A Face to Believe In

Contemporary Pictorial Images of Orthodox Rabbis and What They Represent

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> It is precisely here that "invisible nature" becomes in a special way visible, incomparably more visible than through all the other things that have been made.
>
> Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, §2

Drawing on a customary interpretation of the demands of the biblical prohibition against "graven images," there is among Orthodox Jews, and particularly the haredi variant of Orthodoxy, a long tradition of not making use of human images. In a residue of this attitude, one can still find haredi Orthodox Jews who shy away from having their photo taken. Nevertheless, likenesses of rabbis and holy men have over the years increasingly made their way into the realm of the permissible, especially in the realm of popular culture, where the visual plays a large and increasingly important role.[1] Such images appear ever more often in a variety of contemporary posters, paintings, and other visual collectibles accepted and even endorsed by the Orthodox (including the haredi) Jewish population. They are to be seen everywhere, from the walls of private homes or synagogues and yeshiva study halls, to the decorations in the sukkah, on bumper stickers, and even on cards and stickers to be packed in a wallet or affixed to a car's dashboard. Young Orthodox children have taken to collecting and trading "rebbe cards" and stickers that they glue into a seemingly endless array of albums. Kiosks, Jewish bookstores, and even photo shops in Orthodox neighborhoods often

1. For a history of this, see Richard I. Cohen, *Jewish Icons* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), especially the chapter entitled "The Rabbi as Icon," 115–53.

Figure 1: Storefront, Jerusalem (photo by author)

Figure 2: Storefront, Jerusalem (photo by author)

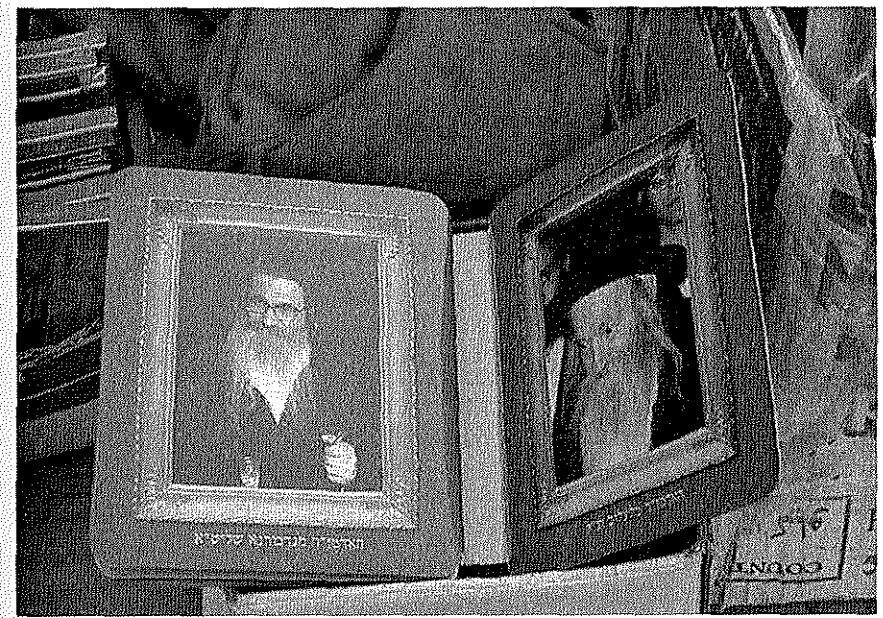

Figure 3: Storefront, Jerusalem (photo by author)

display and offer portraits of rabbis for sale (fig. 1). Storekeepers often prominently post pictures of such holy men in their establishments, affixing them next to amulets, lucky notes of currency, or printed stock prayers (fig. 2). Indeed, the promulgation of these images of rabbis from all groups among the Orthodox by "entrepreneurial individuals looking for ways of extending their livelihoods" as well as by "institutions in promoting their designs" has been behind "the popularization of the rabbi's" images from almost the beginning until today.[2] Yet beyond this economic incentive there remains the conviction that teachings and writings of the rabbis are not enough; an image or portrait is also needed by the devout. It is as if the invisible nature of religion or even holiness can, through the possession of the image, somehow become incomparably more visible and accessible. This is obviously based on the assumption that somehow the rabbi's likeness is the face of faith. The portrait becomes a revered possession.

Among Hasidim, where the association with the idea of the *tsaddik* or rabbinic holy man is an essential component of ideology, few if any followers of a particular rabbi do not have a likeness of him in their homes. The two photos in figure 3, one of the leader of the

2. Ibid., 123.

Figure 4: Storefront, Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

Nadvorna Hasidim *(left)* and the other of the Lalov Hasidim, are typical of countless such portraits.

These images are collected because the devout assume, as Richard Cohen has argued, that "through seeing the rabbi one could derive a certain security and inspiration."[3] Lubavitcher Hasidim, perhaps the most widely familiar such group, devoted powerfully to their seventh and most recent leader or Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, whom many view as the Messiah, in particular collect and display his image. This may in part also be explained by the fact that they have as yet not replaced him and continue to consider him their active leader. The presence of his image before them helps sustain this belief. Throughout their precincts, accordingly, his image is ubiquitous, for sale as a memento or as a source of encouragement; it is considered the sine qua non of a Lubavitcher home, as revealed by the miniature tableau of knickknacks and inspirational ornaments for the home on sale in Crown Heights seen in figure 4. Indeed, while there is no way to know for certain, his image seems to have become even more valued and omnipresent since his death in 1994.

In a parallel fashion, many non-Hasidic yeshiva graduates have taken to keeping and displaying a picture of the head of their school.

3. Ibid., 117.

Figure 5: (above left) Eliezer Shach, (right) Baba Sali, (below left) Ovadia Yosef, (right) the Rebbe of Gur (art by Vladimir Mnev)

This is not only true for the traditionalist Orthodox, for whom Rabbi Eliezer Shach (fig. 5), the late long-time head of the Ponovez Yeshiva in Israel's Bnai Brak (his image appears in fig. 1 as one of the photographs for sale), is a hero, but also for hasidim as well as Jews of Sephardic origins. For others, it is the late Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, the revered adjudicator of Jerusalem's Sha'arei Chesed (whose image appears in fig. 2). For many a graduate of the Isaac Elchanan Seminary of Yeshiva University, a picture of the late Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, perhaps the most illustrious of its teachers, stands prominently on view among his possessions. Undeniably, the possession of such images iconically expresses the desire to hold one's teacher near, a desire that grows after the death of the teacher, a fact certainly true in the case of Rabbi Soloveitchik (about which more below).

In the precincts of Sephardic Jewry, and particularly those who hail from Middle Eastern or North African origins, images of rabbis and holy men are quite common. Pictures today of the late Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzeira of Morocco, the Baba Sali ("our praying father" in Arabic), or the Sephardic kabbalists Rabbi Mordecai Sharabi and Yitzhak Kedourie are widespread and immensely popular. In addition, images of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, spiritual head of the Shas movement and a former Rishon Le-Zion, are an almost obligatory prop in every Sephardic public place. For others, the late Rabbi Meir Yehuda Getz, the self-styled rabbi of the Western Wall who took to dressing all in white as a symbol of the priests who once ministered at the Temple Mount, has become the face of faith in the rebuilding of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and the end of history. For many

Jews, particularly Hasidim, as already noted, but increasingly other Orthodox Jews as well, and especially those from the Middle East and North Africa, who have a long tradition of belief in holy men, likenesses of these rabbis are treated as instrumentalities of the intermediation with heaven that the persons whom they depict are presumed to provide.[4] That is, looking at their teachers (or images of them) will, this interpretation argues, remind them of what it is that the "Supreme Teacher" demands of them—perhaps even stimulate that miraculous connection between believer, rabbi/intermediary, and God.

Finally, the creation of certain stock images of historically esteemed rabbis, whose true appearance remains a mystery, in the image of rabbis of the present has transformed some of these representations into what appear to be prefigurations of the contemporary Orthodox rabbi. In this imagination, the fifteenth-century rabbi Don Isaac Abarbanel can be made to look like a contemporary Sephardic rabbi and vice versa, or the Lithuanian Vilna Gaon can be made to look like one of today's haredim.[5] In effect, this process visually articulates a common aspect of Orthodox ideology: the contemporary claim to continuity between the past and present, the assertion that the Orthodox live now as traditional Jews lived in the past, and that in every aspect the Orthodox are true today to what was true yesterday. All this of course falls under the heading of "visual idealization."

Getting Around the Prohibition on Graven Images

Visual idealization, of course, is a conceptualization that has helped the Orthodox get past the time-honored Jewish prohibition against graven images. While this is not the place to trace the process of and the reasons for the growing and undeniable popularity of such pictures of rabbis, one must note that like so much else that has changed within the domains of Orthodoxy, which claims a particular fidelity to tradition, the practice of making and displaying such images has been rationalized (albeit ex post facto) by a suggestion that, the prohibition on graven images notwithstanding, Scripture and Jewish sources may actually approve having such likenesses. Thus, while in the past pictures were viewed as tantamount to idol worship,[6] a common contemporary justification for such images, whether photos or other likenesses, is offered by citing Isa. 30:20–21: "And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall thy teacher not be removed into a corner any more, but *thine eyes shall see thy teacher* and thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it" (*The Holy Scriptures*, trans. M. Friedlander, 1966). While these verses ostensibly speak metaphorically of the promise of God's—the teacher in the verse—ultimate grace to Israel, a variety of commentators have interpreted them as referring to a way that humankind can appeal to God via the intermediation of those who teach his ways.[7] Among the haredi Orthodox who may still have some misgivings about the use of graven images (in principle if not in fact), this justification for the legitimacy of images is often overlaid on the images themselves. This is manifest in the image shown in figure 6, used as a decoration for the home, which portrays five of the immortal scholars of the last two hundred years of Ashkenazi Jewish life. To the public who purchases this print (found for sale in New York's Satmar Hasidic enclave of Williamsburg but available in many Orthodox districts), these five rabbinic images (of an imagined scene, for these rabbis lived in different places and at different times and never sat for a joint portrait) are familiar, close to iconographic. Written across the bottom, in Hebrew, are the words "and thine eyes shall see thy teacher."

