



**Defying trendlines,  
the movement's impact  
— and its influence —  
continues to grow in the region.**

# **CHABAD INFLUENCE**

**By Bryan Schwartzman**

**Photos by Isaac Bensouden**



Fading sunlight filtered through large windows, illuminating the crowd as the festival of Purim wound down at Chabad Lubavitch of Montgomery County's brand-new, \$4 million synagogue and community center in Fort Washington. Staci Marburg and her two girls, Brianna, age 10, and Jordan, age 13, sat at a round table with a group of other young families, munching on kosher hot dogs and chicken, their conversations taking place to the soundtrack of "Hava Nagila" as a bearded man dressed in a pirate costume played the tune on an accordion.

More than 200 attendees had gathered to celebrate the holiday, and the vast majority of them didn't look or dress like Lubavitchers at all — no black hats or beards for the men, no wigs or ankle-length skirts for the women — but appeared as if they would fit in at any suburban Reform or Conservative congregation. In fact, that's just where many of them, including the Marburg family, used to go. Others said they didn't go to any synagogue at all before becoming involved with Chabad.

At a time when many synagogues are battling to stem membership losses, Chabad is growing at an unprecedented rate, adding 23 local centers since 2001. This growth raises a simple question: How do they do it? How do rabbis who look like they are from the shtetl, who generally steer clear of movies, television and modern literature — even as they make extensive use of other technologies like the Internet — manage to excite and inspire so many Jews?

Rabbi Moshe Brennan, of Chabad of Penn Wynne, has a simple answer. "The reason we are so big," he opined, "is that our vision, in a certain

sense, is 'Let's touch every single Jew.'"

Many Jewish leaders are admiring of the fact that, whether or not they agree with everything that Chabad teaches and believes, the movement has found a way to tap into a spiritual vacuum, a yearning on the part of so many Jews, and to inspire a countless number of them toward a more meaningful Jewish life.

Rabbi Steven Wernick is one of those leaders. Wernick, who grew up in the area, led Adath Israel in Merion Station until 2009, when he was tapped to lead the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism and tasked with turning around what many consider a struggling movement. Referring to the number of Jews who have been engaged by Chabad, he said, "One of the things that we can learn from Chabad: I think they really understood sooner than others the importance of building personal relationships. Much of Chabad's success is built on personal relationships."

When many non-Chabad rabbis talk about Chabad, said Wernick, "it comes up as admiration as well as exasperation. Rabbis often ask, 'How come we are not doing that?' There is no real secret. It is *ahavat Israel*" — love of the Jewish people.

Others in the community feel that Chabad has succeeded by undercutting the prices of established synagogues — rather than by reaching the truly unaffiliated — and asking for a lesser, not greater commitment from Jewish families.

For Marburg, who says she is not especially observant, but wants her kids to have a Jewish education, it wasn't a question of pricing as much as one of im-



*Attendees enjoying themselves at Chabad Lubavitch of Montgomery County's new facility during Purim.*

## Chabad Influence

pact. She was looking for a different way for her daughters to learn about Judaism. In October 2011, she asked them to give the Chabad's Hebrew school a try. She recalled that her younger daughter "cried every time she went" to her old Hebrew school, and her 13-year-old wasn't too happy about it, either. Marburg had heard good things about Rabbi Shaya and Devorah Deitsch's program — it was supposed to be a fun, less pressure-filled environment — and it charged a fraction of the amount that synagogues do.

Today, according to Marburg, both girls literally run to class. "Devorah makes every kid feel special," Marburg said, referring to Deitsch, who runs the 50-plus-student Hebrew school and meets individually with parents before enrolling. Asked if she ever felt pressure to live an Orthodox lifestyle, Marburg replied that the rabbi and his wife "just want to create a sense of Jewish community."

Her eldest, Jordan, just celebrated her Bat Mitzvah at the new shul. Because the synagogue adheres to Orthodox practices, she wasn't allowed to read from the Torah or lead services. Instead, she led a specially designed Friday night ceremony.

While Marburg was initially bothered by what her daughter couldn't do, she thought it was more important that she seemed to genuinely find her studies meaningful and that she "knows what she is talking about."

"We, as Jewish educators," said Devorah Deitsch, who grew up in Minnesota as the daughter of Lubavitch emissaries, and is now mother to eight children, "do not have the luxury of saying, 'Like it or not, you have to go to Hebrew school.' I need it to be relevant. I need to respect their time."

### Fulfilling the mission

Here are the basics: Chabad and Lubavitch are often used interchangeably, but they mean different things. Chabad is an acronym for the Hebrew words, *chochma*, *binah* and *da'at* — wisdom, comprehension and knowledge. Lubavitch is the name of the town in present-day Belarus where the movement was based for more than a century.

