



Inside the Hasidic Jewish Community: Isolation, Tradition, and Daily Life in New York

Izvor: <https://minbarlive.com/videos/america-s-most-secretive-jewish-community-hasidic-jews-48-hours-inside>

A documentary exploration of the Hasidic Jewish community in New York, revealing their isolated neighborhoods, strict religious practices, technology restrictions, and parallel social structures operating independently from mainstream American society.

SAŽETAK

This documentary provides an inside look at the Hasidic Jewish community centered around 770 in New York, examining how hundreds of thousands of members maintain a completely separate way of life within modern urban America. The film documents the community's strict isolation from technology—including prohibitions on internet, television, and conventional phones—and explores their parallel infrastructure including private ambulance services (Hatzalah), community patrols (Shomrim/Shmira), and religious courts (Beth Din). The community's daily life is governed by detailed religious law covering everything from dress codes enforced by modesty patrols to household kitchen separation of dairy and meat, Shabbat observance with its restrictions on electricity and work, and mandatory ritual practices like the mikvah. The documentary covers family structure and large family sizes guided by rabbinical authority, extensive religious education for boys, arranged marriages, and the community's own commercial ecosystem. It also addresses tensions between religious observance and modern life, including conflict with medical emergencies during Shabbat, as well as the experience of those who have left the community.

KLJUČNE PORUKE

The Hasidic community operates as a closed society with its own security patrols, ambulance services, courts, schools, and commercial networks, functioning almost entirely separately from mainstream American institutions.

Technology is heavily restricted: internet and television are forbidden; residents use only 'kosher phones' limited to voice calls; computers in the community are not connected to the internet.

Rabbis hold significant religious and practical authority, including guidance on family planning decisions; one woman reported needing rabbinical permission to stop having children.

Shabbat observance involves strict prohibitions on electricity use, cooking, and work from Friday evening to Saturday evening, with engineered solutions like pre-programmed ovens and light-blocking devices to maintain these rules.

The eruv—a religious boundary marked by wires stretching roughly twenty miles around Manhattan and fifty-five miles across Brooklyn—costs approximately \$200,000 annually to maintain and allows community members to carry items on Shabbat.

Family sizes are substantially larger than mainstream averages; birth rates are high enough to double the population every twenty years; large families may receive over \$100,000 annually in combined public benefits and healthcare coverage.

Married women cover their hair, primarily with wigs costing up to \$6,300 for virgin hair; over a lifetime a woman may spend approximately \$65,000 on hair coverings; married couples observe mandatory separation periods when women are menstruating.

CLANAK

Entering a Closed World

We're about to enter the heartbeat of the Jewish world at 770, a location so closed to outsiders that once you enter, there is no going back. The Hasidic Jews represent the most religious community in America—a closed-off group with hundreds of thousands of members spread across the country. Their minds and hearts are always with Israel, and their prayers are directed there. Yet in the heart of New York, surrounded by skyscrapers and modern life, there exists another world entirely—one that lives by its own traditions, operating almost completely separately from mainstream American society.

When outsiders attempt to enter Hasidic neighborhoods, the first question is always the same: Are you Jewish? The neighborhoods themselves look completely unlike the rest of the city. The community runs its own structures—community patrols that, in certain situations, take on responsibilities similar to law enforcement, ambulance services, and religious courts for internal matters. These volunteer groups have the authority to make citizens' arrests and can obtain permits for increased security.

Isolation from Modern Life

The level of separation from the outside world is stark. When asked if they have ever logged into the internet, community members respond with a firm no—they consider it the most dangerous thing for a person. Television is similarly forbidden. The deeper outsiders go into these neighborhoods, the more they feel like they don't belong. This isolation extends to education. Young boys receive religious education in community buildings from 7:30 a.m. until 9:30 p.m., where they eat, nap, and study. They are not encouraged to plan for conventional careers. Their education includes very little teaching about the modern world, and their exposure to general education and global culture is severely limited.