In some cases, where the image of the rabbis is not immediately familiar, they may be identified by articles of clothing or by their juxtaposition with an object or series of objects whose propinquity helps explain who these men are and what makes them rabbis. That

4. See Yoram Bilu and Eyal Ben-Ari, "The Making of Modern Saints: Manufactured Charisma and the Abu-Hatseiras of Israel," *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 4 (1992): 29–44.

5. "Lithuanian" here refers to the yeshiva rabbis who are non-Hasidic but haredi in orientation.

6. See, for example, Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah hilkhot avodat kokhavim* 3:9, who writes, "Making an icon or any picture are one and the same idol worship."

7. See, for example, Rashi on Num. 23:23 or *Meṣudat David* on Isa. 30:20. The logic here parallels the attitudes that have evolved regarding visiting graves. While the tradition began by prohibiting prayer to the dead or ancestors as a form of idol worship, the practice of praying at the graves of *tsaddikim* or holy men or at the graves of martyrs or ancestors has becomes accepted and even endorsed as a way of using the help of these as intermediaries to God. See S. C. Heilman, *When a Jew Dies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

Figure 6: Poster, provenance unknown, Williamsburg, Brooklyn (photo by author)

is certainly the case in figure 7, in which five rabbis stand, before the synagogue ark, around open volumes of the Talmud lying on the lectern and, with telephones in their hands, presumably offering instruction and guidance to those on the other end of the line who seek to be connected to an understanding of the Talmud. The combination of synagogue, ark, sacred books, pulpit, telephone, and rabbis tells us in an instant what, in the contemporary Orthodox view, the rabbi can be expected to do.

Accordingly, pictures of rabbis have been used for inspirational purposes or as a vehicle for religious help. This is not altogether different from the ways amulets have been used.[8] Others, who may not use the likenesses for purely religious purposes, have turned such pictures into decorations or even glosses on texts. That can be seen in the use of the poster of the rabbis in figure 6 to offer a new understanding of the words from Isaiah, which, as the image makes clear, can refer to rabbis who act on behalf of the "Supreme Teacher," God. In some cases, they also made them markers of identity, so that

8. That this is not peculiar to Jews but even more developed among Christians—both in the past and today—is demonstrated by Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 114ff.

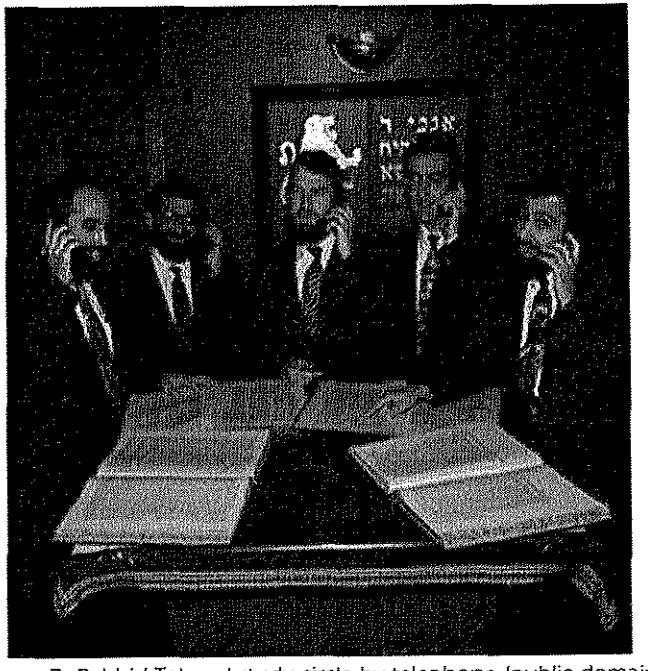

Figure 7: Rabbis' Talmud study circle by telephone (public domain)

the pictures take on symbolic and iconic elements. Such images are, as I shall try to show, also subject to manipulation. For example, when displaying a picture of a particular rabbi becomes not just a representation of him but serves as a means of expressing an attachment to a particular set of beliefs or a kind of approach to Judaism that have become associated with that rabbi, the image becomes a kind of synecdoche for broader issues of religious outlook, a kind of icon in which a part, the image, is metonymically used to stand for the whole.[9] In other words, a shorthand way of demonstrating allegiance to or identification with a particular way of life, a community, or a series of beliefs is to simply publicly display or at the very least possess and value a picture of a rabbi whose association with these is well known. In the simplest version of this, such a likeness can be reduced to a simple sign. In the case of a storefront, the picture tells passers-by precisely and efficiently whom the sellers expect to serve in this store.

9. See Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, "Monkey as Metaphor? Transformations of a Polytropic Symbol in Japanese Culture," *Man*, n.s., 25 (1990): 89–107. See also Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), esp. 14.

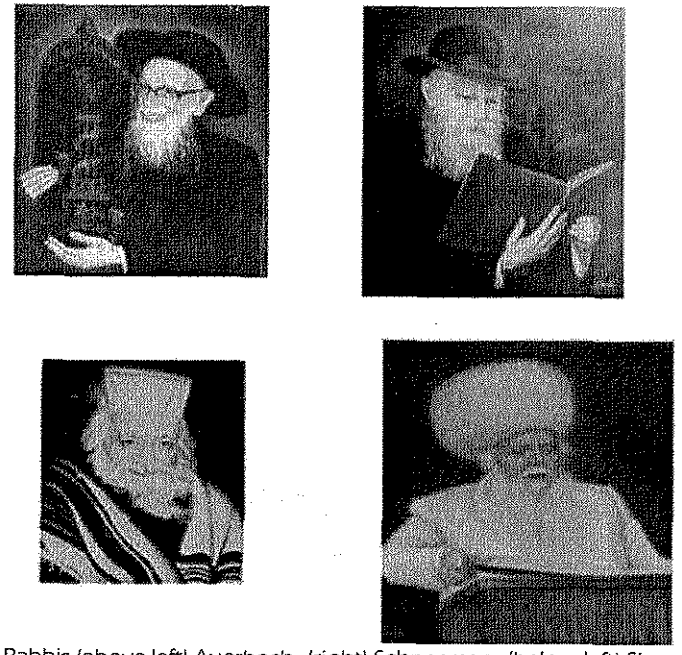

Figure 8: Rabbis (above left) Auerbach, (right) Schneerson, (below left) Sharabi, (right) Getz (art by Vladimir Mnev; http://rabbis-art.20m.com/portrait%20gallery1.htm)

Some Basic Elements of Style

First some words about how the image must appear. There is a uniformity of style in many of these pictures. Most common is a likeness that stresses the face, perhaps on the assumption that the face is the mirror of the soul. And, of course, the face is perhaps the most salient element for distinguishing one person from another (although, as figure 8 makes clear, this may require a special ability to get past the common facial features of the rabbis in question). In these "head shots," the rabbi is almost always wreathed in a beard, earlocks, and head covering, or else wearing or holding something that suggests a Jewish association, in many cases an Orthodox kind of connection. To be sure, each community among the Orthodox Jews has its own elements that must be inserted into the image of the face shot. Thus the yeshivish or Lithuanian group presents an image that often includes the particular square yarmulke or hat associated with their rabbis, or some other indexical element of piety, such as a

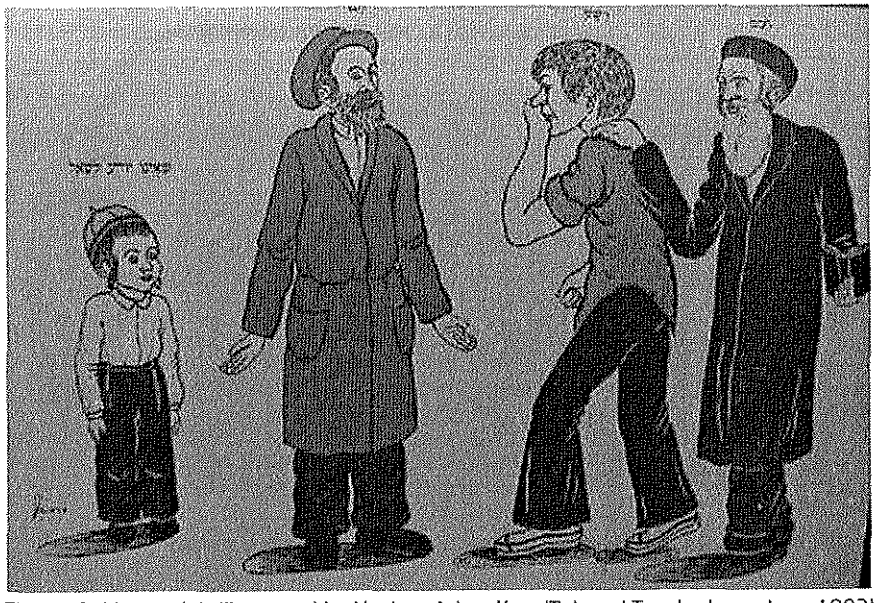

Figure 9: Haggadah illustrated by Yaakov Asher Kop (Talmud Torah, Jerusalem, 1983)

book.[10] A picture of a traditional Sephardic rabbi may include a turban or robe. A picture of a Hasidic rabbi will stress the earlocks or *shtraymel* (fur hat) and occasionally the white *kittel* (cassock or chemise worn on the High Holy Days, Passover, and upon burial). In the case of Lubavitcher Hasidim, the standard black fedora favored by the late Seventh Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson is essential, and among haredim in general the face is always topped by a black hat (fig. 8). In some images, a sharp contrast is even drawn between the rabbi and those who do not measure up to him, as for example in figure 9, an illustration from a haredi edition of the Passover Haggadah for children, showing the four sons. The wise son is clearly the rabbi who holds the book and wears the square yarmulke.

