did The Babe Ruth Story in 1948, but I’ve completely forgotten it. (I have a clearer memory of Babe Comes Home, a silent film, made in 1927, in which Babe Ruth played himself. Anna Q. Nilsson was a laundress who became exasperated with the tobacco-juice stains she had to wash from his uniforms every week. It was contrived that the two of them meet ... and so on.) I’m not planning to remember The Babe, but it’s better than Bendix’s try. Maybe the next Babe film, forty years from now, will be even better.

The screenplay apparently touches just enough facts to keep it from outright fantasy. The Babe was raised in a Catholic “industrial school” in Baltimore, placed there by parents who simply couldn’t discipline him. He played baseball in the school and was scouted by the Baltimore Orioles, who signed him, then sold him to the Boston Red Sox. He went from there to the Yankees, where he quickly became (the worn phrase fits) a living legend. He married twice. (I was in the Yankee Stadium bleachers the day he returned to the team after his second wedding. When he came out to play right field, the salty comments shouted from the stands made him turn around to face us, shake his fist, and mutter some remarks I wish I could have heard.) Much of the rest of the picture seems hokey.

Apart from the embroiderings of his off-field life, a few baseball points might be questioned. His outstanding success as a pitcher for Boston is hardly mentioned. In his five seasons as a pitcher for Boston, he won 87 out of 131 games. The decision to concentrate on his hitting, to take him off the pitching staff and put him in the outfield, was a major matter.

With the Yankees, he is shown only as a home-run hitter. In fact, he was also a terrific fielder. I once saw him throw a practically perfect strike—with one bounce—from deep right field to home plate, to nail a runner coming in from third. And was Miller Huggins, the Yankee manager, really a barking terrier as shown here? The impression given in the press was that he was a quiet, much-loved man.

John Goodman, who was impressive as the manic in Barton Fink, is made up to resemble the Babe closely and gives a good enough hearty performance. Arthur Miller directs adequately. Haskell Wexler, one of the best of cinematographers, who is said to be choosy about what he works on, shot this film—exceptionally. Why he chose to do this run-of-the-mill bio pic is not clear.

The Lubavitchers’ powerful and preposterous messianism.

The Lubavitchers’ powerful and preposterous messianism.

BY ALLAN NADLER

“T”

oday,” writes Edward Hoffman in his piece of propaganda about the Lubavitch movement, which appeared in the very season in which Crown Heights erupted,

Crown Heights is one of the few truly integrated sections of New York City, where black and Jewish homeowners coexist as next-door neighbors, each determined to maintain the safety and viability of their community as a place for families to live peacefully... The Rebbe’s dissolved application of Jewish principles to his contemporary life enabled Crown Heights to remain a thriving Jewish area.

And I am Marie—no, the Chief Rabbi—of Romania. Hoffman’s book is filled with such inanities. Still, it is an unwittingly useful book. Though he has assembled almost no reliable information about the most famous and the most powerful movement in contemporary Orthodoxy Judaism, he has produced a kind of anthology of this sect’s extraordinary delusions about itself.

The Lubavitcher movement is based in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, but its missionaries have reached virtually every town and hamlet in the world in which there are Jews. Hoffman clearly subscribes to the Lubavitchers’ own conceit that they deserve credit for just about all that is good in Jewish life today. Among the many blessings for which he ascribes full credit to the Lubavitcher movement, and to the leadership of its Rebbe or Grand Rabbi, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, are: the Israeli army’s victory in 1967, glasnost and the new freedoms attained by Soviet Jews; the achievements of Israeli leaders such as...
Zalman Shazar; the positive attitudes toward Jews, Judaism, and Israel of Ronald Reagan and George Bush (about the attitudes of the latter Hoffman wrote too soon); and the spiritual survival of Jewry worldwide, from the Americas to North Africa to Australia.

All of these accomplishments pale, however, before Hoffman's "confidence that through the Lubavitchers' devoted spiritual outreach around the globe, the long-awaited redemption will finally come." He shares this eschatological certainty with the Lubavitchers. Indeed, the special fascination of this sect, and its special repulsion, is owed to its transformation of itself in recent decades into the first mass messianic movement within Judaism since the seventeenth century, which saw the disastrous misadventures of Shabbetai Zevi, the false messiah of Timur. The "long-awaited redemption" of the Jews has become Schneersohn's obsession, the principal impetus for the unprecedented and aggressive evangelism of his movement.

Schneersohn's acute messianic expectations dominate every facet of his theology, and they have served as the basis for virtually all of his social and political initiatives. He evokes the immemorial of the apocalypse in every one of his frequent public addresses at the regular religious assemblies known as farbrengen (Yiddish for "get-togethers" with the Rebbe). And the urgent messianic expectation with which he has inflamed his followers has led many Lubavitchers to suspect that Schneersohn is himself the Savior-King of the Jews. Certainly all Lubavitcher Hasidim believe that their Rebbe is, at the very least, "the most likely candidate," as they put it in a typical vulgarization of a traditional notion.

