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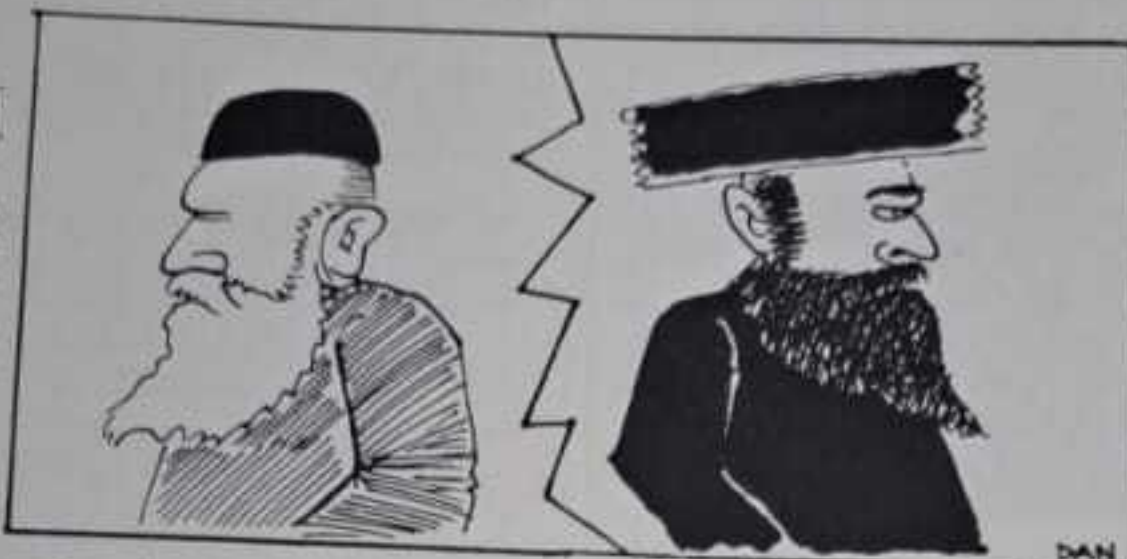
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Complimentary

HASSIDUT AND THE RHETORIC, MECHANICS AND METAPHYSICS OF CHANGE

By Rabbi Mayer Schiller

Hassidim are generally viewed as rigid, "arch-conservatives" on the Orthodox scene. Outsiders see their Eastern European dress, use of Yiddish, rejection of secular knowledge and so forth as manifestations of an "ultra-traditionalism," an unwillingness



The image of Jewish changelessness is clearly mythic for, obviously, Eastern European Torah culture also had a beginning in specific times and places. "Traditional Jewish" dress, speech, music, food (and some inner attitudes as well⁵) would by no

means have been "old school" in twelfth century Spain or second century Babylon. The complete abandonment of history by rightist Eastern European traditionalists reaches absurd heights when, for example, *mishmayot* are illustrated with pictures of *tanaim* dressed in *shtreimlich* and *besbeses* in order to maintain the illusion, known to be false,⁶ that pious Jews always dressed as they did in nineteenth century Poland. *Hassidic* elementary school illustrations regularly portray all Jewish figures in the Torah itself as similarly garbed. Changelessness may be idyllic, aesthetically soothing and provide metaphysical comforts beyond those of Judaism itself, but it is decidedly not the story of how Jews, Torah and time have interacted.

HASSIDIC REVOLUTIONARIES?

It is also most specifically for *Hassidim* a highly preposterous position. For it was less than two centuries ago when *Hassidic* doctrine itself was viewed not as reactionary but as dangerously revolutionary and its adherents as radicals intent on destroying "traditional Judaism." In fact, in 1772 and again in 1781 the "Orthodox establishment" of the time led by the Vilna Gaon and Lithuania's leading scholars officially excommunicated the new "heretical sect." The 1772 ban reads:

... Our brothers of Israel you know of the new sect which has arisen ... whose religion is different from all the children of Israel. ... This leprosy has spread to every country and city ... their disgusting and perverted ways have led many good men astray ... Thanks to God that their sins are now revealed. ... Therefore all communal leaders are called upon to destroy them and to pronounce upon them excom-

to change any outer forms of previous centuries. *Hassidim* themselves foster this image by employing a brash, absolutist rhetoric in their contemporary literature which emphasizes and glorifies their rejection of all innovation.¹ In fact, a strong case could be made that the non-compromising vigor of the *Hassidic* rejectionist stance has frightened the *Yeshivish* *velt* into the adoption of a host of Eastern European norms and practices undreamt of by that school's leaders and masses when they first came to these shores.² Be that question as it may, *Hassidim* now stand secure (or so it seems) as the last remnant, defenders to the end of that which always was and, if they had things their way, always will be. Old school Judaism, *derech Yisrael saba*, they practice and preach, yesterday, today and forever.

