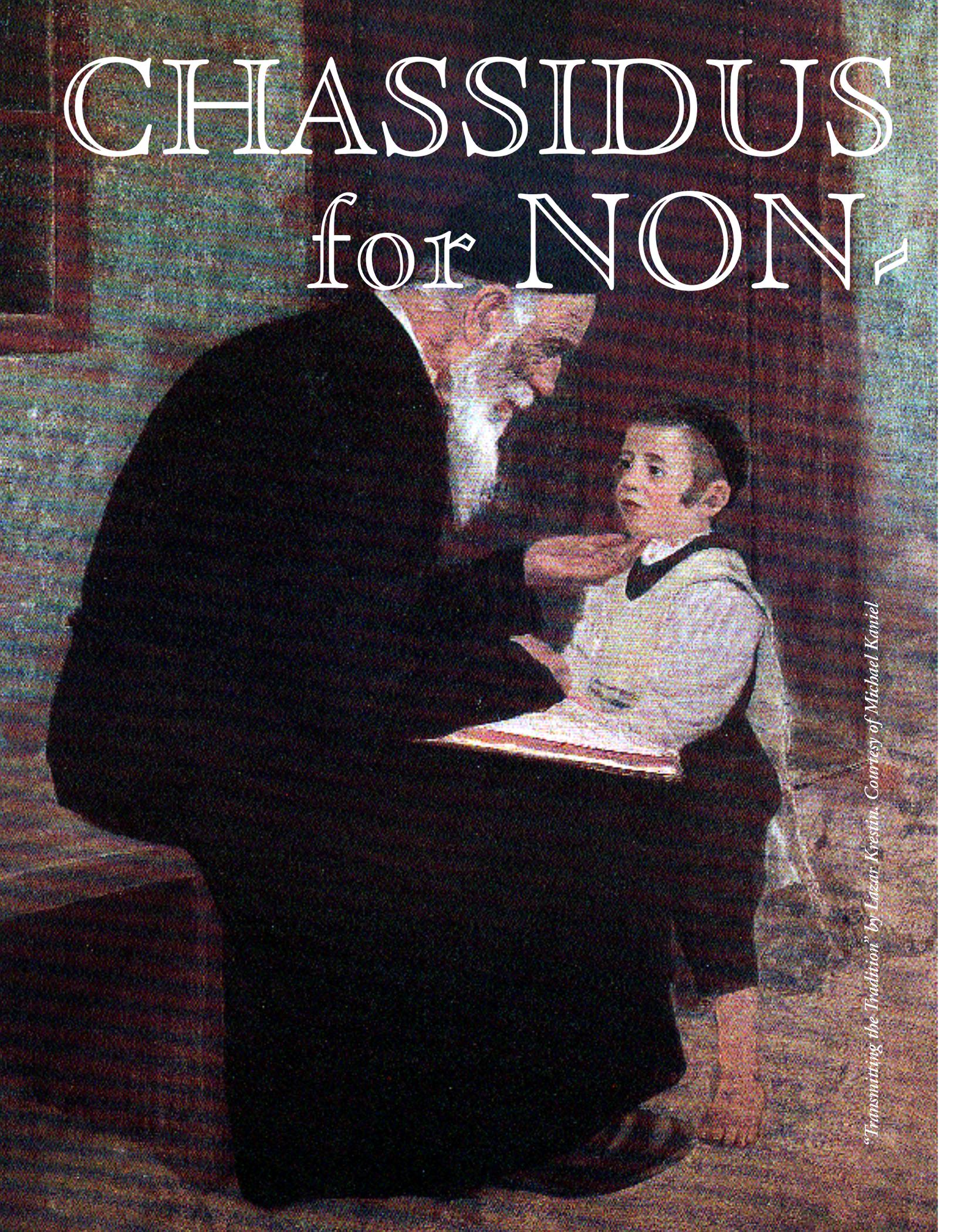


CHASSIDUS for NON



"Transmitting the Tradition" by Lazar Krestin. Courtesy of Michael Kamel

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Ishbitz interprets the verse, “Man does not live by bread alone” (Deut. 7:3) as follows: “bread,” the staple of existence, refers to the 613 mitzvos, which apply to all individuals in all generations; however, it is equally important to learn from the Torah what God wants us to accomplish in the context of the particular time in which we live.* The following four essays highlight aspects of Chassidus that express this dynamic in numerous ways.

