

ON "THE NEW MESSIANISM: PASSING PHENOMENON OR TURNING POINT IN THE HISTORY OF JUDAISM?"

BY DR. DAVID BERGER

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...Although Dr. Berger offers an insightful study of the current Messianic movement among Lubavitcher *Chassidim*, he misses a key point, in terms of understanding the conditions that have enabled the Messianic movement in Lubavitch not only to flourish, but also to grow in strength.

The failure of the "official" Lubavitch movement known as *Agudath Chassidei [Chabad] Lubavitch* (known by its acronym as AGUCH) to even consider the possibility of selecting a new spiritual leader for the worldwide Lubavitch movement has clearly enabled the Messianic faction in Lubavitch to flourish in the wake of no serious spiritual alternative.

Not only have AGUCH, the administrators of the major Lubavitch institutions, community elders, *shluchim* and other non-Messianic Lubavitch rabbis failed to choose a new spiritual leader for Lubavitch, but the issue of choosing a new spiritual leader has become a taboo subject amongst most, if not all, Lubavitch *Chassidim* worldwide, including the non-Messianic or anti-Messianic factions. When a well-respected Lubavitch rabbinical leader in Crown Heights attempted to organize a committee to draft the senior secretary of the late Rebbe as the new spiritual leader of the movement (as *Mashpiah Roshi*, not Rebbe) he was forced to make a hasty retreat and deny that he had any intentions to even contemplate the selection of a new leader for Lubavitch. Thus the failure on the part of the non-Messianic Lubavitch community to come to grips with the need for new leadership for the movement has clearly created a spiritual vacuum in this community which the Messianic movement has very adeptly filled. It is this writer's contention that the appointment of a new spiritual leader for Chabad would lead to the rapid dissolution of the Messianic movement in Lubavitch...

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Although I am proud to consider myself a staunch friend and supporter of Chabad/Lubavitch, I found myself agreeing in many ways with Rabbi David Berger's remarks — sadly enough.

Nevertheless, I must register my objections not for what Rabbi Berger says but rather for what he does not say.

Rabbi Berger fails to sufficiently distinguish between the "Messianists" (as he calls them) of Crown Heights and the prominent rabbis and leaders of the *official* Lubavitch institutions worldwide who have tried for years to distance themselves from the "Messianists" publicly and privately...

I, for one, would like to see Rabbi

Berger clarify his remarks for those who may not know otherwise, as well as apologize to the rabbis and members of *Agudas Chassidei Chabad*, the thousands of *Merkos Lubavitch shluchim* around the world, and many others who have gone on record as speaking out against the "Messianists" in such publications as the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, and *The Jewish Week*...

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Dr. Berger's article, although well-written, is severely flawed. He is sincere, and is expressing concerns that are very real to him. Nonetheless, serious omissions and misinterpretations appear throughout the entire article. His main points are as follows:

a) Lubavitch Messianism, particularly the belief that the Rebbe is (even now) the *Mashiach*, is contrary to Torah, and is based entirely on "inapplicable" and "irrelevant" sources.

b) The conditions that produced this fervor are unclear and "will no doubt be the subject of much scholarly investigation."

c) This belief poses a serious threat to Judaism, and should be dealt with decisively and harshly.

In my opinion each of these points is entirely incorrect;

a) The belief that the Rebbe may be *Mashiach* is firmly within the parameters of authentic Torah Judaism.

b) The origins of this "fervor" are both obvious and noble.

c) This belief does not pose the slightest threat to Judaism.

The Sources

Whether or not the position that the Rebbe could still be *Mashiach* was reached by way of honest and sincere research of authentic Torah sources, or rather to satisfy emotional or psychological needs, is not the issue. Our focus must be entirely on the validity of the position itself, not on how it was reached.

Dr. Berger's assertion that "two thousand years of messianic literature was scoured to find a handful of...quotations," implying that only "a handful" of Torah sources is insufficient, is absolutely wrong. Any student of *halachah* knows that serious halachic questions are often decided on the basis of a single passage in Talmud or a few words in Rambam. All that is necessary to decide any Torah issue, including the one under discussion, is one clear source (providing that there aren't opposing sources).

In our case, there is not one single Torah source indicating that *Mashiach* cannot be from those already departed (the Rambam will

be discussed later), but there are several explicit sources that he can. For example, in his endnotes (#7), Dr. Berger reluctantly refers to an explicit and very relevant passage in *Sanhedrin* 98b, where none other than the great Talmudic sage Rav says that "if [*Mashiach*] is from the departed it is Daniel." This is seemingly quite a clear indication that it is totally acceptable to assume that *Mashiach* can be from the departed, as Rav Don Yitzchok Abarbanel states clearly in his *Yishuos Mishicho* (p.104 in the new editions). Dr. Berger makes light of this by asserting, without a scintilla of evidence, that a view brought down by Rav was held only by a "vanishingly tiny number who may have left open the possibility that Daniel might be."

Dr. Berger further maintains that the first explanation of Rashi to this passage which is the basis for the above interpretation "was surely a minority reading and is not presented as Rashi's own belief."

How Dr. Berger can make such a statement without a shred of evidence is beyond me. But more importantly, it is completely irrelevant. Even if it could be proven that there were only a tiny minority of authentic Torah sages who entertained the possibility that *Mashiach* can be from the departed — is that not enough? Can one call a view held by even one great Torah sage "a revision of a cardinal principle of the faith?"

Dr. Berger further implies that the above source, (as well as the sources that King David himself will be *Mashiach*),¹ is irrelevant because Lubavitch does not claim that Daniel or King David are *Mashiach*, but rather the Rebbe. Here again he is ignoring the obvious. The main thrust of his article is not against the particular belief that the Rebbe is a legitimate candidate for being *Mashiach*, but rather that the concept of a deceased person being *Mashiach* is alien to Torah Judaism. Hence, the above sources regarding Daniel and King David are very much relevant!²

A discussion of the sources, however, is not the main issue at hand. The Torah is infinite, and like other Torah issues, many arguments can be presented supporting or countering both sides. Ultimately in difficult issues one must follow the opinion of their *rav muvhak*.

And this is precisely what many Lubavitchers have done! The Rebbe stated clearly after the previous Rebbe passed away that those that believed the he was *Mashiach* need not alter their views after his *petirah*.³

Dr. Berger alludes to this statement when he writes, "Finally, a number of disturbing statements that he himself [i.e. the Rebbe] had issued after his predecessor's death completed the argument."

Dr. Berger somehow feels comfort-

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able making such a statement. However, a *talmid* of the Rebbe has a Torah obligation to accept everything the Rebbe said. Otherwise he would be violating the Torah prohibition of *lo sasur*.⁴ This prohibition applies even to views that are difficult to accept, as the *halachah* states (*Sifri*; *Rashi*, *Shoftim* 17:11): "*afilu al yimin shehu smoel*" ("even if he says your right hand is really your left"). One cannot criticize Lubavitch for accepting the view of their Rebbe.

Although within Lubavitch itself there is some debate as to what exactly the Rebbe's views were, this is not the concern of the non-Lubavitch community. Those that believe the Rebbe to be *Mashiach*, base their views on what they perceive is the Rebbe's position, even though it is difficult to comprehend. This level of *emunas tzaddikim* should be admired, not criticized.

The Rambam

The only Torah source that I have found that could possibly be interpreted to disqualify a resurrected *Mashiach* is the Rambam. Although the Rebbe does not need myself nor anyone else to justify his views, and he was surely aware of this Rambam, I would nonetheless wish to point out that there is no real contradiction between the Rambam and the sources that indicate that *Mashiach* may be from those who have already departed.

