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THE GATHERING OF THE EMISSARIES



They came as always in November from all the outposts of Lubavitcher Hasidic outreach throughout the globe for this annual reunion of the Rebbe's emissaries, or *shluchim*, as they had come to be called.¹ The *kinus shluchim* was the gathering that brought them "home" to Crown Heights in Brooklyn. Signs in the neighborhood, and even on some of the municipal bus shelters that normally carry commercial advertising, welcomed them in Hebrew and English. More than usual, the streets were filled with men in black snap brim fedoras and untamed beards, the trademark look of the group. Local residents, many of them relatives, were hosting them, and for those who had no other place, the lobbies and corridors of 770 Eastern Parkway, the "world headquarters" of the movement, were filled with luggage. In the parlance of Lubavitch, using the Yiddish that was once (but, as they have become part of the modern world, is no longer always) their lingua franca and the "holy" language of choice for their rabbinic leaders, this was a *farbrengen*, a gathering of Hasidim with their rebbe.* This *farbrengen* was expressly for *shluchim*. Originally, the formal occasion of the *kinus* (convention) had been an opportunity for those out in the world to return and be strengthened in their sense of mission by their proximity to the man

* The literal meaning of *farbrengen* is to entertain. Often it is used the way the phrase "hang out together" is used in casual American speech. Lubavitchers commonly use the word for a gathering of Hasidim at which they sing, have a drink, and recite the Torah and Hasidic wisdom of their rebbes.

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who had dispatched them to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah—*Moshiach* (as the Lubavitchers spelled it). They often arrived first at “770,” as they called the gothic-style brick building that was once the residence of a well-to-do physician, who had also used it as a clinic where he performed illegal abortions.² The house, in which the Previous Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak, and his oldest daughter, Chana, and her husband, Shmaryahu, and son, DovBer (Barry), as well as Yosef Yitzchak’s trusted librarian and secretary, Chaim Lieberman, had lived since September 1940, had long since been added to and converted into a synagogue and study hall. It was here where Yosef Yitzchak’s successor, the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, held forth while they crowded around to hear and hang on his every word and be close to him. It was here they came to once again ground themselves spiritually after their time away on their mission of Jewish revitalization.³

These *farbrengens* had increasingly become an opportunity for the *shluchim* to share one another’s company, compare notes, impart the wisdom of their experiences and strategy, and bond with a movement that extended in time and space. The task of being a *shaliach* was not an easy one. It meant leaving the Hasidic heartland in the Rebbe’s court, where when the Rebbe was there every disciple longed to remain, as well as one’s family and the comfort of a Lubavitcher enclave, and going to places where often there were few or no other observant Jews and trying to convince the uninitiated to embrace Jewish observances and traditions. This attempt to awaken religious awareness and establish Jewish commitments among largely secular Jews is aimed at purifying the world and in Lubavitcher thinking thereby hastening the coming of the day of redemption.

The goal of such proselytizing is not just to make believers or bring back prodigal children, or even to make Jewish observance possible for those who have gone far from their Jewish home. At its core, Lubavitchers believe, it is an essential means to fulfill a messianic vision that began with the Ba’al Shem Tov, the legendary eighteenth-century East European founder of Hasidism, who sought to spiritually unify himself and commune with the Kingdom of Divinity. In one such mystical encounter, he reported meeting with the Redeemer himself: “I asked the Messiah: ‘When will you come?’ He answered me: ‘Through this you will know—when your teachings are publicized and revealed in the

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world and your wellsprings will be spread to the outside—that which I have taught you, and which you have grasped [will be understood by those you have taught] and they too will be able to make “unifications” and ascents like you.”⁴ While perhaps the Ba’al Shem Tov understood in the Messiah’s reply “a striking demand for the communication of esoteric power to the people” and a need to delineate the mysteries of kabbalah so that “every man should be able to make spiritual ascents just like his,” *shluchim* have taken this as a mandate to pass their rebbe’s message to the Jewish people and carry out his mission to prepare the ground for the imminent arrival of the Messiah and Jewish redemption.⁵

Articulating his fellow emissaries’ intentions, a *shaliach* from Massachusetts, Rabbi Shaltiel Lebovic, declared that “our job is to make a dwelling place for God in the lower world. . . . We try to make the world a more and more godly place, until the coming of the Moshiach.”⁶ Ultimately, this aim goes beyond strictly Jewish limits for it seeks to repair the world so that the messianic redemption will come more swiftly than it otherwise might.



At its beginnings in the eighteenth century, Hasidism was engaged in missionary activity, trying to persuade all Jewry that the true expression of their religion is possible only through the ideas and practices of the Hasidic masters. But by the end of the nineteenth century, that mission was largely over. By and large, whoever was going to become Hasidic had already done so. ChaBaD Hasidism, however, a special strand of Hasidism established by Schneur Zalman (1745–1812) of Lyady that became the progenitor of present-day Lubavitchers, has never given up missionizing.* At the turn of the nineteenth century, ChaBaD remained in ongoing competition with the other movements, particularly Hasidism’s opponents, the Lithuanian *mitnaggedim*, who were

*The acronym ChaBaD, denoting the dominant Hasidic philosophy of Lubavitchers, is formed from the words *Chochma* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Understanding), and *Da’as* (Knowledge)—properly *Khokhme*, *Bine*, *Daas*—and refers to kabbalistic elements of the divine that play a part in defining the special nature of the Jewish soul. That soul, they believe, is protected by the Torah and its commandments and endangered by knowledge and practices that come from elsewhere.

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their neighbors and increasingly attracting the brightest stars of Jewish youth. Even as late as the postwar, post-Holocaust period, ChaBaD Hasidism had not even succeeded in drawing many other Hasidim to its way of life. Indeed, while all Hasidic groups had found themselves decimated after the Holocaust, the situation of ChaBaD Hasidim was particularly bleak. Most of their members had found themselves in the Soviet Union even before the war, persecuted and hounded by the Stalinist regime. The twin assaults of the Nazis and the Soviets took their toll. Moreover, the antipathy of Lubavitcher leaders to Zionism discouraged many who might have from immigrating early on to Palestine, where they would have survived in greater numbers, as did, for example, the Gerer Hasidim, who, having come in the 1930s, were now a very large community. This was the reality faced by the Lubavitcher sect's leaders by the mid-twentieth century. They clearly needed a new strategy.

Although Lubavitcher rebbes had made use of *shluchim* for various sorts of outreach since the time of their fifth leader, Shalom DovBer (1860–1920), the missionary imperative became the special concern of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh of their leaders. He identified his primary targets as nonreligious Jews with minimal Jewish education, and by the late twentieth century his sights were set on nothing less than the “the very existence of Jewry,” the capturing of the hearts and minds of the entire Jewish people (including those secular Jews living in the modern state of Israel) and of those non-Jews willing to abide by the Seven Noahide Commandments.⁷

This ambitious plan required an ever-increasing supply of *shluchim*, and indeed the number of them spreading the wellsprings or lighting the lamps in the darkness of exile had grown exponentially since Rabbi Menachem Mendel began dispatching them. Under his guidance, a new generation of Lubavitchers—couples were preferred because they fortified each other, could work with both genders, and, as their families grew, served as a model family—became *shluchim* and traveled to the furthest reaches of the planet, encountering every manner of Jew and style of life. Because they know they are on a mission from their rebbe, who they are convinced would never send them into danger unprotected, the *shluchim* go forth into the world unafraid of spiritual contamination from their “forsaken” outposts. Nor are they worried

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about physical dangers in their often far-flung postings, or the challenge of supporting themselves economically.

