

Introduction

What I Sought, What I Found

"IF YA WANNA SEE, YA GOTTA PUSH." I tried, lamely, stunned to be getting a lesson in assertiveness from a middle-aged Hasidic woman. "*Harder,*" she admonished, and I fell into the rhythm of the women and girls surrounding me. Clawing my way to the front, I carved a tiny niche for myself by the window offering a view, far below, of the men's section of this Hasidic synagogue. I glimpsed the group's religious leader, the Rebbe: the goal of this shoving game. An instant later my victory collapsed, and I found myself far from the window amid a sea of jabbing hands. This may sound dangerous, but I never worried. The atmosphere was benevolent, the pokes hard yet somehow affectionate.

Satisfied with my short Rebbe sighting, I relaxed near the back of the women's section. It was Shabbos, the weekly Jewish Sabbath, and people were saying the appropriate prayers, swaying and bowing in accordance with Orthodox Jewish custom. I noticed a girl, about seventeen, who prayed with particular passion. Her eyes teared slightly as she spoke. I was enthralled. Shabbos is the centerpiece of Orthodox Jewish life, a weekly island of holiness infusing the workaday world with regular intervals of awe; on that day Jews are free from work-related tension and can concentrate on holy thoughts. Members of this Hasidic group feel the holiday offers a taste of a future Messianic period that will banish all concerns beyond the universal goal of knowing God. I thought, "This girl really believes that," and I watched her in fascination.

She finished, closed her prayer book, and kissed it. I imagined she was having a mystical experience. Then she turned to her friend and asked, "Which skirt do you think I look fatter in, this one or the one I was wearing last Shabbos?" To me, she looked slender and graceful in her elegant blue sweater and long, straight woolen skirt. I stared,

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amazed, and she stared back, amazed at my amazement. This question should not have surprised me at all; it was just the sort of thing I myself might have asked someone when I was seventeen. It clashed only with my own musings on Shabbos, the Messianic age, and mystical experiences, as if people who lived steeped in such notions should be beyond the usual worries.

That weekend with Hasidim was a whim, one of many I indulged after graduating from college. I never forgot it. The aggressiveness I saw bludgeoned my stereotype of the mousy Hasidic female. The weight-conscious young woman particularly intrigued me, and I found myself wondering about Hasidic teenage girls in general: How do they think? What are their dreams? Do they ever rebel? How do they perceive themselves? Several years later, I returned to this community, hoping to find out.

For over a year, I lived in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, headquarters of the Lubavitchers, a sect of Hasidim famous for their efforts to inspire secular Jews to become more observant and for their Messianic fervor: their sincere belief that every act of kindness a Jew performs, each Judaic ritual she completes, brings the Messiah that much closer to earthly revelation. The two traits are mystically entwined; each new practicing Jew performs hundreds of rituals and holy acts that might usher in the Messianic age. I spent my time among Lubavitchers exploring the daily lives and inner worlds of their adolescent girls—their thoughts, habits, dreams, struggles, and triumphs. I aimed to know them as individuals, in all their complexity and mystery, to cut through the shroud of secrecy so many Americans associate with Hasidim.

Immediately, I sensed how timeless it all was, and yet how changed since my last Crown Heights stint. I saw the same sights: men braving the heat in black coats and long beards, long-skirted young women joshing each other on their way home from the pizza shop, college-aged mothers with shopping bags hanging from strollers. But when my first Shabbos rolled around, I waltzed right up to the front and landed a seat, which I retained effortlessly throughout the service. The Rebbe had died. There was no longer a reason to gaze at the men's section; the rest of those bearded characters were boring old brothers, fathers, uncles, and neighbors whom you could see any time, and most women were content reciting the service quietly to themselves without seeing the public rituals down below. A nearly unanimous reverence for the Rebbe had given way to bitter debate about how Lubavitch should be run

without him and whether he would return as the Messiah. This incendiary issue pits the *meshichists*, those convinced the Rebbe will reenter this world and lead us into a blissful state of holy perfection, against the anti-*meshichists*, who tend to believe the Messiah must come from the ranks of the living, that Rabbi Schneerson's death disqualified him.

Numbers are impossible to draw in the Messiah controversy; it's not as if formal polls have been taken. As in most ideological disputes, there are gradations. Some Lubavitchers believe in their hearts that the Rebbe is the Messiah ("Moshiach" is the commonly used term) but oppose their peers who want to spread the word throughout the non-Lubavitch world. The public relations risk, they say, is simply too great. Indeed, ire is brewing among some in non-Lubavitch Jewish circles who bristle at the notion that the Rebbe will revive as Moshiach.¹

Most Lubavitchers I met did believe that the Rebbe is the Messiah, but I encountered some wavering and plenty of opposition. Some families, I've been told, have endured painful rifts because of the dispute. I saw few signs of this tension among the girls, though. I knew one young woman who believed but whose parents did not, and she would listen good-naturedly to her father's impassioned arguments on the subject. One afternoon, he railed against a Moshiach Day Parade—"those people have another thing coming if they think a bunch of flags is going to bring Moshiach"—and she kept looking from him to me, smiling. He was, in his own way, teasing her. In school, at social gatherings, on trips, girls of all persuasions got along; the controversy rarely surfaced for them.

Most girls paid little attention to Crown Heights politics, and the crux of their lives—the patterns, rules, and philosophies of Hasidism—remained solid. Hasidim are among the strictest followers of Orthodox Judaism, which touches every imaginable facet of human behavior. They must circumscribe their diet, dress, life goals, and, of course, beliefs and religious rituals within a narrow band of acceptability. Gender distinctions are sharp. Outside the immediate family, males and females inhabit separate worlds. Girls learn in early childhood that the woman's domain is the home, and that women must be modest in dress and behavior in the company of men. Within their own single-sex universe, though, the young women I met often exuded vibrancy and true *chutzpah*. I spent many hours with them, and their energy and spirit were the first qualities I noticed—contrary to popular belief, they seemed every bit as expressive as their peers in mainstream America.

Of course, the term “mainstream” is fraught with ambiguity in a country boasting an astonishing range of cultures, classes, colors, and creeds. Each group has its own tendencies in terms of insecurities, difficulties, and sources of pride. Eating disorders are most common among affluent white girls;² poor girls of color struggle disproportionately with teenage pregnancy.³

But for all this diversity, an underlying common culture pervades America. A middle-class suburban kid, a dairy farmer’s daughter, a Brooklyn-born child of Thai immigrants, a girl from an inner-city ghetto, and a film producer’s daughter in Beverly Hills could all probably get together and debate about television, movies, McDonald’s versus Burger King, tight versus baggy jeans, their opinions of the boys in their lives. Their particular experiences and biases would range widely, but American popular culture would have insinuated itself into all of their minds and provided common ground.

