

Closing the Gap

Connecting the Believer with the Skeptic

Story by Victoria Brown | Photos by David Stuck

Some people believe in God. Others, not so much. What happens when three strong believers and three strong skeptics meet to discuss their faith?



Three men sit around a small circular table in the Weinberg Village Building Five dining room. The first, Ron Lachman, is hunched and slender and shakes with a tremor. The other two, Lester Poris and a man who wishes to remain unnamed, are portly, with bellies upon which they rest their hands as they lean back and hold court.

“So the boys [from Chabad] come,” Poris says, “[to] speak to the people, who sort of invited them.” He explains that several years ago, Weinberg Village management denied entry to “the boys” because they thought they were soliciting. It took the effort of Poris, Lachman and the third man to petition management to allow the men from Chabad to come. “People ask for them. They don’t solicit,” the third man says emphatically.

“I like the discussions we have with them,” Poris says. He mentions a discussion they had with the men from Chabad last week. “They said to me last week that Moses prayed to God 515 times to let him in [to Israel]. Who was counting? How did they know it was 515 [times]?”

The men from Chabad are rabbinical students at Yeshivas Lubavitch of Baltimore. Meir Lazaroff is blond and pale, round and out of breath from the walk to the dining room. He’s been at the Yeshiva for a year and half. His father is the Chabad rabbi at the Texas Medical Center in Houston, Texas. Kehos Weiss is tall and lean with a thin wisp of a black beard and stands with his shoulders hunched, as if he is sheltering against a strong wind. Weiss has been attending the Yeshiva for about half a year. His father is the Chabad rabbi in Charleston, North Carolina.

Lazaroff and Weiss walk into the dining room toting a black briefcase and adjusting the black hats perched on their heads. They greet the men at the table with a familiar ease. Poris tells them loudly, “Unfortunately, [the JT’s] going to print every word we say.”

As Lazaroff and Weiss approach the table, the third man continues his recounting of “the greatest favor in the world” two men from Chabad had done for him. Two previous rabbinical students had visited the graves of his mother and father, recited psalms over them and then took pictures, which they then placed on the third man’s



computer. “That’s what they’ve done,” he says. “They brought back my parents, who I now visit on my computer.”

Although that was before Lazaroff and Weiss’s time, the two agree to visit graves in Columbia, MD for Poris’ wife and Lachman’s wife and son-in-law to say prayers and take photos.

engages Lazaroff and asks, “The Holy of Holies is what?” Lazaroff responds, “A structure. It’s a room.” “Ah! The Holy of Holies is the altar of God,” Poris says in apparent understanding. The rest of their conversation is lost in the background as Rabbi K. explains the experience of the Chabad rabbinical students.

Lazaroff explains that what drives him to go out and speak to people each week is the teaching of Lubavitch rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who “taught us that part of loving every person, every Jew, is not just taking care of their physical welfare, but also their spiritual welfare.” Visiting people and ensuring they complete the mitzvot of wearing tefillin and praying helps improve their spiritual welfare, Lazaroff believes.

Weiss is driven by the desire “to make other people happy.” He wants to “try to help encourage other people and get them to do good deeds and mitzvot and try to bring cheer.”

To be good at this work, Weiss explains, “You have to have an outgoing personality. Being a good actor helps a lot.” For Lazaroff, “The main thing is to feel the mission, and that helps you get through it,” he said. “The challenging part is that you’re very, very tired.”

Lazaroff wants everyone to know that each person has within themselves the ability to accomplish great things.

“The point is to go around and help

“They said to me last week that Moses prayed to God 515 times to let him in [to Israel]. Who was counting? How did they know it was 515 [times]?”

—Lester Poris

They are writing down the address and exact locations of the graves when Rabbi Nochum Katsenelenbogen, Director of Chabad in Owings Mills, commonly called Rabbi K., arrives.

As Rabbi K. greets everyone, Poris

“The entire week they’re studying and they’re studying literally from 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, five days a week. Friday, they study three hours in the morning and then they go out all over the city.”



“They’re here to bring a smile to people’s face[s]... they’re coming to share the love and joy of Judaism.”

–Rabbi Nochum Katsenelenbogen

others; bring light, warmth, happiness, joy, love, goodness, kindness [and] good deeds into the world and into your life [and] the lives of people around you; try to do the best we can to bring closer the redemption, the mashiach [messiah].”

“Chabad-Lubavitch is a philosophy, a movement and an organization,” reads the Chabad-Lubavitch website. “Following its inception 250 years ago, the Chabad-Lubavitch movement—a branch of Hasidism—swept through Russia and spread in surrounding countries as well. It provided scholars with answers that eluded them, and simple farmers with a love that had been denied them” Today, over 4,500 emissary families work worldwide.

The third man complains that the man who runs the Shabbat services at Weinberg is not ordained. “Why can’t you guys send someone over to really run the services?” he asked.

“For somebody who never goes to a thing,” Poris mutters to the third man

“They’re not officiated [ordained],” pushed the man, “[not] like your men.”

Rabbi K. responds, “You know, ten percent is better than nothing.”

“But we shouldn’t have volunteers here running the service,” the third man grumbles.

“Then you should step up to the plate,” replies Rabbi K. “We’re going to send you back to rabbinical school; back to Hebrew school. We’ll give you another bris and we’ll send you back to Hebrew School!”

As the third man goes on about the officiators of the Shabbat service at Weinberg, Weiss helps Lachman wrap tefillin. Weiss says one word at a time and has Lachman repeat after him. He concludes the prayer with the words, “We want the mashiach to come now.”

Rabbi K. raises his voice to get everyone’s attention, bringing his hands together to full rabbinical effect.

“Let’s do this all together,” he says. “Let’s put our hands on our eyes everyone. We’re going to say the Shema.”

Everyone around the table covers their eyes with their hands as the rabbi’s deep voice resounds

throughout the dining hall.

After the prayer is over, everyone lowers their hands. “That was beautiful,” says Rabbi K. “Very nice rabbi,” says the third man.

The third man brings up the topic of the men from Chabad being banned from the building once again. “They are here because the few Jews that are here wanted them here,” he tells Rabbi K.

“They’re not asking for money,” Rabbi K. confirmed. “They’re here to bring a smile to people’s face[s]...they’re coming to share the love and joy of Judaism.”

The conversation isn’t all joyful, however, as the older men at the table have all lost someone dear to them.

Lazaroff tells the men they still have time to be happy and that “we have to utilize [the days we have left]; utilize the joy that’s there.”

Poris replies, “You know, I have to tell you something. That would have been fine and I would have been okay with that up to five years ago.”

“That’s when he lost his wife,” the third man says.



Left: Meir Lazaroff helps Lester Poris put on tefillin. Right: Kehos Weiss helps Nathan Silver put on tefillin.

“June 11, 2014 it all stopped,” Poris says. “My life. The future. I just take one day at a time. I lost the most important thing in my life. So to me, nothing matters. Nothing can hurt me.”

For the third man, his granddaughter is in the hospital battling cancer.

“I don’t believe in anything,” he says. “I’ve got a granddaughter who is dying from cancer. I don’t think He [God] gives a s**t.”

The third man continues, bringing up Poris, whose wife of 59 years died five years ago and Lachman, who lost his wife of 64 years. “As I look at my granddaughter dying of the worst cancer in the world at 11 years old, where is He?” the third man says. “We don’t believe in Him because He’s abandoned us.”

Rabbi K. steps in and gives the third man a hug laden with feeling.

As the rabbi steps back from the hug, the third man says, “You’re one of his messengers, if he’s above.” J:

