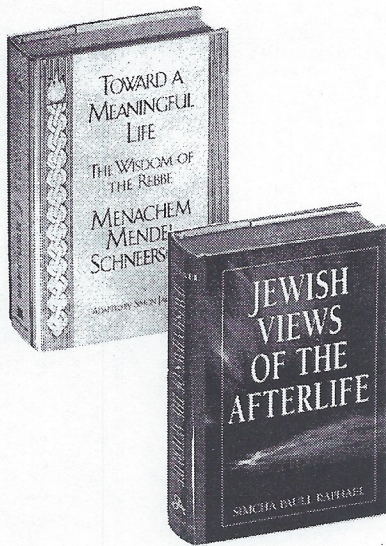




REVIEWS

Messianism's Past, Present, Future



Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, adapted by Simon Jacobson. William Morrow & Co., 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019, 1995; 294 pp., \$20.

Jewish Views of the Afterlife by Simcha Paull Raphael. Jason Aronson, 230 Livingston St., Northvale, NY 07647, 1995; 474 pp., \$40 cloth, \$30 paper.

Reviewed by Lawrence Sutin

These two books, fascinating as they are, might seem a rather odd coupling for a joint review were it not for the fact that the author of *Toward a Meaningful Life*, the late Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, has emerged as the focus of the most significant Jewish messianic movement in over three centuries. An understanding of Jewish views on the possibilities of life after death is essential if one is to understand how Schneerson, who died in 1994 at age 92, has come to be viewed as the Messiah by a substantial number of Lubavitcher Hasidim around the world.

But *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, which I shall discuss first, deserves attention for other reasons as well. Raphael's book is a solid and important pioneering effort in a field that has received remarkably little attention. As Raphael has explained in his opening chapter, "A Personal Journey," it was his own grief over the death of beloved

friends and family members that spurred his initial researches: "My thirsting Jewish soul ached to find Judaism's wisdom on life after death. But, as many have discovered, it was not easy to find Jewish writings on the afterlife. Most modern studies describe Jewish rituals of dying and mourning, but only in perfunctory ways make reference to a postmortem existence."

Raphael is quite correct here, and he goes on to offer an intelligent analysis of why so much of modern Judaism has cut itself off from postmortem teachings and traditions. But his greatest service comes in his clear and intelligent analyses of those teachings (the plural is important here, for they are neither uniform nor even consistent within particular traditions) from the biblical era through the Hasidic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his preface, Raphael acknowledges that "in no way is this book exhaustive" and that "each chapter . . . could be developed into a complete book in and of itself."

Nonetheless Raphael has performed his generalist's task with such integrity and lucidity that he deserves comparison with Gershom Scholem in this respect: just as Scholem opened up the once-derided field of Kabbalistic studies to scholarly (and public) understanding, Raphael has performed a similar service for Jewish teachings on the afterlife.

One of the most fascinating chapters is "Visionary Tours of the Afterlife in Medieval Midrash," in which Raphael sets forth English translations (based, in many cases, upon the century-old prior translations of Jewish folklorist Moses Gaster) of selections from remarkable Hebrew treatises on the postmortem realm, from *Hibbut Ha-Kever* ("The Pangs of the Grave") texts to exalted descriptions of the heavenly *Gan Eden* ("Garden of Eden") realm. Here is a sample from the thirteenth-century *Masekhet Gan Eden* ("Tractate of *Gan Eden*") which describes the transformative bliss of that realm:

And everyday the Holy Blessed One creates for the righteous in *Gan Eden* four unique transformations in accordance with the phases of the day: In the first phase, the individual is changed into a child. He enters the realm for children, and tastes the joys of childhood. In the second phase, the individual is changed into a youth. He enters the realm of youth,

and enjoys the delights of youth. In the third phase, the individual is changed into a middle-aged person. He enters the realm of the middle-aged, and enjoys the delights of middle-age. In the fourth phase, the individual is changed into an elder. He enters the realm of elders, and enjoys the pleasures of elders.

