

## Chabad on Ice

### Jewish encounters with fundamentalism in Finland

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The article examines the Finnish branch of Chabad Lubavitch as a fundamentalist and charismatic movement that differs from other branches of ultra-Orthodox Judaism in its approaches to outreach to non-observant Jews. Whilst introducing the history of Chabad Lubavitch in Finland and drawing on historical and archival sources, the authors locate the movement in a contemporary context and draw on 101 semi-structured qualitative interviews of members of the Finnish Jewish communities, who either directly or indirectly have been in contact with representatives of Chabad Finland. The material is examined through the theoretical concept of 'vicarious religion'. As the results of the article show, whilst Chabad very much adheres to certain fundamentalist approaches in Jewish religious practice, in Finland they follow a somewhat different approach. They strongly rely on people's sense of Jewish identification and Jewish identity. Individuals in the community 'consume' Chabad's activities vicariously, 'belong without believing' or 'believe in belonging' but do not feel the need to apply stricter religious observance. Whilst many of them are critical of Chabad and their activities, they do acknowledge that Chabad fills the 'gaps' in and outside the Jewish Community of Helsinki, predominantly by creating new activities for some of its members.

THE NORDIC COUNTRIES are often described as similar in having a shared history of Evangelical Lutheranism, to which the vast majority of their populations have belonged. With low attendance at church

services but high numbers of church members, they are also often described as the most secular countries of the world (Tomasson 2002: 61). Finland is no exception to this perception (Illman 2019), but it is perhaps better described as a post-secular country, where alternative spiritualities, charismatic Christian traditions and migrant religiosity are transforming the religious landscape (ÅAU 2017). Before Finland became independent in 1917, the Evangelical Lutheran Church had a strong position in the country. After the introduction of a number of legislative changes in connection with but not entirely resulting from the independence of the country, the role of the Church started to decrease. However, to this very day, 68.8 per cent of the Finnish population belongs to this church (ELC), even if only nominally.

The Jewish community of Finland is one of the established minorities in the country and consists of two congregations (Helsinki and Turku) with approximately 1200 members. Both congregations follow the Orthodox Jewish denomination. This is seen, for example, in gender segregation during the synagogue services. Several surveys and studies show that outside the synagogue most Finnish Jews do not actually follow Orthodox interpretations of

Jewish law (Lundgren 2002; Vuola 2019; Czimbalmos 2021), but still choose to be members of the congregations. This reflects the very same secularising developments attested among other religious communities in Finland.

In an interview made for the Minhag Finland project,<sup>1</sup> devoted to the investigation of the Finnish Jewish community, a man in his late thirties noted that some women he knows are annoyed by the official Orthodox policies of their synagogues and have opted to attend the events offered by Chabad Lubavitch, a Hasidic outreach organisation operating within Nordic countries. He added that these women do not know ‘enough’ about (Jewish) denominations: Chabad is, according to him, hardly a more ‘liberal’ option. What attracts these (typically) secularised members to the activities of an organisation often defined as a strong representative of Jewish fundamentalism when they are (supposedly) dissatisfied with the conservative elements present in their own congregation? How has Chabad made such an impression on the Finnish Jewish community?

In this article we investigate the phenomenon of Jewish fundamentalism in Finland: the Finnish branch of Chabad Lubavitch that has operated in Finland since 2003, first from the emissaries’ home and since 2011 from Chabad House, located in the city centre of Helsinki. Chabad Lubavitch is a fundamentalist and charismatic Jewish organisation that differs from other branches of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Judaism in its approaches to outreach to non-observant Jews. We will locate the movement in its contemporary context by drawing on 101 semi-structured qualitative interviews of members of the Finnish

Jewish communities, who either directly or indirectly have been in contact with the representatives of Chabad Finland. The article also provides a brief history of Chabad Lubavitch in Finland and describes its activities. We analyse the material through Grace Davie’s theoretical concept of vicarious religion, which – as Davie articulates it – is ‘the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing’ (Davie 2007a: 127 and 2007b: 22). In addition, we also consider Abby Day’s notion of ‘believing in belonging’ (see e.g. Day 2009, 2011): a concept developed as a deliberate inversion of ‘believing without belonging’. Vicarious religion – as elaborated later – has previously been utilised in researching Chabad in Russia, by Galina Zelenina (2018).

Jewish fundamentalism, perhaps owing to its exiguous presence in Finland, has never before been studied in the Finnish context: the aim of this article, therefore, is to fill this gap. When it comes to the Finnish context of contemporary religious fundamentalism, several studies have been written about the Finnish Pentecostal Movement and charismatic Christian communities (e.g. Haapalainen 2015; Mantsinen 2018; Hovi 2009, 2018); however, while Chabad Lubavitch has been present in Nordic countries since the 1990s, besides Andrew Buckser’s contribution ‘Chabad in Copenhagen: Fundamentalism and Modernity in Jewish Denmark’ (2005), no particular study has addressed the movement’s presence among Nordic Jewry. In his contribution, Buckser (2005) describes how Chabad in Denmark, to a certain extent, derived from longstanding divisions within the Danish Jewish community between the very observant minority and the secular majority. Likewise, he

1 On the project, see Minhag Finland.

notes (p. 126) that the success of Chabad in Denmark may very well be connected to a well-known religious phenomenon in modern societies whereby ‘fundamentalist theologies can outcompete mainline liberal religious traditions’. His observations are also valid for the present study.

### Methods and data

The article presents a combination of methodologies of ethnography and historical research as well as data from recent historical and archival materials and ethnographic interviews. The ethnographic material consists of 101 semi-structured qualitative interviews, collected during 2019–20 within a project focusing on Finnish Jewish everyday lives and the lived traditions of the Jewish Communities of Helsinki and Turku and their members. The historical data and archival materials mostly comprise documents such as board-meeting minutes along with their attachments, and congregational correspondence from the Finnish Jewish Archives in the National Archives of Finland. These were selected according to their relevance for our study. In addition, publicly available materials – such as websites of the Chabad Lubavitch movement – are used in the article.<sup>2</sup>

2 All informants in the Minhag Finland project were over 18 years old; 54 of them were female and 47 male. As the current size of the two Finnish Jewish congregations comprises less than 1500 members, the authors of the article found it especially important to protect the privacy of the informants. In order not to reveal their identities, all information that may identify the informants of the ethnographic interviews was removed from the analysis. When it comes to Chabad Lubavitch, publicly accessible information was also utilised in the article in addition to the interview material.

