Chabad Tracks the Trekkkers: Jewish Education in India

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Fundamentalists and modernists seem, at times, to work in contrapuntal interdependency. While the fundamentalist’s rhetoric markets its image as celebrating the renewal of an authentic past identity in modernity, modernists state the need for and possibility of adapting a cherished past to modern assumptions. Yet, it seems as if it is the fundamentalists who are the ones to embrace a highly modern narrative and that it is the modernists who oppose it. In this article, we investigate this paradox by portraying the educational efforts of the Chabad Movement to introduce young Israeli trekkers in Southeast Asia, from secular, Zionist backgrounds, into a religious lifestyle. We show Chabad’s strategies to be what, in modernist jargon, would be considered progressive informal educational activities, the very ones from which modernists seem to be retreating with the advance of Jewish day school educational technologies in the Diaspora. We suggest that the Chabad movement demonstrates an understanding of the covert symbolic power of formal educational approaches and that it resists them by enacting a radical epistemological change in all that guides their educational activity.

INTRODUCTION

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need for and possibility of adapting a cherished past to modernity. Funda-
mentalist rhetoric is thus seen in the eyes of the modernists as “primitive,”
while modernists constitute themselves as progressive. Yet, it seems as if it
is the fundamentalists who are the ones to embrace a highly modern narrative,
while the modernists generally oppose it (Bekerman & Neuman, 2001;
Neuman, Bekerman, & Kaplan, 2000). In this study, we will further the
investigation into this paradox by exploring the fundamentalist educational
strategies that are implemented by Chabad representatives towards Israeli
trekkers in India. These strategies appear to be what, in modernist jargon,
would be considered progressive informal educational activities, the very
strategies from which modernists seem to be retreating with their agenda to
advance Jewish day school educational technologies in the Diaspora.

More specifically, we will focus on the educational efforts carried out
by the Chabad movement in order to introduce young Israeli trekkers in
India, many of whom went through secular, and to some extent, Zionist and
antireligious socialization, into a religious life style. We suggest that the
epistemological stance adopted by the Chabad educational effort is both in
accordance with modernist educational perspectives and with cherished
traditions of old, positioning them as a true option to resist the assimilatory
forces.

BACKGROUND

Chabad

The Chabad-Lubavitch movement is a Hasidic Jewish movement, which
consists of 250,000 to 300,000 believers throughout the world. Founded by
Shneur Zalman of Liadi (born 1745), who wrote The Tanya, the first schematic
 treatment of Hasidic moral philosophy and its metaphysical foundations,
Chabad (חabad) is the Hebrew acronym for Chochmah, Binah, Da’at, meaning
Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge. Belief in the coming of Mashiach
(Messiah) and the Messianic redemption is one of Chabad’s fundamental
principles. The movement’s last leader was Rabbi Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, known to his followers as “The Rebbe.” He led the movement
until his death in 1994, greatly expanding its activities throughout the world
and founding a network of institutions to further the reach of Orthodox
Hasidic Judaism, with the stated goal of “Jewish unity” (Brod, 1998; Ehrlich,
2004; Kravel-Tuvi, 2002; Sheler, 1994).

Chabad Hasidim believe that there is no successor to Schneerson and
all of the suggested successors declined the mantle of leadership in the days
after his death. The Hasidim believe that Schneerson is still their leader,
guiding them from beyond the grave through prayer and signs. Within the
movement, some followers (The Meshichists) believe that Schneerson will
return as the Messiah, a view that has led to controversy with other Orthodox groups and within Chabad itself, causing a schism between the Meshichists and the formal section of Chabad, which does not claim that Schneerson will return (Heilman & Friedman, 1991; Kravel-Tuvi, 2002). Neither the Chabad heads Schneerson as the Messiah or that tries to persuade the general public of this belief, but such literature is informally published and distributed by the Meshichists. Chabad-Lubavitch leaders have repeatedly condemned the Meshichists in the strongest possible terms. Nevertheless, despite the apparent intensity of this division, it has been argued that the formal section of Chabad disagrees only with the messianic section’s public actions and declarations, not with their beliefs. All of Schneerson’s followers believe that he is still able to influence their decisions, a confidence made most clear by the practice known as “Iggerot kodesh” (“Holy Epistles”), in which followers derive answers to questions through mystical consultation of the published collections of Schneerson’s letters (Ehrlich, 2004).

Chabad operates thousands of centers around the world called Chabad houses. As of 2007, there were 3,300 Chabad centers around the world in 70 countries (chabad.org, 2009). The centers function as Jewish community centers, synagogues, and sometimes schools, providing religious outreach and educational activities for Jewish communities. In any given community, the Chabad house may serve as the nerve center for all the educational and outreach activities of a shaliach (emissary) rabbi and his wife, and their colleagues, known as bahurim (unmarried Chabad men). Often, until the community can fund the building of a Chabad house, the house is located in the shaliach’s home and the living room functions as the synagogue. The shaliach rabbi and his wife consider themselves emissaries of Chabad, fulfilling Schneerson’s charge to spread Judaism wherever there is at least one Jew. Schneerson’s directive builds on the traditional hasidic demand that every Hasid personally participate in the dissemination of Torah and Judaism to one’s surroundings in order to benefit one’s fellow Jews; as Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneersohn explains, “A Hasid is he who surrenders himself for the benefit of another.” Additionally, Chabad demands that their emissaries act out of pnimiyut (inwardness), meaning that one should not serve superficially, as a mere act of faith, but rather with inner conviction. The Chabad houses, and the shalichim who run them, reflect these Hasidic imperatives, as interpreted by Schneerson.

