

The Chabad Lubavitch Movement: Filling the Jewish Vacuum Worldwide

An Interview with Samuel Heilman

- *The influence of the Chabad Lubavitch movement in the Jewish world has greatly increased over the past decades. The seventh Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), who died without a successor - and is considered by part of the Chabad Hasidim as the Messiah - was in the 1950s at the origins of the present international outreach campaign.*
- *The willingness of a substantial number of Chabad Hasidim to travel and live in places with few or no other Orthodox Jews has been a decisive factor in the movement's success.*
- *Chabad has brought Hasidism and Orthodox Jewish practice into the public square and also into the mainstream consciousness of world Jewry. Chabad zeroes in on crucial areas in the life cycle, including childcare centers, nursery schools, and college campuses, as well as public practice of Judaism, particularly Chanukah candle-lighting but also Sabbath candle-lighting for women and the donning of tefillin (phylacteries) by adult men.*
- *Chabad's messianic approach has come under severe criticism. Yet as more established groups of Orthodoxy feel insecure and do not have adherents willing to dedicate their lives to missionary activity, they are reluctant to alienate Chabad on which they may depend in certain locations and situations.*

An Increasing Influence

The influence of the Chabad Lubavitch movement in the Jewish world has greatly increased over the past decades. Samuel Heilman, Harold Proshansky Chair in Jewish Studies at the Graduate Center and Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Queens College of the City University of New York, says that the willingness of a substantial number of Chabad Hasidim to travel and live in places with few or no other Orthodox Jews has been the decisive factor in the movement's success.

"Other Hasidim do not do this as they are not willing to live in communities with mainly Reform or assimilated Jews. They particularly fear that their children will move away from their convictions in such an environment."

Heilman recalls asking in 1999 the Chabad emissary or shaliach, Rabbi Shalom Greenberg, why he settled in Shanghai. He replied that he came from a family of shluchim. His sisters, brothers, and he had a contest as to which of them would succeed in the farthest place. One of them wound up in Odessa, another in Anchorage, Alaska, and he went to Shanghai.

"In 2002 when I visited Shanghai again, it had been transformed into a new Chinese Hong Kong. In 1999 there was no minyan [prayer quorum]. In 2002 Chabad already had many people visiting its facilities as a substantial number of Jews were doing business in the town. Over a few years Greenberg had succeeded in building up a Jewish community."

Growing by Persuasion as Well

"While other Hasidic groups grow only through their high fertility, Chabad increases also through persuasion. This carries a risk. When a Hasidic group imports outsiders, they do not leave behind all they were before. They bring new cultural elements into the group. One finds, for instance, art in Chabad environments, a rather uncommon phenomenon among Hasidim. Chabad Hasidim - also due to the environment they live in - must have a certain level of tolerance toward nonobservance. They usually also have friends who are non-Orthodox Jews."

Heilman has written that Chabad Hasidim are Jewish fundamentalists for whom the Redemption can be hastened by acts of Jewish ritual activity. For them, Judaism is boiled down "to the practice of a set of ritual acts - lighting Sabbath candles, donning phylacteries, giving charity, and so forth - whose performance by all Jews - and in some cases also by non-Jews - will hasten the day of the Messiah's return and hence the Redemption. This is the approach of Chabad Lubavitch. For them the religious transformation of the nonobservant and secular Jews into Lubavitcher Hasidim as well as the assurance that the 'Seventy Nations' - that is, the non-Jewish world - abides by the seven Noahide commandments is the key mission of Judaism."¹

Hasidism on the Move

Heilman considers Chabad structurally different from most other Hasidic groups, because it has always been on the move and from the start was not limited geographically. "The fifth Lubavitch rebbe Sholom Dovber, the Rebbe Rashab (1860-1920), his only son, the sixth rebbe Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, the Rebbe Rayatz

(1880-1950), and his son-in-law Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994) the seventh rebbe, moved partly because they were being chased. The destruction of European Jewry in the Shoah and Communism in the Soviet Union had a major impact on the movement. Chabad was forced to abandon its East European roots and became based in the United States.

"The Rebbe Rashab made the most revolutionary changes in the Chabad approach. He had to confront the Reform movement and became what one would call a 'resistor.' He saw it as his mission to oppose acculturation, enlightenment, assimilation, and the transformation of Jewry. In this process he also started the messianic character of Chabad.

"When the Rebbe Rayatz came definitively to New York, he was already a very weakened man. As he had only daughters, one of his sons-in-law had to succeed him. The choice fell on Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who had lived in Paris and Berlin. He had an education in engineering and thus besides Jewish also secular knowledge. The seventh Rebbe realized that the movement required a different, more expansionist policy, which became known as *asufaratsta* ('You will expand'). This text from the Psalms is also a very popular song in the Chabad movement.

