

The work of the present:

Constructing messianic temporality in the wake of failed prophecy among Chabad Hasidim

ABSTRACT

Temporal issues have remained relatively unelaborated in the rich body of research that applies cognitive dissonance theory to millenarian movements following a failed prophecy. We engage these issues by exploring how the *meshichistim* (messianists) among the Jewish ultraorthodox Chabad (Lubavitch) Hasidim employ temporal categories to deal with the crisis entailed in the death of their leader, the expected Messiah. In messianic Chabad, a double-edged "work of the present" has continued to evolve, simultaneously obfuscating and accentuating temporal delineations between past, present, and future. The ensuing dialectical reality puts into question the common notion that millenarian movements such as Chabad strive at all costs to restore the balance disrupted by failed prophecy. [*millenarian movements, messianic temporality, cognitive dissonance, Chabad-Lubavitch*]

Millenarian, apocalyptic, and messianic movements seeking collective, total, and imminent redemption and pursuing the end of history have been studied from diverse disciplinary angles by historians, scholars of religious studies, and social scientists (BurrIDGE 1969; Clair 1992; Graziano 1999; O'Leary 1994; Robbins and Palmer 1997; Talmon 1968; Thompson 1996). A major research domain within this vast literature is the fate of millenarian movements following a purportedly failed prophecy regarding a crucial conviction, such as the date of the apocalypse or the designation of the messiah. This line of research, initiated by the classic work of Leon Festinger and his associates, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), has propagated a rich body of work that criticizes, revises, expands, and contextualizes the notion of "cognitive dissonance" as a vehicle to explain how millenarian movements cope with failed prophecy.

Our impetus to add yet another contribution to this literature stems from the observation that the temporal dimension remains unelaborated in most studies. This absence is striking given the centrality and pervasiveness of issues related to temporality for millenarian movements (Baumgarten 2000; Graziano 1999; Lenowitz 1998:263, 269; Stone 2000; Szubin 2000; Talmon 1968). Millenarian cosmology is based on a distinctive time perception, informed by an acute sense of imminence and urgency, which the failure of a prophecy may altogether disrupt. Yet most students of millenarianism have addressed temporal issues in a fairly narrow way, mainly limiting themselves to rationalizations for the failure and recurring postponements of the critical event. We seek to enrich this perspective by turning our gaze to the wide array of cultural tools and resources employed to meet the challenges of disrupted messianic temporality in a contemporary Jewish context.

Our study focuses on the acutely messianic followers of the Lubavitch Hasidic sect also known as Chabad, one of the largest Hasidic groups in contemporary Jewish orthodoxy.¹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the charismatic leader (*admor*) of the Chabad movement,² passed away in 1994

at the peak of a messianic surge he had instigated and orchestrated. Although the Rebbe (the Yiddish term by which the Hasidim refer to him) was ordinarily mute regarding the personal identity of the Messiah, during his last years, many of his followers came to the conviction that the Messiah could be no other than the Rebbe himself. Today, more than 13 years after the Rebbe's death, and without an appointed successor, the movement thrives with impressive vitality, reflected in the scope and dynamism of its religious and educational activities and its ability to engage wide circles of nonobservant Jews (Fishkoff 2003:12–14, 279–284). This vitality, which has accorded Chabad a very conspicuous and largely positive image in the Jewish public sphere, is still fueled by a strong messianic consciousness focused on the figure of the late Rebbe. As we describe below, this messianic consciousness is quite varied in Chabad. Our study concerns those followers, self-designated *meshichistim* (messianists; sing. *meshichist*), who maintain that the Rebbe-cum-Messiah is alive and present in the world and that redemption under his aegis is “just around the corner.”³

Our proposed contribution to the literature on failed prophecy is twofold. First, we seek to document the ways emic categories of time are shaped and activated to deal with the unexpected demise of the Messiah-to-be. This process involves the construction of peculiar experiences, perceptions, and emotions in regard to time. Second, on the basis of insights derived from this mapping of native temporal categories and the ways they are deployed, we seek to problematize the common notion that millenarian movements strive at all costs to restore the balance disrupted by failed prophecy and to escape outright its critical implications. Against this unidimensional assumption, we suggest that such movements may opt for a more complex, multilayered explanatory model, in which attempts to neutralize and minimize the impact of the crisis interact diachronically with opposed undertakings designed to sustain and even amplify it.

Before proceeding to the ethnographic case study from which this conclusion is distilled, we briefly review the literature on temporality in religious and millenarian contexts and on failed prophecy, the two domains intertwined in this article. We follow this review with a discussion of the Chabad Hasidic movement and its turn to acute messianism and with a short presentation of the fieldwork setting.

The anthropology of time: Religious and millenarian temporalities

Time has figured as an analytic category in sociology and anthropology from their inception as academic disciplines (Gell 1992), but the literature on temporality has not evolved as a recognized thematic domain (Nagano 1998; Nowotny 1992). Sociologists and anthropologists have focused on the subjective qualities of temporality in molding social action

and cultural meaning, studying it from a constructivist and relativist perspective (Avery 1982; Luckmann 1991; Nagano 1998; Wallman 1992). In studies of social order, collective identity, and power relations, temporal categories have been viewed as integral vehicles for the construction of social reality (Rutz 1992; Zerubavel 1981). Anthropologists have sought to explore and deconstruct the particular processes and mechanisms underlying local constructions of temporality (Bender and Wellbery 1991), with special emphasis on the ways these constructions impact the behavior, affect, experience, and memory of social actors in their life worlds (Briggs 1992; Minicuci 1995). Another research orientation has dwelled on analytic categorizations of different modes and models of time, with special emphasis on temporal bifurcations such as private versus collective, ritual versus mundane, holy versus secular, and cyclic versus linear (Gell 1992, 1998; Owen Hughes 1995). The last two dichotomies resonated with early formulations in religious studies and the anthropology of religion that distinguished between pagan and mythical cosmologies in “primitive” societies and the “progressive,” historically oriented Judeo-Christian cultural heritage in the West.⁴

As generators of power and meaning, religious systems manage and monitor temporal resources, enabling believers to live in and out of time (Thompson 1996). Metahistorical and prophetic, religions are future oriented, envisioning an epoch when the human and the cosmic will merge (Farris 1995). This future orientation is amplified in millenarian movements, in which the end of historical time is imminent and the expectations of its coming intensively nurture the religious imagination of devotees (Kochan 1990; Talmon 1968). Because millenarianism is inherently temporally driven (Barash 2000), many of its students have explored its constitutive time dimensions. These include the status of the present as against the future in light of the strong sense of imminence in millenarian movements (Bromley 1997; Clair 1992; Robbins and Palmer 1997; Szubin 2000; Talmon 1968), the time models (e.g., linear vs. cyclic) that inform these movements (Wessinger 1997), and the discursive and rhetorical mechanisms they employ to engender an acute sense of urgency and exigency (Harding 2000). These mechanisms are also activated after a failed prophecy, sustaining the move from the tempestuous rhythm of millenarianism to the decelerated pace of mundane reality (O’Leary 1994, 2000).

Coping with failed prophecy

As we noted above, to a large extent, the literature on failed prophecy has been shaped by the pioneering work of Festinger and associates (1956), who applied the psychological notion of “cognitive dissonance,” previously tested in experimental settings, to the “real-life” case of a small apocalyptic group in the United States. Using

participant-observation, the researchers documented the responses of individual group members and the history of the group following the invalidation of the group leader's prophecy regarding the date of the apocalypse. Festinger and his associates assumed that the group members experienced acutely incongruent cognitions: their high commitment to the prophecy, on the one hand, and its seemingly irrefutable failure, on the other hand. These incompatible experiences were presumably felt as an upsetting mental state, designated "cognitive dissonance," which the members were motivated to reduce. The observed rise in out-group recruitment attempts, rationalizations to account for the failure, and in-group manifestations of solidarity and commitment were all conceived as the group members' attempts to reduce the dissonance and restore a more balanced mental economy.