CHASSIDIM

A MODERN EXPERIMENT IN CHASSIDUS

A Long Island congregation fashions its own foray into Chassidism.

By Rabbi Moshe Weinberger

Approximately seven years ago I was approached by a group of individuals who were sincerely agonizing over the state of their commitment to Judaism. Although they had been raised in Orthodox homes and had attended fine *yeshivos*, they shared in common a general, painful awareness that “something inside had died;” leaving them observant and learned, but asleep. Together we undertook an experiment and embarked on what has proven to be a remarkable journey to reclaim our lost spirituality.

When asked to head this expedition, I felt that we desperately needed a powerful source of inspiration, one that would illuminate our path through the coming years. Since my Bar Mitzvah I had been studying the works of the great Chassidic masters.

Rabbi Weinberger is the rav of Congregation Aish Kodesh in Woodmere, New York. He is the author of Jewish Outreach: Halakhic Perspectives (Ktav, 1990).

Each one called out to a different part of my emotions and intellect seeking to intensify and invigorate my *avodas Hashem* [service of God].

As a child of Holocaust survivors and raised in the terrible shadow of their pain, I was profoundly drawn to the writings of the Rebbe of Piaseczner, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapiro. This brilliant *tzaddik*, scion of one of the great dynasties of Polish *Chassidus*, continued to teach, encourage and inspire the remaining Jews of the Warsaw ghetto until he was taken to be killed in Treblinka in November, 1943. Some of his Torah teachings from those last days were miraculously discovered beneath the ashes of the demolished ghetto and were later published as *Aish Kodesh* – “Holy Fire.” I suggested that we name our new *beis medrash* *Aish Kodesh*. In a message sent to our earliest members for the purpose of explaining this proposal, I wrote:

Our beis medrash is named Aish

**From Mei Hashiloach, end of Masei.*

Kodesh after the last sefer of the holy Rebbe, Reb Kalonymos Kalman Shapiro of Piaseczner. The Rebbe was truly a holy fire sent to warm the hearts and illuminate the minds of a broken generation. In the depth of the darkness, he remained steadfast in his unshakable faith in the immortality of Knesses Yisrael. Our generation has been resurrected from the ashes of Auschwitz and Treblinka, yet we have fallen into a state of spiritual numbness, a life of cold prayers, empty mitzvos, rote learning, and an overall sense of spiritual alienation. The Baal Shem Tov spoke of a time when there would be “double concealment.” That is to say, besides the concealment itself, there would be a lack of faith that there was a truth concealed; the fact of concealment would itself be concealed. In the Holocaust, Jewish bones were crushed under the weight of hester panim — divine concealment. In our “enlightened” times, Jewish souls are deceived by the delusion of “double concealment.” Too frequently, we offer life-

less prayers in the midst of animated personal conversation and drag ourselves through the details of Orthodox Judaism. We have forgotten the purpose of life, while observing its regulations. We have lost our sense of divine yearning and subsequently have stopped yearning ourselves. We proceed cheerfully with the business of establishing more Jewish institutions and supporting more Jewish causes, not realizing that the essence of Judaism eludes us. Rav Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev once gathered all the Jews of Berditchev in the main synagogue, rose to the bimah and called out: "Jews, do not forget there is a God in Heaven!" To this end our beis medrash was established — to stop the inertia of apathy, to tear away at least one mask of concealment and call out "There is a God in Heaven!"

Thus our experiment began with the *Aish Kodesh* as our role model for spiritual renewal and the *Shulchan Aruch* as our guide to uncompromising halachic observance.

Although I had received the blessings of a number of Chassidic *rebbe*s and *roshei yeshivah*, many of them were skeptical as to whether the experiment would succeed. They questioned: could Chassidic doctrine and custom be implemented in a so-called Modern Orthodox community in the absence of a Chassidic *rebbe* and *Chassidim*?

I believe that *Aish Kodesh* has proven that, in fact, Chassidism has much to offer to some non-*Chassidim*. Additionally, I believe that it is crucial that we recognize that *Chassidus* is uniquely equipped to engage modern man in a dialogue, a "give and take" with an inner dimension otherwise neglected.

