

**Personalities**  
**and Kavod HaTorah**

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**T**he recent decision, by a *beit din* in Israel -- pending a final ruling on the matter by the Chief Rabbi -- to refrain from converting an individual, who believes that the previous Lubavitcher *Rebbe* is the *Mashiach*, has drawn differing responses. Some feel that the *beit din* was correct in its assessment that a belief of this nature is outside the pale. Others, of course, feel that this should not be a bar to conversion as this belief is not outside the pale. What I have found particularly interesting, though, is the argument of Rabbi Shmueli Boteach, specifically his call for sympathy for this error in judgment (see [www.thejc.com/home.aspx?ParentId=m12s114&SecId=114&AId=57522&ATypeId](http://www.thejc.com/home.aspx?ParentId=m12s114&SecId=114&AId=57522&ATypeId)).

The substantive issue itself is not new; this is a matter that has been debated by many over the past decade since the *Rebbe's* passing. Those who present the argument that this belief is not outside the pale of Torah contend that those who subscribe to this belief (a) still are meticulous in their observance of Halacha and (b) ascribe no divinity to the *Rebbe*. As such, while many, such as Rabbi Boteach, still state that this belief is wrong, due to these two factors, they argue, it cannot be described as heretical. Those who disagree maintain that included in normative halachic practice are certain subscribed faith commitments, as evidenced by the presentations in **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Madah**, and that this belief does not meet these standards. The observance of other halachot by the Mashichists, even their meticulous observance of such, cannot override their non-observance of these halachot of subscribed faith commitments. Included in the critique of many within this camp is, also, the perception that this belief does ascribe some level of divinity to the *Rebbe* as further evidenced by the segment of Mashichists who clearly and openly express such a view. At issue are some halachic matters as well as disagreements over the actual nature of the belief. This conversion case actually only highlighted the nature of the disagreement and, given the present movement to centralized decision making in regard to conversions affecting Israel, presented a significant, practical

implication within the debate. The debate will continue as it has done so for the past decade. Rabbi Boteach's focused call to be understanding of those who make this mistake, though, demands further contemplation.

Clearly, we are to recognize that people make mistakes; as a result, we are often called upon to be understanding of such mistakes. Rabbi Boteach's goal, almost immediately at the beginning of his article, seems to be to gain our sympathy for the mistake that the Mashichists have made. Yes it is wrong, he contends, but, he further argues, it is understandable – and it is this understanding that must guide our response. Indeed, **Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mamrim 3:3** outlines a policy of tolerance for people who are mistaken in their faith (within certain parameters) – and this policy has been extended, in numerous ways, in recognition of the difficulties that are encountered in making faith decisions in our present world of *hester panim*, the hidden proximity of God in our present existence. Still, Rambam does not ignore the consequences of such errors and call upon us to forgive every mistake. He still demands of us to understand the inherent weakness in thought that leads to such mistakes. There may be a need for sympathy for the mistake but there must also be a critique of that which led to the mistake. It is on this point that I was distressed by Rabbi Boteach's words. He calls upon us to be sympathetic to the Mashichists for being wrong – but he does not critique the seminal weakness in the Mashichists that led to this mistake. If this belief is incorrect, even if not heretical, is it not necessary to identify how this mistake is invented?

Allow me to quote Rabbi Boteach's words:

The shock of losing a man of such rare greatness [the *Rebbe*] led some in Chabad mistakenly to lend him immortality not by furthering his vision of Judaism as the light of the world, but by declaring him to be the long-awaited Messiah...

The Rebbe was the Jewish colossus of the 20th century and a once-in-a-millennium scholar. But as Edward Kennedy said of his brother Robert in 1968, he "need not be idealised, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life". I have often told my Messianic Lubavitch brethren that by insisting on the Rebbe's messiahship, they diminish rather than aggrandise him. Abraham was not the Messiah, nor Moses. But their impact on the world was definitive and historic. So was the Rebbe's...

Their mistake is to allow that yearning to spill over into desperation and to ignore the 3,000-year-old Jewish insistence that the Messiah

be a living man. Indeed, most Lubavitchers I know who insist the Rebbe is the Messiah do so more out of a visceral, emotional attachment to the Rebbe's memory than out of any deep-seated halachic conviction. For them, making the Rebbe the Messiah becomes a loving honorific. Part of a Chassid's affection for his Rebbe is to believe that his righteousness alone will redeem the world. The fact that he has already passed away becomes an inconvenient technicality which, while it cannot be justified, can be charitably understood.

Rabbi Boteach basically contends that given the extraordinary stature of the *Rebbe*, it is understandable that individuals, too shaken by his death, would be driven to declare him the Mashiach. Is the root problem, though, perhaps – and this does not necessarily mean that we should not be understanding -- in this very perception of the *Rebbe* itself? This is an issue that goes beyond the world of Lubavitch. We are called upon to respect talmidei Chachamim, especially those of universal stature. The question emerges, though: where does kavod haTorah reach its limit? Of course, one may contend that there is no limit on this principle, on how we relate to talmidei chachamim, especially gedolim. It is exactly in regard to this point that we encounter the modern debate in regard to da'at Torah and the authority of contemporary Sages. We have focused our Torah on personalities – and there are reasons for the merit of this position. There is, however, a cost to such overarching attention. Without subjecting even gedolim to the scrutiny of critical Torah reasoning, there is a loss in Torah wisdom.

