

RABBI DOVID ELIEZRIE

Rabbi, let's talk first about your background.

I was brought up in Los Angeles. My wife was also brought up in Los Angeles. When I was about fourteen years old, I moved to Montreal. I went to Israel in February of 1968. I studied in Yeshiva there, got

engaged, got married in New York, spent the year in New York afterwards, around '73. Then we went to Florida for eight years, ran the Chabad House at the University of Miami, and then came to Anaheim, which was the precursor of being in Yorba Linda.

Was your father a rabbi?

Yes, but he was not a pulpit rabbi. He was a rabbi in a formal way, but not active in the same way as I am.

Was that something you always knew you would become?

I think when I went to Montreal when I was a high school kid, I admired the passion and commitment of the Yeshiva students, and that inspired me to think about doing the same.

How did you end up in Orange County after the years in Florida?

What happened was that after we had campus work for eight years, we wanted to work in a community and we were looking around at locations. In Anaheim there was a small group of Israelis who went to the

Conservative Temple Beth Emet, but they wanted to make an Orthodox minyan.

So they made their own minyan, but then it started falling apart. This was just a small group of people who were very traditional, so they turned to Chabad and asked them to send a rabbi, which is something Chabad is known for doing. Chabad is known for being action-oriented, and Chabad is known for its commitment to reach out to a Jewish community. We had already opened one center, Chabad of Irvine.

When I got there, I realized after a while that the neighborhood was “demographically challenged”--to be nice about it--and that the future really wasn’t there in Anaheim.

The small, initial group that made up the shul called itself Knesset Israel. There’s still one person from that shul who comes here every Sunday morning. His name is Sam Eiferman. He was the first president of that entity. And I think that this wasn’t a simple challenge. This was a tough mountain to climb. There was a lot of apathy. We’re doing very well now, but there was a lot of hardship in the beginning. There was a lot of

financial hardship. It took a long time to build the community's support.

At that time, we had a large Jewish representation in the northern part of Orange County, but it hadn't been developed. The Rebbe appointed me to be his emissary in that area. I was given the franchise, so to speak.

Does Chabad always do basically the same thing when it enters a community?

Not necessarily, but here in Orange County, Chabad is the primary infrastructure. So we run the major Day School. We have 11 or 12 centers. And there is one other shul which is Orthodox which is not Chabad. So it depends on the area.

So Chabad will go into any area, as long as there's a minyan?

No, you need a nucleus of Jews who will support a center and make it viable. In this northeastern quadrant of Orange County there were enough and we have become the dominant Jewish force around here. There are a few thousand Jews in this area of Yorba Linda, Brea and Anaheim Hills. In

Orange County, the total is about 80,000-90,000 Jews, but there's greater demographic density down in Irvine and South County.

You arrived in Yorba Linda about 15 years ago. What happened next?

Two or three years before, I did a demographic survey. I realized that we had to be in a permanent location, but I had no money. Usually that doesn't stop us. This is a wild story. I found a decent property on the corner of Knoll Ranch Road and Santa Ana Canyon Road. There was a housing development there. The people in development wanted to sell it for dirt cheap. It was a triangular piece of property, about an acre, acre and a half. There was a little water on it. I thought it looked good for us.

In those days, before you made such a major decision to purchase a piece of property, it was traditional among Hassidim to ask the opinion of the Rebbe. I asked his opinion and the Rebbe told me not to buy this property. It would become a quagmire, he said, such a quagmire that it would destroy everything we're trying to achieve.

What did you do then?

Well, I took a hint from the way the Rebbe answered that we should try to find another property. It so happens that nobody's ever developed that property even today. That was Property Number One.

Next, I found a small house on Santa Ana Canyon Road. The city council said it was too small for Chabad and they wouldn't zone us. I disagreed at the time, because I didn't have any real money, and I was trying to get into anything I could. So we had that battle. In the end, it was a good thing that we didn't get that property, because we ended up on this piece of property, which was much larger. That was Property Number Two.

So then we had the miracle story. We found this property. This is lucky property Number Three. At the time, I had a bookkeeper, Joyce Lovinger, working for me. One day, she comes to me and says that she found an old farmhouse for sale on Yorba Linda Boulevard. It was a run-down, yellow farmhouse, but I bought it anyway.

We had some difficulties with the purchase at first. I didn't have much money to put

down in escrow and the people selling it weren't happy about that. They realized after a while that they could get a better deal, so they wanted to get out of the escrow. Then, the bank had said they wouldn't give us the loan unless we were zoned for religious use. If we had to wait for the zoning, we wouldn't be able to get the loan.

I went over to another bank one day and met with the head of the bank. It was a Jewish bank and they were more flexible with us.

Next, I started looking for seed money to get started. It just so happened that I met with a man who was looking for a way to honor his father in a significant way. Sy Cohen was very generous to give us the down payment to open a new shul in Yorba Linda. The bank gave us the loan and we closed escrow on time! Otherwise we would have lost the property. So, I guess it was meant to be.