Lubavitchers are unlike other Hasidim, who remain far more anchored to the geographic and cultural boundaries of their community, fated to be born, live, and die within its “four cubits” and insulated by its customs and restrictions. While other Hasidim have tried to preserve themselves and their own version of Judaism by ghettoizing themselves, choosing Yiddish as their primary language, dressing in ways that make them seem attached to another time and place, and sheltering their young deep within their community boundaries, Lubavitchers have eschewed these limitations. Although bearded, Lubavitcher men do not wear the fur hat or *shtrayml* common among other Hasidim, preferring fedoras instead. Their married women shun the kerchief that so many of the Orthodox don to cover their hair and wear instead attractive wigs that could pass for their own hair. Thus attired—not quite looking like those around them, but also not wholly other—these couples go way beyond the boundaries of their insular communities, hoping, perhaps even expecting, to change the world.*

These emissaries feel that their power comes not from themselves alone but from the one whom they represent. Their boundless confidence has been characteristic of the movement since its early days. Consider, for example, the case of Abraham Hecht, one of the first ten students in the Lubavitcher yeshiva Tomekhei Temimim in America, who in 1939, on the eve of the Nazi conquest of much of Europe, was sent on a mission by Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, the sixth rebbe, to

* As for the *shtrayml*, which the Previous Rebbe still wore, see chapter two. While many married Hasidic women choose to cover their heads with kerchiefs, hats, or patently obvious wigs, the Lubavitchers were told by the Rebbe Menachem Mendel that they should in fact wear wigs: “I have given my opinion numerous times that covering [a woman’s hair] with a kerchief [*tikhil*], does not in this generation, because of our many sins, work, since the woman *all the time* must stand the test of whether to cover all her hair or just a portion of it, and so on, so that she not be embarrassed by those who make fun of her (even though she sometimes only imagines them but at other times encounters them in reality). But this is not the case when she wears a wig [*sheytil*], for she cannot take off the wig [as she might feel pressured to do with a kerchief] when she’s at a party and such” (Menachem Mendel Schneerson, letter of 10 Adar, 5718 [March 2, 1958], in *Igros Kodesh* [Brooklyn: Otzar Hasidim 5718 (1958)], 16:330–31, emphasis in original). We thank Maya Katz and Leizer Shemtov for help with references here.

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the Lubavitcher yeshiva in Poland.⁸ When the mother of one of those who joined him said she was frightened to send her son on a mission to a place where the Nazis were attacking Jews and Jewry, she was told by the Rebbe, “He has nothing to fear. He’s going to go and he’s going to come back and everything will be all right.” That, Hecht concluded, “wiped out any doubts that we had. . . . If he said nothing to worry about, then OK.”⁹ The assurances of a rebbe were sufficient to allay all concerns.

In the postwar period, parents of *shluchim* were at the outset somewhat anxious about sending their children away as emissaries, especially to the open societies of the West. But the assurances of Rabbi Menachem Mendel, like those of his predecessor, proved sufficient in the end. Moreover, as the movement’s missionary vocation became more pronounced toward the end of the twentieth century, young Lubavitcher couples were further encouraged to choose a joint life as emissaries by strong communal pressure no less than by the urging of their rebbe. As young Lubavitchers increasingly chose to “go on *shlichus*” and out into the world, remaining within the Lubavitcher enclave seemed increasingly like being left behind.

Lubavitcher women have not taken a back seat to men in the missionary vocation. While elsewhere in the Hasidic and traditional Jewish world women were encouraged to find a husband who ideally would be a Torah scholar studying in the yeshiva and whom they would support in that effort, contemporary Lubavitcher women are expected to go out into the world as emissaries with their husbands. In practice, much of the work falls on their shoulders, including coordinating Sabbath or holiday meals for all sorts of guests—often invited on short notice—and acting as a nurturing guide for the Jewishly uninformed. Some, such as Dina Greenberg of the ChaBaD Center in Shanghai, China, have started schools. Women in Lubavitch are not second class; they are full-fledged emissaries who have their own *kinus* and are encouraged no less than men in their mission.

One does not become a *shaliach* overnight. The training often starts in the early teens (and for children of *shluchim* it is part of their upbringing), when the would-be emissary serves as a counselor or assistant in a Lubavitcher summer camp or school in a place where ChaBaD already has an institutional presence. He or she might then

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graduate to the position of assistant to a *shaliach* elsewhere. Finally, after marriage, often in their early twenties, the young couple would find a posting where they were in charge. At first this might be in a territory in which they would be expected to report to a senior *shaliach*, and later they might at last find a place where they could be totally on their own.*

Typical of the *shaliach* career trajectory is the path followed by Hirschy Zarchi, a young Lubavitcher yeshiva student who had been dispatched to Boston in the 1990s to wander Harvard Square and connect with nonreligious Jewish students. He began by setting up a table and urging Jewish men to put on tefillin (phylacteries). He soon realized that he had to change tactics, as the Harvard students would not be swayed by simplistic slogans and easy rituals. So Zarchi began to engage them in deeper discussions. By 1997, after he had married Elkie, the new couple had opened a ChaBaD House at Harvard, and within six years, with the widespread support of faculty and students, they had succeeded in attaining officially recognized Jewish chaplain status on campus. Harvard's ChaBaD House defined itself as on a mission "inspired by the Lubavitcher Rebbe" and "a place where Jews of all backgrounds and degrees of observance can enjoy exploring their Jewish heritage in a warm, welcoming and non-judgmental environment." By 2003, Zarchi, a Hasid who had never gotten a college education, was marching in cap and gown at the university's graduation ceremonies. By 2008 he and his wife had added a "wisdom center" that offered everything from basic answers to questions about Jewish practice to "comprehensive, in-depth treatments of an array of subjects and issues by Chassidic scholars and professionals," as well as advice on "love, friendship, sexuality, intimacy, marriage and more."¹⁰

In 1999, Shalom Greenberg, Israeli-born son of and brother to Lubavitcher *shluchim*, had moved with his wife, Dina, to Shanghai, a burgeoning financial center in the new China and a magnet for Jewish entrepreneurs and business people.¹¹ Setting up shop in a small

* By the third generation of this sort of *shluchim*, the process in places almost became like a family operation, and children who could not find a posting of their own or some other mission often had to be habilitated in their parents' territory. Those who had no family connections might find entry into the mission difficult.

