

Can The Rebbe Be Moshiach?

**Proofs from Gemara, Midrash,
and Rambam that the
Rebbe זצ"ל cannot
be Moshiach**

by

Gil Student

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Preface:

The light of the Torah is meant to dispel the darkness of ignorance. However, there are times when Torah is used to confuse rather than to enlighten. In these cases it is incumbent upon those who were blessed with knowledge to publicize the truth and dispel the darkness of falsehood.

Eight years ago, there was a history professor who was widely acclaimed as one of the leading Modern Orthodox figures of the time. There are very few talmidei chachamim who are academics and this particular rabbi was a tremendous baal midos (refined individual) as well. Not being in his circle, I had never met him. But I had heard of his sterling reputation and, after reading some of his works, concluded that his reputation of being a scholarly talmid chacham was well deserved. His essay on miracles and hashgacha pratit in the writings of Ramban (in Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity, Isadore Twersky ed.) had a particularly strong effect on me because I had struggled for a long time with the

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Ramban's apparently contradicting statements. This was a man of whom Modern Orthodoxy was proud. A respected scholar, an accomplished talmid chacham, and a humble, unassuming person. Then he spoke out against Lubavitch meshichism.

Those who are reading this and had never heard of Dr. David Berger before he spoke out on this subject are probably surprised about his reputation. There are certainly plenty who will deny that it ever existed. But we are not living in an Orwellian universe and no one can erase the memories of those of us who remember beyond eight years ago. The man who is now threatened, harassed, and publicly insulted by rabbis (!!!) was once widely considered to be a fine example of religious virtue in the Modern Orthodox world. Even those of us who were not part of that community respected him. But now he is persona non grata in many places throughout the world. His speeches elicit protest and he has personally been compared in writing to pigs and donkeys.

It is for this reason that I would like to remind the public that the Torah prohibits personal attacks. When someone wishes to criticize the content of this book, this author's personal piety or knowledge are not the issue. Whatever shortcomings I have, and I have many, they are irrelevant to the points raised in this work.

Before we begin I would like to express my deepest thanks to those who have contributed to and reviewed this book. Their efforts greatly enhanced this work.

Introduction:

No modern movement has done more for Klal Yisroel than Chabad and their saintly leader, the Rebbe, was the architect who arranged it all. He sent emissaries to every corner of the world to spread Torah Judaism to the sadly assimilated Jewish masses. His charismatic leadership inspired thousands to reach out to the millions and offer, in brotherly love, a road back to Judaism. Because of the Rebbe, Jews everywhere have been exposed to Torah. His example has inspired courage in many to adopt Torah observance and in many others to take pride in their Jewish heritage. The number of souls that were saved by the Rebbe's efforts is uncountable.

According to some prognosticators, the events of Gimmel Tammuz – the Rebbe's "histalkus" (see chapter 3) – spelled the end for Chabad. Without the Rebbe, Chabad could not continue. However, these predictions have been proven wrong. Not only has Chabad remained strong, it has grown at an unprecedented rate. Thousands more emissaries have been sent out since Gimmel Tammuz and Chabad in general

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has been remarkably energized. Rather than ending Chabad, the Rebbe's histalkus has fueled its growth.

One important reason for this growth is the perception that the end is near. While Lubavitch was always famous for its belief that Moshiach is coming, the loss of the Rebbe means that Moshiach is right around the corner. If we can only do a little more, put in greater effort, then the Rebbe will return as the King Moshiach.

But this ideology has problems. It was no secret that towards the end of the Rebbe's life his followers declared him to be Moshiach. Aside from the billboards and signs, the ever-present singing of "Yechi" made it clear what most Lubavitchers believed.

But the Rebbe's death made this belief hard to retain. When has Judaism ever accepted that Moshiach can come from the dead? However, the talented scholars and orators from among the Rebbe's followers quickly created a new position in which they can maintain that the Rebbe is still Moshiach.