Were there any other synagogues in this area at that time?

A Conservative shul, Adat Ari, started in the early 1990s, but it has since failed. Officially, it merged with the local Reform

temple, but basically it ceased to exist. Many of the people from there ended up coming here, including three of the past presidents.

Why do you think it failed?

No vision, no leadership. It's another conversation about what Conservative Judaism is like. Chabad is opening shuls, and they're coming to those shuls. They couldn't provide proper staff; they didn't have the proper vision. They had more people than we did. They had more potential financially than we did, but they didn't have the drive and the passion.

Is that drive and passion pretty common in Chabad, or is that uniquely you?

That's who we are—that's Chabad. That's what we are known for, and everybody knows it in the Jewish world today. If you want Jewish inspiration, passion, and vision, you come to Chabad. We're a very action-oriented culture.

What was the original response of the community to an Orthodox shul coming in?

Intrigued, to a certain degree. There was an initial stage of excitement. We told people we were going to build a building, and we didn't build a building right away. So there was a lot of skepticism after that. So we went through a lot of adversity in the middle.

We didn't really have the money at first. We went through this whole initial "Oh boy, they're really here" stage, where there was a constituency of people who were happy we were here. And then we went through the "They haven't got their act together" period.

In the beginning, all we had was an old run-down farmhouse on a large dirt lot. It wasn't the most impressive structure in the history of mankind, that's for sure. There was just a farm on the property. In fact, we even had a battle with the tax people, who didn't want to give us a full tax exemption because it had been a farm before, and they said we needed a parking lot that was asphalt. We just had dirt.

What kind of farm was it?

They sold fruits and vegetables at a fruit stand in the front yard. The same people who owned the farm still have a fruit stand not far from here, about a mile away.

The house was not in very good condition. We all had troubles with it. The electricity was old and there was no central air. The upstairs bathroom didn't work and the wooden stairs were rickety. It was all that we could start with. There was this certain excitement of pioneering at the beginning.

So, we moved into the house. We first opened a preschool in the house for about 15-20 kids, and we opened a Hebrew School for about 35 kids. I hired Robin Rubinstein to be the first principal. She taught the Hebrew school kids and she was great. In fact, I am proud to say that one of the first children to go to our Hebrew school recently graduated the Yeshiva and is now a rabbi. Some of the kids stayed with us and some of them moved on to other places.

But you probably didn't want to put much money into fixing the place.

No, it wasn't worth fixing, but we also didn't have enough money to move ahead. So we were stuck between a rock and a hard place; this was the difficult challenge that we were faced with.

We put up some temporary modular buildings for about two years, which helped us out a little bit. But then the city didn't want us to have them here. You're only allowed to have them for a while. The city has a multitude of rules and regulations. They want everything to be aesthetically perfect. They're worried about how many flowers are growing on your property!

They were giving us a hard time politically. They were not happy we were not developing the property. We weren't developing, because we didn't have any money. They started inspecting every Monday and Thursday. They came in with fourteen different inspectors. "You have an extension cord that was three inches too long." They would cite us. They were literally harassing us for a while.

What did you do?

I fought back, naturally! You fight back tooth and nail. They got to realize that we weren't going to be intimidated. I stood up to them, and I battled them, and I didn't give in. I had attorneys involved.

Eventually, we started building. Now our relationship with the city is different. There still are a lot of crazy rules, but politically, it's a whole new world. Now that we're building a building, they're happy campers. We're all going to live happily ever after.

Going back to the farmhouse. What happened from there?

What happened was that I realized that things had to change. There's a time when you have to bite the bullet and move forward, no matter what you've got.

The initial plan I had was to refurbish the property, develop the infrastructure, and put in modular buildings. The city insisted that we build at least one building, so we said we would build the shul building and only put in modules for the offices and classrooms.

So the project cost a lot more than we anticipated.

Plus we had a contractor who was—let's say if he immigrated back to Israel, I wouldn't be heartbroken. The building began and we only went for cash, so we stopped and started for a while. I refused to have a mortgage on this property, because I couldn't sleep at night if I had to worry about paying a monthly loan on this property.

Nobody believed we would finish it. Well, one woman, Linda Rattner Nunn, believed I could, but a lot of other people were skeptical. We did finish it. So it was a big struggle, but we built this building, and then we blossomed.

One of the hardest parts for me was getting started. After we tore down the old farmhouse, I had to move my office into an extremely small, one-room office without any windows in a commercial building on Lakeview Avenue.

I also found out after a while that it was very complicated to plan the construction and that there were a lot of requirements for sewers and other requirements that we

hadn't thought of. It was a much more daunting task than I had expected. I am not a general contractor, so there was a lot for me to learn. However, we finally built this building, and then we really blossomed.

Where did you hold services during the beginning stages of construction?

Everyone came to our house. We converted our family room into the men's section for davening (reciting prayers) and the women sat upstairs at the kitchen table. Actually, it worked out pretty well and was rather hamish (cozy).