The Backpackers

Approximately 150,000 Israelis travel to Southeast Asia each year, primarily to India, Thailand, and Nepal. Most of these tourists are backpackers, Israeli Jews between the ages of 20 and 25, from middle to upper-middle class socioeconomic backgrounds. Their trips, which typically last from 2 to 12 months,
occur during a liminal state before entering young adulthood. Before the journey to Asia, the majority of the Israelis served a mandatory period of army service (two years for women and three for men) and some also spent time working or studying in an academic institution. Participant observation showed that most Israeli backpackers tend to travel to certain districts of India, Thailand, and Nepal, visiting established Israeli enclaves in specific and popular places. In their enclaves, the backpackers continue, to a large extent, their Israeli lifestyle: Most of the food is prepared to resemble Israeli cuisine and the menus often include a Hebrew translation, as do the signs hanging in the streets. The backpackers read Hebrew books and Israeli newspapers, listen to Israeli music, surf the Internet and correspond via e-mail in Hebrew, and speak mainly Hebrew, in some cases even with the local population. Some of the Israelis, mainly those who settle in these areas long term, even establish “Israeli” guesthouses, restaurants, small businesses, or shops (see also Westerhausen, 2002). The enclaves, therefore, are extremely comfortable and familiar to the backpackers, lacking much of the challenge of negotiating a foreign culture that is common to travel (Maoz, 2006b, 2007).

In addition to their native food, music, and language, the Israeli backpackers also are exposed to the practice of their Jewish religion while in Asia. About 20 Chabad houses are distributed in Israeli gathering places throughout Southeast Asia. These branches were established roughly 15 years ago to benefit the Israeli backpackers, and they offer the travelers kosher meals, spiritual and material support, lessons and courses in Judaism, and “a home away from home.” The houses are always staffed by at least two schlichim, some of whom are official representatives of the formal Chabad movement, but most belonging to the messianic section of Chabad.

Throughout Southeast Asia, hundreds of Israeli backpackers visit Chabad branches on a daily basis, and the numbers increase significantly during holidays and Shabbat, reaching a few thousand in some branches. There the travellers participate in the religious ceremonies and celebrations led by the Chabad schlichim. Most of the visitors are secular, and for some it is the first time experiencing Jewish ritual. Many engage in extended or repeated visits to Chabad houses in an effort to learn more about Judaism and its practices, and some (approximately dozens each year) become religiously observant during or after their stay. The decision to visit a Chabad house is voluntary, known as “free-choice learning,” and represents a relatively constraint-free choice of goals and affiliations, involving considerable discretion on the part of the learner as to when, where, what, and with whom to learn. Nevertheless, visiting Chabad has become so common and accepted that it is nearly requisite for any Israeli backpacker in the subculture that develops in Southeast Asia (Maoz, 2007).

Many of the backpackers are in a liminal and moratoric phase, described by some to be a “fateful moment” (Giddens, 1991; see pp. 112–114)
in which they depart from their “old self”—their youth, home, family, and friends—in order to construct a “new self” (Erikson, 1959; Giddens, 1991; Kahane, 1997; Marcia, 1980; Turner, 1969; Waserman, 2004). Researchers have noted that these Israeli trekkers are particularly open to new experiences and demonstrate great interest in local and other novel philosophies (Maoz 2006a, 2006b). Despite this, their trip does not psychologically remove them from their Israeliness, and therefore cannot be classified as a classical rite of passage (Turner, 1969).

Approximately one third of the backpackers, mostly men, report having experienced a crisis prior to their trip (e.g., other travelers from different countries; see Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Spreitzhofer, 1998), some of whom ascribe the crisis to their army service, which they recall as frustrating and despair inducing. Some served in the army during the second Intifada, the uprising of the Palestinians in the occupied territories that began in September 2000. Many witnessed deaths, woundings, acts of terrorism, and some fought among and against a civilian population. The emotional intensity and trauma of such experiences contribute to the urgency some young Israeli backpackers feel to pursue a fresh beginning and develop a new sense of self.

Formal and Informal Education

There seems to be a consensus amongst researchers regarding the distinctions between formal and informal education. This broad agreement includes an explicit or implicit critique of formal education and a conviction in the potential of informal practices to improve formal educational outcomes.

Scholars have characterized formal educational settings, typified by traditional schools, as removed from contexts of practical activity and limited to their goal of teaching skills that will become the means for later activity. Moreover, the image of reality transmitted in schools is fragmented and oriented by disciplinary tracks directed to further academic knowledge that values change and discontinuity over tradition and community. In formal pedagogical settings, it is common that a single adult interacts with many pupils and, unlike in most other socialization settings, this adult rarely has any familial ties to the students, rendering the social relations between teacher and pupil relatively impersonal. Within these settings, students are expected to learn from textbooks, and teachers to assess the students’ progress (Cole, 1990; Goody, 1987; Greenfield & Lave, 1982).

