# Introduction

## *The First Generation of the Redemption*

I was ready that night to usher in the redemption. I was eleven. I understood full well why thousands of us had gathered at 770 Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, the central synagogue of Lubavitch Jews around the world. The Gothic Revival red brick building was known to Lubavitchers the world over simply as "770," and they imbued it with mystical symbolism.

That night, our spiritual leader, "the Rebbe," Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was finally going to publicly and unequivocally declare that he was indeed the righteous messiah of the Jewish people—the Redeemer whom the biblical prophets had promised to the Israelites; the one whom the devout had prayed for during the Crusades and the Inquisition; the one whom the Jews in the concentration camps had cried out for on their way to the gas chambers.

It was January 31, 1993, the forty-third anniversary (according to the Hebrew calendar) of the Rebbe's assuming leadership of the Chabad Lubavitch community. Everyone in the massive hall was pushing and shoving to see the wood-paneled balcony overlooking the sanctuary where the Rebbe was expected to appear. I stood precariously on a crude metal-and-wood bench amid a sea of thousands of eager Lubavitchers. Their pressure crushed me from all sides.

The men and boys who occupied the main sanctuary wore large black velvet yarmulkes (skullcaps), white dress shirts, and dark pants.

Those above the age of thirteen also wore black fedoras and dark sports jackets, and the married men wore long black silk coats called *kapotas*. As was customary, the men never shaved or trimmed their beards. The girls and women—crowded together on the upper level and peering down into the main sanctuary through dark one-way glass partitions—were modestly dressed, wearing long-sleeved outfits with hemlines covering their knees. The married women wore stylish wigs entirely covering their natural hair. Despite being midwinter, it was hot, very hot, inside.

The swirling overhead fans did nothing to alleviate the stuffiness. Beads of perspiration dripped down my face. Even though I was perched on a bench, I still had to stand on my tiptoes to get a better look. Fortunately, the middle-aged stranger in front of me was so preoccupied by the tumult that he seemed unaware of my gripping his moist shoulders to steady myself.

The crowd repeatedly sang the most popular song in Lubavitch those days, the Hebrew *Yechi* mantra: "Yechi adoneinu moreinu v'rabeinu melech ha'Moshiach l'oylum vo'ed" (Long live our Master, our Teacher, our Rebbe, King Messiah, forever and ever). I had been taught for as long as I could remember—by teachers, camp counselors, and my parents—that our Rebbe was the Moshiach (the messiah). Along with the rest of the community, I believed it with complete faith. I was not deterred in this belief despite the fact that slightly less than a year prior to this gathering, the Rebbe, at ninety, had suffered a severe stroke. From then on, he was unable to speak or move his right side. Although outsiders speculated that the Rebbe would inevitably soon pass away, I knew such talk was ridiculous. The Rebbe would never die. I knew in my heart that any day now the Rebbe would rise up from his sickbed fully healed and poised to lead the Jewish people out of exile and into the era of the redemption.

The Rebbe was born in 1902 in Nikolaev, in the Russian Empire (now Mykolaiv, in Ukraine), to a prominent kabbalist father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, and devoted mother, Chana. He spent the 1930s in Berlin and Paris pursuing an engineering education and escaped Nazi-occupied France with his wife and came to America in 1940. Years later he moved into a large private house at 1304 President Street, in Crown Heights. But I no more thought of the Rebbe as "from" Nikolaev as I thought of him as from Paris, Berlin, or President Street. He may have resided in those places, but as far as I was concerned, he was



from planet Atzilus, the supernal mystical realm explored in the Zohar. To me, the Rebbe was infallible. Every word he uttered was true, and everything he did was perfect—by definition.

It was established fact, accepted without question by Lubavitchers, that the Rebbe performed miracles. He blessed barren women to have children; he foretold the future; he healed the sick. In fact, my mother told me that I myself was a "miracle baby." A week past my due date, in January 1982, I was delivered by emergency caesarian section. This was necessary due to the prolapse of the umbilical cord. "You survived because the Rebbe gave you a *brachah* [blessing]." I believed her. I owed my life to the Rebbe.

The men and boys standing on my bench and on the other benches throughout the sanctuary began jumping up and down and clapping their hands while chanting *Yechi*. It was as if the thousands of souls in the packed sanctuary had fused into a single organism that was surging up and down with each repetition of the mantra. I also jumped and chanted. The bench, whose metal frame was custom-welded for this sanctuary, began to buckle under the weight of the crowd. I was terrified. I recalled that three months earlier, my classmate Levi Farkash had been injured when a bench like this collapsed and dropped the men standing on it right onto little Levi, who required surgery on his injured leg and a stay in the hospital.

I had seen the Rebbe several times since his stroke, always on the balcony for precious, fleeting moments. Seated in a wheelchair, he still had the penetrating deep blue eyes and distinguished white beard, but his expression was strangely blank. Gone was the vibrant magnetic charisma that could energize his followers to stand for hours attuned to his every word.

I knew he could no longer lift his arms to inspire the crowd to jump and sing and clap with abandon. The man I saw those few times since his stroke had little in common with the Rebbe I remembered. In four decades of leadership, he had taken the remnants of a Hasidic sect founded in the late eighteenth century by Rabbi Schneur Zalman, which for more than a century was based in the town of Lyubavichi, Russia, and revived it in America. Where, I wanted to know, was the Rebbe who had inspired his followers to travel the world erecting thousands of Jewish outposts, called "Chabad Houses," from Brooklyn to Melbourne, from London to Hong Kong, and from Buenos Aires to Cape Town?

The "Rebbe beepers," small black devices that were modified by a local store to alert Lubavitchers any time the Rebbe was about to make a public appearance, had started sounding their alarm hours earlier. No one in my family owned a Rebbe beeper, but we didn't need one to alert us to tonight's gathering. It was announced days in advance that the Rebbe would be making a special appearance in honor of the anniversary of the day he accepted the leadership of Lubavitch forty-three years earlier. Now everyone waited impatiently for the Rebbe to appear.

I was taught that when the messiah arrived, there would be a great banquet where we would feast on the *levyasan* (the Leviathan, a massive sea creature), along with *shor habor* (an enormous wild bull). I could almost taste these delicacies in my mouth. The Rebbe assured us that we had already finished *putsin der kneplach*, polishing the buttons on our uniforms to greet Moshiach. We could already hear *ickvisa d'mishicha*, the footsteps of the messiah.