What was it like for you and your family being in an area where there weren't many Jews?

For a young couple to set up shop in a town with few or even no Orthodox Jews, to establish a Chabad House, school, mikvah and yeshiva, is difficult, to say the least. The hardest thing, though, is for their children, because the kids are brought up without a social group of their peers. The kids have a hard time; there are not enough religious kids, so it's very tough. That is the greatest adversity of this business.

Staying true to your own values when surrounded by those who do not keep them is not easy. But step into the home of a Chabad emissary (shliach) and you will think you are stepping into a home in Brooklyn. You will find a standard of kashrut and observance no different than in any Chassidic home.

The most daunting task for a shliach is how to educate his children in his own values when they are surrounded by a world which dances to a different tune. Our children are aware of the world around them. Not only do they remain solidly within the fold, a significant percentage continue on the path of their parents, moving to new communities and starting their own Chabad centers.

It always strikes me that this life style creates an even tighter family. Is that true?

It creates a tighter family. That's true. I have six children, four of them are married, and I have five grandchildren, one on the way. They all came up pretty good. My daughter came back to Yorba Linda with her husband and he became the Number Two Rabbi. My other son went to Tustin to open a new Chabad center. My oldest daughter

went to San Francisco with her husband, who's a rabbi there. And my oldest son went to Los Angeles to make lots of money to support everybody, in the infomercial business!

When you're looking at the Jewish world and the tension of values, if you look at Chabad rabbis' families, you'll generally see that the kids are going along with their parents. It's not as easy to be brought up as a religious, Hassidic kid as in Brooklyn or Jerusalem, but for somebody to be brought up in Yorba Linda and come out that way, that is a big deal. That means your values are strong, even though the world that's surrounding you has very different ones.

The people you deal with are nice Jews, but with all due respect, their aspirations for their children and our aspirations for our children are very different. The fact that our children receive a strong, meaningful Jewish education and then go on themselves to inspire another generation to those same ideals says a lot.

In other words, they don't have a Jewish identity which is created by the secular world around them. They have to have an identity

which is created from within their homes.
That's a much tougher challenge.

Let's talk about your vision for this congregation. Has it changed from when you started?

First thing, I don't see this as a congregation. This is a fundamental different worldview than a rabbi in a congregation. Here's what happens: A group of people get together, and they make Congregation Beth Yuppie, and Beth Yuppie decides they're going to be Orthodox, Reform, Constructionist, whatever they're going to pick, eenie-meenie-minie-mo, pick whatever.

So they hire this rabbi, and if he's a nice guy and he does well and everybody's happy campers. They give him a contract, he gets another contract, he gets a rest-of-life contract, and he gets his pension, and he moves to Jerusalem and has a nice apartment. What's his responsibility? He's hired by the congregation. He works for them. That's it. That's what his job is. He gets a check from them every two weeks. He lives happily ever after.

If that is a congregation, what is Chabad?

Chabad, in contrast, goes out in search of the Jew regardless of his or her background or affiliation. To Chabad, EVERY JEW COUNTS. Every Jew has a background. You may have to dig a bit deeper, but it is there. Central to Chassidic philosophy is the principle of the divine spark embedded in each person; the spiritual core that is holy and pure. Even if the Jew is distant from observance there still is inherent goodness. The challenge is uncovering the holiness and nurturing it. We believe first and foremost that one must learn to follow G-d's example with joy in their heart!

Today, many Jews are moving toward Chabad as the center of their Jewish lives. So, Chabad sends a rabbi to a community. We come in to build a community, and we basically set the tone and direction for religious observance. That direction is based in Halachah (Jewish Law) and the congregants know it cannot be compromised. In Chabad centers the rabbi has the final word. We raise the budget. We don't have any contracts, and we stay for life. We change the community and, hopefully, make

people think about serious issues for a change.

We have a different world view. There's a lady in this community who recently had someone in her family pass away. She called a certain temple in the County and said, "My brother died. I need help." And the first question was, "Are you a member?" She said, "Well, we used to be." They said, "Well, we really can't help you."

In Chabad, we have no such thing as membership. We are responsible for the welfare of every single Jew. We have the core community, the constituency so to speak, the synagogue, our congregation, but we see equal responsibility for the Jew who never walks through the front door and maybe doesn't really want to walk through the door. We have responsibility for every Jew. It's a whole different world view. It's fundamentally different than what is now functioning in much of the American Jewish community. We see the world differently, philosophically, ideologically, and we just have a whole different vision. So it's a vision of inclusiveness of the individual to move closer to Judaism.

Can you say more about how that different world view plays out in terms of your daily life?

I'll give you an example. Last week I got a phone call from a prison. The guy calls me collect from jail. He says that he is a Jew in jail, so I tell him our rabbi will go visit him. Today we had a lady who's married to a non-Jew, who wanted a bris, and we helped arrange the bris. One of the rabbis on our staff went to the bris. Now I don't even know if she's ever going to come here in her life, but we helped to bring another Jewish child into the world. We're not looking for how many people we can sign up. We're looking for how many Jews we can impact.

