

ב"ה

YeshivaAl Beit Midrash

Milchamtah shel Torah

The Bendel Among Chabad Yeshivah Students

Three investigations compared
Sources · Testimony · Custom · Tradition

Booklet No. 03

Elul 5786

A Map of the Evidence

What is a source, what is testimony, what documents a living custom, and what remains hearsay?

A • Primary sources

Established. Igros Kodesh, vol. 10: the prayer gartel is worn after marriage; the Polish custom and the practice of wearing two belts are not Chabad custom.

Shulchan Aruch HaRav, sec. 91: basic separation is one requirement; hikon—preparing oneself for prayer—is another.

B • Identified testimony

Strong within its context. R. Dovid Raskin: the future Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, instructed five unmarried students to wear a concealed gartel before yechidus, a private audience with the Previous Rebbe.

R. Leibel Groner: the Rebbe saw a rationale for wearing it before marriage too, but did not institute the practice.

C • Contemporary documentation

An existing practice. Raskin, Goldstein, and Avtzon: a bendel, a thin belt, or an elastic band keeps the tallis katan spread out. This documents a present-day use and explanation; it does not establish when or how the custom began.

D • An unsourced tradition

Not established. The story about a Rebbe and an elastic band; a general instruction to wear a bendel daily; the claim that most Chabad students worldwide do so; and a chronological account of the transition from elastic to a bendel.

Research principle: a valid explanation of a gartel is not necessarily an instruction concerning a bendel.

Four Source Checks

The yechidus testimony. A Chassidisher Derher publishes identified testimony by R. Dovid Raskin that the future Rebbe instructed five unmarried students to wear a gartel beneath their coats before yechidus with the Previous Rebbe. This strengthens Claude's finding

and corrects the weight assigned to this evidence in ChatGPT's report.¹

The bendel and tzitzis. R. Sholom DovBer Avtzon explicitly describes wearing a snug bendel during the week to prevent the garment from bunching into folds. R. Yaakov Goldstein describes this as Chabad custom and refers to the Alter Rebbe's Siddur. Both sources offer contemporary explanations, rather than documentation of the custom's beginnings.²

The quotation from Chabad.org. The statement about unmarried men wearing a belt beneath their shirts was written in a reader's comment in 2011. The editor's reply in the same thread says that Chabad custom is for married men alone to wear a gartel. Grok's use of the comment as supporting authority is therefore weak.³

Chabadpedia. The footnote attached to the statement that "many unmarried students wear a thin gartel" is itself the story about a Rebbe and an elastic band, marked "source needed." The entry documents community discourse; it establishes neither the practice's prevalence nor an instruction from the Rebbe.⁴

Factual Conclusions

What is established

The expressly stated Chabad custom is to begin wearing a prayer gartel after marriage; the Polish custom and two belts are not Chabad custom. Shulchan Aruch HaRav distinguishes basic separation from an additional belt for hikon. R. Dovid Raskin testifies to a concealed gartel before yechidus in the case from 5710 (1949–50). R. Leibel Groner's testimony indicates a rationale before marriage as well, although the Rebbe did not institute it.

1. A Chassidisher Derher, Nissan 5774, pp. 42–43: R. Dovid Raskin's testimony that, before yechidus with the Previous Rebbe, the future Rebbe instructed five unmarried students to wear a gartel beneath their coats.

2. R. Sholom DovBer Avtzon, "Weekly Story: Is It a Tzitzis Bendel or a Shabbos Belt?", CrownHeights.info, June 26, 2020; R. Yaakov Goldstein, "Bindel: Wearing an inner Gartel and Bindel," ShulchanAruchHaRav.com, November 27, 2016. Both describe keeping the tallis katan spread out; Goldstein cites the Alter Rebbe's Siddur.

3. Chabad.org, "Chassidic Black Belt," comment by "itche," January 4, 2011. The editor's reply in the same thread states that Chabad custom is for married men to wear a gartel.

4. Chabadpedia, "Gartel," section on unmarried students, note 16. The story about a Rebbe and an elastic band is explicitly marked "source needed." The same note is attached to the statement that many unmarried students wear a thin gartel.

What is plausible and documented today

An elastic band or bendel over the tallis katan is familiar in contemporary Chabad discussion. Rabbinic and community sources explain it as a way to keep the garment spread out. Separation, hikon, and hiskashrus—the bond with the Rebbe—can offer a Chassidic explanation, but do not constitute an explicit instruction concerning a bendel.

