

# The Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

## David Berger vs. Chabad Lubavitch

### I. Introduction

June 12, 1994. R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson passed away. Rabbi Dr. David Berger, scholar and historian with an interest in Jewish / Christian relations in the Middle Ages, responds to messianic trends in Chabad Lubavitch after the Rebbe's passing. Relevant to our discussions are two passages from Rambam on the topic of Mashiach

#### 1. Rambam Laws of Kings 11:4

If a king will arise from the House of David who diligently contemplates the Torah and observes its mitzvot as prescribed by the Written Law and the Oral Law as David, his ancestor, compels all of Israel to walk in [the way of the Torah] and rectify the breaches [in its observance], and fights the wars of God, we may, with assurance, consider him Mashiach.

If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Mashiach.

He will then improve the entire world, [motivating] all the nations to serve God together as [T'zefania 3:9] states: "I will transform the peoples to a purer language so that they all will call upon the name of God and serve him with one purpose.

If he did not succeed to the degree or was killed, he surely is not [the redeemer] promised by the Torah. [Rather,] he should be considered as all the proper and exemplary kings of the Davidic dynasty who died. God caused him to arise only to test the man, as [Daniel 11:35] states: "And some of the wise men will stumble, to try them, to refine, and to clarify until the appointed time, because the set time is in the future.

Jesus of Nazareth who aspired to be the Mashiach and was executed by the court was also [alluded to] in Daniel's prophecies as [Daniel 11:14] states: "The vulgar among your people shall exalt themselves in attempt to fulfill the vision, but they shall stumble."

Can there be a greater stumbling block than [Christianity]? All the prophecies spoke of Mashiach as the redeemer of Israel and their savior who would gather their dispersed and strengthened their [observance of] the mitzvot. [In contrast,

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ואם יעמוד מלך מבית דוד הוגה בתורה ועוסק במצוות כדוד אביו, כפי תורה שבכתב ושבועל פה, ויכוף כל ישראל לילך בה ולחזק בדקה, וילחם מלחמות ה', הרי זה בחזקת שהוא משיח, אם עשה והצליח ונצח כל האומות שסביביו ובנה מקדש במקומו וקבץ נדחי ישראל הרי זה משיח בודאי. ואם לא הצליח עד כה או נהרג בידוע שאינו זה שהבטיחה עליו תורה והרי הוא ככל מלכי בית דוד השלמים הכשרים שמתו. ולא העמידו הקב"ה אלא לנסות בו רבים שנאמר ומן המשכילים יכשלו לצרוף בהן ולברר וללבן עד עת קץ כי עוד למועד. אף ישוע הנצרי שדמה שיהיה משיח ונהרג בבית דין, כבר נתבאר בו דניאל שנאמר ובני פריצי עמך ינשאו להעמיד חזון ונכשלו. וכי יש מכשול גדול מזה. שכל הנביאים דברו שהמשיח גואל ישראל ומושיעם ומקבץ נדחיהם ומחזק מצותן. וזה גרם לאבד ישראל בחרב ולפזר שאריתם ולהשפילם ולהחליף התורה ולהטעות רוב העולם לעבוד אלוה מבלעדי ה'. אבל מחשבות בורא עולם אין כח באדם להשיגם כי לא דרכינו דרכו ולא מחשבותינו מחשבותיו. וכל הדברים האלו של ישוע הנצרי ושל זה הישמעאלי שעמד אחריו אינן אלא לישר דרך למלך המשיח ולתקן את העולם כולו לעבוד את ה' ביחד. שני כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה לקרוא כולם בשם ה' ולעבדו שכם אחד. כיצד. כבר נתמלא העולם כולו מדברי המשיח ומדברי התורה ומדברי המצוות ופשוטו דברים אלו באיים רחוקים ובעמים רבים ערלי לב והם נושאים ונותנים בדברים אלו ובמצוות התורה אלו אומרים מצוות אלו אמת היו וכבר בטלו בזמן הזה ולא היו נוהגות לדורות ואלו אומרים דברים נסתרות יש בהם ואינן כפשוטן וכבר בא משיח וגלה נסתריהם. וכשיעמוד המלך המשיח באמת ויצליח וירום וינשא מיד הם כולן חוזרין ויודעים ששקר נחלו אבותיהם ושנביאיהם ואבותיהם הטעות.

Christianity] caused the Jews to be slain by the sword, their remnants to be scattered and humbled, the Torah to be altered and the majority of the world to err and serve a God other than the Lord.

Nevertheless, the intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for his ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). [Ultimately,] all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite (i.e. Mohamed) who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for Mashiach's coming and in the improvement of the entire world, [motivating the nations] to serve God together as [Tzefania 3:9] states: "I will transform the peoples to a purer language that all will call upon the name of God and serve him with one purpose."

