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 Excerpt
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Introduction

Illuminating Hasidism

The Hasidic image fascinates. Perhaps more than any other images purporting to represent prewar Jewish life, photographer Roman Vishniac's work for Jewish relief organizations in the 1930s, published under the telling title *A Vanished World*, supplied American audiences with their quintessential images of Eastern European Hasidim.¹ Vishniac's work, which takes as its subject the waning days of shtetl life in the 1930s, illustrates the tension between the ways Hasidim serve as ethnographic subjects – especially as symbols of the Holocaust – and the ways they act as producers of their own image. In describing his experience as an ethnographic photographer among ultra-religious Jews, Vishniac emphasized the clandestine nature of his art, reporting the need to keep his camera hidden from his “ultra-Orthodox members of the [Jewish] community, [as] he had to be mindful of the suspicion with which photographers and other ‘image-makers’ were greeted.”² This oft-quoted musing buoys the raw authenticity of Vishniac's images, but also reveals a fundament of early-twentieth-century art theory that pinned Jews against Art and that historians Kalman Bland, Steven Fine, and Margaret Olin successfully unraveled in the last decade.³ Despite the exposure of the “artless Jew” as a literary fiction,

¹ Jeffrey Shandler charts the complex reception history of Vishniac's photographs as they progressed from “images of urgency” for relief organizations working on behalf of Eastern European Jewry in the 1930s to “images of doom” in the 1940s to emerge as “images of legacy” after the Holocaust. For the ways that photographic technology came to evoke a broader “freezing” of Orthodoxy before the Holocaust, see Jeffrey Shandler, “The Time of Vishniac,” *Polin* 16 (November 2003): 332. For a summary of Maya Benton's curatorial work on Vishniac's cropping out signs of modernity in his prewar images, see Alana Newhouse, “A Closer Reading of Roman Vishniac,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 4, 2010: 36.

² Quoted in Shandler, “The Time of Vishniac,” 319.

³ On the nineteenth-century denial of a Jewish artistic style as a way to exclude Jews from the modern nation-state, see Margaret Olin, “Nationalism, the Jews, and Art History,” *Judaism* 45 (Fall 1996): 461–82. See also Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Catherine Soussloff, ed., *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

art-historical discourse continues to echo characterizations of ultra-Orthodox Jews as un-artistic, further maligned by the evidence of their “misinformed” iconoclasm.

Vishniac’s claim of the “ultra-Orthodox” rejection of his photographic project should not be interpreted as a religious disapproval of photography despite a certain poetic beauty that even Orthodox Jews have found in the notion of Vishniac’s hidden camera. Rather, the much beloved tradition of Vishniac’s clandestine camera work – and this required secrecy is far from certain – should be interpreted as a rejection of the non-Orthodox and foreign Vishniac and his particular project to record disadvantaged Jews, particularly Hasidim, in need of American Jewish aid.⁴ When it came to their own communities, Hasidim played an avid role in their own image making, constructing the parameters of reverential viewing and establishing ritualized models for envisioning the ethereal – for example, the divine or the messianic redemption. However, the much reported rejection of outsider images by Hasidic groups sometimes obstructs a full appreciation of image making by Hasidic communities. Although Vishniac and others read a generalized suspicion of image making into Hasidic hostility toward non-Hasidic artistic projects, the more accurate interpretation is a zealous protection of a carefully honed image that the Hasidic group seeks to perpetuate. Throughout this book, both reverence toward the culture making of the Hasidic master and rejection of outsider cultural claims define the image and establish its role in the religious experience.

