

Hasidic Jews

If you are in New York City or Jerusalem, there is a distinct group of people that stand out from all others. Their black coats, “Al Capone hats”, and long curls of hair hanging down from the sides of their heads can’t help but attract your attention. These are the Hasidic Jews whose numbers in population range about 500,000 primarily in Jerusalem and New York City. When you are in Jerusalem you will think there is more like 5 million of them because they are so outrageous in appearance. Who are these people and where did they come from?

They are a form of mystical orthodox Judaism begun in Eastern Europe in the 1700s founded by a very charismatic leader named Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer. He was a famous healer and miracle worker and predictor of the future. He claimed to be able to “channel” divine sustenance to his followers. He taught panentheism—that God is in everything, and emphasized spiritual experience. God influences the acts of man, and man influences God. There was an emphasis on communion with God through fervent prayer similar to meditation. If you are confused, join the club with everybody else, especially since now the Hasidics are not one movement but a collection of separate groups with some commonality, but each group has its own Rabbi with different teachings. There are about 30 large groups, and many more smaller ones. They all have in common their sidelock curls, black hats, and beards, as well as their involvement with mysticism.

What’s Up With Their Look?

The beards and side curls are derived from their own interpretation of Leviticus 19:27, “You shall not round off the hair on the corners of your heads, or mar the edges of your beard”. When you see these guys you will wonder about their interpretation of that verse. Their long curls on the sides are their interpretation of the “corners”.

Their black hats serve to cover their heads in respect for God. The style of hat identifies their leader. Each Rabbi has his own “hat club”. The black clothes go back to a tradition in the Middle Ages in eastern Europe when they could not get other colors.

Many of them will have boxes on their head which are phylacteries containing hand written verses. Each sect has a Rabbi who is supposedly a saintly mystic who may have prophetic

dreams, do miracles, see angels, attempt healings, and other mystical practices. They teach religious experience over reason. They speak Yiddish to each other, but also may speak English and Hebrew.

What do the other Israelis there in Israel think of the Hasidics? All I know is that when I asked our Israeli guide about them he said, "Ignore them, they are all crazy!"