We don't measure success in the same way. Usually, when you have rabbis in congregations, and they say to each other, "Well, how many members have you got?" "I've got 237 members. I'm up by 13% since last year. How many members have you got?" "I've got 426." "Oh, your net income must be going up because your per capita income—"

We don't see it that way. We're not interested in how many members we have. We're interested in how many Jews we affect in

their lives. And many of the Jews whose lives we affect are not the so-called membership or the core group who comes here. So if somebody comes here for some program, and they're a member of someplace else, but coming here changes the way they see themselves as Jews, then we've had a success.

Because of this different world view, we're doing business differently than the American Jewish congregation because we're not having the barriers for involvement that exist in most—the membership fee and the building fee and the mother-in-law fee, and “I need your tax returns for the last three years,” etc., etc. We have a different way of doing business. I think one of the reasons we're booming all over the country is we've created a whole new model for how Judaism is structured in the United States.

I've heard some stories about people in need coming into your home. Can you comment on this fairly personal involvement with people?

There's a phrase that people use in the Jewish world, “Oh, we're professionals.” I think that's a disgusting phrase. We're not “professionals”. We're Jews! Our family and

our home are hopefully models of Jewish values to the community. Our home and our hospitality are open to welcome every Jew.

Some people come for Shabbos; they come for holidays; they come for programs; they come to kibbitz; they come just because they want to belong to a Jewish community, and they also may come with their problems. There are also those who come just to share a warm, Kosher meal together.

So it's not that you, as a rabbi, and your home are two separate things. When your job is as a professional, you go home at night, and you're disengaged from it. For us, it's really one continuous thing. So our involvement with people doesn't begin and end at nine to five.

Would you say more about Chabad's vision, this inclusiveness, and the philosophy of having an impact on Jews?

Well, some of it is difficult to measure, but you can measure a lot of it because you look around and you see successes. You're affecting a lot of different people. There was a young couple who came to see me last

night, where I knew the kid when he was growing up, and he was married, had a child, moved to Israel last year, and he's very religious. When he was a kid, he was not interested in Judaism too much, but eventually something finally hit right for him.

Today, I was notified about a woman who had just given birth to a baby boy. Her uncle called me up. He said, "I have a niece who's not religious. She's married to a non-Jew. She lives in Corona, California. Her son needs a bris (which is a religious, ceremonial circumcision on the eighth day after a baby boy is born). My mother always told me, 'If you ever have trouble, call Chabad. They'll always take care of it for you.' " So we made the bris. Now what's going to happen ten or twenty years from now? I don't know what the impact will be, but we touched the lives of a Jewish family.

We're doing clubs in high schools now. What's happening is kids would go to get the Bar Mitzvah, and they go on afterwards to high school, and they don't want to come to shul again. So we're chasing them in the schools. We're making clubs that meet once a month or so. They eat pizza, they schmooze with the Rabbi, they kibbitz, they

feel good, they wear t-shirts that say “J Club” on them.

There will be some very liberal Jewish organizations that will have an anxiety attack over the separation of church and state. They must be very bored so they have to keep a wall of separation up, because they’re really scared of religion. They’re more scared of Judaism than anything else.

Would you tell me something about your wife and her involvement?

My wife has what she calls “telephone ministry.” She deals with a lot of people on a daily basis. She makes a Shidduch, a matchmaking opportunity for a marriageable, young man or woman, and she helps with this stuff and that. A lot of this stuff is like non-institutional; it’s just dealing with people on a one-to-one basis. She’s getting a lot of calls. There’s a girl who’s taught for us for a year, and she’s in England for the year, so my wife is organizing next week her bridal shower and we’re flying the girl to California for that.

A lot of people have come through. Part of the business we’re in is that people come

through your lives. In other words, they engage you for a while when they need you, and they move on. You hope that when they move on, they continue on the path to growing in their Judaism.

You spoke of impacting the way people see themselves as Jews. Can you say more about this?

All this about “feeling Jewish” is hogwash. It doesn’t last more than three days. You can eat as much gefilte fish as you want, but that is not what it means to be Jewish. You can play basketball with other Jewish players, but that is not what it means to be Jewish. Too much of the Jewish world is worried, “Can we get a bunch of Jews to go together to a baseball game?” or “We’ll have a Jewish bowling league.” That is not what Judaism is all about. Women think that all they have to do is head up a committee of Jewish women, but there is much more to it in order to be Jewish. Those things are nice, but there is so much more to Judaism that many people are not even aware of. They need to be educated about their own religion.

There are only two things that matter. The essence of Judaism is learning Torah and

doing mitzvahs. They're dancing around the real issues, which are personal engagement with G-d and spirituality. The real issues which make people feel uncomfortable are talking about G-d and what they are going to do in order to make their own personal connection with Him.