The “Hasidic subject” does not simply reject the outsider image as a way to establish the boundaries of the outside world; this position of rejection simultaneously expresses an insider image as an act of membership in a religious community. Mapping the vicissitudes of rejection reveals as multilayered a portrait as the most nuanced study of devotional practices. Just as images of ultra-Orthodox Jews, particularly Chagallesque images of otherworldly Hasidim, played a role in the process of Jewish acculturation in America throughout the twentieth century, images of secular Jews played a vital role in the process of Hasidic acculturation. To put it more concretely with yet one more iconic example, religious “types” (for example, the water carrier, the rabbi, the fiddler) in early-twentieth-century Jewish New Year’s greeting cards helped sanction evolving Jewish lifestyles in America, but by the same token, the inclusion of non-Hasidic others in Hasidic visual culture helped strengthen a sense of independent group identity.

We might single out the notion of *vanishment*, a term synonymous with Vishniac’s images of religious Jews and their Eastern European landscapes, to understand how Hasidim integrated the concept of vanishment into their

⁴ Maya Benton, collection manager for the Vishniac estate, convincingly casts doubt on Vishniac’s use of a hidden camera. Benton lectured on the ways that Vishniac cropped out signs of modernity in his prewar images at “Shattered Memories of a Vanishing World: The Deliberate Photography of Roman Vishniac,” Colloquium on *Looking Jewish: Photography, Memory and the Sacred*, April 29, 2007.

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own vision. While the “vanishing” Eastern European Jewish landscape in such iconic images as those in Vishniac’s photographic albums helped American Jews imagine their historical if irretrievable “roots,” Hasidim replicated (at least on the face of it) images of the Old World (for example in fashion and domestic decorating) in their American communities. From examples as wide-ranging as urban posters (*pashkevilim*) to children’s board games, Hasidic image makers applied the notion of “vanishment” to those Jews disappearing of their own agency into the modern American landscape. In Hasidic culture the image of vanishing Jews describes a contemporary demographic, still redeemable, but more often portrayed as potentially dangerous conduits of assimilation.⁵ And whereas mid-twentieth-century American images of Hasidim tended to contextualize Hasidim in the bygone shtetl, images of America played a significant part in Hasidic visual culture as well. Rarely reproduced in celebratory Judaica albums, images of America circulated both in Europe, during the waves of emigration that Hasidic leaders attempted to curb at the turn of the twentieth century, and then in America during a period of Hasidic reconstruction after the Holocaust. In this desire to define the “inside” through an inclusion or rejection of the “outside,” an intriguing dynamism emerges. The image of the Hasid in a world apart from mainstream European and American culture is one of the myths this book rejects at the outset while elucidating some of the ways that one Hasidic movement engages that stereotype for its own institution-building. By adopting a position of “outsider,” Hasidic groups can selectively engage popular culture and modern media to define and perpetuate their own core principles.

This book looks at the Belarusian Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement and the rich visual culture that the movement produced from the 1880s until today. I chose to focus on Chabad not because it is representative of other Hasidic movements, which often it is not, but because Chabad pioneered and popularized the use of “things,” such as portraits, architecture, and objects in the modern religious experience.⁶ Chabad originated in the late eighteenth century and flourished for a century and a half on the border of Lithuanian territories, far from other Hasidic communities in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Mitnagdim, the religious opponents of Hasidism exercised considerable

⁵ For articles that invoked the fears of Jewish vanishment in the United States and were influential in Chabad outreach organizations throughout the late sixties, see Erich Rosenthal, “Studies of Jewish Inter-marriage in the United States,” *American Jewish Yearbook* 64 (1963): 3–53; Thomas B. Morgan, “The Vanishing American Jew,” *Look* 28 (May 5, 1964): 42–46; Morton Adler, “What is a Jew?,” *Harpers* 228 (January 1964): 41–5.

