Review Essay

WHEN A MESSIAH DIES

The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference, by David Berger

Has Habad, a hasidic sect with a long and proud history of intellectual and communal achievement, become a heterodox movement, the majority of whose constituents and central organizations subscribe to an essentially Christian messianic doctrine? According to the eminent medieval historian Professor David Berger, in this carefully and vigorously argued new book, the answer is yes. And to make matters worse, laments Berger, very few Jewish leaders seem to care that “the classical messianic faith of Judaism is dying.” Instead “their willingness to grant full rabbinical, institutional, educational, and ritual recognition to people who proclaim the messiahship of a dead rabbi conveys the inescapable message that such a proclamation does not contradict an essential Jewish belief.”

This would be a tragic development for Habad, and an unexpected one, for the movement did not begin this way. Redemption, for R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813), the founder of Habad hasidism, was more a personal mystical process than a universal apocalypse. Roman Foxbrunner, in his Habad: The Hasidism of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, writes about R. Shneur Zalman’s philosophy:

The more a kabbalist could internalize the identification of the supernal effects of the commandments with the gradual triggering of the messianic revelation, the less the actualization of the messianic era excited him. Fulfilling the commandments was for him all but the equivalent of that actualization—it was the messianic era writ small.

Later rebbes of the Habad dynasty followed in the first grand master’s footsteps and did not promulgate urgent messianism. The history
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of modern Lubavitch messianism only begins with the reign of the sixth Rebbe, R. Joseph Isaac Schneerson (1880-1950).

R. Joseph Isaac was born in Lubavitch, Russia, and assumed the mantle of leadership during the tumultuous era of civil war that followed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. In violation of the new regime’s bans on Jewish education, R. Joseph Isaac led a movement for the spiritual revival of Russian Jews. He was arrested four times and eventually sentenced to death. As a result of strong pressure within Russia and from abroad R. Joseph Isaac was freed, but by 1927 he was forced by Russian authorities to leave his hasidim and emigrate to Poland. Having suffered through arrests, the scare of a death sentence, and deteriorating health, R. Joseph Isaac finally arrived on the shores of New York in September 1940.

Reports of the millions of Jews being slaughtered by the Nazis led the dejected R. Joseph Isaac to conclude that the Messiah was coming. What else could justify so much anguish? Seven weeks after his arrival, on October 20, 1940, R. Joseph Isaac established the Mahane Israel group, which throughout the war utilized its periodical, ha-Keriya ve-ha-Kedsha, to voice its founder’s views. Mahane Israel believed that the entire history of Jewish suffering from Pharaoh to Haman to Hitler was a series of Divine actions intended to force the Jews to recognize the immoral ways of their host civilizations and repent. Exile was the “crucible in which Jews were to be boiled down and purified of waste” and Hitler was the culmination of this process. The Nazis were sent by God to spur the final stage of repentance before the Messiah would come. As formulated in one typical essay, “to pray to God to recall the evil edicts is now insufficient. These are not ordinary evils intended to punish sinners; they are to force them to repent!” On October 21, 1941 Mahane Israel announced that it was only planning to publish ha-Keriya ve-ha-Kedsha for a short while as the redemption was surely imminent. The Jewish year beginning on September 11, 1942 was claimed as the last year of the galut era. Again, in July 1944, ha-Keriya ve-ha-Kedsha declared that it was the time of redemption. “That this year is the last opportunity for a sincere acceptance of the Torah is beyond doubt. . . . This is the year when all hangs in the balance. . . . This year, beginning in Sivan 5704 (1944) . . . is the year promised long ago for the eradication of Amalek after which the Divine Name will prevail in perfection.” The editor of ha-Keriya ve-ha-Kedsha himself said in May, 1941, that the Messiah, who was “already standing behind our backs,” would reveal himself at the end of World War II. This would be facilitated by the massacre of millions of Jews who fulfilled the requisite “birthpangs of
messiah,” clearing the way for the messianic revelation. R. Joseph Isaac issued a number of fiery “kol koreh’s” (proclamations) between May 26, 1941 and September 11, 1942.

‘Immediate redemption!’ is our call, and this is because it is the call of our time.

We call upon all Jews to join Mahane Israel.

Be ready for redemption soon! It is approaching rapidly even though you do not see it.

By 1946 World War II was finally over, R. Joseph Isaac had been incapacitated by his worsening health, and Mahane Israel ceased to publish its messianic periodical.