For years the Rebbe dropped public hints about the identity of the messiah, but they were ambiguous and open to conflicting interpretations. Possibly the most explicit such hint was given in August 1989 in a talk in which he referenced a passage from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 98b) where one sage claims that the messiah's name will be "Menachem," which was the Rebbe's own first name. The Rebbe declared, "We have Menachem, which refers to the righteous messiah." Those straining to absorb the Rebbe's every word were left to wonder: Was the Rebbe referring to himself, or was he merely restating the line from the Talmud? The Rebbe's wording was maddeningly vague. Most Lubavitchers interpreted this and similar hints to mean that the Rebbe was saying that he himself was the messiah.

Although Lubavitchers spoke a great deal about the coming of the messianic age and about the fact that the Rebbe was the messiah, they said much less about the nature of the end time itself. I was taught, however, based on ancient Jewish sources, that once the redemption began, all Jews and all synagogues from around the globe would be miraculously lifted up on glorious clouds and transported to the Land of Israel; that the streets would be paved with diamonds and precious jewels; that the gentiles would become our servants; and that all the Jews who had died throughout history would be resurrected and reunited with their families. I also learned that the Third Temple would descend from Heaven and the ancient rituals of animal sacrifices described in the Bible would be reinstated.



Lubavitchers had taken some concrete steps to prepare for the messiah's arrival. Inspired by the example of the ancient Israelite women who gladly parted with their gold jewelry (Exodus 35:22) to help build the Tabernacle in the desert, my mother, along with other Lubavitch women, donated gold necklaces, bracelets, and pendants to be melted down and refashioned into vessels for use in the Third Temple. After all, new holy vessels would soon be needed.

Finally, after standing for what felt like hours, the gold curtains parted to reveal the Rebbe. I expected the Rebbe to spring up from his wheelchair, raise both fists in the air and thunder in a booming voice of a man half his age that he was our righteous Redeemer. Instead of rising up, he sat, hunched over, sunken into himself. He sat there, mute and motionless, surrounded by several aides. To me he seemed crushed by the weight of the Jewish exile from Zion, as well as the numerous personal tragedies he had endured, the latest one being the passing in 1988 of his beloved wife, Chaya Mushka, possibly the only other human being who truly understood him as a person. Undeterred, we continued chanting *Yechi* with ever more enthusiasm and determination, as if the strength of our singing could tip God's hand and force the redemption. The Rebbe remained on the balcony for eight excruciating minutes. Then the curtains swung shut again. That was it.

*What on earth is going on? Why didn't the Rebbe reveal himself to us? Were we not worthy of the messianic redemption yet? Is the Rebbe not the Moshiach?*

Standing in 770 waiting for the Rebbe to reveal himself, we were like the ancient Israelites standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, united, one person with one heart. It was a unity given urgency by the promise of the coming redemption. But it was also an urgency animated by all we stood to lose if we should doubt. I heard how neighbors spoke about Shimon Margolis, the son of a prominent Lubavitch rabbi, who cut off his beard, grew long hair, and went to college. "He's a *frayak*! A bum!" They spoke with dripping disdain, as if he were a leper, diseased and contagious. Every time I heard this type of gossip, a cold shiver went through me. *If I mess up, if I stop being as Lubavitch as my friends, they will cut me off and spit me out. I would lose everything: my family, my certainty, my place in the world, my redemption.*

# 1

## In the Tent of Torah

I was terrified of not knowing the words. "*Bireishis—in der unhoyb* . . ." My second-grade classmates and I repeated the words that our teacher, Rabbi Piekarski, chanted. Rabbi Piekarski was a tall man with an inordinately long beard, which made him appear even taller. When he spoke, I could smell on his breath the pickled herring he had eaten for lunch.

For as long as I could remember, I was taught that every word in the Bible was literally true: that God created the universe in six days, that Adam walked the earth for nine hundred and thirty years, and that Jonah really lived in the belly of a whale for three days and nights. On that cool September day, my class was just starting the adventure of learning to read the Torah verses ourselves. We were beginning in the beginning with the first lines of Genesis, translating each Hebrew word into Yiddish. My knowledge of both languages was shaky.

Rabbi Piekarski's voice boomed. "Remember, *kinderlach* [children], I'm walking around the room to make sure your fingers are on the line in *Chumash* [Torah] that we're reading."

I sat in my chair pressing my finger into the words, my green eyes staring at the page, hoping my teacher wouldn't check up on me. My short brown hair, a number 3 on the barber's electric clipper, Lubavitch-style, held my black velvet yarmulke properly in place, but my usual smile was absent. My ears, which were too big for my head (my older

sister Miriam's friends called me "monkey," which mortified me) felt red-hot as I concentrated on the day's recitation.

I was terrified of not knowing the answers when Rabbi Stein, our principal, tested us a few weeks later. He must have weighed four hundred pounds and would get angry if students didn't know their studies. Once, when a classmate had the effrontery to tell him that he "forgot" the answer, the good Rabbi fumed.

"Did you forget to put your pants on this morning? No. So how did you forget the answer?"

That day in Rabbi Piekarski's class, I was also busy thinking about what time my mother would return from grocery shopping in Borough Park. I wanted her to be home when I got there. That way I could see if she bought us doughnuts from The Doughnut Man, vanilla-glazed with chocolate drizzle on top.

I mostly earned As and Bs on my report cards, but I wasn't the type of student for whom learning came naturally. I needed to work hard with tutors after school for hours to keep up with my class. Years later my *yeshiva* (Jewish school) teachers would comment in report cards:

"Nothing stands in the way of the will."

"Zalman has a strong will to be a good student."

"Zalman is making progress and as it says, 'If you work hard you will succeed.' He should go from strength to strength."

My effort evidently stood out over my adeptness at study—an effort fueled by a fear of being found without the answers.

My class continued chanting: "Bara eloykim—hut gut bashafyn."

At home and among friends we spoke Yinglish, a Hasidic patois consisting mostly of English with choice words and phrases from Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic thrown in, like a cholent that is mostly beans and potatoes with a few cubes of beef added for flavor. The language of instruction in my school, Oholei Torah (the Tents of Torah), was Yiddish, and the curriculum included only religious subjects: Bible, Talmud, Hasidic philosophy. No English, mathematics, or social studies.