Family Structure and Reproduction

Family size within the community is substantial and controlled through religious guidance. One community member explained that he has ten children, and if he had not taken breaks, he would have had fifteen. Before choosing to stop having more children, members are expected to talk to a rabbi and decide together. The decision to have children is framed in religious terms—as something that requires asking God.

Married women in the community follow strict traditions regarding modesty and physical separation. Many married women shave their hair and cover it with a wig or headscarf at all times, even when alone with their husband at home. For nearly half of every month, married couples do not touch each other at all—not even to pass something directly from hand to hand. Volunteer groups known as modesty patrols sometimes monitor whether Hasidic community members are dressed appropriately when out in public.

The Central Synagogue and Religious Life

Beneath the central synagogue, there are passageways that cannot be seen from the street, expanding the worship space underground. The synagogue operates as a multi-purpose religious center. Prayers occur three times a day, but for the rest of the day it functions as a study hall where young boys study Jewish mysticism and Hasidic philosophy. The space is filled with life and energy, with young boys displaying intense passion for their studies.

During regular periods, approximately 500 students study in the main synagogue. During the month of holidays, that number swells to 1,000. These students come from all over, mostly from Israel. They pray towards the eastern wall, oriented toward Jerusalem. One student explained that he was reading a summary of the Tanya and spent more than ten hours per day studying, though he characterized the time as enjoyable rather than burdensome. When asked about future career plans, students expressed confidence that God would provide the money and that everything would

work out, dismissing concerns about financial planning that preoccupied people in the outside world.

Prayer Practices and Ritual Observance

Before the first prayers of the day begin, many Hasidic men step into the mikvah, a ritual bath believed to cleanse the soul. Men visit the mikvah every morning and especially on Fridays. Boys also participate in this ritual on Fridays. Women participate in prayer separately from men, in an upstairs gallery divided by darkened glass. One mother described bringing her infant, almost three months old, to pray while men and children pray in the main area below.

Community Infrastructure and Political Influence

The Hasidic community maintains its own infrastructure beyond religious institutions. A small local diner can become a stop for powerful political figures—Donald Trump was planning to visit at one point. Throughout the community, charity boxes are prominently displayed, representing different organizations and schools. These boxes, visibly numerous and varied, reflect the community's internal support systems and religious obligation to give charity.

External Perspectives

When non-Jewish outsiders attempt to film or document the community, they face clear boundaries. Community members note the presence of outsiders and their distinction from the group. One documented exchange involved filmmakers being told they were not Jewish and had come only for filming purposes. At times, their cameras were briefly taken from them. Beatrice Weber, a woman who left the ultra-Orthodox community after being married to a rabbi and raising ten children, would later share her firsthand experiences of what life inside the Hasidic community was actually like, offering an insider's perspective on the realities of living within this closed world.

Messianic Expectation and Educational Goals

Members of this community view the world's current challenges through a theological lens. According to one perspective shared, people often worry that society is drifting further from the coming of the Messiah. However, the comparison made is that just as a mother experiences her most difficult month during the ninth month of pregnancy, the world is similarly shedding its final challenges. There is hope expressed that Moshiach will come very soon. Education within the community also preserves the traditional Jewish hope to return to Jerusalem and to see the Holy Temple rebuilt. During the documentary's exploration, a passage was discovered beneath the synagogue's wood-paneled walls that stretched for dozens of feet and contained clothes, boxes, and other personal items. A large and important gathering was also

taking place in a private setting within the synagogue, something rarely witnessed by outsiders.

Language and Cultural Isolation in the Neighborhood

Walking through the neighborhood, the film crew found themselves in the middle of New York City yet rarely heard English spoken. Most residents speak Yiddish or Hebrew instead. The crew attempted to conduct interviews with residents but encountered significant reluctance. Many people looked away and kept moving when approached. Attempts to ask "Can we interview you?" were met with refusals. The crew noted having zero luck with initial interactions, though one person who had agreed to speak was a crane operator—a non-Jewish Puerto Rican American who has worked in the Jewish community for the past fifteen years. He observed that members of the community "all stick together and they all help each other out."

