

Article

Miracles, Media, Mezuzot: Storytelling among Chabad Hasidim

Simon Dein

Academic Department of Psychiatry, University College London, Charles Bell House, 67-73 Riding House St, London W1W 7JE, UK; s.dein@ucl.ac.uk

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Abstract: In 1994 the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, died leaving no successor. His group split into two groups: messianists who maintained that the Rebbe had not died and was *Moshiach*, the Jewish Messiah, and the non messianists who agreed that the Rebbe had died. This paper focuses upon a prominent Chabad practice; the role of storytelling. I propose the question, “Whose interests do these stories serve?” Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Lubavitch, I present a number of narratives pertaining to the Rebbe’s miraculous feats. Following his death, stories surrounding the Lubavitcher Rebbe not only bolster his “charisma” but lead to a sense of his continuing presence. These stories are produced predominantly by the messianic faction of Lubavitch and following his death are published regularly on messianic websites.

Keywords: Rebbe; Lubavitch; narrative; miracle

1. Introduction: Storytelling

Folklorists and anthropologists have a longstanding interest in collecting personal stories, the analysis of which deepens their understanding of culture. Anthropologist Thomas Eriksen [1] underscores the fact that:

In contemporary anthropology, pleas for narrative have almost become a cliché. Our journals regularly bring theoretical discussions about the centrality of narrative, about narrative as a key to understanding life, about the ways in which the great narratives of history mirror the small narratives of personal lives, and so on; but we rarely get on with actually telling stories. Maybe this is general professional affliction. ([1], p. 36)

Storytelling is inevitably a social art involving an audience and a face to face or imagined community. In any cultural group, it is important to examine among and between whom and with what results, intended and unintended, are these stories told? Whose interests do these stories serve? Focusing upon Christianity, Singleton [2] argues for several functions of storytelling. Telling stories reconstructs lived experiences, facilitates engagement in sense making, relates events to other events, sustains religious communities, and reproduces religious culture. They ensure particular interpretations of events and privilege certain cultural meanings while suppressing others. In the act of storytelling, events are given a particular order. Specific meanings and interpretations are privileged. Stories permit events to be interpreted as “miracles”, as Singleton [3] points out in relation to Christian Evangelical healing. Testimonies attest to the veracity of the Christian belief and to the power of the Christian God [4,5]. They allow the narrator to emphasize the plausibility and incontrovertibility of their experience; a well narrated story can convince the audience about God’s reality. Finally, telling stories can strengthen the identity of those who tell and hear them.

Telling stories occurs within particular power structures. Langelier [6] states the following:

Finally personal narrative is a political praxis. At the heart of the matter is the question: whose stories are being heard? But the secondary question is this: is the manner in which these stories are being told fundamentally privileging one form of story over another...which then fundamentally privileges one group over another? At issue: Whose interest does a personal narrative serve? ([6], p. 266)

And later

All personal narratives are seen as ideological because they evolve from a structure of power relations and simultaneously produce, maintain and reproduce that power structure. ([6], p. 267)

In a similar way, Gubrium and Holstein [7] argue for a similar shift from a strictly textual study of stories towards investigating the storying process, or “narrative ethnography” as they call their approach. They distinguish between the story and the storying process, from narratives as separate texts into storytelling and narrative practice within social institutions. These authors assert:

Concern with the production, distribution, and circulation of stories in society requires that we step outside of narrative material and consider questions such as who produces particular kinds of stories, where are they likely to be encountered, what are their consequences, under what circumstances are particular narratives more or less accountable, what interests publicize them, how do they gain popularity, and how are they challenged? [7]

In religious traditions across the world it is commonplace to recount the miraculous feats of religious leaders. The focus of this paper is on storytelling among Lubavitcher Hasidim, particularly those stories related to the miraculous feats of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

2. The Lubavitcher Rebbe

Hasidism is a form of Ultra-Orthodox Judaism which derives from Eastern Europe and was founded by the Baal Shem Tov [8]. What differentiates Hasidism from other forms of Judaism is the Hasidic emphasis on the zaddik. Most Hasidic communities abound with stories of miracles that follow a *yechidus*, a spiritual meeting with a tzadik: infertile women become pregnant, individuals with cancer are cured, wayward children become pious, and businessmen become rich. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, seventh Chabad Rebbe, assumed leadership of the movement in 1950; he is simply known as “the Rebbe”. Born in Nikolaevo, Russia, his followers recount his remarkable abilities from a young age. At the age of two he was already asking the four questions at the Passover Seder. In elementary school he could no longer study with the other children on account of his superior talents. At the age of nine he reputedly saved another child from drowning by jumping into the river and pulling him out. His knowledge of the Torah was held to be exceptional.

During his lifetime, much Lubavitcher discourse centred on the Rebbe, who was seen by his followers as a “miracle maker”. They attributed him with superhuman powers such as the ability to sleep for only two hours a night on a regular basis. His perceived supernormal powers derived from the fact that he was seen as an intermediary between God and mankind, allowing Divine energy to flow into the world. Because of his connection to God, he was held to cause blessings to descend from heaven into the world and bring about miracles. The Lubavitcher saw him as fulfilling all the criteria for being a prophet [9]:

In our generation, we have merited an individual who meets all the criteria set out by Maimonides: The Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe’s character fits the halachic description of a prophet. “Great wisdom, a giant in character...his mind is constantly directed towards Heaven.” The Rebbe shared his prophecy with us on numerous occasions, and his words were fulfilled in every respect. The Rebbe predicted the downfall of communism five years

before it happened. During the Gulf War of 1991, the Rebbe assured the people of Israel that chemical weapons would not be used, and they would remain safe. The Rebbe was also the first and, at times, the only one to warn the Israeli government of the dangers of land concessions to the Arabs. [9]

Many people met the Rebbe personally at a weekly ceremony called “Dollars” at which each person attending would receive a dollar and ask the Rebbe for a blessing. The Rebbe stopped having private yechidus (audience) in 1981 and Dollars started in 1986. Up to 6000 people at a time attended this ceremony where Lubavitchers reported miraculous events resulting from the Rebbe’s blessings—healing of a relative’s sickness, finding a spouse, providing infertile couples with children, or the acquisition of wealth. I have previously reported upon several instances of this in the illness context [10].

