

The Lubavitchers of Brooklyn

Devoting their lives to the Law, some Jewish “pietist” movements place special emphasis on correctly observing the many commandments (mitzvot) from God—said by some to be 613 in all, positive and negative. Centuries of persecution, especially in eastern and central Europe, have intensified the desire to maintain internal cultural order through following the commandments. The pietists called Hasidim, who grew in the late eight-

eenth century under the tutelage of holy men in the Ukraine and eastern Europe, hold that obeying these rules brings the entire cosmos closer to light and goodness.

The most important Hasidic group today is probably the Lubavitchers, whose headquarters since 1940 has been in Brooklyn. The Lubavitchers venerate their leader or Rebbe, the holy man (zaddik) who mediates between God and the world. The Rebbe is specially blessed by God, and that blessedness is passed on genealogically. All seven generations of Rebbes have been descendants of the movement's founder, Schneur Zalman (b. 1745), each a son, or son-in-law (and usually also cousin because of close intermarriage) of his predecessor.

Recent Rebbes have had strong influence in Israel. Lubavitchers, along with some other Orthodox groups, argue that non-Orthodox rabbis (Reform and Conservative) have no standing and the marriages and conversions they perform are worthless. They also hold that only Orthodox Jews, those who maintain the laws of purity and agree that the Torah remains fully active as Law, have the right to return to Israel under the Law of Return, and in 1988 they nearly succeeded in making their view into the official Israeli position. In the 1980s and 1990s the Orthodox religious parties, which often held the balance of power in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, would from time to time call the Rebbe in Brooklyn to check the propriety of their positions on religious matters.

Many Lubavitchers were certain that the seventh Rebbe, the Paris-educated Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994) was the Messiah, at whose coming the Temple would be rebuilt. Some flew to Israel at his death to await what they called “the ultimate retribution” for centuries of persecution. In September 1996, two years after the death of Rebbe Schneerson, the then Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, made a special trip to Queens, New York, to say prayers at the Rebbe's grave. (He did not meet with the leaders of American Jewish organizations.)

In her book *Holy Days*, Lis Harris (1985) describes everyday life for one Brooklyn household that belongs to the Lubavitchers. Harris underscores the meaningfulness that the women of the household find in living a life of restrictions and rules. The enforced rest on the Sabbath, when no cooking, not even turning on a light, may be done, gives them leisure and freedom from working for others—an important theme in the context of the historical persecution of Jews. “No one is master of any Jew on the Sabbath” states one woman, Sheina, who married into the community. Such rules “force me to think about the sanctity of the ordinary facts of my existence” (Harris 1985, 125).

Sheina grew up in an Orthodox home, but a personal tragedy and chance meetings with Lubavitchers led her to join the community. She agreed to a marriage arranged by a rabbi, and came to joyfully embrace the many rituals and commandments of Hasidic life. Of the purifying bath in the communal bathing place, the mikvah, not used by most Jews, she said that a community is supposed to build a bath even before a synagogue, so important is maintaining purity. For Sheina, rules that prohibit sexual intercourse between husband and wife for two weeks each month (during and after menstruation) and a ritual bath at the end of the interval make sex more passionate, “like a new bride every month” (Harris 1985, 140).

A similar passion for obeying the Law pervades Sheina's weeks of work before Passover to rid her house of the least bit of leavened food—grain that has come into contact with water for more than 18 minutes. Exodus (12:19) commands that “no leaven

shall be found in your houses,” and Hasidic housewives labor hard to comply. Sheina cleans her house from top to bottom, replaces the stove top with a special Passover cook top, and brings out an entire set of Passover cookware that is sure to be free of leaven. Her matzohs come from a nearby bakery, where bakers race from kneading the dough to scoring it to baking the matzoh—all in nine minutes, well within the limit! Sheina and her husband also sell all leavened goods—packaged foods and whiskey (made from grain), for example—to a non-Jew, and then buy it back after Passover. The goods remain in their house, locked away, but the transaction means that the Law has been obeyed, because the goods are not theirs.

Sheina’s Passover meal, like most such meals, features the foods symbolic of exile and suffering: the meat, of that eaten before leaving Egypt, the egg dipped in salt water and the bitter herbs, of sadness and suffering. But the meal follows hours of discussion about the truth of exile as the Jews’ present condition. All those present agreed that the state of exile was permanent until the Messiah should come, and that all attempts at assimilation to the larger world were futile.

What Is the “Jewish Community”?

