

Chabad-Lubavitch: The Impact of Menachem Mendel Schneerson and Messianism

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Chabad-Lubavitch is a sect of Hasidic Judaism. The Hasidic movement developed primarily in Eastern Europe during the eighteenth century and is focused on the act of prayer as a way to connect oneself with G-d. Many of the early Hasids drew on concepts from Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, that had been developed earlier in Western Europe.

Founded in the late eighteenth century by Shneur Zalman of Laidi, the Chabad-Lubavitch movement has grown from its humble beginnings in Russia into a movement that has outreach centers in sixty-one countries (Fishkoff 10). “Chabad” is actually an acronym formed from the first three focuses in Kabbalah: Chochmah, which means wisdom; Binah, or understanding; and Da’at, knowledge. Lubavitch is the name of the town in Russia where the leadership of Chabad was located for nearly a century. Since the sect’s founding, it has had seven key leaders, known as Rebbees. The Hasidic Rebbe is more than a mere “rabbi.” A Rebbe is not just a teacher or interpreter of Jewish texts and laws, but also a kind of personal and spiritual guide for his followers. An essential feature of Hasidism that distinguishes it from other forms of Judaism practiced at the time of its birth is the followers’ intense connection to their Rebbe. But the Chabad-Lubavitch organization has now been without a Rebbe for fifteen years. Following the death of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, its seventh Rebbe, in 1992, Chabad-Lubavitch has been plunged into a controversy about messianism that has left the movement at a crossroads.

Under Schneerson’s leadership of the concept of messianic

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redemption flourished and became a motivating tool. While the Chabad-Lubavitch organization as a whole accepted and spread messianic doctrine, in recent years some went further and declared the Rebbe King Messiah. With this declaration, they became Meshichists (Rapoport 75), breaking with mainstream Jewish doctrine. While the majority of Jewish doctrine includes the belief that a (as yet unidentified) messiah will (someday) come and bring a national redemption, Meshichists are those who have selected and crowned a particular individual, in this case Schneerson, as their messiah. Since Schneerson passed away fifteen years ago, the claim that he is the Messiah poses a special theological problem. The irony is that the controversy over Schneerson's status, which has deeply divided the movement, is a consequence of the same messianic ideology that Schneerson used to strengthen the movement. Even in the midst of this sharp controversy the movement continues to grow and maintain its commitment to the projects Schneerson began.

The concept of a messianic redemption has been present in Jewish tradition, in one form or another, for millennia. The term "Messiah" originally referred to any person anointed in oil and set apart to carry out the work of G-d (Birnbaum 394). In the prophetic works of the Hebrew Bible, it is written that the throne of ancient Israel would remain in the family of King David, the second king of Israel, forever. From this prophecy, belief in the "eventual establishment of divine kingship on earth came to be identified with the restoration of Israel under the leadership of the Messiah, the Lord's anointed" (Birnbaum 394). The Messiah was expected to lead the Jewish people to a national redemption. Discussion of the coming of the Messiah is especially prevalent in Jewish writings during times of turmoil and oppression by foreign leaders. During times of oppression, leaders have arisen either claiming, or being proclaimed, to be the Messiah. When Jesus was accepted as the Messiah by some of the Jewish people, Christianity was formed.

The twelfth century work of Maimonides, the paramount codifier of Jewish law, is regarded as a cornerstone of Jewish thought about the question of the messiah. His work was an attempt to organize and pull together the diverse teachings that had developed throughout the ages into one coherent set of beliefs. These were summarized in

his thirteen principles of faith, which were to be recited daily. The twelfth of the thirteen principles is: “I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah. Though he tarry, nonetheless I will await him every day, that he will come” (Shochet). Maimonides elaborated:

If there arise a king from the House of David who meditates on the Torah, occupies himself with the commandments, as did his ancestor David, observes the precepts prescribed in the Written and the Oral Law, prevails upon Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and to repair its breaches, and fights the battles of the Lord, it may be assumed that he is the Messiah (“Today: The Goal”).