Many studies conducted in diverse religious contexts lent support to the basic assumptions of cognitive dissonance (Bainbridge 1997; Filoramo 2000; Foster 1987; Gager 1975; Nelson 1987; Poloma 1982; Wardi 2000; Weiser 1974).⁵ But Festinger and colleagues' seminal study also drew much criticism on both empirical and theoretical grounds. Some students of religious groups in crisis situations failed to note the behavioral manifestations of dissonance reduction reported by Festinger, such as the intensified level of recruitment following the failure of prophecy (Balch et al. 1983; Hardyck and Braden 1962). And scholars have criticized dissonance theory for not taking into account the subjective life worlds of believers and the power of religious meaning systems to construct social realities capable of sustaining "illogical" and incompatible religious tenets (Bader 1999; Palmer and Finn 1992; Tumminia 1998, 2005; Van Fossen 1988; Zygmunt 1972). Some of these scholars have gone beyond methodological and theoretical revisions to reject the very relevance of cognitive dissonance to millenarian contexts. For example, Joseph Zygmunt (1972:46) has argued that, as an abstract psychological construct, cognitive dissonance cannot capture the variety and richness of the historical manifestations of failed prophecy. Diana Tumminia (2005:43–44) has proposed the notion of "mundane reason" as a better conceptualization than cognitive dissonance for mitigating the gap between emic and etic perspectives on failed prophecy.

Yet, without underestimating the importance of these studies, we claim that most of them have not put to a serious test the basic assumption of dissonance theory concerning the compelling motivation to restore a balanced state of affairs. Even scholars who have sought to revise or replace the grammar of cognitive dissonance with terminology that highlights local meanings still implicitly equate effective crisis management and group survival with regaining balance and restoring harmony. Thus, despite enriching the reductionist notion of "dissonance" by introducing mediating factors related to local cosmologies and subjective worldviews,

the focus on dissonance reduction as a compelling motivational force has not been challenged (Stone 2000). Dissonance and consonance have basically retained their status as mutually exclusive states.

We propose a more drastic departure from the notion of "cognitive dissonance" because, as a variant of drive-reduction theories, it is insufficient to account for the ambiguity, complexity, and contradictions characteristic of religious meaning systems such as Chabad. In addition, the notion of "dissonance reduction" conveys a sense of urgency and exigency in an all-out attempt to restore balance. The corrective actions thus instigated refer to an initial and limited aspect of what could become a long-range process of managing a religious crisis.⁶ We maintain that the ongoing consequences of living with the theological, emotional, and social chasm created by the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe calls for a diachronic perspective, in which the construction of religious meaning and experience in the shadow of a traumatic loss should be depicted in all its complexity.

Messianism and crisis in Chabad

Chabad crystallized as a distinctive Hasidic sect at the end of the 18th century in Byelorussia and Ukraine. From its inception in the towns of Lyadi and Lubavitch in Byelorussia until the end of the 20th century, Chabad was headed by an unbroken succession of rabbis from the distinguished Schneerson family. This impressive continuity ended only with the death of the seventh admor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in 1994. In the second half of the 20th century, Chabad became one of the central movements in Hasidism and in the Jewish world at large. The group has responded to modernity better than most other ultraorthodox communities, promoting an elaborate system of outreach activities designed to bring nonreligious Jews back into the fold and maintaining close ties with the political establishments in the United States and Israel. Through an ever-growing web of *shluchim* (messengers) personally committed to the Rebbe, Chabad's religious and educational institutions have been deployed all over the globe. As a rapidly expanding and highly visible movement in contemporary Judaism, Chabad is all the more intriguing for having been swept by a messianic surge in recent decades.

Belief in the Messiah is a major tenet in normative Judaism, but it has ordinarily been maintained as a "cold script," oriented toward an unspecified future and devoid of personal contours (Kochan 1990; Marcus 1996; Talmon 1968). Historically, this sober if not reticent view has been bolstered by the disruptions that major outbursts of acute messianism, centering on identified figures such as Jesus, Bar-Kokhba, and Sabbatai Zvi, have stirred in the Jewish orbit (Lenowitz 1998; Sharot 1982). Scholars still debate the scope and extent of messianic consciousness in the writings of the first Hasidic leaders. Claims that the founders of

Hasidism actively sought to neutralize messianic aspirations by emphasizing the spiritual dimension of personal redemption are viewed today as too one-sided (Altshuler 2002). One could argue that the metaphysical attributes of the *zaddik* (pl. *zaddikim*), the Hasidic master whose position as a mystical intermediary between the divine and the community accorded him an unprecedentedly central role in the lives of his followers (Green 1977; Poll 1995; Sharot 1982), could transform him into a worthy candidate for a Messiah in times of need. But the near-ubiquitous establishment of dynasties of *zaddikim* as leaders of particular sects in second-generation Hasidism meant the institutionalization of charisma through inheritance rules that ran counter to the messianic notion of the end of history (Lenowitz 1998: 200–201).⁷

Based on a mystical doctrine in which logic, intellect, and rationality were accentuated, Chabad was viewed by early scholarship as even less messianic than other Hasidic sects (Schatz-Uffenheimer 1962; Scholem 1961). Again, later scholarship has rendered the earlier rational–contemplative image of Chabad more complex, emphasizing a dialectical mode of understanding, replete with paradox, tension, and eschatological concerns (Elior 1993; Loewenthal 1994).⁸ Yet, as Naftali Loewenthal has observed, “While the general perspective of the Chabad teachings in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was in an eschatological framework, there is very little evidence that the Chabad fraternity was in a state of messianic tension” (1994:382). From its inception, Chabad has embraced a strong monistic theosophy, founded on an acosmic conception of the world, in which God is the only true reality: Everything that exists, down to the lowliest of material forms, is a direct revelation of the infinite divine essence (Elior 1993; Ravitzky 1993).⁹ Once again, this radical doctrine, a derivative of the basic Hasidic accent on God’s immanence, could be viewed as opposed to the millenarian focus on the ultimate cosmic hierophany embodied in the Messiah. But as we discuss below, once the belief that the Messiah was forthcoming gained credibility, this acosmic theosophy could assist in further solidifying and verifying it.

The messianic turn in Chabad was caused by a confluence of historical, doctrinal, and personal–biographical factors. At the turn of the 20th century, the fifth Lubavitcher *admor*, Rabbi Shalom Dov-Ber, advanced messianic ideas to inoculate his followers against the alluring secular–national ideology of the emergent Zionist movement (Friedman 1994; Ravitzky 1993). But it was his son and successor, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak (1880–1950), the sixth *admor*, who resorted to full-fledged messianic rhetoric in response to the horrors of the Holocaust. Dialectically supplanting existential despair with eschatological certainty and messianic purpose, he presented the Holocaust as the culmination of pre-messianic tribulations (Elior 1998; Friedman 1994).

The messianic idea in Chabad reached new summits under the effective leadership of the seventh *admor*, Rabbi

Menachem Mendel (1902–94), who succeeded Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak, his father-in-law, in 1951 (Erlich 1997). Even though he always presented himself as a mere intermediary between the late rabbi and the community, he was a charismatic leader, assertive, and expansive. From the outset, he viewed the religious–educational projects that made Chabad a leading force in the Jewish world as a means to hasten redemption and their overall success as a clear indication that all the preparatory work (for bringing forth the Messiah) has been completed, that, as was said, “even the buttons (of the Messiah’s garments) have already been polished.” His was a messianism of success, apparently at odds with the catastrophic messianism of his predecessor yet dialectically linked to it by the assurance that a calamity shall not strike twice. In this vein, various historical events, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the exodus of its Jews, the outcome of the 1990–91 Gulf War, and steps toward world peace, were all taken as confirmations of the Rebbe’s prophecies of an impending messianic reality (Katchen 1991; Shaffir 1993).

Given the personality cult that evolved around the Rebbe, a centralist leader who cultivated personal ties with the Hasidim and made them highly dependent on his authority, it was not surprising that the messianic zeal in Chabad was eventually aimed at him. A myth tracing the Schneerson family back to the House of David and portraying a sequence of seven leaders followed by the coming of the Messiah contributed to the conviction that the seventh Rebbe was, indeed, the chosen one. Although the elderly Rebbe never openly supported the attempts of many of his followers to anoint him, he certainly had an all-encompassing messianic consciousness from a very young age. His deteriorating health in the early 1990s, followed by his death in the summer of 1994, brought his followers’ messianic zeal to a new climax but also precipitated a myriad of responses and interpretations that impacted the institutional structure, inner politics, and social relations in Chabad. Among the Hasidim, these reverberations have been articulated through the distinction between *meshichistim* and *nonmeshichistim* (the self-designated “sane”).