One hopes that still further work can be done in translating Midrashic and Kabbalistic works in the Jewish postmortem tradition. Raphael urges in his final chapter that "we need to create a contemporary Jewish death manual that integrates recent psychological perspectives on dying and bereavement with the vast legacy of Jewish tradition on death and the afterlife."

This is indeed a vital, though difficult, task. But *Jewish Views of the Afterlife* provides an impetus and framework that may ultimately lead to its accomplishment. Raphael also casts light on the multiplicity of beliefs about the afterlife that have surrounded the coming of the Messiah. Within this multiplicity, there is a basic distinction between those Jews who believed that the individual righteous soul would ascend after death (without needing to wait for the intervention of the Messiah) and those who accepted the biblical vision of a mass resurrection from the grave as an accompaniment to the Messiah's advent on earth. Even beyond this distinction, there lies the persistent and fundamental belief in the Jewish tradition that the Messiah, when He arrives, can offer the gift of eternal life to those worthy of it.

The absence of a fixed dogma in these areas has fostered many controversial messianic movements throughout Jewish history. The present hopes surrounding Rebbe Menachem Schneerson represent the latest example.

Toward a Meaningful Life represents the first attempt ever by a Lubavitcher Hasidic rabbi to offer a written work addressed in universalist terms to Jews and non-Jews alike. More precisely, it was Rabbi Simon Jacobson, a devoted student and scribe, who adapted and assembled this sampling of Rebbe Schneerson's teachings. The book, based largely on the Rebbe's talks at *farbrengen* (gatherings) in the central Lubavitch synagogue in Brooklyn, was completed after the Rebbe's death. In his introduction, Jacobson makes it clear that the book is intended for "the modern reader, from the most devout to the most secular." He also stresses that "while the Rebbe's teachings carry a universal message, it must be remembered that he was

primarily a Jewish leader."

Jacobson has undertaken a difficult balancing act. *Toward a Meaningful Life* is unquestionably a book of great wisdom and compassion, presented in a direct and simple style. As such it can serve as a guide to understanding for readers of all spiritual traditions. But the book gives only the barest indications of the day-to-day rituals and ways of life of Lubavitcher (or Chabad) Hasidim. In this regard, it cannot be said to be a clear introduction to what those ways of life might entail for the reader seeking to pursue them further.

For example, in the chapter "Women and Men," Rebbe Schneerson, quoting from *Midrash Rabbah* on Genesis, teaches that "G-d created the human race as one entity and then divided them into two — 'a single individual with two faces.' Just as each person is composed of two elements, the body and soul, which we must learn to fully integrate, man and woman are the two elements of humankind." He adds, "After so many years of male dominance, we are standing at the threshold of a true feminine era. . . . It is time now for the woman to rise to her true prominence, when the subtle power of the feminine energy is allowed to nourish the overt power of the masculine energy."

But it is also true, as Rabbi Jacobson confirmed in an interview with the present writer (see sidebar at right), that the Rebbe did not accept that women could serve as practicing rabbis. The Rebbe's approach, Rabbi Jacobson explained, was that women could be leaders, as they are shown to be in many parts of the Torah. But it is also spelled out in Torah that they are not to render legal decisions or to lead religious services. This has nothing to do with male superiority, Rabbi Jacobson stressed, but rather with the respective roles of men and women. In the synagogue, there is the principle of *mehitzah* (separation of the sexes) that must be maintained for the sake of modesty.

This elaboration of the Rebbe's teachings does not appear in *Toward a Meaningful Life*, because Rabbi Jacobson's aim, as he stated, was to write a "nondenominational" book. I offer the contrast simply to indicate the level of particularity of discourse in the text. The Rebbe's teachings on women and men — as indeed, on all subjects in the book — are insightful and applicable quite outside of a Lubavitcher context. But that context is a unique and complex one, and its detailed delineations lie outside the chosen scope of *Toward a Meaningful Life*. If this is understood, then the book can be appreciated for what it is — an introduction to the mind and soul of a great teacher. ■

Was the Rebbe the Messiah? Maybe, Maybe Not . . .

