

The Professor, Messiah, & Scandal of Calumnies

The Rebbe - The Messiah - and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference by David Berger. The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Portland 2001; 195pp.

Review Essay by Rabbi J. Immanuel Schochet

I

"When you hear something unseemly about another, be deeply grieved. For if the report is true, the one spoken about is not good. If the report is false, the one speaking is not good." (Baal Shem Tov)

This maxim comes to mind when reading Prof. David Berger's recent book in which he accuses a prominent Jewish-religious movement, Chabad-Lubavitch, of distorting Jewish tradition, false messianism, adopting Christian doctrines, and indicts its followers as heretics and idolaters.

Dr. Berger starts with a description of the well-known messianic fervor of Chabad-hasidim, generated by the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem M. Schneerson. The author appears to accept the belief in Mashiach and the eager anticipation of the redemption he is to bring about. After all, this constitutes one of the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith defined by Maimonides. He takes issue, though, with the fact that hasidim identify the Rebbe as the awaited redeemer.

He is not disturbed by this phenomenon in the Rebbe's lifetime: "When the Rebbe was alive, messianic claims made for him were ill-advised but well within the boundaries of normative Judaism; indeed, no serious messianic claims have ever been set forth for a more qualified candidate." (p. 12) His problem is that many hasidim continue doing so even after the Rebbe's passing in 1994.

Citing Talmudic-Midrashic statements which aver that the redeemer may arise from the dead, these hasidim support their claim that the Rebbe may be resurrected in due time and then fulfil the messianic prophecies. To Dr. Berger that is absurd. He spurns the possibility that Mashiach may come from the dead, and dismisses the Rabbinic statements as "a rejected position" of a minute minority opinion which has no standing in Jewish law and thought. (pp. 41, 43-45, et passim)

He relies on mediaeval debates with Christians when the Jewish side argued that Jesus died before accomplishing any of the messianic prophecies and dismissed the notion of a "second coming" with a second chance as totally unfounded. Dr. Berger views this as the fundamental reason for our rejection of the Christian savior. Thus "I do not believe that an isolated passage, even by a great rabbi, automatically legitimates a theological position against the weight of overwhelming contrary opinion... [and] is, I believe, invalidated by the weight of the entire Jewish polemical tradition." (p. 45)

In view of many retorts to his earlier articles on the subject, he senses the tenuousness of his opinion. Thus he backtracks by saying: "the core of my argument does not depend on this conviction" (p. 41); "the deligitimation of Lubavitch messianism does not depend upon this position" (p. 60). Now it is because "the essence of Lubavitch messianism rests on the claim that the Rebbe had begun the process of redemption and would soon return to complete it" (p. 42, et passim). He attributes this belief to "a large segment - almost certainly a substantial majority of Lubavitch hasidim" (pp. 2 and 127). He traces it to the Rebbe's declarations about the imminence of redemption and saying that the "metaphysical cosmic redemption process" of separating good from evil (Dr. Berger's English rendition of the kabbalistic concept of *avodat habirurim*) has been completed.

Then he proceeds to the charge of idolatry: "A significant segment of this movement now declares openly that the Rebbe is not only the Messiah but God" (p. 89), and that this belief "has entered mainstream Lubavitch" (p. 93).

The allegedly pervasive adoption of the messianic claims, let alone the idolatrous perception of the Rebbe, by what Dr. Berger assumes to be the mainstream or vast majority of Lubavitch, disturbs him profoundly. For numerous Lubavitch hasidim hold influential positions, as chief-rabbis, rabbis, deans and other religious functionaries, throughout Europe, North and South America, South Africa, Australia, and especially in Israel and Russia. To him this means that the future of historical Judaism is threatened, and he would like to see them cast out from their communities (ch. 12 and 14).

The book is essentially a personal memoir of his lonely crusade to awaken orthodox Jewry to this danger. It reprints his earlier articles, letters sent to leading rabbis, rabbinical bodies and others, to draft their support for his struggle to save Judaism. He is bewildered by the fact that his appeals have fallen on deaf ears (hence the title-component of "The Scandal of Orthodox Indifference"), with the measly exception of encouragement from Satmar hasidim, followers of Rabbi Eliezer M. Schach of Israel, Rabbi Yaakov S. Weinberg of Baltimore, Rabbi Chaim D. Keller of Chicago, and others who remain anonymous.