The Rambam in *Hilchos Melachim* 11:3,4 states that if an individual presumed to be *Mashiach* dies, then it is clear that he is not *Mashiach*. The reason for this is quite simple. Resurrection is a supra-natural phenomenon which cannot be taken into consideration in halachic decisions. Although it is certain that at one point there will be a resurrection of the dead, according to the Rambam, its precise time is unknown, and is not in any way connected to the Redemption. (See *Iggeres T'chiyas Hameisim*). Therefore the *chezkas Mashiach* applied to an individual (i.e. the halachic assumption that an individual is *Mashiach* even before it has been proven conclusively), is lost upon his death.

The Rambam is clearly not disqualifying a *tzaddik* who has departed from being resurrected and then becoming *Mashiach*. He is simply stating that once he dies he loses the halachic status of *chezkas Mashiach*. In other words, the concept of *chazakah* is related to (though not necessarily entirely dependent on) the natural laws of probability. An individual who fulfills certain criteria is, according to the Rambam, deemed halachically *bechezkas Mashiach*, because it is improbable that one who is not *Mashiach* will accomplish these things. The same natural laws of probability obviously preclude resurrection. Therefore, the individual assumed to be *Mashiach* now has the natural laws of probability working against him and therefore loses his *chezkas Mashiach*. Should this individual actually be resurrected, he obviously would be again a legitimate candidate to be *Mashiach*.

The primary cause for the widespread belief that the Rebbe was *Mashiach* prior to his passing was not based on the Rambam but on the established tradition within Lubavitch that the *Tzaddik* of the generation is also the potential *Mashiach* of the generation. This concept is not dependent on the laws of *chazakah*. Until another

tzaddik with the proper credentials is crowned as the new Rebbe (which, for several reasons, will not happen), *Chassidim* will continue to consider the Rebbe as the *Mashiach* of this generation.

Even with regard to the concept of *chazakah*, we may suggest that this is not lost upon an individual's passing. The *Radvaz* (*Responsa* Vol. 3 #1069) states that it is an accepted fact ("true without any doubt") that aside from the general resurrection for the regular Jews which will occur some time after the redemption, there will be an earlier resurrection for the *tzaddikim* of all the generations prior to the *Geulah*. The Rambam was obviously not aware of this *mesorah*, but it is an axiom in *halachah* that we accept the view of a later *posek*. This being the case, it is entirely possible that an individual would not lose his *chezkas Mashiach* upon death, since he, (the *tzaddik* presumed to be *Mashiach*, as well as all other *tzaddikim*), will definitely be resurrected prior to the redemption.

I must admit that I was also uncomfortable with the idea of *Mashiach* being resurrected. However, after serious reflection, I realized that my problem was not because it is contrary to Torah, but simply because it is unrealistic. My faith in *t'chiyas hameisim* in general is not as solid as it should be. From a pure Torah point of view, there is not the slightest reason to disqualify a resurrected *tzaddik* from being *Mashiach*, just as there is no reason to disqualify a resurrected *tzaddik* from being the *Kohen Gadol* or the *Av Beis Din* of the Sanhedrin.

Would anyone have a problem if disciples of the Chofetz Chaim would proclaim that he will be resurrected and be the *Kohen Gadol*? Or if *talmidim* of Rav Chaim Brisker would claim that he will be resurrected and be the *Av Beis Din* of the Sanhedrin? The only question might be, that if we are resorting to resurrection to furnish our candidates, then why the Chofetz Chaim and Rav Chaim, why not *Aharon Hakohen* and *Moshe Rabbeinu*? This might be a legitimate question, but it surely does not alienate these claimants from our faith. No rational mind would exclude the aforementioned hypothetical *talmidim* of the Chofetz Chaim and Rav Chaim from mainstream Orthodox Jewry!

The Death of Mashiach

Although it is impossible to know for sure, it is quite possible that the entire Lubavitch messianic movement was accurately predicted by our sages. I am referring to the concept of *Mashiach ben Yosef*. Although there is some ambiguity regarding some of the details surrounding *Mashiach ben Yosef*, the general picture which emerges from primary sources is as follows:

A great *tzaddik* and scion of the Davidic dynasty⁵ will rise and accomplish many great things.⁶ He will reign for 40 years (*Pirkei Heichalos Rabasi* 39:1), bring many Jews back to Torah, and teach *pnimius haTorah*.⁷ He will also reach out to non-Jews. He will begin the actual preparations for the redemption. He will be considered by a relatively small group of followers as the final and only *Mashiach*,⁸ and it seems he will go along with their assumption. However he will die before he completes the process of redemption.⁹ Some of his followers will give up hope but others will remain steadfast in their faith. This will be considered a great merit for them. There will then be a time of darkness and confusion as the nations of the world, particularly the Arabs (*Yishmael*), will descend upon *Eretz Yisrael* and *Yerushalayim*

(*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* Ch. 27, 30, 31; *Zohar*; *Bereishis* p.112). The government in *Eretz Yisrael* will be controlled by the *erev rav*, who will make a pact with *Esav* (the *Vatican*?) and *Yishmael* (the Arabs) against the Jews.¹⁰ When the situation will seem hopeless, *Mashiach ben David* will appear, resurrect *Mashiach ben Yosef* and the process of redemption will be completed by both of them. Together they will lead *Klal Yisrael* into a new era.

Mashiach ben Yosef is not considered a fraud, *chas v'shalom*, but a true *Mashiach* who will work hand in hand with *Mashiach ben David*. (Other sources seem to indicate that *Mashiach Ben Yosef* and *Mashiach ben David* are actually one and the same.¹¹ The different names correspond to his dual mission. Ben Yosef reflects his status prior to the redemption, and Ben David to his status afterward.)

The above scenario has a striking parallel to the events we have witnessed. Whether or not the events we have lived, and are now living through are the actual events predicted by the sages, remains to be seen. If they are, then the Rebbe may actually be *Mashiach ben Yosef* (or Ben Yosef and Ben David according to those who maintain that they are one and the same).

The Motive

Dr. Berger further writes: "The conditions that produced the extraordinary messianic fervor within Lubavitch during the last decade will no doubt be the subject of much scholarly investigation."

There is no real need for that much scholarly investigation. The conditions that produced the extraordinary messianic fervor within Lubavitch during the last decade are obvious. They have nothing to do with any of the things Dr. Berger mentions, except the writings and discourses of the Rebbe. The Rebbe's words are the absolute, entire and only cause of all the extraordinary messianic fervor within Lubavitch.

It is hard for a non-Lubavitcher to appreciate the depth of the relationship between the Rebbe and his *talmidim-Chassidim*. Aside from the love and devotion, there is absolute unwavering trust. It is this complete and unshakable trust that gives thousands of the Rebbe's *Chassidim* the strength to sacrifice all material comforts and spend their lives in some forsaken place to reach out to some lost Jews and share with them the warmth of Torah and *Yiddishkeit*.

"If the Rebbe says that this must be done, then this is what the Torah wants. This is what Hashem wants. No questions asked!"

It is for this reason that when the Rebbe said in the early '80s that the Redemption is so very near, the *Chassidim* believed him. And when the Rebbe said in the early '90s that *Mashiach* is already here, and the process of Redemption is beginning to unfold,¹² the *Chassidim* believed him.

