

Chabad's Lost Messiah

Tomer Persico

For several terrifying days in late November 2008, all Jewish eyes were on the Indian city of Mumbai. Muslim terrorists had launched a series of coordinated shooting and bombing attacks on targets throughout the metropolis, including the Nariman Chabad House, a hasidic cultural center that served the local Jewish community as well as Israeli tourists passing through. For two days, terrorists held those inside hostage; on the third, Indian security forces stormed the building. There they found the bodies of six captives, including the young Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg and his wife, Rivka, then six months pregnant. Only the Holtzbergs' two-year-old son, Moshe, survived, having been spirited away by his Indian caretaker at the onset of the attack. Later, he was returned safely to his family in Israel.

Amidst their grief, the followers of Chabad found one additional source of comfort—or at least of awe—in the Mumbai tragedy, however: Though the Nariman House and its contents had been severely damaged, an oil painting of the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe and the last leader of Chabad, had survived unharmed. To many of his followers, this was nothing less than proof of the miraculous aura surrounding their deceased leader.¹

Referred to by his acolytes simply as “the Rebbe,” Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) continues to excite the passions of Lubavitchers even today, a decade and a half after his death—a testament to his personal stature as well as his profound impact on the Chabad movement. Under his charismatic leadership, Chabad was transformed within a few short decades from a small hasidic sect into a thriving global network of schools, community centers, synagogues, and charities.² Even those who do not avail themselves of Chabad’s services have like as not encountered, at one time or another, one of the movement’s followers manning a street-corner stand, offering *tefillin* (phylacteries), prayer books, and tutelage for Jews curious about ritual observance. Nor are Chabad’s activities limited strictly to members of the Jewish faith: In accordance with the Rebbe’s instructions, Lubavitchers have also assumed responsibility for convincing non-Jews to follow the Noahide Laws, a set of seven moral imperatives the Talmud claims are binding on all mankind. Owing to this fervent activism, Chabad is now the most widespread and vibrant Jewish organization in the world; in some countries, such as France, Australia, and almost all of the former Soviet republics, Chabad has effectively become Judaism’s public face.

To be sure, such impressive achievements required a powerful motivating force. For Chabad, this force was a messianic awakening the likes of which Judaism had not experienced since the brief rise and fall of the seventeenth-century false messiah, Shabtai Tzvi, and at its center stood Menachem Mendel Schneerson himself. As the Rebbe’s fame increased in the decades since the 1950s, and his movement grew in power and influence, so, too, did the messianic expectations surrounding him become more and more zealous, ultimately overwhelming both Chabad’s rank and file and its rabbinical leadership alike. This cult of personality profoundly altered the movement, both institutionally and theologically. Indeed, since the Rebbe’s death in 1994, no one has been deemed worthy of succeeding him. Moreover, the movement has found itself split between those who have accepted

its leader's death and those—the majority of Chabad's followers—who believe he is somehow still alive.

No less worrisome than this internal schism, the Lubavitchers have found themselves increasingly at odds with other ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. Although Chabad members follow the commandments to the letter, often adding their own, more onerous restrictions, their critics have gone so far as to cast doubt on the movement's Jewishness. The head of the Lithuanian Jewish community, the late Rabbi Eliezer Shach, once called Chabad a “cult” and sarcastically defined it as the religion closest to Judaism;³ Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual leader of the Sephardi Shas movement, ruled that a certain statement by the Lubavitcher Rebbe was “true heresy” and “idolatry.”⁴ And in a recent book titled *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, historian and Orthodox rabbi David Berger demonstrates that one faction of Chabad no longer presents the Rebbe as “only” the messiah, but instead goes so far as to identify him with God himself—cause, argues Berger, for the movement's excommunication from Judaism.⁵ For their part, Chabad members respond to such criticisms with either anger or derision: They describe Berger as a crackpot, scorn the opinions of Ovadia Yosef, and insist that Eliezer Shach was the Devil's representative on earth.⁶

In light of the uproar surrounding the “aberration” of the Chabad movement, one cannot but wonder: *Did* the Rebbe in truth believe he was the messiah?⁷ The messianic faction of the movement naturally insists that he did. The moderates, however, have largely succeeded in convincing the general public that the Rebbe never presented himself as such. At most, they assert, he neither confirmed nor denied such claims. Rather, the messianic fervor that engulfed the movement was “from below”—i.e., at the instigation of his followers.⁸

Yet such apologetics simply do not mesh with the facts. As I will show, the Rebbe *did* believe—and encouraged his followers to believe—that he was the messiah, destined to reveal himself to the people Israel and redeem the world. In fact, he could hardly have thought otherwise: This perception

was an inevitable result of the messianic theology the Rebbe inherited from his predecessors, a theology whose internal logic was reflected in his teachings and which guided both his decisions and actions. The current messianic tension that grips Chabad is therefore not a side effect of its achievements under the Rebbe's leadership. Just the opposite is true: Messianism was the driving force *behind* Chabad's success, and it has only grown stronger after the death of the supposed savior himself.

II

The messiah, we know, can appear in a heartbeat. A messianic belief system, by contrast, is built up painstakingly over time. As the historian Menachem Friedman has shown, Lubavitch Hasidism has awaited the imminent arrival of the messiah since the early twentieth century, when the movement was led by the fifth Lubavitcher rebbe, Shalom Dovber Schneerson. Chabad's messianic worldview, Friedman explains, developed as a response to the various pressures of modernity, in particular the *haskala* (Enlightenment), secularization, and Zionism.⁹ While traditional Judaism viewed these developments with concern, the fifth Lubavitcher rebbe saw them as foretelling the coming of the messiah. He declared the intellectuals of the *haskala* and the Zionists "enemies of God" and warned that as these representatives of the *sitra ahra* (in Aramaic, "the other side," i.e., the forces of evil) grew more powerful, it fell to Chabad to save humanity from the encroaching iniquity.¹⁰ Only Chabad, he believed, could be the beacon of light in an ocean of darkness.

The idea that mankind stood at the threshold of the messianic age, and that Chabad was destined to play a major role therein, was later taken up by Shalom Dovber's son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, upon his succession as the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe in 1920. In the decades that followed,

Yosef Yitzchok was to face a series of staggering challenges, both physical and theological: the Soviet regime's brutal suppression of Judaism; the Nazi occupation of Europe; the Holocaust; and, finally, the establishment of the State of Israel by secular Zionists. Through most of the turbulent 1930s, Yosef Yitzchok himself had been forced to wander across Europe in search of safe haven until, at the urging of his followers, the Americans finally smuggled him into the United States.¹¹

By the time he arrived in America in the early 1940s, Yosef Yitzchok thought he knew why disaster had befallen the Jewish people: God had decided to bring an end to the exile and thus trigger mass *tshuva* ("repentance") among the Jews in preparation for the messiah's arrival. He believed that an event as catastrophic and incomprehensible as the Holocaust could only be followed by an equally astonishing and inconceivable salvation.¹² "We are living in the last days before the redemption," he declared.¹³ All that remained was to "polish the buttons," i.e., take care of minor details.¹⁴

The sixth rebbe passed away in 1950 after a long battle with multiple sclerosis. His successor, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was forty-eight years old when he accepted the mantle of Chabad's leadership. Blessed with both good *yichus* ("family lineage") and, as was roundly acknowledged, a striking and charismatic personality, Menachem Mendel was born in the southern Ukraine to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, who was himself the great-grandson of the third Lubavitcher rebbe, known as the Tzemach Tzedek ("Righteous Sprout," or "Righteous Scion"). In 1923, Menachem Mendel became a close student of the sixth rebbe, and in 1928, he married the rebbe's daughter, Chaya Moussia, in Warsaw. The two moved to Berlin, and Menachem Mendel began to audit university classes in mathematics and philosophy. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, he escaped with his wife to Paris, where he completed a degree in electrical engineering at a technical college.¹⁵ After the German invasion of France, he fled again, this time to New York, where he assumed various Chabad leadership positions (as well as working a stint at the Brooklyn Navy Yard). Throughout

this period, however, he maintained a relatively low profile, rarely making appearances or speaking in public.

Menachem Mendel's appointment as the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe was by no means a foregone conclusion. His brother-in-law, Rabbi Shemaryahu Gurary, was married to the rebbe's eldest daughter and was also considered a strong contender for the position. The scales eventually tilted in Menachem Mendel's favor, however, and he formally assumed leadership of Chabad a year after his father-in-law's death. According to Friedman, the decisive factor in Menachem Mendel's ascent was his zealous commitment to Yosef Yitzchok's messianic theology.¹⁶ Either way, it would soon become clear that the seventh rebbe's messianic fervor surpassed that of all his predecessors—and had a deeply personal dimension.

III

Unlike the rebbes who preceded him, Menachem Mendel was not content simply to foster vague messianic hopes among his followers. On the contrary, he outlined a detailed metaphysical plan, based on kabbalistic ideas, for hastening the redemption.¹⁷ As scholar of Chabad Hasidism Alon Dahan has maintained, the Rebbe's was a "radically apocalyptic" messianism, one that viewed

the linear and historical progression of time as a continuum of mostly tragic events, whose significance could be perceived if and only if they were interpreted according to the concept of the "dwelling below" [*dira batahtonim*, a mystical term that describes the infusion of the material world with the divine]. The messianic end grants these tragedies and catastrophes—and the Holocaust in particular—an optimistic dimension.¹⁸

The Rebbe therefore continued on the path paved by his predecessor, who declared redemption to be just around the corner. All that was left to discern, then, was the identity of the long-awaited messiah. In other words, the question was not *when*, but *who*.

Menachem Mendel first provided an answer, if only an implicit one, in his 1951 succession speech. Delivered on the anniversary of Yosef Yitzchok's death, the discourse, titled "Basi Legani" ("I Have Come to My Garden") in many ways encapsulates his entire doctrine.¹⁹ The speech quotes a Midrash based on the Song of Songs:

R. Menachem Chatanya, in the name of R. Elazar son of Ebona, said in the name of R. Shimon in the name of R. Yossena: It does not say, "I have come to *the* garden," rather it says, "to *my* garden," to my shelter, to my original place of dwelling. And the original place of the *shechina* ["divine presence"] was not in the lower realms, as it is written: "And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden" (Genesis 3:8).²⁰

According to the sages' interpretation, the biblical passage signifies the return of God to his garden, which in turn denotes the reunification of the divine with the world by means of the redemption. The Rebbe used this text as a starting point for his presentation of a highly structured theological view of history. According to this view, the *shechina* abandoned this world on account of the sin of Adam and Eve, and continued to ascend through the seven heavens on account of the actions of six other sinners. Yet seven holy Hebrews, or *tzaddikim*, who lived in the period between the Patriarchs and Moses, drew the divine presence back into this world, where it was finally revealed through the Torah given on Mount Sinai. The reconciliation of the earthly and the heavenly that began with Abraham was thus completed by Moses, who was granted this honor because "all those who are seventh are most beloved."²¹

This final point is of critical significance to Chabad's understanding of history. From the general rule set forth by the Midrash, "all those who are seventh are most beloved," the Rebbe infers that the identity of the

redeemer has nothing to do with certain special qualities, nor is it dependent on human choice. Instead, it is determined by the predestined, divine pattern behind all historical events.²² In accordance with this pattern, God selects a seventh messenger to complete a process of redemption begun six generations before by a great tzaddik. The Rebbe explained,

The seventh's primary quality lies in his being seventh. In other words, he is cherished not on account of his choice, desire, or spiritual service, but because he is seventh—and this is something he is born into.... It was for this reason that it was Moses who was privileged to have the Torah given through him.²³

This interpretation leaves little room for free will or human agency. On the contrary, it appears to espouse an entirely deterministic understanding of divine intervention in this world.²⁴ It holds, for example, that Moses was chosen to receive the Torah from God *not* because of his actions or virtues—as is generally accepted in traditional Judaism—but solely because he was seventh in a line of tzaddikim.