It is an idyllic picture full of much strength, confidence and condescension. Three attributes (especially the last) with much appeal to a generation intent upon believing that its own apprehension of and response to Being was and is the only one. As usual, however, reality sits uncomfortably with ideology and even philosophy. One cannot, despite all the will and rhetoric summoned to the task, strip existence of time, place, culture and personality variables. The *Hassidic* (and generally *yeshivish* as well) self image of monolithic changelessness is, although arguably good tactics³, historically false. This historical distortion is not merely a matter of academic curiosity for its reflective result is a denial of Orthodoxy's dynamic qualities and, on a deeper level, a severe cheapening of Torah's eternity, its message "to every man, every time and every place."⁴

Rabbi Mayer Schiller is a magid shiur at Yeshiva University High School for Boys and author of many books and articles. Last year he coached the Y.U.H.S. hockey team to the MYTISHL championship.

“BOTH BELZ AND SKVER EXPERIENCED REBELLIONS IN THE NAME OF SPIRITUALISM WHEN THE CURRENT REBBES OF BOTH GROUPS REPLACED THEIR ILLUSTRIOUS PREDECESSORS IN THE SIXTIES.”

communications, bans, insults and all curses. . . . So shall they be uprooted everywhere that they be not remembered or mentioned or thought about by anyone for all eternity.”

This ban was signed by the head of the Vilna Rabbinical court, R. Shmuel Avigdor, the Gaon R. Elyahu and eighteen other scholars. Now, whether *Hasidic* innovations were evil, was clearly a matter of fiery controversy. What is important for our purposes, however, is that there were plenty of innovations. *Hasidim* not only introduced significant changes in various areas of accepted *p'sak Halacha*,⁹ set aside Ashkenazic customs governing prayers and rituals¹⁰, but they also absolutely rejected the entire communal and Rabbinic hierarchy of Eastern European Jewry. Rival synagogues and community authorities were set up wherever the movement flourished in open defiance of hundreds of bans, prohibitions, legal procedures and incidents of physical violence. Family traditions of centuries were set aside and families themselves often torn apart all in order that *a new approach to God's service* come into being.

As ironic as it seems, these radical departures in practice and philosophy¹⁰ were condemned because they were not “done by our forefathers.”¹¹ The same rhetoric which *Hasidut* would later employ to defend its own intransigence was used by the movement's initial opponents. This phenomenon is not as surprising as it seems. Revolutions, be they political or spiritual become, if successful, establishments. The fervor which sends small numbers of idealists to storm assorted fortresses throughout history cannot be maintained when the dull business of normalizing day-to-day life and the governing of large numbers become the new task. Stability is inevitably the paramount goal once one is on top. Paradoxically, revolutionary commitment can only threaten revolutions triumphant. The fire of Adams or Henry gives way to the conservatism of a Washington or Hamilton, or else revolutionary children wind up devouring their parents as in France during the Terror.

So too, *Ibavdil* with religious revolutions. R. Yisrael Salanter's “Mussar Movement” is accepted (after much struggle, ban and counter ban). The result: the *yeshivishev* now has its fifteen minute *mussar seder* pursued by

most with disinterest and cynicism. All very much a far cry from the constant spiritual catharsis and introspection called for by the movement's revolutionary founder.

STAGNATION, DIVERSITY AND INNOVATION

Hasidut triumphed. In Poland, Galicia and the Ukraine it became the dominant form of Judaism. In White Russia and the Baltic regions it succeeded in establishing its own communities and schools. The inevitable result of this was that a new authority structure was created intent, as by definition it must be, on preserving its control. Yes, the doctrines espoused were those of the early religious, revolutionary fervor, with its emphasis on the inner life of every Jew and individual response to his needs, but spirituality and individualism do not yield an orderly community lifestyle. Thus, the preservation of the earlier forms of passionate piety rapidly became the order of the day. Eventually, as modern secularism began to spread, it became a matter of maintaining intact *everything* of those prior times. Nothing of the movement's outer manifestations or provincial attitudes (many of which were seemingly time and place bound) were to be changed. A deep establishmentarian freeze came over the *Hasidic* movement.

Now, contemporary *Hasidim* would claim, in response to the above, that the changes introduced by the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples were of direct Divine Origin. It was those changes alone which were and are legitimate. Everything else is prohibited. The leaders of the movement's inception were possessed of a unique form of Divine Inspiration. It will not be repeated.¹² After their revelation we must deep freeze all and everything until the Messiah's coming.