Chabad-Lubavitch is a branch of Chasidism. Today, many perceive Chasidic groups as anachronous, dressing in the manner of several hundred years ago and walling themselves off from many expressions of modern culture. But in the 18th century, Chasids were revolutionaries, rebelling against the dry, legalistic brand of Judaism that emphasized scholarship above all else and seemed to exclude many workaday Jews who didn't have the luxury of spending their days in a yeshiva. The early Chasidic masters — including the first Lubavitcher Rebbe — stressed joy, personal piety, prayer, mysticism and the potential of every Jew to hasten the coming of the messiah.

The movement and its 4,000 emissaries are working to spread knowledge about Judaism and mitzvot on six continents. Its global mission can trace its beginnings to the dawn of World War II. In 1940, as the Nazis embarked on their annihilation of the Jews of Europe, the sixth



Rabbi Abraham Shemtov

Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, was forced to leave the Old World for good and moved Lubavitch headquarters to the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. A year after his death in 1950, his son-in-law, Menachem Schneerson, was named Rebbe of the decimated sect and tasked with rebuilding in the shadow of the Holocaust.

His response to the biggest catastrophe in Jewish history was perhaps as radical as the approach of the early Chasidic masters. At a time when many experts considered Orthodox Judaism a relic, and assimilation, as well as Reform and Conservative Judaism, was on the rise, he instructed his followers to go out into the world and try to relight the divine spark within each and every Jew. With each additional mitzvah, he taught, the world would be brought that much closer to the coming of the messiah.

The Rebbe was clearly one of the most influential figures within Judaism of the last century. Some Lubavitchers maintain to this day that the Rebbe is not dead and he is the messiah (an idea heretical to most Jews, since calling a deceased person the messiah sounds an awful lot like Christian theology). Many experts predicted at the time of Schneerson's death in 1994 that Chabad would wind up in disarray. But the opposite has happened: More Chabad houses have opened in the 19 years since his death than in the 40-plus years he led the movement.

Today, Chabad has become nearly ubiquitous worldwide — with emissaries in far-flung locales from Nepal to Norway — and its presence has grown by leaps and bounds in the Philadelphia area. Its local roots date back only to 1961, when Schneerson told Rabbi Abraham Shemtov, then a young Chabadnik, to move to Philadelphia.

The 75-year-old Shemtov, who lives in Northeast Philadelphia, is now considered one of the acknowledged leaders of the rapidly decentraliz-

ing organization. Shemtov, who was born in Moscow and spent the war years in Uzbekistan, chairs its international steering committee and carries enormous personal prestige for having been so close to the Rebbe.

In a recent interview at the Lubavitch center on Castor Avenue in Northeast Philadelphia, where a picture of the Rebbe hangs prominently, Shemtov insisted that Chabad's success doesn't derive from a brilliant organizational strategy or sales pitch, but from the content and substance of its message. "This was not an artificial setup of a very prudent, very powerful organization. This was the truth," he said.

The essence of the message, he said, his voice swaying in an almost prayerful cadence, is that Jews have been chosen to be a little different, not because they are superior, but to demonstrate to the world that there is a God who rules over the Earth. "Moshiach is a state of the world in which God will be fully recognized as the ruler of the world," he said.

"The Holocaust was on an unprecedented level, so the response had to also be on an unprecedented level, or else it wouldn't have moved. The Rebbe said that 'no Jew should be written off. No child should be ignored or given up on.'"

In 1968, under Shemtov's guidance, the first freestanding Chabad outreach center in the country opened in the same modest location on Castor Avenue, from where he still presides. The first time an American president

ever attended a Lubavitch event was in 1975, when Gerald Ford was in town for a fundraiser for American Friends of Lubavitch.

Chabad's connections in the halls of power are well known. During the interview, Shemtov whipped out a 20-year-old photo of him in the Oval Office with President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore. He also reminisced about his interactions with President George W. Bush, and he is a regular presence at the annual White House menorah-lighting ceremony. (For years, Chabad was best known for its highly visible public menorah lightings, a tradition that Shemtov started in the early 1970s by lighting candles on a large menorah near Independence Hall. Many Jewish organizations objected to the lighting of a religious symbol on public property. Today, public opinion — with the help of a U.S. Supreme Court case — has largely been settled.)

### The Philadelphia story

By 2001 — seven years after the death of the Rebbe — there were 15 Chabad rabbis serving communities throughout the Delaware Valley. But the real story is what has happened since then. Today, there are 38 Chabad rabbis in the area, the newest in Elkins Park. And in several cases, such as in Fort Washington, Merion Station and Newtown, emissary couples have managed to secure their own funding to build centers that rival the homes of established congregations.

