

**The Counterculture to Chabad Lubavitch;**

**The Search for Truth**

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## **Part 1: History of Chabad and the Counter Culture**

Two movements began in the 1960s that on the surface seemed completely unrelated. One was the youth counterculture movement that arose from the beatnik enclaves of the 1950s, and the other, the revitalization of the Chabad Lubavitch movement, an almost tangible result of the rise to power of the brilliant and visionary Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson as the sect's leader. Superficially, the two movements appear to be disparate; one was a liberal, non-conformist, social movement and lifestyle for the youth of the era, trying to escape and redefine the rules and boundaries established by an older generation; the other is an intensely religious sect of Judaism which imposes many rules and responsibilities on its members. The idea that there could be a connection between these two worlds, let alone that people actively transitioned from one to the other, sounds absurd. Why would anyone immersed in the counterculture ever become a Chassidic, Ultraorthodox Jew? Based on an analysis of the ideas these two groups had in common, and citing first-hand accounts of those who made the "conversion" from counterculture to Chabad, this study will shed light on some of the reasons for this unique transition.

To further understand the relationship between these two movements, five people were interviewed and asked different questions relating to their life stories and how they view the seemingly dissimilar philosophies of the counterculture and Chabad. The five people cover a wide range of counterculture experiences, yet all went through similar transformations in becoming religiously observant. The subjects are artists, musicians, and scholars; each experienced counterculture and became religious between the 1960s-1990s, the years coinciding

with the Rebbe's leadership of Chabad. Through an analysis of the interview transcripts, themes were synthesized and similarities and differences were identified.

To understand the perspectives and experiences of those who became Baalei Teshuva, (those who return), through Chabad, an explanation of certain Chabad and countercultural concepts and beliefs are necessary. The Chassidic movement began at the hand of Israel of Mezhbizh. Known as the Baal Shem Tov, Israel began a socio-mystical movement, which revealed Kabbalistic secrets of the Torah to the simple Jew, and taught them in a way that made performance of daily rituals easier to connect to. (Wexler 7). Chassidism grew quickly because of its populist nature. By its very essence, it countered those that followed a system of religious and social elitism. The simple Jew was not able to study the Torah, nor was he permitted to explore its secrets. The Baal Shem Tov brought these secrets to all and inspired the people to feel fulfilled and important in their service of God, which caused many simple Jews to come under his tutelage.

The Baal Shem Tov also added another concept to the practice of his disciples. Until that point the coming of Moshaich and the final redemption was more abstract and not as clear a goal for the regular Jew. The Baal Shem Tov reformed this and incorporated Moshiach as an integral part of religious practice. This mission was formed through an encounter that the Baal Shem Tov had with Moshiach himself. The following is a letter written by Israel to his brother-in-law, Gershon, in which he summarizes the interaction. While scholarship has debated the messianic thrust of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings in this letter, from the view of Chabad Chassidus the messianic nature is accepted. (For more on the scholarly debate see Scholem, *The Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Chasidism*, and Tishbi, הרעיון המשיחי והמגמות המשיחיות בצמיחת (החסידות).

I ascended, one plane following another, till I entered the hall of the messiah, there the messiah learns Torah with all the sages and tzaddikim... There I saw an exceedingly great joy... and I thought that this joy was due to my passing from this world, and they made known to me that I had not yet passed away for it is pleasurable to them above when I unite unions below by means of their holy Torah... I asked before the messiah, 'When will you come Sir?' and he answered me, 'By this sign you will know; when your teaching becomes famous and revealed in the world, and your wellsprings which I taught you and you grasped will be disseminated outside, and they too will be able to practice unifications and ascents like you, and then... it will be a time of divine will and salvation (Ben Porat Yosef in Wexler, 15).

This complicated passage contains two vitally important concepts: first, the idea of spreading wellsprings and second, the unification of worlds. These two ideas form the basis of the Chassidic movement, that of spreading its teachings in order to bring the final redemption.

Phillip Wexler, in his book, *Social Vision: The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Transformative Paradigm for the World*, cites this letter and draws from it what he believes to be the eight general characteristics of the Chassidic Ethos. They are as follows: 1) At the core of the mysticism, it is a social ideology; 2) it is a joyous ideology; 3) the soul is given cosmic significance; 4) it strongly encourages repentance, transformation, and self-improvement; 5) it is egalitarian in that the mystical is accessible to everyone; 6) Godliness is present within everything; 7) it is important for one to understand their smallness in relation to God; 8) wealth is a divine gift that belongs to the whole as opposed to an individual (Wexler, 19). Though they

may not apply perfectly to all sects of Chassidim, these characteristics are seminal to Chabad. Chabad Chassidism is not merely a philosophy; it is a religious and social movement. Wexler's summary truly encompasses the sociological aspects of Chabad Chassidism, the principles by which the Rebbeim created a social movement in addition to an intellectual one.

The first Lubavitcher Rebbe was Shneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe or Baal haTanya. Shneur Zalman was the "grand disciple" of the Baal Shem Tov as his teacher was the Maggid of Mezritch who was the direct successor of the Baal Shem Tov. The Alter Rebbe took the Chassidic ideology that was instituted by his predecessors and created a more intellectual and cognitive philosophy, as represented by the name of the movement Chabad. In Hebrew, חבד is an acronym for Chochmah, Binah, and Daas, (Wisdom, Knowledge, and Understanding), the 3 intellectual attributes of God (Tanya, Chapter 3). The Alter Rebbe's magnum opus, Tanya, fully laid out his philosophy and became the central text of Chabad. There are a number of concepts that are integral to understanding Chabad explained in the Tanya but for the purposes of this study, the most important is the idea of the Jewish Soul. The Alter Rebbe writes in Tanya that every Jew has a Jewish soul that is a "חלק אלוהים ממעל ממש," which translates as "a literal piece of God" (Tanya, Chapter 2). The Alter Rebbe elaborates on this idea further in Chapter 32 of the Tanya and explains that not only does every Jew have a piece of God in him or her but, since God is a unified being, every Jew is inherently connected to one another as a result of this connection (Tanya, Chapter 32). From this concept, and from the Tanya in general, we discover the root of all of Chabad's principles and outlook on life (For more background and explanation on Chabad Chassidic Philosophy see Rachel Elijor's "The Lubavitch Messianic Resurgence: The Historical and Mystical Background 1939-1996").

The Alter Rebbe was the first of seven Lubavitcher Rebbeim, the last being Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known simply as The Rebbe. The Rebbe became the successor to his father-in-law, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, a year after his death on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Shvat in 1951 (Wexler 2). On that day he delivered a Maamer, or discourse, based on one delivered by his father-in-law and released a year before. The title was *Basi Legani*, and outlined the principles that drove the Rebbe's mission, which he worked towards throughout the entirety of his leadership. In *Basi Legani*, the Rebbe writes that the goal of creation is accomplished through controlling the folly of the physical world and transforming it into holiness. The effect is the fashioning of a Dirah Betachtonim, a dwelling place for God in the lower world (Schneerson, 269).

