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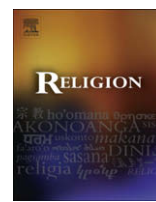
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## To see the invisible messiah: Messianic socialization in the wake of a failed prophecy in Chabad

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### A B S T R A C T

#### Keywords:

Millenarian movements  
Failed prophecy  
Chabad – Lubavitch  
Modes of knowing  
Anthropology of the senses

The study explores how the meshichistim (messianics) among the Jewish ultra-orthodox Chabad (Lubavitch) Hasidim manage the rupture entailed by the death of their leader, the Rebbe, whom they uphold as the King Messiah. Based on ethnographic research of contemporary pilgrimage to the Rebbe's court in Brooklyn, whose rituals and pedagogical framework are constructed by the meshichistim, the study problematizes the functional assumptions and implications of the rich literature on failed prophecies in millenarian movements, a literature heavily influenced by the theoretical model of cognitive dissonance. The case of Chabad meshichistim suggests that a millenarian group can reinvent itself through multifaceted cultural, pedagogical and ritual endeavors that are rife with internal contradictions. Moreover, these endeavors reveal that the rupture has not been balanced, regularized or normalized, but rather expresses the continuous complexity of life in its shadow.

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I have long since become accustomed to the beeping of the cars, and have learned to minimize my steps and weave my way through the congested pavements. It is crowded in Crown Heights. The Jewish new year (*Rosh Hashana*) is approaching, and the Hasidic court of the Chabad (Lubavitch) movement<sup>1</sup> – one of the most dynamic and central movements in the contemporary Jewish world, based in Brooklyn, New York – is becoming busier with every passing day. The neighborhood is all commotion and excitement: peddlers stack fresh produce outside their shops; local Hasidim are shopping for the festive new year meals; countless guests are arriving from near and far, carrying out the traditional Hasidic practice of making a pilgrimage to the court during the month of festivals (*Tishrei*); beggars are also gathering in the neighborhood – they can smell some extra cash. Every few hours, large buses empty themselves of their passengers, tired people with enormous suitcases, who are greeted by local residents and huge banners. The smell of baking emanates from the bagel shop until late at night, and on street corners teenage boys and girls congregate in separate groups, bringing their intimate late-night conversations to an end. The main synagogue and study hall, located in the most central and important building in the court at 770 Eastern Parkway (and known by everyone simply as 770), is bustling with activity. The doors to the hall are unlocked, inviting visitors to enter at any time.

Throughout the month of Tishrei the neighborhood and 770 are painted yellow, the trademark color of the messianic campaign run by Chabad since the 1980s. Splashes of yellow appear on posters and banners above doorways, beneath windows and on the Hasidim's bags. Yellow flags, posters and stickers call the public to prepare for its imminent redemption, proclaiming the late Lubavicher Rabbi (*Rebbe*), Menachem Mendel Schneerson, to be the messiah. The Rebbe's face peers out from most of these flags and placards. A few days after *Simchat Torah*, the last in the series of Tishrei's festivals, the guests start to return to their homes and the streets begin to empty. The neighborhood gradually returns to its usual routine, yet the splashes of yellow do not fade away.

Capturing the pilgrimage to the Hasidic court five or six years after the Rebbe's death, the vibrant ethnographic picture painted above is not trivial. Rabbi Schneerson (1902–1994) passed away at the peak of a messianic tide he had activated and led, although he never identified the messiah figure. In the 1990s, given the Rebbe's ill health and lack of a potential heir, the messianic tide turned directly and indirectly to the figure of Chabad's charismatic leader, with many Hasidim beginning to reject the possibility that he might die. Following what would appear to be the death of the messiah-to-be, and thus the failure of the messianic script, and in contrast to the gloomy forecasts of its

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<sup>1</sup> Its name was derived from the geographical location at which this Hasidic group crystallized during the course of more than a century: the village Lubavitch in Mohilev County, White Russia. The movement's other name, Chabad, is an acronym of the religious method developed by its first leader: wisdom (*chochma*), understanding (*bina*) and knowledge (*da'at*). The term *Chabad* is commonly used in Israel, whereas *Lubavitch* is more widely held in North America.

possible demise (Friedman, 1994), the movement still demonstrates religious and messianic vitality focused on the figure of the late venerated leader.<sup>2</sup>

Based on anthropological–ethnographic research conducted among the messianic circles (self-designated *meshichistim*, or meshichistic circles; sing. *meshichist*) in the Hasidic court at a time of mass pilgrimage, I aim to both explain and complicate this picture of Chabad's current religious and messianic vitality. I seek to shed light on the educational ways through which this contemporary Jewish messianic group reinvents itself and sustains the messianic tide in the absence of both its leader and the messiah. In particular, I consider how the messianic belief is culturally re-organized, performed, maintained and practiced in both collective and individual spheres in the face of failed prophecy, as well as which religious, ritual and pedagogical mechanisms are at play in this venture. These aspects deserve research attention given the centrality of religious–millenarian socialization processes among millenarian movements, even before the messianic definition of reality is acutely disrupted.<sup>3</sup> This also begs the question of whether, or indeed how, this disruption has its bearing on the inner dynamics of belief maintenance. As will be shown below, these issues have not been sufficiently addressed in the literature on failed prophecy and on the Chabad Hasidism.

By raising and addressing the aforementioned questions, I offer a twofold theoretical contribution to the rich literature on failed prophecies among millenarian movements. First, I show that, contrary to the common notion of rationalization as an efficient tool of normalization in the wake of failed prophecy, the rationalization of the meshichistic circles in Chabad Hasidism incorporates internal contradictions and precipitates confusion and unease. Second, I illustrate the pervasiveness of 'belief management,' or 'work of belief,' as an array of pedagogical and religious methods employed at the micro-level and intended to inculcate meshichistic belief in the pilgrims.

Bringing together these two insights, I aspire to problematize some of the implicit and explicit assumptions that characterize the rich literature on failed prophecy among millenarian movements. These assumptions follow Festinger et al.'s (1956) influential book, *When Prophecy Fails*, and are present even in those studies that are critical of this pioneering work. Above all, through my research on the contemporary messianic ecology in Chabad Hasidism, I criticize the over-harmonious and somewhat synchronic suppositions of a social world that can be quickly healed and returned to a state of balance. As the meshichistic framework in Chabad Hasidism proves to be both a spring of vitality and a source of continuous struggle, rife with unsolved epistemological and religious challenges, I shed critical light on the functional assumptions inherent in the literature on failed prophecy.

### Messianism, leadership and rupture in Chabad

Chabad Hasidism was founded at the end of the 18th century in Belorussia and the Ukraine. From the end of the 19th century, and more so following the Second World War, it migrated westwards, with the aim of restoring the life which had been traumatically disrupted in Europe. Like other orthodox and ultra-orthodox groups (including other Hasidic groups), Chabad Hasidim relocated in the New York City area, while progressively creating countless communities in the United States and around the globe, the largest being in Israel and the United States. Chabad established itself as one of the most notable and important groups in the Hasidic world in particular, and in the Jewish world at large. Its wide-ranging proselytizing, almost entirely directed at Jews; its tight connections with political establishments the world over; and its personality cult around the Rebbe, including a messianic cult, are some of the characteristics that have made Chabad the highly visible movement it is today. The last feature clarifies the cosmology in which the Rebbe's death constitutes a point of rupture for the movement.

Belief in the existence of the messiah and the expectation of his arrival are basic elements in Jewish life and thought, even if largely dormant (Kochan, 1990; Marcus, 1996; Talmon, 1968). Messianic movements have appeared throughout Jewish history, centered around purportedly messianic figures, such as Jesus, Bar Kochba, Shabbetai Zvi and Jacob Frank, reviving these elements for a certain period of time (Lenowitz, 1998; Sharot, 1982). Chabad Hasidism, centered around Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is a contemporary instance of this historical chain.

