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*My Rebbe*

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Cover photo: The author receiving a Tanya from the Rebbe  
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## *Chapter 1*

# What Is a Holy Man?

**L**ife as we see it is not all there is. There is more to existence than our physical and material concerns. When we reach above the mundane and seek to connect with a Transcendent Being – that is an act of holiness. Some of us are more holy than others, to be sure. The holy person may be an exalted figure or someone simple – possibly your grocer – but you may feel that he is connected with something “other,” that he is constantly thinking, feeling and experiencing a connection to something beyond our ordinary comprehension.

This is true even when the holy person, the saint, speaks of trivial matters. A great mathematician may talk to a layperson about the simplest elements of arithmetic. Still, the listener can sense – perhaps in the mathematician’s side remarks – that he has a vast amount of knowledge beyond this basic level. One senses it, one feels it. It is true of masters in almost any field of knowledge: a feeling that you experience in their company. A man who has had a full and very adventurous life may talk to us about crossing the street. Yet, if we are perceptive, we feel behind his words that he has crossed rivers and glaciers, climbed mountains and sailed seas.

So it is when a person is saintly. We sense that he or she is attached to a higher realm, or has some knowledge beyond what we

can understand. Holiness lies in the connection, the continuation, into a realm beyond our familiar world.

Words such as “higher,” “above,” and “beyond,” are inadequate in this context, and demonstrate perhaps an unconquerable limitation of language. As we approach the ineffable and the mysterious, words become opaque. Whether all saintly people are connected to the same beyond, however, is a difficult question. It is enough for us to say here that they are connected to the beyond. We have at least the notion of something that is “elsewhere” – something essentially sacred.

The concept of holiness is not confined to traditional Jewish thought; nor are holy people only Jews. An entire book of the Bible tells the story of one such holy man who was not a Jew: Job. His conversation, as presented in Scripture, speaks of the spiritual realm, about a connection beyond the everyday world. Sigmund Freud is not known to have thought he was connected to something beyond the empirical world. Still, he understood that others could experience an “oceanic feeling” – an experience of being as one with a limitless external reality, an immense vastness, an intimation of infinity.<sup>1</sup>

I myself have met holy people, foremost among them the Rebbe. In these holy people, we see the connection with the beyond or hear it more in the spaces between sentences – more so than in their words. As they speak, we understand that there is more above the line and below the line, or in between the lines.

In Jewish thought, the holy person is known as a *tzaddik* – a word with many connotations. The Talmud<sup>2</sup> describes one whose conduct is in accord with religious tradition as a *tzaddik*. Over time, the term has come to mean someone larger than life, a human being with a truly sublime presence. As the seminal work of Chabad *Chasidut*, the *Tanya*, tells us,<sup>3</sup> for the *tzaddik*, spiritual and worldly desires are all connected with the divine.

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1. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002), 11–13.

2. See, for example, Kiddushin 40b.

3. Chapter 10.

We do not ask of a *tzaddik*, “What did he write?” He or she may not have written anything at all, yet still be a *tzaddik*. The question is also not “What did he say?” He may not have said anything worth repeating – and still be a *tzaddik*. The question is even not “What did he do?” Unconnected to a social or religious hierarchy, the essence of a *tzaddik* is in what he is. The essence of being a *tzaddik* is something primordial, like the essence of a precious stone. A precious stone does not have to do anything: it simply exists.

While each of us can strive to connect to holiness, not everyone can merit to be a *tzaddik*, as the Tanya defines the term. There are people who write important books, others who do great deeds and still others who produce pearls of wisdom – all possibly great people, each on his or her own level. But a *tzaddik*, specifically one who is “the foundation of the world,”<sup>4</sup> is likely to have been born a *tzaddik*.<sup>5</sup> In secular terms, the same is true of the genius. Geniuses are born that way, but they nonetheless have to develop their talent. Not everyone born with this potential actually develops into an acclaimed genius. One may have an affinity for beauty and a gift for words, yet remain unrecognized, his contribution merely a stillbirth. As for the *tzaddikim*, perhaps the Almighty scatters all over the world some special “sparks,” people who, if they nurture this gift, evolve in strength and grow into *tzaddikim*.<sup>6</sup>

A group of students once asked the Rebbe the ultimately difficult question, “What does a rebbe do?” The Rebbe answered that the Jewish people are like the earth that contains nature’s treasures hidden underneath. The question is, where to dig? Freud dug in the human soul, and found trash. Adler found big, heavy stones. Contemporary psychiatry searches for ills and traumas that must be uprooted. But when a rebbe digs, he finds gold, silver and diamonds.<sup>7</sup>

Those of us who are not *tzaddikim* need not capitulate, need not give up on the quest for holiness. If we cannot access the saintly on our

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4. Proverbs 10:25.

