

**Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism**, by David Assaf. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press, 2010. 336 pp. \$55.00 (c); \$35.00 (p).

This new volume of collected studies by David Assaf, professor of Jewish history at Tel-Aviv University and a leading scholar of nineteenth-century Hasidism, is an extremely worthy successor to his path-breaking study of Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin, *The Regal Way* (2002), and his painstakingly researched edition of the memoirs of Yehezkel Kotik, published under the title *Journey to a Nineteenth Century Shtetl* (2002). The author describes his present work as that of the historian as detective, as he endeavors to uncover six hidden and suppressed stories from the Hasidic world. Beyond identifying the “perpetrator,” i.e., reconstructing the portrayal of the Hasidic personality whose story had been deemed too sensitive to be told, Assaf’s goal as historian/detective is to reveal the fascinating series of wrong turns and misleading clues, and to describe the various mechanisms of apologetics, polemics, or suppression employed by Hasidim and their Maskilic critics alike over the last century and a half.

The essays included in the volume appeared earlier in various journals, but have been amplified and updated by the author. The volume is an English translation and adaptation of Assaf’s Hebrew work entitled *Caught in the Thicket: Chapters of Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism* (2006). It has been adapted for the English-speaking audience with additional explanations and annotations, by the elimination of several documents in appendices and by the shortening of footnote references (that still comprise over 70 pages of the total). One study in the Hebrew version, which had appeared originally in English, was also eliminated from the present version. For those desirous of further bibliography, the author refers to the relevant passages and footnotes in his Hebrew volume.

The studies in Assaf’s excellent book span the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and deal with figures and aberrant incidents from different regions of Eastern Europe. They have in common the marginalization of their protagonists in Hasidic society, the sad and troubling fate of children or close relatives of noted Hasidic figures, or the suppression of stories that might blemish the name of Hasidism. The author reminds his readers that his small number of studies of children of famous Hasidic figures who strayed from family ways by converting to Christianity or becoming Maskilim is but part of a much larger group. See his references to other cases, pp. 243–244, notes 2–11.

The longest study in the book (pp. 29–96) is on the story of Moshe, the mentally disturbed son of Habad founder Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady and a communal rabbi himself, who converted to Christianity in 1820. Assaf published an article on him in 2000, but this present version is greatly expanded and enhanced thanks to the discovery since then of crucial archival documents related to the incident. Following the general theme of the book, though, beyond reconstructing the story, Assaf devotes much space to the ongoing attitudes of generations of Habad writers (including the sixth rebbe, R. Yosef Yitshak Schneersohn) to the saga. Habad, arguably the most historically conscious of Hasidic groups, has dealt with Moshe's apostasy in ways ranging from suppression, to outright denial, to providing a "happy end" to the story with Moshe becoming a penitent returning to the Hasidic fold. The subjects of the other essays in the book: the story of the fall of the Seer of Lublin from the window of his house in 1814 (he would die several months later from the injuries he sustained) and the varying interpretations given to the incident by Hasidim and Maskilim; the campaign against Bratslav Hasidim in Ukraine in the 1860s (which provides an interesting contrast to the present-day resurgence of that group); Akiva Shalom Chajes of Tulchin, who started out as a fierce opponent of Hasidism and eventually joined the movement, though never completely forgoing his critical stance; Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itscan, a scion of the Ruzhin dynasty, who engaged in a frustrating lifelong attempt to reconcile Hasidism and Western culture; Yitshak Nahum Twersky of Shpikow, who, on the eve of his marriage to the daughter of the Rebbe of Belz in 1910, penned a heartfelt "confession" of his doubts regarding the Hasidic movement, but who would evidently make his peace with it, eventually perishing with his followers in the Holocaust. Twersky's poignant Hebrew letter, addressed to Yiddish writer Yaakov Dineson, is reproduced in full in English translation (pp. 218–235). This is one of the more moving documents in the history of Hasidism, though, as the author himself notes, its importance lies primarily in its literary and psychological content: "... as a historical document, its value for the study of Hasidism and its history is limited, even problematic" (p. 213).

The individual studies are preceded by a methodological introductory chapter subtitled "Hasidic History as a Battlefield" (pp. 1–28). Here Assaf provides an interesting portrayal of the sensitivity of history for Hasidim today (as well as for their so-called "Lithuanian" compatriots in haredi society) and of the various devices employed by contemporaries to deal with embarrassing incidents from the past. His examples are a number of cases of such disputes from recent years, including reactions and denunciations of Assaf's

own scholarly efforts. We see clearly the methods of those who engage in "history as it should have been" (p. 28).

In the end, these expertly reconstructed and penetratingly analyzed suppressed and now revealed tales on the margins of Hasidism gives us only a glimpse of the "center," i.e., the mass Hasidic movement that affected the lives of millions of Jews in Eastern Europe. David Assaf is at work on two projects that promise to fill in those blanks: extensive monographs and publication of documents on the story of Berenyu, a son of Yisrael of Ruzhin who tried to "resign" as tsaddik and leave the Hasidic fold, and the subsequent feud between Sanz and Sadigura Hasidism that rent Hasidic society in Galicia for years; and, together with a gallery of colleagues, the writing of a new, comprehensive history of the Hasidic movement. We await them both with great anticipation.

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