R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, son in law to R. Joseph Isaac and direct descendant of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the founder of Habad Hasidism, was born in 1902 in the Ukrainian town of Nikolayev to R. Levi Isaac (d. 1944) and Channah Schneerson (d. 1964). At age 27, he married his distant cousin, the second daughter of R. Joseph Isaac, Chaya Musia Schneerson. In 1944, two years after he and his wife arrived in America, R. Menachem Mendel was appointed by his father-in-law to direct Merkoz L’Inyonei Chinuch, the organization responsible for Lubavitch publishing and education. Upon R. Joseph Isaac’s death, a struggle for succession ensued between supporters of R. Menachem Mendel and those of his brother-in-law, R. Samarius Gourary (d. 1989). R. Menachem Mendel emerged victorious and was formally proclaimed the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe in 1951. R. Menachem Mendel apparently inherited his father-in-law’s messianic fervor, and some criticism of Habad’s excessive emphasis on messianism is recorded early in the Rebbe’s tenure. But only in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s do we begin to notice a full-scale messianic movement. What happened?

When R. Menachem Mendel suffered a heart attack in 1976, the hasidim became acutely aware of the problem of who would succeed the Rebbe. The Rebbe was 74 years old and childless, yet had not even hinted as to who his choice of successor would be. Panic broke out and at one point a group of Lubavitchers approached R. Barry Gourary, the physicist grandson of R. Joseph Isaac, and told him to prepare to move to the Lubavitch headquarters and “assume the throne” if R. Menachem Mendel should die. R. Menachem Mendel recovered, but the fear of being orphaned by their rebbe still tormented the hasidim. The prospect of imminent redemption diverted their attention from their uncertain future. Psychologically, messianism made succession irrelevant.
By the early 1980's, the messianism that marked R. Menachem Mendel's lectures was intense. The Lubavitch advertising slogan had become "We want Moshiach now!," words which were popularized in a well known children's song. As each year passed and the problem of succession became more acute, the Rebbe and the official Lubavitch publications intensified their messianism to the point of obsession. Virtually every Kfar Habad Magazine was riddled with apocalyptic articles. The publicity campaign that relentlessly exposed people to messianic slogans spanned the United States and Israel. And Lubavitch hasidim responded enthusiastically. But it was not simply messianic fervor that caused worldwide excitement and captured the interest of so many major newspapers and magazines. Lubavitch had not only declared that the "end of days" was at hand but also identified the messianic figure.

The reverence and fascination commanded by R. Menachem Mendel when combined with the existing messianism generated a large folk movement that hailed him as the Messiah by the early 1980's. In 1983, a book was published by the Rebbe's followers in Kfar Habad (in honor of his eightieth birthday) entitled The Anointed King and Complete Redemption. The book refers to R. Menachem Mendel as "chosen by the Holy One, blessed be He, as His anointed and the redeemer of His people." In the late 1970's, in the course of a conversation with a former pupil, the late R. Isaac Hutner discovered that the student's children attended a Lubavitch summer camp. "[R. Hutner] said [to me], 'Saul, you come to me once in twenty years, and all you can tell me is that you send your children to a Lubavitch camp? There aren't enough other camps?' He said that my children would return home saying that the Lubavitcher Rebbe was the Messiah, that Lubavitch would ruin my children."

A debilitating stroke which incapacitated the Rebbe in 1992 did not put a damper on Lubavitch messianic activity. On the contrary, notes Berger, "the Rebbe's incapacity fanned its flames . . . and the illness itself was invested with redemptive significance. Thus, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, who plays a critical role in Christian theology" was identified with the wheelchair-bound Rebbe. The believers' desperate attempts to explain the painful challenge to their belief demonstrated just how entrenched in Lubavitch minds this belief really was. Faith had a magical soothing effect for Lubavitch messianists in those troubling times. Neither hostile critics, nor unfulfilled predictions that the Rebbe would reveal himself the previous Passover, nor the severe stroke, were a match for this pure faith.
On June 12 of 1994, the Rebbe died. “At this point,” writes Berger, “everything in Jewish tradition cried out for the need to face reality. But this was not to be.” Instead, “with the exception of Sabbatianism, Lubavitch messianists have already generated the largest and most long-lived messianic movement in Jewish history since antiquity.” In fact, Berger contends, most of Habad’s core educational institutions and much of its rabbinic leadership espouse a belief in the Second Coming of the Messiah. Not, of course, Jesus or Shabbetai Tsevi (a minority of whose followers continued to promote his messiahship after his conversion to Islam in 1666 and his demise in 1676), but R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Indeed “Yehi Adonenu Morenu ve-Rabbenu Melekh ha-Mashiah le-Olam va-Ed” (“Long live our master, our Rebbe, the king messiah forever!”) is recited publicly and unabashedly in Lubavitch schools and synagogues. That this belief is antithetical to traditional Judaism is patently obvious to most educated Jews. Nonetheless, because Lubavitch messianists have marshaled classical Jewish sources in defense of their doctrine, Berger goes to great pains in arguing that

