The Splintering of Chabad
By Rabbi Zalman I. Posner

In the aftermath of the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s death in 1994, it seemed that there were many within the Lubavitcher movement who were moving in dangerous directions. Perhaps no one saw this clearer than Professor David Berger, in major articles (“Just Between Us: The New Messianism,” Jewish Action, fall 1995; winter 1995) he spelled out the perils of the course many had taken.

Professor Berger has continued to alert the Jewish world in different forums, culminating in his book, The Rebbe, The Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference, where he declares that those who proclaim the messiahship of the Rebbe “stand outside the parameters of Orthodox Judaism,” and must be treated accordingly. It is apparent that there still are reasonable, sober voices within the movement who may help turn the tide in acceptable directions. One such person is Rabbi Zalman Posner, a respected leader, writer and longtime follower of the last two rebbes. We thought it appropriate that a person of Rabbi Posner’s caliber be afforded the opportunity to respond.

A half century ago, the Lubavitch movement in America was limited to Jews familiar with Chassidic thought. I will provide background on the various factions’ misguided views, information not readily available to the lay reader. I was personally acquainted with both Rabbi Joseph Yitzchak Schneersohn (the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe) and his son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, from the day they arrived on these shores. I have written books, published at the latter’s insistence, and have translated parts of the Talmud. I alone am responsible for the contents of this essay.

While the concept of Mashiach has been an integral part of Judaism for thousands of years, in recent years people often used the term jokingly as in “When will you pay me the five bucks you owe me?” Answer: “When Mashiach comes.” In Torah circles, however, the concept of Mashiach was always regarded seriously—he could come at any time.

Rabbi Joseph Yitzchak Schneersohn viewed the Holocaust as the “birth pang of Mashiach,” and believed that his arrival was imminent. Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, who succeeded his father-in-law, continued to constantly stress Mashiach’s imminence with more intensity as time went on.

For the past half century, many Chabad Hasidim felt that were Mashiach to be a person familiar to us all, walking the streets today, the best candidate would be the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson. Then the Rebbe’s passing on gimmel Tammuz 1994. Several groups emerged: “normative” Chasidim, who, basing their ideas on what the Rebbe had said, do not identify Mashiach; Mashiadists, those who believe the Rebbe will return (as Mashiach) and lastly, the defiers, who confusing man with God, are beyond the pale.

Prior to the Rebbe’s passing, disputes in the Chabad community were decisively resolved by the Rebbe. With his passing, there was no longer a definitive authority. (“Why don’t you choose a new Rebbe?” we are constantly asked. “When we find someone like him, we’ll grab him.”) Any Mashiadist who has accepted the Rebbe’s passing, some of them insist, quite vocally, that the Rebbe never died and refuse to use terms such as “the Rebbe,” “the Rebbe’s passing on gimmel,” “I’m his merit protect us,” or “Alav hashalom.” “M’ay he be in peace.” To substantiate their claim, they cite the gemara that “Yakov [Avnu] our father never died….As his children live, he lives.” Of course, this gemara is speaking in symbolic rather than literal terms.

They chant: “Yachi adoneinu moreinu Yechi adoneinu verabbeinu” “May our master, our teacher, our rabbi live forever.” But if the Rebbe is immortal, as they claim, why sing, “M’ay he live forever?” They further maintain that belief in the Rebbe’s immortality is an expression of emunah. But we cannot invent principles of faith. Principles of faith must be grounded in Torah; if not, they are worthless. There is no basis in the Torah or Chabad teachings to justify the belief that the Rebbe did not pass away.

Furthermore, while we must believe in the concept of Mashiach, we need not believe that any one particular individual is Mashiach. Mashiach’s identity is not a subject of emunah, as the Rebbe made clear.

Reflections of his work, establishing schools, and movement had become a giant in out-

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man's awareness of self is a barrier between him and God. His acceptance of mitzvot—his self-discipline involved in that acceptance—is a measure of self-nullification before God, a step closer to Him. The greater the self-nullification, the closer he is to God, and the more aware of Him. Ultimately he can reach the state of merkavah, when he becomes a "vehicle" for God. When this state is attained, as it was by the Patriarchs, man has no personal will. Man's only will is God's.

When the Rebbe, referring to his father-in-law, stated "Atzmut was placed in his body," this I would suggest, is what he himself learned, there was no separation between him and Him, no barrier, not that Rabbi Joseph Yitzchak is God but that he is one with God. However, some tragically concluded that the Rebbe had implied a synonymy between his father-in-law and God. It didn't take too much for some to then characterize the Rebbe himself in that way.

Not surprisingly, no one is big enough to correct the defiers, to convince them that they err, even though their view is not part of Chabad teachings. Though they are vocal, the defiers are small in number. They enjoy little respect. They act without the support or approval of any individuals of stature within the Lubavitch community.

A little lesson in Chabad that might further illuminate the issue. The haftarah of the first day of Rosh Hashanah contains three words that demand explanation, "Kol dayut HaShamim" (I Shemuel 2:3) roughly translated as, "For God is the God of dayot HaShamim." Why the plural, dayot? Rabbi Kabbalah refers to dayot eloyn and daat tzedek, suprahuman intelligence and "lower" intelligence. Two perspectives exist; either God's view, which is spiritual, or man's view, which is material. Thus, depending on the perspective, a question may have two responses. For example, if...