

The Messiah dies—and lives.

KING OF KINGS COUNTY

By Allan Nadler

“I, Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Kings County, New York,” began the one-and-a-half-page last will and testament of the Lubavitcher rebbe, a man who had been declared by his followers to be the immortal savior of humankind. It is not merely the fact of Rabbi Schneerson’s death on June 12 that creates a deep religious crisis for the Hasidim who had anointed him the Messiah; it is also the common way in which he left this world. Unlike the earlier false messiahs of Jewish history, who tended to die—or be martyred—in rather spectacular fashion, Schneerson expired at the age of 92, after a heart attack and two strokes, and after months in intensive care, hooked up to a respirator and surrounded by his medical team at Beth Israel Hospital in Manhattan. Not only did he not die before his time, he lived posthumously.

For more than a decade before his first stroke in 1992, Schneerson had installed the idea of redemption at the center of his religious teachings. In recent years he had been encouraging the Lubavitcher Hasidim publicly to proclaim the imminence of the apocalypse. Moreover, he insisted that their messianic propaganda not be limited to Jews, as any reader of *The New York Times* can attest. The Lubavitchers called on the world to “prepare for the coming of *Moshiach* [Messiah]” with glitzy full-page advertisements, posters prominently featuring the rebbe’s countenance in almost every subway car in New York, highway billboards, bumper stickers and cable television programs.

Schneerson never actually claimed that he was the Messiah, but he never denied it. And after he was silenced by his stroke, the messianic claims of the Lubavitchers were not only undiminished, they lost all restraint. Indeed, it was the loss of the rebbe’s power to speak that conferred upon his most intoxicated disciples an unlimited license to crown him the long-awaited King of the Jews. Dozens of books and pamphlets, in Hebrew and in English, were published, “proving beyond doubt” that Schneerson was the Messiah. While most of these publications were addressed to a popular audience, there were also attempts at scholarly rabbinic tracts. Among them was an unwitting parody of the respected medieval genre of rabbinic responsa, titled, in literally evangelical fashion, *Good*

Tidings: Questions and Answers Regarding the Redemption and Messiah, whose cover featured a kitschy drawing of Schneerson, clad in a prayer shawl and dancing on the mountaintops of Jerusalem.

Last year a store called the International Moshiach Center opened in Crown Heights, featuring a catalog of several hundred items, from pamphlets, posters, videos and bumper stickers to baseball caps, sweat-shirts, keychains and fridge magnets, all prominently displaying the image of the rebbe. This was the place, as the storefront said, “for all your *Moshiach* needs.” And at its annual convention, convened less than a month before Schneerson’s death, the Lubavitch Women’s Organization called upon its members to cast their missionary net wide and spread the tidings of the imminent revelation of the Messiah. Immediately following the convention these women took to the streets and subways of New York distributing wallet-sized “*Moshiach* cards” (see page 17). It was an eschatological version of frequent-flyer programs: “Your *Moshiach* card reminds you that every good deed, every act of kindness you do, brings the world a step closer to its ultimate fulfillment: the age of *Moshiach*. . .” (As it turned out, the expiration date on the card was 6/94.)

This delirium notwithstanding, it occurred to me on the day the rebbe died that, with the common manner of his passing and the prosaic substance of his will, he might have sent a message to his deluded flock: that he was esoterically denying he was the great King they had anointed him to be, and reminding them that he was only Menachem Mendel of Kings County. In the Jewish tradition, the wills of spiritual leaders have often been powerful texts, with great lessons; but this will, in which Schneerson requested a “suitable monument” over his grave and left his “books, manuscripts, objets d’art and all other property intended for personal or household use” to the Council of Lubavitcher Hasidim, could not have been more banal. (The total value of his estate, incidentally, was estimated at less than \$50,000.)

Still, many of his faithful refused to be deterred by so small a matter as Schneerson’s mortality. When I arrived in Crown Heights that Sunday morning to join some 30,000 Jews who had gathered for the rebbe’s funeral, I was amazed to see young Lubavitchers

singing, dancing and drinking vodka directly across the street from 770 Eastern Parkway, the Lubavitch World Headquarters, where the body of their beloved rebbe was lying, in proper Hasidic fashion, in shrouds on a wooden floor. Even more stunning was a small group of women encouraging the men with tambourines. I say stunning, because Jewish law not only forbids song at a funeral; it requires mourners, that is, the children of the deceased, not to listen to any music for a full year. And in Hasidic tradition, the rebbe, a father figure for all of his Hasidim, is mourned like a parent; which is to say, all his Hasidim have the virtual status of mourners, and must act in accordance with that grim role. Far more perplexing than the singing itself, however, was the chant to which the Hasidim were performing their dance: "Long *live* our master, teacher and rebbe, King Messiah, forever and ever."

