



## The End of Suffering

### Mysticism, Messianism, and Medicine in Lubavitch

Simon Dein, University College London, UK

#### Abstract

This paper examines understandings of evil, suffering, and sickness among Lubavitcher Hasidim, a group well known for their messianic assertions. It problematizes the relationship between theological teachings and how people use these ideas “on the ground” during periods of sickness. My focus is upon how these understandings are informed by their mystical text – Tanya – the Rebbe’s discourses, and through websites such as Chabad.org. On the one hand, Lubavitchers teach that evil is illusory, on the other, suffering will cease in the Messianic era. Furthermore, suffering is integral to the structure of the universe, human suffering will end following the cosmic repair. But how do these understandings impact their experience of sickness? For the most part, theology did not directly inform praxis and everyday cognition. Lubavitchers were concerned about practical alleviation of suffering.

Keywords: suffering, mysticism, Lubavitch, Tanya, sickness

#### Introduction

The story is told of some students who came to a nineteenth-century Hasidic master in the hope that he could explain the enigma of evil in a world created by a good God. Reb Zusya, they felt, could do this, for he himself was good and pious, yet sick and poverty stricken. “How, Reb Zusya, do you explain evil,” the students asked:

“What evil,” said the Rebbe with wide wondering eyes. The students pointed out that Reb Zusya was himself suffering from illness pain and poverty.

“Oh that,” replied the Rabbi, “surely that is what my soul needs” (cited in Weiner: 7).

The story above relating to Rabbi Zusha of Hanipol (1718-1800) teaches us that every person causes slight blemishes to their soul through contact with the world. Some see any hardships they suffer in this world as a blessing, as it is perhaps a way of cleansing their soul, before they leave this world and their souls return to their Maker in Heaven. This is one explanation of suffering among several in Hasidism.

Suffering is a human reality. As a form of suffering, sickness has psychological, moral, and social dimensions, and is part of the wider spectrum of misfortune in general (see Kleinman et al.).<sup>1</sup> Evil and suffering are closely aligned in the world's religions. Unmerited suffering often provokes the questions why am I suffering, is this deserved, and why is there evil in the world? Monotheistic religions have centered on two main questions: first, what are the origin and justification of evil, and second, why is suffering distributed so unfairly? In Islam, Judaism, and Christianity this constitutes the problem of evil – the inconsistency between the fact that the world is replete with evil and the existence of a good omnipotent God.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is based on twenty-five years of ethnographic research among Lubavitcher Hasidim in Stamford Hill (UK) and in Crown Heights (U.S.) since 1993. My focus has been upon two major areas: The first relates to their understandings of sickness and how these are informed by mystical frameworks found in their mystical text – Tanya – particularly the relationship between language and the body (Dein 2002; Littlewood and Dein). The second focuses upon their responses to the death of their spiritual leader – Menachem Schneerson – who they maintained was *Moshiach*, the Jewish messiah (Dein 2001, 2010, 2011).

The central question of this paper is how does theology impact everyday experience, particularly the experience of sickness? There may be a disjoint between what members of religious communities are *taught*, what they *know*, and how these ideas are *deployed* in everyday occurrences of sickness. Here I concentrate on three related issues. What does Lubavitch teach about suffering? How do these ideas inform the everyday experience of suffering of Lubavitchers? How do Lubavitchers imagine the end of suffering? Through several periods of fieldwork spanning 1993 to the present, I interviewed Lubavitchers about episodes of sickness,

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthropological writings see suffering as a culturally constructed experience and generally have focused upon aspects of personhood, relational, moral, cultural, and socio-political dimensions (Kleinman; Lewis-Fernandez and Kleinman). Relatedly, Kirmayer notes that physical and psychological distress in diverse ethnomedical systems is seen as disruptions of the social and moral orders. Healing, according to Kleinman, involves the deployment of cultural beliefs, symbols, and rituals that generate meaning and value for the person through culturally authorized interpretations. This includes providing cultural narratives that put suffering in perspective.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of evil has attracted some interest among anthropologists. Parkin notes that the word “evil” is typically deployed in three senses: “the moral, referring to human culpability; the physical, by which is understood destructive elemental forces of nature, for example earthquakes, storms or the plague; and the metaphysical by which disorder in the cosmos or in relations with divinity results from a conflict of principles or wills” (15).

As Parkin notes, the concept of evil however is problematic in terms of its cross-cultural applicability. He presents an overview of cultural conceptualizations of evil and notes that the term is highly contested, arguing for polysemy across cultures. Csordas argues that anthropologists need to study evil, but notes their extreme reluctance to do so on account of the fact that they see it as a mythological or metaphysical category rather than as a moral or existential one. Furthermore, in his view the neglect of evil as an anthropological topic originates from its Christian-centric bias and thus to the assumption that the notion is not easily applicable cross-culturally.

including its causes and its relationship to suffering generally, was present at ritual performances, and attended numerous classes on Tanya organized by Lubavitch in Stamford Hill on a weekly basis. It was in these classes that attention was given to mystical ideas. I searched through webpages on Chabad.org which focused on evil and suffering. I spent three periods of a month each in Crown Heights in Brooklyn (1992, 1993, 2014) at the Rebbe's synagogue at 770 interviewing Lubavitchers about messianic themes. The study received University College London ethical clearance (0659/005). I begin by discussing Kabbalah which has significantly impacted Lubavitcher theology.

### Lurianic Kabbalah

Kabbalah is the Jewish mystical tradition. It is foremost a mystical method of reading Jewish texts and practicing Jewish law, but it also contains a messianic element, incorporating the idea of a salvific God and a messiah figure. Highly influenced by Gnostic and Neoplatonic ideas (Scholem 1965; Idel 1988a, 1988b), the Zohar is the most important of over three thousand texts. Its themes were elaborated in the Lurianic Kabbalah which offered novel insights into and interpretations of it, and, as I shall discuss shortly, Luria's myth of creation, deconstruction, and restoration is a dominant motif throughout this text.