In its dawn, Chabad developed a mystic form of religious worship that emphasized the perpetual presence of God, as opposed to His historical one-time appearances (Elior, 1993; Ravitzki, 1993). For this reason, it was considered less messianic than other Hasidic courts (Schatz-Uffennheimer, 1962; Scholem, 1961). The significant shift towards messianism provided religious, ideological and emotional ammunition against the emergence of alternative religious education networks and secular Zionism, and particularly in the face of the Second World War and the Jewish Holocaust (Friedman, 1994; Ravitzki, 1993). Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak, the sixth leader of Chabad Hasidism, presented this catastrophe as the pre-messianic pangs of imminent redemption, and advanced messianic ideas in practical and organizational terms (Elior, 1998; Friedman, 1994). Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak's son-in-law, sustained this policy, further reinforcing and institutionalizing it (Erlich, 2004).<sup>4</sup> Throughout the years of his leadership (1951–1994), Schneerson greatly occupied himself with messianic concepts and urged his followers to spread the message of Judaism as a way of hastening redemption (Kraus, 2007). Similar to his predecessor, Schneerson offered cosmic and meta-historical readings of important historical events (such as the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the first Gulf War) as absolutely reliable signs of approaching salvation (Katchen, 1991; Shaffir, 1993). Unlike his father-in-law, however, his was a messianism of success and not of catastrophe (Ravitzki, 1993). Over the years, Schneerson changed the tone of his messianic comments from a hopeful style to an assertive one: the messiah is coming.

During the 1980s, different voices in Chabad Hasidism began to identify the Rebbe as the King Messiah. These voices gained strength during the 1990s, when the Rebbe was in ill health, representing the beginnings of what internal Chabad discourse calls the 'meshichistic faction.' The vigorous activities of this faction, including its demand that the Rebbe publicly acclaim himself as the King Messiah, aroused

<sup>2</sup> For other studies highlighting various aspects of the movement's impressive vitality (e.g., its well-oiled global organizational activities, its growth, its intense presence in Jewish circles and its adherence to messianic consciousness), see Dein (2001, 2002), Fishkoff (2003), Kraus (2007: 255), Shaffir (1995), Sheler (1994) and Steinfelds (2000).

<sup>3</sup> The literal meaning of the concept of millenarianism is 'a period of a thousand years', but in academic usage it refers to a religious expectation that collective and total salvation is approaching, usually imminently. Millenarian beliefs can be found in many religions, while a millenarian movement organizes itself via this foundation. A messianic group has a redemptive figure to whom its members direct their millenarian aspirations. In the following, I refer to Chabad as a messianic movement.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the factors that brought about the change in Chabad Hasidism's attitude to messianism, see Elior (1998), Friedman (1994), and Szubin (2000).

much antagonism. The 'non-meshichistic faction' rejected the meshichistim's strident strategies, expressing concern that it might harm future outreach activities and damage the movement's image. Both groups found support for their position in the Torah and various Hasidic texts, as well as in their interpretations of the Rebbe's own writings and the movements of his paralyzed body.

It is difficult to separate the messianic zeal associated with the figure of the Rebbe from the more general cult of personality that surrounded him. First, this cult of personality is anchored in a Hasidic doctrine that locates the leader – the righteous man (the *zaddik*; pl. *zaddikim*), – at the heart of the believer's religious worship, painting him as a holy man who mystically mediates between heaven and earth, between the godly and the human. Throughout the history of Hasidism and Chabad, the concept of the *zaddik* has been backed by institutional and social arrangements that have established a close and mutual relationship between the *zaddik* and his followers (Green, 1977; Poll, 1995; Sharot, 1982). Secondly, the intensity of the personality cult around the Rebbe – quite remarkable in comparison with other Hasidic and religious leaders in the Jewish world – was also related to the power of his charisma. The Rebbe was charismatic both in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1968), as bearing authority based on a mission (in this case, a messianic mission), and in the popular-intuitive sense, as a man with unique individual charm. Under his leadership, relations between the *zaddik* and his Hasidic followers became the crowning glory of the movement's existence; being a Chabad Hasid meant 'being a follower of the Rebbe.'

### 770 and the meshichistic faction after the Rebbe's death

Similarly to other Hasidic courts (Belcove-Shalin, 1995; Green, 1977; Weingrod, 1993), the Chabad court in Crown Heights has been seen as sacred by believers ever since its establishment in the 1940s. This perception was intensified by Chabad, as Rebbe Schneerson rarely left the premises, while many of his followers made pilgrimages to his place. The place is therefore closely identified with the Rebbe and the intense emotionality of relations with him. The original building became a sprawling complex, the political nerve center of the movement, home to its most important institutions. Moreover, during the years of the messianic heyday, the Rebbe reconstructed the standing of 770 in a way that overstepped normative Hasidic conceptions of holiness and charisma. He affirmed 770 as the holiest place in the Diaspora and as crucial to messianic expectations: it is there that the messiah will reveal himself and the third temple will descend from the heavens, before taking it to Jerusalem and complete redemption.<sup>5</sup>

It is not surprising that many of the internal tensions that accompanied the rise of messianism in the 1980s and early 1990s filtered through to 770, where they were considerably amplified. Given the presence of the Rebbe, questions of principle concerning meshichistic strategy took on a practical tone. For instance, should songs of worship that openly recognize the Rebbe as the King Messiah be sung in his presence? And, after his stroke, should they continue to be sung when he is sitting in front of a congregation in his wheelchair, pale and paralyzed?

Such practical questions obtained new meaning as the Rebbe's death deepened the internal division between meshichistim and non-meshichistim, and had a direct bearing on the ritual space in 770. When the Rebbe was sick, differences between the groups could be formulated as primarily tactical and strategic (whether to go public with the Rebbe's anointment); after his death, however, the disagreements took on an interpretive dimension in relation to ontological reality. Many Hasidim who define themselves as meshichistim deny that the Rebbe died and continue to openly acknowledge him as the King Messiah. Their main argument is that, even though the Rebbe's death was confirmed by doctors and his funeral attended by huge crowds, the Rebbe is in fact alive. He is 'concealed' or 'hidden' from human eyes, yet continues to live in a perfectly physical and corporeal sense at 770, where, as mentioned, he will return and reveal himself to the world.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, non-meshichistim accept that, like other *zaddikim*, the Rebbe has passed away in a physical sense but is 'alive' in a spiritual sense, continuing to exert a heavenly influence on the entire world, and on Hasidim in particular. These Hasidim do not rule out the possibility that the Rebbe could have been, or may still be, the King Messiah, and that, in the fullness of time, he may be restored to life. However, they prefer to play down any public interest in the identity of the messiah.<sup>7</sup>

The actual social reality in Chabad is more complex and ambiguous than the above description, and it is difficult to sketch clear and solid boundaries between the two groups.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, because the social relations and murky politics in internal Chabad discourse are formulated and verbalized in terms of this distinction, and because the meshichistic voices in the field of this study do indeed represent the position described above, in what follows I adhere to the distinction between 'meshichistim' and 'non-meshichistim.'<sup>9</sup>

At 770, given the Rebbe's physical absence, the gap between the two positions was translated into concrete questions: Where should one go in order 'to be with the Rebbe' – to 770, or to his grave in Queens? What should the daily routine be, and how should one behave at 770? Discussions I had with leaders of the meshichistic faction and other local Hasidim indicate that the political-ideological battle over these questions was settled quite quickly, with the views of the meshichistic faction winning out.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In Hebrew, the numerical value of the letters comprising the phrase, 'the House of the Messiah' (*Beit Mashiach*) is 770.

<sup>6</sup> Dein (2002) suggests that this position only developed a number of years after the Rebbe's death. However, the research on which the current article is based clearly shows that, at least in Crown Heights, this belief was formulated in the period immediately following the Rebbe's death.

<sup>7</sup> It is reckoned that a significant number of the meshichistic Hasidim are newly religious Jews, and that there is an essential link between the phenomenon of the newly religious and meshichistic activities (Szubin, 2000). It is also thought that the Chabad establishment is largely non-meshichistic or even anti-meshichistic (Fishkoff, 2003: 267–272).

<sup>8</sup> This clear and binary distinction raises a number of difficulties. Both meshichistic and non-meshichistic discourses are multi-vocal and rich (on strident anti-meshichistic politics, see Bruni, 1996; Fishkoff, 2003: 261–284). Moreover, against an emerging 'meshichistic habitus' (such as wearing a 'Messiah pin' in one's suit lapel, or reading certain intra-movement publications), there is still much social intermixing (e.g., education and family ties).

<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to evaluate the size of these groups (Fishkoff, 2003: 272–276). The meshichistim are certainly not numerically insignificant in terms of the global Chabad collective and are particularly notable because of the extroverted strategy that characterizes them. This faction makes its presence felt very strongly both in Crown Heights, where the study was conducted, and in the Chabad communities of Israel, where many subjects of the study come from.

<sup>10</sup> The appropriation of the synagogue at 770 by meshichistim has never meant full religious and political control over 770 as a whole. Other compartments at the complex (e.g., the Rebbe's room and numerous offices) are recognized as non-meshichistic zones. During the time of writing this paper (January 2008), the question of religious and political control over the synagogue at 770 was dealt with in court. Throughout this article, references to 770 are to the synagogue, in which I conducted a large part of my fieldwork.