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apartment, he began calling whatever Jews in town he could locate (there were at the time about one hundred fifty families) to invite them to a Sabbath meal, sometimes getting about twenty-five to come. By Passover eight years later they were hosting four hundred people for a seder in a new ChaBaD House in the Shang Mira Garden Villas on Hong Qiao Road. By 2008 on Sabbaths they were getting on average one hundred fifty congregants in two services and feeding hundreds. They had built a *mikveh* or ritual bath and were catering kosher food throughout China. Their school and infants' center rivaled many found in larger Jewish communities. They had expanded their operations across the Huangpu River to residential Pudong, where Shalom's brother was the *shaliach*, and they had a thriving mother-and-child center offering a variety of activities, from lunch-and-learn to a women's circle and Talmud classes.

In 2003, the newly married *shluchim* couple Asher and Henya Federman were making plans to strike out on their own. At the time Federman was teaching at a yeshiva near the Rebbe's grave in Queens and his wife was commuting to a Lubavitcher preschool program in Greenwich, Connecticut. As Asher explained, they "Googled all the remaining countries in the world without a Lubavitch presence and researched the Jewish population." Before pursuing a particular assignment they spoke to Rabbis Yehuda Krinsky, the head of Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, the central organization of Lubavitch, and Moshe Kotlarsky, vice-chair of the *shluchim*, and on Kotlarsky's advice they settled on the Virgin Islands, where at the Elysian Resort Beach Building they set up their outreach efforts. Here they built what they called "your soul resort in America's paradise," offering many of the same services the Greenbergs provide in Shanghai.¹²

The Zarchis, Greenbergs, Federmans, and *shluchim* like them could go to such geographically and culturally distant places and build new lives and institutions without feeling they had defiled themselves religiously, betrayed their way of life, or abandoned their own community because they were still inspired by and linked to the Rebbe, whose mission provided them with moral protection. As Shalom Lipskar, a *shaliach* in Bar Harbor, Florida, explained, "only because of a sense of self-security, pride in my Jewishness, knowing I was part of a mission, was I able to keep walking down the street without feeling totally inept

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and offensive.”¹³ By the time of Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s death in 1994, there were thousands of *shluchim* scattered across the globe, in places as exotic as Katmandu, Nepal—where on Passover they organized one of the largest seders in the world for the many Jewish trekkers passing through—and as mundane as Long Island, New York, where religiously wayward Jews are aplenty. Indeed, it is increasingly difficult to find any place in the world where there are many Jews and no *shaliach*. Throughout the United States and Canada, especially on all major university campuses where Jews in any number are found—in short, wherever Jews are located—sooner or later a ChaBaD Lubavitcher emissary is at work. Indeed, at their 2009 gathering, Lubavitchers claimed that the number of *shluchim* had doubled since 1994.¹⁴

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern bloc satellite states in 1989 had made these formerly communist countries virgin territory for *shluchim*. The fall of communism allowed a return to the Lubavitchers’ place of origin, where they had first begun their work until being forced to go underground during the early days of communism.¹⁵ After 1989, in what many Lubavitchers saw as a sign of the coming redemption and a consequence of their rebbe’s power to bring it about, they began spreading all over the former Eastern bloc in search of Jews to redeem and remake. One *shaliach*—Berel Lazar, son of *shluchim* in Italy and a former clandestine Lubavitcher activist in the Soviet Union—found his way into the good graces of then Russian president Vladimir Putin, becoming his “favorite rabbi” and eventually chief rabbi of Russia. Others were establishing themselves elsewhere throughout the old Soviet empire. In what many Lubavitchers saw as the hand of God in history, *shluchim* descended on Dnepropetrovsk (formerly Yekaterinoslav), Russia, where their revered rebbe had moved as a seven-year-old when his father, Levi Yitzchak, was appointed the Hasidic community rabbi of the city.

In Israel, where Zionism, nationalism, socialism, and secularism have competed to redefine the modern Jew, *shluchim* offer yet another model of what a Jew should be. They have entered into the competition over Jewish identity. Historically, ChaBaD had been the purveyor of a powerful anti-Zionist ideology, which (as we show) played a part in its initial relationship with the new Jewish state. But that would change. At Kfar Chabad, a village between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem founded

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in 1949, Lubavitchers established a stronghold and from there sent *shluchim* to establish ChaBaD schools throughout Israel.¹⁶ They proved to be especially successful at attracting immigrant Sephardic Jews from North Africa and the Middle East, who felt left out and belittled by the Israeli establishment and were often ignored by other Jewish Orthodox groups. The Hasidim began to have increasing influence in a variety of ways. ChaBaD opened a trade school in Kfar Chabad offering instruction in mechanics and metalwork. In 1970 the village was designated an “absorption center” for Israeli immigrants, providing more opportunity for Lubavitchers to influence newcomers to Israel, and during the decade, ChaBaD *shluchim* began visiting Israeli army camps to provide support for the troops during the Jewish holidays.¹⁷ As we show in this book, Lubavitcher involvement in Israel intensified after the 1967 war and came to influence Israeli politics and society in unforeseen ways.

It took more than messianic belief or confidence in the Rebbe to make all this possible. It required fundamental changes in the world that modern Jewry inhabited and the development of a cadre of young people powerfully committed to the ChaBaD tradition but willing to go out to transform Jews and the world. The first such change was the remarkable resurgence of religion in the modern world. Religion at the start of the twentieth century was considered an inevitable victim of modernity—“the old gods are growing old or already dead,” Émile Durkheim opined, while Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed that without doubt, “God was dead.”¹⁸ But by the end of the twentieth century, a new religious reawakening was afoot in precisely those precincts of Western civilization where modernity had been forged.¹⁹ The second change was ChaBaD’s offering young people who were Lubavitcher Hasidim a way to enter into the new world of contemporary culture—a world that most of their Hasidic counterparts tried to keep at a distance—without feeling they had to abandon all their Hasidic and Jewish attachments. Rabbi Menachem Mendel and his mission held out to ChaBaD young people the promise of, as he once put it, “a sense of respect, particularly towards those who remain steadfast in their convictions, and are not embarrassed by those who make fun of them or their worldview,” but who nevertheless were ready to go out as his emissaries.²⁰ He assured them they could stand with their feet in both the world of their Jewish commitments and the world where those commitments were being

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tested all the time, where the tomorrow of change was often of greater interest than the yesterday of tradition. This mandate spoke to many of the young Hasidim, who, like all adolescents, seek, as Erik Erikson has shown us, “to experience wholeness,” which they discover when they “feel a progressive continuity between that which [they have] come to be during the long years of childhood and that which [they promise] to become in the anticipated future.”²¹ The role of the emissary offered a way to be whole: steadfast in their Judaism but able to go anywhere in the world and define themselves anew. In the atmosphere of religious resurgence, young Lubavitcher *shluchim* and their mission have become more conceivable and acceptable, both in America and everywhere in the modern world Jews have flocked.

