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A Journey through NYC religions

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The Big Messages at Hasidic Jewish teen gathering

Sabbath persuasion by baby steps. Shabbaton, Part 2

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By [Pauline Dolle](http://www.nycreligion.info/author/pauline-dolle/) (http://www.nycreligion.info/author/pauline-dolle/)



(http://www.nycreligion.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/img_8587esmall.jpg)

Neither sleet nor snow, rain or gloom of night will slow down venturesome Chabad emissaries putting out their message of spiritual renewal to teens. Photo: Pauline Dolle/A Journey through NYC religions

The Shabbaton weekend emphasized two things to the teens. First, they are not alone and are part of a global family. Second, it is possible to be a Jew and observe traditional practices in everyday life.

For Jewish teenagers who may have never been in a room with more than ten other Jews, a weekend like this “changes everything, their outlook on Jewish life and what it means to be a Jew,” said a rabbi serving as spokesman for Chabad headquarters. “It’s Jewish pride.” Their identity as Jews becomes larger because it is no longer just individualized, but now blends into a worldwide group identity.

“There’s such a vibe of unity,” enthused CTeener Sam Gabbay from Montreal. Meeting Jewish teens from all over the States made him feel part of a larger group. They also discover that Jews can be religious in every square inch of the modern world.

Some of the younger attendees also learn about Jewish religious practices for the first time. Cade Wharton from Vernon Hills, Illinois, shyly marveled that he had lived like an Orthodox Jew for a whole

weekend. When asked what he'd do differently after he returns home, he said "light the Shabbat candles?" more as a question than as a statement.

His leader prompted him, "And maybe put on the *tefillin* once in a while?"

Cade grinned sheepishly. "Oh, yeah."



(http://www.nycreligion.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/img_8358small2ndleftcade-wharton.jpg)

Living like the Orthodox was an adventure for Cade Wharton, 2nd from left. Photo: Pauline Dolle/A Journey through NYC religions

Older teens who may have more experience with CTeen walk away with a concrete vision for how to align their lives with their new sense of Jewish calling. Benny and Carol Rokni from Milwaukee, whose son Eric has attended the CTeen Shabbaton in New York for a few years now, notice that he comes home a little more mature each year.

“Our value system is about giving, and he comes home with a better sense of ” how that fits inside a religious calling, said Carol.

17-year-old Justin, who is a member of the Dix Hills, Long Island chapter, has been involved with community service as part of CTeen. His chapter was recognized at the CTeen Banquet for its community outreach. Attending the Shabbaton gave him inspiration to also increase his devotion and study. He had been planning to take a gap year to study Mandarin in China, but the rabbis at the Shabbaton inspired him to spend that year studying Hebrew and Torah in Israel.

Persuasion by baby-steps

One of the strengths of Chabad outreach is that it caters opportunities and events to different levels of religious maturity. The Jewish organization utilizes the practice of building ‘*mitzvot* upon *mitzvot*,’ taking baby steps to fulfill the commandments (*mitzvot*) instead of jumping into full-fledged persuasion to the observant life. Chabad believes that these baby steps are more practical and increase the likelihood that the teen will actually continue in their commitment. However small the actions may be, Jewish theology still sees them as full of spiritual worthiness as the more elaborate actions involved in other commandment-keeping.

The first step may be simply a commitment during morning prayers to wear two *tefillin*, small boxes containing scripture that implores the love of God with all one’s heart and mind, one wrapped around an arm and one around the head. A teen may do this small, daily observance before committing to a greater commitment like keeping fully kosher. Chabad injects a paradoxical sense of freedom to choose to be under the Law as a way to be committed Jews.

The practice of adornment with *tefillin* combine the daily remembrance of Jewish law with the great liberation of the Jews from slavery in ancient Egypt.

Megan, a girl from Reading, Pennsylvania, also pointed out that all of the educational panels and rules of shabbat offered at the International CTeen Shabbaton are completely voluntary. Educational panels were offered Saturday and Sunday but were not obligatory. The host rabbis request that cell phone use be kept discreet out of respect for those who are observing Shabbat, but phones are not confiscated,

and there is no consequence for non-observance. So, when teens do opt for religious education or some type of observance, they feel it is their own accomplishment, not something that was forced upon them. So, with satisfaction, Megan happily noted that she kept her cell phone off for the entirety of Saturday and that she attended a panel on ritual cleansing led by Mrs. Leah Rivkin, the co-director of CTeen.



(http://www.nycreligion.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/img_8602efarrtmegan.jpg)

Keeping her cell off for Shabbath, Megan, far right, at the Shabbaton banquet. Photo illustration: Pauline Dolle/A Journey through NYC religions

Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky, chairman of the Central Organization for Education (Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, commonly referred as Merkos), attributed the success of CTeen to three factors: the vision of the Rebbe, the dedication of the emissaries (*sbluchim*) who host and teach, and the dedication of the teenagers who participate.

The educator has no doubt that the teenagers will continue to carry this vision forward. “This spirit, you can’t buy,” Kotlarsky said. “There is no resource you could invest to get this return if it wasn’t genuine.” The Chabad idea of authenticity is also to invest practical accomplishment with a mystical significance.

He reminded the teenagers that where there is a gathering of Lubavitchers who share the Rebbe’s vision, he is still alive with them. “In a certain sense he’s here more than ever,” Kotlarsky proclaimed. “He’s present in the *sbluchim* that represent him.”



