

# HOME AWAY FROM HOME

A research study of the Shabbos experience on five university campuses:  
An informal educational model for working with young Jewish adults



BARRY CHAZAN  
AND  
DAVID BRYFMAN

With introductions by  
Steven M. Cohen

*Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy  
Hebrew Union College*

Joseph Reimer

*Director of the Institute for Informal Jewish Education  
Brandeis University*

Reprinted by Chabad on Campus International Foundation  
August 2006

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Education and guidance constitute a comprehensive discipline with many principles concerning the proper preparation and conduct of both educator and pupil. In general, education entails tremendous responsibility, demands arduous and laborious work and can be carried out only with profound spiritual and physical exertion.

*Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson: Principles of Education and Guidance, published in Hebrew in 1944; English edition translated by Rabbi Y. Danzinger, New York: Kehot Publishing Society, 1990*

## Chabad Houses as an Exercise in Post-Modern Jewish Education:

An introduction by Steven M. Cohen

*Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy, Hebrew Union College*

A rather remarkable development has taken place over the last few years. The Chabad-Lubavitch movement has opened more than 85 houses situated on or near American and Canadian campuses. These are the campuses with the largest populations of Jewish students, comprising clearly a majority of such students across the continent.

Not only have they managed to sustain themselves by way of the donations of local and national supporters, most of whom come from outside of Orthodoxy, but even more remarkably they manage to attract literally thousands of young Jews to Shabbat meals at these houses week in, week out. With 30, 40, 50 and even over a 100 such students participating in these Shabbat meal events, over the course of the year Chabad manages to touch a significant – albeit an uncounted – number of Jewish undergraduates and graduate students. The Shabbat meals program, of course, is but one part of a larger effort on the part of Chabad to reach and engage Jewish youth on campus. Chabad officials claim, “There is a broad range of Chabad campus activities, including learning and intellectual pursuits, programming in fraternity houses, special holiday activities and tikkun olam-type projects.”

The following analysis, “Home Away From Home,” by Barry Chazan and David Bryfman, provides a pioneering qualitative examination of this phenomenon. It explores the Shabbos meal event

itself, the motivations of the young participants for attending, and the educational rationale embodied in the act, whether consciously apprehended by the Chabad educators, often young married couples, or not.

The ability of these centers of Orthodox Jewish traditionalism to appeal to so many products of America’s finest universities immediately raises questions. The most fundamental is the apparent clash of cultures. A Shabbos experience at a Chabad house is unabashedly traditional – it is, for all intents and purposes, religious, culturally parochial and socially segregated. The university environment is, in contrast, exquisitely modern – it is, for all intents and purposes, secular, culturally cosmopolitan and socially integrated.

By and large, the Jewish students who experience Shabbos at Chabad houses are thoroughly a part of the contemporary academic ethos; they are neither deviants nor “freaks” who have wandered away from the mainstream culture of the university. Rather, as we learn from Chazan and Bryfman, they come to Chabad on Friday nights as an interlude in their “normal” week, and a way of re-connecting with the Jewish home life (largely non-Orthodox) they experienced before becoming university students.

How then do the students manage to overcome very powerful cultural barriers to accept the cost-



free (in economic terms) invitation to partake of the Shabbos experience in the seemingly ultra-traditional environs presented by Chabad? How, in turn, has Chabad developed its educational approach in ways that depart from traditional Jewish educational patterns, even while maintaining a core fidelity to certain principles and objectives?

The interaction between students and “educators” (the Chabad families/ hosts/teachers) actually plays out many themes increasingly apparent in what may be termed “post-modern Jewish education.”

One feature of post-modernity is what has been called “the re-valorization of the past,” discovering and creating new and acceptable sources of value and meaning in traditional folkways and cultural elements. The Chabad experience provides a sense of Jewish authenticity, captured by the inference in the report that, “Whatever their degree of connection or dis-connection from Jewish life, many young Jews are seeking something ‘authentically’ Jewish in their lives.” After all, here are warm, accessible Jewish role models who are so blatantly, even counter-culturally, Jewish in ways that are reminiscent of the way students may imagine their not-too-distant ancestors practiced their Judaism. Indeed, the search for connection with Jewish authenticity may, for some, serve as a way to effect a differentiation from their own parents, to effect a connection to “real” Jewishness while at the same time circumventing the “artificial” models of Jewish life their parents or their parents’ generation seem to present.

One feature of successful Jewish education is that

it attends to the human and social needs of the students, understanding that students are free to choose a variety of ways to spend their time, and seek experiences, even educational experiences, that are socially satisfying. As Chazan and Bryfman astutely observe, the provision of the warmth of a home-like experience (and tasty food) addresses one such keenly felt basic human need for students who are of necessity away from home, parents and family.

Recent research on the preferences and inclinations of Jewish young adults finds that, in judging the appeal of a Jewish cultural or educational event, they value people over institution and ideology. They speak of the “vibe” or the “scene,” by which they mean, in large part, the people they expect to attend. The Chabad Shabbos experience is very much about people – other students, the Chabad hosts, etc. – and not overtly and explicitly about ideology or theology. The Chabad Shabbos certainly conveys a subtle ideological/theological message; but it is soft-pedaled in favor of the positive social experience.

Contemporary American Jews place a big premium on acceptance of who they are. They increasingly view Jewish engagement as a matter of personal preference, there being no right or wrong way to practice one’s Judaism, just “my way.” They reject reproach in any form; they seek inclusiveness – a commitment to including all Jews no matter their personal status, preference, or patterns of behavior; and they are firmly “antijudgmentalist,” rejecting any whiff of disapproval of one or another Jew’s decisions of how, when, where and why to practice

his or her Judaism.

Members of Chabad, of course, believe in and abide by quite a different set of principles. But as educators they have adopted an approach that accommodates the antijudgmentalism of modern and post-modern Jewish life. As educators, they welcome all Jews whatever their level and manner of observance and faith. They avoid reproach for failing to practice in desirable ways and focus, instead, upon encouraging and praising steps along the way to a more observant life. They adopt a policy of one mitzvah at a time, shifting attention to the positive deed to be done, rather than the shortcomings of the individual.

However, the non-judgmentalism that Chabad adopts can (and does) result in some rather unusual possibilities. The Chabad educators know that the vast majority of their dinner guests go back to their dormitories and other campus housing with little intention of continuing to observe Shabbat in a tradition fashion, or perhaps in any fashion whatsoever. After all, the very aim of these experiences is to reach the nonobservant students and move them to a path of greater appreciation of Shabbat and Jewish life more generally.

The problematics of a welcoming, accepting, inclusive, and non-judgmental policy can go further than contending with non-observant Jewish students who, after all, are the prime target of Chabad-sponsored educational activities. Referring to the participants in Chabad activities, the Chabad Web site declares, “Those attending have only one common denominator — they are all Jewish.” Yet reality may be otherwise. The children of Jewish

fathers and non-Jewish mothers, seen by Orthodoxy and Conservatism as non-Jewish, could well be among the putatively Jewish students attending Shabbos dinners at Chabad houses.

Perhaps even more problematic is that some unarguably Jewish dinner guests will be returning that night to non-Jewish romantic partners, or even bringing these non-Jewish partners to sample the Shabbos experience. (After all, about half of these Jews can be expected to marry non-Jews in due course.) These speculations along the lines of “Guess who is coming to dinner” at a Chabad house may even extend to gay and lesbian couples, although we have no idea from this research as to their representation among the Shabbos diners. The clear message that Chabad conveys in support of traditional Jewish marriage may well deter these sorts of couples from showing up, as such, at the Chabad Shabbos table. In any event, the whole question of Jews dating non-Jews and Jews engaged in same-sex relationships and their relation to these educational efforts is certainly subject for further study, one whose value is further enhanced by the extent to which the Jewish world at large has been struggling with these very issues as well.

Chabad educators, aware of these issues and possibilities, try to subtly encourage restricting the experience to the company of Jews. At the same time, their genuinely welcoming stance — necessary to operating successfully on the contemporary campus — prevents them from setting firm and fast boundaries. As a result, the power of a cultural commitment to non-judgmentalism and inclusiveness forces even Chabad to adapt to the power

of the “porous boundaries” that now only weakly separate Jews from non-Jews in American society. The Chabad response to the porousness of these boundaries is not to try to directly counter them or to try to re-establish hard boundaries. Rather, they seek through the Shabbos experience to provide social settings that undoubtedly appeal particularly to Jewish students, and that create an interlude of several hours in which Jews are socializing exclusively (or at least predominantly) with other Jews in a setting defined explicitly as Jewish.

One other adaptation to post-modern culture flows from and is consistent with these observations. Members of the iPod generation choose to “sample and assemble” their identities in individual and fluid ways. Much as each individual listener can program his or her own iPod with individually selected melodies arranged in a personally determined order (or no order at all – shuffling is an available option), people today organize their identities in a fashion that is individually constructed and fluidly organized. As Chazan and Bryfman correctly observe,

“These young Jews seem to be at the point in their lives where they are experimenting with an episodic and a la carte menu of Jewish experiences, rather than a definitive total life pattern.”

This set of circumstances makes it possible for hyper-modern Jews to sample the ostensibly hyper-traditional lifestyle that Chabad represents, making for easy entry in the Chabad houses and the Shabbos experience. But easy entry also means easy exit; in fact, easy exit is a necessary component

of easy entry. At one point, perhaps as late as the 1980s, one would imagine that anyone setting foot in a Chabad home for a Shabbat meal, not just once but repeatedly, might well be on the path to becoming a ba'al teshuvah. But today, with the ease of entry also comes the ease of exit. The Shabbos diners may well be compartmentalizing their experience, severely limiting the carryover to other times and places in their lives. Today the student-diners can come to the Chabad Shabbos table because they can reasonably assume that they can leave not just the table, but the larger Jewish life experiences Chabad offers. Keenly aware of this challenge, the Chabad personnel work to establish and sustain contact with their Shabbos guests, as exemplified by their studiously writing down the names of their Friday night guests at the close of Shabbat 25 or so hours later.

This research, by its very design, could not deal with the ultimate and long-term educational impact of the Chabad Shabbos dinner experience. As the authors themselves declare about their study at the outset, “It does not tell us about the long-term impact of the Shabbos experience on participants’ Jewish identity.” Neither from this study nor from other sources do we know how many of these students are taking their Jewish journeys to levels of greater observance. We cannot assess the extent and nature of Jewish growth that was attributable to their very enjoyable and meaningful experiences with the Chabad educators over and around the Shabbos table. We do know that, minimally, they experience a contact with a traditional Shabbat experience, with traditionally-minded religious personalities, and with dozens of other Jewish stu-

dents with whom they would not have associated that night were it not for the Chabad Shabbos experience. Only a systematic, quantitative, longitudinal study can begin to address the question of impact – its scope, depth, and sustainability. Such a study would teach us not only about the impact of Chabad, but, as a useful byproduct, the impact of other experiences that influence these hundreds and thousands of students during their time on the American campus.

We do know that on dozens of campuses, Chabad rabbis and their wives are providing a clearly Jewish home-away-from-home for thousands of Jewish students who clearly find these experiences meaningful and appealing. The ultimate impact of these possibly powerful experiences on the Jewish lives of these students remains to be seen.

But, here and now, we can examine intently, astutely and analytically the Shabbos experiences at Chabad houses as they unfold, and the many layers of meaning they may have for the Jewish students who attend them. “Home Away From Home,” by Barry Chazan and David Bryfman, provides that examination, sensitively allowing readers a revealing and at times intriguing entry into a significant and distinctive educational experience, one that exemplifies some key aspects of one expression of post-modern Jewish education.

