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**“This Is Who I Would Become”:
Russian Jewish Immigrants and Their Encounters
with Chabad-Lubavitch in the Greater Toronto Area**

Abstract

Since the early 1970s, the Chabad Lubavitch movement has served as an important setting for religious, social, and cultural activity among Russian-speaking Jewish migrants to Canada and the United States. While scholars and community observers have long recognized the attentiveness of Lubavitch emissaries toward Russian Jews, there is no quantitative data and little qualitative research on Chabad's influence in the post-Soviet Jewish diaspora. This paper explores the motivations, mechanics, and consequences of this encounter in a Canadian setting, examining how Chabad creates a religious and social space adapted to the unique features of post-Soviet Jewish ethnic and religious identity. Participating in a growing scholarly discussion, this paper moves away from older characterizations of Soviet Jewish identity as thinly constructed and looks to the Chabad space for alternative constructions in which religion and traditionalism play integral roles. This paper draws on oral histories and observational fieldwork from a small qualitative study of a Chabad-run Jewish Russian Community Centre in Toronto, Ontario. It argues that Chabad, which was founded in eighteenth-century Belorussia, is successful among post-Soviet Jews in Canada and elsewhere thanks, in part, to its presentation of the movement as an authentically Russian brand of Judaism—one that grew up in a pre-Soviet Russian context, endured the repressions of the Soviet period, and has since emerged as the dominant Jewish force in the Russian-speaking world. The paper, among the first to examine the religious convictions of Canada's Russian-speaking Jewish community, reveals that post-Soviet Jews in Toronto gravitate toward Chabad because they view it as a uniquely Russian space.

Résumé

Depuis le début des années 1970, le mouvement Chabad Lubavitch a servi de cadre important à l'activité religieuse, sociale et culturelle des migrants juifs russophones au Canada et aux États-Unis. Si les chercheurs et les observateurs de la communauté reconnaissent depuis longtemps l'attention que les émissaires de Lubavitch portent aux Juifs russes, il n'existe pas de données quantitatives et peu de recherches qualitatives sur l'influence de Chabad dans la diaspora juive post-soviétique. Cet article explore les motivations, les mécanismes et les conséquences de cette rencontre dans le contexte canadien, en examinant comment Chabad crée un espace religieux et social adapté aux caractéristiques uniques de l'identité ethnique et religieuse des juifs post-soviétiques. Participant à un débat scientifique de plus en plus important, cet article s'éloigne des anciennes caractérisations de l'identité juive soviétique comme étant peu établie et se tourne vers l'espace Chabad pour des constructions alternatives dans lesquelles la religion et le traditionalisme jouent un rôle intégral. Cet article s'appuie sur des histoires orales et des observations de terrain tirées d'une étude qualitative d'un centre communautaire juif russe géré par Chabad à Toronto, en Ontario. Ce texte soutient que Chabad, qui a été fondé au XVIII^e siècle en

Biélorussie, connaît un succès parmi les juifs post-soviétiques au Canada et ailleurs notamment grâce à sa présentation du mouvement comme une forme de judaïsme russe authentique — un mouvement qui a grandi dans un cadre russe pré-soviétique, a enduré les répressions de la période soviétique et est depuis lors devenu la force juive dominante dans le monde russophone. La recherche révèle que les juifs post-soviétiques de Toronto gravitent vers Chabad parce qu'ils considèrent le mouvement comme un espace exclusivement russe. Cet article est l'un des premiers à examiner les convictions religieuses de la communauté juive russophone du Canada, l'un des sous-groupes les plus importants et les plus incompris de la population juive du pays.

During a two-hour interview conducted in April 2015, Dovid G., a burly, black-bearded 34-year-old born in Kishinev, in Soviet Moldova, marvelled at the sight of his three young daughters scaling monkey bars and kicking a soccer ball in a suburban playground in north Toronto. The spring air was crisp but Dovid, a member of the Hasidic Chabad Lubavitch movement, wore only a blue-and-grey argyle sweater and dark blue jeans, his canvas baseball hat covering the yarmulke I knew he donned underneath. Watching the children play put Dovid at ease. In recent years, life had not been easy. Trained in accounting, Dovid was having difficulty finding a job, and financial strains were putting pressure on his young family.

As we exited the park and walked toward his high-rise apartment near the intersection of Bathurst St. and Steeles Ave., an area with a large population of Russian immigrants, I asked Dovid about his own parents, who moved their family from Kishinev to Denver, Colorado, in 1991. Dovid grew uncharacteristically taciturn. He said that following the family's immigration, his parents became preoccupied with looking after themselves. "Since our parents had a difficult time with money in the Soviet Union, in America it gave them meaning and identity," he said. "In America, everything was easy. They were having a sort of adventure, and [my brother and I] became a bit disillusioned with that lifestyle." He continued:

"To live only for money didn't sit with me. It wasn't something to live for."
 "So what did you do?" I asked. "[My brother and I] became seekers and tried to find meaning elsewhere in the world. Our parents put a lot of energy into finding jobs, buying a house and getting me into university. Still, I felt like our parents abandoned us for making their own way in America. We had to find our own path."¹

In Denver, these difficulties were alleviated by the presence of a local Russian-speaking Chabad rabbi named Aharon Sirota, who co-directed the Western Center for Russian Jewry with his wife Rivka. Like the vast majority of Jews born in the Soviet Union, Dovid had little engagement with Jewish culture or ritual while growing up

in Kishinev. He was quick to point out that had his father not brought home a box of matzah—procured from an unknown source—during the Passover holiday each spring, Dovid would have had no inkling that he was Jewish.² And yet in Denver, Sirota became a key figure in Dovid's life; the rabbi eventually presided over Dovid's bar mitzvah and, when his grandmother died, ministered her funeral.

Dovid's "Lubavitch story" began in 2003, after he graduated from the University of Colorado Denver, where he majored in finance and minored in philosophy, studying Descartes and other ontological philosophers. His upbringing in the United States had inculcated in him an opposition to modernity; he found no comfort, moreover, in secular American Jewish life, which he considered to be hollow. In college, "I felt that some of the [Jewish] American students weren't so interested in religion because they grew up with some sort of *yiddishkeit* [Jewish way of life]," he said. Spirituality offered an alternative way of life. At 24, Dovid enrolled in a Lubavitch yeshiva. His experience there was "like a whole new reality," he said. "When someone doesn't drink for a long time he gets very thirsty. Then when you give him one drop of water it's like, 'wow.' For me, it was like the revival of a soul that hasn't drunk for decades."