### Vicarious religion, ‘believing without believing’ and ‘believing in belonging’

In the early 1990s, the sociologist of religion Grace Davie defined the notion of ‘believing without belonging’ in an article, in which she addressed the declining numbers of church members in Britain (Davie 1990). A few years later, she developed the idea more fully in a book, still focusing primarily on Britain (Davie 1994).

Davie did not suggest, that the idea or the phenomenon of belonging without believing would be quantitatively measurable, yet, her concept gave rise to much debate after these publications. In the early 2000s, she moved on to the concept of what she named *vicarious religion* and explained it as ‘the notion of religion performed by an active minority on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve what the minority is doing’ (Davie 2007a: 127 and 2007b: 22). Examples of this phenomenon, Davie suggests, are how churches and their leaders may perform rituals on behalf of others, church leaders and goers may believe and embody moral codes on behalf of others, and finally churches ‘can offer space for the vicarious debate of unresolved issues in modern societies’ (Davie 2007b: 23). She also described how religious practice has shifted away from ‘obligation’ in the direction of ‘consumption’, a change that seems to be dependent on the concept of vicarious religion. Her formula of ‘believing without belonging’ has been reversed, and applied in the Nordic context as ‘belonging without believing’ (Davie 2007a; Nynäs *et al.* 2020); we may note the characteristic stance of religiosity in the Nordic countries, where it is natural for individuals to take part in religious rituals centred around birth, death or matrimony, and thus to ‘belong without believing’. Alongside the concept of vicarious

religion, therefore, the approach adopted by many people can be articulated via belief or belonging, depending on the specific context (Davie 2007b: 22–5).

Analogously with this idea, Abby Day (2009) argued that individuals may ‘believe in’ their own human affective relationships in preference to (in Day’s study) Christian doctrinal beliefs, even when they claimed Christian identity on the census. She explains that this tendency can be addressed as ‘believing in belonging’ to certain self-perceived family or ‘ethnic’ social groups (p. 264). As Day concluded, marginal or nominal Christian identification was a substantial category for many people, relating to their sense of family or national heritage (Day 2011): “‘believing in belonging’ to a particular culture is, nevertheless, actively demonstrated and the claims vigorously supported by demonstrating adherence to certain social truths, or facts, that are presented as self-evident. The “facts”, offered in evidence of membership in the culture, help strengthen impermeable boundaries that define who has the right to belong’ (p. 49). It is important to mention that Davie’s notion of vicarious religion has received some criticism, such as that of Steve Bruce and David Voas, who suggest that since a church may be used for secular reasons as well as religious, Davie’s examples do not show vicariousness (Bruce and Voas 2010: 247). Davie’s concept undeniably entails certain ‘less convincing elements’, such as her last example, of churches offering ‘space for the vicarious debate of unresolved issues in modern societies’ (Davie 2007b: 23). When considering this notion as well as Day’s formulation from the perspective of Jewish studies, belonging without believing and believing in belonging are – as the examples in the current study will show – particularly interesting concepts that may be applied suitably in the context

of Jewish practices as the definitions of Judaism and what constitutes Jewishness have long underlined that religiosity is not the only defining factor of Jewish identity formation. As Mercédesz Czibalmos (2021: 3–31) summarises, ‘Jewish identity has been thoroughly studied and conceptualised in numerous ways throughout religious and academic discourses: it remains one of the most contested and vexed issues of modern religious and ethnic group history’ (p. 30) and as such it ‘may take explicit forms and be made visible through practicing certain Jewish religious or cultural traditions, but it may also be demonstrated in more abstract notions such as feelings of belonging, whether those feelings are based on a collective, ethnic identity or membership in a Jewish congregation’ (pp. 30–1).

When it comes to the concept of Jewish fundamentalism in general, and Chabad Lubavitch in particular, Davie’s work has previously been applied by Galina Zelenina, when studying the presence of Chabad Lubavitch in contemporary Russia. Zelenina (2018) argued that in the early 2000s Chabad Lubavitch became the self-proclaimed speaker for Russian Jewry and succeeded in creating a nation-building project and in trying to cater to the Russian Jewish community as a whole. According to Zelenina, Russian Chabad, along with a community of Jews who attend the synagogue, is united, for example, by religious obligations or personal connections. They are building a community in which ‘vicarious religion’ (Davie 2007a, 2007b) is practised. In the case of Russian Chabad this means that a larger group is united from the outside by Chabad representatives and through the non-Lubavitcher individuals, who essentially ‘consume’ the purposefully offered programmes of Chabad. In this ‘set-up’, the smaller community believes and practises, while the wider community

around them symbolically supports their actions by attending their activities (Zelenina 2018: 255).

As described later in this article, contemporary Finnish Jewry has a recent history of immigration of Russian Jewry from the former Soviet Union. In addition, most of the congregational members do not follow or live according to the Orthodox *halakhah* in their private lives. They ‘consume’ the events of the congregations, which – as suggested earlier – is a prevalent phenomenon in the Nordic countries, where nominal membership in specific religious institutions is high, but individuals rarely describe themselves as religious. This combination makes the concepts of ‘belonging without believing’ and ‘believing in belonging’ especially apt for studying the movement and its presence in Finland as well.

### **Chabad Lubavitch: a global outreach movement**

Chabad Lubavitch is a US-based global outreach movement and a branch of Hasidism, a Jewish pietist movement that emerged in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. As opposed to ‘mainstream’ (Orthodox) Judaism, in Hasidism the prime religious authority is a charismatic spiritual leader, the *rebbe* (Yiddish for rabbi) or *tsaddik* (the ‘righteous’). The *rebbe* is believed to be in perpetual connection with God and the sole channel of divine information flowing from him to his followers. Hasidism thus introduced innovative patterns of interpersonal and group interactions between religious leaders and their followers (see e.g. Blondheim and Katz 2015: 92; Biale *et al.* 2018).