What Judaism is all about is that Jews connect to Hashem. This is expressed in two ways: Number one, when a Jew does a mitzvah, that Jew connects himself to Hashem. It could be a mitzvah that helps another person out like charity or a mitzvah like putting on tefillin or eating in a Sukkah. It may be slow, but it is occurring – one mitzvah by one more mitzvah. Second, when a Jew learns Torah, they uplift themselves both intellectually and spiritually.

In Chabad, what we're trying to do is make Judaism what it once was, which as a friend of mine says, "We comfort the uncomfortable, and we make the comfortable uncomfortable." That means we have Jews who feel some stress, and we try to give them a little bit of comfort, and the Jew who's too comfortable and he doesn't want to rock the boat, we bother them a little bit and shake them up.

What happens if someone moves to this community, and they don't know Hebrew, they have never studied the Torah? How do they get involved?

We have all kinds of classes for them. We'll teach them on a one-to-one basis, we'll send them to classes. Linda Rattner Nunn, who organized this oral history project, didn't know any Hebrew when she came. This is not a group of religious campers. This is a group of different kinds of Jews who share our care of Judaism. Most of them are not as religious as myself or the other rabbi -- they don't necessarily keep Shabbos, or they don't know how to keep kosher -- but they want us to teach them Judaism the way it's always been taught. And if they don't buy the whole enchilada, so they'll take a bite or a good part of it, and maybe a little bit more of it. Each person is different and each person grows in their spirituality by taking small steps. We're not asking people to change, but only to learn more about their own religion and to take a chance by discovering for themselves ways to take their own spiritual journey.

When it comes to theology, there's a very small core group in the Jewish world that's

really ideologically motivated. Most people are convenience-motivated. In other words, it's where they feel comfortable. In Chabad, we don't see differences in Jews. We just encourage and challenge people to grow in their Judaism.

I went to give a speech a week and a half ago to a group of Holocaust survivors in Los Angeles. It was a traditional congregation. So apparently, the guy who was introducing me was a little uncomfortable that I was speaking there. He says, "Well, we're having a rabbi today, but you should know we have a long history of being a Conservative congregation, and I'm going to introduce a Chabad rabbi."

So I got up there, I said, "For me, all Jews are the same. There are no differences between what kind of Jews there are." We don't see differences between Jews. We just see them as Jews. When we received the Torah from G-d at Mount Sinai, we didn't stand separated into different groups. We stood, all of us, together, side-by-side.

What about Jews who want to be affiliated with a community but are fairly secular?

We have a lot of those, and we have people who go to other congregations, who bring their kids for Hebrew school, or they go to Reform, and they like Friday night dinners. Or they don't get to anyplace, and they like our classes. Again, we have this policy of an open type of environment, so they can come in wherever they want to. Once they come in, we hope to engage them, inspire them, motivate them, uplift them, and challenge them a little bit, but we're trying to break down the barriers for them to come in the front door.

Every Jew has a certain spiritual quality about the person. You have to connect with that, and if you educate them, their identity will be transformed. So on one level, the key is to connect on a spiritual basis, and number two is to educate them so that they themselves can participate.

Most people's understanding of Judaism is very elementary. In other words, they had a few years of basic Hebrew School and they haven't been there since they were a kid. They have a basic understanding of

Judaism, but just haven't thought about it. So we're trying to engage them as adults in a serious intellectual way to encounter Judaism.

What about the person who comes in and says, "I don't believe what the Bible says."

So good, study it. See what you believe. It's not a question of belief, most of them simply don't know. If I put a Bible, in front of 99% of these people in Hebrew, they haven't even read it. First, they can't read the Hebrew. I doubt they read the whole thing in English. So what we're dealing with here primarily is Jewish ignorance.

If you look at the national Jewish population, loyalty to Jewish observance and the community is dependent on years of Jewish education.

Here, we see the other correlation: the more Jews learn about Judaism, the more Jews feel connected to Judaism. There are very few people who are true heretics, who really know Torah, and say, "This is not truthful." I say, "Learn it. If you don't believe it, fine. Don't believe it. Why don't you study it?"

But most people never studied it. They don't know what they believe.

They think they know more than the Rabbi even though they can't even read Hebrew. So my point is to learn. Once you learn, make an intelligent decision. Most people have made an ignorant decision from the basis of a lack of education.

Where do you draw the line between spiritual and religious?

I don't think there is a line. I think American Jews are not too much into spirituality and religion. They think Judaism is matzah balls and gefilte fish. I call them gastronomic Jews. There are also Jews who say, "I feel Jewish in my heart," and I call them cardiac Jews! We have to make them understand or educate them that Judaism is not just about Jewish food or culture or history or family. It's much, much more.

I was recently sitting in a room with a bunch of leaders of the Jewish community, and they asked everybody to tell what is the most important thing about Judaism. I was with one other Chabad rabbi, and there were two other rabbis in the room. This is the top

crème de la crème of the Jewish community in Orange County, and each one of them says, “Family”, “No, Community”, “No, Family”, “No, Community”. And I said, “Oy, vey, we’re in big trouble!”

