

## Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

"And his hips will be girded with righteousness and his loins with faith"

A eulogy in memory of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson,  
the Lubavitcher Rebbe

When William Wordsworth, the great English poet, passed away in 1850, another great author wrote that if he had died ten years earlier he would have earned much greater admiration and unconditional respect. For many of us, including those sitting here, there is a sense that if the Lubavitcher Rebbe z"l had died five years ago, before the Messiah issue became so intense – whether he was in fact the Messiah or only "*b'chezkat Messiah*" – it would have been easier for us to feel the depth of the loss wholeheartedly and to relate to it better.

This point, which stirred up harsh criticism in certain circles – to the point of a battle to crush the phenomenon as it involves the Rebbe, the Chabad movement and every element and aspect of it – has definitely cast a shadow in recent years over the way that many people think of both the man and his movement.

This truly was a serious problem. However, in my opinion, this development, terrible as it may be, must not be allowed to overshadow our veneration – in retrospect – of the man and his movement and make us forget their tremendous achievements and the lofty status they attained.

I want to begin from precisely this problematic point. It never occurred to anyone to declare that Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, or the Rav was the Messiah. And did they not have followers? Did they not have a tradition? Were they not part of a long dynasty? They certainly did. It seems to me that at the root of the matter, the concept of Messianism attached itself to the Rebbe because of his image and status – **their positive aspects**. The Rebbe embodied – and in a powerful way – a certain combination in which one who wished to could see the reflection of a reflection of the Messiah King.

What is the fundamental characteristic of the Messiah King? The complete description is found in the book of Isaiah (Ch. 11):

"And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Ishai and a branch shall grow forth out of his roots. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord; and he shall not judge after the sight of

his eyes, nor decide after the hearing of his ears; but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the land; and he shall smite the land with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And his hips will be girded with righteousness and his loins with faith."

This is the heart of the matter. The Messiah King stands one level above all else. A combination of vision and application, of wisdom and understanding on one hand and of the power to rebuke, to judge and "smite the land with the rod of his mouth" on the other hand, as the sages said: a combination of study and deeds.

On one hand we have a figure graced with the Divine Spirit, a spirit which encompasses both intellectual prowess and greatness on their various levels, wisdom and understanding; the personal gifts of perceptivity and courage; the profundity of Heavenly awe, knowledge and the awe of God. This is one aspect - the spiritual strength of this great figure and personality.

On the other hand we see the power to act, to apply all these spiritual powers to lofty purposes. Both on the individual level, in dealing with the poor, and on the social-national level; not just dealing with the poor of the land but with the entire land.

Here we have both "turn aside from evil," judgment and punishment, and "do good," "And his hips will be girded with righteousness and his thighs with faith," the establishment of world structure and society on these two central values which have always guided the Jewish people, two precepts personified in Avraham Avinu. "Pursuers of justice, searchers for the Lord" - that is Avraham Avinu.

This is the man, this is the figure.

Rambam expresses this in brief (Laws of Kings 11:4):

"A King will arise of the House of David, wise in Torah and doer of good deeds like his father David, both the written and oral Law, who will cause all Jews to follow its ways and bolster its precepts, and he will fight the Lord's wars, and that is the proof that he is Messiah."

"Wise in Torah, doer of good deeds, fighter of the Lord's wars, upholder of the Torah and the Jewish people." Not every man, not even the great, is blessed with the skills and the courage to combine these two

elements, both study of Torah and its application; both the Divine Spirit with all it entails and dealing with evil, with the poor, and with the needs of the land itself.

It seems to me that the Rebbe's most unique quality in terms of both his character and his work and stature was this **combination of study and deed**, on the simple applied level, not only in terms of his spiritual influence on those who felt an affinity for him, but for many others as well.

To the best of my knowledge, no one in this generation compares to the Rebbe - or even comes close - in terms of applying his vision, implementing it, building the Chabad "empire" and managing its "kingdom." This practical application was established on the foundations of Judaism and Torah, and was always related to the ability to apply, to act and to mobilize. On the positive side, he had an impressive ability to "bolster the precepts of Torah" by building networks that spread throughout the world and developing various educational systems, big and small, for children and for adults, for men and for women.