The ponderous building that housed Oholei Torah at 667 Eastern Parkway was adorned with enormous stained-glass windows and a stained-glass dome and included an ornate social hall and a brownish marble staircase, all vestiges of its glorious past when it housed the Brooklyn Jewish Center. The center was a legendary progressive American Jewish cultural institution from its opening in 1920 until its decline in the 1960s. Albert Einstein had spoken there; Mark Rothko had



taught art classes there; Richard Tucker had sung there; and Columbia University had even offered extension courses there. In the 1970s, as it experienced a decline due to white flight, the center rented space to Lubavitch to run their school, and in 1985 the center sold the building to Lubavitch.

Now, five years later, the school taught us to read Hebrew, Yiddish, and Aramaic, but not a minute of the day was devoted to the English alphabet or grammar. The Lubavitchers tried to construct a wall of virtue around the Jewish section of Crown Heights, demarcated by Eastern Parkway in the north, Lefferts Avenue in the south, Utica Avenue in the east, and Nostrand Avenue in the west. In those days, only a handful of Lubavitchers in Crown Heights lived beyond these boundaries. Lubavitchers created a pure space dedicated to keeping out the pernicious influences of the "goyish," or non-Jewish, world.

There were no American flags in my school, and no one pledged allegiance to America each morning. To do so would be totally *treif* (unkosher) and *meshugah* (crazy). Instead, each morning during prayers we proclaimed, "It is our obligation to praise the Master of everything for not making us like the other nations of the world, for they bow down before vanity and nothingness, but we give thanks to the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He." I never gave this prayer a second thought. Just as I never questioned the propriety of the morning prayer thanking God for not making me a woman. These are just some of the prayers we recite each morning to get the day off to a good start.

With the school day over, I slung my backpack holding my precious Trapper Keeper binder over my shoulder and skipped along Eastern Parkway's wide, tree-lined boulevard. I was on a mission to buy nash from Shlomie's, the candy store around the corner from my house. I was a good kid, but no one is perfect. To support my sugar rush, the night before I had executed a deft maneuver while hiding in the kitchen closet. With the aid of a large screwdriver from my father's tool collection in the basement, I popped open the flimsy lock on a metal charity box and pocketed its contents, which amounted to a whopping $9. The charity was intended to assist Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union to resettle in America.

*Mommy fills the house with treats, but I enjoy buying my own nash and eating it by myself, away from my sisters' pleas and my brother Yossi's threats to share with him. Not that Yossi ever shares any of his nash with me! Plus, I'm not worried about God punishing me for stealing the money. Why*

*should I be? Everyone does some kind of shtick to get what they want. My friend Lipa goes into the bodega around the corner and makes off with packs of Topps baseball cards. I take a few dollars from charity to buy candies. Same thing. And besides, God's too busy punishing yeshiva students for real sins like eating a slice of pizza without first making a blessing on it.*

I crossed the four lanes of traffic and the two service lanes of Eastern Parkway. I could have walked straight down Brooklyn Avenue, but this route would have forced me to confront the massive Tudor Gothic–style, age-blackened brick Episcopal Church of St. Mark, with its bright red windows and spire topped with a crucifix. My teachers had instructed me to spit on the ground and walk across the street when I passed a church. Personally, I was terrified every time I passed St. Mark's. Adding to my fear were the golem stories written by Arnold Fine and illustrated by Howard S. Speilman serialized in the children's section of the *Jewish Press* that my father would read to me each week.

An anthropomorphic being created out of clay by Rabbi Judah Loew, the golem protected the Jews of sixteenth-century Prague. Each week I learned how the golem, in the nick of time, subverted the devious plot of Father Thaddeus to concoct a blood libel against the Jews. Every time I passed St. Mark's, I shuddered. I imagined seeing Father Thaddeus in its cavernous basement scheming sinister tricks to plague the Jews.

So instead I stayed on Eastern Parkway. Then I stood in front of 770. I felt as if I knew its every nook and cranny like I knew my own body. There were small stained-glass windows located twenty feet above the front door of 770 depicting rustic Chinese scenes.

The windows displayed two Asian women standing attired in traditional-looking garb, a male figure in Chinese dress sitting in a lotus position, a teapot, and a Chinese junk with multiple-gaffed sails, and several characters of Chinese script. I'm stumped as to why, over the past eight decades, no zealous Lubavitcher possessing a screwdriver took it upon himself to deface these "goyish" images from the iconic façade of the Lubavitch world headquarters. These small stained-glass panels may be the only physical reminder of the former non-Orthodox life of the building.

As I turned right onto Kingston Avenue, the commercial heart of Jewish Crown Heights, I wove my way through the crowd of commuters exiting from the Kingston Avenue subway station. On the corner of Kingston and Union I saw the tiny storefront of the World Lubavitch



Communications Center, known to Lubavitchers as WLCC, the organization that broadcasts live the weekday public talks of the Rebbe and sells audiocassettes and VHS recordings of those talks. According to legend, the soul of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, ascended to Heaven in a temporary spell and met with the messiah. He asked the messiah when he would arrive. The messiah responded, "When the wellsprings of your teachings [Hasidic thought] are dispersed throughout the world." The unassuming storefront of WLCC was actively assisting with the dispersion of the wellsprings and thereby hastening the messiah's arrival.

As I continued my journey to reach Shlomie's along the uneven pavement of Kingston, swarms of girls from Bais Rivkah sporting their school uniforms of modest light-blue blouses and navy-blue skirts scurried around me. The sound of the girls giggling competed with the honking from motorists angered by double-parked cars. Once I turned left on Crown Street, my street, the racket from the cars diminished.

After walking a block and a half I hurried past the massive dilapidated old hospital building on Crown between Albany and Troy. The hospital might have been beautiful when it was built years ago, but now its façade was defaced with graffiti, its oversize windows smashed, and anything movable long since been carried off.

As I treaded warily alongside this dumping ground, a young Black man in an undershirt and shorts approached me walking a ferocious-looking pit bull on a glistening chain.

The hound growled at me. I jumped back in fright. "Got a problem?" the owner asked.

I had learned in yeshiva that if a dog barks, we should recite the verse from the Bible (Exodus 11:7) that promises Israelites that no dog will bark at them during their exodus from Egypt. Reciting this verse was supposed to silence the creature because dogs are by nature in awe of the soul of a Jew. However, if the dog continues to bark after the verse is recited, this indicates that the person reciting the verse is spiritually deficient. In that case, the dog fails to recognize the presence of a Jew. Given the spiritual deficiencies of my soul, not least because I had pilfered $9 from charity the night before, I decided not to take my chances with reciting the verse. I dashed across Troy Avenue instead and kept running until I was safely inside Shlomie's.