⁶ For one insider justification of Chabad’s use of the rebbe-portrait, see Gedaliah Oberlander, “Pictures and Images of Zaddikim in Jewish Law and Tradition,” *Heichal HaBesht* (Brooklyn: Heichal Menachem, 2006), 55–74 [Hebrew]. In his defense of Hasidic rebbe portraiture, Oberlander argued that Hasidim were particularly predisposed to photography because of their desire to get close to their rebbes (citing the Arizal who wrote in his *Midbar Kedeimos*, *Erech Tziur* that one should picture the image of the rebbe when striving to understand a Torah concept one is struggling to comprehend).

influence in the region where Chabad developed, a formative fact in the development of the character of Chabad's institutions and one that further divided Chabad from other branches of Hasidism. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founding leader of the Chabad dynasty, integrated a rigorous approach to Torah scholarship within a kabbalistic framework, whereas other Hasidic branches emphasized spiritual service through prayer, meditation, and song. Even the title Shneur Zalman chose for his movement is instructive; *Chabad* is an acronym of the Hebrew words *hokhmah*, *bina*, and *da'at* (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge), a kabbalistic reference to divine emanations, rather than the more mainstream Hasidic championing of more accessible forms of worship. Beginning in the early twentieth century, Chabad spearheaded a mission of *kiruv*, proselytizing to unaffiliated Jews, which became Chabad's defining characteristic in the post-Holocaust era during the leadership of its last leader,⁷ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.⁸

Indeed, from its formation in the late eighteenth century Chabad has faced challenges to its legitimacy, and it has sought to distinguish itself throughout its history from the encroaching western culture and especially from other Jewish groups.⁹ Early analysts of Hasidism, beginning with Simon Dubnow's positive portrait of Chabad as innovators of "rational Hasidism," judged Chabad an extraordinary example within Hasidic movements.¹⁰ Echoing this assessment, Gershom Scholem wrote, "If one leaves out of account the lone effort at religious orientation made by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and his school, the so-called Habad-Hasidim, Hasidism seems to have produced no truly original Kabbalistic thought whatever."¹¹ In recent years, historian David Berger singled out Chabad for its unorthodox messianism, arguing that the movement not only transgressed Hasidic norms but also Orthodox Judaism altogether.¹² As Dubnow and Scholem redeemed the Chabad branch of Hasidism from the history of mysticism in the early twentieth century and Berger accused contemporary Chabad of propagating a heretical messianism at the end of the century, Chabad's distinct doctrine has been sufficiently rehearsed. What I will focus

⁷ For a discussion of the missionary principle in Chabad Hasidism, see Menachem Friedman, "Habad as Messianic Fundamentalism: From Local Particularism to Universal Jewish Mission," in eds. Martin Marty et al., *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 328–60; Yitzchak Krauss, *The Seventh: Messianism in the Last Generation of Chabad* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot and Chemed Books, 2007) [Hebrew].

⁸ Menachem Mendel dropped the "h" from the Schneersohn family name for his own name.

⁹ On Chabad's historiographic approaches, see Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism," *History and Theory* 27 (1987): 119–59; Zeev Gries, "Hasidism: The Present State of Research and Some Desirable Priorities," *Numen* 34, no. 1 (1987): 97–108.

¹⁰ Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland: From the Earliest Times until the Present Day*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1916), 237.

¹¹ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1954), 340.

¹² David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001).

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on is how visual and material experience helped Chabad's members maintain their differences while living apart from their Chabad communities, as well as aided in their engagement with Jews from nonreligious backgrounds.

Although the Chabad movement has been explored from a variety of different disciplines, my training as an art historian made the rich and wide-reaching material culture produced by Chabad a natural point of entry.¹³ I am interested in how Chabad represents itself visually, whether as an expression of its religious belief or despite those beliefs. Because of the sticky categorization of "culture" and "religion" in religious studies and, more relevantly, in Chabad studies, I identify Chabad's material culture with its use of the term *yidishkayt* rather than with the terms *Hasidism* or *religious Judaism*. Although Chabad did not coin the term *yidishkayt* – indeed it means different things to different people¹⁴ – in Chabad's own discourse, the term signals a concrete, tangible culture inspired by a religious worldview. Fundamental to this use of the term *yidishkayt* is that it connotes a religious Jewish culture, shaped but not limited to legal principles (*halakha*) and tradition (*mesorah*), as in cases when the sixth and seventh leaders of the Chabad dynasty encouraged a number of material innovations to confront the extraordinary challenges of the twentieth century, such as assimilation, Zionism, the Nazi genocide, and communism.¹⁵ If we whittle down religion to a belief system, then *yidishkayt* is the way that the Jewish religion is performed and experienced, and as such, it is the way that religion is constructed. We tend to think of religious practice as a manifestation of religious doctrine, but the latter is as potentially constitutive of the former. "Spreading *yidishkayt*" became imperative to the Chabad movement in the post-Holocaust era, a trend that required Chabad *kiruv* communities to invent