The Rebbe's primary quality was concern. Not in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. concern for his own home, movement or *shtibel*, but seeing the big picture. This included the big geographical picture, with a movement with emissaries, men and women, on every continent, as well as the big cultural picture. Not only in the yeshiva world but in the university world; not only in the religious world but in the secular world, in places from which he should have ostensibly kept his distance. What did he have to do with the IDF? It was his concern that brought this about. He cared enough to see things on a historic and national scale. This is also part of Chabad's admirable tradition - concern for the Kingdom of Heaven in general.

On the other hand, he fought "the Lord's wars." The fighting spirit, the willingness to fight, isn't foreign to the Chabad movement. The movement found itself fighting almost from its inception; in both Tsarist Russia and Communist Russia, the bastion of the movement, the movement found itself confronting evil regimes to one degree or another. Here and there a ray of light broke through, such as Alexander II, a more or less tolerable leader. But as a rule there was a sense that the movement and its people were in a constant state of war with a hostile society, at least on the political level. The more active it was, the more the Chabad movement found itself in confrontations. This situation has been very familiar to Chabad for centuries.

For this reason, self-sacrifice has always been deeply engraved in the consciousness and essence of the movement and is part of its greatness - literal self-sacrifice.

A Jew told me that once he was sitting with Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak, the Frierdiker (previous) Rebbe in Communist Russia, when the people present were asked to do something that involved risking their lives. Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak asked who would be willing to risk his life to carry out the mission, and immediately found volunteers. Indeed, altruism to the point of risking one's life is quite common in the Chabad world.

Even in the darkest times in Communist Russia there was a spark of Judaism here and there. There were those who maintained - publicly or secretly, and under the most difficult circumstances - something of the spirit of Torah, of Torah study, of circumcision, of those things of which the Sages say that the Jews were willing to die for. And this was primarily thanks to Chabad. True, there were other individuals in different places, but as an organized movement, Chabad was the one.

To a large degree the greatness of the Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson z"l, was his **willingness to challenge - and with significant success - not only tyrannical regimes and their representatives, but secularism or lack of spirituality** as a spiritual movement.

This too has a precedent in the Chabad world. The Ba'al HaTanya, the Alter Rebbe, realized even in his day the spiritual dangers inherent in the philosophy that Napoleon represented - Western Enlightenment - and openly took the side of Russia, which, although it teemed with anti-Semitism, the danger to the spirit was less than that of the powers arising from the French Revolution. The tradition and heritage of the Russian Orthodox world, the Church and its subsidiaries, was preferable, in his eyes, in terms of spirituality, to the new so-called Enlightenment arising in the West. For this he was persecuted and had to run for his life.

Awareness of the cultural battle has also been part of Chabad since its inception. Nonetheless, in terms of the scope of the battle and the focus on it, under circumstances in which the political problem didn't exist and everything was channeled into the spiritual realm - this was the Rebbe's specialty. His predecessors, when and if they "fought the Lord's wars," fought them on the field of a hostile police force and an anti-Semitic regime. On Eastern Parkway it was a different story. There was no problem with the police or the regime. The problem was with the street, with the culture, and everything they entailed.

The Rabbi was wise enough to understand this and girded his loins for an ongoing struggle to maintain the Torah on one hand and fight the Lord's battles on the other hand.

To a certain degree, he was aided by a factor that, under other circumstances, might seem strange. He had a "kosher l'mehadrin" education. He studied for a while in Berlin and completed his studies at the Sorbonne. In

these world-famous universities he got to know Western culture firsthand. There, perhaps, he acquired the organizational skills that served him so well later on. However, the main point is his recognition of the challenge and his struggle with it.

This willingness to tackle the challenge had a number of elements and sources. **The Rebbe's hallmark was concern.** Not in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. concern for his own home, movement or *shtibel*, but seeing the big picture. This included the big geographical picture, with a movement with emissaries, men and women, on every continent, and the big cultural picture. Not only in the yeshiva world but in the university world; not only in the religious world but in the secular world, in places from which he should have ostensibly kept his distance. What did he have to do with the IDF? It was his concern that brought this about. He cared enough to see things on a historic and national scale. This is also part of Chabad's admirable tradition – concern for the Kingdom of Heaven in general.

I mentioned the Alter Rebbe who spared no efforts in his struggle against Napoleon in the era of Tsarist Russia, recognizing a vital spiritual problem. A struggle between different worlds, between different philosophies, which he as a spiritual leader could not ignore.

One example: anyone who is familiar with the American lifestyle, firsthand or from afar, knows that there are many problems there surrounding the role of religion in the educational and political systems. The Constitution provides for a clear separation between church and state. And who is behind this struggle? Liberal Jews who are afraid that if they allow the smallest vestige of Godliness into the school, who knows what it might lead to... On the altar of separation of church and state, of liberalism, they're willing to sacrifice anything and everything.