The Zohar was first authored in Spain in the thirteenth century by Moses de León. He attributed the work to Shimon bar Yochai ("Rashbi"), a second century rabbi during the Roman persecution who, according to Jewish myth, received his inspiration from the Prophet Elijah to write this text. On account of his transcendence, it is impossible to describe the true essence of God in words. This true essence is called *Ein Sof*, which literally means "without end," reflecting his lack of boundaries in both time and space. This transcendence means that he cannot have any direct interaction with the created universe. Thus, God relates to the universe through ten emanations from this essence, known as the Ten *Sefirot*; the qualities or agencies of God can be divided into three triads: the intellectual power of the universe, the moral world, and finally the physical world. The tenth *sefirah* – *Shechina* – denotes "dwelling" or "settling" and is the dwelling or settling of the divine presence of God in this physical world. These divine attributes are reflected within man, both in terms of his spiritual makeup and more literally in his physical build. For Kabbalists, the *Sefirot* correspond to various limbs and functions of the human body and there is a "homologous" (Csordas and Kleinman: 12) relationship between the transcendental world and the natural world. The two worlds are directly connected by the Torah.

Lurianic Kabbalah is named after Isaac Luria (1534–1572), one of the great sages of Kabbalah.<sup>3</sup> According to the Lurianic creation myth, when God (*Ein Sof*) created the finite universe, he contracted himself, leaving an empty space (*halal*) into which the "vessels" were emanated. These vessels shattered (*Shvirat Keilim*), and their shards became sparks of light trapped within the material of creation. These shards, known as *kelipots*, are the source of evil and personal suffering. In this schema, those parts of the universe which were illuminated

---

<sup>3</sup> While Scholem (1973) contends that Shabbateism and its messianic ideology were intimately connected with the popularity and dissemination of the Lurianic Kabbalah, Idel (1988a) strongly contests this and argues that in the first few decades the seventeenth century knowledge of Lurianic Kabbalism was restricted to the elite, and had little to do with the spread of the movement among the masses.

represent goodness, while other parts remain in darkness representing evil. Prayer, especially contemplation of various aspects of the divinity (*sephiroth*), is able to release these sparks of God's self, thus bringing about a reunion with God's essence, bringing them closer to a fixed world.

While the early Lurianic formulations held that the evil powers which had entrapped the divine sparks were really evil, but could be destroyed when the sparks were uplifted to their divine place, later formulations maintained that the evil powers were of divine origin and therefore were potentially good. Thus, the world could be redeemed by transforming them into good by uplifting them to their proper place in the upper world. According to this view, evil is a lesser form of good.

Sickness is inevitable in this scheme of things. As Littlewood and Dein argue, "sickness and evil thus refer not to some malevolent power external to the created world . . . but to a lesser state of being in this world which can be redeemed in this life or in another incarnation" (357). They reflect a separation from the Divine. Thus, healing refers not just to humankind but to the universe as a whole. Physical and spiritual sickness overlap. It is only through the performance of *mitzvoth* (good deeds) that the universe will undergo a process of repair (*tikkun*). Exile and restitution are core metaphors to reflect this cosmogony and cosmic repair. For Luria the coming of the messiah is consequent upon the obliteration of evil and humans overcoming the fragmentation of finite existence. According to Luria, the Redemption would arrive through collective effort and the messiah would arrive as a result of the *tikkun*; his coming would not be the cause of the Redemption but rather its outcome.<sup>4</sup>

Kabbalistic ideas have strongly influenced the Hasidic movement and it is to this that I now turn.

### Lubavitch

The term Hasidism refers to a mystical religious revival movement within Judaism, which draws heavily from the Kabbalist tradition. It originated in contemporary Western Ukraine during the eighteenth century and subsequently spread rapidly throughout Eastern Europe. In the first half of the nineteenth century its adherents derived from Eastern and Central Europe, and possibly the majority of East European Jews belonged to it. Its founder, the Baal Shem Tov, was himself a celebrated healer and master of practical Kabbalah. Hasidism's teachings underscore God's immanence in the universe, the necessity to cleave to him at all times; corporality and mundane acts are given spiritual significance. Heavily influenced by the Kabbalah movement, Hasidism privileged the believer's personal experiences of God over and above religious doctrine and ritual. The core distinction between contemporary Hasidism and its earlier forms pertains to the fact that modern Hasidism rejects asceticism and underscores the fact that everyday life is holy.

---

<sup>4</sup> Judaism does not have a unified theory about good and evil. The Kabbalists maintained that evil developed through an imbalance in the cosmos. While generally rejecting the Christian concept of "original sin," a similar concept can be found in Kabbalistic thinking, which describes how all created souls were affected by Adam's failure to complete the assigned task of gathering the final, stray sparks of the shattered vessels that would harmonize the universe. Rabbinic teachings about human nature describe the existence of two inclinations – the *yetzer ha tov* (the good inclination) and the *yetzer ha ra* (the evil inclination).

Hasidism provided a new conception of leadership based on the Lurianic notion of spiritually superior individuals who could attain a high level of *devekut* – closeness to God. This conception was institutionalized in the zaddik (the righteous leader), who worked tirelessly to develop the spirituality of his adherents and at the same time can perform miraculous feats for them through his mediation with God. Lenowitz (199-200) argues for a close relationship between the messianic features in Hasidism and the institution of the zaddik, seeing him as a quasi-divine figure able to perform miracles, repair the cosmos, and bring about the end of time.

