



Jewish World

'Not an All-or-nothing Proposition': How a Former Chabadnik Became a Proud Jewish Atheist

In 'Brooklyn Odyssey,' sociologist Zalman Newfield provides a rare look at what goes on inside the hardcore Lubavitch community. For non-Orthodox fans of Chabad, some disclosures in this memoir may prove shocking

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It is hard to imagine a Jew alive today who has not, at some point, crossed paths with Chabad.

It might have been the Chabad-Lubavitch emissaries – clad in their signature black trousers, white shirts and fedoras, standing on the street corner of one of many big cities around the world – inviting them to lay tefillin or offering them free Shabbat candles.

It might have been the Chabad-led, Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremonies they frequented every year at the main public square in their hometown. Perhaps it was the free Shabbat dinners they enjoyed at the Chabad house on campus while they were students, or maybe even the giant Lubavitch-run Passover seder they attended in the Himalayas during their travels to the East.

Whatever the case, they were likely highly impressed and pleasantly surprised by what they encountered. Because unlike most ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, who tend to shun contact with the outside world, the Lubavitchers are known to be super friendly and open to Jews of all stripes, regardless of what they believe or how they dress.

This ethos of tolerance, however, does not necessarily extend to Lubavitch insiders, as a former community member reveals in his brand-new, no-holds-barred memoir.

In "Brooklyn Odyssey: My Journey out of Hasidism," Zalman Newfield offers a rare look at Chabad – warts and all – from the perspective of someone born and raised in the community who eventually opted out. Although the author is a professor of sociology and Jewish studies at Hunter College in New York, and the book was published by a scholarly press (Temple University), it is by no means a conventional academic study. It is rather a very personal, first-hand account of what happens behind the scenes of the fastest-growing Jewish movement in the world.

And because somewhere around 80 percent of Jews who engage with Chabad, in some way or another, are not Orthodox, the disclosures included in this insider memoir are likely to surprise, if not shock, many of them.

"Brooklyn Odyssey" traces Newfield's journey from a devout Lubavitch boy growing up in Crown Heights, the headquarters of the world Chabad movement, to a proud Jewish atheist.

Like other boys in this insular religious community, Newfield attended all-male Chabad schools – living in dormitories away from home when he was a teenager – where secular studies were banned. Like many of his peers, he later enlisted in outreach missions for the global movement – including postings in Russia, China

and Singapore – as he prepared for the only professional path open to young men in this community: the rabbinate.

Newfield's break with Chabad, driven by his growing skepticism of Orthodox Jewish beliefs, was a slow process. It began with his questioning as a young boy how Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Lubavitcher rebbe, could have died, if indeed, he was the messiah, as many in the community believe. A key turning point was the painful death at a young age of his beloved younger brother Shimmy. "Only years later would I realize how much Shimmy's death undercut my general belief in God's very existence," writes Newfield.

Years later, while working for Chabad in Singapore, Newfield made the acquaintance of a professor who would have a profound impact on his personal and professional journey. Recognizing his keen curiosity about the world and his insatiable thirst for knowledge, this secular, Jewish woman encouraged the young Chabadnik to defy conventions in his community and apply to college.

A few years later, while joining a group of Jewish students – most of them not Orthodox – on a volunteer mission to Ghana, Newfield reached his point of no return. It was this first-of-its-kind encounter with

young liberal Jews that convinced him that "Judaism didn't need to be an all-or-nothing proposition. It was possible to embrace and cherish the parts that spoke to me while discarding the parts that didn't."

Academia as rebellion

For many readers, "Brooklyn Odyssey" will recall [Tara Westover's](#) bestselling memoir "Educated" – her account of overcoming her Mormon survivalist family to go to college and break out of her extremely isolated world. Newfield, unlike Westover, did not have abusive parents or siblings. Nor did any members of his family, like hers, engage in dangerous behaviors, Newfield's father, in fact, is a Harvard-educated doctor who, like his mother, was not raised Orthodox and only discovered Chabad later in life.

Like Westover, Newfield was self-taught. He never learned in school to read or write English and never studied math. When he was 15 years old and was asked to sign his name in English to obtain a passport, the disgraced teenager had to call his father aside to show him what to do. After teaching himself to read English, Newfield discovered books and could not get enough of them. Since only Jewish texts were permitted at his yeshiva, he was forced to devise clever ways of hiding his growing library and indulging his illicit habit.

For non-Orthodox fans of Chabad, who often praise the movement's openness to the world, this deep-rooted

disdain for secular education may come as a surprise. So, too, might some of Newfield's revelations about deeply-entrenched racism, sexual abuse at a flagship Lubavitch yeshiva he attended, and the large amounts of alcohol typically consumed at *farbrengens* – the famous Hasidic all-male gatherings.

His decision to apply to college nearly cost Newfield his once-very-close relationship with his mother, who feared that his faith would be compromised by exposure to critical thinking. Their relationship was tested yet again – and in this case, almost did not survive – when he decided to marry a woman who was not Orthodox, though very Jewish. One cannot help but admire Newfield for the patience he shows "Mommy," who seems to be constantly issuing him ultimatums – until he eventually puts his foot down.

This would not be the first time that Newfield, who graduated from Brooklyn College and obtained his doctorate from New York University, has written a book inspired by his lived experience. His previous academic work, "Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Orthodox Judaism," explores the predicament of Jews like him who rebelled against their religious upbringing.

Despite the vast religious divide separating him from his family, in geographic terms, Newfield has not

moved very far from the neighborhood where he grew up. Today, he lives with his wife and two daughters in Hoboken, New Jersey, just across the river from them. And while he no longer believes in God, he remains very Jewishly engaged – both as an educator and as an active member of the local egalitarian congregation. Although Newfield never considered such a choice possible growing up, in his new life, he enjoys the luxury of embracing those aspects of Judaism he finds meaningful. For readers who might wonder why a non-believer like him would even bother, the memoirist responds: "They connect me to all the Jews in history who have performed these rituals and to all those Jews today throughout the world who continue to treasure them. They also connect me to my parents and siblings and to all the fond memories I have of performing these rituals together."

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