

TROPIC

THE MIAMI HERALD



The Pious Ones

Why do Lubavitch Jews: Have so many kids?
Wear so many clothes? Tie a string around Miami Beach?
Believe the Messiah lives in Brooklyn?

STRANGERS

We'd all seen them walking up and down Arthur Godfrey Road, these out-of-place ghosts from the Old Testament — stern-looking bearded men in black fedoras and black coats, women in long dresses and wigs. And we'd all asked the same question: Who *are* these people?

So when Marjorie Klein came to us with a proposal to profile Dade's fast-growing Lubavitch community (*Strangers Among Us*, Page 8), we jumped at what we were sure would be a fascinating story.

Here was a chance to introduce our readers to this tightly knit group of Hasidic Jews who cling to the demanding dictates of an ancient religion mere blocks from one of the wildest scenes in modern day America — South Beach, more like Sodom and Gomorrah than the Holy City of Jerusalem. Too bad it wouldn't happen.

Great story, we told Klein, but impossible. They'll never let you penetrate their world. They're suspicious of outsiders. They'll never let you *really* get to know them.

Funny how wrong you can be in this business. The Lubavitch community welcomed Klein and one family, the Verdes, let her into their home over and over, patiently explaining their beliefs and customs, inviting her to participate.

They quickly exploded some common misconceptions about the Orthodox. I, who had merely seen them through the windows of my car, had smugly judged them to be a rigid, forbidding, judgmental sect who distrusted everything about modern society and shunned those who did not share their faith. I even suspected that, like the Amish, they might forgo automobiles and modern appliances.

Then I saw Jamie Robinson's photo of Yakov Verde at his computer, and read Klein's description of Yakov cruising with his kids in a flashy convertible, modern jazz blaring from the stereo.

Before she began her research, Klein's view of the Lubavitch was nearly as off the mark as mine. "I had heard all those weird things about them," she said. "I always wanted to talk to them but I felt they wouldn't want to talk



Bill Rose

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to me. Everyone I spoke to was really very friendly and went on forever about their beliefs. They even brought up sensitive stuff I was hesitant to bring up."

The laws of their religion are strict, yes. Many of us might consider them unreasonable. Their religious code tends to mark them as very different from most folks, fat targets for ridicule from outsiders. But Klein also found traits that the larger community respects, even yearns for: a deep devotion to family and an ability to make a safe and nurturing community for their children.

"They have the sort of values everyone professes to want," Klein said. "But unlike a lot of people, they really go out of their way to live what they say they believe."

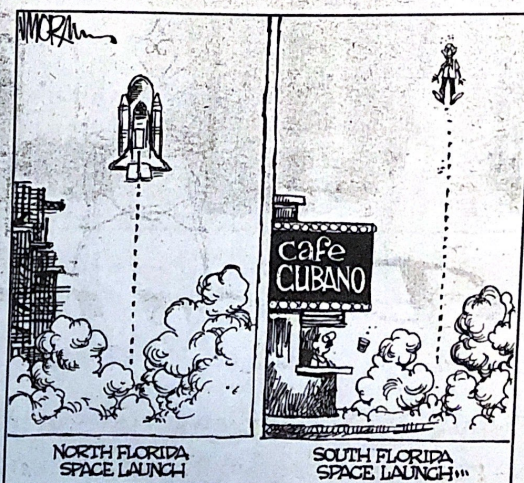
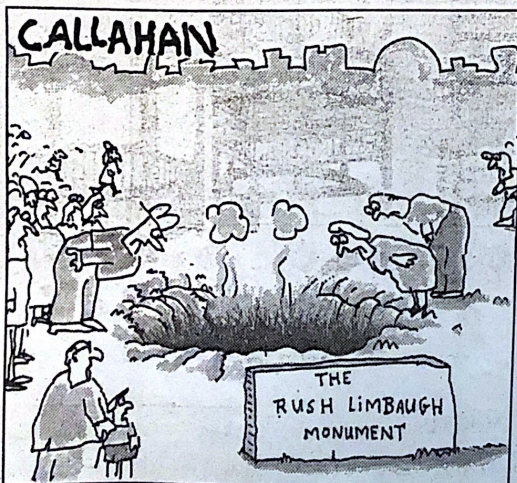
Klein's admiration was not unqualified. After months of reporting, she remained uneasy about the apparently subservient role of Lubavitch women. Her exploration of that subject is one of the most fascinating things I've read in a long time. Whatever you make of it, one thing becomes clear, the Lubavitch, like all people, are too complex to stereotype. It is a lesson you would think we would not have to learn more than once.

As a college student, I had a blind date with a girl from the University of Minnesota. Over dinner, I detected a distinct cooling when I told her I was a Baptist. I was puzzled, but let it drop, resigning to an uncomfortable evening.

As we returned to campus, music blared from a frat house. Her head turned toward the sound and her fingers drummed the beat on the dashboard of my old Ford. When I suggested we join the fun, her eyes opened wide in shock. Then she smiled. Finally.

After several dances, she blurted, "I didn't know Baptists believed in dancing." I burst out laughing. She was serious. Her opinion of Baptists came from a visit with relatives in Alabama. They belonged to a small fundamentalist Baptist church whose minister denounced dancing as Satan's tool. His thundering — and her relatives' stern faces — scared her to death and left her with an image that certainly didn't coincide with *my* Baptist upbringing.

I was greatly amused. How silly of her to judge someone before she really got to know them.



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STRANGERS

By
MARJORIE KLEIN

*An
inside look
at one of
South
Florida's
fastest
growing
minorities.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JAMIE ROBINSON



You notice the men first, silhouettes in black — beards untrimmed, free and flowing; silken fringes flying from their coats. A hat, always: wide-brimmed black fedora or round *yarmulke* perched on the back of the head. The women cluster separately, dressed in high-necked dresses that cover elbows and knees; hair shrouded in scarves, hats or wigs. Always, they are surrounded by children — multitudes of long-skirted girls, *yarmulke*-topped boys, babies in strollers and Snugglis.

They are Lubavitchers: a sect of Hasidic Jews. Jews, like me. But not like me.

Whenever I would see them — and they seemed to be everywhere, more by the day — I would covertly stare and wonder: Who are these people?

I had heard all sorts of stories about customs that seemed too extreme to be true. What's with the wigs — do the women shave their heads? Why do they dress in such heavy clothes, even on the hottest days? And what about all those kids? Haven't they heard of birth control? Is it true that women are considered impure and cannot even be touched by their husbands two weeks out of the month? Do they really drink milk from cows that had been handled only by Jews? Did Lubavitchers tie a string around Miami Beach? Do they actually believe the Messiah lives in Brooklyn?

Every time I'd see the Lubavitch, I'd ask myself these questions without getting any closer to understanding.

And then I met Malka and Yakov Verde.

Shabbos — Feb. 12, 1993

Yakov and Malka and their eight kids live in Miami Beach. It is Shabbos, Friday night, and I am invited to share the Sabbath meal.

AMONG US



The fast-growing family of Yakov and Malka Verde on their way to *shul*.