¹³ Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have singled out the Chabad movement as a particularly interesting group to study, but rarely from a visual culture perspective. Sociologists, psychologists, ethnographers, anthropologists, and musicologists focus on Chabad's theology (David Berger, Naftali Loewenthal, Elliot Wolfson), social dynamics (Jerome Mintz, Avram Ehrlich, Menachem Friedman), politics (J. Feldman, Henry Goldschmidt), global community (Sue Fishkoff, Lawrence Loeb, Samuel Heilman), gender roles (Stephanie Levine and Carol Gilligan, Rachel Elinor), health care (Simon Dein and Roland Littlewood, Yoram Bilu), publication campaigns (Ada Rapoport-Albert, Moshe Rosman), rabbinical biography (Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman), radio (Jeffrey Shandler), and music (Ellen Koskoff).

¹⁴ For nonreligious Jews, for instance, *yidishkayt* signifies a cultural Judaism divorced from religious values. In the Soviet context, see David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Also see Jeffrey Shandler's discussion on "Yiddish culture" in *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), especially 155–76. This chapter, "Absolute Tchotchke," looks at the ways that American Jews mediate their nonreligious relationship to the language of Yiddish (and Jewishness) through objects.

¹⁵ For example, in May of 2010, Chabad of the Valley, California, partnered with Tarzana Medical Center to post mezuzot on all patient rooms "to make the world a safer, healthier place" despite the absence of any *halakhic* indication that mezuzot operate in this way or of any halakhic obligation to hang mezuzot on buildings owned by non-Jews. <http://www.vosizneias.com/54632/2010/05/03/tarzana-ca-catholic-hospital-hangs-270-mezuzahs-on-facility-a-california-first> (last accessed May 27, 2010).

and nurture a symbol system and ritual life in the service of community building and not necessarily as a manifestation of their faith. Encouraged by their *rebbe*, as Hasidic dynastic leaders are known, Chabad Hasidim created a global market for its promotion of *yidishkayt*, which targeted a growing community of *ba'alei-tshuvah*, those Jews who “returned” to observant Judaism often through their experience with Chabad educational initiatives. Unlike other Orthodox outreach organizations, such as the Jerusalem-based Aish HaTorah, Chabad emphasizes individual acts of a material or performative nature rather than a more general commitment to religious Judaism. Whereas companies like the Israeli Zomet Institute and the Canadian Kosher Innovations produce rabbinically approved gadgets to address *halakhic* restrictions such as using electricity on the Sabbath, Chabad produces material to promote *yidishkayt*, such as three-story high Chanukah lamps. Thus, among Chabad’s many distinctions, Chabad’s continually expanding religious marketplace provides the most compelling reason for choosing this group for a study on the intersection between religion and visual culture, if only because this most exceptional Hasidic movement emerged as the most visible Hasidic presence in the world after the Holocaust.

Whatever else critics and admirers might say on the subject of Chabad’s public presence, the fact remains that the Chabad-generated image is the leading image of contemporary Jewish religious life in American popular culture. Chabad invites analysis precisely because it campaigned for distinction from other Jewish groups while establishing itself as the visual face of world Jewry despite those differences. Chabad has worked not only to represent but also to define the terms of representation of *yidishkayt* in the last fifty years, and Chabad images play an influential role in the broader Jewish self-image and in the ways Jews are portrayed from without. In Chabad’s efforts to define itself apart from other Jewish movements, the Chabad image helps define normative Judaism, the boundaries of intra-Jewish tolerance, and the religious and cultural sensibilities of the consumers of Chabad’s *yidishkayt*.