Family Size and the Role of Religious Authority

Following what is described as the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, Hasidic Jews are among the fastest-growing communities in the world. Birth rates are high enough to nearly double their population every twenty years, with the current population standing around one hundred thousand. One woman interviewed shared her experience: eight and a half months after she was married, she had a baby, and eleven months later she had another. She reflected that if she had not taken breaks, she would have had fifteen children instead of ten. When she went to a rabbi asking for a break because it was too much for her, she was told that without the rabbi's word, she cannot take a break. This reflects the understanding that the rabbi is "like the word of God, basically."

According to official figures, large families in New York may be eligible for a range of public benefits. A family of ten that meets the criteria could receive around \$26,160 in food assistance and \$13,600 through the Child Tax Credit. Medicaid coverage for a household of that size may have an estimated value of around \$75,000 per year. Altogether, the combined value of public benefits and health care coverage may amount to more than \$100,000 per year for ten people living under one roof. Data analyzed by zip code shows very high reliance on government services in areas with large Hasidic populations.

Community Values and the Question of Family Size

When asked why families in Hasidic culture have so many children, one person explained the question itself revealed an outsider's perspective. He asked what was meant by "so many"—if someone had ten children, the question became why they did not have twelve instead. His answer was that ultimately, "I have to ask God." The

community's approach to family planning, according to what was shared, reflects religious conviction rather than external standards of family size.

Strict Technology Restrictions

Members of this community live what is described as a kosher lifestyle, meaning that what they eat, wear, watch, and consume is expected to be in accordance with Jewish law. When discussing technology, the community emphasizes the dangers of the internet and devices that provide direct access to the outside world. Most people in the community use what is called a "kosher phone." These phones function like older telephone models, allowing only voice calls—nothing besides talking. There is no texting, no internet access, and no WhatsApp. One person explained the rationale: "Internet is sure very bad. It makes you for sure busy whole day."

When asked if they watch movies or television, residents responded with an emphatic "Sure not." When asked if they knew who Elon Musk was or about celebrities like Tom Cruise, the answer was no. One person stated simply, "We know where the rabbi is. Not more." For this community, saying no to television and popular culture is presented as normal—not a hardship but the accepted way of life. Even the idea of recording memories through video is rejected. As one person explained, when someone watches video for ten minutes, "the ice starts to jump," meaning attention becomes fragmented. The concern is that once you start watching videos, "slowly, slowly, you start to watch videos," creating a habit that is spiritually and mentally damaging.

Rules on Recording and Media

According to community standards, even a video of someone not wearing certain attire would not be considered kosher. When asked who made these rules, the answer was simply: "Rabbis." The restrictions are comprehensive. Cameras that are used within the community can only take still photographs; they are not able to record video. The policy is stated clearly: "no video at all."

When exploring what technology is available, the film crew discovered computers in the community, but they are not permitted to connect to the internet. The kosher phones available in community stores are extremely limited in function—they contain only basic tools like a calculator. There is no way to send SMS messages and no way to search anything online. One person described it as being like "a walkie talkie." The technological environment reflects the community's deliberate choice to maintain separation from the broader digital world and its influences.

Technology and Digital Access

Internet access within this community is carefully controlled through filtering systems. Members have access only to sites they need for work, while other websites are

blocked. Certain companies have built a specialized business around modifying phones and computers specifically for this community, removing internet access completely from all devices. One of these companies manufactures filter technology. When a community member was asked to participate in an interview, he declined—not because he opposed being interviewed, but because he was concerned that viewers might follow a link to the interviewer's channel and encounter content that would not be considered kosher according to his standards.

