WHEN A MESSIAH DIES

To The Editor:

Yaakov Kermaier, in his sympathetic review of David Berger's *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Tradition 36:2, Summer 2002), cites Berger as writing, “Nowhere—nowhere—does Messiah son of David appear on the eschatological stage only to die and be buried before the end of the final act.” This leaves the reader with the misimpression that no sources indicate that the Messiah can come from the dead. Berger himself (grudgingly) acknowledges that sources do indeed exist for that belief. Berger (p. 15) writes that “even the tiny number of sources that may toy with the possibility that the Messiah could return from the dead do not suggest that he may be buried in the midst of the redemptive mission and then rise up to redeem the world.” Kermaier does not ask the obvious question of Berger: once it is granted that the Messiah can come from the dead, why does it make it worse if that person began the redemptive mission in his lifetime?

The fact that there are traditional sources that hold the Messiah can come from the dead was emphasized in a letter signed by Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, zt”l. Berger’s discussion of that letter, and of R. Soloveichik’s opinion in general, were not dealt with in Kermaier’s review. Given our community’s particular respect for R. Soloveichik, we cannot allow his view to be misrepresented.

As quoted by Berger (p. 70), R. Soloveichik’s letter (published in the *Algemeiner Journal* and the *Jewish Press* on June 28, 1996) refers to various sources supporting Lubavitch’s messianist belief, concluding that therefore “it cannot be dismissed as a belief that is outside the pale of Orthodoxy.” Dr. Berger asserts that R. Soloveichik did not write the letter himself, and further, that the letter contains “substantive assertions that the rabbi did not authorize at all”—namely that such a belief is legitimate. According to Rabbi Herschel Greenberg of Buffalo, who was...
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one of the three Chabad rabbis who went to see R. Soloveichik in Chicago, the former assertion is indeed true; the latter is not. Greenberg and others in Chabad had written the letter, including the sources, and handed it to R. Soloveichik for him to read and sign. According to Greenberg, he read it slowly and responded in Yiddish, “I will sign.”

In a footnote, Berger adds that “the rabbi’s infirmity no doubt played a significant role in preventing him from overseeing the process with the vigor and thoroughness that he would have evinced in earlier years.” He strongly suggests that the case of R. Ahron is identical to the case of Rabbi Hirshprung of Montreal, about whom “the unequivocal view” of those who knew him is that he was “at that point in his life in no condition to resist pressures and that his signature on [a similar document] is consequently bereft of meaning.”

The assertion that R. Ahron gave in to pressure cannot be true (even if we grant that Chabad put pressure on him, which R. Greenberg says is completely untrue). All who knew R. Ahron know that he was a man dedicated to emet above all else; he was a man who would not be swayed from his opinions. Furthermore, he maintained his regular schedule (of shiurim and other activities) until the end of his life—well past June of 1996; his signature at that time can in no way be “bereft of meaning.”

Berger then refers to a second letter (or statement) of R. Soloveichik’s, issued one week later, where he writes, “I regret that some may interpret my statement in a way that suggests that I was endorsing specific views or claims regarding Mashiach. . . .” Berger insists that since no one has suggested that R. Soloveichik believed the deceased Rebbe was the Messiah, he must have written this in order to indicate he does not regard the messianist belief as legitimate, despite the “unauthorized” indications to the contrary in the first letter. Berger buttresses this argument by reminding us of R. Soloveichik’s comments two years earlier that the messianist belief was “not [possible] in Judaism” and “repugnant to everything Judaism represents” (p. 72).

This scenario is only plausible if one accepts that R. Soloveichik did not fully authorize the first letter, which is unlikely. A far more probable scenario is as follows: Upon first hearing of the messianist belief two years earlier, R. Soloveichik responded in his (characteristically) strong fashion. Further iyun led him to see that such an approach does indeed exist, not only in the Gemara Sanhedrin but in some later sources as well, and therefore “cannot be dismissed as outside the pale of Orthodoxy,” as per the first letter. Did that mean that R. Ahron subscribed personally to that minority view, one that the Jewish world has not
regarded as mainstream? A second letter was necessary to clarify that he was not endorsing that view, but rather merely noting that holding such a view does not make one a heretic.

