Group makes pilgrimage for 'Messiah'

DAN DEAN/staff photographer

With a picture of Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson in the background, Rabbi Kagan displays one of the thousands of dollar bills once touched by the man some believe is the Messiah.

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Kagan said. Their goal is to persuade nonobservant Jews to be more faithful to the Torah and the tradition of Jewish law.

Kagan is among those who believes Schneerson may indeed be the Messiah. The Messiah is not God, the rabbi said, but the king annointed by God to lead the Jews into a period of universal peace and prosperity.

Tradition holds each generation may have somebody eligible to be the Messiah, Kagan said. Requisites include descending from the House of David and being a scholar and spiritual leader.

"The idea of the Messiah coming is not new," Kagan said. "It's common among Jews. Not only is the Messiah coming . . . but soon."

Kagan said signs clearly indicate an era of universal peace may indeed be at hand, meaning times seem ripe for the Messiah's arrival.

To illustrate, he cites the belief the Messiah will come at a time swords are being beaten into plowshares.

"In Russia, arms factories are being converted to tractor production," he said. "You can't get any closer than that."

He said other events — such the mass exodus of Jews to Israel, the airlift of Ethiopian Jews, the collapse of the Soviet empire — reinforce the possibility of the Messiah being on the way.

"SCUD MISSILES RAINED on Israel during the Gulf War," he said. "Yet the loss of life was minimal . . . as if God were saying, 'I'm in charge here.'

"It was miraculous."

Conditions may be ripe for the coming of the Messiah. But the question of Schneerson being the Messiah is perplexing, even to Kagan.

"Does Rebbe Schneerson have the characteristics prescribed by Jewish law?" Kagan asked. "Absolutely.

"Rebbe Schneerson is our spiritual leader. If he said there was to be a new (or different) observance of the law, word would spread around the world in five minutes. (If not by the Lubavitchers' satellite television network, then by fax machines and excited word of mouth).

"And we'd be gearing up to do it . . . there wouldn't be any subcommittees to study it."

But is Schneerson the Messiah?

"I can't answer that," Kagan said. "But I would be surprised if it was somebody else."

Others are even less sure. Among them, for example, is Orthodox Rabbi Eli Finkelman, director of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation of Metropolitan Detroit.

"Most Orthodox Jews, and probably a good number of Lubavitchers, recognize him as a spiritual leader. But they take a wait and see approach *to any claim Rebbe Schneer*son is the Messiah," Finkelman said.

"JEWS HAVE HISTORICALLY fared better with the concept the Messiah, rather than saying he is at hand," he said.

Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America in New York, has a different view of Schneerson and claims he is the Messiah.

"Not only do most reform Jews reject the notion that Schneerson is the Messiah, but we believe it's blasphemy to think in those terms," Yoffie said in a phone interview Thursday.

"That kind of pseudo-messianic message is dangerous to Jews," said Yoffie, who this summer becomes vice president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Schneerson, himself, has thus far not directly addressed claims he is the Messiah. He doesn't encourage such speculation. But neither does he dissuade followers from such speculation.

Some followers are so taken by the idea, they expect an announcement at any moment. Some are said to wear beepers, so they can get the latest word on the coming of the Messiah.

'People take it very seriously'

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Rabbi Kagan is among those who believe Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, or "Rebbe" as he's reverently addressed, may indeed be the long-awaited Messiah.

"He's a very kindly man," said Kagan. "And there's a glow in his eyes."

Kagan, head of the Lubavitch Foundation in Farmington Hills, which is scheduled to move to West Bloomfield, flies to Lubavitch headquarters in Crown Heights frequently to see Schneerson, or at least confer with his associates.

ON SEVERAL OF those trips, Kagan has witnessed a Sunday phenomenon during which Schneerson hands out crisp new one dollar bills to thousands of the faithful who spend hours waiting in line at the synagogue.

One session was described in the cover story of the March 15 issue of The New York Times Magazine in a story about "the Oracle of Crown Heights."

It's something to behold, said Kagan. Old and young patiently waiting in line for a brief encounter with Schneerson.

Some seek the Rebbe's advice. Others his blessing. Some just want to touch the man who many believe may be the Messiah.

Kagan recalled one woman who, after waiting in line for two or three hours, asked the 89-year-old Schneerson if he ever got tired.

"His eyes were shining when he answered," Kagan said. "He said, 'One never gets tired counting diamonds.'"

Kagan said he believes these extraordinary sessions are Schneerson's way of making sure his busy schedule doesn't lead to isolation from ordinary Jews.

Besides being characteristic of Schneerson, that consideration is appropriate given the history of the Lubavitch movement that took root in the 18th century in eastern Russia because ordinary Jews were being ignored.

Lubavitch promoted the then-radical notion that a simple Jew who prayed sincerely was no less worthy of the knowledge and blessing of Talmudic law.

"REBBE IS NOT reclusive," Kagan said.

Neither is Rebbe given to empty gestures.

With each dollar, the recipient also gets instructions. The dollar is to be given to charity, along with anything extra he or she may want to contribute.

"People take it very seriously," said Kagan.

Even so, as The New York Times article noted, some recipients are awe-struck at having something given by the man who, if not the King of the Jews, is recognized as a profound spiritual leader.

Some carefully tuck the dollar away for safekeeping. Others have the dollar laminated, with a picture of Schneerson superimposed over the face of George Washington.

"People like to keep the dollar given to them by Rebbe. I have several," said Kagan. "But they follow his instructions . . . they obey."

Emphasizing a point he said is not made in the Times article, Kagan said that if people keep Rebbe's dollar, they substitute another, and give that to charity, along with a little extra.

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