

Chabad: Issues that Have Not Been Discussed on Campus

By: Estee Goldschmidt

One of the things that sets Chabad apart from other sectors of Judaism is its ideology of *shelihut* implanted by the late Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, that drives Lubavitch Hasidim to travel around the world and build communities in places where most Jews would never settle otherwise. It is an ideology that calls Jews to fight the “war of God,”ⁱ a precondition for the Messiah according to Maimonides, and urges everyone to prepare for the coming of the King, the Messiah.ⁱⁱ Due to the fact that members of this sect of Judaism have taken upon themselves the admirable responsibility of *keiruv* (outreach), most people in the Orthodox world tend to overlook the tremendous threat that Chabad presents to traditional Judaism. A large percentage of the Chabad movement believes that their deceased Rebbe is the Messiah.ⁱⁱⁱ This Messianist ideology is taught in mainstream Chabad schools, and Melech Jaffe, who authors a blog about Chabad Lubavitch, writes that a Chabad Hasid who does not believe in Messianism is not only a minority within the Chabad movement, but is also considered to be an outcast.^{iv} Many Jews also overlook the differences between the Chabad communities and their own communities due to a preference for tolerance, as well as the conveniences Chabad provides: whenever a Jew sets out to travel, he or she can rely on Chabad to supply kosher food and a place to pray.

Although students at Yeshiva College and Stern College for Women organize events that deal with controversial topics, such as female leadership and homosexuality in the Orthodox community, I have not seen the issue of Chabad and its controversy directly addressed once since I became a student in Stern College in Spring 2008. There are Chabad Clubs in Stern College as well as in Yeshiva College that run trips to the *Ohel* (the deceased Rebbe’s grave) on a regular basis for those who are interested. Yet no one addresses and deals with the issues that Chabad poses. I would like to call out to the student body to do something about Chabad, to educate fellow students, to create awareness of the various ideological problems that Chabad raises in regard to the Jewish community. Even more surprising is the fact that Rabbi Dr. David Berger, Dean of Bernard Revel Graduate School and a hallmark of Yeshiva University, wrote numerous articles and a book called *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* condemning Chabad and requesting support from his fellow Orthodox companions. The RCA has now prohibited Messianist rabbis from joining; however, as a community, Orthodoxy has not yet responded in a forceful manner.

It is important to understand that Chabad

often represents Judaism to the larger world. Chabad Jews are the ones to light a menorah in the Red Square in Moscow, in Times Square in New York, and in Hollywood, California. The most basic Jewish websites, such as Judaism.com and Jewish.ru, are owned and administered by Chabad. Chabad clubs in universities are more popular on college campuses across the world today than Hillel houses, and although it seems that Chabad is a sect not so large in number, it is quite large in the extent of its influence and publicity. Chabad emissaries are living all over the world. They are the ones who represent the Jewish people to the press, media and politicians. To much of the outside world, Chabad equals Judaism, and other forms of Judaism are viewed merely as smaller sects. Therefore, ignoring the ramifications of issues raised by Chabad is no simple matter.

As early as the 1980’s, Chabad began placing extreme emphasis on Messianism. R. Elazar Menachem Shach (dean of the Ponevezh Yeshiva) went as far as putting the movement into *herem* (excommunication). He spoke of the movement as having aspects of *avodah zarah*

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(idolatry) as a result of their messianic beliefs. According to Dr. Berger, “His [R. Shach’s] followers refused to eat meat slaughtered by Lubavitch *shohetim* (ritual slaughterers) or to recognize Chabad Hasidim as adherents of authentic Judaism.”^v

The conditions Rambam sets for the Messiah are that he has to descend from *Beit David* (the House of David), study and keep Torah commandments, influence Israelites to follow him and fight the wars of the Lord.^{vi} According to some rabbinic courts of Chabad, the Rebbe was deemed worthy of being a messianic candidate when he was alive. They interpreted many of Rambam’s necessary criteria allegorically in order to apply to the Rebbe, such as understanding the word “king” in a rabbinic sense and “wars of God” in a figurative sense.^{vii} Even if the Rebbe met such criteria of the Messiah during his lifetime, which is doubtful because it necessitated an allegorical understanding of Rambam’s words, the possibility of his being the Messiah ended with his death on June 12th, 1994.