And because it was so real they could not help but wonder about the identity of *Mashiach*. This is a normal response. Anyone who really believed that *Mashiach* was already present in this world and has begun the initial stages of redemption could not possibly contain their curiosity regarding his identity. This is not fanatical or immature, but simply human nature. And it is also quite natural that the Rebbe would be considered by his *Chassidim* as the most fit for the position. As mentioned earlier, there is a long-standing tradition in Lubavitch for several generations that the Rebbe of a particular generation

ation is also the potential *Mashiach* of that generation. This view was rearticulated by the Rebbe himself.¹³ This attitude is not unique to Chabad, and several parallels can be cited, beginning from the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 98b).

This is the source of the seemingly fanatical belief *Chassidim* held on to during the two horrible years when the Rebbe was suffering the effects of a stroke.

If the Rebbe said *Mashiach* is here, than he has moved from being a potential *Mashiach* to an actual *Mashiach*. And if so, it was assumed that he cannot possibly die before completing the process of Redemption. God in His infinite power will surely heal the Rebbe. Those who knew of the sources regarding the possible death of *Mashiach* were, for obvious reasons, not going to publicize them while the Rebbe was still alive.

This demonstration of faith is admirable. Of course, if the same scenario would transpire in another community, they simply would conclude that their Rebbe must have erred. But, in another community you would not find young *Chassidim* giving up friends and family, packing their bags to go to some distant and unknown location to spend their lives spreading *Yiddishkeit* just on the basis of a nod from their Rebbe.

It is this same faith in the words of the Rebbe that is the primary source for the current widespread belief in Lubavitch that the Rebbe will return and complete the process of Redemption. It is not the failure to come to terms with reality, but rather the unbending faith that nature is subservient to Torah and *tzadikim*, not the other way around.

The Threat

Dr. Berger draws several parallels between Lubavitch messianism and Christianity and Sabbatianism. He warns that "our children will no longer be able to tell Christian missionaries that the Jewish faith does not countenance belief in a Messiah whose mission is interrupted by death, and one of the defining characteristics of Judaism in a Christian world will have been erased." He concludes that if we remain passive in the face of Lubavitch messianism, "we award victory to Christianity in a crucial aspect of its millennial debate with Judaism. We accept a fundamental revision of a cardinal principle of the faith. We must tremble before the judgment of God and history."

In my opinion Dr. Berger has severely exaggerated the threat of Lubavitch Messianism. The fact that parallels can be made between Lubavitch and, *lehavdil*, Christianity or Sabbatianism, means nothing. Many more parallels can be drawn between authentic Judaism and Christianity, Islam, or Zen Buddhism. Maybe we should scratch the whole idea of *Mashiach* since it is so central to Christianity? Or maybe deemphasize the importance of prayer since it is so central to Islam!

Since when do we determine our conduct or belief based on its similarities to other religions? The Torah is the only basis for deciding our behavior and shaping our views.

Dr. Berger has also entirely erred regarding the centrality of the argument against a "*Mashiach* who dies" to refute Christianity. A simple examination of the major debates between great Torah scholars and Christians throughout the ages will reveal that this argument plays no role at all.¹⁴ The major refutation against Christianity and Sabbatianism was, and is, not that their heroes died, but that during their lifetime they accomplished absolutely nothing

that would prove their role as *Mashiach*.

Moreover, the primary function of *Mashiach* is to strengthen Torah, but these *rasha'im* attempted to change the Torah, *chas v'shalom*.

With regards to Christianity, its most serious deviation from Judaism is by far the concept of the Trinity, and attributing Divinity to a human.

Conclusion

Even if one disagrees with all the above and is convinced that the belief that the Rebbe is *Mashiach* is entirely unfounded and *am horarus*, there is still no justification to alienate those that hold on to this belief. Several Torah scholars believed that the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 marked the beginning of the process of redemption. Many accepted Torah leaders disagreed, some vehemently. Nevertheless, it was never suggested that those that hold this belief should, God forbid, be disenfranchised from the rest of Orthodox Jewry.

As long as one does not propose any change in the observance of Torah and *mitzvos*, and there is not the slightest shred of evidence that Lubavitch is headed in that direction, the assertion that one knows the identity of *Mashiach* or how he will appear, is as benign as the assertion that one knows the style of clothing he will be wearing!

What will happen if, *chas v'shalom*, *Mashiach* does not come in the near future? The Ramban also had thousands of followers and he predicted when *Mashiach* will come, and it did not materialize. What happened? There must have been disappointment, but they all continued to be faithful to Torah and forged ahead doing what they could to make *Mashiach* a step closer. The same is true with many other great leaders. The Ramban is not remembered as the one who made a false Messianic prediction, but as one of the great Torah Masters whose contribution to Judaism is everlasting. The Rebbe's place in history was, and will remain, among the giants of all the generations whose immense contribution to his generation can never be forgotten.

The main challenge of Torah Jewry today is not our fight against missionaries, but rather against the ignorance, apathy and assimilation which is affecting millions and millions of brethren. Lubavitch plays a leading and irreplaceable role in reaching out to all these Jews. They maintain well over 1000 educational and outreach centers in all corners of the world. At least 99% of all the activities and resources of all these institutions are spent on things that all the various streams of Torah Jews would consider vital and necessary. It would cause inestimable harm to *Klal Yisrael* were these efforts hampered in any way.

Postscript

Although I have spent the preceding pages defending the halachic viability of those Lubavitchers who continue to believe that the Rebbe is *Mashiach*, I understand why the activities of some individuals within Lubavitch makes many people uncomfortable.

I am referring not to the many Lubavitchers who hold this belief, but to the few who feel obligated to convince others that the Rebbe is *Mashiach*. True, when the Rebbe was alive, a theory was advanced that since the redemption might be a natural process, *Mashiach's* acceptance might also occur through natural means. This would entail that his followers would logically persuade the rest of *Klal Yisrael* to accept his sovereignty. There is sup-

port for this theory.¹⁵

However, at this point when it is only through supernatural means that the Rebbe can be *Mashiach*, many people see no point in focusing on the identity of *Mashiach*.

In conclusion; the most important thing to Lubavitchers and everyone else is not who *Mashiach* is, but that he should come already!

If *Mashiach* is the Rebbe, so be it. Non-Lubavitchers will gladly accept him. If he's not, I'm sure Lubavitch will accept *Mashiach* too. So rather than encouraging conflict and disunity let's rather spend our time and effort preparing for the imminent coming of *Mashiach* (whoever he is) by learning more Torah, doing more *Mitzvos* and increasing our *Ahavat Yisrael*!

NOTES

1. Yerushalmi Brochos Ch. 2 (17a), according to the classic commentary Yefai Toar to Eicha Rabba 1:51 who states explicitly that the view that King David will be *Mashiach* means through actual resurrection. Other sources (see Ohr Hachama to Zohar Vol. 1, 82b) indicate that it refers not to King David himself but rather to a *nitzutz*, spark, of the soul of King David which will be en clothed in the person of *Mashiach*.