— July 10, 2006



## Reflections on the Chabad Shabbat Project

Joseph Reimer

*Director, Institute for Informal Jewish Education, Brandeis University*

In reflecting on the insightful research of Barry Chazan and David Bryfman on Shabbat at Chabad on several American college campuses, I was struck by several points that have relevance for the field of informal Jewish education:

### **(1) The importance of home and the personal touch:**

To attend Shabbat dinner at Chabad, students enter the home of the rabbi and his family and meet that family as they are celebrating Shabbat. Students are greeted warmly and personally and the rabbi makes a special effort to learn each student's name. I am struck by how unusual that experience is for college students and how powerful it must be. Even though many students are learning to stand on their own feet during college, having access on Shabbat to the family touch must be rewarding and satisfying for many.

### **(2) The combination of total commitment and sincere openness:**

At a time when in our society religious commitment is often associated with extremism, it must come as a welcome surprise to students to meet a totally committed halachic Jew who is yet sincerely open to listening to their views and questions. In combining commitment and openness, the Chabad rabbi breaks the accepted stereotypes and calls into question how many view Orthodox Jews. No wonder some observers are surprised to

discover that Chabad on campus is designed to serve not Orthodox students, but any Jewish student who is open to exploring Shabbat. The lack of preconditions is a wonderful lesson for all of us to consider.

### **(3) Rabbi and family as pioneers on campus:**

The Chabad rabbi and his family are in a very different position than most of the rest of us who work on campus. While we are hired to specific jobs with salaries and benefits, the Chabad rabbi and family are making their own way and raising their own funds. They are pioneers in a world of settled professionals. I imagine being a pioneer comes with its own unique problems and anxieties. But I have been wondering what the rest of us lose by being so settled and often secure. Do pioneers bring a special passion to their work that gives them a special appeal?

I am clearly moved by the dedication of the shlichim to their mission. I am encouraged that Chabad offers another Jewish dimension on campus and know from my own daughter's experience that the Shabbat welcome at the home of the Chabad rabbi can have powerful resonance for our young people on campus.

— July 2006

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## Table of Contents

iii	Introduction by Steven M. Cohen: <b>Chabad Houses as an Exercise in Post-Modern Jewish Education</b>
viii	Introduction by Joseph Reimer: <b>Reflections on the Chabad Shabbat Project</b>
2	<b>Executive Summary</b>
6	Chapter One: <b>The Challenge of Jewish Identity in America</b>
9	Chapter Two: <b>Why Chabad?</b>
12	Chapter Three: <b>The Goals, Methodology and Limitations of the Study</b>
16	Chapter Four: <b>The Findings</b>
31	Chapter Five: <b>Discussion, Implications and Conclusions</b>
36	Appendices Appendix I: <b>Training Protocol</b> Appendix II: <b>Underlying Educational Principles of Chabad</b> Appendix III: <b>On Shluchim</b>
43	Bibliography
44	About the Authors

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Goals*

The objective of this study was to examine a pilot project of “*Shabbos*” evening dinners conducted by Chabad on Campus on five campuses in the United States: Harvard University; Stanford University; State University of New York at Albany; University of Florida at Gainesville; and the University of Michigan.

The specific goals of the study were:

1. To create a detailed “portraiture” of the event – what happens at a Chabad Shabbos dinner on campus;
2. To delineate the key pedagogic components of this experience;
3. To collect anecdotal data about why students come and how they feel about the experience;
4. To examine five curricular units created by Chabad-Lubavitch for use at these experiences; and
5. To arrive at a series of conclusions about the potential of this experience for young Jewish college adults.

### *Methodology*

1. Three day-long seminars were conducted in New York with the project staff, five Chabad-Lubavitch campus rabbis, and three professors of education and social psychology to study the nature of the Chabad Shabbos program; plan the research; and discuss, choose, and assign writing of the five curriculum units (March-September 2005).
2. A research design was developed by the Research Director and the Research Associate, the project staff and the five campus rabbis (May 2005).
3. Five educational curriculum modules were developed (July-August 2005).
4. An evaluation team of advanced students from each of the five campuses was formed to implement the multi-dimensional evaluation design (September 2005).
5. The Shabbos Experience program was studied on five campuses over a five month period (September-December 2005).
6. A draft of the study was prepared and sent to the observers for comments and reactions

(January-February 2006).

7. The final version of the study was completed (March 2006).

### *Limitations*

1. The project was not an “outcomes”-based study aimed at evaluating the impact of the experience, but rather a programmatic study of a specific Jewish educational experience. Thus, it does not tell us about the long-term impact of the Shabbos experience on participants’ Jewish identity.
2. The study was not commissioned to study subsequent affiliation with Chabad’s beliefs, behaviors or membership.
3. While observers were chosen on the basis of their credentials in evaluation, they were selected by the five Chabad-Lubavitch rabbis, had all previously been to Chabad Shabbos dinners, and all reflected a positive pre-disposition to the event.

### *Findings*

1. A HOME AWAY FROM HOME  
The Shabbos dinner experience was regarded by participants as “a home away from home.”
2. “MISHPOCHO”  
The experience was regarded as not just a physical home, but one of family. It seemed to respond to some need these young adults — who were now independent and living on their own — still had for “family.”
3. FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD OR “*ESS KINDERLECH ESS*”  
The actual meal – with its traditional Shabbos trappings and foods – was a central factor in this experience. Shabbos was identified with certain kinds of home-cooked foods.
4. “NOT BY BREAD ALONE”  
The rituals associated with Shabbos were accepted as integral to the experience: lighting of candles; blessing over the wine; washing of the hands; grace after meals; Shabbos songs; and wearing a skullcap. These acts seemed to have symbolic import in the overall culture of the evening.
5. “FEEDING THE SOUL”  
The brief *dvar torah* – words of teaching by the rabbi or his wife, known together as *shluchim*, or “emissaries” of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson — was also accepted as part of the overall experience. The *dvar torah* was generally short and in some way attempted to link contemporary issues with traditional Jewish teachings.

6. THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Students developed a pattern of returning to these dinners on a fairly regular basis. They attributed their returning to the family atmosphere, the warmth generated during the evening, the food and the receptivity of the rabbi, his wife and their children.

7. NOT ALL A BED OF ROSES

The bulk of the observations, interviews and focus groups were both upbeat and positive. A few voices indicated that the Shabbos dinners with Chabad are in some way an attempt to attract young Jews to become more Jewish. Some students did periodically comment about levels of discomfort they felt in various stages of the Chabad dinner related to ritual or egalitarianism, but they were not deterrents to continuing to come. Students indicated they did not feel this was a “cult,” and that their parents were not dismayed at their participating in Chabad dinners.

### *Implications*

1. THE CRAVING FOR HOME AND FAMILY

Young adults who are in the developmental stage of separating from home and family still crave the warmth and roots that home represents. The Chabad Shabbos experience seems to answer this need.

2. THE DESIRE FOR A CORE JEWISH MOMENT AND EXPERIENCE

Whatever their degree of connection or disconnection from Jewish life, many young Jews are seeking something “authentically” Jewish in their lives. It may be suggested that the so-called “lost Jew” is actively seeking something, rather than defiantly running away.

3. A PERSON CENTERED EDUCATION

These young people are in search of a person-centered education – an education that relates to each of them individually as a human being — rather than an affiliational Jewish, organizational or institutional life.

4. UNIQUE EDUCATORS

Shaping experiences of this sort seem to invite unique-type educators – male and female — or even a family of educators that differ from the traditional concept of “teacher.”

5. AN A LA CARTE AND EPISODIC JEWISH EDUCATION

These young Jews seem to be at the point in their lives where they are experimenting with an episodic and a la carte menu of Jewish experiences, rather than a definitive total life pattern. For most of the students at the Shabbos dinner, this may represent their Jewish moment of the week.

6. THIS IS A SHABBOS EXPERIENCE – NOT A CHABAD PROGRAM

The core of the dinner is about a Jewish experience – in this instance, Shabbos — and not



about Chabad-Lubavitch or becoming a Lubavitcher.

### *Recommendations*

1. This experience has potentially broader educational implications beyond Chabad and beyond Shabbos dinners for young-adult Jewish educational programming for contemporary college-age youth.
2. The experience suggests an interest in some sectors of young Jewish adults for authenticity, meaningful experiences, more learning about Judaism, and a receptive warm and accepting atmosphere.
3. The experience points to the importance of careful planning, professionalism and creative thinking in events and experiences which would seem to be informal and purely experiential.
4. Specifically, this experiment suggests the potential value of investing in programs of experiential education, and in professionals skilled at implementing experiential young-adult Jewish education.
5. There would be value in pursuing other core Jewish experiences beyond Shabbos dinners. If Shabbos works, maybe Havdalah, Tashlich, the Sukkah and Rosh Chodesh might also work. This experience suggests that it is worth re-examining experiences of our tradition – old and new, religious and non-religious — that have similar potential.
6. It would be worthwhile to conceptualize some of the core educational principles and to develop training programs for a new breed of educators particularly equipped to engage in such work with this vital age group.

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CHAPTER ONE:

## **The Challenge of Jewish Identity in North America**

The 1990 National Jewish Population Study has now assumed mythical, Jeremiah-like proportions in American Jewish life. It is referred to as the proof text that the Jewish population is shrinking. It is taken as verification that the rates of assimilation and intermarriage, when combined with low Jewish fertility rates, will result in a significantly smaller and less affiliated Jewish population in the future. Already half of the estimated 270,000 Jewish college students come from families with only one Jewish parent (NJPS 2000). According to NJPS figures, the intermarriage rate of their parents' generation was 38 percent. Today, the intermarriage rate stands at 47 percent. What will the college age youth of tomorrow look like? This is the situation that must be addressed today.

Children from families with one Jewish parent have been shown by every measure to have significantly less interest in identifying as Jews, regardless of whether that measure is cultural or religious. Perhaps the most striking piece of data from the 2000 study was that only two percent of students with one Jewish parent felt that having a Jewish spouse was very important; less than one percent would date Jews exclusively.

With these attitudes towards endogamous marriage, the problem will only compound. While the statistics surrounding marriage were stronger among students whose parents are both Jewish, still only 44 percent of this group felt that it is important to marry Jewish. If something is not done to affect the attitudes of today's college-age youth, the population of committed Jews will be cut in half by the next generation.

### *The Unique Challenge of the College Years*

Years of research and experience indicate that the college years are crucial for long-term identity development (Erikson 1997; Arnett 2004; Saxe 2004). It is during these years that what have come to be known as "emerging adults" (Arnett 2004) make key life choices about spouse, profession, place of residence and life style. While all ages are important in identity development, it is during the years of emerging adulthood that potentially life-long identity and life patterns are chosen and put in place.

This situation is further complicated since during these years college students are independent, unaffiliated and not tied to organizational structures. In their earlier years, the synagogue, the youth movement, the camp and, in some cases, a summer Israel experience created ongoing links for a certain segment of young American

Jews. This is not the case in the college years when formal Jewish connections are not the norm, and when Jewish involvement is much more of the “a la carte” and sporadic mode.

### *Experiential Education*

There has been increasing emphasis in the past decades on the positive connection between experiential education and identity development. According to John Dewey, an educative experience is engagement in an activity which flows from the life of the participants, reflects an idea and results in growth (Dewey 1938). Barry Chazan, in presenting a philosophy of informal education, argues that the experience in general and the selection of key Jewish experiences in particular is one of the touchstones of informal Jewish education and of identity education:

Informal Jewish education is rooted in a belief that the experience is central to the individual’s Jewish development. The notion of experience in education derives from the idea that participating in an event or a moment through the senses and the body enables one to understand a concept, fact or belief in a direct and unmediated way. Experience in education refers to learning that happens through participation in events or through other direct action, or by direct observation or hearing .... Such experiencing is rooted in the interaction of the idea or event with the person’s life and with a continuum of ideas that enables the experience to contribute to ongoing personal growth. The focus on experience results in a pedagogy that attempts to create settings which enable values to be experienced personally and events to be experienced in real time and in genuine venues, rather than their being described to the learner. Over the years this notion of experiencing has become closely identified with “experiential education,” often seen as the “calling card” of informal education.