These images are not only descriptive; they are also prescriptive. As such they serve not only as models of the rabbi, but also as models for what a rabbi (and those who wish to emulate him) should look like. To be sure, the purveyors and consumers of these images have shaped the character of the visualizations, leading to a great deal of stereotyping and similarity. Thus it is no longer clear whether the images reflect or project what people believe the face of faith should be.

Where there are props, they are commonly those associated with

10. See Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 120.

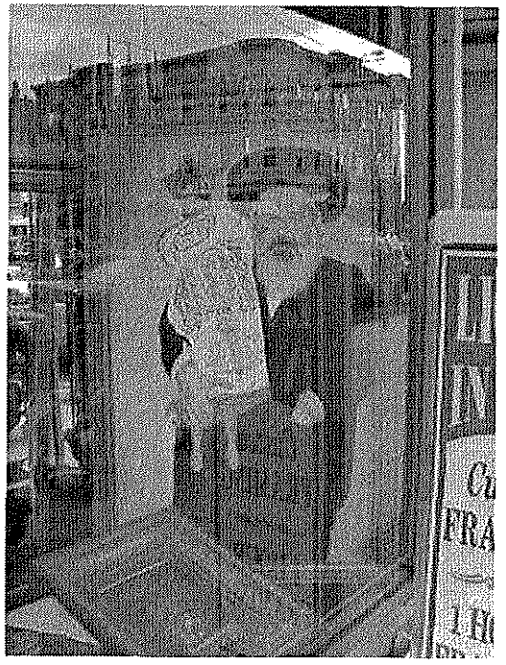

Figure 10: Storefront, Boro Park, Brooklyn (photo by author)

Jewish practice. These include Torah scrolls, palm branches (*lulav*), menorahs, prayer shawls (*tallit*), a variety of holy books, a study table, and hats of various sorts. The impression is that the rabbi is associated with these objects. By virtue of their repeated use many of these objects have become conventions of the genre (fig. 10). That is, they have become iconic, almost indexical, serving as a kind of "standardized symbol."[11] Perhaps the most common of these iconic juxtapositions is the Torah and the Rabbi, with the latter commonly holding the former, as if the two constitute a single sacred entity. The image suggests in an economical and instantaneous way that as we venerate the one, so we venerate the other. The vocabulary of holiness is simple, well known, and not subject to very much variation. It must be immediately transparent.

Variations on this theme can of course be played out. Figure 7, in which the rabbis stand around the Talmud holding phones to their ears suggesting the link to those "studying Torah" with them over the wire, implies that the rabbis are the link connecting the great Talmud tradition to the world on the other end of the line. In this

11. Leach, *Culture and Communication*, 15.

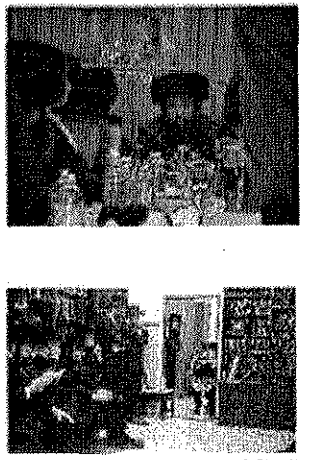

Figure 11: : Surrounded by disciples: the Admor of Skolia (above, photo by author); the Admor of Biale (below, photo by Yaakov Kaszemacher)

case the idea that "thine eyes shall see thy teacher and thine ears shall hear a word" is of course given a new twist, yet still to some extent echoing the sentiments seen in the image of the five immortals in figure 6.

Depicting Charisma

Yet another motif in these pictures is to group the rabbi with others. In some pictures, the rabbi is shown at the head of a table or engaged in some ritual activity, surrounded by followers or disciples, indicating his position as a teacher, leader, and source of inspiration (fig. 11). The expressions of the disciples in the picture, moreover, help the viewer perceive the rabbi; they offer a guide for how he must be acclaimed and approached. In other words, the picture is once again an illustration of how to respond to the rabbi. The spiritual and numinous quality of the rabbi is of course reinforced by seeing him venerated in the image itself. These sorts of images in a sense assist in what Yoram Bilu and Eyal Ben-Ari have called "manufactured charisma."[12]

In the group picture, the "holy assembly" may also consist of other rabbis, with whom an association is symbolically made by vir-

12. Bilu and Ben-Ari, "Making of Modern Saints."

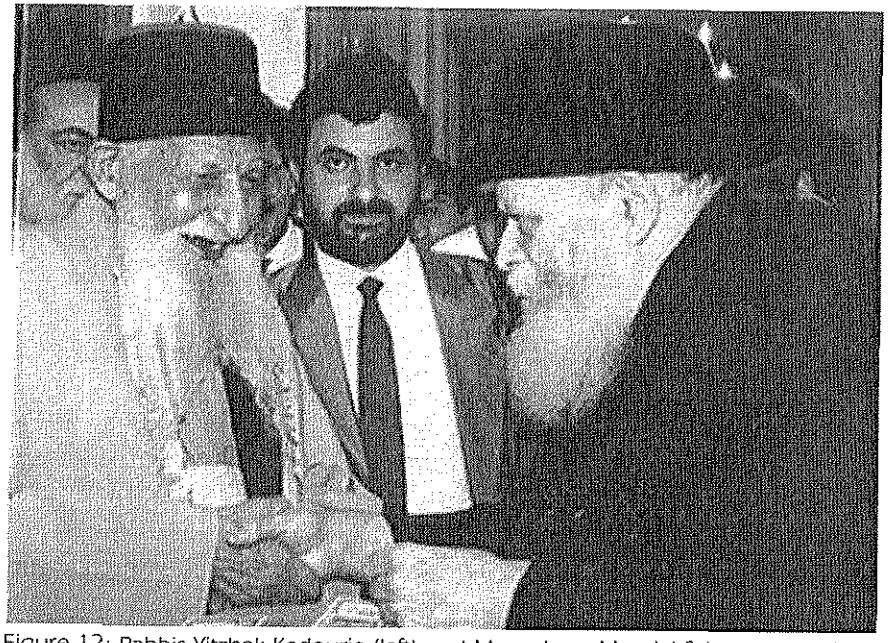

Figure 12: Rabbis Yitzhak Kedourie (left) and Menachem Mendel Schneerson (photo courtesy M. Zeitouni)

tue of the picture. In some cases the assembly is a representation of an actual encounter: a handshake, an exchanged conversation, a walk in tandem. In figure 12, with Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch shaking the hand of Rabbi Yitzhak Kedourie, the not so implicit message is that a relationship exists or existed between the people in the picture. And when the people in question symbolically represent two communities or approaches to Judaism, in this case Sephardic and Hasidic, the image of the meeting between them can also be used to represent a meeting, an association, between these two communities. Indeed, the existence of such images, particularly if they are real (rather than manipulated) photographs—that is, hard evidence that the meeting actually occurred—can serve as the basis of an alliance or even a reinterpretation of legitimacy. Thus a warm handshake between the kabbalist Rabbi Kedourie and the Hasidic messianist Rabbi Schneerson hints at the respect that each point of view has for the other, a reverence that the followers of each rabbi then may legitimately express for the practices and outlooks of the other. Moreover, for those invested in the mythical and mystical, this meeting of the two great lights is viewed as an occasion of cosmic significance.

To be sure, the image in and of itself is not sufficient, but it can serve as an opening for a syncretistic association between Ashkenazi *Hasidism and Sephardic Kabbalism*, which to some degree seem to be competing for the hearts and minds of the faithful.[13] Moreover, such an image can be used to justify the veneration of these two very different figures by the followers of each, without those followers having to bear the responsibility of abandoning their heightened devotion to their community or rabbi. In the context of the competition for followers, which is particularly powerful where the Orthodox of various persuasions share adjacent territories or common enclaves (as is so often the case in the contemporary world), or where mobility is so high that followers of one rabbi can easily find themselves in the precincts of another, such pictures ease competitive tensions among the faithful. This is particularly true of the sometimes growing, sometimes waning tensions between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. The images of a meeting and friendship between their symbolic leaders may be a kind of visible record of détente or accord between the groups—not unlike the famous pictures of Soviet leaders and American presidents shaking hands, or of Jimmy Carter, Anwar el-Sadat, and Menachem Begin at Camp David.