But redemption was not completed with Moses. The light of the divine presence, which descended to earth with the Torah, no longer shines with its original intensity. True salvation, the Rebbe believed, will be attained only when the creation is once again filled with the light that emanated from the divine presence *before* its withdrawal from the world (the *tzimtzum*).²⁵ This task, which has remained unfinished through two thousand years of chaos and two thousand years of Torah, requires a *second* series of seven tzaddikim to conclude the work of the first. These seven tzaddikim, so goes the theory, are none other than the Lubavitcher rebbes. According to this doctrine, the seventh of these corresponds to Moses, and the burden of bringing forth the messianic age therefore falls to him. Evidently, this seventh tzaddik was Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Continuing his sermon, the Rebbe stated unambiguously that the present generation was likewise the seventh and thus would witness the messiah's arrival—a claim based, once again, on the simple fact that

Menachem Mendel Schneerson was the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe.²⁶ There can be no mistake on this point, nor is there room for free will:

Although the fact that we are in the seventh generation is not the result of our own choosing and our own service and indeed in certain ways perhaps contrary to our will, nevertheless “all those who are seventh are cherished.” We are now very near the approaching footsteps of the messiah; indeed, we are at the conclusion of this period, and our spiritual task is to complete the process of drawing down the shechina.²⁷

Menachem Mendel’s messianic belief did not rely only on his being the seventh rebbe in the Lubavitcher line. Another important factor was the role of the *sefirot* in Chabad mysticism. The Kabbala describes the sefirot, the luminous emanations through which God infuses this world with heavenly light, as a sequence of temporal coordinates. According to Chabad’s unique brand of mysticism, the sefirot also correlate to specific tzaddikim, beginning with the Baal Shem Tov—the founder of Hasidism—and ending with the seven Lubavitcher rebbes. Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s explanation of this doctrine is as follows:

Every one of the rebbes is a *maor* [“luminary”]; within this category, however, each rebbe has a distinguishing characteristic in accordance with his position in the scheme of the sefirot. Thus, as is well known, the Baal Shem Tov corresponds to the level known as *atik* [“ancient”]; the Maggid corresponds to the level of *arich* [“long”]; the Alter Rebbe to *hochma* [“wisdom”]; the Mittlerer Rebbe to *bina* [“understanding”]; and so on. And my revered father-in-law, the Rebbe [Rayatz], who is the luminary of this generation, incorporates all the luminaries—the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid, the Alter Rebbe, the Mittlerer Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, the Rebbe Maharash,²⁸ and the Rebbe Rashab—because he brings about the same effects that they brought about in their respective generations.²⁹

The Rebbe’s metaphysical outline of history, then, asserts that the Baal Shem Tov corresponds to the *atik yomin* (the “ancient of days”) and his

disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch, to *arich anpin* (the “long countenance”)—both being manifestations of the highest sefira, *keter* (“crown”). Chabad founder Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe, corresponds to the sefirah of *hochma*. His son, Rabbi Dovber Schneuri, the Mittlerer Rebbe, corresponds to the sefira of *bina*. This correspondence continues until Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, referred to by Menachem Mendel as “the luminary of this generation.” But where is Menachem Mendel himself, the seventh rebbe, in this divine order?

There are several versions of the answer, but they all conclude that the seventh and final rebbe corresponds to the sefira of *malchut*, or “kingship.”³⁰ This sefira encompasses all of the heavenly plenitude emanating from above—meaning, by implication, that the Rebbe himself completes the descent of the divine light through the heavens.³¹ And indeed, on dozens of occasions the Rebbe indicated that he viewed himself as the physical embodiment of *malchut*. In his 1989 Rosh Hashana speech, for example, he claimed that,

All of the above is enhanced by the unique nature of the present year, *tav-shin-nun*, a “year of miracles.” The Hebrew for “miracle” also has the connotation “uplifted,” i.e., it refers to a level that is elevated above the natural order....

The concept of miracles also relates to the custom (quoted by the previous rebbe) of mentioning the *nessi'im* (pl., “princes”)... on Rosh Hashana.

The word *nassi* (sing., “prince”) also means “uplifted” and is used regarding an individual who is elevated above the people as a whole as we find in regard to King Shaul, who was described as being so tall that his shoulders were higher than the heads of the people.

Our Sages, however, explain that “a *nassi* is the entire people” and that each member of the people has a spark of the *nassi*’s soul within his soul. Therefore, all the physical and spiritual necessities required by the people are drawn down to them by the *nassi*. Furthermore, the *nassi* lifts the people up to a higher level. For this reason, it is appropriate to mention the *nessi'im* on Rosh Hashana.

Our Sages teach that God relates to us in a manner of “measure for measure.” Thus, in order to merit the present “year of miracles,” each Jew must begin a miraculous order of behavior, i.e., take on good resolutions regarding his service of Torah, prayer, and deeds of kindness which totally surpass that which could be expected of him based on his behavior in previous years.

This will serve as a vessel to contain the blessings of the present year, a “year of miracles.” Surely, this will include the greatest miracle, the messianic redemption, when “as in the days of your exodus from Egypt, I will show you wonders.” God will “sound the great shofar for our freedom,” bringing the Messiah. His coming is associated with the revelation of the *yehida*, the essence of the soul of every Jew. Then, it will be revealed how “Israel and the Holy One, blessed be he, are all one.”³²

The “nassi,” referred to by the Rebbe as the *yehida*, is the soul that contains within it the souls of all Jewish people. Here, in language obscure to the outsider but plain to his followers, the Rebbe stated that this leader is none other than himself. He claims, in other words, that *he* is the messiah—the redeemer who has not yet been revealed, but whose revelation is nonetheless imminent.

It would appear from his speech that the Rebbe viewed all of human history as flowing inexorably toward the decisive moment when he, as the final descendant of a line of tzaddikim, would be required to act as the savior of humanity. It must be emphasized: In spite of all his scientific education, the Rebbe’s worldview was based entirely on the Kabbala, and can be understood only in its light.³³ According to his mystical belief system, the fact that he was the seventh rebbe in the Lubavitcher dynasty was not accidental, but rather an event of divine significance, an eschatological occurrence that marked the beginning of the end times. Guided by this theory, the Rebbe no doubt felt that the weight of redemption lay entirely on his shoulders. He was therefore determined to fulfill that destiny to the best of his abilities.

IV

One might think that the unambiguous determinism of the Rebbe's worldview would pacify his followers, granting them the confidence and faith required to wait patiently and quietly for the approaching salvation. Such a view, however, reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the messianic mindset. As Max Weber noted, it is frequently the deterministic beliefs that give rise to the most vigorous forms of activism—and all the more so in the case of messianic movements.³⁴ Chabad is no exception. Indeed, the scope of its activities in the second half of the twentieth century is without precedent in Jewish history. Even some of the movement's harshest critics, such as David Berger, have been forced to admit as much:

With the possible exception of Bar Kochba, about whom we know very little, Judaism has never had a serious messianic candidate with the curriculum vitae of the Rebbe of blessed memory. Virtually all the accolades heaped upon him by the messianists are true: He established a worldwide empire of followers, spread Orthodox Judaism to places where it had never been known, energized Jewish education, led substantial numbers of irreligious Jews to observance, and much more.³⁵

The Lubavitchers see these impressive achievements as clear, tangible signs that their Rebbe was indeed the messiah. In fact, Chabad's ambitious endeavors may have been designed expressly to convey this idea.³⁶ The history of religion is replete with individuals who sought to authenticate their messianic status by fulfilling the particular expectations of their religious traditions. Jesus, for example, ordered his disciples to provide him with a donkey on which he could ride into Jerusalem, in fulfillment of the biblical prophecy: "All this was done," explains Matthew in his Gospel, "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet [Zechariah], saying:

‘Tell ye the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.’³⁷ In a similar vein, Shlomo Molcho, a sixteenth-century kabbalist who believed he was destined to be the messiah, sat for a month at the gates of Rome in the company of lepers and other outcasts, since the Midrash maintains that such will be the act of the future redeemer.³⁸

Indeed, one searching for a blueprint for the recognition of the Jewish messiah will have no trouble finding it: It is outlined in Maimonides’s majestic work *Mishneh Torah* (“The Second Law”), considered the most authoritative source on Jewish messianism.³⁹ Near the end of the section dealing with the laws of kings, he writes:

If there arise a king from the house of David who meditates on the Torah, occupies himself with the commandments, as did his ancestor David, observes the precepts prescribed in the written and the oral law, prevails upon Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and repair its breaches, and fights the wars of the Lord, it may be assumed that he is the messiah. If he does these things and succeeds, rebuilds the sanctuary on its site, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is beyond all doubt the messiah. [He will prepare the whole world to serve the Lord with one accord, as it is written: “For then will I turn to the peoples in a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve him with one consent” (Zephaniah 3:9).]⁴⁰

This text is of the utmost importance to Chabad. Maimonides’s stipulations are mentioned numerous times by the Rebbe in his speeches as well as in various Chabad publications issued both before and after his death.⁴¹ It seems fair to conclude that the Rebbe made a conscious effort to conduct himself and his movement in accordance with the “instructions” given in the *Mishneh Torah*, believing that doing so would both fulfill his messianic destiny and validate it in the eyes of his own community and the entire world.

The first Maimonidean requirement, that the messiah be a “king from the house of David,” posed no problems for Chabad: The Rebbe was

indeed believed to be a descendant of King David through Judah Loew ben Bezalel, a famous sixteenth-century rabbi (better known as “the Maharal of Prague”),⁴² and his followers clearly saw him as the leader of the Jewish people in his generation—making him, in their eyes, a “king.”⁴³ They further believed that the Rebbe was superior to the leaders of all other hasidic sects, since Chabad is the true heir to the Baal Shem Tov’s tradition, and thus the “ideal,” or authentic, form of Judaism.⁴⁴ This elevated self-image was evident, for instance, in the Rebbe’s condescending attitude toward other prominent Jewish figures: He refused to visit any of them, irrespective of their stature; those who wished to meet with him were required to make a pilgrimage to his famous residence, 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.⁴⁵

Maimonides further held that the messiah “prevails upon Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and repair its breaches.” This passage appears to have inspired one of Chabad’s most ambitious projects: its global missionary campaign. The Rebbe, believing himself to be the shepherd of the Jewish people and thus responsible for guiding it in the “way of the Torah,” sent his followers across the globe equipped with kosher meals, tefillin, copies of *Tanya* (“It Was Taught”; the central text of Chabad Hasidism), and boundless enthusiasm. They were tasked with reaching out to every Jew they encountered and spreading Chabad’s message to the masses. The hasidim were expected to demonstrate profound devotion to the Rebbe, to the point of self-negation. This obeisance, it was believed, turned them into vessels filled with their leader’s essence, thus enabling the Rebbe to spread himself over the entire world.