On one level, Dovid's path toward *ba'al teshuva* and the *frum* [religious] world is not an unusual one.³ Indeed, he articulated two of the most common motivations that drive secular Jews in North America toward the adoption of an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle: "filling a spiritual or moral void" and a "rejection of the vacuous values they find in American society."⁴

What I did not anticipate, however, was the salience of Chabad in Dovid's embrace of Orthodox Judaism. It is no surprise Dovid's encounter with Sirota materialized when he was a new immigrant: since the 1970s, when thousands of Jews began emigrating from the Soviet Union, Chabad, which was founded in eighteenth-century Belorussia, has served as one of the primary settings for Russian Jewish religious and cultural activity in North America. While there is no quantitative data elucidating the extent to which Chabad has penetrated the Russian-speaking Jewish space, scholars have long recognized the unparalleled attentiveness of Russian-speaking *schluchim* (emissaries) toward post-Soviet Jews.⁵ For instance, Chabad established Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe in 1969 to assist fleeing Soviet Jews "both physically and spiritually" through a variety of social, educational, and humanitarian programs.⁶

Still, when I asked why he committed to Chabad, one of dozens of Orthodox movements, Dovid stressed his attraction was not solely the consequence of propinquity. Nor was it the result of social disillusionment. Rather, Dovid, in no certain terms, invoked Chabad's centuries-long historical connection to Russia and Russian Jewry, highlighting the Hasidic movement as the connective tissue bonding his dual identities as a Russian and a Jew. He explained:

Russian Jews didn't have Judaism. A lot of us didn't know this, but [the late dynastic leader Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitch rebbe] was involved in Russian Jewry. He was preparing for Russian Jews to come out well before the Soviet Union collapsed. The Rebbe was always concerned about Russian Jews. Chabad was always for Russian Jews, and it has very deep roots in Russia. The songs, the stories, they're from Moscow, Petersburg, Rostov. The Rebbe was Russian! He spoke Russian and told stories and teachings in Russian. If I was to be a *frum* Jew, this is who I would become. It felt very natural to me, historically and culturally. It felt very safe and very comfortable.

Dovid's personal trajectory, from secular post-Soviet Jew to Chabad *ba'al teshuvah*, provides a foundation for the two primary goals of this essay, which is based on life story interviews and observational fieldwork in one Russian-speaking Lubavitch synagogue. Beyond recognizing the strong historical ties between the Lubavitch movement and Russian Jewry, Dovid displayed keen awareness of Chabad's employment of its "usable past," which engages his own experience as an ex-Soviet Jew. Nostalgia, the late literary scholar Svetlana Boym wrote, "is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory."⁷ Through its historical narrativizing, Chabad is an active player in this dynamic, conjuring a nostalgic past it can use in the present to foster group identity among Russian Jews. In turn, post-Soviet Jews, I argue, gravitate toward the movement precisely because they view Chabad as a uniquely Russian model of Judaism.

During my fieldwork, I also endeavoured to understand *how* Chabad creates a religious and social space adapted to the particularities of post-Soviet Jewish ethnic and religious identity, organized around shared cultural meanings and values. Moreover, by overseeing Jewish life cycle events, including circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals, along with a litany of social and cultural programming—all delivered in the Russian language—Chabad strives to construct a framework for community in the Russian-speaking Jewish diasporic space, where post-Soviet Jews can access a Jewish identity—and participate in religious and cultural rituals—inextricably tied to their Russian one.⁸

Religion and Soviet Jewry

Much of the scholarship on post-Soviet Jewish ethnic identity in the former Soviet Union and countries where Russian-speaking Jews have immigrated has concluded that these Jews are uniquely divorced from Judaism and that Jewish ritual observance—the practice of Jewish religious customs and traditions—exists on the periphery of the Russian experience. This phenomenon has deep roots in the Soviet period. State-imposed atheism and attempts at forced assimilation after 1917 effectively amputated Soviet Jews from their religious roots. In the years following

the Bolshevik Revolution, Jews were enshrined, paradoxically, as a Soviet nationality, which preserved their ethnic identities as Jews.⁹ According to Zvi Gitelman, this early-Soviet amputation from religious tradition has meant that, in general, the vast majority of post-Soviet Jews eschew "faith, Jewish law and lore, and Jewish customs as the foundations of their Jewish self-conceptions."¹⁰ Instead, their Jewishness manifests on a purely ethnic level, devoid of religious content and based on the immutability of their biological and historical identities as Jews. In other words, being Jewish is "self-evident" and not contingent upon "doing specifically Jewish things," or, in practical terms, behaving as a Jew.¹¹

In his pioneering work on post-Soviet Jewry, Gitelman has argued that this group possesses a "thin," ethnically based identity, absent of "thick" characteristics, such as ritual observance. In one study, only one percent of Jews in post-Soviet Russia had considered "practising Judaism"; the same percentage believed knowing the basics of Jewish practice was important to being a "real Jew."¹² Another, of St. Petersburg residents, found that among those who did consider themselves "religious Jews," only 26.8 percent engaged in regular observance while 35.7 percent did so occasionally and 37.5 not at all.¹³ In yet another, a sociological survey of post-Soviet Jewish immigrants in New York, fewer than seven percent of respondents associated their Jewishness with observing Jewish customs, and fewer than four percent agreed being Jewish required a declaration of one's Judaism.¹⁴

In recent years, several historical works have challenged commonly held assumptions that religion was entirely absent from the lives of Soviet Jews.¹⁵ Still, many have argued that when traditional forms of Jewish observance did emerge, they did so as part of a new, largely secular form of Jewish identity that fused together elements of traditional Judaism with the emergent Soviet culture in the aftermath of the revolution.¹⁶ In a recent essay on the adherents of Khayim-Zanvl Abramovitch, a Moldovan rabbi who was based in Rybnitsa from 1941 until the early 1970s, Sebastian Schulman argues that "religion remained one of the most salient ways in which one articulated, practised, and perceived of one's Jewishness," and that it "proved vital and enduring throughout the Soviet period."¹⁷ Further research is necessary, but Schulman's findings suggest that a deeper understanding of Jewish religiosity in the Soviet period could enhance our understanding of post-Soviet Jewish identity in general, including its encounter with Chabad.

Studies of a more recent past, especially ethnographic and sociological studies of contemporary Russian-speaking Jewish life, reveal a breakdown in the scholarly consensus of a post-Soviet Jewish identity absent of any religious feeling. Methodologically, these studies have attempted to shift the paradigm toward one in which researchers assess and interpret post-Soviet Jewishness not according to normative Western conceptions of Jewishness but more native criteria. The anthropologist

Rebecca Golbert, for one, has called for a complete recalibration of way scholars approach post-Soviet Jewish identity, urging them to look at “emerging forms of expression and identification” through ethnographic fieldwork rather than a “set criteria of ethnic measurement” common in sociological surveys.¹⁸ Similarly, Anna Shternshis has argued that scholarship on post-Soviet Jewish identity has failed to account for what “Russian Jews themselves consider Jewish.”¹⁹

In fact, newer studies have engaged Russian-speaking Jews in the former Soviet Union, North America and Israel who frequent religious institutions or publicly ally themselves with a particular Jewish religious denomination (although not Chabad, specifically). At least two of these studies examine Russian-speaking Jews who have adopted Orthodox Judaism as *ba’alei teshuva*—a form of post-Soviet Jewish hybridity that until recently has gone virtually unexplored.²⁰ In an ethnographic survey of ten newly Orthodox Russian Israelis, sociologist Larissa Remennick concludes that for younger Russian-speaking Jews who came of age in the 1990s and became religious in Russia while attending Jewish schools and summer camps before immigrating to Israel, “being Jews suddenly became legitimate, normal, if not ‘cool.’”²¹ She argues that their intense Jewish engagement as children and teenagers in Russia presaged their heightened religiosity as adults. Her respondents, moreover, retained “continuous ties with the Russian language and culture” and social bonds with other religious Russian immigrants not only because of their shared biographies but also “tacit ostracism that they experience on the part of native Orthodox Jews, who descend from many generations of religious observance.”²²

What can a study of the Russian-speaking Chabad space reveal about how post-Soviet Jews understand their Jewishness as it interacts with their Russian identities, and vice versa? In approaching this question, I avoided the temptation to measure my respondents’ self-identities and religiosity based on the normative behaviour one might expect to witness in an ultra-Orthodox setting. I take my cue from a theoretical approach proposed by Golbert that pushes researchers to allow their respondents to establish the categories through which they can probe the shape and content of an individual’s Jewish identity: “How is Jewishness made meaningful by the population being studied? What are the local criteria for ethnic membership, and who determines them? What factors, external and internal, are involved in the construction of Jewishness?”²³ In this essay, I propose that the style of Judaism practised by Russian-speaking Jews at the Rockford *shul* reflects a synthesis of both their Russian and Jewish identities—indeed, the religious identities they adopt in the Chabad space borrow not just from a Jewish past but a Russian one as well.

