



The Lubavitch House at the corner of Lake Drive and Kenwood Boulevard is the heart of Chabad-Lubavitch of Wisconsin. The organization's headquarters moved to Glendale in 2017. SCOTT ASH / NOW NEWS GROUP

Hasidic Jewish group has grown statewide

Chabad-Lubavitch of Wisconsin now has 13 synagogues

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Yisroel and Devorah Shmotkin were in their early 20s when they decided to leave their Hasidic Jewish community in Brooklyn to begin their life's work in Milwaukee.

Yisroel, who was born and raised in Israel, only knew Hebrew and Yiddish at the time.

With his black fedora and long beard, he and Devorah visited Milwaukee synagogues to spread the message of a Hasidic Jewish movement called Chabad-Lubavitch.

That was 50 years ago. Since then, the Shmotkins went from holding living room services in their two-bedroom upper flat in Sherman Park to leading an organization with 13 synagogues, four schools and more than 70 programs.

Roughly 2,000 people across Wisconsin participate in Chabad's programs, according to their son, Rabbi Mendel Shmotkin. Young professionals participate in social gatherings; seniors get help with independent living; special needs individuals find job training



Devorah and Yisroel Shmotkin are the founders of Chabad-Lubavitch of Wisconsin. SCOTT ASH / NOW NEWS GROUP

and recreational activities. The opportunities go on and on.

While most of the organization's facilities are in Madison, Milwaukee and Milwaukee's North Shore suburbs, Chabad-Lubavitch has expanded its footprint in recent years with new Chabad houses in Waukesha, Kenosha and Green Bay.

Wisdom, understanding, knowledge

Founded in 1775, the Chabad movement rose to international prominence after World War II with Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh in a dynastic line of Lubavitch "rebbe," or grand rabbis, dating to 18th-century Russia.

Schneerson did not name a successor before he died in 1994. Many thought the Chabad-Lubavitch movement would come to an end without a leader. Instead, the movement has continued to expand across the world.

In a recent celebration in Milwaukee honoring the 25th anniversary of the Rebbe's death, Schneerson's secretary, Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, said the organization has seen more schluchim, or emissaries, dispatch since his death than it saw during his lifetime.

About 4,900 emissary families operate nearly 4,000 Chabad centers in more than 75 countries around the world.

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The name Chabad is a Hebrew acronym for wisdom, understanding and knowledge; Lubavitch is the tiny Russian village where some of the movement's early leaders lived in the 19th century. The organization reaches out to all Jews, regardless of sect or level of observance, to teach them about Jewish faith and history.

Still, it has not been without controversy. Some Jewish groups question what they regard as relentless recruiting; in some countries, Chabad has been accused of virtually wanting to take control of — or at least speak for — Jewish communities. And some Jews are put off by the level of devotion to Rabbi Schneerson, even in death.

'A decimated generation'

The Shmotkins were among the first wave of emissaries dispatched by Schneerson to help American Jews reconnect with their faith and heritage in the 1960s.

When they arrived in Milwaukee, they found only about 30 Orthodox Jewish families, all concentrated in a five-block radius near Sherman Park.

"The East Side and the suburbs were like the Forbidden City," Yisroel Shmotkin said.

Shmotkin said many Jews who moved to the U.S. after the Holocaust did not bring their Jewish traditions with them.

"It was a decimated generation that came after the Holocaust," Devorah Shmotkin said. "They could barely hold their heads up."

The Shmotkins focused most of their initial outreach efforts on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus. At a time when young people were questioning authority, Shmotkin said, college students were intrigued by Schneerson's message that all Jews were welcome, regardless of their level of observance.

"We were giving spiritually hungry people what they were lacking," he said.

The Shmotkins decided they needed a house close to campus, so they moved to Summit Avenue in 1971. Two years later, with the help of a local donor, they were able to make a down payment on a 10-bedroom brick house at the corner of Lake Drive and Kenwood Boulevard.

The house cost only \$80,000, Shmotkin said, because the oil embargo made people wary of the energy costs associated with such a large home.

Growth of Chabad

In the last 50 years, Chabad-Lubavitch of Wisconsin has grown far beyond its East Side headquarters.