The same passage from the *Mishneh Torah* also serves as the source of Chabad’s famous “Mitzvah Campaigns,” in which Lubavitchers are sent to cities around the world with the aim of convincing as many Jews as possible to perform various rituals and commandments, or *mitzvot*. During the early decades of his leadership, the Rebbe focused on promoting the mitzvot associated with Jewish holidays: Lubavitcher missionaries conduct mass Passover seders—mostly for Israeli tourists—in far-flung places like

Thailand and Nepal, and on Sukkot, the Rebbe would send his followers out with instructions to encourage Jews to engage in the ritual of *netilat lulav* (“shaking the palm branch”). Then, in the late 1960s, he decided that his efforts had not accomplished enough. He decreed that Chabad should begin promoting the observance of the daily commandments as well, and initiate various educational projects. Soon, his emissaries had set up camp in public spaces, inviting Jewish passersby to don tefillin, to light candles on the Sabbath, and to study Torah.⁴⁶ This approach was unique, to say the least, among other Orthodox Jewish sects, and not surprisingly it was harshly denounced by them.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, these campaigns must be credited with ushering in a wave of *chazara bitshuva* (“returning” to the religious lifestyle) among secular Jews—which, in turn, swelled the ranks of Chabad itself.⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, the Rebbe’s motives in launching such a grand venture were pure. Nevertheless, these efforts were clearly accompanied by the willingness—and the desire—to act as a messiah would.

Maimonides’s messianic criteria, however, also required the Rebbe to fight the “wars of the Lord.” Traditional Judaism generally concurs that Maimonides assumed the messiah would be a political sovereign, and was thus referring to “wars” in the literal sense of the word. Yet Chabad reinterpreted this concept, claiming it was fulfilled by the Rebbe’s missionary activities. It is clear, then, why the Rebbe took care to use explicitly military terminology to describe Chabad’s massive projects: His emissaries were sent on “campaigns,” for example, and their vehicles were called “mitzvah tanks.” This rhetoric was most pronounced when the activities involved children. For instance, the Rebbe established a youth movement in 1980 called Tzivos Hashem, “The Armies of God,” in which youth were taught to act as disciplined soldiers “armed” with the mitzvot.⁴⁹ His followers believed that the purpose of this “mighty army” of pre-adolescents was to defeat “the *yetzer hara* [the evil inclination] and to eradicate it entirely from this world. This army was to subdue entirely the devil that stalls the coming of the messiah and the redemption of Israel.”⁵⁰ At movement gatherings, Lubavitcher children chanted, “Who are we?

The armies of God! / What is our goal? To fight! / Who? What? The yetzer hara! / What will we draw near? The redemption!”

The Rebbe’s use of military metaphor helped to consolidate his followers’ belief that he was at the front lines of the “wars of the Lord,” thus fulfilling one of Maimonides’s most important messianic requirements.⁵¹ Yet the *Mishneh Torah* insisted not merely that the messiah would wage war, but also that he would *win*: To fulfill his divine destiny, Maimonides states, the savior must “subdue” the surrounding nations. This demand was the impetus for yet another, even more grandiose endeavor: “The Seven Noahide Laws Campaign,” launched in 1983.⁵²

The goal of this effort was to encourage non-Jews to follow the Seven Noahide Laws described in the book of Genesis, forbidding idolatry, blasphemy, incest, adultery, theft, murder, and the eating of meat taken from a living animal; these laws also require the establishment of a just legal system.⁵³ In the past, the Rebbe explained, the Jews were unable to urge their neighbors to follow the Noahide Laws for fear of reprisal. Now, however, such persuasion not only was possible, but might actually *elevate* the world’s opinion of the Jewish people.⁵⁴ Indeed, the Rebbe viewed the fact that Jewish missionary work was no longer dangerous as a messianic sign. He believed that non-Jews’ observance of the Noahide Laws would affirm their recognition of God’s kingship, just as it would attest to the divine mission of God’s messenger, the messiah. Such a feat would thus constitute a “complete victory” over these nations, hastening, if not actually bringing about, the redemption.⁵⁵

Perhaps Chabad’s greatest accomplishment in this context was the enactment, in 1978, of “Education and Sharing Day” by the United States Congress in honor of the Rebbe’s birthday. This truly remarkable achievement demonstrated the full extent of the Rebbe’s influence. What’s more, the bill cited the Seven Noahide Laws as a model for the ethical principles of civilized society. Unsurprisingly, the Lubavitchers interpreted this gesture as the realization of Maimonides’s requirement that the messiah “prepare the whole world to serve the Lord with one accord.”⁵⁶

As further proof of their leader's global influence, Lubavitchers also gave the Rebbe—who had been particularly active in the public struggle on behalf of Soviet Jewry—credit for the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent waves of mass Jewish emigration. They saw this turn of events as the fulfillment of Maimonides's stipulation that the messiah must gather "the dispersed of Israel"—although, it should be noted, the Rebbe did not encourage the newly freed Jews to make *aliya* to Israel. Rather, he demanded only their release from the vise of atheistic communism, which had forced them either to abandon their Jewish identity or to conceal it. The Rebbe even criticized the Israeli government for portraying the struggle for Soviet Jewry as a Zionist issue, thus (he argued) delaying their release. By contrast, he had no problem with the Soviet Jews' emigration to America, often referring to the United States as a "benevolent kingship."⁵⁷

Maimonides's claim that the messiah must rebuild the "sanctuary on its site" would seem to be an insurmountable obstacle for those determined to believe in the Rebbe's messianic status. The reason is obvious: He did not rebuild the Temple. Yet Chabad once again brought its creative interpretive powers to bear on the *Mishneh Torah*, the results of which were published in a 1991 pamphlet titled "The Lesser Sanctuary Is the House of Our Rabbi in Babylon."⁵⁸ Here the Rebbe was quoted as saying that ever since the shechina removed itself from the Jewish people, it has resided in the home of each generation's leader, which constitutes the "*primary* lesser sanctuary that God provides for Israel during the exile in place of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem."⁵⁹ In other words, the divine presence resides at 770 Eastern Parkway, Menachem Mendel Schneerson's home. According to the Rebbe, the divine presence there "*is more exalted* than the divine presence in other synagogues and houses of study," because it is a "very special (unique and singular) place that is a substitute for the Temple in Jerusalem... which holds the *essence* of the divine emanation and presence."⁶⁰ He goes on to explain that at the time of the redemption, "the divine presence will return to Jerusalem and will not remain where Israel was in exile... because the

'lesser sanctuary' will be uprooted from this place and relocated to the Land of Israel, to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem."⁶¹ The Rebbe then turns to the *Mishneh Torah*, saying,

Perhaps it is right to say that there is an implicit meaning in Maimonides's statement (in the Laws of the King Messiah), "He rebuilds the sanctuary *on its site*," which seems to ask: What is the purpose of stating here that the sanctuary will be rebuilt *on its site*...? Why doesn't he expressly name the site, [saying] "and he will rebuild the sanctuary in Jerusalem"? Since "on its site" also implies the site of the king messiah during the exile... this implies that while he is in *exile* (where he sits in waiting and anticipation to redeem Israel as well as the divine indwelling [shechina] from exile), the king messiah builds a lesser sanctuary, which is in the form and likeness of the Temple in Jerusalem.⁶²

Put simply, the home of the "leader of his generation" is the dwelling place of the divine presence, and the lesser sanctuary "rebuilt" by the messiah in exile. As if this were not clear enough, the Rebbe restates, "Our rebbe, the leader of the generation, is also the messiah (the redeemer of Israel) of the generation, like Moses," and "the house of our Rebbe in Babylon' *of this generation* is the house [synagogue and *beit midrash*, or house of study] of his honor and holiness, my teacher and father-in-law the Rebbe, the leader of our generation."⁶³ And finally, for the benefit of anyone who might still harbor doubts as to which house—or which leader—he is referring, the Rebbe explains, "the house's number is 770."⁶⁴ As David Berger shows in his book *The Rebbe*, this explanation was more than satisfactory for the Lubavitchers. Berger cites a letter sent by Chabad activist Rabbi Shmuel Butman, chairman of the International Campaign to Bring the Messiah, to *Jewish Action*, the official journal of the Orthodox Union in the United States, stating, "Maimonides's requirement that the messiah build the Temple in its place really means, at least in the initial stage, 'in *his* place' and was consequently met by the renovation of 770 Eastern Parkway (the headquarters of the Lubavitch movement)."⁶⁵

Outside observers may be somewhat astonished by the liberties the Rebbe and his followers took with their interpretation of the *Mishneh Torah*. From the perspective of the Lubavitchers, however, there were no doubts whatsoever: Maimonides's conditions for identifying the redeemer had been met. The messiah was alive and living in New York.

V

Despite the wealth of evidence indicating the degree to which Chabad was conditioned, by both theology and activism, for the ultimate revelation that its leader was the messiah, some refuse to accept that the Rebbe himself really believed as much. To be sure, if one sought a written or a recorded statement by the Rebbe explicitly declaring his messianic status, he would be hard-pressed to find one.⁶⁶ Yet it must be borne in mind that such an expectation fails to consider the peculiar dynamics of communication in closed societies, of which Chabad is certainly one.

Closed societies and cults, especially those based on esoteric religious doctrines, tend to develop unique forms of communication in which some, if not many, things are left unsaid or merely implied. More frequently, ideas and opinions are conveyed through elaborate social codes, small details, added or omitted words, physical gestures, decorations, clothing, or the use of color—all things, in other words, that outside observers would easily overlook, but that initiates register immediately. Members of such groups are especially attuned to signals from their leader, even if these signs have never been formally established in speech or in writing. In fact, an explicit statement may well *detract* from the magnitude of an implicit secret. It was never necessary, therefore, for the Lubavitcher Rebbe actually to declare himself the messiah: His followers had been so conditioned, and were so

prepared, to believe this to be the case that a mere half-smile at the mention of the word “messiah” was enough to ignite their passions and galvanize them for yet another missionary campaign.

