

Jews and Christians

TO THE EDITORS:

Assaf Sagiv's "Coming to Terms with Christianity" (AZURE 38, Autumn 2009) is an important piece. I must confess that I, like many others, was caught up to some degree in the anti-Christian fervor that followed the Pope's recent visit to Israel. After all, for those with religious dispositions, the Pope's visit provided a convenient pretext for reviving Judaism's traditional suspicion and negativity toward Christianity. Offsetting this reflex was Sagiv's essay, which was both an invitation for serious reflection and a convincing portrayal of Christianity in quite a positive light. Finally, its demand for unity on pragmatic grounds was well-founded.

Having said this, however, I wish to highlight a basic concept that I believe Sagiv has oversimplified: the question of the Christian doctrinal revolution concerning the Jews and Judaism. "Try suggesting," Sagiv quotes Aviad Kleinberg, "to any of our rabbis that they should declare what John Paul II and Benedict XVI have declared. For example, that Christians are our young and beloved brethren and that their covenant with the Lord is also intact—"Excuse

me?" you say. "Did we understand you correctly? Give us a break!" Clearly, Sagiv joins Kleinberg in lamenting the failure of Judaism to rise to the challenge of reexamining traditional attitudes toward other religions, even as he concedes that the comparison is not entirely fair: It was the Jews who were persecuted by Christians, we must recall, and not the other way around. Yet in drawing this distinction between the Christian reform and the Jewish lack thereof, Sagiv merely grazes the surface of this complex issue.

First, let us look at the revolution recent years have wrought in Christian attitudes toward Judaism. From the early Church Fathers through Martin Luther and up to Christian leaders of recent decades, Christianity has always maintained that Judaism and its adherents are headed for eternal damnation. Indeed, when Hippolytus, in his *Expository Treatise Against the Jews*, declared that the Jews were "darkened in the eyes of [their] soul with a darkness utter and everlasting," and Origen, in his *Against Celsus*, claimed that they "will never be restored to their former condition. For they committed a crime of the most unhallowed kind," they were not expressing

personal opinions. They were, rather, expressing what is perhaps the most fundamental doctrine of Christianity (which Sagiv mentions): the idea that Christianity has superseded the rejected Jewish religion. Lactantius, another early Christian author, expressed this belief best when, in his *Divine Institutes*, he asserted that because of Jewish impieties, God would “change his covenant, that is, bestow the inheritance of eternal life upon foreign nations, and collect to himself a more faithful people out of those who were aliens by birth.... On account of these impieties of theirs he cast them off forever.” Luther, writing more than a millennium later, articulated the same concept—only now, he could cite history as proof of his claim: “Listen, Jew,” he wrote in “On Jews and Their Lies.” “Are you aware that Jerusalem and your sovereignty, together with your temple and priesthood, have been destroyed for over 1,460 years?... For such ruthless wrath of God is sufficient evidence that they assuredly have erred and gone astray.... Therefore this work of wrath is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God.” It should be noted that the sanctions that Luther recommended be implemented against the Jews were not dissimilar to those applied by Nazi Germany (scholars have made

detailed comparisons to this effect). Setting aside the significance of papal silence during the Holocaust, it is no secret that many devout Christians (particularly in the Eastern Orthodox churches) saw the mass killings of their Jewish neighbors as the final fulfillment of longstanding prophecies.

Now, compare this track record with the 2002 declaration of Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, marking the 37th anniversary of the historic Second Vatican Council declaration:

we Catholics became aware with greater clarity that the faith of Israel is that of our elder brothers, and, most importantly, that Judaism is as a sacrament of every otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognize, and celebrate. It is therefore proper [on] this date for the Pontifical Council to welcome and to encourage any initiative favoring the growth of a bond with Judaism, with its theological and spiritual wealth, and with the culture that is expressed by it.

This statement, and many others like it, were made possible by the turnaround in Christian doctrine sealed in chapter 4 of the Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate* (1965), of which the aforementioned John Paul II was a major architect. Note the radical nature of this doctrinal revolution: In the space of mere

decades, the Church had effectively done away with close to two millennia of consistent theological creed. Understandably, this extreme reversal of so central an idea has caused some confusion among the faithful. The late theologian Edmund P. Clowney, for example, made this point quite clearly: “If there is a way back to the ceremonial law... then Paul labored and ran in vain—more than that, Christ died in vain.”

What brought Christianity to so radical an ideological upheaval? The late Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, a leading mentor within the Orthodox Jewish community, made a convincing suggestion: the State of Israel. In his view, no theological acrobatics on the part of Christians could suffice to explain the resurgence of the Jewish people and its return to its biblical homeland. Indeed, the continued survival of the Jews has always been a thorn in the side of Christian theology. For many hundreds of years, this difficulty was dealt with by viewing the “wandering Jew” as a living example of divine retribution for the Jews’ failure to accept Christ. The miraculous survival of the Jews was therefore seen as the symbol not of an eternal covenant, but rather of eternal damnation. The State of Israel, however, has hammered a nail in the coffin of this doctrine. For not only have the Jews *not* vanished from the face of the earth, they have even

returned to sovereignty in the Holy Land, which in turn has bloomed and flourished as in no other time since the start of the Jews’ exile two millennia ago. Could this, Christians were forced to ask themselves, really be a living example of divine damnation?

