The Messiah of Brooklyn: Understanding Lubavitch Hasidism Past and Present

by M. Avrum Ehrlich

Part Three: The Institutions, Chapter 12, Page 134

The Negative Effects of Fundraising

As will be discussed later, for every successful technique utilized by Habad in its outreach and consolidation, there was a price to pay. Fundraising, for example, led to the emergence of a duplicitous group personality. While rabbis throughout Jewish history had been spiritually generous, welcoming all Jews as equals regardless of their backgrounds and religious caliber as part of an extended family, this changed in Habad. Some Habad rabbis, due to the necessity of raising funds to support themselves and their communities, began to view some Jews as more equal than others. The lucky ones who got special attention were all too often wealthy.

In Habad, fundraising was (and is) often the subject of intense conversation at Shabbat tables and gatherings. While this is not an uncommon situation in non-Habad synagogues and communities, in the Habad movement it was an obsession which underlay the community's ability to function and earn wages. Because the main ideological thrust of the movement lay in outreach, and there was strong encouragement for everyone to set up an independent "Habad House," every Habad activist became concerned with making money, raising funds, or developing wealthy acquaintances to obtain money for the realization of the movement's goals. Obviously, those members of the movement who assisted in alleviating the community's financial burdens were appreciated and respected. Dependence on charitable funds for livelihood, both individual and collective, carries significant risk, however, especially if events occur to place a personal blemish on either the movement or its individual members. The needs of fundraising, therefore, led to the development of a utilitarian streak in even the best and most loyal Hasidim, and challenged the ability of the movement to publicly express more controversial elements of its ideology. Those unconcerned with the ideal of outreach were not as affected by this, and ironically the Hasidim most dedicated to carrying out Schneerson's program were most prone to develop duplicitous characters. In some instances, the development of institutionalized duplicity had serious ramifications for the integrity and character of both individuals and the movement as a whole.

The obsession with fundraising created an aura of awe around the wealthy. Those known to give money became figures of respect in the local synagogue and were talked about with reverence, whether or not their other accomplishments justified it. Other qualifications of success became less important to many in Habad: the scholarly, the pious, the cultured, the artistic, or the sensitive effectively became second class in comparison to the wealthy. In time, all effort within Habad came to revolve around gaining favor with the wealthy members of the community. The partiality toward wealthy people created a culture centered on financial gain, at the cost of the purportedly spiritual nature of the religious interests of the Hasidim. Wealthy Jews, businesspeople, and others with influence were often specifically targeted for fundraising, and in the event that they

entered a Habad House or synagogue, their concerns become the concerns of every potential fundraiser. Deferential attention was commonly paid to them, they were given precedence at the dinner table, and their spiritual concerns were given far greater attention by funds-dependent Hasidim because of their wealth or influence. Time was invested in the wealthy by fundraisers, allegedly because they were Jews and therefore important in the coming redemption, but in reality because they were able to make a financial difference to the movement and its programs.

When any friendship is made between people on the sole basis of financial gain, it results in a degree of duplicity. A wealthy person seeking spiritual guidance is encouraged to develop what he assumes to be a spiritual relationship with a Habad teacher, but for some in the movement, the opportunity is not so much one of spiritually uplifting a fellow Jew as of developing a donor who will finance further outreach. The consequences of this to honesty and trust are devastating not only for the deceived benefactor, but also, spiritually, for the Habad Hasid. When occurrences of this kind are not just passing incidents, but become a regular phenomenon in the movement, as occurred over time in Habad, it reflects an entrenched duplicity whose consequences are manifested in different ways. Certainly, the degree of spiritual cohesion in the movement is diminished.

Ideology and the methods by which Habad rabbis addressed problems were often tailored to the wealthy segments of the community, one result of which was an increasing appeal to populism. We might attribute the choice of terms, the unacademic nature of discourses, and the employment of analogies and metaphors to the desire to appeal to the wealthy merchant class, a segment of the population important to Habad's survival. Interestingly, this took a toll on the quality of Habad theology, which over time began to accommodate and attract the more financially lucrative segments of the community. Use of analogies and language appealed to this popularism, and the issues examined by rabbis in the community were often those of concern to the merchant classes, in distinction to other segments of the community. This occurred even in the discourses of Schneerson himself. Many of the books written by Habad adherents seem to have been tailored to appeal to a specific audience with which the authors seek to enamor themselves. Thus, one result of the need to raise funds was a widespread and institutional descent into populism.

In the long term, the price paid for Habad's emphasis on fundraising and outreach was a sacrifice of intellectual honesty, veracity, and scholarly endeavor. As we shall see, Schneerson's involvement in political issues was later to be moderated by his followers, who were concerned about the popular appeal of Habad as a tool for attracting money to the movement. The more a movement depends on fundraising, the more popular it must of necessity become. Perhaps it is in the sense of a need to appeal to populism that the decline of what originated as a scholarly ideology began. Because it occurs among the spiritual cream of the movement (its emissaries, educators, and rabbis, all of whom are reliant on funding provided by benefactors) it has the potential to spiritually impoverish the movement in the long term.

(via mentalblog.com)