But the Rebbe went much farther than mere half-smiles. Both before and after he suffered a major stroke in 1992, he encouraged his followers to refer to him as “messiah” in his presence. One striking example should suffice: In 1991, during the holiday of Shavuot, Chabad held a *farbrengen*, a Yiddish word used to describe a gathering of hasidim with their rebbe. Among the attendees was Rabbi David Nachshon, the current CEO of Chabad Mitzvah Mobiles. Nachshon presented the Rebbe with a bottle of wine, and announced to all gathered that the bottle would be consumed “the following Sabbath, during the farbrengen with our righteous messiah at the Temple in Jerusalem.” Nachshon then began chanting “yehi adonenu” (“long live our master”) as the crowd joined in. Smiling throughout, the Rebbe waved his hands, whipping those present into a frenzy.⁶⁷

The Rebbe also dropped hints of his true calling in his speeches, as we saw above. One such hint was his frequent use of the Hebrew adverb *mamash* (“really” or “very”) in a way that those outside of Chabad’s inner circles would find difficult to understand. For example, on January 16, 1970, at a ceremony marking the completion of a Torah scroll “to receive our righteous messiah,” the Rebbe stated,

In practice, we have completed the Torah scroll, which my teacher and father-in-law, the Rebbe [Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok] named ‘the scroll of the messiah’ *Bekarov mamash* [“very soon”] we will witness the arrival of our righteous redeemer... bekarov mamash, when each and every person completes his charge... and with this scroll we will greet our righteous redeemer... bekarov mamash.⁶⁸

To those in the Rebbe’s inner circle, the seemingly innocuous term *mamash* had taken on two additional, esoteric meanings: It was considered an acronym for both *Mashiach Menachem Shmo* (“the messiah, Menachem is

his name”) and the Rebbe’s own name, *Menachem Mendel Schneerson*.⁶⁹ In other words, when the Rebbe said that the redeemer would come “bekarov mamash,” he was signaling to his followers not only that the messiah would arrive “very soon,” but also that he himself *was* the messiah. We also see these additional layers of meanings in a statement made by the Rebbe during one of his farbrengens in 1992, in which he claimed that

The true and complete redemption of our righteous redeemer will arrive *mamash*, immediately *mamash*... so it will really happen *mamash*, and *miyad* [“immediately”] *mamash*, with all the meanings of *miyad* (including the acronyms from all the generations: Moses, Israel [the Baal Shem Tov], and David [the kingly messiah]),⁷⁰ and all of the meanings found in “*mamash*,” first and foremost among them the *literal* meaning of *miyad mamash: mamash mamash mamash*.⁷¹

Here the Rebbe makes clear that the word “mamash” must be understood in *all* its possible meanings—including the one that points to the Rebbe himself as the messiah.

Another strong indication of the Rebbe’s belief in his own messianic destiny can be found in his many references to his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe. Sometimes, Menachem Mendel was indeed speaking of his predecessor. On numerous other occasions, however, he spoke about the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe *while actually referring to himself*, a cryptic reference that was well-known to his inner circle.⁷² The importance of this substitution becomes clear in light of the Rebbe’s frequent declarations that his predecessor was the messiah. In 1990, for example, he stated,

Following the announcement of his honor and holiness, my teacher and father-in-law, the rebbe and leader of our generation, messiah of our generation, that all of the work has been completed and accomplished and [we] are prepared to greet our righteous messiah, at the present time... all obstacles and hindrances have been removed. As such, the messiah [not

only exists, but in fact] is also already revealed. All we have to do now is to welcome the righteous messiah in actuality *mamash!*⁷³

Here the Rebbe makes two seemingly contradictory claims: first, that his father-in-law is the “messiah of our generation,” and second, that the messiah has already been “revealed” to the world. Given that the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe died in 1950, these two statements make sense only if the Rebbe was really referring to himself.

In his book *The Seventh*, Rabbi Yitzhak Kraus offers a similar example. According to Kraus, the Rebbe was enthusiastic about the February 1, 1992 Camp David summit between Presidents George H.W. Bush and Boris Yeltsin, which focused on nuclear disarmament. The Rebbe believed the summit was a direct result of “activities for spreading Torah and Judaism, righteousness and honesty in the entire world, which have been and continue to be directed by the leader of our generation, the messiah of our generation.”⁷⁴ Kraus noted that the Rebbe, as was his custom, “attributes all of his activities to his father-in-law, the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe.”⁷⁵ But an alternative explanation for this statement is that the Rebbe was in truth crediting himself with these accomplishments in the same metonymic language he had used in similar circumstances. Kraus further wrote that, during the same conversation, the Rebbe emphasized,

We are at the “climactic moment” . . . of the coming of our righteous messiah. “Here it (the king messiah) comes.” We are already witnessing the beginning of his influence on the nations. “And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares”—in this way God allows the kings of the nations (“the hearts of kings and ministers are in the hands of God”) to decide and declare the occasion and the condition of “and they shall beat their swords into plowshares.” And this is the reason why this decision and declaration was made precisely at this time—because of its particular relation to the true and full redemption by our righteous messiah in actuality *mamash*.⁷⁶

Once one understands the esoteric meanings of the particular terms the Rebbe chooses to employ, the message he seeks to convey becomes clear. And indeed, the Rebbe went so far as to attribute the messianic developments taking place “at this time” to a 1991 halachic ruling signed by dozens of rabbis on Shavuot, which demanded of God that he bring about the redemption and declared unequivocally that the Rebbe was his messiah.⁷⁷ Alon Dahan emphasizes that the Rebbe ordered his “emissaries to read this halachic ruling at the graves of the Lubavitcher rebbes in Russia, and he himself read it at the grave of the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, so it is difficult to assume that he had neglected to notice the ‘insignificant detail’ that his name was listed at the head of the page as the most fitting candidate to act as messiah.”⁷⁸

As we have seen, the Rebbe lived in an extremely intense eschatological frame of mind: He believed he was destined to be revealed as the messiah and redeem the world. Nonetheless, he waited for that unambiguous, providential sign that would grant him public legitimacy, secure in the belief that it would come at any moment. Time after time, he emphasized in his lectures the possibility that only *one more* action was needed, only *one more* Jew had to be touched by halacha, and all of humanity would cross the threshold of the messianic era.⁷⁹ Nadav Shnerb, a national-religious columnist, has provided an apt metaphor for Chabad’s messianic vigilance: It is as though, he maintained, the drill has stalled less than an inch away from the oil deposit, and “if we could only break through the crust, we would witness an outburst of all that is good and cherished in the essence of the Jewish people.”⁸⁰ Of course, the belief that salvation is imminent does not only sustain messianic tension; it also increases and intensifies it. True believers nurture a burning hope that their very next action might bring about the long-awaited redemption. Yet, to their mounting frustration, the redemption never arrives. And so the wait continues. Faced with such unrelenting tension, their souls threaten to burst. Yet they dare not forsake their dream for fear that the moment they do, the savior will be

publicly revealed, and they will lose their place in the front rows of the heavenly *beit midrash*.

For the Rebbe, the struggle was intensely personal; not surprisingly, then, it exacted a considerable emotional price. In fact, it was not uncommon for the Rebbe to break down in tears when speaking of the imminent redemption. These emotional outbursts culminated in an impromptu speech delivered on the night of April 12, 1991: After beginning with a relatively calm discussion of the significance of the month of Nisan as the time of salvation, the Rebbe suddenly cried out:

Following what we have just said regarding the particular emphasis on redemption (especially) at this time, a great puzzlement arises: *How is it possible that despite all that has transpired and all that has been done, the messiah has still not come? ... This is utterly incomprehensible!*

And another puzzlement: When ten Jews gather together (or many dozens of them), during a time that is fitting for the redemption, and nevertheless they do not hurry to act to bring the messiah immediately, and they do not find it absurd that our righteous savior will not arrive tonight, nor will he arrive tomorrow, nor will he arrive in two days—God help us!

Even when we shout, “How much longer?” it is only because of the commandment to do so, for if we *truly* had proper devotion and appealed and demanded, surely the messiah would already have come!

What more can I do? I have done all I can so that the Jewish people will truly demand and clamor for the redemption, for all that was done so far *was not enough*, and the proof is that we are still in exile and, more importantly, we are still in internal exile from the worship of God.

The only thing that remains for me to do is to give over the matter to you. *Do all that is in your power* to achieve this thing—a most sublime and transcendent light that needs to be brought down into our world with pragmatic tools—to *bring the righteous messiah, immediately mamash!*

May it be God’s will that, finally, ten Jews will arise who will “insist” that they must plead to God, and of course they will plead to God—as it is written “For it is a stiff-necked people... (and therefore) pardon our

iniquity and our sin, and take us for thy inheritance”—in order to bring about the true and complete redemption immediately *mamash*.

In order to further hasten and hurry [the redemption] through my actions—I will further entrust each and every one of you with a mission to serve as emissaries in regards to the mitzvah to give charity, because “Great is charity for it draws redemption nearer.”⁸¹

I have done my part. From this point on, all is in your hands.⁸²

At first, the Rebbe’s audience took his words as an admission of failure.⁸⁴ It appeared, after all, as though he had finally resigned himself to his inability to bring about the redemption, and had chosen instead to bequeath the task to his followers, or perhaps to the coming generations, in the hope that they would succeed where he had not. In this rare moment of sober reflection, the Rebbe had seemingly gone so far as to question Chabad’s messianic expectations, or at the very least the possibility of their realization. As is often the case with messianic movements, however, the dread of looming failure only *increases* the passion and motivation of the believers. And indeed, after the initial shock had worn off, Chabad commenced a flurry of renewed, reinvigorated activism whose goal was “Messiah Now.” By far the boldest of these undertakings was the publication of the halachic declaration mentioned above, which expressed Chabad’s conviction that, so far as the messiah is concerned, “If you decree it, he will come.”

Less than a year later, on March 2, 1992, the Rebbe suffered a massive stroke.⁸⁴ He survived but lost the use of both legs, his right hand, and, most devastating of all, his voice. The Rebbe’s followers were not dispirited, however. The majority of them simply assumed that God was testing their faith, and that redemption was closer than ever.⁸⁵ Then, two years later, the worst happened: On June 12, 1994, the Rebbe passed away. Yet this time, too, many Lubavitchers quickly established that their leader’s death was merely the final “trial” before the redemption.⁸⁶

To this day, most Lubavitchers refuse to accept the Rebbe’s demise, explaining it as an incomprehensible mystery, a *hester panim*, or “hiding of

[God's] face." The precise status of the Rebbe is a matter of intense debate within the ranks of Chabad: The majority of Lubavitchers insist that the Rebbe is now in a state of *healem gamur* ("complete concealment"), hidden from the world "like an crescent moon"—implying that the Rebbe, like the celestial body, will eventually reveal himself once again. A minority faction is of the opinion that the Rebbe continues to walk among us, and there are even those who swear they have caught a glimpse of him on one occasion or another.⁸⁷ Either way, anyone who believes the Rebbe was in fact the messiah will insist that he did not pass away, but rather that he only *appeared* to die.⁸⁸ This claim is based on the belief that the messiah will live forever⁹⁰—something the Rebbe repeatedly emphasized—as well as the on the desire to distance Chabad from the Christian doctrine concerning the messiah's death and subsequent resurrection.⁹⁰

Still, in light of the Rebbe's promise to bring about the redemption, the movement remains at a loss to explain *why* said event has not occurred. Some Lubavitchers have admitted as much: "From the time of this announcement [that the Rebbe made on January 24, 1992, in which he explained that all the preparations had been completed and that all that remained was to greet the messiah]⁹¹ of the completion of the work of the exile, every moment that the redemption is postponed is truly a mystery to which we can provide no explanation, cause, or reason. This fact is utterly incomprehensible!"⁹² Yet though he may tarry, the messiah's followers are not discouraged. The wait, they believe, will have been well worth it.⁹³

VI

Ultimately, the personal story of the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, as well as that of the Chabad movement as a whole, is in many ways a tragic tale. All evidence points to the fact that the Rebbe truly believed

he was destined to be the messiah, and that he had, moreover, fulfilled the requirements necessary to be seen as what Maimonides called *behezkat moshiach*—someone who has at least the *potential* to become the savior on the basis of his accomplishments.⁹⁴ He and his followers did everything in their power to realize these messianic hopes—and the results were unquestionably impressive. In spite of all their efforts, however, the Rebbe never received the heavenly sign that would reveal his true calling to the world. He prayed, he exhorted, and he waited, but in the end, it was all for naught. The man who would be king was destined to spend his last months trapped in a broken body, watching as his minions danced around him, singing ecstatically, “Forever live our master, our teacher, our rebbe, the king messiah!”

