

Did the Rebbe Identify Himself as the Messiah—and What Do His Hasidim Believe Today?

Twenty years after his death, the legacy of the Lubavitcher leader—‘the Prince of our generation’—is still a matter of heated debate

By [David Berger](#) | July 21, 2014 12:00 AM



I

The 20th anniversary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s passing has triggered an outpouring of tributes, as well as three major books about his life and legacy—*My Rebbe* by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, *Rebbe* by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, and *Turning Judaism Outward: A Biography of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe* by Rabbi Chaim Miller. All three are suffused with profound admiration. Steinsaltz’s—I omit the honorific in deference to stylistic guidelines—is the most personal account; Telushkin’s reflects considerable research in written sources as well as discussions with a wide array of informants reporting their personal interactions with the Rebbe; and Miller’s is a full-fledged biography that, although written by an adherent and issued by a Lubavitch publisher, asserts its aim to maintain a large measure of objectivity.

I did not need these books to persuade me that the Rebbe was an extraordinary individual of almost irresistible personal charisma, immense learning, exceptional leadership skills, and profound piety. Yet all three drastically downplay the impact of current Lubavitch messianism as well as the Rebbe’s role in generating the messianic movement that has survived his passing. My concern with an accurate portrayal of the Rebbe’s role emerges from a historian’s desire to counter a deep distortion of historical reality but also from the recognition that a failure to appreciate that role feeds the misperception that the current believers are a marginal, almost inconsequential group.

Steinsaltz affirms correctly that “the Rebbe made it his life’s work to bring the Mashiach.” His very first discourse as Rebbe affirmed that “it is this generation’s task to bring Mashiach.” In his last years his emphasis on this theme became “ever more intense” as he repeatedly declared that redemption is at the threshold and that the messiah could come at any moment. In 1991, he gave a talk lamenting the fact that his efforts to bring the redemption had been insufficient and placing the messianic mission in the hands of his followers.

As to the Rebbe’s view of his own messianic status, Steinsaltz writes that he thinks that “the Rebbe considered it possible that he might be tapped to become the Mashiach. ... Hasidim could pick up the hints that the Rebbe left about his messianic role. However, he never made the claim outright and tried to quash all speculation.” When the Hasidim began a song that named him as the messiah, he “stopped them quickly” and said that he should really leave the room. In 1983, he strongly criticized Hasidim who fixed their gaze on “a person of



flesh and blood” during prayer and indicated that excessive attention to his gestures even on other occasions was a waste of time.

Steinsaltz informs us that despite the Rebbe’s discouragement, “many Hasidim” in his later years believed that he would announce himself as the messiah, and after his stroke, “for most Hasidim it was now an urgent possibility that the Rebbe himself might be the Messiah.” After his death, there remained a group convinced that he was the messiah, some of whose adherents believe that he remains alive. Mainstream Lubavitch, he continues, is not concerned with the identity of the messiah, although some of them “still cannot let go of the possibility, even as they understand that it is only speculation.”

Telushkin goes further in dismissing both the messianist belief and the Rebbe’s role in engendering it. He introduces his discussion of messianism as follows:

What I came to understand while researching this issue is that when Lubavitchers use the word “Messiah” in referring to the Rebbe, they do not mean what people think they mean. Perhaps the most surprising conclusion I reached is that the Messiah issue is, in the final analysis, a nonissue.

Telushkin goes on to explain. Maimonides, he says, provides criteria for a presumed messiah and for a definite messiah (a messiah “beyond all doubt” in Telushkin’s formulation). Since the definite messiah must gather all Jews to Israel and rebuild the Temple, it should be obvious that the Rebbe did not attain this status. What, then, do Lubavitch Hasidim mean when they call him the messiah? The answer is that they mean only that he was the potential messiah for his generation. How, then, do some continue to believe that he is the messiah even after his passing? The answer is that they found a few sources legitimating the belief in a messiah who returns after his death to fulfill his mission.

