

THE RABBI GOES WEST

Statement from Co-Directors, Gerald Peary and Amy Geller

We are secular Jews, based in the Boston area, who are culturally Jewish. We are crazy about the humor of Jewish comedians, and savor Jewish food. We've traveled in Israel, and we've shown a previous film we made at the Jerusalem International Film Festival. But we've been far less in touch with the religious and spiritual aspects of Judaism.

For this last reason, we decided to make our latest documentary, THE RABBI GOES WEST, following someone strongly religious, and deeply committed to the Jewish faith. The central character of our film is Chaim Bruk, a young, charismatic Chabad Hasidic rabbi who, ten years ago, moved from Brooklyn to Bozeman, Montana, to bring his brand of Judaism to the American West.

We learned about Rabbi Chaim on the Internet and were particularly intrigued by his vow to put a Kosher mezuzah on the home of every Jew in an unlikely place like Montana. There are less than 2,000 Jews in a state 14 times larger than Israel. We are proud to declare our Judaism by displaying a mezuzah on our front door. And we were drawn to Rabbi Chaim mission to encourage those who are Jewish to become more conscious of their Judaism.

In the summer of 2016, we started filming with Chaim and his family and discovered, to our surprise, that some Montana Jews, including other rabbis whom we interviewed--Reform, Conservative--viewed Rabbi Chaim's Mezuzah campaign with suspicion. They saw it as an attempt to get into people's houses and push his form of Chabad Judaism. Were they correct? At the time, we knew little of Chabad or of Hasidism. Three years later, thanks to our experiences in Montana and our research, we know a lot more.

We realize that many Jews like us, non-Orthodox, have many misconceptions about what Chabad is really about. With Chaim in Montana as the example, our film illuminates how Chabad actually operates in a small Jewish community, both good and bad.

There are aspects of Chabad which we believe are admirable, and others, frankly, which make us uncomfortable. We appreciate how Chaim's congregants, all non-Hasids, genuinely love attending his shul. But we have trouble relating to Chaim's Torah-based religious philosophy, including outdated ideas of gender roles. We have misgivings about Chabad's expansion into areas where there are already synagogues, claiming to be the only genuine Judaism.

Why is this film so important in 2019-2020? We do have major differences with Chabad, religious and political. But we are impressed with how, in an era of divisiveness and antagonism, Chabad is so joyous, often so non-judgmental. Chaim welcomes everyone Jewish, whatever their politics, to come to his Chabad Center to pray, to attend parties, to share a Shabbat meal. This gentle, kinder way of being religious holds a lesson for all Americans.