5. See Tanya, chapter 14.

6. See Yoma 38b.

7. Heard from Zalman Schachter, who witnessed this meeting.

own, we can nevertheless be drawn toward it. In the holy person's light, we are ourselves illuminated and discover our own capacity to illuminate others. A train has only one locomotive; the other cars are connected to it. Together with the locomotive, a car can move somewhere; without it, the car remains in the same place, not moving. For generations, individuals – both simple and sophisticated – have been drawn to chasidic rebbes in order to experience the connection with a different level of being: a higher spiritual world.

*Tzaddikim* cannot be imitated. They are like a rose, or a star. What does a rose do? Or a star? They are there. Wherever they are, they shed a glow. It emanates from their presence: from their smiles, gestures and their very being. This definition of the “*tzaddik*” is perhaps the best introduction to the subject of this book: the seventh Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

## Chapter 2

# The Coming of the Mashiach

To bring the Messiah – known in Hebrew and throughout this book as the Mashiach: this was the Rebbe’s mission and dream. Underlying the Rebbe’s utopian drive was not an escape from the world’s evils. For the Rebbe, bringing the Mashiach meant that humanity would be realigned with justice. It meant that peace would reign and that all the peoples of the world would turn toward a spiritual uplifting.

The Rebbe did not dream of making mere changes, no matter what their scale; he dreamt a far greater dream, of transforming the world entirely. In keeping with traditional Jewish thought, the Mashiach’s coming will signal the beginning of the end of the world<sup>1</sup> – the end of history, but not the end of life. There will be universal justice and peace;<sup>2</sup> our spiritual nature will emerge preeminent;<sup>3</sup> economic inequality and

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1. According to the Talmud (Pesachim 56a), the time of the Mashiach is “the end of days” mentioned in Jacob’s speech in Genesis 49:1, and throughout the Bible.

2. See Isaiah 1:26–27, 2:4.

3. See *ibid.*, 40:5.



physical strife will be no more. Suffering will be alleviated, eventually to be eliminated altogether.<sup>4</sup> The Mashiach's role is to bring redemption for the Jewish people and for all humankind.<sup>5</sup>

Those who seek a better world may dream of redemption; in our time, thinkers have put their hopes in politics, economics and science. In the secular realm, the concept of a savior seems to make no sense; history is destined to continue as it has for millennia. Human nature seems locked in its patterns without chance for change. Even religious and prayerful Jews – those who call for the Mashiach's arrival three times each day – seldom give this possibility much credence. Perhaps we are too caught up in our own material existence. It is this apathy, this skepticism about the possibility of salvation, which was the Rebbe's greatest challenge.

Mentions of the Mashiach are first found in the Bible and widely discussed in the Talmud.<sup>6</sup>

Dating back to earliest times, the word "Mashiach" means simply the anointed one: the anointed leader, the high priest in war, the crowned king. Later, the word Mashiach came to mean the Redeemer. It was the towering, twelfth-century scholar Maimonides who codified Jewish belief on this topic, pulling together much older strands of thought. In a well-organized and lucid text, Maimonides described the messianic age and underscored its importance within Jewish philosophy.<sup>7</sup> The Rebbe himself relied heavily on Maimonides' works.

According to Maimonides, the Mashiach is the one who will bring about a different world structure. Maimonides does not foresee an entirely new and miraculous physical reality. Rather, he describes a reconfigured structure in which the world moves toward a higher level of existence – more orderly, better oriented in life and thought. In the messianic age, the transformed world will be outwardly the same as our own. Time, as we know it, will continue to march on. However, deep changes in social, economic and political structures will enable humanity to develop spiritually. The Mashiach will not just change the global

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4. See *ibid.*, 25:8, 51:3, 35:5.