Today the Lubavitchers sponsor highway billboards, produce posters and bumper stickers, and buy full-page ads in The New York Times to announce the imminence of the Jewish apocalypse, using dumb Madison Avenue slogans such as "Mosheh [Messiah]—Be a Part of It!" The unsubtle refrain of their favorite hymn, led by the Rebbe, is: "We want Mosheh now! We don't want to wait." And so, according to a recent news report (I choose one among many):

Some 2,500 women crowded into the Lubavitch movement's headquarters one recent Saturday night, each hoping to personally witness messianic revelation in the form of Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the Lubavitcher rebbe. . . Some had tears running down their cheeks. One murmured "please, please" over and over again, as she beseeched the Messiah to make his presence known. . . We shall go on and on, until there will be a legion of the king.

You will see," said Deborah Gitchel, one of the evening's participants. . . Through the Lubavitch movement's sophisticated satellite network, the event was seen, and in some places replicated, in fifty-seven cities in thirty countries, from Argentina to Kharkov to Tunis.

Needless to say, no revelation came, on that night or any other. The really remarkable fact is that the Rebbe has said nothing and done nothing to dissuade his followers from their preposterous belief in his messianic status. It is an omission that has stunned and angered many quarters of the Jewish world. Not that his followers would wish to be dissuaded: his promotion is their promotion, too, as they become possessed of the certainty that they are the central agents in the realization of the Jews' most cherished dream.

Despite All Odds: The Story of Lubavitch by Edward Hoffman
(Simon and Schuster, 224 pp., $19.95)

Habadd: The Hasidism of R. Shemuel Zalman of Lyady by Roman A. Foxbrunner
(University of Alabama Press, 400 pp., $49.95)

Communicating the Infininte: The Emergence of the Habadd School by Naftoli Loewenthal
(University of Chicago Press, 392 pp., $39.95)

This compulsion messianism colors, and in many ways distorts, the way that they view the world around them. Thus, for example, several days into last summer's black anti-Hasidic rioting in Crown Heights, a spokesman for Lubavitch, Rabbi Samuel Butman, proclaimed that the violence was a sure sign that the final redemption was near. (Al Sharpton would probably not be dissuaded to hear that he is a chieftain in the wars of Gog and Magog.) It was this same apocalyptic vision that was used by Butman to justify Schneersohn's mystifying, total silence in the wake of the violence against his followers ("Kill the Jews" and "Heil Hitler" were the tauts of Brooklyn's mobs in those ugly days). Now, the Rebbe is hardly a quiet, retiring mystic. He is an outspoken and exceptionally political rabbi, whose face is familiar to millions worldwide; during his half century at the helm of his sect, he has issued public pronouncements on virtually every religious, social, and political subject imaginable, from prayer in American schools to the religious meaning of Operation Desert Storm. And yet this powerful leader had absolutely nothing to say about the most serious crisis in the history of his community.

Where leadership, and practical wis-

dom, should have been, there was only more eschatological speculation. It reached its peak in the immediate aftermath of the unrest, when Schneersohn assured his followers that the Prince of Peace would surely arrive before Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. When the New Year passed with still no signs of the Savior, Schneersohn's followers found out that, although he personally had done all that was required of him to bring in the messianic era, there had been a delay on account of the Jewish people's failure to respond to his missives. The Rebbe reassured the faithful that the end would begin to materialize in about a year. Well, two at most.

The Lubavitchers may not "want to wait," but it is important for observers of this peculiar phenomenon to understand that, when it comes to the Messiah, the Jews have traditionally preferred to wait. The hysterical apocalypticism of this sect has absolutely no place in normative Jewish thought and absolutely no precedent in normative Jewish thought. Since Talmudic times, in fact, the rabbis have strongly cautioned against it. Fearing the harmful consequences of eschatological passion, its disruptive impact upon life in the here and the now, which is a sacred and satisfactory theater of meaning for rabbinic Judaism, the Talmudic sages legislated against reckoning the precise time of the redemption, and forbade hastening, or even praying excessively for, its realization. And Maimonides, Judaism's greatest philosopher, insisted that "one must not engage in the study of the messianic legends . . . nor should one regard such legends as central, for they do not contribute to the love or the fear of God. Moreover, one must not speculate regarding the apocalypse, but rather simply wait, and have faith."

Schneersohn's messianism is egregious not merely from the standpoint of messianism, but also from the standpoint of Hasidism. For it has been the very essence of the theology of Hasidism, almost since the movement's inception in the mid-eighteenth century, to neutralize, in Gershom Scholem's phrase, Judaism's hope for a collective messianic redemption, and at times even to replace it with the prescription for a personal mystical salvation. The need for the apocalyptic transformation of the world and the salvation of the entire planet was scanted by those who believed that they could attain a personal state of spiritual felicity even in an unredeemed world.

