WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH,
A TAMBOURINE IN HER HAND

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Between March and July of 1994, the period just before and after the death of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, I was doing fieldwork among Lubavitch women in Crown Heights, New York, and in Morristown, New Jersey, home of the Lubavitch Rabbinical College. Most of the women I encountered said they believed—or at least hoped—that their Rebbe would not die, but would rather emerge—“rise up” was the expression they used—as the Messiah. While attending their study sessions and prayer gatherings and visiting them in their homes, I inadvertently discovered that a new ritual object was emerging in the women’s community: a “Miriam’s tambourine.” Because a tambourine is a prosaic object, evoking folk concerts and children’s rhythm training, it was not initially clear to me that this object, in the context of the Lubavitch women, possessed spiritual agency.

In this essay, I attempt to narrate, in the form of a chronicle, various forms of spiritual work that the tambourine performed for Lubavitch women. Speaking broadly, I observed that the tambourine enabled the creation of women’s bonds; it channeled anxiety and creative energy, and it released the women from boundaries of time and place as they identified with the biblical Miriam and the confident ancient Israelite women who had gracefully saved the day when their husbands quarreled, complained, despaired, and withdrew from procreation. The tambourine cased women across a threatening transition, guiding and assuring them, and creating a locus for divine–human intersection.

I saw the Lubavitch women, in the context of their leader’s impending death, as ritual and spiritual experts, taking roles that their sect’s laws of modesty might otherwise forbid them proclaiming of themselves. Theirs is a community in which men are to be more visible to the public and women are to be more private. I believe that the tambourine gave the women a means of expanding
their roles without risk: Behind sweetly decorated tambourines, they found an avenue for taking on spiritual leadership at a traumatic time, and for holding their families and community together. I saw them engaged—through their tambourines—in virtuoso, lived religious performances, as they maintained faith and community during a crisis. Would Lubavitch women describe themselves and their actions as I do? I don’t believe they would—not because such a description would be inaccurate, but because such rhetoric would be considered immodest.

*Passover 1994*

Ignoring their exhaustion, stepping beyond their anxiety about all the cleaning and the tasks that remained to be done, Lubavitch women prepared for Passover in the spring of 1994 with particular exhilaration. Many were certain: Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, the charismatic spiritual leader whom they had revered as their Rebbe since 1950, was the Moshiach—the Messiah. At any moment now, he would rise from his hospital bed and announce his reign, and the messianic era would commence.

Many recent acts of violence and violent retaliation had given Lubavitch women the sense that they were living in nightmarish times, a period of overwhelming tragedy and suffering, just the kind of times that were supposed to precede the coming of the Messiah. On February 25th, Baruch Goldstein had massacred Palestinians worshipping in Hebron. Days later, in a seeming act of revenge on the other side of the world, Rashad Baz opened fire on a convoy of Lubavitch students, killing Ari Halberstam and severely injuring his friend Nachum Sasonkin as they drove back over the Brooklyn Bridge after praying for the Rebbe at Beth Israel Hospital. There was Ari’s funeral, with hundreds coming to mourn. This was all on top of an earlier wound the community still felt, the killing of one of their yeshiva students, Yankel Rosenbaum, during riots in Crown Heights in 1991. Lubavitch leaders declared that at such moments of intense darkness, when everything seemed to be falling apart, a coming light could be glimpsed. This classic Jewish narrative felt especially descriptive of the present moment.

To outsiders, a messianic advent seemed unlikely. The 91-year-old Rebbe had had a second stroke and was lying in a coma in Beth Israel Hospital, attached to a respirator. Each day, the Beth Israel hotline offered journalists,
well wishers, and the curious the same pessimistic recorded message: “The Rebbe is unconscious; his condition is critical; he has taken a turn for the worse.” There was no successor to the Rebbe in line. In the Jewish press, many offered a sociological analysis: In response to the unfillable gap in the leadership of the sect, which might threaten its stability, the Lubavitchers believed that the ailing Rebbe was himself the Messiah.

During this time, the Lubavitch women I knew were especially energetic, hopeful, and geared up, as though they were expectant mothers hovering over delivery dates. At least this was their public face. Many said they believed that just as the children of Israel had been redeemed from bondage in Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation, so would the Jews of today be brought out of golus (physical and spiritual exile) and into ge’ulo (the messianic age) on account of the righteous women of their own generation. They believed they themselves had the potential and the responsibility to bring the Messiah. It was a matter of believing deeply, praying, spreading the belief, doing mitzvos (commandments), reaching out to the world, and spreading light, goodness, and Torah. Daunting, but possible.

Spreading the light was not limited to one’s own home and family. Lubavitch women were holding regular gatherings for prayer and study in Crown Heights and in the auditorium of the old Stuyvesant School, across from Beth Israel. In Lubavitch communities worldwide, women who could not get to Crown Heights held their own gatherings, listening in private homes and schoolrooms to “the hook-up,” a telephone connection linking them to the goings-on at 770 Eastern Parkway, the Rebbe’s headquarters in Crown Heights.

These frequent gatherings meant family juggling logistics: bundling up the children and bringing them along, or arranging for private or group babysitting. For women with a flair for writing or public speaking, it meant attracting media interest, arranging and holding press conferences, trying to persuade reporters in the Jewish and secular press to portray the Lubavitch community correctly and respectfully.

Lubavitch women regularly told me that redemption was on the verge of coming to pass because of righteous women. The primary source for their conviction was the midrash (rabbinic homilies) on Exodus. They knew this text well, from their study both of primary texts and of the Rebbe’s discourses, at various formal and informal study sessions for women. (Many people suppose incorrectly that Lubavitch women and girls are neither encouraged nor
permitted to study sacred texts. While they do not study as intensively as the men and rarely study the Talmud—though the Rebbe permitted them to do so—they are expected to study Torah and hasidic texts.)