Here I specifically concentrate on one Hasidic group – Lubavitch – otherwise known as Chabad, comprising about 200,000 members worldwide. Its main base is situated in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>5</sup> Heilman estimates that the Crown Heights Lubavitch population is 10,000–12,000 people. It is notable that a significant proportion of Lubavitchers (around 75% as estimated by one prominent rabbi) are *baalei teshuvah* – returnees from non-Orthodox Judaism, with many having led secular lives before coming to Lubavitch.

Daily life in the Lubavitch community is dictated by halacha – the compilation of Jewish religious laws deriving from the oral and written Torah, which guides behavior in all its aspects. Community members follow strict dietary laws and regularly celebrate the Sabbath and Holy festivals. Men regularly attend the synagogue and read sacred texts. Their clothing is conservative and they have beards and covered heads. Women are expected to have an enthusiastic attitude towards childbearing, cover their hair, and pray regularly with some religious learning. In terms of schooling, male and female children are segregated from the age of three and teenage boys attend residential seminaries, often abroad.

From 1951 until his death in 1994, the Lubavitcher Rebbe-Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Chabad Rebbe, led the group. Born in Russia in 1902, he was renowned as a “Torah prodigy” and his followers maintained that he was fluent in ten languages. By the time of his death the movement had undergone a transformation into one of the largest Jewish movements in the world today with a network of more than 3,600 religious and social institutions based in over 1,000 cities, spanning 100 countries and all 50 American states. For over forty years he lived in 770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn (known by Lubavitchers as “770”), with his house being a major site of pilgrimage for Lubavitchers and non-Lubavitchers alike. Like prophets and founders of new religious movements, he was seen as a miracle worker and many stories about him concerned miraculous healing – cures of individuals with cancer and healing infertility (Dein 2002; Littlewood and Dein).

Chabad has a deliberate public face with well-organized outreach and proselytizing programs; unlike other Orthodox Jewish groups, Chabad is well known for sending out emissaries across the world to return non-Orthodox Jews back to Orthodoxy – an activity known as *kiruv*. Lubavitchers maintain that every Jew possesses a mystical spark which can be ignited and potentially elevate him/herself through the performance of good deeds (*mitzvot*). Furthermore, Lubavitch has widely utilized media technology to popularize its ideas. Chabad.org, the official homepage for worldwide Chabad-Lubavitch movement, is a very

---

<sup>5</sup> Chabad is an acronym of the first letters of the intellectual *sefirot* (*Chochmah, Binah, and Daat*: wisdom, understanding, and knowledge).

popular website among Lubavitchers. It was founded by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Kazen in 1988 and now contains over 100,000 articles promoting Judaism and providing daily Torah lectures, messianic teachings, and Hasidic philosophy to its virtual congregation. There is also a multimedia portal where users can stream Jewish audio and visual presentations. Its producers maintain that Chabad.org and its affiliated sites attract over 43 million visitors per year and over 365,000 email subscribers.

### Lubavitcher Messianism and the End of Suffering

The coming of Moshiach (the Jewish messiah) is central to Jewish faith and many daily prayers directly allude to the messiah.<sup>6</sup> The Rebbe connected a large percentage of his talks to Moshiach and many others have lifted specific references to Moshiach out of his many works. *Kehot*, the Lubavitch Publication Society, has also published many English books on the subject. Lubavitcher ideas pertaining to Moshiach derive from the Medieval Jewish philosopher and physician, Maimonides (1135–1204). According to Lubavitch teachings all the nations of the world will see Moshiach as a world leader and come to accept his dominion. The messianic era will be a time of world peace; war and famine will no longer occur and there will be a high standard of living for everyone. For believers the advent of the messianic era signifies the end of evil, pain, suffering, sickness, and death. Sickness we be no more for the faithful. We might argue that messianism is a lens through which they view the end of worldly suffering.

Prior to the Rebbe's death, Chabad.org published the following about what would happen when Moshiach reveals himself:

The Messianic era will witness ultimate physical and spiritual bliss. All will be healed. The blind, the deaf and the dumb, the lame, whosoever has any blemish or disability, shall be healed from all their disabilities: "The eyes of the blind shall be clear-sighted, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened . . . the lame shall leap as a hart and the tongue of the dumb shall sing . . ." (Isaiah 35:5-6). Death itself shall cease, as it is said, "Death shall be swallowed up forever and G-d shall wipe the tears from every face . . ." (Isaiah 25:8) (Schochet).

The fast approaching arrival of Moshiach, the Jewish messiah, had been a central tenet driving the Lubavitcher movement and for some years prior to the Rebbe's death was a prominent discourse in the Stamford Hill community. Elijah cites evidence that the 1980s witnessed escalating messianic fervor in Chabad. For her, this messianic fervor was a direct response to the Holocaust, helping them deal with this terrible atrocity.

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Jewish eschatology the Jewish messiah is a future Jewish king who will rule over the Jews in the Messianic Age and the world to come. He is descended from the line of David. Many of the facts concerning the messiah are found in Isaiah (2, 11, 42; 59:20), although messianic ideas are discussed by other prophets such as Ezekiel (38:16) and Jeremiah (23, 30, 33; 48:47; 49:39). While the majority of the Second Temple texts do not specifically refer to an individual messiah, there is some mention in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. There is an extensive discussion in the Talmud of the coming of the messiah (Sanhedrin 98a-99a). The Medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides wrote about the messiah in his *Mishneh Torah* in the section titled *Hilkhot Melakhim Umilchamoteibem*.