At other times followers would regularly write, fax, or email him asking for a blessing in anticipation of “miraculous” changes in their life.

In 1994 the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson, died from a stroke leaving no successor. For many years his followers had maintained that he was *Moshiach*—the Jewish Messiah and would usher in the Redemption. After his death Lubavitch divided into two opposing groups. While some messianists hold that the Rebbe died but is to be resurrected as the messiah, others hold that he is still alive, but concealed. The anti-messianists maintain that the Rebbe could have been Moshiach if God had willed it, but they disagree vehemently that he could come back from the dead [11]. The leadership of Lubavitch no longer maintains that he is the Messiah. Since the Rebbe’s death in 1994, his followers continue to write, fax, or e-mail his tomb for help and advice.

Over the past twenty years, an outpouring of his writing has continued unabated, which persists until the present time. These include over 100 volumes of talks he gave at *farbrengens* (as understood by those who transcribed them at a later time), tens of thousands of his letters published in some thirty volumes, and notebooks found in his private office after his death. The word *Mugeh* means edited. The Rebbe spent countless hours over his life teaching the Torah and speaking with no notes during the week (when it could be recorded) and also on Shabbat and Festivals (when it could not). Men with brilliant memories wrote down every word the Rebbe said after the Shabbat or Festival was over and all of this is now printed. Many of these talks were then “edited” by the Rebbe who added in sources and footnotes. He “edited” only a small percentage of his talks, so there exists edited talks and non-edited talks in print in different publications. His writings are treated as the Torah and as holy works.

For his followers—and for many non-Lubavitchers—these posthumously published volumes continue to spread his teachings of the Torah. Many who read them are moved by the depth of learning and the inspiration they offer. As one Lubavitch rabbi states, “those ideas are very much what drive the movement today, and having access to them is obviously very crucial.”

In recent years, various messianic websites have been developed with the aim of enabling connections with the Rebbe. The websites combine written information with video footage of the Rebbe’s *farbrengens* (joyous gatherings) and audio recordings of his numerous discourses. Some of the websites contain video clips of the Rebbe distributing dollars and sound recordings of his followers singing the *yehi*—a song referring to the fact that he is alive. There are autobiographical accounts of individuals whose lives have been significantly influenced by the Rebbe, emphasizing his miraculous feats pertaining to health, wealth, education, and marriage. Many sites provide “proofs” of the fact that the Rebbe remains alive. Examples of these websites include:

YechiHaMelech.org available on chabloglubavitch.blogspot.com/

Moshiachtv.blogspot.com

www.kingmessiah.com

www.770live.com (referring to the Rebbe’s last abode)

www.moshiach.net (including—Living With Moschiah, described as—A weekly digest about Moschiah for the visually impaired and blind);

www.chabad-uk.com which is compiled in the UK and represents the views of Beis Menachem, a messianic Group based in Stamford Hill, UK.

Recent social science scholarship on Lubavitch has focused on two themes: the resolution of cognitive dissonance following his death and the role of visual culture in rendering the dead Rebbe present. In relation to dissonance [10,12–16] have looked at the rationalisations deployed to allay cognitive dissonance in the wake of the failed prophecy, particularly that of spiritualisation. In relation to visual culture, Shandler [17] has examined the use of visual media in creating a virtual Rebbe. Maya Balakirsky Katz [18] describes the visual culture of Chabad: the vast and complex visual tradition produced, revered, preserved, banned, and destroyed by the Hasidic movement of Chabad. This rich material culture includes the hand-held portrait, the “rebbishe” space, the printer’s mark, and the public menorah.

The focus here is on another prominent Chabad practice—the role of storytelling in keeping the Rebbe “alive” following his death in 1994. Based on 27 years of ethnographic fieldwork in Lubavitch, I present a number of narratives pertaining to the Rebbe’s miraculous feats. Miraculous narratives generally pertain to three contexts: those occurring during the Rebbe’s life, those relating to visits to his gravesite, and those surrounding the use of his religious texts—the *Igros Kodesh*—commonly deployed today as a modern form of bibliomancy. Stories narrated around the Rebbe’s gravesite and displayed online are more often than not produced by the messianists in an endeavor to keep the dead Rebbe “alive”. Similarly, as I shall discuss below, it is the messianists who publish stories on the internet pertaining to the use of the *Igros Kodesh* in an endeavor to “prove” the fact that the Rebbe still lives. These stories are often contested by the non-messianic faction of Lubavitch and as I shall discuss below one website Failed Messiah.com is devoted to disproving the Rebbe’s miraculous abilities and his messianic status.

3. Storytelling in Hasidism

Zeev Gries [19] asserts that hagiography is extremely important for Hasidic research because of its significance for Hasidism as an important tool for educating, fashioning a psychological reality, shaping the Hasidic lifestyle, and constructing a Hasidic collective memory. Storytelling has always been an important aspect of the Hasidic way of life. Most centre around the zaddik or Rebbe—the spiritual leader who acts as an intermediary between God and Man.

While Jews have always told religious stories, it is only Hasidism which has vigorously encouraged storytelling, moving it from the periphery to the centre of Judaism. The stories function on educational, moral, spiritual, theurgical, and other levels. Beyond its role as entertainment, Rebbes praised storytelling as a *mitzvah* and a spiritual practice; they reflected on it deeply and taught about its significance.