This bifurcation hides intragroup nuances that render it somewhat simplistic. Among the *nonmeshichistim*, one can find a variety of responses to the other camp, from utter lack of involvement to vigorous attack on messianic excesses.¹⁰ Those *meshichistim* who believe that the Rebbe never died stick close to his residence in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in excited expectation of his impending reappearance there. Yet other *meshichistim*, subscribing to a more temperate variant of messianism, frequent the Rebbe’s tomb in the Old Montefiore Cemetery in Cambria Heights, Queens, in the hope that he will rise from the dead to redeem his people. Many *meshichistim* can be recognized by their distinctive place of residence, social networks, marital ties, reading material, and even evolving messianic habitus (which includes

wearing head covers and decorative pins with statements and icons endorsing the Rebbe as Messiah); but many others are inextricably mixed up with nonmeshichistim in all spheres of life. Contemporary Chabad is a global network of widely dispersed communities that display intergroup and intragroup variability regarding the messianic issue. All these qualifications notwithstanding, in this discussion we adhere to the separation between meshichistim and nonmeshichistim so deeply ingrained in Chabad's own discourse.

Since the death of the Rebbe, the differences between the two camps have become more profound. Until the crisis in 1994, these differences had primarily involved tactical issues: whether to go public with the claim that the Rebbe was the expected Messiah and, if so, how to do it. Following that critical time, the debate has also been tinged by issues related to the ontological status of the Rebbe. The nonmeshichistim reluctantly accepted the Rebbe's death, but, in accord with the established mystical dogma regarding deceased *zaddikim*, they emphasize his ongoing "spiritual" impact on his Hasidim and the world at large. Most meshichistim, unequivocally denying that the Rebbe has ever died, advance the claim that, as the king-Messiah, he is present "in spirit and flesh" in his old residence. Armed with an elaborate corpus of eschatological hermeneutics, anchored in an extreme acosmic view conducive to blurring even the partition line between the living and the dead, they maintain that the funeral of the Rebbe was "an illusion" designed as a trial of faith.¹¹

Whereas some scholars (e.g., Shaffir 1994), relying on cognitive dissonance theory, have predicted that Chabad will survive the crisis of the Rebbe's death, others have cast doubt on the ability of the movement to overcome the trauma (Friedman 1994). Not only was the Rebbe childless but he also made no attempt to appoint a successor (a puzzling negligence that might be taken as his tacit acceptance of the messianic role). Moreover, for the meshichistim, the demise of the Rebbe raised the classical (and theologically critical) problem of failed prophecy: The designated Messiah perished before completing his mission. Scholars still lack the historical depth to assess the prospects of the movement in the long run, but for the time being it is clear that Chabad has not lost significant numbers of members since the Rebbe's death, and its institutions, spread all over the world, function with the same vitality and zeal as before his death. In the following exploration, we go beyond the short-range, objectivist accounts of cognitive dissonance, focusing instead on the multilayered, paradoxical, and diachronic modes of living in a messianic movement without a visible Messiah.

Fieldwork: Setting and protagonists

Tishrei, the first month in the Jewish calendar, includes the High Holidays and is traditionally a time when the Hasidim pay a visit to their Rebbe. Today, during Tishrei, followers

from all corners of the world, male and female, still flock to 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, commonly known as "770."¹² The complex, which the meshichistim have designated the "House of the Messiah,"¹³ hosts the headquarters of the movement, the main synagogue and *beit midrash* (study hall), and the former residence and office of the late Rebbe.

Crown Heights, and 770 in its midst, inundated with visitors during the High Holidays, was the setting for three months of fieldwork conducted by Kravel-Tovi during two consecutive autumns in 1999 and 2000. Finding residence with a local family, she attended various family and communal events in the neighborhood, participated with other female visitors from Israel in classes, prayers, and social-religious gatherings at 770 and in its surroundings, and joined visitors for outreach activities, day trips, meals, and shopping. After returning to Israel, she supplemented her participant-observation with open-ended interviews with ten female visitors and seven heads of organizations and educators (three males and four females) who supervised the visitors in Crown Heights.

The reliance on female visitors in the interviews and their overrepresentation in various public settings during the fieldwork reflect the strict separation of the sexes in Hasidic ritual and educational spaces. Still, Kravel-Tovi was able to unobtrusively observe male-exclusive activities in the 770 synagogue from the *ezrat nashim* (inner balconies designated for women only). She also participated in classes and meetings for female visitors conducted by major rabbinical figures (males, by definition), and she mingled with, and even interviewed, male Hasidim outside 770, where the separation between the sexes was less strongly enforced. Hence, we believe that the insights derived from the observations and interviews transcend gender differences and apply to meshichistic circles at large.

Coming to the House of the Messiah is a means the meshichistim employ to come to grips with the Rebbe's apparent "absence." Facing this ordeal, ostensibly engendered by human shortsightedness, they strive to keep to their faith, maintaining that the invisibility is temporary, the penultimate step before "the true and complete deliverance." They assert that, ultimately, the Rebbe will publicly reveal himself at 770 and reign as the Messiah.¹⁴

The mood and ambience in the synagogue at 770 are firmly messianic, reflecting a stout attempt to cling to the old Hasidic custom of "living with the Rebbe."¹⁵ Pilgrimages to the site are conducted by institutions controlled by the meshichistim, who put special emphasis on bringing in young people. Indeed, in recent years, the majority of the participants in the mass gatherings at 770 during the month of Tishrei have been Israeli teenagers, most of whom never met the Rebbe in his lifetime. This type of pilgrimage, dubbed in Hasidic discourse "a journey to the Rebbe," has become very popular in recent years, drawing a few thousand

participants each Tishrei. Moreover, it has acquired major significance as an expected step in the normative life cycle of adolescents in the Chabad movement in Israel. Our study indicates that the meshichistic camp has transformed a journey to the Rebbe into a major pedagogic avenue through which Hasidic values and messages regarding the outreach mission of Chabad, the centrality of the Rebbe in Hasidic life, redemption, and the Messiah are all inculcated in the young generation. Most important, the young pilgrims, whether of old-time Lubavitcher extraction, converts from other religious sectors, or from secular backgrounds, are exposed to an acute messianic reality in which the invisible Rebbe is made present.

As a place that connects the glorious past of the movement with future redemption through the mediation of the covert presence of the king-Messiah, 770 is the best setting imaginable in which to study temporal issues of messianism in contemporary Chabad.

The construction of messianic temporality

Three cultural categories comprise the temporal spectrum articulated by meshichistim in contemporary Chabad. The first category, "once," or "previously," refers to the Rebbe's long reign as the seventh Lubavitcher admor. The second category, the "current situation," relates to the liminal period since 1994. The third one is "redemption," the eternal era that should begin at any moment, or, in the popular words with which the Rebbe sealed many of his sermons, "just at once, right away."¹⁶ We identified two major strategies that the Hasidim employed to articulate the present by managing its links to the past and the future. These strategies contrast with one another, as one is meant to blur the present and the other seeks to accentuate it, but they are enacted conjointly, thus producing a complex coping pattern fraught with tension and contradictions.

Blurring the present: Practices for overcoming time

Practices subsumed under this strategy are meant to dilute the ostensibly qualitative distinctions between the "current situation," on the one hand, and the categories of "once" and impending "redemption," on the other hand. By obscuring the boundaries between these categories, the present can be stretched and extended infinitely so that it "enfolds" past and future.

"Just as it was": Between present and past. The meshichistic project in Chabad is characterized by an ongoing attempt to overcome the gap between "now" and "then." Although most meshichistim have not resorted to the extreme measure of totally collapsing temporal linguistic categories in their common parlance, they are cautious to phrase all references to the Rebbe's deeds and sayings in the present tense. In messianic brochures and periodicals, for example, state-

ments made by the Rebbe during his long reign are always phrased in the present tense. This grammatical exclusion of the past might easily lead an uninformed reader to believe that the Rebbe is still alive.¹⁷ Many ritual practices at 770 constitute a present experienced as flowing uninterruptedly from the past and as identical with it.

The massive "time work" conducted at 770 is designed to transform the phrase "just as it was" into a viable temporal experience. Paradoxically, this phrasing betrays the inevitability of the distinction between present and past. Yet "now" and "then" are articulated as ontologically identical by the claim that the Rebbe's presence in the world and his relations with his devotees have not changed a bit since 1994. The efficacy of the ritual practices at 770 may be measured by the extent to which they succeed in engaging visitors and making them feel that the "Rebbe is alive and well, just as before."