Chabad: An Authentic Russian Judaism?

Why has Chabad turned to Jews from the former Soviet Union with such enthusiasm? One could argue that Chabad's efforts among post-Soviet Jews are hardly unique, that they are an outgrowth of an "expansionist philosophy" interpreted from Genesis 28:14 called *ufaratzta*, which Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh and last Lubavitcher rebbe, developed in the late 1950s: "Your descendants shall be the dust of the earth; *you shall spread out* to the West and to the East, to the North and to the South."²⁴ The concept demands that movement emissaries fan out across the globe, promulgating Chabad's distinctive view of Judaism and Jewish observance in areas with small or spiritually wayward Jewish populations, actively attempting to inculcate secular Jews with an appreciation for traditional values.²⁵ Schneerson's *schluchim* were tasked with reaching "those who were nearly lost in the depths of the spiritual dust."²⁶

As a group that generally lacks knowledge of religious tradition and practice, post-Soviet Jews, to put it crudely, are prime targets. Where other Orthodox groups might reject outsiders for their lack of prior Jewish religious knowledge, their incapacity to grasp arcane religious concepts or their reticence toward full-blown commitment, Chabad does not.²⁷ Some have argued that for Hasidim, Russian-speaking Jews are relics of the pre-revolution Eastern European Jewish communities in which Hasidism first blossomed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The ethnographer Asya Vaisman Schulman has suggested that Jews from the former Soviet Union are "accorded a special status" by Hasidim because "they are perceived as having lost their connection to religion due to forces beyond their control, coerced to stray from Torah ways by the allegedly malevolent Russian government."²⁸ While Jews from the former Soviet Union are seen as victims, they are also "associated with an imagined righteousness that Jews from the old country somehow embody."²⁹

Chabad is a dominant force in Russian Jewish communal life in North America, Europe and the former Soviet Union. In Russia, for instance, the movement operates synagogues, schools and community centres in more than 170 towns and cities across the country, where they are often the only Jewish presence. I have already intimated how Chabad's willingness to grapple with modernity, as well as its enthusiastic embrace of outsiders, grounded in Lubavitch ideology, makes the movement a safe destination for post-Soviet Jews, a group that generally lacks knowledge of religious tradition and practice.³⁰ At the same time, Chabad is often praised in the former Soviet Union and post-Soviet Jewish diaspora for its historical commitment to Russian Jewry. In Chabad lore, it was Lubavitch emissaries who preserved *yiddishkeit* in the Soviet Union, laying the groundwork for the post-Soviet reconstruction of Jewish life.³¹ Much of the evidence for a vast, clandestine movement inside the Soviet Union, especially in the post-war period, is anecdotal and comes to us from Chabad sourc-

es.³² The activism, however, is not only the stuff of legend. The historian David Fishman has described Chabad efforts—led by the sixth Lubavitch *rebbe*, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson—to protect and preserve Jewish religious tradition amid the Bolshevik anti-religion campaigns of the early Soviet period.³³

Here, the centrality of Russia in the Chabad imagination deserves recognition. Indeed, Chabad positions itself as the authentic version of Russian Judaism, the historically symbolic thread weaving together a Russian Jewish past, present, and future. In its religious and cultural discourse, Chabad emissaries instrumentalize the strong historical ties between the Lubavitch movement and Russian Jewry to stitch connective tissue between past and present. In 1925, when Chabad's future in the Soviet Union appeared especially bleak, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson drew a divine association between Chabad and its Russian homeland. "We must understand that we did not come to this land by chance, and not by chance have we encountered the bitterness of exile, darkness and hardship," Schneerson wrote in response to a Lubavitch *hasid* who begged the rabbi for permission to escape the USSR for Palestine.

It is the will of God, blessed be He. He demands of us that we light up the darkness of this land with the light of Torah and worship.... The time has come for every one of us to understand this, and not look hither and thither in search of other places.... The time has come for us to understand that we have been given a mission in life, the mission of aiding our brethren [here in this land]....³⁴

Yosef Yitzchak was imprisoned in Leningrad and eventually deported from the Soviet Union in 1927.³⁵ Upon his death in 1950, his successor Menachem Mendel, born in Ekaterinoslav, now the Ukrainian city of Dnipro, continued to support Soviet Jewry, directing clandestine activity from Lubavitch headquarters in Brooklyn.³⁶ During the massive waves of Soviet Jewish immigration to North America from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, Chabad widely disseminated the portrait of its founder, Shneur Zalman of Liady, who was incarcerated by tsarist authorities in 1798 and 1800–1801, to Chabad-run settlement agencies and community centres catering to emigres. According to one scholar, with the images, "Chabad organizations recast the whole of Chabad history as winning a war that resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the portraits stood as proof in the Chabad collective memory of the historic role their rebbes played in the struggle between 'Truth' and 'Politics.'"³⁷ Berel Lazar, a Lubavitch emissary recognized by Russian authorities as the country's chief rabbi, has consistently claimed Chabad's legitimacy based on the movement's long history on Russian soil.³⁸

It is on these genealogical, geographical and historical grounds that Chabad markets itself as an authentically Russian form of Judaism, the steward of Russian Jewry on

its tumultuous journey through the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. According to one Russian scholar—and as my respondent Dovid recognized—Chabad can “position itself, with a certain amount of legitimacy as the most ‘authentic’ of all existing approaches to Jewish revival [among post-Soviet Jews], laying claim to continuity with one of the Russian Jewish ‘pasts.’”³⁹ In a post-Soviet Jewish context, this is a powerful claim. Chabad Hasidim who work with Russian Jewish immigrants in the GTA have capitalized on the narrative. According to the most recent JRCC operations guide, published in 2010:

The Chabad Chassidic identity is vitally important to the Jewish community from the FSU. First of all it is the Chabad activists who played the most significant role in the survival of Jewish life under the communist regime, and it is Chabad, as embodied by the JRCC here in Ontario, that continues to serve their needs today.⁴⁰

Methods: A Brief Portrait of a Russian Lubavitch Synagogue

This essay contains findings from an ongoing qualitative study of the religious convictions of post-Soviet Jewish immigrants affiliated with the Russian-speaking Chabad Lubavitch community in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Ethnographic fieldwork began in February 2015. Over a period of ten months stretching from February to November 2015, I interviewed fifteen people born in the Soviet Union who immigrated to North America between the years 1988 and 1991. Born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, they came of age during the decades of Soviet Jewish emigration, *perestroika* and the collapse of the Soviet Union, finding their way to Canada, sometimes via Israel or the United States, as children or adults. All but one arrived in North America directly from the countries of the former Soviet Union; the lone exception re-migrated to Toronto from Israel after his father was killed in a Jerusalem suicide bombing.