The third change that made all this possible stems from the multiple forces of robust economic growth, globalization, and technological advance that have led increasing numbers of prosperous Jews to travel and settle all over the world for business and pleasure. Among this group are observant Jews who need religious services wherever they find themselves, and other less observant or nonobservant Jews who Lubavitchers believe also need their religious services. Lubavitcher emissaries now in place across the globe are prepared to provide these services for Jews on the go. They do so not only for those who want these services but also for those whose desire for these services must be aroused and vitalized.

Asked whom he was there to serve more, the observant Jews who might make their way to Shanghai and needed religious services or the marginally involved, Rabbi Greenberg replied he was there clearly for the latter: “I am happy to provide a synagogue and kosher meal for religious Jews visiting Shanghai. But if I were not here, the observant Jew would still pray on his own or eat the sardines he had brought along; the Jews who are not observant, however, are praying because I and Dina are here and they are eating kosher because we supply them with it. They are the reason ChaBaD has come here, and they are the ones I have been truly sent to serve.”²²

Finally, Lubavitcher *shluchim*, especially those on university campuses or in Jewishly sparse communities, have responded effectively to the growing anxiety among many Jews in this globalized and fast-changing, seductive world that a distinctive Jewish identity might

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disappear as Jews assimilate into open society and the global culture. The *shluchim* have become avatars of religion and outspoken protectors of some sort of obvious Jewish identity. Their efforts have attracted economic and moral support among Jews who, while perhaps not ready themselves to be Hasidim or even fully observant Jews, are prepared to help Lubavitchers do the job. This is what makes it possible for Jewish trekkers in Katmandu, business people in Shanghai, students at Harvard, and vacationers in the Virgin Islands to come to and even help ChaBaD. These Jewish sojourners find in ChaBaD Houses around the world a ready-made and welcoming family of Lubavitchers prepared to help them with their Jewish needs and make them feel at home in an otherwise alienating and anonymous global world.



After Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson's death (his Hasidim called it the Rebbe's *histalkes*, or leave-taking) on June 12, 1994 (Gimmel [3] Tammuz 5754 in the Hebrew calendar), the mission and the *farbrengens* took on a new poignancy and meaning.^{*} No longer was the *farbrengen* an opportunity to be in the Rebbe's physical presence, a meeting that for Lubavitchers was spiritual and religious in nature; rather, it became a time to recall and somehow reanimate that presence and revitalize the mission, if not the movement, that he helped shape during more than half a century of leadership. But there were difficulties.

The Previous Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, had asserted that the age of the Messiah was nigh and that this generation was the last in exile and would be the first of redemption, a message that his successor, Menachem Mendel, had reiterated and intensified. From his first public address as leader he had made many believe that the messianic mission was in the very process of completion. Indeed, at the end of his life, almost all his Hasidim believed Menachem Mendel was himself the Messiah. With his passing, however, much of that message and the mission

^{*} Generally to avoid referring to their Rebbe's death, Hasidim simply use the phrase "Gimmel Tammuz" (the third day of the month of Tammuz, in this case the day on which Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson died) as a euphemism. The use of such euphemisms for death is not unique to Lubavitchers. Traditional Judaism shies away from the word "death." Even cemeteries are commonly referred to as "houses of life" or "houses of Eternity"—*bey-shakhayim* or *beysoylem*.

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it stimulated had to be understood anew.²³ “A fulfilled prophecy makes real what one previously had to take on faith. A failed prophecy, on the other hand, demonstrates that one’s faith was mistaken.”²⁴

But the faith of Hasidim in their rebbe can never be mistaken, for if it is, they are no longer his Hasidim. To give up faith was unacceptable to all Lubavitchers, who had built so much of their way of life and the character of their movement on their faith in the messianic message and its foremost exponent. They could not return home and give up the mission, and with it their hopes for forcing the end and bringing on the age of redemption. Continuity was a foregone conclusion. That is not to say that even believers were not plagued by doubts that surely affected their faith. The challenge was how exactly to maintain continuity. “The Moshiach is going to come,” said a Lubavitcher woman, assuring a reporter—and perhaps herself as well—in the days after the Rebbe’s death. “It’s just not going to happen the way we thought it would.”²⁵

In almost all Hasidic groups, including the Lubavitchers, the death of a rebbe, like that of a king, is commonly followed by the appointment of a successor. That man might be a son, son-in-law, or in some cases an outstanding disciple.²⁶ There might be some tension and conflict surrounding the choice of the successor, particularly if the previous rebbe had not designated him in advance or had failed to leave a will in which he specified who would lead after his demise. Sometimes dynasties and courts might become divided, with sons or sons-in-law competing for followers, a process that in the best circumstances could lead to Hasidic diversity, a spiritual division of labor, and broader influence as rebbes established themselves in different areas of Jewish settlement, taking their names from the towns and villages where they held court (a practice especially prevalent during the period of Hasidic expansion in the nineteenth century). Such was the case with ChaBaD Hasidism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After the death of the first rebbe and founder, Schneur Zalman, his son DovBer (1773–1827), known as the Miteler (Middle) Rebbe, and Schneur Zalman’s outstanding disciple, Aaron Halevi Horowitz of Starosielc, competed for the Hasidim’s loyalty.²⁷ Even more so following the death of the third Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel (1789–1866), better known by his nom de plume, Zemah Zedek, there were competing claims, with one son establishing a following in the town of Kapust (Kopys) and

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three others leading groups in Lyady and Bobriusk, all in Belarus, and one in Nezhin, Ukraine. By the time the sixth rebbe, the sole son of Rabbi Shalom DovBer, the fifth rebbe, whose dynasty had long ago taken the name of Lubavitch (after Lyubavichi, Russia, where the second rebbe, Dovber, had established the court), arrived in New York to reestablish his brand of Hasidism in America, the Lubavitcher line was largely accepted as the dominant if not the only surviving strain of the ChaBaD school of Hasidism.²⁸

During this long history the Lubavitchers always found a way to continue the line through this process of succession, albeit at times with some friction. But the ascendance of the childless forty-eight-year-old Menachem Mendel Schneerson as their leader in 1951 came with the assurance that the long-awaited Messiah would arrive in time to solve any future succession questions.²⁹ This understanding had been implicit from the time he made his first public address as Rebbe through the time he lay comatose in a bed at Beth Israel Hospital in the weeks before his demise. But now with his *histalkes*, Lubavitcher Hasidim refused to formally make the transition to a new leader, for there was no alternative for them—after all, the Rebbe had promised his would be the first generation of the final redemption. To ensure continuity, they simply denied the finality of death and continued to see the Rabbi Menachem Mendel as their Rebbe. They could not say good-bye: “You say goodbye to your parents and create your own life. The Rebbe is our connection with God. Every day he’s helping us live our lives.”³⁰ They could no more sever their connection to him than to Almighty God. If the Rebbe had promised to lead them to the Messiah, he must still be doing so. If they could be led by Rabbi Menachem Mendel during his life in this world, they could also be led by him during his afterlife.