In his work, *Tzav V'ziruz*, Reb Kalonymos Kalman writes: *The human soul relishes sensation, not only if it is a pleasant feeling but for the very experience of stimulation. Sooner sadness or some deep pain rather than the boredom of non-stimulation. People will watch distressing scenes and listen to heartrending stories just to get stimulation. Such is human nature and a need of the soul, just like all its other needs and natures; so he who is clever will ful-*

fill this need with passionate prayer and Torah learning. But the soul whose divine service is without emotion will have to find its stimulation elsewhere: It will either be driven to cheap, even forbidden, sensation or will become emotionally ill from lack of stimulation.

Two years ago while lecturing in Los Angeles, I was told that every Rosh Chodesh almost 1,000 people gather to participate in a seminar on "Jewish Mysticism." Recently more and more reports are surfacing revealing the shocking number of Jewish "pilgrims" seeking spirituality in the Himalayas, and the disturbing growth of pseudo-Chassidic, non-halachic followings throughout America. Thousands upon thousands of Jews are simply unaware of the rich heritage of our own exciting and authentic *Shulchan Aruch*-bound spirituality. It would be easy to dismiss those attracted to such events and groups as "new age wannabes," sensation seekers to be pitied or ignored. In the most Orthodox neighborhoods *minyanim* are sprouting up that attract hundreds, if not thousands, seeking a more uplifting *Kabbolas Shabbos* than those experienced in the local *shuls* and *yeshivos*. To overlook or underestimate the significance of these phenomena would be a dangerous and costly mistake.

Rav Kook wrote: "Aftergrowths of prophecies sprout forth and the sons of prophets awaken. The spirit of prophecy roams the Earth." When the "sons of prophets" awaken to find the "boredom of non-stimulation" in their *avodas Hashem*, they might very well be drawn to cheap, inauthentic "mystics," "kabbalists" and modern day "*rebbe*s" unbounded by halachic authority and custom. These gurus will liberally and dramatically quote from Chassidic texts and fabricate Chassidic tales in order to appeal to the spiritual thirst and imagination of the ignorant masses.

Of course, it is not only the soul of the uninitiated or non-affiliated that

seeks its quota of stimulation. Since Sinai, the study of Torah, written and oral, has ignited the imagination and spirituality of our people. Those who were not able to engage in intense Torah study were nonetheless immersed in the passionate observance of a Torah life. Secular forms of stimulation by means of literature, art, music and culture were to a large extent far removed from the day-to-day lives of the general populace.

Something happened. It cannot be entirely understood in light of any theory of political or economic upheaval. It was predicted long ago by the Zohar (1:116B-117A): *Then, 600 years into the sixth millennium [the year 5600, corresponding to 1840 CE] the gates of supernal wisdom above will open together with the wellsprings of wisdom below. This will begin the process whereby the world will prepare to enter the seventh millennium ["Shabbos," corresponding to the year 2240 CE]. This is symbolized by a man who begins preparing for the Sabbath on the sixth day, Friday afternoon. In the same way, from the second half of the sixth millennium — noontime and onward — everything speeds up, just as everything speeds up on Friday afternoon in the Jewish home and all preparations are made for the Great Sabbath. This is hinted at in the verse "In the 600th year of Noah's life...all the wellsprings of the great deep burst forth and the flood gates of the heavens were opened."* (Genesis 7:11).

Clearly referring to this teaching of the Zohar, one of this century's greatest kabbalists, Rabbi Shlomo Eliyashiv wrote (*Leshem Sh'vo V'Achlama, Sefer Biurim* part 1, page 21): "What was forbidden to investigate and expound upon just yesterday becomes permissible today. This is felt by every true exegete. Numerous matters, whose awesome nature repelled one from even approaching in previous generations — behold they are easily grasped today. This is because the gates of human understanding below have been opened up as a result of the steadily increasing flow of divine revelations above."

It was not only the Baal Shem Tov

and his disciples who felt this great, historic change. The Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner and many others stood courageously at the gate between Heaven and Earth in order to carefully filter the influx of divine revelations which had been suddenly unleashed.

It is, however, a historic fact that, for reasons beyond the scope of the present article, Chassidism alone permitted this transformation in consciousness to become a mass movement, allowing the “wellsprings of the great deep” to reach even the simple tailor or shoemaker. *Chassidus* recognized and legitimized the spiritual stirrings of all Jews and sought a means of channeling this newly respected energy into passionate *avodas Hashem*.

