

Book review *

David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin* [Trans. David Louvish]. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, xvi, 456 pp.

David Assaf's ground-breaking study of the life and activity of one of the most famous nineteenth century *Zaddikim*, Israel of Ruzhin, first won acclaim as a doctoral thesis, and then five years ago as a book, both written in Hebrew.¹ Today, this work is widely recognized as one of the most important recent studies dealing with the history of Hasidism, and Stanford University Press is to be lauded for publishing Assaf's book in a more widely accessible English version.

The English does not translate the Hebrew original in its entirety. The motives, no doubt, were both economic, on the part of the publisher, and the multitude of Hebrew references in the many notes that have been removed, notes that would be of little relevance to the non-Hebrew reading audience. These readers may be assured of Assaf's great erudition and skilful use of sources. It is not clear, however, why the long biographical discussion of Shalom Shachna of Pohrebitch (Israel of Ruzhyn's father) was deleted.

The book's fourteen chapters are divided into four sections. The first eight chapters are biographical, recounting the hero's childhood, youth, and rise to power over a Hasidic group following the death of his brother Abraham of Pohrebitch. Following is a detailed account of the most famous episode in Rabbi Israel's life, his arrest and imprisonment for the murder of two Jewish informers (the so-called Ushits affair) and his flight from the Russian Empire to Sadogora in Bukowina, where he again set up court and eventually died, in 1850. The second eight chapters, although described as dealing with the *Zaddik* of Ruzhin himself, are, in fact, a much broader study of the ideology of "Royal Hasidism" in the context of other nineteenth century Hasidic trends. Discussed are connections between the *Zaddik* and his flock, the functions and structure of the Hasidic court in this period, and even its economic mech-

* Translated from the Polish by Adam Teller.

anisms. It is this bipartite division of the book that give it special importance in the context of Hasidic historiography.

Scholarly, historical biographies of well-known Zaddikim are not unusual. Apart from hundreds of works – all more or less hagiographical – whose authors themselves are Hasidim, at least a score of scholarly, or near-scholarly, studies have retold the lives and ideas of Hasidic masters, notably, Arthur Green's study of Nahman of Bratzlav or Moshe Rosman's celebrated "negative" biography of the Baal Shem Tov. But these, and most similar scholarly studies, treat the first three generations of Hasidic leaders, in the eighteenth century. And Rosman has noted, and persuasively criticised, in his own work, the near-exclusive emphasis in even the scholarly biographies on the religious ideology of their Hasidic heroes. These works also leave wide open the question of the Zaddik after the Hasidic movement's first sixty years. Partly, the paucity of eighteenth century sources has limited investigation for this later period. On the other hand, the more abundant nineteenth century sources have not been sufficiently mined (Simon Dubnow's still valuable magisterial study ends in 1815).

Assaf's work comes to fill this lacuna. Even more so, he demonstrates that the life of a nineteenth century Zaddik can be no less important than the lives of earlier masters. Indeed, the biography he has fashioned sheds light on the Hasidic movement itself in this later period. Like its masters, the movement, too, has suffered from little attention – despite its exponential growth in adherents, as well as its increased influence. Moreover, going beyond religious thought and ideology, Assaf reconstructs central episodes in Rabbi Israel's life (a much harder exercise than it seems), analyses the mechanisms employed to ensure succession, and studies leadership techniques, replete with a penetrating description of the structure and organization of Rabbi Israel's Hasidic court. This study is also innovative in assembling a base of sources several times larger than that used in any previous Hasidic biography. It is distinguished for its wealth and depth, enabling the emergence of a rich and complex picture, whose superb textures surpass those painted in any previous study of a Zaddik.