For many years the Rebbe's followers had maintained that Rebbe himself was Moshiach and he would usher in the anticipated Redemption (Dein 2001, 2012; Berger; Ehrlich; Shaffir). He died in 1994 without leaving a successor. After his death, Lubavitch split into two opposing camps. While some messianists hold that the Rebbe died but is to be resurrected as the messiah, others, in contrast, assert that his death was purely illusory – he remains “alive” though concealed. The anti-messianists argue that the Rebbe could have been Moshiach, indeed he possessed all the qualities for this, but it was not God's will that Moshiach should reveal himself at this time. Furthermore, they disagree vehemently that as such he could arise from the dead. (see Dein 2001, 2011; Kravel Tovi and Bilu). However, as evidenced by the many petitions deposited there, his followers continue to flock to his gravesite – the *Ohel* in Queens, New York – in the hope of receiving blessings and miracles. But even though the Rebbe is no longer there to lead the movement, it has largely survived his death. The Rebbe has been replaced by his teachings which continue to provide both hope and direction.

Despite the strong messianic fervor in Lubavitch around the Rebbe's death, this has now largely subsided. What has been the effect of prophetic disconfirmation on Lubavitch? I would argue that while messianism is still an article of faith, there is no longer a strong conviction of the Moshiach's imminent arrival and it is now a rather abstract idea which no longer influences believers' everyday lives.

### **Tanya, Illusory Reality and Problem of Evil and Suffering**

Lubavitch is a rationalist form of Hasidism which reintroduced the more intellectual elements of Kabbalah into the movement through its text *Tanya* (Book of Teaching). Authored by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812), who founded Chabad, *Tanya* is the central text of Lubavitcher Hasidism, unifying the exoteric teaching of the Talmud with the esoteric teachings found in the Kabbalah. It contains teachings from the Zohar, Lurianic Kabbalah, and the Maharal of Prague.

Lubavitch is dissimilar from other Ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups to the extent that the study of mysticism is encouraged for all members rather than a select few. Lubavitchers, both men and women, read *Tanya* on a daily basis and are expected to go through all the chapters in a yearly cycle beginning on the Kislev 15, the anniversary of the first Lubavitcher Rebbe's release from prison in Tsarist Russia. Lubavitcher men study *Tanya* while attending yeshivah where they will study the text for up to six hours per day. Children tend to learn *Tanya* in school from a young age, but not in a deep way. Young children are encouraged to learn lines of *Tanya* by heart, more to get used to the layout and wording and fundamental importance of the book, than to learn it to understand. Once they reach Bar Mitzvah, they will begin to learn it in more detail, and only really when they get to yeshiva, at the age of sixteen, will they start to learn the concepts in much greater depth.

Studying *Tanya* properly requires a teacher who is versed in the subject; it is replete with mystical terms which the uninitiated in this area will not understand. A skilled *Tanya* teacher will explain these terms and, more importantly, make them practical and relevant. Layers of meaning are hidden behind each word and its interpretation requires religious expertise. Kabbalists stress the fact that below surface reality there is another deeper layer of meaning; thus, there is a contrast between inner and outer layers of truth and reality. *Tanya* is also learned

through reading books by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz or Rabbi Yekutiel Green (in Hebrew). Here we examine Tanya as cultural practice.

Tanya comprises five sections discussing Hasidic mystical psychology and theology and is seen by Lubavitchers as a handbook for daily spiritual life in Jewish observance. Its scope is wide, examining a range of existential issues including the nature of evil, the contradictions of everyday living, life's purpose, and knowledge of God. The text enumerates psychic conflicts, physical urges, evil impulses, ethical dilemmas, and struggles towards self-improvement. The experience of the material world is held to be a reflection of hidden, deeper or higher principles; every human soul is connected to the Divine and man's personality is described in terms of the ten *sefirot* – the divine emanations. The material and spiritual continuously participate in each other; the ultrahuman order is manifest in humankind. A distinction between the physical and spiritual is hardly perceptible in this schema.

A central theme pertains to the fact physical reality is ultimately illusory and things are not necessarily what they appear to be to be overtly. The truth can only be discerned through study and devout practice. In Tanya all physical and psychological phenomena are seen as relative and illusionary. God, the absolute reality himself, is beyond all physical or spiritual concepts. Elior argues in relation to Chabad ontology: "A distinction is made between the essence of things and their appearance and between the eyes of the intellect and one's eyes of flesh; the two are always in tension" (14). Tanya emphasizes acosmism – a philosophy which denies the reality of the universe. God alone is the sole and ultimate reality; finite objects and events have no independent existence in themselves. Tanya states:

In truth, however, "No evil descends from above," and everything is good, though it is not apprehended [as such] because of its immense and abundant goodness, at a level which is inconceivable to man (Epistle 11, *Iggeret Hakodesh*).

Although not a central focus, Tanya is not devoid of messianic expectation. The pinnacle of creation will be in the messianic era when God will find a dwelling place in the lower worlds. Ritual prepares this world for the advent of the messiah.

Specifically in relation to Tanya, Stamford Hill Lubavitch runs weekly classes for beginners in Hasidic philosophy, *Project Lechaim*, both for men and women though taught separately by male rabbis from the Stamford Hill community. I attended numerous such classes and was able to observe how ideas from Tanya were interpreted and contested. Students can also receive one-to-one teaching by an expert in Tanya. The topics of evil and suffering were mentioned frequently in the Rebbe's weekly discourses related to Tanya and are widely discussed in his writings. He often emphasized man's limited perspective on suffering, and that what we might consider evil or bad could be good at another level, often imperceptible to the person suffering.