Alternative Communication Networks

Instead of social media, the community has developed its own information systems. One unusual platform operates through phone calls: residents dial a number and select from various stories, rabbinical teachings, and inspirational content. All of this content is delivered through the telephone system rather than through conventional social media. These communication networks serve a different purpose than mainstream platforms—some users are listeners seeking content, while others function as influencers within the community.

Community security is also locally managed. The neighborhood has its own patrol vehicles equipped with emergency lights and sirens, and the community maintains its own ambulance service called Hatzalah, a private organization. While community members do have their own security and can make citizen's arrests, they are obtaining permits for increasing their security measures.

Sidelocks and Jewish Identity

One of the most visible markers of identity in the community is the payot, or sidelocks. These locks of hair are grown from childhood: boys begin growing them after the age of three and continue the practice into adulthood. For centuries, sidelocks have been worn to show Jewish identity, pride, and community belonging. According to Torah, the practice comes from the commandment that states "it shall live by the two sides."

Religious Garments and Their Meaning

Hashidic men wear the tzitzit, a fringed garment with roots going back over 3,300 years. The various knots and strings of the tzitzit add up to 613, a number that reflects the 613 commandments, or guidelines, that God gave according to Jewish tradition. The tzitzit hangs visibly as a reminder of who placed the community here and what their purpose is.

Beyond the tzitzit, Hasidic men typically dress in formal clothing as a community uniform. This includes a kapata, which is a black overcoat, worn over a white shirt and a black hat. Beneath the hat, men wear a kippah at all times. Some take this practice to an extreme level: when swimming, men wear specialized swim caps to maintain the requirement of head covering even in water. Most people in the community also wear

eyeglasses that look nearly identical—a choice driven by values of modesty, where everyone adheres to a single style of frame that applies to males from age thirteen onward.

Hair Covering and Female Modesty

According to Torah, married women are commanded to cover their hair. Women from the Satmar community have historically shaved their heads; one woman interviewed had done so for twenty years. However, in the neighborhoods explored, women are rarely seen wearing scarves or traditional head coverings. Instead, many wear wigs that are styled to look natural and beautiful.

To understand this practice, the filmmakers visited a wig maker and seller within the community. She explained that women cover their elbows and knees, and after marriage, they cover their hair as well. While a woman could use a hat or scarf, wigs are preferred because they are much more beautiful and look more natural—so much so that a well-made wig can look like a person's own hair. Virgin hair wigs, sourced from Brazil, can cost as much as \$6,300. Over a lifetime, a Jewish woman who covers her hair with wigs spends an average of \$65,000.

The flexibility of wigs allows women to change colors, lengths, and styles while still adhering to Jewish law. One community member explained that while the biblical commandment is simply to cover the hair, the community takes modesty to another level because they want to look good. This approach reflects a view within the community that a woman's hair is actually more significant than her body in terms of modesty—the reasoning being that when a person sees a woman's hair, they might become lost in thought and develop inappropriate desires.

However, there is internal debate about how covering natural hair with a beautifully styled wig that still appears to be real hair aligns with the concept of modesty. Some members of the community, when asked about this contradiction, offered interpretations based on Torah. They noted that according to the Torah, a woman is meant to be beautiful and to inspire men to love God. This tension between the requirement of modesty and the practice of wearing attractive wigs that look natural remains a point of contention even within the community itself.

Religious Enforcement and Community Control

From a young age, community members are taught strict adherence to religious practices. Non-compliance with these rules carries implicit consequences in the community narrative. When something goes wrong—a car accident or an illness—the rabbis may attribute it to the community's failure to follow rules properly, calling for collective repentance. For example, if a woman does not keep her skirt long enough, that infraction might be cited as the reason for someone's illness. This system of

religious enforcement creates strong social pressure to conform to community standards regarding dress, appearance, and behavior.

Continuing Community Exploration

The filmmakers' exploration of the neighborhood continues, with plans to return later to a synagogue for access to a large private gathering that is typically closed to outsiders. Within the community spaces, practical accommodations have been made for residents who avoid smartphones: a Hatzalah button has been placed in some locations to allow community members to contact the private ambulance service without using a phone that would violate their principles.