The scenario I suggest is supported by Dr. Berger’s concession that R. Soloveichik “had agreed to a statement opposing denunciation of Lubavitch” (p. 71), an agreement which would be hard to comprehend if Rav Ahron still insisted the messianist belief was not possible in Judaism. It is further supported by Chaim Rappaport, in his recently published *The Messiah Problem*, based on a conversation he had with R. Ahron a few years after these letters were written.

One further point: Kermaier quotes Berger that many messianists have adopted the position that the Rebbe is “the Essence and Being of God enclothed in a body,” which is “a far more serious allegation . . . raising the specter of idolatry.” Indeed, in Berger’s book (p. 145 ff.) he writes that he “studiously avoided” using the term “heresy” to describe the messianist belief, and that it is rather the above description of God which is definitely heresy, and it is thus that belief which bears halakhic ramifications for accepting Chabad shohetim and soferim. I cannot help but note that here Berger backtracks significantly from his earlier statement (p. 117) that the “primary objective of [his] book [is] to establish that anyone who proclaims the messiahship of the Rebbe stands outside the parameters of Orthodox Judaism.”

But more importantly, the description of a tsaddik as “atsmus in a guf” is a concept in Hassidut which, according to those who use it, means something very different than what the words connote to the rest of us, untrained in Hassidut. Indeed, Lubavitchers have criticized Berger for using such strong language in attacking concepts he has not studied in the primary sources, and indeed none of which are cited in his book. It seems they have a point. (I argued with Greenberg that Lubavitch publications that are written for the public should not be using such dangerously confusing terminology. He readily agreed.)

In conclusion: It is clear from speaking to Lubavitch Hassidim around the country that Berger is correct in his assertion that the messianist view is by far the majority view within Chabad. As one young Chabad shohet in Iowa told me a few years ago, “What can we do? We are anusim al pi ha-dibbur, compelled to believe as we do, by the ‘Divine command’ of the Rebbe’s statements he-Torat nevu’a [!] to that effect.” This view was never considered normative, even within Chabad. (They say it’s now clear they were mistaken, but why should they have thought the Rebbe—assumed to be Mashiah—would die?)
Most troubling is that a large and influential group like Chabad may have an extremely difficult time accepting the (real) Mashiah when he comes. But this does not make them heretics. The Rambam in four places writes that when it comes to matters of hashkafa, there is no binding pesak halacha as to how one must believe (Perush Mishnayot, Sanhedrin 10:3, Sota 3:4–5, and Shevu‘ot 1:4; Sefer ha-Mitsvot, lo ta‘aseh 133). R. Tsevi Hirsch Chajes writes the same (Tevamot 86b).

(Rabbi) Nahum Spirn
Long Branch, NJ

Yaakov Kermaier Responds:

David Berger’s declaration, “Nowhere—nowhere—does Messiah son of David appear on the eschatological stage only to die and be buried before the end of the final act” (emphasis mine), does not, as Nahum Spirn suggests, leave “the reader with the misimpression that no sources indicate that the Messiah can come from the dead.” Berger’s precise formulation clearly allows for a Redeemer who returns from the dead before commencing his messianic mission, a scenario supported by a few isolated sources.

I do not challenge Berger with Spirn’s “obvious question” (“Once it is granted that the Messiah can come from the dead, why does it make it worse if that person began the redemptive mission in his lifetime?”) because Berger himself cogently addresses this issue with the following argument: A resurrected man’s messiahship can be judged by the same halakhic criteria as can that of an individual walking the earth for the first time. If a messianic pretender’s accomplishments fall short of these standards (as outlined by Maimonides and others), his messianic claim will be rejected. If, however, a person with messianic pretensions can die in the middle of the redemptive process and wait for resurrection to finish the job, he is not subject to the same halakhic scrutiny and his claim can never be refuted. For this reason, a Redeemer cannot divide his mission between his first and second (and third . . .) comings. Indeed, Maimonides explicitly precludes this proposition when he writes (Kings 11:4): “But if [the Messiah] does not succeed to this extent, or is killed, it is evident that he is not the one whom the Torah promised.” In Berger’s own words (p. 61): “By confidently identifying a presumed descendant of David as the Messiah despite his death in an
unredeemed world, Lubavitch messianists invalidate Judaism’s bedrock requirements for making such an identification . . . Jewish tradition has unambiguous criteria for evaluating [a messianic] claim, criteria rooted in the biblical prophecies that define the messianic faith itself. To affirm the messiahship of the deceased Rebbe is to undermine a foundational belief of the Jewish religion.”