A ray of light appeared on Dr. Berger's horizon when he successfully persuaded one rabbinic group, the RCA (Rabbinical Council of America), to issue a resolution he composed: "There is not and never has been a place in Judaism for the belief that Mashiach ben David will begin his messianic mission only to experience death, burial and resurrection before completing it." (p. 69)

His joy was short-lived, for, in his words, "then the thunder-bolt struck": R. Aaron Soloveichik, the late dean of the Brisk Yeshivah in Chicago and of Yeshivah University, and a universally respected halachic authority, sharply criticized that resolution: "The belief held by many in Lubavitch... that the Rebbe can still be Moshiach... cannot be dismissed as a belief that is outside the pale of Orthodoxy. Any cynical attempt at utilizing a legitimate disagreement of interpretation coering this matter, to besmirch and damage the Lubavitch movement... can only contribute to the regrettable discord that already plagues the Jewish and particularly Torah community" (p. 70).

Dr. Berger casts aspersions on this letter, alleging that (a) it does not reflect the normative writing of R. Soloveichik; (b) it seems to contradict a communication he had sent to the Forward a few years earlier; and (c) it gratuitously condemns the RCA-resolution as a cynical effort to besmirch Chabad. He concludes that this letter, as well as a much stronger one issued a year later by the venerable chief-rabbi of Montreal, R. Pinchas Hirshprung (also universally respected as a Halachic authority), were issued under duress when both these sages were infirm. (p. 71)

These are the major points. The book is replete with repetitions. Judicious editing could easily halve it. Its host of anecdotal material and critical attributions hidden behind a cloak of anonymity has no place in a serious study. These are devoid of legal and moral value as they preclude validation. This brings us now to a critical appraisal of the arguments.

II

Dr. Berger employs a careless and troubling methodology:

1. He creates statistics to serve his purpose. Real or imagined anomalies are attributed to "large segments," "substantial majority" and "mainstream" of Lubavitch. No evidence is provided for these estimates, except for an occasional reliance on the notoriously exaggerated, or altogether invented, reports and claims of the messianist's faction major organ, Beis Moshiach. It is certainly strange that Dr. Berger, the great defender of the faith, relies on a magazine that he rightly accuses of publishing obscene and heretical materials.

On the other hand, he does not lend credibility to the official leadership of Lubavitch, which he admits to be decidedly non-messianist, and which claims "that the believers (i.e., messianists) are a very small number of marginal hasidim... who know how to make noise and intimidate" (p. 119). The fact that an overwhelming majority of Chabad emissaries throughout the world (Dr. Berger prefers to call them "missionaries," comparing them to Mormon missionaries - p. 118f.) attend the annual conventions organized by that leadership, and at most a couple of dozen partake in the simultaneous one sponsored by the messianists, means nothing to him.

Dr. Berger quotes a pronouncement condemning messianist aberrations, issued by the Central Committee of Chabad Lubavitch Rabbis in the USA and Canada, whose members include most of the rabbinic authorities of Lubavitch. He is very happy with that published statement, but feels compelled to downplay it by branding that rabbinic body "far less important and influential than its ambitious title would indicate" and having "quite minimal influence on the large majority of Lubavitch hasidim!" (pp.101-102)

To be sure, on p. 119 he concedes that "statistical precision is elusive, dependent partly on the reading of minds." Moreover, on p. 117, he defines the "primary objective of this book to establish that anyone who proclaims the messiahship of the Rebbe stands outside the parameters of Orthodox Judaism," and adds: "From this perspective... the percentage of

hasidim who affirm this belief is secondary"! Why, then, would or could Dr. Berger offer categorical numbers before and after pp. 118-119? The only solution to this puzzle is to conclude that either he is able to read minds, or simply invents numbers to produce ad hominem and ad populum arguments to influence his audience.

A telling sample of the professor's research is his citation of a letter by the "vice-president of the Chabad Community Centre in Oldfield Street, London N16" to prove the pervasiveness of messianism in England. He does not know or ignores the fact that this "Centre" is a breakaway group from, and shunned by, the London Chabad community, of a handful of messianists. Even its Shabbat and Holidays services attract no more than about 20 people, most of which are non-Lubavitch neighbours seeking the convenience of a nearby place of worship.

2. Dr. Berger received support from Satmar hasidim and deans of non-hasidic yeshivot. He concedes (pp. 7 and 32) that the Satmar support is suspect because of their long-standing feud with Lubavitch, based on the positive approach of Lubavitch towards the State of Israel, the philosophy of Lubavitch outreach to non-religious Jews, and other substantive ideological differences.

