

The Splintering of Chabad

By Rabbi Zalman I. Posner

In the aftermath of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's death in 1994, it seemed that there were many within the Lubavitcher movement who were moving in dangerous directions. Perhaps no one saw this clearer than Professor David Berger, and in major articles ("Just Between Us: The New Messianism," Jewish Action, fall 1995; winter 1995) he spelled out the perils of the course many had taken.

Professor Berger has continued to alert the Jewish world in different forums, culminating in his book, The Rebbe, The Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference, where he declares that those who proclaim the messiahship of the Rebbe "stand outside the parameters of Orthodox Judaism," and must be treated accordingly. It is apparent that there still are reasonable, sober voices within the movement who may help turn the tide in acceptable directions. One such person is Rabbi Zalman Posner, a respected leader, writer and longtime follower of the last two rebbes. We thought it appropriate that a person of Rabbi Posner's caliber be afforded the opportunity to respond.

A half century ago, the Lubavitch movement in America was limited to Eastern European immigrants and a handful of Americans. By 1990, the movement had become a giant in outreach work, establishing schools, and

In 1948, Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak Schneersohn sent Rabbi Posner to the Displaced Persons camps in Europe to provide comfort and support for the survivors. Rabbi Posner recently retired after serving for 53 years as rabbi of the Orthodox community of Nashville, Tennessee. He is also the founder of the Akiva Day School in Nashville, translator of two sections of the Tanya and other Chassidic classics and author of Think Jewish (1978) and Reflections on the Sedra (1958).

attracting people from every walk of life—intellectuals and academics, scientists, artists, and businessmen. Jews of every religious commitment found a "home" in Lubavitch. One man stood at the helm and his word was unchallenged: Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known by his followers as "the Rebbe." When the Rebbe passed away in 1994, the Chabad community split into several factions, each of which espoused a different view of the Rebbe. Shortly thereafter, critics began charging the movement with heresy, idolatry, and embracing "non-Jewish faiths." My purpose here is to describe the dramatic developments correctly, not from an outsider's perspective but from that of a *Chassid ben Chassid*, familiar with Chassidic thought. I will

provide background on the various factions' misguided views, information not readily available to the lay reader.

I was personally acquainted with both Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak Schneersohn (the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe) and his son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, from the day each arrived on these shores. I have written books, published at the latter's insistence, and have translated parts of the *Tanya* and other Chabad works. I alone am responsible for the contents of this essay.

While the concept of *Mashiach* has been an integral part of Judaism for thousands of years, in recent years, people often used the term jokingly as in "When will you pay me the five

bucks you owe me?" Answer: "When *Mashiach* comes." In Torah circles, however, the concept of *Mashiach* was always regarded seriously—He could come at any time.

Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak Schneersohn viewed the Holocaust as the "birth pangs of *Mashiach*," and believed that his arrival was imminent. Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, who succeeded his father-in-law, continued to constantly stress *Mashiach's* imminence with more intensity as time went on.

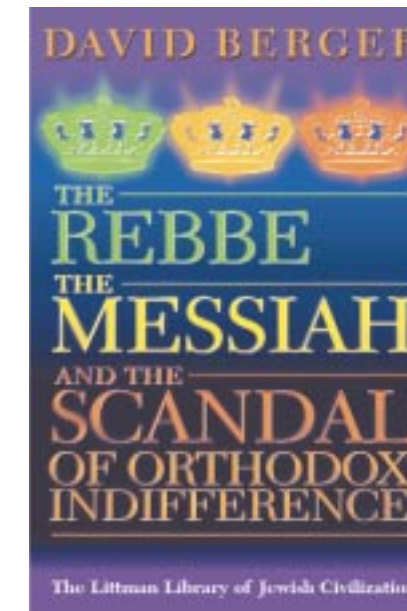
For the past half century, many Chabad *Chassidim* felt that were *Mashiach* to be a person familiar to us all, walking the streets today, the best candidate would be the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson. Then the Rebbe's passing on *gimel Tammuz* 1994. Several groups emerged: "normative" *Chassidim*, who, basing their ideas on what the Rebbe had said, do not identify *Mashiach*, *Mashichists*, those who believe the Rebbe will return (as *Mashiach*) and lastly, the deifiers, who confusing man with God, are beyond the pale.

