

THE LUBAVITCH MESSIANIC RESURGENCE:
THE HISTORICAL AND MYSTICAL
BACKGROUND 1939-1996*

לְדַפֵּן אֶחָד הַצִּדָּה לְצִדָּה

RACHEL ELIOR

I

The acute messianic ideology of Habad-Lubavitch was formulated during the Holocaust in reaction to the unbearable harsh realities of the death camps and the devastation of such a great portion of the Jewish people.¹ The tragic situation, which inevitably created a deep sense of crisis and hopelessness in the Jewish community, raised challenging questions as to the nature of God's omnipotence, and generated an intense attitude of skepticism about divine providence.²

Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson (1880-1950), the sixth leader of the *Habad* dynasty,³ is credited with effecting the acute Messianic

* I am grateful to my friends and colleagues Dr. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Dr. Mark Verman, who helped me in clarifying some debatable issues regarding the Habadic messianic phenomena. I wish to express gratitude to Prof. Ivan Markus and to Daniel Shtubel who brought to my attention important sources. My students who assisted in the different stages of assembling the sources for this study, Dr. Rivka Goldberg and Joel Kortick, deserve special gratitude. I also wish to thank my former student Dr. Kimmy Kaplan for his perceptive remarks. This study couldn't have been accomplished without the wide-ranging help and encouragement of my friend and husband Michael Elior and I wish to express my deep gratitude to him.

¹ See Gershon Greenberg, "Mahane Israel-Lubavitch 1940-1945: Actively Responding to Khurban" in: Alan A. Berger, (ed.) *Bearing Witness to the Holocaust 1939-1989*, Lewison, New York 1991, pp. 141-163; Gershon Greenberg, "Redemption after Holocaust According to Mahane Israel-Lubavitch 1940-1945", *Modern Judaism* 12 (1992), pp. 61-84; Aviezer Ravitzky, *Haketz ha-Megulah u'Minat haYehudim*, Tel Aviv 1993 (Hebrew), pp. 263-276, [= *idem*, *Messianism, Zionism and the Jewish Religious Radicalism*, Chicago University Press 1996, chapter 5]; Cf. Eliezer Schweid, *Ben Hurban LiYisus* (= *From Ruin to Salvation*), Tel Aviv 1994 (Hebrew), pp. 39-64; 243-244. Earlier messianic speculations in Habad as reaction to Zionism were discussed by Ravitzky, *ibid.*, pp. 264, 377, n. 48.

² See Schweid, *ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

³ For biographical details from the Lubavitch perspective, see Shalom Dov Ber Levin, *Toledot Habad be-Artzot ha-Brit 1900-1950*, Brooklyn 1988 (= *History of Habad in the U.S.A.*); For an autobiographical perspective see: Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson,

outlook which transformed the movement.⁴ In the midst of the Second World War he took upon himself the heavy burden and the courageous responsibility to reverse and to restructure the deep sense of impotence, despair and helplessness that overwhelmed the Jewish community during the course of the Holocaust. In the attempt to decipher, interpret and re-define the meaning of reality in these most desperate of *irrational circumstances* he offered eschatological certainty and messianic purpose—what appeared to be the only *rational response* from a theological point of view. He further offered an apocalyptic reconstruction of the catastrophe—claiming that the horrors of the Nazi German occupation were the culmination of a cosmic scheme of pre-messianic tribulations which must necessarily precipitate and impel imminent divine redemption.⁵

After personally witnessing two decades of persecution and repression of Jewish religious life under Stalin in Soviet Russia, events occurring well before the Nazi invasion, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak offered a mystical-apocalyptic reconstruction of reality. He viewed the calamities of the Holocaust as the final stage in the collapse of the old world order, thereby clearing the way for the inevitable redemption in the near future. He forcefully challenged the religious despair that emerged within the persecuted Jewish community by confronting a meaningless arbitrary reality imbued with existential horrors in the early 1940's. He reinterpreted historical reality by replacing existential helplessness with eschatological certainty, and by pursuing the messianic course, which entailed human hope and divine purpose.

Lubavitcher Rabbi's Memories (translated by Nissan Mindel), Otzar ha-Hasidim, Brooklyn 1971; for a critical point of view cf. Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism", in: Ada Rapoport-Albert (ed.) *Studies in Jewish Historiography in Memory of Arnaldo Momigliano*, Supplement 27 of *History and Theory* (1988), pp. 119-159.

⁴ Schweid, *ibid.*; Ravitzky, *ibid.*

⁵ On the history and phenomenology of Jewish messianism, see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays*, New York 1971; Hebrew version in Gershom Scholem, *Devarim Bege* (ed. Avraham Shapira), 1975, pp. 153-222, note esp. pp. 163-164; cf. Greenberg, *Redemption*; Schweid, pp. 14, 230. Various religious circles interpreted the Second World War as pre-messianic tribulations in the early forties as attested by Michael Zilberberg, *Yoman Warshe 1939-1945*, London 1969, Tel Aviv (1979?) p. 26, and cf. Schweid (n. 1 above), pp. 22-29 and Mendel Piekarcz, *Ideological Trends of Hasidism in Poland During the Interwar Period and the Holocaust*, Jerusalem 1990, (Hebrew), pp. 21, 171, 262-264, 318, 335-338. However, no other religious circle reacted with an active ideological scheme and an engendered messianic movement which addressed a wide public and related to *Klal Israel* as a result of that perception—as did Lubavitch.

He contended paradoxically in 1941: "Every Jew should remember that it is not the people of Israel who are dying, God forbid, it is the world giving birth to twins—a new Jewish people and a new land of Israel are being born. . . . The birth pangs have started but will not last long."⁶

In this manner, existential death and a hopeless present were transfigured into a spiritual birth and into a future of hope while the meaningless torment and helpless impotence were transformed into predetermined messianic birth pangs—all culminating in the mystical birth of a new future for the Jewish people and the Jewish land. Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak was able to draw, in an elusive manner, upon a well known Talmudic dialectic conception of redemption which suggests that the Messiah was born on the day that the first Temple was destroyed.⁷ This conception inherently links a crisis of historical catastrophe and a profound sense of impotence with the hope for redemption and messianic omnipotence. Likewise, this belief inseparably connects hopeless and catastrophic birth pangs with messianic revelation and the hopeful inception of a new era. Another notable Talmudic tradition suggests that the messianic era would be preceded by tremendous cosmic horrors and great world wars which would be known as the wars of *Gog and Magog*.⁸ This metahistorical scheme which dialectically connected death and birth, was applied by various orthodox circles to the horrors of World War II, horrors which came to be conceived as pre-messianic tribulations.⁹ According to the metaphor of birth pangs (*Hevlei-leida*), these pre-messianic tribulations were represented as cosmic birth pangs (*Hevlei Mashiah*) which

⁶ *Haker'ah ve-Hakudusha*, Jerusalem 1942, p. 20. On this periodical and its various recensions and translations see notes 10 and 21 below. The full Hebrew version of the above quotation reads as follows:

היום סיון תש"א.
 "יום פורעניות חרשות ר"ל אין צריכות לאמן את לבות ישראל ביום
 השנוייה של נחשיל אנטיסמיית ונחת רעות היום אינה צריכה להסיל את האדם
 מישראל לנך אמש יחדלו נא היהודים מעתה לקבל איש את מי יעשו במרתה
 המסוות 'לאחרי' לנאולה' וכמה שלא חנך חלילה השעה האחרונה וכי זכר כל
 יודי, אם איש ואם אמת, שלא עם ישראל נוסף חלילה אלא מה החבל סודעת ללדת
 האומות: הולכים ונולדים עם ישראל חרם וארץ ישראל חרשו. . . . תואל את ציון
 ויהיטלים אל עליון, תליך וטאל את ארצו ומקמן ומביא את מי נטו. תקפו צידי
 הוללה אבל הארץ לא יאחיס."

