

Chabad, a True Belief System

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In sociological terms a "true belief system" refers to a religion with adherents who believe with perfect faith that their beliefs contain the truth, more precisely the only truth. While some "true religions" more, others are less aggressive in their attitudes towards other, "untrue" religions nevertheless they are always unshakable. The believers "know" the truth, not just believe in it. Chabad is one of these religions as I will show below.

Social scientists like to talk about pre-modern, modern and postmodern worldviews. The former assumes that everybody sees things the same way, and to see them any differently is wrong. According to the modern, there are different, equally valid viewpoints. It still assumes an objective reality that people are interpreting. Finally in the post-modern worldview there is no objective reality, only interpretations of it, based on people's standpoint. One may argue how appropriate the labels are--because they carry a certain level of judgment in a society where high values is placed on modernity--but the ontology itself cannot be argued. Or to put it in post-modern perspective, it is one of many valid classifications. In this categorization Chabad is a "pre-modern" system.

While Fishkoff provides an in-depth account of Chabad, her approach is primarily that of a journalist's. She describes it but does not provide much analysis, not attempting to understand Chabad from a scientific or sociological point of view. I found her book informative, but lacking in explanations. Also, I am wondering how much she was aware of her own biases and agendas and to the extent these influenced the book. For example, based on other accounts I believe she downplayed the messianistic trend within Chabad and the tension between Chabad and other Jewish organizations. To be fair, she mentions both of these, but attributes less significance than I would have. Her objective seems to be to create a warm, fuzzy feeling. This objective developed along with her own growing appreciation of

the positive side of Chabad, with which she was not familiar with before starting to work on this book. Her coverage helped me to have a deeper understanding of Chabad, but opening my eyes wider to its characteristics as a true belief system.

Chabad is a mosaic word, made up from the first letters of three words: Chokmah, Binah, Daat. According to one of the major tenets of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical teachings, there are ten levels of emanations of the divine. This system is supposed to cover the huge gap between the divine and mundane world, by providing layers. The highest level is Malkhut, where the divine itself exists. But the next three levels are the ones that makeup the word Chabad. Thus their chosen name signifies how close they are to the realm of the divine. It wouldn't have been very elegant to pick three of the seven lower levels. Without diving into the depths of the kabbalistic system, let me just point out that these three words are usually translated as Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge. The three of them, reinforcing each other, provides Chabad with what they need to be a True Belief System, they are the bearers of Knowledge, helped with its masculine aspect, Wisdom and feminine, Understanding. Chabad, by naming itself as the highest possible degrees claims to encompass the 3 truest aspects of the world, beside God.

I referred to Chabad above as a "religion". I should have said either "denomination" or "new religious movement." Chabad is a branch of Judaism, it exists within the family of Jewish religious traditions. It has similarities and difference with all the other Jewish denominations. However it is also a "new religious movement". This is the term used by sociologists to describe what used to be called sects or cults. These later words carry negative connotations. Science attempts to be objective, thus they switched to the more neutral term.

New religious movements are often, but not always, led and/or founded by a charismatic leader. This applies to Chabad on several levels. They are part of Hasidim movement, founded in the mid 18th century by an influential figure, the Baal Shem Tov, the Besht, literally meaning the "Good Master of his Name". In other words by a person who had true knowledge of and direct connection to God. After his death however the movement split into fractions. The branches were named on localities, based on where the various spiritual leaders, rebbes lived. One of them, the Alte-Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Ladi, moved to the town of Lubavitch in White Russia, hence the other name the Chabad is known, the Lubavitcher. The latest of 7 rebbes was Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He was the charismatic leader who shaped the movement in the second part of the 20th century and is still heavily influencing its future now, 8 years after his death.

His charisma and centrality cannot be overemphasized. He is a focal point in all four dimensions: peoplehood, time, space, and law. He turned Chabad from an inward looking movement to an outward looking one, by providing a missionary focus: to reach every Jew in the world and turn them towards their way of belief and practice. Fishkoff summarizes the goal of one particular Chabad organization: "Their mission is to connect inmates with their Jewish souls." (311) The group of "inmates" could be replaced with any groups of Jews based; e.g. people in exotic locations (Bangkok, Alaska, Russia), at universities, hippies, drug addicts, young or old.

The Rebbe's concept of peoplehood was both inclusive and exclusive. He followed the halachic understanding that a Jew is a Jew if born to a Jewish mother(, or converted under Orthodox supervision.) Based on this he was more than inclusive, he wanted to reach all Jews, that other organizations did not care about. As one shliach put it: "Our entire outreach

is based on the assumption that there is no such thing as an unaffiliated Jew. If you're Jewish, you're Jewish even if you don't want to be." (237) This can and does offend the sensibilities of people of the modern era, who believe in the right of self-determination. It also connects to my point that this kind of Judaism works like a True Belief System, where the followers know the truth better, than the rest of the world.

