



Lubavitchers as Citizens



A PARADOX OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Jan Feldman

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A Paradox of Liberal Democracy

JAN FELDMAN

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

I T H A C A A N D L O N D O N

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To my dear parents, Stanley and Frances Feldman:

As it is written, “From those who have taught me I have gained wisdom, indeed your testimonies are my counselors.”

PIRKEI AVOT 4:1

To my beloved children, Jeremiah (Yirmeyahu Aryeh), Danit (Devorah Rachel), Gabriel (Tzvi Hirsch), and Zev Amos: Akavya ben Mahalalel said, “Know from where you came, and to where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give accounting.”

PIRKEI AVOT 3:1

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PREFACE

First, let me be clear about what I am not trying to achieve. I am not trying to make a general case about religious subgroups and democracy. I certainly do not want to conclude from my study of Lubavitch that all non-liberal groups are capable of serving democratic purposes. Nor am I making a case for Lubavitcher essentialism. Rather, I am describing a specific group's behavior from which some important conclusions about liberalism and democratic citizenship can be drawn.

Second, I make no pretense about being a completely objective and detached social scientist. Such a stance, were it even possible, would be undesirable. My study is a form of political ethnography, but while many researchers in this mode worry about "identity management problems," I have no need to support a self-conscious distinction between "them" and "me."

My close affiliation with Lubavitch goes back seventeen years to the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union where I first encountered its members taking enormous risks to revive the remnants of Jewish life. My continuing relationship with Lubavitch has enhanced my ability to make their story accessible. Without this insider perspective, deciphering the Lubavitcher world of meaning would be quite impossible. This is not to say that members of the community would give an outsider a cold or hostile reception. On the contrary, they are, for the most part, a very warm and welcoming group of people. On the other hand, they are very sensitive about the fact that many outsiders, particularly journalists (and, in a recent case, a best-selling author), have, in their view, misrepresented and sensationalized the practices of the community. My guess is that there was no malicious intent here; rather, these outsiders simply did not, or could not, make sense of the Lubavitch world. As a participant-observer, I could enter this world without yielding my social scientific

training. My vantage point allowed me to see their world and the secular one from each other's perspective.

My findings are based on several years of research on the Lubavitch community in the United States as well as on the sabbatical year I spent as a visiting professor in the Department of Judaic Studies at McGill University. During this year, I lived in the heart of Lubavitch Montreal, one block from the Yeshiva Tomche T'mimim, the center of the community's religious, academic, and social life. There is no doubt that my four children, ranging in age then from six to twelve, gave me entree into the community and an instant rapport with the mothers on the block. My children were properly attired, sporting the traditional haircut, the distinctive black velvet *kippot* (skullcaps), and *tzitzis* (fringes) dangling from under their shirts. My oldest son became *hanachos tefillin* (the small ceremony in which a boy, shortly before he becomes Bar Mitzvah, puts on *tefillin*, or phylacteries, for the first time) and Bar Mitzvah in the community, having prepared intensively for months with a young *bocher* (rabbinical student) from the yeshiva.

The adjustment to urban life was made easier for my children by the thrill of having flocks of instant friends on the street. In Vermont, the stringent requirements of Sabbath *don'ts* remove them from the activities and games of their peers, but they did not feel even slightly onerous in our adopted neighborhood, where Sabbath was a joyous flurry of friends and noise. For children who have stood out because of their skullcaps, fringes, and dietary requirements, it was an enormous novelty to jettison their minority status and melt blissfully for the first time into the crowd.

Being in a sizable community allowed us to participate in the cycle of holidays and festivals, the *simchas* or celebration of happy events. We prayed (*davened*) in one of the Lubavitch shuls (synagogues), and I attended *shiurim* (classes) and women's discussion groups and school fund-raisers. I was asked to speak at the annual women's convention. I visited the Beit Din, the religious court, the Va'ad Ha'ir, and the separate boys' and girls' schools. One of the most intensely emotional experiences for Lubavitchers is a visit to the *Ohel*, the grave of Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson and his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe. I joined a contingent from the community on a pilgrimage to Brooklyn, the site of the Ohel, on what was considered a momentous occasion—the fiftieth anniversary of the date that the Rebbe took up his position. I won't deny that I left the Montreal community with some real regret, having developed true affection and respect for the community and its individual members. My oldest son is now enrolled in yeshiva in Montreal, because the Lubavitch school in Vermont, where my younger children study, only goes through grade seven.

