the real issues of Israeli security needs, but these comments paled into insignificance when Greenberg launched into a passionate and uninhibited denunciation of self-righteous criticism leveled against necessary measures of self-defense. Far from simply telling Christians what they want to hear, Greenberg engages in dialogue out of a personal sense of Jewish commitment that

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I do not question. For all its flaws, this work too contains much material worthy of its author: To take one example, Greenberg's definition of hope—as distinct from an illusion or an escape—as “a dream that is committed to the discipline of becoming a fact” strikingly illustrates his sharp and engaging mind. It is genuinely painful to feel impelled, as I do, to assert that such an individual has written a book advocating positions fundamentally incompatible with authentic Judaism.

The second reason for anguish cuts even deeper. Not long ago, a friend remarked to me that I reminded him of Cato the Elder. I understood what he meant with no further explanation: just as Cato ended every speech with a call to destroy Carthage, so do I find occasion to denounce Lubavitch messianism at virtually every opportunity. While I cannot plead entirely innocent, my professional expertise in Jewish-Christian relations and messianic beliefs and movements leads me to write—and to be asked to write—about the very subjects that triggered my concern with Lubavitch in the first place, so that I am likely to address material of genuine relevance. This essay is very much a case in point.

As I wrote, I became more and more acutely aware that I was defending religious boundaries that have already been erased. Setting aside the issue of the voluntary covenant, which was not the reason for the major Orthodox attacks on Greenberg, I sensed that many readers of *Tradition* would work themselves into high dudgeon over his approach to Christianity, while they themselves embrace far worse offenders. At worst, Greenberg has described Jesus as an unfinished messiah; he has never declared him the Messiah or a messiah—even for non-Jews—with certainty. At worst—and this is quite terrible—he has implied that there may actually have been some sort of incarnation (though the relevant “signal” was intended only for non-Jews), but he has made it clear that he is not certain of this. For their part, a majority of Lubavitch hasidim believe with absolute assurance in the messiahship of a man who proclaimed repeatedly and unequivocally that his was the generation of the redemption and then died in an unredeemed world. Many of them affirm with absolute assurance and literalism that he so annulled his essence to that of God that he is pure divinity, that he is consequently omniscient, omnipotent, and unbounded, and that one can petition him (and in some formulations bow to him) with this conception of his nature in mind.⁵ With few exceptions, mainstream Orthodox Jews recognize the rabbinic legitimacy of Lubavitch hasidim with no questions asked, and this recognition is rarely withdrawn even in the face of overt declarations of messianist belief.

Of course there are profound differences between Jesus of Nazareth and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, but Jews rejected the messiahship and divinity of Jesus for reasons of deep principle that transcended his personal characteristics. It is this deep principle that the Orthodox rabbinate has betrayed in the last decade. Now that I have learned about something called a covenantal anathema, I am tempted to invoke one against the large number of Orthodox rabbis who accept Lubavitch messianists as religious authorities and functionaries and then rail against Greenberg. In fact, however, there is no need for anathemas or for the comical conceit that I am qualified to pronounce them. It requires nothing more than common decency to recognize that anyone who accords Orthodox legitimacy to adherents of posthumous false messianism and even of *avoda zara* is morally obligated to allow Irving Greenberg to say anything he wishes about failed messiahs, unfinished messiahs, and even messiahs who are God in the flesh.

NOTES

1. It is perfectly evident that Greenberg does not understand his voluntary covenant to be a simple repetition of the voluntary acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people that the rabbis ascribe to the period of Mordecai and Esther. Even if we take that aggadic passage to mean that previous generations were really free to violate the covenant—and I seriously doubt that this was meant literally—the acceptance noted in the *megilla* bound all Jews from that point on. In the post-Holocaust era, only a small percentage of the Jewish people agreed to follow the covenant in all its particulars, and they clearly could not obligate all those who did not. Greenberg never suggests that they could, and the tenor of his presentation gives the unmistakable impression that even the committed few have the moral right to opt out of this voluntary commitment if they so choose.
2. I am more than a bit disturbed when respected Orthodox organizations disseminate material stating as undeniable fact that the redemption must come before the year 6,000 in the Jewish calendar. Other messianic dates in the Talmud have passed, and Maimonides—in an explicit effort to discourage messianic calculation and obsession—made a point of emphasizing that even Hazal did not have a tradition regarding these matters (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2). Many years ago, a friend told me how a classmate of his in a traditionalist yeshiva had told him that if he would be alive in the year 6,000 and the Messiah would not have come, he would throw his *tefillin* on the ground and stomp on them. It is worth reemphasizing the prophet's

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- declaration: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are My ways your ways, declares the Lord. But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways, and my thoughts above your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).
3. For a detailed presentation of my own views on this difficult subject, see “Jews, Gentiles, and the Modern Egalitarian Ethos: Some Tentative Thoughts,” in Marc Stern, ed., *Formulating Responses in an Egalitarian Age* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
 4. Greenberg’s account (pp. 13-16) of his conversations with the Rav about dialogue asserts that “Confrontation” (*Tradition* 6:2 [1964], 5-29) does not represent the latter’s true views and that a different stand by the RCA would probably have led him to reverse course and “back them.” Given the Rav’s record on this issue over the years, this position is implausible in the extreme. See my essay, “Revisiting ‘Confrontation’ After Forty Years: A Response to Rabbi Eugene Korn,” on the website of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning: www.bc.edu/cjlearning (accessed December 2005).
 5. I have discussed the evidence for this account of beliefs within the movement in *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001) and in the revised and updated Hebrew version, “*Ha-Rebbe Melekh ha-Mashi’ah*,” *Sha’aruriyyat ha-Adishut, ve-haIyyum al Emunat Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2005).