We must not be naïve, of course. Had Hitler succeeded in the total annihilation of the Jewish people, Christian doctrine would not have moved one iota from its traditional position. On the contrary, Christianity’s historic repudiation of the Jews would have received divine legitimation. The ultimate survival of the Jews, coupled with the establishment (against all odds) of the State of Israel, effectively forced Christianity into its far-reaching theological concessions.

This brief analysis leads me to the following conclusions *vis-à-vis* Sagiv’s piece.

First, a *quid pro quo* demand for theological openness on the part of Judaism (such as that implied by Kleinberg) is inherently unfair. Christianity was forced to concede that almost two millennia of religious doctrine had been wrong, a concession that has shaken (or, for those who take theology seriously, ought to have shaken) the foundations of Christian faith. But Judaism has no such problem. Its objection to Christianity is, and has always been, a *religious* objection,

with the express and sole intention of preventing Jews from becoming Christians. Sagiv points out certain virtues of Christianity, and Jews of all denominations will be ready to admit them; the traditional objections to Christianity, however, are no less relevant today than they were two thousand years ago, and any demand for Judaism to abandon them is unreasonable.

Second, Sagiv is ready to admit that there are irreconcilable theological differences between the two religions. Yet, he urges us to set aside these differences and “forge unity.” But doing so makes a difficult demand of the Jewish side. It demands forgiveness—or, in Sagiv’s words, “removing old barriers and eliminating old grudges.” Now, forgiveness is no simple matter, as Yotam Benziman and Robert Enright have shown in recent essays in *AZURE*. Yet, were the offending party to offer a solid expression of remorse, forgiveness does remain a morally reasonable demand, especially in the face of such pragmatic concerns as those Sagiv mentions. In the context of the Jewish-Christian divide, the question is whether the expression of remorse has been sufficient for making such a demand. True, Christianity has made far-reaching theological reforms—but are they sincere? Expressions of friendship on the part

of the Vatican toward enemies of the Jewish state cast doubt on the purity of its motives, and at the very least, point to a certain lack of moral clarity. Several decades are a relatively short time and an easily forgotten period in the context of two millennia. An enthusiastic entry on the part of Judaism into interfaith dialogue could thus be construed as premature.

Third, Sagiv glosses over such recent problems in Christian-Jewish relations as the reinstatement (to some extent) of the “Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews.” I do not see this (and some of the other points mentioned) as a minor issue. The prayer articulates a desire that the Jewish religion should cease to exist—which is hardly consistent with the “eternal Jewish covenant” professed of late by Christianity. Now, I can understand the types of pressures that the Pope is under to make such conciliations to Christian tradition. Nonetheless, it is hardly fair to press Judaism for unity with a partner who prays it should no longer exist! (Judaism, of course, does not pray for the demise of Christianity, only that Jews should not convert to it.) Moreover, and in tandem with the previous point, the reintroduction of this prayer places a question mark over the sincerity of the Christian theological turnaround. Again, perhaps more time is needed

before the sides can enter into serious interfaith dialogue in the broadest sense.

Unfortunately, the history of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Western Europe teaches us Jews to be wary of non-Jewish overtures toward peace and reconciliation. In their heady drive for acceptance into the Gentile world, many Jewish communities grasped at every such opportunity. Ultimately, however, they were tolerated only while it was politically and socially convenient—and many paid a dear price for their faith in Gentile goodwill. Of course, times have changed. In and of itself, however, this statement is hardly reassuring; times had also changed in the wake of the Enlightenment, yet antisemitism was still far too entrenched to be done away with altogether. Only the passage of substantial time will tell if today's changes are indeed authentic.

From a Jewish perspective, the greatest change in Jewish-Christian relations is surely the establishment and continued existence of the State of Israel, an event that brought us the (all but) unprecedented luxury of a national home. Let us not forget that over hundreds of years, when Jews so desperately required the protection of the pope, his shelter was not forthcoming. Today, when cordial relations with the Vatican are welcome but far

less pressing, I cannot help but feel that while Christian overtures should be greeted with appreciation and respect, they should also be treated with caution.

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TO THE EDITORS:

In his editorial, Assaf Sagiv calls on the Jewish world to reconsider its traditional view of Christianity as an idolatrous, despised religion. In doing so, Sagiv courageously challenges a centuries-old attitude that is so deeply ingrained within the Jewish psyche that some might well accuse him of undermining the very foundations of Jewish faith and identity. He therefore wisely buttresses his argument by noting that there have in fact been prominent Jewish figures in past centuries, including some who personally witnessed and suffered the ravages of Christian antisemitism, who nonetheless displayed a positive attitude toward Christianity and its important role in spreading shared moral values throughout the world. A comprehensive and in-depth study of changing Jewish attitudes toward Christianity in both medieval and modern times can be found in the pioneering research of the late Jacob Katz, published in 1961 under the

title *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish and Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times*.

