

“The Virtual Rebbe”

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Following is an excerpt from my forthcoming book, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (to be published by NYU Press in spring 2009). This book examines American Jews’ engagements with new media of the past century as part of their religious life, with examples ranging from early sound recordings of cantorial music to hasidic outreach on the Internet. New communications technologies and new media practices have appeared so frequently and regularly during this period that not a single generation has passed without engaging at least one new medium and often dealing with more than one concurrently. In this book I argue that the ongoing imperative of considering new media and their implications for religious life has become a common experience for Jews, as it has for other American religious communities, and this demand has in itself become an important new means of advancing and affirming notions of religiosity.

In American Jewish culture engaging new media has proved a defining force, at times situating Jews as an exceptional or paradigmatic religious community in America in unprecedented ways and distinguishing Judaism in the United States from how it is practiced elsewhere. American Jews’ responses to new media have variously challenged the role of clergy or transformed the nature of ritual; facilitated innovations in religious practice and scholarship, as well as efforts to maintain traditional observance and teachings; created venues for outreach, both to enhance relationships with non-Jewish neighbors and to promote greater religiosity among Jews; prompted religious legal debates regarding the proper use of certain media; even redefined the notion of what might constitute a Jewish religious community or spiritual experience.

“The Virtual Rebbe,” the final chapter of *Jews, God, and Videotape*, excerpted below, examines how an array of media—print advertising, photography, radio, the Internet, and especially television and video—have been used by Lubavitcher hasidim (also known as

Chabad), from the arrival of the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, the community's spiritual leader, in the United States in 1940, through the death of his successor, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in 1994, and continuing into the present. Though not the largest hasidic community, Chabad is the most visible in America and abroad. This commitment to visibility in the public sphere, a fundament of Chabad hasidism for decades, distinguishes Lubavitchers from other hasidim and is central to their mission of fostering increased Jewish religious observance and promulgating their particular vision of Jewish messianism.

Their use of media has prompted new, defining practices for Lubavitcher hasidim, such as videotaping and disseminating many of Schneerson's public appearances since the 1970s, and has proved strategic in presenting Chabad's agenda globally. These media practices have been central to Chabad's response to the devastations of the Holocaust and, most remarkably, have enabled its followers to respond to a more recent crisis of continuity: Schneerson's death, which not only left the community without a successor to his leadership but also challenged the conviction of many of his followers that he was the messiah. Some observers predicted that the Rebbe's death would lead to the demise of Chabad. Instead, the community continues, expanding its presence in the public sphere and forging a new spiritual relationship with the Rebbe, largely through media practices that are remarkably innovative and provocative.

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“Moshiach has become a major media event”

During the late 1980s, as the photo- and videodocumentation of the Rebbe was at its most profuse, Chabad messianism intensified. Insistence that the messianic age was approaching and that Lubavitcher hasidim had a special obligation to hasten its arrival was not new to Chabad, nor did these convictions originate with Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s leadership. However, the messiah was a subject of ongoing concern in the Rebbe’s public discourses, and he identified recent world events—including the fall of the Soviet Union and Israel’s escaping extensive harm from Iraqi missile attacks during the Gulf War—as signposts of the messiah’s advent.¹ In April 1991, the Rebbe proclaimed the messiah’s arrival was imminent and, moreover, depended on the will of his followers: “All that I can possibly do is to give the matter over to you. Now, do everything you can to bring moshiach [the messiah], here and now, immediately.”²

The Rebbe’s proclamation inspired Lubavitcher hasidim to intensify their outreach efforts and to promote messianism in conjunction with appeals to Jews to become more observant of traditional religious practice. A print advertisement produced in the early 1990s proclaimed, “It’s OK to get excited about Moshiach,” thanks to the Rebbe’s announcement that “the Time of the Redemption has arrived.” The ad exhorted less observant Jews to action not only by increased religious practice but also by engaging with the advertisement itself. This included filling out a coupon and mailing it to Chabad’s headquarters with one’s name, address, and an indication of which of a list of commitments one will make to the Rebbe “to do something extra to be more ready for Moshiach.” including “studying the Torah regularly,” “keeping kosher,” and “doing more

to treat my neighbors kindly.” The ad also listed a toll-free number (1-800-4MOSHIACH) to call to request literature or a guest speaker on this issue, and a notice at the bottom of the ad explained that, “due to the urgency of this matter, we permit and recommend newspapers, organizations and individuals to reprint the above for distribution.”³ Responding to the ad and even remediating it were themselves implicit acts of hastening redemption.