Shlomie Goldman, the owner of the store, was a rotund man with a stout head that looked like a massive orb affixed to an even more mas-

sive spherical base. As I entered the poorly lit store, Shlomie greeted me with, "Boychick, do you have cash? No more credit for anyone. I'm not running a *tzedakah* [charity] here."

I perused the half-empty shelves and selected a package of button candies and a big bag of Golden Fluff Potato Stix, all the while trying not to trip on the two gray cats leisurely prowling about their domain. Shlomie packed my goodies into a shopping bag and I made my exit.

I took a circuitous route home to give me time to eat all my treasures. I arrived home only after all was consumed and the evidence discarded in an overstuffed garbage can on the street.

As I walked up the cracked cement steps, I glanced at the front yard where my father toiled to grow irises, tulips, and daffodils. Privet hedges surrounded the small square space like a *gartl* (a long, thin black silk prayer sash) that adorns the midsection of a Hasidic man at synagogue, and the branches of the weeping cherry tree in the corner provided a kind of prayer shawl over the garden.

My house, a two-story red brick structure attached on one side, had a backyard with a rickety swing set and many more of my father's plants. There was a red climbing rose bush hugging the sagging fence. The house was built in the 1920s. By the time I arrived on the scene, the house was showing its age. The steam radiators throughout the house sputtered and wheezed all winter; the cluttered basement leaked (but only when it rained); and the once beautiful wood parquet flooring was coming loose. But it was the only home I knew, and I loved it.

As a child I didn't appreciate it fully, but I was part of a tribe within a tribe in Crown Heights. I was a Lubavitcher who was the child of *baal teshuvahs* ("returnees" to Orthodoxy). With its mix of openness to non-Orthodox Jews and strict adherence to the Hasidic lifestyle, Lubavitch attracted thousands of newcomers to its ranks, my parents among them. My parents had been raised Jewish but non-Orthodox and joined the community as young adults.

Although only 10–20 percent of my classmates' parents were *baal teshuvahs*, because of my parents' circle of friends in the community, all of the kids I played with outside of school were the children of *baal teshuvahs*. So it seemed perfectly natural to me at the time that my parents had joined the community from the outside. Aside from the party line that *baal teshuvahs* possessed a high spiritual status because of the



many sacrifices they endured to transform their life and join Lubavitch, I didn't hear any community discussion about what the process of becoming a *baal teshuvah* entailed or about the lifestyles these newcomers left behind, my parents included.

Maybe they felt that they could never really explain their previous life in that faraway place called secular America. There was no vocabulary in Lubavitch to describe such things as sweet sixteens, high school crushes, and so on. Best never to allude to such matters.

I never felt prejudice against me personally because my parents were *baal teshuvahs*. I only realized years later that such a prejudice does exist among old-guard Lubavitch families when my older siblings tried to find a marriage partner and my parents' status as *baal teshuvahs* was considered a strike against them.

Nonetheless, it was always obvious who were the *baal teshuvahs* in the community. They tended to read Hebrew and speak Yiddish with a pronounced American accent that set them apart from the rest of the community, whose speech was colored with an Eastern European inflection. The children of *baal teshuvahs* also stood out because they lacked the extensive networks of cousins within the community enjoyed by their classmates.

Many of the Lubavitchers in Crown Heights arrived in America after World War II as survivors of the Holocaust or of decades of Soviet oppression against religious Jews. They did not view America as a *goldene medina* (golden land) of opportunity but as a *treif* country and were wary of its secularizing influences. In contrast, all except for one of my great-grandparents came to America in the early 1900s and joined the wave of Jewish "greenhorns" who were eager to become citizens and fully Americanize. They were proudly Jewish but had no desire to maintain all the religious rituals from the old country.

My mother was raised in Queens and my father in Flatbush, in typical American Jewish homes, where major Jewish holidays were observed, but not strictly, and both sides of the family were connected to left-wing political circles. As a teenager, my father's mother, Ruth Chellin, was a member of the Socialist Youth League, and her sister, Anne, was a member of the Young Communist League. My great-aunt even met the legendary Mexican artist Diego Rivera, a staunch communist, who painted her portrait and inscribed it, "To Comrade Anne." A framed copy of it now hangs in my home office. On my mother's side of the family, my great-grandmother Mildred Byer, née Sachnovsky, was

friends with the communist journalist John Reed and the communist poet and novelist Maxwell Bodenheim.

My mother, the daughter of the psychologist and sexologist Samuel Janus and the schoolteacher Esther (Byer) Janus, started her affiliation with Lubavitch while attending Queens College. Samuel was no stranger to religious rebellion. He had rejected the pieties of his Orthodox mother, Miriam Feiga Yanushewitz, née Rothenberg, who was born in Poland and only arrived in America as a forty-year-old in 1929 along with a determination to maintain the religious standards of the old country. Samuel was the only one of his siblings to graduate from college, and he was horrified that his daughter, who showed so much promise in the secular world, had turned her back on it and chose to join a fringe religious group.

All of my grandfather's reasoning and cajoling was for naught. My mother had fallen in love with Lubavitch and could imagine no other way of life for herself. In her last semester at college two years before her marriage, she took a course with a visiting professor, Betty Friedan, entitled "The Sociology of Sex Roles" and argued in class against the professor's assertion that the Bible and Jewish law were sexist.

Friedan had claimed that the Bible was sexist because it doesn't include a single female prophetic figure and that Jewish law is reactionary because it requires women to wait helplessly for men to arrive home from synagogue and chant the blessings of the Sabbath kiddush ritual. Based on ammunition provided to her by Lubavitchers during her regular visits to Crown Heights, my mother countered that there are seven prophetesses in the Bible, such as Sarah, Miriam, and Deborah, and that according to Jewish law, if men are absent, women are permitted to chant the kiddush blessings all by themselves.

It seems fitting that my mother, who was shortly to embrace with both hands the role of full-time Lubavitch housewife and caregiver to a growing tribe of children, would clash with the author of *The Feminine Mystique*. In that groundbreaking work of the second wave of American feminism, Friedan had proclaimed: "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.'"

There was another aspect of my mother's upbringing that played a role in her choice of a strictly religious lifestyle. Only once I became an adult did I realize that my mother was the product of a broken home. Her parents were divorced when she was in elementary school, and her



mother struggled with her own demons. My beloved grandmother was incapable of keeping house. As a consequence, in elementary school, my mother would end up making lunches for herself and her brother, who was two years her junior.