I have already addressed this issue in my first article on the Slifkin affair where I weighed the halachic balance between Torah Authority and Torah Wisdom. There is reason to follow the views of gedolim and there is, no doubt, a sober importance in the expression of kavod HaTorah that underlies the value in adhering to the Sages of Torah. Yet to glean and reap the wisdom of Torah it is incumbent to question, to investigate the reasoning towards the conclusion and not just rest upon the conclusion. Further on this issue, I invite you to look at <http://www.nishma.org/articles/commentary/slifkin.html>. The specific addendum to this issue that emerges from Rabbi Boteach's comment is in regard to our attitude to the Torah personality. In supporting the Torah authority that infuses in an individual, what emerges is a focus on the personality. Respect and honour shift from the conceptual locus of Torah thought to the individual who is deemed to possess such

knowledge. This is, to some extent, demanded by Torah; it is inherently reflected in the mitzvah of kavod talmid chacham. The arguments of kavod haTorah for the talmid chacham, as well as the directives to follow the instructions of such scholars, clearly, are manifestations of this value. The question that now emerges, though, regards the extent of this shift. When we ask if there is a limit on the expression of this honour and respect, our real question is: what is the limit on the honour due the personality in recognition of its potential negative effect on the honour due the conceptual thought system itself?

**T.B. Avoda Zara 19a** may be precisely on point in this regard. The gemara states that one who learns from only one rav, teacher, will never achieve great success [translation from Soncino Talmud] in the learning. The gemara continues that Rav Chisda was somewhat reluctant to share this thought with his students as he was afraid that they would leave him. He, though, did inform them of this maxim and indeed they left him – whereupon they went to study with Rava who informed them that this maxim only applies to the study of the logical and methodological analysis of Torah but in regard to basic terms and definitions, it is best to have only one tradition. Nevertheless, the gemara is informing us that true depth in Torah study and wisdom is only possible when one learns from different sources, different talmidei chachamim. In point is the fact that Rav Chisda's students, who we can assume were very respectful of their rebbi, their teacher, left to learn from others when they were told that true understanding of Torah is only available to one who learns different perspectives. There is indeed a limit to the honour due a personality; the primary need is to develop conceptual understanding and that is only available to one who extends the study beyond the parameters of one personality.

Authority is tied to personality for the argument of authority is built upon respect for the Torah personality and the commitment to accept the decision of this individual or body of individuals. Wisdom demands entering the actual world of conceptual thought and incorporates the full breadth of the multi-dimensional Torah voice. This demands separating from the personality and focusing on the world of thought, especially the divergence that emerges from the variant views of Torah enunciated by different scholars. As such there is a limit on the measureless respect due a personality. This respect cannot quash the proper desire to learn from others. It was not disrespectful of Rav Chisda's students to leave Rav Chisda to learn from others. In fact it was expected.

This is the problem with the modern focus on personalities. It becomes even more problematic when one argues that his/her rabbi is greater than the other's rabbi. In trying to describe one's rabbi as an unparalleled entity, an individual becomes barred from searching to learn from others. The personality becomes the only authority because of his singular status – and the loss is the tapestry of Torah wisdom itself which is only stunningly assembled from many teachers. I recognize assuredly the importance of the value of respecting Torah authority and of kavod haTorah. We are to discriminate based on Torah knowledge; not everyone or every viewpoint is equal. Nonetheless, there is a limit on the focus assigned to personality – the conceptual structure of Torah wisdom itself. The Torah personalities that I have come to respect will, in fact, insist on this – not because of errant humility but out of a longing to bask in the warmth and brightest lights of Torah wisdom.

The problem with personality is not a problem limited to Lubavitch. Many individuals in attempting to describe their view of Torah as primary describe their teacher in the loftiest of terms so that, it would seem, to even question this view is presented as questioning Sinai itself. It is, in fact, in not questioning, in not seeing and respecting differing views, that one is actually challenging Sinai. Torah wisdom must be paramount and that can only emerge in placing the personality secondary to the study of the wisdom itself.

This may further explain why Rabbi Boteach's call for understanding of the Maschichists falls on so many deaf ears. Rabbi Boteach may be right in his psychological assessment. It is understandable that one who saw the *Rebbe* in such superlative terms could make a mistake in describing him as the Mashiach. What Rabbi Boteach does not recognize – and perhaps because he is guilty of the same mistake – is that the real problem and weakness is in this description of the personality over the collective wisdom of the corpus of Torah scholars, not only in this generation but in the millennia. Rabbi Boteach's referral to the *Rebbe* as a "once in a millennia" scholar, led me to immediately think of the scholars of this millennia – Rashi, Rambam. Rabbeinu Tam, Ramban: need I continue? Who am I even to declare that a specific person was the greatest scholar in one particular generation, let alone a millennia? But what is the purpose of even doing so? – except to place one personality over others? And in doing so, Torah wisdom is the real victim.

This is not meant in any way to lessen the respect that is due to the Lubavitcher *Rebbe*. *Kavod haTorah* demands of us to respect our Torah scholars. There is, though, a limit. There are too many who resist the call of kavod – and such disrespect deserves to be critiqued. But those who describe these standards in a manner that is beyond the proper parameters of Torah, who set the personality over the pursuit of Torah wisdom, also demand critique. In the language of Rabbi Boteach's description of the *Rebbe*, we see the real misstep that led to the Mashichists: overextended honour to a personality. This is a problem, alas, that is sadly manifested, towards their own specific personalities, in other groups within Orthodoxy as well. In exaggerating our perception of an individual, we lose sight of the true limitless treasure of Torah wisdom itself. True chachmat haTorah, wisdom of Torah, can only emerge from the diffuse spectrum of differing thoughts presented by a brigade of individuals sharing a single goal of gaining Torah thought in all its diversity, sensitive to unleashing the radiant energy of Torah.

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