The Rebbe created a powerful movement with the purpose of creating the above dwelling place for God. One of his main changes to the Chabad infrastructure was that he expanded the Shluchim movement. The Previous Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson began the program of sending emissaries to far off corners of the world in order to find Jews to bring closer to Judaism; but it was the Rebbe's indelible positive influence that stimulated the exponential expansion of this program even after his death. In his book *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*, Samuel Heilman explores the psychological reasoning behind this expansion, "The faith of Chassidim in their rebbe can never be mistaken, for if it is, they are no longer his Chassidim. To give up faith was unacceptable to all Lubavitchers, who had built so much of their way of life and the character of their movement on their faith in the messianic message and its foremost exponent. They could not return home and give up the mission, and with it their hopes for forcing the end and bringing on the age of redemption. Continuity was a foregone conclusion" (Heilman 13). Heilman is addressing something that is fundamental to

Chassidism, belief in the mission of their leader, even after his death. As of 2019 there are Shluchim in multiple cities across all fifty states in addition to over one hundred countries, far more than at the time of the Rebbe's death (What is Shlichus, Chabad.org). He tasked these Shluchim with finding Jews, opening synagogues, and engaging with people in order to bring them closer to Yiddishkeit.

The Rebbe embraced the concept of Jewish unity as part of his social vision. Wexler discusses the sociology of the Rebbe's movement. He writes that "Loneliness, or alienation, has long been identified by theorists and sociologists as one of the maladies of the human condition, especially in the modern period" (Wexler 78). He explains that loneliness is one of the largest issues sociologically for a person and contends that the practice of the Chassidic lifestyle "constitutes an antidote to loneliness" (Wexler 78). He also explains that the conventional perspective that Chassidism is a service of solitude is incorrect. Gershon Scholem writes that "the originality of Chassidism lies in the fact that mystics...turned to the people with their mystical studies" (Scholem 342). The Rebbe recognized the need for community and acceptance and targeted this feeling in order to bring people closer to God. This movement of acceptance made the transition easier as people were able to continue to be themselves while still growing religiously.

The other side of this discussion is that of the counterculture. In the 1960s and 1970s the youth of the era responded to the consumerist and conformist nature of society by creating a new culture that had a new focus on authenticity, individuality, and community (Slonecker, The Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s). It arose from the bohemian beatnik subcultures in Manhattan and San Francisco and spread to college towns, creating a massive youth movement that spread across the entire country. The addition of new drugs such as marijuana and LSD to

the culture added a mystical aspect to the experience, and influenced the music, dress, and sexuality of the era (Slonecker, *The Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s*). Wexler describes the culture of the 1960s as a response to “The aspirationalism of 1950s America [which] needed to be infused with a meaning and purpose beyond the pursuit of individual material success, otherwise it would indeed come to embody an iron cage, a constricting sameness enforcing the domestication of the spirit generally” (Wexler 51-52). Stephen Prothero writes that “the beats’ flight from the churches and synagogues...never ceased to be a search for something to believe in, something to go by” (Prothero 210). This explanation of the spirit of the counterculture ties into the reason why many Jews found their way to Chabad from their counter cultural pursuits as they were looking for spirituality and meaning to escape the spiritual deadness of the consumerist culture that they were raised in. In Chabad they discovered something that they viewed as authentic, honest, and real, without losing the sense of acceptance and community.

The experiences that people had in the counterculture are innumerable and no list could summarize the number of submovements, events, and experiences that were had by those who participated. In the context of this study though, there are a number of concepts that are important to provide some background on in order to make further sense of the subsequent interviews. One is the phenomenon of the Grateful Dead. A classic rock band from San Francisco, they grew to fame and developed a cult following. Their fan base, though not large, was deeply committed and would tour with them from show to show across the country. As the band grew, so did the crowd and the venues (McNally 439). Around the band a traveling community developed where people would hitch rides, feed, and engage with each other. Another is the organization, Students for A Democratic Society. SDS, as it was known, was a leftist, anti-Vietnam War, student organization, which was active during the 1960s. It ranged

across many different campuses, and its protests involved tactics such as the occupation of college buildings at different universities. Eventually one faction called Weatherman, or the Weather Underground, resigned to terrorist tactics (Stryker 90).

The interviews revealed that there is a unifying theme. They all came from a weak religious upbringing and were able to recognize that there was more to life than what they came to regard as the hypocritical and baseless lifestyle that their society and religious culture set before them. In response, they all left their homes to try to experience a deeper meaning in the counterculture. When they eventually observed it to be lacking, they turned back to their religion, but engaged it with more depth and emotion. In coming to Chabad they saw it as a venue that offered the cultural openness and space to allow them to be who they wanted to be, and to embrace the world as they did before, but in an uplifting manner. They also found within it a religious philosophy that was much more rigorous and honest, and this apparent authenticity struck a chord in all of them. This proved to be the case because even within the realm of Judaism, Chabad is a counterculture to the rest of orthodoxy, and in that sense, they perceived the counterculture and higher purpose that they were initially seeking.

## **Part 2: Their Encounters**

Five different people were interviewed for this investigation. What unifies them is that they all had minimal Jewish involvement in their youth, were involved in the counterculture in some way or another, and eventually became religious Jews through their involvement with Chabad. The following is a brief background of who they are, and where they are now.

Elka Gordon is from East New York and attended an avante garde art school in North Carolina called Black Mountain College. She also attended Brooklyn College and it was there that she met her husband Jerry Jofen. Jerry, who later began to go by his Hebrew name Zalman, was a painter and experimental filmmaker who was involved in the New York underground film scene on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1960s (Pamphlet, The Films of Zalman Jofen). She now resides in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

Leib Meadvin is from Cherry Hill, New Jersey and attended many different Universities and Yeshivas including, Franklin and Marshall College, Tel Aviv University, Ohr Sameach, Yeshiva University, Hadar Hatorah, and Temple University, all while faithfully following the Grateful Dead on tour. He presently resides in Merion Station, Pennsylvania where he works as a math teacher and creates art.

Dov Yonah Korn is from Morristown, New Jersey. After dropping out of high school, he followed the Grateful Dead on tour. He attended Yeshiva University and Rabbinical College of America in Morristown. He currently runs Chabad of the Bowery as a campus and community Shaliach.

Menachem Schmidt is from Highland Park, New Jersey. He was a musician in many different bands and attended Syracuse University. Menachem is the president of Chabad on

Campus, campus Shaliach at University of Pennsylvania, and Rabbi of the Vilna Shul in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Simcha Gottlieb grew up in Inwood, in upper Manhattan. He attended Berkeley College, and Harper College at Binghamton University. Simcha is a Doctor of Oriental Medicine and the author of the book “Awesome Aging.” He resides in Miami, Florida.