He fails to mention, though, that his deans fall into the same category as Satmar. These rabbis displayed well-documented hostility to hasidism in general, and Lubavitch in particular, decades before messianism arose and became an issue. Their offensive statements from the pre-messianic period match and exceed their later ones. Their attitudes demonstrate an obsession to resuscitate the historical feud between hasidism and their opponents of more than two centuries ago, including the parroting of identical accusations and calumnies of Shabbatai Tzvi-ism, heresy and idolatry, as well as the technique of distorting or falsifying hasidic texts. This is readily seen when perusing M. Wilensky's classical *Hasidim and Mitnagdim: A Study of the Controversy between them in the years 1772-1815* (Hebrew, 2 volumes, Jerusalem 1970) and the introduction to my *The Testament of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov* (New York 1998).

Indeed, on p. 85, Dr. Berger quotes "heads of non-hasidic yeshivas" who shrugged off a portion of his material "on the grounds that hasidism in general is idolatry." He does not believe that this was meant literally. It so happens that I am of pure Lithuanian, non-hasidic stock (Telshe and Kelm), the descendant of an unbroken chain of Lithuanian rabbis going back to the academies of the Vilna Gaon and R. Chaim of Volozhin. My parents never uttered critical comments against hasidism or hasidim, but I grew up in that environment and atmosphere with extensive contacts with deans of non-hasidic yeshivas. The cited comment is just one of many and similar ones that I heard in the 1950's, before I identified with Lubavitch. Like Satmar, they, too, condemned the Lubavitch outreach to the non-religious, though eventually changed their minds on that in the 1970's when they noted its extra-ordinary success and set out to compete with it.

The obscene comment by Rabbi Yaakov S. Weinberg, quoted on p. 115 and the jacket, had nothing to do with messianism. It is a typical sample of his repertoire starting, as I know personally, at least as early as the mid 1950's. To this, and the like, applies the Talmudic dictum: "He who disqualifies others is himself disqualified... he stigmatizes others with his own blemish." (Kidushin 70a)

III

Dr. Berger disqualifies the traditional statements that affirm that Mashiach may very well be a resurrected (or reincarnated) individual.

1. Beyond the general Talmudic-Midrashic sources, he acknowledges on p. 11 that "there exist some kabbalistic ideas (sic) about King David himself as the final redeemer" (thus obviously resurrected or reincarnated), but does not take it seriously. This is rather curious. As a self-professed orthodox Jew, Dr. Berger surely recites the standard liturgy of Hoshanah Rabba (seventh day of Sukot), which includes an ancient prayer composed by R. Eleazar Kaliri that affirms "a man has sprouted [i.e., Mashiach], Tzemach is his name, he is David himself!"

And what does he do with the statement of our sages that Moses will be the ultimate redeemer, based in part on Micha 7:15 and Ecclesiastes 1:9? This is certainly an endorsed view to the point that many rabbinic authorities felt compelled to explain how Moses, a Levite, could be Mashiach who must be of the tribe of Judah (see my *Mashiach: The Principle of Mashiach and the Messianic Era in Jewish Law and Tradition*, 3rd ed., New York 1992, p. 39). Their explanations readily resolve also the seeming contradiction of identifying Mashiach with David and Daniel, various Talmudic sages, and later Maimonides, R. Isaac Luria, the Baal Shem Tov, and the leaders of every generation.

2. Dr. Berger claims that the idea of a resurrected Mashiach is "a rejected position," regardless of its source. In his opinion, even a great rabbi's statement cannot automatically legitimate a theological position against the weight of overwhelming contrary opinion. Thus he negates a basic principle of halachic methodology, that in matters of conflicting opinions which do not affect actual practice, one cannot say who is right or wrong! (R. Shmuel Hanagid, Mavo Hatalmud; Rashi, Sanhedrin 51b, s.v. hachi; Maimonides, Sefer Hamitzvot II:133, and Commentary on the Mishnah, Sotah 3:3, Sanhedrin 10:3 etc.) That is precisely why Maimonides rejects any categorical claims on details relating to the order or procedures of the redemption, except for those that are firmly established (Hilchot Melachim 12:2).