In this context, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the second half of Assaf's book, which stands on its own as a study of social function in the Hasidic movement. It focuses not only on Israel of Ruzhin's court, but on all the so-called "Royal [Hasidic] Courts" that dominated Jewish society in huge swaths of the Ukraine and Eastern Galicia. Convinced that Hasidism was more than a religious innovation, rather first and foremost a powerful social one, Assaf offers what effectively is the first full-length study of the way Hasidism functioned as a social organization. Sociological studies have been made of contemporary Hasidic groups in the United States and in Israel,² and

a certain amount of work has tried to contextualize early Hasidism (including its social aspects), but Assaf is the first fully to examine the movement's social functions in its native, eastern European setting. Even when evaluating Israel of Ruzhin's religious ideology, and that of other "royal" Zaddikim (particularly the Twersky dynasty of Chernobyl), Assaf never lets the translation of this ideology into the social sphere out of his sights. The chapters dealing with the financial and administrative mechanisms of the Hasidic court are no less valuable, not to mention that historical literature has largely ignored the subject.

Notwithstanding the little attention previously accorded it, what becomes clear is that Hasidism's social history is essential for understanding the movement's significance, especially in the nineteenth century when it became one of the Jewish "masses." Concentration on questions of ideology is understandable if Hasidism is viewed as a form of Jewish mysticism (Scholem and Idel, among others) or as an ideological formation (Dinur, Mahler, and Ettinger). However, after 1815, there is a nearly unknown period, and during it, Hasidim were no longer drawn principally from a mystical elite, but primarily from the huge numbers (we do not know exactly how huge) of "simple Jews." These Jews, it appears, were generally indifferent to Hasidism's esoteric mystical doctrines. They privileged social over religious or ideological issues; and research, following Assaf's lead, would do well to do the same. This is not to say that Hasidism's social structures had no link to its ideology; the connection was very strong. It was also bilateral – again pointing the direction for research.

Hasidic society may be characterized as three concentric circles: Zaddik, court, and, community. "Canonical" studies of Hasidism concentrate almost exclusively on the Zaddik. With good reason, Assaf accepts the Zaddik's centrality in the Hasidic community; this is his books' basic premise. But, innovatively, he views the Zaddik as a kind of social institution, making his study, in one sense, a continuation of important earlier studies (like those of Immanuel Etkes, Arthur Green, and Ada Rapoport-Albert³) on the ideology of Zaddikism and the role of the Zaddik in Hasidic society. Yet whereas these predecessors stress ideology and its group-function, Assaf emphasizes social function.

Moreover, he expands his study into the second of the three concentric circles, that of the Zaddik's court. His conclusions here seem to me his most original, and they make a lasting contribution to our understanding of Hasidic history. Although there are a number of recent studies on the institutionalization of Hasidic leadership and the forms of succession it adopted in the early years, until now, our knowledge been drawn almost exclusively from a limited number of *mémoires* and anti-Hasidic diatribes.⁴ Assaf also raises

certain expectations that he will deal with the third of the concentric circles, community. The final chapter, in particular, describes the relations between the Zaddik and his believers, although to achieve a full picture regarding the fundamental question of how Hasidic society functioned outside the court more research will be needed, especially to flesh in the details.

In fairness, it should be said that a subject as broad as the Hasidic community per se, going beyond the direct links between a community and its Zaddik, is one that readers do not normally expect a biography to treat. But Assaf does point us in the right direction. In the first half of the nineteenth century, when Hasidism became a mass movement (particularly in the Ukraine), the majority of the Hasidim had only limited contact with their leader and his court. With the exception of a narrow group of radical Hasidim who devoted their lives to religious study, the average Hasid saw the Zaddik and his court only once or twice a year when he made a special pilgrimage to it. Hence, it was not the Hasidic court that was the usual backdrop to the lives of most Hasidim, but the *shtetl*, or the Jewish community, and the Hasidic group which lived, worked, and prayed there. Hasidic historiography, therefore, needs to penetrate further into the Hasid's daily life, especially into the area of social relations, and into the ways in which the movement influenced the administration of the (Hasidic) community.