Before I even leave my house, I have problems: What to wear? Should I dress like me, or should I dress like them? Dressing like me would be easy — pants, short skirt, jeans — all inappropriate. I rake my closet for something modest and concoct an outfit my grandmother would have loved: ankle-length skirt, high-necked blouse, long-sleeved jacket, dark stockings. Should I carry a purse? You're not supposed to carry anything on Shabbos. You're not supposed to drive, either. I worry about that on the drive over, then debate parking: Should I park shamelessly in front? Or around the corner so they think I walked? I park in front of the two-story house, behind the Plymouth Voyager van with a "Moshiach Is On

The Way" bumper sticker.

This area around 41st Street is a neighborhood of homes built in the 1950s and '60s, three bedrooms that became four, five, and even more as the families grew. Six synagogues (also called *shuls*) are within walking distance.

The homes are bathed in that golden light just before the sun sets, when Shabbos will begin. Long-skirted girls and boys with *tzitzit* — fringes from the four-cornered garment all males must wear — flying from beneath T-shirts, play in yards dotted with balls and swings and dolls. Standing on the "Welcome Friends" doormat, I read the brass plate on the door — "Chabad House" — and ring the bell. *Moshiach? Chabad? I*

STRANGERS



Yakov presides over the circumcision of the Blank family's 16th child, a boy.

am truly on foreign ground.

Malka answers the door looking just a little frazzled, like any one of dozens of women from my own familiar world after a long day.

Malka is pregnant, not as full of pep as usual. "Come on in," she says. The house sprawls in all directions. Books in the living room are all holy books; art on the walls is Judaic, and prominently displayed is a portrait of the head Lubavitcher *rebbe* (the Hebrew word for teacher), 91-year-old Menachem M. Schneerson — the Brooklyn rabbi who many Lubavitchers believe is, or will become, Moshiach, the Messiah. The little kids slide and dance around, chasing each other, chastised by an older sister. Menachem, the 2-year-old, spins his tricycle in a dizzy circle. Malka wades through the chaos into the kitchen.

She looks younger than her 40 years. You can see the cheerleader she once was, in the flashing grin that wrinkles up her freckle-spattered nose. She's wearing her everyday wig, brunet in a casual wave. Her pregnancy is just beginning to

show — she told the youngest kids today, the oldest already knew — but despite her fatigue she's pretty bouncy for a mother of eight-and-one-on-the-way.

The kitchen is an appliance Noah's ark, everything in twos. Two ovens, two cooktops, two dishwashers, two sinks: This is a kosher kitchen — and not just kosher, but glatt kosher, an especially rigid version of the Jewish dietary code. Meat and dairy storage and preparation are strictly separated; there are separate cabinets and counter tops for each. Only the refrigerator is exempted; in cold storage meat and dairy can be mixed. The dietary laws have all the boggling complexity of the U.S. tax code.

Aside from the double vision, the kitchen looks like any other — refrigerator covered with kids' drawings and photos, school projects, announcements . . . all with a Judaic theme.

Tomorrow's lunch — *cholent*, a stew of beans, barley, meat, and vegetables — is already bubbling away in a crock pot. Cooking, or doing any form of work, is forbidden on Shabbos, so Saturday's

meal is prepared the day before.

It's countdown to sunset and the kids are wired. The oldest daughter, auburn-haired Basya, 14 1/2, is trying to tame the little ones and get them dressed. "She pushed!" "No, he pushed!" Avraham, 4, and Aviva, 6, battle it out while Mordechai, the 13-year-old son who will be bar mitzvahed in Israel in May, dashes about in his bathrobe. Gedalia, 9, is already dressed in shirt and tie. Hinda, 11, parades back and forth in front of the mirror: Should she wear the black shoes or the white ones to *shul*? she asks me. I say white. She wears the black.

The kids wander into the kitchen and Malka doles out tastes of the meat that will be served later — rich and garlicky but kind of chewy. "It's a problem getting good kosher meat here," Malka complains, a tinge of Long Island still coloring her words. "There's not a kosher slaughterhouse in the area." She shows me a frozen roll of gefilte fish. Frozen! I didn't know there was such a thing. "I'm not a *baleboosteh* [a super housekeeper]," she laughs. "I buy things already made."

She has enough to do. Besides juggling the schedules of eight kids (seven, since the oldest son, Yehoshua, 16, went to rabbinical school in London), Malka teaches Jewish history and ethics at the Landow Yeshiva, helps Yakov with his computer software business and is on the speaker's bureau of the Presidium, a women's organization that spreads the Lubavitch word around South Florida. She has part-time help four days a week, plus Lubavitch women friends who cheerfully take care of each other's kids in a pinch.

Yakov, 39, trundles into the kitchen with a couple of kids hitching rides on his legs, singing a Hebrew song with him as they go. His long, untamed beard — in keeping with the Torah's prohibition against shaving — doesn't hide a mischievous, cheery face animated by dancing eyebrows. "When I put on my sunglasses," he says, "I look like ZZ Top." He shows me a styling trick he performs with his beard, which when unfurled, reaches almost to his waist: He rolls it under, tucking it up so that it looks much shorter than it is.

The word Hasid means "pious one," and Yakov is that, but there is certainly nothing dour about him. He and the older boys have been to the men's *mikvah*, a ritual bath, at a neighborhood *shul* to cleanse themselves before the Sabbath, riding home in his weathered LeBaron convertible, top down, jazz blaring from the radio.

A black fedora is tipped back on Yakov's head, a black coat on his lanky frame. He and their guest, a reserved young Hasid from Orlando, are ready to walk to *shul* but the kids aren't all dressed yet. Usually entire families — often out-of-towners whom they've never met before — stay with them overnight for Shabbos. These are families from other cities where Lubavitchers live in relative isolation. They come to Miami for a sense of community. The young man from Orlando was in Miami on real estate business, but this trip had an alternative purpose: He was looking for a wife. There aren't many Lubavitch women in the land of Disney.

Yakov pops a bite of meat into his mouth, nudges Mordechai, "Come on, come on," adjusts Gedalia's embroidered *yarmulke*, tells Hinda she looks fine, just fine, let's go.

While Yakov and the older kids are in *shul*, Malka and Basya hurry to get dinner ready before the sun sets. Women aren't expected to attend synagogue on Shabbos. When they do go, they sit behind a curtain, separate from the men. Men are in *shul* most of Saturday; during the week, they meet three times a day to *daven*, or pray.

From sunset to sunset, Friday to Saturday, work — physical effort of any kind, operation of machinery or appliances — stops. Lights are on timers. Phones go unanswered. Some apartment buildings have a "Shabbos elevator" that stops on every floor so buttons don't have to be pushed. Toilet paper may not be torn; pop-up Kleenex is used instead. Driving isn't allowed, so worshippers must walk to synagogue. And nothing — keys, money, wallets — may be carried from home.

Hence, the *eruv*: A system of fences, poles and string within which such items may be carried and strollers may be wheeled. "It's a legal fiction, a fake wall," Yakov says, a symbolic extension of home into the community. The system of string and wire fences runs along the Miami Beach boardwalk and near Mount Sinai hospital. When it came down during Hurricane Andrew, it was yet another cause for disruption in daily life until it was rebuilt. Each Friday, the *eruv* hot line (866-ERUV) informs callers whether or not the *eruv* is kosher, or unbroken, that week, and what time — to the minute — Shabbos begins.