Understandably it has not always been easy to strike a healthy balance between renewal and restraint. There have been, and still are, many who have used *Chassidus* itself as a means of experiencing “cheap stimulation” in the service of Hashem. Within the movement itself there have been revolutions and counter-revolutions, and it is often difficult to detect the pure, pristine light of the Baal Shem Tov through the clouds that have formed over the past two centuries. Still, at the core of Chassidic doctrine lies the belief in the Jewish soul’s demand for a deeper understanding and experience of *Yiddishkeit*. It is this belief that has struck a powerful chord in the heart of the modern Jew seeking to reestablish contact with his soul.

In our *beis medrash*, Chassidic texts are studied primarily for the sake of inspiration. Some individuals are most drawn to the succinct, penetrating insights of the Sfas Emes. Others are most profoundly influenced by the breathtaking depth of Reb Tzadok Hakohen, the Baal HaTanya, or Reb Nachman of Breslov. Still, others connect most deeply to the Kedushas Levi,

Maor Einayim, Mei HaShiloach, Tiferes Shlomo, Be’er Mayim Chaim, or Shem MiShmuel. Present day *tzaddikim* such as the Slonimer Rebbe and Reb Yaakov Meir Shechter have written works directed specifically and forcefully to the minds and hearts of those unfamiliar with *Chassidus*. These works are studied together with the writings of the Maharal, Ramchal, Nefesh HaChaim, and others, as well as the daily regimen of Gemara, *Shulchan Aruch* and *Minchas Chinuch*.

Clearly, a large measure of the appeal



Rabbi Moshe Weinberger

Chassidus has had for the masses must be attributed to the domain of Chassidic lifestyle. The Maor VaShemesh (*Ki Seitzet*) writes: “Before the light of the Baal Shem Tov’s path began to shine forth into the world, any Jew whose heart was touched by the fear of God would isolate himself, closing himself in a room apart from social contact...This however is not the main path to true service of Hashem. In truth, the essence of man’s return to Hashem

depends upon *ahavas chaverim* [love of friends], *dibbuk chaverim* [a deep sense of camaraderie] and attachment to the *tzaddikim* of the generations.”

In America, many synagogues have replaced the third Shabbos meal with a lecture. “*Melaveh Malkah*” has been demoted to a thinly disguised fundraiser which falls somewhere between a parlor meeting and a full-fledged dinner. Many Chassidic-style *shtieblach* have replaced the profound Chassidic innovation of “*Chevraya*” [Chassidic brotherhood] with a “*heimishe*” unruly atmosphere, replete with exceptional *cholents* and far less exceptional davening. The excited fellows seated around the table are more often “gobbling up” a piece of *kugel* than a delectable piece of *Noam Elimelech*.

This is unquestionably one of the greatest challenges we face in Aish Kodesh; to create a sense of common goal and purpose, an atmosphere of dignified, holy camaraderie without compromising *shul* decorum. The time of davening cannot be used as an opportunity for social bonding. We are replacing shallow socializing with communal events revolving around occasions that are regarded as sacred, particularly in Chassidic circles. At our first Lag B’omer “*Hilula*” 25 members sat in my basement sharing good food, *niggunim* [melodies] and stories. Six years have passed. This past Lag B’omer more than 300 learning, singing and stomping Jews, anxious to be touched by the edge of Rebbe Shimon [Bar Yochai]’s robe, joined us for the celebration.

We study the teachings of the Berditchiver and we share stories, insights and some cake on his *yahrzeit*. Recently our *chevrah* was invited to a large local *shul* to conduct a Friday night *tisch*. I’ll never forget the sight and sound of a few *minyanim* of men

exhausted from a grueling work week, survivors of the Long Island Rail Road, marching down Central Avenue to a Shabbos *niggun*, nor will I forget the warm reception by hundreds of fellow Jews and their *rau*. The singing and dancing, the incredible sense of *achdus* [unity], was the outcome of real, purposeful socializing, not the superficial table-talk, wisecracks, calls of “*nu, kid-dush!*” we’ve grown so used to hearing over the years.

