

JEWISH IDEAS DAILY

June 10, 2010

The Rebbe

The story of Lubavitcher Hasidism in our time is nothing short of astounding. Here is an ultra-Orthodox sect, deployed all over the world, exuberantly engaged with non-observant Jews and with non-Jews, availing itself of every imaginable form of contemporary communications technology. What was, for generations, the most intellectual and scholastic-minded hasidic dynasty—its other name, Chabad, is an acronym for "Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge"—has become an ecstatic mass movement. At the heart of it all is the seventh and last Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), who died childless—and whom some substantial number of his followers forthrightly regard as the messiah.



RELEVANT LINKS

[The Rebbe and His Biographers](#) Allan Nadler, *Forward*. Friedman and Heilman, while scanting Chabad's social and political history under Schneerson's leadership, as well as key aspects of his spiritual development, offer a provocative interpretation of his life, death, and afterlife.

[The Berlin-Paris Years](#) *Chabad-Revisited*. Lubavitch hasidim take issue with Friedman and Heilman's reconstruction of the period 1927-1940.

[Chabad's Lost Messiah](#) Tomer Persico, *Azure*. Messianism was at the heart of the Rebbe's vision of Chabad and himself.

[The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Jews](#) David Berger, *Commentary*. Belief in the Rebbe's messiahship shatters a core tenet of Judaism and erases a fundamental difference with Christianity; why has it gone largely unopposed?

Recent publications deepen our understanding of this extraordinary figure. A new [biography](#) by Menachem Friedman and Samuel Heilman is especially interesting for its exploration of Schneerson's life prior to his 1951 assumption of the dynastic mantle after the death of his father-in-law, and especially during the 1930s when as a young man he divided his time between studying philosophy and engineering in Paris and Berlin. The authors' conclusion—that Schneerson's rabbinical vocation emerged only once he found himself a refugee in America—has already angered many Chabad Hasidim. Undoubtedly, though, these early experiences were central to his later ability to adapt his teachings and organization to the temper and mores of his times. It was he who sent emissaries (*shluchim*) everywhere and made deft use not only of technology and America's global centrality but of such passing currents as the idealism of the Peace Corps, the counterculture of the 1960s, the turn to ethnicity and "roots," and the return to traditional values.

Central to his energy and vision was, indeed, messianism. In an inaugural homily, he articulated his central doctrine. The Kabbalah teaches that the divine presence descends to this world, hitting bottom

at the seventh and lowest level of existence—the point from which, paradoxically, redemption ascends. It would be the task of his, the seventh generation of Chabad, and of himself, the seventh rebbe, to redeem the world from the bottom up.

In another recent book, the scholar Elliot Wolfson makes clear just how far-reaching was the redemption the Rebbe sought. Teasing out the recesses of his mystical thought (and writing in an intensely recondite idiom of his own), Wolfson reconstructs a skein of esoteric teachings running through Chabad back to the time of its founding figure in the late-18th century. In this conception, the final messianic redemption will involve a decisive transformation of human consciousness through the dissolution of all differences and distinctions, of human finitude and of time itself, into the perfect eternal simplicity of God.

Many of the Rebbe's followers today do not insist on his continued literal existence, or that he will soon return in his person to complete the redemption. But many do so insist, and in Israel their numbers are growing. If Wolfson is right, they misunderstand his teachings more deeply than they know. The question facing Chabad is how it will endure in the absence of a rebbe who was, by definition, the very last. The question that Chabad poses to the rest of the Jewish world is how something like this movement's passion, commitment, and creativity can animate the work of those who do not share its messianic ardor.

You can find this online at: <http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/content/module/2010/6/10/main-feature/1/the-rebbe>