The elaborate ritual system that has evolved at 770 in recent years is composed of practices of embodiment designed to make the absent Rebbe present. To convey the assertion that the Rebbe is still amidst the community, the structured daily routine that dominated the site until 1994 is meticulously reproduced. Most vivid in this system are rituals that act as visual signifiers by "placing" the Rebbe in the same times and places in which his past presence was most strongly felt. The emphasis on the visual mode is congruent with the general priority given in the modern world to vision over other sense modalities for defining what is "real" or "true" (Fox et al. 1983; Howes 1991; Synnott 1991). Visual metaphors abound in apocalyptic movements, which urge their members to "open their eyes" or to adopt "new ways of seeing."¹⁸ Chabad has been especially visually inclined, as portraits of the Rebbe and video recordings of gatherings over which he presided have played a major role in his personality cult (Dan 1997).

Throughout the year, the most basic of the practices of embodiment that serve as sensory prompts for pulling the Rebbe into presence takes place three times a day, at the beginning and the end of each daily prayer. Just when the prayer is about to begin, a young yeshiva (religious academy) student approaches the podium on which the Rebbe used to pray in front of the congregants. He unrolls a carpet over the podium and then lifts a cover to expose the Rebbe's armchair and his "stander" (pulpit). On the Sabbath and holy days, an elderly Hasid is honored with this task. Ready to accept the king-Messiah, the congregants lift their eyes and gaze at the stairs that descend from the Rebbe's office into their midst. Nowadays, they even split to create a clear path leading from the stairs to the podium. On days when passages from the Torah are read during prayer, a veteran Hasid is given the honor of laying the Rebbe's Torah scroll open on the stander. The same Hasidic song that welcomed the approaching Rebbe in the past is excitedly reiterated today. Following the prayer, the carpet

is rolled, the armchair and stander are covered, and the congregants respond with song and dance to the “exit” of the Rebbe.

On the Sabbath and the High Holidays, a *fabrgengen* (Yiddish, ceremonial gathering) takes place in the major study hall. “Once,” under the presidency of the Rebbe, these public meetings were climactic events, replete with joy and ecstasy, during which the Rebbe endorsed Hasidic values and inculcated his vision of the impending redemption. The setting of those gatherings has been kept intact: The Rebbe’s table, covered with a white cloth and set with *halla* (Sabbath loaf), a knife, and a bottle of wine and a wineglass for *kiddush* (the ritual of sanctification), is the focal point. The Rebbe’s armchair is brought to the table, and the Hasidim are seated in front of it. When the meeting ends, after various rabbinical figures have addressed the audience, a veteran Hasid approaches the Rebbe’s table and, facing his armchair, cuts the *halla* into small pieces. The *halla* and, later, the wine from the “wineglass of blessing” are distributed among the Hasidim. These ritual activities are done on behalf of the Rebbe and reproduce his own renowned acts of distribution.

Other practices of embodiment are enacted on the High Holidays that punctuate the month of Tishrei. Following the closing prayer on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), a mobile staircase is put on the podium, as in previous years, so that the Rebbe can watch from above and direct the traditional singing of the Hasidim. During the Harvest Festival (Succoth), a tabernacle is built for the Rebbe with the “four species” awaiting him inside.¹⁹ The Hasidim are encouraged to make the appropriate blessing over the four species. Some passersby even extend their hands to receive the Rebbe’s *lekah* (piece of cake), the custom when he was alive. On special occasions, the Rebbe is accorded the honor of leading the public prayer. The gaze of all present is focused on the Rebbe’s armchair as long as he “utters” his part. Then the crowd ecstatically responds in impressive synchronization, chanting in unison the complementary verse.

Visual technology, which the Lubavitchers amply and deftly employ, is arguably the best means for “reviving” the past and fusing it with the present (cf. Barthes 1993). Throughout the month of Tishrei, two videotapes are screened at 770 almost every evening. The first one is a recording of one of the Rebbe’s public talks and conveys a peculiar sense of spatial and temporal continuity. The Rebbe is shown animatedly talking in the very place where the videotape is screened and, quite often, on the same occasion. For example, a public talk centering on the mystical meaning of Succoth is replayed during that holiday, thus further blurring the gap between present and past. The other video shows the old Rebbe after his stroke, paralyzed and speechless, attentively watching as the Hasidim dance and sing the song that became the battle cry of the meshichistic faction: “Long live our master, teacher, and rabbi, the king–Messiah.” The mes-

sage here is loaded, but the messianic fervor in the scene seems to compensate for the Rebbe’s apparent frailty and incapacitation.

With the pre-1994 ecology, paraphernalia, and daily schedule intact, the sensory practices of embodiment are designed to make the Rebbe strongly felt at 770, to transform his absence into presence. No less important, these ritual practices engage the Hasidim as active participants. The intense interactive bond from the past between the Hasidim and the Rebbe is thus reconstructed in the ritual space created at 770. Whether the past is nurtured by personal memories or by a collectively constructed “once,” these practices are conducive to making the past part of the here and now. The mass pilgrimage to 770 in the month of Tishrei is, in itself, a clear indication that the golden days of the movement have not vanished. In fact, all the Hasidim, not only the meshichistim, have a vested interest in demonstrating that “everything in Chabad is just as it was.” One Crown Heights Lubavitcher woman proudly asserted, “Everyone uttered eulogies on our behalf [after 1994], but now look how many people are coming here in Tishrei; it’s so packed in 770, no room to move even a bit. There is a strong feeling that nothing has changed.”

The epistemic, behavioral, and emotional consequences of conflating past and present in line with the “just as it was” maxim have given rise to a pedagogic system resonant with the rhetoric of the ultraorthodox community at large. Waging war on the rapid social changes that have transformed traditional Jewish society, the ultraorthodox have clung to past traditions and ways of life, which, although imagined and idealized to a large extent, are presented as an absolute, transhistorical truth. Their nostalgic self-presentation as the keepers and revivers of the traditional Jewish world has endowed them with moral ammunition in their battle against modernization and secularization and helped them deny the impact of these processes on their own camp. Within Chabad, this pedagogic system plays an important role in the dispute over the course that the movement should take. Meshichistim and nonmeshichistim alike seek to appropriate the image of the true custodian of Chabad’s past traditions and values and, with it, the identity of the genuine Hasid. In Chabad, as in ultraorthodox society at large, it is evident that in times of plight, the “just as it was” credo constitutes a meaning-giving tool to grapple with disorientation and bewilderment.

Just as the present is cast in the image of the past, the past can be adjusted to the current situation. The practices that seek to restore the past still refer to a tantalizing reality in which the Rebbe is present yet absent, close by yet invisible. As a pedagogic tool to enable the Hasidim to live with the difficulties and doubts engendered by this situation, an attempt is being made to devalue the past by linking it with many of the difficulties experienced in the “current situation.” When one of the female attendees of a Hasidic

meeting at 770 admitted that she found it hard “to feel the Rebbe,” the rabbi in charge replied,

Don't assume it was easier in the past! Do you think that then the Hasidim approached the Rebbe innocent and pure and felt his holiness at once? There were visitors who failed to absorb the greatness and sanctity of the Rebbe, may he be granted good days. All they could see from their mundane perspective was an old man. Hence, what you are describing could happen before, exactly the same thing.

After 1994, the common practice of writing petitions to the Rebbe did not cease but, rather, was adjusted to the new circumstances. Instead of being mailed or faxed to 770, petitions are now randomly inserted into one of the 23 volumes of “Holy Letters,” a compilation of the enormous correspondence the Rebbe conducted in his lifetime. As an oracle, a message from the Rebbe, the text into which a petition is inserted is supposed to provide the right answer for the supplicant. Ordinarily it does, which constitutes another strong indication that the Rebbe is present and that everything is “just as it was” (Bilu in press). But in some cases, the answers received are ambiguous and hard to decipher. Addressing this problem, one rabbi said to his audience of female visitors, “Don't think it wasn't like this before. Even then, one could come out from a personal meeting with the Rebbe or receive a reply from him without understanding its rationale or meaning. It would have taken some time until he could grasp what the Rebbe had told him. It's the same as today.”