The midrash reads:

Israel was redeemed from Egypt on account of the righteous women of that generation. What did they do? When they went to draw water, God deposited little fishes (as aphrodisiacs) in their pitchers, so that they found them half filled with water and half with fishes. These they brought to their husbands. They put on two pots, one for hot water and one for fish, and they used to feed them, wash them, anoint them, and give them to drink, and they cohabited with them between the mounds in the field. . . . As soon as they became pregnant, they went back to their homes; and when the time came for their parturition, they went into the field and gave birth under the apple-tree. . . . God then sent an angel from on high to cleanse and beautify them. . . . When God revealed Himself by the sea, they (the women) recognized Him first. (Exodus rabbah 1:12)

Anticipating that God would perform a miracle for them, Miriam and the Israelite women brought along their timbrels as they left Egypt, so as to use them in celebration; and the miracle—the parting of the sea—indeed transpired. Quoting the medieval exegete Rashi, Lubavitch women said this prescient gesture demonstrated the exemplary faith and foresight not just of biblical women, but of all Jewish women. Including themselves.

It was just before Passover when I first discovered that Lubavitch women in my community were buying tambourines. While I was visiting Ita Morris, a Lubavitch ba’alas teshuva (newly observant Jew) who lived a few blocks away from my house in Morristown, a boy arrived to deliver her tambourine and collect $10 for it. I asked Ita how the idea for the tambourines had come about. She supposed that it had originated in Morristown with Mrs. Lebovic, the boy’s mother, a well known Lubavitch matchmaker:

She had the idea that all the women should have tambourines. She ordered them so all the women will be ready to sing and dance when the Rebbe gets up. It’s said that the women brought about the redemption from Egypt. In their merit, the Jews were redeemed. In our merit . . .
Ita trailed off, the connection between the women of antiquity and the present-day Lubavitch women being familiar to us both.

Later that evening, I joined a study-prayer meeting in the finished basement of a private home in Morristown. Ten Lubavitch women, wives of teachers and students at the Rabbinical College, were preparing to listen to the hook-up. While we waited, several women wrote checks for tambourines, plain ones that Mrs. Lebovic pulled out of a large shipping box.

Over speakerphone, we heard a male voice ask what more could be done to hasten the coming of the Messiah. “We must have simcho, joy,” the speaker urged. “We should begin with an actual action.”

Eager to determine what constituted an “actual action” and to engage in one, a young woman in our group said, “Let’s get out our tambourines!” Even with several newly purchased tambourines on hand, no one took up the young woman’s suggestion.

The women, continuing to listen to the hook-up, were exhorted to carry on giving strength to their husbands and children; the speaker reminded them that historically, when men were ready to give up, the women held the day.

A second, especially energetic younger woman in our midst announced, “We should go to Crown Heights! I’m ready to go, the tank is full of gas. Should we sing and dance?” Still, no one left for Crown Heights at that moment to perform an “actual action”; no one sang or danced that night. No one “did” anything at all with her tambourine.

Indeed: What did one do with one’s tambourine, other than have it on hand? Maybe that was the “doing”—not unlike the ritual preparation of one’s soul for the New Year, which was an invisible rather than overt “actual action.” Certainly, just having the tambourine on hand was what the Israelite women crossing the sea had done: Their virtue lay not in their final celebration, but in their faithful anticipation. Perhaps having the tambourines on hand and anticipating that they would one day be used “for real” constituted the tambourine ritual. Anything else was superfluous, showy.

While the Lubavitch women of Morristown were capable of mobilizing instantly for a trip to Crown Heights (which is where they shopped, visited, and took children to and from school), the collective wisdom of this group was that this was not yet the right moment for the tambourines to be brought into action. The speaker affirmed this when he said that the women should keep doing their part in bringing the redemption by expanding their outreach efforts. Referring to the campaign to encourage young Jewish girls to light candles on
Friday nights, he asked them rhetorically, “Will it take just one more Jewish maidele lighting shabbos candles?”

The speaker reminded the women they should have their tambourines ready: accessible and on hand. It interested me that a ritual that had been created by the women was so quickly becoming regulated by the men, and that this regulation took the literal form of silencing.

At the evening’s end, before the women recited Tehillim (psalms) along with all those connected through the hook-up, a much respected older woman in the Morristown group guided them with a kavono (a sacred intention): “Try to imagine that women all over the world are saying this.” It seemed to me that this spiritual direction was given particularly to the two younger women, who wanted too badly to “do” something concrete with their tambourines.

As a gesture of solidarity, I bought a tambourine for myself and brought it home. Unable to resist a craft project, I decorated my tambourine with ribbons and placed it on the coffee table in my living room. When I passed it the next morning, two thoughts came simultaneously to mind. The first was cynical: “What desperation leads people to do!” The second surprised me: “It’s good I have gotten a tambourine for myself and my daughters, in case it ends up being useful in the coming days. I wouldn’t want to be caught without one.” That second thought evaporated rapidly, but before it did, I was able fleetingly to experience some of the hopefulness embraced by the Lubavitch women.

I soon learned that tambourine buying and decorating were not restricted to Morristown and did not originate with Mrs. Lebovic. Lubavitch mothers and daughters all over the world were buying tambourines so that they would be prepared to rejoice like Miriam when the Rebbe announced himself as the Messiah. In fact, the tambourines had first officially been introduced two years earlier, in January 1992, when representatives of a Lubavitch women’s group presented the Rebbe with a tambourine, intended to convey their belief that it was he, as the Messiah, who would herald the redemption. The night before, hundreds of women had gathered in Brooklyn to dance with tambourines in celebration of the coming redemption.

I asked Mrs. Lebovic how she had become involved. She had gotten the idea of selling both plain and decorated tambourines as a non-profit project from a Californian woman she had met back in February at a Lubavitch women’s conference in Brooklyn. She knew that thousands of tambourines made in Pakistan had been distributed in Crown Heights, and women were decorating them with puff-paint, sequins, beads, silk flowers, ribbons, and the Hebrew
words welcoming the King Messiah. A smaller plastic tambourine had been manufactured for children, and the Lubavitch women in Israel had their own version. In the Midwest, a Lubavitch women’s group calling themselves the “Project of Women for Redemption” had affixed a photocopy of relevant texts on the back of each tambourine they distributed, ending with the Rebbe’s own words: “Now, as then, the Jewish woman’s yearning for Moshiach—a yearning which runs deeper than that of their menfolk and inspires and uplifts it—will form the dominant strain in the melody of redemption.”