⁷ *Jerusalem Talmud*, Berakhot 2:4; *Eicho Raba* (ed. Shlomo Buber, Vilna 1899) 1, pp. 89-90; cf. *Devarim Bego*, p. 165.

⁸ *Pesahim* 118; *Sanhedrin* 97 b.

⁹ *Schweid*, p. 14.

would inevitably hasten the birth of the Messiah and precipitate the revelation of redemption.¹⁰

II

Habad Hasidism was a *mystical* movement established in the late decades of the eighteenth century which possessed *no messianic* character at its inception.¹¹ The Habad movement always strongly maintained a mystical acosmistic belief that God alone is the true essence of reality, that through Him all things are but a manifestation of the divine being, and that every human experience is imbued with the all-encompassing divine presence. The infinite divine entity which permeates all existence is grasped as the vital force of life and the source of its being, whereas the physical world is interpreted as the illusionary cloak for the expanding divine vital force. The paradoxical nature of the divine presence is perceived as a mystical "unity of opposites" or as an eternal dialectic process being simultaneously revealed and concealed, creating and annihilating, being and non being, a process which transcends all constraints of rational perspective concerning time or place.¹² The desperate circumstances of the Holocaust were a severe spiritual challenge for those who attributed absolute being to the Divine Presence and absolute nothingness to

¹⁰ *Hakeri'ah Vehakadusha* (hereafter HK), vol. 1, no. 1 (2 October 1940) on this periodical cf. Greenberg, *Redemption*, p. 76, n. 2; Greenberg, Mahane, pp. 142-148. Levin, *Toldot Habad be-Atzot ha-Brit* (n. 3 above), pp. 344-346.

¹¹ On the mystical nature of Habad and its virtual indifference to messianic leadership and national salvation see: Rivka Schatz, "Anti-Spiritualism baHasidut, Iyumin be-Torat Shineur Zalman mi-Ladi", *Molad*, no. 171 (1962), pp. 513-528; Issiah Tishby and Joseph Dan, "Hasidut", *Ha-Encyclopedia ha-Ivrit*, vol. 17 (1965), pp. 769-822; Rachel Elior, *Torat ha-Elohim be-Dev ha-Sheni shel Hasidut Habad*, Jerusalem 1982; Rachel Elior, "Habad, the Contemplative Ascent to God", in: Arthur Green (ed.) *Jewish Spirituality from the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, pp. 157-205, in: *World Spirituality*, vol. 14, New York 1987; Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School*, Chicago 1990; Rachel Elior, *Torat Abbot ha-Hafakhim: ha-Theosophia ha-Mistit shel Habad*, Jerusalem 1992 (Hebrew); for English version see, Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, Albany 1993; Roman A. Foxbrunner, *Habad: The Hasidism of R. Shineur Zalman of Lyady*, Tuscaloosa 1992; Joseph Dan, "Hasidism", *Ha-Encyclopedia ha-Ivrit*, Appendix volume III, Jerusalem 1995, cols. 412-419.

¹² In addition to the sources mentioned above in n. 11 see further comprehensive discussions on Habad mysticism: Louis Jacobs, *Tract on Ecstasy*, London 1963; Louis Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity-the Life and Works of Aaron of Starosteje*, London 1966; Miles Krassen, "Agents of the Divine Display: New Studies in Early Hasidism", *Religious Studies Review*, vol. 20, no. 4 (October 1994), pp. 293-301.

its worldly manifestations—all the more so since this catastrophe threatened the very existence of the entire Jewish nation.¹³

The *mystical acosmistic perception* of Habad—which negated the autonomous existence of reality and accentuated God's immanence by emphasizing the eternal ongoing dynamic divine presence in the world¹⁴—was radically *transformed* by Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak. He advocated an extreme *apocalyptic perception* of history, orientated towards a transcendental messianic turning point which would inevitably occur in the very near future.¹⁵

The creation of this messianic mythology that reshaped history and promised immediate redemption was the result of a transformation in the very heart of Habad mystical theosophy. Messianic theodicy, or the apocalyptic justification and rationalization of God's apparent helplessness and *impotence* in light of the Holocaust—replaced mystical acosmistic theosophy of the *omnipotence* of God that had prevailed continuously in Habad since the end of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Only a belief in the concealed messianic significance of the events could refute the cruelty of their revealed meaning and resolve the tragic plight of a seemingly impotent divine providence in the light of desperate human experience.

III

Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson escaped from Warsaw, Poland, in 1940, arriving in New York as a refugee from the devastation of Nazi Europe. He had personally witnessed the persecution of the Jews throughout his adult life, first in the Soviet Union, including the ongoing crisis of the war as well as the hopeless fate of the Jews living in Lithuania, Latvia, and in Poland during the first half of the twentieth century, a crisis which reached its horrible culmination in the Holocaust in the Second World War.¹⁷ Rabbi Schneerson was

¹³ Schweid, *ibid.*, pp. 39–40.

¹⁴ Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, pp. 49–102.

¹⁵ See *Atba's K'el K'ere meAdmor Shlita Milubavitch*, Jerusalem 1942–3; cf. HK, Brooklyn 1941 nos. 9–11 (Yiddish and English) partial Hebrew version in: *Coets Maamarim translated from the periodical Hakeri'ah v'haK'olaha*, by Mahane Israel Jerusalem, Jerusalem 1943.

¹⁶ On Habad cosmic theosophy see Elior, *Torat ha-Elohut*, pp. 25–60; *idem*, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, pp. 49–79; Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, pp. 50, 137, 147.

¹⁷ On Rabbi Schneerson's rescue from bombarded Warsaw at the end of 1939

motivated both by the trauma of the disappearance of European Jewry and by his perception of the great spiritual poverty of American Jewry. Upon his arrival to New York, he therefore resolved to utilize the realistic existential tragedy as a hoist, elevating man beyond the horrors of exile towards redemption. As the leading messianic theologian of his age, he called upon the American Jewish community to urgently reassess the situation, to accept responsibility for the fate of Jewish lives in Europe, and to realize the urgency of penitence—*Teshuvah*—and to realize the inevitable immediacy of redemption.¹⁸ Rabbi Schneerson engendered a wave of messianic resurgence with the publication of four urgent appeals *kol kore* (קול קורֵה) in both the Yiddish and English language Jewish newspapers. He used repeatedly the declaration "*lealtar leg'ulah*" לְאַלְתֵּר לְגֻלוּלָהּ meaning "redemption is immediate", "it awaits just beyond your door".¹⁹ He assured his readers and listeners, with both great enthusiasm and with great desperation, through the most radical messianic texts to spring from the Jewish world in the twentieth century, that the apocalyptic scheme was reaching its end, the messianic process would soon be accomplished, and that redemption could be achieved immediately.²⁰

Immediate redemption! Is our call, and this is because it is the call of our time. This is not merely a consolation for those who despair. Even more, it is our good news about actual "salvation which is to come soon" (Isaiah 56:1). We must prepare ourselves in heart and soul to welcome the righteous redeemer. We call upon *all* Jews to join the "*Mahane Israel*" which, with the help of the Blessed Name, is being organized, for this purpose. "Immediate redemption!" Be ready for redemption soon! It is approaching rapidly although you do not see

and his departure from Europe see, Yehudah Koren, *Yediot Aharonot* (15.4.1996); on his arrival to America in 19 March 1940, see Levin, *Toldot Habad be-Artzot ha-Brit*, pp. 166–172. On his life in Russia see, Shalom Dov Ber Levin, *Toldot Habad be-Russia haSovietit baShanim 1917–1950*, Brooklyn 1989 (= History of Chabad in the U.S.S.R.—1917–1950); David E. Fishman, "Preserving Tradition in the Land of Revolution: The Religious Leadership of Soviet Jewry 1917–1930", in: Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The Uses of Tradition, Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, New York and Jerusalem, 1992, pp. 85–118. On other aspects of the writing and activities R. Yosef Yitzhak see Rachel Elior, "Vikuah Mirisk", *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1:4 (1982), pp. 179–235; Rapoport-Albert, "Hagiography" (n. 3 above).