In terms of informal Jewish education, learning occurs through enabling people to undergo key Jewish experiences and values. For example, an experiential approach to Shabbat focuses on enabling people to experience Shabbat in real time — buying flowers Friday afternoon, lighting candles at sunset, hearing kiddush before the meal and eating challah. This approach does not deny the value of learning about Shabbat in classes and from texts, but it does suggest that cognitive learning about an experience cannot replace the real thing.

Jewish education lends itself particularly well to the experiential approach because so many of the concepts that we wish to teach, such as Shabbat, holidays, and daily blessings, are rooted in actual experiences. The moral system of Judaism — honoring parents, helping the needy, social justice — is rooted in deeds.

The cultural life of Judaism — songs, food, holidays — is rooted in meals, singing, ritual objects and specific celebrations. Israel in Jewish life is not an abstract concept, but a real place that can be visited, touched, walked and smelled. Jewish education is extremely well suited to giving experience primacy. And informal Jewish education is the branch of Jewish education which highlights that primacy (Chazan 2000).

Contemporary research on young adulthood and adulthood notes the importance of experiencing for learn-

ing certain life lessons for this age cohort. Young adults are usually deeply engaged in academic and intellectual pursuits; at the same time, they are in a life stage where they are making critical life identity and behavior decisions, and such a stage is heavily influenced by actual experiences as much as by books (Arnett).

Research in Jewish education over the past decades highlights the central role experiences play in camping, youth movements and weekend retreats (Saxe and Sales 2004). The major studies on birthright israel underscore its powerful experiential component and impact (Saxe et al 2004; Chazan and Saxe, in press).

### *The Experience of Shabbos*

A diversity of sources – Jewish, general, philosophic and sociological — emphasizes the power and centrality of the experiencing of Shabbos. A.J. Heschel speaks of Shabbos as a “palace in time” (Heschel 1951). Rudolph Otto speaks of the experiencing of *mysterium tremendum* – the profound spiritual experience that such ritual moments as Shabbos can bring (Otto 1923). Saxe’s research on birthright israel revealed that experiencing Shabbos was one of the unexpected and surprising dimensions of the trip. The Shabbos-evening experience combines an unparalleled totality of sensual, emotional, physical and reflective dimensions summed up so movingly in Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s story “The Kerchief”:

How pleasant that Sabbath eve was when we returned from the house of prayer! The skies were full of stars, the houses full of lamps and candles, people were wearing their Sabbath clothes and walking quietly beside Father in order not to disturb the Sabbath angels who accompany one home from the house of prayer on Sabbath eve; candles were alight in the house and the table prepared and the fine smell of white bread and a white tablecloth spread and two Sabbath loaves on it, covered by a small cloth out of respect so that they should not feel ashamed when the blessing is first said over the wine. ... Happy is he who merits to have good angels hovering over his head and happy is he whose mother has stroked his head on the Sabbath eve (Agnon 1995).

The Chabad Shabbos program on campus was developed to respond to the crisis of identity by utilizing what is one of Judaism’s most basic and moving pillars — the experience of Shabbos. Chabad-Lubavitch has devoted great effort and commitment to making a Shabbos experience available to Jews from all spectrums of Jewish life, from the most assimilated to the most affiliated. Chabad’s educational philosophy is rooted in the great Jewish commitment to experiences and deeds, and is buttressed by contemporary general educational theory’s emphasis of this principle. For Chabad, the Shabbos experience is a jewel in the crown of its educational work.

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## CHAPTER TWO: Why Chabad?

There are more than 85 Chabad venues (often called Chabad Houses) on major university campuses throughout North America. Their activities encompass lectures, classes, discussion groups, holiday observances, prayer services and personal guidance.

The Shabbos dinner is one of the pillars of Chabad's work on campuses. This overall focus on campuses is regarded as one of the central dimensions of Chabad outreach education because it deals with a large age cohort in critical formative years. The activity is particularly sensitive for the organized Jewish communal world because it co-exists on campuses alongside a consensus national Jewish campus network conducted by Hillel International, whose mandate is Jewish life on campuses.

Chabad representatives assert that they are on campuses that represent 60 percent of the Jewish college population. Of that percentage, Chabad representatives claim that well over 30 percent have attended a Chabad program. On a given Friday night, 5,000 Jewish students are spending Shabbos with Chabad. Chabad reaches out to all Jews and does not reflect any specific denominational movement.<sup>1</sup>

The strengths of Chabad's work on campus are manifold, diverse and encompass learning, ritual, the use of experiential learning techniques, and the strength of the relationship between Rabbi and student. Yet, at present, while the numbers Chabad reaches are impressive, their funding is limited. There are still scores of students that are not being reached. Given the demographic realities of the Jewish community, Chabad would like to reach many more students.

### *Who is the Intended Audience?*

The intended audience of Chabad in general, and in the Shabbos dinner project in particular, is all Jews, i.e. "*Klal Yisrael*". This enterprise is not constructed to sustain or advance a particular denomination, and it certainly is not created to primarily serve the Chabad community. The enterprise we are examining is aimed at those Jews who are regarded – or who regard themselves — as distant from or unconnected with organized Jewish life. These activities are aimed at that large sector of world Jewry popularly denoted as "the unaffiliated".

The venue of the campus is strategically located directly in the heartland of these unaffiliated Jews. Using a



military metaphor (which is common in the enterprise's language), the enterprise "takes the battle" directly into the home turf of the "protagonist," rather than expecting them to come to far-off facilities for Jewish activities. It is a kind of education that proactively reaches out to the people it wants to affect in a positive way.

The Chabad campus Shabbos experience can be described as a contemporary educational approach that 1) reaches out to a young adult age group which it assumes can still be educated, and whom it assumes it is important to educate; 2) reaches out to people's needs where they are at; and 3) extends the campus of Jewish education beyond the venues (i.e. elementary and secondary Jewish schooling) that have been regarded as education's primary bailiwick throughout the past century.

### *The Goals of Shabbos*

The goals of the Shabbos dinner are related to a broader Chabad educational vision rooted in hundreds of years of educational writing, but especially in the extensive educational work of the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (Solomon 2000).

Generally, it is possible to talk about three large goals of Chabad's outreach work:

*The first goal of "the enterprise" is the stimulation of the performance of Jewish practices and deeds.* The "enterprise" is directly aimed at having students experience and do Jewish deeds (which in the language of the Chabad movement are called *mitzvos*). It enables college students to have a Shabbos dinner. It helps young women to light Shabbos candles. It makes it possible for men during the week to put *tefillin* on their arms and forehead. It has pre-schoolers write *mitzvo* notes, perform a daily *mitzvo* and make the name *Hashem* a part of their daily parlance. The educational underpinning of this goal is linked to a notion of education as rooted in actual personal experiences which express themselves in real behaviors.

*The second goal of the new enterprise is transformation of the individual.* Chabad education is rooted in a psychology and epistemology which believes that: 1) Each individual person is unique; 2) each individual has the ability to be changed and transformed; and 3) education should be aimed at personal growth and transformation. It is deeply committed to the personal spiritual growth of individuals, regardless of whatever point they may currently be at. The enterprise's second goal is aimed at connecting to the inner self and soul of the individual whoever or wherever he/she is or is at so as to facilitate the process of transformation.

*The third goal is Ahavat Yisrael.* The phrase *Ahavat Yisrael* in this system refers to a sense of affinity, oneness and love for the Jewish people as a whole. Chabad believes that the Jews are a unique people who share a great joyous heritage and future, and Chabad education comes to unify rather than compartmentalize Jews. For that reason, Chabad is insistent that it is not a "denomination" and that *Am Yisrael* is one united family

chosen by God.

Therefore, for Chabad the Shabbos Experience project fits squarely within its Jewish credo and educational philosophy, and it feels that it is uniquely suited to play a role in this area. We have studied this project as an innovative experiment in young adult Jewish education using methods of contemporary informal education.

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup>Chabad has been insistent that it is not another denomination, but represents and is concerned with Klal Yisrael – the totality of the Jewish people. See papers presented by Arye Solomon and Barry Chazan at Conference on Habad at New York University, November 2005.

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CHAPTER THREE:

## **The Goals, Methodology and Limitations of the Study**

### *Goals*

Chabad has much intuitive and practical experience in the area of “Shabbos” experiences, but has been weak in systemic ethnographic, quantitative or qualitative study of its work. This project was commissioned with five goals:

1. To create an actual portraiture of the event – what happens at a Chabad Shabbos dinner on campus;
2. To delineate the key pedagogic components of this experience;
3. To collect anecdotal data about why students come and how they feel about the experience;
4. To create five curricular units that can be used by Chabad houses and other organizations at Friday night dinners; and
5. To arrive at a series of conclusions about the potential of this experience for young Jewish college adults.

### *The Project Methodology*

The project encompassed nine stages:

1. A series of three one-day seminars were conducted in New York with the project staff five Chabad campus rabbis, and three professors of education and social psychology to study the nature of the Chabad Shabbos; plan the research; and discuss, divide up and create the curriculum units. This ongoing seminar served as the active think-tank of the project (March-September 2005).
2. A program was created for implementation of the pilot project on five campuses — the University of Florida at Gainesville; the State University of New York at Albany; the University of Michigan; Stanford University; and Harvard University — between September and November 2005 (May 2005).
3. A research design was developed by the Research Director and the Research Associate, the project staff and the five campus rabbis (May 2005).
4. Five educational curriculum modules were developed (July-August 2005).

5. An evaluation team of advanced students from each of the five campuses was formed to implement the evaluation design (September 2005).
6. The Shabbos Experience program was studied on five campuses encompassing onsite observations, focus groups and individual interviews (September-December 2005).
7. A final draft was prepared (January-February 2006).
8. The draft was sent to the five observers for comments and reactions (February 2006).
9. The final version was completed (March 2006).

### *The Limitations of the Study*

There are several limitations to this study that must be noted.

First, it was not an outcomes-based study aimed at evaluating the impact of the experience. The research commissioned was a programmatic study of a certain Jewish educational experience and not of its immediate or long-term impact on subsequent individual participant's Jewish identity. Thus, it was not intended and does not tell us about the long-term impact of the Shabbos experience on participants' Jewish identity.

The study was not commissioned to study subsequent affiliation with Chabad's beliefs, behaviors or membership. It was a study about a Shabbos experience and not about the organization known as Chabad.

The observers were selected by the five Chabad rabbis. They were chosen on the basis of their credentials in evaluation and the social sciences. At the same time, all had been to Chabad Shabbos dinners and, from their reports, seemed to reflect a positive predisposition to the event.

Since this was a programmatic and not an impact study, no control group of people who did not go to the Chabad Shabbos was regarded as necessary.

All observers did not submit the same number of observations, individual interviews and focus groups.

### *Detailed Methodology*

A series of meetings were held with Chabad representatives and Shluchim (the term Chabad prefers to use to refer to its emissaries) prior to the engagement of observers in the research project. Three all day seminars were held in New York in Spring-Fall 2005. A day seminar to train researchers was held in September 2005. Constant emails and phone conversations were conducted by the Project Director, Rabbi Menachem Schmidt, the rabbis, the Research Director and the Research Associate. An ongoing technologically-based communication system was established.

The seminars were designed to frame the study and to establish its theoretical educational perspectives. Presentations and discussions were led by Professors Joe Reimer and Len Saxe of Brandeis University and Professor Barry Chazan of the Hebrew University. The other purpose of these meetings was to collect detailed information from those closest to the Chabad Shabbos experience about what precise information the research project would be looking for, and what the parameters were for these studies.

As a result of these sessions, a team of Chabad representatives designed five content modules that were to be used throughout the study. These modules were designed to be implemented on each campus on five Friday evenings as part of the overall Chabad Shabbos experience. This form of developing content modules to be implemented at the Shabbos dinners had not previously been coordinated by Chabad on such a scale. The five topics for these content modules were Love and Relationships in Jewish Thought; Time & Living with the Times; Jewish Identity/Pride; Kosher Hypocrisy; and Shabbat.