Joseph Dan [20] notes that storytelling among Hasidim is a religious act and a ritualistic deed that receives a significant place in the lives of Hasidim. Furthermore, stories contain records of the past and reinforce current traditions. Recounting a story of a personal miraculous encounter with their Rebbe might enhance that person’s prestige by implying that the help received was a reward for good behaviour [21]. Storytelling is an important way of forging a Hasidic identity. Finally, storytelling affirms the Hasidic narrative: the power and righteousness of the Rebbes. I would add for Chabad that recounting stories of the Rebbe literally keeps him alive—not only do his followers still receive responses from him but telling the story is held to cause the same miracles to occur as when he was alive. They contribute to a sense of his continuing worldly presence.

Not only did rebbes often tell stories, but they also instructed their Hasidim to do likewise. So telling and listening to tales became popular as never before and were enthusiastically embraced by masses of Hasidim. Stories can conjure up living images of the phenomena they describe; Hasidic teaching explains that one must tell a story so it becomes alive during the telling, and the listener must also conjure up a living picture and visualize himself in the action. We may identify two functions of Hasidic storytelling. The first implies mythical functions that intend to establish contexts and

traditions notably with the act of storytelling; while the second implies magical purposes that view storytelling as having a mighty and even messianic power.

There has been much debate amongst historians as to the exact importance of storytelling amongst Hasidim. Martin Buber (1878–1965), a major writer on Hasidism, emphasized that storytelling was the essence of Hasidism. This has been much criticized by Gershom Sholem, a Jewish historian (1897–1982), who in turn asserts that Buber places too much emphasis on this activity and that Hasidism cannot purely be understood by its storytelling.

There are two kinds of Hasidic stories. The first is recounted by the Zaddik himself in the form of a parable or the form of an apparently trivial account of mundane affairs but containing supernal profundities. The second kind of story is a hagiographical narrative. These describe the saintly conduct of the Zaddik. For Hasidim, the telling of the story is a religious act which is as important as the observance of the commandments, the study of Torah, or prayer. To narrate such a story was considered to be a highly religious duty; in fact, the word for story is *Ma'aseh*, the term deployed in *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (the account of the heavenly chariot seen by the prophet Ezekiel). To relate the deeds of the Zaddik is held to be akin to studying the deepest Kabbalistic mysteries with the same effect produced, i.e., the reunification of the divine sparks, bringing order to disorder.

However, the more extreme view quoted by several eminent Hasidim is that the telling of the story influences the “root of the miracles”, bringing about the occurrence of the original miracle. The repetition of a certain sacred text may cause the reiteration of the primordial event in the present by virtue of the power inherent in the letters that constitute the story. In the Hasidic text *Darkhei Zedek*, the remedy is obtained by the study of stories on medical miracles in the Talmud, and Rabbi Hayim of Chernovitz even recommends reciting the miracles performed by God according to the Bible whenever someone requires a miracle. The recounting of the story can transcend time, returning to the primordial miracle. Some hold that when a zaddik dies he is transformed into a divine name. The very repetition of the zaddik's name causes the descent of spirituality into the world and can cause healing to occur. In fact, according to the Maggid of Zlotchov, even mentioning the name of a sick person together with the Hebrew word *Refuah* (meaning healing) can result in healing.

According to one well known Talmudic story:

When the Baal Shem Tov had a difficult task behind him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer. What he had set out to do was done. When in the next generation the magid of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say, “we can no longer light the fire but we can still speak the prayers”—what he wanted done became reality. A generation later Rebbe Moses of Sassov had to perform the same task. He went to the woods and said “we can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations which belong to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs and that must be sufficient”—and sufficient it was. But when another generation has passed, the Rebbe was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said, “we cannot light the fire, we cannot say the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done”. The story he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three. [22]

It is held that telling stories of former miracles can cause similar miracles to occur. Thus, a sick person can be healed by a tale of a miraculous cure, which acts as a prayer:

A Hasidic story tells that once, to save the life of a sick boy, the Baal Shem Tov went into the forest, attached a candle to a tree and performed other mystical actions and meditations, and he saved the boy, with the help of God. After the Baal Shem Tov's passing, there was a similar matter with his disciple and successor, the Maggid of Mezritch. He said, “I don't know the mystical meditations the Baal Shem Tov used, but I'll simply act, and God will help.” So he lit the candle in the forest and performed the other mystical actions, and his deeds were acceptable on high and had the desired effect. In the next generation, there was

a similar matter with Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch. He said, “I don’t even know how to do what is necessary, but I’ll just tell the story of what the Baal Shem Tov did, and God will help.” And so it was, with God’s help. [23]

There are many stories surrounding the various Chabad Rebbes. They are enthusiastically recounted at the various Chabad gatherings taking place on the Sabbath, Jewish festivals, Chabad festivals, birthdays, or any other deserving functions. As Ehrlich [24] notes, hyperbole is not an uncommon characteristic of telling stories on these occasions. Acts of recounting aspects of the lives of the various *zaddikim* are considered virtuous and Lubavitchers are encouraged to narrate their personal encounters with the Rebbe. Often the stories contain unusual circumstances surrounding the birth and childhood of the leader, hence contributing to his development and legitimacy in the eyes of his followers. For instance, Ehrlich states that as a child, Menachem Schneerson calculated that there should be an eclipse of the sun within a short period of time. He was laughed at and mocked until eventually the earth darkened in the eclipse. He was subsequently regarded by his peers with awe. Storytelling may also have a political agenda. As Ehrlich notes, not only did Schneerson’s storytelling increase his popularity among his followers but he also acted in such a way as to inspire them to recount stories about him. He told many stories about previous Rebbes, hence reinforcing impressions of his relationship with the previous Rebbe, and rendering him a suitable candidate as a successor.