Thus far, I have been postponing any evaluation of these presentations. In this case, however, we encounter a problem of simple coherence that interferes with the continuation of straightforward summary. It is true that messianists provide some sources to defend their belief, but in what way does this address the issue of how the Rebbe could be merely the potential messiah of his generation after his death? Telushkin makes no genuine effort to address this glaring question.

It may be—though I reiterate that Telushkin never addresses the point—that he is relying on the fact that current messianists continue to use the phrase “prince of the generation” about the Rebbe, inspired to some degree by the fact that he used this phrase (as we shall see) about his deceased father-in-law. However, once it is applied after the death of the prince it loses its limiting force. For the believers, the Rebbe’s generation is defined by his leadership, which persists after his passing, and that leadership will continue until he reveals himself as the messiah. As to the use of the term during the Rebbe’s lifetime, the assertion that he was the messiah of the generation was coupled with the absolute conviction that this was the generation of the redemption, and so there too the limitation was bereft of significance. Thus, Telushkin has not shown—and has barely even provided an argument—that “when Lubavitchers use the word ‘Messiah’ in referring to the Rebbe, they do not mean what people think they mean.” They certainly do.

Another section of the chapter on messianism addresses the question of the Rebbe’s reaction to messianic claims made about him. It presents an unequivocal account of opposition to such claims and provides a bill of particulars, which I reproduce in its entirety. In 1965, he required a Hasid in Israel who had distributed a letter identifying him as the messiah to find all the copies and send them to the Chabad secretariat. In 1991, he prohibited the editor of the journal *Kfar Chabad* from publishing “an article

explaining why the Rebbe was worthy of being considered the presumed Messiah.” He rebuked messianic activists, saying, “They are taking a knife to my heart.” Although he encouraged the standard messianic chant on one occasion in 1991, he refused to come down to the synagogue the next morning unless assured that it would not be recited again, and a few months later, when a similar song was sung, he declared that he should really leave. Later still, he reacted to a letter from an activist declaring him the messiah by saying, “Tell him that when the Moshiach comes I will give him the letter.” More explicitly, when a woman from an Israeli newspaper told him he was the messiah, he responded, “I am not.” Finally, in 1992, he told one of his secretaries who raised the issue, “The one who is the Messiah will have this revealed to him from above. This has not been revealed to me.” In addition to all these statements, there is the incontrovertible fact that the Rebbe prepared a will after his wife’s passing that clearly envisioned an unredeemed world after his death.

Telushkin does inform his readers of the great emphasis that the Rebbe placed on his messianic message. He makes reference to the affirmation in that first discourse of 1951 about the mission of this generation and points to the increasing assertions about the imminence of redemption and the encouraging of the slogan, “We want Moshiach now.” He recognizes that the Rebbe may have considered it possible that he would be the messiah, and he appeals to this consideration in speculating as to why he did not declare clearly and publicly that he is not. Given Telushkin’s acknowledgement that the Rebbe may have regarded this as a possibility, it is difficult to understand why he deleted a key phrase without any indication of an ellipsis in citing the Rebbe’s response to his secretary. My guess is that he wanted to minimize the degree to which the Rebbe may have considered a personal messianic revelation likely. The complete sentence is, “At this point [or thus far], this has not been revealed to me.” (Although the Rebbe surely said this in Yiddish, the secretary’s account is in Hebrew. The phrase in question is le-’et ’attah.)



At the gravesite of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson June 30, 2014. (Photo by Eric Thayer/Getty Images)

As to the messianic belief after the Rebbe's passing, Telushkin notes that some of the "mainstream" Hasidim recognize the possibility that the Rebbe will return as the messiah but feel that there is no way to know, while others do not even acknowledge the possibility. The full-fledged messianists are a "shrinking" movement and have been denounced by the mainstream. In any event, the entire matter is a nonissue because even the messianists continue to observe Jewish law.