Most provocatively, the advertisement explained that “many prominent rabbinic authorities” had identified Menachem Mendel Schneerson as “the Presumed Moshiach,” an idea that was publicly embraced by growing numbers of Lubavitcher hasidim. Historian David Berger has recounted how, during the early 1990s, messianist Chabad rabbis argued that the Rebbe’s achievements as a communal leader and teacher fulfilled the criteria for identifying the messiah established by the Jewish philosopher Maimonides in the twelfth century. Berger noted that the Rebbe’s response to these claims was ambivalent: “He vigorously proclaimed the imminence of the redemption..., strongly implied that he might be the redeemer, and certainly did not stop the messianist campaign. At the same time, he refrained from any open, explicit proclamation of his own messianic identity, taught that public relations must be conducted in a manner that would win acceptance, and continued to encourage leadership roles [in Chabad] for people who were known to oppose the messianists.”⁴

In March 1992 the Rebbe suffered a stroke, leaving him unable to speak and limiting his ability to move. This development fueled the convictions of followers who believed him to be the Messiah. “The fact that the Rebbe cannot speak is a sign that redemption is near,” one Lubavitcher hasid explained a year later, when interviewed in a

popular American Jewish magazine. He offered as a proof-text Isaiah 53:3—“He was despised, shunned by men, / A man of suffering, familiar with disease”—a key text in Jewish messianic theology that, as Berger has observed, has a complex history, also playing a central role in Christian doctrine and figuring in Jews’ explanation of their exilic suffering.⁵ In the months following Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s stroke, sociologist Samuel Heilman commented that the Rebbe was, in effect, “alive and dead at the same time.... He is with his followers but he is no longer verbal.... Everything he does is subject to interpretation.”⁶ Indeed, the Rebbe’s stroke prompted a heightened scrutiny of his smallest gestures and increased attention to his silent appearance at public events. As occasions for seeing the Rebbe grew increasingly infrequent, due to his declining health, Lubavitcher hasidim took to carrying pagers, known as “Moshiach beepers,” which notified them when the Rebbe (referred to as M H M, meaning “*Melech ha Moshiach* [King Messiah]”) made a public appearance at 770 Eastern Parkway, Chabad’s central headquarters in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights.⁷ The Rebbe was thus becoming more like his widely familiar presence in photographs, visible but silent and immobile, displayed in places of honor and as the focus of reverential gazing.

By the early 1990s Chabad’s growing attention to the Rebbe as the messiah had become known outside the community, sparking heated discussion among other Jews and eventually attracting attention from the general public. Some Orthodox Jews denounced Chabad’s claims that Menachem Mendel Schneerson is the messiah, arguing that such claims are incompatible with traditional messianic beliefs; other Jews speculated that Lubavitchers’ messianism would damage their effectiveness in the wider community.

Rudy Boschwitz, a former U.S. senator and longtime supporter of Chabad, commented that, “The messianic fever does not help the movement at all. I’m not sure how the messianism will affect my donations.... Anointing the Rebbe the messiah will turn people away.” And Jewish studies scholar Lawrence Schiffman admonished Chabad: “If you turn yourself from an outreach movement into a false messiah movement, many of those who have gained so much spiritually and religiously from your work will find themselves unwilling to follow you further.”⁸

In New York the issue attracted ongoing interest in the local mainstream press. In January 1993 the *New York Times* reported on escalating tension among factions within Chabad, divided over their certainty that the Rebbe was the messiah. This dispute was reportedly approaching a “showdown” over a planned “coronation” of the Rebbe as messiah, to take place at 770 Eastern Parkway and “televised on the worldwide Lubavitch satellite hook-up.”⁹ (This plan was never realized.) A year later, *New York* magazine featured a cover story on the Rebbe’s declining health and the question of Chabad’s future, which the magazine sensationalized as a “Holy War” and a “tale of human frailties with Old Testament dimensions.”¹⁰ As they contemplated the Rebbe’s eventual death, observers outside Chabad often predicted its demise, and some even feared the possibility of mass suicides among the Rebbe’s followers.¹¹

