The Outreach Revolution

Platoons of Orthodox Jews are transforming American Jewish life

By Jack Wertheimer

A CHASM SEPARATES the Orthodox from other American Jews—or so we are told. Orthodox Jews marry younger, have considerably larger families, and provide their children with far more intensive Jewish educational and socialization experiences. They also depart from the left-of-center political positions held by the rest of the community. Mitt Romney is thought to have won in the past presidential election more than 90 percent of the vote in heavily Orthodox neighborhoods, while Barack Obama won landslides in districts with heavy concentrations of other Jews. And when it comes to Israel's security, Orthodox Jews tend to favor hawkish policies and express unqualified support for West Bank settlers in a way that makes many of their co-religionists uneasy. Hence the supposedly growing gulf between them.

But this account is incomplete. The relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews are far more complicated—and bound to get even more complicated over time. A little-noted phenomenon is actually spurring *increased* contact between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, far more so than has been the case for at least two generations. Driving this process are small platoons of Orthodox Jews enlisted in the cause of outreach to non-Orthodox Jews. The scale of their activities is staggering; together, these platoons form an army of outreach. Their enterprise has the power to alter everyone's perspective—to widen the perceptions both of the non-Orthodox Jews who have dealings with outreach workers and of the Orthodox activists who are finding themselves exposed to a Jewish world they could not have imagined during their years of cloistered yeshiva study.

ORTHODOX outreach, or *kiruv* (literally, "bringing close," meaning closer to God and the commandments), first began in the United States after the Second World War. Inside the Modern Orthodox sector—those Jews who rigorously follow the commandments but do not seek to separate themselves from the commercial and cultural life of

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the country—educational programs were launched to teach returning war veterans and Jewish children enrolled in public schools about traditional Jewish observance. By the 1950s, the Torah U'Mesorah movement was energetically planting Orthodox day schools in communities around the country, most of whose students did not come from fully observant homes.

Then, sometime around 1958, the leader of the Lubavitch Hasidim, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, recruited the first small cadre of emissaries to fan out to communities across the United States and abroad with the mission of remaking those communities. *Kiruv** efforts picked up steam in the 1960s with the opening of yeshivas in Israel aimed at potential *baalei teshuva* (returnees to Jewish practice) and beginner services in American Orthodox synagogues. By 1988, enough personnel were engaged in *kiruv* work to warrant the creation of the Association of Jewish Outreach Programs, or AJOP.

Since the 1990s, the *kiruv* project has really taken off, led by Chabad. For younger Jews, Chabad runs early-childhood programs, Hebrew schools, day schools, day camps, and teen programs; Chabad also operates on 178 college and university campuses across the country and sponsors activities geared specifically to young singles and newly married couples in their twenties and thirties. In Dallas, for example, an emissary has converted a former bookstore into a meeting place for Jewish singles; he finds potential participants by frequenting bars preferred by this demographic.

For adults, Chabad also offers a panoply of activities: daily and Sabbath services, High Holiday prayer venues, educational lectures, and social programs. Some Chabad emissaries run hiking and skiing programs where they can connect with Jews in recreational settings. To this mix Chabad adds initiatives directed at sub-populations of Jews, including immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their offspring, and families with special-needs children.

Of particular note is the Jewish Learning Institute (JLI), by far the largest internationally coordinated adult-education program on Jewish topics, offering the same set of courses at hundreds of Chabad locations around the world, all on the same schedule. This means that Jews who are traveling can follow the same course from session to session, even if they find themselves in a different city each week. In the fall of 2012, nearly 14,000 American Jews were enrolled in JLI courses, and overall close to 26,000 participated in Chabad's teen- and adult-education programs.

The Chabad network is striving to create a seamless transition, so that young people who attended its camps or schools will gravitate to a Chabad campus center when they arrive at college and later, as adults, will join Chabad synagogue centers. No other Jewish movement offers this kind of cradle-to-grave set of services. The participants in these programs, needless to say, range in their Jewish commitments, but with the exception of a small minority, all are drawn from the ranks of the non-Orthodox.