Hasidism began two centuries ago as a populist movement for spiritual revival among the alienated Jewish peasants of
the remote western Russian regions of Podolia and Volhynia. It was initiated by a circle of kabbalistic enthusiasts centered around the charismatic, anti-rabbinic faith healer and miracle worker Israel ben Eliezer, better known as the Besht—a Hebrew acronym for Baal Shem Tov, or Master of the Divine Name, a title deriving from his mystical capacity to use the permutations of the Hebrew names of God to effect miracles and healings. The Besht surrounded himself with a coterie of mystical enthusiasts, but in subsequent generations the movement spread rather quickly among the untutored masses of the remote Jewish settlements of Eastern Europe, largely due to the inspired and calculating leadership of his most noted disciple, Rabbi Dov Baer, known to Hasidim simply as the Maggid, or preacher, of Mezeritch.

A

student of the Baal Shem Tov and a great charismatic mystic in his own right, the Maggid of Mezeritch carefully nurtured a group of disciples, each of whom he strategically dispatched to various Jewish centers throughout Eastern Europe in order to disseminate the new pietistic and mystical doctrines. Each of these disciples established a distinct Hasidic sect, or court, from which the message of Hasidism was energetically propagated to thousands of disciples in nearby Jewish communities. By the fourth generation of the movement, the leadership of these courts took the form of ecclesiastical dynasties, with Hasidic rebbes most often bestowing their positions of authority to their eldest sons.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman (1745-1813), a young rabbinic scholar from the Belorussian town of Lyady, was one of the most distinguished and creative pupils of the Maggid of Mezeritch. A man of remarkable intellect and unusual erudition in both Talmudic law and Jewish mysticism, he began to attract followers as the rabbi of Lioznia, his small Belorussian birthplace. In 1800, having earned a reputation as both a rabbinic scholar and a mystical master, Shneur Zalman established a Hasidic court in nearby Lyady. Even by the standards of the court of the Maggid of Mezeritch, Shneur Zalman was exceptional, and unusually prolific. His magnum opus, known simply as Tanya (the Aramaic word for “instruction”), which appeared in 1796, was the first systematic exposition of Hasidic thought, and his multi-volume code of Jewish law represented a practical reformulation of the entire body of rabbinical jurisprudence. His energetic and learned dissemination of Hasidic mystical ideals gave rise to a distinct sect within Hasidism known by the Hebrew acronym for the levels of wisdom—HaBaD (for Hokhmah, Binah, and Daat, or germainal, developmental, and conclusive knowledge).

Since the day in 1820 that Shneur Zalman’s son and successor, named Dov Baer after the Maggid of Mezeritch, moved Habad’s headquarters to the small Belorussian town of Lubavitch, the adherents of Hasidism have become known as Lubavitchers. Until the middle of this century, Lubavitch was a relatively small and geographically contained sect, and almost an elitist movement. The Holocaust, in which the largest Hasidic dynasties in Poland were decimated, changed all that. In 1940 the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe escaped to America.

A

t the core of the theology of Hasidism is an absolute faith in the pervasive presence of God in the universe. Rejecting the asceticism and the pessimism that had dominated Jewish mysticism since the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, Hasidism preached a popularized form of the Kabalah that was marked by a metaphorical optimism, which emphasized the immanence of God in the material world and, consequently, the accessibility of holiness to every man. In the words of one of the earliest works of Hasidism, the pseudo-epigraphic “ethical will” of the Baal Shem Tov:

The Scriptural imperative: “Keep the Lord before me always” instructs us constantly to focus on the fact that every created thing stands equally before God ... for everything that exists and all that occurs in the world is of Him.

It was this active optimism, this sense of the immediacy of the divine, that was largely the key to Hasidism’s quick successes among the persecution-weary and impoverished Jewish masses of Eastern Europe. The Jewish communities of western Russia and the Ukraine had experienced a series of terrible persecutions and massacres in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their repeated encounters with brutal anti-Semitism, combined with oppressive economic circumstances and an effete and uncaring rabbinic leadership, created fertile ground for the development of a populist movement for religious revival. (Some historians have compared the spiritual innovations of the Baal Shem Tov to those of his contemporary John Wesley.)

Hasidism’s belief in the immanence of God represented a radical revision of the regnant dualistic school of Jewish mysticism that had been initiated in the Galilean town of Safed by the renowned

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sixteenth-century kabbalistic master Rabbi Isaac Luria. The Lurianic view was predicated upon a cosmic myth according to which God had to "withdraw" before creating the universe, in order to allow for a "space" other than himself. This primordial withdrawal of God left an awful, gaping abyss between the divine realms and the created universe. At the same time, the myth of divine contraction served a useful theological purpose in explaining the existence of evil in God's creation, identifying it with the coarse matter of the physical world that was abandoned to allow space for Creation.