The widespread belief within the Lubavitcher Hasidic movement that the late Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson is the long-awaited Messiah of Jewish tradition has created a bitter controversy within Orthodox Judaism. Not all Orthodox Jews are Hasidim, but the Lubavitcher movement is unquestionably one of the most vital within present-day Orthodox Jewry. A rift over Messianism therefore has serious implications for the future direction of Orthodox Judaism and, indirectly, of all forms of Judaism.

Even before the death of Rebbe Schneerson in 1994 at the age of 92, many of his followers had come to believe that he was the Messiah. Rabbi Simon Jacobson, who adapted *Toward a Meaningful Life*, an anthology of the Rebbe's views on spiritual issues, was careful in that book not to insist upon the Rebbe's role as Messiah. As Rabbi Jacobson noted in his epilogue on this question:

The approach [to an answer] must be based on objective truth, and not be determined by opinion, emotion, or partisan interest. The Rebbe taught that the Torah, the Bible, is the template of objective, absolute truth. . . . In the Torah G-d says that redemption will come for all mankind and that it will be led by a Messiah, a global leader with a universal message and the ability to transmit that message so that it resonates within every person on earth.

One can reasonably speculate that this criterion had much to do with the "nondenominational" form in which Rabbi Jacobson adapted *Toward a Meaningful Life*. Rabbi Jacobson urged the reader to "answer this question for yourself."

For some Orthodox Jews, however, the question itself is a repugnant heresy. David Berger, a professor of history at Brooklyn College, recently published an indignant essay, "The New Messianism: Passing Phenomenon or Turning Point in the History of Judaism?" in *Jewish Action*, the official publication of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. In this essay Berger charged that the belief in a Messiah who will return from the grave constitutes an acceptance of "Christology" at variance with fundamental Jewish teachings. The result could be that Lubavitch would become a "pariah movement" within Juda-

ism. Berger warned that "this may be a passing phenomenon, but it may also mark a significant moment in the history of the Jewish religion. The more convinced Jews are that it is the former, the more likely it is to become the latter."

Berger notes that within the Lubavitcher movement a substantial number of adherents (though not all) believe in the Rebbe as Messiah, although two factions have emerged — one believing that he will soon return from the grave, the other (the "incarnationists") insisting that the Rebbe never really died at all, but is concealed at present. The latter view avoids the criticism of "Christology," but Berger is scornful of it as well. He argues that from either view, "A profound, tragic irony would follow: Through the misguided efforts of his own followers, one of the great leaders of twentieth-century Jewry would be remembered primarily as a failed Messiah."

In his book, Rabbi Jacobson was careful to note the date of the Rebbe's death (June 12, 1994). In an interview with this author, he insisted that the belief in a Messiah who could return from the grave was a Jewish tenet that predated its Christian use. He also stated that, while alive, "The Rebbe allowed for different opinions — he did not dictate in this area. I cannot impose the view that the Rebbe is the Messiah, but neither can Berger or any other person definitively say that he was not. One must look to traditional Jewish law and make one's own decision."

What did the Rebbe himself claim? "He never stated that he was the Messiah," said Jacobson. "You could say that there were mixed signals. He was aware of the belief amongst many of his followers. Once, at a *farbrengen* [gathering], the people gathered there sang a song that implied, by its lyrics, that he was. And the Rebbe told them firmly that, if it were not that he would insult so many people thereby, he should walk out of the room. On a more passive level, if, say, a woman visitor mentioned her feeling that the Rebbe was Messiah, he might smile at her. Other times, he would handle the issue by saying, in essence, if you believe that I am the Messiah, then do something with the belief — live your life righteously, according to Torah, and make the world a better place. If you don't do this, what's the point of your belief? In other words, he turned the question into a challenge for the believer."

—Laurence Sutin