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Hasidism: A Study of an American Religious Movement

By *Jessica L. Munds*

In the early part of this century, Orthodox Judaism was viewed as a religion with no future because of the “open texture of American society, the educational demands of acculturation, the requirements of the economic structure, and all the implications of the melting-pot theory.” (Shubert Spero 83). Orthodox Judaism was supposed to fade into the background and let both Reform and Conservative Judaism take hold into the roots of the American society. While the practitioners of the Reform and Conservative movements of the Jewish faith attained the American dream of education and prosperity, the Orthodox Jew continued to live in the same condition as his immigrant forefathers. However, by the 1950s, Nathan Glazer reported, “Orthodoxy, despite the fact that it feeds the growth of the Conservative and Reform groups, has shown a remarkable vigor” (109).

In spite of the prophetic messages of various religious scholars and sociologists, Orthodox Judaism continues to thrive in this open religious market we call America. Many ideas have been proffered for the extended life of this movement within the Jewish faith. Scholars, such as Jack Wertheimer and Shubert Spero, discuss many reasons for the shift to the right in American Judaism. Spero concentrates his argument upon the growth of the *yeshiva* movement, schools that prescribe proper religious behavior and convey strong ideological indoctrination to the young Orthodox Jew (88). Wertheimer finds other factors for the shift to the right, such as the post-World War II economic boom allowing Orthodox Jews to move out of the poorer neighborhoods and send their children to the *yeshivas* to be properly educated. During the social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, Orthodox Judaism had an appealing stability because of its strict adherence to tradition and social mores

(Wertheimer 124-25). However, one of the most significant factors in the American Judaic shift to the right during the latter half of the twentieth century can be directly attributed to the work of the Hasidic Jews—a faction of Judaism best defined as sectarian Orthodox. While not all American Jews have joined this particular sect, Hasidism has proven itself an effective weapon in the battle to reclaim Jewish identity in the midst of contemporary American society. However, while the efforts of the Hasidic Jews should be lauded for turning the religious tide against the Reform and Conservative movements, Hasidism harms movement itself and the American Jewish community.

All Orthodox Jews abide by the same laws regulating their social and religious conduct set down in the *Halachah*. The differences between the two branches, the modern and the sectarian, are quite evident. Modern Orthodox Jews focus upon the commonalities that bind them with other Jews while the sectarian Orthodox isolate themselves completely from the non-Orthodox and their influences (Wertheimer 117). The distinctions drawn between the sectarian sect and the modern Orthodox are in terms of particular traditions and customs, intensity and emphases in belief, varieties of rabbinical allegiance, and social structure and organization (Mintz 25).

In *America: Religions and Religion*, Catherine Albanese explores the notion of a successful religion as not being able to survive without the existence of boundaries—both external and internal (14). A good boundary can maintain a community and maintain a religion. The degree of the strength, flexibility, and permeability of the boundary varies from religion to religion. For their own intensive purposes, Hasidism created two inflexible and impermeable layers of boundaries within their religious movement: the religious (internal) and the social (external).

The core of the Hasidic faith is found in its belief that the presence of God permeates and sustains all living matter, and also in the intense enthusiasm they impart to their every action. All aspects of life—work, eating, social intercourse, etc.—assimilate holiness into each separate action. Hasidics believe any righteous man can be called upon to lead the services in place of the cantor, an important role in larger, established synagogues. As Talmudic learning becomes less important to Hasidic Jews, greater importance is placed upon mystical revelation. Hasidics believes an inspired mystic can penetrate more deeply into the text than an educated, rabbinical scholar.

The source for this form of mysticism is found in the esoteric learning

of the Lurianic Kabbala, a redemptive system emphasizing both the special role of the Jewish people in the divine order and the idea of the individual responsibility of each and every Jew for helping perform Israel's God-given task (Dan 10). Rebbes are often created from the mystics who choose to isolate themselves from the rest of the group and find insight into the texts of the faith. In order to recapture the devotion that had originally led them to join the movement, practitioners of the Hasidic faith schedule flexible times for prayer, when they are able to devote themselves fully to their faith. As a final show of their faith and belief in the Almighty, dancing is also believed to be a form of prayer (Dan 26). With these religious boundaries in place, the Hasidic faith is able to set themselves apart from other factions of the Jewish faith.