The Rebbe fought this tooth and nail. Many others gave up, but he fought for religion and prayer in public school classrooms out of concern, not for the Jewish children but for the gentiles, to encourage Christians to embrace their Christianity. Thus he fought, in a number of contexts, for promoting the Seven Noahide Laws and founded organizations under Chabad's auspices for this purpose. This illustrates his long-sightedness, his willingness to fight, and more than anything, his concern.

The guiding light of the Chabad movement has always been the Alter Rebbe's saying: "A Jew must never give up and one must never give up on a Jew." At the heart of the movement is a note of optimism. A note of faith that sometimes overflows its own banks.

Along with concern, the Rebbe had faith in the success of his struggle. The guiding light of the Chabad movement has always been the Alter Rebbe's

saying: "A Jew must never give up and one must never give up on a Jew." At the heart of the movement is a note of optimism. A note of faith that sometimes overflows its own banks – to the point of the Messianism that we see today. At bottom, the movement believes that efforts yield results. If you will it, it is no dream. Based on this principle projects have been organized, initiatives implemented and networks built throughout the world.

The third principle is **the ability to appreciate partial achievements**, an ability that took on a new scope and importance in his unending fight against secularism. Much of the Torah world is built on a dichotomy: there are religious people and secular people, believers and heretics, us and them. Chabad, too, is aware of this distinction, but along with the recognition, and without blurring the dividing line, Heaven forbid, is the awareness – which we should have as well – of the content and value of partial things.

Sometimes this seems absurd to enlightened people. You take someone who has never – and may never – put on Tefillin, grab him off the street, take him aside for five minutes and tell him, "Come put on Tefillin" as if they had magical powers. You wonder what spiritual significance this has, how is it valuable? Sometimes you even see it as disdain for Tefillin, which are being turned into a magical device. And even if this isn't strictly forbidden or heretical, it is ostensibly – as Rambam said of the Mezuzah – turning the sacred into a magical device.

The Rebbe was very smart. In the '50s the Rebbe insisted on walking from his *Beit Midrash* to his house on President St. unaccompanied. Without his "servants." When I saw him walking alone I approached him and said hello. He asked me, "Where do you study?" "At Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan's yeshiva." Naturally he was a little suspicious. "That's good," he said, "but remember, fear of Heaven comes before wisdom." That certainly was his motto. The Rebbe had significant intellectual prowess and a great, broad knowledge of Torah, but this motto, "fear of Heaven comes before wisdom," guided him throughout the years.

Nonetheless, this action could rekindle the Jewish spark in some people, a *pintl Yid*, which is strongly emphasized in Chabad teachings. A reminder of the family home, if only for a moment. One reconnects with one's tradition and heritage. In many cases this is no chance encounter. One has a shot of *mashke* at the Chabad booth at the airport, or puts on Tefillin next to the Central Bus Station. This is a recognition of the importance of the partial vis-à-vis the Jewish spark. The Rebbe introduced this idea not into our society but into a society where it takes on a much greater significance. In terms of Halachah you can question whether it is a Mitzvah to put Tefillin on the head of someone who doesn't believe in them, but this action takes on a new

significance in other contexts in the form of a certain Jewish identity, a certain affinity, which leads to maintaining a relationship with God. Even if the person eats *traife* and violates Shabbat you're helping him maintain a certain level and preventing him from assimilating completely. Perhaps this will even be sufficient to prevent him from intermarrying.

For most students who come to Chabad Houses in various universities the *halachic* lifestyle has no meaning, but you can talk to them about Jewish identity. The Rebbe was the one who instituted this system, imbuing it with faith, motivation and direction.

These are partial achievements on one hand, but on the other hand, both nationally and personally, they are extremely significant.

As we mentioned, this constant battle was waged both broadly and deeply, both geographically and sociologically. I don't know if the world has known another figure who was so admired by people from completely different ideologies - Zalman Shazar on one hand, Bob Dylan on the other, both of whom ran to the Rebbe's *Beit Midrash*. He had a powerful personality along with an impressive ability to communicate and convey a sense of belonging.