Despite its length and its status as a full biography, Miller's book contains remarkably little discussion of the messianic vision that stood at the center of the Rebbe's consciousness. We are presented with the passage in the first official discourse. After that, with the exception of two pages of little substance, we find virtually nothing on the theme until a 10-page discussion of the messianic emphasis in the last years of the Rebbe's life of which only the last four or five address the key issues. What we learn is the following: The preparation for the messianic age that the Rebbe advocated was increased mitzvah observance and broadening the study of Hasidism and the messianic doctrine. He encouraged his followers to do everything they can to bring the messiah primarily through such study. He affirmed the Maimonidean position that one can be sure of the messiah's identity only after he builds the Temple and gathers the dispersed of Israel. He denounced people who sang a messianist chant for alienating people from Hasidism. He wrote the above-mentioned letter to the editor of Kfar Chabad magazine and a similar one to the author of a prospective article.

From my perspective, it is especially remarkable that the five-and-a-half-page Afterword on the success of the movement after the Rebbe's passing and his influence on Jews of all stripes contains not a single allusion to the persistence of messianism. The reader of this book would have not the slightest inkling that anyone believed that the Rebbe was the messiah after his death.

II

If we look back at all three books, I think it is fair to say that readers would be puzzled if confronted with a realistic picture of the intensity and scope of the messianic movement that swirled around the Rebbe in his last years and continued after his death. Yes, he preached that the redemption was imminent and that it is the task of this generation to actualize it. He was arguably the most impressive figure of the generation. But, we are told, he made it clear that the identity of the messiah is unknown, and for all the talk of imminence, he spoke after all of the task of the generation and said—in a passage quoted by Steinsaltz—that though the redemption is at the threshold, we have to pull it in. We get no sense that he provided unequivocal assurances that the redemption would come in this generation. The main reason that readers will not be too puzzled by the widespread messianist belief is that they have been informed that the messianists believed only that the Rebbe was the potential messiah of the generation (Telushkin) and were convinced in his last years only of the "urgent possibility" that he "might" be the messiah (Steinsaltz). In fairness, Steinsaltz drops these qualifiers in his allusion to the current messianists.

In fact, the Rebbe's assurances were far stronger than this portrait suggests, and the messianists' belief that he is the messiah is far less equivocal. What I am about to present here is material provided with his mother's milk to every child in a messianist family but remains virtually unknown to all but a minuscule sliver of the outside community. It is impossible to understand Lubavitch messianism or assess its staying power without awareness of this information.

I must begin with what seems like a digression. The Rebbe's spiritual, even metaphysical relationship to his father-in-law is a key element in understanding him—and no one will ever grasp it fully. Throughout his discourses, he referred to his predecessor as the prince (nasi) of the generation and periodically noted that he is also the messiah of the generation, but the Rebbe also affirmed that this status is continued through the one who took his place. He also said of his predecessor, "His soul is in me." Thus, all the Hasidim understood the Rebbe's depictions of his father-in-law as references to himself. It is difficult to avoid this conclusion, nor would I want to avoid it, since the alternative is to affirm that the Rebbe believed in a deceased messiah. In any case, there cannot be the slightest doubt that the Rebbe knew that his Hasidim, virtually without exception, believed that he was referring to himself. At the same time, his apparent perception that he was in large measure an instrument of his father-in-law's leadership means that some of the exalted characterizations that he expressed were consistent with preservation of a significant measure of humility.

Here then is a sampling of statements made by the Rebbe that combined to generate a deep conviction among the Hasidim that he is the messiah. Except in some cases where I provide a link to a website, all of these statements—and many more—appear with precise annotation in one or more of the following Hebrew collections: Ve-hu Yig'allenu (Brooklyn, 1994, translated into English as *And He Will Redeem Us* [Brooklyn, 1994]); Ha-Tekufah ve-ha-Geullah be-Mishnato shel ha-Rebbe mi-Lubavitch (Kfar Chabad, 1999); Be-Emunah Shelema ed. by S. Shmida (Jerusalem, 2000); Ha-Nekudah ha-Habadit 2 (Marcheshvan 5764 [2003]).

