

## **The Rebbe's Body**

It would surely be an overstatement to suggest that technology has made Menachem Mendel Schneerson into the messiah. Schneerson's remarkable life and personality ensured that he would be remembered and revered for generations to come. He nurtured Chabad from a small group of mostly Russian Jews to a highly visible international movement, all while cultivating personal relationships with both his followers and less religious Jews. More than forty years of superior leadership and fatherly guidance ensured his position as a revered spiritual leader. With or without technological advances, the man's wisdom, kindness, and inspiration earned him a reputation as a religious teacher who would always float a little above the sidewalks he walked.

Although videotape cannot be given sole credit for making this widely-admired man into the messiah, Jeffrey Shandler's research suggests that technology has played a strongly enabling role in the messianist movement. Not only has technology "prompted new defining practices for Lubavitcher hasidim," but these new practices also buoyed the widespread phenomenon of venerating the Rebbe as the messiah, especially after his death. Videotapes and internet feeds have aided both the beliefs and the practices of Chabad messianists; that is, they have made the claim that the Rebbe is the messiah more believable while also creating the possibility for practices that support and enhance this belief. In particular, it is the way in which this technology can represent and render present the body of Schneerson that marks its unique effect(iveness).

Video and internet technology, by allowing the Rebbe's body and voice to remain both present and renewed, have enabled a paradox: the Rebbe is here, but he is not here; he is living, but he receives messages at his grave.<sup>1</sup> The Rebbe is present when his followers continue to see images of him standing, sitting, teaching and even walking down the street. The videos of the

Rebbe walking and doing other seemingly mundane tasks are particularly effective at simply reinforcing his presence. The message to be taken from these ordinary videos is not a particular lesson or sermon or even life example, but rather a reassurance of the continuing existence of the Rebbe's body and voice. These images and recordings also renew the Rebbe because the edited videos create a new experience of the Rebbe and his teachings by creating new—and paradoxically, “live”—interactions with him. For example, Shandler calls attention to the January 1996 broadcast where live footage is interspersed with historical footage of the Rebbe to create an illusion of the Rebbe entering and leading a *farbrengen* with his followers. Although not designed to be deceptive, the broadcast shows people celebrating the Rebbe and the Rebbe himself in those same spaces at different times. This technology not only helps followers close the geographical gaps between communities, but it also creates the impression of closing temporal gaps between the Rebbe's living years and the current moment. It insists both: “[T]here's no *farbrengen* without the Rebbe,” and “Everyone is here to this great *farbrengen*.” Logically, then, the Rebbe is present for his followers, even as they continue to “invite” him. Samuel Heilman's description of the Rebbe is even more appropriate now than they were in the months after his stroke: he is “alive and dead at the same time.”

The pervasive presence of the Rebbe via images of his body also helps us to understand how some Lubavitchers find it more plausible for the Rebbe's body to be present after his death than for his body to be only decaying in the ground. Hasidism has always had an uneasy relationship to a stark spirit-body dualism, and has consistently distanced itself from forms of belief that consider the body a mere impediment to spiritual fulfillment. The body and the spirit, rather, are intimately connected, with the body serving as a crucial part of religious practice. With the importance of the body and its fundamental connection to the spirit in focus, some of

the seemingly outrageously claims of messianists begin to come into focus. In particular, if Lubavitcher Hasidim almost universally agree that the Rebbe is spiritually present, it is neither unreasonable nor unlikely that his followers would ask where his body is. The technology of video and streaming on the internet might help to soothe any cognitive dissonance—resulting from the *apparent* situation of a present spirit but absent body—by answering that the Rebbe’s body *is* here too. In addition to feeling his spirit, messianists can see his body and hear his voice courtesy of technology.

Together the belief of the importance of the body, its connection to the spirit, the certainty of presence of the Rebbe’s spirit, and the images of his body via technology help us understand such seemingly illogical statements as: The Rebbe “is physically alive [and] is living in 770 [Eastern Parkway],” although “we can’t see him,” because “it’s an optical illusion.” What at first seems farfetched begins to make sense in the context of this messianist’s world view: the Rebbe’s spirit is present, his body and spirit are connected, so his body must be present too. Repeated viewing of broadcasts of the Rebbe’s body, especially doing mundane activities, would help the messianist to both express and reinforce his beliefs. Another believer who explained, Rebbes “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.” One can imagine how continual exposure to images of the Rebbe—the nearly omnipresent portraits in addition to videotape and internet feed—would fortify (or perhaps even foster) the religious belief that the Rebbe has multiple bodies. Thanks to technology, his body and voice can be in many places at the same time. In its simplest form, then, the steady stream of newly edited videotape and internet feeds help followers experience their Rebbe and also explain how his body can be both in the grave and still present in the lives of the living.

This technology, then, can help understand the views of Chabad messianists when they claim to espouse a true Jewish messiah who others believe is dead. The traditional Jewish messiah cannot be a disembodied soul because he must bring redemption before he departs the world. For instance, Jews have rejected Jesus as the messiah because he died before bringing redemption, and his body is no longer present on earth.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps herein lies the difference Chabad messianists see between Jesus and the Rebbe: while tradition has it that Jesus' body was missing from the tomb, for Chabad messianists the Rebbe's body is dually present: both in the grave and in the world.

Sarah Imhoff

---

1 Technology of other sorts has also blurred the lines between life and death, while simultaneously highlighting the difficulties of drawing distinctions between body and spirit. Neurological death has been a notorious matter of contention in Orthodox communities, demonstrated as recently as a 2008 legal case in Washington, DC. See, for instance, "Jewish Law's Meaning of Death Nears Court Fight" in *The Washington Post*, November 7, 2008, p. B01.

<sup>2</sup> Except according to some Christian traditions, where the body of Christ is present as the bread eaten during communion.