I also asked Miriam Swerdlov, a well known Lubavitch women’s teacher from Crown Heights, if she had a tambourine of her own. I was surprised that in our previous discussions, she had never mentioned anything about tambourines. I imagined she might be critical of the practice. “Of course I have one!” she answered over the phone and added, jokingly, “My name is Miriam.”

“Do your daughters have tambourines?” I asked.

“We’re a five-tambourine family. You know historically what the point of the tambourines is?”

I did, and she reminded me.

“When men came out of Mitzrayim (Egypt), they said, ‘I don’t believe it till I see it.’ Like, ‘Till the check clears the bank, then I’ll know.’ We women took the tambourines. We are the same people, the same neshomos (souls) that went out of Mitzrayim.”

From this encounter, I understood that if a woman had a tambourine of her own, she could better tell the story of Miriam’s faithfulness. In telling the story, she would not just remember it but experience herself as an incarnation of Miriam, a woman of great faith in bleak times.

Had any women rehearsed what they would actually do with their tambourines, in terms of playing them or performing particular songs or dances, I asked? Given that Lubavitch women do sometimes hold women’s musical performances—staged, for the sake of modesty, for women alone—I knew this was possible.

“Some women painted them and made them pretty,” answered Miriam. “It’s not one of my great talents in life. Some ladies put ribbons on them, all sorts of things.” Miriam indicated that my questions about the tambourines were about superficial manifestations of belief. I had not gotten their point, even if I thought I had. In a plaintive voice full of longing, she said, “Moshiach is coming, he has to, he has to. The whole world is at the end of its rope.”
I then asked Basha Oka, who handled public relations for the Lubavitch women’s organization, Neshei Chabad, in Crown Heights, what she thought the tambourines were about. She responded:

We are the reincarnation of the women who left Mitzraim. The tambourines aren’t a fetish. They’re a way to find our way into expressing our faith that the Rebbe’s words will come true. The tambourines are an expression of our belief. Miriam and the women had faith it was all going to work. Imagine how scary it was then: Going out of Egypt at night into a desert, no food, and no water! It required courage and bravery. By taking along tambourines, the women showed they believed they would eventually rejoice. They went through a hard test. When you pass a hard test, the rewards are great.

Women have a more intimate connection, a deepened understanding of spiritual reality. It is women’s role to bring about the dawning of a spiritual age. The men are discouraged, but the women are to push—like the birthpangs that are associated with the coming of the Moshiach. . . . This current generation is like that generation that left Egypt. Women are now in the same role. The men now, like the men then, are discouraged, but the women have a sense of where we’re going. The Rebbe has given respect to the women of Lubavitch. We are filled with energy and learning. We are very actualized women because of the Rebbe’s confidence and trust in us. We have miracles coming before our eyes. Open your eyes and see. Maybe it seems extraordinary, but this is happening. The Moshiach will speak, and the world will listen.

Likening the Israelites’ experience of leaving Egypt for freedom to a baby’s struggle through a narrow, arduous birth canal is a familiar interpretive strategy. The prominence of birth imagery suggested, for many, that women intuitively understood the move from exile to redemption, in a way that men could not.

Had Lubavitch women living right now, in this generation, done something in particular which would bring the Messiah, or were they about to do something? A Lubavitch woman friend in Morristown had told me, “Women in particular have been saying that the Rebbe is Moshiach. While it’s not our business to figure out God’s plan, this is not a delusion or a mistake.”
To gain a better understanding of the women’s role at this very moment, Basha Oka suggested, I should speak with Shifra Chana Hendrie of Crown Heights, who had “moved the Moshiach campaign forward through her close readings of the Rebbe’s sichos (discourses).” It was Shifra Chana, Basha said, who had seen that:

In terms of making the world ready for Moshiach, there was nothing left to do, only to prepare oneself to welcome the Moshiach. She got very excited . . . she was running around . . . What do you do to welcome the Moshiach? We needed to make a welcoming committee, to have a kabbolas ponim (reception) for Moshiach.

As a result of the committee’s work, Basha said, three thousand people came to a reception on January 4, 1991:

Women were the first to claim that the Rebbe is Moshiach. It was so radical, we were afraid to say in English that we were welcoming the Moshiach, so we said we were welcoming the “messianic era.”

The Rebbe himself, Basha claimed, was supportive of the kabbolas ponim. Apparently, the women had gathered signatures from people, a grassroots demonstration attesting to their belief that the Rebbe was Moshiach. When they went to deliver the list to the Rebbe, his secretaries pushed the list away, “but the Rebbe reached over and grabbed the signatures and held them to his chest.”

“What did the Rebbe say?” I asked.

“His actions conveyed the way he felt.”

“The men just made their kabbolas ponim this year,” she concluded; “then the children made theirs.”

In other words, from this woman’s perspective, had the women not “delivered” (note the midwife imagery) the list to the Rebbe in defiance of his secretaries, the Rebbe could not have confirmed for all, through his physical gesture, that he was indeed the Messiah.

I asked Shifra Chana Hendrie to elaborate on the story I had been told about her role in the Moshiach campaign. The story had struck me as curious, for rarely in my relations with the Lubavitch community had I heard anyone tell a story in which an individual, living woman played such a heroic role, apart
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from women who had been sent to distant towns and succeeded in bringing Lubavitch Judaism to the local Jews. In fact, if there were a biblical antecedent for Shifra Chana’s role, it would once again be Miriam the prophetess, particularly in her role of prophesying the birth of a son, her brother Moses, who would save Israel, as related in the midrash (Mekhila, Ex. 15:20).

Shifra Chana described the discourse the Rebbe had given almost three years before, on the 28th of Nissan, 1991:

The Rebbe said that he had completed his job in terms of bringing Moshiach. Everything was done, and now it was up to us. It was very powerful and completely galvanized me. I went from [being] somebody who used to walk by 770 [Eastern Parkway] every shabbos on my way to the Botanical Gardens while the Rebbe was speaking... to [being] somebody who couldn’t leave 770 while the Rebbe was speaking, because I was waiting every second for something to happen. I saw that everybody, at that point, was not taking it as it was. Now everyone is. But at that moment, not everybody realized the import of what the Rebbe was saying. I made it my business to be there whenever the Rebbe was saying something.