1. "The Prince of the generation is—'Messiah'... I have no objection if 'Messiah' is interpreted in its straightforward sense—our Righteous Messiah, since this is the truth—that the Prince of the generation is the Messiah of the generation."
2. "Our Righteous Messiah...my teacher and father-in-law the Prince of our generation."
3. "My teacher and father-in-law the Prince of our generation, the only Messiah of our generation."
4. Commenting on the phrase, "They will be redeemed immediately (miyad)": "So will this happen to us in actual reality, and with actual immediacy, with all the interpretations of miyad...and particularly with respect to this generation of ours...For the [three-letter] acrostic of MiYaD represents the three periods associated with my teacher and father-in-law the Prince of our generation in the order of their proximity to us: Mashiach (whose name is Menachem), Yosef Yitzchak, Dov Baer." The last two are the names of the Rebbe's predecessors in reverse chronological order. This is the closest he came to an explicit assertion that he is the Messiah, and one can plausibly argue that it is in fact fully explicit.
5. Referring to his father-in-law: "After it has become known that he is a prophet, the people should believe in him, and they should not disparage or criticize him. Their belief should not be in the prophet as an individual, but as a messenger charged with communicating the words of God. This concept has to be publicized to everyone in this generation. It must be made known that we have merited that G-d has chosen and appointed a person who in himself is immeasurably greater than the people of his generation, to serve as a judge, adviser, and prophet to the generation...until the main prophecy, 'To redemption immediately,' for 'Behold Mashiach is coming' right away in the literal sense (mammash)." (The entire discourse can be read in English [here](#) . I have made some modifications in the translation.)
6. There is a rabbinic text that prohibits full-throated laughter in the pre-Messianic age, though not all authorities took this quite literally and observant Jews have generally set it aside. The Rebbe asserted that

this prohibition is no longer applicable because it applies only through the moment before the revelation of the messiah. “But since the Prince of our generation [referring explicitly to his father-in-law] was the Messiah of our generation and he was revealed in full force,” it follows that untrammelled laughter is now permitted and even encouraged.



In June, some 50,000 people visited the site to mark the 20th anniversary of the death of the late Jewish leader. (Photo by Eric Thayer/Getty Images)

7. Messianists have posted a [video](#) of a discourse by the Rebbe after which, as Telushkin noted, he briefly encouraged the singing of the messianist chant. Of perhaps greater interest is the posted section of the talk itself, where someone who understands Yiddish or the Hebrew titles will see the vigorous, unequivocal assertion that this is the generation of the redemption and the last generation of the exile. “The true and complete redemption—without forced interpretations [that would dilute the plain meaning of this depiction—un pshetlakh]” is arriving “right away—literally and literally literally” (in transliteration appropriate for Yiddish—tekef umiyad mamesh umamesh mamesh).

8. The Messiah will proclaim the message that redemption has arrived from the roof of Lubavitch headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. (The Rebbe’s discourse on Parashat Hayyei Sarah 5751.) The heavenly Temple will not descend directly into Jerusalem. It will first descend to a spot adjoining 770 Eastern Parkway, and the buildings, along with all other diaspora synagogues, will then be transported to Jerusalem. (The Rebbe’s discourse, published as a separate booklet, titled Mikdash Me’at: Zeh Beit Rabbenu she-be-Bavel.)

9. On two recorded occasions, the Rebbe provided encouraging reactions to representatives of the Chabad women’s organization who had organized explicit affirmations of his messiahship. For one of these, click [here](#) .

These are some of the “hints that the Rebbe left” that could be “pick[ed] up” by the Hasidim. There is far, far more along these lines. Not a single one of these citations or anything resembling them appears in these books. Readers of the books would not imagine in their wildest dreams that such material could exist.

Lubavitch non-messianists have understandably attempted to mitigate the impact of this evidence. In key instances, they say, we are dealing with rhetorical exaggeration. Thus, the discourse in No. 7 above also affirms that the redemption would come that very day before the evening prayer. Since everyone understood that this was rhetoric, they should have also understood that the assurance about this generation was rhetoric despite its emphatically unequivocal language and the fact that it is part of a series of such assertions over the years. Alternatively, the affirmations of immediate redemption should be understood as prayers. When the Rebbe spoke about his father-in-law’s prophecy of immediate redemption, he did not mean full-fledged prophecy.

