

Visiting a Jewish Temple Site

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American Jewish Identity, Secularism, and Religious Practice

It is a common observation that American Jews are more secular, well-educated, and ideologically liberal than the general American public. They are not known for religious observance as such, in the sense that they are not regular attendants at local synagogues. However, inside the community, another emerging group is not as secular-liberal leaning as the rest of their community. In America, [Orthodox Jews](#) are a growing community who are more religiously committed and take strong positions against leftist views. As part of my research, I was interested in studying the beliefs, rituals, and views of the Haredi, Orthodox Jewish tradition, in particular, the Chabad-Hasidic strand that is also referred to as Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and visiting their temple site and noting my observations of the tradition. Studying the customs and practices of the Hasidic Jewish community led to interesting insights into their lives and how they shape the views of the Jewish Community.

The Hasidic tradition is a sub-sect of the orthodox strand of Judaism. Orthodox Judaism is an assortment of different sub-traditions in Judaism that may have various social differences in understanding the Halakha or Jewish law. However, what unites them and classifies them as Orthodox is their core belief in the Torah, as well as the Oral Law, that it was revealed by God when he spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai, and that its laws, codes, and regulations are valid for all times to come. Consequently, Orthodox Jews live their lives in strict compliance with the Directives of the Halakha or Jewish law. In the Orthodox tradition, there is neither a single body nor an official statement of doctrines. Instead, each Orthodox faction claims to be an heir to their established Jewish doctrine practices. A study in 2013 discovered that Orthodox Jews were now about 10% of the projected Jewish population in the United States. Statistics show that Orthodox Jews are emerging not only in number but as a higher proportion of the American Jewish population. They have a younger median age and are more likely to have their own families, with nearly half of Orthodox Jews (48%) having more than four children. (PEW)

The Jewish site I visited belonged to the Chabad-Hasidic community. The Hasidic Jewish movement is a sub-tradition of Orthodox (Haredi) Judaism that rose from Eastern Europe. Israel ben Eliezer started the movement, also named the Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760). In the Hasidic tradition of Judaism, a closely-knit community is centred around a Rebbe, a Grand Rabbi. They hold fast to their distinct form of cultural dress and practices and emphasize speaking the Yiddish language. Hasidism is primarily a movement for religious pietism (halibut means piety) in Judaism and has played a vital role in influencing Jewish life since its inception. It introduced new values in Judaism by making access to divine teachings more accessible to the community and by forming a social structure around Rebbes.

By the mid-19th century, it became the most influential Jewish movement but had suffered dramatically as a result of the Holocaust. They regrouped in what is now Israel and North America and from there on have been growing as a tradition (Bible). Hasidism insists on complete devotion and a spiritual union with God. Hasidism, it is claimed, is considered the *devekut*, a trance-like meditative form of Jewish worship to be continuously maintained in one's daily life and routine. They believe evil inclinations that may haunt a person to hold spiritual energy and practice to elevate and transform it back into good, its source. Much of these concepts essentially go back to kabbalistic thought and the works of the Safed school.

The Chabad-Lubavitch movement is a sub-branch of the Hasidic sect developed from the works of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who was the author of the work *Tanya*, in 1796. The *Tanya* contains profound spiritual and mystical teachings guided by the thoughts of seven Rebbes who discussed refined and delicate aspects of mysticism. The Chabad-Hasidic movement has become a Jewish outreach movement operating in more than 100 countries worldwide. The movement's motto is to spread the deepness, appreciation, beauty, awareness, and joy inherent in the way of life guided by the Torah, and to revitalize the Jewish way of life by strengthening a person's relationship with God. Classical Judaic writings on spirituality and mysticism, especially the *Zohar* and the *Kabbalah*, are frequently cited in Chabad's works. These scripts are used as foundations for Chabad traditions, as their text is interpreted by Chabad Rabbis and authors, a majority of practices are applications of Rebbe Shneur Zalman's wisdom and teachings. The Lubavitch Rebbe, as *Nasi HaDor* (leader of the generation), is tasked with the duty of deciding the path of his generation. (Jewish Virtual Library)

South Florida Jewry and the Community of Chabad-Lubavitch

The Jewish community in South Florida is second only to New York. In Miami, 150,000 Jews comprise 7% of its total populace. A sizeable Chabad-Lubavitch-Hasidic population can be met shopping on Fridays near 41st Street on Miami Beach, to prepare for their Sabbath. Jews around the world migrated here in large numbers from Cuba, Central, and South America, as well as Europe, earlier and following [World War II](#) (Jansonius). An estimation of the number of Chabad movements is around 18,600 in the US. In the 1880s, most immigrants were evading European persecution, and only a few families were settled. By 1940, the Jewish population in Florida had grown to 25,000 by 1940. During World War II hotels began to allow Jewish customers. As South Florida became more hospitable, more Jews began to migrate to the beach area. By 1960, their population grew to 175,000, as thousands arrived from the Caribbean and Latin America, a migration that continues today. Nearly 10,000 Jews from Cuba fled Fidel Castro's regime to settle near Miami, which now has the highest quantity of immigrant Jews of any area in the United States. South Florida became a hub for Jews coming to the United States from Venezuela, Argentina, Columbia, Mexico, and Brazil. Today, home to approximately 750,000 Jews, Florida's Jewish community is the third largest in the US with growing numbers. (Jewish Museum of Florida)