How will this come about? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of Mashiach, Torah, and mitzvot. These matters have been spread to the furthermoremost islands to many stubborn-hearted nations. They discuss these matters and the mitzvot of the Torah saying: "These mitzvot were true, but were already negated in the present age and are applicable for all time."

Others say: "Implied in the mitzvot are hidden concepts that can not be understood simply. The Mashiach has already come and revealed those hidden [truths]."

When the true Messianic king will arise and prove successful, his [position becoming] exalted and uplifted, they will all return and realize that their ancestors endowed them with a false heritage and their prophets and ancestors caused them to err.

## 2. Rambam Laws of Kings 12:2

Our sages taught: "The will be no difference between the current age and the Messianic era except [the emancipation] from our subjugation to the [gentile] kingdoms.

The simple interpretation of the prophets' words appear [to imply] that the war of Gog and Magog will take place at the beginning of the Messianic age. Before the war of Gog and Magog, a prophet will arise to [inspire] Israel to be upright and prepare their hearts, as [Malachi 3:22] states: "Behold, I am sending you Elijah."

He will come to declare the pure, impure, or to declare the impure, pure. He will not dispute the lineage of those presumed to be of proper pedigree, nor will he validated the pedigree of those whose lineage is presumed and blemished. Rather, he will establish peace in the within the world as [Malachi 3:24] continues: "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children."

There are some Sages who say that Elijah's coming will precede the coming of the Mashiach. All these and similar matters cannot be [definitely] known by man until they occur for these matters are undefined in the prophets' [words] and even the wise men have no established tradition regarding these matters except [their own] interpretation of the verses. Therefore, there is a controversy among them regarding these matters.

Regardless [of the debate concerning these questions], neither the order of the occurrence of these events or their precise detail are among the fundamental principles of the faith. A person should not occupy himself with the *Aggadat* and the exegesis of the verses concerning these and similar matters, nor should he consider them as essentials, for the [study of] them will neither bring fear or love [of God].

Similarly, one should not try to determine the appointed time [for Mashiach's] coming. Our sages declared: "May the spirits of those who attempt to determine the time [of Mashiach's coming] expire!" (B. Sanhedrin 97b). Rather, one should await and believe in the general conception of the matter as explained.

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אמרו חכמים אין בין העולם הזה לימות המשיח אלא שיעבוד מלכויות בלבד, יראה מפשרטן של דברי הנביאים, שבתחילת ימות המשיח תהיה מלחמת גוג ומגוג, ושקודם מלחמת גוג ומגוג יעמוד נביא לישר ישראל ולהכין לבם, שנאמר הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליה וגוי, ואינו בא לא לטמא הטהור, ולא לטהר הטמא, ולא לפסול אנשים שהם בחזקת כשרות, ולא להכשיר מי שהוחזקו פסולין, אלא לשום שלום בעולם, שנאמר והשיב לב אבות על בנים, ויש מן החכמים שאומרים שקודם ביאת המשיח יבא אליהו, וכל אלו הדברים וכיוצא בהן לא ידע אדם איך יהיו עד שיהיו, שדברים שתומין הן אצל הנביאים, גם החכמים אין להם קבלה בדברים אלו, אלא לפי הכרע הפסוקים, ולפיכך יש להם מחלוקת בדברים אלו, ועל כל פנים אין סדור הויית דברים אלו ולא דקדוקיהן עיקר בדת, ולעולם לא יתעסק אדם בדברי ההגדות, ולא יאריך במדרשות האמורים בעניינים אלו וכיוצא בהן, ולא ישימם עיקר, שאין מביאין לא לידי יראה ולא לידי אהבה, וכן לא יחשב הקצין, אמרו חכמים תפח רוחם של מחשבי הקצים, אלא יחכה ויאמין בכלל הדבר כמו שבארנו.

With these statements in mind, today's class will discuss Rabbi Dr. David Berger's arguments and opposition to the messianic elements in Chabad Lubavitch.

## II. Excerpts from The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference

### A. Statements from Chabad Lubavitch on 'The Rebbe's Messiahship (After The Rebbe's Passing)

3. For me, the first indication that belief in the Rebbe's messiahship had withstood his demise came four or five days later when I saw a full-page advertisement in the Jewish Press...(advertising) an afternoon-long event to be held...on Sunday, 19 June 1994, precisely a week after the Rebbe's death. The text ended, 'With broken hearts we affirm our faith that we will at once witness T'echiyas Hameisim [the resurrection of the dead] and we will have the Rebbe lead us out of Golus [exile] immediately, and together we continue to proclaim *Yechi Adonenu morenu verabbenu melech hamoshiach leolam voed* [May our Master, Teacher, and Rabbi, the King Messiah, live forever]. (Jewish Press, 17, June 1994, p. 11) qtd on page 11.