Even if one accepts the plausibility of these arguments—and it is a great struggle to do so—there is not a shadow of a doubt that the Rebbe knew that the large majority of his audience took his statements literally, i.e., they understood that he was informing them that the redemption would definitely take place in this generation and that this assurance is based on prophecy. There is similarly not a shadow of a doubt that the Rebbe knew that when he spoke of his father-in-law as the messiah of the generation, his audience took for granted that he was appealing to his partnership with his predecessor and effectively affirming that he would be the redeemer. It is hardly surprising that in the period shortly after the Rebbe’s death, heartrending Hebrew signs proliferated that read, “The Rebbe promised. The Rebbe will fulfill.” (Ha-Rebbe hivtiach. Ha-Rebbe yekayyem.) As one messianist spokesman put it, the Rebbe said that the prince of the generation is the Lubavitcher Rebbe of the generation, and he said that this is the generation of the redemption. The spokesman went on to say that one does not need to resort to the recognition that two plus two equals four in order to draw the inexorable conclusion; it is enough to know that one plus one equals two.

Since I am convinced by the evidence of the will that the Rebbe—at least at some point—was not fully certain of redemption during his lifetime, I cannot easily explain why he would issue such unequivocal assurances. My best guess is that he believed that the final push had to come from the efforts of the people and that only unequivocal statements would provide the incentive necessary to galvanize them to a sufficient degree. But I do not know. What I do know is that he conveyed a message that did not suggest a modicum of doubt. At the same time, the preponderance of evidence indicates that for the most part he was opposed to public declarations of his messiahship because he believed that they would interfere with the spreading of the message of Hasidism.

III

And so we move to the posthumous movement.

Miller, we recall, ignores it completely. Both Steinsaltz and Telushkin use the term “mainstream” for the non-messianists though both recognize that some of them consider the Rebbe’s messianic return possible. Telushkin calls the messianic segment a shrinking movement. The reviewer of *Rebbe and My Rebbe* for the *Wall Street Journal* goes further than the authors, reflecting the impression that “mainstream” Lubavitch strives to create. “After the Rebbe’s death,” she writes, “a narrow slice of Lubavitchers who

regarded him as a messianic figure gave the movement its own extremist fringe,” and at a later point she speaks of “Chabad’s messianic margin.”

In assessing the size of the messianist sector, we must first understand that within Lubavitch, the term “meshichist” is reserved for people who declare the Rebbe’s messiahship in public and proclaim it in the liturgy. A significant number of these believe that the Rebbe is physically alive. You can be a non- or even anti-meshichist while maintaining the firm belief that the Rebbe will be revealed as the messiah, and many of the Hasidim fall into this category. In light of the sort of passages cited above, it is worth contemplating the obstacles that face a Lubavitch hasid who considers the possibility that someone other than the Rebbe will be the messiah.

Let us first back up and consider an assertion made by Telushkin. “All [my emphasis] Lubavitchers,” he tells us ...”recall a story told by the Rebbe. During a public speech [near the very beginning of his tenure], he spoke of an incident in which the Alter Rebbe, Chabad’s founder, was asked, ‘Will the Messiah be a Chasid or a non-Chasid?’ ” He replied that he would be a non-hasid, because non-Hasidim would not join a Hasidic messiah while Hasidim would accept a Messiah who was not a hasid.

Today, the situation is rather different. Shortly after the Rebbe’s death, an Israeli hasid wrote an anti-messianist book asserting that when the messiah comes there will immediately be a limited resurrection of extraordinarily righteous people. At that point we will ask the resurrected Rebbe whether this apparent messiah is genuine, and if the Rebbe confirms his status we will recognize him “even if he is a Litvak [a (non- Hasidic) Lithuanian Jew].”