In addition to the religious boundaries, members of the Hasidic faith also separate themselves by creating social and physical boundaries. The most evident of these is found within the neighborhoods created by each faction of this ultra-Orthodox faith. After the mass migration from Europe, Hasidism settled in particular sections of New York City, e.g. Crown Heights, Boro Park, Williamsburg, and the Lower East Side. Each neighborhood creates its own society and culture by the maintenance of customs that may be viewed as "exotic" to the outsider. These customs serve as a fence in order protecting identity, and preventing of the acculturation of the children and the possibility of infractions of religious law. One example of these customs may be found in the dress of the typical Hasidic practitioner—the dark, long kaftans, black fedoras and beavers, and coats buttoned on the opposite side. Should a Hasidic Jew choose to garb himself in contemporary wear, it is done in a distorted manner, e.g. a folded necktie and a dark, double-breasted suit.

The circle is also protected by limited contact with the outside world. To preserve family purity, the family's dealings with the non-Hasidic world are strictly regulated. If one is to continue the battle for Orthodoxy, then one is indoctrinated at a very young age. Hasidic children are discouraged from playing or eating at the homes of non-Hasidic children. If the children choose to continue in these activities, then they are reminded to recognize the strict boundaries of their relationship with the non-Orthodox playmate. The *yeshiva* provides the same isolation for Hasidic children, censoring schoolwork to eliminate the influences of the secular world. Basic skills are taught to meet the requirements of the secular government. The Hasidic child studies subjects such as mathematics and chemistry that do not disturb a particular worldview. Subjects such as biology and geology

are not taught because such teachings go against the teachings and history of the *Halachah*. Eventually, the child will be banned from all forms of intellectual intrusions, e.g. libraries and museums (Dan 66). Obviously, from the description of the education of their children, Hasidism places great expectations onto the youth of its community in order to continue the long tradition of isolation and piety.

As one grows older in the Hasidic faith, the boundaries contract as decisions are made outside the personal sphere of being. For example, it is considered a dilution of the religion if a member comes into intimate contact with a gentile. If contact such as this does occur, the immediate recourse is expulsion from the society. Conversion to another religion is another reason for expulsion and ostracism within the framework of Hasidism (Dan 141). However, the most powerful form of separation is that of language. Yiddish, rather than English, becomes the chosen language in the Hasidic home. When English is spoken, even if the speaker is native-born, it is often spoken very poorly and in a halting manner (Dan 65).

It is through the creation of these impermeable boundaries of geography, attitudes towards outsiders, and language that the followers of Hasidism have created their own private world to preserve their sense of religious identity and unity. Since the gentile outsider is not allowed to penetrate the internal workings of this particular faction, the Hasidic Jew is free from his acculturating influences. Without these influences, the Hasidic Jew is allowed to continue upon his path towards a religious utopia built upon the ideals of his religion first formulated in its founding

Ba'al Shem Tov founded the Hasidic faith in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century. Ba'al Shem Tov, called "the BeShT" in abbreviation, taught his students fervent fulfillment of the Jewish Law and joyous piety. In fact when Hasidism is translated into English from its native Hebrew, it means "the pious ones." The Hasidic movement gained power when groups of the ultra-Orthodox sects of the Jewish faith separated themselves from established congregations and followed the BeShT and his disciples, known as the Rebbes, rather than the ordained rabbis and established community leaders. After the death of the BeShT, Hasidism developed a particular form of beliefs, social forms, and rituals under the guidance of Rabbi Dov Baer (Dan 25-26).

Due mostly to the work of the BeShT and Rabbi Dov Baer, the Hasidic movement converted a large percentage of Eastern European Jews within two generations of its creation. However, the growth of Hasidism was not

without internal conflict within the Orthodoxy of mainstream Judaism. The *misnagdim*, who upheld the accepted rabbinic and community structure, considered Hasidism a dangerous and heretical movement. At one time, those involved in Hasidism were excommunicated from the Jewish faith (Dan 27).