Lubavitch girls fall outside this conversation, though, as you will see, not as far as some may think. They are not cloistered—the billboards and newsstands of New York City are everywhere visible, and many have at least some familiarity with television and movies. Still, their exposure to mainstream American culture is limited. Their dress code prohibits pants, shorts, short skirts, and short-sleeved shirts: all standard American goods. Their dietary rules accept only the most stringently kosher restaurants and foods; a snack at Dunkin’ Donuts or McDonald’s is verboten. Most know few boys beyond their families.

Usually, media exposure is meager. A typical Lubavitch girl might sneak in an hour of TV every few weeks when she visits a friend whose parents work after school, freeing her to explore other uses for the monitor they use to watch videos of the Rebbe. She may catch an occasional secular movie—nearly always with minimal sexuality and violence—on a VCR, far from the soul-corrupting cinema, with its entwined couples and vulgar conversations. Likewise, she may inch her radio dial to a local rock station periodically when her parents are out of earshot. But guilt and anxiety often plague these activities; awareness of the media’s ability to tarnish spiritual purity is strong. This is far from the typical American’s placid enjoyment of the diverse visual and musical goodies our entertainment world offers. Many Lubavitch girls do not have even this level of contact with the outside cultural universe; the stricter contingent allows only Jewish videos and songs. In all these senses—dress, food, social life, cultural diet—Lubavitch girls are beyond the vast

United States “mainstream,” despite their undeniable awareness of typical American habits.

“Secular” is another potentially confusing term that crops up often throughout this book. I refer periodically to “secular culture” and the “secular world.” This word in no way implies a lack of spirituality among non-Hasidim; most Americans have some faith in a higher power, and the majority identify at least somewhat with a particular religious heritage.

The issue is degree. Hasidism teaches that mystical notions and the pursuit of holiness should underlie every action. When a Hasidic girl dresses in the morning, she is fulfilling her religious obligation to keep her body modest; before eating even a tiny snack, she says a prayer thanking God for her food. The typical Lubavitch young woman’s classmates and friends are other Hasidim. Her community’s social events nearly always have spiritual underpinnings and include none of her non-Jewish neighbors. Intricate religious injunctions make close relationships with people who are not Orthodox Jews difficult to maintain.

This situation distinguishes Hasidim from passionately spiritual groups like Mormons and fundamentalist Protestants, whose children commonly attend public school, and devout Roman Catholics, whose kids can easily make friends with non-Catholics, even if they go to parochial school. The relationships young Lubavitchers do have with other people usually center on the drive to bring all Jews around to Orthodoxy—say, a young woman’s chats with the college student who visits her home sometimes to learn more about her Jewish roots. Ideally, Hasidism is all-encompassing spirituality; its adherents view the world outside its purview as starkly Other—in a word, secular. My task, as a lifelong member of this secular sphere, was to commune with a new world and its young inhabitants.

Participant observation, knowing the girls by joining in their lives, drove this project. Most days, I observed classes at Bais Rivka, the lively educational home for about five hundred high school students, one hundred post-high school seminary students (“seminary” for Lubavitch girls is post-high school religious education; the word does not imply rabbinical training, which is open only to men), and twenty die-hard learners continuing their studies at night for a year after completing the two-year seminary program. I attended their school trips, class gatherings, community service events, parties, and dramatic productions. Many girls invited me to their homes, both for holiday meals and

for relaxed conversation. By plunging myself into their world, I imbibed the texture of their lives.

People often ask how I managed to ease my way into this community. Moving into Crown Heights was possibly the bravest thing I've ever done, for I had no assurance that I would reach such intimacy with these girls. But I was determined. I contacted the high school principal about my desire to attend classes; she wrote back explaining that my presence would exacerbate the overcrowding that already plagued the high school. Then I met with the seminary principal, who allowed me free rein to attend as many classes as I wished. Slowly, I got to know the girls, who began including me in their holiday celebrations and social activities. Since the high school was in the same building, I became known there as well; before long a few of the teachers had invited me to their classes, and I spent time with the girls in the cafeteria and after school. Eventually, I was granted the privilege of observing these young women in a vast array of settings; I became an eager and grateful participant in the rhythms of Hasidic girlhood.

My genuine respect for Hasidism was fertile ground for the well-honed Lubavitch flair for proselytizing among secular Jews. We engaged in a sort of unspoken trade: by spending time with me, the girls helped with my research *and* got the chance to share the beauty of Lubavitch. And despite Hasidism's mistrust of secular universities, everyone was impressed when I told them my work was part of Harvard University's Ph.D. program in American studies. That detail gave my project importance in their eyes, which spurred interest in me and my work. This was certainly a break from the usual reactions: "American studies? But what can you do with that?" or even better: "Leave it to you to avoid the workforce for all those years."

As I alternated between the Hasidic universe and my usual identity as a lax Jew with no particular spiritual allegiance, I felt an intense mixture of tension and joy. I led a strange, liminal life in Brooklyn, maneuvering between cultures, ideologies, and frames of reference. I emulated Lubavitch customs, but I was always a foreign observer, struggling endlessly to keep up and understand.

Impulsive and clumsy, I made glaring mistakes despite my best intentions, asking pointed questions in the midst of holy silences, eating before the appropriate prayers were said, arriving at Shabbos lunch with wet hair despite the injunctions against showering on the Sabbath. One Friday evening I miscalculated the time and arrived in Crown

Heights after Shabbos had begun, bulky knapsack hanging like a bull's-eye on my back. Carrying is not permitted on Shabbos. I dashed, head down, toward my apartment, but the Fates were not on my side. A group of little boys spotted me; they chased me down the street, yelling, "Shah, shah, shah," a scampering battalion with large black yarmulkes on their heads and white ritual fringes swinging from their waists. Of course, they were used to seeing non-Jews who don't observe Shabbos, but, for better or for worse, I had become familiar to them as a member of their community.

