



LANDER COLLEGE FOR WOMEN
THE ANNA RUTH AND MARK HASTEN SCHOOL

A Division of Touro College

Jewish Educational Media
784 Eastern Parkway
Suite 403
Brooklyn, NY 11213

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Dear Colleagues,

I write to you to express my enthusiasm for the upcoming stages of the preservation project at Jewish Educational Media (JEM). As an art historian interested in the intersection between religion and visual culture, I am personally and professionally vested in the rare gems stored in your digital treasury.

The video archive, which begins with the 1929-1930 visit to the United States of Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, the sixth leader of Chabad, focuses predominantly on the seventh and last leader of the movement, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), known simply as "the Rebbe." The crux of the archive covers the period between the Rebbe's ascendancy to leadership in 1951 to the outpouring of prayers and grief at his funeral in 1994. The archive documents the Rebbe speaking on issues of moral life, Jewish legal thought, international politics, political activism, and the human condition. The archive consists of thousands of hours of audio- and video-recording and 150,000 photographs of the Rebbe engaging devotees in private counsel on the most intimate subjects, and addressing throngs of Hasidim, admirers, and tens of thousands of unaffiliated viewers tuning in via satellite broadcasts. The Rebbe's last talk, delivered in 1992, marks the transition of the archive into an oral history project, which collects the interviews and testimonials of the Rebbe's inner circle, his archivists and librarians, and the unaffiliated who for some reason or other figure in the Rebbe's early biography.

Elkanah Shmotkin and the restorers who devote their lives to preserving the Rebbe's teachings in multi-media formats work towards important goals of interest to scholars. The archive preserves materials central to the Chabad community in the sense that they are primary sources for many of the traditions and beliefs of the Chabad community. The archive preserves the words and deeds of an important moral and religious leader to the greater Jewish community, as well as to the world at large. The Rebbe's influence outside his immediate community can be seen in the international Jewish renaissance that Chabad initiated in the 1960s and continues to define, support, and develop.



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The collection provides an important window into American pluralism and how these values impacted post-Holocaust Jewry. Chabad, along with many other Hasidic groups, came to the American shores in response to repression and religious persecution in Eastern Europe before World War II. Chabad, along with other Hasidic groups that nearly collapsed during the Nazi years, rehabilitated in New York and built significant organizations and followings in the United States. Particularly in an age when anxiety over the “clash of civilizations” and religious extremism informs so many of American opinions and political positions, this archive provides a case study on how the uniquely American forms of pluralism and inclusiveness protected a vulnerable minority group, and how that group turned around to contribute so much to the American people and its cultural landscape.

Apart from its very significant socio-political value, the archive is a treasure trove for linguists, musicologists, and art-historians. It contains a veritable encyclopedia of the Yiddish language, a heritage in danger of extinction, preserved in audio- and video-recording. It contains the Rebbe and his Hasidim praying, singing, and humming liturgy and innovating on Hasidic musical tradition. As an art historian currently working on Chabad visual culture, I see the material JEM collected as central to questions on material spirituality, faith-based vision, worship through corporeality, and models of the master-disciple relationship. The media archive preserves not only the words of their Rebbe, which have already been collected in text-formats, but how he looked, danced, prayed, mourned, and how his Hasidim looked at him, celebrated with him, cried with him, and yearned with him.

In sum, the collection of photographs, videos, writings and other documents of historical significance represent one of the most complete and important collections that document Hasidic life in the United States after World War II. While this primary source material documents a small religious group that profoundly influenced Jewish revival, the importance of the JEM collection lies also in its documentation on the history and impact of religious pluralism in the United States. I strongly support the continued collecting and preservations of these documents and I applaud JEM for their important work.

Sincerely yours,

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