Before the *shul* contingent is off, the candles are lit — the woman's role. Several graceful candelabra, one candle for each child, are poised like silver dancers on a table. Malka asks if I would like to light the first candle; she'll help me with the blessing. But embedded

deep in my subconscious, the *brochah* surfaces and — decades after I learned it in Hebrew school — I repeat it with no help, surprising myself.

The sun sets; the room glows amber as the candles are lit. Kids being kids, they whine and bicker as Malka serenely covers her eyes, prays, then lets each child light a candle. There is a stateliness, a grace to it all despite the informality, and then all the candles are blazing away, the flames of Shabbos.

Soul Mates

Malka and Yakov met through a matchmaker, a rabbi. Malka was 23 and Yakov was 22. Both were seeking marriage "to find a soul mate and have children as soon as possible," says Malka.

"I was a nerd," Yakov laughs. "I'd never been on a date before. I was really nervous, but she looked so good, I knew right away." He proposed on their first date, which, like their other once-a-week dates, consisted of driving around in her car to discuss family values and their expectations of marriage.

According to Hasidic law, which forbids touching before marriage, they never so much as held hands. After two months of this, Malka said yes. A month later, 17 years ago, they were married on campus

I became part of the peace movement, joined communes, did yoga, studied Hinduism — exotic things. I spent many years searching for the Truth. I couldn't believe that the end of life was death."

Her search took her to India where she lived on an ashram and sought a guru, but "I ended up back at Buffalo. At the Chabad House off campus, I met my *rebbe*. He was like a guru to me, living the Torah, not just teaching it."

She discovered that the Judaism she had grown up with had all but eliminated the mystical aspects of the ancient religion. Lubavitch beliefs can sound a lot like Eastern mysticism — the progression of souls through spiritual planes, reincarnation, and even a form of karma (you keep coming back until you get things right). So after journeying halfway around the world, "Michelle" found what she was looking for in her roots. At the age of 21, she became Lubavitch, and changed her name to Malka.

Jeffrey became Yakov as a Case Western Reserve engineering student from Brooklyn. "I wasn't looking for Judaism," he recalls. "My parents were regular Orthodox in a sterile *shul*. I was bored and unhappy, and had become part of the counterculture."

Yakov wasn't dropping acid and bombing banks, but he had abandoned the Orthodox world. Like students everywhere, he was searching for some

was led into Lubavitch services.

"This rabbi was really listening instead of skirting the answers," he says. "It wasn't a bluff. He was answering questions about the spiritual side of Judaism, not just the rituals and practices." It was the first meaningful religious experience he'd ever had. The synagogues of his youth "were like theater. This was a place where everyone was praying from the heart."

Two years into his studies at Case, he dropped out to attend *yeshiva* and become a rabbi himself.

Yakov and Malka are called *baalei teshuva*, repentants who have returned to Jewish heritage.

As they committed themselves to the all-encompassing Lubavitch life, their families and friends had to adjust. Some became alienated; others learned to accept.

Malka's mother, Helen Weinberger, still slips sometimes and calls her Michelle.

"My husband died when Michelle was 7; maybe that had something to do with her need to search. When she first became religious, I didn't understand. Why did she have to cover her beautiful hair? Things like that I resented."

Now she accepts it, and considers herself "the happiest grandmother alive." Even so, certain aspects of the Lubavitch lifestyle still puzzle her.

"The kids can't eat at my house even though I keep kosher; it's not *glatt* kosher. I drive on Shabbos, I eat at nonkosher restaurants and I don't buy the strictly kosher dairy products where not just the farmer who milks the cow has to be Jewish, but the guy who watches him milk the cow has to be Jewish. It's the same cow I get my milk from — is the cow Jewish?"

Malka admits: "There are times my mother and I can't relate. She wants my kids to have a college education, but I'm not gearing them toward that. She thinks I should use TV as an educational tool, a baby sitter, but I limit them to videos that I approve of. I don't think they'll gain anything from TV; there are certain parts of American society that are detrimental to kids — all kids, not just Jewish kids."

"I had hardly seen my sister for 10 years; the religion separated us. But recently she came to Miami and we went to Sara's [one of the few restaurants where Lubavitch can eat] for dinner. Afterward, my mother told me, 'Phyllis and her husband said you're normal.' People — like some of the friends I had in high school — think we've gone crazy or fanatic, they can't relate to us. But this time we were able to bridge the gap. My sister saw I had the same personality, I haven't changed. So that was a big achievement."

The Community

Non-Jews may think of Jews as a single entity — particularly galling to those Jews who consider Hasidic Jews as alien to their own way of life as the Amish.



Malka serenely covers her eyes and prays after Basya, 14, has finished lighting the last of the Shabbos candles. There is a stateliness, a grace to it all despite the informality, and then the candles are blazing away, the flames of Shabbos.

at the University of Buffalo where she was a student. Their first child was born before their first anniversary.

Malka was not raised Lubavitch; she came from a kosher home where "We kept Shabbos and I went to Hebrew school, but my mother raised me to blend into society."

At the age of 17, she rebelled. "My transformation began in the late '60s against American culture. I was idealistic;

meaning beyond the materialism of American society and the rote religion of his upbringing.

One day he was doing part-time janitorial work in the Hillel House, a Jewish student center, when someone grabbed him by the elbow and said, "Are you Jewish?"

Yakov had to think about that for a second. When he admitted he was, he

STRANGERS

Many Jews, including me, define themselves more in terms of tradition and heritage than religion. If asked, I'll say that I am Reform, in the Jewish hierarchy of Orthodox (*yarmulkes*, *tzitzit*, prayer shawls, keeping kosher, services mostly in Hebrew), Reform (little or none of the above) and Conservative (in-between).

The Orthodox community itself is fragmented. It includes a spectrum of groups from the relatively liberal "Conserv-odox" to the fundamentalist Hasidic, which is broken down even further into various sects including the Lubavitch. Many people confuse the Lubavitch with the much smaller, ultra-rigid Satmar and Belzar sects, whose members may be seen strolling the boardwalk — tourists from the Northeast and Europe. (They may be distinguished by the men's headwear: The men wear fur or high round velvet hats as opposed to the broad-brimmed fedoras of the Lubavitch.)

The Lubavitch have grown from a small sect that began 234 years ago in Russia. Officially known as Chabad-Lubavitch (Chabad means "wisdom and knowledge" and Lubavitch is the Russian town known as its launching point), the sect has spread around the world, with centers as distant as Tahiti, Nairobi and Tunisia.

Today the world Lubavitch capital is in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, at 770 Eastern Parkway, an old brownstone office and residence for Lubavitch leader Rabbi Schneerson. A replica of the building, identical to the last brick, has been built in Israel near Tel Aviv so that the rabbi will feel at home when he comes to Israel as the Messiah.