With the aim of restoring 'life as usual with the Rebbe' at 770, meshichistic circles have ensured that the traditional practice of making a pilgrimage to the court during the High Holydays is sustained.<sup>11</sup> To this end, they have instigated a number of organizational changes that express the routinization of charisma given the vacuum left in the court. One of the more significant changes was to appeal to a different population of potential pilgrims than in the past: there was no longer a call for entire Hasidic families to come to the court during the month of Tishrei, but rather a call to the younger generation. This new strategy was directed mostly at Israeli Hasidic youth and was supported and institutionalized by Chabad's educational network in Israel. This network perceives 'the journey to the Rebbe' as having added educational value, separate from the disputed ideological question of the Rebbe's messianic status.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the pilgrimage to the court has become a tangible means of linking the youth, who have not met the Rebbe, with their Hasidic identity and the Rebbe, who is meant to be at its center.<sup>13</sup> In its new context, the pilgrimage to the court is well attended, with more and more adolescents (males and females) visiting the court every year.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, visiting 770 has become part of a cultural script, a significant milestone in the normative process of growing up in a Chabad community in Israel.<sup>15</sup>

## Fieldwork

This study employs an ethnographic perspective and methodology. That is to say, the research was crafted in the framework of qualitative methods, as an inductive and interpretive study of messianic ecology at the micro-level. In particular, it was built on intensive fieldwork through participant observations I carried out over three months in two visits to the Hasidic court in Crown Heights (autumn 1999 and autumn 2000) and field notes I systematically took during this period.<sup>16</sup> The fieldwork entailed staying with a local Hasidic family, attending family and community events and, above all, exploring the daily routine enfolded in the unordinary and festive experience of making pilgrimage to the court. That included joining in with the variety of activities that female pilgrims from Israel participated in and were exposed to, for example ritual and pedagogic activities in the central synagogue at 770, social meetings, proselytizing work, day trips and shopping. All these activities provided me with concrete opportunities to form close relationships with about 15 teenage Hasidic girls, mostly aged 15–18, that continued long after my return from the field. In addition to the innumerable informal conversations I had, I also conducted ten open narrative interviews with ten teenage Hasidic girls upon their return to Israel (asking them to 'tell the story of the journey to the court') and seven interviews with key activists and educators (male and female) from the meshichistic group. I also read a number of travel diaries that the teenage girls kept, as well as newspaper articles from the Chabad press about these trips to the Rebbe's court.

The gendered boundaries of this study were predetermined. After all, I was studying a traditional ultra-orthodox group that keeps the sexes very much apart in everything to do with pedagogy and ritual practice.<sup>17</sup> However, the study offers general insights into the meshichistic group within Chabad, because beyond various gender constructions (e.g., females' role in the messianic script), the messages that the female pilgrims were exposed to have a clear meshichistic frame of reference. Along with the teenage Hasidic girls, I observed religious rituals that took place in the men's section of the synagogue, and I listened with them to lectures delivered by meshichistic rabbis (males, by definition).

The ethnic boundaries of this study were also preset, if not intentionally. Whereas my research plan was to investigate a central and unique meshichistic setting where I could detect actual meshichistic 'belief work,' I learned that my research field exposed me to mainly Israeli meshichistic ecology. Although located in the United States, maintained by local American Hasidic figures and drawing Hasidic people from all over the world, Crown Heights during the month of Tishrei is largely an Israeli zone. Further studies are needed to determine whether the meshichistic framework described here is found in other locations and communities and to unveil how this meshichistic-oriented space affects allegedly non-meshichistic activities that are held in the court (e.g., the annual convention of the Chabad global network of outreach emissaries).

## Coping with a failed prophecy

Millenarian-messianic movements have long fascinated researchers from diverse disciplines, who try to unravel the sources of millenarian thought and characterize its various instantiations (Burridge, 1969; Clair, 1992; Graziano, 1999; O'Leary, 1994, 2000; Robbins and Palmer, 1997; Talmon, 1968; Thompson, 1996). In particular, historians, sociologists and anthropologists have been involved in a lively debate over the fate of such movements after what would appear to be a 'failed prophecy'. This debate largely revolves around Festinger et al.'s (1956) seminal volume, *When Prophecy Fails*, and the many reactions to it, both favorable and critical. The book is based on ethnographic research within an American millenarian-apocalyptic group, and draws on a social-psychological perspective for understanding religious dynamics at a time of crisis. Festinger and colleagues argue that the inevitable gap between the prophecy and its seeming

<sup>11</sup> On the centrality of this ritual practice in the Hasidic experience, see Assaf (1997) and Sharot (1982).

<sup>12</sup> Targeting Israeli youth can be explained by a confluence of factors, including: the fact that some of the central meshichistic circles at Crown Heights are Israelis in origin; that the Israeli Chabad community is among the largest in the global network of Chabad Hasidism; and that the meshichistic group makes its presence felt very strongly among Israeli communities of Chabad. Efforts of the meshichistic circles at 770 to target groups and institutions from other Chabad communities (maybe on other festive occasions), as well as the role that the court plays as a sacred place of pilgrimage among these communities, are yet to be addressed.

<sup>13</sup> For more on pilgrimage as an educational-experiential means of recruiting younger generations for the group's collective aims, see Ben-Zeev (2000) and Feldman (2000).

<sup>14</sup> The numerical estimations I was given by various meshichistic activists (which must therefore be treated with caution) and local Hasidim indicate that there was a sharp decline in the number of visitors coming to the court during the month of Tishrei at the time of the Rebbe's illness: from about 8000 to merely dozens. These numbers have steadily and impressively grown. At the time of the research, about 3000 people were visiting the court, a few hundred of whom were women.

<sup>15</sup> The construction of the pilgrimage to the Chasidic court as a cultural script in the Israeli context might be explained as an ultra-orthodox alternative to the cultural scripts available to secular and religious youth in Israel (e.g., the pilgrimage to Holocaust camps and the 'big journey' of young adults after army service to exotic, far-away places).

<sup>16</sup> Crown Heights has been the research field or subject for a number of academic and journalistic studies. See Fishkoff (2003), Goldschmidt (2006), Harris (1985), Levine (1998, 2003), Mintz (1992), Morris (1998), Shapiro (2006).

<sup>17</sup> In less structured social contexts, such as family meals, community events and so on, the gender-identity politics of the fieldwork was much more flexible. As a result, during my day-to-day fieldwork, I was able to talk with Hasidic men (locals and Israeli visitors) and observe them close up.

invalidation gives rise to 'cognitive dissonance' among the group's committed members. They acknowledge the contradiction, following which they feel a degree of mental discomfort, which in turn motivates them to re-establish a state of cognitive balance. Rather than causing them to abandon the millenarian group, this motivation, the researchers argue, very often leads to an intensification of the members' commitment to it. This kind of response is largely made possible by proselytizing (based on the assumption that if more people believe in the prophecy, then it must be true) and, to a lesser extent, by a set of rationalizations and interpretations for the prophecy's failure and an increased reliance on the group's solidarity.

Many studies explicitly support the explanatory model of cognitive dissonance, or at least align themselves with it (Bainbridge, 1997; Filoramo, 2000; Foster, 1987; Gager, 1975; Nelson, 1987; Poloma, 1982; Wardi, 2000; Weiser, 1974). However, alongside these studies, there are others that strongly criticize Festinger et al. on empirical, methodological–ethical and theoretical grounds. Empirical criticism has referred to the difficulty in reproducing the behavioral responses reported by Festinger and colleagues, such as increased proselytizing after the prophecy's failure (Balch et al., 1983; Hardyck and Braden, 1962). Critics have also argued that the researchers imposed secular empirical modes of thought on the research field, while displaying a condescending attitude towards their subjects (Baumgarten, 2000; Palmer and Finn, 1992; Tumminia, 1998, 2005; Van Fossen, 1988; Zygmunt, 1972). Theoretical critiques relate to the lack of crucial cosmological aspects of millenarian movements and to the simplistic representation of prophecies as the groups' exclusive organizing principle (Bader, 1999; Melton, 1985; O'Leary, 1994; Zygmunt, 1972). A sense of shared history, a developed ideology and an expansive world of meaning, the critical studies demonstrate, are available to the believers as cultural resources that they can draw upon in maintaining their reality. This takes place through various processes of interpretation (rationalizations) and reality construction, no less than through missionary activities (Stone, 2000; Tumminia, 1998, 2005).