Regrettably, most Jews today, particularly those in Israel, are unaware that for more than half a century the Christian world has undertaken a thorough reexamination of its traditional “teaching of contempt” for Judaism and its people. The revolutionary changes that have resulted—changes that are slowly but systematically being integrated into basic Christian teachings at the grassroots level—are all the more remarkable when one considers that Christianity’s denigration of Judaism and demonization of Jews had gone unquestioned for nearly two millennia. As leading Christian theologian Krister Stendahl put it, Christians are finally learning how “to sing [their] song to Jesus with abandon, without telling negative stories about others.” In the case of most major churches, and especially the Catholic Church, with its more than one billion faithful, this change of attitude includes not only a firm commitment to combating antisemitism in any form, but also a clear affirmation of the continuing validity of the particular covenant between God and the Jewish people. Consequently, they have abandoned any and all attempts, whether by force or by friendly persuasion, to draw Jews into the Christian faith.

Sagiv does not include these far-reaching changes among the reasons he gives for Jews the world over to reexamine their traditionally negative attitude toward Christianity. Rather, he focuses on two critical challenges currently confronting both faiths that he believes *require* Jews to adopt a more positive stance toward the Church. Jews, he claims, must join forces with Christians in addressing two major threats: first, the threat of fundamentalist Islam to Judeo-Christian values and the Western civilization built upon them; and second, the threat to humanity at large in an age that has seen unprecedented technological development, but at the same time lacks the spiritual and moral values necessary to ensure the responsible use of newly discovered human powers.

The first threat, it is important to stress, derives from certain Muslim groups and particular interpretations of Islam, but *not* from Islam itself. Indeed, Judaism has always regarded Islam as closer to its own theological doctrine than is Christianity. What we are witnessing today, then, is not a Huntingtonesque “clash of civilizations,” but rather a clash *within* different civilizations and religious cultures. In the words of David Rosen, a leading interfaith activist, in his 2003 essay on Jewish-Muslim relations:

It is a clash between those elements of a religious culture whose sense of historic injury and humiliation leads to alienation and conflict within their own societies as well as to those outside their religious culture; and those who seek to constructively engage other societies as part of world culture and a positive interaction with modernity.

This “clash within civilizations” means that while religious extremists of various traditions and cultures are (almost always unwittingly) part and parcel of a “conspiracy of conflict,” the enlightened voices of religion within these traditions have a responsibility to work together not only to be greater than the sum of their different parts but also to provide the essential alternative testimony—i.e., that of interreligious cooperation and mutual respect.

With regard to the second threat noted by Sagiv, it should be pointed out that in recent years an ongoing, cordial, and constructive dialogue has been established between high-ranking representatives of the Vatican and the Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel. Their meetings are held alternately in Rome and Jerusalem, and each one concludes with an official joint communiqué. The discussions focus not on articles of faith—on which Sagiv rightly notes agreement cannot be achieved—but rather on instilling the shared values necessary to save humanity from itself and

advance the common goal of *tikkun olam* (“repairing the world”).

I would like to add a third threat to Sagiv’s list, one that, in my opinion, provides the most urgent reason for the Jewish world in general, and the Jewish majority in Israel in particular, to reconsider our traditional negative attitude toward Christianity. This threat is not shared by both religions, but is rather specific to the Jewish people.

Christianity’s animosity toward Judaism was already extant in the early centuries of the Christian era, when the nascent religion was still an illegal and persecuted faith, and Christians thus had little to no means of acting on their hatred. Only in the fourth century, when Christians were the ruling power and Jews a minority dependent on their mercy, did this anti-Jewish sentiment become dangerous. For Jews, this period marked the beginning of centuries of persecution at Christian hands; for Christians, it severely undermined the claim to be a religion of humility, love, and forgiveness.

This is also when Jews began to develop a negative view of Christianity. As a persecuted minority in Christian lands, Jews had little to no means of translating that view into injurious actions against Christians. When Jews’ longstanding disdain for Christianity is carried over into a

situation in which they are an *empowered* majority, as is the case in Israel, the situation both poses a tangible threat to the Christian minority in the Jewish midst *and* does severe damage to the moral fabric of Israeli society. As one who has worked intensively in the field of Jewish-Christian relations in Israel for nearly forty years, first as director of the Department for Christian Communities in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and more recently as director of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR), I can attest to the fact that the situation is getting worse. This was the principal reason for JCJCR's founding in the first place. Research we recently conducted in cooperation with the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies shows that not only more religiously inclined Israeli Jews, but also younger Israeli Jews who are largely the product of the local education system, are extremely hostile toward Christianity.