“Just one moment from redemption”: Between present and future. The visit to 770 is conducive to blurring the boundary between present and future, as well. The ritual space created in the site draws the participants nearer, albeit temporarily, to the messianic time and the promise of redemption. Discourse and experience at 770 activate the temporal schema regarding the messianic vision: The Messiah is at the gate, and the world is just a moment from redemption. This schema highlights the liminal qualities of the current period and accords 770 a special status as the place where redemption will start. As such, 770 affords a glimpse of the messianic era. The Rebbe himself cultivated the notion that his own house would be the starting point of redemption in one of his last sermons. Having established the identity of 770 as the abode of the Messiah in exile, he depicted a magnificent eschatological scenario in which the Third Temple would descend straight from heaven to 770, then the two sanctuaries would take off to Jerusalem, followed by the Shechina (the female counterpart of God) and the people of Israel.

The metaphysical qualities of 770 are amply conveyed to visitors in meetings, classes, and written material. Hasidim are taught that, through engaged participation in the ritual and pedagogic activities at the site, one is able and entitled

“to taste a bit of the coming redemption.” As a leading activist in the meshichistic camp articulated it in a meeting one day after Rosh Hashana (the New Year Festival),

What happened to us in the Holiday is part of redemption. This is what we were told about all the time, what we had in our imagination. We received it straight from heaven, from the Messiah. What we went through yesterday was exactly what you were supposed to feel in the Temple. This is what's going to be, this jam-packed atmosphere. It doesn't belong to this time at all.

Indeed, some visitors reported that, in the fervor and excitement of the High Holidays, they were swept by the oceanic feeling of being part of the redemption process. In an interview conducted in Israel, one of the female visitors recalled the following mystical experience on Rosh Hashana:

I had a clear sensation that this huge synagogue was soaring and rolling up in the air, as if it went across the world into some space, beyond time, beyond speed, beyond materiality and nature. All attendants became one big mass, yearning for God, on the way to God, within. . . . This was a moment of redemption. You could really feel it here; it's as if you tasted a bit of what's expected to be in the Temple.

This articulation of profound spiritual experiences through the idiom of redemption transforms messianic consciousness by making it more concrete and graspable. This sense of redemption “here and now” perforce involves a collapse of time barriers, as the current situation affords a miniature experience of the anticipated future.²⁰

Unlike other millenarian movements, the strong sense of urgency and imminence conveyed by idioms such as “just at once,” “just a moment from redemption,” and “Messiah now” was never translated into a specific timetable in Chabad. Rather than set up a date for redemption, the Rebbe strongly cultivated the sensibility that each and every moment could be the right time, thus creating an ongoing connection between reality and eschatology (Szubin 2000). “Just at once” is a time between times. Liminal and open, it encapsulates the “current situation” and the unfolding redemption, yet it is neither the present nor the future (although the boundaries between these times may be temporarily dissolved during ritual). With each given moment carrying the potential for a messianic transformation, the present is always conditional, the future—redemption—always evolving. This time scheme is quite challenging for believers, who are expected to keep their faith fresh and intense while the acute sense of immediacy lingers on. The meshichistim follow the Rebbe in kindling this sense of immediacy by interpreting historical events as signs of imminent redemption. In this vein, a hurricane that hit the U.S. East Coast during the autumn of 1999 was depicted as

nothing less than clouds from heaven sent to carry the People of Israel to redemption (cf. Harding 2000; Kochan 1990), and the emergence of Intifadah al-Aksa in 2000 was presented to visitors at 770 as a sign of the turbulence the world must undergo in the last moments of exile. Note how this sense of imminence, integral to the messianic time scheme, was enacted at 770 during one Rosh Hashana meeting.

After 90 minutes of intense singing in front of the Rebbe's armchair and table, one of the leaders of the messianic camp stood on a chair and addressed the congregants: "The Rebbe is here, with us. He knows that we prepare his chair for each and every prayer. He might show himself in a second, perhaps even as I am talking to you, and we will all be able to see him." His excitement stirred up those in attendance, who faced the empty chair and shouted, "And he redeems us," instead of the future-oriented "And he will redeem us."

Rituals like this, based on metonymic association with the Rebbe (through his armchair), make the imminent time scheme palpable. Even if now is not the full-fledged messianic future, it is "just a moment from redemption." In interviews, some female visitors to 770 claimed that, even during the weekday rituals, such as the uncovering of the Rebbe's armchair before prayers, they could sense the presence of the Rebbe-Messiah. Invigorated by this feeling, they struggled to keep to their faith back in Israel, distanced from the House of the Messiah. Rather than view the present as a constant source of frustration, some interviewees who allegedly internalized the imminent time scheme of messianic Chabad portrayed the present as a constant source of optimistic vitality.

Broadening the present on either side. The ritual and discursive practices designed to overcome time by blurring the boundaries of the present pull the absent Rebbe into presence. The sense of an ever-expanding present, into which aspects of the past and the future are incorporated, helps soften the painful reality of "not yet." Sustained by past memory and future expectations, the present is dissociated from the "current situation" and the vacuum engendered by the absence of the Rebbe. This obscured present "revives" the Rebbe, invigorates his Hasidim, and re-creates the messianic tension in the space between them. A livable present is constituted when the "current situation" is depicted as identical to the past, and the future as imminent and palpable to the extent that it overlaps with the present. By broadening and blurring the present, the meshichistim survive the current situation and they possibly buy themselves a future, too.

Although the blurring of time should not be conflated with its total negation, fieldwork at 770 revealed episodes in which all temporal boundaries seemed to have melted. The following is an illustration of one such loaded moment.

Following a particularly excited gathering at the end of the Festival of Succoth, a videotape was projected on a huge screen stretched on the northern wall of the major study hall

at 770. The Rebbe was shown presiding over a similar gathering conducted at the same time of the year—Succoth in the late 1980s—and in the same place. After completing the evening prayer, the Rebbe turned to face the congregants and, moving his hands up and down, drove them into animated singing. Watching the videotape, the Hasidim in the hall immediately followed suit, and it was altogether impossible to sort out the voices of the actual audience from those of the audience on the screen. As the Rebbe continued to stir up the Hasidim, his hand movements accelerating, the singing of the two audiences became more vigorous. After a few moments, the Rebbe signaled to the attendees to hush, and the two audiences calmed down at once. The Rebbe made a few blessings, and the two audiences responded with an enthusiastic "Amen." Then the Rebbe made a subtle gesture, signaling his wish to take his leave, and the two audiences accompanied his exit with animated singing. A young visitor in the women's balcony addressed Kravel-Tovi: "Did you see all this? This is the redemption. That's how it's going to be, beyond any measure or limitation."

Indeed, in the virtual interactive space constructed between the Rebbe and the Hasidim in moments like this, temporal constraints are likely to melt down temporarily. Watching is transformed into participating, as the attendees leap over the temporal and epistemological gap between observing the videotaped gathering and living it through. Moving backward in time—immersing themselves in a gathering that took place some 15 years ago—the Hasidim are at the same time also moving forward, "tasting a bit of redemption." The ritual space enables the construction of a Buberian present with an I-Thou quality between the Rebbe and the Hasidim (Bergman 1980). Although what is experienced as "perennial present" cannot last more than a few moments, it bears a very special meaning for the participants, endowing them with significant "ritual knowledge" encoded in performative, embodied, and experiential trajectories (Grimes 1990; Jennings 1982; Motz 1998; Preston 1988). As Theodore W. Jennings put it, "Ritual action is not only the dramatic representation of the already known but is also a mode of exploration, discovery, and 'coming to know' . . . ritual does not depict the world so much as it finds or creates the world" (1982:114, 116). Built on sensory-embodied praxis and on a dramatization of symbolic representations (Geertz 1980), ritual provides participants with a profound knowledge of reality. Such ritual knowledge affords a variety of symbolic manipulations of time, as time may be suspended, contracted, or forsaken and reframed through trekking across other temporal spaces (Eliade 1959, 1963; Gager 1975; Lévi-Strauss 1969). Still, in the case of Chabad, it is apparently the strategy of overcoming time that constitutes the ritual, not vice versa.