While important critiques of Festinger et al.'s study have been put forward, they do not pose a significant challenge to its basic functionalist assumptions. This can be seen in the largely non-critical usage of the concept of cognitive dissonance among subsequent authors. Even two researchers who do question the concept itself – Zygmunt (1972: 246), who refers to it as a 'psychological and abstract concept', and Tumminia (2005: 43–44), who prefers the ethnomethodological concept of 'mundane reason' – nevertheless accept the assumption that people are driven to live in balance and are capable of doing so. Thus, even such critical researchers ignore two problematic meanings embedded in the notion of cognitive dissonance, with its emphasis on restoring balance: its sterile binarism and its implied synchronic perspective.

First, the cognitive dissonance concept emphasizes order and stability, and is based on a clear binary distinction between two opposite situations in the world – balance and imbalance, dissonance and consonance. This in itself assumes that the various coping mechanisms (be they proselytizing or interpretive practices) are successful in relocating people from one state to the other. In this sense, the coherence of the millenarian explanatory system has not been challenged. Moreover, it has been taken for granted that group members have the epistemological tools to absorb and internalize the given rationalization. Assumed to be totally persuasive, free of contradictions and rooted in a singular and validated world of meaning, the rationalization simply 'has to make sense.' It would seem that the concept of cognitive dissonance cannot be applied to rationalizations or re-interpretations that do not accord with this binary and exhaustive logic of 'dissonance' versus 'consonance.' The case study presented here sheds critical light on this implicit logic. My study of meshichistim in Chabad reveals an inner conceptual world wherein interpretations of the prophecy and reality are simultaneously logical and unreasonable, normalizing and destabilizing, reassuring and yet challenging.

Second, the concept of cognitive dissonance refers to a temporary violation or disturbance in the natural and expected flow of the order, coordination and consistency of life. It is a threatening and challenging situation that calls for a hasty resolution. As such, it is a concept that encourages, if only implicitly, a synchronic outlook on a limited and extremely basic aspect of coping with failure: the attempt to restore balance as quickly as possible.<sup>18</sup> These synchronic meanings may explain the focus on the system of rationalizations that the group uses as 'first aid,' and the corresponding relative neglect of dynamic and more diachronic elements in actual belief work. This focus on the mere explanations given to the failed prophecy seems to neuter the unique power of ethnography – the methodology adopted by many students of failed prophecies – as a tool which provides access to multifaceted, nuanced cultural work of facing, performing, negotiating and inculcating the rationalization.

The same criticism can be applied to specific studies of Chabad: researchers who followed the movement closely during the years of Rabbi Schneerson's illness employed Festinger's theory to account for its internal dynamics (Dein, 1997; Shaffir, 1993, 1994). They pointed to the combination of a range of rationalizations, social support and proselytizing activities (which characterizes Chabad in any case) as tools for coping with the theological and emotional fracture implied by a messiah lying on his deathbed. The early adaptations made by Hasidim to the Rebbe's death were also analyzed in exactly those terms (Dein, 1997, 2001, 2002; Shaffir, 1995). Such studies teach us that, despite the initial chaos, intense pain and widespread confusion that overcame the Hasidim, Chabad survived the crisis. As proof of this, researchers point to the extremely small number of Hasidim who left the fold, fell apart or suffered from psychiatric disturbances following their leader's death. The messianic consciousness, centered around the Rebbe, has also endured.

These researchers do not ignore criticisms of the model of cognitive dissonance, and even incorporate some of them within their theoretical dialogue with Festinger et al. Thus, for instance, they demonstrate the Hasidim's broad cosmological world and point to the internal logic of believers attempting to attribute renewed meaning to their shaken world. However, Festinger et al.'s basic assumptions regarding the competence of various coping mechanisms to restore balance are left unproblematic. For example, Shaffir (1995: 126) called the spectrum of rationalizations that appeared shortly after the Rebbe's death 'neutralization techniques,' while Dein (2001: 389) assumed that the Hasidic doctrines available to believers were coherent and persuasive enough to enable them to be 'sane people.' Additionally, these authors provide the Hasidim's explanations for the perplexing event of the Rebbe's death, but we do not know how, or indeed whether, they are woven into the ritual and religious life of the Hasidim, both as a community of belief and as individuals.

<sup>18</sup> Tumminia's work (1998, 2005) is exceptional in this regard, and offers us important insights into ongoing continuous belief and reality construction. Zygmunt (1972: 259) refers to diachronic aspects of belief reaffirmation, but does so extremely hastily and in relation to institutional procedures. Balch et al. (1983) also emphasize long-range processes in the development of a "culture of cognitive dissonance."

Standing out against these studies are two investigations of contemporary Chabad whose insights can be read as implied critiques of the cognitive dissonance model (Bilu, *in press*; Reinitz, 2001). In Bilu's work, the Rebbe's death is broadly described as a 'trauma,' not as cognitive dissonance. In both, the research does not focus on the rationalizations themselves, but rather is directed at the routine rhetorical and ritual means employed by Chabad Hasidim in Israel to construct a meshichistic reality.

In light of the above, I prefer to avoid the concept of cognitive dissonance. Instead, I define the Rebbe's death in the broader terms of a theological, emotional and social point of rupture. To be sure, the field in which I carried out my research contains deep and painful cognitive gaps, as well as renewed rationalizations and interpretations regarding the prophecy and reality. However, the functional and social-psychological assumptions and research implications entailed by the concept and model of cognitive dissonance are quite different from this study. I see my departure from the concept as a first step in diverting focus from harmonious and synchronic thinking to a more dynamic and complex thought regarding the multifaceted processes, mechanisms and practices involved in living with the failure of a prophecy over time. Taking advantage of the ethnographic methodology, I propose not to make do with social-psychological thought about cognitive structures and schemas, but rather to look for cultural strategies of reinventing and reviving meaning in a ruptured and challenging religious world.

### **To see with your eyes closed, and to open your eyes: rhetoric of visual knowledge**

The 'trial of seeing' is a central concept among the meshichistim, and educators and rabbis frequently mentioned it in the lessons and gatherings held in the Hasidic court. It is represented as a test in which Hasidim have to distinguish between the overt reality of the Rebbe's continuous absence and the 'true' reality that is hidden from sight. But are the believers equipped with the relevant tools for passing the test? This research demonstrates that the tools are at best very partial.

On the one hand, the concept of a 'trial' is embedded in religious discourse; in ultra-orthodox society, it connotes experience in the secular, modern world, with its false enchantments and temptations. More importantly, the concept of a 'trial of seeing' rests on the theological foundation of Chabad Hasidism. This Hasidic group tends to have an acosmic conception of the world – recognition of a godly being as the only true reality and negation of the separate existence of the material world. Accordingly, even the lowest of all material forms is the direct expression of God's infinite essence (Elior, 1993; Ravitzki, 1993). This mode of thought posits the challenge of denying one's sensory experience and empirical understandings, and adopting a consciousness that assumes that everything partakes of the essence of God. In the movement's literature, the challenge is largely formulated in terms of visual metaphors, such as tension between 'the essence of things' and their 'appearance,' and between one's 'eyes of the intellect' and one's 'eyes of the flesh' (Elior, 1993: 14). Along these lines, the Rebbe's burial is an event that took place at the external, overt dimension of reality, which is thus also limited and fraudulent, and the Rebbe's felt absence expresses man's typically deficient understanding. Given that Chabad philosophy is well diffused among its followers, shaping their routine social and spiritual life (Kahana, 1989), the concept of a 'trial of seeing' seems to reflect this tension between two dimensions of reality. In this sense, it is indeed a normalizing and balancing rationalization.

On the other hand, this rationalization conflicts with the fact that the Chabad Hasidim acknowledge the material world in their daily lives and give primacy to their sense of sight. They may make an effort to 'see' godly holiness all around, but when it comes to ascertaining the truth and constructing reality, they believe what they see. The eyes that witnessed the funeral and that have not seen the Rebbe at 770 ever since turn the meshichistic rationalization into something that does not make sense. 'My father was at the funeral, he saw the actual burial. He really saw it, he's not just making it up,' or 'I can't see the Rebbe at 770' are statements I heard, with variations, from a number of the teenage girls. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that since the Rebbe's death, more and more of the non- and especially anti-meshichistim have been defining themselves as 'sane' when taking a clear and forceful stand against the meshichistim's stance of 'the trial of seeing'.