Granted, the concept of a resurrected Moshiach is foreign to the Jewish public. But that is only due to a lack of familiarity with the somewhat obscure sources in Jewish literature. A close reading, they claim, reveals that Moshiach really can come from the deceased. Furthermore, the Rebbe never really died anyway. He is only temporarily hidden from us.

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Our task is to investigate whether these claims are correct. The proponents of these ideas have an obviously large emotional stake in believing that the Rebbe is still Moshiach and may have been swayed by it. We wish to take a detached look at the sources and, in the traditional talmudic method, carefully analyze them. What do the texts really tell us about a Moshiach from the dead?

We are under no illusion that our short book will cause people who have for decades been advocating the Rebbe as Moshiach to suddenly drop their cause. We would hope that there are people who constantly reevaluate their positions in an intellectually and emotionally honest way. But our limited understanding of human nature is sufficient to know that courageous people like that are few and far between. Why, then, write this book? It will certainly cause disharmony within an already embattled people. What possible gain do we envision this book will produce that will outweigh its guaranteed negative reaction?

Lubavitch, as a group devoted to outreach, has thousands – perhaps hundreds of thousands – of marginal affiliates with limited Torah background. These brave Jews have taken the life-changing step of coming close to Torah. However, their unfortunate lack of education in Jewish topics is frequently remedied solely by Lubavitch rabbis and their literature. Everything they know about Torah Judaism is from Chabad. Many of these people have grave doubts about the Rebbe being Moshiach but the sources are presented to them in a way that overwhelmingly supports the Meshichist platform.

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For various reasons, the scholars in Chabad who recognize the misuse of sources are almost entirely silent. From whom will these baalei tshuva learn if all the rabbis refuse to teach?

What can these people do? Their common sense and basic instincts tell them that Moshiach cannot come from the dead. But the only rabbinic voices that they hear tell them that Judaism does and always has affirmed the concept of a resurrected Moshiach. Should they trust their common sense or authoritative representatives of Judaism? Are their instincts dulled because of their non-religious background?

We are here to say that, at least in this case, their instincts are correct. There is a clear and consistent message from Jewish texts that once someone dies he cannot be Moshiach. Eloquent orators with obscure sources have been trying to confuse this message. However, we firmly believe that a careful reading of a broad variety of sources offers a clear picture. We will generally focus on early sources because they are the foundation of Judaism on which later generations based their views. If the Gemara and Midrash tell us something, these authoritative texts must be heard. When a talmudic or midrashic passage is unclear, we will search through the medieval writings for explanations because the later rabbis based their comments on the earlier ones. And, to a great degree, we will present the texts in their original Hebrew along with an English translation. There are no cards up our sleeves and we want our presentation and methodology to be as transparent as possible. We believe that a logical and careful reading of the

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sources yields only one conclusion – the Rebbe is no longer a candidate for Moshiach.

But readers of this book are to be cautioned. We are certain that this work will not be the final word on this matter. While constructive criticisms are always welcome, in light of recent history we expect that most critiques of this work will not focus on the important issues. We have intentionally stressed our important arguments and readers should make note of them before reading reviews of this book. Then check the criticisms and see whether they focus on minor issues. Do they discuss style more than substance? We will offer solid arguments and critiques must answer these points in order to be substantial rebuttals. Therefore, we strongly recommend that after reading a criticism of this book one re-reads this work to see if the main points have been sufficiently addressed.

Also make note of where the critics agree with us. There may be prominent scholars who will agree with everything in this book except for one argument. It is possible that a critique may well focus solely on this one argument. But do not be fooled. Re-read this book and note where the agreements are. Do not let anyone, or any critique, discredit this entire work by arguing on one point.

Your task, as an intelligent seeker who must ultimately answer to G-d, is to sift through the rhetoric and find the truth. We hope that this small work of ours will help you in this task.

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May the clarification of issues relating to Moshiach bring him quickly in our day!