As stunning as the Chabad network is in its scope, the explosion of *kiruv* work now emanating from non-Hasidic yeshivas is remarkable. The Haredi (literally, "those who tremble" in fear of God) or yeshivish world is far more insular than Chabad, which has always seen its mission as reaching out to Jews of all stripes (a strategy devised in part by Chabad leaders who were living under Communist oppression). But there has been considerable change in this regard. Aish HaTorah, which runs seminars on leading a Jewish life, is the most prominent *kiruv* organization, with locations in some 20 U.S. cities and a presence on nearly as many university campuses. The dramatic increase in community or outreach *kollelim*—centers of study for advanced yeshiva students—is now bringing rabbis ordained at Haredi institutions such as Ner Israel in Baltimore and the Lakewood Yeshiva in New Jersey to some 50 communities around the country. The men involved in community *kollelim* are expected to divide their days between their own continuing education and leading study groups for local Jewish residents. Non-Chabad outreach organizations also include regional initiatives such as the Jewish Awareness Movement in Southern California and the Manhattan Jewish Experience, both directed at Jewish singles; the latter, on the Upper West Side, attracts hundreds of participants on a weekly basis. In quite a few cities, independent operators, often graduates of Aish, have founded their own *kiruv* centers.

* The grammatically correct Hebrew pronunciation would be *kayruv*, but in Orthodox circles *keyruv* is preferred.

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How many people staff this multitude of programs? One estimate from the former head of the Association of Jewish Outreach Programs puts the number of current full-time outreach workers at 3,500. This figure seems far too modest when we consider Chabad's contribution alone: Currently some 1,600 Chabad families serve as emissaries in the United States (a figure that has quadrupled in the past 20 years). Since both spouses engage in outreach work full time, that means 3,200 *shluchim* and *shluchos* (as the male and female emissaries are called) are engaged in *kiruv*.

Moreover, many Chabad schools, centers, and programs are staffed by younger people who are training to become emissaries. They are augmented by a back-office staff, which puts out publications, maintains the website chabad.org, prepares educational materials, and coordinates programs. The Chabad enterprise, therefore, probably consists of over 5,000 people engaged full time in *kiruv*. Then there are the 2,000 non-Chabad outreach workers who constitute the membership of the Association of Jewish Outreach Programs. Not to be overlooked are perhaps as many as 200 Modern Orthodox full-time outreach workers and many dozens of independent operators.

All in all, the estimated 5,000–7,000 men and women working full time across the country in *kiruv*—that is, with non-Orthodox Jews—constitute more than double the number of active Conservative, Reform, and all other permutations of liberal rabbis *combined*.

BY SUBSUMING all these activities under the catch-all of *kiruv*, I am intentionally transgressing one of the pieties of the Orthodox outreach movement. For some purists, the term rightfully should be associated only with those who aim to bring non-observant Jews to Orthodoxy. This all-or-nothing conception was perfectly captured when one Haredi rabbi told *kiruv* workers that they "have accomplished nothing" if the subject of outreach does not "go all the way." Under that conception of *kiruv*, Chabad is merely a "service organization," offering kosher food and holiday celebrations to travelers who find themselves in remote locations of the globe, helping Jews with other needs, and running glitzy holiday programs, but expecting little of the Jews they serve. Indeed, most Chabad emissaries would concede their proximate goals are modest. As one emissary explained it to me, Chabad efforts have "a non-result orientation. Our job is to love our fellow Jews, regardless of outcomes. Chabad does not regard its work as a waste of time if people don't become *frum* [observant]. Any mitzvah is a positive step."

But for all the disdain directed at Chabad's latitudinarianism, outreach workers of all stripes concede that they, too, realize their limitations. In my conversations with more than three dozen outreach professionals connected with the range of organizations, the same pragmatic themes emerged:

"We plant seeds but don't know what impact we have."

"Everyone is on a journey."

"*Kiruv* works on the *ta'amu u'reu* model. Give people a chance 'to taste and observe' traditional Judaism, and then they may come back for more."

"I can only teach Torah, but people have free will; we can't coerce behavior."

My goal is "to increase knowledge of all Jews so they can make informed decisions."

Once they get beyond the insular world of the yeshiva, outreach workers quickly learn their limitations and privately lower their expectations. Not for nothing do some speak of the "Chabadization of Orthodox outreach."

The difficulty of bringing non-observant Jews to Orthodox observance is illustrated by rough numbers. Though no systematic record-keeping exists, well-placed people in the outreach world estimate that there are roughly 2,000 new recruits to Orthodoxy in the United States annually, with as many as 30 percent consisting of college students. As recently as the 1990s, these numbers were thought to be twice as high. Many outreach workers acknowledge that the likeliest targets of opportunity historically have been drawn from Conservative Jewish homes where they had been exposed to some measure of traditional Judaism. With the demographic contraction of that movement, the low-hanging fruit of the past is not nearly as available today, and therefore the pickings have grown slimmer. Conversely, as ever more Jewish children come from intermarried households, the task of bringing Jews to observance has grown more complex—not least be-

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cause according to the Orthodox definition, children of a non-Jewish mother are not considered Jewish and therefore a large proportion of those encountered by outreach workers must first undergo a conversion to Judaism before they can be drawn into an observant form of the religion. That is a very tall order indeed.