Prior to the Rebbe's passing, disputes in the Chabad community were decisively resolved by the Rebbe. With his passing, there was no longer a definitive authority. ("Why don't you choose a new Rebbe?" we are constantly asked. "When we find someone like him, we'll grab him.") Many *Mashichists* however have not yet accepted the Rebbe's passing. Some of them insist, quite vocally, that the Rebbe never died and refuse to use terms such as "*Zechuto yagen aleinu*," "May his merit protect us," or "*Alav hashalom*," "May he be in peace." To substantiate their claim, they cite the *gemara* that "Yaakov [*Avinu*] our father never died... As his children live, he lives." Of course, this *gemara* is speaking in symbolic rather than literal terms.

They chant "*Yechi adoneinu moreinu verabbeinu*" "May our master, our teacher, our rabbi live forever." But if the Rebbe is immortal, as they claim,

why sing, "May he live forever"?! They further maintain that belief in the Rebbe's immortality is an expression of *emunah*. But we cannot invent principles of faith. Principles of faith must be grounded in Torah; if not, they are worthless. There is no basis in the Torah or Chabad teachings to justify the belief that the Rebbe did not pass away.

Furthermore, while we must believe in the concept of *Mashiach*, we need not believe that any one particular individual is *Mashiach*. *Mashiach's* identity is not a subject of *emunah*, as the Rebbe made clear.



Dr. David Berger, an ordained Orthodox rabbi and a professor at Brooklyn College, was shocked by the emergence of two of the groups within Chabad, namely those who accepted a "Second Coming" and those who deified the Rebbe. Regarding both groups' views as intolerable, he approached what he called "Traditional Orthodox" rabbis, expecting them to support him against these perceived threats against the Jewish people. Berger, however, was dismayed by the rabbis' indifference and subsequently wrote *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of*

Orthodox Indifference (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).

How did the deification come about? (Let me emphasize that the deifiers were sharply condemned by Lubavitch *rabbanim* and their words repudiated. But freedom of speech, here and in Israel, is a reality and all one needs is money to put up billboards or advertise in *The New York Times*.)

It started with a statement made by the Rebbe. At the *yahrtzeit* of his father-in-law in 1951, the Rebbe, referring to the Rayatz (Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak) stated, "*Atzmut* was placed in a body." *Atzmut* means "essence," the irreducible, unvarying core; God Himself, the Rebbe was saying, was "placed" in a human body. Some *Mashichists*, however, drew an inference, and then proceeded to draw inferences from that, culminating with deification.

The language of the Talmud calls for more than dictionary definitions. To understand Talmudic language, the student must have a background in Talmudic thought, or a teacher to explain the full meaning. Similarly, Chabad's distinctive language can be misunderstood by the neophyte. This awareness is crucial in understanding what the Rebbe said.

A moment to define "*atzmut*." We must be aware of two aspects when discussing man or God: essence and extension. In terms of man, essence is his soul; extension includes his thoughts, words, actions, ideals, etc. The latter is variable, developing, modified, even rejected and replaced. The essence remains constant.

For man, understanding God can mean understanding His thoughts—as expressed in Torah, or His emotions, such as kindness and compassion as manifested in His behavior towards us. But these are not His "essence" which is beyond us; God's thought and actions are extensions of Him, similar to the rays of the sun being extensions,

not the essence, of the sun.

Man's awareness of self is a barrier between him and God. His acceptance of *mitzvot*—and the self-discipline involved in that acceptance—is a measure of self-nullification before God, a step closer to Him. The greater his self-nullification, the closer he approaches God, the more he is aware of Him. Ultimately he can reach the state of *merkavah*, when he becomes a “vehicle” for God. When this state is attained, as it was by the Patriarchs, man has no personal will. Man's only will is God's.

When the Rebbe, referring to his father-in-law, stated “*Atzmut* was placed in his body,” this, I would suggest, is what he had in mind: there was no separation between him and Him, no barrier, not that Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak is God but that he is one with God. However, some tragically concluded that the Rebbe had implied a synonymy between his father-in-law and God. It didn't take too much for some to then characterize the Rebbe himself in that way.