The Lubavitch community in Crown Heights — some 20,000-strong — has had some dramatic conflicts with the predominantly black areas adjacent to it. On Aug. 19, 1991, a car in Schneerson's motorcade struck two 7-year-old black children, killing one. An angry crowd gathered. The volunteer Lubavitch ambulance and a city ambulance arrived. Police told the city ambulance to take the black child and the Lubavitch ambulance to take the shaken Lubavitch driver and two Jews injured in scuffles with the crowd. A rumor swiftly spread that the Lubavitch ambulance had ignored the black victims and tended only to the Jewish victims. Four days of rioting swept Crown Heights and, after a crowd of young blacks shouted "Kill the Jew," a visiting Jewish scholar from Australia was indeed stabbed to death. On Aug. 29, 1992, a jury acquitted a 16-year-old black youth on charges of murdering the scholar, triggering protests by the Lubavitch community. Tensions remain high and the community claims that anti-Semitism is a constant problem.

Those still unresolved tensions, and the business opportunities of a growing Orthodox population, have drawn scores of Lubavitch families to South Florida. Probably the most visible symbol of the Lubavitch ascendancy is the archite-

"I don't buy the strictly kosher dairy products where not just the farmer who milks the cow has to be Jewish, but the guy who watches him milk the cow has to be Jewish. It's the same cow I get my milk from — is the cow Jewish?"

— Helen Weinberger, mother of Malka Verde.



Yakov, once a full-time rabbi in Tampa, now designs computer software for large corporations.

turally spectacular \$8 million synagogue under construction in Bal Harbour. When it opens in a month or so, The Shul of Bal Harbour will undoubtedly become a magnet for more Lubavitch.

In Miami Beach, 41st Street is the center of Lubavitch life. The streetscape is sprouting restaurants advertising glatt kosher food preparation — the most rigid form of observance of Jewish dietary law — and stores selling everything from computer programs for learning the Torah to Mickey Mouse *yarmulkes*.

On Friday evenings, quiet neighbor-

hood streets fill with men in black hats and women and children scrubbed and done-up for the Sabbath streaming to *shuls* in converted homes or storefronts. A new *mikvah*, a ritual bath for Orthodox women, is near completion on what was formerly the third fairway of a city golf course on Pine Tree Drive.

A group of Orthodox Jews bought Tower 41, a condo at 41st Street and Pine Tree Drive. Now the building reflects their ownership: The elevators stop at every floor on Shabbos, when it's a violation to press the buttons. The

recreation room became a synagogue. The pool has separate hours for men and women. The restaurant is glatt kosher.

The increasing visibility of the Lubavitch has been met for the most part with benign curiosity or puzzlement.

There are a few exceptions. When Tower 41 underwent its conversion, several non-Orthodox tenants moved out in protest. And some people whose property adjoined the par three golf course sued to prevent the building of the *mikvah*, charging that the city improperly ceded public park land to a religious group. The lawsuit has yet to be resolved.

There has been conflict also surrounding *shuls* established in residential areas around 41st Street. None has been more controversial than Beth Yeshaje, the *shul* of Rabbi Armin Grosz on Prairie Avenue.

"In a morning there may be 50 cars outside, but he still insists it's a house," says Bruce Singer, head of the Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce. "They've tripled its size — it's a big square thing."

Frustrated neighbors took a lawsuit against the *shul* to the Florida Supreme Court, which upheld the city's right to enforce the zoning laws by shutting down the *shul*. Grosz never blinked, and continues to operate.

Says City Clerk Roger Brown, "How is the city going to force him out? He's a cutie, a sweet old man with a long gray beard and an accent. Are we going to post police, shut off water and electricity, get an injunction? Then some poor judge is going to have to order this cute little man to be arrested for contempt of court."

So far, no one has pushed it.

Arthur Godfrey Road is still in transition. The porno theater finally closed but, says Malka, "It's a problem for Hasidic men to walk down the street. When the men pass the bikini store that has voluptuous mannequins in tiny bikinis in the window, they have to look away — but the kids sneak a look."

After a while desensitization sets in, and mothers trundling their strollers from *shul* ignore the bus shelter poster with the naked girl barely covered by her Armani shirt. Instead, they notice with great enthusiasm the sign in a window that says another glatt kosher restaurant will be opening soon.

On Sunday, Zigi's on 41st Street bustles with Orthodox kids and their parents on an ice cream outing. Zigi has renovated the chicken place next door, formerly the Chicken Factory, and does a brisk business selling chicken that is not merely kosher, but glatt kosher. Unlike the poultry of his predecessor — Scott Benrubby, former owner of the Chicken Factory — Zigi's chickens will meet with the full approval of the Lubavitch rabbi.

Benrubby, who is Jewish but not Orthodox, claims that he was put out of business by Zigi, aided, he says, by the Orthodox: "The rabbi came to me and



Eldest son Yehoshua gets a haircut from his father as some of his brothers and sisters help out by peeling potatoes.

said I had to be glatt kosher or he'd shut me down. My chickens were kosher, but I never claimed to be glatt kosher. The Orthodox spread rumors, they vandalized, they threatened. They intimidate merchants — to be kosher, to close on Saturday for Shabbos. They harassed me until I was forced to sell to Zigi."

Benruba can not support those accusations. Zigi Markowitz says it was true that the Orthodox community was turned off by Benruba's business practices, but they only demonstrated that by going elsewhere to buy chicken sandwiches. Manish Spitz, the rabbi Benruba claims threatened to shut him down, says he was only doing his job as a code enforcement officer for the city. Benruba's sign claiming to be kosher was false, Spitz said, because he cooked chickens in the same oven as pork ribs. All Spitz wanted Benruba to do was stop claiming to be kosher.

There were incidents of vandalism at the Chicken Factory, but Benruba admits he doesn't really know who was responsible. As for spreading rumors: It is still possible in the Orthodox community to hear unpleasant and unsubstantiated gossip about Benruba.

He is returning the favor: "The Orthodox are powerful, and

they're taking over the city," Benruba says. "They think they own the place, walking down the middle of the road, not moving. Any fanatic — whether Jew, Muslim or 'born-again' — who thinks he's better than anybody else is trouble.

"And to think, I used to lend them my chicken costume for Purim."

Purim — March 7

Hinda Verde can't decide if she wants to be a cheerleader or a Cheerios box. Aviva is dressed like a fairy, Avraham is a Ninja Turtle and Gedalia is dressed in an Army outfit. "I don't like the gun," says Malka's mother. Malka shrugs, "Ma, it's Purim."

Purim isn't Halloween, says Yakov. "It's a good time, not a celebration of evil and devils."

Actually, it's the celebration of the defeat of the evil Haman by beautiful Queen Esther, a story told again each Purim through long readings in Hebrew from a scroll called the Megillah. How long are the readings? Consider the phrase "the whole Megillah." This is where it comes from.

Purim is a time when traditional restrictions are tossed aside. There are

complicated explanations for each of the holiday's customs, but taken together they create a day of topsy-turvy excitement: Men and women may celebrate (but not dance) together, may even dress in the clothes of the opposite sex. The men are obliged to get drunk until "We can't tell the difference between 'blessed is Mordechai [the good guy] and cursed is Haman,'" Yakov explains, beaming as he flips open the briefcase he's lugging to the Purim party. It's filled with bottles of liquor.