Each interviewee was asked about their level of Jewish connection in their youth, and they all related similar backgrounds with a couple of interesting similarities. Elka was involved in a Zionist youth movement and had no religious connection. Her husband, Zalman, was actually from a Jewish town in Russia and part of the religious community there. “His family was Nevarduk. Mussarniks, very intense. His grandfather was called the Alter of Nevarduk, a disciple of Reb Yisroel Salanter. They founded the Mussar Movement.” Since his father was a famous Rosh Yeshiva, they were able to escape the Nazis through Japan and get visas to come to the United States. She explained that her husband was a “wild kid” and that while he never rejected his Jewish identity, a religious lifestyle seemed beyond him.

Leib’s Jewish connection during his youth was that of a typical suburban Jew, with few religious affiliations. He attended Hebrew school, and went to synagogue on the High Holidays and sometimes on Shabbos. “I think my dad was still working on Shabbos so my mom would drop us off, me and my brother.” He recounted a story in which he was learning Chumash in Hebrew School and his Rabbi was teaching them about the laws of Shabbos. Leib asked “Why don’t we do all of these things?” And the Rabbi answered, “Nobody really does these things anymore.” Leib explained “Ok, we believe in this, but we just don’t actually do the stuff it says to do. So, it was a joke. Some things I would be really into but generally I didn’t really have a deep feeling.” Leib recounted that his Jewish experience was very external. It was a big thing to

dress up for synagogue, and the Jewish fraternity he was involved in in high school would have Friday night dinners in order to show their parents that it was “Jewish minded”. He recounts that he did not realize there were observant people. “We would walk over to the orthodox shul on Simchas Torah, but I didn’t have any concept that they were orthodox. The most religious people I knew wouldn’t drive on Shabbos and if they went out to eat, they would only get like a tuna sandwich or something.” He also talked about his struggles with anything that was enforced. His parents would not allow him to go out on Friday nights. They then relented and allowed him to go to parties, but concerts were off limits. He related his frustration that it “seemed ridiculous like you’re just making stuff up. We would keep kosher at home but not out of the house.”

Menachem grew up with what he explained was a strong connection to Judaism. His parents were officers in the local Conservative synagogue and they were very close with the Rabbi, who himself was more Orthodox than Conservative. He said “I grew up going there for Friday night and Shabbos lunch. We went to shul my entire life for Friday nights. I didn’t always go but my parents were very involved. It was kind of interesting on a bunch of different levels. I was one of the only kids in my grade who liked Hebrew school. I really liked it, I was interested in it, I really believed in God, I really liked being Jewish. There was a little problem and that was called rock and roll.” Though Menachem had a foundation of Jewish connection, it lacked depth, and was relegated to a position of marginal importance as music and art became the focus of his life.

Dov Yonah succinctly summarized his Jewish connection growing up: “I grew up as a reform Jew, which meant that I went to Hebrew School Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday. I was totally disengaged; I think I was kicked out once or twice. I had a reform bar mitzvah which also didn’t mean much, I just learned how to memorize the trop. I had a party with lobster and shrimp

on Shabbos at a very preppy restaurant. Judaism meant very little me. I always believed in God, my mother always believed in God. I liked cultural Judaism but religion, mitzvos, and spirituality had no connection.”

Finally, Simcha related a religious experience similar to those above. He explained that “My mother had a sentimental connection to some of her childhood experiences. She went to some kind of a youth group in London. My father had very little. They both passed when I was starting to get into Yiddishkeit. We had a Menorah and that was about the extent of it in our household, some years it was juxtaposed to the Christmas tree.” He said that many of his friends attended Hebrew school but he did not. When Simcha’s friends were turning 13 and beginning to have Bar Mitzvahs, it interested him. He said “I don’t know if it was more about the party but I think I was subconsciously interested in the deeper part.” He told his mother he wanted to have one and he started to meet with a Yeshiva University student to learn enough Hebrew to be able to memorize his Haftorah by rote. He also was brought to synagogue a couple days before his Bar Mitzvah and put on tefillin for the first time. He related that he was not informed about the ritual, “Nobody said what it is, that you should do it every day, that you should get your own, but they wrapped me up. In retrospect, it certainly had some kind of an impact on me in ways that I was not aware of at the time.”

A fascinating similarity between almost all of the interviewees was that they all expressed a belief in God. They perhaps did not understand what it was supposed to mean to them or did not have the right tools to act on it in any way but the fact that they were aware of it is interesting, perhaps an phenomenon connected to the innate connection a Jew has to Yiddishkeit as a result of having a Jewish soul. Additionally, though they each had varying levels of interest in the different Jewish practices that they were involved in, few of them

connected to the deeper philosophy that Judaism has to offer. None of them grasped its rich meaning and history, nor were they exposed to the idea that Jewish practice was more than synagogue and Friday night dinner. As will be pointed out later, each of their involvements with Chabad was what began to show them that Judaism had a philosophy of truth, and that it could provide more meaning than the confused, superficial level of practice encountered in their youth.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe once wrote an undated letter, as published in *L'Chaim Magazine* (Miller 264), regarding the youth of America, in which he addresses this exact principle, stating succinctly what he believed to be the spiritual and emotional state of the Jewish youth at the time:

Unfortunately, in America at any rate, most parents, however well-intentioned have been more concerned about their children's material, rather than spiritual, well-being. The reason for this is not hard to find. Having themselves had to face economic hardships, as immigrants or the children of immigrants, and having found that religious conviction and principles not infrequently proved "restrictive" in a materialistic society...leaving it to their children to find their own way, eventually, in regard to such things as religion and world outlook...It fostered a way of life where principles have been sacrificed for expediency, and time honored traditions have been relinquished for material gains, actual or imaginary...it is a small wonder that the tremendous upheavals which shook the world in general, and the Jewish world in particular, in our generation, have found young men and women almost totally unprepared" (Miller 263-264).

The Rebbe clearly states that which is found above, the entire generation of youth was spiritually ravenous having been given nothing of substance by their parents and went off to search on their own.

Each one of these people went through a remarkable journey to reach religious Judaism and in order to understand why they made that transition, a short summary of their countercultural experiences and their processes of becoming religious is important. Leib's countercultural experience revolved around music and the Grateful Dead. He was initially drawn away from the mainstream because, "People go to high school and then to college, the whole plan was laid out for you. So that's a culture and that's how everyone did everything and anyone who did something different was an outcast. Even if you weren't actually, everyone looks at you that way and talks behind your back. So right away that wasn't interesting to me. It's funny because even in the counterculture there was another culture. There's a certain way of being. In trying to not be the first way, they went to the second way. I personally didn't want to even be beholden to that either, and actually making all decisions truly for yourself is the true counterculture. If you go there you have long hair and tie-dyes and you get high and that's just another culture. Even though I felt more comfortable there it wasn't everything to me." We see from his musings about conformity that Leib truly tried to be an individual in every aspect of his life. He always strove to be authentic and real, and not to just do anything because it was the status quo or because it was expected.