I stood up, I said, “It’s Torah and mitzvahs! You guys are off the wall. You don’t understand! I might be a Zulu Indian for that matter, for family and community. Family and community are important, but it is Torah and mitzvahs that are more important. One of the things Torah tells you is to have a family and community, but you’re looking at the secondary thing and not the primary thing.”

So what’s happened, American Jews have taken this primary thing and moved it to the back, basically because they’re not educated. The biggest problem for the Jew is that they just have not learned what it is to be a Jew. They really don’t have any idea what Judaism is really all about – its teachings, its laws, its values and its ethics.

And so few people would know about those things.

That’s right.

Any Jew who's learned in the Torah knows this. Because Chabad is involved with both the non-religious community and the religious community, we are a bridge in the Jewish world, which is very remarkable. Nobody really spans that bridge more than we do. There are others that do it on a limited basis, but we're the bridge between two parts of the Jewish world. That's number one. Number two, in Chabad we were educated to have a sense of responsibility for every Jew. The Rebbe instilled in us the sense that you have to take care of the welfare of every Jew.

It's not only that they're action-oriented. There's something beneath it.

Why are they action-oriented? Because we at Chabad have a responsibility for every Jew. So all these other Jewish organizations are talking or moving. We're the ones who are *doing*.

Where do people come from in this shul?

Many shuls have one basic demographic. They might have Persians, or they might have Sephardim, or they might have

Ashkenazi, or they might have South Africans. We are unique, because the core group of people who come here are a diverse group of people from all different backgrounds and from all parts of the world. I think that's an interesting quality and they all find the same common value in tradition.

Can you say something about the people involved in this shul?

We have a wonderful assembly of people who come here. I like to affectionately call them a “cast of characters”, because each one is so special and unique. For example, there is one person I know who always takes pride in announcing the parshah in the Torah for each week with a little extra explanation, which we all appreciate. There is another person who has such a deep spiritual attitude which is reflected in his distinctive tone of voice that our services couldn't be done without him. There are so many others who are always there to help our shul with their time or money whenever I need them.

Why do people come here?

They come here for many different reasons. Some people want only certain things we

have to offer. It's very normal. They may want to send their kids to our Hebrew school, because they know that their children will receive a better Jewish education here. Others may enjoy our many adult education courses in the evenings or on Sunday mornings. Some may just like the holiday programs, so they come for Purim or Hanukkah, because we have fun here.

How would you describe your role here?

I carry the financial and administrative responsibility for the institution. In a Chabad structure, there's usually not a Board, but I work with a consensus of the community, so that they should be happy campers with what we're doing.

Do some people want a different structure?

No, they know that I am a shliach, an emissary rabbi. If you talk to people about what they do, he'll say, "Well, I am the shliach in Yorba Linda, California. I am the shliach in Bozeman, Montana." I guess they're getting a guy in Bozeman. His whole identity, the way he talks about himself, the

way he talks about his peers, the words he uses, he's not seen as a rabbi of a shul. He's seen as a shliach to a community.

He's an emissary, or representative.

Yes, in 1986, I was sent here by the Rebbe and by the organization that the Rebbe established to take care of the welfare and interests of all the Jews in a community.

**Where do you want things to go with the shul?
What's your vision now?**

I think we have a lot to do. First thing is we need to get the building built, which will create a real viable center in this area. Then we need to develop a strong preschool, we need to expand the Hebrew school, we need to expand the programs. We need to look in other areas which are not being serviced, such as our college students. We need to get the center at Tustin more established and more settled. We need to expand programs to other Jews who are unaffiliated, reaching out to them and drawing them into Yiddishkeit. There's a lot of work to do. So the first thing now is getting the building done. We think this building will

fundamentally transform this area. It is just the beginning of things to come.

Specifically, in what ways will things be changing to improve the services and to expand the holiday preparations?

Well, for one thing, my daughter Naomi and her husband, Rabbi Levi Blesofsky, have moved back into this community. Rabbi Levi will be our new Hazan/Cantor and will add his deep, melodious voice to our services. He will also be the Jewish community chaplain on behalf of the Jewish Family Services of Orange County. This job involves visiting people in hospitals, old age homes and even prisons. He will also have educational responsibilities here in the shul, as well. There are many other things which he does that many people are not even aware of, but that I couldn't possibly do without him.

Naomi will now be our new Director of Education and has hired several new teachers to work in our new, expanded Hebrew School. She also will start a new Mommy and Me program for other young mothers. Together, they will bring new vigor into our community in so many ways.

I have started to have planning meetings with some of the parents of the Hebrew School students and many other people have also volunteered their help to this committee. Naomi has taken their suggestions and incorporated them into preparing for all of the many holiday events that we constantly have all year long. Everyone is excited to use the new social hall for Kiddush and other large celebrations.

Are you going to build any other additions on this property?