In the days following the Rebbe’s death on 12 June 1994, his hasidim were the subject of intense public scrutiny as, in the words of a reporter for the *Washington Post*, “one of the century’s grand-scale examples of how a religious movement struggles to redefine its faith in the face of failed prophecy.”¹² *New York Newsday* featured the Rebbe’s death on its front page and ran several stories covering his funeral, reactions by

his followers in New York and Israel, as well as reports on the Rebbe's life and the question of Chabad's future. Besides comments from Chabad leaders and ordinary members of the Lubavitch community, *Newsday's* reports featured assessments of the state of the community by academics in the United States and Israel.¹³

In their earliest responses to the Rebbe's death, Lubavitcher hasidim turned to media practices with which they were familiar. The Rebbe's funeral procession was broadcast live via satellite, enabling an international audience of Chabad communities to watch some of their fellow hasidim in Crown Heights "dancing and singing in anticipation of [the Rebbe's] resurrection and the imminent redemption."¹⁴ Mediations of the Rebbe quickly began to play a new role in the community. "From a portable tape player, the voice of Grand Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson filled the Lubavitcher Jewish sect's cavernous hall in Crown Heights," recounted one report, published a week following the Rebbe's death. "They were listening for clues in his words..., trying to figure out how to persevere."¹⁵

By the end of 1994, a new set of practices evolved at the Rebbe's grave in Old Montefiore Cemetery in Queens, New York, where he is buried beside his predecessor. *New York* magazine reported that hundreds of followers sent personal petitions to the Rebbe via fax, which, in keeping with established Hasidic practice, were read aloud and placed at the gravesite. Chabad purchased a house near the cemetery to serve

as a kind of 24-hour visitor's center and decompression center, where the faithful can either prepare for their time at the grave or come down afterward. One room is used for study. Another chamber... is now a video room. Tapes of Schneerson play continually on a lone television surrounded by some chairs.... There's also a room with a long table and writing materials where believers can sit and compose the notes they leave on the rebbe's grave.... And of course, there are the fax machines that regularly print out, along with all of the expected messages and requests, wedding invitations for the rebbe.¹⁶

Press coverage of Chabad in the wake of the Rebbe's death continued to discuss rifts among members of the community, divided over their convictions that the Rebbe is the messiah, the nature of the Rebbe's existence, and the future leadership of Chabad. These internal conflicts were also disputed through Chabad's established media practices. Different factions within the community used print, broadcast, and recorded media, previously deployed in outreach efforts, to advocate in the general public sphere for their positions on messianism.

The Rebbe's status as the messiah was proclaimed forthrightly in *Melech HaMoshiach Is Here and He Will Redeem Us*, a video by singer Moshe Yess, produced and sponsored by Yechi Hamelech [Long Live the King] Productions. Recorded in Miami Beach "in front of a live, culturally-diverse audience" in June 1995, the video promotes Chabad messianism through a series of musical performances. In the first song, performed in a "country-music" idiom, Yess refers to hearing about the Rebbe through mainstream media, including *Time* magazine and evening news telecasts on ABC. Yess uses Chabad's large, heterogeneous audience of potential *ba'alei-t'shuvah* (Jews not raised in traditionally observant homes who decide to follow traditional religious practice), occasional supporters, and well-wishers to inform the style of his message and to link outreach with messianism. Yess implicates his ability to communicate the messianist message to so many different people in diverse idioms in a demonstration of its universal validity.