¹⁸ Levin, *Toldot Habad be-Artzot ha-Brit*, pp. 304–344.

¹⁹ *Arba' Kol Kore meAdmor Shlita mi-Lubavitch*, Jerusalem 1942–3; cf. HK, 1941, nos. 9–11.

²⁰ See Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, *Silut Kodesh—1941* (eds. Hozzat Otzar Hasidim) Brooklyn 1964; *idem*, *Sefer Hamamarim—1940* (eds. Hozzat Otzar Hasidim) Brooklyn 1955; HK, 1941–1945.

it. It is near at hand! The righteous Messiah is already around the corner, and the time for self-preparation is already very short.²¹

Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak employed the mystical authority invested in his person as a Hasidic mystical leader—*Zaddik*²²—to state that the divine decree had already been issued and only true repentance was required to end the pre-messianic tribulations and to bring the Messiah.

In his words, repentance preconditioned the last stage of redemption and, in order to realize the apocalyptic process and the messianic prediction, only all-encompassing repentance was needed.²³ In order to strengthen and to facilitate this apocalyptic arousal, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak established a Messianic Society that was called "Mahane Israel" (hereafter MI) or "Camp of Israel" and he founded a periodical—"*Hakeri'ah VeHakadusha*"—that voiced his views.²⁴ Together they formed the apocalyptic messianic response to the Holocaust as it occurred. MI took upon itself the task to disseminate Judaism within the Jewish secular community, as well as to propagate and

²¹ "Kol Kore Fun'm Lubavitzer Rabbin" HK, vol. 1, no. 9, 26 May 1941, pp. 15–16. An English translation appeared in HK, vol. 1, no. 11, 24 July 1941, pp. 2–3. A Yiddish version was published in the New York Yiddish newspaper *Morgen Journal* on 26 May 1941. On the different publications of this Kol Kore see Greenberg, *Mahane Israel*, p. 160, n. 20.

²² On the mystical authority of the *Zaddik* see Gershom Scholem, "ha-Zaddik", in: *Pirkei Yesod be-Havanat ha-Kabbalah u-Semleha*, Jerusalem 1976, pp. 213–258; Samuel Dresner, *The Zaddik*, New York 1960; Arthur Green, "The Zaddik as Axis Mundi", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XLV (1977), pp. 327–347; Ada Rapoport-Albert, "God and the Zaddik as Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship", *History of Religion* 18, no. 4 (1979), pp. 296–325; Rachel Elior, "Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*: The Doctrine of the Zaddik in the works of Jacob Isaac, The Seer of Lublin", in: Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steve Zapperstein (eds.), *Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Chimen Abramsky*, London 1988, pp. 393–455; Joseph Dan, "Hasidism: The Third Century", *World Union of Jewish Studies, Newsletter* no. 29 (1989), pp. 39–42; Rachel Elior, "Between 'Divestment of Corporeality' and 'Love of Corporeality'—The Polarity Between Spiritual Perception and Social Reality in Hasidism", in: Israel Bartal, Ezra Mendelson, Chava Turiansky (eds.), *Studies in Jewish Culture in Honor of Chaim Sliemak*, Jerusalem 1993, pp. 228–241 (Hebrew); Rachel Elior, "The Paradigms of *Yesh* and *Ayin* in Hasidic Thought", in: Ada Rapoport-Albert, (ed.) *Hasidism Reappraised*, London 1996, pp. 168–179.

²³ On the role of repentance—*Teshuvah* see, Schweid, pp. 53–58; Greenberg, *Redemption*, pp. 62–67; Greenberg, *Mahane Israel*, pp. 141–157.

²⁴ On the various activities of *Mahane Israel* see, Greenberg, *Mahane Israel*, pp. 148–151. On HK see notes 10 and 21 above. On the esoteric and exoteric nature of this publication, see Greenberg, *Mahane Israel*, pp. 141–163; Levin, *Toldot Habad be-Artzot ha-Brit*, pp. 304–344; Nafiali Loewenthal, "The Neutralization of Messianism and the Apocalypse", in: Rachel Elior and Joseph Dan (eds.) *Kolot Rabim, Memorial volume to Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer: Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996), pp. 2*–14* (English section).

to strengthen devoted religious life within the observant community, specifically to generate the essential repentance which would in turn generate the redemption. HK communicated its messianic message from 1940 to 1945, throughout the war years, and generated acute messianic arousal and apocalyptic hope. The periodical presented two fields of battle—in Europe the struggle centered on rescuing the Jewish body while in America the struggle focused upon rescuing the Jewish soul.²⁵ MI and HK aggressively disseminated the messianic world view, demanding both material support in order to rescue the persons of the victims in Europe, and spiritual repentance, in order to rescue the souls of the victims of heresy and secularization in America. Through these actions the Habad movement claimed mutual responsibility for the sins of exile and the hopes for redemption.²⁶

The dissemination of the apocalyptic spiritual message and the messianic activities in the 1940's were interpreted in a fourfold manner: 1. As expressions of *Exile* of both body and soul co-relating the punishment of the "Old World" in Europe with the sins of the secular "New World" Jews in the United States 2. As interpreting the inception of *Pre-Messianic Tribulations* which signified the collapse of the prevailing order and the birth of a new one. 3. Describing the birth of the new era as *The Imminent Redemption* 4. Relentlessly propagating the demand for an all-encompassing *Repentance-Teshuvah*—perceived as the *reversal*—that which will turn the descent of Israel

²⁵ HK cf. Schwied; Greenberg, *Redemption*.

²⁶ The discourse and talk that Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson gave on Purim 1941, indicate that he saw the Jewish suffering in Europe partly as a result of the sins of Jews around the world, particularly in America. It seems that he believed that because one part of the Jewish people were sinning, particularly those in America who had an extremely poor level of religious observance, the Jews of Europe had to suffer: "Jews in America . . . you must know that the sorrows which those Jews across the ocean are suffering are not by chance. This is a decree from heaven, and the decree is a punishment for something of which you are guilty, something for which you are in part to blame. . . . Jews in America . . . you are being called by God's call to repentance. The moment is much more serious than you can imagine". Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, *Likkutei Dibburim*, Brooklyn, 1972, vols. C-D, p. 386 (English version vol. 3, pp. 62-63). By telling the American Jewish community that they are to blame, he also called on them to repent and in this way to save their fellow Jews in Europe. I am grateful to my student Joel Kortick for his help in clarifying this point. It is interesting to note the history of the causal link between the sins of the Jews and their sufferings in the rabbinical historiography that justified the destruction of the Temple in this self-blame. Apparently, the sages preferred self-blame over the possibility of an irrational world which has no correlation between good deeds and evil destiny.

from the verge of death and forsaken exile towards divine providence and assured survival. The passage from the old world into the new world, the passage from the torments of exile into the promised redemption—could only take place through collective self-determination which will lead to repentance.

The mystical-apocalyptic reconstruction of reality as proffered by Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak transformed the *coercive existential death* of the Jewish people and their experience of meaningless torment in a helpless situation within the chaotic reality of the present into a *pre-determined divine scheme for redemption* which, though entailing pre-messianic tribulations, will definitely lead to the aspired mystical birth of a new future.