Since he expects to be in no condition to drive home, I take a bunch of kids in my car and he and Malka cram the rest in her van with the "Moshiach Is On The Way" bumper sticker.

It's an incongruous crowd gathered for the party in Tradition Hall, behind Temple Menorah. Most of the men are dressed in their usual basic black but a few are in costume, or have parked multicolored Harpo Marx-like wigs over their *yarmulkes*. This seems to be a very popular wig; it's bobbing everywhere, on lots of the kids, on a few of the women. Otherwise the women are wearing long dresses, wigs (monochromatic ones) and hats. It seems that every fourth woman is pregnant. Strollers are everywhere, parked here and there among the tables set for dinner.

The kids — Hamans and Queen Esthers, clowns and Mafia gangsters — dodge in and out, *tzitzit* flying from Batman costumes, *yarmulkes* peeking from cowboy hats, running, screaming, laughing. Mordechai, giggling, introduces me to his "girlfriend," a pretty bewigged kid with braces. He doubles over hysterically as I fall for it; his friend is a boy, dressed like a girl.

I meet the Verdes' houseguests for the weekend: Chana and Avraham Ehrenzweig and their three young kids, from Atlanta. They are what Yakov refers to as "nouveau religious" — they became Lubavitch only recently. Avraham — long-bearded, black-hatted — is a telephone lineman. "At first, I wore a hat over my *yarmulke*, but I don't any more. Most people don't bother me about it. They're just curious."

Chana's family still hasn't accepted her becoming religious. "My mother, my sister, they hardly talk to me; they don't understand."

The band plays. The men dance. The women sit, toes wiggling, fingers tapping on tables to the music that blares until conversation is reduced to yelling. Fueled by drink, the men dance wildly, black hats spinning, black coats flying, costumed children bouncing on the

STRANGERS

men's shoulders as they whirl dizzily about. One twirling man is toting a video camera, filming as he goes. "Interesting, huh?" Mordechai asks me, making a face, catching my dazed expression.

Malka is bouncing in her seat to the music. She's annoyed. She loves to dance. "I tried to get them to put up a wall to divide the dance floor so the women could dance," she complains, "but they said the space is too small."

So the women tap their feet.

A woman in a butterfly mask waves me over to where she's sitting. "You've probably noticed it's not very festive tonight," she says.

Seems festive enough to me, I say, but "No, no," she demurs, her eyes tearing behind the mask.

"Can't you tell? There's a sadness.

Everyone knows how sick Rebbe Schneerson is; he's had a stroke. But," she adds, brightening just a bit, "he's only 91. That's not so old, is it? He can get better."

I nod, um, of course he can, but . . . and I hesitate. This is delicate territory. I plunge ahead.

"Suppose, well, God forbid . . . he dies?"

The eyes behind the mask spill over. No, it won't happen, it can't happen, he is Moshiach, the Messiah. Curious, I press on. "But . . . what if it does happen?

What is next? Is there any plan for that, any person designated to take his place?"

She shakes her head, No. Gives a sad little shrug. Raises her hands, palms up. She can't answer. It's too hard to imagine.

Whenever I ask that most difficult of questions, the answer is invariably the same: Moshiach is on the way. The Messiah will reveal himself any day now. And since most Lubavitchers believe that Rabbi Schneerson is Moshiach — the Messiah — he can't die. It's simply impossible.

Ever since the sect was founded more than two centuries ago, the Lubavitch have believed that in every generation there is a candidate — in this case, Rabbi Schneerson — chosen by God to usher in the Messianic age of peace, harmony and enlightenment (explained in detail when you dial (800) 4-Moshiach, and in occasional full-page ads in *The New York Times*). The Lubavitch stress that their Moshiach is human, and that his reign will be an earthly one. But the world harmony he will bring is clearly divine.

Moshiach or not, Rabbi Schneerson is quite a guy, invariably described as "intellectual, scientific, morally righteous and spiritually perfect." His followers consult him before making any decision, personal or otherwise — via phone, fax, letter and, before his illness, personal pilgrimage.

Schneerson's portrait — white-bearded, benevolent — is prominently and ubiquitously displayed in homes, schools, and numerous Lubavitch publications. Before his stroke, he received an endless stream of visitors, five hours on his feet at a stretch, giving advice, answering questions, handing out blessings and dollar bills that the recipient was supposed to



pass on to charity. "Now," says one follower, "I heard that he's mumbling, they even put a microphone to his mouth but he mumbled for half an hour and no one understood what he was saying."

Nevertheless, his advice — whether spoken or given in "yes" and "no" nods — is carefully heeded: "No," when asked if the Miami Beach Lubavitch should evacuate for Hurricane Andrew ("See?" said a believer. "Andrew went to Kendall!"). "No," to whether Israelis should use gas masks during the Gulf War. The phoned, written and faxed requests for blessings for marriages, recovery from illnesses, or even a follower's attempt to win a \$5 million lottery (he won) — are answered via the *rebbe's* secretary.

"I've heard so many times that people think the *rebbe* is like a cult leader," says Malka, cringing at the suggestion, *après-Waco*, that there might be any similarity to that kind of adulation.

"I hate that. We look to the *rebbe* for

Eleven-year-old Hinda Verde helps her mother prepare for Shabbos dinner.



At the Purim celebration, the men dance wildly, black hats spinning, black coats flying, costumed children bouncing on their shoulders as they whirl dizzily about.



At the sheitl-macher, Rivka styles Malka's wig. Married Lubavitch women are not supposed to show their own hair to anyone but their husbands.

advice; he has no control over us, he doesn't brainwash. We all think the guy [David Koresh] was *meshuggener*."

Passover — April 5

For days Malka has been preparing for Passover, a painstaking process that involves ridding the house, car and even the kids' pockets of every trace of *chometz* — bread, cereal, cake, anything made from grain. What is found is either sold via the rabbi or burned. A ritual burning is held for the community behind the Miami Beach Convention Center, but Yakov and the kids hold their own incineration on the barbecue grill.

Malka is exhausted from making her kitchen kosher for Passover. She has put away all dishes, cookware and silverware and brought out items used only at Passover. She has scrubbed the kitchen, taken apart the oven to scour out every trace of *chometz*, protected the sinks with liners and covered all her counter tops with foil. Now all she has to do is prepare a Seder, the ceremonial dinner, for 15 people.

Yehoshua, at 16 the eldest son, is home for the holiday. Studying at the London *yeshiva* to be a rabbi, he hasn't

been home since the autumn Succoth holiday. Pale as winter next to his sun-kissed brothers and sisters, with tender beginnings of a light brown beard inching down his cheeks, he sits somberly beneath his big black hat at Seder.