With a few exceptions, the majority of my oral history interviews were held in a two-level brick synagogue at 18 Rockford Rd., near Toronto's northern boundary at Bathurst St. and Steeles Ave. Located on a residential street corner west of Bathurst, in the shadows of two towering apartment blocks, the “Rockford *shul*,” as it is known to congregants, was at the time one of seven synagogues under the umbrella of the Chabad-run Jewish Russian Community Centre (JRCC).⁴¹ The interview with Dovid, of course, took place in a park a short ten-minute walk from the synagogue. Others took place close to my respondents' place of employment. I conducted the interviews in English at the request of my respondents. Interviews lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours and were recorded digitally unless they occurred during Sabbath meals at the synagogue or in respondents' homes. The Rockford *shul* offers prayer services three times a day—in the morning, afternoon and evening, seven

days a week. With the exception of two Saturday morning services, my fieldwork was conducted during weekday *minchah* (afternoon) and *ma'ariv* (evening) services, beginning in the late afternoon and ending well after sunset. I often found myself stealing away a respondent for forty–five to sixty minutes between *minchah* and *ma'ariv*. While I strived for gender balance, in the end only one third of my respondents were women.⁴²

Early in my fieldwork, Rockford's rabbi, Yisroel K., explained to me that “one hundred percent” of his Hasidic congregants were *ba'alei teshuva*. All JRCC rabbis are adherents of Chabad Hasidism. But it should be stressed that not all worshippers at the Rockford *shul* were Chabad Hasidim. One Sunday evening in April 2015, a night of unusually poor attendance, I recognized six of the thirteen men as Chabad Hasids, bearded and clad in black suits and black fedoras. The rest, however, wore workaday clothes, a yarmulke their only Jewish accoutrement. On other occasions I witnessed men conflating the two styles, wearing trimmed beards and *tzitzit* (ritual tassels) under a sweater vest or sweatshirt, discernibly observant but not obviously Hasidic. Not everyone who dressed like a Chabad Hasid had a yeshiva education, while some wearing non–Hasidic attire did, having studied in Russia, Israel or North America. Both Hasidic and non–Hasidic groups interacted fluidly and shared with me similar observations about the Russian Chabad synagogue as a distinct social, cultural, and religious space for post–Soviet Jews.

The Rockford Sanctuary is located at the bottom of a short flight of stairs, perhaps fifteen feet from the main entrance; a second entrance opens from the sanctuary onto a parking lot at the back of the building. A balcony for women, overlooking the Torah ark at the front of the sanctuary, is accessible from the main entrance, but during the week it was consistently empty. Over the course of my fieldwork, between twenty–four and thirty Hasidic and non–Hasidic men regularly attended *minchah* and *ma'ariv* services, filtering in through both entrances. Some arrived only for *minchah*, others only for *ma'ariv*, which made it difficult to keep track of the total number of worshippers at any given time. While at least half a dozen regulars were boys under the age of thirteen, the congregation was never short for a *minyán*, the quorum of ten adult men required to hold prayer according to Jewish law. The services featured Russian as the language of sermon and conversation and Hebrew as the language of prayer; most of the worshippers read from prayer books with the Hebrew words transliterated into Russian. During the thirty–minute break between the afternoon and evening services, the rabbi hosted a *shiur* (Torah lesson), in Russian. English adorned memorial plaques fastened to the synagogue's walls, but it was rarely spoken in my time at the Rockford *shul*.

"You Ever Heard the Term 'Intelligentsia?'" Russian and Jewish Life at the JRCC

Using census data gathered by the local UJA Federation from 2001 to 2006 along with its own records, the JRCC reported 13,496 Russian Jewish families in Ontario in 2010, with 6,068 based in Toronto. Overall, the JRCC counted 41,500 Russian Jews in Ontario.⁴³ While the figures are proprietary, and thus not necessarily reliable, they do correspond with data collected by Toronto-based sociologist Robert Brym. In his 2001 study, Brym estimated 20,088 "Soviet Jewish immigrants" living in Canada, with 62.5 percent based in Toronto; he noted that Jewish community leaders at the time estimated the total Soviet Jewish population at around 50,000, which, if true, meant 31,250 Russian Jews lived in Toronto in 2001.⁴⁴ By 2013, the JRCC claimed it served "over 50,000 people including 14,000 households."⁴⁵

Non-Russian Chabad centres in the GTA are encouraged to direct Jews from the former Soviet Union to the JRCC.⁴⁶ Rabbi Yoseph Zaltzman, who grew up in Samarkand and Moscow and founded the JRCC in 1980, told me mainstream Chabad centres are "not allowed" to serve post-Soviet Jews.⁴⁷ It is, perhaps, obvious that Russian Jews would choose to attend a Russian-language synagogue managed by clergy with a shared past and experience. For instance, Yisroel K., the rabbi, was born in Moscow in the late 1970s and became a Chabad *ba'al teshuva* there in the early 1990s; his Saint Petersburg-born wife, Henya K., immigrated with her family to Toronto in 1979, the year of her birth. Between them they represent two major waves of Soviet Jewish immigration—the first, between 1971 and 1981, and the third, post-1988—from which most Russian-speaking Jews in the GTA derive.⁴⁸ Having grown up in an era of emigration and relative openness, they represent a segment of the Russian-speaking post-Soviet Jewish community that Shternshis hypothesizes has a "positive sense of Jewish community," tied to Jewish traditions, culture and, in some cases, Judaic practice.⁴⁹

Gitelman disregards the relevance of Chabad's widespread activism among post-Soviet Jews out of hand because religiosity, in his estimation, is of marginal concern to attendees.⁵⁰ Other scholars claim that post-Soviet Jews in general have turned away from the synagogue as the principal venue for Jewish religious and cultural practice.⁵¹ Yet, for many Russian-speaking Jews, Chabad-run institutions in the former Soviet Union and North America, including the GTA, are key entry points to any form of social, cultural, or religious Jewish experience. Once inside the Chabad sphere, post-Soviet Jews are provided a highly accessible and intellectually attractive prism through which they can begin to grasp Jewish concepts, learn how to maintain a Jewish lifestyle and understand "the fundamentals of Jewish life."⁵²

In the GTA, JRCC branches have become nodal points at which post-Soviet Jews can access social and settlement services (i.e., immigration aid, emergency financial assistance, legal counselling, food bank, clothing bank), youth and adult educational and cultural programming, basic Jewish life cycle services (bar and bat mitzvah training, marriage, divorce), and those attuned to the ex-Soviet Jewish experience, such as adult circumcision and Jewish identity verification. While religious services and much of the educational and cultural programming are no doubt meant to incentivize *halakhic* observance (according to Jewish law), JRCC leaders recognize that the complex nature of the Soviet Jewish past requires sensitivity in their approach to religion. As such, the authors of the 2010 JRCC guide write: “Most of our programs and services are not ‘religious.’ Everyone is welcome to participate and benefit from all our programs, regardless of their background or level of observance. When it comes to religious programs, people are invited to enjoy meaningful, spiritual experiences that they feel comfortable with. The JRCC conducts traditional services that follow Jewish law (Halacha), but nothing is ever imposed on anyone.”⁵³