By 1945 it had become obvious that the predicted messianic events had not occurred and that the period of pre-messianic tribulations had indeed brought immense torment and calamity but, alas, no redemption. The HK ceased to appear, an indirect admission of failure for the prophecy of immediate messianic revelation, and Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak did not use the slogans *לא אלוהים לא יאמר* anymore. Further, the political establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was passed over and ignored with complete silence thereby divesting the new state of any messianic significance. Rabbi Schneerson's prophecy may have failed from the point of view of predictive accuracy but had overwhelmingly succeeded from the point of view of building lasting social institutions from the cohesive experience of apocalyptic anticipation.²⁷ The messianic prophecy relating to the physical salvation of the Jewish people failed, but Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak did not give up his vision regarding the salvation of the souls and the apocalyptic anticipation. He was determined to create through his own efforts a new Jewish people, a nation which would be worthy of future messianic revelation. Further, he wished to establish new Jewish

²⁷ See Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*, University of Minnesota 1956. References here are to the Harper Torchbooks edition, New York 1964. The authors delineate perceptively the common response of believers to contradictory evidence occurring in millennial or messianic movements: "Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong; what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before. Indeed, he may even show a new fervor about convincing and converting other people to his view". (*ibid.*, p. 2)

communities, replacing all those which had been destroyed, in order to found a Jewish people befitting the messianic age.

After the Holocaust, Habad adopted a twofold role, one professing a testament and the other, carrying a mission.²⁸ Habad followers were called upon to attest and to bear witness through extreme personal devotion and self-sacrifice to the world that passed away in the Holocaust, reconstructing that which had all but vanished. They pledged a mission to build anew, through an all-encompassing educational process, to include *Klal Israel*, that is, the new religious Jewish community forming over the world. Unlike other Hasidic communities that were trying to rejuvenate their own remnants out of a result of urgent existential motivation and hopes for survival, Habad people were reaching out into the entire Jewish community. They were motivated by their all-encompassing messianic expectation (which had no particular date at that stage) and acted according to the objectives of still concealed agenda for imminent redemption.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak and his son-in-law Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson who, in the eyes of their followers, were endowed with a divine charisma of mystical piety and an incomparable spiritual authority, dispatched emissaries to nearly every Jewish community on the globe, transcending all social, ethnical, cultural and geographical borders, taking upon themselves a responsibility for the entire Jewish community.²⁹ Their goal was to reach out, in an unprecedented manner, to attempt to establish a connection between the non-religious and the religious communities, in order to attract a wider following for more observant ways of life. They were battling religious invalidation, heresy, assimilation, desperate predictions concerning the future of the survivors, material constraints, the weakening of socio-religious bonds and the general sense of estrangement and rejection of the observant life style that emerged in the wake of the Holocaust. They utilized every means of active promotion, aggressively promulgating Judaism by drawing upon a charismatic Hasidic leadership and a mystical heritage, providing educational

²⁸ Schweid, p. 64.

²⁹ See, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sefer HaShlichut*, Kfar Habad 1989; Mordechai Laufer (ed.) *Siprah shel Shlichut*, Kfar Habad 1990; Levin, *Talsh Habad le-Artot ha-Brit*, pp. 209ff., 369-373. On the missionary nature of the emissaries cf. Menachem Friedman, in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, Chicago 1994, pp. 328-336.

needs and assisting in comprehensive family welfare and social care.³⁰

The emissaries, who were eagerly seeking the presence of supporting co-believers in order to recover from the disconfirmation of the messianic expectation of the war time, concealed the outspoken messianic vocation of the 1940's, and replaced it with the concept of *קניין* -*kenia*- (drawing together), reaching out to all members of the Jewish community everywhere, through an educational network, social welfare services, and an intricate religious campaign. Their efforts integrated explicit spiritual and social rehabilitation and implicit messianic hopes that were preconditioned by repentance. Once again Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak transformed a profound sense of powerlessness and despair into a powerful socio-spiritual action, and yet behind the open educational actions and social reaching out there was a still hidden messianic design.

It should be noted that through the transformation of messianic hope into practical activity, the Habad leadership came to realize that in order to maintain the belief in the coming redemption they would have no other choice but "to return to history," in the very Zionist sense of the phrase.³¹ They came to adopt a full devotion to every earthly concern and all mundane human activity—in order to influence and to hasten the divine redemption. In many aspects they created a religious parallel to the secular *Zionist* ideology for which they professed a bitter resentment dating from before the Holocaust. Zionism was perceived by broad religious circles as a secular heresy—an ideology that demanded unlawful human arousal into specific action and deed that must necessarily precede any divine intervention into history—human action which would overlook the traditional prohibitions regarding hastening the end of exile and aim to bring about the yearned for redemption. Habad was willing to adopt different degrees of pragmatic realism and rational politics, combined with a practical orientation towards political organization, educational systems, economical resources and a communication network—in order to engender religious arousal, and repentance, and to precipitate redemption.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), assumed the Habad leadership in 1951,³² one year after the death of his father-in-law,

³⁰ See, Levin, *Toldot Habad be-Atzot ha-Brit*.

³¹ Cf. Schweid, p. 234; Ravitzky, p. 271.

³² Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak suffered during the last few years of his life from a stroke,

Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak, Rabbi Menachem Mendel represented the seventh generation of successive Habad leadership and maintained that his generation, the seventh generation, inevitably had to be the generation of redemption.³³ He further contended that this generation was the last in exile and the first for redemption, since there could be no preconditions or reservations: the time had arrived. He assured his followers that the Messiah would come in his generation and consequently he never conceived of the possibility of an eighth Habad leader. He maintained that Habad would accomplish what others would or dared not attempt: he dispatched thousands of emissaries to disseminate Judaism and Hasidism, often at great personal danger, in many places around the world to hasten the expected redemption.

This combination of comprehensive educational activities striving to reach every member of the Jewish community and the possession of a definite messianic inclination, nourished by a charismatic leader who encouraged the use of all modern resources in order to achieve mystical and messianic goals—succeeded in raising a wide following of Jewish proselytes—*hozrim be-teshuvah*. The Habad movement has thousands and thousands of members who joined as the “newly reborn”, a group which was attracted by the religious awakening, drawn to the messianic orientation of the 1980’s and the 90’s and determined to carry these spiritual impulse and social conviction ever further.³⁴

from multiple sclerosis, and apparently from a form of aphasia and was not able to express himself. The passage from the sixth to the seventh Rebbe was not immediate and not without complications since R. Yosef Yitzhak had no sons and there were several candidates to choose between, among them the two brothers-in-law who were married to his two daughters—Shmaria Gur Aric and Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Yet another relative, Schneur Zalman Schneerson, was also mentioned. There is no critical biography of Rabbi Menachem Mendel. However there are many biased biographies and hagiographies. See, e.g., Shaul Shimon Deutsch, *Larger than Life—The Life and Times of the Lubavitcher Rebbe—Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson* vol. 1, New York 1995. On Hasidic historiography and hagiography, see Ada Rapoport-Albert, “Hagiography,” (n. 3 above); Israel Bartal, “Shimon ha-Kofer”—A Chapter in Orthodox Historiography” in: *Studies in Jewish Culture in Honor of Chone Shimon*, (n. 22 above) pp. 243-268 (Hebrew); Hayim Solovetchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: the Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy”, *Tradition* 28:4 (1994), pp. 23-75.

³³ See *Kol Mevasser* (n. 35 below). On the messianic significance of being the “Seventh Rebbe” who leads the seventh generation of Habad, see Loewenthal, *Neutralization*, p. 11. The origin of this retrospective tradition is debatable and further study is needed.