In those years of Leib's life, he was always attending some form of school, but his life revolved around going on tour. He was continuously getting ready for the next tour by saving money or by preparing things to sell on the road. "Whatever else was going on didn't matter because that's the time that tour was happening. I guess my second year at college was the last

time I had a job and after that my whole life was about vending.” Leib’s Baal Teshuva experience began in an impactful class when he was in his junior year at Tel Aviv University. “We had this class at Tel Aviv University called the Essence of Judaism. This religious guy who was actually a math professor was the teacher. I’ll never forget, he was talking about Shabbos and some kid said ‘well what if you need to drive to synagoge?’ and the teacher said, ‘No. It’s not okay.’ Every professor you ever have just wants the students to like them. He said it doesn’t matter what you think of me, it’s just how it is. That’s when it struck me that there are people that really do it. Even though I’d met all different types of frum people in my year in Israel.” Leib never realized that people truly practice Judaism to the fullest extent, and juxtaposed to what his Rabbi told him in Hebrew school, that, “Nobody really does these things anymore,” this truth was eye-opening to him. From that moment on, Leib was on a trajectory towards Frumkeit.

His journey continued next at Yeshiva University, and then at Ohr Sameach. There he fully immersed himself in learning but he “remembers saying at the time [that according to the Rabbis at Ohr Sameach] the best thing you could do was learn until you got married. Then there was a row of apartments and you’d move there and learn in the Kollel for the rest of your life. And it was just so crazy to me, like what about everybody else? I made this analogy that it’s like going to a show. People who only care about themselves go and get in and get right up front because that’s the best experience for them. We were never in the front; we were in the halls trying to open a door so people could get in, or throwing [ticket] stubs out over the rail so people could make a fake ticket. It was more important that everyone should get in over you getting the best experience. But in the hall where you could dance and there was more room, when you cared for others, that was the best experience anyway. That’s not what I saw at Ohr Sameach. It was all about how great **you** can be and how few averos **you** can do. So that didn’t really work

out for me. I knew there were people who cared for others but I didn't know who they were or where to find them." Leib eventually met some Lubavitchers and people even suggested to him that he should attend Lubavitch yeshiva. However he thought that since he was not born Lubavitch, he wasn't able to join based on experiences he had with other sects of Chasdim in Israel. Prior to leaving on a tour, Leib spent a Shabbos at the University of Maryland. Walking with the campus Shaliach, Leib turned to him and said "'Oh I wish I had been born Chabad.' The Shaliach responded, 'what do you mean?' I said 'if you're not, you can't join up.' He (the Shaliach) thought that was the funniest thing he ever heard because by then there were for sure so many Baalei Teshuva. Right then I decided. It was as impactful as the teacher who said 'No it's not ok.' This moment with the shaliach was another moment where I could tell this was the thing for me." From there Leib started learning in Chabad yeshivas in Crown Heights and Morristown, spending time with Menachem Schmidt, who became his Rabbi in Philadelphia, and became a fully observant Lubavitcher.

Elka's countercultural experience was with her husband, Zalman Jofen. Zalman was an artist and a filmmaker part of the underground film scene of the lower east side in the 1960s. Her life at the time was without much organization. "We had a big loft. First, we were living in a gallery on 3rd Avenue and 31st Street; then we moved to a big 5000 square foot loft. Someone who had been a filmmaker moved in with us and then he (Zalman) started making films. He was open to doing anything. He was very innovative. We were there for a number of years. It was an alternative scene. Drugs, not so much drugs, a lifestyle. Everyone was crashing in our house. I was a waitress; I was supporting us. Everybody hung out over there. We were friends with Allen Ginsburg and the whole crew. Not with Andy Warhol, we didn't get along with him." They eventually lost the loft and moved around for a period of time before ending up in Brooklyn. "It

was really Hashgocha Pratis (Divine Providence) that we ended up in Crown Heights and that the Baal Teshuva movement was going on there. There were people that we could relate to. People from that world that we had been very deeply involved in. People who were creatively and artistically involved. He started making films over here. He used to go to Farbrengins. Then he got really sick but before that he felt very connected to the Rebbe.” Elka explained that Zalman’s entire family was living in another part of Brooklyn at the time and they began to become frum and keep kosher so they would be comfortable eating Elka’s house. As part of a community of countercultural Baalei Teshuva who were living in Crown Heights and becoming more religious together, their Frumkeit flourished.

Menachem was a musician who stopped going to Hebrew school when it started to conflict with band practice, he relates that at the time he did not view himself as so countercultural. He and his fellow band members “knew people that were truly countercultural and were involved in the philosophy and the Black Panthers and that kind of stuff. Those people were countercultural, and they were for real those kinds of guys. A lot of other people were pretty plastic. They were just wearing bell bottoms and headbands, going to rock concerts, flashing the peace symbol, and pretending they were in the program, but they didn’t really care. My band just made fun of them. They would hire us to play at a war moratorium and we’d be laughing like the people think they’re really serious.” At the same time, Menachem, always a deep thinker, was involved in the dialogue of the movement; however, he was searching for an authenticity that he could not find. He relates that “the kids that I knew that spent a lot of time talking about it and thinking about it didn’t seem so much for real. When you’re taking different types of drugs, you would speak about these ideas, a lot of times when you would get high you would talk about philosophical ideas and that type of thing. And even if not, it was sort of in the

air. Growing up in high school my main leisure reading was Herman Hess; he was very into Buddhism. It's very spiritual.” What is interesting about Menachem though is that he never expected to find anything outside of Judaism. He recalled a question from his father, ““Why would a person involve themselves in something that’s not Judaism, Judaism has everything in it already.’ I didn’t really know what that meant, but I believed him. I wasn’t really looking for anything else.”

Menachem eventually went to Syracuse University and studied television art and television production. He was into art and music and would spend his time going to museums and seeing jazz bands. He enjoyed visual art because it was in touch with the spirituality he felt. Everything could be art, and the video medium helped to reveal the dimensions and spirituality that were present in everything. His search for meaningf really began in college. “The television stuff was interesting because you’re observing people, images, and things and changing them into something else. You remove them and change them into something else which is one step away from elevating it. I guess you could say that in that way all of those Western, Countercultural, and Chassidic ideas were swimming around and I got involved with them that way and they were all interrelated. There was a lot about that time that made me think about the energy of the world and how God is behind everything. I always thought about God. It wasn’t very well articulated though because I didn’t know where to look.”

Menachem became involved with Chabad because his best friend, a frequent participant in these enigmatic conversations, had been at a Jewish wedding and became friends with some bochurim from the Rabbinical College of America. In order to spend time with his friend on a break from school, Menachem went with him to Crown Heights. He said “A young man named Moshe Kotlarsky, ... got roped into giving us a tour of Crown Heights. We put tefillin on when

we first came. I was very impressed with only one thing. This unqualified love for Jews, it really blew me away. I could have been an impoverished idiot, and they would have shown me the same acceptance.” He was invited to spend a Shabbos in Yeshiva in Morristown. He said that expected it to be another adventure to an odd religious group that he and his friend would go on, recalling the weekend he spent at a Church of Scientology in Boston. He spent the weekend in yeshiva and recalls his first night learning with a psychologist named Ephraim Lehrer. They learned Chumash and Rashi on the topic of the rape of Dinah. He said “So I’m learning about that with a psychologist, and after the first hour I realized that this is much deeper than anything I ever expected it to be, much deeper than Hebrew School.” From there, the energy of yeshiva was inspiring to him. He began taking the steps to become frum. He asked his mother if there was any kosher meat in the house. A very impactful conversation with his Rabbi concluded with his Rabbi’s taking off his own tzitzis and giving them to Menachem. He began to help run the kosher kitchen on campus and continued to spend every break from university at yeshiva until his graduation. Menachem explained that “I felt that all the ideas that I grew up with I found in Chabad. It wasn’t a new thing it was the same thing that I knew but it was the correct path. It synthesized everything, psychology, energy in the world, God’s presence, the power of being Jewish, Jewish community, and not being fake. For my video arts, as I would edit, I would specifically daven in the editing room so the letters of the davening would be there when I’m editing. I didn’t understand what I was thinking but I had been thinking about stuff like that.”

