

Debating Messianism

In his article “The Splintering of Chabad” (fall 2002), Rabbi Zalman Posner mentions those who quote opinions of Rishonim to suit their purposes. Unfortunately, he engages in such a practice when discussing the menorah.

Though the Rambam and Rashi agree that the menorah had straight arms, Rabbi Posner forgot to mention that they are alone in this view. Moreover, all depictions of the menorah from the time of the Beit Hamikdash—including an eyewitness account by Josephus, replicas found in the Galil, carvings found in archaeological digs in the Old City as well as the Arch of Titus—show the menorah with curved arms.

Rabbi Posner quotes a Rashi in *Sanhedrin* to defend those who state that *Mashiach* may return from the dead. However, Jewish tradition does not come from picking individual opinions. Rather, it has always been a matter of what has been deemed acceptable over millennia of Jewish learning and debate. (After all, there is even one opinion in the Gemara that *Mashiach* will not be an individual, which is certainly not the normative view.) A solitary opinion notwithstanding, a resurrected *Mashiach* has never been part of Jewish tradition. Nor has a straight-armed Menorah. Rabbi Posner therefore cannot deny that the straight-armed menorah has always been exclusive to Lubavitch and has become a symbol of the movement.

Nachum Lamm
Flushing, New York

Rabbi Posner performed an important service by explaining the theological errors and hyper-literalness that lead too many to deify the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *zt”l*. It is critical that leaders with impeccable Chabad credentials such as he speak out on the subject to those both inside and outside of Lubavitch. Slowly, the relative silence is being broken by courageous scholars like Rabbi Posner.

Rabbi Posner, however, writes, “For the past half century, many Chabad *Chassidim* felt that were *Mashiach* to be a person familiar to us all... the best candidate would be the Rebbe.” This comment is critical in understanding how *Mashichism* came to be. While many Lubavitchers agree with Rabbi Posner that the Rebbe was merely the best candidate to be *Mashiach*, many others would say that he was the *only* candidate. They would claim that as the scion of the Chabad legacy, which represents the only correct interpretation of the Divine truth known as *Chasidut*, the Rebbe was the culmination of all the great souls who preceded him. He was the incontrovertible *nasi hador*, leader of the generation. How could anyone else be *Mashiach*?

Both Rabbi Posner and Dr. Berger have served the Jewish community well by publicly disputing the claims of those who wish to distort our precious tradition. I only hope that more leaders follow their lead and teach the confused masses the truth about one of the thirteen principles of our holy faith.

Gil Student
Brooklyn, New York

Rabbi Posner writes that, “normative *Chassidim*, who, basing their ideas on what the Rebbe had said, do not identify *Mashiach*.”

The truth is that there is general consensus in Lubavitch that this is the last generation of exile and therefore the Rebbe, this generation’s potential *Mashiach*, is the true *Mashiach*. As a Lubavitcher, I know of no more than four otherwise mainstream Lubavitchers who do not feel that the Rebbe is the final redeemer. I am confident that Rabbi Posner could not name enough such Lubavitchers to justify the term “normative.”

Melech Jaffe
St. Paul, Minnesota

In his article, Rabbi Zalman Posner addresses two major issues—the deification of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and the affirmation of his Messiahship—and one minor one—the “often...blatant” prejudice that accounts for my “quoting *and accepting* [my emphasis] mindless criticism” of Lubavitch.

Before turning to the subjects that really matter, let me comment on the minor allegation, not only as a point of personal privilege but as a symptom of the distortions that even so sober and ethical a Lubavitcher *Chassid* as Rabbi Posner is capable of perpetrating when he sees his movement under attack. Like all my Lubavitch critics, he completely ignores a quotation in my book* (p. 8) from a review that I

* *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Oxford, 2001).

wrote in *The New York Times* several months after the Rebbe's death, that proves decisively and irrefutably how sympathetic I was to Lubavitch before it turned into a movement dominated by false messianism (or, to put it more accurately, before I realized this). He cites precisely one example of my allegedly oft-demonstrated prejudice, and the credibility of the accusation as a whole is well illustrated by the quality of this example.