2. A comprehensive discussion of all related sources is beyond the scope of this article. Dr. Berger's bold assertion that all of the sources are inapplicable and irrelevant cannot be justified. While it is true that some of the sources put forward in the various Lubavitch publications he cites are not conclusive and may be interpreted in ways that do not support the belief in a resurrected *Mashiach*, many of the sources do require serious consideration. It cannot be considered intellectually honest to simply dismiss them all as irrelevant. In addition to the sources quoted regarding King David and Daniel, there are several other relevant sources, for example: a) In Derech Eretz Zuta end of Ch. 1 (also quoted in Yalkut, Yechezkel 367) *Mashiach* is listed with another eight individuals who have passed away from this world and entered Gan Eden "alive." The exact nature of their ascent to Gan Eden is unclear, and whether this precludes the possibility that they were actually buried, is unknown. (Aside from Eliyalm Hanavi and R. Yehoshma ben Levi, see Kesubos 77b, the details of the passing of the other seven are not recorded). In any case, this source cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, since it proves that the appearance of *Mashiach* involves some sort of supernatural descent from Gan Eden similar to resurrection. [This is also the simple explanation, although there are several other explanations, of Eruvim 43, that the coming of Eliyalm Hanavi and *Mashiach* on Shabbos would entail the traveling of the techum Shabbos through the heavens.] This concept is no less "dangerous" than the position that *Mashiach* will go through a "simple" resurrection, since Christians can claim that their savior also ascended to heaven "alive." b) R. Chaim Vital (Arba Meos Shekel Kesef, p. 77 in Korts edition, p. 241 in new edition) states that *Mashiach* ascends to heaven, body and soul prior to the redemption (see also Zohar Vol. II, 7b). While this is obviously not conclusive proof that *Mashiach* will actually pass away before the redemption, as the ascent referred to may or may not be actual death, it is nonetheless, intellectually irresponsible to dismiss this as an irrelevant source. c) Similarly regarding the sources that refer to the appearance and disappearance of *Mashiach* prior to the redemption (Bamidbar Rabba 11:2, and elsewhere). Whether this means a disappearance analogous to the disappearance of Moshe in

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Egypt, or akin to Eliyahu's ascent to heaven, or actual death — is subject to debate. However, it is definitely relevant source material, for it proves that the process of redemption is not necessarily smooth and straightforward. We see clearly that during the process, an unspecified period of time of confusion and darkness temporarily suspends its progress, and that the revelation of Mashiach might entail the occurrence of supernatural and inexplicable phenomena.

3. Talk on 13 Shevat, 5711 (Jan. 20, 1951), printed in *Likutei Sichos Vol. II*, p. 517, and elsewhere.

4. Although primarily referring to the Sanhedrin, this mitzvah also applies to great religious leaders of each generation. See *Chinuch 495*; *Minchas Chinuch 496*.

5. *Ben Yehoyada to Sanhedrin 98b*. See also sources quoted in Margolios Hayam 94a #4.

6. For many of the details mentioned here, see *Emunos Vede'os of R. Saadia Gaon 8:7*. *Hagasonim of R. Hai Gaon* (printed in *Otzar Hagoanim*, Succah 52a), *Sefer Zerubavel*, *Agadas Mashiach*, *Pirkei Mashiach* and *Osos Hamashiach* (printed among other places in *Otzar Hamedrashim*).

7. *Kol Hator* (a collection of the views of the Vilna Gaon related to the redemption compiled by his student R. Hillel of Shklov) Ch. 2 par: 75, 98 and 122.

8. See also *Iyun Yaakov*, *Eruvin 43a*; *Kol Hatur 2:39*, ("This is the nature of Mashiach ben Yosef, he recognizes his brethren but they do not recognize him.")

9. The death of Mashiach ben Yosef is mentioned in the *Talmud*, *Succah 52a*, and numerous times in the *Zohar* and *Midrashim*.

10. *Kol Hator Ch. 2:2, 4:1*. Even *Shleimah 11:6* and in the notes there. See also *Zocharya 12:2*; *Targum Yonasan*; *Rashi*; *Iben Ezra*; *Radak ad. loc.*

11. *Chayei Moharan (Breslov) p.13* ("There is one tzaddik who incorporates the both Mashiachs"). *Com. R'masiyim Tzofim (R. Shmuel of Shinava) to Eliyahu Zuta p. 20*, ("The two Mashiachs are one...as is known"). See also *Sefer Chizyonos of R. Chaim Vital p.106* (Mashiach is a physical descendant of David from his father's side, Reiven from his mother's side and Yosef in a spiritual sense.) Note also *Pesikta Rabboti Ch. 36* where Mashiach ben David is referred to as "Ephraim, my righteous Mashiach."

12. Talk on *Shabbos Parshas Mishpatim 5752 (Feb. 1, 1992)*, and elsewhere. Interestingly, *Horav Moshe Feinstein zt"l* stated in the late '60s that the person who will be Mashiach is certainly already present in this world, (quoted by *R. Shalom Shachna Zohn*, *Pirkai Tshuvah U'Geulah, N.Y. 1970, p.177*).

13. Talk on *Shabbos Parshas Tazria-Metzora 5751 (April 20, 1991)*, and elsewhere.

14. To the contrary, in the famous debate of the Ramban against the apostate Jew, *Pablo Christiani* in the presence of King James of Aragon in 1263, *Pablo* cites *Midrash Eichah Rabbah (1:51)* to prove that Mashiach was born long ago and passed away. The Ramban responds not by attempting to prove that the belief in a Mashiach who passes away is alien to Judaism, but rather, that the fact that the Midrash groups Mashiach with several other individuals who are in Gan Eden proves that Mashiach is human, not Divine. The Ramban's

argument is also repeated in the great debate at Tortosa in 1413, in which R. Yosef Albo and other great sages participated. I am aware that some modern day anti-missionary activists make use of the argument against a Mashiach who dies before completing the redemption.

(See, for example, *Jews and Jewish Christianity* by David Berger & Michael Wyschogrod, *Ktav 1978*). This is because it is a rather simple and straightforward argument. As such, Dr. Berger is correct that by invalidating this argument, Lubavitch has made their task more difficult. (Many powerful arguments still remain!) However, it is hardly appropriate to penalize those subscribing to a legitimate Torah view just because it complicates the work of anti-missionaries.

15. See *Hoshea 2:2*; *Radak and Metzudos ad. loc.*; *Hoshea 3:5* and *Metzudos ad. loc.*; *Malbim, Amos 9:1*.
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Professor Berger's writing on Lubavitch and the belief in *Moshiach* claim to be scholarly while only rehashing the same old apologist propaganda. The only unusual element this time around for Berger and his ilk is the concession that Lubavitch is a "highly successful and very important movement."

Over 50 years ago, the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe reawakened the dormant belief in the Jewish Redeemer and was criticized for blurring the lines between Judaism and Christianity. He responded to his critics by imploring them not to abandon one of the cornerstones of Jewish teaching to non-Jews and proudly cling to Jewish belief even if it was emulated and "borrowed" by others. Today, Berger, still repeats the same claim.

This seems to be a replay of the criticism aimed at Lubavitch many years ago. Although heavily criticized in the early 1950s ("who needs them at our table," etc.) the Rebbe's outreach approach is now adopted by the entire Jewish community. Jewish outreach and Jewish pride has become integral to all segments of the Jewish community, largely due to the unstinting efforts of the Rebbe and his thousands of *shluchim*-emissaries worldwide.

It took less time, thank God, for the Jewish world to realize that "*Moshiach*" (a household word now) is "real" and not some illusionary hope to see us through difficult times. The Rebbe transformed *Moshiach* from an abstract fantasy to a tangible reality. That *Moshiach* is a "Human Being" and not a spirit. No less a personality as the Gerer Rebbe, *shlita*, thanked the Rebbe and Lubavitch for taking *Moshiach* out of the deep freeze. After serious study of the many texts on *Moshiach*, many vehement critics have reversed themselves.