On the whole, the girls and their families extended incredible tolerance and allowed me to become a true participant in their lives. I befriended a delightfully heterogeneous group of girls, and I tried to empathize as much as possible with each young woman's ideas, difficulties, victories, and discoveries, to partake in her mind and heart as well as her deeds. My days were active and diverse: I often spent the morning at school; the afternoon chatting with a bunch of girls at Crown Heights's kosher pizza shop; the evening studying Hasidic philosophy with a sensitive young woman who yearned to catapult me into Orthodoxy; the wee hours at a hidden hangout for the rare Lubavitch questioners, sniffing the pot-scented air and listening to the poignant poetry a talented young dissident had decided to share with her friends.

Daily observation offered wonderful insight into the adolescents' lives, concerns, and values. But I wanted more: access to the elusive realm of their inner worlds. Thus, intensive interviews with thirty-two girls aged thirteen to twenty-three (in this community all single females are girls, since they have not yet begun their second major stage of life) formed the crux of my project. Unless deep friendship emerges, this is a writer's best hope of gaining a pipeline into people's self-conceptions, beliefs, goals, and desires.

In conducting these discussions, I followed the wisdom of Carol Gilligan and her colleagues at the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development. In their studies of adolescent girls, they have adapted the clinical interviewing method pioneered by Sigmund Freud in his clinical case studies. Rather than sticking to an unyielding interview protocol, they use their initial questions as pathways to discover the young women's own concerns. Lyn Mikel Brown and Gilligan explain this technique in *Meeting at the Crossroads*, a book based on interviews with students at a secular private girls' school: "We would follow the associative logic of girls' psyches, we would move

where the girls led us.”⁴ I did likewise. Although I had prepared questions, I encouraged interviewees to veer from them and share the ideas and memories they found crucial. I was traveling in a foreign world, and I wanted the girls’ thoughts, not my preconceptions, to guide my exploration. Often, these conversations took hours; many young women were eager to share their ideas and experiences with a non-judgmental outsider who respected thoughts that might have scared parents or provoked ridicule from peers.

The Harvard Project is deeply concerned with “voice,” a person’s idiosyncratic mode of expression that shares her feelings and ideas with others.⁵ After transcribing an interview, I followed the Harvard Project’s “Listener’s Guide” and read the interview several times, first focusing on the actual stories told, then analyzing the interviewee’s self-conceptions, and finally moving on to the girl’s descriptions of her relationships—the way she perceives herself within her social world.⁶ It is a stunning exercise in empathy, in exploring the contours of another person’s mind; this method perfectly suited my goal of capturing the girls’ inner complexity.

The combination of observing and interviewing allowed me to dramatize both outward behavior and interior grappling. Every girl I got to know well ushered me into a life filled with drama and intensity. I soon came to a fabulous realization: this material was downright juicy. I found an adventurer who checked out a strip club but later reembraced the Orthodox way, brilliant young rebels who spent their evenings debating Jewish philosophy and agonizing over their loss of faith, a girl whose parents banned her from the house when she began flouting Jewish law, an intensely religious young woman who longed to be a boy, a fervently Messianic girl with a lineup of intense male phone friends, and many other rich stories. I decided to transform my experiences into a book because my young Hasidic friends provided such provocative surprises. They would intrigue anyone who loves exploring people—their quirks, their quandaries, their cultural influences.

Of course, yet another complicated character infuses every word of this book: me. Those who know me well often wonder whether I became Hasidic, or at least more ritually observant, because of my stay in Crown Heights. After all, my attraction to Hasidim stems from a long-standing fascination with religious conviction. My parents are secular Jews. Their decision to enroll my brother and me in a Reform temple’s

biweekly afternoon Hebrew classes had no supernatural undertones; they simply wanted us to explore our cultural heritage. I never linked the depressing ritual of reciting Hebrew prayers in a stuffy classroom with spirituality. Still, passionately religious people have drawn me since early childhood, from the smiling cult members I would see during trips to Manhattan to the nuns who lived in the convent near my suburban New Jersey home. As a kid, I spent countless afternoons in front of that convent's windows, spying on the unsuspecting sisters as they chatted or ate lunch, trying to soak in some understanding of a life devoted to God.

Years later, I wrote my undergraduate thesis about an evangelical Christian group; I adored the weekly meetings filled with impassioned prayer, lively song, and exhortations to spread Christ's message of eternal life. Lubavitch, too, promises immortality. And yet I continue in my miserable, death-fearing ways, never taking the friendly hand of faith my religious travels have offered in so many different forms.

You could consider me a reformable relativist. Eventually, I might choose a particular faith or philosophy. It's unlikely but possible. I approach every ideology I encounter with a balance of fresh openness and underlying doubt. Lubavitch was no exception. I went into Crown Heights an outsider. I left with a heartfelt appreciation for this community and a deep-seated disbelief that the traditional Hasidic woman's lifestyle—marriage, followed by caring for as many children as God will provide—was best for me or for many of the Jewish women I know. In other words, you're reading the impressions of an extremely sympathetic skeptic.

But why do I resist embracing a religious system despite my spiritual yearning? The answer seems locked within my quirkiness, my deeply embedded nonconformity. The girl who collected insects at recess while her female peers jumped rope matured into the woman who spent a year exploring a Hasidic community while her relatives worked as accountants and lawyers. My brother tells me I dress like a seventh-grade boy; I have been known to order dessert first in restaurants; I frequently walk miles out of my way because I get lost whenever I leave my immediate neighborhood.

In short, I fit no mold. Hasidism's stringent regulations concerning dress, diet, gender roles, behavior, beliefs, goals, and lifestyle seemed unendurable to me. For a year, it was fascinating. Much more than that would have taxed me beyond my capacity. But, of course, I grew up

with much more freedom along all these dimensions. My difficulty stemmed at least partially from unfamiliarity.

The supreme role individuality has played in my life filtered into my concerns as I explored Lubavitch girlhood. Do Lubavitch young women develop independent thoughts, desires, and personal styles within the context of a seemingly all-encompassing Orthodox Judaism? Is there room within Lubavitch for eccentricity? Is personal oddness tolerated? How far can these young women go in thought and behavior before they are considered rebellious? How do Hasidic girls perceive themselves: their idiosyncratic characters, difficulties, and gifts? These questions tantalized me and guided my exploration.

Recently, a host of writers have chronicled mainstream American girls' sometimes grueling attempts to conform to our own culture's ideals for young women's bodies and behavior. Clinical psychologist Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* describes young women diverse in personality and family background, lobbying painful evidence that all too many lose confidence as they approach adolescence, developing deep-seated insecurity that radiates out into their body image, their academic performance, their sexual development, and their relationships. They often shed the assertiveness, rambunctiousness, and playfulness that had carried them through childhood. Books and articles focusing on eating disorders and body image obsession have proliferated. I think of Joan Jacobs Brumberg's acclaimed book *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, whose jarring central argument is captured within the title: many girls lavish their most intimate, life-defining energy and thoughts on perfecting their bodies.

