

# THE MAGIC JEWS

*From Manischewitz to Mescaline*

BY HAMILTON MORRIS, PHOTOS BY JESS WILLIAMSON



When I first walked into the apartment on Ridge Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, I didn't see much because the lights were off. It was a long empty room with couches lining the walls. Empty cans and bottles everywhere. At four in the morning all that was left were the remnants of a party. Nothing unusual. A Hasidic Jew was passed out on his back, yarmulke resting on the cushion next to his head. His cell phone was wildly ringing digitized klezmer music from within his wool pants. He lay totally still. I walked toward him, wondering if he was alive. The phone cycled through four more rings before he swiped at his pocket, at which point I let out a sigh of relief.

I could hear muffled singing coming from behind a closed door down the hall. I stepped over the passed-out Hasid, making my way into the next room. Inside, it was completely dark. The air was warm with the smell of bodies. Ten, maybe fifteen, naked Jews were perched, chanting in flawless harmony with one another. They stopped briefly to greet me and then resumed. I watched them speechlessly for a moment before posing the question "What's going on?" A voice in the dark made an incomprehensible remark about LSD, and everybody broke out in bouts of electrified laughter. And then the chanting began again. I only stayed for a few minutes, watching them in awe before I felt for the doorknob and got up to leave. Back in the other room, a Hasid I had not noticed before informed me that the party was over, the acid was gone, and I should come back the next day. I asked him when and how frequently this sort of thing happened. He responded: "Constantly."

For many, religion is tedious work. A chore handed down from generation to generation, rewarding only by virtue of its being unpleasant. Few have had a genuine religious experience, something that warrants worship, reverence, time, and faith. I know I haven't. In Jewish mysticism, God is partially defined by his lack of definition. He is infinite and unknowable, the eternal question mark. I had my first psychedelic experience smoking salvia in a friend's station wagon when I was 16. I lay screaming with laughter, soaking myself with tears, snot, and drool. I knew that something significant had happened, something that would definitely fit under the "infinite and unknowable" heading. But to say that it was a religious experience would be wrong. It was better.

Two days after the party I received a phone call from one of the Jews. I expected it to be along the lines of another party invitation, but to my chagrin it was a request to attend the funeral of one of their friends. He had overdosed on cocaine the previous night. I got on the F to Parkville, Brooklyn, and then walked toward 39th Street nervously. Attending the funeral of a Hasidic Jew I had never met, without a yarmulke, wearing a purple leather puff-coat, made me generally uneasy. Outside the Shomrei Hadas Chapel, Hasids paced nervously while smoking cigarettes. I walked through the door and took a seat in the back, trying to remain unnoticed. At the front of the synagogue a wall of black-clad Jews blocked any view of what was going on. I listened to the Hebrew prayers drone on and found my social discomfort slowly melt into sadness. When the service ended I filed out to watch the pine box heaved into a Ford Excursion as mobs of family and friends cried and smoked and talked on cell phones. It was here that I met Aaron, one of the few in attendance who was without religiously sanctioned clothing. He began to explain things a bit.

The previous night one of his ex-Hasidic friends had been on a drug binge, taking massive doses of coke, ecstasy, and an assortment of benzos. He was fine, if extremely inebriated, when he retired to bed, falling asleep next to his girlfriend. The following morning she woke up next to a corpse. Aaron explained, "It's a nonstop drug binge without drug education. These Hasids have all lived incredibly sheltered lives. You really can't even imagine unless you've been there. When they stray from their families nobody has told them not to mix this with that, speed and ecstasy, alcohol and Xanax. It gets seriously dangerous." "Who's selling them this stuff?" I asked. "There are drug dealers who get a kick out of the whole thing like, 'Let's get the Hasids fucked up,' you know? Which is fine, but they don't realize that's exactly what's going to happen—they are going to get *really, really fucked up.*"

As he told me this I felt overcome by frustration. Maybe it was selfish, but the thought that all I would see of this renegade Hasid drug life was one tantalizing taste, that it was already over and everybody would be scared straight and the scene would disintegrate into obscurity before I got a chance to learn exactly what was going on, really disappointed me. "So I guess this is the end of it all?" I asked. Aaron paused and said, "No, no, no. Definitely not." And on that note I was invited to a party the following night.