In my book, I quote an unnamed distinguished rabbi who told me that the Rebbe regularly visited his father-in-law's grave so that when the Rebbe died, it would be a shrine. This rabbi also said that the Rebbe insisted on the use of atypical menorahs because every new religion needs a symbol. This report, says Rabbi Posner, shows that I am aware neither of the fact that Rashi speaks of Caleb's prayer at the grave of Abraham nor of the sources in the Rambam and Rashi that describe the spokes of the menorah as angled rather than curved. "How seriously can the reader take Berger after gaffes like these? Maybe Berger and his 'distinguished rabbi' should learn more *Chumash* with Rashi."

'This is the third time that published critiques by Lubavitch rabbis have cited this paragraph of the book as an expression of my own views about the Rebbe. In the previous instances I have responded by quoting the few sentences without comment. Here I will preface the quotation by noting that substantial portions of the book, for reasons explained in the introduction, are written in the form of a memoir detailing my own education over the past years regarding both the Lubavitch movement and its critics. At one point in the narrative, I describe reactions to my exchange in *Jewish Action* with the critics of my first article on this subject. [See "JBU: The New Messianism," fall and winter 1995.] First I detail "the most gratifying reaction," expressed both orally and in writing by Professor Isadore Twersky. And then comes the following paragraph, which I quote here in its entirety:

At the same time, a distinguished rabbi in the Traditionalist Orthodox community contacted me to express his longstanding hostility toward Lubavitch. This was my first direct, personal experience of the scathing, sweeping, almost breathtaking denunciation of the movement in some quarters. The Rebbe, I was told, had 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. He had his followers construct and display giant menorahs of an atypical sort, insisting on the view that the spokes of the original menorah were straight rather than curved, "because every new religion needs a symbol." I did not quite know how to react and eventually came to realize that for all his sympathy to my argument, this rabbi saw nothing significantly new in the latest developments. To him, Chabad had long been a species of religion clearly outside the boundaries of Judaism (p. 62).

In significant measure, this paragraph was intended to illustrate my dawning recognition that I could not expect meaningful, public support even from people whose criticisms of Lubavitch were far more hostile and of much longer standing than mine. In any event, it is self-evidently a report of assertions that I regarded as remarkable examples of breathtaking hostility. In recounting this conversation to several people over the years, I noted that this rabbi, who is a well-known *talmid chacham*, had made three comments about Lubavitch, only one of which I considered correct (that the military terminology encouraged by the Rebbe was intended to fulfill the Maimonidean criterion that the Messiah would fight the wars of God). In the paragraph under discussion, I did not record the assertion I believed to be correct precisely because I wanted to illustrate a stunning level of hostility; I had already recorded the assertion earlier, also in the name of a "distinguished rabbi" (p. 9), indicating that I was persuaded of its likely validity. I should probably conclude with the obvious: this rabbi's views, however one evaluates

them, do not demonstrate his unawareness of the passages in the Rambam and Rashi, which he knows quite as well as Rabbi Posner does.

And so we move to the issues that matter. To say that they matter is to understate their significance grievously. I am not sure that words can capture how much they matter.

Rabbi Posner speaks of "deifiers" of the Rebbe. He explains that they rest their case on a misunderstanding of the Rebbe's assertion that a *rebbe* of the highest order is the Essence and Being—*Atzmut uMahut*—placed in a body, and he goes on to set forth his understanding of this formula. In Rabbi Posner's view, it means that such a *rebbe*, though he is not God (or, in another formulation, not "synonymous with God"), he is "one with God;" he has so nullified his own essence that there is no separation "between him and Him," and his physical body "did not conceal God within man."

The precise distinction between being synonymous with God and one with God is by no means self-evident. If there is no separation between him and Him, if he is one with Him, is that not the same as saying that he is part of Him? Does this raise questions about the unity of Him of the sort that Jews have traditionally raised with respect to the Christian trinity? However one responds to these questions, I hope that Rabbi Posner's presentation of what he sees as the standard beliefs of his movement will help to lower the reader's instinctive resistance to the assertion I shall soon make about the extent of *avodah zarah* within the Lubavitch community.