The Lubavitchers continue to dance and sing to this day. And if the Rebbe shied away from explicit declarations, his leaderless followers have long since thrown caution to the wind, openly proclaiming him the messiah. True, some have experienced a painful awakening. The majority of them, however, refuse to abandon their dream.

To the outside observer, this phenomenon may seem almost incomprehensible. Yet it must be remembered that the messianic impulse is one of the most powerful forces in the history of mankind. Indeed, the Jewish people—which introduced this drive to the world—owes it no small debt of gratitude. The ardent secularist David Ben-Gurion probably went too far when he claimed that messianism was “one of the main causes of the existence of the Jewish people,” but his point is well taken.⁹⁵ Of course, while it is true that the messianic idea can motivate both individuals and nations to work toward improving the world, it can also sow destruction and devastation. It is as dangerous as it is productive; it is an article of faith, but also an open door to heresy. Judaism learned this painful lesson more than once, from the catastrophic rebellion against Rome led by Shimon Bar Kochba—believed by many, including R. Akiva himself, to be the messiah—to the disastrous aftermath of Shabtai Tzvi’s conversion to Islam.

Indeed, while Judaism may have given birth to the messianic idea, history shows that every time this ideal manifests itself in the flesh, it eventually results in the creation of an entirely new religion. The power of messianism is so turbulent, and its impact on theology and religious practice so acute, that those caught up in its wake are usually unable to hold on to their Jewish identity. Invariably they are drawn away from it, or else reject it outright. In some instances, such as the Bar Kochba revolt, messianic fervor led to military disaster. More often, however, the primary casualty is halacha, which falls victim to vulgar messianic manipulations, or—as in the case of Christianity—is erased altogether. Paradoxically, then, it would seem that the quickest way out of Judaism is an excessively zealous espousal of one of its most fundamental principles.

Undoubtedly, Chabad's explicit messianism renders it an atypical sect of contemporary Judaism. As we have seen, some critics have already gone so far as to label it a separate religion. The death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and his followers' concomitant refusal to renounce the hopes they placed in him by naming a successor have only widened this rift.⁹⁶ The reason for this is obvious: The idea of a dead and then resurrected messiah is hardly new; it was adopted by a religion with which Judaism has been contending for two thousand years. This naturally raises the question: Will Chabad continue in its current path and, like Christianity, ultimately sever itself from the main body of Judaism?

At present, it is impossible to say. On the one hand, values such as reason and prudence are at the heart of the Chabad tradition, whose very name is an acronym of *hochma*, *bina*, and *daat* ("wisdom," "understanding," and "knowledge"). Yet such sober ideals can find it difficult to compete with the enthusiasm generated by eschatological expectations. The simple fact that those overcome with the messianic drive are louder and generally more active than their more moderate peers makes it probable that *they* will be the ones to shape Chabad's future. The outcome of such a development would be to the detriment of not only Chabad, but all of Judaism, which stands to

lose one of the most extraordinary movements it has produced in modern times. For this reason, everyone—even the unbelievers among us—should pray that this does not come to pass.

Tomer Persico is a researcher in the field of religious studies.

Notes

1. For more on this issue, as well as on the theological intimations included in the eulogies for the victims of the attack, see Avishai Ben-Haim, “Sanctifying God’s Name Through Death? Not Enough,” *nrg Maariv*, December 28, 2008, www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/831/694.html [Hebrew].

2. It is difficult to obtain accurate information on the size of the Chabad movement, as the definition of membership is somewhat amorphous. According to rough estimates, the movement has between 40,000 to 50,000 followers. Considering that Chabad had only a few thousand adherents when Menachem Mendel Schneerson became its leader, these estimates give a good indication of the enormous impact he had on the movement.

3. Avishai Ben-Haim, “Rabbi Shach: Is He Really the Outstanding Rabbi of the Generation?” *Ynet*, November 2, 2001, www.ynet.co.il/articles/1,7340,L-1268268,00.html [Hebrew].

4. Quoted by Alon Dahan, “‘A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms’: The Messianic Doctrine of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson (The Lubavitcher Rebbe),” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006), p. 245, note 161 [Hebrew]. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef’s declaration was made in response to Schneerson’s claim that the Chabad Rebbe (i.e., himself) is the “substance and essence” of God. See Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot/Collected Talks*, vol. 2 (Brooklyn: Karnei Hod Hatorah, 5752), p. 511 [Hebrew]. In addition, there is an audio recording from the 1960s in which the Rebbe can be heard singing Psalms 63:3, “To see

your power and your glory, as I have seen you in the sanctuary,” to which he then adds, “to see *my* power and *my* glory” (emphasis mine). However, that the Rebbe’s “substance and essence” remark must be viewed in the light of hasidic theology in general and Chabad mysticism in particular in order to be properly understood; those familiar with both these complicated traditions will realize that the Rebbe did *not* identify himself simplistically with God, as a superficial interpretation of his statement might lead one to believe.

5. David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), pp. 81-83. In this context it is worth mentioning several websites critical of Chabad messianism, such as www.FailedMessiah.com, edited by Shmarya Rosenberg (who was subsequently banished from Chabad for his writings), as well as <http://moshiachtalk.tripod.com>, by Orthodox rabbi Gil Student, who offers proofs that the Rebbe was not the messiah. See Gil Student, *Can the Rebbe Be Moshiach? Proofs from Gemara, Midrash, and Rambam that the Rebbe, zt”l, Cannot Be Moshiach* (Boca Raton, Fla.: Universal, 2002).

6. See Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening, 5750*, part 4 (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanachos, 1993), pp. 325-331 [Hebrew]. Here, the Rebbe refers to the Chabad custom of not sleeping in the sukka, and declares that whoever objects to this custom is an “*instigator of quarrel* and one who injects *disagreement and hatred* into the Jewish people” (emphasis in original). The Rebbe adds, “Such a Jew is not a ‘learned person of Torah,’” and is in fact “fighting the war of the S.M. [Samael, the Devil] against halacha,” and “delays redemption by our righteous messiah.” The Jew to whom the Rebbe is referring is none other than Rabbi Shach. See the full text at www.otzar770.com, a website containing scanned copies of all the Rebbe’s writings. Chabad’s followers feel a particular malice toward Rabbi Shach. According to a story—most likely fabricated—that is widely circulated within the movement, sometime in the early 1960s, Rabbi Shach wanted to be the head of Tomchei Temimim (“Supporters of the Innocent”)—the central yeshiva of the Israeli town of Kfar Chabad (“Chabad Village”)—but was rejected. Chabad’s youth organization, “The Armies of God,” used to sing a song about Rabbi Shach whose last verse was “The sacred Tomchei Temimim / Shach wished to be its head / and was shamefully driven away / due to lack of knowledge / and you shall say death to the *goy* (‘non-Jew’) / Lezer Shach, may his name be forgotten.”

7. This issue has remained unaddressed despite the recent publication of several books on the Rebbe, including Herman Branover, *A Prophet from Your Midst: A Biography of the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (Kfar Chabad: M.M.S., 2006) [Hebrew], and Yitzhak Kraus, *The Seventh: Messianism in the Last Generation of Chabad* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2007) [Hebrew]. The former is pure hagiography, while the latter is an academic analysis of the Rebbe’s messianic reflections. Surprisingly, both books avoid the question of whether the Rebbe himself believed he was the messiah

and encouraged others to believe it as well. This avoidance serves to reinforce the false impression that the eruption of messianic faith among his followers was not encouraged by the Rebbe, let alone orchestrated by him.

8. In its original sense, this hasidic-kabbalistic expression refers to two types of redemptive awakenings among its members: *itaruta deletata* and *itaruta del'eila* (“awakening from below” and “awakening from above”). Originally, the first type of awakening was believed to have been initiated by believers, and the second by God.

9. See Menachem Friedman, “Messiah and Messianism in Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidism,” in David Ariel-Yoel et al., eds., *The War of Gog and Magog: Messianism and Apocalypse in Judaism—In the Past and Present* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2001), pp. 174-229 [Hebrew]. The article appears online at www.biu.ac.il/SOC/so/Chabad-Mashi'ach.pdf.

10. Letter from Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, to Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter Magor, quoted in Friedman, “Messiah and Messianism,” p. 189.

11. The story of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok’s rescue from Europe would make for a good suspense novel, and is documented in Bryan Mark Rigg’s book *Rescued from the Reich: How One of Hitler’s Soldiers Saved the Lubavitcher Rebbe* (New Haven: Yale, 2004). In order to smuggle him out of occupied Warsaw in 1940, the rebbe’s followers pressured U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who in turn pressured American officials with connections to German officers in Poland. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of German intelligence, coordinated the operation, and sent Ernst Bloch, an outstanding (and part-Jewish) Wehrmacht officer to search for the rebbe and bring him to safety.

12. See Dahan, “Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” p. 23.

13. Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson, “The Truth About the Present Jewish Disaster,” *Reading and Holiness* 9 (June 1941), p. 7.

14. The Rebbe addresses the significance of “polishing the buttons” in a talk given on January 13, 1987. It can be viewed at www.chabad.org/multimedia/livingtorah_cdo/aid/604933/jewish/Polishing-the-Buttons.htm.

15. See Avirama Golan, “Messiah of Flesh and Blood,” *Haaretz*, February 11, 2007, in which she interviews Menachem Friedman, who discovered these facts through meticulous research. The article is available online at www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=824394.

16. Friedman, “Messiah and Messianism,” p. 219. Alon Dahan, however, rejects this idea. He also reveals that after the death of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok and prior to Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s assumption of Chabad’s leadership, the latter

took it upon himself to learn two tractates, one for himself and one for the former rebbe, who was “about to merge into him.” Menachem Mendel likely believed this “merging” was necessary in order to guarantee that there would be ten hasidic leaders between himself and the Baal Shem Tov, ten being a number of great messianic significance. This illustrates not only the degree of intimacy between Menachem Mendel and his predecessor, but also the extent to which messianism permeated his consciousness even before he assumed leadership of Chabad. This belief may well be what convinced him that he—and not Rabbi Shmaryahu Gurary—would be the next rebbe. See Alon Dahan, “Inheritance Struggles in Chabad Hasidism,” *Kivunim Hadashim* 17 (January 2008), pp. 213-214 [Hebrew].

17. See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” p. 12.

18. See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” p. 83.

19. Kraus notes, “His writings from the year 1951 have served as the central motif of his teachings, starting from the beginning of his tenure as rebbe up until his last discourse in the year 1992.” Kraus, *Seventh*, p. 35. The entire sermon can be read in Menachem Mendel Schneerson, “Maamar Basi Legani: The First Hasidic Discourse,” in *Basi Legani: Hasidic Discourses*, ed. Uri Kaploun, trans. Sholom B. Wineberg (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1990). The text is available online at www.hebrewbooks.org/15611. The title is a reference to Song of Songs 5:1: “I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice, I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey, I have drunk my wine with my milk. Eat, O dear ones, and drink, drink deep, O loving companions.”

20. Song of Songs Rabba 5:1. Emphasis mine.

21. Schneerson, “Basi Legani,” p. 99.

22. Leviticus Rabba 29:11.

23. Schneerson, “Basi Legani,” p. 87, www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/115098/jewish/Chapter-3.htm.