Opponents to the messianic movement within Chabad have used video both to assert their authority as official spokespersons for Lubavitch following the Rebbe's death and to articulate their position on his legacy. Here, too, the presence of the community's

sizeable penumbra of outside supporters is strategic. *Living the Legacy*, a video produced by the American Friends of Lubavitch in Washington, D.C., chronicles a tribute to the late Rebbe offered on 28 June 1995 by American political figures and Jewish leaders from around the world. On this occasion the U.S. Congress awarded the Congressional Gold Medal posthumously to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, “the only rabbi ever to receive America’s highest civilian award.” Offering a series of tributes to the Rebbe were members of Congress—including Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, Representative John Lewis, and Senator Joseph Lieberman—the chief rabbis of Israel, Russia, Morocco, and Australia; Itamar Rabinovitch, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States; and George Stephanopoulos, Senior Advisor to President Clinton, appearing on his behalf. Others honoring the Rebbe’s achievements included philanthropist Ronald Perelman, National Chairman of the American Friends of Lubavitch; Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel; Talmudic scholar Adin Steinsaltz; and violinist Itzhak Perlman, who performed a medley of Jewish songs “that were cherished by the Rebbe.”

Chabad was represented at this tribute by leaders from Lubavitch communities around the world and members of the Agudas Chassidei Chabad, the international movement’s umbrella organization, who, significantly, spoke of the Rebbe throughout the proceedings in the past tense. Near the beginning of *Living the Legacy*, Rabbi Moshe Herson, a member of this governing body, articulated its conceptualization of the Rebbe’s posthumous presence for his followers: “The Rebbe is not physically and visibly with us, although unquestionably his spirit is now in this room.” While this and similar statements made throughout the program were not without ambiguity (commenting on Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s legacy, the Chief Rabbi of Morocco stated that “no one

has the right to say that [the Rebbe] is dead”), they clearly avoided speaking of the Rebbe as living or as the messiah. Nor did they address Chabad’s messianic hopes in general or, indeed, Chabad’s future. Significantly, these remarks were made before prominent religious and political leaders outside of Lubavitch, who echoed these sentiments in their own remarks about the Rebbe’s legacy. This strategy facilitated Chabad leaders’ self-presentation to their “American friends” as these leaders wished to be seen by others of authority in the larger American and Jewish worlds and demonstrated the extent to which Chabad leaders depend on outsiders for the movement’s continued existence. Beyond an ongoing reliance on financial support from those outside Chabad, the movement requires continued engagement with others through its outreach efforts in order to fulfill its ultimate goal of ushering in the messianic age.

As these examples demonstrate, a telling element of media works created by Chabad since 12 June 1994 is how they conceptualize and articulate the Rebbe’s existence. What may seem straightforward and self-evident to those outside the community has been a fraught issue within Chabad, because the Rebbe’s viability has powerful implications for the community’s messianism, and, therefore, its sense of purpose. As Berger wrote shortly after the Rebbe’s death, a fundament of Jewish messianic belief is “the conviction that the Davidic Messiah who appears at the end of days will not die before completing his mission,” an argument Jews have made for centuries against Christian claims that Jesus of Nazareth is the messiah. In keeping with mainstream Orthodox Judaism, Berger argued that, when Menachem Mendel Schneerson was alive, “Messianic claims made for him were ill-advised but well within the

boundaries of normative Judaism... But the persistence of such a claim after his death is beyond the pale of Judaism.”¹⁷

In the months following Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s death, Lubavitcher hasidim responded to the theological challenges it posed in a variety of ways, reflecting a diversity of convictions about the Rebbe as messiah. Some Lubavitchers acknowledged that the Rebbe was dead and did not bring about redemption, but they remained vague about his status as the messiah. Explaining that in his final months the Rebbe was in fact preparing his followers for his death, one Lubavitcher hasid commented, “The Rebbe was able therefore to decide on the path to be taken after he had ceased to live. He could have ushered in the Redemption if he had chosen to do so, but he had taken another course.” Others argued that the Rebbe’s teachings about messianism are still valid and the onus of fulfilling Chabad’s mission of effecting the messianic age is incumbent upon his followers. In these remarks, Lubavitcher hasidim tended to avoid speaking directly of the Rebbe as either alive or dead and spoke instead of “the words of the Rebbe” or “the rebbe’s instructions.”¹⁸ Responses varied among Chabad’s unqualified messianists as well. Some accepted the Rebbe’s death as “a physical passing [that] represents a temporary stage” before his resurrection and revelation as the messiah, in defiance of longstanding Jewish doctrines about the messiah.¹⁹ Yet other Lubavitcher hasidim claimed forthrightly that the Rebbe is not dead and therefore poses no challenge to the protocols of traditional Jewish messianism. Rami Antian, treasurer of the International Campaign to Bring Moshiach, asserted that the Rebbe “is physically alive” and “is living in 770 [Eastern Parkway],” although “we can’t see him,” because “it’s an optical illusion.” Shmuel Spritzer, a member of the board of *Bais Moshiach* magazine (a