In my book, I formulated this point as follows: The language of Chabad theology "begins at the precipice of *avodah zarah*, so that the tiniest step toward literalism hurls the believer into the abyss" (p. 103). A key question then is whether or not a significant number of Lubavitch *Chassidim* have leaped into that abyss. Rabbi Posner asserts that "the deifiers were sharply condemned by Lubavitch *rabbanim* and

their words repudiated. . . [They] are small in number and enjoy little respect. They act without the support or approval of any individuals of stature within the Lubavitch community.”

In order to evaluate this assertion, we must know what Rabbi Posner means by “deifiers.” If he means those who use a liturgical formula calling the Rebbe “our Creator” and the like, then he is quite correct. In many cases, however, Lubavitch *Chassidim* refrain from calling the Rebbe “our Creator” not because they deny his Divinity but for other, less fundamental reasons. My best assessment is that they consider the flat assertion that the Rebbe is God to imply at least one of the following false-beliefs: 1. The Rebbe is a deity unto himself rather than a manifestation of the one true God. 2. God does not extend beyond the Rebbe. 3. The Rebbe was intrinsically Divine from the moment he entered the world. Notwithstanding their denial of such beliefs and their consequent avoidance of the crude declaration that the Rebbe is God, many of these *Chassidim* affirm a series of propositions that make them unequivocal adherents of a theology of *avodah zarah*.

My book provides chapter and verse documenting the following assertions culled from works published by the mainstream organs of Chabad, proclaimed by rabbis in the major yeshivot of the movement and written by important lay intellectuals. Righteous people on the level of Moses and the Rebbe are, in the Rebbe’s formulation, the Essence and Being placed in a body. Their entire being is Divinity. For this reason the Rebbe is omniscient, omnipotent, incapable of sin and entirely without limits. He is an *ish haElokim* in the sense of man-God, not merely man of God. When you speak to him you speak to God. It is permissible to bow to him in worship precisely because his entire being is Divinity. He is immortal in principle because only a limited entity can die, and so even his body must continue to exist. I devoted considerable effort in the book to demonstrate that this sort of theology,

even in an essentially monotheistic framework, is no less *avodah zarah* than the essentially monotheistic faith known as Christianity.

Some influential Lubavitch apologists, citing occasional remarks in Chassidic writings that virtually no one outside Lubavitch takes literally; argue that the assertions in the previous paragraph do not constitute a theology of *avodah zarah*. Anyone who agrees with such apologists undermines Judaism at its core. Anyone who disagrees with them must recognize that *avodah zarah* is rampant in Lubavitch, that it has affected the central institutions of the movement in Crown Heights, Jerusalem, Kfar Chabad, Safed and elsewhere. Thus, it is a profound error to grant the presumption that a Lubavitch *Chassid*, whose views have not been determined, is free of *avodah zarah*. The assigning of such a *chezkat kashrut*, or presumption of acceptability, is responsible for the likely use of non-kosher meat, wine, *tefillin*, *mezuzot*, *sifrei Torah* and even—G o d help us—*gittin* throughout the world.

Even after eight years of exposure to these horrific texts, I trembled as I wrote the previous sentence, and I know full well that even people who have no doubt that the propositions listed above constitute *avodah zarah* will find it very difficult to digest. Before dismissing it, however, any reasonably educated Jew, and surely any rabbi asked to rule on the matter, is absolutely obligated to read chapters 8-10 and Appendixes II and III of my book and articulate to himself in clear and convincing fashion why these terrible conclusions do not follow. Because most Orthodox Jews are indifferent to “theology,” our religion is imperiled beyond the wildest imaginings of people who treat Lubavitch deviations as the subject of casual humor.

I should add that several experiences and reports that followed the completion of the book have made me all the more concerned about this issue. A distinguished Lubavitch figure spoke in my neighborhood and scandalized

the rabbi of the synagogue by asserting that the Rebbe is without limits. I received a message from a Canadian Jew reporting that he discontinued his attendance at a mainstream Lubavitch synagogue after an announcement was made before *chazarat hashatz* at a Sunday morning *minyán* attended both by *cheder* children and neighborhood adults, that they should concentrate on the Rebbe. Someone else informed me that he had broken off relations with a Lubavitch rabbi who, he said, is more learned than any of his own *roshei yeshiva*, when the rabbi told him that the Rebbe is omnipresent.