Not surprisingly, no one is big enough to correct the deifiers, to convince them that they err, even though their view is not part of Chabad teachings. Though they are vocal, the deifiers are small in number and enjoy little respect. They act without the support or approval of any individuals of stature within the Lubavitch community.

A little lesson in Chabad that might further illuminate the issue: The *haftarah* of the first day of Rosh Hashanah contains three words that demand explanation, “*Kel dayot Hashem*” (I Shemuel 2:3) roughly translated as, “For God is the God of intelligences.”

Why the plural, *dayot*? Kabbalah refers to *da'at elyon* and *da'at tachton*, supernal intelligence and “lower” intelligence. Two perspectives exist; either God's view, which is spiritual, or man's view, which is material. Thus, depending on the perspective, a question may have two responses. For example, if

one were to ask, “What is ‘reality?’” the answer may be either the physical (body) or the spiritual (soul).

Da'at tachton—From our view, which is that of the physical universe, the very existence of the Creator is in dispute; we and our universe constitute *yesh*, existence, tangible, palpable reality, while the spiritual source is perceived as *ayin*, nothingness. God is hardly imaginable, taxing man's finite intelligence. Man and his science deal with the observable; Man sees his body, while he can only imagine his soul.

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Da'at elyon—The rare individual perceives the Creator, the source of all, the absolutely transcendent, as the true *yesh*. He sees the physical, the created, as *ayin*, nothingness, and totally dependent on the Source of all for its existence.

Man, with his almost ineluctable *da'at tachton*, can appreciate, to some degree, God's wisdom as expressed through Torah. Through learning Torah at the highest levels, man and God merge; Man's only thoughts are

then God's, since he is totally immersed in Torah. Another level of unification with God can be attained through man's awareness of God's “emotions.” Sensing his own insignificance, his dependence for every breath on God, man may experience his “nothingness” in the presence of greatness. He attains *bittul*, nullity, but still retains his sense of self, his existence, his physicality. His *bittul*, nullity, is not total, not absolute.

A few exceptional individuals can attain the highest plane—that of *merkavah*, becoming a “vehicle” that has no will of its own, an absolute *ayin*, focusing only on his “driver.” Hillel would apologize to his students when he interrupted learning for a bite of lunch. “I must do a kindness for my poor body,” he would say. Hillel was not his body. His body was simply a container for his soul, the real Hillel. In contrast, at the start of our daily prayers we thank God for the “soul You placed within me.” We identify ourselves primarily as bodies that have souls placed within. We, alas, are not Hillels.

We can now understand what the Rebbe meant. When the Rebbe spoke of “*Atzmut* placed within a body,” he was implying an incredible unity between God and a human. As stated above, *atzmut* or *etzem*, refers to the essence of the subject, not an extension, but the core, irreducible, constant, indivisible. In terms of a human, extensions may include thought, actions, emotions, beliefs, all subject to variation, growth, development, rejection. Core is unvarying, concealed. *Etzem*, transcending any manifestation of God including thought (as in Torah), refers to God Himself.

We noted earlier that man may attain a degree of *bittul*, self-negation, yet retain an awareness of self, the *bittul* being less than absolute. Any degree of *bittul* is praiseworthy for so few achieve any diminution of ego. Rarely does any man attain total *bittul*, as did the Patriarchs. Rav Yoseph Yitzchak, his successor asserted, achieved this level of *bittul*. “*Atzmut*

placed in a human body,”—the physical body of the Rebbe did not conceal God within man. However, the Rebbe's words were totally misconstrued and the result was—deification! Deification means seeing man as God; the Rebbe, of course never, said or, implied man could be synonymous with God. The distinction is awesomely critical. Unfortunately, there are those who failed to make the distinction and they are embarked on a treacherous path.

In contrast to deification, the issue of the Rebbe's return, which Berger dubbed the “Second Coming,” involves significant numbers within the Chabad community. When Berger approached leaders of the Orthodox world, and found them relatively indifferent, he considered this to be a scandal (hence, the title of his book.) How are we to understand the *Chassidim* and the Orthodox scholars who did not share Berger's fears?