Despite these overwhelming obstacles, the Hasidic Jews continued to develop and evolve. Later stages of European Hasidism saw the creation of *hoys*, dynastic courts of the Rebbe and his followers throughout eastern and central Europe. Very much like the estates of the feudal era, each self-sufficient court contained its own set of artisans, storekeepers, and ritual slaughterers centered on the home of the Rebbe. In time, each *hoys* became known for a certain interpretation of the Hasidic faith and created sects of the Hasidic faith, e.g. the Lubavitch.

The European Hasidic faith finally lost its stronghold over religious society in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when new social movements advocating religious, political, and economic change gained strength across the continent and threatened the livelihood of Orthodox law and custom. Hasidism was viewed as a group of religious zealots clinging to outdated superstition and custom. At the same time, the catastrophic effects of World War I and the Holocaust of World War II led Hasidism to cross the ocean and settle in America (Dan 28-29).

Although earlier waves of Hasidic Jews had migrated to America and settled in key areas in the New York City area, the immigrants of the 1940s and 1950s were different from previous followers of Hasidism who had made the journey. Previous waves of immigrants had arrived as individuals, not as members of the *hoys*, and promptly discarded the focal points of their former customs—the wearing of the *shaitkleh* (wigs worn by Jewish women since the Middle Ages to mark themselves as practitioners of the Jewish faith), the wearing of *yarmulkes* by schoolchildren, and the attendance of women at *mikveh* (ritual baths of purification during the time of menstruation). In order to reclaim their religious beliefs and identity, the new American Hasidism chose to counter the pressures of American society that had already reshaped the lives of earlier immigrants (Dan 37-38). From this point, and due largely to the work of Hasidism, American Judaism underwent a state of religious revival to bring its members back into the folds of Orthodox Judaism.

Alongside the mass migration of Hasidic Jews to America, the 1940s and 1950s were also marked by the arrival of new forms of technology

capable of propagating a new era of religious dissemination. The Lubavitch sect, one of the key players in the world of Hasidism, was one of the first Jewish groups to utilize cable television, broadcasting the speeches of their Rebbe, Menachem M. Schneerson. The Lubavitch also published a magazine called *Moshiach Times: The Magazine for Children* in comic-book format. The most visible form of Orthodox propaganda arrived in the 1970s when Hasidism launched its "mitzvah mobiles" in hope of attracting more non-Orthodox Jews to Hasidism. Stationing themselves in public areas such as university campuses, disciples of the Rebbe met with these Jews in order to bring them into line with the principles of the Orthodox faith. As a result of these campaigns, it is now estimated that one-quarter of all Orthodox Jews in New York are more observant than their parents (Wertheimer 119-21).

It is still too early to assess the real impact of this campaign to garner more Orthodox Jews, but it has increased the prestige of the movement within America's social and religious system. Hasidism is no longer associated with the poor, uneducated immigrant as it was in the first half of this century. Due to organization and development over the latter half of this century, Hasidism has emerged as a viable religious force.

However, due to its isolation in American Jewish society and American society as a whole, the Hasidic movement raises the important question of the cost of Orthodoxy. From an outsider's point of view, one would have to say that the Hasidic movement is doing more harm than good to itself and the American Jewish community, because of its hindrances to modernization and the creation of a unified American Jewish identity.

Because of its self-induced isolation, the practitioners of the Hasidic faith are only harming themselves in terms of socio-economic modernization. While Hasidic Jews of the latter half of this century attained a higher standard of living than their forefathers, the members of the Reform and Conservative movements still earn more money and live a more comfortable life than their Orthodox counterparts. The schism between the two sects of American Judaism can be directly related to the amount and type of schooling that is received by each of the various sects. As I have discussed before, the schooling of young Hasidic Jews is heavily censored to preserve the tenets of the faith. As adults, they cannot stand on an equal footing with their colleagues because of their hindered education. A good example of this can be found in the proliferation of Reform and Conservative Jewish professionals during the latter half of this century. In sharp contrast, Hasidism lacks this large number of professionals within its community.

Another hindrance in the socio-economic modernization of the Hasidic Jew can be found in his choice of housing in depressed areas of New York City, where the incomes are severely lower than in other housing areas. Because of their choice of housing in these areas, they are forced to compete for low-wage, menial positions with other poorly integrated, ethnic minorities.