These numbers suggest that there are more than three full-time outreach workers for every single "success." That is a rate unlikely to impress potential funders as a winning investment. But from the perspective of outreach workers, there are mitigating circumstances. First, winning over 2,000 annual recruits translates into a quantitative net gain—because these individuals will marry other Jews and raise far more Jewish children than they would have otherwise. Theology plays a role, too. If one believes that drawing even a single Jew to God and the commandments is a *mitzvah*, a religious imperative, quantity is far less of an issue. Some have their eye on an even higher religious aspiration because they regard each Jew brought closer to observance as a contribution to Jewish "national *teshuva*"—the return to God's ways that is a necessary prelude to the coming of the Messiah.

Not all funders of outreach programs are sympathetic to the theological perspective. As is the case with so much of American philanthropy of late, metrics are all the rage. Donors are increasingly linking their largesse to quotas: One funder insists that each campus outreach worker must reel in at least seven college students annually. Not surprisingly, these pressures have resulted in creative bookkeeping—and demoralization when unrealistic goals cannot be met. It has also prompted pushback on the part of those who understand the realities of American Jewish life. Outreach, they argue, is a retail operation. It requires intensive one-on-one work, and the decision of a non-observant Jew to become Orthodox often results from the combined efforts of many outreach workers in a variety of settings. For every recruit to Orthodoxy, moreover, there are dozens who choose not to go the distance. An outreach worker has likened the process of engaging Jews to moving people through a funnel that is wide at one end and quite narrow at the other. Outreach programs cast a broad net to bring people to programs that require little of participants, other than a willingness to socialize with other Jews. *Kiruv* workers then try to identify those who seem interested in a bit more—perhaps, some study opportunity, theological conversation, or religious participation. As these seekers move along from one program to the next, only a very small minority come out of the funnel as Orthodox Jews.

AND WHAT about the rest? In off-the-record interviews with outreach workers associated with Chabad, Aish HaTorah, Modern Orthodox organizations, and community *kollelim*, I received the same response, sometimes offered with a shrug, sometimes with strong conviction: *If the Jews whom I have taught and mentored become more active in their Reform or Conservative synagogues*, they say, *or in their federations or Israel-oriented organizations, or in their willingness to marry another Jew and raise a Jewish family of any kind, I consider that to be a success.*

A good many non-Orthodox leaders probably would respond to this flat assertion with incredulity, for it has become an article of faith that Orthodox outreach is cult-like and intentionally designed to raid the non-Orthodox sectors of the Jewish community. With a few exceptions, this is simply false. In fact, what is actually happening is far more interesting: *Kiruv* has become a powerful vehicle for re-engaging Jews with the non-Orthodox sectors of the community. Leading members of Conservative and Reform synagogues attend Chabad educational programs or community *kollel* study sessions and then return to their home congregations, probably as better-informed Jews. Individuals who have had little contact with organized Jewish life are turned on to Judaism by *kiruv* workers and in many cases find their way into non-Orthodox synagogues or secular organizations.

Their numbers are not negligible. Though no one has collected definitive figures, a quick back-of-the-envelope estimate yields eye-opening results: Assuming that there are between 5,000 and 7,000 *kiruv* workers today and each interacts annually with an average of no more than 100 non-Orthodox Jews (a conservative figure given the size of most Chabad centers and the popularity of *kiruv* events sponsored by other organizations), the collective impact of Orthodox outreach may touch between a half million and 700,000

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Jews *each year*, rivaling the impact of the Conservative and Reform movements, and in the majority of cases *complementing* and *enhancing* the work of those important movements.

HOW MIGHT we explain the vast expansion of Orthodox outreach efforts over the past two decades? Economic necessity surely plays a role: As ever more students attend Haredi advanced yeshivas or women's seminaries while simultaneously eschewing a university education, a vast pool of people with expertise in Torah but no other marketable skills must find opportunities to earn an income. Take, for example, the Lakewood Yeshiva, which currently enrolls 6, 500 men in study that leads to rabbinic ordination and post-ordination study. Some of these men will find their way to colleges and universities afterward and train to become professionals; many others will go into business; but a significant proportion will have to find employment in one form or another of Jewish education. *Kiruv* work is a natural fit, as it is fundamentally about teaching Torah (the one type of knowledge these yeshiva products have in great abundance). As Adam Ferziger, a historian at Bar Ilan University, has noted, "the Orthodox outreach 'industry' has opened new vistas for Haredi employment." Predictably, the heads of yeshivas have begun to pay attention to the success of Chabad emissaries in supporting their own families through *kiruv* work and now encourage their students to enter the field.