"*Yeshiva* has matured him," a guest notes, and yes, he is a mature 16-year-old, sweetly impatient with the shenanigans of his younger siblings who, between soprano warblings in Hebrew of the Four Questions, nudge and taunt each other as siblings do. Mordechai, 13 — robust, freckled and friendly — giggles and jokes, to Yehoshua's dismay. Mordechai loves sports, is eager to talk Heat, Dolphins and Marlins. Yakov has taken him to Heat games but, "I hate spectator sports, the whole sneakers thing," says Malka, the former cheerleader. Malka's concerned that the semi-religious adulation that mainstream Americans lavish on sports figures and all the junk they peddle on television will divert Mordechai from what he should be thinking about: God.

"It's hard with Mordechai. He collects the cards, keeps pictures in his room. I don't allow a lot of that. I have to fight off negative values."

Because all her children go to *yeshiva*, are enveloped in religious observance from birth and live in a neighborhood that is predominantly Jewish and mostly Orthodox, the chances of contamination from "negative values" is minimized, but not eliminated. Malka says her children have on occasion played with nonobservant neighborhood children, possibly read their comic books or watched their television shows. "No one lives in a vacuum. We don't isolate ourselves. We know what's going on in the world."

Adds Yakov, "I don't go to movies but I listen to shortwave radio so I know what's going on. I don't read the paper, except for Business Monday, or let the kids read the sports section — they have massage ads there."

Mordechai is the rebel. A typical 13-year-old, he seems to have a low tolerance at this point for the restrictions of Lubavitch. "How were services, Mordy?" "Aaargh." "Are you excited about the new baby?" "Yeah, but no way will I have this many kids."

How does a Lubavitch kid express rebellion? Mordechai wants to go to college. He wants to be a doctor.

"First, he has to be a rabbi," says

Yakov, not kidding. Lubavitch men usually go into business — computers, electronics, jewelry (the diamond merchants in New York are legendary) or have service jobs. Yakov, once a full-time rabbi in Tampa, now designs computer software for large corporations; he performs weddings and *brisses* (circumcisions) on the side. Women who work are most often teachers, like Malka. Lubavitch professionals — doctors, lawyers, accountants — generally finished their educations before they became religious.

Unlike the majority of Jews who value higher education, Lubavitch children are discouraged from attending college. They go to *yeshiva* instead, shielded from the dangers and temptations of the secular world, or become apprentices in their field of interest.

"In a university, you're exposed to philosophies of every nature — atheistic science that denies the existence of God," says Malka. "And the lifestyle of the college student isn't the Jewish lifestyle; it's morally dangerous. The opposite sexes shouldn't touch before marriage. Why expose them to it?"

Another woman said to me, "What do they need to go to college for?"

STRANGERS

Everything they need to know is in the Torah.”

The Books of Moses

The Torah — the Five Books of Moses — is the wellspring of Judaic faith. The Torah and the 20-volume Talmud, which interprets and comments on the Torah, are sacred staples in a Lubavitch household. These, along with other holy books, hold all the knowledge upon which believers base their lives. Each moment of a Hasidic life is thus decreed.

The backbones of Orthodox life are the 613 *mitzvot* or laws of the Torah: 248 positive (“thou shalt”) and 365 negative (“thou shalt not”), including the Ten Commandments. *Mitzvot* range from basic tenets of religious life — edicts on prayer, keeping kosher, resting on the Sabbath, circumcision — to esoteric laws from ancient times concerning animal sacrifice, the proper way to sell a Jewish slave, and the punishment for adultery (choose one: flogging, exile, beheading, strangulation, burning, stoning or hanging). Adulterers are no longer stoned, but adultery is considered one of the three cardinal sins, along with murder and worshiping idols. Repentance is possible, but only after a concerted effort supervised by a rabbi that usually includes fasting and studying.

Sex is considered a holy act since it can result in the creation of another soul. The command “Be fruitful and multiply” accounts for the multitudes of Lubavitch kids: “Procreation for the *mitzvah* of it,” says Malka. “We don’t use birth control unless it’s for health or psycho-

logical reasons.” Abortions are permitted within the first 40 days, but only with permission of the rabbis, and only if something’s wrong, which doesn’t include Down’s syndrome. “They are considered special souls,” says Malka. “God put them in the world for a purpose. It’s not our privilege to take a life, and that includes suicide.”

No-no’s include wearing the clothing of the opposite sex, getting tattooed, shaving the beard, practicing astrology, soothsaying, witchcraft and wearing wool and linen together. *Mitzvot* that appear to make no sense at all — like that last one — are called *chukim*. They have no explanations; no one seems to know where they came from. They are kept simply because the Torah commands it.

Nidah laws often cause outsiders the most puzzlement. “Nidah” refers to the impurity of women. Other impurities are acquired by such means as contact with dead animals or ingesting forbidden food — but it is womens’ intrinsic impurity that is the focus of an extensive set of laws set out in a 96-page booklet, “Code of Jewish Family Purity.” And this is the condensed version.

Ignorance of these marital laws, according to the preface, “hurls many of our faithful brothers and sisters into a whirlpool of sin and contaminates their children with an indelible impurity,” cutting them off from immortality. A woman is a “Nidah,” ritually unclean, for 12 days: the five days of her period, plus the seven “clean days” that precede immersion in a ritual bath called the *mikvah*, after which she and her hus-

band may resume relations — which they do, apparently, with great relish. (“It’s like becoming a bride all over again each month,” gushed more than one woman.)

Not coincidentally, this is also the peak time of female fertility.

During the 12 days of impurity, husband and wife do not touch at all. They can’t hand each other anything, not even a child, who must first be set down before the other picks it up. They must not sit side-by-side on anything that rocks or moves, or travel together in the same vehicle. When they are eating, they must place an object between them. She cannot sing in his presence, he may not smell her perfume, and “affectionate conversation, levity, etc., are forbidden” between them.

The *mikvah*, where married women are immersed in a mixture of rainwater and city water four feet deep, must be a proper, kosher *mikvah* or the intercourse following immersion is considered incest. “It is more important to us than the synagogue,” says Malka Verde. “It isn’t just cleanliness; it’s spiritual cleanliness, a connection with God. Before you even take a *mikvah*, you have to be squeaky clean.”

More than squeaky clean. Before undergoing *tviloh* — immersion — a woman must cut and clean fingernails and toenails; Q-tip her bellybutton; clean her teeth using a toothpick to make sure there are no stray particles; take a half-hour bath and shampoo; remove nail polish, jewelry, contacts, Band-Aids, false eyelashes and false teeth. If she has scabs, splinters, artificial nails or peeling skin, she must get special permission from the rabbi. Before she immerses, she is examined by the *mikvah* matron to make sure there are no violations, and that no foreign substance, not even a stray hair, will come between her and the purifying waters, or it is all invalidated and she remains a Nidah.

Even when a woman is purified, she must comply with rigid laws governing modesty: A married woman must keep her hair covered in the sight of any male but her husband. All women must cover elbows and knees year-round. In Miami’s hot and humid weather these rules can be a real test of faith, not to mention fashion. Yet these women gladly do it, and do it with style. Some are real knockouts in their designer dresses and glamorous wigs. Says Malka, “Why not? You can be pretty and be modest at the same time.”