On the Use of Sources

In applying visual culture studies to the study of Chabad, this book sets out to demonstrate the import of objects and the visual experience to the study of Chabad in particular and religion in general. Art historians often turn to religion in their analysis of particular works of art, but few apply visual culture studies to the analysis of religion.¹⁶ Fewer consider the intellectual queries of visual culture studies in relationship to the Jewish religious experience and fewer still on behalf of Hasidism.¹⁷ Ironically, although Hasidism rose to fill the spiritual and

¹⁶ A classic example is Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

¹⁷ For two exceptional studies that analyze visual aspects of Orthodox text culture, see Menachem Friedman, “The Pashqevil (Pasquinade) and Public Wall Poster/Bulletin Board Announcements

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social lacuna resulting from an extremely text-focused Lithuanian rabbinate in the late eighteenth century, the study of the movement has thus far been predominantly guided by a logocentric focus on the *literary* legacy of the Hasidic master¹⁸ and his most prolific heirs and disciples.¹⁹ Gershom Scholem and his students, who have done the most to explicate Hasidism's intellectual foundations and institutional development, generally turned to the history of ideas as advanced by the Hasidic rebbe's literary tracts.²⁰ As historian Immanuel Etkes pointed out, Scholem and his colleagues primarily understood text as the "blueprint for social action," which offered the theoretical framework for Hasidim to shape their relationship to God, their rebbe, and their religious practices.²¹ In recent years, historians such as Zeev Gries and Moshe Rosman expanded this traditional understanding of the chain of influence from word to deed by considering the text from the perspective of book production, thereby locating rabbinical print culture beyond the written word.²² The rebbe's books, letters, and broadsides functioned as material objects in the home, in the synagogue, and on the street; therefore, the printed word can be studied from an art-historical perspective in the sense that Hasidim preserve the text

in Haredi Society," *Exhibition Catalog in Eretz-Israel Museum* (June–July 2005), 8–37 [Hebrew]; Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the Artscroll Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

¹⁸ In Hasidic literature the Hasidic master is generally referred to as a *zaddik*. The popular American term for *zaddik* is the Yiddish appellation *rebbe*, whereas in Israel the term *admor* (Heb. acronym for "our master, our teacher, our rabbi") has become popular.

¹⁹ By the end of the eighteenth century, the early theoreticians and leaders of Hasidism had already formulated and published the movement's first literary masterpieces, and these works continue to largely inform studies of the movement. The following works remain the cornerstone of Hasidic thought within the movements and in scholarship about Hasidism from without: Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye's *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (Koretz, 1780), Dov Ber of Mezeritch's *Magid Devarav l'Yaakov* (Koretz, 1781), Elimelech of Lyzhansk's *Noam Elimelech* (Lvov, 1788), *Likkutei Yekarim* (Lvov, 1792). The literary achievements of the first generation of the Chabad dynasty have been especially relevant to their distinction from "southern" Hasidism (Ukrainian and Southern Polish movements) because of their integration of traditional talmudic exegesis and Kabbalah. Chabad's founding leader, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, published *Hilchot Talmud Torah* (Shkalov) in 1794 and his masterpiece *Likkutei Amarim* (Slavita) in 1796, followed by *Luach Birhas Hanehenin* (Korzec) in 1801 and the posthumous publication of *Shulhan Arukh* (Kopust) in 1814.

²⁰ Simon Dubnow, Benzion Dinur, and Raphael Mahler examined the social, political, and economic contexts of Hasidism to gauge external influence on the mystical doctrine of "zaddikism." For a useful anthology of primary Hasidic texts (in English translation) on the *zaddik*, see Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thoughts of Hasidism* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1999), 251–322. Gershom Scholem synthesized much of the primary literature on *zaddikism* in "Tsaddik: The Righteous One," in idem, *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 88–139.