At the gravesite of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. (Photo by Eric Thayer/Getty Images)

As I reported in my book [The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference](#), the prominent messianist Rabbi Shalom Dov Wolpo responded as follows in a sarcastic sixty-four page booklet:

In this passage we find not only a denial of our belief that the Rebbe is the Messiah but a decision that the Messiah has no connection to the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov God forbid [emphasis in the original]. Not only this, but the author is convinced that the Rebbe will confirm for us that the Messiah, who is divine truth, is a Litvak with no association with the teachings of Hasidism! And this is the divine truth for which we have been waiting two thousand years! And for this all the sufferings of exile were worthwhile.

To move to the moderates, a vigorous polemical work was published in 2003 by prominent Lubavitch rabbis criticizing believers in the Rebbe's physical survival (Ha-Nekudah ha-Habadit 1). They had to contend with the argument that Lubavitch theology affirms that the world survives through the intermediation of a supremely righteous human being who serves as a conduit for the divine energy. If the Rebbe is not physically alive, how does the world endure? Their answer is that in these extraordinary times before the redemption, a spiritual figure can serve. That figure is, of course, the Rebbe. And so we ask ourselves: If the messiah could be a non-Lubavitcher or even a non-Hasid, why must we conclude that the basic pattern by which the life-force of the world operates has been suspended? Why could that potential messiah not serve as the righteous man of the generation? It is also worth asking how it is that a non-Lubavitch messiah will announce the redemption from the roof of 770 Eastern Parkway.

This is not to say that there are not some Lubavitch Hasidim who recognize that someone other than the Rebbe will be the messiah. It is certainly the case that the people who want to be seen as the mainstream, i.e., the leadership that administers the global enterprise of emissaries, does not project the messianist belief and strongly discourages its overt expression. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the "non-messianist" sector contains a very large component of believers.

It is difficult to determine with full confidence the percentage of unabashed messianists among full-fledged Hasidim. But it is certainly not a "narrow slice," "an extremist fringe," a "messianic margin." The largest population of Lubavitch Hasidim is almost certainly in Israel, where messianism is extremely powerful. The largest Lubavitch yeshiva in the world is probably the one in Safed, and it is vigorously messianist. I did some random Internet searches of Chabad yeshivas in Israel and found the following: In Safed, virtually every student wears a skullcap adorned with the messianist slogan, "May our Master, Teacher and Rabbi the King Messiah live forever," which begins with the Hebrew word yechi; in Netanya most do; in Bnei Brak about half do; at a 2010 event in Torat Emet yeshiva in Jerusalem a giant yechi poster adorned the wall; yechi appears at the top of the home page of the Herzliya and Ramat Aviv yeshivas; the yeshiva of Mitzpeh Yitzhar is clearly messianist; in Lod, Kiryat Gat, Tiferet Menachem Jerusalem and Kfar Chabad, the photos that I have seen indicate that students do not wear yechi skullcaps and/or the website does not say yechi.

The presence of the slogan is determinative. Its absence is not since concerns about the Rebbe's opposition to public pronouncements as well as considerations of fundraising can play a role. It should be noted that the chief rabbi of Kfar Chabad is one of more than two hundred signatories of a rabbinic ruling that one is obligated by Jewish law to believe that the Rebbe is the messiah. The grounds for this ruling are that the Rebbe is a prophet, he clearly indicated that he is the messiah, and one is obligated to heed the words of a prophet. (See psakdin.net for the Hebrew text with a link to an English translation and the list of signatories.) This explains, by the way, why the fact that the Rebbe has not built the Temple or gathered the dispersed of Israel does not prevent messianists from being certain that he is the messiah. They do not abrogate fast days because the Temple has not been rebuilt, not (as Telushkin suggests) because they entertain doubts about the messiahship of the Rebbe.