East European Hasidism developed into a multi-faceted Jewish movement, where the authority of the *tsaddik* is passed on through dynasties bound by family

connections. Chabad (a Hebrew acronym for *chokhmah*, ‘wisdom’, *binah*, ‘understanding’, and *da’at*, ‘knowledge’) represents one of the early Hasidic dynasties, founded by Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745–1812) in Lubavitch, Belarus (Russia of today). The religious ideas Chabad follows and authoritatively interprets are laid down not only in the scriptures sacred to Judaism (Torah and Talmud), but also in the *Tanya* (or *Likkuṭe amarim*, 1796), the pivotal work of Chabad philosophy imbued with kabbalistic (mystical) ideas by Shneur Zalman. The *Tanya* (Aramaic for ‘it was taught’, a reference to the Talmud) contains a systematic exposition of the nature of God and the human soul and how to attain spiritual elevation, and is studied on a daily basis and actively memorised by the Lubavitcher Hasidim (Loewenthal 1990; Etkes 2014).

While wars in Europe and the Holocaust had a devastating impact on the trajectory of Hasidism, removing it from its European centres in the east towards the west, the sixth *rebbe* of the Chabad dynasty, Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn (1880–1950), fled with his family to Brooklyn, New York, in 1940. Under the leadership of his son-in-law, the seventh *rebbe*, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn (1902–94), Chabad developed into a vocal outreach movement for secular Jews and became probably the most visible section of global Orthodox Judaism. Charismatically endowed, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn was seen by many of his followers as the long-awaited Messiah (*Moshiach*), a belief which among some of them did not cease even after Schneersohn’s death in 1994. Usually in Hasidism a power vacuum emerges after the leader’s demise, and his students or male relatives will vie for the position (see e.g. Heilman 2019). However, as Menachem Mendel Schneersohn is perceived to have held a special relationship with the divine, Chabad

has exceptionally never appointed a new rebbe. To this day the talks, videos, pictures and teachings of Schneersohn dominate all its public domains. Schneersohn's greatest innovation was to encourage his followers to reach out to secular Jews and bring them closer to Jewish practices and beliefs. Based on kabbalistic teachings derived from the *Tanya*, the idea is to engage as many Jews as possible in fulfilling Jewish law and thus accelerate messianic redemption. This outreach is practically realised by emissaries (*slichim*) stationed in Jewish communities around the globe (see e.g. Fishkoff 2003; Heilman and Friedman 2010; Biale *et al.* 2018).

Currently Chabad is a worldwide movement, running over five thousand centres in fifty countries (see Centers, Chabad).<sup>3</sup> Until the community can fund the building of their own community centre, a 'Chabad house', their activities typically take place in the homes of the emissaries. Their premises also function as Jewish community centres and synagogues, and sometimes as schools, providing religious outreach and educational activities. The emissaries not only cater to local Jewish communities but also provide a 'home base' for international expats, immigrants or Jewish travellers who are seeking religious events, kosher food or company during their stay. The most visible activity of the emissaries in urban areas is to convince secular Jewish men to put on *tefillin* (phylacteries) (Maoz and Bekerman 2009: 175).

3 The number of Chabad followers is according to Marcin Wodziński (2018: 192–6) approximately 16,000 to 17,000 households, but the number of participants in their events and classes is much higher as they also attract Jews not affiliated with Chabad or Jews who are secular.

Chabad reaches out to a broad circle of Jews – based on their halakhic criteria of Jewish identity<sup>4</sup> – within and outside organised Jewish communities, and currently has a wealth of resources to back them up, as opposed to many small Jewish congregations in the diaspora. In several countries, Chabad and its institutions have managed to take the reins of religious leadership from the old, established Jewish networks, often to the dislike of their leaders, who nevertheless after a while may accept this reality and even find ways to cooperate with the emissaries (Ferziger 2020: 419–20; Golan and Stadler 2016). Their media strategy is the key to their success: Chabad puts great efforts into visibility through various channels, such as blogs, websites, digital and non-digital publications, and audio and video productions in several languages (Blondheim and Katz 2015: 94). As a result of this active online presence, Judaism-related, English-language internet searches often link to websites managed by Chabad, branding it as a worldwide source of information on Judaism.

### **Chabad: Jewish fundamentalism?**

While fundamentalism is a term initially used to refer to Christian (mostly Protestant) movements in the USA in the early twentieth century, Jewish fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon connected to halakhic ideas collected in late antique and medieval rabbinic literature: during the nineteenth century the proponents of

4 According to the Orthodox interpretation of the Jewish law, a person is Jewish if their mother is Jewish or if they converted to Judaism. The complexities of Jewish identities and identification, and conversions to Judaism in general, and in the Finnish Jewish communities in particular have previously been studied by Czimbalmos (2021).

traditional ('Orthodox') Judaism struggled against any innovations by Jewish reformists to the interpretation of these 'fundamental' texts.<sup>5</sup>

Previous research suggests that charismatic Christianity, for instance, tends to remain marginal in 'richer' societies; the success of Pentecostalism lies in its ability to lift people out of poverty or integrate them into communities. In this respect, Pentecostal organisations often encounter competition from the welfare state (Moberg and Skjoldli 2018: 10). According to Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger, fundamentalism is 'the belief that there is one set of religious teachings that clearly contains the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, essential, inerrant truth about humanity and deity; that this essential truth is fundamentally opposed by the forces of evil which must be vigorously fought; that this truth must be followed today according to the fundamental, unchangeable practices of the past; and that those who believe and follow these fundamental teachings have a special relationship with the deity' (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992: 118). On a more general level, fundamentalism is often rooted in the fear that the liberal, secular establishment is wiping religion from society (Armstrong 2004: 875). Ruud Koopmans (2015: 35) further defines religious fundamentalism by three interrelated attitudes. Firstly, believers should return to the eternal and unchangeable rules laid down in the past;

5 Chatam Sofer (1762–1839), the major Orthodox thinker and rabbi in the Pressburg (Breslau) Seminar, is known for his use of the early rabbinic saying *chadash asur min ha-tora*, 'innovation is forbidden by the Torah', to oppose any changes in customs by the progressives. The saying became a symbol of distrust in modernity among the conservative faction in Orthodox Judaism.

secondly, these rules allow only one interpretation that is binding for all believers; and lastly, religious rules should be perceived to have priority over secular laws.