In addition to living according to the rhythms and activities of daily life in the community, my findings are based on dozens of target interviews. These interviews were based on a set of twenty-three questions that were intended to direct rather than confine the discussion. While I did not treat these questionnaires as an authoritative source of hard facts, they served quite well as markers of what the respondents took to be important about the community. I spoke with rabbis, students, housewives, midwives, teachers, jewelry makers, garment makers, doctors, psychologists, school principals, wig makers, hatmakers, businessmen, accountants, computer programmers, provincial and municipal politicians, party activists, elected officials at the municipal and provincial level, and civil servants.¹

A number of my colleagues warned me that any “ultra-Orthodox” group would be both impenetrable and inscrutable, particularly to a woman. They anticipated that the custom of *tsnius* (modesty), which requires the strict separation of the sexes, would make interviewing men difficult if not impossible. In fact, in my case, strict formulas and rules actually facilitated the interview process by structuring the interaction.

The advantage of rules that are well known and impersonal is that the nature of a relationship is already defined. Adhering to the rules allowed us to relax and get down to the business at hand without the awkwardness involved in sizing up one another. I felt more at ease and trusted the authenticity of the responses of Lubavitcher men much more than when I conducted research for my doctoral thesis at the Pentagon, or when, during a sabbatical year, I interviewed coal miners in the Donbass region of the Ukraine. There, the posturing and formulaic gallantry of men in the presence of any woman made interviewing difficult, even comical.

Ironically, it was harder to get the undivided attention of women simply because they were always occupied with their children, but since I often had my own children in tow, I quickly got used to working around interruptions. In a small community (about three hundred families) word quickly got around about my project and I no longer had to sell people on participating. I always left an interview with a list of additional people to speak with. This level of cooperation might have been a bad sign if it had indicated some sort of official clearance or permission, or if people had been coached to present a uniform and rosy picture of the community. In fact, I found that people were very candid and perfectly willing to be critical of aspects of the community life or institutions, such as the schools or teachers that displeased them. Moreover, the answers that my questions elicited were anything but uniform and suggested a high degree of independent thinking.

I was also warned that the “ultra-Orthodox” are wary of secular academics. Although they are certainly wary of the press, based on experience, several Lubavitchers are professors in secular institutions such as McGill and Concordia and the Rebbe studied engineering at the Sorbonne, so my profession is not considered that unusual. There is a good-natured tendency to belittle secular academics, and Lubavitchers enjoy a bit of academic bashing now and then, the same as everyone else. Nor was it considered noteworthy that I am a female academic. Having a career outside of the home is not uncommon for women in this community, although it is assumed that a mother of four small children, such as myself, would be working only out of necessity. Moreover, political science doesn’t arouse any particular emotion because Jewish law and custom have nothing to say about it. On the other hand, had I announced an intention to research Kaballah I would certainly have raised eyebrows; such study is considered inappropriate for women (Madonna’s well-publicized forays into Jewish mysticism notwithstanding), not to mention inadequately prepared men.

Another challenge a researcher faces in studying the community has to do with sorting out the difference between verifiable facts and “common knowledge” claims, some of which have been so often repeated as to become embellished or exaggerated versions of the truth, bordering on hagiography. This is particularly problematic when information about the seventh Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is sought. I want to be clear here: What some outside observers condemn as hagiographic misrepresentations of his life are not deliberate or conscious deceptions, but are fully in keeping with an ancient Jewish tradition of respecting, even venerating, sages and scholars. This tradition continues among Chassidim and among Sephardic Jews and often involves imbuing the sage in question with exceptional, even miraculous, intellectual abilities and powers, traceable to his childhood, before anyone knew that he would become a Rebbe.

I constantly encountered this reverential attitude toward Menachem Mendel. Much of it was deserved, particularly regarding his prodigious intellect and his remote yet approachable, modest, and undeniably charismatic demeanor. But the tendency to romanticize the Rebbe can be maddening for a researcher who expects modern individuals to be aware when they are inflating the good and ignoring the bad, thereby creating a superhuman hero who can do no wrong. Moreover, what outsiders regard as the stuff of legend and lore is likely to be regarded as unassailable truth by many community members.

Additionally, a researcher has to come to grips with the fact that there is a public side and a private side to the life of this community. There is an ele-

ment of secrecy that could be equated with censorship, but it is not the result of a deliberate subterfuge. Emphasizing the positive and downplaying the negative is customary.

