

HASSID MEETS HIPSTER

Brooklyn has become the real NYC. Artists, actors, designers, restaurateurs, and even writers and intellectuals all know that the creative epicenter on the East Coast is in Brooklyn, not on the island of Manhattan as in years past. How did this happen? The reasons are many, but the easy answer is Bloomberg and the largely successful push to turn Manhattan into a white-washed domain of big business and the super-rich.

Greenpoint, Williamsburg, Bushwick, Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights now make up one contiguous hub of counter-cultural energy, with creatives and social revolutionaries flocking here to make their mark.

Brooklyn's cultural ascent has been driven by many factors, but one of the most unexpected was the machinations of the Chassidic landlords.

Unlike other mainstream Jewish groups, who fled urban centers during the rough and tumble 1970s, the Chassidim stayed put, intent on building their insular communities. When the Chassidim were not busy making babies or studying Talmud, they were quietly buying up the depressed real estate of inner-city Brooklyn, thereby positioning themselves for the real estate explosion and gentrification tsunami of the last twenty years. Although casual observers sometimes attach conspiratorial explanations to the Hassidic Jews' ability to capitalize on real estate, the true reason is far more mundane. Because the Hassidim reject secular education, they have far fewer avenues of financial advancement. Since they don't go to college or graduate school, they are locked out of careers as lawyers, doctors, etc. Borrowing or pooling money from a family and investing in an old building was, therefore, one of the few ways Chassidic men could eke out a living.

Today, as we all know, Brooklyn is an expensive place to buy a condo, but this was not the case twenty years ago. Back then, Chassidic factory building owners were desperate to find renters and stumbled upon a strategy. They found that if they catered to young struggling artists looking for large secluded work-live-party spaces that could house five, seven, or more underemployed roommates, they could fill their commercial buildings. They learned that members of the counterculture were happy to live in raw spaces that middle-class professionals, and even working poor families would reject. All they required was anonymity and a single coffee house, which the Chassidim were happy to rent to a hipster-entrepreneur at a greatly reduced price, as an anchor to draw renters to their buildings. Although these arrangements were often only semi-legal, the authorities largely ignored the issue because it wasn't on the radar of the politicians or business community.

This unlikely history is infused with grand-scale irony because, as we know, there are no two communities with more divergent values than the Hipsters and the Chassidim. And since the Chassidim lived right there alongside their real estate investments, they inadvertently incubated the very culture, which is an anathema to everything they believe in. Few if any Chassidic landlords foresaw the mega effect, their actions would set in motion.

The Chassidim are an insular religious sect of Judaism who largely reject secular society, creating for themselves separate communities, adhering to strict moral, religious doctrine. Advertising, media, popular entertainment are all rejected in an attempt to create an environment where purity, spirituality, and service to G-d can be fostered.

In contrast, the hipsters value, above all else, free expression, social experimentation, style and pursuit of material pleasure. Sex, food, music, fashion, and art are all vehicles for self-exploration and self-realization. The only guiding rule is that nothing is too out-there. It's fair to say that Hipsters and Chassidim are, in this way, on philosophically polar-opposite sides of the spectrum.

In spite of these profound differences, those of us who live on the borders between the two communities, have been fascinated by unexpected points of convergence between the Hipsters and the Chassidim.

Talk of some of the more superficial similarities has already begun to percolate up into the popular consciousness in the form of late-night TV punch lines and comedic sketches. Most notably on the Jimmy Kimmel segment aptly called "Hipster or Hassidic Jew?" where the audience is asked to guess whether a close-up shot of a bearded Brooklynite is a hipster or a Chassid? Something that is not always easy to determine as both Hipsters and Chassidim don the color black, full beards, and absurd hats.

But these superficial similarities are just a point of entry to some other ironic and unexpected alignments. For example, both Chassidim and Hipsters shun mainstream society, preferring to congregate amongst themselves on the cultural periphery. Both exude the same attitude that their alternative lifestyle is superior to that of the mainstream and seem completely unconcerned that most outsiders think they are silly, bizarre, or just plain crazy. Furthermore, it can be said that both Hassidim and Hipsters are on a metaphysical quest to find the secret to human fulfillment – the Hipsters by unbridled devotion to creative expression and personal freedom and the Chassidim by Torah study and devotion to G-d.

This mostly unseen symbiosis is often manifested on a street level, as an easy rapport between knowing individuals. Often expressed as little more than an "I get you" nod, at a bar while watching a game or on the baseball diamond at McCarran Park.

In a way, Chassidim are really super authentic New Yorkers. Like their Black, Hispanic, Polish, and Italian inner-city neighbors, they are – unlike the hipsters – indigenous communities, intimately connected to New York history and completely comfortable on their inner-city streets. This characteristic is deeply admired by the hipsters who value authenticity even though it is an elusive commodity in their world, which is – by definition – constantly being reinvented and repackaged. Of course, these personal interactions are set against the backdrop of outright hostility between the two communities at large, which regularly butt heads over modesty issues (public dress codes), bike lanes, and blatant philosophical and political differences, already mentioned above.

Our show, HASSID MEETS HIPSTER, will dive headfirst into this little-understood subculture within a subculture where Hassidim meet Hipsters.