The central goal of instructional discourse in such settings is to give children information stipulated in curricula and feedback about their efforts to learn it, while providing teachers with information about their progress. Recitation is the most frequently reported form of interactive teaching. This form of questioning seeks predictable answers, which are identified as correct or false, and includes a high percentage of yes/no questions; teachers only
rarely ask questions with the goal of guiding students to develop more complete or sophisticated ideas. An additional critique is that instructional discourse differs in both structure and content from the ways in which adults and children speak outside of school. One of its distinctive characteristics is the initiation-reply-evaluation sequence: teacher asks, student replies, and teacher provides evaluation. Another distinguishing facet of school-based language is the emphasis on the linguistic forms of the students' replies. The teacher judges the replies considered appropriate, using turn-taking rules to maintain classroom discourse (Edwards & Mercer, 1993; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Informal education, in contrast, is regularly characterized by its practitioners as “creative,” “nonconventional,” “special,” “original,” and, in some cases, as “anti-establishment” and “politically identified.” Kahane, using a sociological theoretical framework, have developed an ideal model of performance for activities in informal educational settings, specifically youth organizations (Kahane, 1997). They propose that informal organizations construct themselves according to a code of informality based on eight structural components, four of which are explained below as descriptive of informal educational settings:

I. voluntarism, as a relatively constraint-free choice of goals and affiliations;
II. multiplicity, denoting a wide range of available activities that are different in substance yet equal in value or importance;
III. symmetry, in reference to a relationship based on three interrelated elements: actors, who have fairly equivalent resources; exchanges, which are balanced reciprocally; and, therefore, expectations, which the actors tend mutually to accommodate;
IV. moratorium, in the form of an arrangement in which social obligations are delayed and a temporary deviation from commonly accepted norms is legitimated.

Education scholars and anthropologists have elaborated on these elements of informal education in their descriptions of the practice. Anthropologists Lave and Greenfield have characterized informal education (mostly in apprenticeship) as that which is embedded in daily life, conducted in familial spheres, directed by little or no pedagogy or curriculum, and motivated by social contribution, thereby emphasizing its opposition to formal education (Greenfield & Lave, 1982; Lave, 1988).

In later works, learning theory has been applied to the analysis of informal education and learning. Lave analyzes informal educational forms from this perspective (Lave, 1988). They consider three primary factors: telos or the direction of learning; learning mechanisms or ways of becoming and participating; and subject–world relations, in the form of specifications regarding relations between subjects and the social world. From this perspective, apprenticeship consists not of the acquisition of specific skills, but of
becoming a fully practicing participant in a given community (e.g., tailors). Rather than working their way through a program of learning mediated, and thus being distracted, by the acquisition of prescribed tools and techniques, apprentices seek ways to become participants, pursue avenues by which to contribute, and strive to gain an understanding of how their roles and contributions change across time and locality. Apprentices can therefore be seen as crafting their identities in practice as part of the learning process, which highlights their active role in subject–world relations. Knowledge becomes action rather than acquisition. Knowing becomes the active generation of an identity through ongoing practice.

Along similar lines, Rogoff, Matusov, and White (1996; see also Rogoff, 1990) support an approach they refer to as a “community of learners,” in which children learn through observation and participation in ongoing community activities, with mutuality and support from more skilled community members. Other ethnographic studies on cultural specific ways of framing education have been conducted in informal sites, such as homes, and have extended the discourse of critical pedagogies by emphasizing the influence of household knowledge and its potential to interfere with dominant educational assumptions (Bernal, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

In order to describe and interpret the pedagogical narrative of informal education, Silberman-Keller (2000), using a combination of semiotic and literary studies approaches, adopts the notion of “chronotope” as a suggestive term that designates the fusion of temporal and spatial structures. Similarly, in a series of research projects, Bekerman (2002, 2002a, 2004, 2006) shows how pedagogy implemented in informal settings alternates between formal and nonformal patterns of activity, thereby attempting to create a friendly environment that allows for the resonance of multiple voices and the legitimization of open discussion of highly value-laden issues (Bekerman, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006).

Last, it is important to mention that Jewish education has not been devoid of theorizing in the field of informal education. The pioneering work developed by Reisman (1991), in line with a Deweyan experiential perspective, called for focusing on the needs and perspectives of students while paying special attention to their affective needs so as to model valued human experiences which account for more than just the cognitive. Chazan (2003), following a philosophical tradition and reflecting Kahane’s (1997) informal code, characterizes informal Jewish education as a philosophy of Jewish education that emphasizes choice, high degrees of interactivity, a flexible conception of content or subject matter, accessible “teachers,” and much group process. More recently Reimer (2007) has argued for the need to strengthen the educational aspects of the informal which otherwise can easily be confused with socializing processes and called for informal educators to design moments and create the conditions which call upon participants to explore experienced domains of knowledge.
STUDY METHOD

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author in India and Thailand in 2005. The fieldwork included participant observation in seven Chabad houses, field notes, informal conversations and semistructured in-depth interviews with 25 Chabad shlichim (male = 19, female = 6; average age = 26.68) and 21 Israeli backpackers. The researcher functioned as a participant-as-observer, with an inclination to participate in the researched activities, thus gaining an insider’s perspective on the phenomenon (Adler & Adler, 1985; see p. 380). This proved to be a great advantage in studying the backpackers’ experience, as it served to facilitate communication with the Chabad shlichim (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Spreitzhofer, 1998) thereby affording deeper insights into their methods and intentions.