An admittedly strange-looking individual wearing a *yechi yarmulke* walked into my synagogue for a weekday *Miñchá*, took out a color photo of the Rebbe, wearing *tallit* and *tefillin*, and placed it alongside his open *siddur* as he recited *Shemoneh Esreh*. After I spoke during Jewish Book Week in London in early March, I was approached by a sincere Lubavitcher *Chassid*, appearing to be in his late teens or early twenties, who said that he had asked his *posek* if it is acceptable for him to say, “Rebbe, help me.” The answer was yes. He asked what I thought. Like a good Jew, I responded with a question: “Do you mean, ‘Help me by asking God to help me’ or do you mean, ‘Help me on your own?’” The answer was the latter. I then asked, “Do you believe that the Rebbe’s entire *meizus* is *Elokus*?” The answer was yes. Thus, a non-extremist young *Chassid* in a city considered moderate on this issue is essentially praying to a Divine Rebbe. The moment we say that such beliefs and actions are acceptable, we erase the boundary between Judaism and Christianity not only with regard to the messianic faith but also with regard to our essential conception of God. All that is left of our religion is *mitzvat anashim melumadah* (the rote practice of ritual).

Finally, we turn our attention to the belief that the deceased Rebbe is *Mashiach ben David*. Although Rabbi Posner agrees that belief in the Rebbe’s

messiahship “involves significant numbers within the Chabad community,” he describes, those who “do not identify *Mashiach*,” as the “normative” [his, quotation marks] group. Admirably, he does not directly mislead us by saying that the “normative” group is the majority, though this is perhaps implied. There is no question, as I demonstrate in the book, that the Messianists are, in fact, the dominant element in the movement. Rabbi Posner goes on to say that belief in the possibility of a messiah from the dead is established by one of Rashi’s interpretations of the Messianists’ favorite passage (in *Sanhedrin* 98b), and so, Lubavitchers believe that there is no heresy involved in their position.

I cannot reiterate the entire argument of the book here, and so, I will be ruthlessly brief. I will not even address the key passage in the Rambam that decisively rules out the Messianist position. I will simply summarize the two key points that I made. First, the God of Judaism does not send *Mashiach ben David* to announce the Redemption and then to die in an unredeemed world. No Jewish source, legitimates such a scenario, and many vigorously rule it out in contexts that define the contours of the Jewish religion itself. Yet almost all Lubavitch non-Messianists, apparently including Rabbi Posner, would have us believe that Judaism allows for this possibility, so that one who affirms that it has happened has not fundamentally violated the boundaries of the messianic faith. Thus, according to them, God may send the true Messiah to the world to accept a document from a group of his followers declaring him to be the Messiah and to declare that this is definitely the generation of Redemption, that the leader of his movement is the Messiah of the generation, that there is a prophet in this generation, that the *avodat haberurim* (the invisible, cosmic redemptive process) is complete, that the Messiah is already here and all that is necessary is to greet him, and that the Third Beit Hamikdash will descend from

heaven next to the main headquarters of his movement before the two buildings move to Jerusalem. And after all that, the Messiah will die, and be buried in an unredeemed world. To a Jew loyal to the messianic faith of Israel, this should be unthinkable. In short, even if the Messiah could come from the dead, he could not be a man who promised the Redemption in his generation and then died with the promise unfulfilled. To put the matter bluntly, even if the Messiah could come from the dead, he could not be the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Second—and here I reproduce a paragraph that I wrote in response to another Lubavitch critic—the book argues not only that a messianic mission interrupted by death is alien to Judaism. It further argues that any purported descendant of David who is put forth as a messianic candidate and then dies can surely not be identified with confidence as the Messiah, which is, of course, precisely what the Messianists do. To do this is to abolish Judaism’s criteria for the firm identification of such a figure. To put the matter in the language of the *beit midrash*, it is to abolish the *gedarim* (the defining parameters) of one of the fundamentals of the faith. I do not know whether one who abolishes the *gedarim* of a fundamental belief but affirms the belief itself is technically a heretic. I do know that to recognize such a person as an Orthodox rabbi; to appoint him to a rabbinic court, to hire him as a principal of a yeshiva or as a teacher of religious studies—to do, in short, what much of mainstream Orthodoxy is now doing—is to betray the Jewish religion.