I stood dumbfounded at the sight of Orthodox Jews dancing and toasting the life of a deceased rabbi at his own funeral, when I overheard a group of Lubavitcher women next to me debating the issue. "They are doing the right thing," beamed a girl in her early 20s to the older women who seemed disturbed by the spectacle. "This is the beginning of the *Geulah* [redemption], and any minute now the rebbe will rise up and take us all to Israel."

An Israeli Hasid nearby had a brand new VHS camcorder in his hand, which is also not exactly standard fare at Orthodox funerals. When I politely suggested to him that a prayer book might have been a more appropriate thing to be clutching at such a moment, he seemed genuinely surprised. "Sad? About what? The rebbe will soon get up and walk out the front door of '770,' and I want to record this historic, happy occasion." Then he challenged me: "What do you expect will happen this afternoon?" "Absolutely nothing," I replied. I won the little disputation in the street. What did happen later that Sunday afternoon was that the rebbe's body was removed from Lubavitch World Headquarters in a plain pine box, carried over the heads of the throngs of mourners into a waiting limo and buried in a cemetery in Queens. As the limo slowly made its way through the throng, some Hasidim wept, while others cried out: "Rebbe, wake up! Rebbe, come back!" He didn't.

It was evident at the funeral, barely twelve hours after Schneerson's death, that the Lubavitch community was already deeply divided about how to interpret

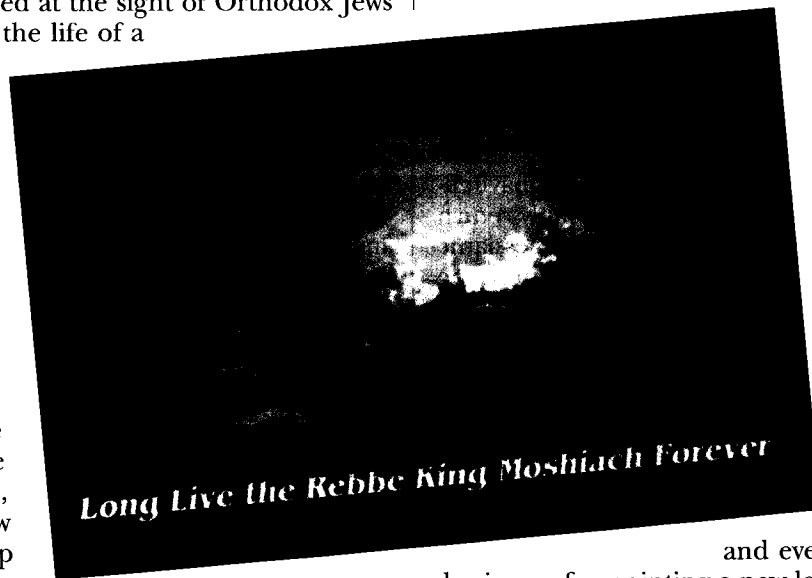
its loss. The symbol of that division was to be found in the lapels of the long black coats worn by Lubavitcher men. Jewish tradition requires that mourners rend their garments as a sign of their grief; and among Hasidic Jews all the men rip the lapels off their coats when their rebbe dies. But on this day in Crown Heights not all of the Hasidim were ready to partake in a ritual that would mark their acceptance of the end that was upon them. A significant number of the dignified older Hasidim had indeed torn their lapels, but most of the younger ones—and certainly those lost in the *hora* in the street—had not. Two days after the funeral Schneerson's will was read aloud before several thousand Hasidim in Crown Heights. The will's primary significance was that it named Rabbi Yehudah Krinsky—the most pragmatic and conservative of the rebbe's senior secretaries, and a man who

has long opposed the rising tide of messianism in Lubavitch—as the rebbe's sole executor. Now that Krinsky's hunch about the ontological status of the rebbe seems to have been confirmed and his power established by the will, a majority of Lubavitchers will, after a long and deep period of mourning, probably come to terms with their apocalyptic discouragement

and eventually get on with the

business of appointing a new leader.

But there is every indication that a significant number of Lubavitchers are not ready to make such a theological and emotional adjustment and accept the rebbe's death. They will certainly reject a successor. Two days after the funeral, in a radio call-in program on New York's WNYC in which I participated, Rabbi Shmuel Butman, the leader of the Lubavitch Youth Organization and chairman of the International Campaign to Bring Moshiach, continued to insist that "nothing has changed," and that his death notwithstanding, "the rebbe is definitely *Moshiach*, because he has told us so, clearly and unequivocally as a prophecy, many, many times." The Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot* quoted the leader of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in the southern Israeli town of Beit Dagan as saying: "Today the redemption begins. Our rebbe is now suffering, and through his suffering he is atoning for the sins of the entire people. This is how he is preparing us for redemption. He will be resurrected. You will see that he will stand again on his feet. The messianic era is approaching. The miracle will materialize. We must open a bottle of vodka and celebrate." (Absolut *Moshiach*.) And the Sunday after the rebbe's funeral, which



marked the end of the traditional week-long *shiva*, or seven-day period of intense mourning, was celebrated as “*Moshiach Day*” in Crown Heights. At an afternoon teach-in attended by hundreds of Hasidim, a panel of Lubavitch rabbis reassured the audience that the rebbe would be revived from the dead and realize his role as the world’s savior.