²¹ Immanuel Etkes, "The Zaddik: The Interrelationship between Religious Doctrine and Social Organization," in ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 159.

²² Zeev Gries, "The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture," *Hasidism Reappraised*, 141–55; Moshe Rosman, *The Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

not only for its intellectual content but also for its value as an object. Chabad initiated the design of the print-object specifically for display in the Jewish home, whose “Jewishness” was defined by the centrality of these objects in the home. Of course, alongside this fundamental reconsideration of rabbinical literature as a *corpus*, a physical body, Hasidim produced a vast visual culture at times illustrative of the rebbe’s words and at times at odds with them.

Yet, other than historian Richard Cohen’s illuminating chapter on rabbinical portraiture and the articles inspired by Cohen’s study,²³ no one has attempted a full-scale account of the image-making enterprises of ultra-Orthodox Jews within their own communities and of their relationship to the development of their religious practices and beliefs. Like earlier text-oriented studies of the Chabad movement, this book, too, opens with the men who founded and established the Chabad branch of Hasidism in the nineteenth century, but from the novel perspective of their portraits that were created and disseminated in the late nineteenth century. In the course of my reading rabbinical print culture, I could not quite locate the legendary draw of the rebbes, whereas the visual culture that they inspired revealed both the leaders’ charisma and the enthusiasm of the men and women who supported the movements throughout the last two centuries. Although a dynastic leadership model emerged by the early nineteenth century and disseminated rabbinical scholarship largely through the written word, the lay movement gathered momentum under far more popular lines of communication and often produced nontextual forms of expression. Hasidic membership was a matter of financial pledge, religious observance, and devotion to a particular rebbe, which Hasidim made manifest through a material culture of gift giving, court architecture, interior decoration, fashion preferences, and ceremonial objects and rites. Although the literary achievements of the rebbes and their editors influence our understanding of doctrine, the image bank produced, consumed, and venerated by the rebbes’ disciples reflects the post the rebbes occupied within their community as well as the tastes of ordinary community members.

The privileging of the literary production of an elite class of men stems, at least in part, from the availability of primary literary sources of the Hasidic masters themselves. Unfortunately, the architectural motifs, letters, postcards, photographs, diaries, memoirs, and memorabilia of the lay disciples were often destroyed along with the Eastern European communities in which they circulated. What survived often requires historical excavation, as its continued use within the movement engenders confusion between the object’s historical roots and its contemporary meanings. The visual and material embodiment of rabbinical culture often took on a life of its own after the rebbe’s death: the revitalization of Reb Nachman’s gravesite in the Ukrainian city of Uman as a Hasidic destination site in the post-Soviet era, the collection and dissemination

²³ Richard I. Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

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of coins imbued with blessing through contact with the rebbe's hand, and in Chabad's case, the public messianic campaigns reached across denominational and gender divides. Once the Hasidic community established these objects as potentially valid conduits of blessing in their own right, individual Hasidim – including women – claimed spiritual mastery over them.

In the case of these and other remnants of prewar Hasidic material culture, a traditional iconographic approach, then, produces a limited and tangential perspective. Art historian Batsheva Ida Goldman eschews the iconographic approach to the study of religious objects in favor of phenomenological concerns.²⁴ By reconsidering the ritual processes in which the rebbe's objects perform, the phenomenological approach allows scholars to consider the textual treatment of the ritual object as only one possible understanding of an object among many other interpretations. Goldman identified "Hasidic object archetypes" introduced by Hasidic leaders and developed by their communities as distinct ritual forms; for example, the ways that graphic components of the Hasidic prayer book affect prayer, the ways that the motif of the rosette on the prayer shawl facilitates the rebbe's ecstatic connection to his Creator, and the use of the pipe and tobacco box as vehicles for spiritual elevation.²⁵ Such an inclusive approach rescues the ritual object from Gershom Scholem's attack on its inability to alter reality, asserting instead that the object acts as a creative and constructive force in religious life.