Nowhere—nowhere—does Messiah son of David appear on the eschatological stage only to die and be buried before the end of the final act—not in the Bavli [Babylonian Talmud], not in the Yerushalmi [Jerusalem Talmud], not in the Zohar [the major work of Jewish mysticism], not in the standard midrashim [rabbinic exegetical and homiletical works], not in the pesiktot [a genre of midrashic literature], not in the apocalyptic midrashim [Sefer Zerubavel, Sefer Eliyahu, Otot ha-Maskiah, Nistarot de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, and many more], not in the letter of R. Hai Gaon (939-1038) [a work describing the messianic process], not in the treatise of R. Sa’adia Gaon (882-942) [a section on the messianic age in The Book of Beliefs and Opinions], not in the Sefer haGe’ula [Book of the Redemption] of Ramban [Nahmanides], not in the messianic works of Abarbanel—not anywhere.

Furthermore, writes Berger, the similarities between Lubavitch messianism and Christianity do not end with the former’s agreement with the latter on the doctrine of the Second Coming. Shockingly, Lubavitch messianists—perhaps not most, but nonetheless many in influential positions—have adopted the position that the Rebbe is the “Essence and Being of God enclothed in a body.” This is the climactic and decisive blow. A far more serious allegation from a halakhic and theological perspective, raising “the spectre of idolatry” completes Berger’s portrait of a Jewish sect that has remained outwardly punctil-
ious in its religious observance while inwardly distorting the traditional messianic faith and abandoning one of the ikarei emuna.

*The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* is more than an academic's history of a Jewish movement gone awry; it is also the personal memoir of a religious man whose conscience compelled him to wage a battle against “Second Coming Judaism.” One cannot help but draw parallels between Berger and those, such as R. Moshe Hagiz and R. Jacob Emden, who fiercely fought secret followers of the deceased messianic pretender Shabbetai Tsevi during the century which followed the latter’s apostasy and death. There are, however, significant differences. First, the messianic figures are hardly comparable. Whereas Shabbetai Tsevi was an antinomian heretic publicly reviled by virtually every mainstream Jewish leader since his death, the Rebbe is revered by many of those who now combat the belief in his posthumous messiahship. Second, and more significant for this essay, Berger’s struggle is in one important way much more difficult than those of his seventeenth and eighteenth century counterparts. The latter were primarily engaged in identifying suspects, gathering evidence of heresy and then publicizing the findings. If they could convince the public and the rabbis that an individual or group was Sabbatian, the war was largely won. Excommunication and other communal sanctions would naturally follow. In contrast, Berger has found, to his astonishment, that Jewish leaders, even when convinced by his findings, are unmoved to speak out or act. Instead, overt Lubavitch messianists serve as heads of religious courts and as rabbis of mainstream communities around the world, and are generally treated as religious Jews in good standing—all with the implicit approval, expressed through silence, of most of the organized Orthodox world. And while there have been some limited successes (Berger effectively lobbied the Rabbinical Council of America, for instance, to declare that there is no place in Judaism for the “Second Coming” doctrine), one cannot but empathize with Berger’s exasperating repeated attempts at eliciting a condemnatory response from Agudath Israel’s Moetzes Gedolei Torah (Council of Torah Sages). Berger is faced with the remarkable challenge of both demonstrating that a heterodox movement thrives in our midst and also convincing religious Jews that this matters.

Admittedly, strong sociological and psychological forces account for much of Orthodoxy’s silence. A desire to preserve Jewish unity, Lubavitch messianists’ Orthodox appearance, reliance in many communities on Habad services, the impressive success of Lubavitch outreach and
There is also the sense that Habad messianism is a fad that will fade away. Recently, a well-known rabbinic personality with extensive ties to the Habad community commented to me that “Berger has definitely got the right scoop, but he is taking this too seriously. It will die on its own.” In response, Berger argues persuasively that the sad reality of a new generation of Lubavitchers already being nurtured on this ideology and parallels with other modern religious movements (e.g. Mormonism) point to the probable longevity of this heterodox belief. Even so, Berger underemphasizes another important factor that will invigorate messianists for many years to come—namely, the Rebbe’s own consequential role in fostering the messianic movement that proclaimed him the long awaited Mashiah ben David. Berger cautiously mentions that R. Menachem Mendel “sent out mixed signals” and “strongly implied that he might be the redeemer.” Furthermore, Berger briefly presents a representative selection of the Rebbe’s own statements alluding to his messiahship. Nevertheless, a more fully developed presentation of the Rebbe’s role may better explain why the messianists cannot abandon their beliefs without implicitly impugning their deceased Rebbe’s leadership.