Local Patrol Groups and Community Safety Networks

The neighborhood's approach to safety relies heavily on local patrol groups that operate alongside official law enforcement. Ultra-Orthodox residents often keep one another informed and sometimes contact Shomrim or Shmira when they have concerns about safety or daily life in the community. On the streets, several local patrol vehicles are visible, equipped with cameras, emergency lights, tinted windows, emblems, and blue and white markings. At first glance, these vehicles can appear official in nature.

According to community members, these patrols function as a community watch, providing support to the NYPD when they are stretched thin. The Shmira — a Hebrew word meaning to guard or to protect — operates with knowledge of the community and its residents that outsiders lack. Members wear certain t-shirts and hats as part of their uniform, and those with New York state permits can carry weapons. The group also handles practical community matters: if somebody has a flat tire or gets locked out of their car, they respond to assist.

Emergency Medical Services and Community Volunteers

Another significant community organization is Hatzolah, a Hebrew word meaning to save. Hatzolah operates as a volunteer ambulance corps made up strictly of community members. The response time is remarkably faster than calling 911, because volunteers are well acquainted with the community and its streets. Multiple ambulances are stationed in strategic spots throughout the neighborhood to ensure rapid response.

When asked about the types of cases they attend to — muggings, stealing, assaults — the rabbi did not wish to elaborate further while cameras were present. However, the community also resolves certain internal disputes through religious courts known as a Beth Din, based on their tradition. While these rulings can sometimes be recognized under American law, in close-knit communities like this, people may find it difficult to refuse a Beth Din process due to concerns about their standing in the community.

Some residents reported that rabbis have instructed them to discuss issues with their rabbi before reporting matters to police.

Community Fundraising and Social Support

During a gathering held to raise donations for families, the community was supporting those seeking to afford more children. In just 15 minutes of observation, more than \$400,000 was collected. The fundraising goal for the night was to reach \$1.2 million.

Physical Boundaries and Modesty Standards

On Lee Avenue in Williamsburg, the measures taken to isolate the neighborhood from outside influences are striking. Blocking coverings are placed on trucks to prevent residents from seeing inappropriate advertisements. Modern trucks often carry advertisements that the community considers unsuitable, so these are routinely covered. Before the blockade was expanded, it covered the entire view from the bridge. Signage warns people against dressing immodestly, stating: no shirts, tank tops, or going barefoot. Volunteer groups known as modesty patrols sometimes monitor whether Hasidic community members are dressed appropriately when in public.

Products available in the neighborhood reflect these standards. Magazines carry no women's faces. Jewish movies available locally are screened as kosher content. All the brands stocked are local — there are no McDonald's, no Starbucks, no chain restaurants.

Economic Self-Sufficiency and Community Commerce

At a local restaurant, it became clear that the neighborhood sustains its own commercial ecosystem. Political figures, including Donald Trump, have visited such establishments. The food served reflects cultural traditions: chicken cutlet, stuffed cabbage, and fish are staples. Community members emphasize keeping their dietary and commercial choices aligned with their culture and values. With ten children — nine boys and one girl — one resident explained that the philosophy is to teach children their way of life from an early age.

The neighborhood has developed its own stores and brands rather than relying on chain retailers. There are no Toys R Us stores; instead, the community supports locally owned toy shops. This deliberate choice to shop within the community means money circulates among neighborhood businesses. When asked why there are no chain stores, one resident responded: "Why would I not support my brother?" Many Hasidic people from Williamsburg own properties in Manhattan, but locally, the emphasis remains on self-sufficiency and mutual support.

Children's Education Through Products and Play

Almost all toys available in the neighborhood reflect a Hasidic Jewish world. No Barbies are stocked, and if a toy has the face of a girl, the community tries not to display it — sometimes covering it instead. From a young age, children become familiar with the community's values and traditions through the items they interact with.