After the Rebbe would speak every shabbos for about three hours, the chozrim [men who memorized what the Rebbe had said on the Sabbath, when writing is not permitted, and committed his words to writing afterwards] would give it to the Rebbe, and he would change it, edit, subtract, add. These edited sichos (discourses) are then approved for publication and distribution. I was part of a small group—there were just three of us who were studying every week when these sichos came out. We were looking to see what the Rebbe had said, what was the progress, what were the clues, whatever. Then one day I read that the Rebbe said that the Moshiach is not only here, but already revealed. Therefore, all that we have to do, all that is left in the world in terms of bringing the redemption is to be mikabel pnai moshiach tzidkeinu befoal mamish—to literally greet and accept melech hamoshiach (King Messiah). Actually, literally. I read it. I blinked. I reread it and looked again, and it really said that. It said Moshiach is not only here, but revealed.

There once was all this controversy in Lubavitch when, years ago, people used to say the Rebbe was Moshiach. The Rebbe discouraged that very much. But the Rebbe never said, “I’m not Moshiach.” He just said you can’t talk like that, because it will push people away from Judaism and
Hasidus [the teachings of Hasidism]. There was one famous incident when Hasidim were singing songs having to do with the Rebbe being Moshiach, and the Rebbe became very angry. Three years ago, the Rebbe allowed it (such songs), and even encouraged the women, that we say he’s Moshiach, and that we publish it . . . We collected signatures of people accepting the sovereignty of the Rebbe as king of the Jews, actually king of the world.

Shifra Chana explained the significance of the rally she was now planning for the eve of the Rebbe’s birthday, on the 11th of Nissan:

We learn that a person’s birthday—and the Rebbe has written about this extensively—was the time when the person was created. The soul came down into the world on that day. So there’s a new life force—light and power—that comes into the person every year on his birthday. It’s a very holy time. So on the Rebbe’s birthday especially, the Rebbe being Moshiach, there’s an incomparable potential for holiness. This is a time when the Rebbe will be receiving new powers, new Godly energy, and a new physical energy also. We’re inviting New Yorkers, people all over, and we’re asking people to take on deeds of goodness and kindness, because when CNN asked the Rebbe for his message to the world a couple of years ago, he said that Moshiach was ready to come now. Our part is to do something to show him the realm of goodness and kindness.

The day after the rally, I asked Shifra Chana how it had gone. It was all right, she said, but it would have been better had the Rebbe “come down”—had he revealed himself as the Messiah. But there was still time. His birthday was still not over, and Passover was still coming in two days. She conveyed her emotions, recalling how she felt as a child when her cousins were coming to visit. For days, she would sit by a window and wait: “Get here already!” It was hard, she explained, and then she added, “I once lost a child, and I’m expecting her back.”

What she was saying was not instantly clear to me, but then I slowly realized what she meant and why her waiting was so arduous, and each delay so disappointing. In keeping with her belief in techias hameisim, resurrection of the dead, she believed that when the Messiah came, she and others would be reunited with their lost loved ones. This inference became certain to me when I told her that I was leaving the next day for my grandmother’s funeral. She
offered consolation, saying, “You should see her soon.” With resurrection imminent, I would be reunited with my grandmother in no time.

The next time I spoke with Lubavitch women about the coming of the Messiah was during the second week of April, 1994. On this Sunday morning, the last day of the month of Nissan, a month whose name contains the word nes (miracle), Lubavitchers worldwide were gathering again. I assembled with the Morristown women and many girls and little boys in one of the study/prayer rooms at the Rabbinical College, to listen to the “hook-up”—more study, prayers, reciting of Psalms—and catch up with friends in the community. The men, I was told, were gathering on a different floor. No one in the room was paying much attention to the hook-up, except when the update on the Rebbe’s health was presented. One mother, Devorie, danced a little “King Messiah” circle dance with a group of children, and I heard the story of how Estie’s littlest son Mendy managed to shut the oven off on the seventh day of Passover, leaving the family with cold food. For everyone, the pre-Passover cleaning and cooking hysteria was over, shelved in memory alongside the many snowstorms and snow days of the past winter. In everyone’s home, the Passover dishes had been packed up, returned to their boxes, and stored in basements or attics. The only traces of Passover were culinary: There was a half-eaten box of matzo brought for a child’s snack, and Passover chewing gum and charms were still in our pockets and pocketbooks. Tomorrow, the new month of Iyar would begin. Ruchl, a Lubavitch woman whose children had once played with mine, told me that the letters of this month’s name stand for the phrase “God will heal you.” Iyar, she said, was the month of healing.

Who would be healed? The Rebbe had been in Beth Israel for many weeks, and today’s medical report was neither better nor worse. I sensed a subtle change in the mood of the women. Undoubtedly, this mood change affected the men as well. One can sit at the edge of one’s seat in a death-vigil/messiah-watch for only so long. I asked Ruchl if people were feeling differently now than they did before Passover. I put it to her this way: Before Passover, people were acting as if they were at the start of a race or on the edge of a precipice, on the verge of major change. There was excitement, wonder, as if a spaceship was about to blast off. But Passover had come and gone, and all the predictions that ge’ulo would come about in our times, as it did for the Jews in Egypt, had not panned out. The new mood suggested a return to normalcy: getting back to the routines of daily life, filing taxes and finalizing summer plans for the children.
In response, Ruchl explained that in this community one should not express doubt, even if one felt it. But who could help it? There was, after all, the matter of the Rebbe’s advanced age, the severity of his stroke. Her own twelve-year-old daughter felt obliged to silence her doubts, but Ruchl encouraged her to express them. She realized that people believed Lubavitch would fall apart if the Rebbe died and there was no successor. But, she said, “we are not a cult. Lubavitch teaching is not just about the Rebbe; it is not about one man. We will exist regardless.”

I recalled the level of emotional intensity and activity among the women before Passover: the domestic Passover marathon, the tragic killings in Hebron, the shootings on the Brooklyn Bridge. It was as if there had been a coherence to the disparate events, a building up to something. Now, randomness was returning, and it was becoming less possible to interpret collaboratively the events of every day as clear signs pointing to a messianic era of world peace and universal acknowledgement of God.

Who would dare say that all the women’s efforts and concentration expended before and during Passover to hasten the coming of the Messiah were for naught? On the other hand, nothing had happened. While divine plans were unfathomable, waiting, as Shifra Chana had said, was still hard.