Chabad shows certain tendencies that fit earlier definitions of religious fundamentalism: strict scripturalism and male authority over canonical texts, longing for an imagined sacred past and strong dichotomies between 'good' and 'evil'. However, what makes the movement different from other fundamentalist Jewish denominations is its approach to outreach and public engagement (cf. also Buckser 2005; Stadler 2012). Several other Jewish groups in the State of Israel, in particular, display fundamentalist features: militant religious Zionists among the settler movement, the Sephardi Jewish bloc represented by the Israeli political party Shas, and the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) groups (see e.g. Inbari 2009; Stadler 2012). Chabad may certainly be counted as part of ultra-Orthodoxy – for example, black clothing, fur hats and beards are the shared style of most Haredi men – but certain characteristics set it apart from other Haredi factions, including the rest of the Hasidic enclave: Chabad's public engagement and global visibility and its active cooperation with secular and non-Haredi Jews, as well as with non-Jewish society. Moreover, while Haredi Judaism has historically been anti-Zionist, Menachem Mendel Schneersohn modified his messianic ideology to accommodate the security of Jews living in the secular State of Israel after the Arab–Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 (Heilman and Friedman 2010: 188–90), and currently many influential rabbis affiliated with Chabad express pro-Israel views similar to those of religious Zionism (Inbari 2009; Katsman 2019).

As pointed out by many scholars of religious fundamentalism (see e.g. Stadler 2012), fundamentalist movements are

typically averse to modernity but are inherently modern products. Chabad, as we elaborate below, is typically strict about halakhically Orthodox identity boundaries but in its outreach operations the organisation uses up-to-date methods and media. As further pointed out by Oren Golan and Nurit Stadler (2016: 72), members of Chabad ‘live within an enclave society, yet at the same time advocate the idea of outreach to Jews of all denominational affiliations and, to some extent, even beyond the Jewish population, for what they perceive as “bettering the world” and advancing the imminent arrival of the Messiah’. While internet, television and other media are seen as *internally* dangerous threats to the community that must be curtailed, Chabad uses these very same media efficiently as tools for spreading its agenda, defined by Golan and Stadler (p. 73) as ‘a dualist strategy toward new media’. Being more open to outside influence in comparison to other ultra-Orthodox factions, Chabad thus represents a particularly intriguing case of Jewish fundamentalism.

In Hungary and Russia, Chabad has been entangled with contemporary politics linked to nationalist and conservative administrations. In Hungary, for example, they have been criticised for their support for the xenophobic regime of Viktor Orbán; as a highly visible Jewish movement Chabad has also been used as a governmental tool to deny any accusations of antisemitism against the Hungarian government, for example after the ‘anti-Soros campaign’ (Plenta 2020). In Russia, the Chief Rabbi of Russia, Berel Lazar, has been referred to as the ‘Kremlin’s rabbi’ owing to the movement’s close links with Vladimir Putin’s regime (Zelenina 2018). In Finland, Chabad has so far remained politically neutral, perhaps because it has not found a fertile ground for such engagements.

As opposed to certain Central or Eastern European countries, where the governments are aligned with the principles of ‘illiberal democracy’ (Krakovsky 2019), in Finland liberal values are the norm, and political activity in this context would act against the values of Chabad Lubavitch.

### **Chabad Lubavitch and the Finnish Jewish community**

The first Jews to receive the right to settle in Finland without the obligation to undergo conversion to Christianity were the ‘Cantonists.’<sup>6</sup> They arrived in the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland during the first half of the nineteenth century as soldiers serving in the imperial Russian army (Harviainen 1998: 294). As a result of the origins of Finnish Jewry, Judaism has taken a somewhat different trajectory in Finland from other Nordic countries (Dencik 2005: 21), and as one result of these historical trajectories, for example, options for non-Orthodox denominations are mostly absent in Finland. As Simo Muir and Riikka Tuori point out (2019: 12), previous research on the origins of these Jewish soldiers in Helsinki shows that a majority of them originated from Lithuania, north-east Poland and Belarus, in other words from the realm of Lithuanian Jewish (Litvak) culture. These connections to the Litvak culture also explain the non-Hasidic nature of Jewish Orthodoxy prevalent in Finland.

The Jewish Community in Helsinki operates a kindergarten, a synagogue and a school, and employs a chief rabbi and a deputy rabbi. The much smaller congregation in Turku and its synagogue are mostly

6 Young Jewish men, who were forcibly torn away from their parents and families, educated in Russian military schools and pressured to join the Orthodox Church.

operated by volunteers. Since the 1980s, the community has become more diverse as immigrants from Israel and from the former Soviet regimes have joined the congregations: many of these newer members have Sephardic/Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and North African) heritage (Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2019: 1–7). The community is thus no longer predominantly European Ashkenazi, and in our interviews the varied traditions of the members emerge in the form of debates about the customs and liturgical styles of the local synagogues. Nonetheless, approximately 50 per cent of the community still has ‘Cantonist’ or, rather, Ashkenazi ancestry,<sup>7</sup> and they remain prominent in administrative and leadership positions of the community (Czimbalmos 2022; Tuori 2022). Correspondingly, approximately half of the interviewees in our project had Cantonist heritage.

While Chabad emissaries arrived in Scandinavia (Denmark and Sweden) in the 1990s, the organisation was launched in Finland in September 2003<sup>8</sup> by Rabbi Benyamin Wolff and Rebbetzin Fruma Ita Wolff, a married couple in their early twenties, sponsored by the Russian-Hungarian Jewish philanthropist family of Sami Rohr (London-Zweig 2004: 31). ‘Chabad in Finland’ in practice refers to the activities of the Wolffs from 2003 up to the present day. The American-Colombian family

chose (or was chosen) to go to Finland also because the rebbetzin had previous family connections in Finland (p. 31). While the rebbetzin’s connection to Finland was occasionally mentioned by our informants, members of the local communities have also informally suggested that Chabad came to Finland because a religiously motivated congregant reached out to the Lubavitchers and personally invited them.