At the same time that we Jews persistently demand that Christians apologize for past persecutions of Jews, and constantly scrutinize every development in the Church for any possible offense, we ignore the increasing number of disdainful public expressions toward Christianity in the Israeli media and government, of desecrations of church institutions and cemeteries, and even of physical

attacks on Christians by Jews. Today, in the State of Israel, fundamentalist Judaism poses no less of a threat to the local Christian minority than does Islamic fundamentalism. That many Christians humbly forgive the affronts and attacks in light of the long history of Christian antisemitism should not blind us to the fact that our moral credibility is being severely compromised, and this alone should be sufficient reason to reconsider, seriously and urgently, our traditional antagonism toward Christianity, precisely as Sagiv proposes.

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TO THE EDITORS:

I warmly applaud Assaf Sagiv's call for Jews to come to terms with Christianity, but I must correct the misstatement that while Christianity has reevaluated its relationship to Judaism, Judaism has not reciprocated. In 2000, *Dabru Emet*, an important document spearheaded by the late Rabbi Michael Signer of Notre Dame University, was issued and signed by over two hundred Jewish theologians and rabbis of all stripes. This document sought to formulate a Jewish approach to the theology of other faiths. To be sure, lacking a central

authoritative body similar to that of the Catholic Church meant that the views expressed in the document were those of the signatories alone. Still, it was a significant step forward, one in what I hope will become an intensive process.

There are two distinct streams or schools of thought regarding Jewish relations toward other faiths. One is parochial, illiberal, and even disparaging, and is most clearly articulated by the Zoharic view that considers non-Jews to be subhuman. This attitude, inflamed and intensified by the tragedies of a medieval Jewish history marked by persecution, degradation, massacres, and expulsions, is evidently very much alive in the thinking and actions of many in the Orthodox camp today. For example, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the premier American Orthodox *posek* (decisor) of the second half of the twentieth century, made no bones about the fact that he considered Christians to be idolaters, and that interreligious dialogue is to be shunned at all costs. Many still follow his ruling. Even the more worldly Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, icon of the modern Orthodox world, specifically enjoined his followers against engaging in theological exchanges with non-Jews, although he did sanction discussion of social action and justice issues. It is encouraging to note in this regard

that the Chief Rabbinate of Israel is actively engaged in consultations and dialogue with Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox clergy.

In his essay, Sagiv mentions a number of scholars who have articulated the liberal view throughout history. But there have been many other advocates of the liberal approach who also bear mentioning. For instance, numerous Italian scholars and rabbis—including Abraham Farissol and Leone Modena of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, respectively, and Samuel David Luzzatto of the nineteenth—all of whom recognized that Christians and Muslims are also God's children, and that their faiths have conveyed the ideas of monotheism, moral living, and justice to billions around the world. The words of Rabbi Isaac Lampronti of Ferrara (1679-1756), in his landmark talmudic encyclopedia *Pahad Yitzhak*, likewise merit our attention. He wrote that Christians are not idolaters, for they, too, believe in the unity of God. Moreover, "they are not suspected of bloodshed or of sodomy or of theft, but indeed are more strict than we are in punishing violators." Furthermore, the non-Jews among whom Jews live today "believe in the creation of the universe out of nothing, and in the exodus from Egypt, as well as the other basic principles of religion. When they pray,

their intention is to the Maker of heaven and earth.”

In keeping with this more open-minded approach, my colleagues and I have been involved for years in seeking to tear down walls of suspicion and hatred between the faiths, and build bridges of understanding and trust. We have made great strides with our Roman Catholic counterparts, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In the wake of the landmark document *Nostra Aetate*, issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council, Jews and Catholics have genuinely turned a new page. Similarly, we have come a long way in our dealings with the Protestant world. Of course, there have been setbacks and disappointments; one cannot expect to correct nineteen centuries of disdain and contempt overnight.

In this vein, the State of Israel must set an example for world Jewry, as well as all nations, in its treatment of religious minorities. It is unacceptable for yeshiva students to spit on Christian clergy in Jerusalem's Old City or for religious zealots to deface Christian churches and institutions. Israeli Jews would not tolerate such behavior for a moment if the perpetrators were Gentiles. The same rigorous standard must apply when the perpetrators are Jews. That is what Israel is all about; that is what our faith tried to inculcate in its teaching, “the righteous of

all nations have a share in the age to come.” But preeminently, we need to keep talking to our counterparts in other faiths, and we surely must develop an adequate theology of “the other.” In the spirit of Isaiah 1:18, “Come, now, let us reason together.”

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TO THE EDITORS:

A particularly egregious example of how far we Jews have to go, in Sagiv's words, to “[remove] old barriers and eliminat[e] old grudges” is contained in the *Aleinu* passage that concludes every Jewish prayer service. Most *siddurim* (prayer books) in Israel include the disparaging “For they [the nations of the land and the families of the earth] bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot save.” The latter phrase is taken from Isaiah, who dismisses those “who carry about their wooden images and pray to a god who cannot save” (Isaiah 45:20). But surely, as Sagiv's editorial indicates, Christianity today is about more than “wooden images.”