The final hindrance for socio-economic modernization among Hasidic Jews can be found in the gender relations within the community. Women are relegated to second-class citizens as they are segregated from their male counterparts. Women are not permitted to be seen during worship services and are not permitted to attend the same *yeshiva* as the males of the culture. Within the female *yeshiva*, more English and history is taught than in the male *yeshiva*. However, young Hasidic females are allowed to learn only basic religious knowledge such as the laws of the *kashrut*, while young Hasidic males study the Talmud, the 63-volume compendium of Jewish law and commentary. Arranged marriages are performed at a young age, and birth control is generally frowned upon for its contradiction of the biblical commandment "to be fruitful and multiply" (Katz). As a result of Hasidism's rejection of the dominant culture and its attempts to offer a radical alternative, it can be said that the results of the feminist movement did not breach the boundaries of the Hasidic community. While the feminist movement has fulfilled many needs of the American woman in terms of health and politics, Hasidic women are at the same point in history as the generation of women who preceded the era of the National Organization for Women, *Roe vs. Wade*, and the latest installment of the battle for the Equal Rights Amendment. The example of the women in this community can be used for the people of the Hasidic community on a whole. In addition, the men of Hasidism may be suffering just as much as the women because of the restricted social mores within the community. Because the teachings of the *Halachah* do not agree with those of modern education, great minds may have been lost. As a result of their forced isolation and stalled socio-economic modernization, the men and women of Hasidism are not allowed to attain a higher standard of living.

One of the most evident problems for the twentieth-century American Jewish community is the maintenance of the Jewish identity and culture in the midst of the American mainstream Protestant culture. In *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, R. Lawrence Moore addresses this problem of the loss and reclamation of Jewish identity by asking the question of Jewish survival in American society where a "meaning for their

belief in God's particularly chosen people in a country whose competing version of that myth turned Jews into nothing special" (74). While the Reform and Conservative Jews assimilate themselves into American culture by making themselves appear more Protestant in nature, Hasidism contracts and focuses upon the strict observance of the traditional Jewish law. To further complicate the battle for the reclamation of Jewish identity, the efforts of the Reform and Conservative movements are viewed, due to Hasidic belief in itself as the only legitimate bearer of Jewish tradition and its exclusive relationship to the Truth, as false, misleading and heretical (Spero 94). The efforts of Hasidism to reach the non-Orthodox Jews they wish to convert are futile because of their relentless non-recognition of the sects where these Jews are to be found. By refusing to recognize these other institutions within the Jewish faith, Hasidism only creates a greater sense of conflict and confusion among the American Jewish community. Hasidism is alone in this battle for Orthodoxy, because the leaders of the modern Orthodox formally cooperate with, but not formally recognize, the Reform and Conservative movements on the basis of the belief that "uncivil behavior will only serve to further alienate the masses of Jews from traditional Judaism" (Spero 95). From this basic schism regarding legitimacy, more issues, e.g. Zionism and Soviet Jewry, divide the American among the sects of Reform, Conservative, modern Orthodox, and sectarian Orthodox. By refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the other factions within the Jewish faith, Hasidism is only splintering and causing greater disunity among the American Jewish community that it is ultimately trying to unify and return to its "true" state of identity.

The Reform and Conservative movements are not trying to actively shed their Jewish identities, but are trying to shed the notion of themselves as outsiders in the American culture. Reform and Conservative Jews perform their traditions to remember the past and the struggles they have endured. This remembrance is especially seen in the Jewish tradition of the *Kaddish*, a remembrance for the dead, which is faithfully kept in nearly all American synagogues and homes. The notion of the outsider, as discussed by Moore, is seen as a positive effort to find a common ground among all Jews in order to create a unity among the different factions of the religion. The Jews are different from mainstream American society because of their vastly different religious practices. However, as our society heads towards a new millennium, does this generalization still hold true? As seen by the rapid growth of Jews in the professional fields of entertainment, medicine, and the law, one can accurately say that the Jew is more accepted than his

immigrant ancestors. Hasidism's choice to isolate itself and perpetuate the myth of the outsider religious nation is outdated in this modern world. By refusing to modernize in terms of socio-economic conditions and by refusing to cooperate and recognize the other factions of the American Jewish community, Hasidism is only doing more harm than good to itself and the American Jewish community.

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