Assaf carefully outlines these topics, and some of his analyses provide fascinating material that lends itself to elaboration. For example, the imposition on the inhabitants of a certain locality of a "tax" (the so-called "*ma'amadot*," pp. 299–303) for the upkeep of the Zaddik's court or the Zaddik's right to nominate religious officials in various Jewish communities (pp. 303–307); these are a clear sign of the dependence of the local Jews on the Zaddik and his court. However, a number of important questions arise. How did these practices develop and spread? Do we have lists of these Jewish "taxpayers" (the cited sources mention such lists) and if so, what proportion of the Jewish population do they include? How efficient were the Hasidic "tax-collectors?" How did the relations between the Zaddik, who nominated the religious officials, and the community, who accepted them, look in reality? Were these always "Hasidic" communities, or could there be different types of dependence? It seems reasonable to assume that this dependence was (had to be) significantly more complex. An anti-Hasidic incident in the town of Piątek (province of Mazovia) in 1860–1862 demonstrates that a relatively small Hasidic group dominated the communal institutions thanks to the wealth and influence of their leader, the Kotzk Hasid, Chuna Unger.⁵ One seems justified, therefore, in speaking of a "Hasidic community," although the majority in the Jewish community in which the Hasidim lived and aspired to the power was ambivalent – if not hostile – towards Hasidism. Such opposition, and

its actual complexity, is also noticeable in complaints made by other central Polish communities like Rypin, Pilica and Włocławek.

Assaf thus shows us where to begin. Future studies, one hopes, will expand on ideas like those he has raised. The consciousness Assaf instills in us of the Zaddik *in* his court, especially as the movement flourished in the nineteenth century, makes it clear how important it will be to supply the wider communal and social setting, the individual Hasid's daily milieu – in which the court of the Zaddik plays so important a role, and especially because of the distance that with their increase in numbers, had grown perforce between the Zaddik and his followers.

Another issue to study will be Hasidic geography, a question Assaf himself has raised. Were there different brands of Hasidism, so to speak, whose differences followed some geographical contour,⁶ molded, moreover, by state institutions, as well as by the Zaddik and his court? Related here is demography. Assaf relies on figures provided by anti-Hasidic forces, especially *maskilim*. Are these sources reliable? And what of other testimonies Assaf brings from people whose general reliability does not guarantee precision, especially with numbers?

It is said commonly that tens of thousands followed Israel of Ruzhyn. Yet there are no unimpeachable sources on the number of Hasidim for the whole period of the movement's existence in Eastern Europe from the mid-eighteenth century until the Holocaust (contemporary Hasidic demography is quite another issue).⁷ What exactly was meant by the phrase, "tens of thousands?" How many followers did Israel of Ruzhyn have and, more broadly, how many Hasidim were there in nineteenth century Ukraine, East Galicia or Bukovina? These are fundamental questions, the answers to which are crucial for understanding the ways in which Jewish society underwent modernization. Yet, the testimony is all vague, at best, if not suspect. One source stated that about 3000 people gathered at Meir of Przemyslany's court in 1839; about 1000 Hasidim visited Israel of Ruzhyn's court in 1826; and on Yom Kippur 1844 about 3000 Hasidim traveled to Israel's court in Sadowgora (pp. 157, 352 n. 5). Assaf brings these figures, but confines himself to noting that they are exaggerated. A place to start further inquiry may be the information provided by foreign travelers and missionaries in the pages of the "Jewish Expositor," the "Monthly Intelligence," and the "Jewish Intelligence." These papers give a considerable amount of information on the numerical strength of the Hasidim, and that of Israel of Ruzhyn's followers in particular.⁸

These comments must all be understood as questions that arose as I read Assaf's study, complementing rather than questioning his pioneering work. The Hebrew version of this book has already served as a major source of

inspiration for many who study the Jews in eastern Europe (not only the Hasidism) – among them, the author of these lines himself. It is to be hoped that the English translation will inspire no less the wider audience to which the book has now been made available.