5. See Zephaniah 3:9.

6. See Isaiah 11:1-5; in the Talmud, see, for example, Tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10.

7. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Their Wars, chapters 11 and 12.

mindset – many great figures in history have done something close to that – but will effect a permanent change, a change that is irreversible.

Prophetic writings vividly describe the changes we can expect during the messianic age. Maimonides reminds us that many of these passages are metaphors and examples and are not always to be taken literally. When Isaiah proclaims that the wolf will lie down with the lamb,<sup>8</sup> he may be telling us something far more important than a change in zoology. Perhaps Isaiah is pointing to an era when strong nations will coexist peacefully with weaker ones. We will not know which images are symbolic and which are prophecies of fact until the messianic age is upon us. In many ways, Maimonides' vision of messianic times is far more profound than our stereotypical, conventional understanding. The time of Mashiach is not about miracles; there will be no extraordinary events outside nature to save us from ourselves.

Using analogies from our physical senses, the prophet Isaiah writes, “Neither with the sight of his eyes shall he judge, nor with the hearing of his ears shall he chastise.”<sup>9</sup> He will be able to smell out what is right and wrong; “With the breath of his lips he shall put the wicked to death.” Unlike powerful rulers of the past, the Mashiach will not depend only on what he sees or hears in making judgments: he will possess higher powers of discernment and understanding. Here Maimonides explains that the Mashiach is not by nature a miracle worker – miracles are entirely beside the point.

According to Maimonides, miracles are not required as proof of the Mashiach's arrival. The Mashiach may indeed perform miracles, but they are not required as proof of his identity. Supra-natural events – the end of poverty, the end of war, the end of injustice – may be only the inevitable result of the massive changes rippling through society. Maimonides spoke about the affluence and peace of the messianic era, which will bring the turn toward spiritual pursuits.

While most people will notice that daily life is changing outwardly, some individuals will find themselves changing inwardly. The Zohar, Jewish mysticism's fundamental work, explains that the biggest

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8. Isaiah 11:6.

9. *Ibid.*, 11:3.

internal changes will be felt by those who are already more spiritually attuned.<sup>10</sup> For everyone else, the real internal transformations may not be so readily seen or understood.

The messianic period is seen as a transitional moment between the world as it is today and the World to Come, “*Olam Haba*” in Hebrew. In the messianic age, history will continue, people will be born, live and die. The time of Mashiach allows humanity to perfect the world as much as it can. When this attempt is complete, *Olam Haba* will begin. The World to Come is a reality radically different from anything we can now recognize. Physical laws of nature will be overturned. Souls that have lived and died in previous ages will be brought back to the world, in what we call the resurrection of the dead. *Olam Haba* is the mirror image of creation and brings the story of humanity to a close.

**Who is the Mashiach?** Maimonides identifies belief in the coming of the Mashiach as one of Judaism’s thirteen principles of faith – but he places no importance at all on the Mashiach’s name and identity. He may arrive in a halo of miracles, as Daniel tell us, “And behold with the clouds of the heaven, one like a man was coming.”<sup>11</sup> Or, in Zechariah’s words, he may be “poor, or lowly and riding upon a donkey.”<sup>12</sup> Either is possible; this is just a detail. We certainly do not know whether he is tall or short, whether he has blue eyes or dark eyes – again, all this is unimportant. While, in Maimonides’ words, the Mashiach may be wiser than Solomon and greater than Moses, these too are not his defining characteristics. However, we do know that the Mashiach will be a son of the Davidic dynasty and able to effect a great, global regeneration. Who the Mashiach is lies only in what he does, in what he can achieve. We will know that the Mashiach has come when he has returned the Jews to the Land of Israel, brought them back to the observance of mitzvot and rebuilt the Temple.

According to the famed fifteenth-century Bible and Mishna commentator, the Bartenura: “In every generation there is a descendant of

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10. Zohar 11:8b.