While the JRCC stresses its mandate “is to build a strong Jewish community among Jews from the FSU and the descendants and families—not the dissemination of Russian culture,” it nevertheless includes Russian culture “as part of our programs in order to serve the needs and interests of our community.”⁵⁴ For instance, the JRCC touts its bookstore as carrying the “largest selection of Jewish Russian books in North America,”⁵⁵ and publishes a monthly magazine called *Exodus* in Russian- and English-language editions, both of which feature classifieds directed toward the Russian-speaking community. All of my respondents agreed that the JRCC’s commitment to programming in the Russian language, as well as its tacit promotion of Russian culture, were important in fostering a “common experience.” Sergei U., to cite one example, briefly attended a Chabad yeshiva in Kiev in 1990. He left the movement after immigrating to Israel in 1991 and shared that he harbours conflicting feelings about Chabad’s theological precepts. One Sabbath afternoon I listened to the 43-year-old father of two argue, in Russian, with a Hasidic companion about Lubavitch messianism and Israeli politics. In spite of his religious disillusionment with Chabad, Sergei attends the Rockford *shul* on most Sabbaths because he can recite jokes, debate theology and argue about current affairs with people who, disagreements aside, are like-minded in nature. He compared the Rockford *shul* to a “social club.”⁵⁶

Leo K., who was born in Leningrad in 1974, described the JRCC not only as a religious space, but a cultural and intellectual one as well. All of my respondents offered similar descriptions, highlighting the dual function as unique in the Russian-speaking Jewish community. When I asked Leo about the attractions of the Russian Chabad synagogue, he responded,

For Russian people, they want to belong to something that's their own. Back in Russia, they're so deeply immersed in Russian culture it becomes part of their life, even here. We read Russian books, we speak Russian, we watch Russian movies, we know Russian music. You want to be with people who have the same background. It is extremely important.⁵⁷

This desire is not lost on JRCC leaders. In the "Notes and Observations" section of the JRCC handbook, the writers relay short statements supposedly made by members of the community. Whether the statements are real or fabricated is irrelevant; either way, they reveal the hyper-acuity of Chabad activists toward the post-Soviet Jewish relationship to culture and intellectualism. Three are worth reprinting in full:

We want programs that cater to our uniquely Russian sense of humor and other cultural factors.

Many of us are accustomed to a culture of opulence in public life, so everything the JRCC does must strive for a level of presentation and classiness we appreciate.

Jews from the FSU, especially those from metropolitan cities, have a tradition of educational excellence, and many of us consider ourselves intellectuals. Our educational programs and events (speakers, etc.) must meet our high expectations.⁵⁸

The majority of my respondents shared versions of these sentiments, especially the third one. In seeking out Jewish activities, religious or otherwise, they emphasized the importance of a strong intellectual component. Shternshis and others have underscored the deep-rooted connection between post-Soviet Jews and Russian high culture. They argue that post-Soviet Jews take immense pride in the intellectual and cultural legacy of their educated Soviet forebears, who, unlike their pre-revolutionary ancestors from the shtetl, were vital and creative—if also socially marginalized—contributors to Soviet society.⁵⁹

Russian scholar Simon Parizhsky has argued that Chabad is fundamentally incompatible with contemporary Russian Jewry as it insists upon the "embrace of exclusivist Jewish particularism" and the abandonment of one's "previous cognitive and axio-normative universe."⁶⁰ This reveals a basic misunderstanding about Chabad, which, more than any other ultra-Orthodox group, sidesteps exclusivism, erecting a big tent for non-religious Jews through its non-judgmental commitment to a concept called *kiruv*, or outreach.⁶¹ Where other Orthodox groups might reject outsiders for their lack of prior Jewish religious knowledge, their incapacity to grasp arcane religious concepts, or their reticence toward full-blown commitment, Chabad does

not.⁶² Moreover, Chabad encounters modernity head on, entering into relentless dialogue with the secular Jewish world.⁶³ Indeed, Chabad is primed to engage Russian Jews' intellectualism. Chabad, too, considers the study of its Hasidic philosophy, rooted in arcane mystical text called *Tanya*, an intellectual pursuit; Chabad, it should be noted, is a Hebrew acronym that stands for *chochma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding) and *da'at* (knowledge).⁶⁴

In the Russian Lubavitch space, Chabad emissaries, I have found, strive for relatability with their post-Soviet constituents, cultivating and promoting an intellectual connection on both Jewish and Russian planes.⁶⁵ In one example, the JRCC-produced *Exodus* magazine refrains from printing articles that only espouse a particularistic Lubavitch worldview. While the publication does feature a regular essay about personal encounters with the late rebbe and an "Ask the Rabbi" section with a Lubavitch interlocutor, it also prints syndicated columns on Israeli-Palestinian relations and terrorism in Europe by (conservative) non-Chabad Jewish commentators such as Caroline Glick, Jonathan Sacks and Daniel Pipes.⁶⁶ One of my respondents, Dovid L., who was born in Moscow, described Chabad as the "religion of intellect." In a later interview, he discussed the conversation he has with JRCC rabbis, leading to the following exchange:

"When you speak to people and you use Russian references from your past life, people understand. The books you read, the lifestyle you led. For Russian people, it's very, how would I say it? I don't know if you ever heard the term 'intelligentsia?'"

"Yes, of course."

"Yeah, so, for Russian people it's the books, the music, the literature, the art. It becomes part of the people. When you interact with people, all of this comes up in conversation."⁶⁷

Taken together, these two notions reveal a post-Soviet Jewish hybridity unique to the Russian Lubavitch space. JRCC leaders' instrumentalize their understanding of Soviet Jewish values of education, intellectualism, and culture, in tandem with Chabad's own intellectually minded Jewish religious content, effectively creating an identity platform on which its constituents can amalgamate, or find coexistence between, their Soviet and Jewish identities.

Field Notes: Cell phones in Shul and l'Chaim's

According to anthropologist Fran Markowitz, "Rituals, because they encapsulate, demonstrate, and play with central symbols of a social system, can be used as keys to unlock the unconscious workings of a culture."⁶⁸ With that in mind, in this section I examine a selection of rituals at the Rockford *shul* to illuminate the uniqueness of

the Russian Chabad synagogue—or the Russian synagogue,” as Steven J. Gold has dubbed it⁶⁹—as a religious and social space adapted to the particularities of post-Soviet Jewish experience.

On a Saturday morning in late March 2015, I rode a subway and a bus for nearly an hour to the synagogue at 18 Rockford Rd. I arrived there shortly after 8:30. A handful of men were already there, preparing for the weekly Sabbath service about to begin. Some perused bookshelves lining the back of the sanctuary for Russian-Hebrew *siddurim* (daily prayer books) and *chumashim* (bound copies of the Torah); some stationed themselves at one of six long tables covered with thin white cloth, tying black *gartels* (belts) around their stomachs; and some gathered around the rabbi, Yisroel K., who sat in his customary position at the front of the room, to the right of the ark, which contained the Torah.