The researcher was at first reluctant to approach the shlichim, which dress as typical Hassidics even in India. In Israel, she had hardly any connection with them, and as a nonreligious woman, she was concerned and worried about their reactions toward her. She did not conceal the fact that she was conducting academic research, and even told them she was going to publish some of its results in an Israeli lifestyle and spiritual magazine. The researcher was surprised if not astonished to find the shlichim friendly, very cooperative, and extremely nice to her. Of course the fact that she would publish her thoughts and insights in a magazine could have made the effect, but as she later found out, during her fieldwork, that “being nice” was their leading motto. To better gain their trust and confidence the researcher spent hours and days at their house—hanging around, chatting with them and with their guests, eating, participating in lessons, and so on. She frequently visited places that had an adjoining restaurant, as she wanted to show her gratitude by paying for her own meals.

The data was analyzed according to conventional qualitative methods (Mason, 1996; Silverman, 1993). Our first interpretative efforts were monitored through peer debriefing in order to account for the influence of our prior expectations and theoretical inclinations on the preliminary coding, and we employed negative case analysis to gain confidence in the hypotheses proposed. We carefully analyzed the data, looking for patterns and thematic issues of relevance, which were then coded to allow for further analysis.

Educating the Backpackers

The Chabad shlichim in Southeast Asia can easily reach the Israeli travelers, who travel in a collective manner and prefer tastes of home even while so far away, including exposure to elements of Jewish religion (Maoz, 2006a, 2006b 2007, 2007). Nevertheless, developing more than superficial interactions and actually educating the secular Israelis is a complex mission undertaken by the Hasidim. The majority of Israeli backpackers grew up in an
environment of secular socialization, which may have been antireligious, and they therefore usually regard Chabad as a movement of eccentric religious extremists. The decrease of the Ashkenazi, secular Zionist hegemony in Israeli society has allowed for the recognition of alterity, including alternative narratives, identities, and subcultures, which interpret Judaism and Jewish identity in multiple ways (Bekerman & Neuman, 2001).

The Chabad shlichim make strong efforts to ensure that the Chabad houses offer a warm and inviting atmosphere so that the young travelers will find a friendly and familial setting and, therefore, a sense of belonging. The Chabad shlichim are young, not over 40 years old, although older than the travelers, and often married. They live with their children in the Chabad house, where the learning takes place, or very near by. The study room is typically close to the kitchen, and food is often served before and during the study sessions. Although the Israeli travelers are usually comfortable within the well-beaten paths of the Israeli enclaves, the Chabad house’s atmosphere of being an “alternative home” in a Third World country sometimes enables the shlichim to act as foster parents to young and sometimes fearful travelers. The Hasidim talk to the travelers about their journeys and their inner feelings, they give advice, and support the backpackers emotionally and, in some cases, financially, emphasizing Chabad as a “family-like” environment.

The travelers are always welcome to enter Chabad houses, sit, eat, talk, and learn, without any pressure put on them for increased religious observance or participation. The study sessions are always optional and are provided in a calm and friendly way. The travelers are offered informal lessons, some on regular basis and some spontaneous, special courses, called “bevruta” sessions (learning in pairs), which give travelers the opportunity to learn privately with any of the Chabad shlichim, reading traditional or Chabad-published texts or conversing about subjects related to Judaism, travel, or spirituality. The Chabad shlichim adapt themselves to the travelers’ needs; as Zohar, a shaliach in Rishikesh, explains, “The courses here change in their content and length according to the time the bevre [the gang, slang for people] have.” His colleague Roi, also from Rishikesh, adds, “every evening there are lessons, but it changes, it’s not steady here . . . it changes according to the backpackers’ requests.”

Chabad’s central objective is “to help any Jew in a materialistic and spiritual way,” and indeed they strive to assist the travelers in every possible way during their journeys. Chabad shlichim lend money to the travelers; give them advice for their trips; feed them; accompany them to hospitals, doctors, and train stations if necessary; visit them in jail; find them a place to sleep (some of the houses have rooms for this purpose); help them with (sometimes free) calls and mail service; and serve as mentors, guides, and parental figures. The backpackers consult with the shlichim in private matters as well, regarding romantic relationships for example, and when a
backpacker is in stress, agony, or danger, the Chabad Hasidim are again the natural address for any kind of help or support. Chabad representatives also serve as “protectors” for the Israelis when the backpackers fight or dispute with a member of the local community. The organizational influence that Chabad has on the streams of travelers, and the resultant financial impact this can have on the tourism-based economy of the enclave, imbues Chabad with a great deal of power within the local population. Dror, the rabbi from Dharamkot, says, “even people who get in trouble due to drug use know they have a protective force here... They [the Indians] know they should not mess with us. We will boycott someone if he hits an Israeli... 120 people came for Kabbalat Shabbat (Friday night prayer service) and I told them to boycott...”

As claimed before, many backpackers do not wish to be really “free” as they are reluctant to deal with the new place alone, and they give up their autonomy in return to the security of the collective. This tendency, which was termed “Escape from Freedom (Fromm, 1941) was found to be a strong motive among individuals who turn to intensive group situation who offer messianic hopes (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997, pp. 115:116; Deconchy, 1980; Liff, 1975, p. 116).

