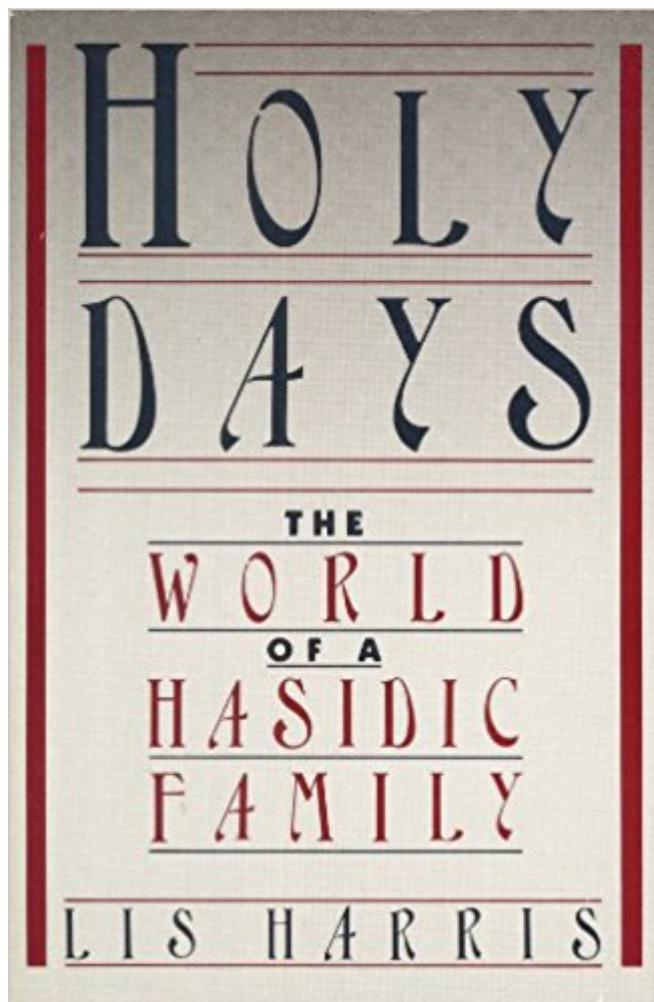


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# Holy Days: The World Of A Hasidic Family



## **Synopsis**

"A beloved contemporary classic, *Holy Days* is a personal account of New York's Hasidic community, its beliefs, its mysteries, and its encounter with secularism in the present age. Combining a historical understanding of the Hasidic movement with a journalist's discerning eye, Harris captures in rich detail the day-to-day life of this traditional and often misunderstood community. Harris chronicles the personal transformation she experienced as she grew closer to the largely hidden men and women of the Hasidic world."--Page 4 of cover. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Hasidism, the Jewish revivalist movement begun in 18th century Poland, encourages prayer, mysticism, singing and sanctification of daily life. The Lubavitchers, the largest of some 40 Hasidic sects, today live mostly in Brooklyn's Crown Heights. There Harris befriended a Lubavitcher couple and penetrated a sect known for its strict adherence to Old World customs, its deep suspicion of outsiders and secretiveness. To some, the Lubavitchers seem frozen in the past; to Harris, a sympathetic observer, they "live in a kind of perpetual Biblical present" by linking everyday events in their personal lives to a spiritual heritage that is very much alive. Appropriately, Harris shifts back and forth in time, from the Crown Heights household where she was for years a regular visitor, to the exploits of Israel ben Eliezer, founder of Hasidism, and other Eastern European wise men who were inspired by kabbalistic teachings. This work of cultural anthropology helps readers to

understand the Lubavitchers while gaining respect for their carefully guarded traditions. First serial to the New Yorker; Jewish Book Club main selection. NovemberCopyright 1985 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The author is a staff writer for the New Yorker who approached a family of the Lubavitcher sect with the purpose of writing about their holidays, everyday observances, and place in the community. The result of her year-long effort is a warm, informative, highly readable book (the material was serialized September 1985 in the New Yorker). Harris joins the Konigsberg family in Crown Heights at Purim and returns for every major and minor holiday, and of course for many a weekly Shabbat. But we get much more than just Holy Days from her: there are also lucid descriptions and explanations of rituals for all family events (with death getting only a passing mention) and we learn a great deal about the history of the Lubavitch movement and its leaders, its relationship to other Hasidic sects and its stance toward Israel. Gerda Haas, Bates Coll. Lib., Lewiston, Me. Copyright 1985 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Despite some readers' negative feedback I, for one, love this book! I have owned several copies which all have been given away. I find myself re-reading this book yearly. I feel a part of the families she visits.