Religious Lego sets are particularly popular. A holy temple set represents the most important symbol in Jewish history, with roots dating back nearly 3,000 years. Another popular item is a mini Shabbos set designed to educate children about adult roles and responsibilities. Through play, a child pretends to be the father of the house, wearing the hat that only a father would wear and learning to make the blessings that only a father would recite. All toy clothing is designed to be modest and appropriate. One community member explained that once you enter the secular world, toys are available that he believes affect children negatively from a young age — dolls and other items that he cannot allow his own children to play with. He recalled his own childhood, when even playing with a cousin was governed by strict boundaries regarding appropriate interactions between boys and girls.

Marriage, Dating, and Family Formation

Within this community, dating practices differ significantly from mainstream culture. Rather than dating freely, young people typically work with a matchmaker who suggests potential partners based on compatibility. One community member explained that because there is no physical contact allowed during courtship, people can meet "really quick." These meetings take place in the parents' house, following a model where the couple gets to know each other before commitment. When asked about the timeline for marriage decisions, one person stated plainly: "If my parents decided that this was the person I was going to get married to, I was going to marry them."

The concept of remaining unmarried is not considered an acceptable life choice. According to Beatrice, staying single as a bachelor or bachelorette is "not even considered a possibility" in this community. The religious and cultural framework strongly emphasizes marriage as a fundamental part of adult life. Biblical precedent is cited to justify the approach to marriage: in the Old Testament, Rebecca married Isaac, and "afterwards they loved each other." This narrative informs the understanding that romantic love is expected to develop after marriage rather than before it.

Religious Rules Governing Intimate Life

Religious law extends deeply into the marriage relationship, governing physical intimacy in specific ways. One woman described the rules: "There's a lot of rules, like about when you're intimate, the light is supposed to be off." Beyond lighting restrictions, there are also periods of mandatory separation. After a woman gets her

period, she is considered ritually impure for two weeks. During this time, the couple must sleep in separate beds and cannot touch each other—not even to pass objects directly. She illustrated the practical consequence: "You take the baby, you put the baby in the infant seat. Then the husband picks up the baby from the infant seat." This creates a physical barrier in everyday interactions. She described the intensity of these rules, noting that she "kept all the rules."

These restrictions extend even to pregnancy. Pregnant women were discouraged from visiting zoos because they were not supposed to look at animals that were not kosher. The reasoning given was that observing non-kosher animals could somehow render the unborn child impure within the community's understanding of religious law.

Architecture and the Built Environment

Religious law shapes not only homes but entire building design. Every building in the neighborhood features porches that extend straight to the sky, which serve a practical religious purpose. Once a year, during the holiday of Sukkot, the community builds temporary huts and sleeps under the open sky. This practice commemorates the experience of their ancestors wandering the desert after leaving Egypt. Additionally, every building is visibly covered with protective fences on the windows. According to Torah law, there is a commandment to build a protective guardrail around a home to prevent danger, and this religious obligation is followed meticulously.

Kitchen Separation and Dietary Law

Dairy and meat are kept strictly separate, a requirement that extends throughout the home and especially into the kitchen. During a visit to Rabbi Shlomo's house, the extent of this separation became clear. The kitchen contains two of almost everything: two stoves, two microwaves, and two dishwashers. One side of the kitchen is designated exclusively for dairy products. As the Rabbi explained: "Anything that my wife wants to cook, dairy will go into the oven. Only dairy goes into that microwave or that dishwasher." In the evening, when meat is being prepared, a different stove is used. This separation is rooted in the religious principle: "We have to keep meat and milk separate."

The separation is so thorough that even plates and cutlery are divided. One set of utensils is reserved exclusively for meat, and if meat utensils come into contact with dairy products, they cannot be reused for meat without special treatment. The rules are nuanced: if a meat utensil has touched cold dairy, it can be washed and reused. However, if it has touched hot dairy, the utensil cannot be used for meat again. For some Orthodox families, a newly purchased kitchen utensil is not considered fit for use until it has been ritually dipped in a pool of rainwater three times. This immersion ritual is performed for every kitchen item.