³⁴ On the role of the “Jewish reborn” *Hozerim be-teshuvah* in the Habad Messianic campaign see William Shaffir, “Jewish Messianism Lubavitch-Style: An Interim

With the establishment and expansion of Habad centers all over the world, starting from the fifties on through the seventies, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, commonly known as "The Lubavitcher Rebbe", was able to regenerate the acute unqualified messianic expectation, all through the 1980's. He asserted repeatedly that this was the "last generation", the generation of redemption and consequently demanded that all his followers broadcast the imminent appearance of the Messiah.³⁵ He required his emissaries from around the world to prepare the Jewish people for this expected redemption as he emphasized again and again that all was entirely dependent upon the Habad activities ("כי בט הרבר הלוי"). He further maintained that there was a direct connection between the promulgation of Torah and of Hasidism and between the hastening of the coming of the Messiah, repeatedly saying in public "נאילה בקרוב מסט" "redemption is veritably very close". The messianic prediction was proclaimed with vigor and accepted by many convinced followers who then acted accordingly: they committed themselves by constant propagation in the messianic prediction, by uprooting their lives and going to new places where they built new Lubavitch communities, attracting new adherents and disciples every day; by preparing spiritually and

Report, *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. XXXV:2 (December 1993), pp. 115-128; and see note 45 below.

³⁵ See, M. Zelikson [Slonim], ed. *Kol Mevasser Mevasser ve-Omer: Kovetz Hiddushai Torah: Ha-Melekh ha-Mashiach ve-ha-Ga'ulah ha-Shalemah*, 1983; Ravitzky, pp. 265-270. Naftali Loewenthal has pointed out that two different concepts of redemption were simultaneously expressed in R. Yosef Yitzhak's writings and public discourse: the theme of *Ga'ulah kelalit*, the general redemption which will take place after the apocalypse of the war, and that of *Ga'ulah peratit*, achieved through intensive contemplation in prayer and through strengthening normative Judaism. He further asserts that in the teachings of R. Menachem Mendel one aspect of redemption is a preparation for the other. See Loewenthal, *Neutralization*, (n. 24 above) pp. 1-14. The messianic tension in Habad had different expressions. There were various messianic publications by different Lubavitch writers who expressed private initiatives which reflected a certain public atmosphere. In 1965 Avraham Pariz published an announcement that claimed:

י"קל מסט... בשמחה רבה יסורים אני למשר לכם כי זהו סוף המשיח... כבר נמצא
ענה כאן אינו, זהו הוא הרבי מלובבינסק... הוא אינו צריך את בחינתו מלפני מסט
בו המשיח

In 1970 A.Z. Slonim planned to publicize the messianic identity of R. Menachem Mendel but was contested by some Habad leaders. In 1983 M. Zelikson-[Slonim], published *Kol Mevasser Mevasser ve-Omer: Kovetz Hiddushai Torah: Ha-Melekh ha-Mashiach ve-ha-Ga'ulah ha-Shalemah*. On the nature of this publication the editor attested in the introduction:

ישיבת דרך בקימת בחינה מרחם לסקן דין הרמב"ם על אופן התגלותו של המשיח
המשיח ובעיקר כי זהו סוף המשיח

Habad followers responded by an overwhelming commitment to live constantly with a renewed and invigorated messianic consciousness, to study messianic teachings, to publish endless treatises, pamphlets and books on redemption, to write and to publicize in every manner on the immediate redemption, and to prepare both night and day for the coming of the Messiah.

When taken together—the inherited messianic vocation that the Seventh Rebbe received from his predecessor, the mystical consciousness originating from the charismatic leadership, the commitment to the dissemination of messianic expectations, the resultant overwhelming messianic awakening coupled with pragmatic realism, all borne by the thousands of emissaries and new followers—it is no wonder that the messianic resurgence rose to such new heights.

In the course of the eighties and nineties, Habad followers, including the multitudes who had responded to the wide religious arousal and the vital outreach activism, enthusiastically carried out a messianic campaign unprecedented in its amplitude. The outcome of this process was the replacement of the *general* expectation of imminent redemption in the near *future*—by an expectation of a *personal* Messiah embodied in the figure of the Rebbe who would reveal himself in the *present*. In the eyes of many of the Habad followers, the messianic tension was sharply concentrated on the Rebbe, and the fact that R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson forcefully proclaimed the imminence of the redemption and encouraged the cry “We want Moshiach now!” strongly implied that he himself might be the redeemer. He was often depicted in words and praises that transcended human nature and was described in concepts that Jewish tradition reserved for God and God alone. Unprecedented mystical descriptions from the eighties and the nineties relating to the divine nature of R. Menachem Mendel attest to the extremity of this development:

“עצמות אנוסוף והאלטה בבשר ודם הוזהו של הרבי עצמות אנוסוף
שחלש בטפו של הרבי”

Union reversed its policy of prohibiting Jewish emigration and began to allow Russian Jews once again to leave. The unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union was perceived as a sign that the redemption was near. The defeat of Iraq in the Persian Gulf war in 1991 as well as the unexpected fact that in spite of severe Iraqi missile attacks on Israel there was no widespread injury, raised hopes and expectations for messianic imminence and were further perceived as an apocalyptic victory. For the use of dramatic events as a turning point, see Shaffir, 118-119.

("The essence of the Divine Infinite was invested in a physical garb: The Rabbi himself is the essence of the Divine Infinite that was enclothed in the body of the Rabbi").⁴⁰ The ambivalent role of R. Menachem Mendel himself within the messianic movement as both instigator and as restrainer as well as the level of his participation in the personalization campaign as the embodiment of the Messiah remains uncertain and will probably never be unequivocally answered.

According to all indications, R. Menachem Mendel, while most certainly fulfilling the role as a messianic activist, refused in the 1970's and the early 1980's to grant permission to publish messianic texts that proclaimed him as Messiah and nominated him as *Melech HaMashiach*. However, while he did not necessarily see himself as Messiah, he said nothing and did nothing in the early 1990's to dissuade his followers from their belief in his messianic stature and certainly did not attempt to curtail the messianic campaigns proclaiming him to be the Messiah. There can be no doubt that he ascribed great religious significance to the messianic awakening that swept his followers, although he refrained from any open, explicit proclamation of his own Messianic vocation. The majority of the texts proclaiming him as Messiah were published and disseminated only at the time of his final illness and incapacitation when the apparent refutation of the messianic prediction increased the enthusiasm and activity of his followers.

In the last decade before R. Menachem Mendel's death, the movement divided into the *messianic majority* who pronounced R. Menachem Mendel himself as the Messiah, and into a self-proclaimed *sane minority* that strove to keep a measure of respectability and reason, urging a restriction of messianic hopes. The messianic group, known as *meshichistim*, was engaged in the enthusiastic activity of obtaining new followers,⁴¹ and spared no effort in bringing the Messiah into

⁴⁰ M. Zelikson, ed. *Kol Mevasser*, pp. 32, 48-49; cf. *Iggeret LeYahid*, note 42, below, p. 17. See also Shalom Dov Wolpo, "Nahamu Nahamu Ammi—Nehamah be Kiflayim", *Kfar Habad* 106 (5743), 6-7.

⁴¹ On the significance of recruiting ever greater numbers of believers when a growing cognitive dissonance is occurring cf. *When Prophecy Fails* (n. 27 above) p. 28: "If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all be correct"; see also *ibid.*, p. 229 "The presence of supporting co-believers would seem to be an indispensable requirement for recovery from such extreme disconfirmation".

the public arena, disregarding the mounting criticism and condemnation. In opposition, the non-messianic group, known as the *shfuisim*, "the sane ones", unsuccessfully attempted to restrain these activities to internal Habad circles and to avoid exposure to the public eye.⁴²

The division in Habad created opposing sides, those who held to unrestrained popular "exotericism" (i.e., the public proclamation of the Rebbe as Messiah following his stroke in March 1992) and those who held to "rational" discreet "esotericism" (i.e., the insistence that the Habad mission was only to declare that this was the messianic time, denying any need for a public proclamation of the Messiah). The division was more tactical in nature, not really substantive since both factions believed in different ways that R. Schneerson definitely was or certainly might be the Messiah.