But instead of examining the issues and sources in a serious manner, the article calls to unfund yeshivos, campus outreach, camps, work with widows and orphans and thousands of life-saving, religious, educational, cultural and recreational programs of Lubavitch, throughout the world, performed with *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice) by close to 2,000 *shluchim* — because of a philosophical disagreement. What is further disturbing is that a traditional organization has lent its voice to a secular historic perspective to delegitimize what is clearly a recurrent theme in traditional Jewish teaching on *Moshiach*.

Even Berger's footnotes are remarkable for the complete absence of reference to traditional sources supporting his thoughts. Berger does not even manage to uncover one Gemara,

one *Midrash*, one medieval or recent rabbinic authority to support his ill-conceived claims. True, he quotes Maimonides. But the Rambam talks of the Messianic candidate failing or being killed. Only the foolhardy would rush to declare the Rebbe's movement to bring *Moshiach* a failure. With thousands of emissaries around the world and the *Moshiach* awareness and belief constantly building — with more than 100 institutions, worldwide, established after the tragedy of 3 Tammuz — the Lubavitch movement under the Rebbe's continued leadership remains committed to its goal of helping to bring the Redemption. Surely all of Israel prays for the success of this effort, soon to be...

How can one possibly discredit a belief firmly based on classic Talmudic-Midrashic texts as un-Jewish?

The belief that the *Moshiach* can arise from the dead was prevalent among the Talmudic Sages — it is mentioned in three separate texts, each quoting different sages: Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin 98b*) offers two possibilities: one from the living, one from the dead like Daniel. Jerusalem Talmud (*Berachos 2:4*) and *Midrash Eichah (1:52)* "If he is from the dead, his name is David." Although some commentaries explain these to mean that only the historical Daniel or David could become *Moshiach*, other authoritative commentaries leave open the possibility that he could be someone "like Daniel" or someone called David — among the many names of *Moshiach* ("brief commentary" of Rabbi David Darshan of Cracow, disciple of the Ramo, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, on Jerusalem Talmud, and commentaries on *Midrash Eichah*).

The great sage Abarbanel says clearly "You should not find it difficult [to understand] that the King *Moshiach* will be among those who arise in the Resurrection." (*Yesluos Meshicho*, Jerusalem 1993, p.104).

Nowhere do later authorities discredit this possibility; in fact, some mention it as a practical likelihood (see, for example, Abarbanel, *ibid*; *S'dei Chemed VII*, p.2984.)

Lubavitcher *Chassidim* also base their beliefs upon the words of the Rebbe — renowned as the most erudite and profound Torah scholar of our time and an unimpeachable authority for any belief's Torah authenticity. After his predecessor's passing in 1950, the Rebbe often emphasized that the previous Rebbe would arise to redeem us. His first discourse on 10 Shevat 1951 ends with the words: "May we be privileged to meet the Rebbe down here in a physical body ... and he will redeem us."

A few days later, in a highly unusual personally handwritten recording of his talk, the Rebbe responded to a question concerning this matter:

"I have been asked why I say that the verse [Isaiah 26:19] 'Arise and sing those who dwell in the dust' will be fulfilled soon, with him [the previous Rebbe] among them, and the Rebbe will lead us out of exile. Isn't the correct order [a] arrival of the *Moshiach*, [b] era of the *Moshiach*, and only later [c] resurrection of the dead? This is also the order quoted in [Chabad] *Chassidus*.

"The reply to this is that although, generally speaking, the order is [a] arrival of the *Moshiach* [b] rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash*, [c] ingathering of the exiles, [d] resurrection of the dead, nevertheless there has been and will be resurrection from the dead of individuals also before then, and there are a number of well-known cases in the Gemara and Midrashim, and of *Tzaddikim* who resurrected the dead, as our

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a rejected position (a *shittah dechuyah*), the core of my argument does not depend on this conviction. Whoever the Messiah might be, once he begins his Messianic activities, there is no dispute as to the certainty that he sees the process to its completion without an intervening death, burial, and resurrection.

Jews have written numerous works through the ages describing the career of the Messiah. In some cases, we find only highlights of the unfolding Messianic drama, in others, painstaking accounts of every stage. Differences abound. Alternate scenarios are proposed. But nowhere — nowhere — does Messiah son of David appear on the eschatological stage only to die and be buried before the end of the final act — not in the *Bavli*, not in the *Yerushalmi*, not in the *Zohar*, not in the standard *midrashim*, not in the *pesiktot*, not in the apocalyptic *midrashim* (*Sefer Zerubbavel*, *Sefer Eliyyahu*, *Otot ha-Mashiach*, *Nistarot de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, and many more), not in the letter of Rav Hai, not in the treatise of Rav Saadya, not in the *Sefer ha-Geullah* of the Ramban, not in the Messianic works of Abarbanel — not anywhere.

This is no ordinary argument from silence. The notion that this option existed but was not mentioned in any of the texts whose fundamental purpose is to describe the unfolding of the Messianic age defies reason. Since the essence of Lubavitch Messianism rests on the claim that the Rebbe had begun the process of redemption and will soon return to complete it, there can be no question that we are dealing with a belief utterly rejected by every generation of Jews before the summer of 1994.¹

Are there sources which make this rejection explicit? Aside from the Rambam, whom we shall revisit later, Jews repeatedly and vigorously rejected such a belief precisely where we would expect them to do so — in confrontations with representatives of a dominant faith which was partly defined by that very belief.

Rabbi Weisberg makes the remarkable assertion that “a simple examination” of the major Jewish polemics shows that the argument that the Messiah will not die before completing his mission “plays no role at all.” Let us begin, then, with selections from a famous passage in the *Vikkuach ha-Ramban*: *I cannot believe in [Jesus’] Messiahship, for...the prophet said that in the time of the Messiah, “No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all of them shall know me etc.” And it says, “For the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.” And it says, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares...Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war.” And from the days of Jesus till today the entire world is full of pillaging and robbery...; indeed, how difficult it would be for you, my lord the king, and for your knights, if they would never again know war. Furthermore, the prophet says concerning the Messiah, “He shall strike down a land with the rod of his mouth.” The aggadah explains...; “If the Messianic king is told, ‘This nation has rebelled against you,’ he will say, “Let the locust come and destroy it,”...and this was not true of Jesus.²*

The argument that Jesus cannot be the Messiah because the prophecies of the

Messianic age have not been fulfilled, an argument which in its very essence denies that a Messianic career can be interrupted by death, is ubiquitous in Jewish polemical literature. It appears in the *Vikkuach ha-Meyuchas la-Radak* (Talmage’s ed. pp.85-86), Jacob ben Reuben’s *Milchamot ha-Shem* (Rosenthal’s ed., p.78), R. Meir of Narbonne’s *Milchemet Mitzvah* (Parma manuscript, pp.31b-32a, 44a-b and elsewhere), Solomon de’ Rossi’s *Edut ha-Shem Ne’emana* (Rosenthal’s *Mechkarim*, vol. I, p.390), Mordechai of Avignon’s *Machazik Emunah* (Vatican ms., pp.9b-11a), *Sefer Nitzachon Yashan* (my edition, pp.107-108), R. Moses ha-Cohen’s *Ezer ha-Emunah* (Shamir’s ed., pp.64-65), R. Yom Tov Lipman Muehlhausen’s *Sefer Nitzachon* (section 279), Yair ben Shabtai da Correggio’s *Cherev Pifyyot* (Rosenthal’s ed., pp.77-78) and elsewhere, not to speak of a slew of Christian polemics which quote this Jewish argument.³ The famous story in which R. Chaim Brisker confounded a missionary by maneuvering him into saying that Bar Kochba could not have been the Messiah because he was killed before the redemption gains its power not from its innovative content but from the clever way in which it expresses the consensus of *Klal Yisrael*. Neither Michael Wyschogrod nor I nor any other “modern day anti-missionary activist” invented this argument.