Historical archival materials and ethnographic interviews show that Finnish Jews had already had contacts with both Hasidism and Chabad before the Second World War. A few Jewish families in the Turku area (western Finland) originated from Hasidic families in Latvia, which is also seen in a local custom of the men of the families tying their *tefillin* in the ‘Hasidic way’. One informant in Turku shared how her grandparents in Riga had become acquainted with the Schneersohn family, the leaders of Chabad, as long ago as the 1920s. After the war, the couple travelled to New York to meet Menacham Mendel Schneersohn to discuss the potential mixed marriage of their son, which they opposed heavily, and after the negotiations, the bride eventually converted to Judaism. The informant added that Chabad continues to be very concerned about the future of the children of mixed marriages. Another informant, a man in his early seventies, remembered meeting Menachem Mendel Schneersohn in New York in the late 1960s and had relatives in the USA whom he dubbed ‘Chabadniks’.

Chabad has also played a small but surprising role in the recruitment policies of the Helsinki congregation. As mentioned above, many Cantonist Jews in Finland came from Litvak Jewish families in Russia that were not affiliated with Hasidism; therefore most of the early rabbis hired by the community were non-Hasidic Lithuanians

7 Nowadays the term ‘Cantonist’ is used as a wider term to refer to those members of the Finnish Jewish community who are descendants of the Ashkenazi Jewish pre-war community.

8 In the database of the Finnish Patent Registry Office (PRH), the organisation in its current form as a non-governmental organisation was officially formed at the end of 2004.

(Muir and Tuori 2019). Nevertheless, in the 1960s, when the Jewish Community of Helsinki was in serious need of finding a permanent rabbi, they sought a rabbi from among a variety of both Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations (NA Hpl 1968, 1969; Czimbalmos 2019; Muir and Tuori 2019). In 1967, the congregation considered hiring a rabbi with Chabad affiliation from New York, which the congregational leadership did not reject right away, or at least the rejection is not documented, although the board deferred the decision about the rabbi to a later point (JCH Bmm 22.5.1967, 29.5.1967).

### **Perceptions of Chabad in the interviews**

Adam Ferziger (2020: 419) has pointed out that Chabad's success among the less observant or less affiliated North American Jews lies in the warm and personal approach of their emissaries. Hosting non-Lubavitch Jewish guests at various events is, obviously, an integral part of its outreach activities (Ehrlich 2004: 166). Indeed, our informants often described Chabad as much more welcoming than the Jewish Community of Helsinki. Several informants with Cantonist heritage shared how the Chabad emissaries had personally contacted them soon after their arrival in Finland and established a good rapport with them. Male informants who at the time were in their early twenties remembered how they had been invited over for a Shabbat dinner with Torah lessons. It is important to mention that most of the people they contacted were among those whose halakhic status as Jews was unquestionable. Some were intimidated by these repeated contacts, but others chose to engage.

A foreign-born woman in her late thirties, who did not consider herself observant but felt she had a strong Jewish identity, said that when moving to Finland 'it wasn't

on the top of my list to deal with religious stuff'. After a while she got to know the local Chabad by pure chance: she attended their events to acquaint her children more thoroughly with Jewish traditions. The way she talked about Chabad signals the notion of 'belonging without believing': she suggested that Chabad came to Finland 'to assist people and strengthen ... their [the community members'] Judaism and their identity, their practices, their observances'. In doing this, they 'filled the gaps' – as we will also detail later – by offering events centred around Jewish holidays and classes on Jewish religious topics. They were naturally targeting those who had a sense of belonging to Judaism, but did not necessarily 'believe' or know how to perform Jewish traditions. She noted that the local Jewish community already had a Jewish kindergarten and a school and naturally the synagogue, but that 'beyond that there wasn't so much going on'. Generally, many informants thought that the arrival of the Lubavitchers 'woke up' the community. Some even went as far as calling the community 'dead' before the pre-Chabad times.

According to our informants, this activation nonetheless made the community see the arrival of Chabad as a threat, and their arrival also generated scepticism. A Cantonist man in his eighties remembered that there was some opposition to Chabad among the members of the council of the Helsinki congregation in the early 2000s, but many had also thought that they could not 'chase them away'. Some, however, had been suspicious to the point that they thought Chabad could eventually take over the community, or at the very least divide it, given the international connections and the vast financial resources at their disposal. A Cantonist man in his sixties reflected on this fear: according to him, in Gothenburg, Sweden, Chabad had 'split the community

by founding its own synagogue, kindergarten and school'. In Helsinki too, Chabad began to attract many people while the congregation had been passive in organising cultural and religious events. According to this informant, it was partly due to this fear that the Israeli religious Zionist Bnei Akiva emissaries (typically a married couple from Israel) were employed to work at the Jewish School in Helsinki in 2010.<sup>9</sup> Chabad and its arrival in Finland apparently had a major impact on the administrative decisions of the congregation: it had to react to the competition created by Chabad's presence.

As mentioned above, Chabad is an increasingly strong and international actor as a source of religious information online. Chabad's online activity has worked wonders also in Finland: 'newcomers' among our informants shared how their first online contact with Judaism in Finland was Chabad, instead of the local community. One foreign-born informant related that before moving to Finland with his family he had tried to find information about living a Jewish life in Finland and how Chabad had accessible information on their website about local education options. Before relocating he contacted the *shlichim* (emissaries) and was positively received by them. As a relatively new member of the Finnish Jewish community, he added that in his opinion Chabad rather 'complements' the activities of the community and that there is no actual competition between the Hasidic organisation and the Helsinki congregation.