When my mother visited Crown Heights for Shabbos as a college student, she saw the "Norman Rockwell" version of Lubavitch families and fell in love with them. They looked like everything her home was not. Instead of a few kids and a dog, these families boasted eight to ten kids all sitting around the Shabbos table smiling at their parents and dutifully answering questions about the weekly Torah portion, their innocence intact. Even the parents were sheltered from the destructive and radical trends plaguing secular American society, including sexual violence, extreme political ideologies, and feminist thought that claimed that men and women were exactly the same in their makeup and roles. Blithely resistant to the cosmic order, secular Americans were doomed to a meaningless, chaotic existence. At least, it seemed that way to my mother.

The Lubavitchers knew in their hearts that men and women possessed different souls and were created by the Almighty to perform different tasks. Their daily lives are absorbed with the performance of countless *mitzvos* (commandments), each imbued with deep meaning. This tableau of Hasidic life was only part of the picture, but it was the part that was visible to my mother at the time.

My father, the son of Joseph Newfield, an accountant who soon retired due to ill health, and Ruth (née Chellin), a math teacher in a Brooklyn public school, was a quiet child. He didn't receive much attention from his mother, who was preoccupied with working full time, maintaining the home, and taking care of her ailing husband. My father became adept at solo activities such as reading *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia* and growing radishes and carrots in his parents' backyard.

My father was socially awkward in elementary school. He spent six years with the same group of classmates and never managed to learn the names of most of them. He felt left out from the clique of popular students.

My father's time as an undergraduate at Columbia University, beginning in 1968, overlapped with major social agitation on campus. Yet the Age of Aquarius left him cold. In that era's division of the world into the freaks and the squares, my father was solidly entrenched in the latter camp. In my father's sophomore year, he was annoyed to discover all the

dust bins in his dorm gradually disappeared. It turned out an industrious undergraduate commandeered them all, filled them with rich alluvial Manhattan soil from South Field, and, with the help of a bank of florescent lamps, began growing pot in his fifth-floor dorm room in John Jay Hall. Needless to say, although my father had years of horticultural experience, he neither was asked for nor offered his botanic wisdom to the pot-growing operation. He was at Columbia, but not of it.

I have an easier time understanding why the Lubavitch lifestyle appealed to my mother than to my father. Given my father's aversion to the freaks at Columbia, it's hard for me to understand what attracted him to the Lubavitch tribe, with their long beards, dangling *tzitzis* (side fringes), and incessant talk of making a dwelling place for the *shechina* (divine presence) down here on Earth.

My father was often asked by curious non-Orthodox Shabbos guests at our home, "How did you land in Crown Heights?"

He would always respond with a version of the following: "On my second day at Harvard Medical School I met the local Lubavitch rabbi, Dovid Wichnin, who invited me to his home for Shabbos." The rabbi didn't speak to my father the whole Shabbos, but on Saturday night, after a day of communal prayers, meals, and song, he turned to my father and said, "I want you to stay with us every Shabbos." My father went on to stay with the Wichnin family every Shabbos for the next four years. By the time he graduated medical school, my father's clean-shaven face was sporting a bushy black beard and he had joined the Lubavitch "team."

My father never said the word *team*. He never used a sports metaphor in his life, just as he never played a sports game. Ever. He made it seem like it was an inevitable metamorphosis, like the forces governing the transformation of a baby flamingo's gray and white feathers into pink. He was a loner who read C. W. Ceram's *Gods, Graves, and Scholars* in second grade and was content to putter around in the garden by himself for years. It seems he finally felt the urge to join a group and be part of something larger than himself.

By the time my parents met in 1977, they were both fully committed to the Lubavitch way of life. To symbolize their new religious status, they had independently shifted from using their English names, Beth Robin and Stanley Austin, to using their Hebrew ones, Basha Rayzl and Shlomo Asher, in all areas of their life.



Because my parents were totally committed to Lubavitch and the Rebbe, when they had doubts about whether they should proceed with their wedding plans, like all good Lubavitchers, they wrote to the Rebbe for his counsel. He responded with six Hebrew words: "Nachon hashidduch v'tov. Azkir al hatzion" (The matrimonial match is good and correct. I will pray for you at the resting place of the previous Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn). On the strength of those six Hebrew words, all doubt was cast aside, and they went forward with the union. My parents' lives, as individuals and as a married couple, were devoted to the Rebbe's dictates and guidance.

Although my parents wholeheartedly threw their lot in with Lubavitch, they hadn't had much formal education on its extensive school of thought and its two-century history and culture. My father spent several weeks at the men's yeshiva for *baal teshuvahs* in the Catskills during college and medical school vacations and also a few days at its Crown Heights location. My mother made multiple trips to the Lubavitch women's seminary in Minnesota and spent a year in a similar institution in Crown Heights. That was the extent of their formal Lubavitch instruction.

So my parents were in effect learning on the job, trying to educate themselves on how to be Lubavitchers while simultaneously trying to raise their children in a Hasidic atmosphere. My father had mountains of audiocassettes in his home office that contained lectures by Lubavitch rabbis on topics ranging from Jewish medical ethics to parenting according to the Torah. He was so busy taking care of his patients and his family that he seldom ever touched these cassettes.

The main source of Lubavitch knowledge my parents received once married was from the occasional public talks by local rabbis they would manage to attend. The bottom line was that the total knowledge my parents acquired was a fraction of what their daughters would receive through their attendance in Lubavitch formal schooling from kindergarten through seminary, and even less compared with what their sons would receive through their decades of intensive yeshiva training.

Notwithstanding her limited Lubavitch knowledge, my mother, whom we called "Mommy," was completely committed to its program. While in college, she had ambitions to follow in the path of her father and become a psychologist, but by the time she joined Lubavitch, she had put all that aside and had one main ambition: to raise a large fam-

ily of healthy and happy children who would grow up to be devout Lubavitchers. She didn't pursue any personal interests or hobbies, unless you count shopping for food and clothing for a full house.