The Rebbe was a profound, powerful, prominent leader. This power was sometimes revealed on a small scale. For many years I lived a few minutes' walk from Eastern Parkway, where the Rebbe's *Beit Midrash* was located. I went there occasionally. Once, on Simchat Torah night, I came to the courtyard at three in the morning. The Rebbe was standing there, "conducting" the congregation. When he wanted them to dance faster he turned his hand, and did the same when he wanted to slow the tempo. Nobody there made a move without the Rebbe's instruction. The sense of power was in the air. This power was also sensed, of course, on the greater scale.

A few decades ago I attended the funeral of the previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak. Then too there was a celebration on the Eastern Parkway; the street was packed with people, but it was but nothing compared to the power that Chabad has today. The same fantastic organizational ability alongside true spirituality, Torah depth and awe of Heaven - the Rebbe espoused all these guiding principles; the same love of Israel that he brought to his movement - all these constituted the foundation for his world.

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knowledge of Torah, but this motto, "fear of Heaven comes before wisdom," guided him throughout the years.

The Rebbe had a great affinity for the land of Israel. This affinity – between him and the land of Israel and that of some of its citizens for him – was, to a certain degree, ambivalent and divided. On one hand, it had a certain universalist side to it. He didn't push for *aliyah*. He managed to infuriate quite a few Jews in Israel when he commented on the verse in Parshat Yitro: "You shall make Me an altar of earth, and you will sacrifice your burnt offerings and peace offerings upon it, your sheep and your cattle; wherever I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you." The Rebbe explained: "Your burnt offerings" – your spiritual ascensions; "and your peace offerings" – this is the wholeness you can achieve, and you can and should fulfill these two things "wherever I cause My name to be mentioned." Some people here were shocked to hear this, but this universalist approach is typical of the Chabad tradition. This is illustrated by a surprising incident: In 1978, when I was in South Africa, I met a rabbi with whom I studied in the US, who became close to Chabad. He told me that the Rebbe instructed the Jews of South Africa to stay there, and promised that no evil would befall them until the coming of the Righteous Redeemer. At the time this seemed to me to be an incredible pretension – how could the Rebbe take on such a weighty responsibility? But who knows, maybe he knew something that others couldn't foresee. I only mention this as an example of his willingness to compromise, and perhaps come to terms with the Jewish presence in the Diaspora.

On the other hand, he had a deep connection and significant involvement in everything that happened here in Israel. An involvement that led him, among other things, to take clear positions on certain issues. The Rebbe led the struggle for greater Israel more than any other religious leader outside of Israel and waged an aggressive battle throughout the years against compromise in this matter. This affinity was also illustrated by his ability to penetrate into many systems that most other Hassidic leaders cannot – or perhaps don't want to. There aren't many Gur or Belz hassidim in the Israeli army, but there are many Chabad hassidim. Here too, once again, is an illustration of Chabad's attitude toward both the individual and the group, and in small things. The custom of coming to the Rebbe, receiving a dollar and moving on, illustrates the affinity for the individual. The connection with Israel and the Rebbe's status in Israel was undermined to a certain degree a few years ago. For decades the Rebbe was careful to maintain an apolitical stance, not identifying with any particular party, but a number of years ago the Rebbe put his weight and reputation behind Agudath Israel, and then began the process we've seen in recent years along with the erosion of his status.

Even those who aren't particularly close to the Chabad movement, even those who have some criticism



against it, must admire and appreciate the greatness of the movement and this illustrious man. Not only that, he should be thankful to them. Even those who don't belong to Chabad have been enriched by the movement and its great leader, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who led the movement for over forty years and did so much for its advancement and the advancement of the values that unite us with the movement.

We must emphasize once again: Despite everything we must not let these things overshadow the Rebbe's greatness on both the personal and general levels. Bearing witness to his greatness is the fact that many people now wonder if they are eulogizing only the man or the entire movement. About ten years ago Rabbi Amital pointed out a well-known phenomenon in the US which isn't often spoken of. There were three leaders there, each a giant in his field: Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the Rav, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. What they all have in common is that they have no successor.

Perhaps in terms of the Chabad movement, in which the Rebbe played a dominant, almost imperial role, this is particularly apparent. This is a testimony not only to his personality and character but to his work and deeds. Even those who aren't particularly close to the Chabad movement, even those who have some criticism against it, must admire and appreciate the greatness of the movement and this illustrious man. Not only that, he should be thankful to them. Even those who don't belong to Chabad have been enriched by the movement and its great leader, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who led the movement for over forty years and did so much for its advancement and the advancement of the values that unite us with the movement. May his memory be blessed!