Many weeks passed, and on the 8th of June I belatedly received a press release from Agudas Neshi Ubnos Chabad, the Lubavitch Women’s Organization, faxed by Shifra Chana. Entitled “Jewish Women Ready Tambourines for Rebbe’s Recovery,” it announced an event sponsored by an organization called “Rejoice for the Redemption,” held the night before at a junior high school building near Beth Israel Hospital. The organization, “heeding the prophecy of the Lubavitcher Rebbe that the Messianic Era is on the way,” would provide a banquet, a “Moshiach in the Media” video, and a tambourine lesson. The significance of the tambourines was explained in the press release:

According to the book of Exodus, the women’s faith in Moses and the Almighty was so strong that they carried tambourines with them in anticipation of greater miracles as they left Egypt. Jewish mystical sources refer to this current generation as a reincarnation of those redeemed under Moses. Thus, like their forbears, many Jewish women today own tambourines, some bedecked with paint, sequins and ribbons. In communities across the country, these humble instruments have become a symbol of trust in the Rebbe’s words and belief that the great events of the Messianic
Era are imminent. The hallmarks of this new age are universal peace and
goodness, and the open revelation of the existence of G-d.

The press release reviewed the familiar signs pointing toward the Rebbe’s
being the Messiah, including his “prophecy” that his followers in the Miami
area did not have to evacuate during Hurricane Andrew in 1992, his declara-
tion that Israel would be safe during the Scud missile attacks of the Gulf War,
and the countless miracles he wrought for individuals seeking his aid: healings
and reversals of fortune.

Here, the tambourine was a symbol not just of the women’s belief that the
Rebbe would bring the Messianic age, but also of their belief that the Rebbe—
in his own words—had confirmed that he was the Messiah. The humble tam-
bourine, the voice-masking prop of the faithful women, represented this bold
claim: that the signs of the times could be read without doubt as indications
of the approaching redemption.

The Lubavitch women of Morristown had traveled to the event together by
bus, I learned. It was, as one woman described it, “a celebration of . . . faith
through singing and dancing.” They saw the video and attended a workshop on
tambourine decorating, and all the way back home, they sang niggunim (sacred
melodies). This was permitted, since the bus driver was a woman.

The Death of the Rebbe

Then what was not going to happen simply happened. The Rebbe died in the
middle of the night on June 12th. In Crown Heights this was announced by
three wailing sirens. Some mistook the sound of the siren for that of a shofar
announcing the redemption.

People dressed quickly. Many had been leaving their best clothes at the
foot of their beds for months now, so they could dress properly to greet the
Moshiach. Some had even taken to sleeping fully dressed. Now, stunned
and anguished women and men poured into the synagogue at 770 to pray,
the women in the balcony, the men down below. In the streets outside 770,
I was told, women danced through the night with their tambourines, singing
to greet the Rebbe as Messiah, despite his physical death. One woman from
Morristown described her immediate reaction:
When the Rebbe’s wife died, you knew how to comport yourself. But now, when it was time to tell the children, I started to choke. I said that the Rebbe’s heart had stopped, which meant he was physically gone. My six-year-old asked, “Does that mean Moshiach isn’t coming?” I said that Moshiach is definitely coming, but the children knew that for themselves, as they hadn’t departed from their emuno [faith].

The funeral was held on Sunday, the very next day, in accordance with Jewish practice. In the hours before it, according to The Jewish Week, young men danced in a small circle outside 770, and many more danced inside. “[A] dozen young girls from a Crown Heights yeshiva loudly waved tambourines on the front steps of a dormitory building” across the street, an action that drew disapproval from some adults. One girl explained that she had bought the tambourine “as part of a Lubavitch project to emulate the prophet Miriam, who led the Hebrew women, freed from Egyptian slavery, through the Red Sea with timbrels. ‘We’re doing the same thing,’”

In Allan Nadler’s account, we learn that he was amazed to see ‘young Lubavitchers singing, dancing and drinking vodka directly across the street from . . . where the body of their beloved rabbi was lying. . . . Even more stunning was a small group of women encouraging the men with tambourines.’

Was this vision reminiscent of the biblical women seducing their husbands with little fishes, or did it evoke many Eves with fruits leading men to sin? Nadler, surprised by the singing and dancing—Jewish law forbids song at funerals and requires mourners to abstain from music—overheard Lubavitch women debating the propriety of dancing at this time. Those in favor of it explained that this was the beginning of redemption, and momentarily the Rebbe would rise up and take them all to Israel.

Reporter Toby Axelrod described the women standing outside 770 as:

the sunlight that poured through the rain—their raised voices were against nature, for a miracle. “Women have the kind of belief that changes reality,” said Tzvia. . . . “Men are more realists.” . . . “The women declare about the messiah, not the men,” proclaimed Tovi, and Uzit shook a tambourine . . . “because women never had any doubt.”
Later, Axelrod reported,

when someone told the women to leave the platform to make room for politicians, several said they would stand their ground. "I think we are a little closer to the Rebbe than Mayor Giuliani . . .," said one woman. "I don’t want a good place to see a box," said another. "I want a good place to see a miracle. A box is a box is a box."

That afternoon, at each moment of the funerary proceedings, before men and women could file separately past the Rebbe’s casket at 770, before the casket was then carried out and the women screamed a shattering "Yehi . . .!" (the King Messiah chant), and before the casket was then brought to the Old Montefiore Cemetery in Cambria Heights in Queens, many women expressed their belief that the events would come to a halt, and the Rebbe would be resurrected then and there as the Messiah. Some told me that they thought the hasidic trademark, simcho— their joy in the face of even the bleakest realities—would help make that happen. A woman named Mirele, a musician and mother, said that the women and men who rejoiced were told by rabbis that this was no time for dancing. Miriam and the women, they reminded me, played their tambourines after the sea had been crossed, not before. On Sunday evening after the funeral, as dazed and shocked men and women, having paid their respects at the gravesite, either prayed inside 770 or milled about in the plaza outside, I saw that women had left their tambourines lying about on the ledge of the women’s balcony. Some were stuffed into baby strollers, or sticking out of hastily packed suitcases and diaper bags. The many tambourines I saw were silent tambourines. I had been told that Lubavitch women had entrusted tambourines to the Rebbe’s nurses in Beth Israel Hospital, so that immediately upon his “rising,” the sound of tambourines would be heard, even if non-Jewish nurses played them. I imagined those tambourines were also lying still. There was not much simcho in the air. I felt none at all.