What has not been established

No general instruction from the Rebbe to wear a bendel daily has been found. When and where the transition from elastic to a bendel began is unknown. No data establish that most Chabad students worldwide follow this practice. The story about a Rebbe and an elastic band remains unsourced; hiskashrus is not a documented official rationale.

Recommended wording for publication

Some unmarried Chabad yeshivah students today wear a thin bendel over the tallis katan and beneath the shirt. Contemporary Chabad sources explain it primarily as a means of keeping the tallis katan spread out; some also give it a meaning of separation and preparation, similar to a gartel. However, the Rebbe's explicit sources concern the prayer gartel, which Chabad custom begins after marriage, and a concealed gartel before yechidus in particular cases. No primary source has been found in which the Rebbe instructed all unmarried students to wear a bendel daily. R. Yehudah Leib Groner's testimony shows that the Rebbe saw a spiritual rationale before marriage as well, yet specifically refrained from instituting it as a communal custom. The bendel should therefore be presented as a custom or an additional observance found in certain Chabad circles, with practical and Chassidic rationales, rather than as an established general directive of the Rebbe.

Key Sources and Links

1. Igros Kodesh, vol. 10 · letter 3356 · 2. Shulchan Aruch HaRav · sec. 91 · 3. Ceitlin-Weiss teshurah · collection on wearing a belt · 4. A Chassidisher Derher · R. Dovid Raskin's testimony · 5. R. Chaim Hillel Raskin · Gartel Rules · 6. R. Yaakov Goldstein · Bindel · 7. R. Sholom DovBer Avtzon · Tzitzis Bendel · 8.

Comparing the Research Methods

Grok

The method

Grok constructs a historical and conceptual narrative. It begins by distinguishing the external gartel worn by married men from an internal bendel, moves to the Rebbe Rashab's enactment and the Rebbe's letter, and then arranges the rationales as accumulated layers: tzitzis, separation, hikon, makifim (encompassing spiritual influences), and hiskashrus. Finally, it proposes a unifying explanation: the bendel is a living compromise between Chabad custom and the spiritual need for a gartel.

Strengths

- The most readable text. The reader quickly understands what the item is and the tension surrounding it within Chabad.
- It presents R. Yehudah Leib Groner's testimony in Yiddish and captures its conceptual point accurately: the same rationale applies before marriage, but the Rebbe did not wish to introduce a custom that would appear Polish.⁵
- It correctly distinguishes the tzitzis rationale from the reasons for a gartel, and explains separation and hikon well.
- Its synthesis explains why students may experience the bendel as a Chassidic item, rather than merely a functional elastic band.

Weaknesses

- It sometimes substitutes confident description for documentation. Phrases such as “most Chabad students,” “the official reason,” and “this is how the custom developed” are unsupported by a survey, an enactment, or a documented chronology.
- It directly attributes the formulation about makifim to the Rebbe, although the quoted letter does not use that word. The Rebbe

⁵. Testimony of R. Yehudah Leib Groner, cited from the Chen teshurah (wedding publication), 11 Adar 5758, p. 11, in the Ceitlin–Weiss teshurah, 21 Sivan 5775, p. 38.

cautiously links the belt to the tallis, writing: “Although I have not found this stated explicitly, it may be suggested.”⁶

- One of its citations from Chabad.org is, in effect, an anonymous reader’s comment, rather than an editorial response. A statement’s appearance on an authoritative website does not make its author an authoritative Chabad source.³
- It extends the yechidus case to writing a pan, a written petition to the Rebbe, and visiting the Ohel, as though these form a single official exception. The strongest direct documentation found concerns yechidus. Traditions and analogies exist for the other circumstances, but the level of proof is not the same.

The contribution

Grok’s contribution is the compromise model: the bendel allows a person to preserve Chabad custom outwardly while inwardly expressing the idea of the belt. This is a persuasive interpretation, but it must not be presented as the history of the custom without a source describing that process.

Claude

The method

Claude works as a bibliographical critic. It ranks evidence, marks what was and was not checked, devotes a section to blocked avenues and sources it could not open, and defines what could change the conclusion. Its approach is less narrative and more like a source dossier.

Strengths

- The most important new contribution is R. Dovid Raskin’s testimony: before five unmarried students from Russia entered yechidus with the Previous Rebbe in the winter of 5710, the future Rebbe instructed each of them to wear a gartel beneath his coat. This is identified, documented testimony, but it concerns yechidus rather than a daily bendel.¹

⁶. Igros Kodesh, vol. 10, letter 3356, 18 Adar 5715, pp. 393–394: “Although I have not found this stated explicitly, it may be suggested”; and: “But these two customs are not practiced by our Chassidim.”