Finally, while there have been many collections of Hasidic tales translated into English, Nigal [25] *The Hasidic Tale* is the first scholarly study of Hasidic storytelling, its history, its place in Hasidic society, and its importance for understanding the theology and sociology of Hasidism. The book begins with a bio-bibliographical study of the major authors who collected and published the *Hasidic Tales*. The second part of the book, constituting the bulk of the work, collects and analyzes Hasidic stories thematically. A number of diverse topics are examined, such as the Hasidic tale as seen internally by the Hasidic movement, the *zaddik*, and his relation to his followers and his opponents. Another major theme is areas of life that the *zaddik* was believed to have the power to control, such as health, children, and livelihood. The magical and supernatural worlds are also the domain of the *zaddik*, and stories about the *zaddik’s* powers in this realm are also analyzed.

4. Ethnographic Fieldwork, Narrative, and Miracle

How do contemporary Lubavitchers themselves see storytelling? I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork among Chabad communities in Stamford Hill (UK) from 1989–2016. I lived with a Lubavitch family and attended Lubavitch teaching sessions, Jewish festivals, and Lubavitch celebrations. I attended a number of Tanya sessions and read the texts and discussed various interpretations with them. I also read numerous books describing the Rebbe’s life and various magazines published by Chabad describing the Rebbe’s miraculous feats. I visited Crown Heights (Brooklyn, NY, USA) on three occasions, each for a period of one month in 1993, 1995, and 2013 which allowed me to obtain a diachronic view of messianic beliefs.

The purpose of my interviews was to elicit stories pertaining to the role of the Rebbe in illness—to ask about specific instances of illness and also to understand the role of storytelling in Lubavitch generally. I never went “fully native” and did not dress in Hasidic garb. To this extent I believed that I was still treated as an “outsider”, but there was continuous pressure for me to become an “insider”. While my informants were aware of my anthropological background, much of the time they attempted to convince me to join the movement and were somewhat saddened by my refusal to do so. On a one to one basis, I felt that individuals who recounted miraculous feats about the Rebbe had a vested interest in “converting” me. I am a secular Jew and it would have been meritorious for them to bring me into the Orthodoxy.

Most Lubavitchers interviewed mentioned the fact that stories still connect them to the Rebbe.

One Rabbi stated:

Hearing stories of the Rebbe is a tool through which we connect to him. And being connected to the Rebbe can bring the listener to have more faith in God, and that itself can lead to great things. [26]

Moshe Fallowstein, a 20-year old yeshiva student from Brooklyn who now lives in Stamford Hill, recounted how he thought that stories had an important place in the Hasidic way of life.

Stories tell people just how important the Rebbe is. If something is precious, wouldn't you like to tell people about it? Of course you would. As to whether they have any religious effect, I don't know but they are good deeds. When you sing about a particular person or talk about a person who is dead, you can actually bring down the soul of that person, with significant effect. Also telling a story prevents idleness. You are meant to read the Torah all the time. [27]

Another recounting is by Miriam Schneider, a seventy-year old woman who joined Lubavitch at the age of twenty. She is an academic who has taught history throughout her life. Married with nine children she stated:

While I cannot speak for other Lubavitchers, I feel stories about the Rebbe are inspirational and increase faith. They are generally more interesting to engage in than reading matters of Halacha, mysticism, Hasidus and history. [28]

Rabbi Adler, a rabbi in North London, recounted the following:

Telling a story about the Rebbe can inspire a person to perform mitzvot. This can bring about divine energy and cause a miracle to occur. God provides this miracle. It is taught in the Talmud that you should review your Divine service. If you do this one hundred times this is good but if you go over the top and review it one hundred and one times this can cause a miracle to occur. [29]

Thus, storytelling connects Lubavitchers with the Rebbe, and is held to enhance spirituality and faith, bring Godliness into the world, and can result in miracles.

During my ethnographic study I was not aware of any difference in attitudes towards storytelling between men and women. Nor did there exist any difference in the propensity of either males or females to recount these stories.

5. The Rebbe's Miracles

Stories relating to the Lubavitcher Rebbe are legion and many have been published. They often emphasise Divine omnipresence, contemplation of Divine immanence, and Torah knowledge. Two anthologies written before the Rebbe's death, *To Know and to Care* and *Wonders and Miracles*, comprise stories of the Rebbe's life. *To Know and to Care* describes how the Rebbe is:

Looked up to by hundreds of thousands of Jews and non-Jews throughout the entire world, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, radiated energy, sensitivity, leadership, and purpose. Demanding much from his followers and even more from himself he showed deep insight into people's present needs and a breadth of vision for their future. This anthology of stories paints a varied picture of the Rebbe's selfless values, his creative initiative, and his thrust towards outreach. It shows how people the world over have been able to enhance their lives through developing a relationship with him. [30]

The book *Wonders and Miracles* describes the Rebbe's paranormal feats. The book's cover shows the Rebbe, within an ark, against the background of the Western Wall of the temple. Just as the ark where the Torah scrolls are kept is the meeting place of Heaven and Earth, so the Rebbe, within the ark, is a cosmic nexus. The cover reveals the dual nature of the Rebbe, both human and divine, and

suggests that addressing him will assure the delivery of miracles. The Rebbe himself emphasized the holiness of the holy tale. Simply recalling the previous performance of a good deed is sufficient to revive the salvational effect of the deed itself, now forgotten ([31], pp. 188–89).