From its beginnings, Chabad in Helsinki has actively engaged children from kindergarten to teens. A young woman shared

how she had known the Chabad rebbetzin since she was twelve and she had created a strong, positive bond with her. She considered that the rebbetzin was very 'modern' in her looks but added that her connection with the rabbi was more distant because of Chabad's traditional gender roles. Amongst the range of different ultra-Orthodox denominations, Chabad Lubavitch is known to enhance 'Jewish visibility' (Balakirsky Katz 2009), and yet its followers present themselves in a rather modern way, which makes them easier to relate to, generating a fine balance between observance and modernity. Those who are not familiar with the movement and its conservative ideology may easily be attracted by their seemingly modern approach and outlook.

A young man in the same age group defined himself as an active synagogue-goer. Interestingly, he felt that the chief rabbi (of Finnish Cantonist heritage) and the Chabad rabbi had formed 'sects' of their own within the Helsinki congregation. The man did not regard himself as belonging to either of the groups. He had the habit of asking Judaism-related questions from both of them and had noticed that he often received different answers, which is not surprising considering that the two rabbis are on different spectrums of understanding Orthodox tradition. While Chabad and the Helsinki congregation are on increasingly friendly terms, our informants occasionally still saw them as being at odds.

### **From Chanuka on Ice to Lag Ba'Omer: Chabad events in Helsinki**

In Helsinki, Chabad organises events around the Jewish holidays as well as classes on Judaism for various age groups. All of these are also familiar from Chabad's mode of operation elsewhere. There are weekly classes on the major work of Chabad Hasidism, *Tanya*, and the Talmud, and

9 Bnei Akiva were hired until in 2019 the congregation replaced them with the office of deputy rabbi.

daily lessons of Rambam's (Maimonides') medieval halakhic code *Mishneh torah* (a curriculum initiated by the Lubavitcher rebbe in 1984; website Chabad Finland).<sup>10</sup> The number of attendees in these classes is not known, and our informants only rarely mentioned these classes in the interviews.

One of the more popular events of Chabad in Finland is the annual Chanuka on Ice celebration, where Chabad is responsible for lighting the first candle on a huge *hanukkiyah* (a nine-branched candelabra) placed next to the ice-skating rink close to Helsinki's Central Railway Station, usually in December.<sup>11</sup> Such 'trademarking' of Hanukkah is not a new approach on the part of Chabad Lubavitch. In the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, as Maya Balakirsky Katz (2009) suggests, predominantly non-Orthodox Jews engaged in the celebration of this holiday. Menachem Mendel Schneersohn decided to apply the Hasidic concept of *yafutsu ma 'ayanotekha hutsah* ('spreading your well-springs' from Proverbs 5:15), connected to the Talmudic concept of obligation to publicise the miracle of Hanukkah (*pirsume nisa*), in an international media campaign to erect Chabad-sponsored menorahs all over the world (Balakirsky Katz 2009: 242–3; Plaut 2012: 168). Hanukkah celebrations are now hallmark events of Chabad and are organised in cities across the globe.

In Helsinki, the event attracts families with children and is now one of the most popular events of the Jewish Community in Helsinki, even to the point that it seems detached from the religious connotations of Chabad. Informants with Cantonist



Chanuka on Ice in Helsinki.

ancestry, however, expressed less need to attend such events. A woman in her seventies suggested:

It [Chabad] just isn't my thing. That I would do more [commit to stricter observance]. That they organise Chanuka on Ice, it's OK, it's a nice event and so on, but for me to go to their premises, and there ... No, I don't have any need for that.

Being born of a Jewish mother, this informant's Jewish identity has never been questioned, and she probably does not feel the necessity to 'prove' her Jewishness. As she emphasised in her interview, she is not observant, but does find joy in following some Jewish traditions, or cooking Jewish dishes strictly in a 'traditional' way. This form of Jewish identification has previously been highlighted by a recent article (see Illman and Czimbalmos 2020)

10 For similar activities in Copenhagen, see Buckser 2005: 126.

11 Transliteration of Hanukkah follows the original form of the celebration.

on Finnish Jewish religious practices and identification.

Another trademark for Chabad is Lag Ba'Omer, a spring holiday celebrated on the 33rd day after Pesach. The woman in her thirties, mentioned above, said that Chabad had a major role in getting her and her children more involved in Jewish traditions. She had been invited to a Lag Ba'Omer picnic by a friend, where she became acquainted with the Chabad emissaries. Eventually her family became more involved in the Jewish community, as she related: 'It started to make sense that our kids were [attending their events] ... that it was a good time to get them more [involved], or to give them traditions and to do that kind of stuff.' As she is not particularly observant, her goal was clearly to get her children acquainted with Jewish traditions, and thus have a sense of belonging to Judaism. Buckser (2005: 132) has noticed a similar development among liberal Danish Jews in their contacts with Chabad, but observes its limitations: 'A few said that after visiting Chabad House, they had thought that lighting Sabbath candles now and then, or possibly to keep kosher, might not be the worst idea, but this feeling had not been translated into action. ... The appeal of Chabad lay almost entirely in its positive attitude toward Jewish identity.' In the case of our informant the connection with Chabad did translate into action: she described how she now attends the synagogue on the high holidays and lights the candles on Hanukkah, and sometimes even celebrates the Sabbath by baking a *challah* or lighting the candles. Chabad events had been for her a gateway to finding and strengthening her Jewish identity and engaging in religiously motivated acts.

### **Chabad: filling the gaps**

As in other countries, Chabad in Finland is not only known for organising events, but also for filling the gaps in the organisational structures of locally existing Jewish communities. They typically establish different institutions in order to cater to the needs of local Jewry – or rather, to expand the scope of their outreach. According to the interview material and to other sources on Finnish Jewry, holidays such as Lag Ba'Omer and even Hanukkah had not been celebrated in the local Jewish communities to the extent they now are after the arrival of Chabad. Chabad apparently identified certain 'gaps' in terms of events connected to the Jewish calendar.

It is not uncommon for Jews to join congregations in order to provide Jewish education for their children (Wertheimer and Victor 2009: 79), and the phenomenon is prevalent in Finland, as well (Czimbalmos 2021). Chabad is known for establishing new educational institutions that specifically target both religious and completely secular Jews. These institutions serve as outposts of Jewish life, essentially as centres for 'winning Jews back to authentic Judaism' (Wertheimer and Victor 2009: 80), as previously described in a study on a Chabad Hebrew School in the United States.