In this traditional account of redemption, the messiah is not merely a concept, but an actual person, descended from King David, who will lead the Jews into a state of national redemption. The Messiah will observe Torah and fight in the name of the Lord. At the time of redemption, said Maimonides, “there will be no hunger or war, no jealousy or rivalry. For the good will be plentiful, and all delicacies available as dust. The entire occupation of the world will be only to know G-d” (“Today: The Goal”). If these things are not accomplished, however, or if a person dies, we can reject that person’s claim to be the Messiah: “it is evident that he is not the person concerning which the Torah foretold, and he is [just] like all the other kings of the House of David who were virtuous and honest [and] who died” (Botwinick 420).

The concept of the messiah was present in early Hasidic writings. In the Baal Shem Tov’s (Besht’s) *Holy Epistle* he tells his brother-in-law of an encounter with the Messiah during an ascent of the soul. When the Besht asks the Messiah when he will come, the Messiah responds, “By this shalt thou know it (Exod. 7:17): when your teaching has become renowned and revealed throughout the world, and when thy springs [have been] dispersed abroad (Prov. 5:16)” (Lamm 551). There has been much conjecture about the meaning of the Besht’s letter. At the time the Besht was writing, the failed messianic movement of Shabbatai Svei was still at the forefront of concern. The political ideals of the Maimonidean conception of redemption seemed so

unachievable that the “messianic goal could only remain relevant...if they took on a mystical and religious form” (Ehrlich 81). For many Hasidim the message of the Besht was to not to concern themselves with the coming of the Messiah. They focused on their own religious and spiritual growth, believing that they could reach a temporal state of redemption through *d'vekut*, the mystical union between the individual human being and G-d.

But for the modern Chabad movement, the goal became to spread the teachings of the Besht and to complete *mitzvoth* (holy deeds), to redeem the sparks of holiness from life and thus to hasten the coming of the Messiah. It was Menachem Mendel Schneerson's father, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, who began to revive Maimonides' conception of political redemption. As the Rebbe during the first half of the twentieth century, he was confronted with the fact of the Holocaust. After two decades of persecution in Russia, Yosef Yitzchak relocated to the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn in 1940. Knowing that millions of Jews were dying horrible deaths at the hands of the Nazis shattered the beliefs of men who remained free from the horrors, as well as those who survived them. Faced with a movement's crumbling belief system, Schneerson began to speak of the coming redemption in more concrete terms. He offered a new interpretation of the catastrophe, reinterpreting “historical reality by replacing existential helplessness with eschatological certainty, and by pursuing the messianic course, which entailed human hope and divine purpose” (Elior 384). Instead of relying on the concept of personal redemption, he began to talk of a physical political redemption that would emerge from the crisis in Europe. In 1941 he began a campaign based on the concept that “immediate repentance brings immediate redemption” (Schneerson 15 March 1987). In his *Hasidic Discourses*, written between 1941 and 1945, he wrote: “Often the *ma'amarim* speak of the lessons to be learned from the earth-shattering events of the time and their connection to the coming of Moshiach.” Yitzchak Yosef built his explanation from a Talmudic discussion that suggests that the Messiah was born on the day that the first temple was destroyed, thus connecting “catastrophic birth pangs with messianic revelation” (Elior 385).

Upon the death of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, his son-in-law Menachem

Mendel Schneerson took over his role, and one year later, Schneerson was elected to be the new Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch. Rebbe Schneerson stressed both personal and national redemption, combining the traditional Maimonidean view with the traditional Hasidic view. His view relies on “personal piety and individual redemption” to lead into the “national and political salvation of the Jewish people, and through them the world” (Ehrlich 81). Schneerson frequently told his followers that the coming of Moshiach was immanent. He repeatedly told them that “the Talmud already in its day, stated: ‘all end times for the Redemption had passed; it now awaits only repentance’” (15 March 1987), which echoed the campaign started by Yosef Yitzchak.

The best way to bring redemption, Schneerson told his followers, was through completing the *mitzvot*. “Citing Maimonides the Rebbe repeated time and again: ‘a single person, performing a single mitzvah, could be the deed that tips the scales and brings redemption to the entire world and all of creation’” (1974 Mitzvah Tanks). Schneerson told his followers that they “must expand every effort to publicize to every Jew that by his single deed, by his single word, or by his single thought — since now we are in the era immediately preceding *Moshiach’s* coming and approaching the end of this era — his every action can truly bring deliverance to the entire world” (Schneerson 15 March 1987).