4. Days after the Rebbe's death, a messianist newspaper in Israel compared non-believers to the worshippers of the golden calf who lost faith because Moses was absent one day longer than had been anticipated. Five months later, a more moderate publication of Israeli believers pointed to Rambam who had, after all, set forth 'a great principle, that with respect to these matters, no one knows how they will happen until they happen.' The point, of course, is not to cast doubt on the Rebbe's messiahship but to blunt the force of his death. Shabtetai Tzevi's prophet had cited the same Maimonidean passage after his hero's apostasy; once again, the great medieval rationalist was mobilized to defend a failed messianic mission." (23-24)

### B. Statements from Chabad Lubavitch Attesting to 'The Rebbe's Divinity

5. In the autumn of 1996, the Israeli weekly *Sibat Ha-Geulah* printed a revised version of the standard messianist slogan which read "May our Master, Teacher, and Creator (instead of "Rabbi"), the King Messiah, live for ever" and a few weeks later it declared that it was permissible to bow to the Rebbe because "his entire essence is divinity alone." (92)

6. The most elaborate of this spate of writings affirming the Rebbe's divinity appeared in English in an August 1996 issue of *Beis Moshiah*, a lengthy weekly journal with a substantial circulation in which mainstream messianist figures regularly participate. The author, a layman with a doctoral degree, set forth his view of Jewish theology:

A certain Lubavitcher Rov [rabbi] was chiding a certain Lubavitcher Chasid about his continuing faith in the Rebbe as Melech ha-Moshiach [the King Messiah]. The Chasid bit the bait and, in the ensuing banter, commented that if the Rebbe was wrong, then all Chasidus [hasidism] is disqualified all the way back to the Baal Shem Tov. The Rov became serious and said, "No my friend. all the way back to Moshe Rabbenu" [Moses our Rabbi].

So, being stuck with Moshe Rabbenu means being stuck with the Rebbe which means being stuck with the absolute truth of all their statements, including those statements about what is Rebbe. For example, that Rebbe is the 'Essence and Being [of God] enclothed in a body,' that a Rebbe is by nature 'omniscient' and 'omnipotent,' that all material and spiritual blessings flow from the Rebbe....

So who [is] *Elokeinu* [our God]? Who *Avinu* [our Father]? Who *Malkeinu* [our King]? Who *Moshianu* [our Redeemer]? Who *Yoshianu V'Yigaleinu Shaynis B'Karov* [will save and redeem us once again shortly]? The Rebbe, Melech HaMoshiach. That's who. (Aryeh A. Gotfryd, "The Rebbe's Answer: A Dream Come True", *Beis Moshiah* (1 Elul 5756/16 Aug. 1996), 66-63) (Berger p. 83)

7. On the third anniversary of the Rebbe's death, a full-page advertisement appeared in *The New York Times* declaring that "The third of Tammus is not the Rebbe's yahrtzeit," a word denoting the anniversary of an ordinary human being's demise. In this case, we were informed, the date marks the time when the Rebbe "was liberated from the limitations of corporeal existence." In the absence of such limitations, he "is accessible to all of us, everywhere, at any time...Anyone, however great or humble, can turn to him with their deepest prayers. There are no barriers. There is no need to make a pilgrimage or stand on line to receive his blessing...Amazing stories keep pouring in from all corners of the globe. People are experiencing miracles large and small...And all this because of a personal connection to the Rebbe who is with all of us." (The New York Times, 8 July 1997) qtd p. 86

### C. Berger's Response

8. The primary objective of this book is to establish the principle that anyone who proclaims the messiahship of the Rebbe stands outside the parameters of Orthodox Judaism and must be treated accordingly. (117)

9. Admiration, tolerance, inclusiveness, and unity have thus far produced a consequence that can be stated with stark simplicity. Virtually all Orthodox Jews, whether they believe in the messiahship of the Rebbe or not, belong to a profoundly different religion from the one they adhered to in 1993. (3)

### 10. RCA Application: Affirmation Regarding Messianic Belief

<http://www.rabbis.org/pdfs/ApplicationForm.doc>

By checking this box and with my signature below, I affirm that the following resolution, adopted at the RCA's 1996 Annual Convention, reflects my beliefs: "In light of disturbing developments which have recently arisen in the Jewish community, the Rabbinical Council of America in convention assembled declares that there is not and never has been a place in Judaism for the belief that Mashiach ben David will begin his Messianic mission only to experience death, burial and resurrection before completing it."

### D. The Argument

11. As I write, two propositions from which every mainstream Jew in the last millennium would have instantly recoiled have become legitimate options within Orthodox Judaism:

1. A specific descendant of King David may be identified with certainty as the Messiah even though he died in an unredeemed world. The criteria always deemed necessary for confident identification of the Messiah - the temporal redemption of the Jewish people, a rebuilt Temple, peace and prosperity, the universal recognition of the God of Israel - are null and void.