messianist Lubavitch weekly), agreed, explaining that the Rebbe is invisible because *rebeyim* “have two bodies, one in which they physically live and another in which they move around. They can be in more than one place at once.... The rebbe will reveal himself, no question.”²⁰

As different groups within Chabad presented their positions on messianism in public, they sometimes made striking use of media practices with which they are familiar. Especially remarkable is a live, international broadcast on 31 January 1996, marking the date when Menachem Mendel Schneerson assumed leadership of Chabad in 1951. Promoted with a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* and other newspapers, this broadcast links Lubavitch communities around the world with Chabad’s central headquarters in Crown Heights “to declare the Rebbe as King Moshiach and to pray for his immediate revelation.”²¹ Following the protocols of a live news broadcast, the hour-long program is anchored by “news correspondent” Jeffrey Weiser, who is clean-shaven, unlike the hasidim seen in the broadcast, though he wears a skull cap, as he is “reporting” from inside the Chabad synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway. Weiser introduces Rabbi Shmuel Butman, chairman of the International Campaign to Welcome Moshiach, an especially active messianist movement within Chabad. (In the mid-1990s Butman presided over a “Moshiach store” in Crown Heights, selling messianist literature and media as well as a variety of promotional materials.) Butman describes what is taking place: “Central to the *khosid* [hasid] is a *farbrengen* [spiritual gathering with a rebbe].... And there’s no *farbrengen* without the Rebbe.... Here 770 looks like it hasn’t looked in a long time. Everyone is here to this great *farbrengen*. Everyone is waiting for the Rebbe. The Rebbe’s table is here. The Rebbe’s chair is here. And everyone is waiting—

any moment—for the great revelation when we will meet with the Rebbe again.”

Butman explains that the chairman of the rabbinical court in Crown Heights is now in the synagogue and is “inviting the Rebbe to this great *farbrengen*.” The broadcast then cuts to a brief clip of vintage footage of the Rebbe entering the same space amid a crowd of hasidim. On the sound track, the Rebbe is heard speaking about the messiah’s imminent arrival. Then the broadcast returns to Butman and Weiser for continued coverage of the event, which offers a series of live connections to Chabad congregations in Russia, South Africa, Israel, France, Australia, and the United States, where local rabbis exhort their communities to call for the revelation of the Rebbe as the messiah. These live, remote segments alternate with sequences of vintage audio and video of the Rebbe, starting with his first *farbrengen* as the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, in which he articulated tenets of Chabad messianism before enthusiastic crowds of followers. At the program’s culmination, multiple images on a split screen present Chabad communities around the world joining in the simultaneous chanting of the messianists’ proclamation, “Yechi Adoneinu Moreinu V’Rabbenu Melech Hamoshiach L’olom Vo’ed!” [Long live our lord, our teacher, our master, king messiah forever and ever]. This chant, Butman explains, is meant to “bring life” to the messiah and effect his imminent revelation.²²