The offending phrase in *Aleinu* was the cause of severe accusations against Jews in 1703 in Prussia: “Edict concerning the Jewish prayer *Aleinu*; that they must eliminate certain words, not spit and not hop during its recitation.”

Fortunately, our prayers are no longer subject to others' censorship—but isn't it time that we ourselves censor these words and the negative attitudes they encourage?

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Chabad's Messianism

TO THE EDITORS:

Tomer Persico's important article ("Chabad's Lost Messiah," *AZURE* 38, Autumn 2009) deals primarily with the question of whether Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson saw himself as the messiah. Persico's unequivocal reply is yes. I feel compelled to concur, particularly with his statement that "the Rebbe made a conscious effort to conduct himself and his movement in accordance with the 'instructions' given in the *Mishneh Torah*, believing that doing so would both fulfill his messianic destiny and validate it in the eyes of his own community and the entire world." In other words, Maimonides provided him with a work plan, which he followed with precision. In my book *Rationalism in Hasidic Attire: Chabad's Harmonistic Approach to Maimonides* (2009, Hebrew), I, too, argued that

the Rebbe strove to emulate the image of the messiah delineated by Maimonides, and that his leadership was a practical interpretation of Maimonidean messianism.

Nevertheless, I disagree with Persico's view that messianic fervor, especially in its Chabad incarnation, is liable to lead to disaster. To be sure, messianic episodes throughout Jewish history have left major traumas in their wake, so much so that anything even remotely suggestive of messianic belief strikes fear in our hearts. The very term "messiah" now makes us flinch, and far more than we await his arrival we deny his existence. Indeed, in public discourse, in order to taint a certain ideology as objectionable, one need merely dub it "messianic."

Yet removing faith in the messiah from the spiritual and social life of the Jewish people in recent generations has hardly left a void. The Jewish people simply transformed traditional messianism into something else. Messianism symbolizes an aspiration to wholeness and repair; when emptied of its traditional contents, nationalist sentiments proved a convenient substitute. Hence, a secular messianism developed in the form of Zionism. At a later stage, when the word "nationalism" also became uncouth, it was replaced by a type of universal messianism, otherwise known as the peace movement. The

fervor accompanying this movement arguably poses a threat just as great as that of any other messianic zeal, for in it, too, ideology holds more sway than reality.

One of the Rebbe's main goals was to restore the belief in the messiah as a central foundation of Jewish consciousness and daily life, and to teach the Jewish people that it is possible to prepare for the messianic era and hasten his arrival. The Rebbe's messianism was indeed an active one, but it was not dangerous. It did not, for example, call for war to liberate parts of the Fatherland, or demand that the mosque on the Temple Mount be blown up. Neither did it call for the sacrifice of Jewish settlements in the Land of Israel on the altar of peace. The Rebbe used the slogan "Messiah Now," but he imbued it with spiritual and moral content. He held that we live in an age in which every small step for Judaism (and humanity) was a large step toward the ultimate redemption. He saw the collapse of communism as living proof that significant universal processes need not transpire through calamity or war.

Moreover, the belief that the Rebbe was the messiah actually helped *ease* the fear of messianism. His intelligence, good-heartedness, and warmth won over Jews and non-Jews alike. The fact that many Chabad

followers persisted in believing that the Rebbe was the messiah even after his death—even if such belief appears deluded—does not strike me as dangerous. His emissaries carry on the same work with which they were involved during his lifetime. Moreover, as their activities span the globe, innumerable people of all stripes avail themselves of their assistance.

My second point of contention relates to Persico's concern that Chabad Hasidism is coming to resemble Christianity and will eventually become severed from Judaism. This apprehension is based on the fact that many of the Rebbe's followers continue to believe he is the messiah, despite his passing. Out of a genuine sense of concern for the future of the organization, Persico suggests that these followers sober up and accept that the Rebbe has passed away—and that with him went the prospect of his being the actual messiah.

Considering the extensive knowledge Persico displayed, not only of the Rebbe's writings but also of the special bond he shared with his *hasidim*, I was puzzled as to how he could genuinely expect them to view their revered rabbi's belief as a delusion. If his concern for the future of Chabad is sincere, he should instead direct his call to those who wage war against the organization and who compare it, wrongly, to Christianity.

Chabad's opponents do not object to it because of a deep-seated belief that the messiah is yet destined to appear. Rather, comparisons between Chabad and Christianity are wielded by those who harbor hostile feelings toward the organization for other reasons. Judaism has a long and trenchant history with Christianity, and our aversion to it is arguably justified. It is easy to find similarities between Chabad messianism and Christianity in order to demagogically taint the former's legitimacy and cast doubt on its Jewishness.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz was among those hostile to the Rebbe's messianism and spoke out against it in harsh terms. Yet despite the wide gap separating the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Leibowitz, the two share the same view that Judaism is embodied in adherence to *halacha* and that the laws of redemption are derived from the Torah. For this reason, Aviezer Ravitzky rejected the frequently drawn comparison between Chabad messianism and Sabbateanism. In his book *The Revealed End and the Jewish State* (1993, Hebrew), Ravitzky asks whether Chabad's messianic excitement should indeed be seen as a kind of return to the messianic tempest surrounding Shabtai Tzvi. He answers in the negative, insisting that certain significant elements separate the two developments. Chabad messianism,

he explains, does not breach the boundaries of Torah and halacha. It is, rather, entirely subordinate to the halachic guidelines Maimonides set forth in his *Mishneh Torah*. Furthermore, Chabad's messianic reawakening is not accompanied by what Ravitzky characterizes as a significant shift in national, political, and economic life. Chabad's followers draw a clear distinction between the mystical consciousness and messianic fervor for which they are known and the pragmatic realism and political sobriety that guide their day-to-day lives.