2. The messianic faith of Judaism allows for the following scenario: God will finally send the true Messiah to embark upon his redemptive mission. The long-awaited redeemer will declare that all preparations for the redemption have been completed and announce without qualification that the fulfillment is absolutely imminent. He will begin the process of gathering the dispersed of Israel to the Holy Land. He will proclaim himself a prophet, point clearly to his messianic status, and declare that the only remaining task is to greet him as Messiah. And then he will die and be buried without having redeemed the world. To put the matter more succinctly, the true Messiah's redemptive mission, publicly proclaimed and vigorously pursued, will be interrupted by death and burial and then consummated through a Second Coming. (1-2)

12. Many observers, especially after the strokes that disabled the Rebbe not long before his death, put forth a variety of prognostications. Upon his passing, some said, we would see a large number of suicides. (The City of New York designated specially trained counselors to help hasidim, especially children, to cope with the

trauma of the Rebbe's death.) Others asserted that the movement would disintegrate. Still others, immediately after his death, affirmed that the messianist belief might last for a transitional period of a few months, but it would surely disappear when the Rebbe did not return by the first anniversary of the tragic event. (10)

13. From: The Jewish Messianism: Passing Phenomenon or Turning Point in the History of Judaism?  
Originally published in Jewish Action (Fall 1995) 35-44, 88

"I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry I await him each day, hoping that he will come."

This version of Rambam's twelfth principle of Judaism has served as a source of faith and consolidation for generations of Jews, and, in Christian countries, as a central affirmation of resistance to belief in the messiahship of Jesus. During the past year, we have witnessed a profound transformation in the understanding of this principle by a major movement located well within the parameters of Orthodox Judaism. This may be a passing phenomenon, but it may also mark a significant moment in the history of the Jewish religion. The more convinced Jews are that it is the former, the more likely it is to become the latter (18).

14. Because all of this seems so strange to outsiders, many observers cannot bring themselves to see the truth: the dominant elements among Hasidim in the major Lubavitch population centers of Crown Heights in Brooklyn and Kfar Chabad in Israel - perfectly normal people representing a highly successful, very important Jewish movement - believe that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson will return from the dead (or from his place of concealment) and lead the world to redemption. (26)

15. Along with Sabbatianism and Christianity, this movement has survived the death of its Messiah. Although it has much in common with its two predecessors, it is also significantly different, and some of the differences, particularly Chabad's commitment to observing all the mitzvot and the character of its messianic figure, still entitle us to use the term *lehandil* in comparing these movements. At the same time, the similarities are so striking and the issue so critical that we have no right to mince words in drawing analogies. A summary comparison, then, should provide a useful overview.

Among the similarities:

- The creation of new grounds for belief in response to apparent failure.
- Faith in an immediate return which is then postponed
- The citation of evidence from biblical verses, and, in the case of Sabbatianism and Lubavitch, from rabbinic literature as well.
- The appeal by Sabbatians and Lubavitch Hasidim to Rambam's affirmation of ignorance regarding details of the messianic process.
- The belief (held by some but not all messianists) that the messianic figure is not really dead at all

Among the differences:

- The exceptional qualifications of the Rebbe
- The argument before the Rebbe's death, and in some circles even after it, that the sceptic is obligated to provide a superior candidate.
- The movement's viability in the absence of its messianic component
- The belief in a Messiah who, unlike Shabetai Tzevi and perhaps unlike Jesus, never made a formal explicit declaration of his messiahship. Hence - a movement that might be described as a false messianism without a false Messiah

- The commitment to the full observance of Jewish law.
- The availability of a vast library of videotapes which can preserve a sense of the departed Messiah's physical presence
- The pluralistic environment (28-29)

16. On 17 June 1994, five days after the *petirah* (passing) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe *ztl*, an advertisement appeared in the *Jewish Press* declaring that he would be resurrected as the Messiah. At that point, I wrote a letter containing the following assertion: "There is no more fundamental messianic belief in Judaism than the conviction that the Davidic Messiah who appears at the end of days will not die before completing his mission" [*Jewish Press*, 1 July 1994] (43)

17. Though the belief that the Rebbe is the Messiah is itself a repudiation of a fundamental Jewish doctrine, at this point, it is only the beginning. We now confront an incredible reality which has surged beyond the confines of false messianism and the 'mere' affirmation of a Second Coming. A process which developed over decades, even generations, in Christianity and the seventeenth-century movement of the messianic pretender Shabetai Tzevi is unfolding with blinding speed in Lubavitch messianism. To a historian, this is a gripping drama, the opportunity not of one lifetime but of many; to a believing Jew, it is the bizarre rerun of a nightmare. The Lubavitcher Rebbe is becoming God. (92)

### III. Appendix / Bibliography

#### Primary Reading

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