The five campuses included in the study were Stanford University, Harvard University, the University of Michigan, the University of Florida at Gainesville and the State University of New York at Albany. These five campuses were chosen because their five shlichim families and programs are recognized leaders in providing quality programming on a regular basis. The Chabad houses themselves are of different types (e.g. Ivy League, state schools, different sizes, etc.) in different geographic locations. It was also expected that the families chosen would be effective leaders and teachers who could implement any lessons and new programming which would come from the effort.

Each campus Chabad rabbi was asked to locate advanced students with skills in the social sciences to become field observers for this study. The students were offered a stipend for the time that they would spend collecting data for this study. The students met together for a day of preparation and training on Sept. 19, 2005, at which time they were introduced to the study and trained in use of the protocols (see Appendix 1 for Protocols).

Four data collecting methodologies were incorporated in the study:

1. Detailed descriptions of the evening / observation notes of the experience (written by the observers after Shabbos);
2. The organization by the observers of a select number of focus groups of participants to discuss the experience;
3. A select number of personal interviews conducted by the observers; and
4. A final overall summary of the five Shabbos experiences by the observers.

In total, 22 different Chabad Shabbos dinners were observed on five college campuses across the country between September and December 2005. There were 32 separate observations conducted of these Shabbos dinner experiences. (At University of Florida and the State University of New York, there were two students



conducting reports of the same Shabbos dinner experiences. At the University of Michigan, two students submitted joint reports. Only two reports were submitted from Harvard University, by two different observers.)

A total of 33 individual interviews and focus groups were conducted on three campuses. Interviews and focus groups were not conducted at Harvard University or the University of Michigan. Interviews generally consisted of open-ended questions that lasted approximately 20-30 minutes in duration. Focus groups ranged from between five and nine people and generally lasted approximately one hour. These open-ended forums deliberately tried to gather a cross-section of students that attended Shabbos dinners at Chabad. Researchers involved in the observations also submitted summary reports of their experiences being involved in the gathering of data about Shabbos dinners at Chabad.

Student observers were requested to email their reports to the Research Associate as soon as they were completed. In this way the Research Associate was able to offer feedback and encourage the observers to go into more depth on many of the issues which were of particular importance to the study. The main area which observers were encouraged to spend more attention in writing up their observations was in the area of the *dvar Torah* and other learning pieces that were taking place. The Research Associate found it necessary to continually comment on the reports in order to ensure that as much as possible, the observers refrained from offering their opinions or value judgments about the things which they observed. This issue was complicated by the fact that all of the observers were in fact participant-observers, as it was impossible for them to be a part of the experience without actively engaging in the proceedings. The observations were also complicated by the fact that students could not take written notes or use any audio-visual equipment to record the events of the Shabbos dinner as this would have violated the religious regulations of the Shabbos experience in the Chabad environment. The student observers were on the whole very diligent and mature in their approach to the study.

As noted, all of the students that were asked to gather data for this research study had previously attended Shabbos dinners at Chabad, all knew the Chabad rabbi and family on campus, all had a good relationship with them and all generally conceived of Shabbos dinners at Chabad in a positive way. At the same time, the multiplicity of reports from the five diverse campuses reflected an openness to critically describe events and personalities in a respectful but clearly critical way.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: The Findings

The diverse methods of data collection were carefully recorded, analyzed, compared, re-analyzed and summarized on a periodic basis. At the end of the five month period, all reports were examined and a set of eight general findings were delineated.

These findings are described by the following metaphorical titles and will each be described individually:

1. A Home Away from Home
2. “*Mishpocho*”
3. Food, Glorious Food or “*Ess Kinderlach Ess*”
4. Not by Bread Alone
5. Feeding the Soul
6. The Afikoman
7. The Return of the Native
8. Not all a Bed of Roses

### *1. A Home Away From Home*

If one didn't know any better, one would think that each Chabad House, no matter where it was located, was identical. Students described bookshelves with many religious texts on the walls. There was a *mezuzah* on every doorpost, which some students would kiss as they passed through. (Where they learned this custom is not clear). On the wall in the main living room was always a photograph of the late Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, staring at you no matter where one stood in the room. And there were always two major rooms in the house – a large living/dining room and a kitchen. These were really the only two rooms that students ever described (except for the *sukkah* on Sukkot). These were the rooms where all of the action was taking place.

Whether this type of home was familiar or unfamiliar to the students, there was never any doubt that they were entering a Jewish space described by many, and sometimes advertised by Chabad, as “a home away from home.”

In reality, “home” for these students was not the Chabad house. Students who attended Shabbos dinners

usually lived on campus. Students would almost always approach the Chabad house by foot, a factor of significant importance, given that it was essential for the location to be within walking proximity to the bulk of student housing.

Approaching the house often appeared to be a social event all in itself, as the closer one came to the building, the more clusters of students that one would meet along the way — all heading in the same direction, all towards Shabbos dinner at the Rabbi's home. Very few students arrived at the Chabad house alone – it seems that coming to dinner was something that people did together, either with old friends or people that they had met at previous dinners. It didn't really seem to matter if you knew one other person or you knew everyone, as soon as you entered the house it just didn't matter – you were now welcomed into a much larger family.

## 2. “Mishpocho”

“Greetings vary from a hearty ‘Good Shabbos!’ to ‘What’s up dude/babe?’ They also vary in language. Through the night I noticed English, Spanish, Hebrew, Turkish and Yiddish. Many men eagerly shake hands with one another, while some just give a head nod from a distance. The women wave, some kiss on the cheek or hug, some say a friendly ‘Hi!’ Many guests retain their secular ways of greeting during the services, not letting down their guard to the advances of religious/Yiddish influence. Some let go, and suddenly replace ‘Shabbat’ with ‘Shabbos.’ The religious fellows, especially the Rabbi, are first to greet guests warmly if friends don't get to them first.”

Without exception, each student was warmly greeted as they entered into the house. The Rabbi would meet everyone while the Rabbi's wife would pay special attention to welcoming the female students. More often than not, it was the traditional “*Gut Shabbos*” which would be heard as each group of students entered the house. New students would often receive a special warm welcome and all students were encouraged to meet and mingle with as many students as possible, a theme which would often continue into the evening. Students commented at how special they felt when the Rabbi would not only remember their name, but their interests, and be able to maintain a conversation with them on anything from academic life to Jewish issues, baseball and relationships.

“It is the Rabbi and his wife who make Shabbos House what it is; as the parental figures in the Shabbos House extended family, they are warm and compassionate people who really do care about the students as much as their own children. They are nonjudgmental and do not force beliefs or practices upon anyone. Their attention to detail in preparing for the Shabbos experience — the table presentations, the Dvar (learning), the food — makes the experience one that students grow fond of and want to take with them once they leave the university setting.”

It was the central character of the Rabbi and his family that time and time again resonated throughout the various descriptions of the Shabbos dinner experience as the most significant and influential part of what was taking place. In many ways the personable, charismatic, non-judgmental persona of the Rabbi is not

only what holds the evening together, but what ensures that students return time and time again. The Rabbi represented a real person, living with a real family in a real home. Students felt that they could talk to the Rabbi and his wife not just as spiritual advisors, but also as human beings. Having adult respect in such a way was not something that many students experienced in other parts of their campus life.

To the casual observer this relationship may be impossible to conceive. The Rabbi was always dressed in traditional clothing and yet this never seemed to be an obstacle for the students, to the point where very few even mentioned things which might otherwise be obvious to report on, such as the length of his beard or the type of head covering he was wearing. Students, on the other hand, would dress “neatly,” “modest” and “appropriately,” seldom wearing jeans, but never resembling the Rabbi. Many males would not even bring their own *kippah*, but this was never an issue as a basket full of *kippot* was always strategically placed near the entrance of the house so that the Rabbi did not even have to mention it to his guests. No one ever reported the Rabbi asking someone to put on a *kippah*, and only once in all the observations was it reported that a male in the house was without a head covering. In this instance, it was reported that a visiting member of Chabad actively encouraged a male student who did not feel like wearing a *kippah* during services to do so by asking him if he was a Jew.

As already mentioned, the Rabbi’s wife would greet all of the female students, many of whom would join her in the kitchen to help prepare and serve the food. Some had been at the house earlier in the week to cook the meal in advance. In some cases the Rabbi’s wife was encouraged to speak at the Shabbos meal, even at times to give a *dvar Torah*. This is often something which she is very familiar with, as the Rabbi’s wife is often involved in Torah study at other times during the week, primarily with female students. But in general the role of the Rabbi’s wife is to ensure that the meal is served and that the female students in particular are made to feel very welcome.

Another significant aspect, as described by many students, of the family life in the Chabad house was that of the family’s children. The children of the Rabbi and his wife were seen as not only delightful by almost all of the students, but integral to their overall experience in the home. Many students enjoyed interacting with the children, who often assumed sibling-like roles each week. The children contributed greatly to the sense that the students were indeed entering into someone’s family as well as their home.

It is also evident that the children serve additional functions in relation to the Shabbos experience itself. As one student describes, “the kids are very loved by all the students and they are an integral part of the Shabbos experience. In addition, they help students who need help with prayers or anything like that.”

The children, as well, by simply doing what they are accustomed to doing, become exemplars of Jewish ritual practice and belief. As another student reports, “the Rabbi’s children are four of the most beautiful kids I have ever seen. It is so heartwarming to see how they all play together and interact with the students. M., the oldest, is his dad’s right hand man. During services, you can hear his voice on top of everyone else’s. It is

amazing how such a little boy can be so enthusiastic during prayers, songs, and throughout the night.”

### 3. *Food, Glorious Food or “Ess kinderlach ess”*

Stating that the major role of the Rabbi’s wife is to prepare the food should in no way be seen as diminishing her role. It is quite clear that without the food these Shabbos dinner experiences would simply not go on. First, the food is free – a clear bonus for any college student. Second, the food is good – a real attraction for students dealing with cafeteria food on a regular basis. Third, the food reminds students of home – or does it?

The meals served at each campus were remarkably similar to one another, as if there was a universal Shabbos dinner cookbook disseminated by Chabad. The following scene could have been taking place at any of the five campuses and presumably anywhere throughout the country:

“The meal is served family style, as that method works best with the way the tables are set up in the room. On Thursday night, a few female students who regularly attend Shabbos dinner help the Rabbi’s wife prepare the meal. There are four courses at a Shabbos dinner on our campus. The first is mainly a variety of salads and other prepared appetizer dishes. The second is always a soup. The third course is the main course with chicken, kugel and a vegetable (green beans this week). The final course is a dessert, which is usually just sliced fruit. The meal at our Chabad House is consistent from week to week with seldom variety. The plates and silverware are all plastic but the food is served from nicer serving dishes.

Students seat themselves with their friends and the people they came with. The food is good this week. The drinks served are water out of pitchers and various bottles of soda.”

The students felt comfortable with the chicken soup, chicken and variations of vegetables that they would devour each week. Certain foods became such staples of the experience that students were disappointed if for some reason the food didn’t appear on that week’s menu. It didn’t matter that the food was served on plastic plates and eaten in a room that was often unbearably hot. It was devoured with gusto each week and no student ever left hungry (some even managed to be able to take home leftovers at the insistence of the Rabbi’s wife).

The striking fact here is that the participants associated the meals with “home,” yet for many, if not most of them, this food was not at all typical of meals they had with their families on Friday evenings (if they had family meals at all). Yet when asked, despite often flippantly commenting that the meals were very homey, students often described Friday night dinners with their parents as not resembling that which they ate at the Rabbi’s house. These discrepancies didn’t seem to matter when it came to eating food, for at the Rabbi’s house these all represented the homey food of the Shabbos experience, what is often conveyed by the Yiddish word *heimish*.

