

Moshiach

- Basil Herring.

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The Jewish Week, Nov. 26th, 1993, carried the following full page advertisement, which read in part: “We eagerly await the fulfillment of the Rebbe’s clear statements, made with the clarity of prophetic vision, that Moshiach is coming immediately. It is apparent that, in our times, there is no one more fitting to assume the role of leading us to the redemption as Moshiach, than the Rebbe. We therefore join in an expression of commitment and faith in the coming redemption. Yehi adoneinu moreinu ve’rabeinu melek ha-Moshiach, le’olam va’ed. Long Live the Rebbe King Moshiach forever.”

The New York Times, Wednesday March 23rd, 1994, carried another full page ad, this time with the banner headline “The Time of your redemption has arrived: Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Lubavitcher Rebbe, King Moshiach.” The ad went on to explain why the Rebbe, even as he lay comatose, on a respirator, was without any doubt the Moshiach. Thus it said “in these times our increased commitment and attention to the Rebbe’s teachings and leadership will undoubtedly speed the process of his complete recovery and revelation.”

Yesterday, July 8th, on the occasion of the forthcoming sheloshim that marks the 30th day after the death of the Rebbe, another full page ad appeared in the New York Times. This time, the headline consisted of a quote from the Gemara Taanit, originally describing Jacob our patriarch. It said “Mah zar’o be’hֹayyim, af hu be’hֹayyim. As his children are alive, he is alive.” The ad then continued: “The Rebbe’s leadership is tangible. It is manifest (in many ways, including) the call for us all to intensify our positive actions in preparation for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent redemption of all mankind.”

These three statements, a few among many that could be quoted, require a rabbinic response. I do not say this lightly—to the contrary, I say it with great care, and trepidation. Some might say that this is a subject that is best left alone. But I believe that it is the responsibility of a rabbi to provide guidance from the pulpit on the great issues of the day, as they affect Jews and the Jewish people and faith. Especially when a rabbi perceives danger and peril. Thus today, I will speak my mind, choosing my words carefully, in spite of my fear that I will be misunderstood by some. For my fear of another clear and present danger, as attested by these ads, is greater yet. So please listen to me carefully. For I speak to you not out of a desire to foment criticism or dispute, but rather to protect and advance what I humbly consider to be the truth that best serves our people and our faith, on this Rosh Chodesh Menachem Av, that ushers in the days when we are so mindful of the destruction of our Temple, the dispersion of our people, and the ongoing travails of galut.

I will begin by saying that the Lubavitcher Rebbe was a great man, a tzaddik and spiritual giant who during his lifetime advanced the cause of Torah and Yiddishkeit in remarkable, and to my mind, undeniable, ways. He was not the greatest lamdan, or scholar, of our time; but he was a charismatic and visionary leader, blessed with enormous organizational talents. It is also true that he possessed a remarkable supernatural sense that enabled him on many occasions to offer prescient guidance and counsel to the thousands who came to seek him out, some of them, doubtless, here today. And what he built around the world out of the ruins of the Holocaust was a phenomenal achievement, as any of us who travels the Jewish world will attest.

But these achievements, apparently, were not enough for his followers. For whatever reason, and those reasons are really not important at this point, someone decided that the Rebbe was no less than the fulfillment for all time of the Messiah. That of all the generations since Moses, our generation alone, deserved, and was destined, to see the arrival of the one and only true Messiah. And so they labored mightily in the Rebbe's lifetime to substantiate and promote the claim to his messiahship, sometimes subtly, but as time went by with more and more certitude and conviction. Truth to tell, as long as the Rebbe was alive, no one had any right to say with certainty that they were wrong, or that the claims were mistaken. I for one, not being a Lubavitcher ḥasid, viewed the campaign to coronate the Rebbe with skepticism, but not outright rejection. After all a Jew is required to believe that the Mashiahֹ might indeed appear at any moment, out of the blue, in the most unanticipated manner imaginable. It is one of the thirteen, inviolable, principles of Jewish faith that the Mashiahֹ will certainly come, and might even come today. Thus who could say that those who manned the mitzvah tanks and established the Chabad Houses were wrong in their messianic zeal? And much as many of us were perplexed by their decision to spread the word to the Gentile world, believing as we did that it would bring more scorn than respect, not only on the Lubavitchers but upon orthodoxy and Jews in general, still we could not deny them the right to spend their money and share their faith in his recovery and revelation, even as he lay on his death bed.

And then, 4 weeks ago, the Rebbe died. And what we feared, came to pass. On the very day of his funeral some of his followers stood across the street from the body singing, dancing, and drinking vodka, with a number of women providing musical accompaniment with tambourines, repeatedly singing the words of the headline "long live our master, teacher, and rebbe, King Moshiach, forever and forever." When asked why they were so happy, one answered "this is the beginning of the redemption, and any minute now the rebbe will rise up and take us all to Israel." At the funeral, many refused to tear kriyah, because they were certain he would arise from the grave. And a few days later, a spokesman for the movement said on a radio program that "the rebbe is definitely Moshiach, because he has told us so, clearly and unequivocally as a prophecy, many, many times." And in Israel a Lubavitch leader was quoted in Yediot Achronot, a national newspaper, 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... we must open a bottle of vodka and celebrate." And of course, there is the newest ad in the New York Times, as we have quoted it, that claims that the Rebbe indeed is still alive, confirming that the campaign to crown the rebbe as the Moshiach, far from being buried with him, has taken a whole new turn, one which now exhorts the Jews, and the world, to believe in the imminent resurrection of the Rebbe, to be revealed as Mashiahֹ in, what can only be called, a second coming.

