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A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Celebrating 25 years of diversity and dialogue

In this issue

Some thought it would never happen. Most knew it was inevitable. Where are we now, only months after the Rebbe died?

When the messiah dies Neil Gillman

"We don't see with our eyes. We see with our brain."

That was the concluding sentence of my ophthalmologist's random musings on the mysteries of sight in the course of a routine examination some weeks ago. It recalled the claim that "seeing is not believing; on the contrary, we see what we already believe." Or, the neurologist Oliver Sacks' memorable "To See And Not See" (*The New Yorker*, May 10, 1993) about a man whose sight was restored but who simply didn't know what he was seeing. "He saw, but what he saw had no coherence. His retina and optic nerve were active, transmitting impulses, but his brain could make no sense of them....It was...the behavior of one *mentally* blind, or agnostic--able to see but not to decipher what he was seeing."

Finally, it also served to recall the *New York Times* June 14, 1994 article, a few days following the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, which quoted a professor of psychology of religion at Yale: "People's need to make sense of the world is so much stronger than their commitment to factual realities. Facts are easier to rearrange than their needs are."

Gleaning Meaning From Seeing

I have frequently made a similar point in teaching the epistemology of the religious experience. We Jews do not believe that we literally see God. What we do see is the panorama of nature and history. But

we interpret what we see as manifesting God's presence in history and nature.

For example, Exodus 14:30 tells us that "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea." But the next verse tells us that "Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians." What Israel literally saw was dead Egyptians, but what they "saw," that is, interpreted to have seen, was God's power. That leap from seeing to "seeing" constitutes both the strength and the hazard of the religious experience.

When Meaning and Seeing Collide

We can characterize these interpretative structures which shape what we literally see as myths. We commonly distinguish between myths and facts or myths and reality, implying that in contrast to the facts or the reality, the myth is a fiction. But that conclusion is totally unwarranted. A myth can also be very real, and without a myth, without a way of integrating the data of experience, we wouldn't even know what the facts are in the first place.

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Myths are extraordinarily plastic; that is one of their great strengths. They can be reshaped to accommodate a wide range of facts. But from time to time, the gap between the seeing and the "seeing" becomes unbridgeable. When that happens, two options are available. We either proclaim that the myth has died and proceed to choose or create alternative ways of shaping the facts, or we can take advantage of the myth's plasticity, in a sense "deny" the facts, and continue to cling to our new reshaped myth.

All eschatologies are intrinsically mythic. They provide a structure of meaning, a set of spectacles through which a community "sees" or interprets events in nature and history as moving toward some consummation.

As with all myths, there is an inevitable tension between the facts and the eschatological structures we use to understand them, between the seeing and the "seeing". The more concrete the myth, the more narrowly it is tied to history, the greater the risk that the facts will subvert the myth and the tension will become unbridgeable. That has happened at least twice in our historical experience, in the eschatological movements surrounding Jesus of Nazareth and Shabbatai Zevi.

When the Myth is Defied

In each case, segments of the eschatological community chose to proclaim the myth to have died, accepted the "facts" of history and went on to reclaim an alternative eschatological myth. But in each case, other segments of the community chose to deny the facts, take advantage of the myth's plasticity and remodel it. The death of Jesus of Nazareth and Shabbatai Zevi's conversion came to be understood as part of the pre-ordained pattern, and the community continued to await their ultimate reappearance and vindication.

This is the situation that now confronts the Chabad community and both of these classical responses are in place. Those members of the community who most stridently pursued the vision that the Rebbe was indeed the Messiah, refuse to accept the Rebbe's death as final or to mourn, instead danced in the streets, cling to their myth and await the Rebbe's vindication. Their colleagues whose messianic expectations were more restrained, rededicated themselves to the movement's programs and embrace the classical (and skeptical) Jewish eschatological expectation that God will send the Messiah in due time. Until then, we await and work for that day.

This is the eminently desirable response to the death of a Messiah. To do otherwise is to drift into an illusory

NEIL GILLMAN, a *Sh'ma* Contributing Editor, teaches Jewish philosophy at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

world in which history becomes increasingly inconsequential. But that is the judgment of an observer for whom the myth has been broken, that is, exposed precisely as a myth.