#### 4. *Not By Bread Alone*

“The Chabad Shabbos dinners were universally acknowledged to be the best culinary experience on campus. The quality of the food, presentation and atmosphere were said to be far superior to anything else offered by other Jewish organizations. But I also feel that with Chabad I’m getting something special, a more genuine Jewish experience that is not watered down.”

Although the students themselves would often describe the food and the people as the central feature of their Shabbos experience, it is essential to report on other aspects of the evening, which although often not perceived as significant by the students, are extremely significant to the overall context of the evening.

Shabbos is a time for many ritual observances to occur. One is left with little doubt that the Chabad Rabbi would like it if more students would participate in these rituals, but hardly ever was it mentioned that the Rabbi actively promoted these aspects of the evening. It was as if students knew they were there and how to participate in them if they so chose.

Prayer services were always short, approximately 30 minutes. Timing was critical to the entire evening. Although students were always invited to stay at the Rabbi’s house well into the evening, the rituals and learning portions of the evening were kept brief, a fact noticed and appreciated by many students. Prayers themselves were conducted according to Orthodox tradition, with a *mechitza* separating the men from the women. A few students commented on this negatively, with some of those for whom this was not a custom choosing to go to Hillel services on campus if that was their preference.

Some students who participated in the meal chose to first go to Hillel services for various reasons, with no one ever denigrating this in any way and the Rabbi always ensuring that timing allowed for students who attended other services on campus to be able to make it in time for dinner at his house. It is important to recognize that most students appeared to have no problems rotating between Hillel and Chabad activities, realizing that at different times both organizations fulfill specific needs. The religious services at Chabad were often led by the Rabbi, another Chabad person present or student leaders who were mainly Orthodox. The services would often involve a lot of singing, clapping or even dancing. A central feature of the prayer services was its intended inclusiveness. The role of the Rabbi was critical to making students feel at ease with the services, as one observer reports:

“The Rabbi stands close to the leader of the services and participates enthusiastically, letting participants know where in the text we are every few minutes and naming the various prayers. The majority, though not all of the attendees are familiar with the services, and all join in the singing.”

Students cited many reasons why they came to Chabad for prayers, including that they liked the Rabbi, they liked the service, that they didn’t like Hillel services or that they liked to pray at the same place where they would eat dinner.



Directly preceding the meal and after the meal there were many other traditional rituals in which students were encouraged to partake, including the lighting of the Shabbos candles, *Kiddush*, blessings over the *challah* and the wine, washing one's hands and *Birkat Hamazon*. There were also a variety of other rituals in which students would partake, including putting salt on the *challah*, which are more based on tradition rather than prescriptive practice. Blessings would often be recited collectively by the Rabbi (except in the case of candle lighting which was recited by the Rabbi's wife), or at times students or other guests would be encouraged to lead blessings. Candle lighting was especially important for several female students who would consistently come early so that they could partake in this ritual with the Rabbi's wife.

What makes these rituals even more interesting is the make up of who these Jewish students are. When they describe the atmosphere as being "home-like," for many of them it clearly doesn't connote images of their own home or upbringing. It is virtually impossible to categorize the students who attend the Chabad Shabbos dinners. They cover the entire array of Jewish practice, including Orthodox (mainly modern-Orthodox), Conservative, Reform, Secular, Israeli and Jews by Choice (converts). All students seem to come to these dinners looking for something. For some this is described as a "spiritual" experience, for others it is a "family" experience.

Very few students speak of these dinners making them want to become more religious, although several did allude to the changes that they were making in their lives because of their Chabad Shabbos experiences. A common response was by one student who said that "he felt more comfortable about Jewish ritual practices than before, and that through the Chabad dinners he discovered 'the beauty of Shabbat.'" Other students also mentioned "trying to keep kosher," or getting involved in "other Jewish activities," but it is difficult to conclusively ascertain whether these were as a direct result of the Chabad experiences.

No one interviewed spoke of the dinners making them want to join Chabad, although a couple of students were not prepared to rule this out as a possibility. Most students did believe that the dinner made them feel more Jewish, and for many it is clearly the most "Jewish" thing that they do each week.

Many students reported bringing friends and guests to the Shabbos dinners. Interestingly, not all of the guests were Jewish. Some of the non-Jewish guests were exploring different cultures; others were exploring their Jewish roots, while in one case two students were conducting their own study for a course on different cultures. Although this is not actively encouraged by the Rabbis, it was seen as a way to teach others about the beauty of Judaism. The following account appears fairly consistent amongst the various Chabad Rabbis:

"A few non-Jewish friends were brought tonight. They seem to enjoy the evening as a new cultural experience. I once asked the rabbi whether he was all right with non-Jews being brought. He said it is all right because it is important to show people our culture, as long as the non-Jewish visitors are not in excess. The Rabbi wants to make sure Chabad remains a place for Jews to meet other Jews."

The following exchange illustrates how non-Jewish guests also allow an opportunity for Jewish students to further question and understand that which is important to them.

“A non-Jewish person comes to services every week. I think it is because he wants to learn about Judaism and this is the only way he can. He arrived before services started with his mom and sister. He sat on the men’s side, while his family sat on the women’s side. One of my friends came to me and asked me to give his family a prayer book and make sure that they felt comfortable. I said no problem. I got two books and brought it to them. After handing it to them, I introduced myself. Right after I was done saying my name, the mom asked me, ‘Now are we allowed to touch.’

I explained to her that it was fine for us to touch but that it was not okay for religious, Orthodox men and women to touch. For some reason her question stuck with me the entire night. ... I found it interesting that out of all the questions someone who is unfamiliar with Chabad and Judaism would have, she asked that one. Why didn’t she ask why the men and women were separated, or why the Rabbi has a long beard? I also wondered what she thought when she read the prayer book.”

Inviting other Jewish guests to the dinner was clearly very important to the Rabbis, who would often invite other Chabad members, university faculty or other friends. A few students commented that the welcoming of other people made them feel like they belonged to something much bigger than just Chabad on campus.

### 5. *Feeding the Soul*

“This week the Rabbi spoke about general Jewish identity and how there is no real label for a Jew (i.e. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform). He spoke about how we all should be proud to be a Jew regardless of our level involvement. We found the speech very warming and pride-infusing.”

“My sense was that students really understood this Dvar Torah. When I looked around the room they were nodding their heads in agreement with the Rabbi’s speech.”

As this was one of the major aspects being researched, one would have thought that by highlighting Jewish learning during the Shabbos dinner experience, this would have been significant for the students as well. At every Shabbos dinner at Chabad, there was always a *dvar Torah*, a brief teaching or speech given either by the Rabbi or another learned person (usually men). Often these “teachings” seemed impromptu and delivered primarily as monologues, usually relating to a Jewish theme (often the weekly Torah portion) with some point of relevance for the lives of the students. While some observers described the learning as being interactive, when pressed it is clear that the standard presentation is predominantly frontal and unilateral. This paradoxical style is probably best explained by the following observation: “The Shabbat experience at Chabad is highly interactive. Often the Rabbi’s dvarim are interrupted by student comments or jokes.”

This particular research involved the development of a series of five modules —well-researched and well-referenced — that included visual aids and encouraged student questioning. In many regards this was a more sophisticated way of implementing what had been done previously. In other ways this was a large departure for some Rabbis who in the past had relied on their expansive knowledge of texts; instead, it focused on five themes that were collectively thought to be of importance to Jewish students across America.

The clear consensus from this study is that shorter is better. Across the board, students seemed to favor a *dvar Torah* lasting no longer than 10 minutes. Considering that the prayer services lasted up to 45 minutes, dinner could last from anywhere between one to two hours, and after-dinner activities could extend several hours into the early morning, it could seem that this 10-minute window was largely insignificant for the students. However, by and large, the students seemed to welcome the learning for the evening. Most students were quiet and attentive during the *dvar Torah*. Most students enjoyed the learning, especially when they focused on issues that were relevant to their lives. Despite what we might think about youth culture today, many students even appreciated the morals that often accompanied the end of the stories, even if they were not subtle.

On occasion a student was asked to speak. On at least one occasion the Rabbi's wife spoke. Sometimes the Chabad Rabbi would invite a prominent speaker to come and address the students, and this was sometimes turned into a larger function, as it was attractive to a larger number of students. Such was the case when Harvard University invited Alan Dershowitz to a Chabad dinner. But by far the favored speaker of the students was the Chabad Rabbi himself – as long as he was eloquent, funny, charismatic, not too preachy, didn't go on too long, engaged students, encouraged them to ask questions, didn't embarrass anyone and provided a deep, yet simple message that the students could take away with them. When asked about the *dvar Torah* in focus groups or interviews, most students — even though they could not remember the overall point, — recalled the visual aids employed by the Rabbi and the fact that they enjoyed learning something Jewish.

In general it appears that the Rabbis did not always use the content modules that had been designed specifically for use in this research project. Although this is difficult to quantify, it appears that in 11 (50 percent) of the Shabbos dinners observed, the content modules were used in full or in part. By using a module in part, the Rabbi used the theme of the content module but not necessarily the entire module outline. Most Rabbis would use the content module unless there was a special event (e.g. a guest speaker) or holiday (e.g. Sukkot). In the case where the content modules were not used, the Rabbis preferred to speak about a message that related to current events, a Jewish celebration or an event directly related to the students at a specific campus. It appears that in a campus such as Stanford University, where there are more graduate students in attendance, the content modules were used less by the Rabbi, and that more students or visiting professors and rabbis were given an opportunity to offer a *dvar Torah*.

In most cases the students commented on the theme of the *dvar Torah*, which generally correlated to one of the five topics of the respective modules. Students also enjoyed the items on the table that were often associ-

ated with the theme of the evening.

The scope of this study did not allow for a conclusion to be drawn as to the effectiveness of these content modules, as opposed to “learnings” that did not use the content modules. However, some of the responses from the students to the learning generally indicate that they were accepted very well by a broad range of students.

The following examples are reactions to the content module on “Kosher Hypocrisy” from three different campuses. Together they illustrate that the modules depend largely on the Rabbi presenting the learning. However, the consistencies between the campuses also indicate that a joint curriculum is possible.

**Campus A:** “After a few minutes, the rabbi stands up and begins delivering his Dvar Torah. He says that he wants to discuss Jewish hypocrisy. He says that some students don’t come to the dinner because they don’t want to be hypocritical by coming to Shabbos House for dinner, only to then leave to go out and party. Mendel then refers everyone to the ‘dessert sukkahs’ on the tables. He points out little white squares of paper attached to popsicle sticks stuck into the brownie outside the sukkah. On the squares of paper are random pictures of, for example, a textbook, a Mets logo, a bar code, a beer bottle, etc. He says that this represents that regardless of what students do throughout the week, they’re still welcome to come to Shabbos House to share in the Jewish experience, so that even if one is not religious, one can still join in for at least some religious experiences.”

**Campus B:** “The theme of this week’s Shabbos was ‘kosher hypocrisy.’ In all honesty, this was not one of the Rabbi’s finer sermons. He had trouble keeping the attention of many students. One thing that worked well for him was the use of his children during the talk. Rabbi asked a question with regards to the story he was telling (i.e. ‘what did they do to make a sacrifice?’) to his son Mendel, and Mendel responded with a quick but correct answer (‘threw him in the fire.’) This was clearly planned, but went over very well with the crowd and kept people’s attention a little longer. The theme of the speech tied back into being a developing Jew and growing up in the modern Jewish world. Specifically, the Rabbi asked us if it were possible to be a completely kosher Jew in the world we live in. Of course, he was not just referring to dietary practices, but all facets of the lives we live.”