The Kippah and Constant Religious Awareness

Male community members wear a kippah (skullcap) at all times, including while showering and sleeping. When asked if there are times when the kippah is removed, the answer was a firm no. The reasoning given reveals the spiritual intention behind this practice: "This keeps you conscious that you're not the only person that exists. There's someone above you that put you here for a purpose." The kippah serves as a constant physical reminder to be aware of God's presence and purpose. As the speaker explained, "Judaism and serving God is at every moment, whether you're going to the gym, going to the doctor." Even when sleeping, the kippah remains on, though it may accidentally fall off. It is not intentionally removed.

Shabbat: The Weekly Day of Rest

Shabbat, the weekly day of rest observed on Saturday, is a central institution in community life. The biblical foundation is straightforward: "God created the world in six days and he rested on the seventh. And then God told the Jewish people that we should do the same thing." During the week, community members work and earn money, but when Shabbat arrives, "everything is done." The focus shifts entirely to rest and spiritual observance.

The observance of Shabbat involves strict rules about electricity and work. Before Shabbat begins, candles are lit to usher in the day. Once Shabbat starts, no electrical switches can be opened or closed. If a light is on, it stays on. If it is off, it remains off. The status of nothing can be changed. This rule can present practical challenges. For example, if someone wants to read in bed, they cannot turn on or turn off a light. To solve this problem, Jewish couples developed a creative solution called the Shabbos light: "You get into bed, you eat your whatever. You're reading your magazine, and now you want to close the light. But it's Shabbat. You can't. But the light is on. I didn't turn it off. I just blocked the light." Blocking light is permitted because no electrical switch is being manipulated.

Refrigerators present another challenge, as they automatically turn on a light when opened. Jewish engineers invented a solution: a refrigerator that does not turn on any lights when opened. This innovation allows the door to be opened without violating Shabbat restrictions.

Meal Preparation and Cooking During Shabbat

Cooking is completely prohibited once Shabbat begins. To accommodate this, all meals must be prepared in advance. On Friday, food is prepared and then placed in a special oven setting that functions as a warmer. The oven's settings can be adjusted before Shabbat begins by holding specific buttons. A label on the oven reads, "It's about you doing it before Sabbath. You set it for exactly what temperature you want it to be at,

how long you want it to be on for." This pre-programming allows meals to be warmed throughout the day without any active cooking or manipulation of controls during Shabbat itself.

Work is prohibited on Shabbat because the day is meant to avoid reshaping the physical world and instead focus on rest and spirituality. For observant Jews, daily life pauses completely. In rare cases, certain restrictions can complicate emergency medical situations. One woman recalled the birth of her first child: "When I had my first baby, he went to the synagogue and I was like, she was a premature baby. And then I remember going to the doctor and the doctor was yelling at me. Why? He took me a few hours to come in. I'd been laying in bed and I should have been in the hospital." The tension between strict Shabbat observance and urgent medical needs illustrates how deeply these religious laws are embedded in community life.

Shabbat Observance and Life-or-Death Decisions

The rules of Shabbat are taken so seriously that observant Jewish people avoid using electronics, cooking, working, driving, or carrying money and keys to make daily life possible. One person recounted a harrowing experience where a medical emergency occurred on Shabbat. Instead of calling an ambulance, the person went to the synagogue, viewing the call for emergency services as a desecration of Shabbat. The narrator was too scared to call for help themselves because of the rule against desecrating Shabbat, even though the situation could have been life-threatening. "My baby could have died," they explained, highlighting the tension between religious observance and immediate safety.