The precedence given to the sense of sight is part of the Western and Jewish model of how reality is known. Western culture associates sight with knowledge and 'objectivity' (Fox Keller and Grontkowski, 1983; Howes, 1991; Synnott, 1991). In Judaism, too, despite the alleged diminution of visual aspects (due to concerns about idols and material representations of godliness; Soskice, 1996), much Halachic writing is mediated by sight. Accordingly, the 'trial of seeing' is particularly demanding, testing the ability of believers to define reality contrary to their normal way of doing so.

Chabad Hasidim therefore subscribe to two different systems of logic: an abstract, theological-mystic logic and an everyday, visual-empirical logic. As long as these two systems of logic are implemented in distinct contexts and situations, it would seem that the tension between them can be ignored in everyday life. However, in the unique context and place being discussed here, both systems of logic are enacted simultaneously, as the following examples illustrate.

After evening prayers at 770, many of the Hasidic teenage girls hurry to an adjacent hall to hear a lecture delivered by Rabbi Dvir, a meshichistic rabbi from a town in northern Israel.<sup>19</sup> Although exhausted after a full day's activities, they are curious to meet the person behind the name that most recognize from the movement's newspapers in Israel. The following is a short excerpt from his lecture, which dealt in its entirety with the 'journey to the Rebbe' in its unique current context:

You came here – praise God that there are girls who come all the way here – you came in the footsteps of your friends and your sisters, because – what can you do? – seeing with your own eyes is nothing like hearing, and you wanted to see things as they truly are and not just hear about them. And honestly, when you see what is going on here during Tishrei, the happiness, the excitement... Anyone who opens their eyes can see that the Rebbe, the King Messiah, is alive and well. It is now that we can ask whether the Rebbe has real followers, not when you can see him, and everyone is shouting, "Rebbe, we're with you." For people who think like animals, what they can't see doesn't exist. But even those who follow their eyes and say "We saw the burial" eventually come here. The Rebbe's sermons provide us with ammunition against what our eyes can see. Quite simply, don't believe what you see. It's the toughest test of all, but the fact that we were given it means we can pass it, this concealment, and if we see with our own eyes large numbers of people arriving, with more arriving every year, then the Rebbe's disappearance simply cannot be.

<sup>19</sup> All names have been changed to protect the speakers' anonymity.

Rabbi Dvir does not touch on the question of why the Rebbe needed to 'be hidden' from human sight, or whether this 'concealment' is to be expected or possible within the framework of Jewish messianic discourse. In other words, he is not trying to make cognitive sense of the discord between reality and prophecy. Instead, he deals with the question of how one can know the current reality, that is, know that the Rebbe is at 770. He talks about ways of knowing and, more specifically, about knowledge based on seeing. His concern with sight stems from his familiarity with the cultural authority of this mode of knowing, and with the challenge facing the community, including the teenage girls in the audience. This leads him to undermine the legitimacy of visual knowledge and to represent it as unreliable, inferior and animal-like. Yet, at the same time, he selectively, perhaps even unintentionally, draws on the unquestioned authority of visual knowledge to further his meshichistic definition of reality. When one sees crowds of people visiting 770, just as in the past, one is looking at evidence of the truth and at a clear sign that the Rebbe lives; and when one sees the Rebbe's empty chair, one is witness to a lie. It is in this paradoxical combination of these two modes of discourse about visual knowledge that we find the leaders of the meshichistic faction trying to muddle through the difficulties of their own rationalization. Rabbi Dvir makes it the responsibility of each member of the audience to 'see beyond' perceptible reality, to know that the Rebbe is present even though he cannot be seen.

As we shall see below, interviews with Hasidic teenage girls show this to be a very challenging, sometimes impossible task. However, while Rabbi Dvir is talking, the audience listens quietly without showing any signs of agitation. Perhaps this can be explained in terms of the rabbi's noncommittal, almost metaphorical usage of visual terms such as 'opening your eyes.' This usage, which blurs the line between literal and symbolic aspects of seeing, is common and has been routinized in meshichistic rhetoric. In any case, the girls' quiet reaction is quite different from their flustered response to the admittedly atypical meshichistic rhetoric illustrated in the following description.

It is impossible to miss Rabbi Heller. Ever since he arrived at 770 from Israel, along with the group of Hasidim that he leads, the messianic singing erupting from the men's seating areas has intensified. One morning, Rabbi Heller went upstairs to the women's seating area in the synagogue to lecture on the 'trial of seeing.' The following is a short excerpt from his lecture:

What is the main point in our time? To receive our righteous messiah. And how do we do this? The Rebbe said that we only need to open our eyes. The Rebbe stressed that this does not mean opening our spiritual eyes, but that he was unequivocally talking about a real, physical opening of the eyes. We are now in a new situation, an intermediary situation. The reason for us being in exile is not that redemption has not yet come, no! Redemption is already here! [Raises his voice] And yet we are in exile. Why? Because we cannot yet see the redemption that exists in physicality. The Rebbe is alive and well in physicality, sitting here and waiting for us to see him. But our eyes are closed. So how should we open our eyes? If we believe the Rebbe's words, the words of the Torah, then we must live this matter, and insist, and insist, and insist. This is our trial of seeing. Now, let's say I'm currently studying one of the Rebbe's sermons that says that he is alive. I lift up my eyes to the Rebbe's lectern, and I can see the lectern but not the Rebbe. But he is here! [Shouting] So it's a sign that I don't fully believe. Again, I delve into the sermon and examine myself: What do I believe? Who am I anyway? If the Rebbe said something, how can I, as cheeky as I am, lean toward those who are confused? So I shall lift my eyes once more [raising his voice and emphasizing each word], and I shall see the Rebbe! Three, four, and..., and if I still can't see him, it just shows that I don't really believe.

When Rabbi Heller talks about the 'trial of seeing,' he charges it with particularly radical and demanding meanings: literally seeing the Rebbe. He draws a straight line from 'knowledge' to 'seeing,' and represents the latter as an ability over which one has control. It is therefore not surprising that the audience's reaction was entirely different. There was restlessness that built up during the lecture; the girls whispered to one another and passed notes around – exceptional behavior when one considers the relations of power and respect between a female audience and a male rabbi. At the end of the talk, the young women left the synagogue in an excited state, exchanging views with one another. Their discomfort reflected their uneasiness and dissatisfaction with the new meanings that the rabbi had attributed to the concept of the 'trial of seeing.' As we were walking out of the synagogue, one told me: 'I felt like I couldn't breathe. I had to get out of there because I nearly suffocated. I went out onto the balcony. It was too much for me. I mean, I can see that I can't see.' Another added: 'I am opening my eyes! ... well, I still can't see. It is precisely when I open my eyes that I can see that the chair is empty. When I close them, the Rebbe is with me.'

It would appear that Rabbi Heller stretched the distance between the meshichistic definition of reality and commonly accepted ways of knowing reality too far. However, he did not invent the troublesome nature of this taxing faith; he just intensified it to the point of unbearable confusion and frustration. Whether the difficulty is in seeing the Rebbe in physicality, or in 'seeing beyond' his invisibility, it is a consequence of the rationalization, and not of the failed prophecy in itself. It is therefore the rationalization that stands at the center of the pedagogic discussion; it has become a predicament that creates new challenges instead of diminishing them or dealing with them.

The meshichistic strategy of placing 'the trial of seeing' at the core of the current definition of reality and encouraging potential believers to visit the place where that test is most exacting does not fit the binary and functional logic of the cognitive dissonance model. Alongside its anchor in theological logic and the echo of familiar and legitimate discursive tones, the 'trial of seeing' in 770 profoundly contests that which is taken for granted in the way that reality is known. It does not point to a clear transition from 'dissonance' to 'consonance,' but rather to adherence to their simultaneous intermingling. Instead of leading the Hasidim towards an unruffled and balanced state, the meshichistic approach can lead to a constant grappling with it. The intensive pedagogical concern at 770 with the concept of the 'trial of seeing' reflects such continuous unease, as well as a creative and resourceful effort to handle the complex rationalization.