Prior to his death, his followers would petition the Rebbe about life predicaments by writing directly to “770”. He often responded by giving them a blessing and advised them to fulfil the mitzvot. He frequently told them to check their *tefillin* (phylacteries) or *mezuzot*—a metal casing placed at the right hand doorposts of every room containing a parchment with Hebrew prayers written on them. Typically, they would find some aberration in the writing on the parchment which reflected some disorder in their physical body. The sickness narratives are distinctive. The narratives have a similar formal structure: predicament, appeal to the Rebbe, the Rebbe’s response, and a resolution of the predicament which at times was seen by Lubavitchers as miraculous. Importantly these miraculous healing narratives are not just individual stories, but rather are a recognized genre and are also a shared type of community story that individuals draw upon to express and resolve their predicaments. Rarely did I hear narratives where an appeal to the Rebbe had been unsuccessful. In fact, a few informants articulated the fact that to doubt the Rebbe could actually bring on bad luck. I present a selection of narratives. These examples indicate the close relation between the religious text and the body, between the spiritual and the physical worlds. One such typical story:

Mr Cohen, a 60-year old member of Lubavitch, developed angina due to a blockage of his coronary arteries. Distressed by the pain which was not alleviated by medication, he wrote to the Lubavitch Rebbe. The Rebbe told him on three occasions to check his mezuzot. Finally, after sending the parchment to a scribe, it was found that the Hebrew word *lev* (heart) was scratched. Once the parchment was replaced his heart pain disappeared. Mr Cohen attributed his improvement in health to a close relationship between the Hebrew word *lev* (heart) and the physical heart. This story reinforces the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds. The Rebbe’s power is demonstrated by the fact it was only he who could heal, doctors and medicine failed to alleviate the problem¹.

In a second instance [32] in 5745 (1985), Chaya-Rivka Hoenig, the oldest daughter of Rabbi Yitzchak-Dovid Grossman, the famous chief Rabbi of Migdal HaEmek in northern Israel, was 16 and a half years old.

One Friday, when she returned home for Shabbat from Beit Chana High School in Tsfat, her parents noticed that her right eye was swollen. She told them it was also painful.

The parents consulted numerous doctors only to receive diverse and often conflicting opinions. One proposed that the root of the problem was a malfunction in the eye itself. Another thought it to be a form of skin disease, while a third claimed it must be the result of an allergy. All concurred that the damage was very serious and that she would probably lose all vision in that eye.

Failing to improve and after significant deterioration in her eyesight the family visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe following a recommendation from a famous eye surgeon the family had consulted. As soon as he arrived at “770” he caught his first glimpse of the Rebbe and shouted: “Rebbe!” he cried out with great emotion. He gestured with his hand. “Here is my daughter. The one I wrote to you about with the eye problem. She very much needs the Rebbe’s blessing for a complete healing.”

¹ Since the Enlightenment, few would maintain an intrinsic link between words and objects and between texts and the body. This link constituted part of the worldview of Renaissance magicians such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico Della Miranda, Paracelsus, and John Dee, who emphasized the aphorism “as above so below” and the essential unity of the spiritual and material worlds. Foucault asserted in *The Order of Things* for a shift in 17th-century Europe from the concept of resemblance, wherein words and objects were one (the “doctrine of signatures,” where names had a natural affinity to the things they labeled), to one of representation, in which language related to the world in an arbitrary way.

The Rebbe already knew about the eye problem of Chaya-Rivka Grossman. He had received by mail several reports and requests for a blessing over the course of the year. He looked over to where she was standing and briefly glanced at her damaged eye. In less than a second he turned to Rabbi Grossman and said, "Immediately do a mezuzah check, and may she have an immediate complete recovery. And may you merit to raise her to a life of Torah, Jewish marriage and good deeds."

Rabbi Grossman called out "Amen v' Amen!" and ran to the nearest public telephone as soon as the Rebbe passed from sight. He told his wife what the Rebbe had said and asked her to summon right away the expert *sofer* (scribe) whom they always used, and he should minutely examine all the mezuzot in the house. Rabbi Grossman returned to "770" to pray in the Rebbe's minyan. At the same time, his wife contacted the *sofer* and explained to him the urgency of an immediate visit.

It did not take long to discover the problem. An entire word was blotted out from one of the mezuzot! Which word? "Ainecha"-"your eyes," in the verse, "and they [the words in the head-tefillin] should be for an ornament between your eyes (Deut. 6:8, 11:18)." The scribe immediately replaced the defective mezuzah with a high-quality one that he had brought with him, just in case.

The young girl made a sudden recovery; the pain slowly disappeared and the vision gradually returned to normal. [32]

This is a typical healing account. Events unfold to deny any possibility of healing apart from divine interventions. The girl only made a complete recovery after her family consulted the Rebbe. Doctors were unable to help her. Interestingly, the Rebbe was recommended through an eye surgeon. Healing is articulated as a consequence of faith and belief. Healing is more than making someone better; it has supernatural connotations and strengthens faith in the Rebbe. Only a miracle could make the girl well.

Another account published in *Wonders and Miracles*:

A resident of New York Boro Park, who regularly attended the local tanya (the basic text of the Lubavitch, the teachings of their first Rebbe) class, wrote to the Rebbe about the slow development of his ten-year-old daughter: She spoke at the level of a four-year-old. He wrote to the Rebbe many times, but received no answer.

Finally, he decided to travel to the Rebbe's headquarters "770" (Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn) to personally speak to the Rebbe. In the secretaries' office, he pressured them for a response to his letters. The secretaries assured him that there was no reason to exert pressure. "Every letter that arrives is given to the Rebbe. Only he decides when and how to respond."

"If so", said the man, "tell the Rebbe that I am not leaving this room until I receive his blessing for our daughter". Sitting himself down, the man proceeded to write a new letter. He described the conditions in his house, and added that if his daughter recovered, it would bring great light and joy to his home.

"After (the afternoon prayers), Rabbi Leibel Groner (the Habad chief-of-staff) approached the man." The Rebbe asked me to ask you, "What about the mezuzos?"

The man raced home to check his mezuzos.

"What's going on here?" The man asked himself, after finding that all his mezuzos were 100% kosher. Not sure of what to do next, he set out again for "770".

The secretary brought another note from the man to the Rebbe. Again the Rebbe asked, “What about the mezuzos?” The man thought he was going crazy. He went home again to check his mezuzos.

“All your mezuzos are kosher”, the (scribe) reassured him.