Was it the men who had suppressed the simcho that could have been activated by the women’s tambourines? Or had the women laid down their tambourines autonomously, understanding that the time for their use was still to come?

Women were expressing their grief in various ways. “Some were red-eyed and couldn’t even say hello,” said my friend Ruchl the next day, “and there were those who said we needed just one more step to redemption, and had to
keep the faith.” She noted all the ambulances the city had dispatched. “What did they think would happen? No one flipped out or went crazy.”

After the Funeral

Death did not alter the belief of Lubavitch women who knew their Rebbe would be revealed as the Messiah. Just after the funeral, one mother of nine expressed a common viewpoint: “I am sure the Rebbe will reveal himself! Nobody thought he would die. We are sad but excited, because we’re all going to see the revelation. I hope it happens right now, because we have suffered enough.” A young girl reminded her mother that her high school graduation would be that Thursday, and her mother responded, “We’ll probably be in Jerusalem.” The mother meant that by Thursday, the Messiah would surely be revealed, all the dead would be revived and resurrected, and all the Jews would be transported to the Holy Land. Under such circumstances, you couldn’t count on graduating in Crown Heights as planned.

Lubavitch women gathered each evening during the week of mourning, listening to their various rabbis in their home communities advise them about what to do now. (All the Lubavitchers, not just the women, were given detailed instructions; on the Lubavitch listserv, the information was called: “Directives to do now.”) There were instructions for conduct, disclosure of emotion, praying, reciting psalms, studying, lighting memorial candles, giving to charity, telling stories about the Rebbe, and pursuing the Rebbe’s missions. In Morristown, women were told how they should conduct themselves as mourners, how they should feel, and how they should pray and study. I imagined they might be told to reorganize their belief system now that the miracle they anticipated, the coming of the Messiah, appeared at least for the time being not to have happened. But the directives were more concerned with mourning rituals and how to comport oneself in the presence of the media, in case expressions of emotion might be misconstrued to indicate that the community was bereft, beyond repair, or splitting off into factions.

At a gathering at the Chabad house in Morristown (which also happened to be Ita Morris’s house), a rabbi told the women sitting around a long dining-room table that it was unfortunate that events happened as they did, and the death was not anticipated, but that’s what God did. The passing of a righteous man was more tragic than the destruction of the holy Temple. But even if the
Rebbe was no longer present in his body, his soul was present with his people, for would a righteous man desert his people? “Our father is with us, praying for us.” As Lubavitch-watchers might have anticipated, the women were told that even though they may have done everything they could to prepare for the Messiah, there was still room for improvement, a last drop of self-improvement. No dancing, the rabbi cautioned the women again and again, lest anyone even consider it.

Not one woman present appeared to be on the verge of shutting down. Despite their sadness, they were as effervescent as I had always found them to be. They had been listening politely to the rabbi, for Lubavitch women, not unlike other women of faith, know well how to appear to heed the prescriptions of their male clergy and then take only what is relevant to them. They knew themselves to be fully capable of dreaming up and actualizing a spiritual and political agenda of their own. Their Rebbe knew this about them, and they loved him for it.

The potency and thoughtfulness of the Lubavitch women found no echo in the many media reports of Lubavitch responses to the Rebbe’s death. In fact, the media paid nearly no attention at all to women. The images were only of the Lubavitch men: men keeping vigil for the Rebbe outside of Beth Israel Hospital, men surging toward the Rebbe’s casket as it was brought out of Lubavitch Headquarters, men being asked who they thought would take over. Women I spoke with said that the media had made the women silent and invisible, affirming the false assumption that Lubavitch women were subjugated, wig-wearing, second-class citizens, barred from prayer and sacred study and stuck making babies and noodle kugels. Had the media looked beyond preconception, it might have been revealed that Lubavitch women had been active players in this latest and traumatic period of the sect’s communal life. Had they been seen “from inside,” people would have known, as Rus Devorah Burdman, a Lubavitch social worker, put it, “This is just as real for us as it is for the men.” This reality was neither mirrored nor amplified by the media. The women did not want credit, but they did not want to be erased.

In their outreach efforts, Lubavitch women took pains to counter the assumption that they were oppressed. In particular, they emphasized the heightened respect and dignity women were accorded within their homes and marriages, the key role women had in teaching and raising their Jewish children, and their leadership in creating the spiritual atmosphere of the home. The wives in married couples that had been sent as shluchim, emissaries to communities
that have no Chabad presence, could boast that they had participated as equal partners with their husbands in teaching, community outreach, and fundraising. And while Lubavitch women would not be seen participating in the public rituals of community worship (because of the laws requiring that men abstain from hearing kol ishah, the voices of singing women), this did not mean that Lubavitch women did not organize, study, pray, and sing in women-only communal frameworks. They were proud of the woman’s distinct and separate role; that it was enacted in private, and the man’s in public, did not matter to them. It was a woman’s role to encourage men, who were more easily dejected by financial woes. Their task was to boost the men’s morale.

While I had never heard Lubavitch women complain about how they were viewed by the Rebbe, this did not mean that they did not comment privately, among themselves, upon how women in the Lubavitch community were treated, in general, by other male leaders. (None of their complaints was ever shared directly with me; I overheard them in insiders’ conversations.) After the local rabbi’s post-funeral instruction session, one Morristown woman complained to her friend: “His approach to holding us together was not a woman’s approach, but a man’s.” At the hook-up session I had attended in the spring, while the women were still praying for the Rebbe’s recovery, I overheard women complain about the preponderance of male speakers and male rhetorical styles. One woman said, “It’s hard to listen. Any speaking is a man’s.” As male voices droned on, I noticed that the women easily got distracted by matters of the here-and-now; in that particular instance, it was by the question of how you could tell if milk had gone sour. As the group became fully absorbed in the matter, and someone asked if a pregnant woman could smell the sour milk, one woman chastised the others, saying, “Let’s listen to this, and let’s not talk about sour milk.” They vented their frustrations amongst themselves. They were annoyed with the way women were misperceived by the secular media and exasperated by the way their own men could fail to appreciate women’s alternative ways of coping. In this way, by voicing their dissatisfaction with male styles of leadership only within the confines of their community, one could say that they were emulating Miriam the prophetess, who complained about Moses’ leadership behind the scenes.