Perhaps the best example is the way that the community, in its literature and accumulated oral lore, represents the life of Menachem Mendel in his youth, or pre-Rebbe, days. He spent his student years in Berlin and Paris and was apparently rather comfortable in the outside world. Photographs show a man with a trimmed beard, dapper attire, and French newspapers in hand. This would be seen, in any other man, as somewhat unseemly, or *unchassidische*, behavior. Moreover, the photos of his wife reveal a sophisticated, stylish woman with partially uncovered hair and a definite ease in the world. There is no attempt to censor or suppress these photos, though the details of the couple's early life together are shrouded in mystery. What is interesting and very revealing is that Lubavitchers have turned the young Rebbe's modernity into an advantage by using it to illustrate the distinction between the character of a Rebbe and that of an ordinary man. While the rest of us would clearly run great spiritual risks were we to engage in worldly activities, a Rebbe cannot only skirt dangers, he can transform them into holiness. Unlike the average person, he can come into contact with aspects of life that would taint a person of lesser character. The average person does not possess his spiritual purity, and therefore should certainly not emulate his reading of secular newspapers. (Young people circulate the story that the Rebbe was hiding holy texts behind the newspaper.)

More important than whether claims about the Rebbe or his life or his powers hold up to careful scrutiny is the significance and meaning of these claims to the community. For instance, researchers have pointed out with great indignation that there is no hard evidence that the Rebbe Menachem Mendel ever graduated from the Sorbonne, as is universally accepted by the community.² Whether he graduated or, for that matter, ever even attended, the fact that his followers make him out to have been a star student in the sciences and engineering speaks to their recognition of the esteem granted by the outside world to academic credentials and scientific knowledge. For understanding the community, this fact may be in itself an important truth. In the final analysis, I did not find it particularly disturbing that Lubavitcher publications and oral lore gloss over or even ignore some issues or controversies. Challenging the truth claims of the Lubavitchers about their beloved Rebbe was not part of my project.

I came to know many people as friends, confidants, neighbors, co-workers, and citizens. I found Lubavitchers to be complex people who live not in two

worlds but in one world with two dimensions, two clocks, and two calendars. Their role in life is to unite the two dimensions, sacred and profane, by infusing practical, ordinary, daily activities of life at home and at work with G-dliness. They believe to a person that we are obligated to make a home for G-d in the world, and that we will imminently leave *golus*, or exile (physical and spiritual), for *geulah* (redemption). They expect this eternal Sabbath to be ushered in by the messiah (Moshiach).

Joshua ben Perachaya said, "Provide yourself with a teacher; acquire for yourself a friend" (Pirkei Avot 1:6).

In researching and writing this book, I have had the good fortune to have found both, and often in the same person. The spiritual and practical guidance of Rabbi Yitzhok Raskin and his wife Zeesy Raskin through the years is beyond measure. In addition, Yisroel and Rachel Jacobs have been a continuing source of both friendship and inspiration.

While it would be impossible to thank all of the people who were willing to be interviewed or who showed my family hospitality during our year in Montreal, I would like to acknowledge the special kindness of the members and rabbis of the Montreal Torah Center. They gave us a spiritual home. In particular, I benefited enormously from the wisdom of Rabbi Moshe New and his wife, Nechama New. I am especially indebted to Rabbi Shmuel and Chaya Zalmanov and to Miriam and Tanya Landa for their friendship and insights. In addition, I am greatly indebted to Rabbi Yitzhok Sputz, principal of Yeshiva Tomche T'mimim, for his kindness to my oldest son, and to Meyer and Nomi Gniwisch for providing him a loving home and keeping a watchful eye on him when I returned to Vermont, thereby allowing him to continue his studies at yeshiva.

With great affection and admiration I want to acknowledge Rivka Cymbalist. The chance meeting that turned into an enduring friendship I count as my great good fortune. You and your husband Gedalia have been our trusted confidants and advisors in many matters. Rivka, while our children gave you the label "the fun Mom," I appreciated your serious reflections, direct manner, intensity, wisdom, and sincerity as much as your snowball-throwing prowess. May we, in the merit of our collective striving and in the merit of our children, be privileged to see the final redemption in our times.

I also want to thank my friends and colleagues, Pat Neal, Thomas Mazza, and Robert Taylor, for their thoughtful and kind comments on this manuscript. Bob, your unstinting encouragement and friendship contributed to the successful completion of this project.