The book begins and ends in times of institutional and ideological crisis when a participatory visual culture and a set of media practices helped facilitate transitions within the Chabad movement. My main sources consist of visual objects produced within Chabad communities, giving the reader an insider's view of the issues that envelop each portrait, architectural program, material object, and graphic symbol. This body of material provides the historical data for an analysis of how the movement strove for centralization during a period of political and economic transformation (1886–1915), compensated for the absence of its leader from its seat in the Belarusian town of Lyubavichi (1915–40), survived immigration to America in the wake of the Holocaust (1940–50), and engaged broader Jewish communities with religious revival campaigns (1950 to the present). A reception history of objects produced by or for the rebbe provides access to the ways that devotees help shape Hasidism as they reinvent hagiographic portraits and the courtly culture of their leaders according to their own religious, political, and social preferences. How devotees use and distribute material objects related to their rebbe influences their rebbe's charisma, public persona, and legacy. At the same time, the circulation of these same objects contributes to followers' participation in the rebbe's inner circle, aids them in vying for increased power within the community, and helps them negotiate their relationship with the outside world. The politics

²⁴ Batsheva Ida Goldman, *The Hasidic Ritual Object* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Dissertation, 2007) [Hebrew].

²⁵ Goldman, *The Hasidic Ritual Object*, 1–274.

of the image in Hasidic life is made all the more fraught by its multilayered significance, so images are accepted, adored, banned, polemicized, or celebrated at different times in their life cycles. Thus, hostility to the outsider photographer can coexist, in a different context, with the veneration of images created by people who are hostile to Hasidic life. Indeed this occurs regularly in the Chabad image bank.

Although the evidence of the vast visual culture produced by Chabad refutes theories of Hasidic iconoclasm, I came to see the Hasidic object as complicated by the discomfort with the materialism of images, on the one hand, and the semi-devotional status of rabbinical objects, on the other. The portraits of the rebbe, the objects that he favored in ritual, and the public works that he promoted have influenced not only the aesthetics of religious life but also the religious dimensions of the visual experience. In the wake of David Morgan's groundbreaking work on the intersection of visibility and religion, scholars have made great progress in the interdisciplinary exploration of art and religion, coining terms like "visual piety" and "religious seeing." Morgan, Sally M. Promey, S. Brent Plate, Colleen McDannell, and other scholars of the religious gaze typically apply themselves to Christian contexts, but the "sacred gaze" applies to the Chabad religious experience as well.²⁶ Looking at images, giving and receiving them as markers of religious rites of passage, praying and studying in their presence, and passing them on to future generations are acts of visual piety that reflect the values imbued in the rebbe's portrait and of the objects produced at his initiative.

These scholars of visual culture, a relatively new discipline that is still coming of age, provided me with a lens for my own analysis of Chabad history.²⁷ I treat the images in this volume not only for what they depict but also for how they make us see, while at the same time considering the personal, subjective, engaged responses of the beholder as constitutive of the object's meaning and power. Morgan evoked the sacred gaze in his study of religious visual culture because "the term signals that the entire visual field that constitutes seeing is the framework of analysis, not just the image itself."²⁸ As the scholar of religious

²⁶ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); S. Brent Plate, *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," in ed. Robert Blair St. George, *Material Life in America, 1600–1800* (Boston: Northeastern, 1988), 17–37; Sally M. Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (September 2003): 581–603; Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

²⁷ On the use of visual images in the field of history, see Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); W.J.T. Mitchell, "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture," *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (December 1995): 540–4. For a methodological framework on the use of visual culture studies in the field of religion studies, see David Morgan and Sally Promey, eds., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), introduction.

²⁸ David Morgan, *Sacred Gaze* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.