### **To internalize inner seeing: rhetoric of emotional knowledge**

Alongside intensive concern with the 'trial of seeing,' and as an alternative to visual knowledge, the meshichistic faction at 770 also proposes the ideal of knowledge 'from the inside.' Inner knowledge is portrayed as fundamental knowledge, existing at a higher or deeper validation level than visual knowledge. First, in keeping with the assumptions of acosmism, the limitations of sensory sight are not relevant with regard to inner vision. Second, the constitutive self-image of Hasidism, which was particularly developed by Chabad, is of discovering the 'inner dimension of the Torah.' Hasidism is seen as a doctrine which illuminates every aspect of the believer's worship and as a tool for bringing the follower closer to true godliness, even when it is hidden in the tumult of everyday life. Hasidism demands that its followers work on their inner worlds so as to be worthy vessels of the inner dimension of the Torah. Upon his arrival, the messiah is expected to



disseminate this inner dimension of the Torah and publicly reveal it (Brod, 1998: 29–36). Facing a disappointing external reality, this appeal to Hasidic assumptions that resonate with the ideal of internal knowledge is not surprising.

Sensing the Rebbe's presence, proximity and holiness – what is known in emic discourse as 'feeling the Rebbe' – is frequently represented to the Hasidic teenage girls at 770 as inner knowledge. As such, it is portrayed as a reliable source for knowledge of true, if concealed, reality. Idioms associated with the concept of emotion in 770 (spontaneous, unconquerable, non-rational, and internal) are reminiscent of Western notions of emotion, particularly its perception as 'corporeal' and 'natural' (Lutz, 1986; Williams and Bendelow, 1998). However, whereas in Western cultures, these representations locate emotion closer to the pole of 'body' in the mind–body dichotomy, making it an unreliable and inferior mode of knowledge (Jaggar, 1989; Peile, 1998; Scheler, 1992), in Chabad the very same idioms have a positive meaning, locating emotion nearer to the pole of 'inner world,' as opposed to the external (sensual) world. These idioms render emotion into a fitting way of knowing the current messianic reality and serve the meshichistic self-image of a 'true Hasid' (in the dispute with anti-meshichistim regarding the heritage and vision of the Rebbe in messianic matters).

Needless to say, 'feeling the Rebbe' at 770 is not a 'natural' occurrence that takes place on its own, even if that is how it is portrayed and sometimes even feels. There is a strong cultural expectation of emotional arousal at 770, reinforced by an interpretive construction that depicts such arousal as testifying to deeply held knowledge about the Rebbe's presence. Interviews with Hasidic girls and their educators suggest that this structure exists in the broader socializing framework surrounding the journey to 770, that is, in the educational establishments that prepare the teenage girls for their visit to the court and receive them when they return. In Israel, the teenage girls hear from their teachers and other girls who have already made the journey that, 'Words cannot express it. You have to go there to understand.' When they return to Israel, they too are brought into the circle of testimony that feeds the stories of their travels with an emotional rhetoric. Additionally, intensive emotional construction takes place during the visit to the court, as the following exemplifies.

Mrs. Fein has been accompanying 'the girls' journey to the Rebbe' from the very first month of Tishrei since his death. As an energetic and renowned educator from Israel, she helps the local staff outline a Hasidic framework for the girls arriving at the Rebbe's court and keeps a watchful eye on them while they are far from home and close to Manhattan. In addition, she frequently gives talks to the girls. The following talk was delivered during a meeting between the Hasidic girls from Israel and the local Hasidic girls from the 'Bet Rivka' high school:

This year, thank God, there are twice as many visitors as last year, and everyone is happy and excited to have arrived here at the house of the Rebbe, the home of the messiah. For women, matters of emotion and honesty and being connected to the inner side are so strong, that when we come here everything comes out, all our inner side revealed here. Let me give you an example. One of the girls approached me after the day of celebrating Rosh Hashana and told me, "I'm not here yet, I haven't landed yet, what I felt during Rosh Hashana you can't feel anywhere else." And since then she really has started to see things differently, she felt spiritually uplifted, that holiness was spilling out. She felt the Rebbe. She understood something. What did she understand? She understood what a great gift we have in Chabad, that the Rebbe is living among us. Do you understand? She didn't just feel spiritually elevated, she wasn't emotional only because the atmosphere is different from what she is familiar with at home. She was excited because she felt the Rebbe, and when we come here we have to feel those things, all of the visitors do, both boys and girls. This is the place to feel it... And girls, I know that it's not always easy, and that you always want more, but if you work on your inner side you will be rewarded by feeling such things.

Mrs. Fein refers to emotions and feelings throughout her talk. 'Feeling the Rebbe' is represented as the organizing principle behind the journey, as its promise and as a sign of its success. An emotional–experiential discourse characterizes many instances of pilgrimage (Feldman, 2000; Reader, 1993), including sites in the Jewish–Hasidic context (Erlich, 2004; Rapoport-Albert, 1988). However, in this particular instance, the load borne by the emotional discourse seems to stem from its conception as a reliable mode of knowledge. As the images of emotion presented above absolve one from the burden of clear, external proof, they create an alternative to empirical–visual knowledge. Yet, even Mrs. Fein acknowledges that 'it is not always easy' and calls on the Hasidic girls to work on their inner side – a concept related to surveillance, in that it focuses a critical gaze at one's 'self,' rather than at the world or claims made about it. This concept presents a perpetual challenge to change and see things differently, and thus protects the meshichistic definition of reality. Like many other spheres in Western culture (Lutz, 1986; Williams and Bendelow, 1998), when directed at the teenage girls described above, the challenge is more sharply presented in essentialist terms of women's 'natural' affinity to emotion.

### **To imagine and see beyond: ritual practices of re-presenting the Rebbe**

In addition to clear verbal pedagogic messages about appropriate modes of knowing the Rebbe's presence, the pilgrims to the Rebbe's court are also offered practical opportunities for acknowledging this hidden reality. These opportunities are embedded in a rich, creative and still developing ritualistic ecology, which symbolically expresses the meshichistic definition of reality. After the Rebbe's death, meshichistic circles at 770 began to conduct 'practices of re-presenting': various ceremonial practices that reproduce the Rebbe's presence in the world and revitalize the connection with him. These practices organize the daily routine at 770 according to an ideal temporal schema of 'just as it used to be'.

Three times a day, one of the yeshiva students uncovers the Rebbe's empty armchair just before prayers and then covers it again after prayers are completed. On the Sabbath and religious festivals, one of the Hasidic elders is given this honor. The prayers start with the congregants 'welcoming the Rebbe' into the synagogue with song and dance, and they similarly 'accompany him' on his way out. Very often they sing the song of the messiah: 'May our master, teacher and rabbi, the King Messiah, live forever.' On the Sabbath and other days on which the Torah is read, the Rebbe's Torah scroll is placed on the lectern in front of his empty armchair. At special ceremonial gatherings, when the Rebbe used to sing with his followers, sermonize to them, and distribute wine and the Sabbath loaf (*halla*), the same artifacts are still used: the Hasidim lay the Rebbe's place at the table, set his armchair by it, place food and drink on the table for him, and organize the congregants' seating arrangements in accordance. During the event, one can see Hasidim raising their glass in the direction of the Rebbe's chair, as if drinking to his good health and talking to him. At the end of the event, one of the Hasidic elders carefully and very reverently distributes the wine and the *halla* among the crowd. At larger gatherings, there may be thousands of attendees; it is unbearably crowded, and people arrive hours before the event actually starts in order to save themselves places. During the month of Tishrei, these practices of re-presentation take on even greater and more intensive elaboration, as there are more festive gatherings, to which time-specific practices of

re-presentation are added, such as building 'the Rebbe's tabernacle' (*sukkah*) underneath his room at 770, and buying a set of the four species for him.<sup>20</sup>

These practices of re-presentation construct a ritual and virtual space for the Rebbe's hidden presence, where it is given concrete visible manifestations. This is not accidental: visually re-presenting the Rebbe replaces and emulates the visual cult that existed around him in the past. Indeed, visual rituals were an important part of the emotional-spiritual connection between the Hasidim and the Rebbe, and of the messianic tension that developed around him (Dan, 1997). Moreover, since his passing, the visual cult has assumed even greater importance as a means of worshipping the Rebbe and connecting the younger generation to his figure. In Crown Heights, as elsewhere on Chabad's globe, portraits of the Rebbe are hung in public spaces, institutions and private homes, and videos of him are played repeatedly (Fishkoff, 2003: 278–279).<sup>21</sup>

The contemporary rituals at 770 are nurtured by this widespread cult of visualizing the absent messiah. Where the Rebbe's portrait is omnipresent whenever you open your eyes, you are more inclined to imagine the Rebbe's presence with closed eyes. These contemporary rituals bring the Rebbe to life by creating an alternative to his presence, or by compensating for his absence. Moreover, they do so by means of the same sensory dimension – the visual – that would appear to testify to his absence, and in the very place where that absence is most immediately and keenly felt. Therefore, at the same time that visual knowledge is officially renounced as part of the rhetoric of the 'trial of seeing,' it is nonetheless part of the ritual foundation for the meshichistic definition of reality. The armchair, the lectern, the wine are all saturated with the Rebbe's presence, which they are held to embody. Thus, they are able to sustain religious ritual and imagination. As the Hasidim interact with them, it is as if the Rebbe's presence sheds its amorphous and concealed form and takes on a dramatic and concrete shape, one that can be grasped and that can nurture the imagination. The practices of re-presentation serve as a theater set, helping the imagination and guiding the Hasidim to collectively 'see' beyond the Rebbe's visible absence: now the Rebbe is entering the room, now he is handing out halla to his followers, now he is here, now he has left. The imagination takes on the sense of being able to make present, or re-present, that which is absent, to make accessible and available something which clearly is not (Green, 1989: 62). The imagination creates a religious experience of contact with the Rebbe and engages the Hasidim as active partakers.