³. Chabad.org, “Chassidic Black Belt,” comment by “itche,” January 4, 2011. The editor’s reply in the same thread states that Chabad custom is for married men to wear a gartel.

¹. A Chassidisher Derher, Nissan 5774, pp. 42–43: R. Dovid Raskin’s testimony that, before yechidus with the Previous Rebbe, the future Rebbe instructed five unmarried students to wear a gartel beneath their coats.

- It located R. Sholom DovBer Avtzon's article describing a snug bendel intended to prevent the tallis katan from folding, and R. Hendel of Montreal's practice of sewing a strip of cloth. The author himself emphasizes that he is not a rabbi and is not issuing a practical halachic ruling. This is therefore identified community documentation, not a source of halachic rulings.⁷
- It candidly states that there is no clear date for the custom's spread, no evidence of universal observance, and no written reply found concerning a daily bendel for unmarried students.
- Its sections on dead ends and the threshold for revising a conclusion are excellent research tools: they keep the reader from confusing failure to locate evidence with proof of nonexistence.

Weaknesses

- The grading system is inconsistent. Chabadpedia, Wikipedia, and HaMichlol sometimes receive grade A, even though they are tertiary sources. A claim may be correct, but a secondary source must not receive the status of a letter or a sichah.
- It calls some points verified when they were actually checked through a source quoting another source. The text discloses this, but the summary label is too strong.
- The discussion of the royte bendel, the red string, is useful only to prevent confusion over terminology. It is too long in relation to the question and weakens the focus.
- It makes little use of Groner's testimony, although this is among the most important identified testimonies for understanding the tension between the spiritual rationale and the decision not to institute the practice.

The contribution

Claude's contribution is its handling of uncertainty. It goes beyond listing sources: it states explicitly what is missing and what would be needed to raise a claim from the level of tradition to that of an instruction.

⁷ R. Sholom DovBer Avtzon, "Weekly Story: Is It a Tzitzis Bendel or a Shabbos Belt?", CrownHeights.info, June 26, 2020. The author states that he is not a rabbi and is not writing practical halachic guidance.

ChatGPT

The method

ChatGPT begins by sorting the concepts, ranks each source by its proximity to the event, builds a timeline, and then examines each common formulation separately. It also distinguishes an idea's validity from evidence that the idea was stated about a bendel. Thus, one can accept separation, hikon, and hiskashrus as genuine Chassidic ideas, while rejecting the claim that the Rebbe designated them as the official rationale for a student's bendel.

Strengths

- The clearest distinction between an external gartel, a concealed gartel, an elastic band, and a bendel. This is more than terminology: each appears in a different context and at a different level of evidence.
- A consistent preference for the letter and Shulchan Aruch HaRav over summary websites. The Shulchan Aruch itself distinguishes basic separation from an additional belt for hikon. It even states that someone who goes all day without a belt need not add one for prayer.⁸
- It preserves the source's wording. The letter establishes Chabad custom after marriage, but presents the connection to the tallis as a suggestion. It also excludes from Chabad custom both wearing the gartel before marriage and wearing two belts.⁶
- Broad coverage of the stories, including the anonymous tradition about five identifying signs, the Rebbe's own practice, and the story of hiskashrus at a wedding canopy, with different weight assigned to each.
- The section "What may be said in the Rebbe's name" is particularly useful for Torah writing and teaching, because it examines the wording of a statement, rather than only its general idea.

Weaknesses and corrections

- The first report assigned the yechidus testimony a B–C grade because it knew it through a compilation. After locating R. Dovid Raskin's

⁸. Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chayim 91:1–2: separation between the heart and the private parts, a belt for hikon, and the qualification for someone who goes all day without a belt.

⁶. Igros Kodesh, vol. 10, letter 3356, 18 Adar 5715, pp. 393–394: "Although I have not found this stated explicitly, it may be suggested"; and: "But these two customs are not practiced by our Chassidim."

testimony in an identifiable publication, this particular case should be raised to grade B.

- The first report rated the rationale of keeping the tzitzis garment spread out as moderately weak. R. Yaakov Goldstein’s article refers explicitly to the Alter Rebbe’s Siddur, and Avtzon’s article documents the practical reasoning. The explanation is therefore stronger as a description of current use, but remains weak as proof of the custom’s historical origin.⁹
- The stricter method produces a denser, less flowing document than Grok’s. For a reader seeking a quick answer, it may feel overly cautious.