STRANGERS

But who commanded such modesty? Covering the hair, for instance, comes from a single mention in the 3,300-year-old Five Books of Moses, where an adulteress was forced to uncover her hair. Covering the body dates back to the Gemara — the oral law — which forbids women to enter the marketplace with elbows and knees, considered sensual areas of the body, uncovered. The basic idea is that women are simply too tempting to spiritually less-developed men, and men must be protected from their charms — though that doesn't stop women from dressing up glamorously. Malka doesn't worry about apparent contradictions or question the source of the restrictions. "If you accept the laws, you don't delve into where they came from," she shrugs.

Sorority

"Good evening, Ladies and Ladies!" Ruthi Navon greets her screaming fans

— all women — as she bursts onto the stage of the Castle Hotel theater. Navon's wild curly wig is flying, her voluptuous figure sheathed in blue velvet as she strides into the lights. Malka beats her hands together, leaping to her feet in excitement. "I'm such a groupie!" she squeals.

Ruthi only sings for women. Even a woman's voice is considered too alluring. Her husband, a former rock drummer who quit when they became religious, is the only man permitted to hear her sing, and then only when she's not in a state of impurity.

"There's a legal technicality that permits men to listen to women sing on radio or tape, because it's electronic," Malka explains. But because Ruthi is also a friend of theirs, Yakov can't even listen on tape. Way too intimate.

Before she became religious, Ruthi was a rock star in Israel. Now, with the same energy and stage presence, she performs benefits such as this concert,

which will help needy Jewish brides. Her range is religious rock to soft lullabies, sung in English, Yiddish and Hebrew, backed up by an all-female band. The crowd, as they say, goes wild.

"Hinda, she's not shy," Malka laughs as her 11-year-old rushes to the stage at Ruthi's invitation, joining well-dressed, bewigged matrons, *babushka'd* grandmothers and some of her schoolmates in the Hora, a circle dance.

The concert is over. The women file out to wait for their cars at valet parking, toting their complimentary "Color Me Beautiful" bags of cosmetics. They all seem to know each other, hugging, kissing, asking about the family. I feel like I'm rushing a sorority, and know I won't make the cut.

Maybe it's the common experience of rituals like the *mikvah* that makes Lubavitch women so close-knit. Maybe their bonding is a byproduct of the segregation imposed to prevent men from being seduced by the female presence.

They don't consider themselves limited or handicapped in the roles of mother, wife, homemaker. Rather, they see that as a privilege: The keeper of the flame.

"From the outside, it looks like we're repressed, but really we are exalted, on a higher plane," says Malka. "I was women's lib before I became observant, and I haven't changed my stance." I must look skeptical because she adds, "Being around women all of the time makes you appreciate even more how strong and capable they are."

They do seem strong and capable, but in their world the men are the ones who make and enforce the rules. A daily men's prayer goes like this: "*Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, who hast not made me a woman.*"

The women's prayer is: "*Thank you for making me according to God's will.*"

That might sound like a woman accepting a subservient role, but Lubavitch women think of it as celebrating the privilege of being the one God

made responsible for bearing and raising children. "The reason the man has to wear a *yarmulke*," Malka says, "is because he has to be reminded of God constantly. A woman doesn't. She is closest to God because she has the creative power within her own body."

Though men sometimes seem to have all the choice assignments in communal life, it is interesting to note that the Talmud teaches that in conjugal relations it is man's responsibility to please his wife.

Still, sometimes a woman's lot can seem unambiguously harsh. Leah Cohen became Lubavitch at about the same time she met her husband. They married after a brief courtship. Now, after three children, she's facing her conviction that they are incompatible. In mainstream society, she would simply seek a divorce. Under Jewish law it is the man who gives a bill of divorce, called a *get*, and the woman who receives it. If he refuses, she is an *agunah*, Hebrew for "a woman in chains," unable to remarry until the man dies.

"Divorce is the biggest test in *yiddishkeit*," admits Leah, whose husband refuses to give her a *get*. "You can't understand why the law is made like this. My father doesn't understand. He says, 'Why don't you just get a civil divorce?' But even though the rabbis don't forbid it, I'm not going to civil court at this time.

"Maybe I just don't understand things. I have to live my life according to Torah, regardless if it seems biased. Maybe I don't know enough. This could be a punishment for something. God is divine, I'm only human. It's my problem, not being able to deal with it."

The *Sheitl-Macher*

The young blond woman knows what she wants: "I want to be able to put it in a pony, little wisps around the face, not so flat, all one length. Look," she complains, whipping the blond

wig — a *sheitl* — off her head, "you can see the knots." Her own hair is pulled back into a ponytail, squashed beneath a tight-fitting cap.

"You don't see one knot in my *sheitls*," counters Clary Zinger, the visiting wigmaker, gritting her teeth. It's been a long day. She plunks the wig back on the woman's head. "Look. See? Visps," she says in her Hungarian accent, fluffing the bangs up, "and ve make a little 'ump' in front."

"Rivka! Come look," the blond demands, and Rivka, who owns this Miami Beach wig styling shop, comes out and looks. Rivka isn't her real name; she insists that I change it or she won't permit me to observe.

Clary, whose wig business is in Antwerp, Belgium, is in Miami for two days to take orders for her \$2,000 custom-made wigs made from virgin (meaning never colored or permed) hair "from nuns, or from Russia now that it's opened up." She's been in the business 30 years, has 20 people working for her, speaks seven languages and has six kids. In these two days, she will take over 20 orders; when the wigs are shipped back to Miami, Rivka will style them.

Youthful, attractive, mother of six, Rivka, like her husband, has been Lubavitch since birth. She moved here from Crown Heights 13 years ago and became *sheitl-macher* for the Miami Beach Lubavitch. She fits and sells ready-made wigs from \$50 to \$350. Malka is here today to pick up a wig she had washed and styled.

Shelves of Styrofoam wig heads crowned in brunet pixie shags, red tousled curls, and blond Dolly Parton bouffants provide a blank-faced audience. The pace quickens. Hair clippings tumble across the floor, stirred by gusts from the open door as women trailed by kids come and go, taking turns in Clary's chair.

"This is my first *sheitl*." The woman shifts nervously in

STRANGERS

the chair, staring at the mirror while Clary molds the cap to her head. She's been gradually becoming observant, and now she's ready to cross a line. "I'm uncomfortable because my rabbi sees my hair. He won't look at me when he makes a blessing at my table."

"My own father and sons won't look at me when they make a *boruchah* [blessing] because they know my head isn't shaved *under my sheitel*," Clary says, sympathizing. "They're a very strict Hungarian Hasidic sect."

Suddenly, Clary turns to me for the first time. The words tumble out as she tells her story:

"We were the only Jewish family in a small Hungarian village in the 1950s. The revolution in 1956 changed everything. I was picked on in school by my teachers. They made me write on Shabbos. It was hard to keep religious, to keep kosher; no other Jews were there to watch or care, it would have been easy not to. But we did.

"My father said I had to make 100 percent in all my classes or he wouldn't let me into the house. So I did, I made 100 percent in the conservatory, and after I graduated he took me to the hairdresser's shop in the village and told me, 'This is what you will do.' I had to apprentice with the hairdresser. That was my sacrifice for being a woman.