24. Kraus points out that “the perception of redemption as a deterministic process serves as a crucial element in Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s teachings... consistent with this idea humanity acts, generation after generation, according to the plan, and its zenith—the cosmic redemption—will be manifested in the creations’ recognition of the absolute unity of the creator.” Kraus, *Seventh*, p. 29.

25. According to the kabbalistic teachings of the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, God had to “constrict” or “contract” himself in order to create the space necessary for creation. This is referred to as the *tzimtzum* (“constriction” or “reduction”). The Torah is seen as a manifestation of the heavenly light that emanated into the space vacated by the divine essence. In kabbalistic terms, then, the

Rebbe's insistence on bringing the *primordial* light of the divinity—the essence of God himself—into the world would be a reversal of the *tzimtzum*. Chabad mysticism, unlike other mystical doctrines—including Luria's—does not see this act as the nullification of the material world and a return to the divinity, but rather as a lowering of the divine presence to Earth, and its unification with worldly reality, for the divine essence yearns for a “dwelling in the lowly realms.” This idea reflects the prominent monistic aspect in Chabad theology, which sees God in everything and views the separation between the divinity and the earthly world as an illusion that will be dispelled when redemption comes. This pantheistic view, which strives for the merger of the Creator and the created as the zenith of the “unity of opposites” (“Coincidentia Oppositorum”), was formulated by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and his brilliant student, Rabbi Aharon Halevi Horowitz from Strashelya. See Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Chabad Hasidim*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Albany: State University of New York, 1993). The Rebbe expanded upon this doctrine, deepening its messianic aspects. See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” pp. 12-27.

26. Chabad defines a “generation” as the duration of each rebbe's leadership.

27. Schneerson, “Basi Legani,” pp. 88-89, www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/115098/jewish/Chapter-3.htm.

28. Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn, known as the hasidic Maharash Rebbe, is the sixth rebbe in the Chabad rabbinical dynasty, which traces itself back to the Baal Shem Tov.

29. Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5711, part 1 (5754), p. 106. For an English translation, see Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Proceeding Together: The Earlier Talks of the Milubavicher Rebbe Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson*, vol. 3 (Tishrei-Teves 5711/1951) (N.Y.: 778 Eastern Parkway, 1999), pp. 161-162. Available at www.sichosinenglish.org/books/proceeding-together-3/17.htm.

30. The Baal Shem Tov sometimes represents the sefira of keter, sometimes the *atik deketer* (“ancient one of the crown”), and on still other occasions the sefira of *hesed* (“compassion”). See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” pp. 201-206. Dahan also notes that according to every counting method, the Rebbe was supposed to be identified not with the sefira of malchut, but rather with the sefira of *yesod* (“foundation”). The reason for this is that the Rebbe was actually the *ninth* generation since the Baal Shem Tov, not the tenth. The Rebbe found an interesting theological solution to this problem: He claimed to have “merged” with his father-in-law, Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn. As a result, the Rebbe was, mystically speaking, two rebbes simultaneously. Dahan explains that this “merging” was necessary in order for Menachem Mendel to embody the sefirah of malchut according to the line of rabbinical succession. See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” pp. 211-214, 256-262. In this way, the Rebbe ensured that his father-in-law, Yosef Yitzchok,

had in effect held the leadership during two sequential periods—first during his life, and then after his death, as a result of his unification with Menachem Mendel. In terms of Chabad mysticism, then, Yosef Yitzchok would be identified with *both* the sefira of *hod* (“sincerity”) and the sefira of *yesod*. His successor, Menachem Mendel, could thus legitimately be identified with the sefira of *malchut*. Dahan writes that “Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s action was unprecedented and bold. The double appointment of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson and, in addition, the simultaneous existence of two generations—the ninth and the tenth—was utterly mystifying. More than once I have asked myself the obvious question: Why did Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson act in such a way? I must admit that I was able to find but one answer: The tenth, *malchut*, generation is the generation of redemption; and one who precedes the time of the tenth generation and at the same time declares that it is currently occurring, simultaneous with the ninth generation, and that two rebbes are serving in parallel—Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson through Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and Menachem Mendel Schneerson himself—is *one who desires to precipitate matters and expedite redemption*. Furthermore, the appointment of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson as leader of the ninth generation turns Menachem Mendel Schneerson into the leader of the tenth generation, and, according to the messianic dynasty model, into the messiah himself.” See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” p. 214 (emphasis mine).

31. In kabbalistic literature it is customary to view the sefirah *malchut* as a symbol of the passive female, which absorbs the plenitude that descends from the male sefirot above it.

32. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sichos in English* vol. 43, Rosh Hashana (5750), part 2, available at www.sichosinenglish.org/books/sichos-in-english/43/01.htm.

33. Chabad Hasidism initially favored reason over emotion. In the *Tanya*, for instance, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi emphasizes that “the brain rules and reigns over the spirit that is in our hearts.” *Tanya: Likkutei Amarim* (Brooklyn: Karnei Hod Torah, 5744), ch. 12, p. 34 [Hebrew]. Under the leadership of Rabbi Shlomo Dovber Schneerson, however, this began to change, mainly as a response to the Lithuanian yeshivas’ emphasis on scholarship, as well as the emergence of the *haskala* and secularization. During this period, Chabad began to place increasing emphasis on the “interiority of the Torah,” that is, the kabbalistic interpretation of the sources, which was considered more important than the plain study of the *halacha*. Gradually, the internal logic of the Kabbala became the only paradigm through which Chabad could perceive reality. The Rebbe’s embrace of the messianic conclusions derived from this logic appears, therefore, to have been inevitable.

34. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Ruskin House, 1930), pp. 102-128. A prominent example of this phenomenon is Gush Emunim, a political and messianic movement that

seeks to establish Jewish settlement in the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria (the modern-day West Bank). In his doctoral thesis on the subject, Gideon Aran writes: “From the long history of the social, religious or political movements that possessed a clear messianic quality, we can infer that, surprisingly, a worldview distinguished by optimistic determinism... is in fact related to radical activism. Obviously, one might assume that absolute knowledge of future events, and the confidence that things will occur in a way that is both necessary and desirable, would lead to a passive inclination—that is, to a calm and inactive anticipation. However, it appears that [deterministic] faith nearly always stimulates decisive action and an attempt to take an active role in the course of events, while crudely violating existing restrictions and harshly imposing new rulings upon the individual and society as a whole.” See Gideon Aran, “From Religious Zionism to a Zionist Religion: The Roots of Gush Emunim and Its Culture” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1987), p. 453 [Hebrew].

35. Berger, *Rebbe*, p. 22.

36. It is not possible here to give a complete analysis of the theological logic that drives Chabad’s widespread missionary activity, but one example may serve: When asked to explain the necessity of worldwide religious activism, the Rebbe quoted a famous letter from the Baal Shem Tov to his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon of Kitov, in which he described a conversation between himself and the messiah. The Baal Shem Tov asked the redeemer, “When will you arrive, sir?” and the messiah replied, “When your wellsprings overflow outward.” The Lubavitchers, viewing themselves as the elite of the hasidic movement (and Judaism as a whole), interpret this answer as a commandment to disseminate their teachings. In accordance with the biblical passage, “And you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south” (Genesis 28:14), their goal is to spread their “seed” over the globe, providing a taste of it to every human being on earth. Although this is an eschatological form of activism, in that it clearly seeks to hasten the redemption, I have chosen in this essay to focus on the specific projects the Rebbe initiated in order to reveal his messianic identity to the world.

37. Matthew 21:4-5. This passage is actually based on a misreading of Zechariah 9:9, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem, behold your king comes to see you, he is just, and victorious; humble, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass.” There are several other incidents described in the Gospels in which Jesus attempts to enact messianic prophecies from the Bible. For example, when he is captured by the Romans, he tells Peter not to resist, saying, “Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?” (Matthew 26:53-54). Jesus’ passivity in the face of arrest is likely based on his expectation that he will thus enact Isaiah’s description of the suffering messiah: “In truth, he has borne

our sickness, and endured our pains, yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded because of our transgressions, bruised because of our iniquities; his sufferings were that we might have peace, and by his injury we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5). Interestingly, some of the Rebbe’s followers quoted the same verses regarding the stroke that left their leader incapacitated. See, for example, *Long Live the King Messiah* (Bnei Brak: The Institute of the Messiah’s Doctrine, 5766), p. 61 [Hebrew], available at www.shluchimcenter.org/kvatzim/yechi.pdf.

38. Sanhedrin 98a, “He [R. Joshua Ben Levi] asked him [Elijah the Prophet]: When will the messiah come? Go ask him yourself, was his reply. [R. Joshua asked:] Where is he sitting? [Answered Elijah:] At the entrance [to Rome]. [R. Joshua asked:] And by what sign may I recognize him? [Answered Elijah:] He is sitting among the poor lepers: All of them untie [their bandages] all at once and rebandage them; whereas he unties and rebandages each separately, [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted, [it being time for my appearance as the messiah] I must not be delayed. So R. Joshua went to the messiah and greeted him: Peace upon you, master and teacher. Peace upon you, O son of Levi he replied. When will you come, master? asked R. Joshua. Today, was his answer. On R. Joshua’s return to Elijah, the latter inquired, What did he say to you? Peace upon you, O son of Levi, he answered. Thereupon he [Elijah] observed: Thereby he assured you and your father of [a portion in] the world to come. He rejoined: He spoke falsely to me, stating that he would come today, but he has not. He [Elijah] answered him, This is what he said: ‘today even, if you will only hearken to his voice’ (Psalms 95:7).” The Lubavitchers assumed that the Rebbe did not venture out of Crown Heights, Brooklyn—and definitely would not make *aliya* to Israel—because he was required to dwell “at the entrance to Rome.” See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” p. 336.

39. In one published discussion with the Rebbe, the notes (approved by him) clarify that Maimonides is the final adjudicator on this matter, and no one is permitted to disagree with him. Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*, part 5 (5749), p. 149, note 51 [Hebrew]. Additional evidence of the vast importance attributed to Maimonides’s opinion on the issue of messianic criteria is a well-known halachic ruling, sanctioned on Shavuot in 1991 by numerous Chabad rabbis, in which they acknowledge that the Rebbe was the messiah. The halachic justification for this ruling was based on Maimonides’s writings. To read the ruling, see www.psakdin.net/en.

Scholar of Jewish thought Aviezer Ravitzky refers to Chabad’s adherence to Maimonides’s halachic rulings as proof that there is no similarity between Chabad messianism and Sabbatianism. He writes, “The laws and the norms of the Torah themselves constitute the laws and norms of the redemption; the messianic process is completely subject to the halachic criteria and guidelines set down by Maimonides in the final section of his *Mishneh Torah*.” See Aviezer Ravitzky,

Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), p. 202.

40. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Their Wars 11:4. The sentence in brackets appears in this place in the censored version. In the complete text, it appears slightly later. Regarding the statement itself, it is not surprising that Chabad embraced a messianic vision in which “the world goes on its usual way.” According to the Rebbe’s interpretation, Maimonides’s writings refer only to the era *preceding* the messiah’s arrival. After the redemption, the Rebbe claimed, the laws of nature will change—a development that Maimonides does not take into account in the above-mentioned text.