Such a dualistic cosmogony lent itself easily to ascetic expressions of spirituality, in which man was required to transcend the evil, that is, the sensual, temptations of the physical world in order to get closer to its transcendent Source. Lurianic Kabbalah's dualism also issued in a pessimistic interpretation of Jewish history, according to which the chronically oppressive exile of the Jews simply mirrored a higher similar fate, the exile of God from the world. Like the Jews, the divine, too, is dispersed, and can be redeemed only through man's self-imposed exile and withdrawal from the pleasures of this life.

All this was too much for Hasidism. It radically revised Lurianic pessimism and its dualistic view of Creation, as well as its attendant asceticism, by insisting that the primordial withdrawal of God from the world is to be understood epistemologically, not ontologically. That is, God did not actually withdraw from Creation at all. In order to accommodate man's inherent cognitive limitations and render the physical universe sensible to him, God merely had to obscure himself from human apprehension. The early Hasidic theorists conceded that, from the standpoint of man's limited cognitive capacity to apprehend the divine in the created universe, God does indeed appear to be distant from the world. They insisted, however, that he remains, in essence, thoroughly immanent in his own creation. And precisely in this concealment of the divine presence in the world lies Hasidism's great spiritual challenge to man: to overcome, through mystical contemplation, the dichotomy between God's apparent transcendence and his actual immanence.

The contrasts, so emphatically drawn by the medieval theologians, between God and the created world, body and soul, good and evil, the real and the ideal, are all deliberately obscured in Hasidic thought. The medievals' contrast between an imperfect and corruptible material universe and a transcendent, eternally changeless, perfect, and self-sufficient Creator, had no place in Hasidic mysticism. For the Maggid and his disciples, God is down here, not up there; or more precisely, the distinction between down here and up there is no longer interesting. This belief led the Hasidic masters to insist that the temporal, physical world be celebrated, not transcended. Rather than counseling the suppression of sensual pleasure, as did earlier rabbis and mystics, the Hasidic masters insisted that the senses be used in the service of God. According to the scholar Roman A. Foxbrenner (who is himself a Lubavitcher), in his learned but ponderous study of the thought of Shneur Zalman, the essential idea of classical Hasidic theosophy is this:

God's perfection... consists not in eternal, changeless self-contemplation but in a dynamic fulness of being that becomes progressively more perfect and encompasses every imaginable change and diversity. The lush, colorful, variegated and complex world of phenomena and feeling is not an obstacle to be avoided, a test to be passed, a temptation to be suppressed; it is an opportunity to be exploited for [divine] service.

For early Hasidism, the highest ideal of religious practice was the attainment of a mystical state of communion with God, known in Hebrew as Devkuth. What distinguished Devkuth from the ecstatic states of other schools of mysticism was that it was not necessarily a matter of transcendence. Given the immanence of God in nature, one could even achieve a mystical state, according to many Hasidic masters, through engaging in properly directed physical acts, such as eating, drinking, and copulating with one's wife. They preached the joyful worship of the immanent God in and through the physical universe that he pervades.

In the early history of the Hasidic movement, all of its devotees were encouraged by the rebbes to strive for some form of Devkuth: the mysticism of the early movement was democratic. By the third generation, however, the achievement of the exalted state, particularly when attained through sensual indulgences, was viewed as too risky a popular ideal. Devkuth was henceforth to be practiced only by the rebbes themselves, through whose experiences the Hasidim could enjoy a kind of vicarious transport. The unprecedented spiritual power with which this endowed the Hasidic masters gave rise to unique rituals. Among the most widespread of these practices was the rebbe's Sabbath tikh, or table, a public forum at which the master could share his mystical attainments with the masses of his Hasidim; to this day throngs of the faithful gather to focus on their rebbe as he "eats and drinks in holiness" and to compete for his leftovers, through whose consumption they, too, could partake of the master's mystical experiences.

The position of the rebbe, known also as the Zaddik or Righteous One, became increasingly exalted in Hasidic theology, to the point where he became the sole instrument for the spiritual redemption of his disciples. In some Hasidic sects, it was believed that the soul of the rebbe mysteriously included within it the souls of each one of his followers. The perfection of one's soul thus became contingent upon one's attachment and devotion to the rebbe. This adoration is rather an odd thing in Judaism, but the contemporary Lubavitchers have taken it to a new extreme by insisting that Schneersohn's soul encompasses not only its own souls, but also the souls of every Jew alive today. This myth has led his followers to refer to him with such hyperbole as the "Moses of our Age," the "Universal Soul," and the "Prince of the Generation."

While Hasidism's real theological originality consisted in articulating and popularizing a revision of the esoteric doctrines of the Kabbalah, its most well-known innovation was the introduction of a radically new form of rabbinic leadership. The extraordinary authority of the rebbe represented a radical rejection of the traditional rabbinic, whose influence had hitherto always been owed to the charisma of scholarship and not to the charisma of mystical experience. The institution of the Zaddik marked a transformation of the rabbi from a detached and dispassionate scholar into a personal kabbalistic guru. Hasidism's bold challenge to traditional rabbinic authority, and particularly to the traditional prestige of learning, was among the main reasons that it was viewed with such deep suspicion by the Eastern European rabbinic establishment, which warned Jews against mingling or praying together with the Hasidim, and even issued a ban prohibiting "internmarriage" with their sons and daughters. A veritable holy war on Hasidism was declared by the preeminent rabbinic sage of the eighteenth century, Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna (best known as the Gaon, or the genius, of Vilna). And Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the founder of Habad, was among the early preachers singled out for suppression by the enemies of Hasidism. As a consequence of denunciations by the
ing of God, a challenge to man to penetrate it and to perceive the exclusively divine reality beyond.