After the Rebbe's passing, do Chabad followers still maintain that the messianic process is subject to halachic criteria and those guidelines outlined by Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah*? The answer would appear to be no, for Maimonides ruled, regarding an individual "believed to be the messiah," that "if he has not succeeded thus far, or was killed, clearly he is not the one the Torah promised, just like all of the worthy and upright kings of the House of David who died" (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 11:4). However, a careful reading of the words of Chabad rabbis shows that they have not turned their backs on Maimonides, but rather stretched their interpretation of his writings. In their view, the words "has not succeeded thus far" mean that the messiah's efforts to bring the Jewish

people closer to the Torah have failed or been halted, and “killed” means “killed in battle.” Since the Rebbe’s efforts to bring the Jewish people closer to the Torah continue through his emissaries, and since he was not killed in a war, Maimonides’ writings do not contradict the view that the Rebbe remains the messiah and will still appear as a redeemer.

This interpretation, as forced as it may sound, indicates that Chabad rabbis consider themselves obligated by halacha. Jewish literature is known to accommodate far-fetched interpretations defending a halachic or philosophical stance of one kind or another, so long as the interpreter considers himself bound by the text. One can easily point to various implausible talmudic interpretations and dicta, many of which are cited by Maimonides himself.

True, certain developments on the fringes of Chabad cannot be countenanced. I have heard about a number of hasidim who altered “*yehi adoneinu moreinu verabbeinu*” (“long live our master, teacher, and rabbi”) to “*yehi adoneinu moreinu uvoreinu*” (“long live our master, teacher, and creator”). A declaration of this sort undermines the very foundations of monotheism and contradicts the fundamental principles of the Jewish belief system. As such, it should be strongly condemned.

Even during the early years of Hasidism in the eighteenth century, ideological excesses were known to have developed and were among the reasons for the broad-scale opposition to the movement and its excommunication by the Vilna Gaon. This opposition also acted as a counterweight, checking the spread of the more extreme trends. Hopefully, today’s opposition to Chabad messianism will also serve as a counterweight, one that will eventually rein in those fringe elements that are not even accepted by the Chabad establishment or its rabbis.

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TO THE EDITORS:

Congratulations to Tomer Persico for a learned and compelling demonstration that the last Rebbe did indeed think that he was the messiah and wanted others to think so, too. Along with David Berger, Persico joins meticulous scholarship with moral authority. He does not mince words, but articulates the danger posed by Chabad to normative Judaism in all its formations.

His essay calls to mind the still more daring essay by Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Prophetic Inspiration After the Prophets” (1996). As with that

piece, Persico demonstrates the contribution of the academic study of religion to the interpretation of contemporary Judaic affairs. He also calls into question the stability of Chabad and makes one wonder how people of critical intelligence in the Jewish community can take seriously the bizarre claim that Chabad puts on offer on this and many other topics.

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TO THE EDITORS:

In his article, Tomer Persico manages to prove quite convincingly that not only the followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe but also the Rebbe himself believed he would be revealed as the messiah. The fact, however, that the Rebbe did not hold any political office—in keeping with Maimonides' stated requirement that the messiah be a political leader who would "fight God's wars"—posed a problem. According to Persico, this is the reason for Chabad's liberal use of such concepts as "God's armies" and "mitzva tanks." Chabad has also removed the concept of "God's wars" from its original, political context, granting it a more refined, spiritual meaning: reciting psalms, reading the Ten Commandments on Shavuot, or disseminating the concept of the Seven Noahide Laws.

This is all true, but it is nonetheless not the whole picture. Not only did the Rebbe see himself as greater than all of the "righteous of the generation"—as well as above all of Israel's prime ministers, presidents, and IDF commanders—but as a result of his extensive involvement in politics, and on account of his deep reservations regarding the notion of *Athalta Degeula* (the founding of the State of Israel as the beginning of redemption), he believed he possessed the clearest of all possible political viewpoints, even as they pertained to military and strategic affairs. He believed, quite simply, that he was responsible for the fate of the State of Israel.

The Rebbe's many years of opposition to territorial concessions in the Land of Israel, as well as his political campaign against the concept of "land for peace" and the peace accord with Egypt, should not be overlooked. Stories abound, for example, of ongoing conversations with former prime minister (and then-IDF commander) Ariel Sharon on matters of strategy. In Israeli national affairs, the Rebbe saw himself as an emissary of divine providence and the supreme commander of the armies of the Jewish people in the imminent era of redemption. He believed it was incumbent upon him to wage "God's wars" according to the precise criteria

set forth by Maimonides—and not just in the metaphoric sense.