This is a lyrical look at a world that is not accessible to most people on a daily basis. Lis Harris felt a strong attraction to the Hasidic Jews she saw around her from time to time, so she found a way to learn more about the people who live this life. Her book is respectful and informative. A weakness of the book is that her level of personal involvement in the writing seems uneven. This book is an unabashed memoir, where she describes how she got involved with the project (a longing to know more about what she saw in her own family pictures and felt drawn to, in the face of a quite secular upbringing). However, having described how she got involved in this project, she then fails to tell us how she resolved her longing. What did she learn about these people that enables her to look at the photographs without feeling the same drawing-in? I say this despite the fact that the individual parts of the book are highly personal -- her descriptions of the mikveh and of the lives of unmarried girls are lyrical and moving. The book is well worth reading, but the author's nearly completely assimilated background does make it hard for her to distinguish between "ultra-orthodox" religious practices, and more common practices of observant Jews (say the modern Orthodox, for example). Many things she encountered elicited a "gee whiz -- how odd!" response from her, and it was strange that

she couldn't distinguish between the practices she encountered which are unique to Hasidic life and the practices which are common to practicing Jews of many stripes. The book would have been stronger had she spent less time looking for academic explanations of what she encountered and spent more time understanding the context -- how do these people fit into the context of observant Jewish practice? On the whole, however, it is an excellent book, well-written and worth reading.

This book, which is based on a New Yorker article published several decades ago, is a fantastic glimpse inside the familial world of ultra-Orthodox Jewry. Especially interesting is the role of women, and how they manage in this very controlled environment.

I bought this book for someone who was interested in learning about Jewish life and what it means. She just wanted to learn a little more about religious Jews. Even though some of the info may not be accurate, it is a good overall introduction to Observant Jewish life and an enjoyable read.

Very interesting really enjoyed it.

The book was interesting but the vocabulary was above my understanding. This does not include the Hebrew words. I also found the history confusing. Overall it was a learning piece. The focus was on this one family and the history of Hasidim.

Lis Harris was a journalist for "The New Yorker" when the material in this book was published as a magazine series, and as a book in 1985. She was brought up as the daughter of non-religious Jews and she herself felt no interest in the "droning congregants, unintelligible prayers and posturing rabbis" of the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform denominations she had seen glimpses of. She says she took for granted that these "diluted rituals and distracted congregations" were merely "faint echoes of a once vital tradition." She suspected that she "could recover the past [and her own personal distant family heritage] in its most vital form in a Hasidic community." She says further that "Jews, of course, had no monasteries or nunneries, since the central beliefs of Judaism are incompatible with the notions of celibacy or prolonged separation from the hubbub of everyday life, but if one were searching for a place where the practice of religion was uppermost in the life of a Jewish community, the Hasidic court seemed to be the best place to look." A keyword in these remarks is "community." Reading the book, it becomes apparent that members in Hasidic practice

make every effort to give up their personal egos and preferences for the sake of the community, the group--which exists for the exacting practice of a particular form of Orthodox Judaism and the meticulous keeping of the 613 commandments, but with the HASIDIC DIFFERENCE. Specifically in Chapters 1, 2 and 4, and just generally in the exposition of the first third of the book, Lis Harris gives background information about the origins and practices of Hasidism, which I found helpful. I learned that the modern 17th c. version of it was founded in Poland by the Baal shem Tov, abbreviated the "Besht." Harris deals with traits of Hasidism in general and the Lubavitcher form of Hasidism in particular. Overall, Hasidism sounded very attractive to me because it purposed to "see the beauty and holiness in everyday things." It purposed to "elevate ordinary life" in JOY. It "redefined" Jewish values by placing "prayer, mysticism, dancing, singing, storytelling, and sanctification of daily life on an equal with Talmudic scholarship..." (To me, that sounded "terrific"! No longer was theological intellectualizing singularly uppermost and totally IMPORTANT, but also positive emotions and FEELINGS played a very important role. So perhaps, I thought, the "feminine" elements of human creation were being allowed recognition in this RELIGION. [And I thought that would be a positive innovation for Judeo-Christian religion in general.]) I learned that Hasidism was always "a leader-centered movement" built around charismatic rabbis who were pious and supernaturally gifted, as well as learned. Followers deferred to their leaders in almost all decisions in life, as in arranged marriages and choice of work. Different Hasidic "dynasties" formed and were called "courts." Each had its distinctive charism such as healing, learning, wealth, and so on. Chapter 2, which is a compressed social and religious history of Hasidism, is a bit difficult to comprehend quickly. (Although the author is a very good writer, I had to read that chapter twice, slowly.) With some difficulty, the author was able to find a Lubavitcher Hasid family that would allow her to enter their world as an observer of the very set-apart-from-the-rest-of-society Lubavitcher religious community practices and family life [in Crown Heights, NY]. She spent an unspecified time, at least a year it seemed, visiting with the family, whose names and true identity are disguised in this story. With them or sometimes alone, she attended all the typical religious observances and meetings of Lubavitcher religious organizations that took place. Among other events, she attended a family wedding and a circumcision. She gives one whole chapter to telling in detail about her first experience of going to the Mikvah (ritual bath). The important "meaning" of the Mikvah is very interesting to read about. The author never really fulfilled the expectation she created early in the book by saying she hoped to find a "vital tradition" for herself. I think she did indicate subtly that in some particulars she found Hasidic life lacking for her preferences. I did not notice any statements of outright criticism in any of her reportage, which SEEMED to be presented neutrally. Some of the