Notes

1. David Assaf, *Derekh hamalkhut: R. Yisrael mi-Ruzhin umekomo betoldot hahasidut*, Jerusalem, 1997, 538 + 4pp.
2. Among the most important sociological studies of twentieth century Hasidism, see: Daniel Meijers, *Ascetic Hasidism in Jerusalem: The Guardian-of-the-Faithful Community of Mea Shearim* (Leiden, 1992); William Shaffir, "Boundaries and Self-Presentation Among Hasidim: A Study in Identity" in Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, ed., *New World Hasidim: Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Albany, 1995), 31–68; Stephen Sharot, "Hasidism in Modern Society," in Gershon D. Hundert, ed., *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York, 1991), 511–531. On the social context of early Hasidism, see the path breaking studies of Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov* (Berkeley, 1996), Immanuel Etkes, *Ba'al hashem: Habesht – magiya, mistika, hanhaga* [Ba'al Hashem: The Besht – Magic, Mysticism, Leadership] (Jerusalem, 2000).
3. See, among others, Immanuel Etkes, "The Zaddik: The Interrelationship between Religious Doctrine and Social Organization," in Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised* (London, 1996), 159–167; Arthur Green, "The Zaddik as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (1977), 328–347; Ada Rapoport-Albert, "God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hassidic Worship," in Gershon D. Hundert, ed., *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York, 1991).
4. For one of the most interesting memoirs of the functioning of a Hasidic court, see Ita Kalish, "Life in a Hasidic Court in Russian Poland towards the End of the nineteenth Century," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 13 (1965), 264–278. On the literary memoirs of Malka Shapiro, see Nehemia Polen, "Coming of Age in Koziennice: Malkah Shapiro's Memoir of Youth in the Sacred Space of a Hasidic Zaddik," in Alan Rosen, ed., *Celebrating Elie Wiesel: Stories, Essays, Reflections* (Notre Dame, 1998).
5. *Archiwum Głowne Akt Dawnych, Centralne Władze Wyznaniowe 1716*, 131–287; *Archiwum Głowne Akt Dawnych, Komisja Województwa Kaliskiego 3224*.
6. Aharon Ze'ev Eshkoli [Aescoly], *Hahasidut bePolin* [Hasidism in Poland] (Jerusalem, 1998), 34–46; David Assaf, "Hahasidut behitpashtuta: Dyukano shel R. Nehemia mi-Bihava ben "Hayehudi Hakadosh" [The Expansion of Hasidism – The Case of R Nehemiah Yehiel of Bychawa], in Israel Bartal, Hava Turniansky and Ezra Mendelsohn, eds., *Keminhag Ashkenaz uPolin: Sefer Yovel leHone Shmeruk – Kovetz mehkarim betarbut yehudit* [Studies in Jewish Culture in Honour of Chone Shmeruk] (Jerusalem, 1993), 267–279, and his "Hasidut Polin o Hasidut bePolin? Levaayat hageografiya hahasidi," *Gal-Ed* 14 (1995), 197–206.
7. I have recently published a preliminary study on the numbers of Hasidim in Congress Poland until 1830: Marcin Wodzinski, "Ilu bylo chasydow w Krolestwie Polskim okolo 1830 roku?" in Konrad Zielinski, Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, eds., *Ortodoksja. Emancypacja. Asimilacja. Studia z dziejow ludnosci zydowskiej na ziemiach polskich w okresie rozbiorow* (Lublin, 2003), 25–47.

8. See, for example, Alexander M' Caul and L. Hoff, "Journal of Messrs. M' Caul and Hoff," *Jewish Expositor and Friend of Israel* 10 (1825), 145; L. Hoff, "Journal of Mr. Hoff," *ibid.* 10 (1825), 28; idem, "Extracts of Two Letters from the Rev. L. Hoff," *ibid.* 14 (1829), 138, 140.

Wrocław University, Poland

MARCIN WODZINSKI