The messianic "exotericists" were acting with great enthusiasm, irrational persuasion and unbounded energy under the inspiration of imminent redemption ("We Want Moschiah Now!"), expressing complete disregard for the undeniable refuting evidence pertaining to the temporal present and near future. They spread their urgent messianic message in the journals "Kfar Habad", "Beis Moshiach", "Sihat HaShavouah", and in the weekly pages of "Parashat Hashavouah" and by various means in public campaigns. This group was headed by the spiritual leader, R. Yoel Kahan,⁴³ assisted by R. Shmuel Butman, the director of the Lubavitch youth organization and chairman of the international Moshiach campaign (who was planning to publicly anoint the Rebbe as Moshiach). Yosef Yizhak HaCohen Gutnik financed the international messianic campaign and was involved in effecting political consequences in Israel.⁴⁴ The Messianists enjoyed

⁴² For an internal critical view of the extreme messianic course see Yehoshua Mondshine, *Iggeret LeYadid* (= "A Letter to a Friend") Jerusalem 1993 (a circular letter aimed to Habad people, typed on a typewriter) Scholem Collection 6710.1, Israel National Library. The writer is a Lubavitch Hasid who resented the messianists and described with detail the developments from an anti-messianistic point of view. For an external report informed by inner circles see Nadav Ish Shalom and Yuri Yanover, *Rokdim U-Bochim, The Truth on the Habad Movement*, New York 1994 (Hebrew).

⁴³ See Mondshine, *Iggeret*; cf. *Rokdim u-Bochim*, pp. 70-73.

⁴⁴ The messianic arousal had a profound effect on the political position that Habad advances in Israel and is still advancing. Habad holds to an extreme right-wing policy and supports both politically and financially right-wing conservative policies and political parties. See Yosef Yizhak HaCohen Gutnik, *Shlemut ha-Haaretz, The Rabbi of Lubavitch: Al haSakanah bi-Mesirat Shtetl Eretz Israel* (On the Danger of Giving Away Areas of the Land of Israel), Brooklyn 1996.

the support of popular circles, of enthusiastic women groups, and of the proselytes known as *hozrim betshuvah*.¹⁵ The "sane" circles, those who were interested in the future of Habad as an accepted religious movement and as an international educational order, were headed by R. Abraham Shemtov and R. Yehudah Krinsky, a senior secretary of the Rebbe. They were supported by the educational establishment and by some members of Agudat Hasidei Habad. The "esoteric" circles, while acknowledging the importance of the messianic idea, were not usually willing to consider the practical consequences of imminent redemption and resented the fusion of the intimate mystical world of Habad messianic vision and the pragmatic reality of unrestrained public religious activity. Their opinion was transmitted primarily through the publication and the distribution of private correspondence since they claimed to be suppressed and persecuted by the dominant messianic majority. The non-messianic circles were guarded in their approach, believing that the messianic propaganda would lead to contempt, defamation, and to a devaluation of all public Habad activities. They further maintained that an overemphasis on messianism would generate an estrangement from God in broad Jewish circles and will cause many to drift away from the Hasidic world.¹⁶

¹⁵ The central role of *Hozrim beTshuvah* and women groups in the messianic arousal was noticed by students of sociology and anthropology who studied the current Habad phenomena; their work is in preparation. The uncompromising enthusiastic position, which transcends the accepted religious common denominator, was propagated to a great extent by the *Hozrim BeTshuvah*. Adam Tchubin discussed this aspect of his work on Habad community with me and suggested that the newcomers find the messianic enthusiasm a promising avenue for their religious activity since it "compensates" for their own relatively low status as newcomers to the ranks of Habad, devoid of the spiritual authority shared by elders or the prestige of those of distinguished Habad descent, cf. eye-witness description: "The split in the movement is between mainstream messianists and radical messianists. The mainstream messianists tend to be older and remember the previous Rebbe. Most were born into Lubavitch families, believe that the Rebbe is the best candidate for Moshiach in this generation and say that the way to bring him is through greater Torah study and *mitzot*. . . . The radicals tend to be younger, Israel-based and *be'alei teshuvah*. . . . They believe that the Rebbe is the Moshiach and the way to bring him is to crown him and to force the hand of God. They see the Rebbe more in their mind's eye than in person. They are the ones who have sponsored full-page ads in American Jewish newspapers and street signs in Israel, 'Welcome King Moshiach' with the Rebbe's picture", Yosef Abramowitz, "What Happens if the Rebbe Dies?", *Moment* (April 1993), p. 72. I wish to thank Daniel Shrubel for drawing my attention to the article of Y. Abramowitz. The central role of Lubavitch women in the Messianic circles still awaits a comprehensive sociological study.

¹⁶ Cf. Mondshine, *Iggret leYadid*, note 42 above. Indirect aggressive response to

IV

In March, 1992, Rabbi Schneerson suffered a major apoplectic stroke.⁴⁷ The *Mesichistim* increased their messianic fervor following the physical refutation and apparent disproof of their belief. They emphatically invested the stroke with redemptive significance following the Biblical tradition of the suffering servant of God in Isaiah 53 which culminates with the verse: "He will be taken from the land of the living, and will be wounded for the sins of his people" (*ibid.*, 53:8) an astonishing exegetical tactic, in view of Christianity's usage of this text. The messianic circles transcended all the major physical consequences of this condition by turning them into a mystical omen, arguing that through his suffering the Rebbe was atoning for the sins of the entire nation and thus was preparing them for redemption. They further contended paradoxically that the Rabbi would not die at all and would imminently be revealed as the King Messiah.⁴⁸ They concluded that they must take the initiative and to give the messianic wagon the last needed push, through relentless written and oral actions, and to effect the open and declared revelation of the Rabbi as Messiah.⁴⁹ The messianists, driven by the deep conviction of the immediate messianic revelation of the Lubavitcher Rebbe—sought wide public acknowledgment of his messianic identity. The public campaign culminated in the anointment of the indisposed, paralyzed and speechless 90 year-old Rabbi Menachem Mendel as

the author of the *Iggeret* was published in *Beit Moshiach* 60 (November 3, 1995), p. 28.

⁴⁷ On the grave medical situation and its grim consequences regarding the divisions in Habad see: *Rokdim u-Bochim* (n. 42 above).

⁴⁸ The anointment and the public campaign that took place in 1992-4 received wide public attention and were described in Israeli and Jewish newspapers from an outsider's point of view in various critical tones. See Allan Nadler, "Last Exit to Brooklyn". *The New Republic*, May 4 (1992), p. 32 and see below.

⁴⁹ Expression of the later stages of the messianic resurgence written from an insider's point of view can be found in Habad periodical publications such as *Kfar Habad*; *Sivat haShavua*, *Beit Moshiach* and in volumes such as Levi Yitzhak Ginzburg, (ed.) "Messiah Now" (Kfar Habad 1993-4, III volumes); Levi Yitzhak Ginzburg, (ed.) "Long Live the King Messiah" (Kfar Habad 1994); Pinhas Maman (ed.) "The Torah of the Messiah", New York 1993; Menachem Brod, *Yemot HaMoshiach*, Kfar Habad 1992; Mordechai Moshe Laufer, (ed.) *Yemot Melech*, Kfar Habad 1991; Yosef Yitzhak Havelin, *Sha'arei Geulah*, Kfar Habad 1992; Yosef Avraham Heller, *Kinot Hilbata Lemahiba*, Brooklyn 1992, and many other anonymous messianic titles such as *Mevasser Tin*; *Kol Mevasser*, *Torat HaGeulah*, *Mamianoni Hayeshuah* and many others in Hebrew, English and Yiddish, all of which are collected in Gershom Scholem Collection in the Israeli National library in Jerusalem.

