

On False Messianism

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The eleventh perek of Maseches Sanhedrin in the Bavli, known in rabbinic literature simply as "Chelek", is a treasure-trove of critically important aggadic statements and discussions. Recently, one passage in particular-fifteen words to be exact-emerged from relative obscurity to take center stage in Judaism as the most often-cited and fundamental proof-text for a hotly contested doctrine.

"Rav said, 'if he [Moshiach] is from the living, he is similar to [kegon] Rabbenu HaKadosh; if he is from the dead, he is similar to [kegon] Daniel Ish Chamudos'" (Sanhedrin 98b). Rashi suggests two possible readings. The first is that we disregard the word "kegon" and understand Rav to mean that if Moshiach will be a living person, he will be Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, since he suffered greatly and was a completely righteous individual; if Moshiach is a dead person, he will be Daniel, since he too suffered greatly and was a completely righteous individual. The second interpretation incorporates the word "kegon", so that Rav is telling us that if our model for Moshiach (i.e. the person to whom Moshiach will be most similar) is someone alive, it is Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi; if our model is a dead person, it is Daniel. Rashi gives us no clue as to whether he preferred one reading to another or regarded both as equally possible.

From Rav's statement according to Rashi's first reading, (and also from a somewhat similar passage in the Yerushalmi on Brachos 2:4) Lubavitcher chasidim claim that Chazal would not disapprove of their conviction that their deceased Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, will rise from his grave in Queens for us "to greet him" as Moshiach. At this point, they argue, all that remains is merely for us to greet him, since he has already fulfilled the criteria for a positive and confident identification of Moshiach as codified in Rambam's Mishneh Torah in Hilchos Melochim. They insist that he is "be-chezkas Moshiach" because "he has compelled all of Israel to follow the Torah" and "has fought the wars of the Lord." Many prominent Lubavitcher rabbis go further, and claim that the Rebbe has fulfilled even the criteria for Moshiach be-vadai, since "he has returned the Jews to their land" (the recent wave of Russian aliyah) and "has built the Beis HaMikdosh in its place" (the renovation of the building at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, referred to by the Rebbe as Beis Chayyeinu).

Moreover, many insist (over 150 rabbis in a "psak din") that in any event we must regard the Rebbe as Moshiach be-vadai, since he himself prophesied the following facts (among others): that the process of refining the world for Moshiach, the so-called "avodas ha-berurim," has already been completed, that Moshiach has already arrived, and that we are already living in the age of the redemption [zman geulaseinu]. (That the Rebbe was a bona fide navi, a prophet in the most literal sense of the term. is beyond question to the vast majority of

Lubavitchers.) And, finally, they believe that it is clearly implicit in many of the Rebbe's statements that he himself is Moshiach.

Later, we will return to the vast chasm between what Lubavitchers have possibly proven from the gemara (i.e. that Moshiach might turn out to be someone who has already lived and died) and what they actually needed to prove: that Moshiach can start the final redemptive process, earn a positive and confident identification by the Jewish people as Moshiach, and then die in the middle of it all, only to be resurrected when the generation is ready to "greet him." But first, let us examine the other Lubavitch sources.

After scouring fifteen centuries of rabbinic literature, Lubavitchers discovered precisely two passages that would seem to concur with their reading of the gemara in Sanhedrin and to extend its principle to dead messiahs other than Daniel. One is found in Abarbanel's *Yeshuos Meshicho*, in a re-examination of a midrash that had been cited by a priest to Ramban in the famous disputation at Barcelona in 1263. When confronted with the midrash, which states that Moshiach was born on the day of the destruction of the Temple, Ramban responded that he did not accept that particular midrash. In any event, Ramban went on to say that if he were forced to accept the midrash, he would conclude simply that Moshiach had never died, and had been alive somewhere all these centuries.

In *Yeshuos Meshicho*, Abarbanel writes that although his own position is not to accept this midrash literally, if one were forced to take it literally (which, again, he does not), it could be understood in light of Rav's statement in Sanhedrin, i.e. that the person destined to be Moshiach may indeed have been born on the day the Temple was destroyed, and has already died. Interestingly and importantly, Abarbanel doesn't seem to consider this a concession to the Christian point of view, and that's for precisely the same reason it doesn't support Lubavitch claims. The person who will one day be Moshiach may be someone who has already lived and died, but he has not already started his messianic career. He has not already established himself as the Messiah in actu and then died in the middle of redeeming the world, only to come back later and finish what he started, which is exactly what Christians and Lubavitchers believe.