As a young mother, she spoke quickly, drove her red Ford Crown Victoria station wagon even more quickly, and was able to size up a person in a matter of minutes. And she was usually right. She wore a short brown *sheitel* (wig) and often had at least one kid in her arms. She was extremely devoted to every detail of her children's lives. She stayed up till 2 A.M. to curl ribbons on birthday bags for my first-grade classmates. And it was to her that I came running when I woke up crying in the middle of the night with my legs aching from growing pains. She would rub my legs, administer Tylenol, and have me repeat after her, "Hashem shik meer a refua sheleyma" (God send me a complete recovery). That combination of affection, science, and faith always worked to make me feel better.

One of the key ways my mother expressed love was through her culinary creations. She was a Lubavitch Julia Child who whipped up mouth-watering meals throughout the year, but especially for Jewish holidays. The heavenly aromas of the holiday dishes are embedded in my mind. On the eve of Yom Kippur, we had salmon steaks and fried *kreplach* (meat dumplings); for Sukkos, we had stuffed peppers and stuffed zucchini, roast duckling in orange jam, and Silver Tip beef; for Chanukah, we had potato latkes and homemade doughnuts; and for Purim, we had pepper steak stew and stir-fried vegetables. She never accepted the conventional belief that Passover food, with all its restrictions, was tasteless and endlessly experimented with shepherd's pie recipes and schnitzel covered in crushed almonds or walnuts.

My mother produced all these dishes even before she democratized her kitchen and allowed my sisters to assist her. (The boys were never allowed in the kitchen except during Passover, when we were conscripted to peel mountains of potatoes and apples for her cooking.) Given the countless demands on her time and energy from her budding crew, each dish she created was a testament to her love for us and her desire to create beautiful holiday memories.

My father, whom we call Tatty—Yiddish for "Daddy"—had short dark-brown hair that has since grayed, and he wore thick glasses that pressed into the arch of his nose. He was quiet, and when he spoke, he spoke slowly. His best friends were the tulips, daffodils, and hyacinths



he tended to in our front- and back-yard gardens and those of our neighbors. He was forever pointing out to me trees, bushes, and flowers.

He was not a typical Lubavitcher. He worked outside the community as a dermatologist and treated mostly non-Jewish patients. At the time, no Lubavitchers who were born in the community became physicians. And although he had a long beard, wore a black fedora, and enthusiastically retold miracle stories of the Rebbe, as any Lubavitcher would, he appreciated secular culture and knowledge.

My father grew up listening to opera—in grade school, he even performed in the Metropolitan Opera Boy's Chorus—and walked around our house singing snippets from Puccini's La Bohème, Turandot, and Tosca. He woke us on Saturday mornings to go to shul by singing Irving Berlin's "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning." He subscribed to the *New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *National Geographic*, *Columbia College Today*, *Harvard Magazine*, and three archeology magazines. Only years later, once I was out of the house, did he exchange the Berlin song for one of his own creation, "Early in the Morning the Chasidim Wake Up Yawning, tralala la la la la la," and cut down on the secular subscriptions and added to the mix the *Jewish Press*, the *Algemeiner Journal*, and other ultra-Orthodox periodicals.

My father occasionally took us kids to the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art but hurried us along when we encountered nudes or paintings of Jesus. Once, while visiting friends in Pittsburgh for Passover, he took us to a nineteenth-century millenarian Christian village that had been turned into a museum. What could go wrong? The beginning of the tour was just fine. We inspected the giant barrels they used to make beer and their collection of stuffed rare birds. Then we entered the huge dining hall—the tour guide said that when it was built it was the largest room in the United States without supporting pillars. On the wall was painted a huge mural of Jesus feeding the masses. He yanked me out of there so fast my yarmulke almost fell off my head.

My parents, like all Lubavitchers, took the biblical commandment to be fruitful and multiply literally. Each child born brings down a new soul into the world, hastening the messianic redemption. Within a span of eighteen years, my parents had nine children. They had five daughters, Miriam Feiga (whom we called Miriam), Chana Sara, Rivkah Yocheved (Rivky), Ester Bracha (Esty), and Chaya Mushka (Chaya), and four

sons, Chaim Yosef Moshe (Yossi), me, Shimon Eliezer (Shimmy), and Menachem Mendel (Mendy).

It is common for boys in Lubavitch to be named after the rebbes of Lubavitch and girls to be named after the rebbetzins (the wives of the rebbes). I was named Schneur Zalman in honor of the first Lubavitcher rebbe, whose *yahrzeit* (anniversary of his passing) was celebrated three days before my birth, on the twenty-fourth day of the Hebrew month of Teves. But there is a deeper meaning to a name. Lubavitchers believe a name represents the essence of a thing. Thus, when the Bible recounts that Adam gave names to all the creatures of the Earth, he wasn't simply giving them a linguistic label by which to be referred but was actually revealing their essence. Time would tell the inner nature of my essence.

As we grew up, my siblings and I were exposed to aspects of the outside environment through our non-Orthodox relatives. Our parents encouraged loving relationships with them but also sought to protect us from their worldly influence. Uncle Jeff, a Shakespeare and American Civil War enthusiast, took us to ballgames at Shea and Yankee stadiums. Similarly, my mother's father, whom we called Pops, relished telling me about Murder Incorporated and Jewish gangsters, and when he did, he always spoke about it as if he were part of it somehow, as if he were a personal acquaintance of Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky. And my father's mother, Bubby Ruth, a veteran public school math teacher, always encouraged us to read secular books on a broad range of subjects.

For Thanksgiving, we would visit Aunt Marta, an artist, world traveler, and collector of Mexican and Asian antiques, in her Southampton hotel. We couldn't join the other guests for the traditional turkey. Instead, we brought our own kosher meals, including brisket sandwiches and roast potatoes from Mermelstein's. When we arrived, my mother would rush to hide the crucifixes, ceramic pigs, and Buddha statues that adorned our rooms, stashing them in a closet until we left, just as our matriarch Rebecca hid the idols of her father, Laban.

After World War II, Crown Heights became a center of Hasidic life in America. Thousands of Hasidim from numerous sects made this two-square-mile neighborhood of Brooklyn their home. Some Hasidim, such as Bobov and Skulen, were joined by their rebbes—their spiritual leaders. The Hasidim established more than forty synagogues,



along with yeshivas, *mikvahs* (ritual baths), charities, Judaica shops and bookstores, kosher restaurants, and other Jewish-owned businesses.