I devoted a chapter of the book to explaining what I see as the scandal of Orthodox inaction, and I elaborated a bit in the May issue of *Modern Judaism*. One of the most significant impediments to action is clearly the deeply rooted instinct that people who look and act like Lubavitch *Chassidim* must be fully Orthodox Jews. The notion that large numbers of them could be heretics or even practitioners of *avo-*

dah zarah is so indigestible that observers will do almost anything to avoid it. First they will say that only a small group believes the Rebbe is the Messiah. Should they be persuaded of the falsity of this patently absurd proposition, they move to the position that this belief is not so terrible after all, thereby undermining the messianic faith of Judaism. When the discussion shifts to *avodah zarah*, resistance to recognizing the truth about the theology held by central elements in the movement is even more intense. Worse yet, some who come to recognize the widespread embrace of this theology in Lubavitch begin to say that even such beliefs are not so terrible. The unshakable article of faith is that the majority of Lubavitch *Chassidim* must be good Jews. Everything—even Judaism itself—must yield to that faith.

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Rabbi Posner responds

In response to Mr. Lam’s comments, whether the menorah branches are curved or angled is not a halachic matter, and therefore we need not negate even minority opinions. Since there are no halachic consequences, aside from Rashi and the Rambam, few, if any, Rishonim ever addressed the issue. Moreover, Rav Shach agreed with the Rebbe in regard to the menorah’s appearance. ArtScroll’s *Sapirstein Edition of Rashi* (p. 339, 341) also depicts a menorah with angled branches. Thus, it is hardly a Lubavitch issue.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that replicas from ancient times ever intended to duplicate the menorah of the Beit Hamikdash. The menorah depicted in the Arch of Titus was certainly not that of the Beit Hamikdash, which stood between six and eight feet high and was not easily carried. It is possible that the menorah in the sanctuary of the Beit Hamikdash had to have angled branches while the menorah

in its courtyard (mentioned in Al Hanisim) did not.

Regarding whether or not *Mashiach* can return from the dead, since Rashi's second interpretation is that he will do so, it remains a possibility and certainly does not constitute heresy.

Mr. Student says that, "many Lubavitchers would say the Rebbe was the only candidate for *Mashiach*." I have two comments: first, the Alter Rebbe, the first Chabad *rebbe*, once said that *Mashiach* will be a Misnaged, because if he is a *Chassid* the Misnagdim won't accept him but if he's a Misnaged *Chassidim* would accept him anyway. I presume the Rebbe was smiling when he said this. Second, my father, *a"h*, who was highly regarded by the past three *rebbes*, used to say every *Chassid* should insist that his *rebbe* is *Mashiach*. Every Litvak should insist his *rosht yeshivah* is *Mashiach*. In other words—let him—whichever he is—come, now!

A concluding comment to Mr. Student: When Rabbi Yoseph Yitzchak Schneersohn sent me to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1949, the Jewish future did not look promising. Immigration to the United States could never counter the assimilation in our society and replenish the shrinking American Jewish population. In the 1940s, way before the onset of the outreach movement, many in the Torah community attacked us Lubavitchers [for engaging in outreach] saying, "You are going to influence them? They will influence you." Fortunately, the *rebbes* saw the potential. (But like so many pioneering ideas, Jewish outreach experienced the following stages: 1. opposition 2. imitation 3. imitators claiming to be the inventors.)

The Rebbe's achievements in outreach, the kind seldom associated with Chassidic *rebbes*, are sui generis, unduplicated by any current Jewish leader, if ever. These accomplishments alone would fill volumes. We should focus our attention on the incredible international network of *shelichim* and their unduplicated accomplishments—these must be part of the heritage of all

Jews, not only Lubavitchers.

Mr. Jaffe notes my contention that normative *Chassidim* "basing their ideas on what the Rebbe had said... do not identify *Mashiach*." I must support this statement with an event I witnessed about ten years ago. After the Rebbe suffered a stroke, he could no longer speak but could gesture. At an international meeting of Lubavitch *rabbanim*, some questions were put to the Rebbe in writing. The *mazkirut*, secretariat, of about five members, were all present to record the Rebbe's responses to the various questions. We asked the Rebbe: "Should the ongoing campaign to publicize the imminent coming of the *Mashiach* be continued?" His answer: "Yes." We further asked: "Should *Mashiach* be associated with a particular person?" His answer: "No." The refusal of the "normatives" to name *Mashiach* is in accordance with the Rebbe's instructions.