The Rebbe frequently commented upon the Holocaust. In his writings he vehemently rejected all theological explanations for this atrocity. He saw any attempt to explain away the Holocaust as conceited. For him, any understanding was beyond the capacity of the human mind. He viewed this event in terms of healing – a form of divine surgery on the body of the nation to prepare for salvation. In particular, he strongly eschewed any explanation based upon divine punishment and disagreed with the Satmar leader, Joel Teitelbaum, who saw the

Holocaust as a divinely ordained punishment for secular Zionists creating a modern Jewish state in the land of Israel. Far from disproving God's existence, the Lubavitcher Rebbe argued that our rage towards him attests to his existence. Specifically referring to this atrocity, the Rebbe penned as follows:

It is clear that “no evil descends from Above,” and buried within torment and suffering is a core of exalted spiritual good. Not all human beings are able to perceive it, but it is very much there. So it is not impossible for the physical destruction of the Holocaust to be spiritually beneficial. On the contrary, it is quite possible that physical affliction is good for the spirit (*Mada Ve'emuna*, *Machon Lubavitch*, 1980, Kfar Chabad).

Lubavitcher ideas about suffering were summarized by one rabbi: Rabbi Black, a forty-year-old rabbi with a family of eight children, explained to me concepts of evil and suffering in Tanya. Having grown up in a traditional Orthodox family in London, he started attending Hasidic philosophy at the age of thirteen after his Bar Mitzvah and for the past twenty years or so is a “card-carrying” Lubavitcher. In his words:

Everything is by Divine providence. Everything was created by God, even evil. Evil refers to that which is separate from God. But in evil Godliness is concealed and we cannot see the Godliness in it. It is hidden goodness. So why do people suffer? Everyone is prone to sin. Suffering is a cleansing or purification of our sins. Say for instance a person is 90 percent good in his life and ten percent sinful. Instead of God punishing him in heaven he may suffer on earth so that when he dies he can go straight to heaven. God is doing a good thing through this process of suffering. What looks bad from our perspective and looks like evil is actually good from God's perspective. God created evil so we can do good. There cannot be good without evil. God gave evil and free will, it's our choice to perform good deeds – *mitzvot*. If there was no evil in the world there would not be any opportunity for man to do good. We do not understand God's ways. However, we can be sure that everything that comes from God has a purpose.

Specifically in relationship to sickness, he narrated:

At one level everything, even sickness come from God. It can occur for many reasons from natural to spiritual. When someone is unwell we pray for them. Why do this if everything comes from God? He decides that a person should become unwell. I can explain it like this. Everyone in the world has accrued merits throughout their life. Prayer may increase a person's merit. God may allow that person to live longer because of this. In Chabad we are expected to check our *mezuzot* when someone is ill. Replacing a defective *mezuzah* with a kosher one is a good deed. This can help him recover by increasing his merit. Performing good deeds brings about a process of repair or *tikkun*.

People become unwell for different reasons. It might be their own responsibility for instance not looking after themselves or poor diet. However, sometimes it is not the person's fault like in cancer. But pain and suffering can

be beneficial. For instance, if someone trains for a marathon they may experience pain and exhaustion but this is for a greater good, i.e., so they can run the marathon and raise money for charity. Ultimately, we do not understand God's ways.

Evil and suffering are not the same thing. Evil represents going against God's will. Evil can be brought on by the person themselves, e.g., a person hangs out with negative influences. They become evil, but do not necessarily suffer. One question we are always asked is about the Holocaust. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson, said we should not try as humans to understand why this happened. God has his reasons, but we cannot understand them. But the Rebbe disagreed with other rabbis who saw it as a punishment. This is not a view held by Lubavitch.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe said that we are now approaching the age of the messiah. This is occurring in two stages. First, the world will continue as now for a time. However, godliness will increasingly be revealed in the world. In the second stage, when this process is complete, the Redemption and Moshiach will arrive and evil will disappear. The Rebbe has prepared us for the redemption. His illness and death were natural events and it is expected that he would die as he was an old man.

Tanya gives us a fresh perspective on everything in life. You go about looking for the hand of God in everything. Everything comes from God. Every challenge or misfortune is a test from God and a chance to perform good deeds and improve our merit. For Chabad this merit is for the benefit of the world, not solely for the benefit of the individual person. This will bring about the Redemption.

### Theology Does Not Directly Impact the Experience of Sickness

In relation to sickness Lubavitchers would traditionally pray for God's support as is normative in Orthodox Judaism and also write to the Rebbe for a blessing when unwell. He would generally respond by offering them a blessing and asking them to check their religious artefacts such as the *mezuzah* or *tefillin*.<sup>7</sup> A dereliction in their artefacts was frequently held to result in physical sickness. In one example a misspelling of the Hebrew word *lev* ("heart") could result in a heart attack. While Lubavitchers maintain that spiritual disorder is closely tied with physical sickness, the body and the spiritual realm are intimately linked (Dein 2002), they generally expressed little concern about how this actually worked. It was only the ritual experts who were able to explicate Kabbalistic understanding behind this, often referring to Tanya. In many cases of sickness lay people did not hold clearly articulated notions about how their actions were effective, beyond the mention of the close relationship between the physical and

---

<sup>7</sup> The *mezuzah* is a small box affixed to the right-hand door post of a Jewish home. It comprises a piece of parchment called a *klaf* inside a decorative case and inscribed with Hebrew verses from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21). The *tefillin* (also referred to as phylacteries) are cubic black leather boxes with leather straps containing Hebrew parchment scrolls worn by Orthodox Jewish men on their head and their arm as part of the weekday morning prayer.

spiritual worlds. In fact, it was very striking that their understandings of sickness, while incorporating some spiritual elements, were largely framed around biomedical explanations.