Charging the act of a mitzvah with the power to tip the scales to redemption gave the Rebbe’s followers a great sense of purpose and strength to go out and expand the movement. Echoing Maimonides’ language, Chabad took on the role of “fight[ing] the battles of the Lord.” The Rebbe sent young men in “mitzvah tanks,” a collection of RVs and rental trucks, into the streets, with the intention of convincing male Jews to enter the “tank” and put on *tefillin*, boxes holding Biblical verses that are essential to morning prayer in traditional Judaism. The Rebbe told his followers in a speech: “the entire Torah is likened to *tefillin*, it encompasses all *mitzvot*” (Schneerson 28 September 1980). The Rebbe also created a youth organization, Tzivos Hashem, or Army of G-d. The Rebbe sent emissaries, referred to as *shluchim*, throughout the globe to establish Chabad houses in communities that had a number of Jews. These rabbis worked to create communities that bring support and education to Jews and work to increase the *mitzvot* done. The

Rebbe said that “when we draw another person close to the Torah with love, which is a result of love for a fellow Jew, this approach affects the person that he not only learns or thinks about Torah, but he is truly educated by it. He internalizes Torah and perceives its truth” (Schneerson 28 September 1980). By bringing others close to the Torah, the community would work to spread the teachings of the Besht and thus bring the world closer to redemption. One Lubavitcher explained the Rebbe’s goal as follows: “Every Jew has the spirit of Messiah, every Jew is going to reveal the spirit of the Messiah. Each Jew has a spark. The Rebbe asks, ‘Why do we want to gather so many Jews together? Because with so many sparks it’s easy to make a flame’” (Mintz 30). This rhetoric served to motivate followers, giving them a powerful reason to observe the commandments and encourage others to do so as well. While one person’s contribution might be small, their spark could be part of a much larger fire.

As Schneerson consolidated the movement and inspired his followers to do good works in the community, individuals began to place their faith in him, and eventually began to raise the possibility that he was the Messiah. It is not clear whether the Rebbe believed it himself, but as he grew older and Chabad’s empire expanded, the talk of him as the Messiah grew louder and more frequent. The Meshichists reasoned as follows: 1) Jews anticipate the coming of the Messiah at every moment; 2) many authorities had defined this age as the final stage before redemption; 3) it has been written by many scholars that G-d had “prepared a candidate for the messianic ‘position’ in every generation”; 4) in many works the Tzaddik, Rebbe, or Moses of the generation is identified as the Messiah of the generation; and 5) Rabbi Schneerson was seen to be in possession of the qualities of the righteous Messiah (Rapoport 28). Even esteemed leaders of other Hasidic dynasties hoped that Schneerson was the messiah (Rapoport 32). However, the Rebbe himself made it clear that there was no question that he was “adamantly opposed to the preoccupation with the dissemination of this idea” (Rapoport 32). In one case a follower of the Rebbe wrote a book proclaiming him the Messiah. The Rebbe responded: “think it if you must, but don’t write it and don’t say it...you’re fighting me, you’re fighting all the Lubavitcher Rebbes, and you’re fighting the Messiah” (Mintz 354). The Rebbe wanted his

followers to focus not on who the Messiah was, but on what could be done to bring the Messiah. One follower explained:

We hope it's him. We hope it's anybody. Being a follower of his and knowing his righteousness, he might be a candidate. He's one of the few candidates around. That's not the same thing as saying it's him...If Ha'Shem wanted us to know he would have told us. Asking who is the Messiah is an irrelevant question. The Rambam [Maimonides] said that we cannot be carried away by prophecy...The issue is what have I done today to bring the Messiah? How many people have I educated on the subject? That's much more practical. The theoretical issue is not going to help me. (Mintz 353)

But the same follower also said that “believing you know who the Messiah is makes it easier,” recognizing that the growing belief in Schneerson was itself a source of motivation for his followers (Mintz 353). Belief in the coming of the Messiah could be motivating, but knowing the Messiah personally made the belief far more real.

On April 11, 1991, the Rebbe addressed his followers, looking distressed and upset. He spoke to them harshly and said:

How is it that the Redemption has not yet been attained? That despite all that has transpired and all that has been done, Moshiach has still not come?