Moreover, Dr. Berger implies that Maimonides erred grievously by legitimizing the opinion that the prophet Elijah may come after the appearance of Mashiach, which goes against the weight of overwhelming contrary opinion! (Hilchot Melachim 12:2; cf. R. Yehonathan Eibeshitz, Tumim on Choshen Mishpat I:3)

3. Dr. Berger relies heavily on arguments in mediaeval polemics. It is of major concern to him that "one of the defining characteristics of Judaism in a Christian world will have been erased" by the possibility of a resurrected messiah (p. 31, and see also p. 35). In truth, of course, the Jewish faith is defined by its own tradition and not by its differences from Christianity. Polemical debates, regardless of its participants, are neither definitive nor authoritative. The Talmudic rabbis engaged in such debates as well. Oftentimes they conceded that they rebuffed their opponents with "straw" or "broken reeds," i.e., that their responses were no more than polemical tactics and not their true positions.

A typical example would be the Jewish responses about "the suffering servant" of Isaiah 53. The polemicists follow the majority opinion of mediaeval Jewish exegetes that it speaks of the Jewish people, as opposed to the Christian claim that it speaks of the messiah. This view is found also among some Talmudic rabbis. It does not negate, however, the validity of the pervasive Talmudic-Midrashic-Zoharic interpretation that the subject of that chapter is indeed Mashiach.

In this self-same context, Dr. Berger draws ammunition for his attack from the fact that Christian missionaries now argue that the claims of messiahship for the Lubavitcher Rebbe support and vindicate the Christian allegations of a "second coming." He ignores the fact that for the longest time they have claimed that authentic Jewish sources support and vindicate the messiahship of Jesus. They keep republishing books which cite numerous passages from Talmud, Midrash, Zohar, Jewish Bible-commentaries and other works, to validate their arguments. Are we now to erase these quotations from our heritage?

4. Dr. Berger questions the authenticity of the statements by R. Aaron Soloveichik and R. Pinchas Hirshprung, alleging that they were written under duress. To him this allegation is not disrespectful, for "it is the refusal to acknowledge what everyone knows to be the case that defames a learned rabbi by falsely describing an acutely embarrassing declaration as the product of his considered judgment and asking history to remember him as a defender of false messianism" (p. 71).

In other words, out of reverence for their memory he accuses these venerable sages to have violated the Biblical prohibition not to be afraid of any man (Deuteronomy 1:17)! Surely, if, Heaven forbid, such authorities can be pressured to validate heresy, it stands to reason that all their other pronouncements are void and meaningless. The allegation, therefore, is not simply disrespectful but undermines the very structure of halachic authority.

Dr. Berger contends that Rabbi Soloveichik's characterization of the vote on the RCA resolution as a "cynical effort to besmirch Lubavitch" is an altogether groundless insult. Yet Dr. Berger himself provides us with the "modicum of evidence" he said to be non-existent:

On p. 67 he reports that he was asked by the chair of the RCA Resolutions Committee to "reformulate the resolution to include some positive statements about the Lubavitch movement and the Rebbe. I was happy to comply." He added 2 brief sentences as a preamble (cited there). On p. 69 he relates that "fewer than a handful of participants expressed any substantive reservations" to the resolution. But then, "surprisingly, it was the added, laudatory material that provoked substantial opposition"! He claims that this was "largely because of a preference for a spare, unencumbered text." In other words, adding one sentence of 18 words, or the other of 20 words, or both, would have rendered the separate paragraph of the resolution, consisting of 56 words, "encumbered and unwieldy"! With all due respect, the suspicion of ulterior motives for the "advocates of brevity" who prevailed over Dr. Berger is more than reasonable.

For the record, I enquired with the immediate family of R. Aaron Soloveichik as to his position in this matter. They informed me that he regarded the attribution of messiahship to the deceased Rebbe as a *shtut* (folly) but definitely not heretical.

5. Dr. Berger laments the fact of so many Lubavitchers holding influential positions as communal rabbis, heads of rabbinical courts, and other religious functionaries, as a tragedy threatening the very survival of traditional Judaism. He wants them fired and cast out from the community.

Question: were these men appointed because they are Lubavitchers or because they possess all the requisite qualifications, including appropriate scholarship in Jewish law? Second question: is it conceivable that these rabbis are as knowledgeable in Jewish law and tradition as their antagonists? Yet Dr. Berger and his bed-fellows presumptuously arrogate to themselves the authority to act as the prosecutors, judges, jury and executioners.

IV

At this point I am compelled to react to references to myself in the book.