Lubavitch opened its first Madison location in 1973. A youth day camp, Camp Gan Israel, was established in 1973 in Milwaukee. Lubavitch Nursery School, now known as Jewish Beginnings, opened in the North Shore in 1975.

Lubavitch opened its first traditional synagogue, or shul, in Fox Point in 1983. That synagogue would later relocate to Mequon, where it became the Peltz Center for Jewish Life. The facility now includes a synagogue, preschool, Hebrew school, Judaic library and Torah center.

With the addition of a downtown Chabad in 1990, an East Side Chabad in 2002 and a campus house in 2011, Lubavitch now has four synagogues in the city of Milwaukee.

Chabad of Bayside was founded in 1999. In 2010, The Shul Center moved to

its current location at 8825 N. Lake Drive.

In 2017, Chabad-Lubavitch acquired two buildings at the corner of Green Bay and Green Tree roads for a new synagogue, high school and administrative offices.

The organization has also expanded its programming to include clubs for women, teens and young professionals.

The Friendship Circle, for example, is a program that has provided social, recreational and educational opportunities for Milwaukee-area residents with special needs since 2004.

The organization plans to provide job training for adults with special needs at a bakery, coffee shop and art space that is scheduled to open in Fox Point this winter.

Growth elsewhere in the state

Lubavitch is also acquiring new Chabad houses in Kenosha, Waukesha and Green Bay.

Much like the Shmotkins 50 years ago, rabbis in these communities often develop a local network with just a few families. They start by holding services in their house. As their following grows, the need for a synagogue arises.

In Kenosha, the B'nei Tzedek Chabad congregation has decided to move services out of Rabbi Tzali Wilchanski's house and into a new building that will include a synagogue, library and a mikvah for ritual immersion.

The Waukesha-Brookfield chapter of Chabad-Lubavitch is also expanding, and recently purchased a new building at 1275 N. Barker Road.

In the Milwaukee area, Jewish families often learn about Chabad-Lubavitch because of the organization's preschool, day camp and other programming available to the wider Jewish community.

Many others are introduced to Chabad-Lubavitch through the holiday guides the organization distributes to 10,000 homes in 47 cities throughout Wisconsin.

You are getting 'the real thing'

One of those holiday guides landed in the hands of attorney Rick Marcus about 40 years ago.

Marcus had grown up attending a reform synagogue. His family held a Seder dinner on Passover and attended synagogue on High Holy Days, but they did not keep kosher or observe Shabbat.

Marcus connected with Rabbi Joseph Samuels of the downtown Chabad house. In their weekly meetings, Marcus said he would learn about aspects of Judaism that he was not exposed to growing up.

Marcus, who now serves as the board chairman of Chabad-Lubavitch of Wisconsin, said he appreciated the authenticity of Chabad.

"I think people are naturally attracted to it, because you know you are getting the real thing," he said.

The Shmotkins' son, Rabbi Mendel Shmotkin, is the executive vice president of Chabad-Lubavitch of Wisconsin. In the past 50 years, he said, more than 300 Wisconsin families have started observing Shabbat.

Shmotkin said he is not on a mission to convert people. Rather, he said, he is fulfilling the Rebbe's mission to reach every Jew in Wisconsin and help them "find their latent Jewish spark."

"This is about helping people find what's already theirs," he said.

Shmotkin said he believes people are attracted to Schneerson's vision for a Judaism that accepts all Jews, regardless of their observance.

"You're not a Jew by what you do.

You're a Jew by who you are," Shmotkin said. "There's an unconditional love there. You are part of this family. You are part of this Jewish community. That's in your spiritual DNA. Now it's a question of finding a mitzvah, a practice, an involvement, that speaks to you."

At the same time, though, Shmotkin does not believe in bending the orthodox — some would call it ultra-Orthodox — interpretation of Judaism to gain more followers.

"We believe every person ought to be exposed to a rich and complex Judaism, with the trust that they will figure out how to find something that speaks to them that they can participate in," he said.

Growing high school

Lubavitch has also expanded its educational institutions, with 480 students enrolled across eight schools.

About 130 students attend Jewish Beginnings, a preschool on the Karl Jewish Community Campus in Fox Point. Next door, another 151 students attend the K-8 Bader Hillel Academy.

In 2013, Lubavitch opened its first high school in the area, Bader Hillel High School.