What more can I do? I have done all I can to bring the world to truly demand and clamor for the Redemption...The only thing that remains for me to do is to give over the matter to you. Do all that is in your power to achieve this thing — a most sublime and transcendent light that needs to be brought down into our world with pragmatic tools...

I have done all I can. I give it over to you. Do all that you can to bring the righteous redeemer, immediately!

I have done my part. From this point on, all is in your hands. (“Tammuz 1994: Transmission”)

His followers were confused by his words. Some thought that he was

giving up, while others began to work harder to complete his campaign. When he was incapacitated by a stroke eleven months later, the message took on a new meaning. One Hasid told an author that “the Rebbe knew this [his stroke] is going to happen. And a very strong proof could be the sentence itself, ‘I’ve done everything I could do.’ The Rebbe didn’t say it after ten years...he gave us eleven months to prepare” (Shaffir 48). Meshichists took the statement as proof that the Rebbe was the Messiah, describing the time as the “birth pangs of the messiah,” during which the community would have to suffer without the Rebbe before redemption would come. If the Messiah was meant to be a guide for bringing the world to peace by following G-d’s commandments, the Rebbe could be the Messiah even if not present. Following through with his programs could bring the world to peace. Bringing the Messiah became the job not of the Rebbe, but of his Hasidim. The campaigns were increased and heightened, the movement reenergized towards the coming redemption. A group of Meshichists crowned the Rebbe King Messiah. Increasing numbers of people convinced themselves that the Rebbe was going to become the messiah. As bold as this belief was, it still remained within the confines of traditional Jewish views of the messiah. And then Schneerson died.

Again, the use of messianic rhetoric and talk of redemption are not problematic in Jewish theology. Maimonides’ is considered one of the great Jewish thinkers, and his thirteen principles of faith are not contested by Orthodox theologians. The Rebbe’s messianic rhetoric was directed squarely at motivating Jews to perform traditional *mitzvot*. One author suggests that the Rebbe’s “messianic drive was both constructive and innovative and as long as it lasted, might have served to achieve its utopian goal” (Ehrlich 86). Even the claims of the Meshichists were not entirely problematic, until the Rebbe passed away in 1994. In the 1990’s, many Chabad rabbinical courts issued legal rulings that the Rebbe met the traditional Maimonidean criteria. As Maimonides wrote, if a leader arises from the House of David, works to fulfill the commandments, and repair the breaches in observance of the Torah, then “he may be assumed to be the Messiah.” Schneerson claimed to be a descendent of David, and he had made it his life’s work not only to obey the commandments but to bring the Jews of the world together to heighten observance and perform acts of *tikkun*

olam (mending the world). But his death created intractable problems for the Meshichists' claims. Maimonides' code clearly states that if the assumed messiah dies before his mission is completed, then he is just "like all the other kings of the House of David who were virtuous and honest [and] who died" (Maimonides). At this point the tradition of Jewish theology clearly points to the conclusion that the Meshichists are wrong, that Schneerson neither is nor was the Messiah.

As the Orthodox rabbi David Berger points out, for thousands of years Jews have stressed that one of the key differences between Judaism and Christianity is that Judaism cannot accept a messiah who died before the task was completed. Since the Rebbe's death Berger has published multiple articles as well as a book on the issue. In one article he writes that by allowing Meshichists to remain in good standing within the Orthodox community, "we award victory to Christianity in a crucial aspect of its millennial debate with Judaism. We accept a fundamental revision of a cardinal principle of faith. We must tremble before G-d and history" (Berger 26). In 1996 Berger led the campaign to have a resolution passed by the Rabbinical Council of America stating that there was no place in Judaism for the idea that the messiah "will begin his messianic mission, only to experience death, burial and resurrection before completing it" (Berger 27). Most seriously, Berger has alleged that the Meshichists "have adopted the position that the Rebbe is the 'Essence and being of G-d en clothed in a body'...raising the 'spectre of idolatry'" (Kermaier 88). In his book *The Rebbe, The Messiah and The Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, Berger portrays the Lubavitch movement as a "Jewish sect that has remained outwardly punctilious in its religious observance while inwardly distorting the traditional messianic faith" (Kermaier 88).