I visited the Chabad House of Mid-Miami Beach during its Shabbath morning services. As I entered I saw in front of the synagogue sanctuary, a cabinet termed the Holy Ark that contains Torah scrolls, considered very sacred. The Ark had doors and some curtains that were opened at a few points. There are Hebrew letters on parchment in manuscripts containing what is called the Five Books of Moses. There was a light called the eternal light above the ark. It signifies the Western lamp that is believed to have continually shone in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. In the centre of the place facing the front, a platform called bimah and a table are placed where the Torah is being read. The ark serves as the Axis Mundi of the synagogue. The men and women were seated separately during the services (Chabad.org).

For attending the rituals, the first requirement is to make sure that the dressing is appropriate for the occasion. Women are expected to wear longish skirts with a traditional top, married women are expected to cover their hair. The men have their heads covered. Looking around, I noticed that most men wore a prayer shawl draped over their shoulders, called a tallit. This is customarily worn after marriage. There was a rack with spares that attendees could use. The standard prayer book, Siddur, contained incantations and prayers for each day. The text was in Hebrew with English translations. To attend the morning service, a Siddur along with a Chumash i.e., the Five Books of Moses are needed to take along before being seated. Men and women were segregated in the seating. The prayers were led by the cantor known in Hebrew as chazzan, who read the Hebrew text aloud. Some portions of the prayers are recited only by the cantor while most portions were recited by everyone, who responded according to the instructions in the siddur. The common response was "Amen." Said in unison. In some places, one is required to recite an Aramaic poem that praises God, called Kaddish. One can join with everyone by saying Amen, even if one isn't reciting the Kaddish, at appropriate places. Prayers can be said in Hebrew or English. A Shabbat morning service lasts two to three hours,

Prayer, Psalms, and the Sacred Structure of Temple Worship

Other sacred Jewish scriptures that are recited include Introductory Hymns from a selection of passages from the Psalms that praise God. Some of the passages are recited quietly while some are sung or recited in unison, one of them is called "HaAderet VebaEmunah". After reading the Kaddish, the Shema is recited, It is central to all Jewish prayers. Before it begins, a talk is given that usually covers topics such as the wonders of nature or the angels, and how the creation praises God. After the talk, the congregation says the Shema. It is a declaration of God's unity and devotion and subservience to Him. The Shema consists of a specific sentence followed by three passages from the Bible. After the Shema, God is thanked and praised for saving the Children of Israel from Egypt. A silent prayer known as the Amidah is said after the Shema, standing together. The congregation faces the front of the synagogue with their feet together and whispers the words of the Amidah. Once everyone finishes, the chazzan repeats the same prayer aloud, adding a few extra passages to it. Afterwards, there is a session in which the chazzan and the congregation engage in another rite

called Kedushah in which everyone stands placing their feet together. The second phase of the service starts with the reading of the Torah, where the scrolls are obtained from the ark and brought to the table in the middle of the sanctuary to be read, accompanied by some hymns in unison. After a few concluding prayers, the kiddush prayer is said over wine, after which it is sipped. The traditional greeting is “Shabbat Shalom” which everyone passes to each other, as the congregation makes its exit. (Chabad.org)

The prayers restore the knowledge of the Torah and other scriptures for the congregation, create a sense of community, and elevate the people spiritually. It teaches them to look beyond the material desires and consumption of the world and channel that energy to attain favour with God. The design and the symbolism used in the synagogue trace themselves back to the texts. The ark is a symbolic representation of the Ark of the Covenant of the First Temple, one of the most important symbols in the Jewish faith. (Jewish Virtual Library). The tradition and stories surrounding it were similar to what I had also been accustomed to hearing growing up in a Christian household. The Torah is the First Testament in the bible, and a lot of beliefs and stories that were talked about were not foreign to me, except for the Hebrew terminologies used to describe the events. What can also be noticed from the prayer service is that the world where Moses and David used to live in, is recreated for the congregation and they are inspired to follow the examples of their ancestors who lived at the time. The texts and passages are a combination of historical events, incantations, and prayers, recalling communication between God and man, and replicating the experience in their daily lives. This allows them to find peace through the prayer service, from their work lives, stress, and daily routines and purifies their hearts and souls.

Since the Chabad-Hasidic movement lays great emphasis on not just the law of the Torah but on making worship and devotion joyful to the heart, this helps the followers achieve not only strong moral conduct but also a sense of happiness, fulfilment, community, and peace of heart. Even though the practice of sipping wine as a religious ritual did not appeal to me, I still found it to be a new and refreshing experience, that allowed me to observe and appreciate the role of organized religion in shaping people’s lives for the better. As a Christian, it improved my understanding of the Jewish faith and what appealed to me the most during my visit was how the Chabad-Hasidic sub-movement in Judaism has managed to retain many forms of the original aspects of their religion and preserved their historical traditions, in their rituals and everyday practice, since many other movements have abandoned traditional Jewish beliefs for reformed and modern opinions.

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