(http://www.nycreligion.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/img_8683-moshe-kotlarsky.jpg)

A vigorous advocate for the vision of Chabad, Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky. Photo: Pauline Dolle/A Journey through NYC religions

The Rebbe

A singular distinction of Hasidic Judaism is its devotion to great charismatic rabbis called *rebbe*s.

Around the time of the evangelical Christian Great Awakening that landed in early 18th Century New York City, in Poland Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer was pioneering a Judaic form of spiritual awakening. Eliezer, who is better known by his title Baal Shem Tov -- the Master of the Good Name, taught that the simplest peasant could experience God and understand spiritual truths. He emphasized an

emotional, mystical experience of God in reading the Torah, worship, and in everyday life.

Ten years or so after his death, the Hasidic movement developed around charismatic teachers located in different towns like Lubavitch in Eastern Europe. The Lubavitch are also known as Chabad, which is an acronym of the Hebrew words for wisdom, comprehension and knowledge.

The sixth *rebbe* Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, who fled from Europe in 1940, declared that promoting and encouraging Jews towards repentance and practice would hasten the coming of the promised Messiah, the Jewish savior. This was an amazing optimism in the face of the rising menace of Nazism to Jews around the world.



(<http://www.nycreligion.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/young-menachem-schneerson-1951.jpg>)

Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, soon after he became head of Lubavitch-Chabad in 1951. Photo from A Biography of Rebbetzin Chana Schneerson
By Shmuel Marcus and Avraham D. Vaisfiche,
published and copyrighted by Kehot Publication Society.

In 1951, Menachem Mendel Schneerson accepted the title of Rebbe and continued his predecessor's message and reinvigorated his community's outreach. Schneerson is the seventh rebbe who some say is the last one before the appearance of the Messiah. He is functionally like a Havdalah that separates eras. As such he is most commonly referred to as 'The Rebbe, or in the English translation, the Grand Rabbi.

Schneerson had a unique perspective on the 1960s teenagers. Other Jewish leaders saw rebellion and chaos. Schneerson saw opportunity. Instead of condemning the energy and passion of teenagers, Schneerson saw its potential for global impact. After the Rebbe's death in 1994, Chabad founded a large number of institutions based on his ideas of how to build up the movement. However, it took a champion of outreach to teens to finally prod into being the CTeen network in 2008 as an official branch of Chabad's educational program.

The Shabbaton Origins Story

Any organization that believes in Genesis' story about God creating the beginning of the world is going to think big in terms of its own origins. Rabbi Beryl Frankel, originally from Los Angeles, recounts with a remarkable awe about the origins of Shabbaton.

He was in Brooklyn working with MyShliach, a program modeled after the Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America program. MyShliach pairs children of Chabad emissaries (*shluchim*) living in remote areas like Bangkok or rural Oklahoma with a mentor, who keeps in contact with the child by phone or the internet.

As Frankel was looking at his demographics, he noticed a troubling pattern. Though Chabad had very strong programs such as MySchliach for children up to bar mitzvah ages of about 13, there were few programs catering specifically to teenagers. The elders were supposed to "deal with" that demographic but usually there was little follow-up.

"Teenagers aren't a popular demographic to work with. Even parents say 'good' luck with teens," he laughed ruefully. He recalled that even he "gave my parents a run for their money" in his teenage years. Also, nobody wanted to be saddled with the failure of "losing" the teens.

Frankel took his findings to Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky and his son Rabbi Mendy Kotlarsky of Merkos. He got a favorable hearing. They agreed that teens didn't have a settled place in Chabad's network and would do something about it.



(http://www.nycreligion.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/img_8831esmallmendy-kotlarsky.jpg)

Teens need their own place in the Chabad world, Rabbi Mendy Kotlarsky, I. Photo: Pauline Dolle/A Journey through NYC religions

In November 2008, Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky invited a group of 60 teenagers from the New York City metropolitan area to his home to observe Shabbat. He and his wife prepared a traditional Shabbat service for the teens. The next morning, the group went to the Oholei Torah school.

At first Chabad leaders dubbed the venture as the Inaugural Unity Weekend at which teens could experience each other as a unified cohort. The *Havdalah* was conducted on a private cruise ship. A local Jewish rock band, YOOD, played for the gathering.

In the next two years the numbers moved up to 100 participants. Chabad was learning how to relate to teenagers. At that point interest in the weekend experience exploded.

Early February 2011 with a new name, the first National CTeen Shabbaton gathered 200 teens from the East Coast and Canada for the journey through *Shabbat*, *Havdalah*, and Ohelei Torah school. Ever since, the attendance has increased by a third or more each year. In 2013 the outreach welcomed attendees from Europe and one from Nigeria. Last year for the first time, Chabad worked with the city to secure the Square in Manhattan for the *Havdalah*. Folk singer Alex Clare led the celebration for 1,000 teen, including for the first time attendees from Singapore and Hawaii.

Frankel reports that this gathering teens has now become the second largest international Chabad gathering, next only to the spectacular annual gathering of the international emissaries (*shluchim*) themselves. The movement is now working to develop teens as their leaders and other projects for the future.



(http://www.nyreligion.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/img_8373esmall.jpg)

CTeen at Shabbaton. Photo: Pauline Dolle/A Journey through NYC religions

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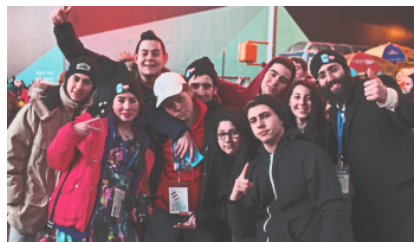
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