Chapter 1:

What is Moshiach?

One need not be a particularly astute observer to notice that the world is full of personal and communal tragedy. There are many people whose lives are filled with difficulties and history tells us of the seemingly continuous travails of the Jewish people. At the time of this writing, Jews all over the world and particularly in Israel are in distinct danger. Is this the best G-d could do?

Certainly not. This world is not intended to be one of simplicity and serenity. However, there will be a time when this will be the case. We have been promised in the Torah and by the prophets that there will be a time of worldwide peace and tranquility. A time when war will cease and humanity will gather together to worship G-d in unity. This is called Yemos HaMoshiach – the Messianic Era. The prophets gave us much information about the events leading up to and during Yemos HaMoshiach, as did the sages of the Talmud. However, there are a number of points that are unclear. The exact chronology of events – what will happen first – are sometimes a matter of debate. We will attempt to

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present a basic outline of the events, with full knowledge that it is not inclusive of every opinion.

Gog and Magog

Yechezkel tells us in chapters 38 and 39 about a battle that will occur in Israel between the forces of Gog, king of Magog, and the Jewish people. This will be a terrible war and, at first, the Jews will lose many battles. But not only the people of Magog will wage this war against Israel; many nations of the world, even enemies, will join together in this effort. Yechezkel 38:5-6 lists the nations of Persia, Cush, Put, Gomer, and Assyria. Tehillim 83:7-9 adds Edom, Ishmael, Moav, Hagarim, Geval, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre, and Assyria. Exactly to whom these nations currently refer is unknown but they seem to represent the nations ranging from North Africa to the Mediterranean and across the Middle East. While it is tempting to speculate about the identity of this conglomerate of nations, particularly while listening to news reports about Arab League summits, we will not try guessing regarding such an important topic.

The effects of this united battle against Jerusalem will be very serious. Daniel 12:1 describes it as “a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence.” After two unsuccessful attempts to capture Jerusalem the enemy will finally succeed in a devastating way. “I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses looted and the women raped; half the city shall go into exile...” (Zechariah

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14:2; cf. Malbim). During this period the leader of the Jewish people will be killed. Who is this leader?

Moshiach ben Yosef

Rav Saadia Gaon in his *Emunos VeDeyos* 8:5 tells us that Moshiach ben Yosef will be from the Galilee, as Rabbi Yochanan says in *Rosh HaShanah* 31b – “From there [Tiberias] redemption will begin.” Moshiach ben Yosef will be a descendant of Yosef who will ascend to the military leadership of the Jewish people and will gather an army to fully conquer Jerusalem before the war of Gog and Magog. This original capture of Jerusalem is referred to in *Ovadiah* 1:21 – “The saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Eisav.” Similarly, an earlier verse (1:18) says “The house of Yaakov shall be a fire, the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav stubble; they shall burn them and consume them.”

However, when Gog and his allies subsequently battle against Jerusalem they will kill Moshiach ben Yosef. *Zechariah* 12:10 says “They shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.” This defeat will be crushing in both a physical and emotional sense. The devastation over the loss of this leader will be widespread as the *Gemara* in *Sukkah* 52b tells us. While, as the *Maharsha* there points out, the redemption at that time will not yet be complete. The final redeemer – Moshiach ben David – will appear soon after.

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Moshiach ben David

Literally, Moshiach means someone who has been anointed. It is used in Tanach to refer to a number of people including priests, kings, and even the Persian king Koresh (in Yishayahu 45:1). But when the Jews speak of Moshiach they generally mean the royal descendant of David who will lead the Jewish people, and indeed the whole world, into Yemos HaMoshiach.

Some time after Moshiach ben Yosef is killed, Eliyahu the prophet will come to tell the world that Moshiach (ben David) will imminently arrive. The Gemara in Eirubin 43b says that Moshiach cannot come on Shabbos or Yom Tov because that means that Eliyahu would have to come on the day before; the Jewish people were promised that Eliyahu will not come on those days and interfere with the Shabbos and holiday preparations. In other words, Eliyahu will come at least one day before Moshiach.