Sensitive renditions of American teenage girlhood often describe a profound tension. Pressure on many young women to shape themselves into the pretty, nice, amenable, friendly but not overly boisterous specimens our society adores can breed inner turmoil and obsession with physical appearance. But resistance to these expectations crops up everywhere. Harvard Project research places particular emphasis on girls' struggles against cultural norms. Conscious, overt rebels find ways to express themselves: A working-class girl featured in *Meeting at the Crossroads* continually shares her unusual opinions and life experiences, often to the dismay of her prep school teachers and wealthy classmates. A Korean contributor to an anthology that explores girls' resistance to mainstream mores bitterly remembers her white peers' re-

fusal to accept her heritage; at fourteen, she renounced her school's social life and worked to improve her Korean language skills.⁷

Others assert subtle but heartfelt efforts to retain a sense of inner strength. Psychological jockeying often accompanies outward conformity. For one *Crossroads* interviewee whose behavior epitomizes the norms of feminine goodness, remaining aware of emotions that feel unseemly, like anger or hatred, seems like a last-ditch attempt to hold on to the person who simmers beneath the veil of perfection. In other words, there are expectations that appear unshakable. And then there are the adolescents, whose personal characteristics rub up against cultural norms with infinite variety.

Not long ago, yet another media frenzy focused on adolescent girls, this time on the nastiness that can poison their friendships with one another. The surface buzz about the "alpha girls," the popular teens who rule their cliques with iron hands and venomous tongues, suggests a breed of young woman who is confident, secure, and powerful—if not kind. But the actual research illuminates the underlying ambivalence and self-doubt that typically propel this meanness.

In *Odd Girl Out*, Rachel Simmons argues that our culture's expectation that young women conform to the feminine ideal of "nice and kind" can cause rage to fester beneath the surface. Believing that open confrontation with friends or peers who make them angry would be unseemly, girls release their fury in covert but deeply harmful ways: gossiping; spreading out at the lunch table when an unwanted girl comes by; ignoring people; taunting a girl as a group, so no one person bears responsibility. Usually, they target their own friends, picking one person from within their clique to tease and ostracize, making her the "odd girl out." Rosalind Wiseman's *Queen Bees and Wannabes* reports similar problems of subtle but devastating cruelty among girls. And the victims are not the only sufferers. Far from bastions of confidence, many perpetrators endure loss of self-esteem, obsession with reputation, and inability to express their feelings. These girls are living a terrible irony: an illusion of niceness with an undercurrent of fury.

So what does all this have to do with the Lubavitch girls? Cliques are certainly a part of their social landscape, as is catty, underhanded meanness. I picked up loud whispers meant to be overheard by a third-party target (e.g., "Look at Fruma's shoes!" whispers Gittel to Malka, within earshot of Fruma). I also saw cruelty to girls who lacked social

skills. One young woman, who suffered with illness and a severe learning disability that hampered her ability to read social cues, was continually ignored by her classmates—she'd say something odd yet inoffensive and receive silent scowls in return. "Out-of-towners," whose parents lived outside of Crown Heights but who boarded with neighborhood families to attend Bais Rivka, often complained that the locals were snobs, that they were not as friendly and accepting as they could have been.

From my observations, though, Lubavitch young women didn't tend to have as much trouble within their actual friendship groups; mainstream girls' most serious problems often come from their "good friends." Lubavitch girls tend to be boisterous and direct, and passive-aggressive subterfuge carries less allure when people share their emotions directly.

On a Bais Rivka trip, Shira stormed into the dining area, crying. Someone asked what was wrong, and she bellowed: "Feigie said I'm fat and ugly!"

Then Feigie herself ran in, yelling, "I didn't mean it like that!" Soon about ten girls were involved in moderating the dispute. The discussion was very open, and eventually Shira realized that she had misunderstood Feigie's comment. Sobbing, Shira apologized to Feigie for accusing her of meanness. If a similar dispute had developed in a suburban middle-class high school, Shira might have been mortified to confront Feigie directly, let alone shout about her gripe in a room filled with her classmates. Shira's anger would have rankled beneath the surface, and she might have begun spreading noxious gossip, hoping that all her friends would turn against Feigie. The short blowup I witnessed might have averted unbearable long-term tension. Shira's honesty and openness startled me, but the girls found this scene unremarkable, a typical spat that played itself out like hundreds before it.

My gut expectation was that Lubavitch would narrow the window of self-expression, that strict regulation would stunt girls' personal voices with much more force than in America at large. Others shared my preconceptions. When I told a Harvard Divinity School professor I wanted to explore how Lubavitch girls' individual personalities developed within their stringent religious system, he admonished, "Back up. The first question is whether this happens in the first place. You're dealing with a very strict group, with very rigid expectations for women." My grandmother, who emigrated from Poland in 1908, yanked me into

her living room to impart a dire observation drawn from early memories among Polish Hasidim: “Personality? Hasidic girls? Naahh. Those people, they’re dirty, they’re stupid, and they treat the girls like *shmattes* [Yiddish for ‘rags’].”

The possibility that these girls’ lives could be anything other than the Platonic essence of feminine subjugation seemed as unlikely as a suckling pig on a Shabbos table. Yet there they were—long skirts and remote synagogue seats notwithstanding—teasing, running, playing, and downright enjoying; their personal styles shone through to any aware observer. An impressive depth undergirded the zest. Lubavitch girls’ self-understanding and ability to express their thoughts and feelings were often stunning.

Like their mainstream American counterparts, their reactions to their culture’s expectations for young women ranged widely, from the full-blown rebellion of apostasy and employment at a strip club, to subtle limit-pushing like too-short skirts, to studied embracement of their society’s vision for them. The issue is complex, though, for Lubavitch does rein in many outward expressions of individuality to promote the kind of conformity this community’s survival demands. Future goals, so diverse and personal among most American teenagers, fall within a narrow realm among practicing Lubavitch girls—they all plan to marry, have children, and devote their lives to Judaism. The biggest question for most is whether to settle in Crown Heights or to support a Lubavitch outpost elsewhere. Sexuality, a wide arena for self-expression among secular adolescents, is strictly forbidden before marriage in Lubavitch. Mainstream teenagers examine song lyrics, films, friends’ convictions, family traditions, and books to help them develop their own values and life-defining philosophies. Typical Lubavitchers look only at Jewish sources for inspiration, since they have been taught never to consider any idea that contradicts Hasidic teachings.