Some of the backpackers drawn to Chabad are in a mental or physical crisis due to anxiety provoked by their liminal state, trauma that occurred during military service, or other causes. This vulnerability often results in the backpackers’ increased reception of Chabad’s spiritual message. The significance of Chabad’s position among the Israeli travelers is established in part by an acute awareness of the backpackers’ often vulnerable and delicate situation, as they reflect and search for meaning far from home, in this liminal period of their lives.

As noted before, many of the backpackers have experienced a crisis prior to their trip and most of them are trying to rebel against the army rules and regulations, and the parental figures who created their former past and identity. The quest leading to conversion (which in our case is recommitment to the existing faith) has been regarded as the model of any adolescent crisis and its resolution (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; see p. 115). A profound personal crisis was found to be the prelude to the dramatic personality change which is observed in converts (James, 1902; KirKPatrIck & Shaver, 1990). Personal stress was reported as characterizing the two-year period preceding conversions (UIman, 1989). The loss of self-confidence, the restlessness that leads to the search for an answer is the sine qua non for the transformation of the self through conversion (Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; see p. 118).

Some of the backpackers drawn to Chabad are in a crisis due to drug use. The majority of Israelis visiting India smoke or use drugs—70% compared to 40% of European backpackers (Maoz, 2006a, 2006b; Waserman, 2004). Approximately 2,000 backpackers each year require psychological help due
to drug abuse; some 600 require hospitalization (Samocha, 2003). One traveler, for example, whom the first author met, was a prisoner in Delhi (one of 14 Israeli prisoners in India at the time of the fieldwork) due to drug dealing, and rediscovered Judaism after getting support from the Chabad shlichim. One of the shlichim shared in an interview, “we came to visit him and gave him strength, energy and support, so he felt he was being personally cared for. When he was released, he immediately came to help us prepare meals. Now he puts on t’filin (phalacteries), which he hadn’t done in two years.” The backpacker shared that, “you rot there in jail, and suddenly two Hasidim arrive and you feel that someone has remembered you.”

The distance from Israel is another factor that enables the Chabad Hasidim to have an effect on the backpackers. The travelers are removed from socializing factors, such as the media, parents and old friends, and thereby less influenced by them. Their “significant others” are now only the other backpackers and the recruiters, who become the new socialization powers. Nechami, the rabbi’s wife in Bangkok, who gives a daily lesson to the women backpackers, says, “you hear less of the ‘anti’ here, you are less exposed to the media and you are detached from the conflicts in Israel.” Another one of the shlichim said, “In Israel there is brain washing by the media . . . they detest religion . . . when you detach yourself from the brain washing you see that everything is superficial. Here you can try a lot of things. There is all the time in the world.” Dror, the rabbi in Dharamkot, also stressed available time as a factor that facilitates a connection between the Chabad Hasidim and backpackers: “They [the travelers] have free time and are not in an insane marathon.”

Although there are variations in the setting and structure of each Chabad house, there are consistencies of approach throughout all of the houses in southeast Asia. Several Chabad emissaries interact with the travelers, including the rabbi, who is the main figure, his wife, and his assistants, “the baburim.” Sometimes men and women are separated for study, and the women travelers go to the rabbi’s wife for lessons and advice. The backpackers are not expected to learn from formal textbooks, but rather from traditional Jewish texts, mainly The Tanya and papers and booklets published by Chabad; however, much of the studying is conducted through open discussions and lectures.

The travelers study in a nonformal setting, either in the Chabad house or outside on a porch, that usually imitates the ambiance of the local chai (tea) houses where the travelers like to congregate. The backpackers often sit on mattresses or pillows, rarely around tables, and usually in a circle. The casual atmosphere and circular physical arrangement generate easy visual contact and a structure that induces participants to participate in the conversation.

The Chabad Hasidim begin each study session with the use of a “trigger” (Barthes, 1972; Freire, 1970). This trigger involves raising a question, telling
a story (often about one of Chabad’s rabbis), using a personal narrative, relating specific biographical examples from previous experiences, or reading textual excerpts. Triggers suggestively invite participants to express multi-layered reactions in which knowledge as well as value-laden and affective personal opinions are interwoven. The use of triggers, accompanied by the guided moderation of a dynamic group discussion, generates different types of dialogue. Dialogue around the study themes is never limited to knowledge belonging to a specific disciplinary field. The Hasidim tap into multiple areas of knowledge (biographical, historical, biblical, etc.) and encourage the free use of associative thinking and relating.

The Chabad representative directs the discussion by commenting between each of the participants’ turns, encouraging widespread participation, directing questions to specific individuals, and requesting follow-up comments. Chabad Hasidim are accepting of the Israeli travelers’ comments and opinions in the activity and try not to express open and direct criticism. Their speech echoes the slang of the backpackers and is quite up-to-date. “It is important [that Chabad] sends young people here . . . who understand the Israelis and do not patronize them . . . I have no problem with speaking the Israeli slang I have learned here,” says Rabbi Wilhelm from Bangkok.