How do they gain the financial support of community leaders and machers — people like Gary Erlbaum, Craig Snider, Oskar Laskow and Sharon

The 2012 dedication of the Chabad Lubavitch of Montgomery County



## Chabad Influence

Pinkenson—who are usually not Orthodox themselves? How have they managed to grow rapidly, even exponentially, in an era when many local non-Orthodox synagogues have struggled or even been forced to close?

In an era when synagogues and Jewish organizations are seeking to transform themselves, are there lessons to be learned from the Chabad model?

Rabbi Brennan's experience is emblematic of the movement's current growth curve. The 32-year-old came to the area with his wife, Devorah, nine years ago, originally to assist Rabbi Shraga Sherman—who is considered one of the area's most dynamic Chabad emissaries—in his outreach work on the Main Line. Eventually, he said, he and Sherman decided there was enough demand to add another Chabad center. Two years ago, the Brennans started Chabad of Penn Wynne, which holds its activities at the Kaiserman JCC in Wynnewood.

"Our immediate goal is to expose people to Judaism," he said. "People are shocked to hear that Judaism discusses anything relevant. Our job is that we are educating people. What you do with that education is your choice." Although Chabad of Penn Wynne isn't nearly as big as Chabad of the Main Line, its family and education programs typically draw at least a few dozen people.

Chabad's imprint on the region expands well beyond their eponymous

that didn't require an expensive synagogue membership.

As Brennan put it, "There are individuals who cannot afford to pay dues above a certain amount, and we want them to be welcome as well." He acknowledged that this does create a situation where people from other synagogues may come in the door because of the prices.

Chabad rabbis also work all the time. Congregational rabbis are, more than ever before, seeking to establish work/life boundaries, carve out their own personal and family time and not have the synagogue be all-consuming. Chabad rabbis, on the other hand, are known to not take days off or go on family vacations. The rabbis and their families, which typically include a large number of children, live and breathe Jewish outreach.

But the aspect of Chabad admired most by others is the welcoming, non-judgmental attitude exhibited by its rabbis and rebbetzins. They tend to reject labels, simply saying that "a Jew is a Jew is a Jew." But that doesn't mean Chabad rabbis are accepting of other forms of Judaism.

"The Rebbe tolerated compromise, not as justified, but as a fact," said Shemtov, meaning that he understood that not all Jews keep all of halachah, or Jewish law. "The fact that they sanctify their compromise" by calling it Reform or Conservative Judaism, for example—"that, he cannot forgive. We say, that is not a healthy diet. A healthy diet is otherwise. But in your case, you

*"We could be more successful than Chabad if we produced a parallel set of activities under liberal auspices"— Rabbi David Teutsch*

centers: The Jewish Relief Agency, which helps feed the hungry; the Friendship Circle, which pairs teenagers with disabled individuals; the Jewish Business Network; and the Old City Jewish Art Center were all founded by Lubavitch leaders. Then there is the outreach Chabad has done on the University of Pennsylvania campus—including a yearly Shabbat dinner for more than 2,000 students—and other area colleges.

### The politics of inclusion

Sue Fishkoff, author of the 2003 book, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch*, said, "The fact is that Chabad is still growing and has become more integrated into the Jewish mainstream and in the world. More Chabad centers have become permanent fixtures."

Each Chabad emissary couple receives almost no financial support from Crown Heights—they must raise the funds for their programs and buildings themselves. They don't generally charge for memberships, instead usually delivering or offering some kind of service first, and asking for a donation afterwards. For years, mainstream synagogues have been able to charge a few thousand dollars for membership because parents needed to belong to a synagogue in order to send their kids to Hebrew school and have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Chabad helped challenge that model by setting up Hebrew schools

cannot yet handle such a diet," said Shemtov. The implication is that, once a person gets more spiritual nourishment, he or she may be able to take on more and more until, maybe, they can handle the whole thing.

Rabbi David Teutsch, the former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, has some pointed criticisms of Chabad. He argues that the group's philosophy is out of step with the egalitarian, liberal views of most American Jews. Still, he thinks the rest of the Jewish world has much to learn from Chabad.

The movement succeeds, he said, because its rabbis are friendly and warm and welcome every Jew, not because they have a particular philosophy that resonates. "The major success of Chabad is due to its strategy. The vast majority that Chabad reaches would be meaningfully touched by liberal rabbis who come closer to sharing the world view of those they are trying to reach," he said. "We could be more successful than Chabad if we produced a parallel set of activities under liberal auspices.

Teutsch, who acts as a consultant for synagogues across the country, said Chabad has a huge number of advantages. It projects an Old World authenticity that attracts a huge amount of money from non-

practicing liberal Jews.”