To take a moment and clarify my religious background: I am a Jew. I was bar-mitzvahed (at Masada no less) but I never went to Hebrew school. I never went to temple. I learned a CliffsNotes version of Hebrew and memorized my Torah portion from a recording on a MiniDisc. In short, I know nothing about Judaism. I am also not religious or "spiritual" in any way. I feel awkward even saying the word "prayer." The Jews I met at Ridge Street come from Hasidic and Orthodox Brooklyn neighborhoods. Most speak Yiddish as their first language. Aside from a love of psychedelics and maybe some shared genetics from way back when, we have nothing in common. I was introduced to all of them by a friend of a friend of a friend. A psychedelic mushroom is called a magic mushroom, and by that logic these Jews could be called Magic Jews. So that's how I started to think of them.

The doorbell at the Ridge Street apartment had a placard labeling it a photographer's studio, which may or may not have been true. Inside there was an array of Jewish fauna, ranging from those in full Hasidic costume to others looking like they had just arrived from a Rainbow Gathering in Vermont, all originating from an environment of extreme religious oppression. Some were old. Most were young. There were almost no women, and those who were there seemed to have minor if not nonexistent ties to Hasidism. They were spectators like me.

After the funeral, Aaron and I had discussed working with an uncommon spiritual catalyst called 2C-E. At the party that night, we opened a bag, cut the white powder into small lines, and offered it around. Somebody asked what it was, and I said it was a synthetic psychedelic in the same chemical family as mescaline. A guy with long curly hair shouted from across the room, "2C-E is not mescaline!" I was stunned at his psychedelic bravado but rushed to agree with him and point out a second time that this chemical was not mescaline, just related to it. Jews began to crowd around the lines of powder. Aaron stepped forward, volunteering his nostril and a rolled-up dollar bill. He bent over the book, snorted a line, winced, and then sneezed the crystals into a cloud around the table—the most Jewish drug blooper imaginable. Literally a Woody Allen joke. Everyone else rushed to rescue what was left with credit cards while Aaron stumbled into the bedroom followed by a girl with frizzy red hair. I began gnawing on a piece of kugel with jittery anticipation.

Aaron is obscenely charismatic and one of the few Magic Jews who could pass for a gentile. He speaks without an accent, wears normal clothes, and flirts ruthlessly with any woman around him. Upon leaving the bedroom, he turned to a friend and declared, "I broke my vow of celibacy after one day!" The friend cried back, "You're an animal!" Despite all this, Aaron comes from a family he calls "hardcore Orthodox" and has gone through the same sort of religious trials as everyone else in the room. He told me, "I had two circumcisions because my mom is a convert and Judaism goes by the mother. I lived in California until I was 13, then we moved to New York where it was much more religious and they said, 'Oh, the California rabbis are not legitimate. You have to convert again.' I was 14 years old and it was bad timing for a circumcision, but they took a knife and went to work on my penis. I was just starting to go through puberty and these three 80-year-old rabbis were cradling my balls. I was like, 'Do I have to do this?' They said, 'Don't you want to be Jewish?' and I was like, 'No!'" Aaron's parents think he's a degenerate drug user and they wait patiently for him to return to a life of Orthodoxy in Monsey, New York. He assured me this is not going to happen.

At Ridge Street, another Jew, this one in his 30s and named Hershel, consumed a line of 2C-E. Hershel has a light brown beard and a round body. His voice is hypnotically buttery and his general aura is like being wrapped in a warm towel. Hershel was married by force at 18. He has a wife and two kids in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, from whom he escaped in order to explore psychedelics. He has no home and drifts from place to place, praying and eating LSD. He is thought of as the leader of the Magic Jews but is too modest to accept the title. He explained to me, "I have one agenda, and that's more Hasidim doing psychedelics. I grew up Hasid, but I didn't know God at all. Then I was an atheist, and then psychedelics came to me and I understood. Psychedelics allowed me to rediscover God. Before LSD, I hated God."