He returned to the Rebbe’s secretary and asked that the Rebbe be informed that all his mezuzos were kosher and that he did not understand what was expected of him. When the secretary came out of the room, he told the man, “The Rebbe asks, ‘What about the mezuzah that is missing?’”

The man was shocked. It had never occurred to him that this was what the Rebbe had in mind. He definitely remembered that there was a mezuzah in every doorway of his home.

Taking no chances, the man checked every doorway in his house. At the end of his inspection, at the last doorway, he almost fainted. He suddenly remembered: “the storeroom...where all the children’s toys are kept. There is no mezuzah there.” He ran to the scribe, purchased a new mezuzah and affixed it to the doorpost. Then he sat down and awaited a miracle.

From that day on his daughter showed signs of improvement. A few weeks later, she began to talk like a normal ten-year-old.

“I don’t understand”, the man concluded. “I lived in this house for twenty years and never paid any attention to that door, but the Rebbe of Lubavitch, who never visited my home, knew what was in every corner.” ([31], pp. 48, 49)

Again this story illustrates the fact the healing could only take place through the Rebbe. Doctors are never mentioned. Even though the Rebbe had not responded, he appeared to know that the girl had a problem. Even though the father thought there was no problem with the mezuzot, the Rebbe was still able to recognize that there was a problem while never having visited the house, thus demonstrating his superhuman powers. The healing reputedly enhanced the father’s religious practice.

6. Miracles at the Ohel

Following the Rebbe’s death, the miracle stories continued. But how do his followers communicate with the dead Rebbe? Many Lubavitchers continue to email or fax his gravesite—the Ohel, in Queens, New York—whereby his secretary reads out the request. During the Rebbe’s lifetime, he would frequent the resting place of his father-in-law, the sixth Rebbe (Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson) two, three, four, sometimes even six times a week, bringing his followers’ troubles and prayer-requests to the holy resting place. The Rebbe answered hundreds of thousands of people by writing (in Hebrew), “I will mention [your request] at the tziyon.” He would painstakingly read every single one of the thousands of notes, then tear and leave them at the grave, perhaps as a physical memento of the supplicant.

Like other tombs of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim saints, the Ohel attracts tens of thousands of visitors a year, who often travel long distances to “commune” with Rabbi Schneerson and it has become a major pilgrimage site for Lubavitchers and non-Lubavitchers alike. His followers maintain that he is even more powerful following his physical death without the limitations of his physical body.

His grave is carpeted with *Kvitlim* (petitions) over a foot high. At the Ohel, visitors have a tradition of writing *kvitlach*—prayers on small pieces of paper—which are then torn up and tossed onto the graves. In the visitor’s center, a fax machine receives over 700 faxes a day, while a computer receives 400 e-mails daily. These *kvitlach* are all printed and then taken to the graves, where they are torn into shreds and placed atop the graves. Some assert that they have received “miraculous” responses.

One such instance is described below:

Mordechai travelled from the United Kingdom to visit the Rebbe's tomb. Born into a Lubavitch family in Stamford Hill, London, Mordechai had spent many years teaching in a Jewish Boy's school. Married with nine children, his mother was seriously ill with bone cancer. When visiting the Ohel, he petitioned the Rebbe to provide a cure for her and give her the ability to get through her chemotherapy. During my interview with him several months after he had returned to Britain, he recounted that his mother had gone into remission and was functioning well. He impressed upon me the fact that despite his "apparent death", the Rebbe is still very active in the world.

Mordechai was a messianist maintaining that the Rebbe was not only the Messiah but that he had never died. Again, he stressed the fact that the Rebbe had intervened in his mother's healing. Unlike the other stories cited above, he did acknowledge that chemotherapy had in fact helped his mother.

Started in 1997, *shmais.com* brings news to the Lubavitcher communities across the world and regularly includes a section, "*Living with Moshiach*", which discusses the messianic times and the imminent arrival of Moshiach. This instance relates to infertility [33]:

As Shluchim near two very large convention centers, we often have the privilege of hosting guests from all over the world for Shabbos. That is how we met Reuven (not his real name), a doctor from Long Island.

At the Shabbos table, Reuven told us that he is originally from Chile. When I asked him if he was connected with Chabad there, he replied, "I began learning about my Yiddishkeit from Chabad. Then I left Chabad. Recently, I became closer to Chabad again, because of a miracle from the Rebbe." Of course, we were all ears.

My wife and I had two beautiful children, and we wanted more. We waited and prayed, to no avail. After nine or so years, we visited the best doctor in this field, who told us to be happy with the children we have, as there was no way we would have any more.

I go to work in Manhattan every morning by train. One day, I decided to take my car. On my way home, I encountered a heavy rain. Not being well-acquainted with the route, and with limited vision, I lost my sense of direction. I drove around in circles and could not find my way. Eventually, I recognized a street name—Francis Lewis Boulevard. I believed this street would lead me to my neighborhood, so I continued on it until I came to a dead end. I had to go right or left. I had no idea which way to go.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I noticed a chossid standing on the corner. I rolled down my window and asked him if he knew where I could get the highway to Long Island. He didn't, but said, "There's a Chabad House here. Why don't you inquire inside?" I got out in the cold rain and knocked on the door of the Chabad House. In response to my request for directions, the chossid inside handed me a slip of paper. Back in my car, I looked at the paper and noticed that it had directions listed to all the different highways. What Chabad House is so organized, I wondered, with directions prepared to all the highways? And then I saw the word—Ohel.

Oh, this is the Ohel! I had never visited the Ohel, and never intended to visit to the Ohel. But there I was on a cold and rainy night, sitting in my car near the Ohel. If Hashem brought me here, I thought to myself, maybe I should go in. I got back out of my car, knocked on the door again, and asked about the procedures of davening at the Ohel. The chossid explained what to do. I went out into the rain and stood at the Ohel for quite a while, all alone in the quiet of the night, and I davened to Hashem in this very holy place, the resting place of a great tzadik, for everything I could think of.