"Rabbi Schneerson, who died without a successor - and is considered by many Chabad Hasidim as the Messiah - was in the 1950s at the origins of the major international outreach campaign. It brought Hasidic emissaries to main streets, malls, and airports as a strategy to combat assimilation. The movement used military imagery, referring to its outreach vehicles as 'mitzvah tanks' and to the youth movement as *Tzivos Hashem* (the Army of God). This strategy turned Chabad into a missionary movement among American Jews and abroad. In this way Hasidism, once a mass movement but after World War II far more obscure and marginal, was brought again into the mainstream consciousness of world Jewry."

Not a Large Movement

Heilman points out that despite the major media attention Chabad obtains, due to its worldwide activities and presence in far-flung places, it is not a large movement. "There are probably more Satmar Hasidim in the United States than Chabad adherents.

"In Crown Heights in Brooklyn there are ten to twelve thousand Chabad Hasidim. Another seven thousand live in the village of Kfar Chabad in Israel. Beyond that numbers become a question of both guessing and definitions.

"One can assume that there are about three thousand Chabad shluchim. They together with their wives and their numerous children may account for another twenty thousand Hasidim. That brings the estimated number up to forty thousand. In a town with a Chabad house, there may be two shluchim and their families. If fifty people visit it

frequently, are they all Orthodox? Should one count them as Chabad Hasidim? Not necessarily, yet many of them are attached to Chabad.

"When Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Aizik Hodakov, late chief of staff of the office of Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, was asked how many Chabad Hasidim there were, he reportedly replied: 'How many Jews are there in the world?' This answer expressed the concept that potentially all Jews are Chabad Hasidim."

Filling Rabbinical Positions

"Chabad Hasidim are not only characterized by their frequent willingness to leave their heartland but also by their missionary messianic fervor."

Heilman observes: "Like all missionaries, even when they succeed, they are also transformed by their surroundings. One cannot be extremely ultra-Orthodox when one doesn't have an ultra-Orthodox minyan to attend. When they cannot start a school for their own children they have to send them for education elsewhere.

"A crucial element in Chabad's success is the movement's willingness to fill vacuums - for instance, in a community that cannot find any other suitable rabbi. Chabad, driven by its ideology and religious fervor, will typically be willing to provide a candidate for such a position.

"That often also means that the community gets a rabbi at a lower salary than the going rate. When appointing a Chabad rabbi one has to accept his ideology. The mode of prayer has to be Orthodox. His projects will have to be supported financially. The community will have to have certain institutions such as a *mikveh* [ritual bath] and some kind of school. It will have to move more toward Orthodoxy even if only some of its members will become more religiously observant.

"The Chabad rabbi's influence varies between communities. In Russia, for instance, it is extraordinary. Rabbi Berel Lazar, the Chabad Chief Rabbi in Moscow, has the ostensible support of President Vladimir Putin. In Russia, Chabad attracts certain people by giving them free food and education."

A Vacuum at Harvard

Sometimes the vacuum a Chabad shaliach decides to fill is identified only by him. Heilman gives an example from his personal experience. "There is a very pleasant Chabad Hasid named Hirsch Zarchi who started out proposing to Jewish passersby to put on tefillin [phylacteries] in Harvard Square at the university. He became the Rebbe's

shaliach in the town. In the 1990s he set up a very successful Chabad house at Harvard.

"When one of my sons graduated at Harvard, Zarchi marched in the academic procession." Heilman remarks: "Which other Hasidic rabbi would march in an academic procession? Here is a person without academic credentials who never went to college. Yet being at Harvard and able to interact with and impress some of the most intelligent and challenging students in America, he must deal with enormous intellectual and religious challenges.

"Zarchi and other Chabad rabbis like him and their wives are committed for life to a certain location. Their aim is to draw Jews to Orthodoxy. As far as non-Jews are concerned, they have a campaign called Seven for Seventy, trying to convince them to follow the seven Noahide commandments.

"Chabad shluchim do not aim to convert non-Jews to Judaism but some people are so much attracted that they do. A fellow student of my son at Harvard had a Sikh father. His mother was raised as a Catholic in Costa Rica, though she may have been of crypto-Jewish origin. He was attracted by both the general Jewish-student house of Hillel and by Chabad. He didn't convert at Harvard. Recently, however, I met him in Washington, DC, in a synagogue and learned that after some time in an Israeli yeshiva, he had converted to Judaism."

The Functioning of the System

When asked how the Chabad system functions, Heilman replies: "Though there is a central body, the Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, in essence each Chabad shaliach has a territory.

Another Chabad rabbi can only come to live in an area if he gets the agreement of the rabbi already there. Candidates often go to the grave of the last Rebbe asking for his agreement. They often find an answer by opening a volume of his letters at random and looking for a line on the page that will indicate approval or disapproval of the plans.

"Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, the secretary of the late Rebbe and administrator of worldwide Lubavitch, is also often asked what location is available. The decision where to locate his activity is, however, largely the Chabad shaliach's own.

"At Queens College where I teach, a Chabad shaliach arrived for the first time in 2004. The college has a very active Hillel organization and is connected to the major Jewish community in the borough of Queens. This shaliach became the self-appointed Chabad rabbi of Queens College. His modus operandi is that he comes to the kosher cafeteria and offers classes. He meets with professors and tries to find financial supporters in the community. Slowly he builds activities. He will either swim or sink.

"My brother-in-law is the Hillel rabbi at Tufts University. I told him not to worry when the Chabad shaliach arrived, saying that he was not a competitor. I considered that the students he will reach are not the ones Hillel does and said: 'If he arouses interest in Jewish life, the only institution that they have to go to is yours. In a way, his success will redound to your success as well.' Indeed Chabad has not hurt Hillel in any way."

Heilman says that a shaliach who fails to build an activity would have to find somewhere else to go or something else to do. "It would be a very interesting research project to trace a newly-arriving Chabad rabbi from the beginning and follow his trajectory. Every case is unique. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the success or failure factors because they may greatly vary. As far as universities go probably a major role is being played by whether it is a community college or a residential one, the nature of the student community, and how receptive the local Hillel rabbi is. Another major factor everywhere is the qualities of the shaliach's wife."

Heilman stresses that the reality of American Jewish communities is, however, very different from European ones, where there are established nationwide communities. "America is much more open. In Europe there have occasionally been major problems with Chabad emissaries. In Prague there is a struggle for control of the Altneu Synagogue between the Chabad followers and the local Jews and rabbi." Marketing Tools

"Chabad has some specific marketing tools. Chanukah is a very important holiday for them. They set up a menorah in a public location or light candles in a nursery school. These activities attract people. The shaliach may become a member of a synagogue and use it to recruit followers. He may offer free teaching, a class here and there. A synagogue that does not have any activities in the middle of the week often wonders what it could lose by accepting such an offer."

Another marketing tool, Heilman observes, is that Chabad has created a successful media image in Washington. "Rabbi Abraham Shemtov has been the Rebbe's 'ambassador' to the White House for many years. He used to have a Torah study group in the Senate with then Minnesota senator Rudy Boschwitz, who supported the Chabad movement. There are pictures on the web of each U.S. president since Jimmy Carter in the Oval Office together with several Chabad rabbis. Shemtov got a medal from Congress for the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. On Chanukah 2004, Chabad kids and rabbis and families lit candles with President George W. Bush in the Oval Office."

When asked why other, larger Jewish organizations do not achieve the same, Heilman replies: "Many are not interested, nor do they have emissaries fired by the same religious fervor."

Funding

Heilman explains why Chabad succeeds in obtaining funding from unaffiliated Jews. "Some feel unloved. Rich people can feel lonely too. They encounter in the Chabad shaliach somebody who is not looking for a stock tip or something like that.

"Chabad shluchim give people a feeling that they care about them. Chabad is able to convey a sense of Jewish authenticity to people without demanding a total transformation of those they talk to. It is enough for them if somebody declares 'I'm Jewish.' They will help him don tefillin even if he says: 'I'm not going to do it again.' Sometimes this approach, much of which is face-to-face, works very well.

"Chabad shluchim know that they will have to fundraise. Initially a shaliach may be supported by his parents or in-laws. He may get a small subsidy from the head office. That is an incentive to do well. The smart ones will learn fundraising techniques.

"Some get more formal training than others. There is, however, no evidence that those with formal training succeed more than others. The emissaries also have international meetings where they learn from each other. The outcome of any missionary activity depends very much on what one has to sell and how one does so. The Chabad product is very saleable to certain types of Jews."

Messianists and Others

Heilman points out that one might divide Chabad Hasidim into messianists and nonmessianists. "The main Chabad building at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, where the last Rebbe lived, is now in the hands of the messianists, who call it Beit Moshiach [the Messiah's House]. When the Chabad shluchim - who are much less messianist since active messianism does not 'sell that well' in the provinces - gather in Brooklyn they meet elsewhere, most recently at the Marriott Hotel.

"A certain reversal has taken place in the movement. Crown Heights was its heart as long as the Rebbe was alive. Everything else was peripheral. Now the Chabad adherents in Crown Heights have little to do. They are often obsessed with messianism, missing the Rebbe as a core tying them together. They have replaced him with messianic longing. Many are Israelis, who go back and forth to New York while waiting for the Messiah. They do so with remarkable intensity and enthusiasm but the essence of their activity is waiting."