**Campus C:** “Before the cider was served, the Rabbi gave a short Dvar Torah on Jewish hypocrisy. He was more enthusiastic and passionate than the last Dvar Torah. He pointed out that tonight’s dessert was an edible Sukkah. It was a large brownie in an aluminum tin, and a Sukkah was built out of wafers as walls, held together by marshmallow fluff, and pretzels and green sour sticks as the *Schach*. Surrounding the sukkah were pictures of different things, like an iPod, movie tickets, paychecks, beer brands, textbooks, comfortable beds and/or shopping tags. And there is a little guy who has a sign on the door of the Sukkah which reads ‘It’s the ‘IN’ thing.’ The Rabbi proceeds to explain that hypocrisy isn’t Kosher, and everyone knows that. Therefore some students may think, how can I come to the Rabbi’s place if I just came from XYZ or plan on going to ABC? They sense an inconsistency in doing Jewish in the midst of all this other stuff, and therefore would rather not. That’s where Kosher Hypocrisy comes in.

It’s OK to be a ‘hypocrite’ and do something good. Without condoning or condemning or justifying all the other behaviors, each Mitzvah is a Mitzvah. And that Mitzvah is a Mitzvah

regardless of what came before it or what will come after it. ... My sense was that students really understood this dinner, especially when he explained the dessert. When I looked around the room they were nodding their heads in agreement with the Rabbi's speech."

## 6. *The Afikoman*

For several students at all the campuses it was often neither the dinner, nor the learning, that had the greatest impact on them. Many students particularly enjoyed knowing that after dinner they could just hang out at the Rabbi's house with their friends and the Rabbi. As one student describes, "after the cleaning outside is mostly done, everyone heads into the house. This is my absolute favorite part of the night. The kitchen gets so crowded with people and everyone is eating the leftover desserts, talking, and laughing, and it is at this point of the night that I feel at home the most. It is such a warm feeling and when I leave there, I feel great."

Although it is difficult to ascertain the percentage of students that actually stayed on beyond the meal (it was clearly a lot less than were at dinner), there was definitely a core group of the self-referenced "more committed" students that often stayed on until the early hours of the morning, often long after the Rabbi and his wife had gone to sleep.

Although many students would leave straight after the meal, many would also remain to say *Birkat Hamazon* and also just to schmooze with the Rabbi. This was a time when they could talk to the Rabbi about anything, and by all accounts he was more than happy to engage in any conversation, from politics to religion, from relationships to sexuality. The following scene could have occurred at any of the five college campuses:

"The people around me discuss the political issues of the day (the comments made by Iran President about Israel, the riots in France) as well as discussion of Israeli movies some of us have seen, and a forthcoming concert by an Israeli rock band. Students help clear up the remains of the meal, and spend time talking to the Rabbi and his wife. The atmosphere is very relaxed and informal now. The conversations and songs continue into the night, with people gradually leaving in small groups or couples. The last of the students leave shortly before midnight."

It was clear that even more than the dinner itself, after dinner was a time where interactions between the sexes, including considerable flirting, was able to take place and often encouraged by the Rabbi. Students would have no hesitation in talking about what they did socially, and even where they were heading straight from the Rabbi's house on Friday night – even though going to bars, clubs and other parties in the dorms were clearly a transgression of the Chabad way of celebrating Shabbos.

One of the more common activities reported after the meal was that of singing. Although singing occurred at various other points during the evening — including during prayer services and the meal itself — it seems that after the meal was a time when traditional singing (*zemirot*) would occur with great enthusiasm. At one

campus the singing of “We ain’t gonna work on Saturday,” a modern folk-sounding song emphasizing the commitment of observant Jews not to engage in work on the Shabbos, was sung with such gusto on a weekly basis that it had become as much a part of the Shabbos-ritualized experience as anything else. Singing was often accompanied by banging on the tables, and at times dancing — or at least swaying by many people, including the Rabbi — to add to the festive nature of the evening.

Singing, like other aspects of the evening, was often initiated by students. Some of these students were designated leaders, while it appears that at other times some singing was begun spontaneously by regular students who had come to dinner. Students displayed this type of initiative in several other ways during the course of the evening.

Many would voluntarily get up, without being asked, to help serve the meal. Male students would often be asked to lead services or conduct blessings. Many students would stay back to help clean up after the meal. During the meal the Rabbi would also call upon various student leaders to make announcements about various upcoming events on campus – not necessarily attached to Chabad and often promoting other Jewish organizations on campus, including the local Hillel, or Israel-oriented clubs and organizations.

### *7. The Return of the Native*

“They liked the food and the atmosphere of Shabbos House. The comfortable, family atmosphere, the Rabbi and his wife remembering their names, and the children were all things people pointed out. They are not pushy or missionizing, very accepting people and very educational and informative. They are very complimenting. One student said it was nice to know she was wanted and appreciated, especially in college where students are trying to find their niche in the campus. One student said she liked the veggie option at every meal.”

By far the biggest reason that students said that they continued coming back to Chabad was because of the family atmosphere and warmth generated during the evening.

It was clear that for many students the dinners reminded them of home, even though it might never have resembled their own home. Many students also described the evenings as one of the only times during the week when they could really relax and be themselves in an open environment that was accepting of everyone. Students specifically mentioned that the openness of the Rabbi and his wife, and the non-judgmental way in which they interacted with the students, was particularly appreciated. The Rabbis in general seemed to take a genuine interest in the lives of the students which was often seen as a real change from the anonymity of university life.

It is true that without the good, free food being served at a prime location, many students would probably not even enter the Rabbi’s home in the first place. Some students came to Chabad Shabbos dinners for the



first time because they were “bored” or “have nothing better to do.” Other students came because it might be the only Shabbos dinner alternative on campus or that they did not like the other options offered (usually by Hillel). While most students found out about Chabad Shabbos dinners through word of mouth, a few reported finding out about it on a Web site, while one student said that he just followed someone wearing a *kippah* one Friday evening and ended up there.

For many students it was an important part of their own religious observance and a place where they could feel comfortable expressing themselves as Jews, no matter their religious affiliation. Despite their reasons for entering, it seems that once they were in the house, it was a combination of the Jewish atmosphere and the Rabbi (including his family) that provided the overall experience that keeps the students coming back week after week.

Coming back together in a group of friends was also seen as very important to the students, although it was clear that many of these friendships had in fact been formed at the Shabbos dinners themselves. This social navigation is best illustrated by the weekly ritual of trying to find a place to sit at the dinner table. While students commented that it was important to sit near friends, or near someone that they were attracted to, it was also seen as important to welcome in new people and ensure that they had a place to sit and made to feel comfortable in their new surroundings.

### 8. *Not All a Bed of Roses*

While the bulk of the observations and interviews were both upbeat and positive, not every observation reflected satisfaction. Some criticisms of Chabad came from those who were not fans of Chabad and wouldn't even step foot inside the Chabad house. Other more interesting comments were those offered by some students who did attend the Chabad Shabbos dinners. Although far less in number than the positive comments, many of these negative comments were offered by students that continued to come back to Shabbos dinners at Chabad.

By far the biggest critique about the Shabbos dinners at Chabad was that they were in some way an attempt to attract young Jews to become more Jewish. This phenomenon was infrequently referred to as missionizing, and more often as ‘kiruv,’ a Hebrew term which offers a more positive connotation, denoting trying to bring someone closer to the Jewish religion. (For the record, the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe rejected using the word “kiruv” to describe this work).<sup>1</sup>

Most students agreed that an objective of the Shabbos experience was to make students want to feel and be more Jewish. Sometimes this message was overt, especially when Rabbis would encourage students to perform more mitzvot, attend more Chabad functions, and date (and ultimately marry) someone Jewish. Some found this uncomfortable, particularly if they found the Rabbi as being a bit too forthright or personal. Some

students referred to “manipulation,” “coercion” or “close-mindedness,” but these were clearly the minority of views reported. The vast majority of students thought that this aspect of the Shabbos experience was totally fine, partly because they knew what they were coming to and realized that they didn’t have to stay if they didn’t want to. It is important to recognize that the recorded observations were primarily conducted by students who returned to Chabad Shabbos dinners and did not necessarily reflect the entire spectrum of attitudes about the organization and their activities.

Students did periodically comment about levels of discomfort that they felt at various stages of the Chabad dinner. Dealing with rituals and using language — mainly in Hebrew prayer services — that was foreign to them were the two major areas of discomfort. This feeling was not always seen as being negative, as many students enjoyed the chance to be exposed to something new and different, and particularly appreciated it when someone, often the Rabbi or his wife, would help navigate them through the prayers or help them with the blessing while washing their hands. Introducing students to something that was foreign was seen by many as possibly being intimidating, but was usually mitigated by the open-minded nature of the Rabbi, who was willing to accept everyone.

Interestingly, one focus group described Chabad as intimidating, but this was because the students attending, and not the Rabbi, seemed to judge others. As the group described, “there are not many people between the extremes — either you are into Chabad or you are an outsider — which makes it difficult to enter the social atmosphere.”

However, as the conversation continued, it appeared that, “although the Rabbi and his family do not judge, they still appear intimidating because of their attire and attitude toward Judaism. One person said they should not have to dress differently to be good Jews. They assume people want to wear a Kippah or practice a certain level of Judaism, not just be around the atmosphere, so certain norms are imposed.”

Some students felt that the *mechitza*, the physical divide between men and women during prayer services, was problematic. These students often wished for there to be another option for prayer that more reflected their way of praying with men and women together. For a variety of reasons, some of these students had no alternate place to pray.

Still, despite their issues, these students were prepared to come to the Chabad services because they enjoyed it for other reasons.

Only one focus group report reflected a marked critical tone about Chabad. In this group, some of the participants thought that Chabad was intimidating and closed-minded. Interestingly, this group was made up of mostly students who had grown up observant and were knowledgeable about Judaism from cultural and religious viewpoints. They cited what they called “imposing” policies of the movement. Most of this focus group did not blame the Rabbi himself, but rather Chabad as a religious philosophy and institution. Those

students who commented on what their parents thought of their involvement in Chabad generally reflected that their parents were in favor of their children going to Chabad and not scared of Chabad making their children “too Jewish.”

Most students reported that their parents were thankful and grateful that their children were having such positive Jewish experiences on campus. A few students reported that their parents also had started donating money to Chabad on campus because of their children’s involvement. (One student also mentioned that he too donated money to Chabad).

The long term effects of the Chabad Shabbos dinner experience are unknown and beyond the purview of this study. The comments by one female student perhaps best encapsulate the enthusiasm associated with Chabad Shabbos dinners. For those who are still somewhat skeptical, these same comments may only serve to further accentuate concerns:

“After I graduate I can see myself coming back to Shabbos House to visit and (in a joking voice) would drive four hours for R.’s (Rabbi’s wife) famous ‘chip salad’ - a delicious salad with a mayonnaise dressing and broken chips. I want to take this Shabbos experience with me in the future and do these same rituals and cook a nice Shabbos meal after graduation and when I am married.”

For the many students that turn up each Friday evening to the Chabad house at their respective college campuses, the Shabbos dinner experience appears to be a seminal Jewish experience that is far more important than a free meal and a few blessings. The number of students that return each time a dinner is offered seems significant enough to suggest that the experience has become ritualized into their weekly lives. Many students describe the Rabbi’s house as a home away from home or a place filled with warmth, and most feel that this journey each week into the unfamiliar, which has now become familiar, is a significant part of their Jewish life on campus and beyond.

For the Rabbi, and his family, the weekly Friday night dinners are clearly integral to their role as Chabad Rabbis on campus. These Shabbos experiences symbolize their strong mission and commitment to the Jewish people and to each Jewish soul that they come in contact with. It appears that these Rabbis do what they do almost instinctively, relying on their magnetic and charismatic personalities, as well as their love of Judaism, to connect to each student that walks into their home.

There clearly are some aspects of the Chabad Shabbos dinner on campus that are consistent across the continent which are too common for them to be considered coincidental. Many of these elements appeared to have been learned from experiences which are then shared with fellow Rabbis. Many of these components may in fact be intuitive, but then the question must be asked: Why have other organizations not been as successful as Chabad has been in attracting these students to their activities?