There were two other periods in Jewish history when such a sequence of events occurred. The first gave birth to Christianity, when a dozen apostles refused to accept the finality of the death of a man they thought was the messiah. From them, and their miracle stories that grew in time, the Jewish people was irrevocably splintered, and decimated. And they did not have the sophisticated tools of modern mass communication and persuasion that Chabad activists know to use so well. The second time it happened was in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the entire Jewish world again was tragically split over the messianic credentials of the Turkish Jew Shabbetai Zvi, as a result of which millions of Jews either lost their faith or redefined their relationship to tradition and community, giving rise, according to the scholar Gershom Scholem, to Reform Judaism, and other trends and movements in modernity, from which we have yet to recover, more than 300 years later.

In the light of those precedents, I would like to examine the question as to whether there is some source for the noption that the Mashiahֹ, whoever he be, is resurrected to reveal his true identity, and save the world. A good beginning point is right here in our parshah, which (Nu. 33:38) tells us that Aaron died al pi Hashem, “by the mouth of God.” Rashi quotes the midrash that understands this to be, literally, death by neshikah, the kiss of God, as were the deaths of Moses and Miriam. Now generally this phrase is understood to say that the angel of death did not have power over them. But that is not to say that they did not die. As Maimonides puts it in the Guide 3:51, the phrase teaches that God Himself put them to death at the very moment of their highest spiritual achievement, when their souls left their bodies to enter into eternal spiritual immortality. And, as Maimonides there puts it, no one else, not even the patriarchs, achieved such a lofty status at the moment of death. Every one else was subject to the conventional workings of the angel of death.

But if this is the case, what of the gemara, quoted in the New York Times ad headline, that says that Jacob never died? Now the gemara itself raises the question, that if Jacob never died, how come the Torah says he was embalmed, eulogized and buried? It goes on to quote the verse in Jeremiah 30, that says that God indeed promised Jacob to redeem him when He would in the future redeem his descendents from exile. The Maharsha, commenting on this passage, after careful analysis, concludes that it is not referring to Jacob’s physical life, but his spiritual immortality alone. Why then refer to Jacob, and not the other patriarchs who surely also achieved spiritual immortality? He answers that Jacob alone is identified with the totality of the Jewish people, unlike Abraham and Isaac who fathered other religions via Ishmael and Esau. We may add: the verse identifies Jacob with redemption from exile, insofar as he alone died in exile, to be brought back for burial in the Holy Land; thus he becomes the symbol of ingathering from diaspora, and redemption from alienation in a foreign land. But it is not that he physically lives even now. All men, even Moses, must die, and remain dead, until the resurrection of all the righteous at the end of time. Indeed the whole notion that the Messiah dies and is resurrected, has no legitimate biblical or rabbinic source that has ever been accepted by the Jewish religion, in any form. All that there is, is the idea of Mashiahֹ ben Yosef, a precursor of the real Messiah, who is killed in battle. But resurrection? Never. Such a notion was treated with scorn and anathema, the product of wishful thinking, and spiritual delusion.

But such halakhic and philosophic considerations aside, it would not be an exaggeration to say

that with the latest developments since the death of the Rebbe, in Crown Heights and beyond, we face the real prospect that many of our fellow Jews will follow a path of sectarian messianic delusion. Until now our fears were confined to the rise of a catastrophic split on the left between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, by which the two groups would cease to recognize and deal with each other as Jews. Now, if history is any guide, we have to confront the agonizing possibility of a split on the right, along the lines, God forbid, of these other failed, and unyielding, messianic movements. That is the fear that we must now reckon with, minei u-bei, on either side, a “double-whammy” at a time when as a people confronting the twin 20th Century decimations of the Holocaust and massive assimilation, we are least able to confront the challenge out of strength and solidarity.

Yet we dare not lose faith. For such is the nature of Jewish history: dialectical, and filled with paradox; at the very moment when things seem so grim, hope springs forth anew, and out of death and destruction comes life and renewal. This is how the great Hasidic lover of the Jewish people, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in a remarkable comment on the meaning of the month of Av puts it: the month is spelled Aleph Bet, each corresponding one half of the month. Aleph, that stands for arur, “cursed,” includes the 9 days we start today leading up to the multiple destructions and dislocations of Tisha B’Av that resulted from Jews separated from Jews in anger and intolerance; Bet, standing for barukh, or blessed, starts the second half of the month with Tu-B’Av, the day of reconciliation, marriage, unification, and solidarity. Thus together they connote ultimate consolation, hence the name Menachem Av, the Av of comfort, of blessing, of renewal.

But it will not come by itself. We are not at liberty to await God’s miracles with passivity and blind faith. If the cause of truth is to triumph, if Torah is to flourish, if the Jewish people is to triumph over adversity, it will only be if we set our minds, our hearts, our souls, and our bodies to the task. Then, and only then, will God bless our efforts with success. Kein yehi Ratzon!