On pp. 53-55 and 59-60, Dr. Berger refers to my response to an offensive article published by the aforementioned Rabbi Keller in the Jewish Observer which attacked messianism as well as hasidic teachings and practices. Dr. Berger's quotes me correctly: Christians differ from the messianists because they believe that their savior was already the effective Messiah, and that the messianic redemption is already an established fact, though yet to move to a new stage with the 'second coming.' This is not a matter of semantics but fraught with practical implications: that belief caused them to abrogate the Torah and mitzvot (even as the Sabbateans too changed halachah because of their belief). There are no such changes whatsoever among the messianists.

Dr. Berger then interprets my words. He claims that I appear to maintain that there is no objection to the belief that the Messiah will appear on what he calls the 'eschatological scale' and die before completing his mission. In other words, he claims that I support the very opposite of what I actually wrote! His total distortion of my position staggers the imagination. My sole point was to distinguish between an actualized messiah (eschatological scale of actual redemption) and a potential messiah. An actualized messiah is what Maimonides calls *Mashiach vadai*, as opposed to his term of *chezkat Mashiach* (validly potential *Mashiach*). The reality of *Mashiach vadai* is established, as Maimonides states, by the fulfilment of messianic prophecies alone.

My reference to the Christian abrogation of the laws is clearly to prove that they believed that Jesus was the actualized messiah. In the words of Paul: "If righteousness is through the law, Christ died for nothing." (Galatians 2:21; and cf. *ibid.* 3:19ff.; Romans 4:14f., 10:4; *et passim*).

To claim that I define an established redemption "in terms of the abrogation of the Torah," and that "Judaism rejects only the sort of incomplete messianic mission that nonetheless achieves the annulment of the Torah" (p. 55) is utter nonsense. It violates the fundamental principle of the immutability of the Torah. No prophet, including *Mashiach*, can ever introduce innovations to the Torah. On the contrary: when *Mashiach* comes, "all the laws will be re-instituted in his days as they had been aforesaid... The essence of all this is that the Torah, its statutes and its laws, are forever and all eternity; nothing is to be added to them or diminished from them. Whoever adds or diminishes anything, or interprets the Torah to change the plain sense of the commandments, is surely an impostor, wicked, and a heretic!" (*Hilchot Melachim* 11:1 and 3)

To attribute to me the view that Judaism rejected the messiahship of Jesus because he did not effect a true redemption, and therefore was not already the actualized messiah, but "did not rule out the possibility that he could still turn out to be the Messiah" (p. 54), is maliciously offensive. Jesus is rejected a priori because he lacked at least two of the cardinal prerequisites stated in Isaiah 11:1-2, in that he was not a male descendant of King David and violated the Torah in several instances.

This clarifies also the Rebbe's statement, cited above and attacked by Dr. Berger, that the cosmic *avodat habirurim* has been completed. The fact that Torah-observance continues in the Messianic era also means that *avodat habirurim* continues then as well, albeit of a different kind and order. Evil and the spirit of impurity will be removed with the actual coming of *Mashiach* and the redemption, and not before (see Zechariah 13:2 *et passim*).

The Rebbe clearly speaks of the order requisite for the redemption. His pronouncement is no different in principle than one made by the universally acclaimed R. Israel Meir Hakohen (Chafetz Chayim) who more daringly stated (e.g., *Ma'amar Tzipita Liyeshu'ah*) that the ultimate prerequisite of teshuvah (repentance) has already been achieved. The Chafetz Chayim constantly insisted on the imminence of the redemption, urged the immediate study of the laws relating to the soon-to-be-rebuilt Temple, and was instrumental in his son-in-law preparing a concise compendium of these laws (*Avodat Hakorbanot*). As a professional historian, Dr. Berger should at least have noted the astounding homogeneity between the messianic activities and urgings of these two sages.

The Christians misinterpreted Jeremiah 31:31ff. to arrive at their erroneous conclusion (see Hebrews 8:6ff., et passim). They may also have known about the Jewish teaching that "the commandments will be abolished in the future to come" (*Nidah* 61b). They did not realize, however, that this relates (a) only to the ultimate era after the general resurrection of the dead, (b) even then only to those to be resurrected, and (c) even then there is a dispute whether this will be temporarily or permanently. [For an acute analysis of this concept, see the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Halachot Torah shebe'al peh she'einan beteilin leo'lam* (New York 1992), and also his *Torah Chadashah Me'iti Teitze* (New York 1991; both reprinted in *Sha'arei Ge'ulah*, vol. II, Jerusalem 1992).]