This denial of ontological reality to the material universe, and this insistence that the sensory world is illusory, has been characterized by scholars of Hasidism as "panentheism" or "acosmism," terms vividly suggestive of the radical character of the doctrine. Certainly there is a paradox in such a theology. It is world affirming and world denying. By insisting on the pervasiveness of God in the universe, Hasidism affirms the importance, even the sanctity, of mundane existence. Yet in finally denying ontological reality to anything but God, Hasidism seeks to get beyond the world.

This dialectic has been a central feature of Habad Hasidism since its inception, and it is masterfully described by the fine Israeli scholar Rachel Elish in her book *The Paradoxical Ascent to God* (which will soon appear in English from SUNY Press). And this "paradoxical ascent" further contributed to classical Lubavitcher Hasidism's virtual indifference to national salvation. The masters of Habad urged their followers instead to pursue the intense contemplation of mystical acosmism, the awareness, through deep reflections of the intimate presence, and finally the exclusive reality, of God. It is no wonder that there is hardly even an oblique reference to Jewish national hopes in early Habad literature. And yet today the Lubavitcher Rebbe speaks of almost nothing except the Messiah, who is on his way.

That is just one of the Lubavitchers' many contradictions. There is also the galling matter of the radical and unremarked-upon shift in Lubavitcher attitudes to Zionism and the significance of the State of Israel. Throughout his book, Hoffman portrays these Hasidim as passionate supporters of Israel. He contrasts their positive attitude to Israel with the anti-Zionism of the Reform movement in modern Judaism: while previous Lubavitcher rebbes were unfailingly enthused with the Jewish return to the Land of Israel, the Reformers were urging their followers to forget about the biblical prophecies of a return to Zion and to adopt the lands of their exile as permanent homes in which to realize their national and spiritual destinies. He deploringly cites the early American Reform leaders' proclamation that "America is our Palestine; Here is our Zion and Jerusalem."

What Hoffman fails to mention is that the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who has never once set foot in the land or the state of Israel, has often made very similar statements. For, regardless of the pro-Israel facade that they now present to their financial supporters in the non-Orthodox Jewish community, the Lubavitchers are not, and have never been, Zionists. Quite the contrary. The two previous Lubavitcher rebbes, Shalom Dov Baer Schneerson (1866-1920) and Joseph Isaac Schneerson (1880-1956), waged war on all forms of Jewish nationalism, religious and secular.

Shalom Dov Baer Schneerson characterized Zionism as a "poison which contaminates and destroys the soul." He assured his followers that because Zionism constituted nothing less than a heretical rebellion against divine providence, it would fail in its efforts to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. (So much for the prophetic powers of the rebbes.) His successor Joseph Isaac Schneerson—the current Rebbe’s father-in-law and predecessor—led the ultra-Orthodox battle against the Zionists both in Russia and in the United States. He insisted that his followers not follow the "evil Zionist heretics," and his customary response to Hasidim who requested his permission to escape the oppressiveness of life in Communist Russia by immigrating to the land of Israel was, in Yiddish, "macht dash Erets Yisrael" ("create your Israel here"), an expression that was invoked by the present Rebbe when he urged his followers not to desert Crown Heights.

Joseph Isaac Schneerson's feelings about the movement to create a Jewish national homeland in Israel were reflected in his frequent condemnations of Zionism, such as this one:

Here [in Brooklyn] we are in exile among the goyim, but over there, in Israel, we are in exile among the Israelis. It is far worse and more difficult to be in exile among those evil Israelis than it is to be among the goyim, because the goyim only keeps the Jewish body in captivity... whereas the evil Israelite wishes to take the Jewish soul captive and to contaminate pure Jewish souls. Many evil Israelis who have gathered together in the land of Israel seek to contaminate not only Jewish souls, but also to defile the Holy Land itself, and to infect the Hebrew language... They usurp the Hebrew language and give Hebrew names to the evil institutions which they have established in which they convert Jewish children to apostasy... Those of us who are here should be thankful that we are not over there in the diaspora of the land of Israel, in which the pious Jews are enslaved to the sinful members of our people. It is clear that before the Messiah arrives, it will be necessary to cleanse Israel from these evildoers, whom God despises.

This pronouncement was made public in New York by Menachem Mendel Schneerson during the celebration of Passover in April 1943. Thankful to be in
exile in 1943. The publication of this testimony to the preferability of Jewish fate in exile chillingly coincided with the single most emblematic moment of that fate: the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw ghetto.

