

**Forward**

**December 2, 1994** (pages 1 & 4)

## **Rabbis Blast Lubavitcher Messianism**

**Warn Resurrection Talk Echoes Christian Themes**

by Lucette Lagnado

The concerns are being voiced in the wake of last week's community-council elections in Crown Heights, where potential leaders were anointed in the name of the Rebbe, who died in June. Invoking the Rebbe, members of the Crown Heights' bet din, or rabbinical court, became players in the election, issuing formal recommendations as to which slate of candidates to support.

### **Distorting Judaism**

The community's turmoil has to do not only with who shall preside over Lubavitch in the messianic era, but also with who shall preside over them in the Republican era -- specifically, who shall reign over the multimillion dollar real estate properties, schools and institutions that make up the wealth of Lubavitch. In any event, the situation has reached the point where some rabbinical authorities, including a Chicago-based sage, Aaron Soloveichik, as well as other rabbis and scholars, fear that the Lubavitchers have crossed a line and are distorting fundamental tenets of Judaism.

Unraveling the threads of the latest news from Lubavitch starts with the victory of the incumbent community-council president, Rabbi Joseph Spielman, who has been prominent among the group advancing the notion of the Rebbe as Messiah. The man who wields much of the power, Rabbi Yehudah Krinsky, the Rebbe's former driver and chief of staff, has been considerably more low-key about the supposed "second coming" of Schneerson. In the elections, Rabbi Krinsky was known to be close to some of the individuals who lost.

Rabbi Shmuel Menachem Butman, his arch-nemesis, chortled that the community's vote for individuals such as Rabbi Spielman reflects the popular will that only people supporting the notion of the Rebbe as the next Messiah would remain in control. Rabbi Butman, who has chaired the International Campaign to Bring Moshiach, insists that "it is not some of the people in the community, but all of the people in the community as well as Lubavitch throughout the world, who believe...that the Rebbe will take us out of exile, and that the Rebbe will lead us to the great final redemption." Rabbi Krinsky could not be reached for comment.

Yet, as the Jews of Crown Heights continue to mourn the loss of Schneerson, memories of the Rebbe's long and poignant illness, his evident suffering and the months he spent in a hospital intensive-care unit make him ripe for martyrdom and are giving him, critics warn, a strangely Christ-like cast. Some scholars are urging that the Jewish world issue a

clear condemnation of the latest development as being absolutely contrary to halacha. There is also the fear that the movement will make it easier for evangelists to function.

### **"Repugnant"**

"I don't believe it. I don't believe it. It is incredible," Rabbi Soloveichik exclaimed when informed of the words of Rabbi Butman and others in Crown Heights about the imminent return of the Rebbe as Moshiach. The world-renowned rabbi said flatly that "there is no possibility whatsoever" that Menachem Mendel Schneerson would emerge from the dead to be the Messiah. "That could be possible in the Christian faith, but not Judaism."

Jewish texts, prominent rabbis and scholars say, suggest the Messiah will come from the ranks of the living. Rabbi Soloveichik added that the mere suggestion that a dead individual would return as Moshiach is "repugnant to everything Judaism represents."

Rabbi Butman, one of the leading messianists during the Rebbe's lifetime, was adamant, however. In an interview with the Forward shortly before he went to Manhattan to light the Chanukah menorah, he said defiantly: "We believe that the Rebbe is Moshiach and we say it."

### **Dangerous Ground**

Rabbi Soloveichik, however, was contemptuous, denouncing Rabbi Butman as "a little fanatical," someone who "means well but, out of desperation, conjures non-rational ideas." The late Rebbe, said Rabbi Soloveichik, "can't be the Messiah -- he is not living -- a Messiah has to be living -- a living Messiah, not a dead Messiah."

Still, the idea of Schneerson's return has caught on. Interviews of Lubavitch women conducted by the Forward yielded virtually the same response: the Rebbe is coming back. Basha Oka, a Crown Heights resident, said "the reporters who are most receptive are not Jewish," while another, Rosalynn Malamud, whose husband was among those elected, said it was easier to explain the ideas to Christian friends. For Ms. Oka, very simply, "The Rebbe is still here."

Several critics believe that the Lubavitch community is treading on dangerous ground, and that the Jewish community at large must act immediately to put a stop to practices and beliefs that are at odds with fundamental Jewish tenets.

David Berger, a professor at Brooklyn College and City University of New York and a noted Orthodox scholar of messianic movements, said he was deeply disturbed by what he was witnessing among the Lubavitch. "I will withhold the word heresy because it is the strongest word that can be used in the context of Judaism," Mr. Berger said of the belief in Schneerson's resurrection as Messiah, "but I am perfectly willing to say this is a thoroughly illegitimate position within Judaism."

Mr. Berger said that while he was disturbed by the sect's messianism when the Rebbe was alive, he was willing to accept it because of the good works Lubavitch was doing the world over rescuing lost Jewish communities. "Once he died, to continue to maintain this position seems to be so unacceptable...that it is the obligation of every Jewish leader to say in no uncertain terms that this is not a position that will be tolerated within Judaism.

"The persistence of such a claim is beyond the pale -- the movement will destroy its legitimacy," Mr. Berger predicted.

### **'Closer to Christianity'**

Mr. Berger, a student of Jewish-Christian relations, raised another disturbing prospect, namely, that the new teachings of Lubavitch would make it easier for Christian missionaries to get Jewish converts. "Does this make the job of missionaries easier? The answer is, absolutely, because one of the fundamental Jewish arguments in response to Christian missionary efforts was that Jesus could not be the Messiah because he died before redeeming the world." By saying the late Rebbe is Messiah "aborts" the standard Jewish response, Mr. Berger said.

One longtime critic of Lubavitch, Rabbi Allen Nadler of YIVO, sees the recent developments as yet further evidence that the sect is deviant from traditional Judaism and ought to be shunned as dangerous. "I am a lot more detached ever since the Rebbe died. Before, I felt that Lubavitch had a place in the table of Jewish discourse. But now, they are closer to Christianity in their way of thinking," Rabbi Nadler told the Forward.

"All of my animus aside," Rabbi Nadler, an ordained Orthodox rabbi, added, "it is very clear from all the Jewish sources since Christianity that talk about messianism that the idea of death and the rebirth of a Messiah is contrary to Judaism." Indeed, he argues, "There is...a strong history of opposition to the belief in a resurrected Messiah."

Rabbi Soloveichik offered Lubavitch a consoling piece of advice, urging them to appoint for themselves a new Rebbe who could lead the community -- "They should appoint someone, if they don't it will be very damaging," he said with emotion.