It is doubtful they would have done so, however, without significant shifts in the landscape of Jewish life. For much of the past two centuries, traditional Judaism has hemorrhaged vast populations to other Jewish movements or secularism, leading the Orthodox world to adopt a defensive, self-insulating posture. But in recent decades, this strategy has been rethought in some quarters because Orthodox Jews no longer see themselves as a beleaguered minority. Once a net loser of adherents, Orthodox Jewry in most places around the globe has now stabilized and, if anything, is growing. Much of this population increase is the result of high fertility rates: Orthodox Jews produce considerably more children than non-Orthodox Jews do, with the most fervently Haredi and Hasidic sectors reproducing at rates triple and quadruple those of their non-Orthodox co-religionists.* In addition, though there unquestionably are dropouts from Orthodoxy, these numbers pale compared with the number of defectors from other religious movements. Orthodoxy is also attracting followers who were raised in families adhering to those movements: In the United States roughly a quarter of self-identified members of Orthodox synagogues claimed in 2000 that they had been raised in non-Orthodox homes.

This demographic resurgence has been coupled with a newfound sense of self-confidence, born of a conviction that the Orthodox alone will continue to thrive while the other religious movements of American Judaism are in steep decline; and born of a realization that they have little to fear from interactions with their non-observant co-religionists. The prophet of the turn to assertive *kiruv* was Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, who threw down the gauntlet as early as 1951. Employing martial imagery, he justified an aggressive campaign as follows: "Orthodox Jewry up to this point has concentrated on defensive strategies. We were always worried lest we lose positions and strongholds. But we must take the initiative and wage an offensive." This strategic doctrine has gradually gained a following in other quarters. It is now understood that there is much to be gained spiritually, financially, and demographically from intensive efforts at reaching out to those who may be brought closer to God and the commandments of the Torah. Orthodox outreach thus represents a shift from fearful defensiveness to a heady sense of mission, whose goal is nothing less than the rescue of Jews for God and Judaism before they are lost forever.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, what some *kiruv* insiders see as an intoxicating cause is the object of much criticism, if not scorn, in other sectors of the American Jewish community. Conservative and Reform rabbis routinely tangle with *kiruv* workers, in some cases fighting tooth and nail to keep them out of their communities. A Chabad rabbi reports that when he tried to participate as a worshipper in a cam-

* I traced this phenomenon in "Jews and the Jewish Birthrate," from the October 2005 issue of COMMENTARY, and in "First New York's Jews, Then America's," from the September 2012 issue of COMMENTARY.

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pus prayer service, he was barred by the Hillel rabbi; others claim they have been subjected to orchestrated shunning campaigns. Some of the tension results from strong ideological differences, as when Chabad emissaries erect Chanukah candelabras in public spaces that raise the ire of liberal rabbis concerned about church/state infringement. But much of the recrimination revolves around more prosaic concerns. *Kiruv* workers are accused of poaching members from existing synagogues, even as they claim to be serving only the unaffiliated. And then there are congregational rabbis who resent the razzle-dazzle of episodic mega-events staged by *kiruv* workers. "Sure they throw a dandy Purim carnival or matzo-baking party, but they can invest heavily in such one-offs because they don't have to maintain a synagogue year round and address the daily needs of congregants," one rabbi, speaking for many others, bitterly contends.

Financial considerations further inflame tensions. *Kiruv* workers are accused of undercutting the costs of synagogue membership by offering free or inexpensive High Holiday seats, charging modest fees for Hebrew school, and most galling of all, managing entirely without synagogue dues—thereby undermining the business model of most synagogues, which is predicated upon mandatory membership fees. To add insult to injury, rabbis of liberal congregations charge *kiruv* workers with hypocrisy for talking about *raising* levels of observance even as in actuality they expect *less* of their people. Bar- and bat-mitzvah preparation is an especially sensitive issue. Synagogues require children to have spent a minimum number of years (usually at least three) studying in a congregational school as a prerequisite for celebrating their milestone in the synagogue sanctuary; *kiruv* workers often waive such requirements and "bar mitzvah kids" who have had little or no Jewish education. The disparity between the stated objectives of outreach and this lowering of standards is a special provocation for many rabbis and synagogues, especially given their heavy reliance on bar- and bat-mitzvah preparation as the hook to draw families to join.