The problem for the Lubavitchers was that the Zionists succeeded. The triumph of Jewish nationalism, and the almost universal Jewish support for Israel, threatened to leave the Lubavitchers out in the cold, and so, their own traditions notwithstanding, they pragmatically changed their tune. This grand rabbi who has never been to Israel and never repudiated his own anti-Zionist theology now presumes to instruct the Jewish state on its proper, indeed its divinely mandated, courses of action. He has become the most influential hawk in the Diaspora. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Rebbe publicly urged the Israelis to capture Damascus; and during Israel's war in Lebanon, he instructed them to take Beirut. He was a noisy critic of the Camp David Accords, and has consistently maintained that Israel must never return so much as one inch of occupied territory under any circumstances.

Schneerson's pronouncements on Israel's foreign affairs are not presented as his personal opinion, they are issued ex cathedra, as infallible expressions of the divine will. Or, as the Lubavitchers in Israel say, they are "Dvur Malshut," Royal Decree.

Those decrees have included the Rebbe's repeated interventions into Israeli domestic legislation, particularly in the controversy over the definition of a Jew under Israel's Law of Return. During the election campaign in Israel in 1990, candidates of the ultra-Orthodox Agudath Israel party, which was endorsed by the Rebbe, handed out annulets with a picture of the Rebbe, promising his personal blessings for anyone who voted for them. Following the elections, the Rebbe even managed to use his influence, all the way from Brooklyn, to undermine the formation of a Labor-led coalition government because of Shimon Peres's opposition to an amendment to the Law of Return that would exclusively recognize the Orthodox definition of Jewish identity. But Schneerson's advocacy of extreme right-wing positions in Israel's affairs has never been accompanied by an acceptance of the Zionist ideology that gave rise to the state.

The inconsistencies and the hypocrisies abound. Consider the unprecedented reach of the Rebbe's teachings. One of the most unexpected consequences of Habad's messianic activism has been Schneerson's recently proclaimed "mission to the gentiles." Appealing to an ancient rabbinic view that the "goyim" are expected to fulfill only the seven commandments, including the prohibitions against murder and idolatry, issued by God to Noah after the flood, the Rebbe recently encouraged his followers to preach these "Noahide Laws" to the world. In preparing for redemption, he argues, it is essential that American society become more religious, and that its citizens, Jews and non-Jews, acquire a more heightened awareness of God's presence. It is for this reason that the Rebbe has energetically supported prayer in American schools, if only in the form of a moment of silence, and has spoken in favor of overturning the current laws regarding abortion. Most controversially, he has encouraged the blurring of the separation of church and state, primarily through a zealous campaign of erecting huge menorahs in public places in major American cities during Hanukkah. The Lubavitchers have even gone to court in a number of states to protect these obvious violations of the principle of separation.

There is a sense in which these efforts at undermining the secular character of American public life are perfectly consistent with classical Habad theology. Hasidism's insistence on the immannence of God in creation, and especially its mystical refusal to acknowledge the reality of a purely physical realm of existence bereft of holiness, abhors a separata. The idea of a polity deliberately conceived as secular, that is, the idea of a polity such as America's, is anathema to the mystic whose theology does not allow for the reality of a profane realm of existence. And yet there are some powerful ironies in Habad's new messianic universalism, in its mission to the gentiles; and surely the most unpleasant of them concerns Habad's otherwise undisguised and even overt contempt for the "goyim." In the normative rabbinic and Jewish philosophical traditions, Israel's choseness was most commonly seen to derive from God's revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. It was the uniqueness of their religion, not of their race, that distinguished Jews from others. Only a very small number of idiosyncratic medieval Jewish theologians—most notably the poet and philosopher Judah Ha-Levi in twelfth-century Spain and the mystic Judah Loew in sixteenth-century Prague—sought to define the Jewish distinction racially rather than spiritually. Yet it was precisely this minority view, according to which there is something innately superior about the Jews, that was rehabilitated in its most extreme form by Shneur Zalman. The founder of Lubavitcher Hasidism taught that there is a difference of essence between the souls of Jews and the souls of gentiles, that only in the Jewish soul does there reside a spark of divine vitality. As for the goyim, here is Foxbuner's characterization of Shneur Zalman's attitude:

Gentile souls are of a completely different and inferior order. They are totally evil, with no redeeming quality whatever. Consequently, references to gentiles in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's teachings are invariably invidious.... Their material abundance derives from supernatural refuge. Indeed, they themselves derive from refuge, which is why they are more numerous than the Jews, as the pieces of chaff outnumber the kernels.... All Jews were innately good, all gentiles innately evil. Jews were the pinnacle of creation and served the Creator, gentiles in nirdar and worshiped the heveni hosts.

Shneur Zalman's racism far exceeded the much more limited religious elitism of the few earlier rabbis who subscribed to the view of superiority, that the gentiles were either innately evil or temporally wicked, the former antithetical to the latter.