Moshiach will be a wise and charismatic man. He will be a brilliant scholar and a great prophet, inspired in all his endeavors. With these talents and divine assistance he will bring about Yemos HaMoshiach. After recapturing Jerusalem, he will rule as a king over Israel. But his wisdom will be so widely recognized that all people – both Jew and non-Jew – will look to him for guidance. The miracles that occur at this time will bring the entire world to appreciate G-d and His plan for humanity.

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This will lead to world peace. “He [Moshiach] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Yishayahu 2:4).

Yishayahu further describes Moshiach as follows:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Yishai, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

ויצא חטר מגזע ישי ונצר
משרשיו יפרה. ונחה עליו
רוח ידוד רוח חכמה ובינה
רוח עצה וגבורה רוח
דעת ויראת ידוד. והריחו
ביראת ידוד ולא למראה
עיניו ישפוט ולא למשמע
אזניו יוכיח. ושפט בצדק
דלים והוכיח במישור לענוי
ארץ והכה ארץ בשבט פיו
וברוח שפתיו ימית רשע.
והיה צדק אזור מתניו
והאמונה אזור חלציו.

(Yishayahu 11:1-5)

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Jews from all over the world will return to the land of Israel. Indeed, non-Jews will kindly assist Jews in returning. The righteous Jews of the past will be resurrected to enjoy this spiritual period in history. The Temple will also be returned and the sacrificial service reestablished. All this will happen during the reign of Moshiach.

However, as we said above, the chronology of these events is not entirely clear. For example, Rambam says that resurrection might happen before Moshiach's appearance or long after (Maamar T'chiyas HaMeisim, ed. Kafah p. 86). Additionally, there is the possibility that some of the above events will not occur.

Two Ways for Moshiach to Come

R' Alexandri said: R' Yehoshua ben Levy said: It says "In its time" and "I will hasten it" (Yishayahu 60:22). If [Israel] merits, I will hasten it. If not, in its time... It says "Behold! With the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13) and "A humble man riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). If [Israel] merits, with the clouds of heaven. If not, a humble man riding on a donkey.

אמר רבי אלכסנדר רבי יהושע בן לוי רמי כתיב בעתה וכתיב אחישנה. זכו אחישנה לא זכו בעתה... כתיב וארו עם ענני שמיא וכתיב עני ורכב על חמור. זכו עם ענני שמיא לא זכו עני ורכב על חמור.

(Sanhedrin 98a)

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The Gemara points out contradictory descriptions of the time and nature of Moshiach's arrival. To explain this discrepancy, the Gemara utilizes an important concept. G-d has planned out world history and established a predetermined time when Moshiach will come. However, if the entire Jewish people repent and become righteous then Moshiach will come immediately and triumphantly, even in advance of the predetermined time. This concept is advanced by the rabbis. Rav Saadia Gaon (Emunos VeDeyos 8:6) says that if the Jewish people repent then Moshiach ben Yosef will not come. Rather, Moshiach (ben David) will immediately come. Similarly, Rav Yonason Eybeshutz in his Kreisi uPleisi (end of 110) writes that this applies to Eliyahu as well. If the Jewish people repent then, without prior announcement, Moshiach will immediately inaugurate Yemos Hamoshiach – may it happen speedily in our day.

Thus, the buildup until the coming of Moshiach is part of the natural order of events that G-d has programmed into history. All else being equal, the world will proceed through a slow process of war and upheaval, including the drama of Moshiach ben Yosef's victory and defeat, leading up to Yemos HaMoshiach. However, the Jewish people have the ability to bypass the natural order of history by returning to G-d with all of their heart. If they accomplish this then history is stopped mid-course and ended. Immediately, G-d will miraculously change history and reveal Moshiach, who will inaugurate the new world order. Because this is a

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deviation from history, it must be miraculous and immediate. However, the normal course of history that leads to Moshiach in his time need not be miraculous because it is part of G-d's plan in nature.

