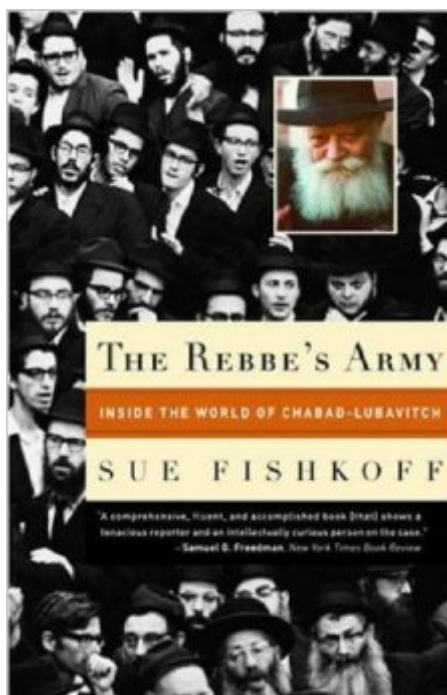


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The Rebbe's Army: Inside The World Of Chabad-Lubavitch



Synopsis

“Excuse me, are you Jewish?” • With these words, the relentlessly cheerful, ideologically driven emissaries of Chabad-Lubavitch approach perfect strangers on street corners throughout the world in their ongoing efforts to persuade their fellow Jews to live religiously observant lives. In *The Rebbe’s Army*, award-winning journalist Sue Fishkoff gives us the first behind-the-scenes look at this small Brooklyn-based group of Hasidim and the extraordinary lengths to which they take their mission of outreach. They seem to be everywhere—in big cities, small towns, and suburbs throughout the United States, and in sixty-one countries around the world. They light giant Chanukah menorahs in public squares, run “Chabad houses” on college campuses from Berkeley to Cambridge, give weekly bible classes in the Capitol basement in Washington, D.C., run a nonsectarian drug treatment center in Los Angeles, sponsor the world’s biggest Passover Seder in Nepal, establish synagogues, Hebrew schools, and day-care centers in places that are often indifferent and occasionally hostile to their outreach efforts. They have built a billion-dollar international empire, with their own news service, publishing house, and hundreds of Websites. Who are these people? How successful are they in making Jews more observant? What influence does their late Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (who some thought was the Messiah), continue to have on his followers? Fishkoff spent a year interviewing Lubavitch emissaries from Anchorage to Miami and has written an engaging and fair-minded account of a Hasidic group whose motives and methodology continue to be the subject of speculation and controversy. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

"Chabad has a formidable infrastructure. It has an elegant and fascinating theology, an interpretation of reality based on the Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, that many Jews find intellectually and spiritually compelling." ~Sue Fishkoff

On a rainy November afternoon in 1993, Sue Fishkoff received a call from the Lubavitch headquarters in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. At the time, she was not fully aware of the Hasidic movement and had never met a "Hasid." Soon, Sue Fishkoff was traveling throughout America and immersing herself in the world of Chabad Houses. As she discovered the optimism and devotion, she started to admire their openness to the world. She was in awe of how Lubavitchers tried to consciously show love in every moment of their lives and noticed that while they did adhere to Jewish rituals, they were nonjudgmental. The author does object to various aspects of Chabad in North America. She doesn't like the women's sheitels, sitting behind a mechitza, the aversion to modern culture and their refusal to consider concessions to the Palestinians. However, the author says her book is not about the political involvement, it is a comprehensive history of Lubavitch Hasidism and an exploration of basic human kindness. She also helps to shed light on the shlichim. These are young Lubavitch couples who act as Jewish missionaries to areas that do not follow Orthodox beliefs. They set up "Chabad Houses." Most of the book focuses on the daily life and history of Chabad. She tells stories of how couples set up on a campus and then work their way into situations where they are feeding hundreds of students, holding campus celebrations for Jewish holidays and teaching classes in Bible, Talmud, Jewish Law and Hasidic philosophy.

I grew up in what was probably a typical mid-century Jewish family - both parents raised in the U.S. and thoroughly Americanized. A secular conservative household. I received a fairly typical religious education for that time and culture - the minimum necessary. In retrospect, I probably learned more about Judaism after I left home than I did before. For Jews such as me, the world of Hasidism - intensely and often excitedly religious - is often something mysterious. As well as a source of guilt when we compare it to our own wobbly religious observance. Most of my acquaintance with the thinking of the Hasid, and with the Lubavitch movement in particular, is bookish, rather than experiential. Which is why I was delighted with Sue Fishkoff's "The Rebbe's Army," a close and honest look at the Lubavitchers as a social and cultural phenomenon. She is a well respected member of the Jewish Press who has taken the time to pick up the threads of this small but influential group who gently, but persistently work not to broaden Judaism, but to deepen it. In countless cities both here and abroad are the shlichim - young couples who leave the comfort and shelter of their own religious center in Brooklyn to seek to re-establish the traditional core of

Judaism. This is their story. While strictly ultra-orthodox, the Lubavitch have created an outreach program that manages to touch not only Jews of every religious bent, but the non-Jewish community as well. Most often, they arrive as stranger but stay to become dear friends. Fishkoff who has traveled extensively in this world writes more about their experiences and lives than about the specific tenets of their beliefs.

In Sue Fishkoff's book, "The Rebbe's Army," the reader gets an insider's look at the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, which derives its strength from the wisdom and teachings of the last Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. For forty-three years, until his death in 1994, the Rebbe was the heart and soul of Chabad, and even after his death, he is still a tremendous source of inspiration for his many followers. Chabad is not just a movement; it is a worldwide organization. Thousands of married couples act as emissaries throughout the United States and in sixty-one foreign countries. Their mission is to rekindle the spark of Judaism that they believe is present in all Jews. Fishkoff points out the apparent contradiction of Chasidic Jews who adhere to strict observance of Torah law, but who, nevertheless, seek out and live among non-observant Jews. This means that some couples, such as the emissaries who live in Thailand, are largely cut off from the support system of friends and family. Once a couple takes a position as emissaries in a foreign country, they are generally there for life. Although Fishkoff gives a brief background of how the Lubavitcher movement originated and grew, she concentrates mostly on emissaries in various parts of the United States, including Alaska. Fishkoff depicts the Chabad organizers as a savvy bunch. They are psychologically astute, great communicators and superb fundraisers. She also touches on how Chabad has used Hollywood celebrities to raise money and awareness. Although, in her preface, Fishkoff claims that she will not discuss Chabad's political strength, she includes a chapter explaining how the Lubavitcher Chasidim have become involved in Washington politics.

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