AFTERWORD

Arthur Green

More than fifty years ago, I was serving as youth director at a synagogue near Boston. As I finished teaching a group of teens one Sunday morning, the congregation's rabbi approached me, followed by an elderly Hasid who was making his rounds, collecting funds for a yeshivah. The rabbi asked me if I could drive his visitor to the train station. Happy for the opportunity to have a conversation in Yiddish, I agreed. When I asked the Hasid the name of the institution for which he was seeking funds, I noticed that it was a classic Litvak institution, one that certainly had once been a center of strong anti-Hasidic bias. I asked him how a Hasid could be collecting money for such a place. He replied with the following parable, rich in Eastern European Jewish lore:

> Once there was a wealthy Jew, an innkeeper, who lived in a village where there were no other Jews. He had two lovely daughters. When time came for the first one to get married, he went to the head of the yeshivah in a nearby town and said: "I want a bridegroom for my daughter, the very best student you have. I'm willing to make a sizable gift to your yeshivah." The rabbi agreed, the young man was chosen, and the wedding was held. As was the custom, the young scholar went to live in his in-laws' home, where he continued to study. The young man had only one quirk: he ate only *fleishigs*; he loved eating meat and disdained all dairy. This oddity (today we might suspect an allergy) did not bother the family at all. They were happy to feed him whatever he wanted. Happy with the marriage, the father returned two years later to the rabbi, when it was time for his younger daughter to wed. This son-in-law had the opposite quirk: he ate only *milkhigs*, dairy. "No problem!" The father-in-law insisted. He set up two small, separate tables. Each son-in-law sat with his *gemara* (Talmud volume) open and ate what he preferred.
>
> But then, as they say, the wheel began to turn. The innkeeper started to lose his money (perhaps due to one of many governmental restrictions placed on rural Jews). The fleishig son-in-law, instead of the rich roasts he had been consuming, was served cheaper cuts, chopped meat and liver. The milkhig son-in-law, instead of butter and cream, was getting blintzes and pierogi with more dough and ever less rich fillings. Still, they continued to sit, eat, and learn. Finally, the innkeeper became penniless. All they had to eat in the house were dry potatoes, without either butter or gravy to moisten them. Still, one son-in-law

sat at a fleishig table, eating potatoes cooked in a meat pot, and the other ate them at his own table, prepared as dairy.

A visitor came into the inn one day and saw the two young men at their respective tables. "What is this? He asked. "Why are they sitting separately?" "This one is eating fleishigs and this one milkhigs," was the reply. "Of course they have to sit separately." The visitor called out: "Can't you see? They're eating the same dried-out potatoes! Let them already eat together!"

At one time, the fund-raiser assured me, Hasidim and Mitnaggdim were really different, each eating of their own rich traditions. But now, he said (in typical "decline of the generations" mode), the diet of both is poor enough that they should be able to eat together.

How did this come about, the reabsorption of Hasidism into the normative Orthodox, and ultimately ultra-Orthodox, community? And does it represent Hasidism's greatest success or its ultimate failure? The answer lies in historic circumstance, but leads quickly to the heart of what Hasidism is. Around 1810, forty years after Hasidism's first emergence onto the scene of history, Haskalah or Western Enlightenment appeared on the horizon of Eastern European Jewish life. When Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav moved to Uman in that year, he scandalized his Hasidim by renting a room in the home of a Maskil who was suspected of no longer living as an observant Jew. While Haskalah had first emerged in Berlin, Amsterdam, and Prague almost simultaneously with the birth of Hasidism in the Ukraine, it was Napoleon's march across Eastern Europe that paradoxically brought with it the new ideas and aspirations of the French Revolution that he had so betrayed.

Both rabbinic authorities and Hasidic masters were shocked by this new development, and realized quickly that they would need to make common cause against it. By then, Hasidism had passed the test of staying within the bounds of halakhah, despite (or perhaps partly because of) the wild accusations that had been made against it in earlier years. When placed up against the Haskalah alternative, Hasidism did not look nearly so bad in the eyes of the rabbis. This relative change of heart may have been eased by the fact that Hasidism's most vitriolic enemy, the Gaon of Vilna, had already passed from the scene. The Hasidic leaders, delighted at the prospect of new respectability within the community, were happy to turn the enthusiasm of their followers toward zealotry in following the commandments in their most rigorous interpretation, a sign of extra piety. In much of Eastern Europe, Hasidism quickly came to serve as the knifepoint in the struggle against modernity, standing also as the chief object of derision at the hands of a growing chorus of Haskalah critics.