For more than a decade, towards the end of his life, R. Menachem Mendel unquestionably took an active role in spreading the belief that he was the Messiah. The seemingly extraneous word “mamash”—literally “really” or “actually”—appeared consistently following a prayer that the Messiah come soon in almost every one of the Rebbe’s addresses over the last fifteen years of his life. Did the Rebbe initially intend that “MaMaSh” hint to the initials of his name (Menachem Mendel Schneerson) and thereby point to the Rebbe’s personal messianic ambitions? Later speeches provide clarity. In a typically suggestive lecture on the weekly Torah reading of Parashat Mishpatim, the Rebbe was not satisfied with the ambiguous word “mamash.” He concluded his speech, “so shall come to be for us really (mamash), immediately, instantly (miyad), really (mamash), with all the connotations of ‘miyad’ and all the connotations of ‘mamash.’” In his footnote on “the connotations of ‘miyad’,” the Rebbe writes, “and with greater specificity, related to our generation—the letters of MiYaD allude to the three eras . . . in order of their proximity to the present—Mashiah (Menachem is his name), [the sixth Rebbe] Yosef Yitshak, and [the fifth Rebbe] Dov Ber.” This should not be understood as an outright proclamation of himself as the Messiah. The simplistically literal interpretation of “Mashiah (Menachem is his name)” would be...
referring to the passage in *Bavli Sanhedrin* (98b) that asks, “What is the name of the Messiah?” One of the answers that is offered is “Menahem, son of Hezekiah.” There is no reason, however, why the Rebbe should have seized upon this answer of the Talmud instead of the other possible names offered. The second level of meaning clearly lay just beneath the surface. It should also be noted that the issue of whether words like “mamash” or “miyad” were originally loaded terms quickly became moot. As the Rebbe was certainly aware of how the masses of Lubavitchers understood these terms, his continued use of the usually superfluous phrases amounted to playing an active role in propagating his messiahship. Already in 1983, the Rebbe, at the end of an address, said, “And immediately, instantly, the true and complete redemption is coming through our righteous Messiah—Menachem is his name, like the name of the Tsemah Tsedek. May he come and redeem us and bring us upright to our land.”26 By referring to his namesake who lived over a century earlier, the Rebbe hardly succeeds in deflecting our attention from the living Menachem, namely himself. It is also important to remember that the Rebbe was, by all accounts, a gifted communicator. Had he desired to put an end to the messianic speculations he could have done so clearly, repeatedly, and emphatically. He did not. Some have suggested that the Rebbe genuinely and rightly believed in his own messiahship, but that the generation was unworthy.27 Even if this theory is true, it has proved insufficient to shatter messianists’ beliefs. In a footnote, Berger advises readers interested in the Rebbe’s role to read *And He Will Redeem Us*,28 a messianic tract which includes numerous statements (some admittedly taken out of context) made by the Rebbe encouraging the belief in his messiahship.

Some may argue that even given the gravity of these developments, a concern for *kavod ha-Torah* should silence any discussion of the Rebbe’s role in this still unfolding tragedy. There is precedence for such a stance. The Noda bi-Yehuda (R. Yehezkel Landau, 1713-1793) eulogized R. Yonatan Eibschutz (1695-1764) despite considerable evidence that he considered Eibschutz a crypto-Sabbatian.29 At least one scholar has argued that Landau distinguished between Eibschutz the man and Eibschutz’s substantial religious scholarship in order to protect the honor of the Torah and mitigate the hillul Hashem resulting from the allegations.30 Landau’s logic was predicated on Eibschutz’s vehement denial of the accusations and the presupposition that others would therefore not be adversely influenced by Eibschutz’s personal theology. Accordingly, Landau reasoned that letting Eibschutz’s (alleged) heresies go unpunished was a small price to pay to prevent a public desecration
of God’s name. In contrast, an open discussion of the Rebbe’s large role in the movement which crowned him Messiah would further, not compromise, public religious interests by helping concerned Jews understand why neither time nor persuasion will heal this festering wound. Lubavitch messianists are confident, and reasonably so, that the Rebbe believed in his own messiahship. In the minds of hasidim, the Rebbe was virtually infallible, certainly incapable of a colossal blunder such as misidentifying himself as the Messiah. For a Lubavitch messianist, then, belief in a deceased Messiah is a much more viable option than accepting that R. Menachem Mendel misled or failed his followers.