Tension emerges: Lubavitch culture lovingly nurtures each girl’s developing persona but keeps many domains under careful surveillance. This conflict is the centerpiece of my project; every one of the girls I profile offers a variation on the theme of selfhood in the context of tight conformity.

From the beginning, I was impressed by the Lubavitch girls’ command and power—qualities that, within their all-girl domain, were not only tolerated but encouraged. I asked many young women what sort of person was well liked at Bais Rivka. By far the most popular answer

was the loud girls, an unlikely response in the high schools I attended, where outwardly aggressive young women often struck people as obnoxious and grating.

Writers frequently suggest that girls tend to lose something as they shift from childhood to adolescence—a certain energy, honesty, or unselfconsciousness. Mary Pipher remembers her cousin Polly as a daring, argumentative, zestful child. As Polly's teen years approached, both the boys and the girls excluded her because she didn't conform to the restrained, feminine ideal. Eventually, she calmed down and learned the new rules for social success. But Pipher sensed a tragedy here, that she had witnessed "the loss of our town's most dynamic citizen."⁸ Pipher uses this anecdote to introduce *Reviving Ophelia*; Polly serves as an exemplar of the many girls who seem to lose some of their spirit as adolescence hits.

Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan frame this sense of loss more theoretically, viewing the problem as a submersion of "voice." In their words: "Over the years of our study, even as they became more sophisticated cognitively and emotionally, young girls who had been outspoken and courageous in both an ordinary and a heroic sense became increasingly reluctant to say what they were feeling and thinking or to speak from their own experience about what they knew."⁹ Brown and Gilligan write about girls who learn to hide their strong feelings, to paper over their disagreements with others in order to maintain outward civility. The meanness Rachel Simmons describes results directly from this process; eventually, squelched emotion can spur passive-aggressive conniving.

The Lubavitch girls fell outside these trends; they typically cultivated strong, clear personal voices in their relationships, engaging their conflicts with stunning clarity. Shira and Feigie's argument, an everyday event to the girls who witnessed it, underscores the open honesty that often drives Lubavitch friendships. And, as you will see throughout this book, Lubavitch girls often maintain the childlike playfulness that Pipher mourns in so many of the girls she describes. Their impishness struck me as remarkable; I haven't seen anything quite like it among other young women I have known.

Of course, in many ways the Lubavitch girls are granted much less tether than most American young women. I will always remember the pain one girl felt when her parents ousted her from their home for violating Jewish law and the sense of rebellion she attached to studying

Judaic texts with men. But within the confines of Orthodox regulations, an unusual license often reigned.

A question looms: Why? Why would Lubavitch girls tend to hold on to the childhood voice and spirit that many in America at large seem to lose? Why would they cultivate a much richer self-awareness than one might expect from a sect that appears to downplay the power of the individual in deference to the glory of God? I can offer many possible explanations—the camaraderie and safety of their single-sex social world, their tight-knit community, the power of their religious faith, their unusually close families, values within Hasidism, the Lubavitch zeal for nurturing every Jew's unique and vibrant soul. Most likely, all these factors play a complex and interrelated role.

On one level, the Lubavitch girls' liveliness and openness should come as no surprise. The research unveiling inhibited young women who channel their pent-up emotions into covert anger focuses on middle-class or affluent, largely white communities. But the world of American girlhood encompasses much more. Young women from backgrounds that don't fit this mold often imbibe quite different messages about ideal behavior. Lubavitch Crown Heights is, on the whole, white and financially secure (with a large minority of poor Hasidim), but its core habits and values diverge radically from mainstream middle-class American mores.

In a study of young women identified as being at risk for early pregnancy and/or school dropout, Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy M. Sullivan found that "there is little evidence that the majority of these girls experience pressure to conform to the idealized standards of femininity so prominent in the dominant culture."¹⁰ These girls were all poor or working-class, from a range of backgrounds: African American, Caribbean, Latina, Portuguese, Irish, and Italian. Research among both African American and working-class white girls suggests that the stereotypical white middle-class ideal of the nice, kind, quiet woman is alien to them. Often, black girls are pushed to develop inner strength and independence so they can successfully juggle the roles of breadwinner and nurturer; they will likely have vital, if not total, responsibility in both of these domains. Black girls must also learn to defend themselves against the racism they will endure.¹¹ Fascinatingly, research suggests that black girls on the whole maintain higher levels of self-esteem throughout adolescence than their white and Latina peers despite disproportionate poverty, broken homes, and exposure to

violent crime.¹² Their characteristic psychic strength and ability to assert their needs and opinions overtly seem to boost self-confidence. Lyn Mikel Brown, who studied white girls from the working-class town of Mansfield, Maine, found that the young women developed a certain toughness, a willingness to express both anger and love with stark openness, an attraction to fighting and debate, and an admiration for people who defend themselves.¹³

Economic stress and ethnic bigotry may foster scrappiness and open aggression, the sense that one must fight to reap any reward in this world. And perhaps cohesive social groups help young women develop confidence and ease of self-expression—whether the bond stems from racial discrimination, cultural tradition, religious passion, or small-town ties unbroken by middle-class rites like residential college. A study of black and Latina girls found that the young women with the strongest sense of ethnic identity tended to enjoy the highest self-esteem;¹⁴ defined social networks of all kinds might buoy girls (and all human beings) as they struggle through life. Lubavitch youth take enormous pride in their background. Even the staunchest rebels often relished their status (as one girl bragged while enjoying her third glass of beer at a club, “I’m Lubavitch, so my tolerance for alcohol is impressive”).

Today’s Lubavitchers have inherited community coziness from their forebears; in some ways, Crown Heights, Brooklyn feels like a tight-knit nineteenth-century eastern European Jewish village, where townspeople developed very particular roles: the patient fish store man who offered advice on countless domestic squabbles, the dressmaker whose beautiful clothes were legendary, if only within her tiny neighborhood. Several girls did long for an even closer community bond, complaining that a school grade of over one hundred students is too large, that they’ve never gotten past surface friendliness with their neighbors, and that cliques divide Bais Rivka. But their benchmarks differ from mine. Shared beliefs, ultimate life goals, and intricate social networks bind people in ways I never imagined when I was growing up in a tiny New Jersey suburb. Everyone seems to know most of Lubavitch Crown Heights, and girls develop distinct and memorable reputations—the brilliant rebel, the charismatic leader, the thoughtful mystic.