11. Daniel 7:13.

12. Zechariah 9:9.

David who is worthy to be the Mashiach.”<sup>13</sup> There are always those who have the qualities to become the leader of redemption, even if that possibility is not fulfilled. In each generation, there are potential messiahs. It is not even important that the prospective Mashiach be aware of his latent destiny. This drive for a redemptive figure is part of Jewish history. From the rebel general Bar Kochba in the second century to that secular prophet Karl Marx, we have always sought to identify the possible messianic figures among us.

It is no sin for someone to announce that he is Mashiach. After all, he is not claiming divinity. The would-be messiahs of our past have generally fallen into two categories. Some, like Shabbetai Tzvi, were false messiahs, who made inappropriate and even heretical claims; their acts resulted in destruction and the demoralization of the Jewish people. Others were upright and righteous human beings who simply could not achieve the results expected of the Mashiach. Maimonides writes about these two types, mentioning several people specifically. He dismissed a claimant in Yemen, for instance, as an ignoramus, and another as mentally ill.<sup>14</sup> However of another prospective messiah, a scholar in Spain, Maimonides speaks very respectfully.

**Is it worthwhile to be born? Is the world worth saving?** The Talmud records a discussion among the sages: is it better to have been born or never to have lived at all? Seen from the human perspective, the Talmud concludes that the soul would be better off staying with the Almighty.<sup>15</sup> In the poignant words of Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers: “For against your will you are formed, against your will you are born, against your will you live.”<sup>16</sup> A famous song about the soul – its theme is also the leitmotif of Ansky’s play, *The Dybbuk* – goes, in the Chabad version, “When the soul descends into the world, it cries bitterly: How did I fall from a high roof into a deep cistern?” The answer: “It is a descent in order to ascend, until everything is worthwhile.”

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13. In his commentary to the book of Ruth.

14. In his *Epistle to Yemen*.

15. Eruvin 13b.

16. Mishna, Avot 4:22.

The song begs the question: what was God's purpose in creating us? Why did He create the universe and life as we know it? Based on the kabbalistic tradition, *Chasidut* defines the purpose of God in the world as "having His abode in the lower realm":<sup>17</sup> He wants His presence to be known and felt by us. In this view, we can never know why God has chosen this course; we can only know what the purpose is. As we say in the *Aleinu* prayer, the Almighty has given us the task of perfecting the world (*tikkun olam*) under His kingship. We were created to serve the Almighty. In the messianic era – as all humanity acknowledges God's supremacy and turns to Him in worship – His purpose will have been fulfilled.

It is for this reason that Judaism believes in the importance of progress. It is useless for history simply to repeat itself. In each era, our mission is to improve and perfect. The prophet Isaiah tells us that the messianic moment will arrive "in its time; I will hasten it."<sup>18</sup> When the time is right for the Mashiach to act – when we have done all we can – God will redeem us. The timing of Mashiach's arrival is in our hands; the work is ours to do. None of us is exempt from this universal mission. The completion of the world, its elevation into holiness and the elimination of evil: these tasks belong to all of us. In this way, we achieve God's purpose in creating humanity.

Chasidic thought here rests on an ancient mystical tradition: the world is imperfect because God is hidden. It is true that – whether revealed or hidden – the Almighty is everywhere. A Godly spark resides within everything in creation. To give us room to act, however, God disguises Himself, as it were. God is hiding so that we can find Him. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev used to sing that he was playing hide-and-seek with God – and would find Him everywhere. Step by step, act by act, each good deed we do elevates the world and helps to reveal God's presence. When a person takes parchment made of a cow's skin and writes the Torah upon it, that act elevates the cow to holiness. Food that is prepared in a kosher way is sanctified and brings the sacred into the world. Using the internet for Torah study makes the latest technology a part of God's service. Our great work is to connect these deeds, to live

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17. Tanya, chapter 36.

18. Isaiah 60:22.

our lives so completely that every action we take brings us closer to God, to holiness and to redemption. It was Maimonides who sketched for us the persona and the era of the Mashiach. But, in our times, it was the Lubavitcher Rebbe who animated this idea and understood its urgency in our own time. The Rebbe encouraged everyone to take on one good deed after another and to turn the arrival of the Mashiach from a vague hope into the marching orders for redemption.