The women’s complaints were not meant to suggest that all Lubavitch men failed to acknowledge and respect the women’s capacities and different styles of speaking and coping. Many men I spoke with throughout this period, and
in particular during the week of mourning, remarked that their women were “more together” than the men and, hence, could be leaned upon. As Mrs. Lebovic’s husband, Rabbi Yehezkel Lebovic, said, “A lot of us men are in a quandary, but the women are staunch.”

Basha Oka knew why, and she explained succinctly: “We are the reincarnation of the women who left Egypt.” Another woman declared that at the funeral: “The women were the strength and the men went to pieces. The Rebbe told us countless times that women would lead the redemption. The Rebbe has given us such empowerment!”

In this period following the Rebbe’s death, Lubavitch women continued to gravitate toward the prophetess Miriam in their textual references. Tambourines were still being sold and decorated. Turning to Rashi, the women continued to identify with those ancestors whose enormous faith had equipped them to divine that they would soon be celebrating the miracle of God’s rescue. They had role models. As they told it, the Israelite men, who could not look into the future, were more prone to despair. Just like their own men.

What next? Once the heaviest days of mourning had passed, and it was more possible to think clearly again, would the women of Lubavitch reconstruct their theology to encompass the loss of the Rebbe? No matter how long I waited, they told me they wished I would not ask them just yet. It was unfair, they said, indecorous. I did not ask anymore.

Searching between the lines of sacred texts and of the Rebbe’s writings (particularly those he wrote just after the death of the previous Rebbe, his father-in-law, in 1950), and searching, too, in their hearts, Lubavitch women were trying out different and tentative theologies. They remained composed: “In this moment of ultimate disorientation,” said Burdman, “we are still aware of our mission to educate the world in love and peace.” Their work would continue: “performing deeds of goodness and kindness so as to bring on the redemption.”

Toward the end of a gathering later that summer, Mrs. Lebovic came in with new tambourines designed by artists she had commissioned. The proceeds would go toward a hachnosas kallah fund, monies to help a poor bride. She said she knew the women would kvell (express delight) when they saw the decorated tambourines, and kvell they did. The tambourines facilitated the articulation of new theological understandings and reaffirmed familiar ones: Redemption would still come, eventually, and God would provide sustenance for carrying on, as always.
Vanessa L. Ochs

For Mrs. Lebovic, I believe, the tambourines remained a tangible reminder of the faith of Miriam and a woman’s ability to do what she has to do to sustain life, even when it is tempting to stop functioning. They were a sign that it was possible to believe in a joyous future despite a painful present. Because they were a sign of everyone welcoming the Moshiach, they didn’t need to be professionally decorated. One woman purchasing a tambourine said, “The tambourines show that whatever happens, we’re looking forward to good times, and our connection to God isn’t contingent on always seeing the revealed good.” Another woman said she had planned tambourine decorating for her daughter’s birthday party. Yet another said that at her daughter’s wedding, the women brought their tambourines and did “a little dance act” for the bride. Later that July, an article about Mrs. Lebovic and her tambourines that appeared in the Newark Star-Ledger clarified how the tambourines were to be used. “The instruments need not be used at any time in relation to the redemption,” Mrs. Lebovic is reported to have said. “It’s not a religious duty to shake them. Some people just hang the tambourines up, using them as ornaments for their homes.”

If it is accurate, this remark is significant. First, it suggests a growing acceptance of redemption’s delay. Second, it begins to answer the question of what women were supposed to do with their tambourines now that the Messianic age seemed less imminent. Mrs. Lebovic seems to have established guidelines for practice: (1) Shaking tambourines does not necessarily mean redemption has come; (2) there is no prescribed way or time for their shaking (unlike the shaking of the lulav on Sukkot, for example); and (3) until the redemption seems more likely, it is proper to keep them visible, hung on the wall as ornaments.

Mrs. Lebovic quickly sold one of the tambourines bearing an image of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem for $36. She suggested it be used as a wall hanging and not as an instrument. With her tambourines decorated with crowns, musical notes, and cut out pictures of the Rebbe, circled with sequins, glitter, gems, ribbons, and silk flowers, Lebovic brought simcho back into this room in Morristown. Simcho was being restored to New York, Massachusetts, Florida, and even Russia, where tambourines were also being shipped and sold to women’s groups. As purchased objects, meant for decoration, they had become agents of remoralization.

Mrs. Lebovic shared how the tambourines enabled her to reframe this complicated episode. Her words, recorded in detail, reflect how the tambourines
were still making sense shortly after the Rebbe’s death, even though they had not been used, as originally envisioned, to announce and celebrate the moment the Rebbe simultaneously died and was revealed as the Messiah.

The *Moshiach* is still coming. That hasn’t changed. We’re going to have to wait and see how he will come. There’s no doubt that there will be wondrous miracles. Women have a different perspective; we have faith within. *Chazal* (the ancient learned rabbis) gave credit to the *nashim tzidkaniyos* (the righteous women), all those that took tambourines through Miriam’s inspiration. Miriam dared to approach her father. [This is a reference to a well known midrash in which Miriam rebukes her father for divorcing his wife so as not to have more babies, who would be killed by Pharaoh’s edict. It was Miriam who convinced her father to remarry Yochebed and beget Moses.] Wasn’t this more difficult than the task of Moses, who approached Pharaoh? In Egypt, the men gave up martial unions, but the women said, “Now we have it rough, but we have to go on!” They gave their husbands little fishes to entice them, to get them interested in the worthiness of family life and pursuing normalcy, because they believed the world wouldn’t end. God rewards this kind of faith that manifests itself in action. The women didn’t give up; they wanted to show their belief in redemption. They dressed their families Jewishly; they gave them Hebrew names; they didn’t assimilate into Egyptian culture.