It seems that the most common force uniting these dinners may be the experiences of the Rabbis at doing

professionally what they are already doing personally. Having a Shabbos dinner is something that the Rabbi does every week, and the fact that there are sometimes hundreds of students in attendance doesn't seem to influence the format or content of the evening in any significant way – this is what the Rabbi knows, does and loves. This study has looked specifically at what happens when an organized curriculum has been added to the Chabad Shabbos experience and the results, perhaps unsurprisingly, reflect that this does little to change the flavor or dynamic of the evening, although it does provide Rabbis with themes and resources on topics that are timely and well-received. All of that being said, there are several factors this study uncovered which remain consistent at Chabad houses across the country.

### **(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup>See address by Rabbi Lau on 27 July 1944 at South Head Synagogue in Sydney, described by Arye Solomon in *The Educational Teachings of Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson*, op.cit.

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CHAPTER FIVE:

## **Discussion, Implications and Conclusions**

What can we learn from this detailed look at the unlikely scenario of hundreds and hundreds of unaffiliated young American Jews on all American campuses taking a few hours off to have a Shabbos dinner? There are some clear messages about the effort to present Jewish values and life to young adults on college campuses that are suggested by this study of Chabad.

### *The Craving for Home and Family*

The theme of home and family is overwhelming in this study. Clearly, young adults who are in the developmental stage of separating from home and family still crave the warmth and roots they represent. After all the ideas, courses, social functions and extra-curricular activities, young people still seem to deeply want a taste of that primordial experience represented by the words “home” and “family.” The Chabad Shabbos experience seems to answer that need.

The key to creating this powerful feeling of home and family seems to be deeply rooted in the Rabbi and his family. The experience sought is acquired by seeing it modeled. Ironically, the “home” figures in these five campuses were young and the parents of young children; but they represented the warmth, stability, and security that traditional home figures have classically fulfilled.

### *The Desire for a Core Jewish Moment and Experience*

The Chabad Shabbos experience and this study re-enforce a theory that a minority of studies, Jewish educators and academics have been suggesting, and that is rejected by the bulk of Jewish life. The common myth is that young Jews today are a lost tribe that has drifted from Judaism and is distancing itself from the Jewish people. This myth is rooted in the 1990 NJPS Jeremiah prophecy which has been taken as gospel.

This study supports voices heard in the several birthright Israel studies and in the research of such scholars as Steven Cohen, Barry Chazan and others, that this age group is not a lost tribe but a seeking generation. Indeed, this research points to young people seeking something Jewish in their lives. It points to an experience that seems to touch something these young Jews have deep in them and, ironically, mostly haven't experienced. And it points to a surprising appeal of the different and the authentic.

This study reinforces the theory that instead of defiantly moving away, the so-called “lost Jew” is seeking something authentically Jewish and he/she has been left to go astray by mainstream Jewry. They aren’t lost; we lost them.

### *A Person-Centered Education*

This study points to a central educational point that is not about Judaism or Jewish identity, per se. These young people are in search of a person-centered education – an education that relates to each of them individually as a human being. Most of their lives are lived on large campuses in large classes and with great anonymity. Moreover, most of Jewish life addresses them as a certain kind of generation, or in the name of the Jewish people or Jewish organizations. “The Jewish world” doesn’t even know the names of these young people.

The Chabad rabbi and his family are a unique kind of Jewish educators (see Appendix on *Shluchim*). They are generally young, of this world, remember names, are building relationships and not edifices, and are interested in each student — who comes first — rather than focusing on the future of the entire Jewish people. Contemporary Jewry has de-personalized being a Jew; at a Shabbos dinner in Albany, Ann Arbor, Cambridge, Gainesville and Stanford, you become a person.

What is particularly striking is that it is precisely in the heartland of intellect, ideas and career building, where you are related to existentially, personally and emotionally. These rabbis are very bright people; and while many, if not most, do not have general university degrees, their minds have clearly been honed (“*v’shinantem*”) for great intellectual rigor. They seem to have a kind of *chochma*, *bina*, and *daat* which expresses itself in deep personal emotion, affection and caring. The three seminars the researchers and the guest professors experienced with this group in New York reinforced the sense of a group of experiential person-centered educators as deeply concerned with people as with *Yiddishkeit*.

### *An A La Carte and Episodic Jewish Education*

This study was commissioned in order to look at what happens during the Shabbos experience and once again, its focus was not on its outcomes. There do seem to be serious longitudinal impacts in Jewish life (the Saxe-Kadushin Cohen Center birthright Israel studies are one of the first of this kind) and in fact we have few scientifically sophisticated studies of outcomes of Hillel, youth movements and even day schools.

But one “outcome” seems clear from this modest pilot study: The Shabbos experience seems to be an episodic a la carte part of a full week in a young Jew’s life. By this we mean that being a young Jew on a college campus



encompasses a grand multitude of experiences in any one week: dates, courses, readings, breaking up, sex, roommates, parents, parties, extra-curricular activities, travel, concern with the body and a hundredand-one other experiences. The Chabad Shabbos dinner is one of many such experiences.

It is at the most a few hours out of 168 hours in the weekly life of a college student. For most of these students, it does not seem to represent a life pattern of similar events or a “lifestyle”; for most of them it is their Jewish moment.

What this means no one knows. There are those in the Jewish world who believe that only a full menu of Jewish experiences can guarantee deep adult Jewish involvement; others suggest that being a modern Jew means living in many worlds and finding meaning in each of them. Some people suggest that episodic events, whether of a few hours or a few days, particularly in the significantly formative college years, can have profound impact on subsequent adult Jewish identity.

The bottom line is we simply don't know the answer to the question, and the Jewish people have been too impatient for “magic-bullet” answers rather than to patiently study this subject properly. One thing we can say about the Chabad Shabbos dinner is that for our sample, it is their Jewish episode of the week.

### *This is a Shabbos Experience – Not A Chabad Program*

Our study clearly points to the fact that the core of this experience is a Jewish experience – a Shabbos experience – and not a Jewish organizational event. It is Shabbos which happens to be conducted effectively by Chabad. Participants can both enjoy and be critical of elements that they don't like, e.g. non-egalitarianism. The stigma of Chabad does not seem to be a deterrent; the latter seems to be more of a phobia of adult Jewry than students. Finally, the experience does not make participants “*Chabadnikim*.” There are no indications of massive change of garb, behavior, courses of study or affiliation as a result of these experiences. Again, there is currently no long term data, but there are no indications that the Shabbos dinner will lead to the numerical growth of Chabad.

### *Shabbos is the Content*

One aspect of this project was for Chabad rabbis to meet together, conceptualize what they do often intuitively, and write curriculum modules. All three of these goals were achieved, and the self-reflection seems helpful for beginning to develop an overall “theory” or approach to implementing such experiences. This is important for Chabad, which has a rich theoretical pedagogic literature written by prior Lubavitcher Rebbes, but is not strong in a contemporary well-formulated pedagogic literature for this age group.

The curriculum units seemed helpful and were used by the rabbis to enrich their work. They were also helpful in giving some overall framework for these experiences across U.S. campuses. However, they should not turn into a required core curriculum for two reasons. First, over-emphasizing such a required curriculum *could* increase the possibility of “Chabadizing” an essentially Jewish experience, and that would not be desirable. Second, the core curriculum of this experience is Shabbos, the Rabbi and his family, and a brief *dvar Torah*. Like any good written curriculum materials, they can assist the core, but not replace it. It would be valuable to develop more such topics, but the greatest value would be the expansion of core Jewish experiences orchestrated by educators such as these rabbis.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

All of these factors together lead to the conclusion that we are looking at an educational enterprise that constitutes a potentially significant approach to young-adult Jewish educational programming for contemporary college-age youth. The experience studied seems bigger than simply 22 Friday night dinners. It was executed professionally and could be a model for how to do such experiential education. It was not missionizing or “cultish” and, at least concerning the Shabbos dinners, was very up front about its goals. Its over all goals seem no more legitimate or illegitimate than most ideological education, Jewish or general to affect world views and life-styles.

The Chabad Shabbos experience is an educational program that aggressively assumes a religious gravitas that is shaped by the core beliefs of a religious world view. Yet it is “personalist” in its educational approach, and places primacy on the individual in education. It is an experiential approach which places primacy on the role of direct personal experiencing as a way of approaching meaning and knowledge, and a system rooted in a core Jewish experience. Finally, it is an approach deeply dependent upon a new kind of educator.

For that reason, and in a most paradoxical sense, it seems that we are looking at an example of a very traditional Jewish group which has created a strikingly 21st century educational program which seems to have appeal. Indeed, once one strips away the traditional theology, cosmology and ideology, this experiment seems to be a wake up call and a beacon to those contemporary Jewish professionals and lay leaders desperately trying to figure out how to reach the unaffiliated. A bearded and head-covered movement with origins several centuries ago in a small town named Lyadi in Belorussia seems to have found guidelines and a handle to speak to 21st century young Jews who seemingly have drifted light years away from their Jewish roots.

### **Our recommendation to the Jewish world is:**

1. To learn from this experiment how to do experiential young-adult Jewish education. These rabbis and this event seem to have captured something (that others also have noticed) that

- responds to the needs of “emerging young Jewish adults” across the board.
2. To utilize core Jewish experiences beyond Shabbos as the content. If Shabbos works, maybe Havdalah, Tashlich, the Sukkah and Rosh Chodesh might also work. This experience suggests that it is worth re-examining experiences of our tradition – old and new — that have the power to engage. If Shabbos dinner worked, maybe there are other religious and non-religious types of events that have similar potential.
  3. To train the right kind of “educator” to implement such experiences. Clearly, this experience is linked to a unique type of educator who is skilled, interested and equipped to genuinely reflect Judaism, and at the same time possesses unique abilities to reach out to young adults. Maybe we need to train a new cadre of such personnel for the coming years and decades.

**Our recommendation to Chabad is to:**

1. Expand its work in this area. Chabad has found a significant Jewish educational experience, as apparently has been the case in other areas, and it would seem to be worth its while to consider seriously attempting to expand the venture.
2. As suggested above, Chabad, along with other Jewish organizations, should build on this initiative to experiment in other Jewish holiday/experiential areas which may respond to the core needs of young Jewish adults. Chabad should continue its willingness to think “out of the box.”
3. To expand the kinds of educators it has engaged in this work. This work clearly requires a unique type educator. This project seemed to focus on exemplars. If one really wants to grow in this area, it may be necessary to increase the educational training of Chabad rabbis so that they can incorporate more pedagogic tools in their repertoires.
4. To systematize this effort without making routine the charisma that the current approach has. The grand challenge of education (and religion) is to take unique ideas that have chemistry and enable them to grow without turning them into “keva,” routinization and routine.

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 APPENDIX I:

**Training Protocol**

Chabad Shabbat Project  
 Barry Chanzan and David Bryfman  
 Septempber 19, 2005

*Guidelines for Observation*

The goals of this observation are:

1. To accurately as possible “photograph” (in words) as many of the scenes as possible that occur during the Chabad Shabbos dinner experience;
2. To provide as “thick” a description as possible of the non-programmatic elements of the evening: dinner conversations before and during the meal between participants; sociology and demography of who comes; precise observation of role of Rabbi, wife, children; topics that the students talk about;
3. To provide as accurate as possible a summary of the “teaching” (subject) portion of the evening;
4. To conduct a number of individual interviews and focus groups about the experience; and
5. To write a summary analysis of what you think you saw.

The methodologies will be:

1. Observation;
2. Summarizing observations (obviously not on the spot);
3. Location of a select number of individuals for personal interviews;
4. Conducting two to three focus group discussions of small groups of participants; and
5. A summary analysis at the end of the five Shabbos visits.