Berger's claim that the movement is dominated by Meshichists, however, it is not in accordance with what many Lubavitchers say. Zetlin, a Lubavitcher from Stamford Hill, England, shared his belief: "In every generation there is a potential *moshiach*...I think people want to be convinced about the Rebbe. 10 percent are convinced, 80 percent want to be convinced and 10 percent are not sure" (Dein 394). This quote suggests an intense desire for messianic redemption that falls short of Meshichism. If pressed, many Lubavitch Hasidim will not say that the Rebbe is not the messiah because that notion is too painful

for them; but as Zetlin points out, neither will they say that he is, because of the theological inconsistencies that this belief presents. There is something about Schneerson and his role as the Rebbe that makes his followers willingly stay caught between acceptance and rejection of the concept of him as the Messiah.

Some of the complication in the beliefs of Lubavitch Hasidim derive from one of the core values of Hasidism: the relationship between the Rebbe, or Tzaddik, and his followers. Yaakov Yosef of Pollonye, the first published Hasidic author, explained why a Hasid must cleave to his Tzaddik. In his work *Tzafnat Pa'ane'ah* he wrote that the relationship explains the verse: "And they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses" (Exodus 14:31). Yaakov Yosef explained:

They believed in G-d by their faith and *d'vekut* in Him. But, as the Talmud asked, how is it possible to cleave to him in *d'vekut*? Therefore the scripture explains: and in his servant Moses. For whoever believes in and cleaves to the "shepherd of Israel" is ipso facto in *d'vekut* with Him as the Sages commented. (Lamm 307)

A Hasid is defined by his Tzaddik, and is guided spiritually by that individual. It is through the Tzaddik that he is able to achieve *d'vekut* with G-d. The relationship of the Tzaddik and the Hasid is necessary for the follower to achieve a temporal spiritual redemption.

The modern role of the Rebbe is to "ascertain the Hasid's spiritual purpose and instruct him in the way to achieve his goals." Having the Rebbe as an individual representing the movement during a court case is understood as a "basic necessity for every Hasid who aspires to reach the Chabad level of contemplation" (Ehrlich 18). But Schneerson took the veneration of the Tzaddik to a new level, one that transcended the Tzaddik's death. After Schneerson was selected to be the Rebbe, he still regarded his deceased predecessor, Yosef Yitzchak, as his Rebbe. Between the time of Yosef Yitzchak's death and Schneerson's promotion to Rebbe, Schneerson began going to Yosef Yitzchak's gravesite to read letters that Hasidim had written looking for guidance. Schneerson would read a letter at the gravesite

and write an answer that he felt best reflected the teachings and opinion of Yosef Yitzchak. This practice continued throughout Schneerson's career until the his stroke in 1992, which he had at the gravesite of Yosef Yitzchak. During a speech given in 1985, the Rebbe shared a teaching on the word *histalkus*, commonly translated as "passing," from the sixth Rebbe. The deeper meaning of the term was said to come from its alternate translation as "diffusion," which implies that upon death, "the Tzaddik's greatness is diffused, through all worlds, just as G-d's glory does not depart from the worlds, but rather, is diffused within them, 'bringing salvation to the world'" (Schneerson 7 August 1985). The death of a Tzaddik can thus be interpreted not as a loss for the world, but instead as a spreading of greatness throughout.

This model of devotion to his deceased Rebbe is one that Chabad-Lubavitchers emulate today. They rely on the teachings of Schneerson to guide their lives and have not replaced him with a new Rebbe. Instead of posing their questions to a living Rebbe, they rely on Schneerson's books to guide their lives. Even the practice of bringing letters to the Rebbe's grave has continued (Mark). Given this model of a leader, it is easier to understand how Schneerson's Hasidim are caught somewhere between belief and disbelief in his status as Messiah. Those who believed him to be the Messiah before his death have had a hard time giving up that belief, since they had been taught that they could have a tie to their Tzaddik and continue his mission even after his death.