But by the end of the 1960s, as large numbers of Black Caribbean Americans moved into the neighborhood, most of the Jews, including the Hasidim, fled. This exodus was part of a larger pattern of "white flight" of white ethnics in Brooklyn and other parts of the country in the face of the arrival of Black residents. The Lubavitcher Rebbe was determined to keep his followers in place. The Rebbe declared, "Kan tziva hashem es habracha" (Crown Heights is the place where God commands his blessing). With God's blessings, Crown Heights would remain a neighborhood with a strong Jewish community. On April 10, 1969, the Rebbe proclaimed that Jewish law prohibited Jews in the neighborhood from selling their homes to non-Jews (presumably to Black homebuyers). He declared it forbidden to weaken the Jewish community and threaten the survival of the synagogues and other Jewish institutions in the area.

The Rebbe didn't content himself with theological and Jewish legal pronouncements. He also actively supported a practical initiative, an organization called Chevra, to raise funds to purchase houses and apartment buildings and make them available to Jewish residents, thus stemming the tide of white flight. In 1971, the Rebbe announced that anyone who purchased a share in the Chevra program, which cost $500, would receive a $1 bill from him that was imbued with immense blessings for physical and spiritual well-being.

The Chevra program was successful in selling many shares to Lubavitchers all around the world and in buying up many Crown Heights homes and apartments for the Lubavitch community. In 1976, my father, who was not living in New York at the time, bought a share without knowing that he would end up buying our family home through Chevra in 1979. To this day, my father treasures the laminated $1 bill he received from the Rebbe along with his Chevra certificate.

The white flight from Crown Heights contributed to the Lubavitch community's sense that it was embattled and surrounded by enemies. Many outsiders are aware of the racial tensions that flared up in Crown Heights in 1991 when Yosef Lifsh, a young Israeli Lubavitcher, driving his car as part of the motorcade of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, accidentally struck and killed Gavin Cato, the seven-year-old son of Guyanese immigrants. In retaliation, on the following day a group of Black teens stabbed and killed Yankel Rosenbaum, a twenty-nine-year-old rabbini-

cal student. Rioting continued for three days without sufficient police intervention. Several Jews were injured; stores were looted; and homes and cars were damaged. When platoons of cops finally did arrive and take up positions throughout the neighborhood, I felt safer. The cops were here, I felt at the time, to protect *us* from *them*.

But racial tensions had been simmering for decades, fed by a steady diet of mutual disregard and negative stereotypes, as well as competition between the two communities over scarce government funding and public housing. The city government claimed that it did not have sufficient funds to provide the necessary police protection to residents.

In 1964, in response to the rise in street crime, Rabbi Samuel Schrage established the Maccabees, a community patrol consisting mostly of young Jewish men to alert the police when a violent incident occurred and help the victims. The police and municipal government provided funding for the patrol to purchase police equipment such as two-way radios. The Maccabees had a dispatcher, and residents in a crisis could call for emergency assistance.

Schrage was criticized by some local Jewish residents who viewed the patrol as vigilantes. He considered disbanding it, but the Rebbe encouraged him to expand the patrol. At its height, the patrol boasted five hundred members. Leaders of the Black community, who were critical of the patrol, referred to the Maccabees as "Jew police." The Maccabees disbanded in 1971, but the group reemerged in the late 1970s under the name of Shmira (the Guardians) and is still in existence.

As a kid growing up in 1980s Crown Heights, I would occasionally hear the one-word alert "Chaptsim!" (Catch him!) It was a kind of distress call in Yiddish, a Bat-Signal to alert Lubavitchers to spring into action and surround an outsider for alleged wrongdoing.

There was a yawning gulf between the Lubavitch community of Crown Heights and their non-Jewish, and mostly Afro-Caribbean, neighbors. I routinely watched Black families in suits and dresses, holding Bibles, going off to church on Sundays. In the summertime, young Rastafari men with dreadlocks carried large boom boxes and played reggae music late into the night. On hot days, young Black girls in tank tops and shorts, their hair made up in braids, played double Dutch jump rope and licked large blue-and-red popsicles and young Black boys turned on the fire hydrants and cooled off in the jetting water.

I observed all of this but never interacted with any of it, as if I were living behind a clear glass wall. I didn't know the first or last name of any



of my Black neighbors, and doubtless they didn't know mine. We lived, attended school, worshipped, and played in two completely disconnected worlds that just happened to occupy the same crowded city blocks.

Apart from the basketball courts at Lefferts Park, where my older brother Yossi occasionally joined mixed pick-up games with Lubavitchers and Black Caribbeans, there was no place in Crown Heights where the two communities met in respectful cordiality.

Not only did most Lubavitchers not interact with their Black neighbors, but there was intense negativity aimed at them. It was common to refer to them as *shvartzes*, a derogatory Yiddish word for Black people. I regularly heard, "Hey! That's the *shvartza* that stole my cousin's bike." I also frequently heard hateful "jokes" at school.

One sabbath during the height of the racial tension in 1991, I slept over at my friend Avigdor Schwartz's home. At the Friday night meal, while munching on homemade multigrain challah and hummus, Avigdor's parents discussed the "increase the peace" project created by the maverick Lubavitcher David Lazerson, which sought to bring Lubavitch and Black teens together for basketball games. "Is he *meshugah*? Our decent boys playing with those *vilder chayas*!"

*How can these sweet people, who always host me for Shabbos sleepovers and go out of their way not to embarrass me when I wet the bed, say such mean things about our Black neighbors? Aren't we all created by God in His image?* I realized that even the "nice" Lubavitchers thought of their Black neighbors as dirt. It was obvious that for Lubavitchers the commandment "Ve-ahavta le-re'acha ka-mocha" (To love your fellow as yourself) didn't apply to loving Black people.

Although I never had a meaningful interaction with any of my Black neighbors, when I was ten or eleven I did have a brief friendship with Michael Jones, a non-Jewish Black visitor who was staying with an aunt living a few doors down. He was my age but a few inches taller than me. I'm not sure how the friendship was sparked, but I remember hanging out with him and chatting about playing baseball. He offered me several bent Topps baseball cards and his well-worn batting glove. I accepted the cards but declined the glove.

A few days into our friendship, I was hanging out with him when a Lubavitch neighbor of mine, Yecheskel, invited me to come to his backyard. I came and brought my friend Michael. As soon as we were in his backyard, Yecheskel's father came outside, called his son over, and whispered something. Yecheskel came over to me and said, "My father says

*you* can stay but he can't," and pointed to Michael. I was confused by Yecheskel's father's demand. We had just arrived. Michael didn't have any time to misbehave or do anything to upset Yecheskel's father. I decided to leave Yecheskel's backyard with Michael. I still don't know why I did that. I certainly didn't have a well-developed theory about racial prejudice. It just seemed wrong to exclude someone from our play.