The collapse of a myth is inevitably a chaotic experience. Clifford Geertz, in his seminal "Religion as a Cultural System" (collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1978) suggests that whenever chaos breaks into the cosmos-making function of religion, it poses three distinct challenges: the challenge of interpretability (understanding how and why the trauma occurred), of copability (finding the resources to endure the suffering), and of justifiability (believing that the world continues to exhibit moral coherence).

The Need for Re-mythification

It is part of the genius of Jewish religion that it provides the resources to meet all of these challenges uniquely well. In the case of Chabad, the first and third of the challenges will be handled by variations on the theme that "the time was not ripe," and the second, by the day-to-

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Administrator/Production Bambi Marcus

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day structures which Judaism imposes on our lives. That is the supreme function of halakhah. It represents a quasi-realized eschatology which enables us to structure our lives in the here and now, deal with the chaos that is inevitable in our age of history, and await the ultimate *eschaton* to come. It is precisely the power of this quasi-realized eschatological structure which impelled Judaism's resistance to the more aggressive eschatological movements that arose in the course of its history.

The single most regrettable offshoot of this entire episode is that for many Jews, the eschatological impetus itself has become suspect. That reaction is nothing short of tragic. No community can survive for long without an eschatological myth, for it is precisely our eschatologies that give meaning to our lives. Our task, then, is to reclaim the indispensability of classical Jewish eschatology, precisely as myth. □

A rebbe for all mankind

Zalman I. Posner

He was *sui generis*, unique in how he related to every type of person, how he addressed our cares, how he showed us all we are capable of becoming and being. Months have passed. The covenant between God and man that pain eases with time has not been fulfilled--and never really will. Consolation for those who knew him, or knew of him? Gratitude that we had that blessing.

The successor to Moshe at the banks of the Jordan was the "man in whom there is spirit", Joshua. The classic interpretation is that he could "meet the spirit of every person". Joshua became the Moshe of his generation, addressing every individual in that person's terms. This set the pattern for Joshua's successors in turn.

We are familiar with scholars, for example, appreciated by their peers but who cannot easily relate to the unschooled. There are eloquent orators who galvanize thousands but leave the educated cold. They are leaders but not Joshuas, not successors to Moshe.

Spanning Continents and Movements

As the second half of the 20th century opened, in early 1951, a new figure appeared in the Jewish world, the

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ZALMAN POSNER is rabbi of Congregation Sherith Israel. He was ordained by the Lubavitcher Yeshiva where he studied from the first day it opened.

young Lubavitcher Rebbe who accepted the mantle of his late father-in-law as Rebbe of the Chabad community. But his influence and interest were not to be limited to any community, any stratum of Jewry, any aspect of Jewish life and thought.

He rejected every limiting adjective on Jews, words like Reform and Conservative and Orthodox, *dati* for the "religious" in Israel and *chiloni* for the "secular. The word "Jew" said it all for him. Every Jew was "one of us" for him, his *ben yachid*, his "only child" and if that person's need was healing for illness or his indifference to his heritage or persecution or political leadership jeopardizing the safety of a Jewish community of millions--his problem was the Rebbe's.

"Dollar" Days

K'mayim hapanim--as a face is reflected in the other's face, people reflected the feelings of the Rebbe toward them. Thousands lined up on Sundays for "dollars", when he would give a dollar bill to all comers to give to charity, with, if the person wished, another dollar of his own. "Dollars" on Sundays became standard and storied, people scheduling trips from abroad to enable them to be at "dollars". The Rebbe seemed to be impervious to exhaustion. A lady once asked him how he can stand there for so many hours. The Rebbe's response was, "I love to count diamonds."

That's how thousands literally met him--face to face, one on one. At the moment I stood before the Rebbe, and his eyes (as I write these words I recall the Yom Kippur *Musaph*: Fortunate are the eyes that saw all this) looked into mine, and into my soul, the universe ceased to exist for him. I, and I alone, was the universe for the Rebbe for that moment.

"Dollars" meant a moment with the Rebbe for those throngs. By their testimony and their presence, they reflected his concern and love. "Love your fellow" was not a platitude for him--or for them.

The Ways of Leadership

He transcended the fragmentation of the Jewish world, the Us and Them. We were all Us to him. He penetrated to the core of the Jew, his soul, incorruptible, pure, and that was what he saw and helped the other see within himself. He could and did bring out the capacity for good in each of us, and what more could we ask for?

Leadership is more than inspiring others to follow or having organizing skills. Leadership begins with having clear objectives, direction and purpose, inspiring goals worthy of dedication.