The idea that they could be led by a man who had died was not altogether foreign to Lubavitchers. It had a precedent. Indeed, from the beginning of his own reign, Rabbi Menachem Mendel had insisted that his predecessor and father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, remained Rebbe—even after his earthly departure. In taking on the leadership of Lubavitch, he, Menachem Mendel, would therefore serve only as a channel, receiving and sending messages from and to the “Previous Rebbe,” as Yosef Yitzhak came to be known, during Menachem

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Mendel's regular visits to the latter's gravesite in Old Montefiore Cemetery in the Cambria Heights section of Queens, New York.³¹ He would still refer to his predecessor as *n'si doreynu*, the leader of our generation, "who continues to serve on high and cares for his flock here" and who will lead us to receive the Messiah.³²

This rationale for Menachem Mendel's leadership, so important at the outset and repeated endlessly by him, had gradually faded in the consciousness of many of his followers as they increasingly embraced him in the role of Rebbe. But with his death, Lubavitchers revived the idea of taking directions from a rebbe who was in an afterlife but could continue to care for and direct his flock here. As Menachem Mendel had done with *his* Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak, so would they do with him, Menachem Mendel, with the same if not greater loyalty than they had when he was alive.

But could *they* be the channel for him? He, the holy and inspired leader, *alone* had served as the conduit for messages from his predecessor, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak; how could a *group* become the conduit through which the Rebbe would continue to lead? And what about the coming of the Messiah? Both Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak and, even more so, his successor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, had assured the Lubavitchers that the Messiah's arrival was imminent and the actions of the Hasidim were driven by a preparation for this day of redemption, but now both were dead and the Messiah was nowhere to be seen. How could they keep the faith? Menachem Mendel had helped restore them after Yosef Yitzchak died, but who would revive them now?

The revival process began at least partially in the cemetery. The practices associated with the commemoration of the anniversary of death began when many of the Hasidim went to the cemetery and visited the Rebbe's *tsiyen* (tomb) and brought *pidyones* (sometimes called "*pan*," an acronym for *pidyon nefesh*, "the redemption of the soul"), personal notes on which the names of the petitioners and their requests are listed. Those who give a rebbe *pidyones* are said to be bonded to him spiritually.³³

The idea of going to the grave of a *zaddik*, or what some have called "the cult of the departed saint," has a long history in Hasidism and *kabbalah*.³⁴ This practice is driven by the belief that the *zaddik*, saint or great sage, is regarded as mediating between the divine and those among the

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living who had a deep connection to him, even after death.³⁵ This was part of a process called *yihudim* (unifications), mystical procedures by which the living continue to be attached to the soul of the departed saint. It is based on the assertion of the *Zohar*, the primary text of kabbalah, that the *zaddik* is more present “in all the worlds” after his death than during his life.³⁶ Indeed, the Talmud (B.T. *Hulin* 7b) in its assertion that “*gedolim tsaddikim be-mitatan yoter mi-be-hayyeyhen*” (saints are even grander in their death than in their lives) provided perhaps the ultimate basis for the notion that a rebbe could achieve more for his followers after his passing than during his lifetime.³⁷ Accordingly, part of the responsibility of the dead *zaddik*—and of course a rebbe is a *zaddik*—involves his petitioning on behalf of the living (particularly those with whom he is unified) after his passing. The *Zohar*’s categorical assertion that “without the prayer of the dead the living could not exist” serves as a basic proof text for the practice of going to the grave. It was here, according to the kabbalist Rabbi Hayyim Vital (1542–1620), that *yihudim* were best accomplished, since the lowest part of the *zaddik*’s soul, *nefesh*, was ever present, and hence the living petitioner could better gain contact with the residual presence of the departed saint at the graveyard.³⁸

ChaBaD Hasidim were particularly attuned to the notion that contact with a *zaddik* could be mediated via other means. Indeed, their founder, Schneur Zalman, had told them in an epistle that became part of their most sacred text, *Tanya* (published in the eighteenth century, and whose study was meant to serve as a substitute for the close personal contact that his Hasidim expected to have with its author), that the soul of the *zaddik* infused his followers with a transcendent life force, and that even after the *zaddik*’s death, his spirit (*ruekh*) “remains truly in our midst,” but only for those who are sincerely and completely bound to him.³⁹ For true believers, and Hasidim surely qualified, the departed *zaddik* is present even more than he was during his lifetime. That was why going to the grave was so important. And for no one was it more important than Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Now that he was no longer among the living, it was also important for his followers.⁴⁰

While 770 had been the place to encounter Rabbi Menachem Mendel during his lifetime, “after Gimmel Tammuz,” as his followers often referred to the period following his physical leave-taking, the cemetery

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became an intensified focus of their devotions, just as it had for him after the death of *his* predecessor.⁴¹ Here, just east of the last house in a row of modest, single-family homes along Francis Lewis Boulevard, in a working-class and largely African American neighborhood in Queens, New York, not far from Kennedy International Airport, Lubavitchers had established a most extraordinary Jewish holy place, considered by them to be as sacred as any of the other places on earth that Jews venerate. The focus of the veneration was a small stone mausoleum (the *ohel*), open to the sky, where now the remains of the two Rebbes, Yosef Yitzchak and Menachem Mendel, lay buried side by side, surrounded by other important Lubavitchers and across a small stone path from the deceased women of Lubavitch.

To reach it, visitors pass behind the row of small cottages. Inside the house closest to the cemetery the Lubavitchers have installed a small office with several phone lines, a fax machine, and a computer equipped to receive missives and *pidyones* to the late Rebbe from petitioners all over the world—messages to be deposited on the bier. The office is manned by a gentle young Lubavitcher from England, Abba Refson, who sorts and directs the electronic supplications. It is active at all hours of day and night (the world of ChaBaD followers never sleeps).

The main cottage features a small reception room in which a video mix consisting of thousands of hours of the Rebbe's talks and public sessions, all of which have been documented, runs endlessly. Visitors can sit and watch him on reruns while they compose themselves and the written petitions they will deposit on his grave. In what was once a kitchen, people wash their hands at two sinks, in line with the tradition that all those leaving a cemetery must purify themselves, and some lave their hands in preparation for visiting the resting place of the *zaddikim*, the righteous, as the rebbes and their holy disciples are also known. The largest room inside the cottage has a library and chapel where people may pray (facing east toward the tomb and Jerusalem) and study the enormous body of literature, published talks, and letters the Rebbe produced in his lifetime and that are now part of his legacy. One Hasid among the many who visited the space on this commemorative day referred to the library as "the Rebbe in the book."

Refson often watched with bemusement as people came for the books of the Rebbe's letters and opened them at random, hoping to

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find on the page answers to the questions they had asked at the grave. This bibliomancy had become a common means of communicating with the Rebbe.⁴² Refson was not a big believer in this, for he had seen too many people opening the book more than once, presumably when they did not find a satisfying answer the first time.⁴³ But among many of the visitors it remains a popular practice.