*Data Collection A: Observations on Friday Night*
**General Observations:**

- Describe where and when the event was taking place. Also pay close attention to the house itself, outside and inside. It is also important to pay close attention to the way people arrive to the dinner – alone/in groups? Etc.

**Attire**

- What was the attire of the people coming to the Shabbos dinner?
- Were they wearing items that easily made them recognizable as being Jewish?

### **Greeting**

- How are they greeted and by whom?

### **Services**

- Describe all aspects of the services conducted at the Chabad House, including who was leading services, the set up of the synagogue and the type of liturgy being conducted.

### **Meal**

- Describe all components of the meal, including how it was prepared and served, and what the meal consisted of. It is also important to include student reactions to the meal.

### **Rabbi**

- Describe in detail the Rabbi throughout the evening. Pay careful attention to his mannerisms, his persona and the way he interacts with other people throughout the evening.

### **Rabbi's Wife**

- Describe what the Rabbi's wife was doing, and who she was doing things with, throughout the evening.

### **Rabbi's Children**

- Describe the Rabbi's children in as much detail as possible, including their ages and their roles during the evening. It is also important to focus on the ways in which the students interact with the children.

### **Rituals**

- Describe the rituals that take place during the Shabbos experience. Some of these might be formal and some of these might be less formal events that take place on a regular basis at the Shabbos experience.

### **Timing**

- How long are the various components of the evening, including the services, the meal and the learning?

### **Study/Dvar Torah**

- Describe in detail the study portion of the evening, as this is the primary focus of the study. Pay close attention to the style of presentation by the Rabbi and the tools (pedagogic and personality) that he uses in order to teach. When during the evening does it occur?
- Also pay attention to the way in which the students react to the learning.
- Briefly summarize what you regard as the main point of the study/Dvar Torah.

### **After the Meal**

- Describe what happens after the meal. Pay close attention to the students that stay and what they do, as well as the students that leave and what you believe that they are going to do after leaving the Chabad House.

### **Student Leaders**

- Are there a group of student leaders in attendance and what, if anything, do they do throughout the Shabbos experience? Are they Chabad members or students from other organizations?

### **Any Other Observations**

#### *Data Collection B: Individual Interview*

It is suggested that this be open-ended; the following questions are suggested guidelines, but you should feel free to take it in directions that interest you and/or the interviewee.

Some questions that students might want to ask during the interview include:

- Why do you go?
- How did you find out about it?
- Do your friends go?
- Do you enjoy it?
- Are there other Friday night “Jewish” options on campus?
- If yes, why do you go here, and not to the others?
- Are you somewhat/very/not at all familiar with Chabad?
- Does your family know you go? If yes, how do they feel about it?
- Do you define yourself as a member of any Jewish denomination?
- Do you think you ever might become a religious Chabad person?
- Do you go occasionally/quite a bit/all the time?
- How did you feel about the study part? Great/good/OK/so-so/didn’t really get into it?
- All in all, do you like it/love it/enjoy it/it’s OK?

*Data Collection C: Focus Groups (This more extensive document about focus groups was distributed in November*



*to the observers):*

A focus group is a great way for us to add substantial details to the observations we have been making about the Shabbos dinners at Chabad. One of the most important things about a focus group is that you, as the facilitator, shouldn't feel a need to direct every question in order to illicit a response. A free-flowing discussion will often generate some of the most important comments by the participants.

In general I would imagine that each focus group should last for a minimum of one hour. You should aim to have a good cross-section of people involved in the discussion, representing the variety of people who attend the dinners. With that being said, there are several topics that we would like to try and cover in the focus groups, and below are some questions that might trigger productive discussions:

- How did you first hear about Chabad and Chabad Shabbos dinners?
- What do you like/not like about the Shabbos dinners?
- Is there anything about the Shabbos dinners that makes you feel uncomfortable?
- Why do you or don't you come back to the Shabbos dinners?
- How important is the learning that takes place at the Shabbos dinners? (People might need to clarify about the dinner as a learning experience or about the dvar Torah specifically. We are interested in both, but we particularly want to know about the dvar Torah piece – was it memorable? Is it important? Etc.)
- Has going to Shabbos dinners influenced any other aspects of your behaviors/practices/beliefs?
- Is the Chabad aspect of the dinners a deterrent, a pull, irrelevant?
- Do you think that Chabad (the Rabbi, the family or any other component of the dinner experience) tries to missionize?
- How do these dinners compare with other Jewish events on campus?
- Are you “afraid” of what might happen as a result of getting involved with a group like Chabad?
- Do you think such a network, based on the people who attend a Shabbos dinner, should be expanded?
- Do you think that the Chabad Shabbos dinner experience is “good for the Jews?”

### *Data Collection D: Summary Analysis*

We want you to be our eyes, ears and heart during the five Shabbatot. But we also very much would like your analysis at the end – a kind of overview narrative summary of issues, themes, ideas and points that seem to sum up what you saw.

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 APPENDIX II:

## Underlying Educational Principles of Chabad

Chabad has a long and rich tradition and literature that expounds core epistemological underpinnings of its approach to education. This educational literature includes the *Tanya*; *Derech Mitzvosecha*, written by the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Tzemach *Tzedek*; *Chanoch Lanaar*, written by the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneerson; and the *sichot* and the *maamarim* of the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Perhaps the most practical and striking of Chabad's educational texts is a document that in 1898 Rabbi Shalom DovBer was reputed to have asked his 18-year-old son Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson to write: a volume on education. It is said that within three months, Yosef Yitzhak produced a treatise subsequently known as *Klalei Hachinuch V'Hahadraba – The Principles of Education and Guidance*.<sup>1</sup>

The volume presents an epistemological-psychological description of the nature of the human psyche and the role of education in affecting this sphere<sup>2</sup>. The *Principles* begins with the argument that *chinuch* is about “the human task of self-refinement.” The essence of education is about dealing with the nature of individual mind and being, and human nature is, at its core, about the “fierce battle between good and evil, truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness” (p.28). Thus, education and the educator are immediately assigned an important role as interlocker, mediator, personal counselor and even therapist in the development of the mind and consciousness of the individual. This volume places the heart of education within the learner, a theme introduced in the fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe's volume, *Chanoch Lanaar*.

The second assumption of the volume is the primacy of tailoring education to the unique needs and character of individuals: “The ideal of education or guidance is possible only when tailored to a person's character” (p.46). Chapters 8-13 of the treatise discuss the many diversities of people, and the need of education to be tailored to these unique qualities. Thus, it is no accident that Chapter 2 of this volume contrasts *chinuch* and *hadracha* with *limud* and *horaah*, emphasizing the special importance of the former.

The final assumption that is central to this volume is the assertion that matters of education and guidance are relevant not only to children, but to all people, regardless of age: “Education and guidance for adults should be geared to their type” (p.50). While many of course will immediately remind us of the tradition of life-long education in Jewish history,<sup>3</sup> 20th century Jewish, and also general, education has been heavily “pedagogic,” i.e. focused on the child. Post-university young-adult and adult education were given increased attention only towards the middle and end of the 20th century.

There is one other underlying assumption that is not highlighted in the *Principles* which is prominent in the Chabad

world view: The clear social philosophy is that Judaism is not a religion, an organization or a political loyalty. It is everything – it is a culture, a civilization, *Yiddishkeit*.

### **(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup>The volume was published in 1944 in Hebrew and in 1990 in English, translated by Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger (New York: Kehot Publishing Society, 1990).

<sup>2</sup>A paper entitled “Sigmund Freud and the Lubavitcher Rebbe” published in the *Psychoanalytic Review* in the year 2000 reports of a visit in the winter of 1902-1903 of the Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe Rabbi Shalom DovBer Schneerson, accompanied by his son Rabbi Yosef Yitchak Schneerson, to Vienna to consult with Professor Sigmund Freud. According to the paper, the Rebbe and his son spent from Jan. 6 to April 5, 1903 in Vienna. The paper goes on to discuss psychoanalytic and Chassidic views of depression and possible influences of these two figures on each other (Stanley Schneider and Joseph Berke, “Sigmund Freud and the Lubavitcher Rebbe” *Psychoanalytic Review*, 87 (1), 2000).

<sup>3</sup>Israel Goldman. *Life-Long Learning Among Jews* (New York: Ktav, 1975).

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## APPENDIX III: On Shluchim

The educators who conduct these Shabbos experiences are part of a new breed of educators denoted as *shluchim*. The concept of *Shlichus* seems to have taken on especially powerful meaning in the reigns of the Sixth and especially Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbes. The original emissaries received their assignments and credentials from the Rebbe. Even when the enterprise grew to large proportions, and the Rebbe no longer personally engaged each shaliach, *shluchim* saw themselves as on a great lifetime mission and as personally charged to do this educational work by the Rebbe. *Shlichus* assumed a kind of elitism and aristocracy, and by now there are generations of *shluchim* families who have made this an honored profession.

*Shluchim* clearly see themselves as sent by and representing a great ideal—education—and a great person, the Rebbe. Their work is rooted in a grand vision, mission and Visionary. *Shlichus* is not regarded as a temporary assignment; it is seen as a career similar to a diplomatic career. One enters the world of *shlichus* assuming it is going to be a lifelong profession.

This is clearly not a one person profession; *shlichus* is a family affair. It involves an entire family unit living as a family, modeling Jewish life, with each family member having specific tasks, encompassing fund raising, teaching, pre-school education, women's matters, marital counseling, peer education, locating Jews and exemplifying what being Jewish means. Finally, this work is a full-time 24/365 profession. It is work that requires one to be “on duty” mornings, afternoons, evenings, holidays, weekends and special occasions. It is a total life-long commitment.

The qualities of this new profession include:

1. Being a believing and practicing Jew.
2. Modeling the behaviors and values that one comes to teach.
3. Being a knowledgeable Jew (encompassing: Bible, Talmud, Siddur, Halacha and Chassidus).
4. Having the skills of the fund raiser, the social worker, the administrator, the politician and the communal worker who knows how to talk to contemporary people; being skilled in listening; being adroit at fundraising and community coalescing.
5. One quality that is not required to be an educator in this “enterprise” is a general liberal arts education or university degree; at the same time, *shluchim* must be able to communicate with students and faculty who live and operate in the academic, intellectual world.

In sum, *shluchim* are educators who see their work as a life's profession—Torah-true personalities in knowledge and action, and contemporary fund raisers, politicians and business oriented professionals.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Barry Chazan**

Barry Chazan has served as Professor of Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for many years and has held visiting positions at Ohio State University, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University. He is the author of books and articles on moral education; philosophy of Jewish education; informal education; and teaching Israel. He has served as head of the Melton Center for Jewish Education at the Hebrew University, Educational Consultant to the JCC Association, Educational Consultant to the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies, and is Director of Education for birthright israel and currently Master-Educator in Residence at the Community Foundation for Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago.

### **David Bryfman**

David Bryfman is an Australian-born Jewish educator who has worked in formal and informal Jewish educational institutions in Australia, Israel and North America. He completed his undergraduate and Masters in Education degrees in Melbourne, where he was also active in Habonim Dror and the Australasian Union of Jewish Students. He lived and studied in Israel, including the Machon Le Madrichei Chutz L'Aretz (Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad), Melton Senior Educators Program at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at Pardes. In Australia he was the Director of Informal Jewish Education at a large Jewish day school, a Hillel Director, the Director of birthright israel in Australia and several other Israel experience programs. He lived in St. Louis for two years, where he was the Director of the Central Agency's Community Supplementary High School and Teen Initiative Programs. He is a graduate of Brandeis University's Informal Jewish Education Leadership Seminar. He is currently a Doctoral student in Jewish Education at NYU focusing on informal Jewish Education and is a current fellow in the Wexner Graduate Fellowship Program.

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To request a copy of the curriculum materials used in the Home Away From Home study, please contact the Chabad on Campus International Foundation at [mcd@chabad.edu](mailto:mcd@chabad.edu).