Heilman notes that these Chabad Hasidim are not the only messianists in the Jewish world. "Part of the Israeli settlers in the West Bank and formerly in Gaza are also messianists; some believed that the Messiah would come before the disengagement in Gaza.

"There is a confluence of worldview and some other similarities between the two groups and it is not incidental that the Chabad movement has been working among the

messianist settlers. From Chabad's standpoint, if these settlers consider that the Messiah's coming is imminent they could believe that he is their Seventh Rebbe. If part of the settlers say that this is the Messiah's time, and to accelerate his coming one has to settle the Land of Israel, Chabad can take a free ride on that messianic element.

"In some ways, the death of the Rebbe has opened new avenues for Chabad. In the past there was the problem that their leader, whom many of them considered the Messiah, had not come to Israel. After his death the Rebbe has become 'movable.' Chabad Hasidim built a replica of his Crown Heights house in Kfar Chabad. Similar replicas are being built elsewhere. In this way their Messiah can be or come everywhere.

"In many cults in which prophecies are not realized, many followers, instead of giving up, become more energetic. They claim that the failure was a test to be passed in order to generate more believers. The Chabad movement became even more adamant after the Rebbe died.

"There are claims that the Rebbe foresaw all this and through the idea of establishing Chabad houses and sending shluchim has created a franchise. Now every local Chabad rabbi becomes an intermediary between the people around him, the Rebbe, and God." Criticism "The messianic approach of Chabad has come under severe criticism. One major critic is Professor David Berger of Brooklyn College and Yeshiva University.² He takes Orthodoxy to task because they tolerate Chabad while in his view its version of messianism is Christological. Berger will not eat food that is prepared under Chabad supervision because he considers that any group that believes that there ever was a Messiah has crossed the red line of what is acceptable to Judaism."

Heilman says: "To a certain extent Orthodox Jews rely on Chabad because they have no choice. If one wants to attend an Orthodox service in far-flung places such as Kathmandu, Shanghai, or Beijing, there is only Chabad. Nobody else wanted to go to these towns to create services. This Chabad presence everywhere would have been Menachem Mendel Schneerson's main legacy, had there not been his false messianism."

Heilman adds that Orthodoxy's reluctance to denounce the messianistic aspects of Chabad derives from the fact that other Orthodox and in particular the Modern Orthodox feel anxious about their future and do not want to alienate any allies. "They also feel very guilty, because they should have been doing this outreach and opened hostels in places like Bangkok. Instead they are among the travelers who most often take advantage of Chabad's good services. Thus they do not want to bite the hand feeding them when they

"The more established Orthodox groups do not have people willing to dedicate their lives to missionary activity. Their adherents do not wish to spend years of their lives when they are just married going out and trying to make nonaffiliated Jews more affiliated and involved.

"There are some other groups who undertake outreach such as the Breslov Hasidim but they are fewer and far less organized than Chabad. Their emphasis is on the spiritual rather than the concrete. They also make more demands than Chabad on those they try to attract. Yet they have some success too. The Kabbalah movement also attracts nonreligious Jews. But Chabad is much closer to standard Orthodoxy apart from its messianism."

Zeroing in on the Life Cycle

"Chabad is changing continuously. Its move into the campuses was a relatively small one. The media report that from 2001 to summer 2005 thirty new Chabad houses had opened on American campuses, with another ten planned for the coming school year.³ On campus Judaism is weakest and that is where they are most likely to have success. Most general outreach programs, for instance, Birthright, one that brings college students to Israel, aim at kids post-high school. Chabad is present in the colleges themselves, which is very important. It is there that one establishes relationships, when marriages begin, and one begins to think about creating one's own family.

"Chabad is also present in the childcare centers and nursery schools. They are zeroing in on crucial points of the Jewish life cycle. And they're there when people are traveling, starting from the airports. The biggest Passover seder in the world is probably the one Chabad has in Kathmandu."

Interviewed by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

1. Samuel C. Heilman, "Jews and Fundamentalism," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 17, Nos. 1 & 2 (Spring 2005), pp. 183-89.
2. David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).
3. E.B. Solomont, "Chabad Makes Major Inroads at Universities," *Forward*, 26 August 2005.

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Daniel Elazar, founding president of the JCPA, was a pioneer of Jewish communal studies. Many essays on the subject have appeared for over 25 years in JCPA publications such as Jerusalem Viewpoints and the Jewish Political Studies Review. This new publication "Changing Jewish Communities" continues in this tradition and will specifically address issues in Jewish communal studies. It is part of a JCPA project which includes a lecture series and a website with other related articles. Articles for this publication will include both interviews and essays and can be viewed at www.jcpa.org/cjc.htm.

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