Thus began Chabad Messianism: phase two. Today, members of the Chabad movement believe that the Rebbe is the Messiah, even though he passed away. This seems to blatantly contradict a fundamental Jewish belief that the Messiah of the House of David will not die until the completion of redemption, which is based on a dialogue in the Talmud between God

and *Mashiah Ben David* where God guarantees life to him.^{viii} Additionally, Nahmanides, in *Sefer ha-Ge’ulah*, condemns the Christians for saying that their Messiah will awaken, since that implies that the prophetic redemption was not actualized during the prophet’s lifetime.^{ix} Although there are sources in the Talmud that discuss the possibility of Messiah arising from the dead, Rambam ultimately asserts in *Hilkhot Melakhim* that a man who is deceased cannot be the Messiah.^x

R. Aharon Feldman, Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Israel Rabbinical College, gives support to Dr. Berger, saying, “In our times, to define who *Moshiach* is *not* is as vital as to define who he is.”^{xi} In July 1996, the Rabbinical Council of America accepted the resolution that “there is no place in Judaism for the belief that *Mashiah Ben David* will begin his messianic mission only to experience death, burial and resurrection before completing it.”^{xii}

Dr. Berger also points out that believing in Chabad Messianism can be an infringement on the twelfth principle of faith set by Rambam – the principle of awaiting the Messiah every

day,^{xiii} for this principle calls for belief in an individual that can actually be the Messiah according to the conditions set by Halakhah, yet the Rebbe cannot meet these standards of *Mashiah* because he is no longer alive. Furthermore, such a notion is transforming the nature of two millennia of Jewish history. Such believers relegate the waiting of the Messiah to the past since they believe that he has already arrived. As R. Moses Hagiz similarly put it sharply about the followers of Shabbetai Tsevi, “They deny the coming of the Messiah because according to them he has already come.”^{xiv}

A common dismissal of Dr. Berger’s allegations against Chabad is that he accuses the Messianists, but they only constitute a minority of Chabad Hasidim. Yet, this does not seem to be the case. 770 East Parkway (the house of the deceased Rebbe and the most significant central yeshiva and beit midrash in the Chabad movement) is adorned with signs of the slogan “*Yehi Adoneinu, Moreinu, ve-Rabbeinu, Melekh ha-Mashiah le-Olam Va’ed* (Long live our King, our Teacher and our Master, the King the Messiah Forever and Ever).” This verse is taught to kids in Chabad day schools across the world and is inserted into their prayers. Although some Chabad Jews make a point of hiding their Messianism from the outside world, it is extremely prevalent in the Lubavitch community. Melech Jaffe, who wrote an extensive article about Chabad development called “A

Brief History of Lubavitch Messianism,” scoffs at those who think that only a minority of Chabad believes that the deceased Rebbe is Messiah: “Lubavitchers uniformly believe that the Rebbe will return as Moshiach. The negligible handful of mainstream Lubavitchers who do not accept this are isolated and do not form any contingent.”^{xv}

All the issues highlighted here are just the tip of the iceberg and require in-depth study and analysis. Dr. Berger’s book discusses these issues at length, bringing all the relevant sources and disputations.

In light of the sources and issues highlighted in this article, our community should be aroused to further study these ideas. While we are sitting in our ivory towers, a group enveloped in our tradition is disseminating ideas foreign to our beliefs and representing us unfaithfully in many parts of the world. Due to their successful activities, Chabad’s influence is growing at an alarmingly quick pace. My father, R. Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow, has conducted research on the impact that Chabad has had on the rest of Orthodoxy, such as the outreach programs that were pioneered by Chabad and have had a ripple effect on the rest of the Orthodox community. He explains in his forthcoming book *The Changing Face of the European Rabbinate*: “The novel approach of Chabad towards the media and outreach forced a traditional Orthodox response and adjustment, and while the Lithuanian Yeshiva world might be critical of Lubavitch theology, its success challenges them to adapt and emulate and learn from Chabad.”^{xvi}

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ⁱ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001), p. 119.

^{iv} Melech Jaffe, “A Brief History of Lubavitch Messianism,” 2003. Available at: <http://www.moshiachlisten.com/history.html>.

^v Berger, p. 7.

^{vi} Rambam, *ibid.*

^{vii} Berger, p. 9.

^{viii} *Sukkah* 52a.

^{ix} Chaim Dov Chavel (ed.), *Kitvei ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1963), pp. 268-269.

^x Rambam, *ibid.*

^{xi} Berger, p. xix.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

^{xiii} Rambam, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to *Sanhedrin*, chapter 10.

^{xiv} Moses Hagiz, *Sefer Shever Poshe'im* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1970), p. 58.

^{xv} Jaffe, *ibid.*

^{xvi} Pinchas Goldschmidt, *The Changing Face of the European Rabbinate* (forthcoming).