We're also going to build Orange County's first mikvah. This will enable married, Jewish women to observe the laws of Jewish family purity in an oasis of holiness and beauty. It will be first class quality and give a feeling of peacefulness and quiet reflection to everyone who enters.

What kind of response has that plan had?

Women are curious and looking forward to observing the mitzvah of immersion in the mikvah and connecting themselves to an age-old tradition. We will be offering classes instructing women in the laws regarding this mitzvah. We feel fortunate in Yorba Linda

that married, Jewish couples will benefit personally and spiritually by observing the laws of Taharas HaMishpocha (Jewish family purity).

As we build the mikvah, I'm sure more and more people will use it, and the mikvah will be successful. That's what usually happens. What we've found in other communities is people have been using it.

Many of the people I've interviewed had Orthodox backgrounds in their families.

Some of them have, but most of the people who come here aren't Orthodox. Most of them went to a Conservative congregation. Now that constituency is coming here. Instead of moving further away from Judaism, they're moving closer. They're on a road back, not a road away. That's a very big difference. They know also that, in a Conservative temple, the religious community sometimes gets together and pressures the Rabbi to do something he doesn't necessarily want to do. On the other hand, I won't be budged. If Torah law says that this is how it's supposed to be done, then that is the way it will be done.

I'll never forget when I was buying this property, and I had no money to close escrow. One member of our congregation [who had some money] said, "I don't like the mechitza (divider) between men and women." I said, "Then I won't close escrow." There are certain things that can't change. No matter what he's going to tell me and how much money he's going to put in front of me, I'll walk. That's the difference. I could have lost it all, but I think he gave me the money because he realized it was real. It's not a game. There are principles here that are not going to be changed.

So we're lifting people up instead of pulling people down. The other synagogues are letting people go—they're in a train station, they're leaving the station, they're coming to us, they want to get closer to Yiddishkeit. That's the difference. It's a very, very big difference.

Where do you get what you need for yourself, to keep going with your commitments?

I feel fortunate that G-d has given me the opportunity to be a teacher and a leader in my community. I am blessed to be a Chassid of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and to be a shliach,

an emissary of his, to bring joy and inspiration to others.

I realize I'm not here for myself. I'm here for a higher purpose. I'm here because the Rebbe gave me a responsibility, and I can't shirk that responsibility. For me, this is not a job. I could make a lot more money doing something else. This is a responsibility. We are responsible for the spiritual well-being of all Jews. We have to do something about it. We can't shirk our responsibility. So we have that sense that we're here for a broader purpose.

And it keeps you going.

It keeps me going. But there are difficult days also. We've got to raise a lot of money now for this building. But we're going to do it. People are constantly learning something here. They're tired of watered-down Judaism. They want the real thing. They want something more.

You seem to feel such a personal responsibility for people. Do you know others who feel this way?

A friend of mine who's the head of Chabad in New Orleans said to me on the phone last week, "Am I responsible for this Hurricane Katrina? Maybe if I had done a better job, then this wouldn't have happened." What does that mean? He felt a sense of spiritual responsibility for what happened. The question is how do I make myself a better person?

I mean, the truth is, we believe G-d brings everything into the world; He brings good; He brings bad. But why G-d does these things, I cannot answer the question.

What my friend was saying is that when something happens, we have to look into ourselves on a spiritual level. There's a connection between the Creator and the creation, the whole system.

Some people have discomfort with having some authority that tells them they should do something. Because people want to live their lives nice and comfortable. They don't want to be bothered; they don't want to be

challenged. Everything should be sweet and nice. Everybody's very into a world where they're comfortable. We live in a society where we don't want to think about things on a deeper level.

Here comes Judaism along and says, "Listen, ask yourself, 'If you really are such a great person, are you willing to change yourself?' You have to ask yourself before you go to sleep at night, 'What did I do today? Was it also great? Did I do something to make a difference in the world?'" So why do people run off to these places far away? Sometimes, it's because they don't want anybody to ask them these questions.

Can people ask themselves those questions without religion?

What religion does is it gives responsibility for your actions to a higher authority. God said, "I made the world. I gave you a reason to exist. What are you doing to show your appreciation? What are you doing to meet the challenge He gave you?" If everything is what we rationalize with ourselves, whatever we feel, so we can feel like the American Society, then Western culture is moral relativism. I can do whatever I want as long

as I don't hurt another person. Torah comes along and says you have a responsibility to do something, so if something tragic happens in your community, look at yourself and say, "How can I be a better person?" Where's your responsibility? That's what my friend said about himself without even realizing he was saying it, in Yiddish, "If I was a little bit better, maybe this wouldn't have happened." Awesome statement.

So that's responsibility. So what we're trying to do is we're trying to make a few Jews uncomfortable. One guy came to me once a few months ago, about a year ago. He says, "I feel like I'm always uncomfortable. I'm always asking myself if I can do more." I said, "You're finally getting it."

Because there's always more to do.

That's exactly it! Life is not just a cruise. We all still have a lot to do to make those changes.