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to a racial theory of Jewish choseness. It is virtually without precedent and without parallel in the history of Jewish thought. Moreover, this characterization of gentiles as being inherently evil, as being spiritually as well as biologically inferior to Jews, has not in any way been revised in later Hasidic writing. The obvious incompatibility of this racist view of the gentiles with Habad’s current missionizing to them is something that the Lubavitchers have not even begun to acknowledge or to address. The lenses that their partisan historians deliberately obscure, as they cling to the myth that Habad Hasidism is essentially ahistorical and impervious to change.

There are other significant ways in which today’s Habad Hasidim are extending the spiritual initiatives of the founders. The current Lubavitcher Rebbe has established centers, known as Habad houses, in virtually every place in the world in which there is even a semblance of a Jewish community; his followers can be seen in malls and on street corners in every major American city, and in special vans known as "mitzvah tanks" (they are fond of the military metaphor) and "mitzvah mobiles." These vans distribute their literature and sacred artifacts, which today include photographs of the Rebbe, and preach the good news of the Messiah’s impending arrival. While this activism has reached new extremes during the messianically charged tenure of the current Lubavitcher Rebbe, it is perfectly consistent with a central objective of Habad’s original ideology, namely, the widest possible dissemination of Hasidic mysticism to the untutored Jewish masses.

This goal of nineteenth-century Habad, “to communicate esoteric Hasidic teachings to the broad ranks of the Hasidic fraternity,” is described in lucid detail by Naftali Loewenthal, a British scholar who is a Lubavitcher, in his erudite, if not always perfectly objective, history of ideas. Loewenthal carefully narrates the dialectical process in the intellectual history of Habad by which the esoteric kernel of earlier kabbalistic teachings, once zealously guarded from popular dissemination by an elite circle of initiates, was gradually “translated” into accessible forms by Shneur Zalman, and later by his son Dov Baer, in order to render them “relevant to ever broader echelons of Jewish society.” According to Loewenthal, “the real point of originality of the Habad school” consists precisely in this “ethos of ever-increasing communication of the esoteric.”

Loewenthal is correct in this assessment of the uniqueness of Habad, but he errs in attributing a messianic impetus to Habad’s original popularization of mysticism. This is an apologetic distortion. Loewenthal’s otherwise excellent study is marred by such subtle attempts to justify the unprecedented aspects of the current Rebbe’s ideology by reading them into the theological writings of the founders of Habad. He repeatedly tries to portray the development of this branch of Hasidism as the natural and inevitable product of the religious thought of the original sect established by the Baal Shem Tov.

Thus Loewenthal’s thesis about the messianic element in early Habad Hasidism is based on a single letter attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, in which the founder of Hasidism described a “conversation” he had with the Messiah during a mystical trance. In this conversation, the Messiah informed him that the final redemption is entirely contingent upon the spread of his, that is, the Baal Shem Tov’s, teachings throughout the world. The letter recounts that he was initially pained by the realization that redemption would be a long time coming, but then became ecstatic when he sensed that he could at least instruct a small circle of devotees in mystical techniques so that they, too, could share the eschatological spiritual life that he enjoyed.

It should be plain, however, that this fascinating text can just as plausibly be read as a loss of heart about the messianic era, as an attempt to replace the inertia of messianic expectation with an active and practical formula for personal salvation in an unredeemed world. And there are other problems with Loewenthal’s book. He seriously exaggerates the historical significance, and more generally the sophistication, of Habad. His revisionist reading of an infamous episode in the early history of the movement provides a perfect example.

In 1812, in the midst of Napoleon’s Russian campaign, Shneur Zalman publicly expressed his dread of the French conqueror and prayed for the victory of Alexander I. His rationalization for supporting a furiously anti-Semitic czar over an Emperor who was bringing civil liberties to the Jews of Europe was simple:

If Napoleon wins, the wealth of the Jews will increase and their position will be raised. But their hearts will be estranged from their Father in Heaven. However, if Czar Alexander wins, then although the poverty of the Jews will increase and their position will be lower, their hearts will cleave to and be bonded with their Father in Heaven.

Unbearably uncomfortable with the implications of this episode, Loewenthal insists that, far from being opposed to the Jews’ attainment of civil liberties, Shneur Zalman was simply concerned about the secularization and assimilation that Napoleon would force upon his Jewish subjects. He insists that “R. Shneur Zalman did not want the ghetto: he, together with his son, Dov Ber, sought ‘permanent freedom’ for the Jewish people.” But what is this “permanent freedom” to which the early Lubavitchers aspired? It turns out to consist in the conversion of all Jews to Habad Hasidism.