Incidentally, I once heard an anecdote that occurred when the Rebbe was still robust. A *Chassid* with access to the Rebbe tried to get him to speak about the identity of *Mashiach*. As the two were walking together, the *Chassid* said, "They say in the street that the Rebbe is *Mashiach*." Dismissing him, the Rebbe said, "Don't you know that the one destined to be *Mashiach* knows nothing about it until five minutes before he is told, and I haven't heard anything yet."

Some comments regarding Dr. Berger's letter: The title of Dr. Berger's book, *The Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, is intriguing. Is it indifference? Is it possible that the rabbis referred to by Dr. Berger simply disagree with him? Are they to be condemned for such incredible impudence?

Dr. Berger's charge of *avodah zarah* among Lubavitcher *rabbanim* and *shochtim* is an exercise in hysterics, a swear-you-are-not-and-have-never-been-a-*Mashichist*, Salem-style witch-hunt. Unlike Dr. Berger, however, while the "indifferent" *rabbanim* may not agree with *Mashichism*, they won't tar Lubavitch with *avodah zarah*.

Opposition to *Chassidus* goes back to its birth, well over two centuries ago.

Reb Chaim Volozhin, a leading student of the Vilna Gaon, Reb Itzele, Reb Chaim Ozer and the Chafetz Chaim were all Misnagdim, but their opposition was ideological, not emotional, and certainly never tainted with hatred.

The following is background material that might be useful: The question, "What is the Jewish attitude to the Second Coming?" may have different answers, depending upon who is asking the question. While medieval Jewish scholars rejected the Second Coming, they did so within the context of a church debate. Their rejection of the Second Coming was a rejection of the Nazarene. However, as I stated in my article, while to contemporary *rabbanim*, the term Second Coming is innocuous, to Dr. Berger, it has Christian overtones.

Whether or not the *Mashichists* constitute a majority of Lubavitchers is an apparent concern of Dr. Berger's. I asserted in my article that there are significant numbers of *Mashichists* within the Chabad community, a true statement by any standard. However, determining whether or not they constitute a majority is a far more difficult matter. Unlike almost every other Orthodox group, there are no "members" of Lubavitch. Belzer *Chassidim* are recognized by their garb, the *shul* in which they *daven*, the yeshivot their sons attend, etcetera. Similarly, in many Litvak yeshivot, there are straightforward standards for membership: if one is capable of learning, one is accepted. Lubavitch, however, is a community comprised of a broad range of people including the learned, the newcomer to Judaism and the less-than-observant. Anyone who chooses to call himself a Lubavitcher *Chassid* can hardly be challenged.

Dr. Berger criticizes the Rebbe for using militaristic terms like Tzivos Hashem, the army of Hashem. This "army" is an incentive program for young girls and boys, which encourages them to do *mitzvot* and learn Torah. Exciting, fun and successful, the program involves tens of thousands of children all over the world. To Dr. Berger,

however, the militaristic language is an echo of the future conquests of *Mashiach*. Dr. Berger is applying his own interpretation to the Rebbe's words.

Lawyers and physicists have languages of their own and the uninitiated cannot begin to understand what they are saying. Dr. Berger provides us with dictionary definitions of words like *atzmut* and *metziut*, but he is unaware of the meaning these words have for Chabad *Chassidim*. Dr. Berger notes that he asked a London *Chassid* whether the Rebbe's *metziut* (which, in this context, may roughly be translated as "existence") is *Elokut*, to which the latter answered yes. But what does *metziut* mean to Dr. Berger? Does it mean the same to the *Chassid*? The term is often used pejoratively by *Chassidim*; it implies ego and denotes a person who is keenly aware of his own existence. Ego and self-centeredness are virtually universal flaws, which did not taint an Avraham, a Moshe, a Hillel, a Reb Yisrael Salanter, a *rebbe*. (Potentially, every single one of us can attain this level of self-nullification.) I

suggest that this is how the *Chassid* might have understood Dr. Berger's question: "Is the Rebbe subject to ego inflation or is he totally subordinated to Hashem?" The *Chassid's* answer: totally subordinated.

