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by Zalman Newfield, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2026, 286 pp., $28.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9781439927618

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BOOK REVIEW

Brooklyn Odyssey: my journey out of Hasidism, by Zalman Newfield, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2026, 286 pp., $28.00 (paperback), ISBN: 9781439927618

Zalman Newfield's *Brooklyn Odyssey* is a memoir about growing up in and gradually leaving the Lubavitch Hasidic community, more widely known as Chabad. Yet while the subtitle frames the book as a journey "out of Hasidism", the book is in many ways much more specifically about Lubavitch itself, a movement that occupies a unique position within the Hasidic world through its international character, theology, and unusually active engagement with non-Hasidic Jewish society. This specificity is important, because the book's sociological value lies precisely in how closely it brings the reader into the internal logic, structures, hierarchies, educational systems, and everyday social worlds of Lubavitch life.

Written by Newfield, associate professor of sociology and Jewish studies, reflecting on his own life, the memoir becomes more than a personal story. For many 'outsiders', including non-Lubavitch Jews who frequently interact with Chabad through its global outreach work, this intra-community world rarely becomes visible in such detail. Newfield writes from an unusual position, both as someone who grew up inside the Lubavitch community and as a sociologist reflecting back on it. One of the book's strengths is therefore its tone. Newfield does not write from a position of strong resentment or simple rejection. Rather, the memoir is shaped by multifaceted lived experiences, attachment, ambivalence, humour, pain, and ongoing sociological reflection. In this sense, the book also contributes to the growing body of both academic and non-academic *off the derech* literature, referring to Jews leaving Orthodox religious life, while complicating many of the genre's more dichotomous stories of rupture and departure.

One of the most interesting aspects is how much the book teaches the reader about Lubavitch from within. Newfield brings the reader into the movement's theological world, educational structures, symbolic systems, and internal distinctions. We learn about specific Lubavitch interpretations of Jewish law and tradition, in everything from the continued use of the Rebbe's own wedding invitation as a model for new wedding invitations, to which Jewish texts are prioritized or avoided within Lubavitch yeshiva education. The Rebbe himself, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, remains a central presence throughout the memoir, not only as a religious leader but as the symbolic and emotional center around which the movement organized itself. It also brings insights into Lubavitch educational and gender structures. Newfield describes how girls often received more secular education than boys, while boys were immersed almost entirely in religious studies and yeshiva life. Particularly interesting is the drastic contrast between the relative social isolation of young yeshiva boys from the non-Hasidic world during upbringing, and the international outreach work many are later expected to perform. Lubavitch's famous outreach project, aimed at bringing less observant Jews closer to Judaism and religious practice, appears here not from the outside but through the eyes of the young "Rebbe's soldiers" being socialized into this mission. Newfield describes being sent to yeshivas in places such as Miami and Buenos Aires, as well as participating in outreach work in Russia, China, and Singapore. Through this, the memoir captures one of Lubavitch's defining tensions: an internally bounded community simultaneously built around global movement and outward-facing engagement.

The book is equally successful in describing distinctions and hierarchies within the movement that others would barely notice. Particularly interesting is Newfield's discussion of "old" Lubavitch families, whose lineage can be traced back to Eastern Europe or directly to the Rebbe's family, in contrast to *baalei teshuva*, Jews who joined the community later in life after growing up secular or less observant. Newfield's own parents belonged to the latter category. These distinctions quietly shape status, belonging, and authority within the community, complicating simplified images of Hasidic collectivism and homogeneity. Another major theme running through the memoir is the passing of the Rebbe and the crisis that followed. Newfield captures both the communal and personal dimensions of this rupture, and how it forced a reconceptualization of Lubavitch's future. The emergence of messianist and anti-messianist factions after the Rebbe's death becomes not only a theological disagreement, but a struggle over authority and the future identity of the movement itself.

At the same time, the memoir teaches us a great deal about Lubavitch's relationship to surrounding society. This includes encounters with non-Orthodox American Jews, Sephardi Jews, secular American society, Christianity, and neighbours in Crown Heights. Here again, the uniqueness of Lubavitch becomes particularly visible compared to other Hasidic groups, precisely because of its extensive interaction with the non-Hasidic world. Some of the most sociologically interesting moments emerge in these encounters across different Jewish traditions. During outreach work in Singapore, for example, Newfield describes tensions between Lubavitch representatives and the local Sephardi Jewish community with roots in Baghdad. The arrival of Lubavitch's specifically Hasidic and Ashkenazi traditions into an already existing Jewish communal structure created negotiations over authority, religious practice, and what kinds of traditions could or could not be imposed locally. Another tension captured is between the Lubavitch community and the growing Black Caribbean population moving into Crown Heights. Newfield describes prejudice and suspicion from both sides, communities sharing space while rarely engaging, and the communal and economic efforts made by the Rebbe to keep Lubavitch families in Crown Heights and avoid a "white flight" from the area. This reminds us how urban minority life can involve proximity without intimacy, shared space without much interaction, and mutual suspicion between groups positioned differently within American ethnic and religious landscapes.

As a memoir, *Brooklyn Odyssey* is beautifully written. Particularly moving are Newfield's descriptions of his younger brother's death at the age of eleven, as well as the ongoing negotiations with family and community surrounding acceptance, belonging, and freedom. Yet these personal stories also provide sociological insights by showing how leaving a religious community is rarely a clean or complete break. Family relations continue, social worlds overlap, and earlier ways of thinking and relating remain present long after exiting. As Newfield himself describes, whether sitting in synagogue visiting family in Crown Heights or working in secular academic life as a sociology professor, he still finds himself emotionally and culturally connected to the world of "farbrengens" and "maises" that shaped him.

Reading *Brooklyn Odyssey*, one feels enriched not only by a more nuanced understanding of the sociology of the Lubavitch community, but also by curiosity about how its world functions today. Much of the memoir reflects a Lubavitch of roughly twenty or thirty years ago, before contemporary digital media and newer forms of engagement with secular society began shaping Hasidic life as well. Newfield's detailed account of Lubavitch infrastructure, socialization, outreach, and community life therefore leaves the reader wondering how these same dynamics might appear today, where social media itself increasingly seems to have become another arena for the work of the "Rebbe's soldiers".

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