The Chabad Chief Rabbi of Russia remains listed on the rabbinic ruling that the Rebbe is the messiah. In Crown Heights, a signatory of the ruling (Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Schwei) has apparently become the most influential member of the Crown Heights rabbinic court. The main synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway remains decorated with messianist slogans. My impression is that the situation in the largest yeshiva in Crown Heights, Oholei Torah/Oholei Menachem, is mixed, but within the last year eight mashpi'im (religious mentors) there issued a letter on an unrelated matter where the Rebbe is referred to as a matter of course as the King Messiah. (Hebrew readers can consult it [here](#).)

That letter also uses another expression in reference to the Rebbe: avinu malkenu (our father our king). This is a term reserved for God in standard Jewish usage. One of those mashpi'im, Rabbi Sholom Charitonow, wrote an article that I discussed in my book as an example of the conviction that the Rebbe is fully divine, a belief that is not confined, as most observers assume, to a small number of unbalanced individuals. In the case of this letter, one could conceivably argue that the term is intended to refer only to God and not the Rebbe, but to insist on such a reading given the context would be a manifestation of willful blindness.

There is considerable additional evidence of the prevalence of unqualified messianism in Chabad today, but I will stop here. Whatever the precise percentages, it is evident that this belief is widespread and is being transmitted to the next generation in a host of educational institutions. When we add the firm believers among the “non-messianists” to the large number of overt messianists, it is difficult to avoid the impression that believers constitute a majority of full-fledged Lubavitch Hasidim.

IV

The question then is whether or not any of this matters. We have seen that for Telushkin it does not because the messianists observe Jewish law. He does not tell us whether he maintains that Jews need not believe anything as long as they are observant or if this judgment applies to a limited number of doctrines. Several years ago, I prepared a very brief summary explaining how I see the seriousness of this deviation. The bulk of that summary follows:

No mainstream Jews affirmed that the descendant of David sent to redeem Israel would return from the dead to fulfill his mission, and only a nugatory number regarded this as a possibility. Maimonides ruled this out in principle in a highly authoritative work. Polemical and non-polemical texts insist on this position as a defining element of Judaism.

With the exception of Christians and Sabbateans, no Jews at all believed that this descendant of David might initiate a messianic mission in which he would promise imminent redemption and then die in an unredeemed world. We must remind ourselves that the Rebbe, addressing multitudes of followers, repeatedly and emphatically affirmed that his generation would be that of the ultimate redemption; his audiences manifestly understood these affirmations as an unqualified promise or prophecy. None of the sources cited by believers in the Rebbe's Messiahship to validate the possibility of a Messiah from the dead lend even a scintilla of validation to the absurd proposition that the Messiah, whatever his good intentions, might be expected to provide the Jewish people with misleading information about the time of the redemption. Messiah son of David does not fail in his first attempt. Messianic candidates almost always expressed, as the Rebbe did, assurances of imminent redemption that turned out to be incorrect. The affirmation

that such an individual is Messiah son of David despite his death in an unredeemed world is precisely what mainstream Jews have unanimously, passionately, and unhesitatingly declared to be false messianism.

In sum, the assertion that it is even possible that the Lubavitcher Rebbe will be revealed as the Messiah undermines the parameters of the classic messianic faith of Judaism. Lubavitch messianism goes beyond this to declare with certainty that he is in fact the Messiah.

There is no question that the Lubavitcher Rebbe left an impressive, even awe-inspiring legacy. Nonetheless, an assessment of that legacy must take account of the fact that he bears primary responsibility for the development of a messianic movement that turned out to be misguided and persisted after his death as a movement of posthumous false messianism. The greater issue is whether or not admiration and sympathy for Chabad will lead to the legitimation by the larger community of this betrayal of the historic messianic faith of Judaism.

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not represent those of his institution.

The Tablet Longform newsletter highlights the best **longform** pieces from Tablet magazine. **Sign up here** to receive bulletins every Thursday afternoon about fiction, features, profiles, and more.

David Berger is the Ruth and I. Lewis Gordon Professor of Jewish History and Dean of the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University.

Find this story online: <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/179435/berger-rebbe-messiah>

Tablet Magazine is a project of Nextbook Inc. Copyright © 2019 Nextbook Inc. All rights reserved.