Boys and girls are separated. The boys currently occupy the former Good Hope School in Glendale; the girls recently took over a building at the southwest corner of Green Bay and Green Tree roads.

In the past six years, the high school's enrollment has grown from four to more than 50 students.

Shmotkin said about half of the students come from the Milwaukee area, the rest from other areas of the country.

Sonia Beame, for example, came from Florida. Her family did not keep Shabbat growing up, but her experience at a Jewish summer camp inspired her to become more devoted to her faith.

Sonia looked at Jewish high schools in Florida and around the country, but they all seemed too expensive or required a religious background. Finally, someone suggested Bader Hillel High School in Glendale.

Sonia said she was drawn to the small, close-knit environment of about 17 girls — a major change from her previous high school in Florida, which had nearly 3,000 students.

"It's nice that it's small in a way," she said. "It's more family-oriented."

Sonia lives with seven other girls and counselors in a house near the school. The other female students live in the Milwaukee area with their parents. She said the environment of the school and her house allow for close friendships.

"It felt like my two lives came together, my Jewish life and my school life," she said. "I don't have to be two different people in two different places."

New synagogue

When school is not in session, the Glendale building is used as a synagogue called the Chabad Lubavitch Torah Center.

The synagogue draws about 75 people per week, Shmotkin said, with more people attending on High Holy Days. About half of the membership comes from the former Soviet Union, he said.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, many Jews left for other countries.

Among them were Ayzik and Rachel Okun, who lived in Belarus.

"We were not satisfied with life as Jews in the former Soviet Union," Rachel Okun said. "We always felt insecure and not welcomed."

Judaism, like other religions, could not legally be practiced in Soviet society. Still, some Orthodox Jews kept their

Understanding Jewish traditions

Kosher: Food that may be consumed under Jewish dietary laws. Generally speaking, meat must come from animals that are slaughtered in a painless manner. The blood must be removed. Certain animal products, such as pork or shellfish, cannot be consumed. Meat should not be mixed with dairy products.

Shabbat: Shabbat or Shabbos is a day of rest and celebration that begins at sunset Friday and ends the following evening after nightfall. Because this is a day of rest, observers do not work, drive or initiate the use of electrical appliances.

The Beard: Many Orthodox Jewish men do not shave their beards because the Torah prohibits men from using a straight razor to cut their beard.

Tallit: In Jewish tradition, men wear this Jewish prayer shawl that has fringes attached to each of its corners. According to the Torah, the fringes will remind its wearer to follow God and his commandments.

Tefillin: Hebrew parchment scrolls that are placed within small leather boxes, which are wrapped around a person's head and arm during prayer. The Torah prescribes this practice, which represents the alignment of heart, mind and deed each day.

Kippah: A kippah, or yarmulke, is a head covering worn by Jewish men to add awareness of God's presence. Some men will also wear a fedora on top of the kippah.

Sheitel: A wig or head covering worn by some married Jewish women that is seen as a symbol of modesty.

Mikvah: A central component in traditional Jewish life, a mikvah is a pool of water used for ritual immersion. The mikvah represents renewal and is used to renew intimacy between a husband and wife every month. The mikvah is also used when one converts to Judaism or is prepared for burial.

(Source: chabad.org, Rabbi Mendel Shmotkin)

faith and traditions in small Jewish towns, known as shtetls.

Ayzik Okun grew up in a shtetl in Belarus, and celebrated some of the Jewish holidays growing up.

Rachel Okun, on the other hand, never knew she was Jewish until later in life. Her grandparents were practicing Jews, but they never passed their religion on to her parents for fear they would be discriminated against.

When they moved to Fox Point in 1994, Rachel Okun said, "It was a huge relief when we noticed that people accepted us for who we are."

They were welcomed by Jewish Family Services. They also met Rabbi Yaakov Elman, who invited them to his house for Shabbat dinners and Jewish holiday celebrations.

Elman is the director of Lubavitch's Jewish REACH program, which was formed in 1988 to help Jews from the former Soviet Union transition to American life, as well as provide counseling, youth programs and religious education.

Rachel Okun said she appreciates how Shmotkin, the rabbi at the Glendale synagogue, has been patient and slow in introducing them to the teachings of the Torah.

"It was an unbelievable gift for us to get back our faith, and at our own pace," she said.