Sometimes the association among the rabbis is not actual but rather suggested by means of some framing device. Thus a common practice is to create a kind of pantheon of heroes on a single page or in a series, suggesting a relationship of equivalence or similarity, a shared charisma. The message here is that all in the set are comparable in some way. For example, "rebbe cards" or stickers, which have become popular among children in the haredi world—much as baseball or superhero cards are among their non-Orthodox peers—suggest such associations and equivalences. Thus, for example, in the typical series of stickers seen in figure 13, we see that Rabbi Eliahu, the Gaon of Vilna, and Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzeira are by virtue of this grouping in one set, along with the various rabbis of Zvhil, Spinka, Pittsburgh, Vihznitz, Biale, Erloi, Chernobyl and Machnovka, made members of the pantheon of holy rabbis. Obviously the images have been adapted so that there is a kind of visual similarity, including giving the Moroccan Abuhatzeira and the eighteenth-century Vilna Gaon a visage and features that are similar to the other,

13. To be sure, Hasidism and Kabbalism are connected; but during their development of a cadre of followers over the twentieth century, they have carved out competing or at least politically and socially distinct constituencies.

Figure 13: Drawing of the eighteenth-century Gaon of Vilna (top, 2nd from left) between twentieth-century photos of Hasidic rabbis of Vizhnitz and Chernobyl. Olam Ha-Rabaynu Album (Brooklyn: Bais HaSefer Books, n.d.)

more contemporary Orthodox rabbis. The message here, in part, is that there is continuity between yesterday and today, between the holy rabbis of the Sephardic tradition and those of the Ashkenazic. All can share in a common charisma.

In general, and certainly among the haredi Orthodox, especially those who come from the Middle Eastern tradition of venerating holy men, the idea has emerged that there is a pantheon of rabbis, all of whom are somehow part of a select and elect class of beings. Hence, the way the images have been framed or composed (often by cropping out elements that would suggest variations among the figures) creates enough of a common element in all of them to make them seem as if they are part of an identical series. This consolidates the face of faith. As such it moves in the conservative direction of the haredi worldview, a view that suggests that different is dangerous while conformity is desirable. Or, as one poster puts it: these are the *tsaddikim*, the righteous ones, and those who look upon them will be joyful—perhaps blissful—that they are all as one (fig. 14). That is to say, those who see the *tsaddikim* all as one will find joy in this vision.

This sort of association by framing, however, can only propose or imply a bond. In an effort to go further than this, some images have been created that take rabbis who lived at different times and represent them as sharing a space in a kind of meta-historical fashion. In this way, history is rewritten, time is shredded, and a virtual relationship is created that ignores or perhaps remakes historical realities. Generally such representations take the form of paintings—

Figure 14: Boro Park, Brooklyn (photo by author)

Figure 15: Poster of Satmar Hasidic rabbis, Williamsburg, Brooklyn (photo by author)

particularly when the immortals are those who were never photographed. This is not unlike the images with which Americans are familiar that depict Presidents Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt together or the thinking that probably moved the sculptor Gutzon Borglum to choose the images for Mount Rushmore.

When a similar combination places a contemporary rabbi in the visual company of others who preceded him, particularly where the latter are among the revered "immortals," the clear effort and implication is to endow a contemporary with the aura of shared charisma with the "immortal." This is undoubtedly behind the effort of some contemporary supporters of former president Ronald Reagan to have his visage added to Mount Rushmore.

In figure 15, an attempt is made to combine three generations of rebbes of the Satmar dynasty, including the previous and current leaders along with one son of the present leader. While there is no effort here to "fool" the informed viewer who knows, for example, that three generations of the same family did not sit side by side for this portrait, the picture sends the message that those imagined in it constitute "a single group," *agudah aḥat* spiritually, ideologically, or charismatically. In this case, there is also a political agenda, for there remains great controversy in the Satmar court as to which son of the

Figure 16: : Rabbis Ovadia Yosef, Aryeh Deri, and Yitzhak Kedourie (left to right), on a poster in a store window, Boro Park, Brooklyn (photo by author)

current rebbe will inherit the leadership. This picture asserts that the dark-haired younger man in this illustration is the heir apparent, doing so by visually bonding him with the two other rebbes, and eliminating any visual sign of his brother, the other claimant to the throne.

The capacities of manipulation that modern digital imaging allows has of course made it possible now to create virtual photos of gatherings that never really took place and make it look as if they did. The mechanism of grouping can also enable a younger rabbi to share the charisma of older immortals as a vehicle for empowering or ennobling the former. Thus, for example, figure 8 inserts the young Rabbi Aryeh Deri, who at the time this tableau was made was the jailed and disgraced hero of the Shas (Sephardic Torah Guardians) Party and many of its non-member supporters, who constitute a kind of second Israel, between images of rabbis Ovadia Yosef and Yitzhak Kedourie, both of whom are considered saintly and revered by the same population. It asserts a relationship (if not an equivalence) that lifts his fallen star back into the firmament of the immortals. (Indeed, the three rabbis seem to be set against the backdrop of

Figure 17: Poster found in Williamsburg, Brooklyn (photo by author)

Heaven.) As the new generation of leadership of the Satmar Hasidim is asserted by the one image, the next generation of Sephardic immortals is projected in the other.

Visually playing with time is part of what is going on here. Figure 15 above also seems to say that there is no earlier and later, but only one grand metahistorical present: a fundamentalist attitude that is a preconception of many of those who embrace traditional Judaism. This theme is even more vivid in figure 8, which is quasi-historical, seeking to recreate a mythical scene in Marienbad, an Austrian spa that became a favorite retreat for rabbis and the place where the third great convocation of Agudat Israel took place in 1937 on the eve of the Shoah, a gathering which in retrospect has come to be romanticized by some Orthodox as a golden moment of Orthodox Judaism, a moment when Hasidim and mitnagdim came together as one,[14] an event represented in and by this hagiographic drawing and metahistorical poster. One sees as well in figure 8 a scene reproduced in a haredi children's Haggadah, a scene of another golden and

14. This was also a convocation that took a position opposing Zionism, a position today championed by the Satmar Hasidim and their late Rebbe Rabbi Yoelish Teitelbaum, shown here leading the parade. This too is part of the hidden message of this poster and the image it presents.

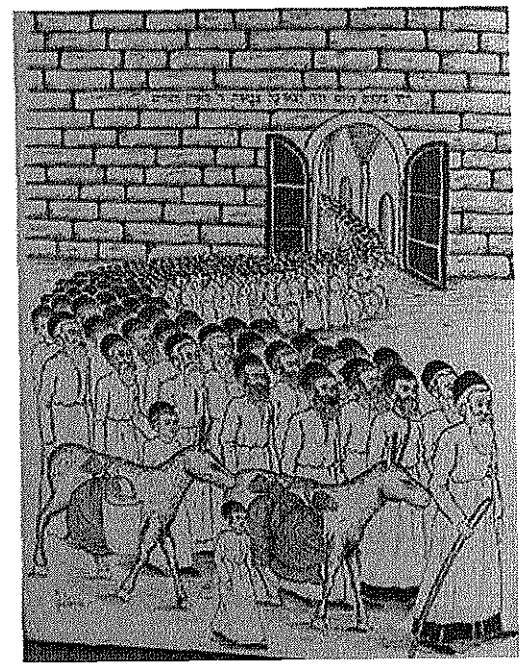

Figure 18: Haggadah illustrated by Yaakov Asher Kop (Talmud Torah, Jerusalem, 1983)

mythical moment. In this visual imagination, all the Jews who experienced the Exodus were rabbis with long beards.

Oh, Joy

Face shots, as already noted, are among the most popular of images of the rabbis. Truncating the rest of the body seems to suggest the mind or spirit is the essential to be visually considered.[15] While generally they offer views that are severe, serious, or pious, there are occasions when the visage shown is one that is apparently joyful. Generally, this sort of expression is incorporated into the image when the essence of the character of the rabbi and the group he leads is perceived as having a particular attachment to delight and happiness. Thus, for example, pictures of the late Bobover Rebbe and of a current and popular community leader among the Breslover Hasidim are represented as smiling rabbis. In figure 8, the Bobover Rebbe, a leader recently deceased at the time this image was put on

15. See Cohen, *Jewish Icons*, 127.

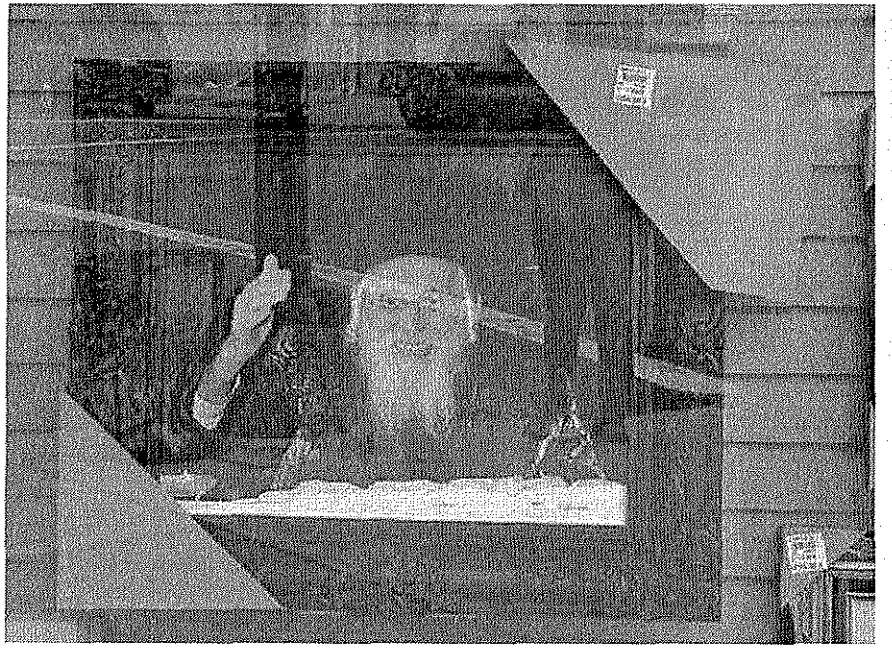

Figure 19: Storefront, Boro Park, Brooklyn (photo by author)

display throughout the Brooklyn neighborhood of Boro Park where he lived and where the bulk of his followers still reside, reflects the pleasant demeanor of this man who was known for his joie de vivre. His smiling visage seems to gaze out from the beyond and wave goodbye to those of his followers who mourned his passing but celebrated his life. It was a picture that many of them were quick to purchase.