Such an interpretation of the ongoing role of the dead rebbe must be described as what it is, which is Christological. Again, the dilemma now facing the true believers in Schneerson’s messianic stature is not unprecedented in Jewish history. This is not the first time a Messiah has died; for Jews, in fact, there has never been a Messiah who has *not* died. The spectacular rise of Christianity long after the crucifixion testifies to the ability of messianic religions to be animated by the death, and the reports of the resurrection, of their savior. The youthful faction in Lubavitch that continues to proclaim him as the Messiah who will be resurrected (an idea with absolutely no basis in Jewish texts) will likely be ostracized by the movement’s traditional mainstream, and, like the early Christians, develop into a cult of its own. A majority of Lubavitchers, led for the moment by Krinsky, will probably return to the traditional Hasidic path, in which the messianic idea was deliberately maintained as a distant hope rather than an urgent priority. (See “Last Exit to Brooklyn” by Allan Nadler, *TNR*, May 4, 1992.)

There is another option, also with a usable past in Jewish history, for those poor souls who remain convinced that Schneerson was the Messiah but are unwilling to be estranged from the Jewish community. At the end of the seventeenth century and into the centuries that followed, thousands of pious Jews, many distinguished rabbis among them, continued to believe in Shabbetai Zevi, the false messiah from Izmir, long after his conversion to Islam in 1666 and his subsequent death. Hundreds of years later believers in Shabbetai Zevi throughout the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe continued to redefine the nature of their messianic faith. While many disappointed Sabbatians rejected traditional Jewish practice and broke with the Jewish world, some of them went underground, developing an esoteric apocalyptic liturgy in which they secretly continued to pray to their Messiah, while maintaining the outward appearance of fully observant Jews. Some of these crypto-Sabbatians even held prominent rabbinical posts, notably the chief rabbi of Hamburg in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Eybeschütz, who is revered to this day by Orthodox Jews as a legal authority. It is entirely possible that a significant number of Lubavitchers will now follow a similar path; and a secretive messianism will have the additional advantage of not alienating the financial support from the rest of world Jewry, upon which Lubavitch has always depended.

The fantastic adoration of the rebbe that was so evident at his funeral explains not only the crowds who were present, but also the many Jewish and rab-

binic leaders who were absent. A handful of other Hasidic rabbis attended, but not a single head of this country’s many yeshivas or rabbinical schools, who normally make a point to attend such events, came to pay his last respects to the rebbe. The Lubavitch-controlled Yiddish weekly, *Der Algemeiner Journal*, reported that the absence of these distinguished rabbinical scholars was deliberate and malicious, as they did not want to have any part in what they feared would be “a manifestation of the true influence and power of Lubavitch.”

The presence at the funeral of Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Israel’s Likud party, and Rudolph Giuliani and Alphonse D’Amato indicated that the distinguished rabbis who stayed away were not entirely paranoid. The Lubavitcher rebbe was not merely an impressive religious leader who managed to spread the Lubavitch doctrine to hundreds of Jewish communities throughout the world; he also displayed incredible talent in advancing a deeply conservative political agenda, which included fierce opposition to the Middle East peace process, beginning with the Camp David Accords. In 1990 Schneerson single-handedly undermined the formation of a Labor coalition government led by Shimon Peres by prohibiting two Orthodox members of the Knesset from joining. The final payback came Monday morning, when Netanyahu—not exactly a pious Jew—appeared on the Fox channel in New York to praise Schneerson’s “moral leadership” and “religious example.”

Then again, the attendance of a few conservative politicians from America and Israel was not quite the manifestation of political power and religious influence that the Lubavitchers desired. In their ingenious and aggressive use of the mass media, they had succeeded in creating the widespread impression that Lubavitch was the largest movement of contemporary Orthodox Judaism, but that impression was always a mistaken one. They constantly boasted that Schneerson was the “leader of world Jewry” and the “Moses of our generation.” So it was significant, and a little uncanny, that just five days before he died, Schneerson’s most bitter Hasidic rival, Moshe Teitelbaum, the Brooklyn-based, anti-Zionist Satmar rebbe, was greeted upon his arrival in Jerusalem by more than 100,000 admirers, over three times the number that attended Schneerson’s funeral. *Der Yid*, the Satmars’ weekly Yiddish newspaper, published an unsurprisingly chilly obituary of Schneerson that included an elaborate and sophisticated critique of Lubavitch messianism. The obituary concluded with a withering pun on the customary Jewish benediction for mourners. Instead of offering the prayer, “May the Divine Presence comfort you,” *Der Yid*’s last words to Schneerson’s followers were, “May the Divine Presence pity you.” May the Divine Presence pity them all.

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