When asked about the relationship between sickness, suffering, and mystical teaching, they would often defer to a religious authority, telling me to ask one of several rabbis whom they held to be extremely knowledgeable in this area. While questions sometimes arose pertaining to God's role in suffering, particularly why he had allowed them to suffer, it was striking that informants hardly ever appealed to theological notions to account for or deal with their sickness. It was only the rabbis who were able to articulate such notions about sickness and suffering in any detail.

Generally, Lubavitchers would approach a doctor for help and readily adopted biomedical explanatory models of their illnesses and its treatments. Living in Stamford Hill and growing up in the UK, or in the U.S, they were familiar with biomedicine; many – the *Baalei teshuvah* – had come from secular backgrounds before joining Lubavitch, and were in no way antagonistic to approaching biomedical practitioners or accepting naturalistic explanations. Their explanatory models reflected western cultural knowledge including knowledge of biomedicine.

One example makes this clear. Mrs. Levine is a seventy-year-old woman with eleven children. Originally born into a traditional Jewish family (but not Orthodox), she joined Lubavitch at the age of eighteen prior to commencing university. She has resided in Stamford Hill for over fifty years and has studied Tanya and was familiar with its concepts, and she was familiar with the idea of *tikkun* and the illusory nature of evil. Having lived through the intense messianic fervor in the 1990s, she acknowledged that she had expected the Rebbe to reveal himself as Moshiach and the Redemption to arrive before his death, and she had hoped that evil and suffering would end. She continued to hope that Moshiach would arrive, but was not concerned about when or how this might occur. She met the Rebbe on several occasions in “770” and was familiar with his works and had personally written to him about episodes of sickness in her family. He sent her a blessing and had instructed her to check her *mezuzot*.

She was recently admitted to her local hospital following a heart attack from which she nearly died. She told me about her feelings in relation to becoming ill:

From personal experience . . . when I became ill, I did feel angry but kept struggling to see that even if I can't see that it's somehow for the best, God has things somehow organized, even though it doesn't make sense to us. People do experience suffering in this world, but we cannot always understand these things. Only *Hashem* (God) knows the reason why.

However, when asked to explicate further about theological ideas she deferred to a local rabbi. Her discourse in relation to sickness reflected little in the way of theological reflection.

In a second example, Miriam Rosenberg, a forty-year-old lady, discussed her son Sholi's asthma. She was born into a non-Orthodox family and only became religious at the age of twenty-one after finishing university. She is currently a teacher in the Stamford Hill infants school. She attended many Tanya classes held at Lubavitch House and had read the Rebbe's works. Like most Lubavitchers, she had expected the Rebbe to reveal himself as Moshiach and had not expected him to die. She affirmed to me that Moshiach would arrive, this was a

tenet of faith for her and, as she admitted, did not affect her everyday life. Neither was it a major concern for her as to how and when this would occur.

She reported that Sholi suffered with severe and life-threatening asthma and on a number of occasions he had nearly died and had to be ventilated. She met the Rebbe on several occasions at “770,” and on two occasions when Sholi became ill, she wrote to him asking that her son should recover. She received a letter from the Rebbe’s secretary with the Rebbe’s blessing and recommending that she should check the *mezuzot* in her house. She also prayed to God that her son would recover fully which was subsequently the case. She was unable to explain how checking the *mezuzot* “worked” and while she admitted that at times she despaired that her son would improve, she never asked questions about why people suffer. Again, on asking this she told me to speak to a rabbi.

In a third example, Kate Rosenblatt, a forty-year-old mother of five children developed breast cancer. She was born on the East Coast of America into a Lubavitch family and had grown up in an Orthodox environment. She immigrated with her family to the UK at thirteen years of age. She described fond memories of meeting the Rebbe on a couple of occasions, was familiar with a number of his texts, and had learnt the principles of Tanya including ideas about *tikkun*. Her husband Moshe ran the local “Project Return,” a weekly meeting at Lubavitch House discussing various mystical ideas. In relation to the Rebbe, she maintained that he could perform miracles; she was, however, uncertain that he was the expected Jewish messiah. At the age of thirty-nine-years, Kate developed breast cancer with bone spread and was in severe pain. I met her on several occasions during the course of her illness. Her discourse centered around biomedical themes – her diagnosis, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy, and she rarely ventured into the realm of religion. On one occasion when I discussed how she was coping, she noted:

I’m not worried. I’ve written to the Lubavitcher Rebbe and I’m sure I will be healed. He has performed many miracles. I know it’s possible to be cured from cancer, there are many stories of this happening.

On further questioning about why she had become unwell her response was, “I can’t really explain this, its bad luck.” She did not question God’s actions nor did she invoke any theological ideas about her suffering, but maintained strong conviction in the Rebbe’s capacity to heal. Tragically, she died about two years after developing the cancer.

The informants discussed here were female and we cannot naturally assume that men think in a similar way. However, in my ethnographic research over the past twenty years it was very rare for men to discuss theological ideas in relation to suffering.

## Discussion

This paper has examined the Lubavitcher theology of suffering. At the cultural level the Lurianic Kabbalah is a metaphor for exile and restitution and is a spiritual interpretation of the historical predicament of the Jews exiled from Spain in 1492. It answered questions of significance for sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish refugees: Why the exile? How could God allow the expulsion of Jews from Spain? In view of these catastrophic events, what is the vocation of Jews in this world? It gave cosmic meaning to their trauma and to their endless history of expulsions, offering hope that at a future time suffering would be abolished.

Scholem (1973), writing in the years following the Holocaust and the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel, saw Kabbalah as metaphorical for the Jewish experience in history. According to the messianic aspect of Luria's work, humankind was compelled to repair the broken world and pave the way for the messiah's arrival. Similar processes occurred in the ascent of Zionism with its promise of assuaging the traumatic Jewish experience in the twentieth century.