Similarly, the wallet photo (fig. 8) of a joyful Breslover Hasidic leader (which constitutes the reverse side of an amulet that informs believers of the need to recite the Hebraic formula that overlays the card whenever they are afraid: "all the world knows that I am Na, Nach, Nachma, Nachman from Uman") reflects a central tenet of Breslov Hasidic culture and belief: the need to go through life fearlessly and with delight.

Doing Jewish

As we have already seen, there are, in addition to the more common face portraits, a number of "action shots." Generally, the "action" in question consists of some patently Jewish activity. As we have

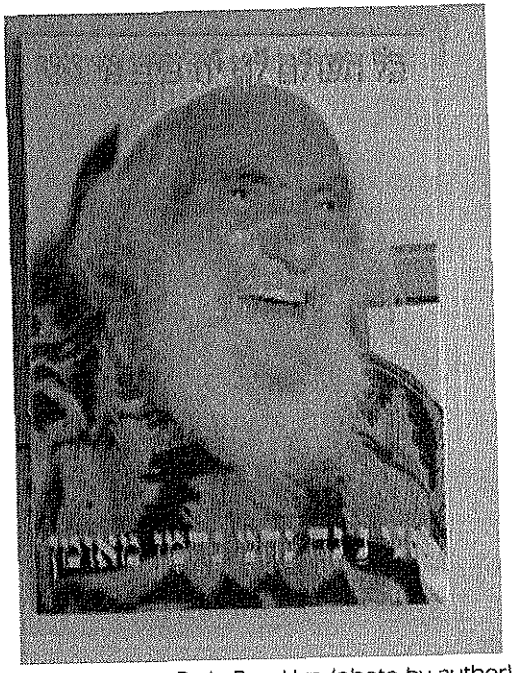

Figure 20: Boro Park, Brooklyn (photo by author)

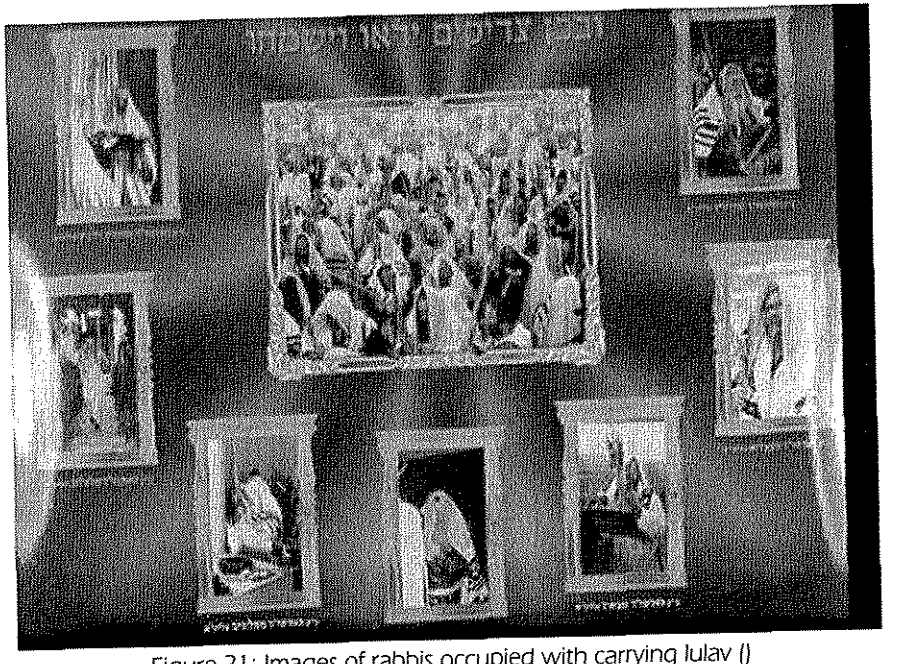

Figure 21: Images of rabbis occupied with carrying lulav (

seen, this includes prayer, study, the handling of ritual objects, and occasionally (particularly among Hasidim) dancing, hand-clapping, or displays of piety. When the rabbi is shown in full figure, he is always made to appear to be on the way to somewhere or otherwise occupied, as if to indicate that he is not one to stand about idly. Note particularly in figure 8, an assembly of scenes from the festival of Sukkot, the series of what are called *admorim*, an acronym for "our master, teacher, and rabbi," the picture *(far left center)* of Lalover Rebbe with his palm branch or *lulav*, in which the subject is shown walking at a deliberate pace presumably toward the synagogue to perform his sacred duty. Similarly we see the other rabbis all at prayer with palm branches in hand and prayer shawl over them in displays of piety.

Manipulations

I have already indicated that these images are subject to manipulation. I would now like to focus on three examples of image-tampering in order to illustrate a typical variety of such manipulations.[16] These are efforts to make pictures evocative. In some cases the manipulation of the image seeks to evoke and suggest certain qualities about the person depicted. In other cases, the manipulation endeavors to iconically turn an image into a symbol or visual synecdoche, a shorthand figure that can stand for something more complex. Finally, sometimes the manipulation is a combination of these two: to evoke feelings about the one pictured while turning that image into a synecdoche that will do so for all who view it. In some cases, viewers for whom these figures are in some way role models may even take elements of the appearance and try to emulate them, so that what is a convention in the pictorial image may become a convention of appearance. Thus the picture becomes, as we have already seen, not just a model of what a rabbi looks like but a model for what he should look like. One last point needs to be made. Many of these images draw and borrow from the vocabulary of photographic conventions, yet it is the ways they use these conventions that tell us about the messages imbedded in them.

16. Tampering with images is as old as collecting them. See ibid., 139.

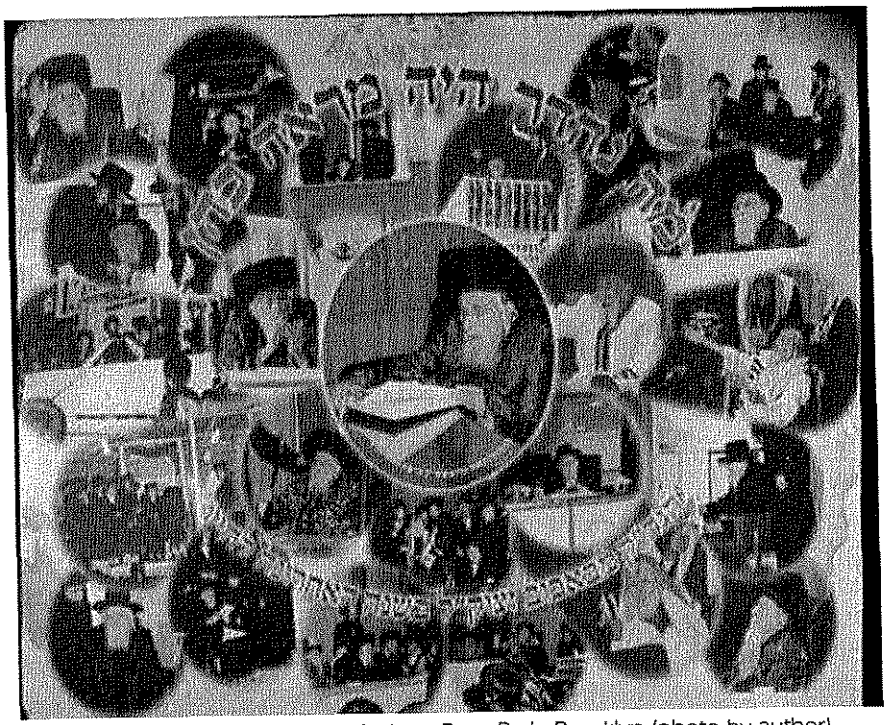

Figure 22: Poster in store window, Boro Park, Brooklyn (photo by author)

The Bobover

Consider first a poster (fig. 22) comprising a collage of images of the late Bobover Rebbe, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam. Produced in the weeks and months after his death and purporting to evoke the last year of his life, it shows him in a variety of scenes, all surrounding what is claimed to be the last picture taken of him alive. In several of the scenes he is shown being waited on and ministered to by his aides and disciples. In others he is shown seated at a "rebbe's *tish*," the ceremonial gathering during which the Hasidim and the rabbi break bread together and reaffirm their connections to one another in the context of a ritual meal and religious occasion. Often he is shown performing some ritual activity, in prayer, or offering words of teaching. Sometimes he is shown clapping his hands, a common pose for a man who was known to enjoy seeing his disciples in dance and joy. And of course he is seen seated with his sons, including the eldest, Naftali Zvi, who would become his successor.

The poster, however, does not simply aim to show all these

Figure 23: : The making of an icon (images from www.ou.org)

scenes. Rather, these images are seen in retrospect as awe-inspiring visions, sights that parallel the awe-inspiring vision of the high priest in the Holy Temple of yore. To make this point, the makers of this poster-collage have overlaid the image with text that says, "How beautiful was the sight of the Cohen," a phrase the resonates with a line from the liturgy of the High Holidays and which plays on the fact that the late rabbi also came from the priestly tribe. The use of the text and imagery, each of which serves as a gloss on the other, then serves not only to evoke all the attachment his disciples and followers felt toward the late rabbi but to do so in such a way as to recall the religious yearnings and national attachments of the Jewish people to the days of yore, the Holy Temple, and all the seasons of the year. And of course, by implication, it creates a discreet parallelism between the mourning for the late rabbi and the national Jewish mourning for the Holy Temple and the priestly service that went on there.