These passages and others like them certainly reject the position that the Messiah can die in the midst of his mission, but it is difficult to read them in that limited a fashion; they almost surely deny altogether the option of a Messiah who returns from the grave. Moreover, these denials come in a context which refuses any Jewish legitimacy to the alternative position. This is not an ordinary *machloket*; it is an assertion of what the Jewish religion believes as a defining element of the faith.

What, then, of the sources cited by Rabbi Butman and, more fully, by Rabbi Weisberg? The statements in *Chazal* about David and Daniel can easily be understood, as Rabbi Weisberg himself indicates, in a manner which lends no support to the belief in the option of a Messiah who comes from the dead. The issue before us, then, is the later authorities who interpreted these texts to allow for this option.

Let me begin with a methodological point. A commentator explicating a text will sometimes explain the meaning of that text without endorsing its validity. In the case of a traditional commentator on the Talmud, this may be so when the opinion in the text itself is one of several views and when the commentator presents more than one interpretation. Thus, when I wrote that the first interpretation in Rashi to *Sanhedrin* 98b (the Daniel passage) is “not presented as Rashi’s own belief,” I meant simply that we cannot know from here that Rashi — assuming that this is Rashi’s commentary — endorsed the view that the Messiah might come from the dead.⁴

Why did I write that a “vanishingly tiny number” of Jews may have held open the possibility that Daniel would be the Messiah? The reason is the absence of virtually any reference to this option in Jewish works outside of a few commentaries to this passage in *Sanhedrin*. We have already had some taste of the vastness of Jewish Messianic literature. The possibility that the Messiah will be a renowned figure of the past hardly seems like a trivial matter that would leave all Messianic authors through the ages so unimpressed that they would ignore it completely. Yet the yearlong labors of Lubavitch

Messianists appear to have produced precisely two passages which raise this possibility as what Rabbi Butman calls “a practical likelihood.” (He means, or should mean, “possibility.”)⁵

In fact, only one of these citations — the *Sdei Chemed* — really qualifies. This was one of the passages that I had in mind when I wrote of “a handful of broadly relevant, though inapplicable quotations.”⁶ The *Sdei Chemed* does understand the *Gemara* to raise the possibility that the Messiah will come from the dead. He makes it unmistakably clear that he regards this option as far less likely than the alternative and says that it will take place only if the generation has “great merit.” It is also evident that unlike Lubavitch Messianists, the author of the *Sdei Chemed* believed that once the Messiah appears in his redemptive capacity, he will see the redemption through to its conclusion without an intervening death.

In general, I do not believe that an isolated passage, even by a great rabbi, automatically legitimates a theological position against the weight of overwhelming contrary opinion. Even with respect to issues of full-fledged heresy, one can point to isolated statements by distinguished Jews which differ from the Jewish consensus. This is true of anthropomorphism and even of certain issues touching on the composition of the Torah.⁷ These statements do not mean that an Orthodox Jew is permitted to entertain the belief in a corporeal God or to be open to revisionist views about the Mosaic authorship of any part of the Torah. The position of the *Sdei Chemed* is, I believe, invalidated by the weight of the entire Jewish polemical tradition, a tradition which surely reflects the genuine belief of *gedolei Yisrael* through the ages. However that may be, even the *Sdei Chemed*’s position lends no support to the current belief of Lubavitch Messianists.

The passage in Abarbanel’s *Yeshu’ot Meshicho*, which is also cited by Rabbi Weisberg, is Rabbi Butman’s second example of a statement that presents the scenario of a resurrected messiah as a “practical likelihood.” This passage deserves some careful attention.

We will recall that Rabbi Weisberg cited a discussion in the *Vikkuach ha-Ramban* in which the Christian quoted a *midrash* that speaks of the Messiah’s birth on the day of the destruction of the Temple to prove that he has already come (not, as Rabbi Weisberg says, that he “was born long ago and passed away”). Notwithstanding Rabbi Weisberg’s inexplicable misrepresentation of the Ramban’s reply, the actual response was twofold. First, the Ramban said that he does not believe this *midrash*, an assertion which has generated an entire literature but need not detain us here. Second, he said that he will accept it at face value for the sake of argument because it proves that Jesus, who was not born on the day of the destruction, is not the Messiah. When asked how the Messiah could be living for more than a thousand years, he replied that this is entirely possible in the case of a man who will ultimately inaugurate an age in which the effects of the first sin will be undone. What the Ramban does not say is that the Messiah may have since died but will be resurrected to redeem the world.

In *Yeshu’ot Meshicho*, Abarbanel addresses the Christian argument from this *midrash*. He says that if we are to take the *midrash* literally, we could say, as the Ramban did, that the Messiah has been living, presumably in the lower *Gan Eden*, for well over a thousand years. But, he adds, if we indeed take the

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midrash literally, which he does not, he would prefer to understand it in light of the view, based on *Sanhedrin* 98b, that the Messiah could have died in his youth and will return at the end of days. Abaranel clearly excludes the option that the Messiah's redemptive career will begin before his death, and he goes on to explain how he understands the *midrash* in non-literal fashion. Thus, like the *Sdei Chemed*, Abaranel does understand the *Gemara* to present the option of a resurrected Messiah, but because he rejects the literal meaning of this *midrash* altogether, we have no basis for saying that he regarded this scenario as a practical possibility. Indeed, in discussing the "servant" figure in *Isaiah* 53, he refutes the rabbinic view — he had earlier disposed of the Christian view — that this is the Messiah by citing, among other arguments, the verse that says, "He was cut off from the land of the living."⁸

At this point, we can turn to the Rambam's decisive invalidation of the Messianists' belief. At the beginning of *Ma'amar Techiyat ha-Metim*, the Rambam shares his frustration over accusations that he denied the belief in resurrection. He had, after all, expressed his affirmation of this belief in the clearest possible language. Even this, however, could not stop people from attributing to him a view which he explicitly rejected. He goes on, however, to seek consolation in the fact that God himself could not avoid this problem. He wrote in the Torah, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one," and Christians took the three divine names as evidence of the Trinity.

Once more, the Rambam is being subjected to the same indignity. He is no longer here to defend himself, and so the task falls to us. In the clearest imaginable language, the Rambam writes that if a Davidic king compels all Israel to follow the Torah and fights the wars of the Lord, he enjoys the presumption of being the Messiah. "If he proceeds successfully, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, then he is surely the Messiah ... But if he does not succeed to this extent or is killed, it is evident (literally, "known") that he is not the one whom the Torah promised." In effect, Rabbi Weisberg makes this last phrase mean, "It remains entirely possible that he will be the Messiah." Rabbi Butman obscures the point by taking what he calls the Messiah's "failing" out of its clear context, which refers to a failure to build the Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. Some Messianists in Rabbi Butman's circle have extended and, in my view, misapplied a homily of the Rebbe and argued that the Maimonidean reference to building the Temple refers to 770 Eastern Parkway. Thus, one fulfills a key requirement for moving from presumptive Messiah to definite Messiah by building a large synagogue in Brooklyn.

All of this is nothing less than an affront to the Rambam. We plunge into a surreal world in which words have no meaning and all rational discourse is impossible. The belief of Lubavitch Messianists is flatly incompatible with the Rambam, who rules as he does despite his full awareness, in a passage noted by Rabbi Weisberg himself, that the resurrection may precede the coming of the Messiah.⁹ The fact that the Rebbe declared the *Mismeh Torah*'s discussion of the Messianic process to be halachically

binding makes the Messianists' predicament all the more uncomfortable,¹⁰ but the dilemma is of their own making.