Messiah followed by a campaign to "Prepare for the Coming of the Messiah Menachem Mendel". His advanced age and great illness made the urgency of the public campaign a pathetic spectacle that transcended all constraints of Jewish tradition.

This paradoxical decision that ignored immediate reality and challenged all physical and medical probability was further complicated by the public subscription of many thousands of followers to a petition expressing their enthusiastic support for Rabbi Menachem Mendel in his new position.³⁰ The Messianic circles simultaneously maneuvered on both rational-traditional and irrational-apocalyptic levels. They were moved to seek Halachic support for their messianic claim and to issue a rabbinical verdict proclaiming Rabbi Menachem Mendel's messianic character, arguing a Halachic-legal basis for their messianic claims through the tradition found in "*Hilchot Melachim*", the messianic guidelines laid down by Maimonides.³¹ At the same time they demanded "להביא ה'לכ על ה'טו"ד" that is, the abandonment of rational considerations that cast doubts on the current fulfillment of the messianic agenda and the disregard of all events which might seem to refute the messianic belief.³² R. Yoel Kahan, the head of the messianic faction, claimed that anyone who cast doubt on the messianic identity of R. Menachem Mendel had cast doubt on the very existence of God. At the same time his followers published a long list of books that strove to grant Halachic, mystic, and religious validity to the public campaign. They presented the mystical background through the "*Holy Epistle of the Besh't*"³³ which

³⁰ In the course of 1994, full-page advertisements pledging subscription to the Messianic role of R. Menachem Mendel were published in Israeli and American newspapers. One example from *Yediot Aharonot* 23.3.94 reads as follows:

אנו וסוף אל מה האלה האמיתות והמלכות... אנו מקבלים עלינו את המלכות
הרבי מלך המלכות משיח לעולם ועד, ומשנה גדולה זו פנים אנו במקשה ומשנה
לשוא ולתגבר את עם ישראל וארץ ישראל ולחייב את האלה האמיתות והמלכות.
(לקום לחתום עם ה'ספר) יד ארזנו מרוב ורוב מלך המלכות לעולם ועד

³¹ See Shalom Dov Wolpo, *Yehi HaMela'ch HaMashiach*; Kiriat Gat 1992. On the paradoxical use of the Maimonidian passage in Habad Messianic arguments see, David Berger, "Messianism, Passing Phenomenon or Turning Point in the History of Judaism?", *Jewish Action* (Fall 1993), pp. 35-44, 88. The argument is written from an academic-religious-orthodox point of view. On the social impact of the messianic campaigns from the Habad point of view, see Shafir (n. 34 above), pp. 114-117.

³² See *Yonai Melech*; introduction.

³³ See Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, *Iggeret ha-Kodesh*, In: *Shishi ha-Besh't*, Yehoshua Mondshäine (ed.) Jerusalem 1982; English translation and discussion, Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Mystical Testimonies*, New York 1967, pp. 150-151; Ben Zion Dinur, *Be-Mifne*

advocated widespread dissemination of Kabbalistic and Hasidic ideas as a vital precondition for the coming of the Messiah. The early issues of the anonymous newsletter "*Beit Mashiah 770*" (*mi-yomano shel ehad ha-trimim*) that bears the interesting subtitle "private—with no responsibility whatsoever" is the pathetic culmination of the messianic expectations.⁵⁴ The newsletter regularly described the daily experiences of the Hasidim who lived around 770 Eastern Parkway, the Lubavitch center in Crown Heights, New York, waiting for messianic announcements on their electronic Moshiah beepers.

Through all these unprecedented written and oral campaigns hailing the Rebbe as Messiah, by utilizing every agency from Messiah bumper stickers, leaflets and booklets, public pronouncements, massive signs and posters on homes and highway billboards, full-page advertisements in the Jewish and general press, to the most advanced means available from satellites and international media through Internet communication and computer graphics, Lubavitch sponsored and demonstrated an ingenious and aggressive use of the mass media⁵⁵—from an outsider's point of view—in order to announce the imminence of redemption. From an insider's point of view, they strove to generate immediate miracles, to bring about the deed which would transform the speechless impotent, elderly and stricken human Messiah into the omnipotent eternal divine entity, there, in their immediate presence, in their own day and time.

The messianic circles were living an ongoing tragic paradox, ignoring the sad physical and mental condition of their sick, paralyzed, coroneted messiah and adopting a completely irrational viewpoint, demonstrating the overwhelming power of messianic expectation and its total immunization to the shortcomings of physical reality. The Messianists expressed a total indifference towards any events refuting the messianic belief as well as a complete disregard of any expression of criticism pertaining to negative assessment, rational or biological

ha-Dovot, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1954; Isaiah Tishby, "Messianic Idea and Messianic Trends in the growth of Hasidism" (Hebrew) *Zion* 32 (1967), pp. 1–45; Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism, A Quest for The Historical Ba'al Shem Tov*, Berkeley, 1996; Allan Nadler, *Last Exit . . .*, p. 34; Rachel Elior, *Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov—Mystical Image and Magical Background* (forthcoming).

⁵⁴ *Beit Mashiah 770* a computer printed circular (not to be confused with the above mentioned *Beit Mashiah* which is a weekly magazine).

⁵⁵ The influence of the massive use of the media for religious purposes by the American Christian fundamentalist organizations might have played a role in the decision to use this media for the public campaigns of Habad.

facts, religious concerns or disparaging reaction to their messianic campaign—from within the Habad Lubavitch circles or from without, that is, from the broader Jewish community.⁵⁶

It should be remembered that the Habad movement always believed in the paradoxical nature of the divine presence, perceiving the divinity as a mystical unity of opposites, as being simultaneously revealed and concealed, present and absent, as a dual process of creating and annihilating, as being and non-being, as transcending all constraints of a rational perspective of time, place, and conventional perception of reality.⁵⁷ Thus, by applying the dialectical *divine* paradox to the hidden-revealed *human* Messiah, Habad could envisage a messianic movement which incarnated the mystical paradox within human dimensions. The analogy to the *Sabbatean* precedence of paradoxical faith in an apostate messiah and in the dialectical interpretation of reality as revelation through concealment—can hardly escape the eye. However, while both messianic movements do share a paradoxical belief in an inner messianic reality transcending physical con-

⁵⁶ Rabbi Eliezer Shach, the head of the ultra-Orthodox "Lithuanian" yeshiva faction (stemming from the historical "opponents" of Hasidism) headed the attacks on the rising Lubavitch messianism in Israel and Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, the anti-Zionist Hasidic Satmer Rebbe, headed the attacks in the United States from his seat in Williamsburg-Brooklyn. The attacks in Israel were published in "Yated Neman" the daily newspaper of the "Lithuanian" faction, where Rabbi Eliezer Schach denounced Rabbi Schneerson as a false messiah. For quotations of growing criticism from opposing religious circles that compared Lubavitch messianism with Sabbatianism, see Ravitzky, p. 370, n. 105; Mondshine, *Iggeret*, p. 22 and see below.