The Rav

The case of figure 8 is an example of how a picture that has become a synecdoche standing for something else becomes increasingly subject to manipulation. It comes from the world of modern Orthodoxy. Having accepted the idea that displaying an image of a particular rabbi can serve as an indicator of allegiance and attachment to a particular way of life or values, a number of modern Orthodox Jews have searched for a figure who would enable them symbolically and efficiently to indicate that they associate themselves with a serious attitude toward Torah learning yet one that is not haredi or fundamentalist in its orientation. While the distinctions between the modern and haredi Orthodox points of view are nuanced and not simple to express, a picture here can literally be worth the proverbial thousand words. To provide a kind of shorthand and symbolic way of evidencing and stressing these differences

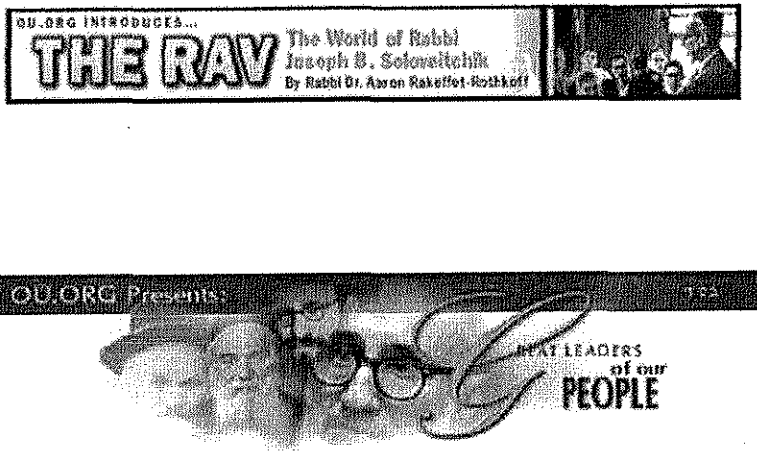

Figure 24: www.ou.org/about/judaism/rabbis/jbsolov.htm

from their haredi counterparts, many modern Orthodox Jews (and particularly many of the rabbis among them, for whom this particular identity is especially important as a point of reference) have, as already mentioned, taken to associating themselves with the late Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Known for his capacity to mix the worlds of Jewish and university scholarship and for his relatively open attitude toward this worldly wisdom even as his religious integrity and Jewish learning were universally judged to be outstanding, this rabbi became (perhaps even more since his death than in life, when he could still do and say things that might contradict his symbolic character) for many a role model of how one could stand with one foot firmly in each world, a stance in sharp contrast to the haredi stance that denies the legitimacy of the world outside the four cubits of Jewish life. Even the moniker that became associated with him, "the Rav," the rabbi, served to suggest that Soloveitchik had become iconic, the model of and for what a rabbi (and indeed a true modern Orthodox Jew) should be. The problem was, How could a person evidence an attachment to and endorsement of this sort of a model? One solution emerged in the use of the rabbi's image (figs. 8, 8). Gradually photos of him were reproduced, several of them becoming canonical. These two are among the best known. The first two different images in figure 8, particularly when prominently displayed, became for the person who displayed them a means of demonstrating metonymically that he shared the worldview and values of "the Rav." Making the picture one's own was a way of suggesting that one made all that this person represented one's own. So impor-

tant has this image become that it is found appearing in a variety of contexts and taking on a life of its own. In the banner in figure 8 (*top*), drawn from the Orthodox Union's website as an advertisement for an endorsed biography, one sees an image of the Rav as teacher, with his strikingly clean-shaven students in respectful attendance. And in another image from the same site (fig. 8, *bottom*), he becomes the dominant figure, the culmination (if one reads from left to right, in the direction of the English language, the tongue of contemporary Jewry) of the "great leaders of our people."

To be sure, the popularity of this image, which captures the rabbi in his days as teacher, at the heights of his pedagogic activity, has grown particularly since the rabbi's demise. Without entering into a psychological analysis, one can nonetheless suggest that the increasing use of this image surely represents a desire to resurrect the world when this was the case. Moreover, as the Orthodox world has been pulled increasingly to the "religious right," the use of this picture has increased as a metonymic device to express an unwillingness to be thus drawn to the right. Of course, an image—unlike a living person—is far more subject to manipulation. Unlike the living person, who can say and do things that might make him a far more ambiguous figure, the image remains controlled by those who are manipulating it. In other words, the "Rav" who was once a leader of some ambiguity, who at times took positions that some might consider haredi, is today a controlled symbol, icon, and visual synecdoche.

The Lubavitcher

The image of Rabbi Soloveitchik and its manipulations, however, is dwarfed by far in the domain of image management by what is perhaps the most manipulated of images of orthodox rabbis in recent memory. This is the image of the late Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. As Richard Cohen has argued, "Rabbinic representation, especially in its Lubavitch mode, can be found competing with the images of male and female celebrities." Indeed, he concludes, for the Lubavitch followers "it is the portrait [of Schneerson] that looms large, designed to gain the attention and awe of the bystander."[17]

As a putative Messiah, he cannot simply be depicted as another

17. Ibid., 259.

Figure 25: Rabbi Schneerson (below, second from right) Olam Rabbanim Album (Brooklyn: Bais HaSefer Books, n.d.)

rabbi. Rather, he needs to be shown in a variety of poses and images that suggest not only his superiority but also his solicitude. He must also be shown able to provide blessing and also in some way to transcend time. How is this done? Some of the images below give us a hint of the process. First, he must be presented in the pantheon of famous rabbis (fig. 8). Here we find Rabbi Schneerson as one sticker on a sheet of other "great" rabbis, including the revered Hazon Ish Rabbi A. Y. Karelitz, who served as the preeminent halachic authority of the early twentieth century, on his right; the Rebbe of the Munkatcher Hasidim above him; and the much-respected twentieth-century talmudist and former head of the Novorodock Yeshiva in Pinsk, Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, known as "The Steipler," nearby; as well as other contemporary rabbinic heroes of the haredi rabbinate.

But that association is insufficient for those who would view him as Messiah. For them, the Habad/Lubavitcher Hasidim, he must be depicted at the apex of their rabbinic lineage, the brightest star in their firmament. This is accomplished in an image (fig. 8) on the reverse side of a laminated prayer for travelers that is currently distributed at airports and other public places and widely held in the precincts of believers in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. It depicts the five star Habad rabbis: *(smaller images, right to left)* the Founder; the Third Rebbe (the first of the Menachem Mendels, but better known

Figure 26: Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

as the Zemach Zedek); his grandson, the Fifth Rebbe, known as Rabbi Shalom DovBer; the Sixth, his son Yosef Yitzhak, the father-in-law of the Seventh Rebbe; and *(center)* the Seventh Rebbe himself. But this series of images creates a disruption in the time line in which they lived, framing them in such a way that the Seventh Rebbe becomes the prince of princes, above—both literally and symbolically—the rest. Here too is the now standard reference to the verse from Isaiah, here the subtle message that these rabbis alone, and above all of them Menachem M. Schneerson, will be the one who leads them to inspiration and God's ways.

But is this not taking liberty with history? Does this not assert a dominance that cannot be proved? As if to answer that question, the following posters, currently popular in the same community and adorning many a sukkah there during the 2002 celebration of the Sukkoth festival, depict scenes that of course never happened but yet serve metonymically to suggest a story line that justifies this assertion of the Seventh Rebbe's dominance. First is a poster, shown in figure 8 for sale behind a variety of menorahs, that depicts these same rabbis walking down a mythical street together as if they coexisted at a single moment in history. In this manipulated image of five of the most famous and influential of the Lubavitcher rebbes, a tale

Figure 27: Storefront, Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

is told visually that suggests that they represent a single band, a holy five—an image manipulated in much the same way as the Satmar Hasidim in figure 15. Here the Seventh Rebbe and his predecessor and father-in-law bracket the other three distinguished leaders.

Even more manipulative, however, is the poster in figure 8, which puts four of these rabbis together yet again; but now we find them in a situation in which the image suggests a child shall lead them. That child, looking a bit like little Lord Fauntleroy, is in fact the seventh and last of the Rebbes, Menachem M. Schneerson, the so-called Messiah, according to those who created this poster. The young child in the poster is a recreation of a photo, famous in Habad hagiography, of the young Rebbe at the age of two (fig. 8). This manipulated image suggests that the previous rebbes, great though they were, surely deferred to the child who would later lead them. Here is the baby Messiah who leads them, his predecessors, down the garden path. That there are Christological overtones in this sort of manipulation should come as no surprise to those who have argued that Lubavitch messianism carries such overtones.

The Rebbe image must also be associated with solicitude and blessing. This has been accomplished via a series of Lubavitcher greeting cards that take pictures of Rabbi Schneerson and use them as the background for many wishes. Thus, for example, the picture

Figure 28: Poster in window, Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

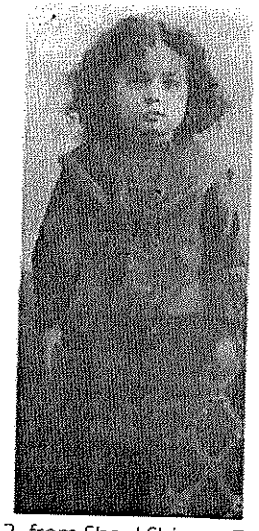

Figure 29: : The Rebbe at age 2, from Shaul Shimon Deutsch, Larger than Life (New York: Chasidic Historical Productions, 1995), 14

Figure 30: Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

in figure 8 depicts the rabbi with a cheery expression and superimposes on it an image of a dollar bill and words of blessing for a business. The Rebbe was of course renowned for distributing dollar bills to those who came for his blessing (a kind of one-upmanship over John D. Rockefeller, who only distributed dimes), currency that was later held onto by the recipients as if it were an amulet. Here the combined image of the dollar and the rabbi recalls that reality and by use of the images offers a kind of virtual blessing for a business.