41. See, for instance, Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*, part 18 (5750), pp. 276-284, in which the Rebbe examines Maimonides’s rulings in detail. For an example of a Chabad publication on *Mishneh Torah* that came out before the Rebbe’s death, see the halachic ruling discussed in note 39, above. For an example of a publication that came out afterward, see *Long Live the King Messiah*, pp. 13-14 and 42-58, which describe Maimonides’s messianic criteria and explain how they were fulfilled by the Rebbe.

42. See Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” p. 221, note 76.

43. The claim of the Rebbe’s “kingship” is based on the belief that he embodied the sefira of malchut, which rules this world. Berger points out in reference to this claim that “by ‘king,’ Maimonides surely meant a temporal ruler with genuine powers of compulsion who fought real wars, not someone who is king only by virtue of the rabbinic dictum that rabbis are called kings, nor was Maimonides thinking of a man who persuades a few thousand Jews to observe the Torah and whose battles are fought with ‘mitzvah tanks’ and soldiers belonging to a youth movement named ‘the armies of the Lord.’” Berger, *Rebbe*, p. 9.

44. Dahan explains that “an essential difference between the rebbes of Chabad and the rest of the tzadikim is that both the Chabad rebbes and their followers viewed themselves [the rebbes] as the exclusive leaders of Israel... in their view, the tzaddikim, especially those from Galicia and Poland, do not constitute the general soul of the Jewish people, but only that of their followers... only the rebbes of Chabad absorb the heavenly plenitude.... Chabad perceives itself as the essence of Judaism, and not just as another movement or a stream therein.” Dahan, “A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms,” pp. 238-239.

45. Indeed, when Zalman Shazar, then-president of Israel, wished to meet Menachem Mendel Schneerson, he had to go to the Rebbe’s Crown Heights residence since the Rebbe refused to visit him in the New York hotel in which he was staying. The Rebbe also refused to refer to him as “president” (*nassi* in Hebrew, which also means “prince”), because the Rebbe considered *himself* the only true “prince” of Israel. Not

surprisingly, the page dedicated to Shazar at Chabad's online encyclopedia, Chabadpedia, uses the English transliteration of "president," rather than the Hebrew term, to make clear that his title referred to a strictly mundane office. See www.chabad.info/Chabadpedia/index.php?title=%D7%A9%D7%96%22%D7%A8 [Hebrew].

46. Yaakov Ariel, a professor in the department of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, points out that there was no massive Jewish repentance movement before Chabad embarked on its missionary activism. In the 1950s, the first two emissaries sent to address Jews who were no longer observant were Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. Missionary activities were expanded only as a result of their achievements—about which their leaders were in truth quite ambivalent. Later emissaries, however, were more loyal to the hasidic movement's ideological stance. The success of these enterprises inspired the establishment of the Diaspora Yeshiva in Israel in 1967, headed by Rabbi Mordechai Goldstein. The Ohr Samayach and Aish Hatorah yeshivas appeared shortly afterward, and drew in many of the newly observant during the 1970s. One may conclude, therefore, that Chabad was present at the onset of the modern phenomenon of the "return" to observance by secular Jews. For more on this topic, see Yaakov Ariel's May 21, 2008 lecture at a conference at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev titled, "Kabbala and Contemporary Spiritual Revival: Historical, Sociological and Cultural Perspectives," available as an abstract at http://hsf.bgu.ac.il/cjt/files/SpiritualityConference-Abstracts.htm#Yaakov_Ariel.

47. For example, a severe public condemnation was delivered by the Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, in his book *On Redemption and Change* (Brooklyn: Jerusalem Publishing, 1967) [Hebrew]. After the Six Day War, Teitelbaum criticized religious Jews who "drag" after the Zionists and "call out that God has delivered great, mighty miracles" (p. 88). Teitelbaum further declared, "Some observers of the Torah and mitzvot have until now recognized the impurity of Zionism, whose actions and ruses and successes are all but the Devil's acts meant to incite and expel many of the Jewish people, and suddenly they have changed their mind and they speak like typical Zionists and marvel at the success of the wicked" (p. 186). Although the Satmar Rebbe did not mention Chabad or its Rebbe by name, it is clear that he is referring to them: Chabad initially objected to Zionism but later changed its position and came to see the State of Israel as a positive development in the process of redemption. Teitelbaum also referred directly to the mitzvah of tefillin and wondered why his unnamed rivals "specifically focus on [it]," an implicit criticism of Chabad's "mitzvah campaigns." The Rebbe apparently understood Teitelbaum's intentions and replied to the accusations, albeit without mentioning his name, immediately following the release of his book. See Schneerson, *Likutei Sichot*, part 6 (5750), p. 271. More details of the debate can be found in Kraus, *Seventh*, pp. 167-174.

48. One must distinguish between the encouragement of *tshuva* and the “mitzvah campaigns.” The purpose of Chabad’s tefillin stands, for example, is first and foremost to get Jews to perform *one* mitzva, not necessarily to bring them to complete ritual observance, although clearly this is the most desirable outcome. According to Chabad theology, “the act is the main thing,” and the redemption cannot be brought about simply by contemplating the radiance of the divine spirit. Instead, one must perform actual mitzvot and encourage others to do so as well. This is done in order to create a “dwelling in the lowly realms” for God—that is, to bring the divinity into this world. According to the Rebbe, it is the Jewish people’s role to *prepare* this “dwelling,” and no Jew can escape this mission. “There is no doubt,” he said, “that in preparing this home for God in the lower world, all of us need to be involved, and all of the Jewish people, each and every one, needs to fulfill his mission himself.” Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5711, part 1 (5754), p. 213. From this point of view, it is unnecessary and even forbidden to wait for all Jews to repent, because redemption is in any case extremely near. Precisely because salvation is so close, however, it is necessary to convince more and more Jews to perform mitzvot, even if only on random and isolated occasions, because every single mitzvah has the potential to breach the last barrier separating us from redemption. This outlook is obviously influenced by the kabbalistic teachings of Yitzhak Luria, according to which the fulfillment of the mitzvot raises the divine “sparks” confined in the *olam haklipot* (“world of husks”). Only when all of the sparks have been liberated and returned to their divine origin will redemption be attained.

49. The Rebbe described the Four Species, the plants waved together on the holiday of Sukkot, in a particularly militaristic way: “The *etrog* is a sort of ‘bullet’ or ‘shell,’ the *lulav* is like a ‘gun,’ and the *hadass* is like a ‘knife’ and so forth.” Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5744, part 1 (5750), pp. 268-269. Quoted by Kraus, *Seventh*, p. 215.

50. Yosef Hartman, *Education in Chabad Doctrine* (Kfar Chabad: Ohalei Yosef Yitzhak Lubavitch, 5744), p. 323 [Hebrew]. Quoted in Kraus, *Seventh*, p. 206.

51. Berger notes, “A distinguished rabbi has told me that he considers this military terminology, endorsed by the Rebbe himself, to have been motivated by the desire to fulfill the Maimonidean criteria, and I am afraid that he is probably correct.” Berger, *Rebbe*, p. 19.

52. According to Chabad, the Jewish year 5743 (1983), written in Hebrew as ה'תשמ"ג and in English as *tav-shin-gimmel-mem*, is interpreted as *Tehe Shnat Gilui Mashiach*, or “May it be the year the messiah is revealed.”

53. See Sanhedrin 56a.

54. Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5747, part 2 (5750), p. 614.

55. It is important to note, however, that Chabad does not believe that Jews and non-Jews share the same amount of responsibility for bringing the messiah. Ultimately, it is the Jews who will hasten the redemption, both by adhering to the mitzvot and by awakening the messianic consciousness of the Jewish people.

56. The Rebbe stated, “This declaration constitutes an *apparent sign from above* regarding the necessity of this action [teaching non-Jews the Seven Noahide Laws] in these times. Simply put—we are, as stated, at the ‘end of days.’” Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5747, part 3 (5750), p. 68, emphasis in original.

57. The Rebbe used this expression frequently in his writings. For example, in *Farbrengen*, he stated, “In previous generations, the Jews suffered oppression from the Gentile nations in which they lived and in the present generation, the opposite is true. Most Jews live in countries whose governments are generous and assist them in the observance of the Torah and mitzvot, allowing them to carry out the spiritual service that will bring about a personal redemption, which in turn will hasten the coming of the redemption as a whole. Surely, this is true of the country in which we are living. Furthermore, these countries are also granting assistance to Jews in the world at large, helping Jews immigrate to *Eretz Yisrael* (‘The Land of Israel’).” See Schneerson, *Farbrengen / Convening*, 5751, part 3 (5753), p. 188. For an English translation, see Schneerson, *Sichos in English*, vol. 48, “Shabbos Parshas Acharei-Kedoshim, 13th Day of Iyar, 5751,” available at www.sichosinenglish.org/books/sichos-in-english/48/13.htm.

58. *The Lesser Sanctuary Is the House of Our Rabbi in Babylon* (Brooklyn: Otzar Hahasidim, 2004) [Hebrew]. The full Hebrew text of the essay appears online at www.shluchimcenter.org/kvatzim/malchus/2/034.pdf.

59. *Lesser Sanctuary*, p. 399, emphasis in original.

60. *Lesser Sanctuary*, p. 400.

61. *Lesser Sanctuary*, p. 401.

62. At this point, the original text—approved by the Rebbe—mentions the Midrash from tractate Sanhedrin according to which the messiah sits at the entrance to the city of Rome. Chabad interpreted this as referring to New York City, i.e., the Rebbe’s place of residence. See *Lesser Sanctuary*, p. 402, emphasis in original.

63. *Lesser Sanctuary*, pp. 404-405, emphasis in original.

64. *Lesser Sanctuary*, p. 406, emphasis in original. According to Jewish numerology (*gematria*), 770 has the same numerical value as the words “house of the messiah.” The Rebbe noted this in a different discourse.

65. Berger, *Rebbe*, p. 39.

66. The Rebbe's most explicit statement on this subject appears in the quote mentioned on pages 92-93, endnote 32.

67. This was described to me by an eyewitness to the event. The same person also told me of other incidents during which the Rebbe encouraged shouts declaring him the messiah by waving his hands. The witness assured me that the Rebbe's followers had no doubts about the Rebbe's confidence in his messianic destiny, and that this was the motive behind his actions. To view a short film in which the Rebbe encourages the chant "Long live our master!" (*yehi adonenu*), see www.israel613.com/VIDEOS/first-yechi.rm. For an even more egregious clip, filmed after the Rebbe's stroke, see www.israel613.com/VIDEOS/yechi-1kisle5753.rm.

68. Schneerson, *The Collected Book of Essays*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Karnei Hod Hatorah, 5753), p. 97 [Hebrew], quoted at length in Kraus, *Seventh*, pp. 69-70. As stated above, Kraus chose not to tackle the question of the Rebbe's own belief in his messianic status. As a result of this omission, the book suffers from some notable flaws. For example, Kraus ignores the meaning of the term "mamash" as used by the Rebbe.

69. Toward the end of February 1992, a mere week before the Rebbe suffered the stroke that robbed him of his ability to speak, Micha Odenheimer wrote in *Haaretz* about the Rebbe's "implying indiscreetly" that "an unidentified person by the name of Menachem, whose name can be abbreviated as M.M.S. [i.e., "mamash"], and who is the current rabbi and leader of this generation of Lubavitch, may be the messiah whom all are waiting for." Moreover, he had indicated that "flesh and blood in the body of the messiah, whose name is Menachem Our Righteous Messiah, is present with us in the synagogue and in this beit midrash." Micha Odenheimer, "The Days of the Messiah of Chabad," *Haaretz*, February 28, 1992 [Hebrew]. For more on this subject, see Dahan, "A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms," pp. 38, 382-383.