Language reflects the culture and concerns of the speaker, and often contains concepts that are alien and incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with that language. Thus, when translating from one language to another, approximations abound, but they lack the precision of the original. *Mashiach* is not translated correctly as Messiah. The former is Hebrew, the latter, English or Christian. Attributing the qualities of Messiah to *Mashiach* will lead to insoluble problems. Similarly the words, “second coming” and “Second Coming,” have different meanings, the latter carrying heavy Christian overtones for those familiar with Christianity. Berger has studied Christianity more than most American Jews have. “Second Coming” has Christian meaning for him, and hearing *Mashichists* accept that expression is a red flag bearing the message “Danger!” “Missionaries ahead,” “Beware!”

Berger fears that once Jews accept a Second Coming, they might be attracted to Christianity. But those

“Orthodox Traditional” and Chabad rabbis whom Berger deems indifferent were mostly born in Poland or Russia. (I know some personally). Christianity is a “competing” religion in the US, and attracts susceptible Jews, but it never posed a significant threat in Eastern Europe. Jews in those countries knew anti-Semitism, hatred, pogroms and discrimination. Christianity held no attraction for them. Thus, to them, the term, “Second Coming,” is innocuous. Berger's background prevents him from understanding the rabbis and colors his perception.


Furthermore, the rabbis do not denounce the *Mashichists* as heretics since they know that the *Mashichists* base their belief on Rashi's comment on *Sanhedrin* 98b; There, Rashi considers the possibility that *Mashiach* will arise either from the living or from the dead. Rashi does not quote “heresies.” Relying on this Rashi, the *Mashichists* continue to believe in a second coming. But Rashi offers both possibilities—*Mashiach* will either rise from the dead or the living. The *Mashichists* however conveniently choose to ignore the opinion of Rashi which doesn't suit their purposes.

Often, Berger's prejudice is blatant, and he is not above quoting and accepting mindless criticism. For example, he cites a “distinguished rabbi in the Traditional Orthodox community,” fortunately unnamed, who called to “express his long-standing hostility to Lubavitch” [and alleged] that “the Rebbe...regularly visited his father-in-law's grave so that it should already be established as a shrine when he himself would be buried nearby.” The practice of praying at a graveside of a *tzaddik* is found in a Rashi in reference to Calev who prayed at the grave of Avraham. This silly charge does not belong in a serious work of scholarship.

Berger goes on to quote the above-mentioned rabbi concerning the giant Lubavitch menorahs: the Rebbe, the

rabbi maintains, instructed that the branches be straight, not curved, because—“every new religion needs a symbol.” (I wouldn't believe this ridiculous assertion either, dear reader, neither from the “distinguished” rabbi nor from the distinguished professor.) Berger continues, “To him [the distinguished rabbi], Chabad had long been a species of religion clearly outside the boundaries of Judaism” (62).

Berger imperils his professional standing by quoting such foolishness. According to the Rambam, the menorah's branches were straight, not curved. Indeed, the Rambam drew a sketch of the menorah with straight branches, which his son, Rav Avraham attests to. (See the Rabbi Yoseph Kafach edition of Rambam's commentary to Mishnah, *Menachot* 3:7, which reproduces the menorah drawn by the Rambam himself.) Also, see Rashi, (Shemot 25:32) s.v., *bealachson*, where he maintains that the branches were angled, not curved. How seriously can the reader take Berger after gaffes like these? Maybe Berger and his “distinguished rabbi” should learn more *Chumash* with Rashi....

Misinterpreting the *Mashichist* may have dire consequences for all concerned. Understanding him compels us to clarify and deepen our own thinking. Where the “deifiers” are blatantly wrong, it is imperative to demonstrate their errors. On the other hand, those *Mashichists* who believe that the Rebbe will return may be disputed but not vilified. And of course, we have refuted the view that the Rebbe never died. Disputes like this one are marked by vehemence and heat. Hopefully, this essay has provided some illumination. 

Note

1. In *Tanach*, when Batsheva cried out *Yechi* for her husband, King David, she did not intend it literally, since she said it after he assured her that her son would succeed him to the throne. She meant it symbolically.