(*Jewish Action* readers may not be familiar with the term *rebbe* as distinct from *rabbi*, as well as what a *Chassid* is, etcetera. My book, *Think Jewish*, which was recently reissued, addresses these, among other points.)

Similarly, Dr. Berger misinterprets the Rebbe's own statement. To Dr. Berger, "*Atzmut* was placed in a body," implies that God's essence was placed into the Rebbe's body, and somehow there was a fusion of man and God. To a *Chassid*, however, it means that the physical body of the Rebbe did not conceal God within man.

Dr. Berger's conversation with the London *Chassid*, who, he admits was possibly a teenager, shows how alien the ways of *Chassidim* are to him. Dr. Berger goes on to say how the *Chassid* asked his *posek* if it is acceptable to say "Rebbe help me?" To which Dr. Berger

asked, "Do you mean help me by asking God to help or...help me on your own?" The answer was the latter.

First, is it really appropriate to deduce Chabad theology from a teenager? Second, Dr. Berger's question is entirely inappropriate and meaningless to a *Chassid*. When a *Chassid* is in need (for example, he has a sick child), he will turn to his *rebbe*. He does not question the *rebbe* as to how he will help. The *rebbe* can help in any way that he sees fit—by praying, offering practical advice or giving a *berachah*, etcetera. Most likely, Dr. Berger's question—as he meant it—is not what the young man heard.

As an academic, Dr. Berger knows that recourse to original statements is imperative. And yet he fails to do this in regard to the Rebbe. The hundreds of books of the Rebbe's writings provide extensive background as to how the Rebbe thought and used language. Equally important are his footnotes, which provide Torah sources for all of his statements. Is it acceptable to base hostility on ignorance? **JA**



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FEATURES

- A Special Section Commemorating
The Rav's One-Hundredth Birthday and Tenth *Yabrtzeit*
- 10 *A Posbeter Melamed* Hershel Reichman
12 *A Mission Fulfilled* Haskel Lookstein
- 16 *Unmasking the Purim—Pesach Connection* Fyvel Shuster
- 18 *The New Olim* Jonathan Udren
32 *Orthodox Rescue Revisited* Efraim Zuroff, David Kranzler

ISRAEL

- 48 *On and Off the Beaten Track in...Old Gesher* Peter Abelow



page 10



page 18

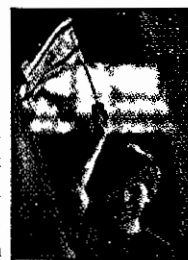
DEPARTMENTS

- 4 *LETTERS*
- 8 *PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE* Argentina's Jews: A Community in Peril Harvey Blitz
- 28 *PROFILE* Where the Tree Falls: Remembering Rabbi Walter Wurzburger Shalom Carmy
- 40 *JUST BETWEEN US* *Unsung Heroes* Adam Jessel
- 50 *JEWISH LIVING* A Formula for Happiness Abraham J. Twerski
- 52 *LEGAL-EASE* What's the Truth about... *Tzadi?*
53 What's the Truth about... *Bobe-Mayses?* Ari Z. Zivotofsky
- 56 *KOSHER KOPY* Sweet-Talk: Inside the Kosher Bakery Yisroel Bendelstein
- 58 *CHEF'S TABLE* The Gifted Cook: How to Satisfy a Vegetarian on Passover Eileen Goltz
- 61 *NEW TO* (U)
- 66 *BOOK* One People, Two Worlds by Ammiel Hirsch and Yosef Reinman
Reviewed by Yitzchok Adlerstein
- 70 *HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2002 OU NATIONAL CONVENTION*
- 72 *THE UNION SOCIETY*
- 73 *COUNTERPOINT* Debating Messianism
- 80 *SECOND THOUGHTS* Of Weddings, *Halachah* and Epistemology
Emanuel Feldman



page 48

Itai Adler, of Efrat, welcomes new *olim* from North America at Ben Gurion Airport on July 9, 2002.
Photo: Nefesh B'Nefesh



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