Dr. Berger also casts aspersions on my reference to R. Nachum of Chernobyl's belief that the resurrected Baal Shem Tov will be Mashiach, by questioning the veracity of the source (p. 59f.) He misses the point once again. The text I quoted was published by a very meticulous and erudite scholar, and gained approbations from numerous pre-eminent rabbis and authorities. Whether or not the report is historically correct is irrelevant. The import is that we are discussing a concept that is deemed fully valid and legitimate.

We noted Dr. Berger's juggling act. Originally he ridiculed and condemned the very possibility of a resurrected Mashiach. Then he moved to the new position that the real offense of the messianists is that they claim that the Rebbe had actually begun the process of redemption in his lifetime (thus was already Mashiach vadai, in actuality) and would soon return to complete it. Moreover, he states that I do not appear to object to such a belief.

Frankly, I am astounded. After so many years, and many discussions and debates with some of the most fervent messianists, I have never heard this statement of Dr. Berger's allegation. He offers no evidence whatsoever for its existence, leaving us to conclude that it is a figment of his imagination. Indeed, it stands in blatant contradiction to an unequivocal pronouncement of the Rebbe that the redemptive process starts, as ruled by Maimonides, with the actual fulfillment of the messianic prophecies, and not before (*Likkutei Sichot*, vol. V, p. 149).

In any case, it is mind-boggling how Dr. Berger makes the transcendental leap from a defense of the possibility of the Rebbe remaining a potential Mashiach to a defense of his novel redefinition of the messianists.

Ironically, I have no quarrel with the substance of the RCA resolution (redundant though it is) which rightly rejects the Berger-version of the messianist credo. At the same time, however, I fully endorse Rabbi Soloveichik's critique of it, for now it has been vindicated by Dr. Berger's own account of the proceedings.

V

The book is filled with numerous other errors and fallacies, too many to deal with here. Least among these are the careless inaccuracies. [For example: the "unknown individual born on the day of the destruction of the Temple" is said never to have been a leader at all (p. 59), when our tradition identifies him as an incarnation of King David (*Or Hachamah on Zohar* I:82b); Lubavitch is accused of constructing menorahs of an atypical sort "because every new religion needs a symbol" (p. 62), when that "atypical sort" is the shape prescribed by Maimonides (*Menachot* 3:7); or an alleged citation on p. 128, note 124, which appears nowhere in Chabad liturgy; and so forth.] The above, however, suffices to reveal the probity and reliability of the book and its author. His tendentiousness is revealed also by a typical Freudian slip. In the very first chapter (p. 5), he defines the birth of Hasidism as "a movement of rebellion against the Jewish communal establishment." This is surely a curious statement for a would-be history-professor in the post-Graetz era.

This leaves but one more sensitive issue, the charge of idolatry.

Five years ago, an article appeared in Beis Moshiach with obscene and idolatrous statements that one is halachically proscribed from repeating even in critical context but cited in Dr. Berger's book. Then there were press-reports about a psychopath in Safed who twice tried to murder the local chief-rabbi, a well-known Chabad hasid and scholar, because the rabbi condemned and excommunicated him for making the same type of statements as appeared in Beis Moshiach. Perhaps there is another handful like them.

Regardless of these, the professional opponents of Lubavitch charged that movement with the heresy of idolatry already much earlier, as does Dr. Berger his book. Thus on p. 83 he writes: "such atypical manifestations deflect concern by convincing outsiders that the problem of avodah zarah (idolatry) is limited to lunatics; in fact, they are symptoms of a deep problem at the core." A large part of the book is devoted to reinforce that premise.

The common denominator between the "lunatics" on the one hand, and the mitnagdim (antagonists to Chabad) with Dr. Berger on the other, is their present reference to one and the same source: a comment by the Rebbe made in the spring of 1950. The Rebbe discussed the mystical concept of a rebbe-tzadik and said that a person like that is "[Divine] Essence and Being placed in a body." All the aforementioned take that to mean, perish the thought, "Divine incarnation" in a literal sense. In tandem they distort the Rebbe's words.