By the end of his book, all pretense to objectivity gone, Loewenthal tries to show that Habad spirituality offered the true and permanent solution for the “Jewish problem” in eastern Europe. Had it only been adopted by the Jewish masses, he suggests, this campaign for
the mystical awareness of the immanence of God would have been far preferable to the Jewish enlightenment, and to Zionism. And this confidence in the superiority of Habad to all other expressions of Judaism, not to mention other faiths, completely dominates Lubavitch thinking today. It is typically reflected in the statement of a Lubavitch emissary, cited by Hoffman, about the place of Lubavitch in the context of the larger Jewish community:

Lubavitch cannot be slotted in, because it stems from a much higher perspective, and it radiates and generates breadth, depth, and purpose into all of the aforementioned agencies [synagogues, Hebrew schools, and Jewish communal organizations and philanthropies].

All their protestations of tolerance and all their have-a-nice-day evangelical sweetness notwithstanding, there really is no room in the Lubavitch psyche for such notions as religious pluralism and cultural diversity. Just as classical Habad’s monistic mysticism could not tolerate the idea of any realm of existence divorced from holiness, the Lubavitchers today cannot genuinely respect the constitutional foundations of American society or the secular origins of the State of Israel. The Lubavitchers have broken new ground in giving the appearance of an embrace of modernity; they make instant use of new technology, they work the American political system smoothly, they have mastered the black arts of public relations, they will drown you in testimonials (I quote from a press release for the celebration of Schneerson’s recent birthday) “by world-class politicians (e.g., Italian PM Andriotti [sic], Mrs. Margaret Thatcher) actors (e.g., Whoopie [sic] Goldberg, Elliot Gould, Jon Voight), and others concerning the Rebbe’s impact on their own lives” but this appearance is deceptive.

It is not difficult for those who espouse a theology that distinguishes between the exoteric and the esoteric, that both affirms the world and rejects the world, to seem one way but be another way, to participate in the world but for purposes unsaid and entirely their own. The Lubavitchers combine a utilitarian approach to modern institutions with a deep contempt for their values. Their approach to modernity is purely instrumental, and directed solely toward the world’s conversion to their way of thinking. And it is no wonder, if they are convinced that this conversion is the necessary condition for the redemption of all creation.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, upon whom so much of this messianic hope hangs, is 90 years old and ailing. He is childless, and he has not even suggested a successor. When pressed about the future of the dynasty, Lubavitchers simply affirm that “Moshiach is on his way.” Perhaps he is. But if he tarries much longer, the fate of Habad will be as uncertain as the apocalypse. What awaits this movement, and many of its supporters and fellow travelers in the Jewish world, is an experience of eschatological disappointment; and that, as the Jews have learned many times, from the first century to the seventeenth century, is the cruelest and most spiritually crushing experience of all.

The Heart of the Country

By Roy Porter

Customs in Common
by E. P. Thompson
(The New Press, 547 pp., $29.95)

Easily the most charismatic living British historian, and eminent not just as a scholar but as a campaigner for disarmament and civil liberties, E. P. Thompson seems likely to prove an intellectual man of destiny. For if Marxist history survives, as surely it will, as a significant system of social analysis, that survival will owe much to Thompson’s lifelong labors to refashion it as a penetrating instrument of historical inquiry that also wears a human face. Himself a missionary’s son, Thompson has assumed the missionary’s mantle to proselytize for “socialist humanism.”

Ever since his William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (1955), Thompson has battled to establish a humane Marxism against doctrinaire ideologues and bloodless academics alike. His early bête noire was the crass reductionism of economic historians with their slide-rule attitudes to truth and uncritical establishmentarian prejudices. Notably in The Making of the English Working Class (1963), his masterpiece, Thompson combined sympathy, savage indignation, and archival expertise to trounce scholars blind to everything in the Industrial Revolution save technological tinkerings and trade cycles. How could an industrializing movement that shattered the lives of millions of workers be reduced to percentages and graphs? How dared econometricians continue to ignore those workers who once had been exploited by the profit system? It was high time, Thompson insisted, to “rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsoleto’ handloom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condensation of posterity.”

Posternity’s condescensions, however, were not unique to the right. Though a staunch Marxist, Thompson felt driven to target his most piercing polemics against fellow Communists, especially those of the structuralist and scientific persuasion associated with Louis Althusser. The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays (1978) accused such theoreticians of fiddling with barren philosophical models of socioeconomic configurations while disregarding the personal struggles that were the true motors of political change. Pretentious abstractions about class structures only perpetuated the fallacious paradigm of class and superstructure that, by disavowing human agency in the name of economic determinism, had paved the way for Stalin. Althusser, Thompson concluded, was only Stalinism dolled up in chic French fashions. What counted, by contrast, was not class structure, but class formation; and the key to that lay in grasping class consciousness, for “class,” he contended, “is a historical phenomenon” that “happens when some men as a result of common experience ... feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.” One notes, as always, Thompson’s utter avoidance of jargon.

Given the huge acclaim accorded even by its critics to The Making of the English Working Class, Thompson might have been expected to press forward with further studies of the proletariat, examining experiences of class conflict through studies of trade unions, Chartism, and labor politics under the conditions of Victorian industrial capitalism. But he plunged into something altogether more