Impressive as the ritual space at 770 is, its success in creating a messianic temporality with a blurred, ever-expanding present cannot be taken for granted. Some Hasidim find it

difficult to “overcome time,” even in the most ecstatic gatherings at 770. Note that even those who do experience “a bit of redemption” during the ritual have to deal with the fact that they cannot stay in this extratemporal space forever. How can they deal with ordinary temporality in the nonritual settings of their daily lives? In these settings, the frustration with a never-ending “just at once” may take a toll. The sober words of the interviewee who reported experiencing the synagogue “soaring and rolling up in the air . . . beyond time, beyond speed” are quite telling in this regard: “When you are coming out of this excitement, you suddenly grasp that there are other things outside, there are cars, black people. Suddenly you get that there are other things, and the Messiah isn’t here; and this is shocking, you suffer anti-climax . . . and you have to go on, to hang around, to live, and in the beginning it’s very difficult.”

The answer to these questions is double edged, displaying the complexity of the messianic imagination. On the one hand, the blurred, expanded present is depicted as a challenge, a trial of faith with which the Hasidim have to deal by looking beyond sheer sensory reality. On the other hand, the difficulties inherent in the “current situation” are attended to, sustained, and elaborated. Viewed also as assets and not just liabilities, obstacles are cultivated in the service of constructing an accentuated present.

Accentuating the present: Practices for sharpening time

The naked “current situation” is an ugly present, fraught with crisis, bereft of the Rebbe and of redemption, and with no clear timetable to bring it to an end. By accentuating the gap between the present, on the one hand, and both past and future, on the other hand, the meshichistic faction also constitutes a present that is strongly differentiated from the other times and clearly inferior in comparison. This time work engenders an acute sense of gloom regarding the present and a no less strong sense of wistfulness and yearning regarding the past and the future.

“Too late” and “not yet”: Practices for embodying the current situation. Long before his demise, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson had been inextricably identified with 770. Throughout his 44 years as the seventh Lubavitcher admor, he rarely left Crown Heights, and he spent most hours each day in his office at 770.²¹ In the last decade of his life, he was more visible in the public quarters of the complex, and after the death of his wife he moved his residence to his office there. Against this strong past presence, the Rebbe’s current absence from 770 appears quite vociferous. The meticulous practices of embodiment aimed at filling the vacuum may make it all the more salient, as they transform the absence of presence into the presence of absence (Handelman and Shamgar-Handelman 1997). That is, the Rebbe’s absence may be amplified by exposing the artifacts and objects asso-

ciated with him and integrating them into the daily schedule at the site. The Rebbe’s armchair is orphaned, his table remains empty during ceremonial gatherings, and his “utterances” during prayers are inaudible. Paradoxically, as the practices of embodiment make the Rebbe strongly present, they also make his absence more acute. As substitutes for the “real thing,” they are likely to magnify the loss as much as soften it. This duality is manifested in the following excerpt from an interview with one of the Israeli visitors to 770: “In the meetings I would say, ‘Rebbe, I would like to see you; I can feel your presence here, so why can’t I physically see you, why not?’ It’s a feeling of pain. In these meetings all the pain is coming out, all the absence is revealed there, all is missing.”

Emphasizing the sensory, especially visual, aspects of the gap between presence and absence, the practices of embodiment render vivid the gulf between the present, on the one hand, and the past and future, on the other hand. The “current situation” is painfully encoded in relics that accentuate the spectrum between “too late” (the Rebbe cannot be seen sitting on his chair any more) and “not yet” (he cannot be seen sitting on his throne as the king–Messiah). The empty chair thus becomes a model of and a model for the “current situation,” articulating but also constituting the constraints and limitations of the present.

We suggest that this presence of absence should be viewed not as an unintended consequence of the practices of embodiment but, rather, as one of their objectives. Enlarged pictures of the empty chair appear time and again in messianic publications with the recurring plea “We wish to see our king.” Presented in isolation, outside its ritual milieu, the chair thus appears as a metonymic sign of the loss and exile enfolded in the “current situation.” Note how this theme is raised in the following episode documented at 770.

Following the Rosh Hashanah gatherings, two female visitors approached the local activist who headed the pedagogic committee in charge of the Israeli pilgrims. One of them said excitedly, “It was amazing, incredible! I really felt the Rebbe was here. Throughout the gathering, gazing at the chair, I had a clear sensation that the Rebbe was sitting there, I have never felt like this before.” The other girl nodded in agreement and added, “The Rebbe is here, he is simply here, no other way.” The local activist replied, “Sure, the Rebbe is with us each and every moment, all the more so on Rosh Hashanah; and soon we will be able to see him in the open. But, for heaven sake, we cannot be satisfied with this. We must wish and pray that we can *really* see him” (emphasis added). The first girl started to answer, but the activist interrupted her, “With all the joy, we cannot but feel embittered for not being able to see him yet. Hopefully, we will be in joy soon.”

Intriguingly, the activist did not seek to capitalize on the girls’ exciting experience, even though it dutifully resonated

with the time scheme promoted by messianic Chabad. Acknowledging their excitement and joy, she adamantly reminded them that the Rebbe was not “really” there, that the chair was still empty. Another episode that illustrates the same pedagogic orientation was taken from the personal diary of a 19-year-old female visitor:

We met for a gathering in the Succah of the Slonim family. One of the ex-personal secretaries of the Rebbe, after recounting some nice Hasidic stories, asked for comments and questions. Some girls admitted that they couldn't really feel the Rebbe. They burst into tears, saying that they would like to feel him more closely. The Rabbi's answer was very reassuring. He said that, painful as it was, we have to keep staring at the empty chair. He said very straightforwardly that those girls who couldn't feel the pain for not seeing the Rebbe had a real problem. But it's a good sign if someone really wanted to see the Rebbe and felt the pain. One had to work hard in order to feel that one was living with the Rebbe.²²

The Rabbi's answer is intriguing. Instead of imagining the Rebbe by “seeing” through and beyond the empty chair, he asks the girls not to avert their gaze from the void. As an emblematic representation of loss and absence, the empty chair should draw all the sorrow of not being with the Rebbe. The responses of both activists indicate that the notion of the accentuated present is anchored in an established discourse on emotions. In the context of this discourse, it is legitimate to experience grief, discontentment, and bitterness when facing the naked “current situation.”

“Until when?” Defying the present. In the Jewish traditional context, “Until when?” is a vocal complaint, a protest toward heaven, cried out in times of plight and expressing annoyance and frustration in the face of persistent adversity. The Rebbe employed this idiom time and again in the messianic campaigns he galvanized, and his Hasidim have followed suit. The complaint is now addressed to the absent Rebbe himself, urging him to come out of hiding and show himself as the king–Messiah. Rather than softening the misery of their protest, some messianic activists seek to accentuate it, as one of them publicly asserted at a gathering at 770: “What do we want? Just to see our king. Therefore we must scream and beseech ‘until when,’ a genuine, painful, terrible cry. The pain involved has no remedy; therefore any attempt to alleviate it is not appropriate and should be rejected.”

The same theme of imploring, of misery, was spontaneously raised in many of the interviews with female visitors. Additionally, in the public quarters at 770, male Hasidim can often be seen bursting into tearful cries of “Until when?” It is not surprising that many of these dramatic displays take place in front of the Rebbe's empty chair. On Simchat Torah, a celebration on the final day of Succoth that marks the com-

pletion of the annual reading cycle of the Torah in the synagogue, many Hasidim consume large quantities of alcohol and burst into tears in front of the chair. Although the empty chair appears to be a locus of emotional catharsis, the protest it elicits might harbor subversive doubts associated with the annoyance and even despair enfolded in the “Until when?” exclamation.

The nostalgia of “once.” The teleological orientation that envelops any messianic discourse makes it antagonistic to nostalgic commemorations of an idealized past.²³ Propelled by the grievances of the present, nostalgia appears counterproductive to the rationale of the practices of embodiment discussed above. Nevertheless, “once” is a much-discussed theme at gatherings and in informal conversations. The Hasidim deal obsessively with the past, fondly recalling and weaving together minute details of the Rebbe's sayings, gestures, customs, and countenance to reproduce a vivid picture of him. On festive occasions, such as Sabbath or a holiday, a reputed messianic rabbi would address the female visitors to 770, informing them how this day was celebrated “once,” when the Rebbe was still in charge. Ostensibly, the objective of these public addresses was to conflate past and present, to tell the participants how it was when the Rebbe could still be seen, which is exactly what's happening now, when he is invisible. But, in actuality, the idealization of the past could distance it from the present. The gap between “once” and the “current situation” is explicit in the following public address delivered by the same rabbi at a gathering before Rosh Hashanah:

In the morning the Rebbe would enter the synagogue, his secretaries behind him carrying in their hands huge piles of petitions from all over the world. The Rebbe would pray over the petitions. When the shofar (ritual horn) was blowing, the Rebbe burst into tears, it's impossible to describe this scene. The Rebbe wrapped in his prayer shawl hitting the petitions with his fists. People who weren't there simply can't imagine the scene, it defies comparison. What happened then was so unique, out of this world. When I recall all this, I start . . . it's impossible to describe it.