The Lubavitch messianist doctrine is, therefore, not simply a “matter of hashkafa” for which “there is no binding pesak halakha” (a broad issue which is anyway, I believe, far more complex than Spirn’s citations would imply), but a halakhic matter as well. Spirn’s intended application of his four Maimonides references would ironically (and, to my mind, erroneously) eviscerate Maimonides’ own halakhic rulings with regard to validating a messianic claim.

The allegation that certain influential Chabad personalities conceive of their rebbe as “the Essence and Being of God enclothed in a body” is quite serious, if not explosive. Berger’s charge to this effect does not rest, as Spirn implies, solely on the highly suggestive “atsmus in a guf” phrase applied to the Rebbe. Even if these words could be innocently construed, other passages in messianist publications leave no doubt that an ikar emuna is under attack. The following excerpt from the weekly journal Beis Moshiach is just one of the striking examples cited by Berger (p. 83):

These are radical statements that many would like to sweep under the rug of normative Judaism. However, they are neither wild exaggerations nor poetic parables. Rather these ideas are facts of life which help us understand how a ‘human being’ like the Rebbe can foresee and control and coordinate the finest details of someone’s personal life effecting his powerful blessings over many years and many miles removed. In other words, there is nothing shocking about the Rebbe’s powers given that his nature is above the limitations of nature. . . . The Rebbe is, in fact, the boss over nature . . . he delivers . . . a symphony of countless harmonized details of particular divine providence and . . . has, in effect, past present and future all in his pocket. . . .

So who [is] Elokeinu [our God]? Who Avinu [our Father]? Who Malkeinu [our King]? Who Moshianu [our Redeemer]? Who Yoshianu V’Tigaleinu Shaynis B’Karov [will save and redeem us once again shortly]? The Rebbe, Melech HaMoshiach. That’s who.

Moving away from the substance of my review, Spirn addresses another contentious issue, while taking me to task for not doing the same. Can our tradition, as understood by Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik,
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zt"l, accept in principle the Second Coming doctrine? In June 1996, R. Soloveichik affixed his signature to a declaration which seems to answer this question in the affirmative. This, despite the same Torah titan’s prior unequivocal statement that the notion of the Rebbe emerging from the dead as Messiah is “repugnant to everything Judaism represents.” Berger writes that R. Soloveichik’s signed statement of 1996 initially “struck him like a thunderbolt.” Yet, to his relief, he “subsequently learned from impeccable sources ... that the document contains substantive assertions that the rabbi did not authorize at all.” R. Soloveichik’s “trust was betrayed” and his “commitment to amity would not allow him to say so sharply and explicitly.” Moreover, contends Berger, R. Soloveichik’s “infirmity no doubt played a significant role in preventing him from overseeing the process with the vigor and thoroughness that he would have evinced in earlier years.” Spirn’s second-hand account that R. Soloveichik “read [the document] slowly” before agreeing to sign does not directly clash with this latter assertion of Berger’s. Nor does R. Soloveichik’s dedication “to emes above all else” and his “continued regular schedule of shiurim” prove that he had the clarity of mind and emotional fortitude to resist what may have been considerable pressure. As I did not have a personal relationship with this gadol, any attempt on my part to assess the rabbi’s condition during his final years would be entirely conjectural. Spirn is also perplexed by Berger’s assertion that R. Soloveichik repudiated the Second Coming doctrine, yet agreed “to a statement opposing denunciation of Lubavitch.” Given R. Soloveichik’s impression—in his own words: “that the overwhelming majority of Lubavitcher Chasidim do not subscribe to the notion that the Rebbe will be resurrected as the Messiah”—I see no inconsistency in this stance.

Spirn concludes his critique by conceding, “that Berger is correct in his assertion that the messianist view is by far the majority view within Chabad.” He also bolsters the argument that the Rebbe himself nurtured the movement that crowned him the long awaited Mashiach Ben David, and that Lubavitchers are therefore “anusim” in their allegiance to the Rebbe’s messiahship. In short, while Spirn agrees that Lubavitch Messianism is a large movement with promise for longevity, he does not feel that the religious community need be concerned. I disagree. A careful reading of The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference reveals why Spirn’s complacency is misplaced, and why world Jewry ignores Berger’s deeply disturbing polemic at its own peril.