Chabad is exclusive in the sense that it is not interested in non-Jews. As long as gentiles keep the seven Noahite laws they are considered righteous people. Nothing more is required. The proselytizer denominations within Christianity and Islam would be interested in converting as many people as they can, but because Chabad is interested in "converting" only Jews, although still as many as they can. However Chabadniks follow and extend the ethical commandments towards all humanity. This is exemplified by a young shliach, who was working with drug addicts, including African Americans. His client described him aptly this way: "Levi doesn't see color. [...] He puts other people's needs first, time and time again." (307). On the surface this aspect of caring for the whole of humanity, does not support my point. But this more like an exception to the rule, because the vast majority of their efforts are focused on Jews. In sociological terms the "ingroup" takes precedence over the "outgroup."

The highest position in the "ingroup" is being a shliach. Shlichim are the emissaries who, after spending the majority of their young adult life studying in yeshivah, go out in the world, and carry out the mission. These highly dedicated people "are always on stage, constantly aware of themselves as representatives of a movement, a rebbe, and a way of life that holds themselves to a 'higher standard'." (205) Those who are selected to become shlichim are already the crème of this closed society, but their aforementioned sense of responsibility makes them even more well-poised. If, as Jewish theology suggests, Jews are

chosen for a special, unique task by God then the shlichim are akin also chosen to special, unique task by the Rebbe, or after his death, by the leaders of the Rebbe's organization. This parallel sheds another ray of light on the Rebbe's role as direct spiritual leader of a centralized system. To give a more rounded picture I have to admit that the organization has some flexibility to it in regard the selection and placement of the shlichim. They have individual liberties on how to accomplish the centrally set goals.

The concept of time for Chabad is also centered on the Rebbe. One could divide it into three sections: before the Rebbe's lifetime, during, and after. The emphasis is on his period. Those who met him or lived during his lifetime claim to draw special power personally from him. He served similar function to Indian gurus and evangelical faith healers. According to Fishkoff everybody who met him, including non-Jews, politicians, public figures, average people, acknowledged his charisma and presence. This phenomenon gives new meaning to the adage "seeing is believing." Those who saw him believed him, his authenticity and driving force, providing another sign of true belief.

The Rebbe's death sent shockwaves in their community. Fishkoff points to the most affected fraction: "After the Rebbe's death many Lubavitchers who had loudly proclaimed him as the Messiah went through deep spiritual crises." (269) The phases of grieving as psychologists identified them helps us to understand the various reactions. Some were angry, how could this happen, when they believed that the Rebbe was the Messiah and as such would not die. Some practice a form of denial when they accord with a variation of the messianistic belief that he will return. There is even a miniscule minority who simply does not believe he has even died. Others accepted and moved on, with difficulties.

Another structure in time is the Shabbat. If possible, Chabad elevated its position even higher. It was already the most sacred time in the Jewish religion before Chabad's rise. Abraham Joshua Heschel calls it the cathedral of time, rightfully so. Encouraging the celebration of Shabbat as one's private Jewish observance, was part of the Rebbe's original mitzvah campaign in the 1950s and 1960s. They enabled lots of Jews to perform the ritual of lighting the Shabbat candles Friday night, thus separating the sacred time from the humane.

They also integrated other holidays as tools in their outreach campaign. The most vibrant description in Fishkoff's book was the one on Passover in Bangkok. Tere thousands of traveling Jews, a lot of them secular Israelis get together to celebrate something they might have never done back in their homeland. The phrase "outreach program" doesn't cover the entire depth of meaning of Chabad's activities. One could also call them "marketing campaigns". As a Chabad director explained: "Some denominations see themselves as God's policeman. We see ourselves as God's salesmen." (55) The secret of their success is that they are not just fully aware of it, but use every tools at their hand to be good at being "salesmen." They look for opportunities for "sales". E.g. when they find young Israelis traveling in exotic places they are there, when they see unaffiliated Jews in the heart of the US mainland they are there too. In this regard they are similar to every large, well-organized proselytizing religion. This kind of work needs the kind of determination that can be provided only through perfect faith.

The final aspect of time I would like mention is the division between the here and hereafter. Compared to the other two Abrahamic religions Judaism puts little emphasis on the later. As one shliach said to a group of women: "If you concentrate on the world-to-come, you don't work hard enough to make this world better." (231) This coincides with the

traditional Jewish lore of Judaism being a moral religion, placing value on one's actions and thoughts in this realm. By doing so Jews and Chabad both pass up on the option of luring people to become followers by offering the possibility of a happy heaven. This also forces them to make the best of this lifetime, explaining the source of their joy of life. They have to be filled with it here, because unlike other religions' supposition there is no other option/space/time to do so.

