

Chabad Franchises

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Chabad (Lubavitch) Chasidic movement is one of the phenomena of our time. It originated in Eastern Europe. Its transplantation to the USA in 1940 was transformational—but only because of its charismatic leader, the late and beloved Rebbe (with apologies to those who think he still lives) who took the helm after his father-in-law died. He was an amazing man and a visionary. His genius was not just to turn a small Chasidic sect, disorientated and confused by Communism in its home territory and then dislocated by Nazism, into a dynamic world force in Jewry. It was to introduce Madison Avenue methodology into his movement in the 1950s, which stimulated its fascination with and effective use of publicity, fundraising, and outreach.

For the uninitiated, Chabad is a Chasidic movement that is overtly evangelical amongst Jews. It was the first sect to welcome Jews regardless of the level of their religion or affiliation. It sent out young neophytes to stand on street corners asking passers-by if they were Jewish and wished to perform a Mitzvah. They gave the impression that they were totally open minded when in fact they were a very traditional movement and would brook no internal deviation. Its ideology was driven by a long-established Messianic fervor that encouraged every member to believe that he or she could help make the world a better place and bring the Messiah.

I should declare here that I have great difficulty, no, I actively disagree with much of Chabad ideology, both religious and political, but I confess my awe at the service and dedication its apostles offer the Jewish world. I loved that the Rebbe required his followers to be committed to Israel, to the state and the army. But he also chose to identify with the extreme right-wing “land or nothing” political position in Israel. I dislike Chabad’s understanding of the human soul and have little patience for much of its unique customs and calendar, but that is its business. For the average member, it is probably a necessary way of keeping them together and on track, and I remain amazed at the way the movement seems able to replicate the unfailing good humor of almost all its devotees, and their commitment and loyalty.

Generations of young “Shluchim” were sent out into the world to spread the Jewish word to Jews. The official ones were given seed money and then expected to become self-sufficient setting up Chabad communities and centers (and no one seemed to bother to ask too much about the financial conditions). They were soldiers in the Rebbe’s army, ready to do his bidding. They would graduate, then go to see him, to receive his commission and blessing. They had a spiritual support structure that enabled them to go far from the security of the movement’s headquarters in Brooklyn and still feel intimately bound with every word and idea of the Rebbe. They referred to his texts for direction during his lifetime, and even after his death these are treated as oracular. Wherever the representatives went they sent their sons back to headquarters for their further education and the replication of the typical

Chabad representative with a unique black hat, frockcoat, untrimmed beard, and appearance tailored as closely to that of the Rebbe himself as nature and artifice allowed.

The model the Rebbe established worked well throughout his reign. There were of course hiccups; the turf wars and power struggles, financial indiscretions and misappropriations. There were occasionally rivalries and splits but they were kept under control by the Rebbe's authority and only tended to explode after his death. It worked as Chabad spread around the world and gained the foremost reputation for providing religious services no matter where in the globe you might be. In effect, Chabad is a hugely successful franchise with all the support structure franchises offer. However, over time, official Chabad houses all but saturated the Jewish world. What was a new graduate to do if he had no franchise to inherit?

Already in the Rebbe's day, the problem arose as to how to deal with the next generation. A small Chabad house could support one or two families, but then what if you had ten children and they had all been conditioned to follow the tradition? As the supply of trained personnel exceeded the positions available and as Chabad spread, so the availability of unconquered territory began to diminish. They began to look for positions in other organizations and communities. But the really innovative coup was its own extension of the franchise. The new model that really only gained recognition after the Rebbe, was unofficially called "mushrooming". Neophytes started to move into new areas, to infiltrate established communities. If you had an idea for a mission, you went with it. No matter whose territory it was. You either survived and built up your counter-franchise or you failed. Rather like the Christian preachers who followed the wagons West way out of reach of the Established churches.

I am not sure that an organization with a strong central organization under a powerful single head could or would have made this leap. But I would argue the Rebbe's greatest success was in the one area that others see his failure: his failure to appoint a successor. That was his greatest stroke of genius of all.

The Rebbe was faced with the issue of continuity. I do not think there was anyone who could have stepped into his shoes. So better have no one than someone who would disappoint, who perhaps in his insecurity might try to impose too much control, to stifle individuality. Many second generation Rebbes became stricter and more obscurantist to bolster their credentials. By dying intestate, the Rebbe left his image as the role model. But he also bequeathed the first religious franchise system in Judaism. It was a master stroke. The ideology was there and fixed. But the way of continuing and allowing for individuality, creativity, and enthusiasm was to throw everything open to anyone in the movement to sink or swim. I cannot think of a more obvious example of religion borrowing from successful commerce.

Chabad is a practical movement that is out in the world facing practical challenges. In the practical world there must inevitably be different ways of doing things. The theological world always yearns for obedience and conformity. Chabad has within it the seeds of continuous creativity—not

religiously, I hasten to add, they is little innovation there, but organizationally. A central powerful figurehead tends to impose rigidity and conformity. A looser system encourages individuality even within its ideological structure. That was the Rebbe's genius, and it is now Chabad's great strength.

Institutions and religions create hierarchies and centralized control. This leads to fossilization and the dead hand of conformity. That is what ends up infecting and destroying most religious institutions and systems. But at least organizationally, dynamism and creativity was the Rebbe's secret weapon.