In addition to this place, the Lubavitchers have gradually purchased several other cottages nearby to accommodate overnight guests and petitioners, one in which they established a yeshiva, and a larger house on another street where they billet students who come to plumb the meaning of the Rebbe's texts. Next to this little yeshiva they have built a ritual bath for the daily immersions and for those visitors who wish to purify themselves even more before "coming into the Rebbe," as they often refer to these visits. Behind these are two Quonset huts that dwarf the houses and serve as a kind of staging area for a small opening into the cemetery and stone walkway leading to the graves. Over time the huts have been converted to spaces where pilgrims can study or pray. On the long tables in the huts and everywhere inside the house are small Lucite boxes in which stacks of blank paper and pens are available for those who want to compose *pidyones*, little notes to God and the Rebbe. In a corner there is a constantly replenished supply of cookies, tea, and coffee; the body needs a lift even where the soul is king. At the side of the hut, near the path that leads to the cemetery, are shelves stacked with spare *gartls*, the black sashes Hasidim wrap about their waists during prayer to symbolically separate the higher from the lower parts of the body and the mind from animal inclination. Underneath the *gartls* is a stack of worn slippers (and more recently Crocs) for those who wish to remove their leather shoes (a tradition when one steps on sacred ground) before entering the holy place inside the *tsiyen* (grave) or *ohel*, but do not want to step on the cold stone in their socks. Here too are some psalters whose frayed pages show the signs of the countless fingers that have traced their words in supplication.

From the hut, visitors can walk a short distance to the small section of Lubavitcher notables that surround the Rebbe's *tsiyen*. Since his death, pilgrims have been pouring in from all over the world, often on their way to or from nearby Kennedy International Airport or 770. Non-Lubavitchers, many of them Sephardic Jews of North African or

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Middle Eastern origin, come seeking what they have searched for at other holy places they are accustomed to visiting: personal blessings, the redemption of their souls from evil, the intercession of the divine, cures for the ill, or endorsement of their important life choices and guidance from on high.⁴⁴ But for Lubavitchers in particular, the pilgrimage to the *tsiyen* is a way to keep close to their Rebbe. They flock there on days considered special in the ChaBaD calendar, such as Gimmel Tammuz or Yud (the Tenth of) Shvat (the day Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak died and on which a year later Rabbi Menachem Mendel ascended to his position), as well as the days preceding the *kinus shluchim*.

On the sidewalks and in the hut, everywhere around the place, there are stacks of pamphlets filled with prayers, readings, and a variety of materials meant to assist the ritual of visiting. These practices are variations on established rituals of Jewish gravesite visits, with specifically Lubavitcher customs. Arriving at the *tsiyen*, one knocks on the door, removes one's shoes, enters, and deposits one's note on the ground after tearing it above the grave, where the pile of white slips of paper is enormous. While there, one recites psalms and perhaps lights a candle, then departs. Even *Kohens*—Jews who are considered the descendants of the ancient priestly tribe and who normally cannot visit cemeteries because of death's capacity to defile their special purity—are allowed by Lubavitcher custom to visit the Rebbe's tomb, based on the principle accepted by ChaBaD that while presence near a dead body is defiling, even a *Kohen* cannot be defiled by the corpse of a *zaddik*. The Lubavitchers have found a way to make it possible under Jewish law to reach the *tsiyen* by installing red curtains on both sides of the pathway from the hut outside the cemetery to the mausoleum. The curtains ritually separate the space the pilgrims pass through from the surrounding dead bodies. The presence of these curtains seems to have a further symbolic meaning; they dramatically highlight the fact that there is only one path for faithful Jews to walk, one that leads back to the Rebbe.

For many of the faithful, the wait in the line to the tomb on Gimmel Tammuz or other holy days in the ChaBaD calendar is considered part of the experience. The waiting and all the related ritual preparations recall the mental and spiritual preparations that a true Hasid must make before approaching his Rebbe. As Rabbi Yisrael Shmotkin, a visiting

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shaliach from Milwaukee, explained, before an audience, however brief, with the Rebbe, “[you had] to get your mind and heart so that you should feel the need for the spiritual enhancement, *cheshbon ha’nefesh* [soul searching]. In fact, you never feel sufficiently prepared. The more spiritually sensitive a Hasid is, the more difficult the preparation.”

Insiders understand this experience of pilgrimage not as “going to a grave” but rather as “going into the Rebbe.” They go “into” him and come away charged up with “feelings” and understandings that fill their interior imagination.

“It is today exactly as it was; I go through the same preparations that I made before I would go in to see the Rebbe when he was alive,” Shmotkin added, explaining his relationship to the Rebbe after the latter’s death. As for the responses pilgrims such as Shmotkin expect from their deceased Rebbe, “the way you ask the Rebbe for something determines the kind of answer you get.”⁴⁵ His physical absence can be “neutralized” by the attitude of the believer. He might be physically dead, but he continues to be spiritually alive in those who turn to him.⁴⁶ Over the three days of the commemoration of this anniversary of his death, Lubavitchers reported 28,000 visitors, and near 40,000 *pidyones* were faxed to the cemetery.⁴⁷

Many of those who went to the cemetery on the anniversary of the death claimed to have received messages from the deceased Rebbe. Where once his charisma brought his disciples together, now they bonded over an intense and shared sense of bereavement and loss, as well as a commonly held commitment to continue the mission he had initiated and incarnated. In a sense, this bonding and the determination to ensure continuity have led to a kind of transformation and absorption of the Rebbe’s charisma by the assembled.⁴⁸ No single one of them became the Rebbe, but in some way the collective and their assembly—their coming together—brought him to life. That was particularly evident at the *ohel*.

Many of the older Hasidim, especially those who could narrate their encounters with the now absent leader, began to exude some of his charisma during the assemblies. While the Rebbe was alive, they might have constituted a secondary elite, but in his absence they have risen to the highest tier. While gathering to commemorate their Rebbe’s memory, when one of the older men begins to offer his recollections—a story, a

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tune, a lesson learned—younger Lubavitchers crowd around him and hang on his every word, as if straining to penetrate his memories and make them their own. They might even organize *farbrengens* around senior Hasidim whose personal histories and recollections go back to the first days of Rabbi Menachem Mendel's tenure.⁴⁹ One such episode occurred on the eve of Gimmel Tammuz, when Rabbi Berel Shemtov from Detroit, one of the oldest *shluchim* and the first to be sent out by Rabbi Menachem Mendel in America, became a magnet for a crowd of enthusiastic young Hasidim by beginning a conversation with a visitor about what it meant to relate to the Rebbe on the eve of the anniversary of his death. Shemtov's father, Bentzion, a contemporary of the Rebbe, had been a devoted Hasid of the Previous Rebbe, from even before the time he had been a rebbe, and had been a student at the Tomekhei Temimim yeshiva in Russia. His sons and grandchildren were prominent *shluchim*. The Shemtovs were as close as one could get to someone who had deep roots in the Lubavitcher saga.⁵⁰ Avremel Shemtov, Berel's brother, was now chair of Agudas Chassidei ChaBaD, the highest post in the movement in the absence of a rebbe. As Berel spoke, he suggested to his eager audience that they, the young Hasidim, were crucial to what was happening in ChaBaD. "Those who do not remember the Rebbe in life are 'bigger Hasidim' even than those who did," he remarked, "because they have to work harder to bring him back."⁵¹