The contribution

ChatGPT’s contribution is to separate three questions: Is a particular idea valid in Chassidus? Was it stated about a gartel? Was it stated about the bendel of unmarried students? Much of the confusion arises when a positive answer to the first or second question is presented as though it also answers the third.

Testing the Main Claims

Claim	Grok	Claude	ChatGPT	Finding
In Chabad, the visible prayer gartel begins after marriage	Correct	Correct	Correct; grounded in the letter	Established
The Rebbe explicitly explained it in terms of makifim	Presented as almost explicit	Presented as the Rebbe’s explanation	Distinguishes a later interpretation	Not established by the cited letter
Some Chabad students wear a thin bendel	Yes—even a majority	Yes, but not universally	Yes, some; no quantity given	Known to exist; extent unknown
The bendel originated to keep the tallis katan spread out	A main and historical reason	The practical reason	Qualified as contemporary documentation	Current rationale supported; historical origin unproven

⁹ R. Yaakov Goldstein, “Bindel: Wearing an inner Gartel and Bindel,” ShulchanAruchHaRav.com, November 27, 2016; cites the Alter Rebbe’s Siddur, Laws of Tzitzis, on a folded portion not counting toward the garment’s minimum size.

Claim	Grok	Claude	ChatGPT	Finding
The Rebbe told students to wear a concealed gartel before yechidus	Yes; generalizes	Yes; cites Raskin	Yes; first report gave too little weight	Well established for the 5710 case
The Rebbe instructed every unmarried student to wear a bendel daily	Rejects at the end, but the narrative tends toward it	Rejects	Rejects	No such instruction found
The story about a Rebbe and an elastic band is fact	Includes as tradition with partial qualification	Marks as unsourced	Marks “source needed”	Hearsay only
Hiskashrus is an official reason for the bendel	Gives it considerable conceptual weight	Calls it a popular extension	Distinguishes the wedding-canopy story	Possible personal symbolism; not an instruction
Most Chabad students follow this practice	Affirms	Avoids quantification	Avoids quantification	No data

Assessing and Ranking the Reports

Of the three responses, ChatGPT provides the most reliable research framework, Claude adds the greatest bibliographical value, and Grok offers the most readable and intuitive narrative. ChatGPT’s advantage is not that it concludes less, but that it consistently separates four things the sources themselves do not always distinguish: an external prayer gartel, a concealed gartel before yechidus, elastic holding the tallis katan in place, and the thin bendel worn by unmarried students. This prevents a valid rationale for a gartel from becoming an instruction about a bendel that has not been found.

Rechecking the new sources supplied by Grok and Claude also yields two corrections to the original ChatGPT report. R. Dovid Raskin’s testimony raises the instruction to wear a gartel beneath the coat before yechidus from the level of a compilation to identified testimony. The practical rationale of keeping the tallis katan spread out is also better documented than the first report acknowledged. Nevertheless, documentation of a present-day rationale still does not establish the custom’s historical origin.

The scores below are a guide, not a scientific measurement. The decisive test is the table of claims and sources. Since one of the reports is my own, I applied the same standard to it and corrected it wherever a new source required a change.

Ranking by Intended Use

Purpose	Leading report	Reason
Accessible, persuasive writing for a general reader	Grok	A continuous narrative, clear divisions, and a confident tone
Finding additional sources and reporting dead ends	Claude	Located Raskin’s testimony and Avtzon’s article
Torah or historical writing that can be cited cautiously	ChatGPT	A hierarchy of sources, precise terms, and a distinction between fact and inference
A reliable final answer integrating the findings	Corrected ChatGPT	ChatGPT’s method with the two additional supports contributed by Claude and Grok

Numerical Comparison

Scores run from 1 to 10 and reflect a research judgment of the responses supplied, not an overall assessment of the models.

Criterion	Grok	Claude	ChatGPT
Distinguishing types of belt and their contexts	8.4	8.8	9.6
Hierarchy of sources	6.7	7.6	9.5
Primary-source verification	7.1	7.5	9.0
Preserving qualifications	6.9	9.0	9.5
Coverage of stories and explanations	8.8	9.1	9.3
Clarity and readability	9.3	8.5	8.8
Staying focused on the question	9.0	7.7	9.4
Reliability of the final conclusion	7.6	8.4	9.2