Space is also centered on the Rebbe. As Fishkoff observes: "While the Rebbe was alive, his synagogue was Chabad's heart, as his office was its brain."(263) There are numerous examples in the book describing the effects of his proximity. As if he would be a magnetic pole to which the lines of powers are drawn to. His passing away didn't change the effects, only the methods. His gravesite became a shrine with mythical powers. Sending an email to him--that is printed out and thrown in pieces onto his grave--helps the faithful. Judaism in general does not encourage this kind of cult or personality. Jews' institutional heroes are kings, priests, and prophets. They all revered for their special connection to God, being the representative, the ritually holy, and (bearer of) the message respectively. But the Rebbe was treated above these categories. This is a major difference between Chabad and mainstream Judaism. Although there are some other branches of Hasidim, who elevate their Rebbe, but none to this height.

Lubavitchers have emotional connection to the physical center of the movement: "It's Crown Heights. It's where Lubavitchers feel at home." (318) No matter where they live, they feel sentiments towards the location. Their relationship with Israel, on the other hand, is more ambiguous. They do have centers and a vocal group there. But the Rebbe never visited it, a fact that Fishkoff chose not to mention. According to traditional belief the Land of Israel will

be restored to the Jews in the Messianic age. Because we don't fully live in this age yet, therefore the current state of Israel cannot be the one Chabad works towards. Nevertheless they are not as antagonistic towards it, as some other denominations; they accept its existence and cooperate with it. But it doesn't place such a central role as it did for the Zionist movement.

Shlichim spend the majority of their time following mitzvot, commandments. "We keep it because it is a divine commandment." (156) No questions asked, no explanation necessary. In a modern age, where everything is relative, nothing is certain this position can be very tempting. The responsibility of decision making is not ours; we just have to follow the commandments. The responsibility of action might seem simpler in an age where there is an overwhelming abundance of decisions to make. This is the pull of many new religious movements: once one accepts the dogmas of the system and takes the leap of faith they give a convenient framework to live one's life. Convenient, in the sense of being unambiguous, but not necessary in the sense of how to act it out. For example following the halacha, Jewish law can be demanding in marital life, keeping kosher kitchen, resisting temptation of secular entertainment and activities. However Chabad built a strong infrastructure to help the willing to follow the rules.

Torah, the five books of Moses in the Bible, is the central text of Jewish law. Every other text, including the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, Responsa is built around it directly or indirectly. As in all other aspects within Chabad, the Rebbe's words take precedence. There is an organization with the sole purpose to collect and publish everything he ever wrote or said. This seems to me on the verge of violating the sanctity of Torah, putting so much emphasis on it. The Rebbe is/was Chabad's saint. There are lots of ways of keeping the

commandments. Chabad tries to do it by following as closely as they can the way the Rebbe laid down. This should not be taken lightly because "to be Jewish is to do Jewish."

As I have shown the major themes in Chabad are arranged in concentric circles. At the center of peoplehood is the Rebbe, surrounded by the shlichim, then by the rest of Chabad, then by Jews and at the outside are the gentiles. The best of times was being in the presence of the Rebbe during Shabbat. The second best is Shabbat, then the holidays, in our lifetime and finally the world to come. The center of space was wherever the Rebbe was. He was most often at 770 Eastern Parkway, Crown Heights, the neighborhood where the core of Chabad still lives. (After his death his gravesite took over the central position.) The land of Israel is in the next circle and the rest of the world is in the outskirts. Keeping Shabbat is the central commandment to keep, followed by putting tefillin on and the rest of the 613. Non-Jews only need to keep 7 laws.

The arrangement of these four sets of concentric circles provides a hierarchy that is rather suitable for true believers. Most of this structure exists in traditional Judaism, but "as is the case with many issues of Orthodox belief and practice, Chabad has its own spin on the matter..." (244) This special spin is what makes them a true belief system.

Fishkoff gives a number of good reasons for Chabad's success. "They are all mission-driven, and prepared to devote their lives to it." (100) This kind of unselfish devotion is rare, and recognized in our materialist society by those who are open to it. "Chabad's outreach program is colored by one central maxim: make it as easy as possible for a Jew to live more Jewishly." (55) They make what seems from the outside a difficult way of life--being so different from the rest of society's—simple and reachable. The alienation effect decreases for the people who they can touch. They introduced the market oriented approach to Judaism,

using all and the best available technique to "sell" it. This is the novelty they brought to the Jewish tradition. However we have to put it in context: sociologists recognize 1960s (the time period, when Chabad began to grow and take on this orientation) as the beginning of "religious marketplace". Another reason for success is this sound approach: "The Rebbe laid down four main directives for entering a new city: Don't cause friction, make sure you have a financial base for the first year, build a mikvah if none exists, and avoid countries on the verge of revolution." (113) The first is particularly sensible and allows them to blend in to certain extent into the Jewish landscape.

Maimonides, the 12th century philosopher and physician wrote the authoritative catechism of Judaism. Each of his 13 Principles of Faith start with the words: "I believe with perfect faith..." Chabad perfected this perfect faith and adjusted its action to it. Only, as true believers can.