Lest I give the impression that I was somehow uniquely sensitive to racial injustice at age ten, I must admit I was not. Around that time, my nonreligious Aunt Marta, with her dangling and jangling Tibetan necklaces, hauled an armful of drawing books, colored pencils, and toy soldiers from her Upper West Side apartment to my house. She had the soul of a Buddhist monk and the spirit of a Wall Street tycoon, was invested in real estate in Manhattan and Key West, and regularly trekked through India and the Far East. She wanted me to use her supplies to start a business on my street. My first response was, "The *shvartzes* are gonna steal them!"

I remember a fourth-grade substitute teacher named Nuchum Shapiro bragging to my class that he and a few buddies had beaten up a Black man accused of stealing from a Jewish home. Nuchum claimed that he pounded the alleged thief in the face with such force that blood spurted from the man's mouth into Nuchum's, requiring that he rush to Hatzalah, the Jewish ambulance service, to "disinfect" his mouth. I'm not sure if the story was fabricated to impress us, but my whole class was riveted by it, and no one seemed to question the morality of meting out such street "justice."

Without realizing it, I had absorbed into my consciousness the foul taint of racial animus. Every Passover during the Shefoch Chamascha ritual, I would open the front door, lit candle in hand, and call for God to pour out his wrath on nonbelievers. "Pour out Your wrath upon the nations who do not know You": This angry plea was introduced in the Middle Ages in response to the cruelty of the First Crusade in 1095. When we recited the prayer at the seder, a time I was assured the gates of Heaven are especially open to sincere requests, I regret it seemed to my young mind righteous to think of our Black neighbors who stole our bikes and broke into my family's car.

The fact that Lubavitchers stayed in Crown Heights when most other Jewish residents fled is still a puzzle to me. My Lubavitch friend Mordecai Goldberg has a theory. According to Mordecai, the Rebbe wanted to stay in Crown Heights to prevent assimilation. As Mordecai saw it, the Rebbe strategized that seeing the economic hardship and social distress that their Black neighbors suffered would cause Lubavitchers to remain committed to their insular form of Judaism. "This took away the temptation for Lubavitchers to be like their neighbors."



The Rebbe's insistence on staying in Crown Heights does seem to echo the prayers of his predecessor a century and a half earlier, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe and founder of the Lubavitch movement, Schneur Zalman of Liadi. During the Napoleonic Wars he beseeched God to intercede in favor of Czar Alexander to preserve the piety of the Jews. Under Napoleon, he reasoned, the material condition of the Jews would improve, and they might forget about God. Under the czar, they would suffer more, but then they would need to depend on God and maintain their religious commitment.

On the cold night of December 31, 1897, Brooklyn surrendered the status as an independent city it had enjoyed for more than two hundred years and became a mere borough of the modern City of New York. As far as the Lubavitch residents of Crown Heights were concerned, not only was Brooklyn still an independent city, but Crown Heights was an independent universe. The norms that held true in other locales simply didn't apply here. In far-off places (such as America), young people chose careers for themselves. But for Lubavitchers, there was only a single profession that was ever discussed: to become an emissary (*shliach*) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and help strengthen Jewish communal life in far-flung regions of the world. It's not that the word *career* was a dirty word so much as an unheard of one. We were all supposed to become *shluchim*.

Historically, in Eastern Europe religious Jews made a living through a variety of vocations. Hints of this past are still retained in common Jewish surnames based on Yiddish words for particular lines of work, such as Kramer (*kremer*, shopkeeper), Druker (*druker*, printer), and Schreiber (*shrayber*, writer). Some of my nonreligious relatives would ask, "So you're gonna become a doctor like your Daddy?" I always felt like they were crazy. I couldn't even read English. How in the world was I going to get through college, let alone medical school?

In Lubavitch, it was assumed that young people would become *shluchim*, even though that often didn't happen, and many members would eventually go into a business of one sort or another. It was not as if

Lubavitch society so disdained wealth that people used gold to make chamber pots, as the subjects of Thomas More's *Utopia* did. Still, Lubavitchers did seem oddly unconcerned about careers and making a living.

The Rebbe and other community leaders must have known that many, if not most, Lubavitchers would not end up as *shluchim*, but they didn't seem to make any preparations for these people to be successful in business or other secular professions. It is possible that many Lubavitchers accepted the Rebbe's rejection of secular studies and the related rejection of secular careers because they truly believed that the messiah would arrive any day and obviate such mundane concerns. Once the messiah arrived, the streets would be paved with precious stones.

Given the intense Lubavitch focus on Jewish outreach and *shluchim*, Crown Heights itself had a contradictory quality for the community. On the one hand, it was the heart of the Lubavitch solar system because that is where the Rebbe, the sun, was located. On the other hand, Crown Heights was also only a staging ground for the Rebbe's army to launch its outreach invasion of the rest of the world. Of course, *shluchim* would occasionally return to see the Rebbe, just as soldiers return to central headquarters to receive new orders. But the ultimate objective of any army is to take to the field of battle and not to remain closeted in its barracks.

Although growing up I had heard stories of wealthy Jews in Europe before the Holocaust who were honored with the best seats in the synagogue near the eastern wall of the sanctuary, I had never thought about class distinctions among Lubavitchers. Born into a family that regularly dined on baby lamb chops and pepper steak, I had assumed that all my classmates did the same.

Only in my twenties did I first learn of Lubavitch parents who couldn't afford to pay for their kids to go to sleepaway summer camps, as I did, and that some of my elementary school classmates and their families lived in government-funded Section 8 housing. Rabbis, religious schoolteachers, and small shop owners, all without high school diplomas, often found it hard to make a living. My father only recently shared with me how the administrators at Oholei Torah, my elementary school, would greet him with a smile when he came to pay tuition each September. By paying the full tuition for his children, my father was in effect sponsoring several other kids who were less fortunate.



As is so common for children raised in comfort, I had no conception of my actual economic status. My mother was never swathed in mink, her hands were never weighed down by diamonds, and my family never took lavish Passover vacations to Israel or Florida, as was the case with some others in Crown Heights. My parents drove the same car for nineteen years. They never remodeled their kitchen, even though they lived in the house for forty years. Nonetheless, my family was extremely comfortable and much better off than most of our Lubavitch neighbors.