Perhaps the most severe critics of *kiruv* emanate from within the Orthodox world. Chabad in particular is faulted for its minimalistic expectations and for peddling a form of "Judaism Lite." "Why not aim higher and bring non-observant Jews to full Orthodox observance?" they ask. "Is this the best use of Orthodox Jewry's limited resources?"

Still others fault the bumbling nature of the enterprise. "The *kiruv* world is still dominated by amateurs advising amateurs," writes Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, himself an Orthodox rabbi. The field offers "little sustained professional training and mentoring in specialized areas."

And then there is the criticism about the intellectual shallowness of some programs. One frequent target is the Bible Codes seminars run by Aish HaTorah to demonstrate that buried in the Biblical texts are references to all sorts of historical events, including the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the assault on the Twin Towers on 9/11. To arrive at these hidden clues, one simply ignores the actual sentence structure of the Torah and, voilà, references to events that have occurred millennia after the text was written may be uncovered by stringing together contiguous letters vertically, horizontally, or diagonally! Chabad, too, has been faulted for far-fetched teachings, as when dinosaur fossils are explained away as items intentionally planted by God to test our faith in the accuracy of the Genesis narrative. Why engage in such sophistry, many in the Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities wonder?

And from an ethical perspective, others worry that the pressure to win recruits is leading some to engage in disingenuous advertising. "*Kiruv* workers can sometimes rope 'em in by painting an unrealistic canvas, describing only the beauty of the *frum* community," laments another Orthodox rabbi. Some *kiruv* workers, alas, like other men and women on a religious mission, are not immune from the seductions of deceptive practices.

AS THIS catalogue of criticism attests, there is plenty of room for introspection and self-correction inside the *kiruv* world. But judging by the way they vote with their feet, a good many Jews who interact with Orthodox outreach workers see something else—altruism, deep religious conviction, a love of Jewish learning, and passionate commitment to a cause. Are these perceptions accurate? In many cases, most assuredly: The mission of Orthodox

outreach has attracted some remarkably dedicated and generous human beings to what they regard as holy work. In one important sense, though, the accuracy of these perceptions is less significant than the many opportunities for encounter created by the *kiruv* movement and the ensuing bridging of a vast social gulf between Orthodox Jews and other sectors of the community. Through these efforts, Orthodox Jews now have a human face, and, as one Chabad emissary has put it, "the fear factor of being in a *frum* environment" has diminished.

And what about the reverse: Do those who work in outreach rethink their stereotypical views of Jews who differ from them? And are they in any way influenced by the Jews with whom they come into contact? At this point, one can only answer these questions with more questions. For example, one may wonder about the impact of the new social media upon the thinking of those who employ them. Chabad.org receives more unique visitors than any other Jewish website in the world; Aish HaTorah has posted YouTube videos, such as its "Google Exodus" and Rosh Hashanah Rock Anthem, that have each received millions of hits. Are these simply examples of new forms of technology employed in the service of tradition? Or have the technology and the new social media brought about any deeper reordering of the relationship of *kiruv* organizations to the Jews they aim to reach?

Or to cite another suggestive development, what does it mean that a large gap is opening between *kiruv* workers and their Orthodox critics? It is an open secret that a growing divide now separates Chabad emissaries in the field from fellow Lubavitchers who reside and work in isolated enclaves in Brooklyn. *Kiruv* workers situated in the gamut of outreach programs say their critics don't understand the hard realities of Jewish life in America. A pulpit rabbi operating in the Modern Orthodox community but sympathetic to *kiruv* has castigated the Orthodox world precisely for *its* insularity: "To effectively inspire people to become observant, the effort must be done in isolation from the established Orthodox community," Rabbi Ilan Feldman laments. "*Frum* communities as *cultures* are simply not conducive to outreach," he believes, because those communities have a defensive perspective and don't welcome Jewish seekers who are not yet planted in the Orthodox life. Put differently, outreach workers of necessity develop a far more empathic understanding of the non-Orthodox population than do other sectors of the Orthodox world.

It's too early to tell how much those engaged in Orthodox outreach will absorb the cultural assumptions of the Jews they serve, but inevitably they are more likely to see a recognizably common Jewish humanity when they work with Jews who are not like them. Particularly in an age such as ours of extreme polarization and deep concern about incivility in American Jewish life, the possibility of rapprochement between some sectors of the Orthodox community and other types of Jews is good news indeed.

And so too is the fact that with the growth of the *kiruv* movement, the American Jewish community can rely upon a new resource to complement existing religious movements, synagogues, and educational institutions in their collective mission to inspire Jews of all ages to draw closer to their religious tradition.