The card with the dollar is not simply a blessing or a greeting for someone to display, as the dollars distributed by the Rebbe had once been displayed. Rather, as the Hebrew attached by someone to these images promises, it is "blessings" that come "from the mouth of the prophet and seer." The element of messianism is unstated, but the intercession of the rabbi, the suggestion that he is the intermediary who is prophet and seer, who sends the blessings via his image, certainly suggests something extraordinary. In other similar images, the picture of the rabbi, wishes, and facsimiles of excerpts from his letters are combined in the same way for other occasions: weddings, bar mitzvahs, new homes, and the like. All seek to use the image of the rabbi as a means of offering blessings. The association of the Rebbe, the dollar, and good deeds is repeated often, as in a full-page ad in the *New York Times* (fig. 8) encouraging readers to follow the

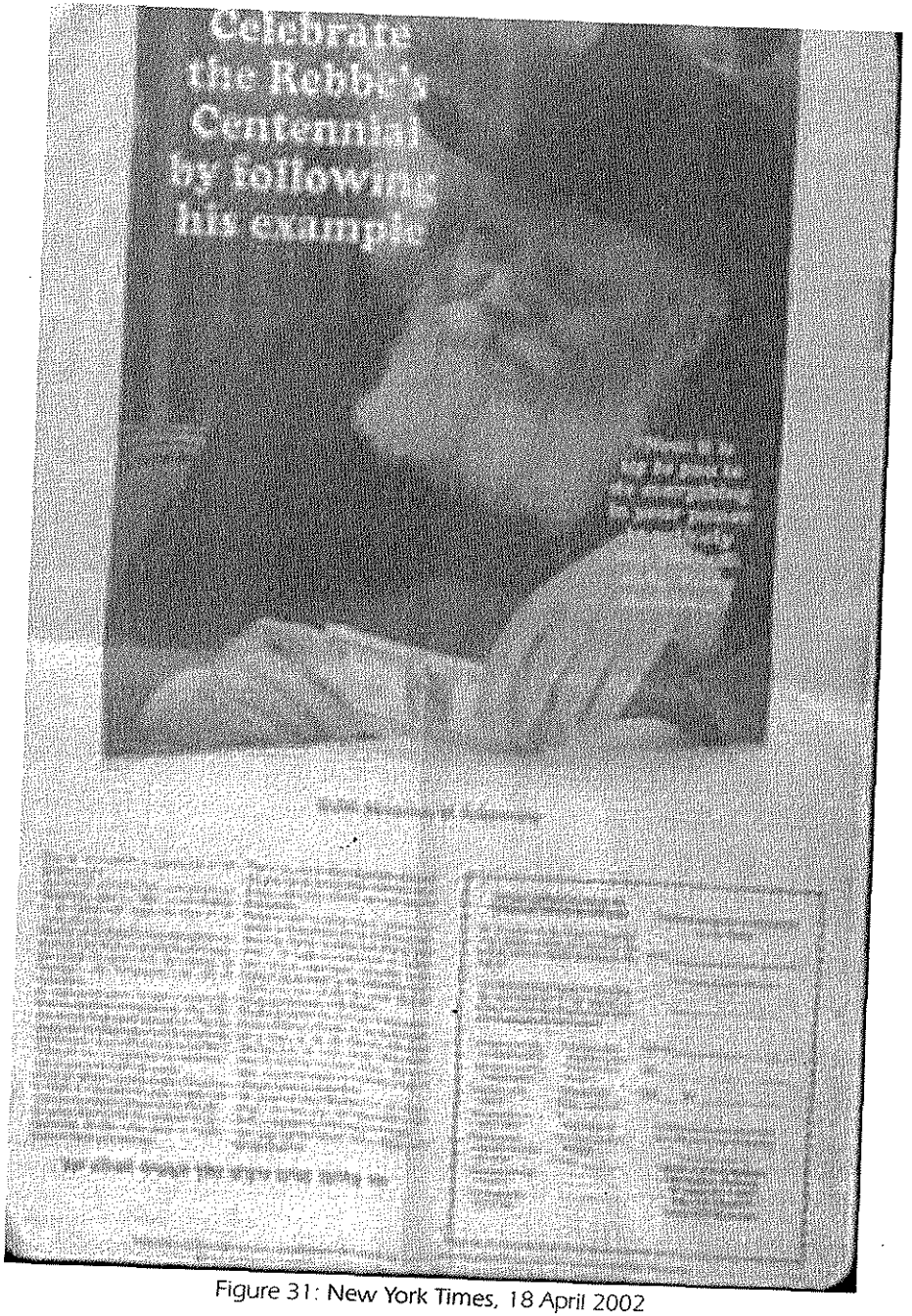

Figure 31: New York Times, 18 April 2002

Figure 32: : The Rebbe is Messiah, Crown Heights, Brooklyn: wall posters (above); bumper stickers (below) (photos by author)

rabbi's example of charity and good deeds to hasten the messiah's coming. For those who read and understand Hebrew (perhaps those most open to the message), the final line reveals that the sponsors of the ad consider this man the Messiah. The line in Hebrew is "Long Live Our Master, Teacher and Rabbi, the King Messiah." To this one could add, "The presence of the portrait of the Lubavitcher rabbi in a wholly secular context shows the defiance" and powerful faith of his followers, in their determination to fulfill the Hasidic ukase to confront the uninformed, unbelievers or "sinners on their turf."[18]

Of course, all this is a minor manipulation when compared to the images that do not simply hint at but openly promote the messianic character of this rabbi. The following series of images (fig. 8) shows how the picture of the rabbi is identified as Messiah, along with slogans that make the association undeniable. First comes the not quite explicit bumper sticker: "the Rebbe promised; the Rebbe will fulfill his promise." Then at last comes the explicit and undeniable one that proclaims: "Long live the King Messiah," next to a likeness of Rabbi Schneerson. The wall posters that appeared instantly after a terrorist attack and murder at a Jerusalem fast-food restaurant, urging those with troubles and anxieties to write to the Messiah, also proclaimed that that Messiah was none other than the one whose

18. Ibid., 260.

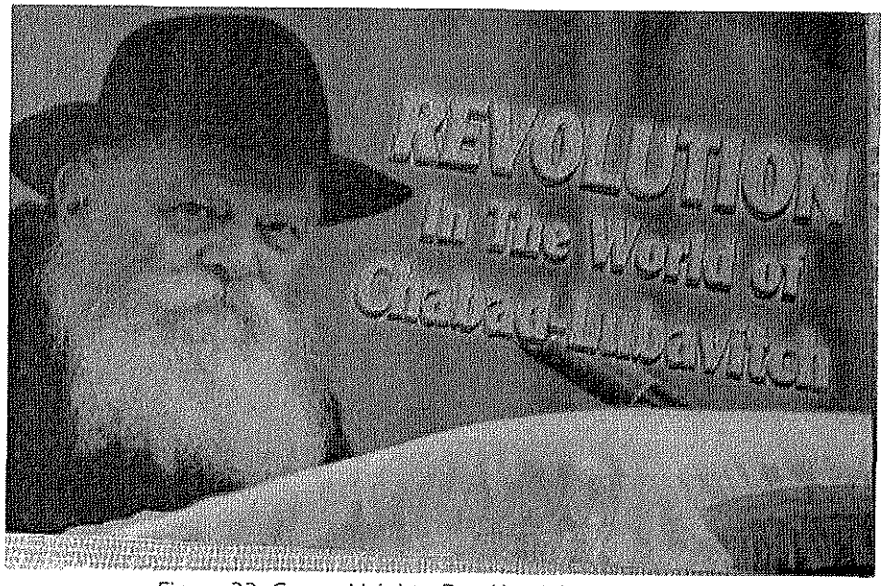

Figure 33: Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

picture appears above the words "King Messiah," an image so familiar by now that no name was required. These bumper stickers and wall posters demonstrate that the image had reached a level of recognition that obviated the need for any further identifiers.