For about ninety minutes the service unfolded effortlessly, until the Torah was removed and its scroll unfurled on the *bimah* (pulpit) in the centre of the sanctuary. The *parashah* (weekly Torah reading) was *Vayikra*, a lengthy passage in the Book of Leviticus that delineates the Jewish laws of sacrifice. Most Sabbath Torah readings are divided into seven portions, with a prayer recited before and after each one. Yisroel committed to reciting portions two through seven. His delivery was stilted and atonal. He laboured over the Hebrew, struggling with the words as surrounding members called out mistakes, forcing the rabbi to halt his progress and correct himself. At the conclusion of the seventh portion, with the Torah scroll still open, two men joined Yisroel at the *bimah*. For several minutes the three of them whispered in Russian. I witnessed this scene while sitting near the back of the sanctuary, perhaps ten feet away. The two other men at my table were both Hasids named Dovid. Absorbed in their prayer books, they seemed unconcerned with the problem at the *bimah*, as if these liturgical confusions occurred on a regular basis. When I asked the Dovid on my left what was causing the delay, he leaned back in his chair and stared at the centre of the room. “I really don’t know,” he replied, fingering a few strands of his beard. “I think they forgot to pause between the sixth and seventh portions and now they’re trying to figure out how to deal with the *mafiir*,” or the final portion.

The rabbi’s wobbly Torah reading came as an utter surprise. Unusual for a Hasidic rabbi, or any rabbi for that matter, Yisroel seemed unprepared—perhaps unable—to lead his congregation competently at the climax of the Saturday morning service. He was not alone in his ritual clumsiness. Although many of the congregants, like their rabbi, dressed in the style of Lubavitch Hasidim, carried out synagogue rituals and participated in Jewish prayer, their outwardly devout behaviour did not necessarily correlate with fluency in Jewish orthodoxy. Leo K., who led services for several weeks as part of a process of mourning for his recently deceased wife and two daughters, described to his relationship to Jewish texts, common among my respondents: “I can

daven (pray). I can read the prayer. I don't understand that well, I don't understand one hundred percent, I understand a little bit. But I can lead the prayer."

As the weeks went on, it became clear that ritual practice inside the Rockford Sanctuary was far from sacrosanct. Instead, it was performed in such a way that it accommodated the idiosyncratic nature of Russian Jewry described above. In other studies, Russian Jewish respondents, especially from older generations, have voiced dismay at the inaccessibility of synagogue services. They complain that synagogues are "designed for 'insiders'—Jewish people familiar with the structure of Jewish prayer and some Hebrew language."⁷⁰ The Russian Chabad synagogue, however, attempts to ameliorate this discomfort through patience and tolerance, even if parishioners' behaviour contravenes Jewish Orthodoxy.⁷¹ While Yisroel K's own struggles at the *bimah* exemplify this tolerance, it also came into focus one *minchah* service in March during the Amidah, one of the most important prayers in the Jewish liturgical canon.

Recited in the morning, afternoon, and evening, the Amidah demands solemnity and reverence. During its recital, worshippers are expected to stand straight, with "feet touching one another in at the instep.... Nothing is allowed to challenge one's involvement in the amida [sic]. . . Openly defiant deviations (e.g. boisterous conversations), are both halachically (according to Jewish law) and socially illegitimate, for they publicly undermine devotion to prayer called for by the occasion."⁷² On this occasion, midway through the Amidah, a cellphone went off, its ringtone filling the silence with a digitized tune. The owner, a non-Hasidic man in his fifties, glanced at the phone but did not silence the sound. Nor did he do so when the phone rang twice more, suggesting he was not aware of the Amidah's solemn etiquette. In addition to the cellphone incident, in my time at Rockford I observed frequent disruptions of the silent Amidah prayer by Hasidim and non-Hasidim: people chatted, tapped on their cellphones, and brewed coffee in a kitchenette attached to the sanctuary. And yet, no one was ever (publicly) reprimanded. By way of comparison, Sasha Goluboff writes of a similar occurrence she witnessed at Moscow's (non-Chabad, Orthodox) Choral Synagogue in the mid-1990s, when a group of Georgian Jews talked loudly through the Amidah, prompting one incensed Russian congregant to yell, "Sha!"⁷³ While Goluboff's sources were not completely observant in their daily lives, their adherence to Orthodox praxis inside the synagogue serves to illustrate Chabad's relative leniency, which is perfectly suited to ex-Soviet congregants not steeped in Jewish religious tradition and normative synagogue behaviour. It is important to remember that Chabad places primacy on practice (doing Judaism) over mastery of religious concepts; "intention, while valuable, is not the point."⁷⁴ Indeed, my respondents who did not self-identify as Lubavitch praised the JRCC for not demanding strict adherence to religious tenets.

Another illustrative example of this open-mindedness occurred after the post-services *kiddish* one Saturday morning, when Dovid G. delivered a speech in honour of his newborn daughter. Standing next to the *bimah*, Dovid spoke, in Russian, about the *mitzvah* of bringing life into the world and raising a family. It was his first time sermonizing in front of the congregation and, shifting his weight from side to side, he was visibly unsure of the religious ideas he was feeding the crowd. The rabbi sat to Dovid's immediate left, nodding his head and gently offering support as Dovid stumbled over words. As Dovid finished, the room erupted in applause and the men toasted shots of vodka. Later, Dovid approached me and asked a string of questions: "How did I do? Was it okay? Did I make sense?" His lack of religious knowledge, starkly contrasted with his external appearance of beard and black velvet yarmulke, was no problem at the Rockford *shul*, which, I discovered, served as a sort of testing ground for post-Soviet Jews in a similar transitional stage as Dovid, gradually re-configuring their Jewish selves within a safe, exclusively Russian *ba'al teshuva* setting.

The Sabbath *kiddish* meal helps illustrate the extent to which my respondents understand their enactment of some normative Hasidic practices as distinctly Russian. After services one Saturday morning, I was invited to stay for *kiddish*. White sheets had been spread over the sanctuary's prayer tables and congregants distributed Styrofoam bowls filled with beet salad, egg salad, and cholent. Men and women occupied three tables each on either side of the sanctuary, separated by a children's table. Bottles of vodka were passed around the men's side of the room. The set-up was similar to a Russian Chabad *kiddish* Gold observed in Los Angeles in the 1990s and it matched other post-Sabbath luncheons I have attended at Chabad centres in the former Soviet Union.⁷⁵ The Hasidic *kiddish* table is not complete without alcohol. Popular during festivals, including the Sabbath, drinking has played both a religious and cultural role in the Hasidic experience for centuries. According to Hasidic tradition, the consumption of alcohol helps separate spirit from body, enabling an individual to experience a purer relationship with the divine, unimpeded by corporeal concerns.⁷⁶ For that reason, Glenn Dynner has explained, "Hasidim confined the heaviest drinking to sacred times and spaces."⁷⁷

At Rockford, the men poured vodka into tiny plastic cups and ordered a round of *l'chaim's*. As the bottles were circulated, one man turned to me, the only outsider, and asked, in English: "Do you know how to do a *l'chaim*?" Another man across the table from me added: "This is how they do it in Russia!" Finally, the rabbi chimed in: "Of course he does! He knows Berel Lazar," he told the table, referring to a meeting I once had with Russia's chief rabbi. In her study of Moscow-based Jews, Sasha Goluboff found that her (non-Hasidic) subjects considered "excessive drinking of alcohol to be a Russian trait," inappropriate for Jews. Sobriety, in other words, was cast as a positive Jewish attribute, and drunkenness a negative Russian one.⁷⁸ Similarly, Alice Nakhimovsky has pointed to examples in Russian literature where alco-

hol is a beverage imbibed only by Russians, not “unmasculine” Russian Jews.⁷⁹ The men of Rockford, however, embraced alcohol consumption as a clear marker of their Russian—not Jewish or Hasidic—identities. In fact, one of the men at my end of the table, Alex R., a 41-year-old software consultant from Mogilev, Belarus, referred to the Sabbath *l'chaim's*, of which there were many, as “something we do as Russians.”