This community tightness contributes critically to the Lubavitch girls’ emotional strength. Their cohesive all-girl social world (schools

and all socializing are single-sex) seems to minimize some of their tension by allowing a refreshing openness about their concerns. These young women speak forthrightly, at school and social events, about their insecurities, without fear that their peers will seize on their vulnerabilities and mock them. One very heavy girl at Bais Rivka told me in a loud voice during a crowded lunch break, "My weight gives me pain, always." At my high schools, someone would almost surely have jumped in here, thrilled at the opportunity to savage an easy victim, but the surrounding girls just smiled sympathetically. Another plump young woman told me, right in the midst of a social gathering for the tenth grade, "If I could change one thing about myself, it would be my size." She laughed, embarrassed, and several girls chimed in with various remarks to assuage her discomfort: "She likes to joke about herself"; "She's such a great girl to talk to about these things." The social atmosphere can be catty and cliquish, and many girls are dismayed to find themselves on the margins, but a certain underlying comradeship pervades these young women's lives. While it doesn't banish typical concerns, it makes them less fearful.

The girls' bonds are continually reinforced. Mothers host regular gradewide gatherings, where young women come together to play games, eat home-baked goodies, sing Hasidic songs, and chat together in an informal setting. The host often knows her guests' mothers, and she'll ask about them as she weaves around the living room and talks to the girls. Occasionally, parents or community recruits give talks on Jewish themes. Seminary girls organize these events for the high school grades, and two or three seminary students will show up at a typical high school gathering and try to inspire enthusiasm for the planned activities; these parties can foster friendships between girls of varying ages. Not surprisingly, the more rebellious types are the least likely to attend, but most girls come at least a few times throughout the year. Even the most disaffected young women often reminisce wistfully about recent class trips—yearly events that can inspire nonstop pranks and laughter.

Perhaps for many girls the very boundaries of acceptable belief and behavior that can seem so limiting to secular minds actually maintain and nourish their independent voices. Cross-gender friendships are strictly banned, so young women do not have the opportunity to lapse into mainstream America's familiar routine of girls subverting their

brash, bold sides to impress the boys. Since exploration of social universes beyond Orthodox Judaism is forbidden, the community becomes extremely tight-knit, and people feel known and appreciated, a powerful motivation to develop their talents and personalities. The gifted young singer can share her talent with all of female Crown Heights during the high school's yearly musical production; the joker becomes famous throughout school for her pranks.

Of course, this intense closeness carries dangers as well. The airtight consensus and warmth of the majority can make the few infidels feel like strangers in the promised land. Rampant gossip affects nearly everyone, blemishing reputations and breeding casual discussion about acquaintances' intimate pains. A rebellious student at the post-high school seminary thought she enjoyed a pristine name, when in fact several of her classmates whispered of her exploits with neighborhood boys. A Bais Rivka teacher who clashed with the girls inspired a continuous stream of speculation based on choice tidbits from her life: perhaps she's bitter because of her disabled son; maybe she never got over her father's early death. . . . The atmosphere was rather like one huge extended family—everyone is known, but everyone is exposed.

Crown Heights's aura of community begins with the family. The family is the fundamental unit in Orthodox Judaism, the place where past, present, and future merge: holidays commemorating ancient events passed from parent to child. A Hasidic girl's family life is fascinating for yet another reason; it is the one place where the genders converge. As I began to spend time at girls' homes, I wondered whether this was the true source of all the horror stories about Orthodox girlhood, whether the power the young women enjoy at school must in fact be traded in at the end of each day for domination by fathers and brothers. Maybe the males in their lives were downright cruel, or, more likely, perhaps they sweetly, subtly, and unconsciously squelched girls' initiative and drive, all in the name of spirituality.

I discovered many families that exuded warmth, and a few with overwhelmed, distraught, or emotionally distant parents. During my countless hours spent among Crown Heights families, for both holiday celebrations and informal visits, the majority of homes struck me as caring, safe places. The few questioners often deeply resented girls' back-seat functions during religious rituals and disproportionate household chores, but most young women enjoyed their families and their roles within them. Typical girls expressed their opinions with passion during

family discussions, and the playful spirit I saw at school was nearly as strong at home.

Profound disturbances like physical abuse or verbal berating by parents certainly exist here; one young woman shared nightmarish tales of being thrown down the stairs by her perpetually agitated mother. I have spent several afternoons in her home, and the family's conversations often hinge on put-downs—

DAUGHTER: "I put the fruit salad out on the table."

MOTHER: "You idiot! That was supposed to be for tomorrow. You're always ruining something."

I have no doubt that this sort of behavior was more common than I was able to observe. Getting a sense of a family's darker side as a guest, particularly one with the well-known goal of writing about her impressions, can be like trying to appreciate a rainbow in a black-and-white photograph. People can always modulate their actions and stamp out their most embarrassing impulses. When I was growing up, my mother used to lament that she couldn't be a fly on the wall, observing my non-family life. She knew that her actual presence would distort everything; instead, she yearned to be an invisible camera, taking everything in on the sly. Throughout this project, I was very visible, and my presence certainly affected the behavior of the people I was watching.

Even so, I spent so much time in Crown Heights and immersed myself in so many dimensions of this community that I truly believe I soaked in the texture of Lubavitch life. In many cases, I may have received a somewhat packaged vision of the truth, a movie version as opposed to messy, haphazard life. I will never know for sure the subtleties and gradations of my effect on the people I observed. Yet I realize from my own family that acting only goes so far. Much as we may want a certain guest to think everything is well among us, tensions and disputes somehow crop up, regardless of the company.

Thankfully for my blood pressure, I will never experience the raw emotion of any family other than my own, but the combination of widespread snooping and in-depth interviews gave me a strong sense that most girls enjoy their family lives. With a few stark exceptions, families received enthusiastic praise, even from girls who unthinkingly exposed their dissatisfactions with school, community, and social life. A girl venting about her peers' snobbishness or her teachers' unfairness

would grin and visibly calm down when I turned the questioning to her parents.

Lubavitch youngsters' single-sex social life seems to enhance their communal spirit beyond their families. The girls never see young men in their schools, camps, or activities, which may help them develop assured, powerful personalities. In mainstream America, boys can dominate the social scene, pulling the most striking pranks in school, graphically sharing their impressions of girls' looks, imposing their preferences when discord arises.