Here, mention must be made of an innovation that would certainly be viewed as unconventional in Chassidic circles. Having dealt with *baalei teshuvah* for many years, I became increasingly aware of the tragic impact uncoordinated spiritual growth can have upon a marriage and a family. When either the husband or the wife begin to feel excluded from the spouse’s spiritual world, the effects can be devastating. In order for any real, permanent and healthy change to take place, the entire family must be included. Traditionally, or perhaps more accurately, historically, women have often been the ones to feel excluded. Life in the Chassidic court revolves around the *rebbe* and the *beis medrash*, while the woman’s “court” was conducted in the home and the family. I am not contesting this arrangement. I do, however, feel that it cannot work amongst women who were raised in a non-Chassidic environment. Women in general are extremely receptive to *Chassidus*, and it is crucial that they be included in any program for spiritual growth and development. After consulting with *gedolai haTorah*, I instituted a *shiur* in *machshavah* [Jewish thought] for men and women to take place an hour before *Minchah* every Shabbos afternoon. I have used this time to transmit the inner core of Chassidic doctrine, while at the same time comparing and contrasting it to the teachings of the Gra, Reb Chaim Volozhiner, and the *Baalei Musar*. This class has attracted many couples from the entire area who are afforded the opportunity to grow closer instead of apart as a result of Torah study. The *derashos* of

Shabbos Shuva and Shabbos HaGadol have been regularly attended by approximately 700 people of diverse backgrounds who share a spiritual thirst which they seek to quench only within the framework of halachic, Torah Judaism.

In addition to this, during longer post-Pesach *Shabbosim*, the women will often arrange to join together in one of the homes for their own *Shalosh Seudos*, replete with *divrei Torah* and *niggunim*. The luxury of an *eruv* makes it possible to bring the little ones along who play in the yard or join their mothers and grandmothers around the table.



One of the major reasons women have often felt excluded from the *tefillos* [prayers] and Torah of the Chassidic court is the simple physical obstruction known as the *mechitzah*. From the beginning, I insisted that the *shul* maintain the stricter view of having a six-foot non-transparent divider between the men and women. Due to the efforts of my wonderful *baalei batim*, we recently were able to replace this with a marvelously innovative six-foot *mechitzah* that permits one-way viewing from the women’s section. This change has contributed significantly to the ability of the women to participate more fully in the davening and *derashos*, without making any halachic compromises.

Finally, the one aspect of *Chassidus* all readers are familiar with is the centrality of the *tzaddik-rebbe* in the lives of the *Chassidim*. The personality, power and role of the *tzaddik* occupy a great amount of space in the discourses of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov. Entertaining no delusions whatsoever about my humble origins, shortcomings and deficiencies, I nonetheless recognize the need for a charismatic *rebbe*-type leader in our midst. Reclusive by nature, the most personally challenging aspect of the Aish Kodesh experiment has been to attempt to transform myself into this type of leader. The

fact that I came to Woodmere complete with beard, *payos* and *shtrimmel*, did not prepare me for the upcoming struggle. If this effort has met with any measure of success, it is largely due to the fact that I stand in complete awe, as a *Chassid* before his *rebbe*, when I’m in the presence of my *chevrab* at Aish Kodesh. Most assuredly my “*Chassidim*” have no *mofsim* [miracle acts] they could possibly attribute to me. I, on the other hand, bear daily testimony to the miraculous readiness these Jews have shown, to open their minds and hearts to *avodas Hashem*, and their determination to apply what they’re learning to their day-to-day lives as Orthodox Jews.

A story is told of a group of Jews who sat one Motzei Shabbos commiserating over the apparent hopelessness of their situation. They simply felt defeated, unable to contend with the destructive power of the evil around them. Suddenly, one lifted his head and called out, “We have no choice but to go seek a true *tzaddik*, one who can lift us from despair and set us upon the path of Hashem.” Together they traveled through the night until they reached the town of Chernobyl. They nervously approached the home of the Rebbe, Reb Mordechai, where a candle was still burning, and quietly knocked upon the door. The Rebbe, who was lost in thoughts of his own, was startled and opened the door. Upon seeing the group of tired, frightened travelers, Reb Mordechai cried: “Precious, beloved brothers, how could you have known, how did you gaze into my heart? At this very moment it became so clear to me, that without the company of *Chassidim*, without their warmth and inspiration, I am lost, I am no Rebbe at all. Let us together seek the Master of the Universe!”

So we continue on at Aish Kodesh, a modern day “Rebbe” seeking inspiration and guidance from those who have come to him for the very same gifts. May the Master of the Universe protect us from delusion; may He draw our hearts near to Him in sincerity, faithfulness and truth.