Drinking is embedded in Hasidim's cultural code, but, as my respondents indicated, in Russians' as well. This act helps illuminate the braided nature of Russian Jewish identity in the Lubavitch space; moreover, the Russian Chabad synagogue is a space that allows for the “possibility of a synthesis of cultures, both Jewish and Russian,” where drinking is at once a performance of Jewishness and a performance of Russianness.⁸⁰ Moreover, it reveals the unique coexistence of Russianness and Jewishness in an ultra-Orthodox environment oriented toward post-Soviet Jews. Respondents felt no need to mute their Russianness despite the overt Jewish colouring of their environment. Indeed, their Russianness and their Jewishness converged.

While the small sample size in this study presents a challenge in making reliable conclusions about the evolving nature of post-Soviet Jewish identity through its exposure to Lubavitch praxis, this essay provides preliminary insight into how further study of this interaction might lead to a recalibration of the way scholars approach post-Soviet Jewish identity. By and large, my respondents have discovered—or, as some put it, returned to—Judaism through their encounter with Chabad. For some, this has meant adopting religious dress and living according to *halakha*; for others, this has meant engaging in religious rituals or, with far less commitment, developing a sense of what being Jewish means to them.

As far back as 1996, the ethnographer Fran Markowitz wrote in a study of Russian Jewish teenagers that the increasing opportunity for Russian-speaking Jews to practise their Jewishness would allow “new definitions of identity [to] vie with and challenge the old and, as a result, various forms of combining, separating out, or merging Jewish and Russian traits will co-exist in the coming years.”⁸¹ It remains imperative to search for “emerging forms of expression and identification” within a population only recently exposed to the saturation of Jewish social, cultural, and religious opportunities.⁸² The questions posed at the beginning of this essay represent my belief that the ways Jewishness is explored and actualized among Russian-speaking Jews should be examined more specifically with Chabad in mind. Chabad's influence in the Russian-speaking Jewish world opens a rich forum for these Jews to negotiate their identities in the future. Perhaps, as even Gitelman has wondered, these ethnic entrepreneurs “will have the effect of changing not only behavioral habits but also values and beliefs.”⁸³

Acknowledgments

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- 1**
Interview with Dovid G., April 2015, Toronto.
- 2**
Dovid's memory here is fractured, but he insisted a Lubavitch emissary lived in Kishinev in the 1980s. It is possible he remembers the Chabad rabbi Zalman Abelsky, a native of Russia who moved from Israel to Moldova in 1990 and remained there until his death in 2014. "Slice of Life: Rabbi Zalman Abelsky OBM," *Jewish Community of Kishinev and Moldova*, last modified July 27, 2014, <http://www.kishinev.org/en/slice-of-life/rabbi-zalman-abelsky-obm>.
- 3**
Ba'al teshuva literally means "one who returns" and refers to previously non-religious Jews who have adopted an Orthodox lifestyle. As Sarah Bunin Benor writes, "BTs exist in a cultural borderland between their non-Orthodox upbringing and the *frum* ... communities they have joined." Sarah Bunin Benor, *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 1.
- 4**
Bunin Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 13–14.
- 5**
For the United States see Boris Gordis, "All is not in the Family: Thoughts on 'Integration' of Russian Jews and Other Jewish Ethnic Groups in the US," *Sociological Papers* 17 (2012): 1–22; and Steven J. Gold, "Community Formation Among Jews from the Former Soviet Union in the United States," in *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Re-settlement*, eds. Noah Lewin-Epstein, Yaacov Ro'i and Paul Ritterband (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 261–283; for Europe see David Shneer, "The third way: German-Russian-European Jewish Identity in a global Jewish World," *European Review of History* 18, no. 1 (February 2011): 111–121; for Australia see Suzanne D. Rutland, "Jews from the Former Soviet Union in Australia: Assimilating or Maintaining Jewish Identities?" *Journal of Jewish Identities* 4, no. 1 (January 2011): 65–85.

- 6**
"History," *Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe: The Chabad Lubavitch Russian Immigrant Program*, accessed June 15, 2015, <http://www.russianjewry.org/about/history.php>.
- 7**
Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.
- 8**
Zvi Gitelman, "Introduction: Homelands, Diasporas, and the Islands in Between," in *The New Jewish Diaspora: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 1–19.
- 9**
Anna Shternshis, "Kaddish in a Church: Perceptions of Orthodox Christianity among Moscow Elderly Jews in the Early Twenty-First Century," *The Russian Review* 66 (April 2007): 277.
- 10**
Zvi Gitelman, "Jewish Identity and Secularism in Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine," in *Religion or Ethnicity? Jewish Identities in Evolution*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 248.
- 11**
Fran Markowitz, "Jewish in the USSR, Russian in the USA," in *Persistence and Flexibility: Anthropological Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience*, ed. Walter P. Zenner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 81.
- 12**
Valeriy Chervyakov, Zvi Gitelman and Vladimir Shapiro, "Religion and ethnicity: Judaism in the ethnic consciousness of contemporary Russian Jews," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 20, no. 2 (April 1997): 293–294.
- 13**
Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 151.

14

Samuel Kliger, "The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union," in *New York Glory: Religions in the City*, eds. Tony Carnes and Anna Karpathakis (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 154.

15

See Mordechai Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941–1964* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012); Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), esp. 112–144; and Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), esp. 107–157.

16

See Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kasher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); and David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

17

Sebastian Z. Schulman, "Undzer Rebenyu: Religion, Memory, and Identity in Postwar Moldova," in *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse*, ed. Jeffrey Veidlinger (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 225.

18

Rebecca Golbert, "In Search of a Meaningful Framework for the Study of Post-Soviet Jewish Identities, with Special Emphasis on the Case of Ukraine," *East European Jewish Affairs* 28, no. 1 (1998), 28.

19

Shternshis, "White Piano in a Shtetl: Material Culture and Ethnic Identity in the Post-Soviet Jewish Urban Community," *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 114.

20

See Larissa Remennick, "From State Socialism to State Judaism: 'Russian' Immigrants in Israel and their Attitudes towards Religion," *Sociological Papers* 15 (2010): 60–73; and Anna Shternshis, "Virtual Village in a Real World: The Russian Jewish Diaspora Online," in *The New Jewish Diaspora*, 229–245.

21

Remennick, "From State Socialism to State Judaism," 60.

22

Ibid, 72. See also Shternshis, "Virtual Village in a Real World," and Marina Sapritsky, "Home in the Diaspora? Jewish Returnees and Transmigrants in Ukraine," in *The New Jewish Diaspora*, 60–74.

23

Golbert, "In Search of a Meaningful Framework," 5.

24

Maya Balakirsky Katz, *The Visual Culture of Chabad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140. The term appears again in Isaiah 54:3: "For you will spread out (*paratzta*) to the right and to the left. And your descendants will possess nations and inhabit desolate cities."

25

Ibid. For a fascinating overview on the messaging strategies of Chabad *ufaratzta* campaigns, see Katz, *The Visual Culture of Chabad*, 140–143.

26

Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 162.