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NOTE ON SPELLING AND TRANSLITERATION

Because it is sometimes awkward or even impossible to convey a meaning in translation, I have used a number of Yiddish and Hebrew words in the text. I provide a rough translation in parentheses following the word. There is no standard guide for transliterating Yiddish and Hebrew, and I encountered various spellings of the same word. On one poster, for instance, I noticed three different renderings of the word *Moshiach* (messiah). I initially decided that I would adopt the spellings used in the Lubavitch presses, but even those were not standardized. Finally, I decided to use the spelling that produced the pronunciation closest to that used by my Lubavitcher acquaintances. This choice also has its problems, since pronunciation varies between the older, European-born generations and the younger, native Canadian and American generations. Even within generations, different countries and regions are reflected in speech patterns and accents. In this case, I stuck with the spelling that conformed to the most prevalent pronunciation. Accordingly, while many scholars write Hasid or Hasidic, I have written Chossid or Chassidic. In a more theoretical discussion in the text, I might have used Shabbat for Sabbath, but in relating someone else's words, I may have used Shabbos, as it is most often spoken in the latter way and written in the former.

I have also used *G-d* because the name of G-d is not written out by many observant Jews because of the strong prohibition against attempting to represent or define, and therefore limit, G-d. Many religious Jews use *Hashem*, which means "the name," in order to speak of G-d. The prohibition is also related to the making of idols, which even writing G-d's name would represent.

LUBAVITCHERS AS CITIZENS

Does Democracy Need Liberals?

The public philosophy of the United States and Canada, liberalism, is ambivalent about diversity, sometimes seeing it as a healthy by-product of democracy, at other times as a threat to it. One specific type of diversity, that constituted by nonliberal religious groups, seems more than other types to test the extent to which the state is willing to honor its expressed commitment to toleration and neutrality with respect to citizens' views of the good life. In this arena, where the values of a particular subgroup may collide with the values of the majority, liberalism's putative commitment to tolerate diversity may be overridden by its apprehension about the impact of a nonliberal subgroup's demands on the stability of the liberal democratic regime.

Framed in this way, this apprehension becomes submerged in the more general question of what values and virtues are necessary to the survival of democracy. Here, it becomes one strand of an ongoing and lively discussion prompted by the loss of confidence in most circles that private vices automatically become public virtues when refracted through the prism of the economic and political marketplace. Democracy might be a *low-maintenance* political regime, but it is becoming clear that it is not a *no-maintenance* one. This realization has led to a revival of interest in normative concepts of citizenship. What does it mean to be a good citizen? Must private and public values correspond? If so, does a democracy have a legitimate interest in shaping the private values of its citizens?

It is commonly asserted, and intuitively persuasive, that democratic political institutions require the support of a democratic political culture. This being the case, common sense would seem to support some form of government intervention, most likely in the form of public education, into the process of value formation of its citizenry. It is no surprise that having noticed a corre-

lation between democratic values and liberal values, many political theorists treat the two as virtually synonymous. For them, the statement “democratic political institutions require the support of democratic values” can just as accurately be rephrased as “democratic political institutions require the support of liberal values.” But this assertion, in addition to being insufficiently tested, casts needless suspicion on some nonliberal enclaves in American and Canadian society, which, despite their rejection of such liberal values as individual autonomy and critical rationality, hold tight to democratic values.

This is a study of a particular religious enclave, a subset of Chassidic Judaism known as Lubavitch or ChaBad. It is intended to test the proposition that democratic values and behaviors depend on a liberal mindset. The characteristic liberal mindset might include:

1. critical rationality, or the willingness to scrutinize all beliefs and truth claims, treating them as provisional until *proven* according to *objective* standards;
2. universalism, or the willingness to put aside parochial or particular loyalties in favor of attachments to more general principles *common* to all of humanity; and
3. individual autonomy, or the willingness to treat the individual as the basic unit of analysis and the final arbiter of all of his or her choices, values, and commitments.

Chassidim, including Lubavitchers, reject this liberal mindset, yet they seem to function reasonably well as democratic citizens, without resembling either Pericles or Diogenes. This is not to say that all nonliberal groups are equally benign and should be accorded full approval and the right of unscrutinized and unimpeded activity among us. Nor would I want to claim that liberal values are irrelevant to democracy simply because some nonliberal groups demonstrate the capacity to operate democratically despite their illiberal attitudes. What Lubavitchers allow us to investigate is the common assumption that liberal and democratic attitudes and behaviors are inextricably linked. Perhaps if more legal and political theorists were to take a close look at some of the groups that they find so troubling, they might feel less alarmed about the threat that these groups pose to democracy. Lubavitchers, generally speaking, make an excellent test case because they are articulate, informed, politically active, democratic, and nonliberal.

Lubavitch is an example of what Robert Cover¹ would have referred to as a nomic group, a self-legislating island of traditional authority with its own enduring and distinctive narrative and world of meaning. This nomic group