Before turning to the large question of how dangerous all this really is, let me deal briefly with several matters of detail.

1. In a very brief paragraph, I made the passing remark that the conditions producing the Messianic fervor in Lubavitch will no doubt be the subject of scholarly investigation. Rabbi Weisberg's characterization of this peripheral comment as one of the three "main points" of the article is exceedingly strange.

2. Rabbi Weisberg argues that Lubavitcher *Chassidim* who believe that the Rebbe declared himself the Messiah are duty-bound to maintain this belief on pain of violating a biblical prohibition. Internal debates about the Rebbe's intentions are "not the concern of the non-Lubavitch community."

There are several problems with this analysis. First, if an authoritative figure says something which appears to contradict a deeply held Jewish belief, every effort should be made to explain that statement in a way that removes the contradiction. This is precisely what Rabbi Yechezkel Sofer, a Lubavitcher thinker who is the Rabbi of Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, has just done in his new book.¹¹ Second, even if we extend the prohibition of *lo tasur* to the leaders of each generation and add to this the general obligation to follow one's *rav muvhak*, it is difficult to understand the suggestion that endorsing a position held by every single *gadol* of your generation other than your *rav muvhak* is a violation of this prohibition. Finally, the commandment applies by definition to the leaders of your generation; the suggestion that following the view of all *gedolei ha-dor* against that of your deceased leader violates *lo tasur* staggers the imagination.

As to the argument that outsiders should not interfere in the internal affairs of Lubavitch, I am reminded of a comment by a former neighbor who expressed distress over a controversial theological position presented to him by another Jew. When I responded that he must at least admit that the concept is fascinating, he replied, "Yes, but that's my religion he's talking about."

3. Had Lubavitch Messianists been content to identify the Rebbe as Messiah son of Joseph, I would never have written my article, and so Rabbi Weisberg's discussion of this Messiah has little bearing on the issue at hand. I should, however, point out that his assertion that "the general picture which emerges from primary sources" depicts Messiah son of Joseph as a "scion of the Davidic dynasty" is highly misleading. There is not a whisper of a suggestion in *Chazal* or the *rishonim* that this Messiah is anything but a physical descendant of Joseph and a member of the tribe of Ephraim, and some sources assert this with a clarity that makes any other interpretation impossible. Later, we begin to find suggestions that he *might* be of Davidic descent,¹² and finally, a few sources actually regard this as likely.

With respect to our issue, the only passages which appear, at least superficially, to be germane are two nineteenth-century remarks which allegedly assert that the two Messiahs are the same person. One of those, in *Ramatayim Tzofim*, almost surely means that the two Messiahs are united by belonging to the Davidic family, not by sharing the same body. The second, ascribed to R. Nachman of Bratslav, may signify more than that, but even this probably means only that some element of the second

Messiah's soul exists in the first Messiah. Equally important, by the nineteenth century there was a widespread tradition that Messiah son of Joseph would not have to die after all, and so even if one person were literally both Messiahs, this would not require him to die and then be resurrected as Messiah son of David.¹³

4. Rabbi Weisberg suggests that the Messianists pose no danger to the ultimate reputation of the Rebbe even if the Messiah's arrival is delayed. After all, did not the Ramban also provide a Messianic date which went unfulfilled?

The difference, of course, is that the Ramban explicitly declared that he proffers his statement without certainty (*divrei shemma vefshar*); the Messianists maintain that the Rebbe issued a "clear prophecy" that the redemption is imminent. What a delay would do to the Rebbe's reputation if this assertion is believed is too terrible to write and too obvious to have to write.¹⁴

5. Both Rabbi Butman and Rabbi Weisberg make the unimpeachable point that Jews should not abandon authentic Jewish beliefs simply because they were borrowed by Christianity. Of course not. But Jews should also not adopt *alien* beliefs which they have been denouncing for untold generations in their debates with Christians.

6. Rabbi Butman begins his letter by asserting that my article "claim[s] to be scholarly while only rehashing the same old apologist propaganda." I did not make such a claim. My contribution to *Jewish Action* was not intended as a scholarly article but as a popular one, though it rested, I hope, on the foundation of good scholarship. In this response, the need to discuss the sources in some detail has forced me into a more scholarly mode, though even here I have tried to keep scholarly jargon and apparatus to a minimum. (I was helped by the fact that the pressure of the journal's deadline forced me to write this response quickly.) Since the article addressed the *posthumous* belief in the Rebbe, I wonder how old its apologist propaganda could be.

As for "rehashing" old material, I was more than a little amused to notice that Rabbi Butman's aversion to this practice appears to have dissipated with startling rapidity. Five of the eight sentences in the third and fourth paragraphs of his letter correspond almost word for word to a letter by Rabbi Zushe Silberstein that appeared in the *Algemeiner Journal* on February 3, 1995 and was later reprinted in *Beis Moshiah*.

7. I not only agree with Rabbi Butman that Lubavitch has done exceedingly important work; I even agree that the Messiah campaign has had a salutary effect in enhancing awareness and understanding of the Messianic faith. My efforts to combat the religious catastrophe that we have allowed to develop in the wake of the Rebbe's *petirah* have made me realize to what degree the Messianic instincts of knowledgeable Jews have atrophied because of the withering of a meaningful Christian threat. The instinctive horror that our ancestors would have felt at the belief in a Messiah who was just buried has waned and, in some cases, virtually disappeared. Perhaps this exchange will help reawaken it.

At the same time, this potential good is balanced, even outweighed, by an evil. Because of the indelicate, propagandistic character of the Messiah campaign even in the last years of the Rebbe's life, the Messianic faith

itself came to be approached with wariness or, worse, amusement even by observant Jews. The problem has worsened now that the Rebbe is gone. Jews are more aware of the belief in *Mashiach*, but that awareness is tinged with irreverence. *Yatza sekharenu be-hefsedenu*.

8. Jena Morris Breningstall takes me to task for failure to credit sufficiently the forces within Lubavitch who are attempting to combat the Messianists. While it is difficult for an outsider (and, I have discovered, even for insiders) to have a clear picture of the current situation, I do have a better sense now of the position of the anti-Messianist group. In many respects they have shown significant courage, sometimes even physical courage, in preventing Messianist takeovers of events and institutions. International Chabad organizations have, I think, remained largely resistant to Messianist forces, and they deserve great credit for this.

At the same time, I cannot agree with the dominant position in these circles that one must work quietly to undermine the Messianists. On September 10th of this year, schoolchildren in Crown Heights were bused to Avery Fisher Hall in Manhattan for an event *le-kabbalat penei meshiach tzidkenu* clearly identified as the Rebbe. If the educational system in the hub of Lubavitch Chassidism is indoctrinating a new generation in this faith, the movement is facing an acute danger to its soul. We need to hear a very simple sentence from the non-Messianist group. It must be said in public and without equivocation. "The Rebbe *zi"l* is not the Messiah." Not "he is probably the Messiah but it is improper to announce this." Not even "he may or may not be the Messiah." As long as the sentence, "He is not the Messiah" sticks in the throat of the non-Messianist group, the danger to the movement — and to Judaism — will remain.

And so we finally arrive at Rabbi Weisberg's concluding point, which must be taken very seriously indeed. Is this a benign error or is it a threat which must be confronted and either quarantined or defeated?