An example of comprehensive academic-religious criticism on the Messianic claims of Habad can be found in Allan Nadler's article mentioned above. See also Allan Nadler, "King of Kings County", *The New Republic* (July 11, 1994), cf. note 40 above. A grave concern from religious point of view is expressed in David Berger's article mentioned in note 51 above. Lawrence Schiffman, professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, wrote in an open letter to his friends in the Habad-Lubavitch movement in the *Long Island Jewish World* (January 29, 1993): "What you risk in your messianic pretensions is not your own Jewish observance, but the continued role of Chabad-Lubavitch as a major catalyst of Jewish observance in the wider Jewish community. If you turn yourself from an outreach movement into a false messiah movement, many of those who have gained so much spiritually and religiously from your work will find themselves unwilling to follow your future". Habad was criticized from all directions—Orthodox, Hasidic, Mitragedic, academic and secular circles as well as from inside and outside factions who all expressed their concern, resentment and reservation in different tones. Cf. *When Prophecy Fails*, pp. 19–22 for the response of the members of messianic movements to sharp criticism.

⁵⁷ Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, pp. 97–100.

straints, spiritual disproof and rational consideration and do cultivate a dialectic perception of the parity between the inner truth and the disappointment of external reality—they do not share practical conclusions. *Sabbatean messianism* transgressed all borders and restraints of the traditional Jewish world with a debatable religious awareness, through provocative spiritual expectations and by emphasizing paradoxical traditional practices while Hasid remains solidly within the Jewish tradition in spite of its paradoxical mysticism and acute messianic perspective.

In conclusion I would like to argue that inherent in the Hasid movement are three principal elements that nurtured its messianism:

1. A tradition of *paradoxical spirituality* perhaps the key to the acute mystical messianism—that which can transcend reality and ignore physical constraints and rational qualifications.⁵⁸

2. *Mystical leadership* drawing on a dynastic heritage invested with unlimited mystical authority that transcends constraints of reality, influencing both the Hasidic community and the heavenly spheres.⁵⁹

3. *Social creativity*: from its very inception Hasid demonstrated interest and capacity in the establishment of new social institutions and outreach systems which would attract and initiate newcomers through education. In the second half of the twentieth century, the social creativity that was directed to the entire Jewish community transcending all local borders and traditional differences and ultimately hoping to generate repentance and redemption, thus bridging the gap between history and metahistory.⁶⁰

The merging of these three elements, richly supported by written mystical discourse and oral deliberation combined with the desperate historical circumstances of the first half of the century, generated a messianic movement founded upon catastrophe.⁶¹ By the second half of the century, after the positive historical experience of the nearly unlimited material security and spiritual freedom of Jewish life in America, the catastrophic messianism faded, leaving behind a messianism of affluence which could utilize the innovation and freedom of modern material society for its own spiritual ends but which

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–100.

⁵⁹ Cf. n. 22 above.

⁶⁰ Cf. Levin, *Toldot Hasid be-Artzot ha-Brit*; Ravitzky, n. 1 above.

⁶¹ See Schweid, cf. Scholem, n. 5 above.

would require ever-expanding new goals and achievements in order to sustain messianic tension.⁶²

Habad has been living with the cognitive dissonance of a constantly changing focus for the last fifty years. Its *initial* stage was marked by the paradox of the impotence of the omnipotent God during the Holocaust which was temporarily resolved by a pre-deterministic messianic interpretation of history. Its *second* stage was the moment of disillusionment that followed the disproof and failure of the immediate messianic prophecy in the wake of the second world war. The unequivocal refutation of any messianic hopes in 1945 was not only a paradoxical moment of despair, but also a moment of great creativity since in the wake of the failed messianic prophecy came an unprecedented religious arousal marked by great outreaching activity and spiritual commitment. Habad turned that moment of despair and disconfirmation into a moment of great social creativity by turning to the broad public and adopting the missionary role. The movement took upon itself the task of disseminating overt Judaism and covert messianism all over the world through appointed emissaries in order to prepare a generation that would merit a future messianic revelation. The immense educational activity carried by the Habad emissaries all over the world formed the *third stage* and brought about a resurgent wave of religious devotion and repentance that nurtured acute messianic expectations. In the *fourth stage*, that which occurred in the 80's and the early 90's under the direct inspiration of Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the messianic expectations were inflamed and concentrated around his own figure. The paradox of an old and sick, bedridden and speechless Messiah marked the *fifth stage* in which the messianic movement recruited all its resources to transcend the constraints of time and place in order to compel heaven to transform the mortal epitome of messianic expectation into an eternal divine Messiah. The *sixth stage* was the cognitive dissonance experienced with the final illness and death of the promised Messiah, the event which expressed the paradox of the tragic impotence and temporal helplessness of the expected omnipotent redeemer and eternal saviour. It is premature to fully assess the spiritual and social consequences of the messianic prophecy that failed.⁶³ However it

⁶² See Ravitzky, pp. 266-267.

⁶³ Several months after the death of the Rebbe, leaflets and books were published in Hebrew and English which purported to explain the grounds for contin-

seems that this striking disconfirmation did not halt the movement, but rather gave it new life. Once again, as in other messianic and millennial movements, we note the appearance of increased enthusiasm and conviction after a sad and seemingly hopeless refutation. Habad is experiencing now the *seventh stage*—in the wake of the new stage of “when prophecy fails” it has splintered into many smaller interrelated groups, often at odds one with another. They continue to speak of the Rebbe in the present tense although he passed away some years ago, on June 13, 1994. Some of the more extreme messianic circles deny the fact of his death, arguing that there was no passing away and claiming that “The Rebbe lives and exists *hai vekayam* among us now exactly as he did before, literally, literally, *mam-mash mam-mash*.”⁶⁴ They continue to expect his immediate reappearance as the messiah and keep publishing daily announcements in the newspapers concerning his immediate revelation. The members of the Lubavitch community are living with his *past* audio-visual and written messianic heritage, while continuing the vast educational commitment and social activity of the *present* and are seeking to relocate the messianic revelation in the *future*. Unlike some other followers of messianic movements that gave up their beliefs and witnessed their movement disintegrate in dissension, controversy and discord until it virtually disappeared, Habad followers seem to withstand the unequivocal refutation of the messianic agenda. They hold to the messianic nature of the Rebbe and to the equivocal nature of his death and consequently entertain hopes for his resurrection, but it seem to have no immediate relevance to daily life as these beliefs are not specific anymore nor are they concerned with the real world, where observant ways of life and the daily educational work are taking precedence.

The messianic resurgence occurring in Habad during the course of the twentieth century still awaits a comprehensive theological analysis which could draw on the full textual evidence and historical

ued faith. Notable among them are *Ve-Hu Tig'alenu*, Brooklyn 1994; *And He Will Redeem Us*, Brooklyn 1994; Shalom Dov Wolpo, *Hemisyon ha-Aharon*, Kiryat Gat 1994. On the immediate reaction to his death in Lubavitch centers in Crown Heights and in Israel, including total denial and expressing hopes for immediate resurrection, see Nadler, *Kings*, pp. 16–18.

⁶⁴ See Levi Yitzhak Ginsburg, “Hirhurim Likrat Yom Malkenu Meshihenu, Yom ha-Segulla Gimmeil Tammuz”, *Beis Moshiach* 41 (June 9, 1995); 13; Levi Yitzhak Ginsburg, *Le-Havi Liemot ha-Moshiach*, Kfar Habad 1995; Michael Friedman (ed.) *Meloch Ha-Moshiach*, Safed 1996. Cf. Berger, p. 39.

documentation and include a comprehensive sociological evaluation reflecting the complexity of the religious and social phenomena that sprang from this spiritual inspiration and paradoxical mysticism. The historical-chronological descriptive outline offered above, and the preliminary theological observations that sought to point out the complexity of the different aspects involved in the Habad messianic phenomena, should be perceived only as the very beginning of a long discussion.