What this implies, and what is said explicitly by R' Ovadiah Bartenura in his commentary on Rus (in the back of the standard Mikraos Gedolos on Bamidbar) and others, is that every generation has a *potential Moshiach* who, if and when the generation should merit it, will immediately become the *actual Moshiach*. For example, it is claimed by many that the Arizal was the potential Moshiach of his generation and, if every Jew had truly repented and become righteous, he would have immediately been crowned by G-d as the King Moshiach and initiated Yemos HaMoshiach. Because this would have been a coming of the Moshiach that was merited, there would have been no need for Moshiach ben Yosef and Eliyahu to precede Moshiach (ben David). Rather, the Arizal would have become the Moshiach immediately and miraculously.

Similarly, the Gemara in Sanhedrin 98a tells us that R' Yehoshua ben Levy met Eliyahu near the entrance to the tomb of R' Shimon ben Yochai. R' Yehoshua ben Levy asked when Moshiach will come and Eliyahu told him to ask Moshiach, who lives near Rome. R' Yehoshua ben Levy went to Rome and asked Moshiach when he will come and Moshiach responded, "Today". R' Yehoshua ben Levy told this to Eliyahu who explained that Moshiach meant, "Today – if you listen to His voice" (Tehillim 95:7). Based on what

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we said above, this is perfectly understandable. The Moshiach with whom R' Yehoshua ben Levy spoke was the potential Moshiach of that generation. Had the generation repented and merited immediate redemption then he would have been Moshiach. Now, almost 2000 years later, that man is no longer alive and is not Moshiach. However, then he was because he was the potential Moshiach of his time.

As is probably evident by now, this concept of a potential Moshiach in every generation will become very important in our later discussions.

When Will Moshiach Come?

As we said above, the Gemara in Sanhedrin 98a says that there are two times when Moshiach can come. If we merit Yemos HaMoshiach, if the Jewish people is entirely righteous, then Moshiach can come at any time. Otherwise, there is a set time for Moshiach to come. There are many hints in the Bible that enable us to calculate exactly when this set time will be however the biblical references are often obscure. It is frequently difficult to decipher their precise meaning.

In Sanhedrin 97a we are told in very strong terms that it is improper to calculate the year of Moshiach's arrival because if one is wrong, and that time comes and passes without Moshiach coming, then some people will stop believing in Moshiach.

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However, we find that the greatest among our sages did just that. For example, Rashi in his commentary to Daniel 7:25 calculated that Moshiach would come in the year 1405. Ramban in his commentary to B'reishis 2:3 calculated that he would come in 1357. Rav Saadia Gaon in his Emunos VeDeyos (8:3) said it would be in the year 980. Rambam, in his Iggeres Teiman (ch. 3 p. 41), wrote that a tradition in his family held it would be in the year 1210. More recently, the Chasam Sofer (Tshuvos, 6:61) calculated that Moshiach would arrive in 1890 and Malbim (Daniel 12:11-12) calculated 1925. All of these years passed and Moshiach did not come. Why these great scholars were permitted to calculate the year of the coming of Moshiach is for another time. However, we can say with certainty that we do not know when Moshiach will come. We just hope it is soon.

Even in the times of the Gemara they lived with a constant anticipation of the Moshiach. In Avodah Zarah 9b, Rabbi Chanina says that subsequent to 400 years after the Churban one should not buy a field in Israel because when Moshiach comes the field will return to its tribal owner. Similarly, in Eiruvim 43a we are taught that someone who vows to be a Nazir starting on the day that Moshiach comes is forbidden to drink wine like a Nazir on regular days just in case Moshiach has come on that day.