The Eruv: Religious Boundaries and Community Infrastructure

Within the rules of Shabbat, some communities in New York have created an eruv—a religious boundary marked by wires stretched between utility poles. The thin wire visible throughout the neighborhoods is called an eruv, and it is vitally important to community members. If this wire snapped, older people would not be able to use their walkers and sick people would not be able to use their medicines. An eruv is a religious boundary that allows people who observe Shabbat to carry certain items in public areas. In New York, one eruv stretches roughly twenty miles around Manhattan, while another extends about fifty-five miles across large parts of Brooklyn, marked by wires attached to utility poles. These boundaries require regular inspection and maintenance. The Manhattan eruv alone is reported to cost around \$200,000 a year to maintain.

Prayer and Religious Observance in the Synagogue

Just before entering the synagogue, Rabbi Katz began giving blessings out on the street. Upon entering, visitors encountered the mezuzah—a small piece of parchment

containing portions of the Bible. Every time people walk by, some touch it and kiss it as an offering of protection on the house and the synagogue. When entering the sanctuary, men of all ages were already deep in prayer, united as if everyone shared the same purpose. Before prayer, they put on religious items on different parts of their bodies. One man explained that he was performing a mitzvah by putting on tefillin—black boxes bound to the body. One box goes on the arm towards the heart, which expresses the love one has towards God. The box placed on the head expresses the intellect, as "a Jew, you have to think about God." According to the Bible, the box has to be positioned between the eyes, checked carefully with a mirror to ensure proper placement.

Devotion Through Song and Movement

Before the prayers began, people wore the prayer belt and sang in anticipation of the service. The lead rabbi stood at the front, and the crowd watched him closely, taking their cues from him. Throughout the service, people kept reminding themselves of the rules by singing and reading Torah. Many of the people here do not just read the Torah—they breathe it, live it, and see it as absolute truth. The community started singing all together, along with praying for the well-being of the State of Israel. The people prayed and sang for their holy temple to be rebuilt, though the site where they believe it should stand is already home to Al-Aqsa, one of the holiest sites in Islam. Rebuilding it on that exact site would mean the two religious sites could not exist there at the same time, and the site is located in East Jerusalem, which the United Nations considers part of Palestinian territory. The people sway while praying as an expression of devotion and spiritual intensity.

Community Openness and Conversion

Hasidic communities also accept converts, and some of the people encountered openly encouraged visitors to learn more about Judaism. "We're all created by God for one purpose," one community member stated. There is a certain caution in the air for this Hasidic community. The place is almost like the Vatican of New York City in a city that never sleeps, where prayer seems to continue almost around the clock.

Coming of Age in Hasidic Culture

When a boy turns thirteen for his bar mitzvah, they change their clothes completely. Boys go from wearing colored shirts and slacks to wearing the full suit and full black hat, marking their transition into manhood. Only white shirts are worn from that point forward. By the time they turn thirteen for high school, there is no academic studies at all. Before this transition, one man was observed putting on tefillin—the black boxes—for the first time as a grown man. As one community member explained, when a boy turns thirteen, he is taking on responsibility for Jewish culture.

The Discovery of Hidden Passages

Inside the synagogue, behind the wooden panels along the walls, a passage was discovered in 2024. The passage was nearly sixty-five feet long and contained mattresses, clothes, boxes, and other personal items when authorities came to inspect the area. Some people refused to leave when authorities arrived. Rabbi Friedman described the discovery as a simple wall opening—breaking open a wall to create a door from one building to the next building. However, they did not get permission and did it on their own, for which they were disciplined. Given the extent of the digging, authorities considered the situation serious enough to take legal action.

Leaving the Community

Beatrice once occupied a prominent position in the community as the wife of a rabbi, but she later left it. When asked if she ever felt regret about leaving, she said no. She explained that after leaving, her family tried to take away all the children from her. "I experienced such betrayal," she described, explaining how personal the conflict became when she departed from the community.

#Hasidic Jewish community

#Religious isolation and technology restrictions

#Community infrastructure and parallel institutions

#Shabbat observance and religious law

#Family structure and rabbinical authority

#Modesty standards and dress codes

#New York City neighborhoods