Dov Yonah’s perspective of the counterculture is nuanced. He was disenchanted with the mainstream from a young age. He had no interest in the programmed conformity of the culture he grew up in. “It was all about going to a good school, finding a good wife. It was very proper.” Dov Yonah wanted to be an actor, he played the stock market, he wasn’t looking for meaning

yet, but he definitely did not want to be contained to a normal path. He defines counterculture as “an interesting entity because by nature it defines itself by ‘negative awareness.’ By nature it is ‘not that.’ There is a very low bar of integrity. I followed the Grateful Dead which is a clear counterculture movement, a traveling Woodstock. Based on everything from the 70s that I read about, the philosophical, intellectual, and spiritual revolutions that were happening at the time, I thought I would find people at the Grateful Dead scene far more enlightened or more intentional. There were for sure people like that but there was also the feeling that it was the collection of disgruntled members of society. A lot of drugs, it was very disappointing. I quickly went from being amazed to being disappointed by it. Counterculture is living in ways that are not normative in a society, which was a formative steppingstone in me finding a Jewish lifestyle which is its own counterculturalism. Those spaces that I occupied didn’t satisfy me sufficiently.” The lack of integrity and depth is what led Dov Yonah to continue to search.

His search for meaning began with other religions. His first experience with Chabad though, was when he was approached on the street to shake lulav and esrog. “In a metaphysical sense that’s what got me here, but, practically, I walked into a Chabad yeshiva on Yud Tes Kislev, on a relative accident, and stayed for a week.” Yud Tes Kislev, otherwise known as the Rosh Hashanah of Chassidus marks the release of the Alter Rebbe from prison. Dov Yonah had a Chabad uncle who always pushed him to learn about Judaism through Chabad but that was the last thing he wanted. “I had had such a disappointing Reform Jewish experience. I definitely didn’t want to spend time with people who were even more religious, at least that seemed like the wrong move to me. I had all of these preconceived notions about their closed mindedness and chauvinism.” The night of the farbrengen began the journey. “I spent a whole night there, a whole week there, farbrenging and questioning. It was intense. I was wearing full hippy garb,

dreadlocks and all. I was on a different level. Then I went on a journey for a couple months on my own, but I took tefillin and a Tanya and a siddur and I realized, [over the course of the journey], that Torah was the life I wanted. I was davening to God, ‘show me what you want from me’ and it became clear that I should go down the Torah path even though it was clearly not a dreadlocked, hippy, pot-smoking, nudist [life], living in Vermont and making maple syrup, like I thought I’d be [living].” Dov Yonah then went to Yeshiva University and realized that it was not the exact Orthodox community he wanted to be a part of. “I went and I was a vegan, and I had my own apartment since I couldn’t eat their food. I shaved my dreadlocks, and I started there, and I quickly realized that it was not a Chabad environment so I started going back to Morristown every week Thursday night to Monday morning, so I had my Shabbosim at Chabad and that really crafted me in the Rebbe’s way and the Chassidic ideology.”

Simcha’s experience in the counterculture was the most complete and, in a certain sense, the most representative of what the counterculture was. It also was important because of his experience with Meir Abehsera who will be mentioned later on. Simcha’s experience in the counterculture contained “Several facets. Some political, some cultural, some psychological, some psychedelic in origin. When I was a senior in high school [I started to think about] social consciousness and social activism. I was very young. I graduated high school at 16.” From an early age Simcha was exposed to the deeper philosophy in the counterculture which only compounded when he went to university. “When I went to UC Berkeley, I was already involved with one of the leftist groups Students for a Democratic Society which became much more famous later on. It was the moderate intellectual wing of the radical student left. It was a very cerebral approach. I was interested from the standpoint of social activism, wanting to make a better world. Civil rights movement, Anti-Vietnam war, things of that nature.” That focus of his

experience did not last as Simcha said that, “I became disenchanted with the political aspect pretty early on. The more I saw it, the more I saw the self-serving narcissistic quality of the leadership and followers, and I saw this is not part of the solution, it's part of the problem. I took a sharp right turn from that.” In addition to the political, many of the cultural aspects were of an artistic nature. “Somewhere along the lines there was a cultural aspect which included avante garde arts like the Living Theatre. [Another important aspect was] music. I spent some time back on the west coast in San Francisco where there was a whole music scene. Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company. Then the British invasion of Eric Clapton and Cream and [Jimi] Hendrix. There was a lot of involvement in music. It was meaningful to us, it had a certain spiritual energy to it that I don't think was well defined but in the sense that it was counterculture it was a departure from the mainstream culture. It wasn't Lawrence Welk and Ed Sullivan. It wasn't Frank Sinatra. It was our own youthful expression.” The culmination of music in the counterculture was Woodstock. A three day festival held in upstate New York, Woodstock represented the changing music of the era along with the capacity for love and kindness that existed in the counterculture. Michael Clarke describes how it fit within the context of the social movements as well. “Woodstock was eagerly promoted as a the festival of peace and love, a demonstration that large numbers of young people could congregate without violence and disorder despite the forebodings of the authorities and in context of substantial youth participation in the anti-Vietnam War movement and the civil rights campaign in the USA” (Clarke as quoted in Bennet, 35). We see that the music scene of the counterculture was enveloped within all of the social movements that people were organizing.

Simcha worked to cultivate consciousness through meditation and other spiritual pursuits. “I started doing yoga and eating a macrobiotic diet.” That, in addition to other things, led to

Simcha's more objective view of the universe. "It was the moment when the first photographs of planet Earth were taken from satellite or [from] the moon. We were seeing things from above, the big picture, the cosmic perspective, not blinded by the confines of life in our small section of planet Earth, of the west side of Manhattan, of upstate New York. It was a short hop from there to Atzilus, Briyah, Yetzirah, and Asiyah (The four worlds/levels of existence according to Kabbalah and Chassidus)."