This is a question that needs to be addressed on two levels: theological and historical. On the theological level, Rabbi Weisberg and I disagree about the fundamental issue. In my view, the belief that *Mashiach ben David* can die in the middle of his unfulfilled mission is antithetical to the deepest Messianic convictions of all our ancestors. There is no source in all of Jewish literature that supports it. Our ancestors rejected it in a context that often led to *kiddush ha-Shem*. The major halachic source dealing with the Messiah rejects it explicitly and firmly. Metaphorically, it can be said that the denial of this belief is a *ma'aseh rav* of *Klal Yisrael*, which has firmly closed the door on Messianic claimants after their death. Without this denial, there can be no closure, and one wonders how Rabbi Weisberg knows that Bar Kochba was indeed not the Messiah. On a purely religious level, what does it mean to say that such a belief is benign?

Historically, the assertion that this is a benign error flies in the face of Jewish experience. History does not have to repeat itself, but we ignore it at our peril. One reason for the historical framework of my article was to underscore the dangers of posthumous Messianic movements, one of which has been the transformation of the Messianic figure into something more than a human being.

Rabbi Weisberg maintains that Christianity's most serious deviation from Judaism was attributing divinity to a human being, and in this he is surely correct. In my arti-

cle, I attempted to raise this issue as briefly and delicately as I could. At this point, I have to be slightly more forceful. The term "Essence of the Infinite" (*atzmut Ein-Sof*) was used for a short time to describe the Rebbe during his lifetime. Examples of this terminology have apparently surfaced again since the Rebbe's death, when history indicates that they can become especially dangerous.¹⁵

The article also made a fleeting, cryptic reference to a "disturbing report" of "full-fledged incarnationist rhetoric." A friend in Israel whose reliability is beyond question told me that some time ago — he thinks it was while the Rebbe was still alive — he was listening to a call-in radio program which featured a fairly prominent Lubavitcher guest. A caller reported that while working in a Lubavitch institution in the United States, he had heard staff members tell children that the Rebbe is the *Ribbano shel Olam*. The guest's reaction was not outraged denial; rather, he replied, "There are certain things one does not discuss on the radio."

Let me emphasize that I am not suggesting that this is a widespread belief even among the Messianists; what I am saying is that this story underscores my conviction that confident, relaxed equanimity about a belief which has shown so much explosive potential in the past is unwise and irresponsible. The identity of the eschatological *Kohen Gadol* or head of the Sanhedrin is not bound up with an article of faith, nor has it been associated, even indirectly, with Jewish martyrdom, nor has it torn the Jewish people apart. We have no right to stand by quietly as a belief standing at the core of Judaism is radically transformed.

Let us imagine that many thousands of observant Jews had launched a movement declaring a recently deceased rabbi as the Messiah in the generation of the Chazon Ish and Rav Aharon Kotler. Or the Chofetz Chaim and R. Chaim Ozer. Or the Chasam Sofer. Is it conceivable that they would have refrained from proclaiming its illegitimacy?

And so I turn to the religious leaders of our generation and ask you to consider Rabbi Butman's challenge to me. If you are silent, he says, it must be because you "do not share [my] ignorance," that is, because you maintain that there is nothing objectionable about the belief that *Mashiach ben David* was buried in the summer of 1994. If this is not your position, he implicitly asks, why then do you not speak out? Why indeed?

Notes

1. This point has now been made in a book by a Lubavitcher rabbi in Israel which appeared after my Jewish Action piece. See Rabbi Yechezkel Sofer, *Yitbareru ve-Yitlabbenu*, pp. 67, 71. More on this book later.
2. *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. by C. D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 311.
3. For some of the Christian citations and several more Jewish ones, see my *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1979), pp. 271, 279. (The book is currently out of print but will soon be available in paperback from Jason Aronson.)
4. For both sides of the scholarly controversy on the ascription of this commentary to Rashi, see the references in Avraham Grossman, *Chakhmei Tzarfat ha-Rishonim* (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 217, n. 278.
5. The virtual silence of the sources regarding the Messiah's return from the dead is also the key factor in persuading me that Rashi's first interpretation was a minority reading. It appears clear that this option played no role in the Jewish Messianic

consciousness. We could explain this by assuming that most Jews attributed this view to Rav but dismissed it out of hand; this, however, hardly seems like an explanation of choice. It seems far more likely that Jews ignored this option because they did not think that any rabbi had proposed it.

This conclusion is reinforced by the internal difficulties that appear to beset the first interpretation. According to this interpretation, Rav said that if the Messiah is from the living, he is Rabbi Judah the Prince (not someone like him); if he is from the dead, he is Daniel (not someone like him). There is good reason for Rashi's decision to neutralize the word "like" in the Gemara (though this step in itself is a serious obstacle for this interpretation). If the Messiah is only like Daniel, why can't he be from the living? The reading that he is only like Daniel would slide so close to Rashi's second interpretation (that if the model of the Messiah is to be sought among the dead, then that model is Daniel) that it is hard to see the point of proposing it. However, once the word "like" is neutralized, we are left with the troubling assertion that R. Judah the Prince could be the Messiah despite his own assertion reported in *Yerushalmi Kilayim* 9:3 that he is of Davidic descent only through his maternal line. Tosafot's endorsement of that *Yerushalmi* in *Sanhedrin* 5a, s.v. *de-haksha shevet*, constitutes powerful, if indirect evidence that they follow Rashi's second interpretation here. See too the references cited in *Yefeh Einayim* to *Sanhedrin* 5a. (I made some of these points in a letter to the *Algemeiner Journal*, Feb. 24, 1995.)

6. Rabbi Weisberg's long footnote about the sources he says I called irrelevant is revealing. I never specified which sources I considered irrelevant and which I considered merely inapplicable. He no doubt senses — quite correctly — the weakness of those arguments and consequently assumes, more or less correctly, that I regarded the sources upon which they are based as, strictly speaking, irrelevant.

7. See some of the citations in Marc B. Shapiro, "The Last Word in Jewish Theology? Maimonides' Thirteen Principles," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993): 187-242.

8. *Perush al Nevi'im Acharonim* (Jerusalem, 5716), p. 243, bottom of column 2.

9. Abraham Halkin and David Hartman, *Epistles of Maimonides* (Philadelphia, 1993), p. 222.

10. See Sofer, *Yitbareru ve-Yitlabbenu*, p. 20.

11. See note 1.

12. This is the most that is said in the sources cited by Rabbi Weisberg in the footnote allegedly documenting his assertion. Ben Yehoyada does not even say this much but speaks of a "spark" of Messiah son of Joseph in Messiah son of David.

13. On the sources for Messiah son of Joseph, see *Ha-Tekufah ha-Gedolah*; *Kol ha-Tor*, pp. 421-428. On the view that he need not die, see pp. 428-431. On R. Nachman's comment, see the later Bratzlaver work which explains that "even though the soul of ben David was also in him, he was primarily from the side of Messiah ben Joseph" (quoted in Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, p. 194).

14. See *Yitbareru ve-Yitlabbenu*, pp. 83-88, for a vigorous argument that the Rebbe never issued such a prophecy. Rabbi Sofer's book also addresses the Rebbe's statements about his predecessor as well as the other arguments which Rabbi Butman makes based on the Rebbe's teachings through the years.

15. See *Or Torah* (*Nisan*, 5755): 572-573 (called to my attention by Prof. Marc Shapiro) for a letter criticizing this usage, which appeared according to the letter writer in *Sichat ha-Shavua*, *Parshat Korach* 5754 and *Parshat va-Yeshev* 5755. My effort to obtain these issues has been unsuccessful. §

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