This telecast exemplifies the facility with which Chabad messianists draw on their established media practices and extensive media inventory to foster a new kind of spiritual communion among widely scattered fellow hasidim. The broadcast articulates a crucial juncture between the diachronic axis of the Rebbe’s leadership of Chabad and the synchronic axis of contemporary international devotion to him. Whereas *farbrengens* broadcast when the Rebbe was alive extended devotional attention to his charismatic

leadership to followers worldwide, this broadcast centered their attention on a shared conviction that the Rebbe is the messiah and that, through Chabad's existing institutional and communications infrastructure, they can be united in prayer for his reappearance. The telecast's imbrication of live broadcast with vintage footage of the Rebbe was not meant to present the Rebbe's return as an actuality, but rather offered a simulation of his followers' shared aspirations. For those who believe that the Rebbe is the messiah and anxiously await his reappearance, this montage of live and vintage video rendered their imagination of the Rebbe's redemptive return in the form of a mediated experience of communal viewing. Drawing on the familiarity of Lubavitcher hasidim with video images of the Rebbe, especially in the context of watching a *farbrengen*, this broadcast demonstrated new ways of engaging with these images. In the face of the Rebbe's continued absence, this broadcast gave a new sense of purpose to a virtual gathering of believers around the world, validated by its enactment before an international general audience.

During the week following this telecast, Agudas Chassidei Chabad responded with a full-page announcement of its own in the *New York Times*, denouncing such "recent statements and declarations by individuals and groups concerning the matter of Moshiach and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of sainted memory"—thereby clearly speaking of him as deceased—and advising "the public to exercise discretion when confronted with unauthorized public statements in the media or otherwise, concerning the Rebbe and his teachings."²³ Even as this statement addressed the general public—responding, perhaps, to anti-messianist censure from other Jews, especially in the non-hasidic Orthodox community—it also asserted the authority of

Agudas Chassidei Chabad within the Lubavitch community. Undaunted, the International Campaign to Bring Moshiach organized another special broadcast on 31 March 1996, the Rebbe's birthday, with messages aired in multiple languages (including Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic) on mainstream cable television stations from The Weather Channel to TV Food Network. In a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, the broadcast's producers informed readers that "today, your TV will finally broadcast something of value." The ad exhorted readers to celebrate the Rebbe's birthday by focusing on his "revelation that 'Moshiach is on the way,' ushering in the era of Redemption," and to order a "Redemption book and video package."²⁴ Here, broadcasting and video acquire legitimacy as they assume the Rebbe's traditional role of revelation, while properties of these media, especially television—visibility, simultaneity, liveness—inform the discourse of the Rebbe's current state of being. In Butman's words, "Moshiach has become a major media event."²⁵

This contest between factions within Chabad was not only conducted in mainstream media but scrutinized therein as well. The *New York Times* reported in February 1996 that some Lubavitch leaders, including rabbis who served on the executive committee of Agudas Chassidei Chabad, found the activities of the most outspoken messianists in their community "embarrassing" and undeserving of the extensive attention they had attracted, being the work of a "fringe" movement within Chabad. The *Times* also explained that "when the rebbe died, many expected Rabbi Butman and his followers to desist and accept his death as proof that they had been wrong. Instead, they gradually stepped up the campaign."²⁶ Several observers of Chabad characterized these developments as exemplifying the findings of *When Prophecy Fails*, a 1956 sociological

study of how a contemporary community coped with the consequences of an unfulfilled prophecy—in this case, the failed prediction that beings from outer space would destroy the Earth, as claimed by a group in the suburban Midwest of the United States shortly after World War II. This prophecy's failure led not to the group's disillusionment but rather to "increased fervor" and especially to increased efforts at "publicity seeking" on behalf of their beliefs. The study's authors theorized that this response constituted an effort to resolve the "cognitive dissonance" between expectations engendered by prophecy and their failure to materialize. *When Prophecy Fails* claimed that the fervor of belief can become so strong that "it may... be less painful to tolerate the dissonance than to discard the belief and admit one had been wrong." In addition to efforts to rationalize the apparent failure of prophecy, proselytizing becomes a key activity for the disappointed believers: "If more and more people can be persuaded that the system of belief is correct, then clearly it must, after all, be correct."²⁷