70. The word *miyad* ("immediately") is employed here as an acronym for "Moshe, Yisrael, David," which refers to Moses, the Baal Shem Tov (whose given name was Yisrael Ben-Eliezer), and King David, whose descendant will be the messiah. The same letters can also stand for "Menachem Mendel, Yosef Yitzchok, Dovber"—the last three Chabad rebbes, in reverse order.

71. Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5752, part 2 (5754), p. 282.

72. According to Dahan, "When Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson crowns the 'leader of the generation' as messiah, he may indeed refer to Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson, but it is clear the crowning applies to himself as well, at least in the eyes of his followers." Dahan, "A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms," p. 47, note 24, and p. 178. Kraus ignores this habit of the Rebbe's, which causes

certain inaccuracies to creep into his work. He writes favorably, for instance, of the Rebbe's modesty, "Although Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson does not tend to acknowledge his own doings in his talks, he describes the third period [of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok's leadership] in a way that constitutes a summary of his own deeds. This is manifest even though he paradoxically attributes the period to Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson." Kraus, *Seventh*, p. 54. As Dahan demonstrates, however, there is no paradox here, nor is this modesty on the Rebbe's part. It is, in fact, a theological sleight of hand used to serve the Rebbe's messianic agenda.

73. Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5752, part 1 (5753), p. 277.

74. Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5752, part 2 (5754), p. 270.

75. Kraus, *Seventh*, p. 249.

76. Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5752, part 2 (5754), p. 268.

77. See note 39 above. This action can be understood only in light of the Rebbe's belief that reality is determined by *halacha*, and not the other way around. The motive behind the ruling, then, was to force God to reveal the messiah. See Dahan, "A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms," p. 55.

78. Dahan, "A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms," p. 382. In a discussion with the then-chief rabbis of Israel, the Rebbe said, "In the Sages' stories (*midrash hazal*) we find that our righteous messiah (Elijah the Prophet) will first be revealed in the Galilee, and within the Galilee itself, in Tiberius that is 'fine to look at'; but *no one will be strict if Elijah the Prophet appears abroad, even in Brooklyn, and in the following day the messiah will come to Tiberius.*" Dahan, "A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms," p. 384, emphasis in original. On p. 382, Dahan provides evidence that, under various pretenses, the Rebbe tried to "erase" part of the talmudic name of the messiah, "Menachem Ben Hizkiya," leaving only his own name, "Menachem."

79. See, for example, Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5743, part 4 (5750), p. 2001: "What is the value of all these arguments and explanations... when the subject at hand is the need to attempt to hasten and bring closer the coming of our righteous messiah by a single second!" See also Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Letters of the Rebbe*, vol. 18 (Brooklyn: Karnei Hod Hatorah, 5750), p. 498 [Hebrew]: "Do not scorn a single day, for there is no means of evaluating even a single act, such as a young man laying tefillin or a young girl saying the Shema Yisrael prayer... and every single detail is a condition for bringing closer the general redemption." See also Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5748, part 1 (5750), p. 595: "And perhaps the small act of this young boy will be the 'hammer blow' that will lead to redemption!"; and Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5747, part 2 (5750), pp. 624-625: "It is clear that the act... can be by a single deed alone, but 'there is none with us who knows to what extent' or what is that 'single deed' that

will actually lead to redemption. That is why the mission is set upon each and every one.”

80. Nadav Shnerb, “A Response to the Radicals,” *Nekuda* 309 (March 2008), p. 26 [Hebrew].

81. This is in reference to the Rebbe’s custom of handing out dollars to pilgrims, often in large groups. Clearly, the motive behind this was to hasten the messiah’s arrival.

82. Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5751, part 3 (5753), pp. 118-119, emphasis in original.

83. This was described to me by eyewitnesses.

84. Some claim that the Rebbe suffered an additional stroke two days later, but Chabad officially denies this. See Yori Yanover and Nadav Ish-Shalom, *Dancing and Crying: The Truth About the Chabad Movement* (New York: Meshi, 1994), pp. 31-32 [Hebrew].

85. The following recollection by a Lubavitcher hasid reveals how heavy a blow was that which Chabad suffered upon the Rebbe’s death: “Father’s illness was a natural thing. Father lived, father gave eighty years to the world... he passed away normally. But since the Rebbe became ill—I can’t live. It is something completely different; it is much more sacred than Father. And I would not want, God forbid, to diminish Father’s praise... [but] the Rebbe is with me twenty-four hours a day. Now I cannot move.... I wake in the morning, eat breakfast, get into the car, and drive to work, and I know the Rebbe goes to the *mikveh* [ritual bath], goes to 770, and he connects for me all the things that need connecting. I speak to God, I get a busy signal. Beep beep, busy. He needs to bring me the line... ‘And they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.’ I cannot create this connection on my own... I need him. When my son is ill... I need the Rebbe the whole time.... I need to know that he is there and that is what he does and the problem will be solved no matter what.... Father was Father. And his honor is still as such. But here it is something a thousand times more significant. It is everything for me.” Quoted in Yanover and Ish-Shalom, *Dancing and Crying*, pp. 51-52. Yanover then asks various followers: “‘And if this generation will not live to see the coming of the messiah, God forbid?’ ‘That cannot be,’ a friend insisted. ‘And yet, are you not raising here a generation of children who expect, expect—and in the end there will be a colossal fall’... ‘What you are saying is: Imagine there is no God in the world,’ a friend reprimanded. ‘You are asking us the same thing. Even more—no, it is the same question. One can never answer such a question.’ ‘The “what if” does not apply to us,’ said Dorit. ‘So it is all a lie, it is all a lie,’ the friend interrupted. ‘So there is nothing.’” Yanover and Ish-Shalom, *Dancing and Crying*, p. 146.

86. According to one report, residents of Kfar Chabad danced and drank vodka when they heard the news, crying out, "It is a test! The Jewish people was also tested at Mount Sinai, where the Devil showed it the corpse of Moses.... In the media they say that the Rebbe is dead, that he was wrapped in a shroud, but he will rise, and all those who did not believe in him will hide in caves...! There are but a few last minutes until the messiah will be here to make the final decisions in a state of revelation; we must prepare ourselves!" Ezra Chen, "In Kfar Chabad, They Celebrated with Vodka," *Davar*, June 13, 1994 [Hebrew].

87. This opinion is held, for example, by Rabbi Zimroni Tzik, editor of the Hebrew-language Web site Hageula ("The Redemption"), www.hageula.com. Tzik is also responsible for publicizing short films in which the Rebbe supposedly appears momentarily. The most well-known can be viewed at www.flix.co.il/tapuz/showVideo.asp?m=1556581. I thank Assaf Lapid for this information.

88. This recalls a Midrash, alluded to in note 94 below, which claims that when Moses delayed his descent from Mount Sinai, the Devil used this opportunity to seduce the Jewish people, causing it to think that their leader had died. "When Moses went up the mountain, he said to them: 'At the end of forty days I will come, within six hours.' They thought that the day he went up was included in the number of the forty days, but in fact he had said to them 'forty days,' meaning complete days, including the night. But the day of his ascent did not have its night included with it, for on the seventh of Sivan he ascended. Thus, the fortieth day was the seventeenth of Tammuz. On the sixteenth of Tammuz, the devil came and brought confusion into the world and showed a semblance of darkness and confusion, as if indicating that Moses had surely died." See Rashi's commentary on Exodus 32:1.

89. The Rebbe is also supposed to be the first human being to live for eternity. For more on this, see Dahan, "A Dwelling in the Lowly Realms," pp. 274-275.

90. In this context, it is important to note that Hasidism ascribes immense importance to spiritual activity in this world, the purpose of which is to liberate the divine sparks confined within the "husks" that comprise the material world. This may be one of the reasons why the idea of a dead messiah who lives on in the world to come or the world beyond is so foreign to this tradition.

91. "They have already 'shined their buttons and so forth,' and now one only has to be ready to greet our righteous messiah." Schneerson, *Farbrengen/Convening*, 5752, part 2 (5754), p. 256.

92. *Long Live the King Messiah*, p. 31.

93. A striking indication of the Rebbe's messianic awareness is the astounding fact that he had no children, and thus no natural heir. We know from his lectures that the Rebbe was well aware of the latest medical treatments for infertility, and he

instructed his followers to make use of them. Moreover, even if he was incurably infertile, this does not explain his failure to appoint an heir, especially toward the end of his life. In an illuminating article, Alon Dahan suggested that the Rebbe was willingly celibate. If so, it was due to his belief that he was indeed the messiah, and that in the messianic era—which would, of course, begin during his lifetime—death would not exist and the lives of all creatures would continue for eternity. The Rebbe did indicate that eternal life was within reach and would begin with him:

The most important thing—that it will be “to life and to blessing,” to a good and long life, according to the various versions of the Blessing of the Month that are said in holy communities in Israel; to an eternal life in the upcoming future, souls in bodies, including those still alive, without a temporary pause [i.e., without having to die before the resurrection], at the coming of the our righteous messiah from the tribe of Judah, and Moses and Aaron with them, and the forefathers with them, and with the leader of our generation at the head. And I will begin—to life, to life and to blessing.

Schneerson, *Farbrenge/Convening*, 5749, part 4 (5752), p. 148. This appears to explain why the Rebbe did not feel the need to appoint an heir: He believed he was going to live forever. Dahan writes,

In light of these things it can be understood why Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in his mystic allegory, refers to himself along the lines of the passage, “And David my servant is their leader forever.” As the last rebbe who seals the dynasty—and without any related descendants or people in charge—Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson truly believed in the possibility that already in our generation, which obviously includes him as the current generation’s leader according to his and his followers’ views, we will all be granted eternal life, and he himself will continue to be the leader of the generation forever.

Alon Dahan, “A Last Redeemer Without Heirs: Did Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson Choose Not to Leave Any Related Heirs or People in Charge Out of Messianic Motives?” *Kabbalah* 17 (2008), p. 303 [Hebrew].

94. According to Jewish tradition, every generation has someone who is worthy of being the messiah. Genesis Rabba 56:7 states, “There is no generation that does not have someone like Moses.” This same person, if the time is right, and if the entire generation is deserving of it, then becomes the messiah. This same tzaddik, usually the “outstanding one of the generation,” is then “assumed to be the messiah,” and simply waits for his revelation.

95. Ben-Gurion said this in conversation with various writers and other influential figures on October 11, 1949. Quoted in David Ohana, *Messianism and the State: Ben-Gurion and the Intellectuals Amid a Political Vision and Theological Politics* (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion University, 2003), p. 115 [Hebrew]. This book is

forthcoming in English as *Political Theologies in the Holy Land: Israeli Messianism and Its Critics* (Routledge, 2009).

96. Rabbi Shaul Shimon Deutsch attempted to claim the title of Schneerson's heir, but was rejected by Chabad, which went so far as to portray him as mentally unstable. Deutsch now surrounds himself with a relatively small number of followers. One of the main reasons for his rejection was theological: Chabad's belief that the redemption is supposed to take place in the seventh generation precludes the possibility of appointing an eighth rebbe. To do so would nullify one of Chabad's most essential religious precepts.