

Ha'aretz, Thursday, January 15, 1998

The Prophet of God

No one can 'evade the yoke of the belief in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's Messiahship', writes Gedalyahu Axelrod

By Gedalyahu Axelrod

I read the article by David Berger - "On false Messianism, idolatry and Lubavitch," Ha'aretz, Jan.11) in which I was attacked together with other rabbis of cities and heads of rabbinical courts in Israel and abroad, for signing a formal rabbinical ruling stating that the Lubavitcher Rebbe has the status of a prophet, and that he is the Messiah, and that every Jew must accept the sovereignty of his Messiahship, by dint of the Jewish law which obligates all Jews to obey a prophet. The writer of the article went so far as to proclaim that "this declaration alone is sufficient to exclude its promulgators from Orthodox Judaism." In his article, Berger makes an hysterical attack on the entire Lubavitch movement. First, I would like to make one thing absolutely clear to David Berger and to everyone else. There is no halachic dispensation that will enable anyone to evade accepting the yoke of the belief in the Rebbe's Messiahship, because of Maimonides' ruling that obligates all Jews to do so. That may be the reason why he is so angry, because - as far as I can see - he has no inclination to do so, and he is using this furious outburst to try to escape his obligations.

Maimonides, in his Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah [Laws of the Foundations of the Torah], Chapter 10, determines the criteria for a great and wise prophet: that he "has broad knowledge," "is in full control of himself," "predicts the future," and most important, that he declares that the Lord sent him to be a prophet. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, in session with thousands of his followers, dropped a spiritual and historic bombshell by declaring himself the prophet of the generation.

We Jews, throughout all generations, have been willing to enter blazing furnaces for our faith. We will remain strong in this mission as well. We will accept the prophet of God, the sovereignty of the Rebbe, Messiah the King, because we are thus obliged by virtue of our Judaism. Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, one of the greatest rabbis in the United States, published an open letter in the American press on June 24, 1996, in which he attacked those who persecute Chabad, such as the likes of Berger, and determined that belief in the Rebbe as King Messiah, even today after his passing from our vision, does not conflict with the views of Judaism.

As for the ability of the Rebbe to see into the future, let me

mention just two prophecies. One was during the Gulf War, when the Rebbe said that it would be unnecessary to wear gas masks because no chemical weapons would be used; and the second, when he told Benjamin Netanyahu, during Netanyahu's visit with him before his election to the Knesset, that in the future he would have to contend with 119 people. The only confrontation of this type would be in elections for prime minister, when each member of Knesset pulls in a different direction.

I would like to address the claim of idolatry - Heaven forbid - raised in the article. I can only marvel at the way people are willing to destroy a movement known all over the world for its staunch devotion to the observance of commandments and to bringing Jews closer to their Judaism. And those who are even more familiar with Lubavitch, know just how pure and sublime it is. True, there have been some anomalous comments which should not have been made, but these exceptions are being taken care of by Chabad rabbis everywhere by means of education and guidance, so that those who made them do not deviate from the path of halacha. I believe that David Berger must beg the forgiveness of the tens of thousands of followers of Lubavitch who proudly carry high the torch of Judaism, and who are not deterred by those who would destroy it from the day of its foundation.

(Rabbi Axelrod is the head of a rabbinical court in Haifa.)