In this regard, I would like to relate a personal conversation I had with the Rebbe during the Yom Kippur War. In the year preceding the Yom Kippur War, I traveled to the United States as a representative of the World Zionist Organization. During my time there, I attended a number of *farbrengens* held by the Rebbe, along with Menachem Levin, who served as the Israeli consul in New York. On each of these occasions, we were invited to step up to the dais where the Rebbe sat, surrounded by his elder hasidim. To me, it seemed that they wished to demonstrate, in full view, our willingness to submit to the Rebbe's authority.

A few days after the war broke out, on the night of Simhat Torah, October 18, 1973 (which for us was *Yom Tov Sheini*, the second day of the festival), Levin and I arrived at the Rebbe's *beit midrash* in Crown Heights just before the ark was opened for the traditional dancing with the Torah scrolls. Suddenly, the sea of black hats parted to clear a path for us to reach the Rebbe's dais. The two of us stood at his side, and for an hour before the dancing began, the Rebbe spoke with us as the entire congregation stood still, wondering at the delay. They must have known the conversation dealt with the war then being fought in the Jewish state.

The Rebbe spoke with us about the significance of the war, focusing on its part in the process of redemption. I do not recall whether he referred specifically to the war of Gog and Magog, but the inference was all too clear. He asked—and later demanded to know—why the military campaign had halted in the Golan Heights, and why IDF forces, which had already rebuffed the Syrian army, refrained from advancing to capture Damascus. At the time, IDF forces had withdrawn from their defensive posture and had gone on the offensive, arriving within 34 kilometers of the Syrian capital. From a practical standpoint, the capture of Damascus was possible, and would unquestionably have decided the outcome of the war.

We tried to justify Israel's decision to the Rebbe, attributing it to concerns that Russia would carry out its threat of intervention if the IDF advanced toward the Syrian capital, with likely horrific results. We also said that it appeared as though Israel wanted to concentrate heavy forces on the southern front in order to drive the Egyptian army definitively toward the Suez Canal.

The Rebbe rejected our arguments one by one. He claimed that entering Egyptian territory was a strategic error, since it would not alter the balance of power in Israel's favor. He also said that the State of Israel's most

serious problem was the battle with Syria, and that until that front was won decisively, the Arab war against the Jewish state would never end. Damascus, he explained, as a city with an ancient history, symbolized the stability of the Muslim world, and therefore the threat Islam posed to the Jewish people. A blow to such a symbol would thus destroy the confidence of the Arabs. Moreover, he insisted, Russia was all talk, and American opposition to a sound defeat of Syria was only for the sake of appearances. In reality, the United States was eager for Israel to vanquish Syria. Regarding the issue of Israeli casualties, he claimed that if we did not win the battle decisively at this propitious time, in the future far more blood would be spilled in the course of subsequent wars the Arabs would impose upon us.

The Rebbe peppered his political remarks with quotes from homiletic sources and kabbalistic literature describing Damascus as a thorn in Jerusalem's side. He reiterated several times the well-known talmudic passage on the Roman Empire and Jerusalem: "Caesarea and Jerusalem: If someone tells you both lie in ruins, do not believe it; both remain standing, do not believe it. [But if someone tells you] Caesarea lies in ruins and Jerusalem remains standing, or Jerusalem lies in ruins and Caesarea remains standing—then you can

believe it" (Megilla 6a). He compared Caesarea to modern-day Damascus through various pieces of textual evidence, and he repeated several times the well-known Midrash, "Jerusalem will be destroyed on all sides, and the gates of Jerusalem will reach as far as Damascus" (Song of Songs Rabba 7:10).

On that same Simhat Torah night, for the first time since its completion, the "Torah scroll of the messiah" was taken out of the ark, and the Rebbe was given the honor of carrying it during the first rotation around the *bima* (platform). Thousands of men filled the beit midrash with frenzied song and dance. There was an almost inebriating sense among those present that the messianic era was imminent, and the messiah was none other than the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who was carrying the Torah scroll written in his honor.

At the end of our conversation, the Rebbe had asked us to go back home immediately after the dancing and phone Israel to convey his urgent message to the heads of state. They must, he insisted, instruct the IDF to conquer Damascus, and fear no one. Menachem Levin promised to bring his remarks to the attention of Prime Minister Golda Meir, and I assured him I would contact the heads of the National Religious Party to convey his message in detail.

It should be noted that from a halachic standpoint, this request could be seen as problematic. As Israelis in the diaspora, we were not compelled to observe the second day of the festival in private, yet we were forbidden to desecrate it in public. But as a *hora'at sha'a* ("emergency ruling") the Rebbe overlooked this issue, even pressing us to do his bidding quickly. This approach recalls that of other known candidates for the role of the messiah who disregarded finer points of halacha, applying a *hora'at sha'a* based on their certainty that the end was nigh. So, too, did these other potential messiahs often distort the simple meaning of verses, as Persico shows the Rebbe to have done in his article.