Nostalgic references to the Rebbe abounded during public gatherings at 770, when veteran visitors acquainted newcomers with the Rebbe's whereabouts on similar occasions in the past. The following exchange is representative: “Look here, the Rebbe would enter from here.” “And from where was he directing the singing?” “Do you see the staircase? From there, (but) by this time he would be back in his office.” Alternating between past tense and present tense, this kind of recalling was unabashedly nostalgic: “Why couldn't it go on just as it was?” “Why did all this have to stop?” “What a great time it was, no comparison” (with the “current situation”). The popular meaning of *nostalgia*, referring to

a romantic and sentimental view of the past (Seremetakis 1994), and the painful longing that this recall invokes (Davis 1979) are both represented here. Fred Davis (1979) has argued that nostalgia is about more than grieving over the present, it is about the adulation of the past; but in the case of Chabad, both elements appear inextricably linked.

Ritual of mourning, longing, and eagerness. Practices that blur the present are consistent with the messianic logic that denies the Rebbe's death and juxtaposes present-day reality to redemption, but practices that accentuate the present run counter to this logic and require explanation.

One possible reason that messianic Chabad has embraced practices that sharply distinguish the current situation from the past and the future has to do with the psychodynamic notion of the "work of mourning" (Freud 1917). The literature on grief and bereavement acknowledges that an elaborate cognitive and emotional processing of these negative experiences is essential for overcoming the sense of loss (Lindemann 1944; Rubin 1997). In Chabad, the work of mourning went undone, despite the multitudes that flocked to the Rebbe's funeral and other commemorative ceremonies. The shock and pain that the death invoked were not denied, but an ambiance of profound mourning was not created, as the Hasidim were urged to channel their grief to the constructive course of strengthening the movement and dispatching its teachings and vision.

In traditional Judaism, the completion of the mourning process requires, first, that the reality of the death be acknowledged. Following that, the emotional ties with the dead should be severed and new social relationships established (Spiro 1967). None of these tasks was adequately completed in Chabad. Many meshichistim flatly denied the death of the Rebbe. Nonmeshichistim and meshichistim alike were encouraged to strengthen rather than disengage their spiritual and emotional ties with the Rebbe, whether they believed he was deceased or just invisible. In the absence of a successor, the vacuum created by the Rebbe's disappearance has not been filled by bonding with a new admor.

The ritual space at 770 can be viewed, among other things, as a *lieu de memoire* designed to compensate for this deficient mourning process by reconstructing the loss metaphorically and experientially. Here, the Hasidim can most directly and painfully face the vacuum left by the Rebbe and gain some catharsis by expressing their exasperation over the "current situation." The nostalgic mood that enshrouds them at 770 appears as a mitigated manifestation of the mourning they could not openly pursue. As a means for enduring the unendurable, nostalgia is conducive to coping with past traumas (Maschio 1992; Naficy 1991). The nostalgic affect displayed by activists and visitors is part of the bodily, sensory, and semantic memory of the Rebbe. In the ritual setting at 770, artifacts and modes of conduct acutely and uncannily convey the sensation of "once," of life with

the Rebbe. As much as these prompts assist in making the absent Rebbe present, they also serve to magnify the sense of loss, thus constituting a cathartic arena for releasing the pain of bereavement.

The "work-of-mourning" hypothesis is primarily germane to veteran Hasidim, for whom the living Rebbe was a significant figure. What about the young generation of Hasidim, whether born Lubavitchers or new converts to the movement, those who did not know the Rebbe in his lifetime? These young Hasidim, who now constitute the majority of the visitors to 770 during the High Holidays, have grown up with the intricate reality of a present-absent Rebbe. Their recollections of what it means "to be with the Rebbe" are usually vague and mediated. They may have watched a videotape of the Rebbe or faxed him a petition, but only a few of them can recall seeing him in person. Those who were born into Chabad remember the day of the Rebbe's death as a traumatic event, but they were too young to appreciate the loss and share the grief experienced by their parents and older siblings (Dein 1997, 2001).

Still, the Rebbe is a given in the life of most young Hasidim, even though he is a "virtual Rebbe" enlivened through an elaborate pedagogic system and practices of embodiment. For example, some of the young visitors to 770 have mentioned the oracle of the "Holy Letters" as a swift avenue, almost too facile, by which to contact the Rebbe and receive his advice. Intriguingly, they describe this and other practices of embodiment in matter-of-fact language, without resorting to the tormented wistfulness and longing characteristic of the discourse of older Hasidim. Is it possible, then, that the practices that accentuate the present have served to inculcate in younger Hasidim a sense of misery and distress that kindles the messianic tension? The desire to see the Rebbe continues to grow as he is further mythologized through intense preoccupation with the past. The reluctance to put up with the "current situation," epitomized in the recurring cry "Until when?" propels the Hasidim to dispatch the messages of the Rebbe and fuel the messianic project. Note that this account, which resorts to the classic notion of "crisis-informed" or "catastrophic" messianism (with the disappearance of the Rebbe as the constituting trauma), is at odds with the notion of the "messianism of success" cultivated by the Rebbe during his presidency.

Conclusion: The precariousness of messianic temporality

The two actions required from us now are impeccable joy over the genuine and complete redemption, without a bit of worry and sadness in the world, together with the excruciating cry, "until when," a cry that has no answer, account or resolve. These actions intermingle and supplement each other in the most improbable, incomprehensible way, and yet—in a very obvious, palpable way.

—Rabbi Levi Yitzhak Ginzburg²⁴

Ethnographic fieldwork conducted at 770, the stronghold of messianic Chabad, has shown that meshichistim invest much effort in constructing and articulating a viable sense of the present. The interviews conducted in Israel hint that this “work of the present” outside the ritual space and pilgrimage center of 770, although less vigorous in daily routine, permeates into other life spheres of the Hasidim. The thesis presented here is that Chabad has dealt with the traumatic loss of the Messiah-to-be through a double-edged “work of the present.” This intricate undertaking brings together contrasting experiences, perceptions, and emotions. Presence and absence, joy and bitterness, longing and eagerness are thus inextricably aligned. Practices that blur the present seek to overcome the gaps between the Rebbe’s past and future presence and the “current situation,” the time of the orphaned Hasidim. The painful void of that situation is filled by negating it: The death of the Rebbe is not conceived of as an excruciating reality but, rather, as a trial of faith, an illusion informed by human shortsightedness. To look beyond the sensory reality of absence and loss is to look beyond time, to constitute a messianic transcendental temporality in which the ever-expanding present is securely ensconced. The construction of this type of present is supposed to invigorate the Hasidim and fill them with a sense of optimism and self-assurance fueled by a double source: the joy of being with the Rebbe as they once were (enfolding the past into the present) and the joy of the redemption to come (enfolding the future into the present).

Through practices that blur the present, messianic Chabad can forge a narrative of resilience, growth, and continuity. In contradistinction, practices that accentuate the present weave a counternarrative in which the current situation is articulated as naked and ugly, a time of regression, distress, and agonized anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. In this narrative, the present is equated with void, darkness, exile, and loss. Despite the tenacity and ongoing institutional expansion of Chabad, the awareness that the present is a time of lowliness, bounded between the summits of “once” and “redemption,” instigates feelings of melancholy, misery, and eager yearning.

The “work of the present” thus leads the meshichistim in a very precarious trajectory stretched between contrasting time perceptions and emotions to form a complex, multilayered meaning system. This system is informed by conflicting objectives. The desire to be with the Rebbe and to sense his presence is incompatible with the apprehension that his figure might be reduced to an empty chair and a picture on the wall. The need to plainly believe that the messianic era is already here clashes with the wish to retain the messianic tension by promoting the expectation of imminent (yet undated) redemption. The dynamics of the emotional script in messianic Chabad require that Hasidic joy be complete and immaculate, but at the same time also partial and discordant. Clinging to one of these poles is problematic. If the

present is perfect, why invest efforts in advancing an alternate, messianic reality? If it is vacuous, bereft of the Rebbe’s presence, why embark on a journey to his abode?