The new construction here is certainly going to make a big difference in this community, isn't it?

It's going to be stunning! It won't be the largest synagogue in Orange County, but I think it will be the most beautiful!

The Yorba Linda Star newspaper recently wrote an article entitled, "Chabad Expanding to Meet Needs: Construction on new campus for growing Jewish community is underway", January 19, 2006, on page 1, showcasing our growing Jewish community.

Grant Biniasz wrote, "Long housed in the little sanctuary on Yorba Linda Boulevard, North County Chabad is in the middle of a \$2.2 million construction project that will add nearly 12,000 square feet and two new buildings to the existing campus. The recently framed community building will feature a library, kitchen and social hall.

One of our worshippers, Ira Cohen, said it best, "The current building is magnificent, but going from a religious function to a social function takes a lot of energy." His wife, Linda Cohen, said, "The idea of a large social hall is very exciting. The construction

of a Kosher kitchen will allow the synagogue to host more family events, since all the food currently used for celebrations or holidays must be catered from Kosher kitchens in Los Angeles.”

Grant quoted the rabbi as saying, “The new buildings will be consistent with the sanctuary’s ‘old world’ look, with curved windows and walkways lined with Jerusalem stone shipped all the way from Israel.”

“Rabbi Eliezrie estimates that construction will be finished within six months. He is quoted as saying, ‘When the new construction is completed in the summer of 2006, not only will the building itself be extended, but I plan to expand Chabad’s Jewish Learning Institute and Hebrew High programs and offer an extended-hours daycare. Every step of construction brings us closer to becoming one of Orange County’s most diverse centers for Jewish education and worship.’ ”

“This is quite an achievement for the community. For people here to raise the funds to do this, it really is a statement of Jewish growth in our community. Now we’ll have a campus to meet the needs of the

community. We are very excited about our future growth!"

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Photograph: Cliff Lester

Rabbi Dovid Eliezrie and Family

Back Row: Yosef Eliezrie, Rebbetzin Blumi (expecting Tova) and Rabbi Shuey Eliezrie (holding their daughter, Ita), Rabbi Dovid Eliezrie (Center), Rabbi Shlomo and Rebbetzin Chana (Eliezrie) Zarchi,

Second Row: Dina Eliezrie, Yoni and Sarah Chana Eliezrie (holding their son, Ari's hand), Rebbetzin/Director of Education, Naomi (Eliezrie) Blesofsky (holding their son, Chaim) and Rabbi/Cantor Levi Blesofsky,

Front Row: Yaakov Meir Zarchi, Chaya Zarchi, Great-Grandmother, Dora Ruta (holding Shneur Zalman Zarchi), Bassie Zarchi, Rebbetzin Stella (Ruta) Eliezrie (holding Menachem Mendel Zarchi), and Yankel "Kovi" Blesofsky



Remodeled entrance door to Congregation Beth Meir
HaCohen / North County Chabad (September 2007)



New Extension to Sanctuary (social hall, library, new
lobby, and kitchen) (September 2007)



New Library



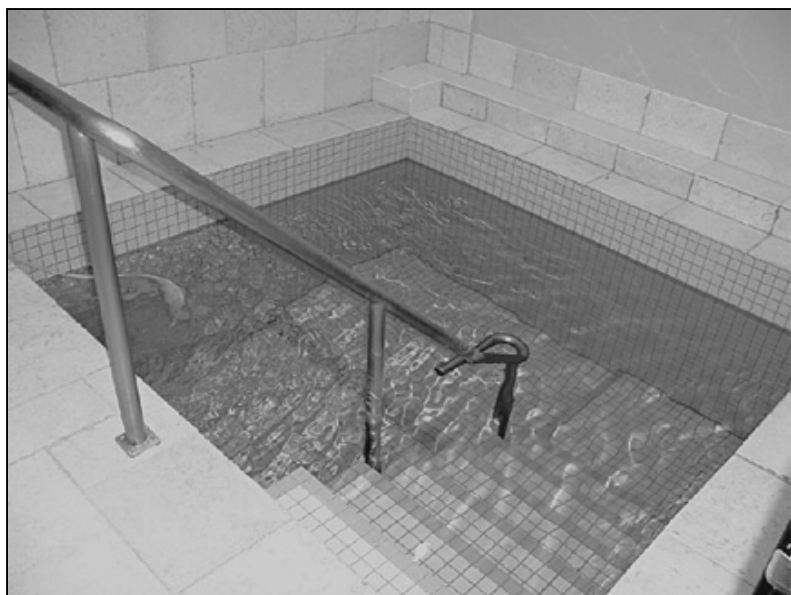
New Education Building



New Social Hall



Kitchen and Pre-School Classroom, Unfinished
(September 2007)



The New Mikvah Filled with Water



Entrance to the New Mikvah



Unfinished Landscaping Behind the Social Hall
(September 2007)



Unfinished Landscaping between the Social Hall and
the Education Building (September 2007)



New Education Center
Architectural Rendering