The Hasidic leaders of the early nineteenth century had not the slightest sense that they were betraying, or even changing, the message of the Ba'al Shem Tov or his disciples. They were only following an ancient definition of the term *hasid* as one who does more than the law requires. What we might call "religious extremism" in our day had long been associated with that term. The Talmud (Shabbat 121b) records that "If a person kills [life-threatening] snakes and scorpions on the Sabbath, the spirit of the hasidim is displeased with him." The Talmudic editor then quickly adds: "The spirit of

the sages is not pleased with such hasidim." Yes, it was true that the Ba'al Shem Tov had spoken out against excessive ascetic practices, and that the early teachings of the movement are filled with admonitions to serve God in joy. But in our day, these new leaders quickly added, the temptation to sin is newly rampant. Surely our pious forebears would want us to raise the walls against it ever higher. And does not the wise King Solomon himself say: "There is joy when the wicked are vanquished [Proverbs 11:10]?"

But it may also be said that this inclination toward the normative began at an even earlier stage. The Ba'al Shem Tov, we should recall, was a shaman and folk-healer, dealing in holy names and magical practices as well as herbal medicine. He was a reader of the stream within Jewish mystical literature that was least associated with the normative tradition: fragments of the old Merkavah tradition, the teachings of the Abulafian school, and the mystical/magical hodgepodge represented by the *Sefer Razi'el ha-Malakh*. Those who succeeded him, however, especially in the dominant school of Mezritsh, were much more attuned to the "mainstream" within the Jewish mystical tradition. Some magical practices were carried on as part of the Hasidic legacy, and may have even had a resurgence later, but these were overshadowed by teachings that sought spiritualized readings of texts that were known to all.

Hasidim saw the Besht and his message largely through the prism of teachings brought in his name in the work of his disciples. Already there he is portrayed as quoting and interpreting Talmudic statements right and left, a portrait that may well have been in part drawn by the learned disciples (especially Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye) rather than accurately representing the Besht himself. The earliest literary sources of the movement, in short, may already represent a pulling back from the magical and folk-religion margins of Jewish life toward the more normative center.

This is true also with regard to the figure of the Hasidic tsaddik in comparison with the pre-hasidic ba'al shem. The powers of intercession and healing passed from the magician/shaman to the Hasidic holy man. His prayers are seen as effective because of his intimate relationships with both God and his disciples. God loves the tsaddik because of his righteousness; that is why his prayers are answered, not because he knows the proper magic words. That "righteousness" is surely witnessed in part by his faithfulness to the normative piety of Judaism. His close bond with his followers brings their concerns into his prayers, allowing them to come before God. But that same bond also draws them into an imitation of his pious way of living, reinforcing the tradition itself.

A major reason why the match between Hasidism and emerging Orthodoxy worked so well was the distinctive choice for dynastic succession within the Hasidic movement. It did not have to have turned out that way. The Mezritsh school was a gathering of master and disciples. So too was the contemporary circle around Pinhas of Korets, as well as the slightly later circles of Bratslav and Pshiskhe. But very early in Hasidism's history, the sons of Yehiel Mikhl of Zlotchev and Hayyim Haykl of Amdur sought to succeed their fathers. Perhaps most decisively, Barukh, the Besht's grandson, moved to Mezhbizh to establish his court near the grave that had already become the first Hasidic pilgrimage site. They were followed by others, including the Twerskys of Chernobyl and ultimately the descendants of the Maggid of Mezritsh himself.

Not incidentally, in our day the opponents of the Hasidim have come to embrace the succession model too. Heads of a yeshivah, who once acquired this position as a consequence of their achieved scholarship, gradually have come to be appointed because they are sons or sons-in-law of the previous head. Like Hasidim, they have come to believe they are "holy seed," *zera kodesh* whose authority is a function of birth or marriage more than of their own intellectual attainment.

A person who has religious authority by dint of inheritance is naturally inclined to reinforce the source of that authority, which lies in the personalities and life-patterns of prior generations. Often beset by a sense of inadequacy to their role (since spiritual charisma in fact does not pass in the genes), later generations of rebbes used their power to oppose any change or innovation not in keeping with "the spirit of elder Israel." This tendency dovetailed perfectly with the insistence of Moshe Sofer, the Hungarian ideologue of Orthodoxy, who proclaimed that "any innovation is forbidden by the Torah." The interlinking of Hasidic and rabbinic dynasties, which we have seen especially in Galicia and Hungary, took place because they came to share the same ultra-conservative worldview.