In their analyses of Chabad's activities since June 1994, some scholars have argued that the responses of Lubavitcher hasidim to the Rebbe's death afford an opportunity to nuance the conclusions of *When Prophecy Fails*. Anthropologist Simon Dein posited that "even such an intense religious group as Lubavitch are not a group of fanatics who follow doctrine without question," but rather have tried "to reason their way through facts and doctrine in the pursuit of understanding." Followers of Chabad, he claimed, "coped with this failed prophecy by appealing to a number of rationalizations which not only preserve, but enhance, their commitment to messianic prophecy." A central strategy for Chabad members, which Dein termed a "process of spiritualization,"

entails a shift from “the empirically testable belief that the Rebbe is the messiah” to “a superrational unfalsifiable belief that he is more powerful in the spiritual world.”²⁸

Lubavitcher hasidim articulate this spiritualization most readily in terms of the Rebbe’s visibility or presence. Dein reported that shortly after the Rebbe’s death, many of his followers “expressed the idea that he would be resurrected. Most emphasized that he still had a major presence in the world and that, without the hindrance of his physical body, his spiritual presence was even greater.”²⁹ In a study of responses to the Rebbe’s death among Lubavitcher hasidim in Canada, sociologist William Shaffir noted how Chabad leaders offered prooftexts to model this new understanding of the Rebbe’s place in the world, and how his hasidim might engage it, by recalling Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s own account of how Shneur Zalman, the first Lubavitcher rebbe, cited the Zohar, the foundational work of Jewish mysticism: “‘A Tzaddik [sage] who departs from this world is present in all the worlds more than he was during his lifetime.’” To which one hasid commented: “The leader remains a leader even now and even though not seen physically still remains a leader.... Even after his death, his presence can be felt more than even before, not being limited to the physical body.”³⁰

It was not inevitable that discussions of the Rebbe’s existence after 12 June 1994 would center on visibility, but neither is it surprising. Seeing the Rebbe—not only in person but, much more widely, through an array of mediations of both still and moving images—had become a hallmark of Chabad hasidim under Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s leadership. Portraits of the Rebbe have functioned at times like a brand for Chabad, at times like a devotional icon; both the Rebbe himself and his followers characterized contemplating his image with spiritual value, drawing on precedents within

Chabad teachings that are, in turn, rooted in rabbinic and biblical prooftexts. In his final months, the Rebbe had become more and more like a portrait— silent and immobile, displayed with special reverence. His stillness enabled followers to project onto him their own understandings of his significance independent of his agency.

At the time of the Rebbe's death, author Chaim Potok suggested that “the media-conscious orientation of the Habad movement, starting with the arrival of Yosef Yitzak in the United States, may have been a key factor in its promulgation of a strongly messianic ideology. Messianism may have been seen as a device to attract more media attention to the movement and its outreach goals.”³¹ I would argue, conversely, that Chabad's elaborate media practices have enhanced the community's ability to imagine the Rebbe as the messiah: a figure with worldwide renown and impact, exhorting his followers to make unprecedented use of the divine gift of technology to advance redemption. In some ways, the Rebbe was like the “miracle of television”—able to be in more than one place at the same time, widely seen and yet immaterial.

The extensive inventory of moving images of Menachem Mendel Schneerson has acquired new significance since his death. Many videos link the Rebbe's image with his words and provide opportunities to recall his performance as communal teacher and inspirational leader. While his discourses at *farbrengens* have been transcribed and published, like the teachings of generations of hasidic leaders, videodocumentation of the Rebbe at these gatherings provides a record of the performance and reception of his spiritual instruction as well as the instruction itself. Punctuated by the enthusiastic singing of disciples, these recordings model for the viewer an experience of the Rebbe as a charismatic leader quite apart from the content of his discourses. Other films and

videos of the Rebbe, often recorded without sound, document the Rebbe's activities as a public figure: leading prayers, meeting with visitors, overseeing ritual practices, greeting long lines of followers. Even amateur footage of the Rebbe simply walking along Eastern Parkway attracts attention, offering a reminder of his powerful, active presence among his followers. This video inventory can both remind viewers of the Rebbe's absence and suggest ways to compensate for it—even by transforming the Rebbe's physical absence into an advantage. Valued during his lifetime as means of extending the enlightening encounter with the Rebbe to followers far from Crown Heights, these images now can enable subjunctive engagements with the Rebbe for those who remember him and those who can only know him through his virtual presence. Indeed, as some of his disciples have argued, the Rebbe may be more powerful a spiritual leader as an invisible, dematerialized presence—or rather, as a virtual reality—for his followers, exemplified by his legacy of mediations and media practices.