Our sages note that all passages the heretics cited for their heresy, have their refutation near at hand. For example, "Let us (plural) make man..." (Genesis 1:26) is deflected by the adjacent "God created (singular) man..." (Sanhedrin 38b) Even so, when Moses wrote the Torah and came to the verse "Let us make man," he said: "Master of the Universe! Why do You provide a rationalization for the heretics?" God answered: "Write! Whoever wishes to err let him err!" (Bereishit Rabba 8:8)

The same applies here. The abusers of the Rebbe's statement typically quote out of context. The phrase cited is an integral part of the following:

"There are those who ask: how can one ask [for blessings etc.] from a rebbe, which is tantamount to an intermediary?... In truth, however, Israel, the Torah and the Holy One, blessed is He, are altogether one. It is not just that Israel becomes bound up with the Torah and the Torah with the Holy One, blessed is He, but truly one indeed. Just so it is with the bond of hasidim with the rebbe: it is not a case of two entities becoming united, but becoming literally altogether one. The rebbe is not an intermediary who separates, but an intermediary who joins together. With a hasid, therefore, he and the rebbe and the Almighty are one.

"(I have not seen this stated explicitly in hasidism, but it is a feeling. Thus whoever wishes to sense that, let him do so and whoever does not - I will not argue with him, let him remain with what he has.)

"The question of intermediary, therefore, does not apply, as this is Essence and Being placed into a body."

In the sequel the Rebbe cites several proof-texts from Talmud, Zohar and hasidic texts which aver theomorphic ascriptions to saints.

The "controversial" phrase in its full context makes it crystal clear, beyond any shadow of doubt, that a rebbe is not, Heaven forbid, identified with the Godhead. God, rebbe and hasidim are incontrovertibly distinguished one from another. In sound Talmudic-Midrashic tradition, the tzadik (saint) stands above the people and serves at best as in intermediary to bring the latter to a bond with God. The concept of intermediary is explicitly qualified to be of supportive nature ("an intermediary who joins together"), as opposed to, Heaven forbid, the Christian concept of an indispensable intermediary ("an intermediary who separates") which violates a fundamental principle of the Jewish faith.

The distortion by the lunatic fringe of the messianists and the venomous mitnagdim who reject hasidism a priori, is no more than crude ignorance or pernicious mischief. "Whoever wishes to err, let him err!"

It should be noted, though, that the Rebbe appears to have anticipated this tragic malignity three decades before the birth of the lunatic fringe, and way before the "discovery" of his words by the mitnagdim in the 1980's: in the reprints of this discourse in Kuntres Yud Shvat (published in the 1960's), and in Sefer Hama'amarim Bati Legani (New York 1977, p. 277) he ordered the deletion of the "controversial" phrase!

[Incidentally, I am not clear about the phrase "I have not seen this stated in hasidism." In my *Chassidic Dimensions* (2nd ed., New York 1995, pp. 99-115 and 120-124) I analyze the concept of the rebbe-tzadik as an intermediary, tracing it to standard rabbinic sources and its extensive treatment in the classical hasidic texts (and note there also the explanation of theomorphic ascriptions). Perhaps the Rebbe meant that they do not use his specific formulation. Alternatively, he refers specifically to Chabad-texts.]

My final comment is on a lighter note. Dr. Berger wants Chabad hasidim excommunicated unless they are prepared to say "without equivocation: 'The Rebbe is not the Messiah'." (p. 51) They are not to be hired unless they will first swear that "the Rebbe is not and will not be Moshiach" (p. 144).

This tragi-comical tantrum of Professor Berger, reminds me of an encounter with a fervent messianist, during the time of the Rebbe's final illness when the messianist group first dared to raise its head unbridled. I concluded the debate with a simple question: "Are you prepared to swear with a Torah-scroll in your hand that the Rebbe is definitely Mashiach?" In visible shock he hemmed and hawed, and remained silent. I offer the same challenge to Dr. Berger: "Are you prepared to swear with a Torah-scroll in your hand that the Almighty will definitely not designate the Rebbe to be Mashiach?"

No doubt, today one may find individuals, among both the extremist messianists and the mitnagdim, and most likely Dr. Berger himself, prepared to give such oaths. For their god is one who is made in their image and likeness and restricted to abide by their prejudices.

Dr. Berger's book chronicles a quixotic odyssey. He is aware that many, even among those sympathetic to his cause, regard his efforts as "symptoms of a personal idiosyncrasy" eliciting "musings about unhealthy obsessions." (p. 132f.) For his sake, we wish and pray that he consider this concern much more seriously.