Chabad followers claim Jewish thought and philosophy as the only chance of conducting a happy and fulfilling life, a way of saving any Jew from a shallow, frustrating and meaningless existence. Chabad describes the Jewish way as the sole authentic and valid way of life, but does so subtly.

The Chabad Hasidim recognize that many of the young Israeli travelers, who are, as we pointed out, in a liminal and sometimes crisis phase, are in the midst of a profound search for meaning through exposure to esoteric spiritual philosophies and practices, which promise a better life. Chabad intentionally establishes branches in areas and enclaves where travelers remain for extended periods, often because they are looking for answers among the local philosophies. The Chabad shlichim prevail on the travelers to recognize that for the first time in their lives they can make their own decisions and design their own future with no influence or interference by the socializing forces of Israeli society, including the media, family, and formal education (it is interesting to note that similar rhetorical strategy is seen in the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) Jewish movement in the United States; Goldberg, Heilman, & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2002). The Chabad Hasidim emphasize the supposed similarities between Buddhism and Judaism, and insinuate that it is better to search in the well known and comfortable domain of “home,” that is, Judaism. The lack of external interference in the foreign, secluded enclaves fosters the Chabad emissaries’ effort to reach and influence the backpackers.

In the seminal Hasidic work, The Tanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman defines Chabad Hasidism as “מה שלט על הלב” (the mind ruling over the heart/emotions). Based on this imperative, the Chabad Hasidim strive to act
rationally rather than surrender to their emotions. Tolerance and postmodern pluralism is supposedly Chabad’s approach, in contrast to other Jewish streams but in accordance with the tolerance shown by David and his successor, Solomon, towards other faiths and practices in Jerusalem (Bekerman, 2004; Cox, 2009). Aware of the travelers’ broad search for meaning, the Chabad shlichim avoid criticizing the travelers for their interest in what the Chabad representatives call between themselves, “avodah zara” (idol worship). Zohar David, a shaliach in Rishikesh, relates,

some come to us in between yoga classes. I do not say anything to people if they go to yoga. It is important to let a person choose, not to convey a tone of criticism. If they ask me, I explain the Torah’s position, that it is avodah zara, but [we] don’t directly say it, as sometimes one should find the way alone. It is hard to tell people the truth to their face. Once [a Chabad emissary] told a backpacker something about [his search for meaning] and he was insulted and left.

Only with time, after a backpacker has spent an extended period with Chabad, do the shlichim share what they truly believe about other local philosophies.

Not only does Chabad refrain from explicitly denying the eastern philosophies (Heilman & Friedman, 1991), but they often try to adopt the local ways of attracting the travelers. They too host and teach the travelers in nonformal settings, stressing warmth and friendliness, as many Indian gurus do, and conduct some of their activities as part of retreats in nature, a common educational practice in India. They teach lessons and workshops in the woods or by a lake, employing local techniques such as mediation. In this sense, Chabad borrows from eastern practices in order to connect with its audience, which is young, secular and in search of instant answers (Maoz, 2006a, 2006b).

“We will accept anyone for what he is, that is why [the backpackers] accept us,” claims Rabbi Wilhelm from Bangkok. In addition to outwardly accepting the backpackers’ exploration for meaning in various philosophies, the Chabad shlichim avoid criticizing the backpackers about other choices as well. Although the Chabad Hasidim dress modestly, guided by strict observance of Jewish law, they do not comment to the travelers about their dress, which can be immodest and sometimes provocative. Nor do they express judgment about the backpackers’ hedonistic behavior or use of drugs. One of the shlichim in Delhi said, “a muhikan approached me with tattoos . . . someone else would look at him and say, ‘who is this crazy person?’ [but] the Rebbe teaches us to look only at the soul. [He was] full of drugs, came to eat me [but] every Jewish person has a good soul.” Dror, from Dharamkot, said, “I do not get into the drug issue. . . . I don’t tell them [not to smoke] when I see them smoking. Maybe only on rare occasions.” Tolerance is a central tenet of Chabad, and the rabbis instruct the shlichim
and bahurim to behave accordingly. David, one of the bahurim from Bangkok, says, “We receive guidance about how to approach the backpackers, how to answer them, to help . . . to hear them out. We are instructed to be tolerant of everyone and I understand that; if a person will show up indecent, I will not treat him negatively.”

Chabad’s educational system in India, Nepal, and Thailand is organized into an elaborate network. Once a traveler connects with Chabad, the sblichim make strong efforts to maintain the connection. Backpackers are “moved” from one branch to another. The sblichim refer the travelers to the Chabad house in their next destination and prepare their fellow Chabad Hasidim to expect them there. Additionally, the Chabad representatives do not wait for the backpackers to find them, they actively pursue the travelers in the Israeli enclaves. They hang announcements in the streets and sit in the restaurants and tea houses that the backpackers frequent, trying to befriend whomever they meet. Zohar David tells how he meets the travelers, “my biggest challenge is to go to a restaurant to sit there and learn; it’s hard for me as I am not talkative, but eventually Israelis will start talking to me. Sometimes I sit for hours, or I come with a guitar. It breaks the barriers.”