Here was an old-timer encouraging and praising the very people in whose hands continuity rested. If they had doubts they could accomplish this in the absence of their leader, he assured them "the Rebbe gives a person the strength he needs." In fact, he argued, "a *tsaddik* lives more today than yesterday." How could that be? It was, he explained, "the Rebbe's *neshamah* [soul]" that was always the source of his ability to bestow blessings, not his physical being. And "he is a more a *neshamah* today than he was before." These were almost the same arguments that Rabbi Menachem Mendel had made after the death of his predecessor, and indeed what Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak had said about himself.⁵² Now the Hasidim were making these claims. Precisely his incorporeality was what gave him a greater presence, as long as those assembled believed in his capacity to bless them.

For the Lubavitchers, then, Gimmel Tammuz had become not a day of mourning but rather a *hillula*, a day of celebration with a sense

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of triumph over the continuing mission and a chance for Hasidim to demonstrate to themselves and others that they could find within themselves, as a *shaliach* put it, the “collective energy that transcends and at the same time empowers the individual.” Thirteen years after the Rebbe’s death, tears were replaced by an excitement in the air, as if this were the eve of a festival—as in many ways it was.

If in the past the *farbrengens* provided an occasion to “reconnect with the Rebbe and interact with colleagues,” in the absence of his physical presence the focus of their attention was their proximity to those who felt his absence most keenly. The *farbrengen* now would serve primarily, as one Lubavitcher put it quoting Isaiah (41:6), as a vehicle for “*ish es re’ihu ya’azoru ul’echiv yoimar chazak*,” for each and all as one to help one another and to offer strength, support and encouragement. If in the past it was the charismatic Rebbe in person who orchestrated the enthusiasms and collective effervescence of his Hasidim, now their interaction and continuing devotion to him accomplished it.

There were all sorts of signs that the group had in a sense come to embody the Rebbe. In his lifetime, beginning on 11 Nisan 5746 (April 20, 1986), his eighty-fourth birthday, Rabbi Menachem Mendel had taken up the practice of handing out crisp new dollar bills that were meant to turn every recipient into a *shaliach mitzvah*, someone who would act as his agent to give that dollar (and perhaps more) to charity and thereby fulfill the mission of doing that mitzvah. “Charity,” the Rebbe had said on many occasions, “hastens and immediately causes the true and complete redemption.”⁵³ It had become a famous practice, as for most of the rest of his life he distributed tens of thousands of dollar bills to all manner of people who came to 770 Eastern Parkway on Sundays. As the Lubavitchers gathered to mark the thirteenth anniversary of his passing at the *tsiyen*, young Lubavitcher yeshiva boys—the *temimim*, the unblemished and pure of heart, as they were called, and because they went to the yeshiva of that name—walked along the street in front of the cemetery and handed out dollar bills to all those assembled. In so doing, these youngsters, who had never seen the Rebbe in life, embodied and expressed both the future and the past. They effectively mimicked what the Rebbe had done, but with a new twist in that rather than waiting for people to line up for dollars, they went out to them.

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The children, the Rebbe had often said, “were entrusted with a special mission to particularly dedicate themselves to all matters of Judaism.” This included “using their own personal allowance money to give extra charity,” an act that would help the Jewish people “as a whole,” because the charity given by a child in particular had “special significance” in hastening the redemption. Moreover, not only should they give, they were to “inspire all their neighbors to do the same.” These children were doing just that. In so doing, they were the incarnation of continuity and the vehicles for bringing the Messiah. Their dollars were the Rebbe’s dollars, but now given by the group via the children to all comers. And they were doing it, as the Rebbe had told them God wanted them to, “with joy and exuberance,” thus making the “world a dwelling place for God himself.”⁵⁴ With obvious pride, their initiative became the talk of the day among all those who had come to the *tsiyen*.

These Hasidim also kept the Rebbe alive by continuously plumbing and internalizing the messages that were in the copious literature built up of texts their rebbes had left them. They paid particular attention to ensuring that the young studied and assimilated these words. This in fact they had done since the fifth rebbe, Rabbi Shalom DovBer, had established the Tomekhei Temimim yeshiva, at which he included as subjects of study, in addition to the traditional Jewish texts, Hasidic texts, or *khsides*, as they were often called, including the so-called *Sichos* (talks), *maʿamarim* (discourses), *Divrei Elohim Chayim* (*DACH*, in its Hebrew acronym), the Words of the Living God, as offered by their rebbe, and *Igros* (letters) of their rebbes that were taken down, studied, committed to memory, and repeated. In this way, Hasidic text, teacher, and student became one. Study of their founding rebbe’s *Tanya* taught them that. The idea of accessing a rebbe by means of a text was thus a long-established principle for these Hasidim. That the Rebbe was no longer among them physically was irrelevant to this sort of encounter. Indeed, for the young ChaBaD Hasid, for whom the intellectual element was critical, the written work would be among the most direct personal encounters with the Rebbe.



Through the collective energy and consciousness that such *farbrengens* stimulated, through their sharing and adopting of recollections,

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through their assimilation and repetition of his words, and through their emotional attachments, the Lubavitcher Hasidim thus kept their Rebbe alive. As long as the young and old remained enthusiastic, willing, and able to share in all this, they claimed they could feel the Rebbe among them as a guiding force. As Leizer Shemtov, a third-generation *shaliach*, put it, “When the Rebbe was here physically, one could feel secure by relying on the Rebbe to identify threats and opportunities and lead the response. After the *histalkes*, we no longer have that. The initial feeling is one of vulnerability and loneliness. Eventually the feeling sets in that we can do this all together nourishing ourselves from one another’s strengths. That feeling strengthens at each *kinus*.”⁵⁵ “Can we even fathom the collective power that we have?” asked Rabbi Ari Solish, the enthusiastic young new *shaliach* to Atlanta, addressing his fellow emissaries at the 2006 banquet.

If Gimmel Tammuz was a gathering to recall their connection to the late Rebbe, what was the *kinus shluchim*—the coming together of the emissaries—if not a celebration of their network and their accomplishments? It is the network in which the life of Lubavitch now resides. The ability to spread the message, to engage in the mission, to learn from one’s counterparts, to share experiences and wisdom, to train one another or to be apprenticed to one who is practiced in being a Hasid on the move, and even the opportunity to share memories of the past—all this is what gives life to Lubavitcher Hasidism in the absence of a living rebbe.