Six months later my wife was pregnant, and on Erev Shevuos, 5770, we were blessed with a baby boy. We felt that Dovid would be the perfect name for a Shevuos baby, and we also

felt blessed with this wonderful brachah, so we named our son Dovid Boruch. We were very grateful and happy beyond words.

Gimmel Tammuz approached, and we were encouraged to return to the Ohel to thank the Rebbe for interceding for us with Hashem, who gave us the wonderful blessing of our son. My wife waited in the long line and prepared the Tehillim (Psalms) she would read, knowing she would not have much time in the Ohel. Soon after she entered the Ohel, she was immersed in her prayers when suddenly the pages in her Tehillim blew and left her looking at a different kapitel. She was looking at chapter 144, and the words that now stared her in the face were “L’Dovid Boruch.” There was no doubt in her mind that the Rebbe had received her message of gratitude!

“If I hadn’t experienced all this first-hand,” Reuven concluded, “I would not believe it!”

Reuven is now a frequent visitor to the Ohel. He is learning Tanya along with his other Torah studies, and he feels that miracles like this should be publicized. [33]

In this instance, a woman was infertile for nine years having visited the best doctors available. It was only when opportunistically her husband visited the Ohel and prayed over (to?) the deceased Rebbe that she became pregnant. There is no information provided as to the medical causes of this infertility and in this story doctors are dismissed in one line, only to prioritize the miraculous feats of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

7. Stories Pertaining to the Rebbe’s Igros Kodesh

I now discuss the use of the Rebbe’s voluminous texts, particularly his *Igros Kodesh*, to solicit advice from him. The *Igros Kodesh* is a compendium of the correspondence and responses of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. It is modeled on the *Igros Kodesh Maharayatz* of his immediate predecessor. It comprises many realms of discussion including philosophy (Talmudic, Halachic, Hasidic, mystical, or other), scientific matters, global events, counsel in private issues, schooling, and social/communal proceedings. There are now 25 volumes of the Rebbe’s published letters in Hebrew and Yiddish, and many volumes of English letters. While statistics are unavailable detailing the use of this text by Lubavitchers, several members of the London community asserted that it was widely deployed both by messianic and non-messianic Lubavitchers.

For many years Lubavitchers have deployed the physical text to communicate with the Rebbe, to solicit both his blessings and his answers to their requests². This is based on a long historical legacy. When Hasidim in Russia were out of immediate contact with the Rebbe, they would insert their letters in a Tanya; after the Frierdiker Rebbe (sixth Rebbe) passed away, the “current” Rebbe wrote in his “general letter to Hasidim” that whoever could not make it to the *tziyon* (grave) on the day of the *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of death) should put the letter in one of the Frierdiker Rebbe’s *seforim* (books), and then send it off to the Ohel (structure built over his resting place). In a *Sicha* (talk) of the Rebbe in 5749 (1988/89) the Rebbe mentions a *minhag* (custom) of many Yidden including both Gedolei Yisroel, simple people, and even women that before making certain decisions they would open a *sefer kadosh*

² Bibliomancy involves the use of books in divination. There are many examples from Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Perhaps best known is the conversion experience of St Augustine. In relation to Judaism, Leviticus 19:26 forbids divination. The purpose of divination is to predict the future in order to enable one to choose the most effective course of action in the present. The Torah forbids this because we are supposed to lead our lives according to its laws, and not according to any notions we may have of what might prove advantageous. In the “gray area” of life, i.e., those issues about which there is no explicit directive from the Torah and regarding which someone might be in doubt regarding what to do (for example, what career to pursue, whom to marry, etc.) it is permissible—and even advisable—to attempt to ascertain God’s will through means that He himself has provided: as the Torah here describes, we are allowed to consult bona fide prophets for this purpose, and ever since the close of the era of prophecy, the inspired insight of reputable sages of the Torah has taken their place (Tanya, Igeret Hakodesh [34]).

(holy book) and look at the place where the sefer randomly opened to and make a decision based on what is written there. [35]

Typically in this practice, questions are randomly inserted into a volume of the *Igros Kodesh* and a response is obtained by opening the page at which it is inserted. For example, when writing a letter about health, the page where the letter is inserted, which they open to, relates to health. Or when asking for a blessing for matters pertaining to marriage, one often receives a blessing or advice on this exact subject. It is the messianists who have typically deployed this method of communication and have displayed “success” stories on their websites. One such story is described below.

As told by shliach to Tzfas, Rabbi Yitzchok Lifsh, at a farbrengen in 770:

A week ago, on a Sunday night, I was standing near the bima where the Rebbe farbrengs when a bachur approached me and said that two Israeli girls were standing near the subway station opposite 770 and were asking to speak to a rav urgently. I looked around and when I didn't see any rav mora hora'a I decided to see whether I could help them.

I met the girls who were standing and crying and could barely speak. As they blubbered their way through the details, I could make out a very bizarre story. According to what they told me, their father, who lived in Manhattan, had suddenly decided that evil spirits and witches were chasing after him and wanting to harm him. As a result, he was staying indoors and barely ate, and his condition deteriorated daily.

“We are afraid that he'll commit suicide,” they concluded sadly.

I was shaken by their story, and suggested they write to the Rebbe and put the letter in a volume of *Igros Kodesh*. At first, they refused, saying that any minute their father could harm himself and they wanted me to accompany them to see him as soon as possible.

“Maybe it's too late already,” they said in a new torrent of tears.

Only after I explained how amazing it is to write to the Rebbe did they finally agree. They went up to the ezras nashim and spent a long time writing their story. I went into 770 and brought them volume 16 of the *Igros Kodesh*.