How the Backpackers are Impacted

The trekkers’ experience with Chabad were diverse. David, 30, who proposed to his girlfriend in Chabad Dharamkot, said about the Chabadniks that “they are not preachers, not scary, do not pressure you to become religious.” Another backpacker claimed that in Chabad houses in India they “talk about The Rebbe all the time, always are preoccupied with him, and it really disturbs me.” And another backpacker felt that they are trying to recruit him: “They are talking about it indirectly, always on The Rebbe and the salvation and the messiah that will come if we behave good.”

Many backpackers were suspicious as to the Chabadniks’ goals and wishes and the ones who were more inclined to integrate without asking too many questions were the ones who were searching for answers for some time, usually in other places too.

A backpacker, whom the researcher befriended, searched for answers in India in Buddhism and Hinduism, studied yoga and Ayurveda before finding Chabad. After a few months of learning Kabala and participating in courses and lessons in Chabad, he started to put on tfilin and considered himself a soon-to-be Chabadnik. He said: “I led a hectic life—parties, girls, fun, but with no meaning at all . . . after searching in different places I came to realize that the answers lie here.”

Dotan, a nice kibbuznik who runs the Chabad restaurant in Dharamkot, came from “a place in which they don’t even celebrate a Bar Mitzvah” and his parents were very much upset with the change he went through. He came to Chabad with a friend, was persuaded by him to put
tfilin and to learn Judaism, and after a while he decided to stay there as one of the schluchim. In his interview he said: “I got here truth, there are answers here to every question, and not by brainwash. All the people who come to India are in a search for something, and people are entering Chabad and find the faith.” Dotan’s case demonstrates the central role played by friends and peers in recruitment and conversion (Nelson, 1972). Dotan’s wife and two of his friends followed him in his new life, as well.

Dozens of backpackers go through a conversion every year while in India in a process of re-affirmation and recommitment to their existing faith—to Judaism. It is an ongoing process with different phases and layers. Some are drawn back to their former identity and way of living after returning to Israel and some continue the process in Israel with the aid of local Chabad houses, which they are referred to by the schluchim. The schluchim also arrange annual meetings in Israel of the backpackers who visited them abroad, and keep in touch with many by e-mail, thus helping the backpackers to maintain their newly found commitments and to refrain from returning to their former lifestyles.

Chabad and the Informal

Chabad’s educational strategies are closely aligned with an informal educational approach. They take place in “the margins” of time and space, in a voluntarily chosen moratorium period, usually between adolescence and young adulthood, when the travelers’ social obligations are delayed and temporary deviation from norms is accepted (Kahane, 1997). Their strategies are embedded in daily life, conducted in spheres that resemble familial locations, and directed by little or no pedagogy (Greenfield & Lave, 1982; Lave, 1988). Yet, they are attache to teleological considerations (Lave, 1996) while paying special attention to relations between subjects and the social world emphasizing mutuality and support from more skilled community members (Rogoff et al., 1996)

The Chabad representatives allow for the resonance of multiple voices and legitimize open discussion of highly value laden issues by agreeing to talk with the travelers about other local philosophies. Symmetry also characterizes the interactions between Chabad and the travelers, as all the actors have fairly equivalent resources and exchanges are balanced reciprocally. Multiplicity is very much apparent in Chabad’s teaching which, as shown above, denotes a wide range of available activities that are different in substance yet equal in value or importance.

Unlike formal educational settings, which have been characterized as removed from contexts of practical activity and convey a fragmented image of reality, Chabad involves itself in a holistic way in the travelers’ lives, trying to provide for all of their needs. Their educational structure is also holistic in that it takes place as part of their regular lifes (in their homes, during
meals, etc.). This emphasis in materiality is notable given western educational inclinations to the abstract. For Chabad, education is part of life, just as apprenticeship is embedded in regular life situations, and offers participants intrinsic rewards. Chabad focuses on the totality of the human experience, not just on cognitive facets, and attends to all of the needs of its beneficiaries.

Unlike in formal pedagogical settings, it is not a single adult who interacts with the travelers, but several Chabad representatives. The students usually sit in a circle with the teacher sitting among them, an arrangement that exemplifies a symmetrical approach and eliminates overt hierarchy, thereby encouraging dialogue and conversation. The teachers do not critically assess the quality or quantity of what has been learned, which allows for free expression and unabashed exploration of ideas. These techniques are further emphasized when the study occurs in the woods or by a lake; the world in its multiple architectures is the place of leaning, not separate educational institutions. Within these informal settings, students are not expected to learn from formal textbooks, rather the mediating texts are informal written texts, from a book or pamphlets (Cole, 1990; Goody, 1987; Greenfield & Lave, 1982). In this sense, the texts imitate daily conversation.

However, despite Chabad’s reliance on informal educational techniques, their informal education is essentially an organized systematic educational activity. Chabad’s approach reflects a well-organized educational machinery, based on a common assumption of their educational purpose. In a pradoxical sense, Chabad has formalized the informal.