This sort of thinking may suffice in the folksy, provincial world of *Hasidic* insularity, but it ignores several basic questions. First, assuming the uniqueness of the Baal Shem Tov's revelation,¹³ we are left with no means to understand change among Torah Jews *prior* to his arrival. How were those changes legitimated (which they obviously were because they became part of the ongoing spiritual baggage of *K'lal Yisrael*) without explicit Divine revelatory impetus? Two, who is to say that the same methodology (whatever it might be) that existed before the Baal Shem Tov cannot continue after his departure? In short, since *Hasidut* clearly did not open the book on Torah legitimat-

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ed changes, why should we assume that it closed it? Might it not be a tenable premise to suggest that all change in *K'lal Yisrael* is initiated by an interplay of Divine Providence and human input? The Baal Shem Tov was, conceivably, particularly influenced by the former, but that cannot end the obviously ongoing process of change itself which has always taken place, co-authored as it were by both God and man.

In fact, the *Hassidic* movement itself was, almost from its inception, stimulated by changes and resultant conflicts reflecting that its particular apprehension of Torah was always subject to diversification or modification of time, place and person. The Great Maggid's approach to the Baal Shem Tov's path was not shared by many of the latter's prominent disciples.¹⁴ Later, each of the former's disciples added to, or subtracted, from their master's teachings in some way. Following the movement through later generations it became obvious that every school of *Hassidut* modified in many ways the movement's beliefs and practices in order to suit the needs of different times and places, and personalities of its varied leaders. The differences between the Ukrainian dynasties of Rzyhn and Tschernobil and the Polish schools following Pszycha-Kotzk are immense. Worlds of significance separate Lithuanian *Hassidic* schools such as Slonim and Stolin from those of Galicia such as Zanz and Belz. In fact, in each of the geographical areas just mentioned there were noted exceptions to the general drift where new and different courses were charted such as Breslav in the Ukraine, Lubavitch in Lithuania and Zidichov in Galicia. All of the above parting of the ways represented shifts of emphasis, basic doctrine, lifestyle and ritual observance. In short, they were all change incarnate.

Many of them were greeted with the heated opposition that all innovation faces. The fiery opposition of the Lubliner's Galician disciples to Pszycha or the Zanz and his children to Sadigura, was as stormy a defense of the status quo as had been that of the Vilna Gaon to the entire movement. Stagnation followed by a renaissance accompanied by established opposition is as much a part-and-parcel of the *Hassidic* movement as it is of the tale of Jewish history in general.

HASSIDIC COMMUNAL CHANGE

Leaving aside the lofty realms of *derech avodah* for a moment, *Hassidim* have experienced the normative process of change in a host of practical, communal areas. What is most fascinating about these changes is that they hap-

pened in communities pledged to a rhetoric of "no change." Apparently, the natural processes involved are so primal, that they occur beyond the conscious reaches of public policy articulators. To cite just a few examples from the post World War II *Hassidic* experience, we note the introduction of universal Yeshiva education until marriage for all males (undreamt of in Europe for assorted practical and theoretical reasons) of formal female education (non-existent outside of Agudah influenced *Hassidim* pre-War), of near universal Kollel training post marriage and, perhaps most significant of all, a profound liberalization of educational technique with heightened individual attention, use of non-textual aids and lessened physical punishment becoming widespread. All the above were due to a combination of changed economic circumstances, the need to respond to a new cultural backdrop and the coming to power of American born and subconsciously influenced *Hassidic* youth. Thus, change becomes revealed as an inevitable part of individual and communal life. Its need is so great that it will proceed even when lacking a theoretical support system to substantiate it.

RECENT HASSIDIC REVIVALS*

The wellsprings of radical *Hassidic* innovation and spiritual renaissance seem at first glance to have run somewhat dry as the twentieth century draws to a close. To the non-initiated observer the post World War II resurgence of *Hassidut* in America and Israel has been the personification of monolithic communalism and resistance to change. This impression is a vast oversimplification of the truth. Actually, in four of those *Hassidic* groups most associated with uniform intransigence there have been explosions of religious revival and, in some cases, striking change. Although most of the following cases are garbed in a rhetoric of a "return to tradition" they are, in essence, communal breakoffs motivated by renewed spirituality.