¹ See Alter Eliyahu Friedman, *From Exile to Redemption: Chassidic Teachings of the Rebbe and the preceding Rebbeim of Chabad*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Sichos in English, 1992).

² Yosef I. Abramowitz, "What Happens If the Rebbe Dies?" *Moment*, April 1993, 70.

³ "It's OK to Get Excited about Moshiach" [advertisement], [1992?].

⁴ David Berger, *The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Oxford: Littman, 2001), 23.

⁵ Berger, *The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, 23.

⁶ Ari. L. Goldman, "Debate Splits Lubavitcher Hasidim," *New York Times*, 29 January 1993, B2.

⁷ Simon Dein, "What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails: The Case of Lubavitch," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (fall 2001): 392.

⁸ Abramowitz, "What Happens If the Rebbe Dies?" 33. Quote from Schiffman originally appeared in *Long Island Jewish World*, 29 January 1993.

⁹ Goldman, "Debate Splits Lubavitcher Hasidim," B1-B2.

¹⁰ Craig Horowitz, "Holy War," *New York*, 14 February 1994, 28.

¹¹ Berger, *The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, 10.

¹² Laurie Goodstein, "Schneerson's Followers Cope With Void of Failed Expectations," *Washington Post*, 19 June 1994, A3.

¹³ "Lubavitch Leader Dies at 92," *New York Newsday*, 13 June 1994, 1, 4-6, 20-21 (encompassing several articles).

¹⁴ Dein, "What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails," 397.

¹⁵ Goodstein, "Schneerson's Followers Cope With Void of Failed Expectations," A3.

¹⁶ Craig Horowitz, "Beyond Belief," *New York* 28:25 (19 June 1995), 42. The custom of inviting the Rebbe to attend weddings as a means of invoking his blessing was widely practiced while he was still alive.

¹⁷ David Berger, "Moshiach and The Rebbe" [letter to the editor], *Jewish Press*, 1 July 1994, 74.

¹⁸ William Shaffir, "When Prophecy Is Not Validated: Explaining the Unexpected in a Messianic Campaign," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 2 (December 1995): 127-128.

¹⁹ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Campaign expands to airwaves to declare late rebbe 'Moshiach,'" *JTA Daily News Bulletin* (Jewish Telegraphic Agency), 9 February 1996, 2.

²⁰ Cohen, "Campaign expands to airwaves to declare late rebbe 'Moshiach,'" 1-2.

²¹ [Full-page advertisement], *New York Times*, 31 January 1996, A11.

²² International Demonstration of Unity to Greet Moshiach [videocassette], (Brooklyn: International Campaign to Welcome Moshiach, 1996).

²³ "Statement by Agudas Chassidei Chabad-Lubavitch" [advertisement], *New York Times*, 9 February 1996, A23. The announcement is dated 30 January 1996.

²⁴ "The Time of Your Redemption Has Arrived" [advertisement], *New York Times*, 31 March 1996, sec. 1, 28.

²⁵ Frank Bruni, "To Some, Messiah Is the Message," *New York Times*, 25 February 1996, sec. 1, 38.

²⁶ Bruni, "To Some, Messiah Is the Message," 38.

²⁷ Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group that Predicted the Destruction of the World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966[1956]), 3, 209, 27, 28. *When Prophecy Fails* was originally published by the University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis). The introductory chapter discusses past examples of false apocalyptic forecasts and pseudo-messiahs, including seventeenth-century self-proclaimed messiah Shabbetai Zevi.

²⁸ Dein, "What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails," 399, 383.

²⁹ Dein, "What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails," 397.

³⁰ Shaffir, "When Prophecy Is Not Validated," 129.

³¹ Chaim Potok, "Rabbi Schneerson: One of a Kind," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 June 1994, as cited in M. Avrum Ehrlich, *The Messiah of Brooklyn: Understanding Lubavitch Hasidism Past and Present* (Jersey City: KTAV, 2004), 173.