Similarly, messianism provides a cultural template which offers the possibility of an end to evil and suffering. As Stephen O'Leary notes, all cultures that postulate divine origins also imagine a future time when evil will end. For him the apocalypse locates evil in time and is a symbolic resource that allows societies to define and address evil, looking forward to its imminent resolution. It represents history as a dramatic contest between good and bad. Apocalyptic myth offers a temporal and teleological framework for understanding evil, asserting that evil intensifies until the anointed time of the imminent end. It is an attempt to resolve the problem of theodicy.

But how do these cultural themes impact everyday experience of sickness? Lubavitcher teachings about suffering derive from both online and offline textual sources: the Tanya and its Kabbalistic elements, the Rebbe's discourses, popular internet sites such as Chabad.org, and the Hebrew Bible. They create cultural worlds that are a means through which they experience the world. In terms of Lubavitcher teachings, four ideas predominate in relation to evil and suffering: Evil is illusory, suffering will cease in the messianic era, suffering is integral to the structure of the universe, and human suffering will end following the cosmic repair. Sin, while frequently mentioned as a cause of sickness in the Hebrew Bible, was rarely mentioned as a cause of sickness by my informants.

It was very striking that their understandings of sickness, while incorporating some spiritual elements, were largely framed around biomedical explanations. There was no contradiction between religion and biomedicine. While these concepts are *theoretically* divided in Euro-American cultures, as Latour argues, this does not necessarily occur in practice – like many other categories, such dichotomies are rarely “lived” in this way. This was evident among my informants. Lubavitchers were more concerned with the pragmatics of healing and symptom alleviation and did not symbolically elaborate on their sickness experiences to any great extent. For the most part theology did not directly inform praxis and everyday cognition.

We need to differentiate between what people are *taught*, what they *know*, and whether they *deploy* these ideas during their everyday lives. Berliner and Sarro note that how individuals develop religious faith is understudied by anthropologists and assert that individuals are not merely passive recipients of religious culture, rather they are actively involved in the learning process. Learning religion is not simply a cognitive exercise, it is as much a social process and occurs within a sociocultural context, in the interstices of social interaction.

As Parkin notes anthropologists have for a long time held “the assumption that religion just happens to people” (cited in Berliner and Sarro: 6). Little interest has been expressed in the construction of religious knowledge. They forget that much time and effort is devoted to *instructing* people. Lubavitcher Rabbis underscore the importance of learning mystical and messianic ideas for all, including women, not just for a small elite. Much time is devoted towards running classes and personal teaching in these topics.

How can we account for this disjoint between what is taught and how these ideas inform everyday cognition and experience? Not all religious believers are philosophers concerned with metaphysical and existential questions. Keesing proposes:

Religions first of all, *explain*. They answer existential questions: how the world came to be, how humans are related to natural species and forces, why humans die, and why their efforts succeed and fail? Undoubtedly, not all individuals in a society worry about such questions. But every society has its philosophers who seek answers to existential questions, while others carry on assured that there *are* answers, and are more concerned with coping, solving, and striving than with explaining (330).

Relatedly Bourdieu cautions against the “scholastic fallacy,” which assumes that people interpret the world along the lines of social scientists and theologians (384). Informants do not necessarily share the social, cultural, and symbolic capital of scholars. Instead, they deploy pragmatic religiosity – religious actions are not primarily geared to orthodoxies and orthopraxis, but to beliefs and desires rooted in everyday life (Quack).<sup>8</sup> Their logic of practice is oriented towards practical ends, that is, the actualization of wishes and desires prevalent in their everyday life (Bourdieu). Quack argues that beliefs underlying peoples’ healthcare seeking are in some cases not to be conceptualized as belief systems or explanatory models of illness, but as an ambivalent amalgam of propositional attitudes and representations that are accepted without them being fully understood – the half-understood beliefs referred to as semi-propositional beliefs by anthropologist Dan Sperber.

We may speculate on the reasons for this disjoint between theology and everyday experience.<sup>9</sup> First, unlike other Hasidic groups, Lubavitchers regularly mix with non-Orthodox Jews and with non-Jews and are regularly exposed to secular ideologies including that of biomedicine. We cannot view them as a premodern culture but rather are deeply steeped in the institutions of modernity like biomedicine and modern media technology. While often writing to the Rebbe, they generally consult with their general practitioner when they are unwell and deploy biomedical treatments. Biomedicine for them provides a soteriology. I would concur with Good who notes that Euro-American culture’s understandings of suffering come under the realm of medicine and consequently become “medical” concerns. In fact, for them questions of how and why in relation to sickness are often conflated.

Secondly, I would argue that Kabbalistic ideas, messianism, and the illusory nature of evil are too abstract and cognitively challenging to deploy in everyday theorizing about suffering. To explore this idea further I appeal to the cognitive science of religion which argues that knowledge of the workings of our cognitive apparatus facilitates understanding of religious transmission. Traditionally, cognitive scientists have asserted that there is a significant

---

<sup>8</sup> A number of scholars have pointed out that, both in the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of medicine, the use of the concept of “belief” is problematic (Southwold; Needham).

<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in his work among Burmese Theravada Buddhists, Spiro notes a disjoint between Buddhist normative conceptions of no self (*Anatta*) and the views of Burmese villagers who maintain the existence of the ego or soul that this doctrine strongly denies. Since they themselves experience a subjective sense of a self, the culturally normative concept of an ego-less person does not fit in with their own personal experience.

cognitive divide between folk religion and theology – between “official” and “popular” religion. While folk religious beliefs are considered to be cognitively natural, theology is replete with concepts that cannot be easily represented in the human mind (Boyer).