Simcha spent a year touring with the Living Theater after college and then returned to Binghamton along with many of his friends from college. "One came back from 2 years in the Peace Corp. and 2 months in a Buddhist monastery. We met up and rented a farmhouse outside of Binghamton. We started a little organic garden and macrobiotic meals. We practiced zha zen, yoga, and meditation. We had a zendo in the barn. That same summer we had a mutual friend who knew Meir Abehsera. He came up to Binghamton and lectured and what have you. We established a relationship with him as kind of a mentor in natural medicine and macrobiotic diets. Not long after he moved to Binghamton and over the course of the next couple years, he began returning to what had been himself a very close strong relationship with Torah and mitzvot. He came from a long line of illustrious Mekubalim (Kabbalists). We saw that and we liked it and gravitated towards it. I was naturally drawn to it in a very deep way." Simcha left on a meditation trip around Europe for about a year and when he returned there was a movement on the commune, led by Meir, towards Yiddishkeit.

Meir created a small yeshiva in Binghamton where the members began to learn and grow closer to Yiddishkeit. Simcha describes the experience as "a home, it was friends. We would hang around and talk about stuff. There was no official push. Meir used to say that when you're talking to people who are getting interested in Judaism and asking questions, 'they don't want

your answers, they want you. They want a relationship with you.” Through that process they all grew closer to Judaism as a family. Simcha relates that unlike other friends, that fact that he did not deal with the hypocrisy of an inauthentic Jewish experience when he was younger made it easier for him, as he did not face the same conflicts that others faced. He did not begin his journey with a bad taste in his mouth. Simcha eventually moved to Crown Heights, joined a Yeshiva there, and continued his journey to become closer to God.

While each subject has their own story and their own experiences, they nonetheless share a critical unifying factor. Chabad provided them with the whole truth in a way that allowed them to still maintain space for and acceptance of who they were. Though they saw truth in countercultural philosophy, to each it was not sufficient, as it did not connect with them on an inherent level. It was for that reason that they found their way back to Judaism and specifically Chabad, as the concepts they noted in counterculture were transformed and substantiated by the Chassidic philosophy. Some of these concepts that unify the Counterculture and Chabad were further explored in subsequent questions.

As all of these people drew closer to Chabad, they each encountered the Rebbe for the first time. Leib related that when in his presence, he felt the Rebbe exuded a feeling of awareness and energy, even though he had difficulty understanding what he was saying. He explained how impactful it was to know that everything that Chabad did and does was because of this person. He related that “The Rebbe had such a unique and novel approach and way of looking at things. His quotes are so powerful to me. ‘Sometimes you don’t know whether to punish a child or hug him. If you punish him when he needs a hug, you’ve made a serious mistake. But if you hug him when perhaps he should have been punished, you’ve just brought some extra love into the world. (Punishment, Chabad.org)’ It seems so obvious, how could you even argue with that but that’s

not what people believe or how they think. The Rebbe just broke it down for this world in a way that nobody else did.”

Menachem’s first encounter with the Rebbe was his first time in Crown Heights. He went to Mincha at 770, and “The Rebbe stood there but that shul can fit 100 people maybe. So [his rabbi] pushed us up so we were standing 3 feet away from the Rebbe. I had no idea, nobody had told me anything about this, I didn’t even know this concept [of a Rebbe] existed in Judaism, let alone stand 3 feet away from the man. Every part of me was short circuiting. I left like who is that? What is that? The idea of a Rebbe was confusing.” Menachem, like many others, was thrown off by the idea that there was a leader that was exalted like that in Judaism. He said it took him a long time, and a lot of thinking to eventually sort it out for himself.

Elka explained that she felt connected to the Rebbe since she lived in Crown Heights, and “everything [in Crown Heights] was about the Rebbe and the Rebbe was so interesting.” She explained that the Rebbe’s approach was brilliant. She said “The Rebbe understood everything. He understood where all these people were coming from. The Rebbe’s outreach to the BT (Baal Teshuvah) community. That struck a chord with him (Zalman) and he was able to relate to it.” As people who were living in Crown Heights as the Rebbe’s influence grew, his powerful perspective and approach was apparent.

Dov Yonah had an interesting perspective as he felt an incredibly strong connection to the Rebbe, even though he never met him. He claimed that, “There’s no question that neither me or my wife would be frum without the Rebbe.” He expressed that the Rebbe’s teachings and ideology are pervasive throughout Chabad, whether from the Rabbis in yeshivas or from the Shluchim. Dov Yonah said “I saw so many movements [in the counterculture] that were ‘oh it’s religious, it’s spiritual’ but the Rebbe is really trying to end the story of creation and bring

Moshiach. And that got me. I was like ‘OK whatever is a part of that, religion, Yiddishkeit, Mitzvahs, [Torah], Chassidus.’ The Rebbe’s ideology captured me for sure.”

Simcha related that as he was still initially becoming interested in Yiddishkeit, and living in Binghamton, some of his friends had gone to see the Rebbe, and he decided he wanted to go as well. “I got on a bus in Binghamton, borrowed a friend’s black hat, came down to New York, and came to a farbrengen. I believe it was Yud Beis Tammuz (Holiday celebrating the release of the 6<sup>th</sup> Lubavitcher Rebbe from prison). I had heard about what it looked like, but, needless to say, even in those days when it wasn’t that big, I took one look around, took a look at the Rebbe and at the crowd. My first thought was I can look at the Rebbe, and I can tell that that guy has it going on. I’m not sure about all these other people but I just got it right away, this is the real deal. Didn’t understand anything but I had learned a little bit.” As Simcha progressed in his studies, he began to learn more of the Rebbe’s Torah. “I learned more stuff and Maamarim but it started there. It was just genius, it was brilliant. It was just truth, hot off the presses from wherever truth comes from. It was really clear to me, although I felt that I had seen some glimpses of truth in my previous engagements with spirituality, that this was substantive. You couldn’t get away with being a lightweight. It was for real, it was thick, it was dense, it touched everything. It was Avodas Habirurim (the job of refining the sparks). I was taken with the Rebbe right away.”

One similarity between all of the interviewees was that they recognized the Rebbe’s greatness almost immediately. Even without knowing who he was, they saw how important and central he was to Chabad and the ingenuity and power of his world view. The idea of a Rebbe was difficult for some, though not as many as expected. It would be understandable if these people who were searching for religious meaning initially struggled with the idea that there was

a figure who was above his followers, and some did. However, they all were awestruck and inspired by the Rebbe, and fully attribute their religiosity to him, whether directly or indirectly.

With this important background, a more nuanced analysis of the parallel concepts between the counterculture and Chabad is in order. One of the most powerful concepts that was discussed was *Dirah Bitachtonim*, a way of making a dwelling place for God in this world. For people in the counterculture, one of the largest issues they had with their previous Jewish and cultural experience was that they were told that the things they wanted to involve themselves in, like art and music, and religion, were contradictory. The common theme amongst all of these people is that they found space in Chabad. Not only were they able to engage in these pastimes while still being religious, but, based on the concept of *Dirah Betachtonim*, they were able to go to concerts, or make art, or play music, and elevate the medium. Elka's husband took his craft of experimental film and started making religious films, the most famous of which is "Rituals and Demonstrations" which presents Jewish rituals but in a way that represents their deeper dimension. His films were so popular they were shown in the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. Zalman said his goal was "To turn aesthetic forms into vessels bearing the blessings of God" (Pamphlet, *The Films of Zalman Jofen*). This quote, taken from a pamphlet advertising his art, beautifully represents this concept, that taking the mundane and making it holy creates space for interest in any field, even those that previously could have been considered inappropriate or unclean.