In the context of the meshichistic definition of reality, imagination also becomes a way of knowing reality. While the concept of imagination does not appear in the meshichistic lexicon, as it has sensitive connotations of fantasy and illusion, the leaders of the meshichistic faction frequently encourage the Hasidic teenage girls to 'draw the Rebbe's face' in their mind during the rituals. This mode of knowing does not merely involve conjuring up mental images of the Rebbe, but rather takes place through experience and being part of the crowd. It occurs in a ritual framework with emotional involvement. This argument is congruent with Csordas' (1994) concept of the imagination, as well as the influential approach in the study of ritual that acknowledges the authority of 'ritual knowledge' (Grimes, 1990; Jennings, 1982; Motz, 1998; Preston, 1988).

Paradoxically, this authority, and in particular the authority of visual imagination and emotional knowledge, leads to the acknowledgment of a double reality of the Rebbe's simultaneous presence and absence. By virtue of its bringing the believer to a place of visual lack and emptiness, the pilgrimage to the court is a practice that highlights the Rebbe's absence. Moreover, the ritual practices of re-presenting merely emphasize this absence. As Handelman and Shamgar-Handelman (1997) put it, these rituals turn the absence of presence into the presence of absence. Instead of removing holy relics associated with the Rebbe from the synagogue, or at least ceasing to draw on them, the Hasidim exhibit and activate them. Instead of minimizing the Rebbe's (visual) absence, they reveal and intensify the emptiness that is there in any case. The ritual framework is organized around the visualization of presence and absence, and around the painful gap between them. It transpires, therefore, that the meshichistic ritual project incorporates contradictions, similar to the rationalization itself. Presence and absence, 'feeling the Rebbe' and feeling the pain of his absence, are intermingled.

This ambience generates a variety of challenges that the Hasidim have to face at 770. An example of this is provided in the following ethnographic excerpt.

One morning during the Harvest Festival (Succoth), a few Hasidim begin to gather near the 'Rebbe's succah' at the entrance to 770. During Succoth, the Rebbe would traditionally hand out honey cake (*lekach*) to his followers, and especially to the pilgrims. Since the Rebbe's death, a hesitant, yet persistent ritual has developed around this custom. Lacking a clear behavioral codex, and with much freedom of action, Hasidim pass by the Rebbe's tabernacle – 'in front of the Rebbe' – and ask him for some lekach. Almost all are young, and their body language and eclectic clothing show some of them to be at the early stages of their journey to Orthodox Judaism. Each of them performs the lekach ritual in an idiosyncratic fashion. Some stop by the opening of the tabernacle for some time, while others pass by quickly. Some ask for the lekach by holding out their hands, while others keep their hands in their pockets. Some Hasidim hurry to put their hands in their pockets having held them out, while others continue 'holding the lekach' for quite a while, or even lift their hands up to their mouths as if they are eating it. Some start sobbing loudly, while others maintain their composure and appear impassive. There is only a slow trickle of Hasidim; most of those present make do with looking on.

I am standing nearby, alongside a small group of Hasidic teenage girls (about 20, most of whom I know well). They are watching with a clear sense of disquiet. They are embarrassed by what they see, astonished, hypnotized. One of the girls leaves the group, saying in an intentionally loud voice, 'Now that's just too much. They are completely crazy.' This comment, which is relatively rare in the meshichistic ecology of 770 during Tishrei, hangs in the air for a while, creating a quiet restlessness. Another Hasidic girl asks her friend to explain what is happening at the tabernacle. She answers, partly to herself, partly to her friend: 'They... they... are asking... they are getting... they are taking, yes, they are taking lekach from the Rebbe, it's... like it always was.'

When it would seem that the men have finished filing past the tabernacle, it is the turn of the women. Like the men, they too demonstrate a variety of methods. One says to herself, 'That's it; I'm just going to do it.' She stands in front of the opening of the tabernacle, holds out her hand for a short while, and returns to the group, her eyes sparkling. 'That's it, I got lekach.' I ask her why she hastened to withdraw her hands to the sides of her body. She is surprised by the question, and looks alternately at me and at her hand. 'It's all spiritual.

<sup>20</sup> Four kinds of plants – citron, palm branch, myrtle, and willow – are ritually used on the feast of Succoth.

<sup>21</sup> For a comparative perspective on visual cult as an organizing medium of religious experience in Christian traditions, see Christian (1996), Wiebe (1997), Zimdars-Swartz (1991).

It's spiritual,' she answers. Other Hasidic girls who have heard this short conversation smile silently. One of them laughs a strange, gruff laugh. Frustrated, she says, 'How scary, I can't bring myself to do it,' and hides her face in her hands. Two other girls start to cry. Another Hasidic girl, who seems in some distress, says to her crying friends: 'I have such a strong feeling that he's there, but I'm ashamed. I dare not approach.' One of them answers her: 'That's right, that's just how I feel. But you know, you mustn't be ashamed in front of the mockers.' At this point I interrupt the conversation by asking, 'Why should you be ashamed? What of?' One of the girls replies, 'Because it looks weird. I'm standing in front of something I can't see, and everybody knows that I can't see it, and none of them can see it either, and it's like I'm pretending.' Through her tears, a Hasidic girl coming back from the tabernacle says: 'We didn't choose to live in this time, before the redemption. A time when you can't see him and you have to imagine. It's a frightening time.' The other teenage girls nod their heads.

The imagination required by the lekach ritual is complex and intense. For a start, in traditionally orthodox Jewish ritual, there is no precedent to this sort of activity of imagining an invisible physical presence of a figure, entity or artifact. Moreover, during the mass rituals, the group nurtures the imagination and can carry the individual along with it, but in the praxis of the lekach ritual, the group's eye – and mine – looks on. The teenage girls are in the public sphere and are required, or require of themselves, to carry out an intimate yet exposed ritualistic act and to 'perform' in front of an uninvited audience. However, the embarrassment, the awkwardness and the ambivalence exhibited by the girls in relation to the ritual itself and the concrete possibility of actually participating in it are not exclusively caused by my questions, or the element of performing in front of a curious crowd. The external eye – mine and that of the crowd of onlookers – only sharpens the girls' own critical, reflexive eye. In a very concrete way, the ritual confronts the girls with difficult questions about their faith and their ability to translate it into practice: What does it mean that the Rebbe 'is at 770'? Is he really 'standing at the doorway of the tabernacle'?

In the absence of artifacts, human intermediaries or a clear ritualistic framework to sustain the Hasidim's imagination, the Rebbe's presence remains abstract, intangible. At the same time, it has to be perceived as a true and concrete presence, as the Hasidic girls are called upon to perform an 'improvised pantomime' of proximate and unmediated imagined communication with the Rebbe. If the large ritual practices enable the individual Hasid to be swallowed up by the crowd and to feed off the collective ritual space, the praxis of the lekach ritual calls for the independent deployment of the imagination. This gap holds for both genders, but more profoundly so for women. During the mass ritual events, they are seated in the women's gallery with the status of participant-observers. The lekach ritual, however, requires an active positioning within the meshichistic ritual sphere.

This example demonstrates that, while the Hasidic girls do not decline imagination as a mode of knowledge, they nonetheless limit it somewhat. The relatively radical translation of the meshichistic definition of reality, having to stand on a social stage, and the element of actively participating in a ritual all illuminate the boundaries of the imagination and the perimeters of its performance. These boundaries make it awkward for the girls to find themselves within the ritual space, and hence to find the Rebbe. This difficulty sheds light on the problem of facing the challenge entailed by the meshichistic rationalization and the practical-performative tasks that it stipulates.