There is yet another way that Lubavitchers revive their missing Rebbe, and it was manifest at the 2006 *kinus*. A wall of video screens surrounded the vast hall at Pier 94 in Manhattan where the gathering was being held. The ubiquitousness of videos of the Rebbe made his voice and words very much a part of the day. On them, past and present merged seamlessly in a kind of visual metaphor of precisely what was critical for continuity. So, for example, when Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky began the proceedings by calling on the assembled to sing a melody that Rabbi Menachem Mendel had taught them, a video of the Rebbe teaching the tune flashed on the screen. As the virtual Rebbe began to sing, the screens showed the Hasidim who were at his *farbrengen* at the time singing with him and, as the cameras at the present *kinus* panned across the hall, cross cut that image with shots of the assembled here and now

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also singing, thereby bringing all into the moving image. The voices of those in the past and those at the current banquet became indistinguishable. The virtual and the real, the past and the present, appeared almost interchangeable. At that moment one could be forgiven for imagining that the Rebbe was not simply an image flickering on a screen but a real person present in the room. That, of course, was the point.

“ChaBaD’s attention to visibility as an essential component of its spiritual mission has proved strategic in the community’s survival of a major loss,” as Jeffrey Shandler has put it.⁵⁶ Countless Lubavitchers admitted they had watched the videos, which were now available online as part of a huge documentary project carried out by the Lubavitcher Jewish Educational Media under direction of a thirty-something-year old Elkanah Shmotkin. These videos enable the Lubavitchers to see the Rebbe in ways that no other Hasidim have ever been able in the past to see their previous leaders. Photographs of their rebbes had come to be important visual aids to maintaining a spiritual attachment between disciple and followers, particularly when the Rebbe was physically distant. The unprecedented number of photographs and moving images of Rabbi Menachem Mendel (which he, unlike other Hasidic rebbes, encouraged), along with the repackaging of these into the *Living Torah* series of disks on which bits of his addresses (with subtitles in English, Hebrew, Russian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese for non-Yiddish speakers), as well as a series of “special moments” and other snippets of his actions, are available by subscription or individual purchase and make the Rebbe a virtual presence everyone can have on screen on demand. Lubavitchers screen these images in some places every week at the close of the Sabbath, listening to Rabbi Menachem Mendel’s remarks for that particular week. For those who were not present at the original talk, this is a chance to experience it for the first time, while for the others it is a chance to see it in a new way.

Some Lubavitchers who had experienced the original *farbrengens* in the Rebbe’s presence even suggested that, while they missed his being there, watching these videos offered something more. At the original events, most of the attendees barely glimpsed the Rebbe and were often jostled by the crowd as they looked at him, or they were for some other reason unable to focus completely on what he said. Still others noted that their reverence for him had prevented them from looking directly

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at him. But by watching the videos they could absorb the whole experience in comfort. They could see their Rebbe's face in close view, observing in ways they never could before. Commenting on Rabbi Menachem Mendel's penetrating blue eyes, so often described by outsiders who met with him, a Hasid admitted he had never dared look directly at the Rebbe when speaking to him and only after viewing the videos discovered the "power of his gaze and the blue of his eyes." In a sense, the videos made the Rebbe closer and more present than he had been in life. Moreover, they made the encounter more intimate. In much the same way that viewers who encounter late-night television talk show hosts in real life often report they feel as if they know them intimately, because "[I have them] in my bedroom every night before I go to sleep," there is a closeness that the video image can create with the viewer that almost trumps real life.

"Through video not only can participants in the original events re-live and reconnect, but for those who never met the Rebbe, it recreates the experience, touching and moving them as well," as the narrator of the trailer for the *Living Torah* series puts it. "In the words of one woman who watched a video of the Rebbe and then called her *shaliach* in excitement, 'Rabbi, I was just at my first *farbrengen*.'"⁵⁷

Of course, for years Lubavitchers had been used to relating to the Rebbe as a video presence. Many of his talks and appearances had been beamed by satellite throughout the world via a technology he encouraged and celebrated when it was used for good. Looking at him now, it was easy to believe he was still alive and sending messages to his followers, but from "another location."

In addition, the editing of the videos, as well as the way they were organized by subject, occasion, and the like, allowed the viewers to distill the long and sometimes complicated talks with Rabbi Menachem Mendel or the hours of routine life in the court to moments and sound bites that could be translated into everything from pithy messages that anyone could understand—particularly useful in outreach work—and inspirational views that allowed one to go straight to the highlight zone.

Thus, for example, on one disk the Rebbe is seen at a *farbrengen* telling a story whose point is that an observant Jew should not be embarrassed to perform Jewish acts in front of nonpracticing Jews or even

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non-Jews. The story is of a successful Jewish businessman who has leased a yacht and seeks to know from the captain which direction is east, so that he can direct his daily prayers that way and toward Jerusalem. The captain, a non-Jew, the Rebbe reports, is deeply impressed by the fact that such a successful man still stops all his affairs and prays to God thrice daily. The Rebbe then observes, in a message that one can imagine many *shluchim* who were sent to impress nonobservant Jews and non-Jews alike—perhaps many of them also successful businessmen—of the importance of prayer, might want to highlight: “In this case,’ said the captain, ‘I will also begin to think about God.’”

“I heard this second-hand,” the Rebbe concludes, “and I don’t know if the captain ended by promising that he would also pray, *but thinking about the Holy One Blessed be He is also ‘prayer.’*”⁵⁸ This latter sentiment could surely be used in the Lubavitcher mission to bring the consciousness of God’s presence in the Jewish world.

The videos thus could be understood “as but one means of realizing Chabad’s ongoing commitment to making esoteric principles of spiritual transformation, once the provenance of a learned elite, accessible and meaningful to the entire Jewish community.”⁵⁹ If once the image of the Rebbe was meant to make the viewer feel closer to the one in the picture, now that image can replace him. If at one time the living Rebbe could only be seen in one place, now the virtual Rebbe, the image, could be seen everywhere. There is something profoundly American and modern about this video packaging of the Rebbe. The Rebbe could live forever on reruns, and he could be reanimated by all who played the videos.

And beyond all this, Lubavitchers also remained tied to their leader in his afterlife by continuing to carry on the mission on which he had sent them, a mission they remained certain was still needed to guarantee a redemption for all Jews. They did that by becoming *shluchim* in ever greater numbers. That was precisely what the *kinus* and the *farbrengen* that accompanied it was meant to celebrate and reinforce.

How long, however, could the Lubavitchers remain on the mission without arriving at the moment of redemption? Could the Hasidim who expected the Rebbe to bring them to the Messiah himself be satisfied with what was becoming an endless wait? And who was this leader who had brought them to this crossroads? How had he become such a presence in his absence, in an America where Hasidism—indeed,

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Jewish Orthodoxy—was expected to wither and die? Where did he come from, this man who trumpeted the Messiah and promised redemption in a world where the very idea seemed out-of-date and the Lubavitchers appeared to lead what they hoped would be legions of the skeptical and secular? To answer that question, we must first go to the day his predecessor died. There we can begin to understand how this man who stood between the old world and the new, the sacred and the secular, redemption and defilement, came to be “the Rebbe.” It is to that day we now turn.