Similar themes were seen from Simcha and Menachem. Menachem related that he felt a higher power but there was a disjointedness between all of the philosophical concepts he struggled with. Simcha related that even previously his philosophy contained an idea of a unifying force. "Tachtonim (Lower Worlds) was a spirituality that was one, it was unity, there

was something beyond what you saw because the material reality was only masking a spiritual dimension of reality, but it was almost pagan in a way.” What Simcha meant by pagan is that there was a sense of unity of everything, but without the central power of the one God, it was disparate and disjointed with the belief stemming from many different sources. His concept of God being that unifying force did not come until later and made the concept much clearer for him.

Leib took this idea of elevating reality to heart. His love of live music led to him taking that passion and turning it into a shlichus. He approaches it with the mindset that “I’m going there (to concerts) as a Chossid, and everything I do there I do it as a Chossid. It’s also just the way of connecting with people, and that’s also about bringing other people closer.” He uses the outlet to meet people and connect to them but his religious identity does not prevent him from engaging, he does not need to remove himself because instead he elevates. For Dov Yonah, this idea was revelational for him. He said “In all my religions studies and all my experiences in counterculture, I never saw outside of Chassidus, Dirah Betachtonim. In religion you either say the world isn’t important like in the eastern philosophies, and you’re just supposed to evolve and spiritualize, and this world doesn’t matter, if you can meditate all day it’ll be better. Western religion is you’re a sinner and life’s a sin but believe in [God] and you’ll be saved...The hippies have a let’s celebrate life mentality but it’s so immature and unsustainable that it’s confusing.” He found the two ends of the spectrum in his studies but neither felt complete for him. He summarized the synthesis that “Torah is the only pathway that teaches us how to live in the world. How to deal with sexuality and how to deal with money, and food, and wine, and ego, and fame, and creativity and art, and to acknowledge the experience but not to be afraid to engage with it on the condition of elevating it.” This idea of elevating the mundane but not removing

one's self is part of what made Chabad so accessible and the fact that all of the interviewees experienced this represents this common theme between the two philosophies.

Another concept is that of Jewish unity and support for one another. In Chabad philosophy there are a lot of discussions about how Jews are inherently connected by their Jewish soul. The idea of the Jewish soul was more challenging for some than expected. The Chabad philosophy which states that the Jewish soul elevates and connects Jews to a higher spiritual level than the gentiles did not sit well with many coming from the egalitarian Countercultural perspective. In fact, Simcha related that it was a concept he struggled with immensely and that he knew many people who did not reconcile it and they stopped being religious. Simcha said that it was only through an increased immersion into the depths of Chabad Chassidic philosophy that he was able to understand the concepts required to accept this difference between Jews and non-Jews. Regardless, coming from the counterculture where there was unconditional acceptance on a surface level, Chabad provided that same acceptance, but with a deeper rooting. Many of the interviewees expressed that on the surface in the counterculture there is a care for one another but when it hits a limit, it is abruptly ended. In Chabad it might not always be felt, but because of the understanding that every Jew is connected and there is a mutual responsibility for one another, not just on an altruistic level, but on a soul connection level, there is no limit and cap where the giving ends.

Leib related that in his travels, there was a unity and community that existed because of their commonality. At first it was on tour where he saw community support for one another for the first time. People would raise money for bail, give rides to random people, or just share their food. This continued even more once he became Frum and he found Shluchim everywhere who he connected with and who helped him. He said he experiences that "it doesn't matter whether

you're rich or poor or a Shaliach or a hippy: everyone is here for a reason and you're celebrating and are close to a person because of that." There is a relationship that exists between all Jews because of their inherent connection that is similar to the unity and community that existed between others in the counterculture. The fact that it was common between counterculture and Chabad is what drew many from one to the other. The depth that exists in the philosophy of Chabad community bound them and carried them forward.

The idea of materialism is connected to the idea of Dirah Bitachtonim, but much of the counterculture's ideology arose due to a disinterest in the consumerist culture of mainstream society. The connection that exists between the anti-materialism of the counterculture and Chabad is important. In the counterculture there was a movement away from consumerism, and people tried to live with very little. Especially those on tour or traveling tried to remove themselves from the physicality of life. This, however, is not sustainable. It often went too far as Dov Yonah experienced, "There was a moment where I was in counterculture and I lost my wallet. I had lyme disease and we were doing a bunch of crazy psychedelics. I was sick, and I said to someone, 'I'm not doing well,' and the guy was like, 'It's all good bro,' which is what they'd always say. I said, 'you know what, it's not good. You're like bleeding out of your face, our car broke down, none of us have money.' We all had scabies, they lived in our skin, lice. It was a mess, and I was like, 'This is not good.'" In the counterculture it was taken too far. That is why, once people were able to see Jewish life in Chabad, where materialism is important but in a context that seemed proper, they were happy to accept it and embrace it.

One of the biggest things that was lacking in the early Jewish experiences of these people was the completeness of truth that they saw in Chabad. As discussed above, the Rebbe's directive to Shluchim was not to dilute anything because those who are searching can recognize

the real truth and can be discouraged by obfuscation of true intent. Leib related that “For sure growing up it was watered down... I did always believe though, so it was really like an awakening. In a way Chassidus is the synthesis of the truth of the Torah and the truth of that counterculture community that I was a part of. Like this is everything.” Leib’s belief was depressed when he recognized that the Judaism of his youth was not complete and not intellectually honest. Only when he realized that the whole truth is present, did he choose that path and engage with his inherent belief in God. Elka related that her recognition of the truth in Judaism is what led to the ease with which she became frum. In fact she explained that “The whole [counterculture] scene was very hefker (ownerless). Especially for women it was very difficult, you came home, and you never knew what was going to be in your house, to become Frum was a great relief. You could see the truth in the structure. It was like coming from the war to peace time. Counterculture was never calm, so it was chaotic. Coming from there to the calm of Crown Heights was a great relief.”

Dov Yonah also had a similar experience. He said, “I was lacking an awareness of what the true inner reality of existence was for sure. Torah gave me that. I think that the provocative nature of Chabad is also what captured me.” The upfront nature of Chabad was very attractive to many people. Dov Yonah actually synthesized this into his own Shlichus and explains that at his Chabad house, “We’re unapologetic about it. We’re God-provocative we call ourselves. We’re just ‘let’s get into it.’... That’s definitely the Rebbe’s brilliance and it definitely captured me. And it keeps working with others.” Menachem did not use the word truth, he referred to it as clarity. He said “I felt that all the ideas that I grew up with, I found them in Chabad. It wasn’t a new thing; it was the same thing that I knew but it was the correct path. It synthesized everything. Psychology, energy in the world, God’s presence, power of being Jewish, Jewish

community, all in a way that wasn't being fake." The importance of providing authenticity led to the unlocking of faith in all of these people.