details of Rebbe's statements and conversations that she reported, however, could not have failed to stir reader's emotions regarding their favorite cultural and/or religious hot buttons one way or another. For instance, the passages about the Lubavitcher beliefs rejecting proofs of "Evolution" and the Rabbi's insistence upon Divine Creation would undoubtedly stir negative reactions in some readers. (But would be welcome to others.) To me, aspects of the religious attitudes to male and female relations were both wise but also sometimes ridiculous-seeming. Some of the points regarding "modesty" in female dress and other ways of avoiding the ever-present danger of male arousal in certain situations when sex would be religiously forbidden seemed worthy of respectful regard rather than ridicule. On the other hand, the author presented other approaches to the same topic that did seem a bit ridiculous, as, for instance, when the reason females are not allowed to perform in public music recitals is because the men watching were liable to become aroused by the sight of them! (A surprising and novel issue that most readers will never have thought about!) Most readers probably will agree with a visiting non-Lubavitcher lady who becomes incensed over this issue and rebelliously speaks out, saying, "Landowska was some kind of temptress? She drove the men in the audience crazy? I'm sure she'd have been surprised to hear it.") One particular chapter that has introduced flashes on "controversial-issues" ends with the Rebbe giving a long speech about "the faith" and then ending with a topic of concern to him. He tells about how, along with other clerics, he is circulating a petition urging that all public schools begin their day with a moment of silence. He says he is not advocating any kind of prayer, only a moment of silence so that any school child regardless of religion can start the day thinking about the Creator so that the rest of the day will be imbued with the spirit of those thoughts. The Rebbe says he believes children fortified in that way would not want to harm one another or do violent things to hurt one another. He just believes that the moment of silence would help to contribute to a "spirit of goodness." At this point, the author quotes a friend of hers who had recently complained, "All fundamentalists are alike. They're never satisfied with simply having their own religious views, they have to impose them on everyone else." The author goes on to state her own reaction as follows: "But somehow, this seemed like an inadequate representation of the Rebbe's message. He expressed his belief in the curative power of goodness so plainly and passionately that it could be felt in every corner of the room. For a few moments, my disapproval of the petition and my skepticism evaporated. To my amazement, I found myself wishing that things could be as the Rebbe wished them to be." p 215 (So, this paragraph stands as only one of 2 examples I noticed of Lis Harris expressing her own personal opinions about an "issue" during her otherwise impartial-SEEMING reportage.) Lis reproduces one little flash of an angry reaction against the Lubavitchers from one of their neighbors.

A young man comes up and aggressively, pronouncedly, wishes one of the L. men a "Gooooood Shabbos!" which the L. man totally ignores and refuses to acknowledge in any way. Walking away from the scene, the young man is overheard to explain to his companion that he is angry because he has repeatedly encountered this refusal from the Lubavitchers to acknowledge his very existence. Elsewhere in the book, the author has mentioned that the L. groups simply will not or cannot deal with any social interaction outside their own group. (I was especially interested to discover this scene because I encountered that same kind of rejection twice in my own efforts to pleasantly greet Lubavitchers that I happened to meet on a neighborhood sidewalk outside one of their official buildings in the town where I live, and I found it heart-chilling. This book helped me to understand that it is a universal practice with the group to ignore any but their own people. Apparently their joy in their religion is NOT a joy they will share with people outside of their exclusive groups. But, nevertheless, they are reported to be very evangelistic in NYC in efforts to make conversions.) I found this to be an informative, well-written, and interesting book. Am glad I read it. I'd especially like to learn more about the Besht about whom I've heard interesting stories. This book gave me insight into the Lubavitch religious & family life. I am not qualified to say how accurate and true-to-life a picture Lis Harris presents. Some other reviewers complain about certain aspects of the reportage.

This is such a touching, moving book. A secular Jewish writer, wanting to understand more about the ways of the Hasidim, was invited by a family to celebrate the various Jewish holy days with their family. The result is a beautiful, respectful portrait of something few outside the Orthodox community ever get to see, as well as a sense of the depth of piety and closeness such a committed observance can bring. Lis Harris writes like an angel; she brings these ancient ways to vivid life for us to share with her. Hasidism was established by the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name), and here is a little story about him: on Rosh Hashanah, half the day is devoted to God, and half to man. One half is reserved for praying; the other half for feasting. After a particularly intense prayer session, the Besht said to the congregation: "Half the day is for God; half for us. The half reserved for us, we have now enjoyed; therefore, let us go feast, so we may give to God, the half that is due Him." I recommend this book unreservedly. It will touch your heart.

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