When they had finished writing, they put their letter into the volume at a random spot. Then they opened it to page 164. You have to see it to believe it:

“In response to your letter of 15 Kislev in which you write the main points of what you have experienced, and what you attribute and mention witches and magic etc. You should put this completely out of your mind, and strengthen your trust in Hashem, who supervises every single person with divine providence, but you need to check your tefillin and the mezuzos of your home, and on every weekday before davening in the morning, you should give some coins to tzedakah. And after the morning davening, also on Shabbos and Yom Tov, you should say the monthly portion of Tehillim as it is divided over the days of the month.”

That is just the first paragraph of the letter. [36]

While the contents of the story cannot be confirmed, in this instance the Rebbe's response appeared to confirm the initial problem of evil spirits. The aim in recounting it was to bolster the power of the Rebbe and also to enhance religious practice.

It has now become possible to petition the Rebbe online and request a blessing. One messianic Lubavitcher site, <http://www.kingmessiah.com/>, provides visitors with a link to write to the Rebbe and “behold miracles”³

³ Religion has become one of the most popular and pervasive topics of interest online. Although, for many conservative religious groups, religious practice and lifestyle are shaped by their rejection of modernity, which is seen as secular,

As Ehrlich ([56], p. 264) notes: “That the method works, at least for believers, is evident from the many stories of fortuitous answers and miraculous occurrences passed by word of mouth in the movement and published in messianist Chabad journals.” However, some Chabad rabbis such as Rabbi Ginsberg in Israel strongly caution against its use and have compiled guidelines to limit its potential excesses. Rabbi Ginsberg asserts that the *Igros* is not to be deployed when answers are forthcoming from other sources. For medical issues, a doctor should be consulted and similarly, for religious questions, a rabbi. The only issues for which the process of *Igros Kodesh* may be endorsed are those for which there are no “normal” solutions. It is important to note that Rabbi Ginsberg’s views are contentious and are not widely accepted among Israeli Chabad.

8. FailedMessiah.com

Shmarya Rosenberg, born Scott Rosenberg in 1958, is a blogger who publishes the blog FailedMessiah.com referring to the belief among Lubavitcher Hassidim that their late Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is the Messiah. He became disenchanted with the Chabad-Lubavitch movement in 2004 after discovering an unsigned and unsent letter addressed to him by Menachem Mendel Schneerson, responding to his request for Chabad aid in the effort to rescue the Jews of Ethiopia. This resulted in the creation of his blog, *FailedMessiah.com*. In his blog, he regularly discredits the Rebbe’s miraculous abilities and is very critical of stories pertaining to them; emphasizing the fact that every story about the Rebbe should be treated with caution. Every miracle story Chabad tells about its Rebbes should be viewed with suspicion. He is equally critical of the use of Schneerson’s texts to divine the future.

In one blog article he reports on a new Chabad advertising campaign in Israel: *The Messiah Makes Miracles and Wonders!* It encourages people to call a telephone number and get “answers” and “blessings” from the Rebbe, who passed away in 1994. The “answers” and “blessings” come from consulting the collected volumes of the Rebbe’s correspondence in an oracle-like fashion, randomly opening a volume and scanning the page for “answers” and “blessings”. His main point of contention is that this practice is highly Unorthodox with no religious legitimation in Judaism.

Chabad.info reports on a new Chabad advertising campaign in Israel: *The Messiah Makes Miracles and Wonders!* It encourages people to call a telephone number and get “answers” and “blessing” from the Rebbe, who passed away in 1994. The “answers” and “blessing” come from consulting the collected volumes of the Rebbe’s correspondence in an oracle-like fashion, randomly opening a volume and scanning the page for “answers” and “blessing.” [57]

Above I have presented narratives of the Rebbe’s miraculous feats. It is the messianists who continue to publicise accounts of these, not only bolstering the Rebbe’s charisma but also making the absent Rebbe “present”. To this extent, storytelling serves the particular interests of one particular group—the messianists. Informants had a vested interest in providing positive narratives which maintain a sense of connectedness with the deceased Rebbe.

Interestingly, a few Lubavitchers did mention occasions when the Rebbe was wrong. One rabbi recounted how he had been given a blessing for a business which subsequently went bankrupt.

as Hadden and Cowan [37] rightly note “There is scarcely a religious tradition, movement, group, or phenomenon absent entirely from the net”. Research on religion on the net has focused upon several interconnected themes: virtual community [38]; identity [39]; evangelism and proselytization [40]; the status of cyberspace as sacred or profane [41–44]; the dialectic relationship between online and offline activities [45]; pilgrimage [46,47]; and the authenticity of online religious ritual ([44,48–51] on Christian prayer sites), although websites representing other faith traditions as diverse as Buddhism and neo-Paganism sometimes include petitionary activities including online prayer. Within other faith traditions, as with Orthodox Judaism, there may be differences of opinion concerning the authenticity of such undertakings. For example, [52] reports the Romanian Orthodox church’s disapproval of one such service. There are examples from Buddhism [53] and Paganism [54]. The use of the Internet for online petitioning is not unique to Lubavitch. One site “Window on the Wall” [55] provides the opportunity to send a prayer request to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

He admitted that this occurred because he had not performed certain mitzvot. It was not because the Rebbe had been at fault. In another instance, a man wrote to the Rebbe about his son with recurrent leukaemia. While he survived chemotherapy, he died shortly afterwards. This person was told that the reason for his son's death was that he had not trusted the Rebbe enough. If a positive result does not occur after contacting the Rebbe, it is generally attributed to the person's lack of faith in him. It is never because the Rebbe is not all powerful or out of control. As in many systems of magic, the participants do not see outside the system [58]. If magic is ineffective, it is because counter magic has been performed. No one considers that magic is ineffective in the first place.

Accounts of miraculous activities are widespread in the world's religions. What purposes do these narratives serve? This paper has stressed that storytelling and power structures are closely linked. The process of storytelling serves the interests of particular groups and is an ideological process. It is important to establish who tells these stories, for which audience, and with what purpose? This is important when examining reports of miraculous feats in other religious groups.⁴

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