### Hasidic teenage girls talk about the meshichistic project

The complexity of the meshichistic socialization project was also revealed in the interviews I conducted with the Hasidic girls. On the one hand, the journey to 770 is portrayed as inspiring, and for some even transformative. Following their trip, the teenage girls adopt the meshichistic outlook, either in vague terms or according to its strictest definitions. Furthermore, they rely on the modes of knowing that were suggested to them at 770 as ways of internalizing, maintaining and buttressing their belief: the paradoxical double usage of visual knowledge and the reliance on emotional knowledge and the imagination. In this regard, the socializing system at the Rebbe's court appears to be effective and inviting, and in practice enables the girls to be or to become meshichistic. On the other hand, the Hasidic teenage girls frequently describe meshichistic belief as ongoing 'work,' as an unceasing struggle against 'rational' thought and knowledge. While the girls find significant moments of exaltation within the meshichistic rituals and have the tools to fill them with meshichistic meaning, the meshichistic faith seems elusive. The teenage girls describe a belief that is not intuitive and that requires them to live with unanswered questions.

For instance, Batya talks about her own turning point, when she relinquished her reluctance to embrace messianic thought, and particularly the messianic status of the Rebbe, and began to recognize how central this is to her life:

Batya: I didn't used to be so meshichistic. The journey did it to me. It didn't used to be such a big issue for me, because I didn't know as much and I kept my distance from the whole subject. I thought it was better not to deal with it.

Author: Why?

B: Because in any case, you know... it's better not to be crazy [laughs]... but now I know you can't get away from it, it's a fundamental issue... even if it doesn't always seem logical, you know.

Rivki describes herself as having grown up with meshichistic ideas from a young age. Even so, the trip to 770 deepened her commitment to them:

Rivki: I remember we opened the door at 770 and went straight to see the Rebbe's chair, and then, all of a sudden, I felt my heart become lighter, like "now everything's going to be OK"... Because there was a really strong presence of ... a presence, something weird, a good and calming presence in the chair and throughout the whole place, in the whole of 770... And since then my entire life has changed. I mean, even when I was in eighth grade and I didn't really understand the lessons, or most of them anyway, the gatherings and the whole atmosphere and the festivals influenced me. And then I knew I was going to stay faithful to the Rebbe forever. I mean, I'm meshichistic.

Author: What do you mean, "I'm meshichistic"?

R: I believed it before as well, but now...

A: What did you believe?

R: That the Rebbe is the messiah and that he is there, but all of a sudden... Look, there's knowledge that you know. You know that it's scary to meet a lion, but when you're standing in front of a lion, all of a sudden you understand what it really means to be afraid of lions. So you're meshichistic, that's right, and you know that the Rebbe is the messiah and that he is there, and if the Rebbe says so, then it's

true. All those slogans that you know. When you get there, it confirms everything for you, because you can see, you can feel it, because you are standing in front of it, within it.

Through experience, Rivki's emotional knowledge becomes part of her identity. She interprets her emotional experience as proof of the truth that is hidden in 770. This truth revealed itself to other interviewees as well, but not without difficulties, unanswered questions and continuous struggle. As Chavi puts it:

When I got there, well, the empty chair, and people waiting for the Rebbe to give a blessing, and it didn't happen. At first it bothered me, I said to myself that the fact that the Rebbe isn't here, I mean, you can't see him, it reduces all the holiness and the messiah and everything, but everything I felt afterwards proved to me that it's really not like that. All the excitement and everything I felt, it gave me the antithesis of everything I'd thought... The whole thing of feeling and drawing the Rebbe's face with everybody, and looking at the chair and thinking about the Rebbe, it's so powerful, I could only feel that there. Look, I think I'm an intelligent person. What do I mean by that? I'm logical. If I can't see something – then it doesn't exist, so there's a clash, and it's always clashing. All those questions never end. I talked about it with the girls, and you see all sorts of situations, and you ask yourself, "do you belong to that or not?" Of course there are questions.

Miriam expressed a similar experience:

At first those questions occupied me all the time. Like, am I feeling the Rebbe or not? Do I really know that he's here with us or not? I was with another friend who also had an unsettling experience in terms of being indecisive and always moving from here to there. At first I was looking at the girls, and it was like they all looked the same, shouting "long live the king" and everything. But I learned to understand that with this also [laughs] seeing isn't enough either. All the girls had questions and doubts, even if you couldn't see them, but it doesn't mean you don't believe. I cried a lot at 770, because you expect that you will believe and feel it, and it doesn't always work. I remember that I worked on myself all the time so that I'd get emotional.

## Conclusion

I opened this article with an ethnographic picture of the animated human movement of pilgrims in the yellow streets of the Hasidic court, and I have finished it with an ethnographic description and narrative testimonies of a tearful, difficult and taxing religious encounter experienced by some of these pilgrims. It is my assertion that the meshichistic group within Chabad Hasidism is currently stretched between these two possibilities. It inhabits a sphere where Hasidic *joie de vivre* and the expectation of imminent redemption coexist with gnawing doubts, internal contradictions and a continuous lack of balance. My ethnographic research demonstrates that the meshichistic circles in Chabad are a socially vivacious religious group. The younger generation's pilgrimage to the court sustains the group's positive self-image and creates its concrete and symbolic bearers. However, the study also reveals and exemplifies the intricacy and impediments that are integral components in messianism in contemporary Chabad.

Asking how the messianic belief is culturally re-organized and performed in the face of failed prophecy, I suggested a twofold contribution to the rich literature on failed prophecies among millenarian movements. The case of the meshichistic group in Chabad Hasidism shows that the social strength of millennial groups does not necessarily lie in their rationalizations. First, there can be an element within the rationalization that heightens rather than resolves imbalance. The assumptions that a group's epistemological–interpretive tool box can rectify the situation and that there is only one tool box with an exclusive claim to interpret a chaotic reality have been shown here to be problematic. Second, the deployment of rationalizations to cope with what would appear to be the failure of a messianic script is not the whole story. Instead, processes of defining and constructing reality occur constantly. Indeed, the movement's vitality does not stem primarily from rationalization of the failed prophecy, but rather from the modes of knowing reality that are provided to believers both directly and indirectly.

The meshichistic practice of belief is based on an enormous test of faith for young Hasidim, namely, to continue to believe in the explanation in the very place that poses challenges to it, in the place where their basic perceptions of being and orientation in the world can be destabilized. It would seem that the leaders of the meshichistic faction at 770 are alert to this problem and strive to meet the challenge they themselves have created. They provide an answer to the question of how one can know this new reality and translate the rationalization into creative ritual practices (which, of course, include much more than goes on in the court during the month of Tishrei). These two aspects complement and foster one another: the first deals with the lens through which the 'truth' is read, while the second organizes reality and thus cultivates the use of this newly focused lens.

The salience of these processes in the specific case study of Chabad can be explained in light of the complex rationalization that all the more vehemently requires the maintenance of belief among members of the group, as well as the length of time that has passed since the tragic event. Over time, providing and re-citing explanations cannot be enough to hold and nurture beliefs. Instead, woven into both symbolic and concrete processes filled with religious and communal meaning, they become a more 'real' source of vitality. In her article on 'The Practice of Belief,' Motz (1998) links the existence of belief or knowledge of reality with the actual practices that create it: for her, belief is a practice and not an entity. At 770 during the month of Tishrei, the meshichistic belief or rationalization is 'done' and 'created.' In this vein, the Rebbe could not be a 'living messiah' were he not to 'enter' the synagogue three times a day, and were potential believers not provided with the tools for dealing with the 'trial of seeing.' Rather than the rationalizations themselves serving as a coping mechanism, it is the ways in which they are inserted into reality that perpetuate the millenarian movement after a crisis.

Both the challenging rationalization and the cultural work employed to maintain it prove the movement's vitality to be only one side of the coin. Discordant sounds – doubts and constant wrestling with definitions of reality – are heard alongside the unmistakable cries of joy. These sounds can hardly be contained or explained within a functional, harmonious framework.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Shaine Center for Research in Social Science, to the Lafer Center for Women and Gender Studies, and to the Scholion Interdisciplinary Center for Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University for fundings during research and writing. I am indebted to Prof. Yoram

Bilu for his support and valuable comments on earlier drafts. The master thesis which this article is based on was written under his supervision. I would like to thank three anonymous reviewers, Adam Klin–Oron, and Sigal Ozery for helpful suggestions. Any errors are mine alone.

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