In the Finnish context, this meant the establishment of a separate Chabad Jewish daycare centre, as in Helsinki both a Jewish kindergarten and a Jewish school existed (the former since 1953 and the latter since 1918). The Ganon Chaya Daycare, as the website of Chabad in Finland states, 'was opened in Finland to serve the needs of the growing Jewish population' (see Ganon Chaya). The institution is and was located outside the premises of the Jewish Community of Helsinki, where the Jewish kindergarten and school of the community

are situated. While some informants thought of this as a great addition, some were rather pragmatic about the institution. The foreign-born woman in her thirties (quoted above), for example, drew a clear line in her level of involvement with the institutions established by Chabad. She said that her main goal of attending Chabad's event was partially to educate her children about Jewish traditions (as mentioned above, in relation to Lag Ba'Omer). When it came to the question of her 'organisational involvement' and enrolling her children in Ganon, it would have been impractical for her, as the family lived far from the centre, and the other Jewish institutions are located elsewhere. She added that the kosher food Ganon offers for the children was 'not important for her' and she 'doesn't care at all'. On the other hand, a converted woman in her sixties had high praise for Ganon: she said that a new generation of more religious young people has emerged from the programmes offered by Chabad. The children who come to the local Finnish Jewish kindergarten (*gan*, aged 4 and up) from the Chabad *ganon* (ages 1 to 3) become, according to her, 'natural' in their knowledge of Judaism, and Jewish festivals in particular.

It is, of course, arguable whether the Jewish population of Finland is growing. When it comes to official congregational membership – which does not equal the number of Jews in the country – according to a recent article in *Hakehila* (2021), the magazine of the Jewish Community of Helsinki, the community is struggling with a decreasing number of members.<sup>12</sup>

12 Whereas the number of official members in 2019 was, for example, 937 people, by the end of 2019, the number decreased to 918. In 2020, 51 individuals resigned from their membership (Nadbornik 2021: 43).

In addition, a number of Jewish individuals opt not to join the congregation because of the membership fees (that are paid as taxes). Over the years, many individuals have left the community, either for similar taxation-related reasons, or because of personal issues with the community (Czimbalmos 2021: 63), which may remain the case today, too. In this respect, Chabad's activities and the informal 'bonding with non-Lubavitch Jews' – as Elise Berman describes (2009: 71) – establish a new form of social network within Chabad.

Secular and observant Jews may attend their events informally without any official, institutional or financial commitment. Some may 'belong without believing' and some may 'believe in belonging' (Davie 2007b; Day 2009, 2011). Essentially, instead of attending by obligation, they 'consume' the events (Davie 2007a: 143–7; Zelenina 2018: 255) organised by Chabad Lubavitch. These are inherently religious events, which definitely serve the needs of those individuals who are not necessarily observant, but feel a strong cultural connection with Judaism because of their roots. They do so because they feel connected to Judaism and have a Jewish identity, but, in their own view, religious practice, faith or belief are less important for them, or are interpreted in a much broader sense than the framework of the 'institutionalised Chabad scheme' would allow for. Of course, one reason for not requiring official membership when joining Chabad's activities may be the fact that the emissaries' level of observance is significantly higher than that of most individuals – in the current case study – in Finland. Whereas other ultra-Orthodox groups may reject outsiders for their lack of prior Jewish religious knowledge, or because they will not commit entirely right away, Chabad does not follow this approach (Tapper 2020:

64). Whilst not requiring official membership and seemingly creating a broad outreach, Chabad emissaries are, as Berman phrases it, ‘unique missionaries’: they only reach out to those who they consider to be halakhically Jewish, and thus, in a way are already in their community, or as Berman puts it, ‘to everyone with a Jewish mother’ (Berman 2009: 83).

Berman is surely aware of the halakhic concept of the definition of Jewishness. She is therefore pointing to a specific issue: in the perspective of Chabad Lubavitch, following the Jewish law, matrilineal ancestry is preferable to conversion as an indication of being Jewish. A convert in his fifties, for example, approached Chabad first, prior to his conversion to Judaism. He wanted to become more familiar with Judaism but was told that it is not possible to convert through Chabad – at least not in Finland.<sup>13</sup> Previous research on religious fundamentalism has suggested that religious fundamentalist communities tend to be hostile towards out-groups (Koopmans 2015: 38–9). Of course, the level of ‘hostility’ may vary and may present itself in various forms. A Cantonist woman in her thirties, living in an intermarriage, who attended Chabad events earlier in her life and has often been invited to the emissaries’ apartment, said that she ‘felt that it’s preferred that she would come alone’ to their events, that is, without her non-Jewish husband. If allowing for a possibility of official membership, Chabad would definitely need to step over a particular boundary that they have – explicitly or implicitly – erected.

13 On potential converts seeking positive Jewish connection through Chabad in Denmark, see Buckser 2005: 137.

## Russian-Finnish Jews and Chabad

Along the lines of ‘filling the gaps’ it is important to reflect on the question of Russian Jews who have arrived in Finland over the past decades, and to whom local Jewish communities have seemed to be less welcoming than the Lubavitchers. As mentioned earlier, for many Jews interviewed in our project, Chabad Lubavitch seems to represent an ‘authentic’ form of Judaism. Joshua Tapper argues that post-Soviet Jews gravitate towards Chabad, because they are a ‘uniquely Russian model of Judaism’ (Tapper 2020: 61). As in other Eastern European countries, in Russia Chabad has seemed to offer solutions for the trauma of the 1990s to Russian Jews. The humiliation of the Perestroika years and deep-seated antisemitism in post-Soviet Russia may have led to Chabad becoming particularly attractive to Russian Jews after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Zelenina 2018: 257–8).

Presumably, the migration of Russian Jews to Finland did not erase their negative perceptions and experiences of the Soviet Union, which was amplified by the perceived hostility of the Finnish community. For example, most adult men from the former Soviet Union were required to be circumcised before joining the Jewish Community of Helsinki. This Orthodox demand was seen as discriminating against a number of Russian Jewish men who had not been circumcised as children during the Soviet period and thus excluded them from the possibility of becoming members.