This manipulation of the image suggests what figure 8 asserts explicitly: a "revolution in the world of Habad-Lubavitch." This is a revolution in which a rabbi has been turned into a messiah and his image has been transformed into the expression of that belief in the messiah. By coupling the visage of the rabbi with these words, the poster essentially says that his persona is the revolution. In a sense this completes a process that leads to what Cohen calls "the spiritualization of the rabbinic image."[19]

This revolutionary epoch is elaborated in figure 8, which uses a portrayal of the rabbi's smiling face in a kind of blurry, dreamlike drawing, based on a familiar photograph, as the symbol of what it calls "the seven era." The use of this phrase echoes with Habad meanings, for it resonates not only with the theme of this being the era of the seventh rabbi in the dynasty but also with the message attached to the image suggesting this is a time for all people to ready themselves for the coming of the messiah by observing the so-called seven Noachic laws, universal commandments given at the time of

19. Ibid., 140.

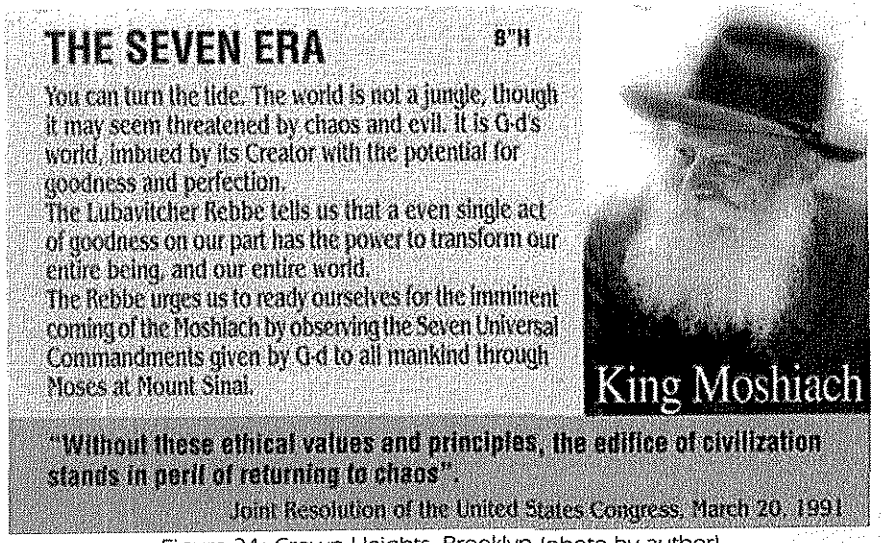

Figure 34: Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

Noah to humankind that when universally observed will, according to Habad belief, usher in the messianic era.[20]

In the Lubavitcher enclave and areas where Habad has spread its influence through its outreach work, that revolutionary "seven era" has already begun, and the manipulation of the Rebbe's image is part of it, or at the very least a visual synecdoche of it. That this is the case is seen in the manipulation of figure 8, in which the Lubavitch outreach campaign, which is so much a part of this revolutionary effort, is promoted. Here we find, on the back of one of the mobile Habad Houses, the Seventh Rebbe's face, framed by modifiers and identifying complements. Thus above his giant visage is a verse that says in Hebrew, "The time for your redemption has come," while alongside is the slogan, "Let's welcome Moshiach with acts of goodness and kindness." The association with this radical plan that ushers in the messianic age with this image is unmistakable. A store sign (fig. 8) in the Lubavitch Crown Heights neighborhood is even more direct and unambiguous.

Perhaps the most extreme manipulation of this rabbinic image comes, however, in the illustrations in figure 8. In these reproductions of two Lubavitcher collages, the Seventh Rebbe appears as a kind of heavenly presence. This setting might not be viewed as unusual for a fallen leader; the idea that a deceased loved one is in

20. Those laws are listed on the reverse side of the card.

Figure 35: Queens, New York (photo by author)

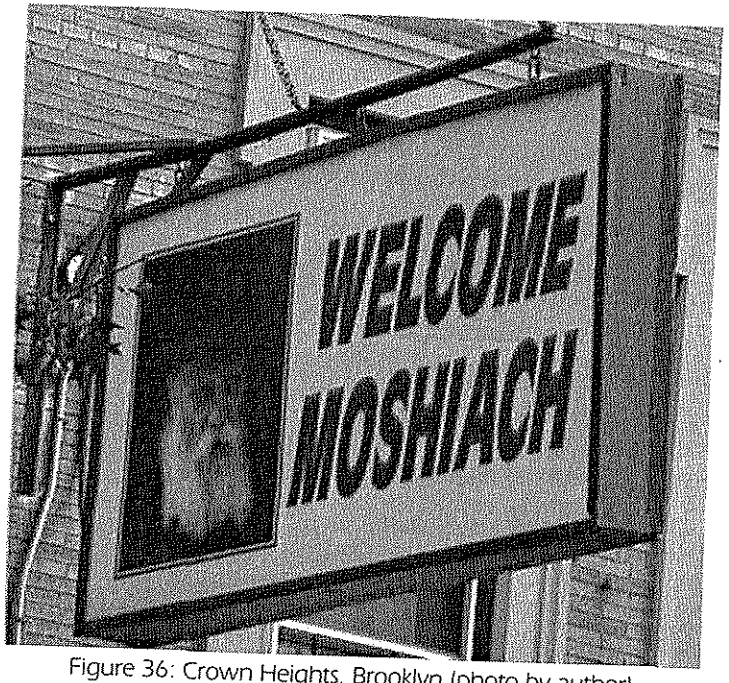

Figure 36: Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photo by author)

Figure 37: Crown Heights, Brooklyn (photos by author)

heaven is of course not revolutionary or unprecedented. However, these works of popular art appear to go further. Moreover, given that this is a person whom many among his followers (and likely purchasers of the collages—which are offered for sale in a Crown Heights gallery) consider the Messiah, the images need to be looked at with this reality in mind. As such, we cannot miss some salient details in each of them. In the study on the left we see the Rebbe as framed and constructed by crowds of his followers. That is, he cannot be separated from them. This is of course a visual expression of a central element of the relationship that the Hasidim feel toward a rebbe and that these Hasidim in particular express toward their deceased leader: though he may be dead, he continues to be the one toward whom they feel attached and whose guidance and help they seek. In this manipulation of the image, however, the Rebbe remains set in the midst of a line of Hasidim who pass into and around him and continue higher into heaven. That is, one might suggest that here he is simply the intermediate entity in heaven on their way to the Higher Power beyond, the invisible source from which the rays of light that illuminate the Rebbe's face emanate.

The second collage sends a somewhat different message. Here the Seventh Rebbe is shown in several images: in prayer shawl and phylacteries, in his distinctive fedora, and as a smiling visage, the latter two figures dominating the picture. Shown as well are three other previous Lubavitcher rebbes: the so-called *alter rebbe*, the "old rebbe" who was founder of the dynasty; the Zemach Zedek; and the previous rebbe, his father-in-law. But, as in several of the other images already considered here, they play a clearly subservient role, being smaller here and off to the side, dominated by the image of their successor. Part of the collage as well are scenes that depict elements of this rebbe's famous "mitzvah campaign," the elements of Judaism that he sought to stress in Habad outreach work. These include a mezuzah, which he urged all Jews to affix to their doorposts and examine in order to make certain their sacred contents were up to specifications; a tableau of a woman and a young girl kindling Sabbath candles, a practice he urged on not only married adult females but also the youngest of them; and a young man donning the tefillin that he advocated as a practice that Lubavitchers should encourage all adult Jewish males to do and which constitutes an important part of what his emissaries still do in their campaign in the public square. Visible as well are scenes that recall the high holy days, the Torah scroll and a young boy working on reading what are presumably holy writ, as well as men seated around a table engaged in Jewish study. Finally, there are some silhouettes of people walking hand in hand, perhaps dancing, and a street scene in which the figures are all Hasidim. All this seems to visually sum up a world in which the Seventh Rebbe is the prevailing image and force.

Yet woven into all this is the credal prayer of Judaism, the Shema, Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. This subtly, perhaps even unconsciously, suggests that this prayer, which is normally addressed by Jews to God, is somehow within the province of the Rebbe. This is stressed by the juxtaposition of the first line of the prayer that follows the credo: "and thou shalt love the Lord your God ..." with the Rebbe's face. That is, in place of the closing words of the verse, "with all your heart and all your might," we find the countenance of the rabbi. The coincidence is striking. One can even imagine this poster adorning a wall toward which one prays. As such, the manipulation of the Rebbe's image as the visual completion of the essential commandment to love God gives off a message that at the very least mixes devotions and at the most places the rabbi at the end of those devotions.[21]

Conclusion

The use of images of rabbis has clearly entered into the popular culture of contemporary Orthodoxy, and particularly its haredi segment. Driven by motives that are not in their essential core exclusively artistic, this use, however, reflects a variety of the underlying concerns and worldviews that inform Orthodoxy. They assertively suggest a continuity between past and present. They serve as vehicles for communicating what is considered an appropriate image of the rabbi. They allow for symbolic manipulation and provide efficient means for communicating identification with a variety of worldviews and ideologies. They serve as amulets. The creation of these images also expresses certain elements of political power and ethnic pride.

Insofar as certain images become more popular than others, the ethnic groups for whom the image is important and for which it serves as an icon can feel itself as being more popular. Indeed, the sale and distribution of these images is often a barely camouflaged mechanism for spreading the influence of the groups who hold that image to be representative for them. The more people hold the image of the Rav dear, the greater the perceived impact of modern Orthodoxy. Similarly, the more people post and display the image of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the greater the perceived influence of Habad Hasidism. And of course, the more images of famous Sephardic rabbis are posted, the more ascendant is the perceived power of Sephardic Jewry.

The fact that these pictures are often sold or distributed from common sources suggests that, at least as far as the suppliers are concerned, they are all part of a common pool. They constitute a part of the increasingly indispensable possessions of the contemporary Orthodox Jew. No less in America than in other locales where these Jews find themselves, these images reflect that transformation of at least some rabbis into religious and social symbols; one might

21. Precisely these sorts of muddlings are what David Berger has objected to in his tract that accuses Lubavitch messianism of crossing the line from Judaism into heresy. See his *The Rebbe, The Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Portland, Ore.: The Littman Library, 2001).

even say trademarks of faith. They express different brands of Orthodoxy in pictorial ways.

Yet in all cases, the point to recall is that the power and import of the images is no more or less than that of those who manipulate them and who have used them. The holders and purveyors of the images are the ones who matter most. It is their nature that becomes in a special way visible.

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