Turning back to our Hasid's parable, however, we should note that it is not one son-in-law who sees the error of his ways and returns to the normative behavior of the other. Not at all! Both young men's diets had come to be impoverished by the changes in the household's condition. So it was with Hasidim and Mitnaggdim, especially by the end of the nineteenth century, when both saw themselves as being routed by increasingly dominant and often aggressive secular paradigms of Jewish life. Together, they looked back nostalgically toward a premodern era (surely purified by those nostalgic lenses) when traditional halakhic praxis had been the universal norm and the only conflict was about whether to follow the Ashkenazic or Sephardic prayer book rite. Surely "in those days," it was thought, before the great flood of secularization, everyone was pious and learned, as we can only hope they will one day be again, when this scourge called modernity passes from the earth.

But did this integration of Hasidism into an emerging antimodern Orthodoxy mean an abandonment of the movement's first goal, that of renewing an inward and joyful life of prayer and devotion? Did it cease standing up against religion as thoughtless and habitual practice? It would not be entirely fair to say so, though the answer varies greatly among the multiple Hasidic sects and the specific battles they happened to be fighting at any particular time. Groups with distinctive devotional styles, including such varied ones as Karlin, Lubavitch, and Bratslav, remained highly faithful to them over many years. Prayer itself still has a more dominant place in Hasidic life than it does in that of non-Hasidic Orthodoxy. More time is devoted to it and expressions of personal enthusiasm, though varying from one sect to another, remain more welcome. True, the violent body movement during prayer to be seen among the Arelekh of Jerusalem, the loud shouts among the Karliner, or the agonizing cries of the Bratslavers during their lone hitbodedut prayer sessions, may sometimes take on the appearance more of self-punishment than of joy. But who are we outsiders to judge what goes on in the heart of a Hasid behind the veneer of such outward demonstrations of intense engagement in the act of prayer?

The dialectical relationship between joy and asceticism is also relevant to the question of Hasidism's long-term success or failure in promulgating its vision. The call for serving God in joy is found both in the earliest inner documents of Hasidism and in the opprobrium at Hasidic worship already expressed in the first bans against it. Opposition to asceticism is documented already in the Besht's severe warning against it in his letter to his disciple Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye. This view of life is well attested in such classics as Chernobyl's *Me'or Eynayim*, giving expression to a certain pious joie de vivre that has long been associated with Hasidism. Rabbi Nahman's cry of "It is a great mitsvah to be joyous always!" resounds through the teachings of Bratslav in all generations. But we also know that there were voices to the contrary. In both Mezritsh and Lizhensk, room was found for an ascetic strain within Hasidism. We have seen later and even contemporary evidence that this side of Hasidism has made strong rebounds in later generations. Again, however, we must ask whether the opposition between joy and ascetic renunciation is not more an outsider's view than an accurate depiction of life as seen from within. The renunciate (Franciscan or Buddhist as well as Hasidic) might feel great joy in the closeness to God he has achieved precisely by successfully living up to calls for sexual abstinence and control of appetites. This view of what brings inner contentment, while distant from contemporary societal norms, should be familiar to any student of religion.

Surely the most impressive achievement of Hasidism's history has been its remarkable ability to recover after its followers were so massively slaughtered and its home so brutally obliterated by the Nazis and their collaborators. Who could have imagined in 1946 that the bedraggled survivors in the displaced persons camps, most of whom had been forced by circumstance to live outside the norms of strict religious behavior during the Holocaust years, would be able to rebuild both personal lives and communal institutions over the succeeding decades? The saga of Hasidic survival and its reconstruction in new and alien territory is among humanity's greatest testaments to the power of faith in the modern era. The network of mutual support among the survivors, led by the impressive generosity of several tsaddikim in the immediate postwar years, should tell us that the tale of Hasidism's history is far from over.

At the same time, the influence of Hasidism over large portions of non-Hasidic Jewry continues to grow. Both Chabad and Bratslav, now reshaped as Jewish outreach movements, have brought aspects of Hasidic teaching to large numbers of Jews. Within the modern Orthodox community, especially in Israel, the proliferation of Carlebach minyans and the many study circles delving into the teachings of Ger, Izhbits, and Rabbi Tsadok of Lublin are testament to a revival of Hasidic popularity. In North America, the Jewish Renewal movement carries the legacy of a universalized neo-Hasidism as taught by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. But far beyond those groups, the study of Hasidic sources and the semipantheistic theology of early Hasidism have provided spiritual nourishment for large numbers of Jewish seekers in quest after a religious teaching and way of life that may yet speak to them in an emerging postmodern era. The author of these lines is proud to have played some small role in that process.

HASIDISM

A NEW HISTORY

With an Afterword by Arthur Green

DAVID BIALE, DAVID ASSAF, BENJAMIN BROWN,
URIEL GELLMAN, SAMUEL C. HEILMAN, MOSHE ROSMAN,
GADI SAGIV, AND MARCIN WODZIŃSKI

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON AND OXFORD