The Lubavitcher Jews set themselves off from others on the basis of God’s command: “I am the Lord your God who has set you apart from the nations.” Yiddish continues to be the first language for many, and many avoid what they consider to be unnecessary contact with non-Jews in their midst. But this effort at seclusion also has contributed to tensions in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights where many Lubavitchers live alongside others, especially African Americans. Jewish citizens’ patrols (called the “Maccabees,” after the leaders of a successful revolt in second-century B.C.E. Judea) were accused of harassing local black residents; in 1991 black residents rioted after a black child was killed by a Lubavitcher-driven car, and some Lubavitchers accused the Mayor of anti-Semitism (Remnick 1992).

Lively debates within the Orthodox Jewish movement turn on whether separating oneself from the cultural mainstream is necessary for purity and survival, or a denial of the changing, larger world. Lubavitcher rabbis, through their 1,350 yeshiva schools worldwide, their Chabad houses in many cities, and their active outreach programs, seek to convince other Jews that as “the chosen” they are unique, and will never be fully accepted by non-Jews.

Other Jewish leaders, heirs of the nineteenth-century Reform movement toward cultural assimilation, stress that Jews are also citizens of the countries in which they live and part of modern world culture. German and eastern European immigrants to the United States in the nineteenth century found a world in which no religion was enforced—religion was a matter of individual choice. Whether Reform or Conservative (the latter being more concerned with keeping the Law), synagogues built in the suburbs during the religious revival of the 1940s and 1950s were dedicated to preserving the tradition or civilization of Judaism even for those who did not practice many of the rituals. Some features of ritual were borrowed from the dominant Protestant churches—organ music, men and women sitting together—and social clubs, libraries, and youth groups became at least as important to many Jews as worship. As Riv-Ellen Prell (1989)

has argued, as adults became less and less drawn to the synagogue by the obligations of religious law or the force of community, the synagogue focused more and more of its activities on teaching children “how to be a Jew.”

In the 1970s, some of these children developed “countercultural” religious institutions, in particular, new prayer communities (*havurot*). They did so in an effort to infuse their lives with a stronger religiosity, to recapture a lost totality—nostalgically located in the eastern European Jewish town, the *shtetel*. And yet they created these new forms within American culture. Membership in the prayer groups was as an associational community of free choice. Cultural values of gender equality and democracy suffused their activities. Women as well as men were counted toward making up the minimum of 10 worshipers for a prayer group (*minyan*). Prayer sessions involved sharing of roles and discussions of proper prayers (Prell 1989).

Mainstream U.S. Judaism and its further offshoots thus developed without the emphases on maintaining boundaries through strict observance of the law found among some Orthodox Jews today, including the Lubavitchers. American cultural ideals of democracy and expressive individualism make a law-centered religious life difficult. Of course, this very difficulty reinforces the notion of being in permanent exile that animates Lubavitcher life.

And yet the centrality of law to Orthodox Jewish self-definition, and the monopoly of Orthodox rabbis over Jewish legal institutions in Israel, means that the question of “who is a Jew?” remains unresolved. The approximately 10,000 conversions to Judaism made each year in the United States are generally performed by Reform rabbis and are not recognized by Orthodox authorities. Nor do Orthodox rabbis recognize marriages conducted under Reform auspices, or civil divorces not accompanied by a religious court’s divorce declaration, the *get* (Meislin 1981). Although these cleavages disturb many in the United States, and have given rise to calls for an American religious court, they have particular importance in Israel, where they bring to the fore not only the issue of Jewish identity but also of Israeli identity (see Chapter 15).

We have examined two kinds of rules restricting the actions of a category of people in the name of a supernatural order, or a divine commandment. Some rules restrict what this category of people may do—what they may eat, what they may wear, how or whether they may cut their hair. These special restrictions underline, often conspicuously, their difference from other categories of people. The second kind of rules limits freedom of intercourse between categories of people—who you may marry, with whom you may eat, or even with whom you may have physical contact. Of course these two kinds of rules reinforce each other, for if you may eat only certain foods and must avoid others, your life and the lives of your children are easier if you marry someone in your category.

One clear effect of these rules is to maintain boundaries. But they also may give positive reinforcement to membership in the group. Sheina rejoiced in her search for leaven, and found the confined world of the Lubavitchers to restore a direction and also a pleasure to her life. Of the Muslims with whom I have fasted, many found the deprivations of the fasting month of Ramadan helped to focus their minds on their blessings, or on spirituality. Prohibitions can have multiple effects, inward and outward, on social and religious life.