Moreover, as we mentioned, Abarbanel declares unequivocally that he does not accept even this face-value understanding of the midrash, and prefers another, non-literal reading, one that he goes on to outline. The literal reading he suggests in place of Ramban's is intended only as a *dechiya*, something with which to respond to a Christian debate partner. So Abarbanel actually rejects the possibility of even a resurrected Moshiach. If you need further proof of this, take a look at his commentary to *Yeshayah* (53), where he explains that the "Eved Hashem" described there cannot be Moshiach, since the *pesukim* there state that the Eved Hashem died and Moshiach will not die.

Now for the second "source." In his encyclopedic work Sdei Chemed, Rabbi Chayyim Chizkiah Medini (1832-1904) transcribes a lengthy letter he received from an obscure rabbi. At one point in the letter the rabbi states that Moshiach might come from the dead, and cites the gemara in Sanhedrin as a source for this. But the Sdei Chemed doesn't concur with the rabbi's suggestion anywhere, and it should be clear to anyone with even a passing familiarity with the genre of published rabbinic correspondence that quoting the full text of your correspondent's letter doesn't mean that you agree with every word of it you don't respond to. Yet not only do Lubavitchers take for granted that the Sdei Chemed agreed with everything written to him-and even endorsed it all-they present the words of the obscure rabbi to unsuspecting audiences as if they were the very words of the Sdei Chemed himself.

But none of what I just said is even necessary. This text, much like the passage in Yeshuos Meshicho and the first position presented in Rashi to Sanhedrin 98b, has nothing at all to do with what Lubavitchers need to prove, namely that Moshiach can start his job, complete many of his messianic duties, reveal his identity to us, attain "official Moshiach status," and then die, only to be resurrected later when the generation is fully "ready to accept him" and "wants Moshiach badly enough."

Indeed, it is clearly implicit in the context of Abarbanel's dechiya of the Christian proof that the resurrected Moshiach he suggests cannot be a Moshiach who has already started his job, i.e. has done things that would cause his generation to regard that he had ushered in some sort of "era of the redemption." For if Abarbanel were to concede that possibility, he would be conceding precisely what the priest was trying to prove from the midrash, precisely what Abarbanel set out to be docheh in the first place.

Let's also take another look at the first interpretation in Rashi. As we have already seen, what it states is that Daniel, like Rabbenu HaKadosh, is a candidate for Moshiach since he suffered greatly (being thrown in the lions' den) and was a completely righteous individual. What it does not state is that Daniel did anything messianic in nature or initiated any messianic process. Daniel's great work on behalf of Torah and the Jewish people isn't even mentioned. Now Daniel certainly did at least as much for the Jewish people as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and Daniel's Torah teachings, his prophecies, and the repercussions of his leadership were certainly still manifest in the world in the days of Rashi. So if Rashi had been even slightly willing to accept what Lubavitchers today believe, namely, that we recognize a dead man as Moshiach because of messianic activities begun in his lifetime, why didn't he even mention Daniel's illustrious career?

So there we have our three sources for a resurrected Moshiach: (1) a lishna kamma in Rashi (which might apply only to Daniel), (2) an interpretation that in one place in his writings Abarbanel presents as one he rejects, and in another place simply assumes is wrong, and (3) a couple of lines in a long letter written to the Sedei Chemed that the recipient decided to print in its entirety. And even if

one finds these sources convincing, compelling, and authoritative, I must again stress that they have nothing whatsoever to do with what Lubavitchers want them to prove, i.e. that Moshiach can experience death after beginning his messianic mission in our world, and then consummate that mission when the world "greet him." Moreover, we have seen that the two most important sources seem to exclude precisely that possibility.

So then how is it that Lubavitchers have had some success in convincing people with these sources? Their method is simple: (1) Out of the variety of ideologies within their camp, they choose the minimalist, most "pareve" version of their position to defend, and then (2) they exploit its vagueness when they defend it. Let me explain. Lubavitchers themselves are divided over the nature of their messianism. Some believe that the Rebbe will rise from the dead; others say that he is still alive in some metaphorical sense (tzaddikim live on through their deeds; etc.); yet another group insists that the Rebbe is still physically alive in the most literal sense and is just "concealed" from us right now.