The sacred space at 770, with the Rebbe’s artifacts at its center and the elaborate pedagogic system activated by the practices of embodiment, sustains the messianic meaning system by simultaneously fusing and separating the three temporal categories of “once,” the “current situation,” and “redemption.” This meaning system and the complex emotional ideal attached to it are crystallized in the emergence of a new generation of Hasidim in Chabad. The “work of the present” fashions for young Lubavitchers a significant Hasidic experience tailored for the ever-expanding present without the Rebbe, but at the same time it also creates a commitment to the “real thing,” the Rebbe as a living, visible king–Messiah and the messianic future of redemption.

The trail taken by the meshichistim appears arduous, but the emotional roller coaster that they ride is resonant with temporal rhythms in Judaism that have swung between catastrophe and redemption since time immemorial. The temporal trajectory stretched between low and high is inscribed in the cycles of the day (oscillating between darkness and light) and the week (between the weekdays and the Sabbath). This temporal trajectory is also encoded in the narrative plot of major festivals, such as Passover, Hanukkah, and Purim, and in the ritual calendar of the State of Israel (Goldberg 1998; Handelman 1990). More specifically, the Hasidic approach that sought to reconcile contrasting emotions and cognitions was expanded in Chabad into an elaborate dialectical edifice, known as the “doctrine of the unity of opposites” (Brod 1998; Elior 1993). Although the messianic path in Chabad is neither uncomplicated nor immune to challenges, it was carved with tools from the cultural repository of traditional Judaism, and of Chabad mysticism, in particular.

In this ethnographic study, we sought to shed light on the cultural tools and resources employed by messianic Chabad against the challenges of disrupted messianic temporality. Cultural categories and conceptualizations of time, fashioned and deployed in divergent ways, constituted the reality, history, and vision of the movement and, at the same time, were constituted by them. The temporal strategies that Chabad has employed since 1994, conjointly obfuscating and accentuating temporal delineations along which the messianic vision has been inscribed, have construed a complex reality, fraught with tension and contradictions. This reality defies the simplistic notion of dissonance reduction, informed by an all-out drive to restore balance and harmony as soon as possible. Chabad (and perhaps other millenarian movements, as well) has evolved in a multifaceted cultural matrix in which attempts to normalize and repair the crisis of failed prophecy have supplemented—not supplanted—the opposite endeavor of magnifying the crisis and underlining its disruptive implications.

Notes

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1. The terms *ChaBaD*—an acronym for *Chochmah* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding), and *Da'at* (knowledge)—and *Lubavitch* are synonymous and refer to the followers of the same Hasidic sect. In Israel the term *Chabad* is commonly used, whereas in North America the term *Lubavitch* is more popular.

2. *Admor* is an acronym for *adonenu, morenu ve-rabbenu* (our master, teacher, and rabbi).

3. Reliable data regarding the relative size of the meshichistic camp and of other groups in Chabad are not available. There is no doubt, however, that they constitute a significant and highly visible camp in contemporary Chabad. On the inner divisions in the movement, see Fishkoff 2003:272–276.

4. These distinctions were criticized for their underlying ethnocentric ideology (Fabian 1983; Smith 1991). For a theoretical and empirical critique, see Farris 1995.

5. For studies that employed Festinger's theory to account for the developments in Chabad after the death of the Rebbe, see Dein 1997, 2001, 2002, and Shaffir 1995.

6. Long-range processes of failed prophecy have been studied in various religious contexts (e.g., Balch et al. 1983; Tumminia 1998, 2005), but these studies do not explicitly discuss the diachronic management of enduring crises.

7. A noted exception is the Braslav Hasidic sect, which has remained tied to its charismatic founder, Rabbi Nachman, since his death in 1810. Rabbi Nachman's followers, whom other Hasidic groups mockingly designate "dead Hasidim," believe that, despite his absence, the rabbi has remained spiritually active in the world. Rabbi Nachman viewed himself as the ultimate zaddik and was known for his messianic aspirations (see Garb 2005:131; Lenowitz 1998:204–209; Sharot 1982:179–181). A systematic comparison of Chabad and Braslav is yet to be conducted.

8. Known as the "doctrine of the unity of opposites," Habad's elaborate theosophy rests on six dialectical systems: the two opposing divine wills, materialization and annihilation; the two fashions of divine presence, transcendence and immanence; the double meaning of existence, *yesh* (being) and *ayin* (nothingness); the two contrasting points of view, that of the divine (which conceives the truth of reality) and that of humans (which is illusory); the two souls that make up the Jewish mind, the bestial soul and the divine soul; and the two dimensions of the worship of God, the annihilation of corporeality (e.g., by ecstatic prayer) and the drawing of the divine into the depth of matter (e.g., by strict observance of the commandments). Because each of these opposites changes its essence fundamentally and incessantly, the laws of existence are manifested in a metadialectical process: differentiation and manifestation within corporeality, on the one hand, and unification and stripping away of corporeality, on the other hand (Elior 1993:33–35).

9. Acosmism is based on an epistemological paradox because it entails the pantheistic argument that "everything that exists is within the divinity, but at the same time it denies that the world has any actual existence" (Elior 1993:62).

10. For a review of the antimeshichistic politics in Chabad, see Fishkoff 2003:261–284. Intriguingly, one does not find vast antimeshichistic literature in the Jewish Orthodox community outside

Chabad. David Berger's (2001) vehement attack on Chabad's messianism is a notable exception.

11. This trial is compared with the one Abraham withstood when asked to sacrifice Isaac or, more often, with the one the people of Israel failed when Moses temporarily forsake them on his way to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai. In messianic Chabad, many parallels are drawn between Moses, "the first redeemer," and the Rebbe, "the ultimate redeemer."

12. Journalists Lis Harris (1985) and Sue Fishkoff (2003) have presented accounts of Crown Heights for the general reader. Jerome Mintz (1992) has depicted the dynamic social life in the neighborhood in a nuanced ethnography, and Bonnie Morris (1998) and Stephanie Levine (1998) have studied the lives of women in the neighborhood from social historical and psychological perspectives. Henry Goldschmidt (2000) and Edward Shapiro (2006) have studied the tense social relations between the Hasidim and the Afro-American and Hispanic inhabitants of Crown Heights.

13. In Hebrew, the numerical value of the letters comprising the phrase *Beit Mashiach* (the House of the Messiah) is 770.

14. In recent years, a stream of publications have reported apparitions of the Rebbe, most of which are said to have taken place at 770.

15. Following the appropriation of the 770 synagogue by the meshichistim, many of their opponents stopped praying there. Some moved to another synagogue in the neighborhood, also designated "770." Others transformed the Rebbe's former office in 770 into a place of prayer. Committed meshichistim do not enter the office because they believe that the Rebbe continues to reside there and should not be disturbed in his private quarters.

16. The Hebrew phrase is *techef u-miyad mamash*. The meshichistim read *mamash* as an acronym either for the Rebbe's name, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, or for *Mashiach Menachem Shmo* (a Messiah named Menachem).

17. When referring to the Rebbe in speech and in writing, the meshichistim are careful to dub him "the Rebbe *shlita*" (*shlita* is an acronym for "may he be granted good days"), as if he were alive, while forbidding the use of phrases such as *zal* (may his memory be for a blessing), normally used when referring to the dead. Our records show that, ordinarily, this seemingly provocative practice went unchallenged by nonmeshichistim, probably because it has been used so commonly as to become an unnoticed convention.

18. See, for example, the apostle Paul's announcement of the new way of seeing necessary to perceive the alteration of the universe following the coming of Jesus (2 Cor 5:16–17).

19. Four kinds of plants—citron, palm branch, myrtle, and willow—are ritually used on the feast of Succoth.

20. Scholars have noted similar attempts in early millenarian Christianity to constitute on earth some of the attributes of the future redemption (Gager 1975).

21. He often left Crown Heights to visit his father-in-law's tomb in the Old Montefiore Cemetery in Queens.

22. In accord with a long Hasidic tradition, visitors to 770 are encouraged to write a diary in which they minutely detail the events and experiences of their visit.

23. The past is ignored in messianic discourse unless the messianic future is supposed to revive an idealized past.

24. Rabbi Ginzburg is a prominent messianic activist. The quote is taken from his piece in the messianic weekly *Beis Moshiach* (The House of the Messiah), dated March 19, 1999.

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