Teutsch takes his criticism of Chabad a step further by saying that the “implicit Chabad attack on the legitimacy of liberal Jewish streams is a destructive force in the contemporary Jewish community.”

### Reaching the unaffiliated

Craig Snider is one of Chabad’s success stories. Snider, the son of Philadelphia Flyers owner Ed Snider, has had a varied and lucrative business career in his own right. His wife isn’t Jewish and his children weren’t brought up in the faith, and he himself had had little involvement for years. Then, about eight years ago, not long after he turned 50, he learned that his friend Gary Erlbaum, a developer and longtime Jewish community leader who is known for donating large sums to pro-Israel and Jewish groups, was doing weekly study sessions with Rabbi Sherman of the Main Line Chabad. Eventually, Erlbaum talked Snider into having lunch with Sherman.

“I didn’t know what the *parsha*” — the weekly Torah portion — “was. I didn’t know what the Talmud was,” Snider recalled.

He ended up taking a class taught by Sherman called “The Kabbalah of Time” that, he said, simply blew his mind, “kind of like Einstein but with God and Torah.”

“It was very relevant. I realized there was this mystical side of Judaism,” said Snider, who today often attends services at Chabad. “We in America know very little about our Jewish philosophy. American Judaism is all about Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. It’s sad, because there is such a rich tradition. These men and women are the first to say, ‘Hey, look, you can be Jewish, you are always welcome.’ There is no fee to attend services for the High Holidays. There is no board that hires and fires the rabbis. He runs the place. There is no politics from the bimah.”

Mark Freed, an attorney who lives in Berwyn, has found a similar connection. He had been trying to reconnect with Judaism for years, but Reform and Conservative services left him feeling flat. Five years ago, he went to Shabbat services at Chabad of Chester County.

“I just felt like the missing piece seemed to be there,” he said. “The thing about Chabad is they really accept you for who you are. They don’t expect you to become a Chabadnik.”

“I basically go to shul now, every week. I get there by 9:30 or 10 a.m. and I will usually stay through lunch,” he said. “They are presenting traditional Judaism in a way that is accessible to me.”

For years, other denominations and movements have been taking stock of Chabad, many at first feeling threatened and claiming they don’t “play by the rules.” But more and more young rabbis are asking what they can learn from their Chabad colleagues.

Among them is Rabbi Eli Freedman, who several years ago joined the staff of Philadelphia’s Rodeph Shalom, a Reform synagogue that is growing and has managed to attract scores of young families.

“Laurel and I totally see ourselves as ‘Reform Chabad,’” said Freedman, referring to his wife, Laurel Klein. “We are very welcoming. We invite folks to our home for meals all the time, and provide a low threshold for getting involved. Unlike Chabad, we are progressive, egalitarian and focus more on the ethical and moral mitzvot than the ritual ones. We also have no agenda whatsoever.”

Do Lubavitch leaders think they have something to teach other Jewish movements? Or do they think their methods won’t be successful without their particular philosophy? After all, while many non-Orthodox rabbis maintain cordial, even close relationships with Chabad rabbis, Chabad rabbis won’t sit on a panel with them, join a board, conduct a joint service or generally do anything that recognizes a Reform, Reconstructionist or Conservative rabbi as a rabbi.

“We are very happy that others are trying our method,” said Shemtov. “We only reach out to them, and ask them, ‘Don’t do it partly, don’t emulate the superficial.’”

### Taking the long view

What does the future hold? Will Chabad become the dominant force in American Judaism? Or at least the primary address for non-Orthodox Jews?

Teutsch said he believes in the future vitality of liberal Judaism. But rabbis will need to think of themselves as rabbis for the whole community, in the same manner as Chabad rabbis. And, he continued, moving away from the membership model toward the Chabad idea of voluntary contributions is also a step in the right direction — and something that a few synagogues around the country are already doing.

“Ultimately, I believe that values like egalitarianism and inclusion, which are certainly core values for Reconstructionist Judaism, are profoundly important and are in direct conflict with values put forth by Chabad, which include a kind of ethnic triumphalism,” he said.

Rabbi Menachem Schmidt, who has served as a Chabad emissary in Philadelphia for 33 years and is the driving force behind the Old City Jewish Art Center, sees things differently. He thinks that Chabad’s “incredible success and expansion will only continue with more vigor. The *shluchim* will continue to work together to make their centers even more effective, eventually opening more centers over time as the need arises.

“Our biggest challenges are consistent,” he added. “Our mission of reaching every Jew doesn’t change. We will connect to all Jews with true *avahat Yisroel*. There aren’t any shortcuts in doing that.”

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