27

Katz, *The Visual Culture of Chabad*, 6.

28

Anya Vaisman Schulman, "Seamed Stockings and Ponytails: Conducting Ethnographic Fieldwork in a Contemporary Hasidic Community," in *Going to the People*, 295.

29

Ibid, 296.

30

Menachem Friedman, "Habad as Messianic Fundamentalism: From Local Particularism to Universal Jewish Mission," in *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 346.

31

See, for instance, "L'Chaim on a Moscow Train Platform: 25th Year Since the Fall of the USSR," *Chabad.org*, December 24, 2015, http://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/3176824/jewish/LChaim-on-a-Moscow-Train-Platform-25th-Year-Since-the-Fall-of-the-USSR.htm.

32

For one example, see Hillel Zatzman, *Samar-kand: The Underground With a Far-Reaching Impact* (Chamah, 2015). Or, in Russian, David Schechter, *Soldaty na pereprave: Vospominaniya hasidov Chabada, sobrannyye i literaturno obrabotannyye D. Schehterom* (Moscow: Knizhnik, 2014), and Zeev Vagner, *Vosemnadsat* (Jerusalem: Shamir, 1989)

33

See David E. Fishman, "Preserving Tradition in the Land of Revolution: The Religious Leadership of Soviet Jewry, 1917–1930," in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 85–118; M. Avrum Ehrlich, "The Unique Relationship between Habad Hasidism and Russia," in *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora: Volume 3 (Countries, Regions, and Communities)*, ed. M. Avrum Ehrlich (Santa Barbara, CA: ABO-CLIO, 2009), 998–1001.

34

Fishman, "Preserving Tradition in the Land of Revolution," 105.

35

There is no definitive scholarly treatment of this episode in Lubavitch and Soviet history. For an autobiographical account see Joseph Isaac Schneersohn and Alter B. Metzger, *The Heroic Struggle: The Arrest and Liberation of Rabbi Yosef Y. Schneersohn of Lubavitch in Soviet Russia* (Brooklyn: Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, 1998); and Rachel Altein and Israel Jacobson, *Out of the Inferno: The Efforts That Led to the Rescue of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch from War Torn Europe in 1939–40* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 2002), a hagiographical account printed by Chabad's publishing division.

36

Ehrlich, "The Unique Relationship," 1000.

37

Katz, *The Visual Culture of Chabad*, 40.

38

See, for instance, Berel Lazar, "*Nado sozdat' uslovia, pri kotorykh everei ne stremilis' by uezzhat' iz Rossii*," *Lechaim* 7, no. 99. Lazar repeated this idea in an interview with the author on February 22, 2015, in Moscow, Russia.

39

Simon Parizhsky, "Jewish Studies in the FSU: From Scholarship to Social, Cultural and Educational Construction, Regeneration and Growth," in *Educational Eclectics: Essays in memory of Shlomo (Seymour) Fox*, eds. Shmuel Wygoda and Israel Sorek (Jerusalem: Mandel Foundation, 2009), 70.

40

Yoseph Y. Zaltzman and Izzy Greenberg, *JRCC Programs and Mission: JRCC Operations Handbook, Part 1* (Toronto: Jewish Russian Community Centre of Ontario, 2010), 40.

41

There are eight JRCC-affiliated synagogues as of March 2020. See https://www.jrcc.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/73805/jewish/Branches.htm, accessed March 6, 2020.

42

Benor, *Becoming Frum*, 48–49. As Bunin Benor has written, this disparity is virtually unavoidable in any study of Orthodox Jews because the researcher is often separated from the world of the opposite gender.

43

Zaltzman and Greenberg, *JRCC Programs and Mission*, 40.

44

Robert J. Brym, "Jewish Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Canada," *East European Jewish Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2001): 35.

45

Yoseph Y. Zaltzman, *Yoseph Y. Zaltzman to Nancy Martins, November 20, 2013*. Letter. From City of Toronto, <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2013/pg/comm/communicationfile-41866.pdf>. See Brym, "Jewish Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Canada," 35, 41n3.

46

According to the JRCC operations manual, "members of the Jewish FSU community who approach Chabad organizations should be referred to the JRCC." Zaltzman and Greenberg,

JRCC Programs and Mission, 10.

47

Interview with Yoseph Zaltzman, April 2015, Toronto.

48

Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration and Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 279–281.

49

Shternshis, “Virtual Village in a Real World,” 232.

50

Gitelman, *Jewish Identities*, 337–338.

51

Shternshis, “Kaddish in a Church,” 277.

52

Gordis, “All is not in the Family,” 6–7.

53

Zaltzman and Greenberg, *JRCC Programs and Mission*, 12. In reality, this mandate has proven tricky to navigate. According to one community insider, in 2014, JRCC rabbis refused to participate in Toronto’s inaugural Limmud FSU conference, which gathered hundreds of Russian-speaking Jews from across the province for a weekend of lectures and seminars, because the organizers would not accommodate strict Sabbath and kosher requirements. Interview, Galina S., April 2015, Toronto.

54

Zaltzman and Greenberg, *JRCC Programs and Mission*, 12..

55

The 2007 JRCC Annual Report (Toronto: Jewish Russian Community Centre of Ontario, 2007), 18. While many of the titles cover Chabad themes, the store also features general history and literature, such as Anatoly Kuznetsov’s *Babi Yar*.

56

Interview, Sergei U., April 2015, Toronto.

57

Interview with Leo K., March 2015, Toronto.

58

Zaltzman and Greenberg, *JRCC Programs and Mission*, 66.

59

Tamar Rapoport and Edna Lomsky-Feder, “‘Intelligentsia’ as an Ethnic Habit: The Inculcation and Restructuring of Intelligentsia among Russian Jews,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 23, no. 2 (June 2002): 233, 236; Shternshis, “White Piano in a Shtetl,” 123; Parizhsky, “Jewish Studies in the FSU,” 67–68.

60

Parizhsky, “Jewish Studies in the FSU,” 72.

61

Katz, *The Visual Culture of Chabad*, 5–6.

62

Ibid, 6.

63

Friedman, “Habod as Messianic Fundamentalism,” 340.

64

Ibid, 331.

65

Examples are numerous in the contemporary Russian context. In Moscow, de facto centre of Russian Jewish life, Chabad organizes well-attended Yiddish concerts, sponsors film festivals and klezmer concerts, publishes a popular Jewish affairs magazine, hosts a chic Georgian restaurant and administers the non-denominational Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center.

66

See, for example, *Exodus Magazine*, December 2015, <https://issuu.com/exodus-magazine/stacks>.

67

Interview with Dovid L., February 2015, Toronto.

68

Fran Markowitz, “Rituals as Keys to Soviet Immigrants’ Jewish Identity,” in *Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry*, ed. Jack Kugelmass (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 129–30.

69

Gold, “Community Formation,” 270.

70

Shternshis, “Kaddish in a Church,” 284.

71

Sharrona Pearl, "Exceptions to the Rule: Chabad-Lubavitch and the Digital Sphere," *Journal of Media and Religion* 13 (2014): 132.

72

Samuel Heilman, *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 144.

73

Sascha L. Goluboff, "Fistfights at the Moscow Choral Synagogue: Ethnicity and Ritual in Post-Soviet Russia," *Anthropological Quarterly* no. 2 (April 2001): 63.

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Pearl, "Exceptions to the Rule," 123.

75

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