Certainly, not all young women fall into these trends; if you know several teenage girls, you can most likely picture some who steal the show in mixed-gender settings. I speak of tendencies, not inevitabilities. In my own memory, boys *tended* to be the ones who caused the zany scenes in class, made the most raucous jokes, and shared aloud the desires and revulsions certain girls sparked within them. Myra Sadker and David Sadker, whose book *Failing at Fairness* reports on their intensive observations within America's schools, corroborate these memories. Even confident, socially adept young women sometimes look back and lament that the coeducational social scene silenced their ideas and squelched their physical energy. Take Naomi Wolf, now a well-known writer and speaker. As a girl she was popular, bright, and ambitious, but her desire to please the boys made her meek and submissive to her male peers, stopping her from running down the school hall with her friends and sharing her wit.¹⁵

For Lubavitch girls, these problems are alien. In their all-female world, they shout, run, and vigorously express their opinions. They are blissfully unacquainted with the day-to-day drubbing boys struggling to overcome their own insecurities can dish out. I recently joined two Lubavitch girls, Brocha and Malkie, on a coeducational ski trip for modern Orthodox high school and college students. Modern Orthodox Jews follow Jewish law but are more lenient than Hasidim; many of their social activities include both boys and girls. Hasidism bans mixed-gender socializing, but these girls were a bit rebellious (though they were passionate believers, with a fervent pride in Lubavitch). They had heard about the trip through a friend at the Orthodox but not Lubavitch Touro College and, being prone to adventure, decided to go along, try out a new sport, and meet some Jewish young people from a somewhat different background.

The boys dominated the bus; they shouted and nudged each other while the young women chatted quietly. A diminutive young man announced that the girls would sit in the back (the trip was coed, but each gender needed to sit separately). The modern Orthodox young women began trooping off to the back, but the Lubavitch girls complained: “Hey! What do you mean? What is this?” Malkie moved up a few rows, beckoning impishly to Brocha to join her.

“Move *back!*” the boys yelled, but the Lubavitchers were intransigent, and eventually the young men managed to arrange their seating so that the errant duo did not interfere with religious injunctions.

A few last stragglers, all girls, ran toward the bus, and a chunky boy offered his expert assessment as each approached: “Ugly, ugly, ugly, so-so.” The modern Orthodox young women fidgeted and glanced at each other nervously, each probably wondering how he would have judged her. The Hasidic girls looked uncomfortable as well; Lubavitchers are hardly immune to common concerns about physical appearance. But they were also shocked, unlike their modern Orthodox peers, who accepted a familiar event with quiet resignation. Such comments certainly plagued both of my high schools, where the girls were just as apt to shrink back and take their lumps.

Brocha, normally a shy young woman who kept her rebellious leanings under careful wraps, yelled out, “Excuse me, but I know which bus never to take again!” For a long minute, the entire bus was silent. The boys’ right to hurt the young women had been questioned by someone new to girl-bashing. The quiet was particularly noticeable in the front half of the bus, where the boys had been yelping, whooping, and singing Adam Sandler’s pop hit about Hanukkah while their female peers chatted softly in the back. Lubavitch girls are used to taking control; on *their* trips, they are the ones who shout and play, all over the bus—front, back, and center. The situation seems to have given some of them more confidence than many mainstream and modern Orthodox girls, who must contend not only with their own anxieties but with the fallout from the boys’ as well.

Beyond the single-sex lifestyle, historical and cultural trends within Hasidism encourage strength among women. While modern feminists would cringe at Hasidism’s demarcation of gender roles, the movement has encouraged women to be aggressive within the boundaries of their wifely and motherly responsibilities. Since Hasidism’s beginnings in

eighteenth-century eastern Europe, Hasidic women have developed qualities that far transcend stereotypes of retiring, impotent females: verbal sparring, sarcasm, economic expertise, multilingual knowledge, an understanding of politics.¹⁶ Jewish theology has supported women's power in certain key arenas. Eastern European Jewish women often worked to support their families—and learned the necessary information about the wider world—while the men spent their days analyzing Judaic law in accordance with their religious obligations.

Many eastern European Jewish mothers developed into do-it-all superwomen, supporting their households financially, emotionally, and physically while their husbands studied; self-assertion and a sense of power were logical outgrowths of their omnibus role. The rampant Jewish mother jokes that poke fun at domineering moms hint at very real historical tendencies among eastern European Jewish women, many of whom had Hasidic ties. Jewish immigration brought these traits to America. This legacy has enormous influence on contemporary Lubavitch girls.

Here in the United States, Lubavitch is no bulwark against common adolescent concerns: these young women worried that they were unattractive, overweight, and unpopular. Many lavished impressive energy on their looks. The girls would glance nervously at the mirrors in their homes. At school there were no mirrors, but people were constantly fixing their hair or arranging their clothes. Many Bais Rivka students hated the high school rule that shirts had to be tucked in because they feared that everyone would notice their large stomachs. On Shabbos, most girls were impeccably dressed—one young woman described the female section of the synagogue as a “fashion show.”

By the second year of seminary, when the girls were beginning the marriage search, they had often developed a heightened interest in designer clothes and makeup. Some of the heavier girls began losing weight. After all, impressing the right young man would mean landing the perfect husband, the most heavenly gift they could attain, and everyone knew that Crown Heights boys place beauty high on their list of priorities for a wife.

When I asked girls if they wanted to change anything about themselves, the overwhelming majority conjured wish lists about their appearance, longing for slim, tall bodies; clear complexions; exquisite facial features. Eating disorders have certainly touched this community; people whispered about the young woman who starved herself to

death and the girls who hovered suspiciously near the toilet after fearsome feats of consumption. For a few girls, every snack inspired an internal maelstrom of debate: Should I have the orange drink? Even with the pizza? Does that mean I can only have one slice? Or maybe I can still have two if I take off the cheese. . . .

Indeed, both spiritual and earthly concerns tug at these girls, sometimes colliding and often fusing in fascinating ways. They are real people with human desires, growing up in media-saturated New York City; of course they want to look good. This sect is not completely cloistered—Lubavitcher Hasidim do have some contact with the mainstream media. Typical young Lubavitchers have seen clothing advertisements and magazine covers with willowy, air-brushed models. As I've mentioned, many girls have had at least some exposure to television and movies. Hollywood notions of beauty, femininity, and sexuality can easily creep into their minds; even G-rated films often carry all sorts of messages about these issues.