Amid all the debauchery I wove my way out the door and began walking toward the Manhattan Bridge. It all would have been strange enough if I wasn't tripping. A few days later I received a call from Aaron, who told me they had all been evicted from Ridge Street and had already moved into a cabin in the Catskills, a place without electricity or running water. He gave me a list of phone numbers and told me to catch a ride up as soon as possible. I met my ride at his home in Brooklyn, where I was greeted with an eye-wateringly large gravity-bong hit that made me more or less comatose for the entire trip into the woods.

I came to in the dark as the car slurped into a muddy clearing. Aaron emerged from the trees with a giant flaming torch in hand. I

followed the flame through the trees, unsticking my feet from the mud with each step. In front of me was a corrugated-tin two-story A-frame monstrosity. Beyond it was a moonlit lake with a waterfall and hundreds of acres of Eden-esque land. The property and house were paid for by a group of mysterious Jewish elders who were sympathetic to the cause. Their only stipulation? That nobody uses the land to grow weed.

Inside the cabin it was candle-lit, filled with singing, and extremely hot from a blazing fire set inside an oil-drum furnace, which was right in the middle of the room. Sweaty, half-naked Jews were festooned about, lying on dark couches, sleeping in beds, in corners, on the floor, in the rafters. A picnic bench at one end of the room was crowded with boxes of matzo, glass prayer candles with depictions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, and bottles of Manischewitz wine. I took a seat and swallowed a tab of LSD, then handed one to Hershel, who laughed uproariously as he placed it in his mouth. He proceeded to heat pans of water on the stove so he could draw himself a mikvah in a kiddie pool outside. Then it started to rain. It was too dark to write so I just lay on my back and listened to April showers pelt the tin roof. I was in total ecstasy. It felt as if each raindrop was falling from the sky to give my eardrums a hand job. Hershel emerged from the rain and I commented on how beautiful it sounded, to which he responded, "What rain?" I was totally confident that I had discovered some impossibly strange version of the paradise.

I woke up harshly the next morning to a screaming argument between two Jews. "You behave this way, you won't get anywhere. You want to have women, don't you, Yoni? You want to fuck a woman in her vagina?!" Yoni wore a yarmulke and was still in the gray area between Magic and Hasidic, like some sort of deeply uncomfortable psychedelic puberty, doubtful of the old way but afraid of the new one. Offended by the Christian icons, he had scratched the faces of Jesus and Mary off their respective candles the previous night. A Jew named Lavvy screamed at Yoni, "Jesus loves you even if you scratch off his face." Yoni screamed, "NO! NO! NO! Fuck Jesus!" while he covered his ears in agony. This sort of scene was not uncommon and was done for Yoni's own good. A seemingly insignificant lesson turned into a painful paradigm-shattering, reality-crumbing theological crisis. Lavvy, who comes from the same part of Brooklyn as Yoni, adjusted with more ease. He has made a name for himself as a burgeoning fashion designer, causing an uproar in the Orthodox blogosphere for sending models down the runway wearing outfits made from deconstructed prayer shawls, yarmulkes, and other traditional Jewish attire.

Lavvy got tired of reeducating Yoni, wrapped himself in an American flag, put on a motorcycle helmet, and pranced out the door looking like an Israeli version of Evel Knievel. He stripped nude as he walked into the woods surrounding the house, where there is an automobile graveyard. Lavvy straddled the cab of a half-disintegrated bus, wearing nothing but his helmet. It was around this point that I started to wonder when and if I would ever be able to get a ride back home. I went looking for the Jew that had driven me up, but much to my dismay I found him passed out in an unexplained Clifford the Big Red Dog costume. I made sure he was breathing and then nudged him a few times in a futile effort to wake him up. By the time it had gotten dark again, I realized that nobody beside myself had any intention of leaving. I poured a glass of Manischewitz and lay down. I hadn't eaten anything except matzo and LSD for over 24 hours.

