

Fieldwork as Reality Check: Commentary on “The Virtual Rebbe”

Whenever I encounter an article, news clipping, documentary, or other story about the Lubavitcher Hasidic community in Crown Heights, I hold my breath. Will the story be a celebration of Lubavitcher beliefs, a sort of love story extolling the virtues of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and his flock of followers forging a life for themselves amidst the disbelieving, secularized, largely amoral and un-godly American community? Or, will the story be a critique of this steadfastly religious community, couched in the frankly biased voice of older scholarship, or the detached amusement, irony, even cynicism of present-day postmodernist interrogation?

There appear to be no other choices. These perspectives have essentially defined the editorial and scholarly coverage of this community since its first presence in the United States in the 1940s, creating an interpretive context for Lubavitcher life that is neither totally true nor false. Defined by its outsider-ness, this literature portrays a little-understood community as either profoundly disillusioned, or one that is largely un-self-critical and in conflict.

Jeffrey Shandler’s chapter, “The Virtual Rebbe,” from his upcoming book on modern technology and Jewish religious practice in America, is no exception. While he makes a good case for the polarity of Lubavitcher thought concerning the messianic potential of the late Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994, he also uses common and prevailing stereotypes of Lubavitchers to construct his argument.

On the one hand, he is correct: long before the Rebbe’s death, evidence for his messianic claim was evident in the community. While conducting fieldwork in the late 1980s and early 1990s, collecting information about the performance of Lubavitcher music, for example, I was well aware of the growing intensification of messianic fever. One song in particular, “We want Moshiach, Now!” was sung over and over at farbrengen and was often touted as the first song in English to take on the status of ‘nigun.’ “It really works best in English,” one of my informants

told me. “When the Rebbe shouts NOW, it just has so much intensity! There’s no other word like the English, NOW!”

On the other hand, his division of the community following the Rebbe’s death into two well-defined camps: those who believe in the Rebbe’s eventual return as Messiah and those who feel betrayed and disillusioned since his passing, is an over-simplification of the varied responses to the status of the Rebbe that have arisen within the community over the past fifteen years. This set-up, although convenient for Shandler’s larger argument concerning the use of modern technology to keep the Rebbe in virtual messianic space, does some injustice to the variety of Lubavitcher responses to the Rebbe’s death and to a middle, perhaps more thoughtful position.

What troubles me is that Lubavitchers always seem to come across as alike in these accounts—and I include Shandler’s here. They appear as homogeneous, monothematic thinkers, even a little ‘crazy’ or ‘dumb’ (i.e. they can’t distinguish ‘reality’ from ‘religious fantasy’). No one (including Shandler) actually says this explicitly; but, there is always an underlying, sometimes ironic, or ‘objective,’ authorial tone that seems to say to readers: “Can you believe this?”

This tone is somewhat heightened in Shandler’s account by his division of the community into those convenient (and familiar) bounded binaries: the messianic fanatics and the disillusioned faithful. Both of these stereotypes, though handy for Shandler’s rhetorical purposes, never seem to adequately portray the variety and complexity of Lubavitcher thought that I came to know during many years of fieldwork in the community.

Thus, what always seems to be missing in these accounts is a certain crucial perspective--that of Lubavitchers, themselves. I am not speaking of the various quotations taken from Lubavitcher advertisements, publications, or quotations embedded within a *New York Times* article. These, too, are constructed by the unusually savvy Lubavitcher leadership and public relations, and pressmen, who are well aware of the skepticism and sometimes outright prejudices of their non-Lubavitcher audiences. What I am talking about are the nuanced, the ambiguous, the

‘fuzzy’ categories of thought that more adequately describe the many and varied ‘every-day’ members of this community and their responses to the Rebbe’s death.

I understand that Shandler is focusing not so much on the variety of responses to this loss, but on the uses of various media to enhance the Rebbe’s potential status as Messiah. And, as he rightly points out, there is nothing within the vast body of Jewish law or practice to prohibit the use of such technology. In fact, there are many encouragements to do so. Technology is believed to be inherently neutral—and, if put to good (i.e. Godly) use, can be a positive force. Thus, a virtual, spiritually encoded Rebbe on a screen can be seen as no more than a modernizing take on an older practice. For example, many stories surrounding the performance of nigunim that I collected, attest to the power of the song to bring forth its original composer and many of my informants stated that during such a performance they could feel, even see, the presence of a former Rebbe or well-known musician. Television and Internet broadcasts simply make that ‘seeing’ more ‘modern.’

A “virtual gathering of believers” should not be a surprise here—it is simply a creative extension of a well-known practice, one that Lubavitchers have been using for centuries to re-cast and revitalize a deeper, core practice. For Lubavitchers, just like the rest of us, are living in the America of the twenty-first century and although they may lead religious lives, they are also daily negotiating their relationships with the contemporary world around them, a process that has allowed them to more comfortably hold onto core beliefs and practices, while at the same time adapting to their contemporary environment.

What is missing here and in most depictions of this community are the many distinctions, differences, and complexities of thought that exist within this community (and everywhere), that often emerge in the context of simply talking with people about their lives—that is, doing ethnographic fieldwork—that process of actually talking with the everyday, ‘on-the-ground’ person who is not necessarily the public face of the community, nor its critic. Fieldwork, as I frequently tell my students, is a good reality check, one that prevents us from falling into easy

category-making in the service of proving or disproving a grander idea. Life is messy, often chaotic, and simple categorization does not do it justice. Relying only on other scholarly work, journalistic reports, or in-house publications to gather information is necessary, indeed, but not sufficient to adequately portray the richness and diversity of Lubavitcher life, even as it struggles with virtual Rebbes and Messiahs.

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