I argue that the illusory nature of evil is counterintuitive; suffering and evil are very real experiences. For the most part, messianism, while still an article of faith, is an abstract concept for many, a hope rather than a strong conviction following prophetic disconfirmation in the wake of the Rebbe’s death. While messianic ideas are widely taught in the community, they do not appear to directly influence discourse about suffering and sickness except perhaps in a few instances where rabbis articulate direct relationships between the two. We might argue that for most, while still a prevalent idea, it does not influence the day-to-day life for most Lubavitchers.

Finally, the findings in this study have significant implications for methodology in medical anthropology. We cannot assume that all members of a cultural group share the same ideas about suffering and sickness. Soucy argues, “there is still a tendency in anthropological inquiry to rely on ritual specialists for ascribing a unified ‘meaning’ to a ritual. Sociological factors like power or accumulation of cultural capital are often ignored, as are individual experiences of a ritual, or motivations for participation in it” (180). In his view, anthropologists have concentrated too much on the interpretations of religious professionals at the expense of lay believers. It is generally a key informant – usually a religious professional – who interprets these rituals. The assumption is held that lay believers would usually verify and accord with this expert’s opinion. Other kinds of knowledge and alternative interpretations are not expressed as loudly. This is because they lack authority on account of the marginal status of those expressing them. So, similarly, in religious studies, feminist critiques have underscored the extent to which men control religious meanings.

## Bibliography

Berger, D.

2001 *The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*. Oxford: Littman Library.

Berliner, D., and R. Sarro

2008 *Learning Religion: Anthropological Approaches*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Bourdieu, P.

1990 “The Scholastic Point of View.” *Cultural Anthropology* 5, 4: 380-91.

Boyer, P.

2001 *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Csordas, T.

2013 “Morality as a Cultural System?” *Current Anthropology* 54, 5: 523-46. Available online at <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/672210>.

- Csordas, T., and A. Kleinman  
1996 "The Therapeutic Process." Pp. 3-20 in *Medical Anthropology: Contemporary Theory and Method*. Revised edition. Edited by C. F. Sargent and M. T. Johnson. London: Praeger.
- Dein, S. L.  
2001 "What Really Happens when Prophecy Fails: The Case of Lubavitch." *Sociology of Religion* 62, 3: 383-402.  
2002 "The Power of Words: Healing Narratives amongst Lubavitch Hasidim." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 16: 41-62  
2010 "A Messiah from the Dead: Cultural Performance in Lubavitcher Messianism." *Social Compass* 57, 4: 537-54.  
2011 *Lubavitcher Messianism: What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails?* New York: Continuum.
- Ehrlich, M. A.  
2004 *The Messiah of Brooklyn: Understanding Lubavitch Hasidism Past and Present*. Jersey City: Ktav.
- Elior, R.  
1998 "The Lubavitch Messianic Resurgence: The Historical and Mystical Background 1939-1996." Pp. 383-408 in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*. Edited by P. Schafer and M. Cohen. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Good, B.  
1994 *Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heilman, S.  
2005 "The Chabad Lubavitch Movement: Filling the Jewish Vacuum Worldwide." Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (December 15). Available online at <http://jcpa.org/article/the-chabad-lubavitch-movement-filling-the-jewish-vacuum-worldwide>.
- Idel, M.  
1988a *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. New Haven: Yale University Press.  
1988b *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Keesing, R.  
1975 *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*. Second edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

- Kirmayer, L. J.  
1989 "Cultural Variations in the Response to Psychiatric Disorders and Emotional Distress." *Social Science and Medicine* 29: 327-39.
- Kleinman, A.  
1988 *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kleinman, A., V. Das, and M. Lock, editors  
1997 *Social Suffering*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kravel-Tovi, M., and Y. Bilu  
2008 "The Work of the Present: Constructing Messianic Temporality in the Wake of Failed Prophecy among Chabad Hasidim." *American Ethnologist* 35: 64-80.
- Latour, B.  
1993 *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lenowitz, H.  
2001 *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis-Fernández, R., and A. Kleinman  
1994 "Culture, Personality, and Psychopathology." *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 103, 1: 67-71.
- Littlewood, R., and S. Dein  
1995 "The Effectiveness of Words: Religion and Healing among the Lubavitch of Stamford Hill." *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 19, 3: 339-83.
- Needham, R.  
1972 *Belief, Language and Experience*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- O'Leary, S.  
1994 *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parkin, D.  
1985 *The Anthropology of Evil*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Quack, J.  
2013 "What Do I Know?" Scholastic Fallacies and Pragmatic Religiosity in Mental Health-Seeking Behaviour in India." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 16, 4: 403-18.
- Schochet, J. Immanuel  
n.d. "The Messianic Era." Chabad.org. Available online at [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/100899/jewish/The-Messianic-Era.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/100899/jewish/The-Messianic-Era.htm).

- Scholem, G.  
1965 *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul  
1973 *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah: 1626–1676*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul.
- Shaffir, W.  
1995 “When Prophecy is not Validated: Explaining the Unexpected in a Messianic Campaign.” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 37, 2: 119-36.
- Soucy, A.  
2000 “The Problem with Key Informants.” *Anthropological Forum* 10, 179-99.
- Southwold, M.  
1979 “Religious Belief.” *Man* 14: 628-44.
- Sperber, D.  
1997 “Intuitive and Reflective Beliefs.” *Mind and Language* 12,1: 67-83.
- Spiro, M. E.  
1993 “Is the Western Conception of the Self ‘Peculiar’ within the Context of the World Cultures?” *Ethos* 21: 107-53.
- Weiner, H.  
1992 *9 1/2 Mystics. The Kabbalah Today*. New York: Simon and Schuster.