In contrast to the Jewish Community of Helsinki, the Lubavitchers seemed to be more welcoming towards Jews from the former Soviet Union for multiple reasons. According to the journalist Sue Fishkoff (2003: 23–4), the rebbe taught his followers never to embarrass another Jew for knowing little about Judaism, and rather

encouraged them to teach what they know in a friendly and humble fashion. This, of course, facilitates the performing of Judaism vicariously on behalf of those who are not aware of how certain rituals are supposed to be performed – in the Orthodox manner, of course. A Russian middle-aged woman told how she felt discriminated against by members of the Jewish Community of Helsinki. She noted that Benyamin Wolff is ‘her rabbi’ and that after Chabad’s arrival, the Jewish Community of Helsinki started to ‘steal the events [organised by Chabad] and started ... the same events ... everything which is now in the community he [Benyamin Wolff] brought’. According to Sarah Bunin Benor, Chabad has institutionally become the representative of American Orthodoxy, which has introduced ‘American Ashkenazi language and culture to Jewish communities around the world’ (Benor 2012: 12). According to several informants, some members in the Helsinki community perceive Chabad as having the ‘knowledge’ of how to perform Judaism and that their customs are perceived as more ‘authentic’. These informants were in fact critical of this phenomenon: a man in his early thirties noted that Chabad tends to target people whose knowledge of Judaism is ‘very low’, that the customs they teach are ‘from New York’ and that local *ba’ale teshuvah*<sup>14</sup> end up believing that Chabad customs and interpretations are ‘normal Judaism’. Another man in his late thirties, himself a *ba’al teshuvah* who had early on been invited to Chabad events, said Chabad contacts had been the beginning of his immersion into Judaism, although later he had decided that it was not for him. He related that the Chabad rabbi had made

14 Heb., those who are ‘returning’ to become more observant in Orthodox Judaism.

him feel ‘very special ... because this is what Chabad knows how to do very well’.

This sense of acceptance and welcome may definitely appeal to those who had to hide their Jewishness throughout the Soviet Era. Even without having any sense of religious faith, being observant or even knowledge of religious practices, they approve of Chabad’s outreach, and thus feel a sense of belonging, and do Judaism – with Davie’s notion – ‘vicariously’ (Davie 2007a, 2007b). The experiences of exclusion, combined with those of the (post-)Soviet era naturally may have generated the same response in those living in Finland as in those who stayed in Russia: an attraction to the Chabad Lubavitch movement, with yet ‘another gap filled’.

## Conclusions

The main aim of this article was to introduce the history of Chabad Lubavitch in Finland by drawing on historical and archival sources, as well as on recently collected, semi-structured qualitative interviews (101 of them) of members of the Finnish Jewish communities, who either directly or indirectly have been in contact with its emissaries. The analysis of the materials was carried out by taking previous research on the Lubavitchers, Grace Davie’s concept of vicarious religion (Davie 2007a, 2007b), and Abby Day’s concept of ‘believing in belonging’ (Day 2009, 2011) as analytical tools.

Chabad emissaries have now been in Finland for almost two decades. On the basis of the interviews, most Finnish Jews described Chabad positively as an element of active change in a community that was criticised for neglecting some of its members. As some of the interviews highlighted, however, Chabad was not received without suspicion, and some congregants still remain sceptical. The arrival

of the movement in the early 2000s essentially activated the Jewish Community of Helsinki, perhaps out of the fear of losing members and not being able to offer similar events to those that Chabad did. As the interview material and previous studies show, Chabad both in Finland and globally tries to reach out to Jews (or who they consider as Jewish in their halakhic definition) and attempts to engage them ‘unconditionally’ in their activities with a ‘low threshold’, that is, without requiring the individuals to pay membership fees (at least officially) or practising Judaism in a particular way. The majority are allowed to attend their events and be ‘consumers’ of these while practising Judaism ‘vicariously’ (Davie 2007a, 2007b) without the necessity of being strictly observant – or observant at all – in Jewish practices, whilst the minority actively perform this observance on their behalf. This, of course, has resulted in Chabad attracting individuals who may have little understanding of Jewish practices but feel a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people, and as such, ‘believe in belonging’ (Day 2009, 2011).

Even though the women mentioned at the beginning of this article are accused of not ‘knowing’ enough about Jewish denominations – being dissatisfied with binary gender separation of the Helsinki synagogue but then turning towards a fundamentalist organisation that is by no means more committed to equality than the local synagogues – it is obvious that Chabad has offered something the Finnish Jewish congregations had failed to give: more activities and agency for women and for youth, as well as feelings of ‘authentic’ Jewishness and Jewish identity. Still, Chabad is a Hasidic outreach organisation that holds fundamentalist beliefs, endorses strict scripturalism under male authority and gender segregation, elaborates on

textual sources from the *Tanya*, and quotes the speeches of the rebbe. However, when talking to most of our informants, the emissaries in Finland seem to refrain from these ‘fundamentalist’ acts, at least until the congregants have become close enough to them. This may be due to Chabad’s understanding that fundamentalist approaches would not be supported by many of the congregants.

Outside Finland, Chabad Lubavitch has manifested itself rather aggressively, while so far, the Finnish branch of the group is seemingly taking a neutral stance – in comparison to their activities in countries such as Hungary and Russia. Since 2011, Chabad has had a house of its own in the city centre of Helsinki. They not only run the daycare centre and organise Jewish business lunch gatherings but have also explored possibilities of opening a local Jewish museum. Chabad, an organisation that holds fundamentalist beliefs and uses modern tools in its global outreach programme, with the ultimate aim of messianic redemption, has already left an indelible mark on Jewish life in Finland. While some of our informants approached the actions of the Lubavitchers critically, the broader context of their operations and the agenda of Chabad appeared to be unknown to most. The informants seem to be satisfied with the ‘vicarious actions’ the Lubavitchers take upon themselves. It remains to be seen whether this seemingly nuanced presence is about to change, and whether Chabad Lubavitch, and its attractive outreach as the allegedly ‘authentic Judaism’, will adopt similar roles and approaches to those it has assumed in numerous other countries. ■

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