But what seems even more important in Chabad’s approach is that their basic epistemology establishes a different kind of formality, which is called “informal” in western epistemology. Throughout 20 Chabad branches in India, Thailand, and other countries in Southeast Asia, Chabad has structured informal education to most effectively reach this particular population of Israeli travelers and provide them with a specific outlet for learning, and thereby living.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The informal textual and oral discourse organized through a specific rhetoric, and the implementation of specialized educational practices performed in Chabad’s teaching–learning activities, as described in the previous sections, allow for the inference of an underlying epistemological educational stance. Compared to formal educational systems which function according to a dualistic epistemology (Harre & Gillett, 1995; Newman & Holtzman, 1997); a rhetoric of hierarchy (Foucault, 1980; Gellner, 1997); and a practice that supports uneven power relations (Mitchell, 1988), thereby supporting a traditional positivistic outlook (Cheetham, 1991; Newman, 1997), Chabad’s approach represents a radical departure.
Chabad stresses a multiplicity of discourses (worldly, holy, etc.) and didactic practices (music, dance, prayer, meditation, mundane activities) guided by “phenomenological/constructivist” learning approaches, which through the juxtaposition of diverse practices generates certain ways of processing knowledge by tapping into alternative images of time and place (Silberman-Keller, 2000). This modality is furthered through the creation of space for dialogue that is personalized and directed toward specific, ideologically laden issues, through the use of varied, mediating tools that underscore a material epistemological approach, rather than the cognitive one used in formal education. These practices succeed in encouraging more active participation in the activity by all those involved.

It is worth recalling that formal educational structures did not evolve out of natural human interactions; nor did they begin by chance. The development of mass education, through schooling, is closely related to the industrial revolution and the development of the nation state. Both necessitated the recruitment of masses to their service; masses with basic cognitive and behavioral skills that would serve the needs of the nation state and its economic structure. Thus, schools are not disinterested arenas within which neutral knowledge and skills are transmitted from the minds of specialists to those of individuals who are intended to be empowered. Rather, in the modern era, schools have served as the primary means by which sovereigns have unified and integrated different local groups inhabiting the areas they were successful in subordinating to their power, under one flag, one language, and one narrative (Billig, 1995; Gellner, 1997).

As Bourdieu (1991) suggests, power and domination are seldom exercised through brute, overt force; instead, they are sublimated and expressed indirectly and covertly as symbolic power and symbolic violence—for example, the nation sovereign state. Jewish modernists, secular as well as religious, seem to have subscribed to this program of educational modernization and its hidden assimilatory practices. Though ideologically committed to resisting modernizing assimilatory trends (including Western ethics, aesthetics, economics, and science), modernists often adopt, through the underlying paradigmatic premises that substantiate their abstract practices, an educational formal epistemology and thereby reinforce that which they endeavor to counter. The educational practices of the Chabad movement, in contrast, demonstrate an understanding of the covert symbolic power of the formal approaches. Chabad chooses to resist them not through the manipulation of contents (adding hours or writing new texts) but through a radical epistemological change in all that guides their educational activity.

We strongly believe that educators and scholars can learn a great deal from Chabad’s approach, which will benefit modernist Jewish education. Jewish educators can start by trying to create educational settings that address their preferred cultural products in action, in dialogue, and in context and not in the abstract. Jewish educators could try to overcome their
traditional alignments with philosophical idealistic inquiry, concerned with
the nature of reality and problems of virtue in educational contexts that
guides them to envision traditional textual literacy as the heart of cultural
Jewish production. They could try instead to engage learners in interpretative
active practices which might make texts relevant to their present contexts.
Jewish educators could try and shift their educational focus from the individual
to the social arena.

To do this Jewish educators should consider the possibility that culture
(Jewish or other) has little to do with the habits we train people to adopt
and everything to do with the environments we build for people to inhabit
(Varenne & McDermott, 1998). All in all Jewish educators should look for
educational solutions in the reorganization of present Western world politics
(the environment build for us to inhabit) rather than in the limited parameters
of their school settings or the solitude of their teachers’ or students’ minds. As Bordieu (1993) so brilliantly states, “competence (Jewish or other)
[italics added] has a value so long as it has a market” (p. 81). What Chabad
has realized is not only the dangers of modern epistemology but that the
agora (the public sphere—the environment build for us to inhabit) is the
real arena where to conduct the struggle of resisting hegemonic powers.

Some would counter this assertion by claiming that modernist Jewish
educators already apply such informal educational strategies in multiple
settings, including summer camps and community centers. Although there
is validity to this claim, camps and community centers differ from Chabad in
that for Chabad, the informal, as it is expressed in the Southeast Asian expe-
rience, is not segregated from everyday practice but defines it; it is their sole
approach, and thereby introduces the possibility of the informal becoming a
true challenge to present assimilatory hegemonic forces.

Moreover Chabad’s educational strategy as described above is in
accordance with modernist constructivist perspectives. In this sense,
Chabad can be characterized as wholly modernist, but with an atypical
presentation: Chabad understands itself as implementing the dictates of an
old and cherished tradition, one that regards education as practical, not
ideal/theoretical, as stated by Maimonides in his introduction to Tractate
Avot (Kravitz & Olitsky, 2000), “and it becomes him to make himself
accustomed to doing good deeds until such time as he achieves those
qualities.”

Last, it is worth remembering that the formal educational approaches
implemented in schools served colonializers working against tradition as a
central instrument of effecting change in attitudes among indigenous pop-
ulations, while in modern countries these same schools serve as the prevailing
method for sustaining the stability of the ruling system. Paradoxically,
Chabad choosing these informal tools tries to open such spaces modern
Jewish educators might unknowingly close such opportunities when stiking
to formal strategies (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991).
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