"I'm still angry with him. I wanted to be a lawyer — who knows what I could have done or been?"

Rivka interrupts, agitated: "How many of us don't dream and wonder 'what if?' Take what she's saying with a grain of salt. That's not what she meant — she meant it's a blessing to be able to sacrifice as a woman, that it's the woman who has the most important job, raising a family, cooking for them, tying shoelaces, rocking them to sleep. To be a woman is to hold the future."

Clary backtracks, agrees. "I understand my father. He was a survivor, he lost six children in the war and then he had me. I was the girl. He felt that if I had gone out into the city, I would have been a *shiksa* [a non-Jewish woman]. This way, as a hairdresser, he'd know where I'd be, what I'd be doing, that I could take care of myself. And I love what I do, I've done well in my business, so on the one hand I'm grateful to my father for making me remain religious." She pauses. "And on the other, I'm still angry."

Behind the Gingham Curtain

I am surrounded by women as we crowd behind the gingham check curtain separating us from the men's side of the *shul* during Shavuus services. Women and children are crammed into about a third of the space allotted the men. Taking advantage of my near-to-curtain front-row position, I dare to detach the curtain from the Velcro tabs designed to keep it shut, lift it and peel.

A few men meet my stare, glare back,



Three of Yakov and Malka's children — from right, Hinda, 11, Gedalia, 9, and Menachem, 2, at play in the back yard. Their parents hope they grow up to be just as Orthodox as they are.

then resume *davening*, bobbing back and forth to their own rhythms as they pray fervently, prayer shawls thrown over heads, often encompassing young kids — boys and girls both — who have wandered over. Unlike the temples and *shuls* I have been familiar with all my life, the *shuls* of the Lubavitch seem informal, almost disorganized. There is no one rabbi at the *bima*, or pulpit, leading the congregation in a cut-and-dried service, following the prayer book like a cookbook. Instead it appears to be a do-your-own-thing service with minimal leadership, everyone muttering and bobbing to some inner voice, occasionally responding to the rabbi and the cantor.

The women's side, shut off from whatever is happening on the men's, nevertheless duplicates its pattern, sight unseen. I am amazed that the women manage to *daven*, tend to the numerous yet well-behaved children oozing in and out of chairs and laps, and follow the invisible-to-me service. I riffle through the prayer book in an attempt to at least fake it, even though I can't read Hebrew, when suddenly a hand reaches over and flips through my book. The long, pale finger of a white-turbaned woman snakes its way across the page and points out the place. Somewhere in all

this chaos, there is order.

That may be the secret of Lubavitch: from an apparently endless maze of obscurity there emerges a clear path. The unending struggle to fulfill regulations and observances yields purpose, and a goal: eternal life. To its followers, the insular Lubavitch life provides comfort, security and community in a world that grows more frightening each day.

This appeal is by no means unique to Orthodox Judaism. According to a study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, religious fundamentalism of all kinds — Christian, Muslim and Jewish — is escalating globally as world stress escalates.

"Becoming Lubavitch changed my life completely," says psychologist Rhoda Lipton. "I've lived both lives. The other life stinks. It's terrible, a disaster; you don't know where you're going or what you're doing. *Our kids aren't on drugs, screwing around, or getting AIDS.*"

True Romance

Looking at a family portrait, Malka Verde exclaims: "I still can't believe I have all these kids! It's one thing when they come one at a time, but when I see them all together it's overwhelming, that they're all mine."

Kids R Us could be the Lubavitch logo. They're everywhere and remarkably well-behaved, even in groups. Big ones care for little ones; Hinda, the 11-year-old, has claimed the new baby, who will sleep in her room once it is weaned. She's already the Little Mother, looking after her younger brothers and sisters, as Basya does.

Basya is 15 now, and she and Malka disagree about certain things. "She'll argue about the length of sleeves, why do they have to be below the elbow — that kind of thing."

Basya goes to the beach and swims, but must wear a long T-shirt to cover herself. "I don't bother swimming any more," says Malka. "It's too much trouble."

She dismisses the older kids' occasional rumbles of rebellion. "They're just being teenagers," she says, but adds, "I hope they choose this life from their own inner decisions," as she and Yakov did, "not just because they were brought up this way. It takes a powerful, inspirational experience to want to do this. It's a hard life to live just for the heck of it."

She says she would be unhappy if any of her children chose to be less observant, but "I would not forbid it. As adults, they would be on their own. Everybody has free choice." If — God

"Becoming Lubavitch changed my life completely. I've lived both lives. The other life stinks. It's terrible, a disaster; you don't know where you're going or what you're doing. Our kids aren't on drugs, screwing around, or getting AIDS."

— Rhoda Lipton,
Psychologist

forbid — one of her children married outside the faith, "I would follow the law. I wouldn't let my own emotions override the law." The law says a parent must disown a child who marries a non-Jew.

Such questions are part of the curriculum at Lubavitch schools — separate for girls and boys — which teach basics such as science and math, but focus on Jewish history and ethics, the subjects Malka teaches at the girls' high school of Landow Yeshiva.

Malka apologizes for the run-down condition of the school on the day I visit. "We believe in the internal things, not the external," she says with a wry chuckle. But it's true the school is short of money, and dedicated teachers have forgone paychecks just to keep the place going.

Parents who can afford to pay, do; all the other kids are on scholarship. Nobody gets turned away. The Verdes' payments for their seven oldest children help make that possible. It also makes tuition a greater burden than their mortgage, says Malka. Not to mention the cost of keeping kosher — Lubavitch grocery bills are roughly twice what nonkosher families spend.

Malka has learned not to sweat the finances. "God provides," she says. "I used to worry how we would support all of these kids, but I don't worry any more. Somehow, it works out. Families manage, and everyone takes care of everyone else."

Malka helps defray some of the tuition by teaching a few hours each day. To outside ears her subjects can seem arcane,

but among Lubavitchers the names of ancient rabbis and the minutiae of events thousands of years in the past may crop up in daily conversation.

This particular morning, current events are dominant — one in particular: The upcoming marriage of one of Malka's 16-year-old students to the handsome 22-year-old Key West Lubavitcher rabbi. The love story goes like this: The rabbi's parents sold their Miami Beach home to the girl's parents. The rabbi was instantly smitten, but she was only 13, so he waited three years, chastely visiting the family whenever he could. The parents only thought he missed his old home, until their daughter came of age and the rabbi announced his intention.

The girl's classmates are thrilled with the romance of it, but their mothers aren't. "They would rather their girls wait until they're 18 or 19, so they can travel, go to camp, have a life before they marry and start having kids," says Malka. "By 17, she'll have her first baby, and she'll be a mother from then on."

The July wedding — at a Key West Holiday Inn — was indeed a great event. I had to give the report to Malka by phone. She had been unable to attend. Two weeks before, after a long and difficult labor, she had given birth to a boy: Schneur Zalman Chanoch Verde, Yakov and Malka's ninth child. God willing, not the last. ■

MARJORIE KLEIN is a freelance writer.