Due to the long and difficult exile, scarcely a century has gone by in which people have not thought that they were experiencing the “birth pangs of Moshiach” – the suffering that will precede his revelation. The massacres in Spain

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during the 15th century leading up to the expulsion of all Jews from Spain in 1492 was widely seen as a sign that Moshiach's arrival was imminent. The devastating pogroms of 1648-9 (Tach VeTat) that so disrupted Jewish settlements in Eastern Europe were also seen as sure signs that Moshiach was on his way. Unfortunately, their hopes for Yemos HaMoshiach did not come true in their day.

May it come soon in our time!

Chapter 2:

Who is the Lubavitcher Rebbe?

The first Lubavitcher Rebbe was R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1746-1812). He was a student of R' Dov Baer (The Maggid of) Mezeritch, who was in turn a student of the Baal Shem Tov. R' Shneur Zalman, the Alter Rebbe, led a group of Chasidim who called their movement Chabad. It was also called Lubavitch, after a town in Lithuania that was at one time the center of the movement. He had an illustrious lineage going back to Rashi and through him to King David.

After the Alter Rebbe's death, his son R' Dovber (1773-1827), the Mittler Rebbe, led the movement. Third in the line of Lubavitcher Rebbes was R' Dovber's nephew, R' Menachem Mendel (1789-1866). He is commonly known as the Tzemach Tzedek after the title of his highly regarded tshuvos (responso). He led the movement through a very difficult time. The Czar in Russia was making life very difficult for Jews and R' Menachem Mendel tried to intervene with the government on behalf of his followers. After R' Menachem Mendel's death, his son R' Shmuel (1834-1882), the Rebbe Maharash, led Lubavitch. In turn,

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his son R' Sholom Dovber (1860-1920), the Rebbe Rashab, took over after him.

In 1920, R' Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson (1880-1950), the Rebbe Rayatz, took over the mantle of leadership of Lubavitch from his father. The Rebbe Rayatz built a strong organizational structure for Lubavitch and began many educational and outreach projects. However, finding himself in communist Russia, he realized that he needed to move his operations to a more hospitable environment. He moved to Warsaw and then, with World War II starting to break out, he settled in America.

After the Rebbe Rayatz, his son-in-law R' Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) became the spiritual leader of Lubavitch. Prior to that, the Rebbe Rayatz was instrumental in bringing the Rebbe out of Russia and, in Warsaw in 1929, married his daughter off to the man who later become the Rebbe. After the marriage, the Rebbe Rayatz began preparing the Rebbe for his important future role.

In 1944, after settling in New York, the Rebbe was appointed the head of Kehos publishing. Through this position he was able to publish and disseminate great works of Torah throughout the world. Two years later he was appointed the head of the Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch through which he zealously established yeshivos throughout the world. Even before he became the official leader of

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Chabad, the Rebbe was already disseminating Torah throughout the world.

On January 28, 1950 (Yud Shvat, 5710) the Rebbe Rayatz passed away and the Rebbe was later appointed his successor. From then on, the Rebbe devoted all his efforts to teaching Torah to all Jews, everywhere in the world. His frequent lectures developed complex insights on Torah that were published by his chasidim and he directed his followers to publish many books and pamphlets as well. All this helped develop a Torah literature on many levels of understanding so that both the beginner and the expert could learn from the Rebbe.

The Rebbe also instituted a very personal but wide web of *shluchim*, emissaries, each of whom was personally sent by the Rebbe to a destination in which to start or strengthen a Chabad community. The *shluchim* were directed to the largest metropolises and the smallest towns, to the most central places and the most obscure areas. Because of the Rebbe's love for every Jew and his sincere desire for Torah to be available to all, he sent emissaries to every corner of the Earth. This wide network of followers has quickly made Lubavitch into the largest segment of Orthodox Jewry in the world.

Building on all of these organizational structures, the Rebbe built a huge empire of outreach and educational centers. His success brought world-wide fame and recognition, even in Gentile circles. Throughout his time of leadership, the