The trip home to Far Rockaway seemed to last forever. I felt the urgency of the task the Rebbe had assigned to me in every fiber of my being. He had made me feel as if I were carrying the fate of the Jewish people on my narrow shoulders. That night, I managed to reach the late MK Zevulun Hammer, who was summoned from a meeting of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee being held in Tel Aviv. I conveyed my conversation with the Rebbe to him, along with the latter's explicit demands.

About half an hour later, I received a call from the late MK Yitzhak Raphael, who wanted to hear exactly

what the Rebbe had said, and how he had dismissed the concerns of military failure and unnecessary bloodshed. In reply, Raphael confirmed that Defense Minister Moshe Dayan was indeed worried about Russian intervention, and had therefore commanded the IDF not to advance beyond the lines Israel held on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, on the Golan Heights front.

Arie Morgenstern
Jerusalem

TOMER PERSICO RESPONDS:

I would like to thank all those who responded to my article. I found their letters not only interesting, but illuminating as well.

Yaakov Gottlieb raises the question of how messianism in general should be regarded. He points out that when the belief in the imminent arrival of the messiah is pushed out of public discourse, the resulting vacuum is of necessity filled by a different brand of messianism, either nationalist or ideological. According to Gottlieb, the Rebbe tried to restore faith in the messiah. This type of messianism, he believes, does not pose a danger to its adherents or to anyone else, because "It did not, for example, call for war to liberate parts of the Fatherland, or demand that the mosque on the

Temple Mount be blown up.” Now, I certainly agree with Gottlieb that an end to the belief in the messiah does not herald the end of messianism, and that secular messianism exists today on both the right and the left. I disagree, however, that the messianism promulgated by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson was innocuous. True, Chabad hasidim are not violent, and in fact are known for their positive contributions to the Jewish public in Israel and the rest of the world. On the other hand, the Rebbe’s teachings are definitely subject to political interpretations, as evidenced by Arie Morgenstern’s fascinating response to my article.

Danger is measured not only in terms of physical harm, but spiritual harm, as well. Despite my admiration for them and my appreciation for their good intentions, many of today’s Chabad hasidim are trapped in an illusion. The concern here is not that they will use force to realize their messianic vision (since, in any case, force would simply not help), but rather that in total contradiction to the central ethos of Judaism throughout the generations, they would shift the focus of Jewish life from the world in which we live to a fantasy world, one in which the messiah has already arrived and his name is known to all. In such a world, all

other Jewish teachings would pale in comparison. Quite simply, nothing else would matter.

This is not only a spiritual danger for hasidim, however. It also threatens the messianic concept at large. If Gottlieb really believes, as he writes, that “One of the Rebbe’s main goals was to restore the belief in the messiah as a central foundation of Jewish consciousness and daily life,” he should also recognize that the general public’s distaste for Chabad’s overblown displays of messianism, and its view of the organization as a mere personality cult, only *distances* the majority of the Jewish people from the notion of messianic faith.

On this point, perhaps, it would be fitting to note Elliot R. Wolfson’s provocative book on the Rebbe, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (2009), which came out after my article was published. In the book, Wolfson presents the far-reaching thesis that the Rebbe’s messianic teachings exhorted his followers to anticipate the messiah not as a specific individual, but as a redemptive state of consciousness. Wolfson notes parenthetically that today, most Jews have lost the ability to await the messiah in human form (perhaps, I would add, because this concept appears somewhat primitive

to them). The problem with this, Wolfson argues, is that in the process they have also lost their faith in *any* form of redemption, even one that occurs internally (as described in the teachings of Jewish mystics from Abraham Abulafia to the Baal Shem Tov). If so, the danger of Chabad's obsessive messianism is that its followers will be so preoccupied with awaiting the Rebbe's revelation that they will distance themselves from the possibility of an authentic religious redemption—one that, if Wolfson is right, even the Rebbe himself had in mind.

Another issue Gottlieb raises is the question of the whether and how the Chabad movement can remain part of Judaism. This is an important question, but as it belongs to the realm of the future, it remains unknown. I certainly concede Gottlieb's point about Chabad members' unbending adherence to halacha (a point I stressed in my article);

likewise, I concur that there exists a world of difference between Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson and Shabtai Tzvi. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that this trend is still in its incipient stages. Christianity took more than two hundred years to sever itself completely from Judaism, and as is well known, it was for many years considered just another stream of Judaism, with many of Jesus' disciples observing Jewish law to the letter.

That being said, while I certainly hope my comparison is groundless, I fear that it harbors a grain of truth. Time will tell whether the path Chabad is traveling runs parallel to other forms of contemporary Judaism, or diverges ever so slightly from it. At present, such a divergence might seem inconsequential, but it may well lead to a greater and greater distance from mainstream Judaism. Let us hope this is not the case.

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