So when Lubavitchers argue using the gemara in Sanhedrin and the sources we discussed above that cite it, they are choosing the first, minimalist version of their ideology, i.e. that the Rebbe actually died, but will come back as Moshiach. Then they attempt to diminish the radical nature of their position even further by letting you remain with the impression that the Rebbe is not already Moshiach in their eyes. But when you ask them why they expect specifically the Rebbe to be resurrected, and not any other dead tzaddik, they say something interesting: they tell you that the Rebbe in his lifetime fulfilled all of Rambam's criteria for being "be-chezkas Moshiach," and that he has never lost that status. They might add, or say instead, that in his last years the Rebbe prophesied that we are already living in the age of the redemption and that Moshiach is already here. It becomes exceedingly clear that the Lubavitch position is that Moshiach has already arrived, and has died after arriving. Indeed, they refer to him in his current state as "Melech HaMoshiach," and not as "someone who will be Moshiach at some point in the future." Moreover, they perforce must adopt the position that the Rebbe is already Moshiach. Otherwise, how could they justify insisting that the Rebbe, out of all the deceased Torah giants in Jewish history, is going to be the one that will come back from the dead to be Moshiach?

So what have rabbinic authorities throughout the ages had to say about this, the real ideology of Lubavitch, a messianic ideology identical to the fundamental, defining Christian one? The Torah sources on the subject are explicit, unequivocal, and unanimous: they declare that a messiah who dies in the middle of his career cannot be the Messiah. This argument can be found in the aforementioned Vikkuach HaRamban at Barcelona, as well as in many other sources, including Cherev Pippiyos, Sefer Niztochon HaYoshon, the Vikkuach HaMeyuchas LeRadak, Rambash HaMeili's Milchemes Mitzvah, and R. Moshe HaKohen's Ezer HaEmunah. It can be found also in Rambam's Mishneh Torah (Hilkhos Melakhim) in the very passage that Lubavitchers themselves love to

quote. After providing us with the criteria that identify someone as "be-chezkas Moshiach," Rambam continues, "...But if he does not succeed to this extent, or is killed, it is known that he is not the one the Torah promised."

The Mishneh Torah's words, "or is killed" [neherag], are straightforward and unambiguous. But the Lubavitchers explain this away by pointing out that the Rebbe was not "killed;" he merely died. They add that for the Rebbe to have been "killed" would mean that the Rebbe's campaign for Torah observance, his "wars" for the Jews, had failed, and we all know that Lubavitch outreach efforts around the world have not abated-have even intensified-in the years since the Rebbe's death. Besides the fact that this turns the Rambam's statement on its head, a simple reductio ad absurdum shows a glaring problem: if we were to read the Rambam this way, we would be forced to identify almost every prominent rabbinic figure in history as still being be-chezkas Moshiach, since their teachings and the results of their leadership are still thriving in the world to this day. To be sure, Lubavitchers try to get around this problem by creatively manipulating the text and its attendant concepts, but the only real result of their clever sophistry is the mockery they make out of a critically important passage in the Mishneh Torah, the only halachic discussion of Moshiach in rabbinic literature.

Of course, an entire camp of Lubavitcher chasidim has sidestepped all of these problems: they claim that the Rebbe never died in the first place, that he is still alive, if not physically then at least in some halachic sense. To support this claim, they present a litany of Talmudic and midrashic statements regarding tzaddikim who seem to have never died. This is not the place to address this school of Lubavitch thinking, which is even more delusional and convoluted than what we have examined so far. In the surreal world of Lubavitch hermeneutics, sifrei halakha are read as if they were sifrei drush, and texts cease to have any meaning other than those that creative and wishful readers wish to project onto them.

But the upshot of all this is not that Lubavitch has no sources for its false messianism. They may have no traditional sources, but they do have the words of their late Rebbe and Prophet, who, in their eyes, made it absolutely clear to them that Moshiach had already arrived and that he was the one the Torah had promised. Moreover, as early as 1951 in his very first sicha, the Rebbe declared that his late father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, would rise from the dead to redeem us. As chasidim loyal to the words of their Rebbe, they can't conceive that he could have been mistaken in any way, or that anything they're doing could be against the words of Rambam or any other authority. Their creative apologetics are simply the logical consequence of a belief that was clearly articulated by more than 150 of their rabbis in a "psak din," the belief that the Lubavitcher Rebbe was a prophet, and that Torah law binds all Jews to obey the words of a prophet. It is this belief that we must confront if we are to effectively counter the false messianism of Lubavitch and stand up for the sacred, authentic Jewish faith in Moshiach Tzidkeinu.

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