Around the time I had totally given up hope, I was approached by a couple returning to the city who I had not met or noticed the previous night. I got into their car and we began driving home listening to a scratched Ricky Martin CD. The girl began to question me about what I was doing upstate since I looked a bit different from the rest. I told her I was writing an article about drug use in the Hasidic community, which had become my stock answer. Nobody responded for a few moments, then she cleared her throat and said, "Yes, it's quite a problem." She paused, turning down the volume on the stereo, and then went on. "My boyfriend died two weeks ago from a cocaine overdose." My heart skipped a beat. "I was at the funeral, it was terribly sad," I said. "Yes," she responded, her voice strained. Her new boyfriend shifted in his seat and said, "It was terribly sad, but you know you have to move on." I jumped in with a quick "Yes, yes, of course. You cannot dwell on these things." Her boyfriend put his hand on her shoulder and cranked up "Livin' La Vida Loca." Nobody spoke for the rest of the ride. Back in the city, I got out on Canal Street feeling as if I had just overdosed on confusion.

The next call that I received from the Magic Jews informed me that they had been kicked out of the house upstate. It turned out that the elders didn't really own it after all. They all reconvened at a synagogue on the Lower East Side one evening. I arrived around midnight to find Jews spilling onto the street smoking cigarettes, drinking, and flirting with shiksas. A Hasid I had never met before took my hand and said, "Welcome home." Inside, I saw the word "rabbi" scrawled across a wall with an anarchy symbol replacing the A. In the corner, a Jew sat at a piano picking out "Stairway to Heaven." I took a seat and before long was approached by Aaron, who suggested we smoke some DMT on the back stoop. A bag containing a yellow powder the color and consistency of dried earwax was produced and carefully poured into a pipe. We both inhaled, sitting side by side on the unlit steps, shrouded by low-hanging tree branches. My brain started to divide into two, then four, then eight brains. I exhaled and was suddenly aware of a flip-flop-wearing jock scowling at us from across the street. I started to wonder once again: What was the significance of any of this?

In the 60s, Reform Jewish rabbis started to use psychedelic drugs for the pursuit of God. Some came to the conclusion that the psychedelic experience was in every way more real and important than the religious experience, even going so far as to say that any comparison between the two would only serve to desecrate the sanctity of psychedelics. In 2000, a group of Orthodox Jews living in Queens was found to be selling more than 100,000 MDMA tablets a week. Police seized a million tablets from their apartment. Some papers reported it to be the largest drug bust in New York history. But why is any of this surprising? Everybody gets high. At this moment somewhere there is a nun robo-tripping and a monk inhaling computer duster. What matters is how it's done. While some of their contemporaries quibble about whether or not it is permissible to smoke weed on the Sabbath or if LSD is kosher, the Magic Jews have completely ridden themselves of religious bureaucracy and distilled what they know of Judaism to its tastiest

essences, shamelessly consuming it and hoping others will follow by example. In that way, it is psychedelic religion at its purest.

During my trip to the Catskills, a sheet of LSD was acquired and then greedily consumed in a matter of minutes. Magic Jews were frothing at the mouth with psychedelic lust. Hershel took my arm and said he would like to speak with me alone. We walked down an unlit road and looked at each other's silhouettes. "You know, Hamilton, some people want to do this for the wrong reasons," Hershel said. I nodded as he went on. "Sometimes they only want orgies, and sometimes we have orgies, but you must understand your intentions." I nodded again, wondering what he was suggesting. He continued, "These are powerful places. When you bring light back into the picture, it automatically takes care of a lot of darkness, but I don't think it's inherently good. I think it destroys everything you've got. If you're focused, you can rebuild. But not everybody is." By that point both of us were tripping pretty hard and I was capable of understanding about as much as he was capable of making sense. Still, I think his point was something along the lines of: We are toying with powerful things here, and some of us are naive people. Therefore some of us could be permanently damaged by the stuff we're doing now.

A few hours later one of the Magic Jews railed a line of ketamine while navigating the lake in a rowboat. He staggered onto the shore, then collapsed in the driveway, spewing vomit all over himself and dropping into a deep and unresponsive K-hole while everyone watched in horror. Eventually they got distracted, turned him onto his side, and returned to a bonfire to snort more ketamine. As the sun rose and the alien chirps of what I can now only identify as glass harmonica birds lulled me into a trance, I saw Hershel emerge from the woods. He was alone with a prayer book in his hands, grinning and smoking a cigarette. We both listened to the birds sing for a minute while I accepted the weirdest thing of all—the real possibility that it all made sense.