Forward.com

New Book Reveals Darker Chapters In Hasidic History

Allan Nadler | Fri. Aug 25, 2006

Of all the literary genres to emerge from the 19th-century *Haskala*, or Hebrew Enlightenment, one of the most popular was anti-Hasidic satire. And the most notorious of these parodies was “Megaleh Temirin” (“Revealer of Secrets,” Vienna 1819), a ribald lampoon written by Joseph Perl that recounts a series of desperate, bungled attempts by fanatic Hasidim to seize and suppress a dangerous anti-Hasidic German book that they feared had the potential to inflict great harm on their revered rebbe and their sect.

Now, almost two centuries later, life is imitating satire. The twisted intrigues invented by Perl to highlight the Hasidim’s fear of critical inquiry into their closed world is today playing itself out on the ultra-Orthodox street, from Jerusalem and Bnai Berak to New York, Antwerp and Montreal. This time, however, the fearsome book is neither satire nor polemic, but a serious work of scholarly inquiry by Israel’s leading historian of Hasidism.

“Neehaz ba-Svakh: Pirkei Mashber u-Mevucha be-Toldot ha-Hasidut” (“Caught in the Thicket: Chapters of Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism”), written by David Assaf, chair of Tel Aviv University’s Jewish history department, appeared in Israel just three months ago, but it has already generated fierce controversy. Indeed, although the book, which is in Hebrew, can be ordered from the publisher, it cannot be easily obtained in bookstores. According to reliable sources, who insist on anonymity, several tri-state area dealers of Orthodox books, as well as a few in major Canadian and European cities, are stocking limited copies of Assaf’s explosive book “under the counter” — selling them only to their trusted elite clientele, contingent on a strict promise that the transaction remains a secret.

As is so often the case with controversial literature, those who claim to be most offended are usually the ones buying, reading and simultaneously trying to repress the books in question. Indeed, raucous exchanges about Assaf's work have sprouted on a variety of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Internet sites and blogs, in both Hebrew and English. The interlocutors on these blogs include some distinguished Hasidic scholars and librarians, as well as average readers. The complaints range from the rude ("Assaf's book is like a fart in a cowshed: barely noticed and soon forgotten") to the ridiculous ("Look how low Merkaz Zalman Shazar [Assaf's publisher], named for the President of Israel who was himself a Hasid of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, has fallen"). But the most common critique is an ad hominem attack on Assaf's personal integrity and level of religious commitment. "For those people like David Assaf, the things we call Yiddishkayt he has no understanding of because he is not a frummer yid," one commenter wrote on Mentalblog.com. Or, as another more succinct writer, who happens to be a respected Hasidic librarian, put it, "[Assaf] is a vile creature blinded by hate." So, what's all the fuss about?

The purpose of Assaf's book is to revisit and clarify some of the most shocking episodes in the history of Hasidism, events that have been deliberately suppressed or extensively distorted for apologetic purposes by Hasidic historiography. The book consists of seven chapters, each of which examines in great depth some very embarrassing oddities of Hasidic life — some of which have long been known to historians of Hasidism. But Assaf has now clarified them by extricating the kernels of historical truth not only from Hasidic hagiography but also — and this seems to have gone right over the heads of his Orthodox critics — from Hasidism's enlightenment, or enlightened opponents, who often distorted the same events for their own purposes.

The chapter that has created by far the most Internet chatter concerns the conversion to Christianity in 1820 of Rabbi Moshe Schneerson, the youngest son of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, venerated founder of Chabad/Lubavitch. In it, Assaf offers a complete history of the efforts at distortion and repression by Lubavitcher apologists, horrified by the conversion of

their founder's son, and by their enlightened opponents, who could not have been more delighted by it.

Let's begin with the Hasidim. Although this tragic episode has not been unknown to historians, neither has it exactly been part of the standard official history of this most high-profile of Hasidic dynasties. In fact, the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson, in his published chronicle of Chabad history went so far as to deny that the conversion ever took place. According to Schneerson's hagiographical account, Rabbi Moshe was compelled to engage in a theological disputation with the Catholic priest of his town, in which he was of course victorious, and then was forced to flee for his safety. Rabbi Moshe, according to Schneerson's account, spent the remaining years of his life as a lamed-vovnik — the classic anonymous saint of rabbinic mythology — and was buried anonymously in the Ukrainian shtetl of Radomysl.

As Assaf demonstrates, this fanciful tale has no historical basis whatsoever. Instead, Assaf concludes that Rabbi Moshe's conversion is best explained as a result of the well-documented, though unspecified, mental illness from which he suffered since childhood. And he offers proof. As he explains, while searching the Belorussian State Archives in Minsk, historian Shaul Stampfer recently came across a treasure trove of documents verifying Rabbi Moshe's apostasy — including a letter of intention to convert that was addressed to the Catholic Priest of the Belorussian town of Ula (where Moshe served as rabbi), and his actual baptismal certificate, dated July 4, 1820. For the skeptical, Assaf includes reproductions of these documents in his book and adds that it is almost certain that shortly after his conversion to Christianity, the rabbi was consigned to St. Petersburg's famed mental hospital, Obuchovskaya, where he died.

While the story of Rabbi Moshe's apostasy may be the lightning rod for much of the indignation provoked among Chabad apologists, the most vulgar document published by Assaf is quite clearly the tale recounting the "fall" of the famed founder of Polish Hasidism, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak Horowitz (1745-1815), popularly known as the khoyze, or seer, of

Lublin. What is known is that sometime during the celebration of Simchat Torah in 1814, the severely inebriated seer fell, or more likely jumped, out the second-story window of his room above the Hasidic shtibl where he held court. Like the affair of Rabbi Moshe's conversion to Christianity, Hasidic hagiography has managed to transform what was either a drunken mishap or a deliberate suicide attempt into a mystical affair signifying a failed attempt to hasten the messiah's arrival.