And this is precisely why Berger should have focused more attention on the Rebbe’s contribution to the current situation. After all, it is crucial for Berger’s argument—especially for his call to stigmatize as non-Orthodox all Lubavitch messianist rabbis, ritual slaughterers, and scribes—that he prove with every available argument that this messianic movement is here to stay. The battle that Berger is urging will be bloody. Communities will be split, tempers will flare and Habad messianists will not surrender without a fight. The pain cannot be justified unless, as Berger maintains, messianists pose a long-term danger to Orthodoxy. And given the stakes, Berger cannot afford to minimize important evidence that might bolster his case.

Similarly, Berger can ill afford to forget possible allies in his struggle. He describes in detail his persistent prodding and lobbying of Haredi gedolim to vocally support his cause. He records the private and limited public support that came from these great rabbis. What of Modern Orthodox gedolim—those most revered by a disproportionately large segment of this book’s likely audience? Modern Orthodox Jews (even rabbis), like their Haredi co-religionists, are not likely to rally behind Berger’s painful directives without the full-throated support of the Torah giants whose guidance is sought on other major issues of communal policy. Berger shares with us a letter sent to a renowned modern Orthodox rosh yeshiva in which he boldly writes that “[the] time has come for people with real qualifications to assume this task” of defending the Jewish faith. However, he does not inform us of the rosh yeshiva’s response, nor of subsequent efforts to elicit one. Have Yeshiva University and Yeshivot Hesder rashei yeshiva been approached and encouraged to weigh in on this critical issue? If they and others have expressed opinions, were they at odds with Berger’s? Are there any plans to propose a more detailed RCA resolution in support of Berger’s far-reaching call for action? Silence leaves us wondering.
Nonetheless, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* is a compelling, jarring, deeply disturbing polemic and precisely what Professor Berger intended it to be: “[A] memoir, a history, a religious tract . . . an indictment, a lament, and an appeal.” It is passionate, yet scholarly and precise. Its message is emotional and religiously inspired, yet its careful treatment of evidence bears the unmistakable mark of a seasoned scholar.

In 1941, *ha-Keriya ve-ha-Kedusha*, R. Joseph Isaac Schneerson’s official periodical, published a polemic entitled “The Truth About the Present Jewish Disaster” which blamed the World War II era non-Lubavitch American rabbinate, specifically the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, for not recognizing the imminence of redemption. R. Joseph Isaac repeatedly argued that world Jewry ignored Habad’s messianic reading of the times at its own peril. Six decades later, under very different circumstances and with an entirely different agenda, Professor David Berger echoes those sentiments.

NOTES

I wish to thank Zalman Alpert of Yeshiva University’s Gottesman Library for reading this essay and for sharing with me his informed and insightful comments.

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 62.
8. KK vol. 2 No. 14, October 1941, p. 11.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
17. Based on my conversations with Zalman Alpert who has spoken to Gourary about the incident.
19. Many of these articles are, in fact, reprints of the Rebbe’s lectures and letters.
24. Gershom Scholem, in his Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah (1989) p. 695, note 13, recounts the following anomalous generous assessment attributed to the Ba’al Shem Tov: “that he [that is, Sabbatai Sevi] had a spark of holiness, but Samael [that is, the Prince of Evil] caught him in his net.”
27. Others suggest that the Rebbe’s poor health following his 1976 heart attack blurred his perspective to the extent that he was incapable of appreciating the intensity and irreversibility of the movement he was inspiring. Since neither Lubavitch messianists nor Lubavitch non-messianists will likely accept that the Rebbe was not fully compos mentis for more than a decade, this argument will hardly help dampen the messianic fervor. Nonetheless, this approach may help non Lubavitchers who revered the Rebbe understand how things went seriously awry.
28. And He Will Redeem Us, Brooklyn, New York, 1994. The book is poignantly dated on the cover page “44th year of the Rebbe Melech HaMashiach’s leadership.”
30. Ibid., pg. 192. Leiman points out that others such as the Penei Yehoshua (R. Jacob Joshua Falk) did not agree with Landau’s balanced approach and were accordingly quite vocal in their condemnation of Eibschutz.
31. KK, June 1941, vol. 1, no. 9, pps. 7-8.