When the Rebbe died, his community was at a loss for new ideas. They were not prepared for his death, even though he had been incapacitated for two years and was in his nineties. On the day he died, funeral plans had not even been discussed and the question of succession had not been addressed. Many fault the Lubavitch-Hasidim as well as Schneerson for not making plans for succession, but it had become ingrained in their belief system that redemption was immanent, making planning for the next leader seem pointless and in bad faith. In the speech accepting the role of the seventh Rebbe of Chabad, Schneerson addressed his followers with a speech that declared their generation to be the one of the coming of the Messiah. Because "all sevenths are precious" in Jewish tradition — as illustrated by the fact that Moses was the seventh prophet of G-d and was the one finally

able to receive the Torah — the generation led by Schneerson had a special responsibility:

It is this that is demanded of each and every one of us in the seventh generation... although the fact that we are in the seventh generation is not the result of our own choosing and our own service...we are now very near the approaching footsteps of the Messiah, we are the conclusion of this period, and our own spiritual task is to complete the process of drawing down the Shekhinah...into our lowly world. (Lowenthal 383)

Since the seventh generation was precious, it seemed to Schneerson that they, like Moses, would succeed in changing the world and bringing the desired redemption. To plan for an eighth generation would imply that Schneerson and his followers did not have the faith in G-d necessary for the coming of the Messiah.

Without a clear leader, the Chabad Lubavitch organization is in an awkward position. While the generation that did not know the Rebbe is growing up and showing itself to be committed to his teachings, the movement is facing the loss of administrative control and personal guidance from an individual. While the Rebbe's Hasidim can cling to his ideas and teachings, this is not the same as clinging to their Tzaddik. Who are new Lubavitch Hasidim supposed to cleave to? They do not have the same experience and connection with the Rebbe that others had. Even though technology has made it easier to cleave to a Rebbe you have had no contact with, through videos and recordings of his speeches, the personal connection is lacking. Many are pushing for a new Rebbe to be selected, while others adamantly oppose this concept. As time progresses the movement divides more and more. The Meshichists pose a theological problem in the eyes of the rest of the Jewish community and even among other Chabad-Lubavitchers. Chabad-Lubavitch communities are divided to the point that they can no longer work together. In many places the rift between Meshichists and the rest of the community is so great that they have built separate institutions.

But even in the face of division and lack of clear leadership, the movement thrives. After the Rebbe's death the movement did not

dwindle but grew. While it is hard to determine the number of Chabad Lubavitch followers, estimates in 2000 range from 100,000 to 200,000. Nearly one million children attend Chabad schools, summer camps, and other youth programs. In 2000 there were emissaries in over 100 countries around the world (Steinfeld). According to Chabad officials in 2004, a new Chabad House opens, on average, every ten days; the number of *shluchim* throughout the world doubled to 4,000 in the decade following the Rebbe's death (Mark). Much of that growth came out of responses similar to that of Rabbi Chaim Cunin, PR director for West Coast Chabad Lubavitch, after hearing the news of the Rebbe's death:

I was sitting with my son Levi in the office, and we looked at each other and he started to cry. I said, "The Rebbe wouldn't want you crying. The Rebbe wants action. Let's open a new Chabad institution." And we opened Chabad of Malibu, right then. And many of our projects since then — the new girl's school (Bais Chaya Mushka, on Pico Boulevard), the Chumash — the funding has come from Malibu. Everything flowed back to that first institution that was opened during *shiva* [the week-long period of mourning following an individual's death]. (Weinig)

Whatever each of our individual and collective *shlichus* (mission) meant before Gimmel Tammuz they mean so much more after Gimmel Tammuz...Now we are quite literally the hands and feet of the Rebbe, and he relies on us to fulfill his *shlichus* even more. The goals that the Rebbe set out to accomplish clearly lie on our shoulders. (Weinig)

The Chabad Lubavitch movement is caught in a theological web. Its followers are able neither to affirm nor to deny that Schneerson is the Messiah. Until they can choose, the community is in the strange position of flourishing but yearning for guidance. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson molded Chabad Hasidism into what it is today. Under his leadership and guidance the movement grew from a collection small communities around the world into a multinational movement

with over 3,300 institutions (“About Chabad Lubavitch”). His charisma and personal connections to his followers, as well as an abundance of recorded material, have allowed the movement to remain motivated and committed thirteen years after his death, even in the face of controversy. He was so successful that he has left his followers with nowhere else to turn.

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