But Hasidism's critics would have nothing of such fanciful explanations. What really happened, according to a Haskalah rendering of this sad episode in a hitherto unpublished and uncensored version of Sefer Nekiyut U-Ferishut ("The Book of Cleanliness and Abstinence") preserved in Perl's archives — which Assaf has now published for the first time — the seer of Lublin became so drunk that he had to leave his Hasidim so he could "crash" for a while in his upstairs bedroom. At one point during the night, he got up to urinate — out of the window, of course — and with his "holy scepter in his hand" he fell into the septic pool that lay beneath. Later that night, two Hasidim who went out to "use" the cesspool found their holy master there, holding on to his erect penis — a pre-Cialis phenomenon that they could interpret only as a sign of the seer's prophetic powers. (Or as mockingly described in this version: "They approached him, turned him over and found that his bris had remained faithful to him and steadfast in his hand, and thus proclaimed: 'Aha! Let this be a miraculous sign to the House of Israel. So the word went forth from Lublin that Rabbi Isaac was among the prophets."). The rabbi never recovered from his injuries and died later that year, not surprisingly on the fast day of the Tisha B'Av.

Assaf judiciously rejects both the apologetic, messianic explanation of the Hasidim and the satirical, polemical misuse of the khoyze's drunken fall by the Maskilim. Instead, he proposes that this was the second suicide attempt by Rabbi Horowitz, who was famously prone to long periods of depression. Based on clearly authentic Hasidic sources, Assaf reveals that many years before his 1814 window jump, the khoyze tried to throw himself off a mountaintop near the town of Lizensk and was saved from certain death only when his hiking companion, Rabbi Zelke of Grodzitsk, grasped his gartel in the nick of time. (Could

the midair gartel suspension of the khoyze have inspired bungee-jumping ? Assaf leaves this question to future generations of Hasidic historians.)

Many Americans were shocked earlier this year by the revelations of intense intra-Hasidic violence that accompanied the battle for leadership of Satmar Hasidism between the respective followers of rabbis Aharon and Zalman, after the death of their father, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum. But next to Assaf's chapter on the violent persecution of Bratzlaver Hasidim of the mid 19th century, perpetrated mainly by rabbis David Twersky of Talne and Yitzhak Twersky of Skver, contemporary Satmar skirmishes appear quite tame. In addition to their anti-Bratzlav activities, Assaf recounts the general tendency of the Talner and Skverer Hasidim to use intimidation and a variety of violent means, including death threats, rock throwing, home invasions and hostile synagogue takeovers, to "conquer" a string of shtetls in the southern Ukraine in the mid 1860s. The violence got so bad that the tsarist government was finally compelled in 1868 to issue a law prohibiting Hasidic rebbes in the Ukraine from extending their leadership beyond their own towns. But as Assaf documents, the persecution of Bratzlaver Hasidim continued even after the Holocaust, in Jerusalem and Brooklyn in the 1970s and '80s.

The other chapters are profiles of a number of complex and troubled Hasidic rabbis, some of whom ended up leaving the fold. Assaf has also published for the first time a number of explosive manuscripts that have languished, unexamined, in both European and Israeli archives for almost two centuries. The very last, and most moving, of his seven chapters includes the full text of a shocking letter sent in 1910 by the deeply depressed young rebbe of Shpikov, Yitzhak Nachum Twersky — scion of the most distinguished Ukrainian Hasidic dynasty, which included the rebbes of Tchernobyl, Skver and Talne — to a Warsaw writer, Yaakov Dineson. On the eve of his marriage to the Belzer rebbe's daughter, whom he had never met, the despondent young Twersky was clearly desperate, if unable, to escape his "tiny and ugly" Hasidic world:

"I send you my portrait…as I wanted you to see and comprehend the terrible dissonance

and distance between my inner life and my outer world….I despise the people around me, loathing their way of life…I have good taste and love beauty but I am obliged to wear the clothes of the uncivilized: A long silk kapoteh down to my feet, and a shtreimel of tails — that is our badge of shame….And what a terrible thought to think where I am now going. To a 'harem' in the town of Belz….Coerced to marry a woman from there, my gloomy life here with all its black darkness will seem bright by comparison."

As it turns out, Rabbi Twersky's marriage to the Belzer rebbe's daughter was a happy one, and he not only remained in the hasidic fold but also became a revered rebbe in his own right; however, many of the other Hasidic lives discussed in Assaf's remarkable book proceeded far less blissfully.

Assaf is not satisfied with verifying and clarifying the obscure scandals and crises of Hasidic history; equally important are the incredible lengths to which the internal chroniclers of Hasidic history have gone to censor, repress or recast these scandals. Assaf's book effectively constitutes a double-barreled assault on the apologetic narrative of Hasidic historiography and the exaggerated misuses of these embarrassing episodes by modernizing Jewish historians to discredit Hasidism entirely, both of which have molded the lives of Hasidic rebbes according to false stereotypes.

The real importance of Assaf's research is the extent to which it complicates the hitherto regnant accounts of Hasidic history, both the romantic and the polemical. By examining the inner demons and doubts that tormented a variety of hasidic leaders, torments that evoked a wide spectrum of responses, from conversion and suicide, to alienation and despair, Assaf enriches our understanding of the hasidic world. far from disdaining his subjects, assaf succeeds finally in humanizing them by cutting through the apologetic mythologies of the hasidim and the polemical mockery of their opponents and demonstrating the natural frailties of even the most pious and revered of men.

Allan Nadler is a professor of religious studies at Drew University.

Fri. Aug 25, 2006