A very revealing question related to the points of conflict that existed between counterculture and becoming frum. In other words, what about Chabad's philosophy was difficult for them. The most important and meaningful similarity between all of them is that no one expressed any true difficulty in becoming fully observant of the many laws and customs that are required of religious Jews. This was an unexpected reality as many left the mainstream culture because of the rules and expectations of how life needs to be led. Interestingly, it seems that it is because they already left the mainstream culture, that they had an easier time entering the rigorous boundaries of Orthodox Judaism. It is because, in essence, Orthodox Judaism is in and of itself, another counterculture. There was not a concern about how Orthodox Judaism looks to the rest of the world because they were already outside the lens of the rest of the world. Leib put it nicely when he explained that "I was able to break out from my upbringing through the Grateful Dead. I was already not concerned with what people thought of me, whereas other people who I've met over the years didn't have the strength to break away to make such a change since they were still towing the line." There were other interesting things that people brought up that were philosophical conflicts that took time to resolve, such as elitism in the Chabad community and judgment for some of their backgrounds and level of observance. Such aspects were expected. Though Judaism was a better cultural fit for them, they understood they were entering a new system of community living. Conflicts were minor, understandable, and easily resolved; overall the parts of counterculture that were left behind were not sorely missed.

### **Part 3: Chabad Lubavitch; Judaism's Counterculture**

One of the most incredible connections between all of the interviewees was their connection to the concept of *Dirah Betachtonim*. Throughout the counterculture there is a gross relationship with the physical, from either end of the spectrum. On the one hand there were those who “took on a variety of experimental forms, angled variously through hedonistic experience or lifestyle choice” (Grunenberg and Harris, 42). In an effort to combat the social hangups of their parents, the youth leaned into an ultra hedonistic lifestyle in which personal pleasure was tantamount. On the other hand were those who took the route of eastern philosophy in which removal of pleasure and worldly things allows for the ultimate enlightenment. For those who were interviewed, neither of these seemed like the proper final goal.

The idea of *Dirah Betachtonim*, as explained by the Rebbe, is a synthesis of these two lifestyles. He writes in the same Maamer, *Basi Legani*, that it is through two steps that one can interact with the world, the first and lower step is that of *Hiskafia*, or refraining from physicality. The Rebbe explains that the first step is to separate oneself from hedonistic tendencies. The second and higher step however, is that of *Hishapcha*, or transformation. The Rebbe explains that through the transformation of darkness into light, one can take the physical and mundane of the world around them and transform it into the holy and spiritual (Schneerson 269). This philosophy is a synthesis of the two opposite counterculture perspectives of anti-materialism and hedonism. Through the engagement with the physical in the right mindset, it can be uplifted. This rang true for the interviewees as it created the space for them to engage with the physical pleasures of their youth while focusing them into a higher purpose, the service of God. They no

longer had to hide from the hangups of their childhood culture, nor did they have to settle for an incomplete countercultural philosophy. Chabad Chassidus offered them everything.

The final two questions that were asked to every person interviewed succinctly summarize the conclusions of this study. The first was, “Was becoming religious in any way a rejection of the counterculture?” Elka Gordon explained that she relates much of her experience to divine providence and that “You experienced it, you were part of it. I always felt like I was at the center of the universe but then I came here and I felt like this was the center of the universe. There with the counterculture, many things were revolving around you and it was a real exploration. From one [universe] to another, and that other [first] universe was finished.” In other words, she felt as if she made a natural transition from one to the next as she grew and that counterculture was not bad, she had simply run her course with it. Simcha Gottleib related a very similar experience, he did not think of it as a rejection at all rather “it was more of a continuity. It was a logical evolution, a next step.” He too viewed it as a development. Leib Meadvin related that he does not think of it as a rejection in the slightest, in fact he believes that in a certain sense, they are one and the same. He said “No, that [Chabad] is the counterculture. This is not the world. The world for people is making money and getting stuff, getting success, power, and fame. Glory for themselves. Chabad is totally counter to that.” He relates that in his view, Counterculture and Chabad both share the same focus on the deeper meaning and the spiritual as opposed to power, fame, and wealth. He did not experience a rejection. Rather, he found a counterculture in Chabad that contains the philosophical depth and inherent authenticity that 1960s counterculture was lacking.

The final question asked to the interviewees was “Do you see any parallels between the Rebbe’s vision for society and the sociological beliefs of the counterculture?” Not all the

interviewees were able to formulate this answer as clearly as expected, though the comparison seemed clear. Some did, and their point was simple. Many of the sociological goals of the counterculture were for the betterment of the world at large. They were anti-war; they were civil rights activists; they worked for the improvement of people's lives. The Rebbe had a similar goal. Menachem said, "From the Rebbe, you could write a social vision that reflects any viewpoint, but there are a lot of things that are appealing to a liberal viewpoint now. Prison reform, the idea of the importance of every individual. All these things open up the door to discussions with people that are very disoriented at this point. That's exciting for me. The possibilities are exciting. I think that the amazing thing the Rebbe did with all of these speeches, especially the ones that were on the cable broadcast shows, was to take Chassidus and put it into social ideas for people who were laser focused on it. It was so right on. There are a lot of things that if we could get them out would really fit the world." Menachem believes that there are many principles that the Rebbe and Chabad have in common with the counterculture, now leftist movement. However, the Chassidic perspective is richer and more substantiated. He believes that the ethics and philosophies of Chassidus are what can make the two social visions accessible and practical for everyone. Simcha shares a similar viewpoint, "The Rebbe's view of the world and questions of social justice. It's there in Chassidus but it's not seen or understood by a lot of people. But the Rebbe is the Rebbe, and he saw it. I think the exposure of that dimension of what Chassidus has to do with the world could benefit a lot of people." He, along with the others, saw that the importance of care for one another, acceptance, and community activism that were present in the counterculture were fundamental in Chabad, and the Rebbe's all-encompassing heart and skill at implementing them was revolutionary.

The essence of Chabad, as highlighted in this study, is that it is, by its very nature, countercultural. As a philosophy of inherent love, community, and acceptance, it contains many parallels to the counterculture movement of the 1960s-1990s. This is why it drew so many people from the counterculture. These were souls who were searching for more. They lived their youth full of dissatisfaction with the world around them and turned to the counterculture to search for a deeper meaning. Their efforts were not ever fully satisfied as the counterculture, though spiritual, lacked the higher purpose and ultimate goal that Chabad represented to them, revealing Godliness in the world and bringing the final redemption. The interviewees related that even when comparing it to other forms of Orthodox Judaism, Chabad is a counterculture. In others there is an intense focus on becoming a great scholar or performing the most good deeds in order to be rewarded in the world to come. Alternatively in some branches there is a focus on fear of God and the avoidance of sin. Chabad is counter to both of these as its intent is not to gain reward or avoid sin, rather it is to make the world a better place for those in it and to do so by revealing and sharing the good that is inherent in creation, whether that be on the streets of Crown Heights or in the middle of the crowd at a Grateful Dead concert.

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