I’m trying to perceive what might have happened. Leaving Egypt, there was still a lot to be despondent about; they didn’t know manna would fall. Miriam took her tambourine. We will need it. We’re going through it now. There will be such a need to celebrate God’s benevolence. They were ready. It was natural for women to want to show gratitude. They anticipated future miracles; we find that trait in women. The nation went into the desert without an infrastructure, but the women knew the world would be sustained.

I take my inspiration from Miriam and thank God the tambourines came my way and gave me the wherewithal. The tambourines are tangible; they are a humble instrument of music. They help symbolize the faith of Miriam and her generation of women. Women are created to be mothers, so we have it in ourselves to carry on no matter what, and to see the potential long-range outcome, just as a mother would see the future for her child. If a woman knows it is the time to dance, she dances. Messiah will appear in some way, either through resurrection... or we’ll see. We are prepared.
I know God is running the show; with my tambourine, I am ready for what God will give us in the interim and to get ready to celebrate when the redemption comes, and to help our brothers and sisters to carry on.

After four years passed and no new rebbe emerged, according to a report by Jim Yardley, those who previously had loudly proclaimed the Rebbe as Moshiach were being “dismissed . . . as a fringe group whose views are not representative of Lubavitch.” It was feared that they might “reinforce negative stereotypes of Hasidism and undermine the credibility of Lubavitch at a time when the group is aggressively expanding and trying to reach out to Jews around the world.” On the fourth anniversary of the Rebbe’s death, Rabbi Krinsky criticized the messianists, saying, “No one can know with certainty, and clearly should not campaign about, who Moshiach may or may not be.”

Others speculated that the future of Lubavitch would resolve itself, as a consensus supporting one leader developed over time. In the interim, the community would rely on the Rebbe’s extensive writings, tapes, and videos for his guidance and a sense of his presence.

The women took a different tack, an alternative to the ugly stories of factions, mistrust, and backbiting. For them, the tambourines provided a different way to narrate their present communal stresses, artistically and mythologically, and to surmount them spiritually, even drowning the disruptive male voices out with the gentle clanging of many bells.

One of the Morristown women expressed her own take, characterizing the women’s alternative stance:

I am not obsessed about leadership. Our own local rabbi is involved internationally. The main thing, what we really need to do now, is to live all the Rebbe’s teachings; they are all very clear. The most important thing is achdus (unity), among Hasidim, among all Jews. It would otherwise be a desecration of the Rebbe’s memory.

**Tambourines and the Passage of Time**

Years have passed, and Lubavitch women still wait. They no longer habitually toss their tambourines into backpacks and baby strollers. But sometimes the tambourines are still carried from place to place, and function and are
experienced, like the ritual tzitzis (fringes) worn by men, as sacred reminders of sacred obligations that are carried around on one’s body. The tambourines “proclaim” in every moment of one’s life that one has to act in such a way as to hasten redemption. They announce that one has to carry oneself, continually and in every situation, as if the messianic age could commence in an instant.

Tambourines can still be found on shelves or hung on walls; Lubavitch girls are encouraged to have and decorate one of their own. In the April 3, 1998, issue of L’Chaim, a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization, Esther Melamud related:

Whenever we set up a table, whether at the local J.C.C. or in a supermarket, in addition to brochures about various mitzvot, such as keeping kosher, lighting Shabbat candles, having mezuzot on one’s doors, we also publicize the Rebbe’s message that the time of the Redemption has arrived and that Moshiach’s coming is imminent. As part of the display we have a beautifully decorated tambourine. . . . Everyone always asks us about the tambourine. I remember once when an older woman was so excited by what we said about the Redemption and its imminence that she took the tambourine in her hand and started dancing with it.

The officials preferred to focus energies on their expanding outreach efforts, rather than on what had been called the “Moshiach Campaign.” But if, outside of Crown Heights, the Moshiach Campaign was quieting down (or was being quieted down), in Crown Heights messianism still flourished, and school children were still being led in chanting “Long live the Rebbe, King Moshiach, for ever and ever.”

After the fourth anniversary of the Rebbe’s death had been commemorated by thousands of Lubavitchers at the Montefiore cemetery with quiet prayer, the “Third International Moshiach Congress” was held in Crown Heights. Jim Yardley interviewed a woman who counted herself among the Messianists, those who persisted in publicizing the message of the Messiah’s still-imminent arrival. Rivky Shvey spent Thursday selling Messiah posters, tapes, candy bars, and tambourines. Just as Moses led the Jews through the Red Sea, Ms. Shvey said, she kept a small tambourine in her carrying bag in readiness for the arrival of the Messiah. “Just in case I’m on the subway when Moshiach comes,” Ms. Shvey, 33, said, “I’ll have one.”

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With the passage of time, the tambourines of the Lubavitch women seem more and more like the tambourines of Miriam and the women in scripture: Potent symbols from a time that already has the feel of an era long ago, simultaneously slightly larger and slightly smaller than life. They are being safeguarded, so that they will be ready for celebrating redemption.

Back in the summer of 1999, I spent one Sunday morning in Crown Heights searching for a decorated tambourine. I went inside gift stores, Jewish bookstores, stores specializing in ritual items. Nearly giving up, I went to a toy store, and was sent from there to the small office and shop of Tsivos Hashem, “God’s Army,” which sold Jewish learning items that would appeal to young children. Two tambourines hung on the wall; I paid $15 for the smaller one. My tambourine was painted sky blue. In the center was a tiny cameo-shaped picture of the Rebbe, outlined in gold glitter paint. Over his head were the Hebrew words Boruch habo melech moshiach—“Welcome King Messiah!” Under the image of the Rebbe were two olive branches drawn in green and red glitter paint, and between them a fabric rosette was attached with glue. White lace and sequins covered the wooden frame of the tambourine. It was very delicate, very pretty.

A friend, seeing the tambourine displayed on a shelf in my house and noticing the rosette, lace, and sequins, remarked, “That tambourine’s not for using, is it?”

“It’s not meant for playing,” I explained. “But it is meant for using—one uses it by having it, by explaining what it’s about. In that sense, it’s being used right now.”

Notes

1. Hebrew terms are transliterated throughout this article according to the Ashkenazi pronunciation widely used among Lubavitchers. It differs in several ways from the pronunciation of modern Hebrew.

7. In this publication, Hebrew words were transliterated according to their pronunciation in modern Hebrew.