However, the backdrop of the girls' lives offers the far more profound values of spiritual grappling and community, inextricably intermeshed. The goals of shedding fifteen pounds or wheedling the money for high-top sneakers from conservatively dressed parents press, but so does the drive to follow the commandments and cultivate kindness in order to spur the coming of the Messiah. Lubavitch philosophy teaches that everything has mystical significance, that there are no accidents, that every last particle on earth mirrors a divine counterpart in heaven. You may hate your thighs or your nose, but you have them for a very particular reason; they serve some purpose in helping you fulfill your godly mission. This message, constantly reinforced by home, school, and community, competes mightily with material concerns and insecurities and helps these girls maintain their vibrancy while they struggle with ideals like beauty and social popularity. It is no panacea, as the eating disorders and distress about body image attest, but it can place worries in a larger context and stop them from enveloping the girls' personalities.

Hasidic thought influences these young women with such depth because it merges completely with their lives. The rituals, philosophy, and lifestyle of Lubavitch pervade their existence from the moment of birth, undergirding their families, their school, and their interactions within the Crown Heights community.

The *Tanya's* paramount importance among Lubavitchers is part of what distinguishes them from other strictly Orthodox Jews. Its author,

first Lubavitcher Rebbe Schneur Zalman, published his masterwork back in 1796. Today's Lubavitchers still study this work intensively throughout their lives. Rabbi Zalman envisioned a lifelong process of spiritual growth, drawing on intellect, emotion, and self-discipline. Within Lubavitch, the *Tanya* is living, God-infused philosophy, an indisputable guide to our world.

In school, girls explore the *Tanya* (translation: it has been taught), along with more standard Orthodox Jewish subjects like Bible and Jewish law. Their studies reflect the rules, behavior codes, and theology that steer their lives. When they examine the minutiae of the dietary laws or the regulations governing Shabbos, they need the information not just for the test but for their daily existence. When they read the *Tanya's* views on the Jewish psyche, they are not merely analyzing ideas; they are exploring their souls. They may joke through some classes, but they understand that, fundamentally, the messages are profoundly relevant to their lives and thoughts.

Religious occasions fill the lives of Orthodox Jews. Shabbos comes every week, offering a daylong respite from mundane duties and an elaborate family meal each Friday night and Saturday afternoon. Other holidays arrive regularly, pulling at the full spectrum of human emotion. They range from the somber Yom Kippur, when fasting Jews atone for their sins, believing that their sincerity and observance level on this day will directly influence their lives throughout the coming year, to the joyous Purim, which commemorates ancient Persian Jews' miraculous salvation from the designs of an evil man intent on exterminating them and features costume parties, baskets of food delivered to friends, a festive family meal, and drunken revelry.

In Crown Heights, everything revolves around the Jewish calendar. As each religious event approaches, school classes teach the relevant observance codes, history, scholarly commentary, and mystical notions—each year in slightly more depth. Ambitious mothers often organize all-grade parties at special times for the girls so people can celebrate with friends as well as families. During major holidays, the hundreds of Jews on the streets seem to form a single body: one mass of black hats, long dresses, and pattering children's feet heading toward the main synagogue. It's a complex life, rife with rules and never-ending rituals. But it adds order, predictability, and comfort to the girls' struggles and insecurities; no matter how fickle the social life at school, Shabbos arrives once a week, with its glowing candles and its family meals.

Make no mistake: this is far from an ideal community. The pain and alienation at the margins, the pure torture endured by the few who dare to take their minds and actions beyond Lubavitch boundaries, stop me far short of endorsing universal Hasidism. This book will introduce several young Lubavitchers—bright, vibrant questioners—who simply cannot conform to the stringent expectations that rule Lubavitch lives. Their hurt is unnerving and unforgettable.

In a sense, it's pointless even to ask whether Lubavitch would in some absolute sense be "better" than mainstream America for the typical young woman; Hasidism is not a viable path for most Americans, including myself. I will escort you through the girls' lives and minds more for the pure delight of knowing them than for any lessons you might glean.

Indeed, I observed a sampling of Lubavitch girls, in one place and at one time; I do not present my impressions as representative of anything larger—of Orthodoxy as a whole or of life in all religious enclaves. I view these young women simply as individuals who expanded my notion of what it means to come of age in our world. And yet I had certain reactions to the girls I knew, which I do not hesitate to share. I was entering a new culture that disturbed me at times, charmed me at others. These young women are not archetypes, but they do serve as a window into a universe few outsiders have glimpsed.

My portrayal of the girls has inspired strong reactions among some early readers. Lubavitchers themselves are often stunned that my year among them has not drawn me into the fold. Lubavitch regulations alienated me early on; this system would hurt anyone, male or female, who feels a fundamental kinship with the other gender's prescribed path, or whose creativity clashes with Lubavitch strictures. I ache for Rochel, who longed to study Judaic texts with the same intensity as her brothers, and for Chaya, who struggled for the right to express her musical vision. Still, I do feel that Lubavitch has insights that could benefit the world at large, which I explore in my concluding chapter, unsettling people who worry that I seem to promote the Orthodox way. It's a sticky conundrum, for I may offend both "liberal" and "Orthodox" worldviews.

I love spending time with people driven by ardent belief, whether religious, political, or moral. Throughout my life, I have explored various groups, thinking that one might offer me an understanding I could embrace as my own. But truth does not necessarily come in neat

packages. Truth is a slippery, ever-evolving notion; I cannot expect to corner it in one place, ideology, or frame of reference. Gems of insight exist nearly everywhere—and within philosophies that seem to conflict.

I want nothing more than to expand options for women and girls, to help them nurture their talents and their psychic strength. After a year among Lubavitch girls, I wonder whether certain aspects of their traditionalism—their single-sex lives, their passion for meaning, their respect for the human soul—might help some young women who now suffer. In other words, Orthodoxy may have something to add to the feminist project, if “feminist” implies the desire to help as many girls as possible grow into confident, secure adults.

We live in a world defined by black-and-white dichotomies: modern versus traditional, West versus East, liberal versus Orthodox. Complexities and nuances are bleached out in our zeal to codify others and pinpoint our own beliefs. It’s a dangerous view of human diversity that at best constricts our ability to learn from other visions, and at worst stokes mutual ignorance and untamed animosity. I want to transcend that notion, to view Lubavitch girls with the hope that their great, flawed culture can enrich the conversation in our own.