In 1960 Viznitzer institutions in Bnei Brak expelled dozens of their finest and brightest young *Hassidim* as well as some of their teachers. These "young Turks" had been pursuing a course of no holds barred *avodah* involving

**The author wishes to state that he is merely relating the facts of the following internecine struggles without evaluating the justice of any of the causes mentioned. To do so adequately would require an extensive work. It might also prove unrewarding for the combination of loyalty, piety, truth and love which yields every man's spiritual preferences may not be reducible to rigorous, analytical terms.*

“REVOLUTIONS, BE THEY POLITICAL OR SPIRITUAL BECOME, IF SUCCESSFUL, ESTABLISHMENTS.”

much idealistic *perishut* (asceticism) and, as could be expected, some elements of eccentricity. The participants were among the most learned and pious in the community. Their crime was that their heightened spiritual goals led them to question certain aspects of the Rebbe's *boif* (court) and lifestyles of some of his family. It was feared that they would rapidly become a radical and rival spiritual power within the bosom of a stable community. Hence, their ostracization and label as the "Viznitzer *mordim* (rebels)," a title they carry till this day. So the expelled set out on their own as individuals. Some of them would, after the passing of R. Hayim Mayer the previous Viznitzer Rebbe, attach themselves to his son, the Monsey Viznitzer Rebbe, R. Mordechai. Many of them saw him as less interested in group advancement and more interested in spiritual renewal than his brother the Viznitzer Rebbe of Bnei Brak.¹⁶ This was a case of *Hassidic* religious rebellion which (except to the extent that it survives in the current differences between Bnei Brak and Monsey Viznitz) was effectively snuffed out.

Both Belz and Skver experienced rebellions in the name of spiritualism when the current Rebbes of both groups replaced their illustrious predecessors in the sixties. In both cases the new Rebbes were seen by some *Hassidim* as most interested in the cause of group consolidation and expansion while de-emphasizing the particular self-demanding *avodab* of their traditions. Defections and expulsions of the critics took place in both groups.¹⁷ Today, the Belzer dissidents are either isolated, have their own "Belzer *mitnagdim*" synagogues or have adopted another Belzer *aynikel* (descendant) R. Yehoshua (Shea) Rokeach of Bnei Brak as their leader. The alienated Skverer have in many cases gravitated towards R. Chai Yitchak Twersky, the Rachmistrivka Rebbe of Boro Park, to satisfy their spiritual yearnings. So we have two cases of spiritual resistance actually leading to the strengthening or founding of other *Hassidic* groups.

Finally, there is the case of Satmar¹⁸ which has periodically been plagued with rightist dissidents who saw the movement's mainstream growing spiritually complacent as well as "soft on Zionism." Here too, the dissidents have generally come from the *baalei avodab* portion of the population.¹⁹ In recent years, though, Satmar has received a bit of a jolt from a surprising quarter. A young *baasid*, R. Yoseph Yehiel Mechal Leibowitz, left the community to assume the position of Rebbe of his own small group of Satmar defectors. This faction dedicated, in the eyes of its followers, to lofty *Hassidic* spirituality,²⁰ is seen by its opponents in the Satmar Kehillah, as maniacal fantasizers led

by an egocentric impostor. Having settled in Monsey, New York, they are referred to as *Mechelesim* by their opponents and Nikolsburger among themselves. Here then is a fascinating case of a new group formed in response to a real (or perceived) spiritual vacuum.

Admittedly, the above instances of spiritual struggle are light years away from the depth and sincerity of two hundred years ago. For the most part, though, *Hassidic* change and revivalism have ground to a halt. *Hassidim* are consumed for the most part by "party" advancement and "no change" rhetoric.²¹

Ah, but does that make them all that different from their contemporaries? Has not the *yeshivische welt* attempted to resurrect in America, forms and feelings relevant to Volozhin and Kletzk but perhaps somewhat in need of redefinition in Peoria, or Queens for that matter? And, oh yes, the Modern Orthodox, with their disinterested masses serviced increasingly by a clergy shaped by modified "yeshivishism,"²² seem blissfully content to enjoy their abundant treasures of capitalism without recourse to a Judaism capable of addressing their particular needs. Our collective arteries have hardened and the twin phenomena of conservatism and apathy settle over the land.

A PROFOUNDER INSIGHT

Yet, some earlier visionaries of the *Hassidic* movement sensed the need for periodic renewal and change. R. Mordechai Yoseph of Izbitz and his descendants did much groundbreaking work on the metaphysical dynamics of change. In his breathtakingly original *Hassidic* work *Mei Ha-Shiloach*, he postulates that the superiority of Moshe to other prophets was the formers' awareness of time and place limitations on all Torah apprehensions.

... for all prophets their message to Israel ... was according to time and place, and according to their understanding so they prophesied. It appeared in the spirit of their prophecy that the word of their prophecy would last forever. But, in truth, changes occur according to the value of each generation. Moshe was superior to them ... in that he grasped everything in its time and place. He understood that prophecy is only for a time and after that time the Holy One Blessed Be He desires something else.²³

This profound theme is further amplified by his grandson, R. Gershon Hanoch Henekh of Radzin:

This is the deeper meaning of vow nullifica-

ration of those hoping to establish ecumenical dialogue among Orthodox Jews. Hassidim do not see themselves as a faction but as the faction in Judaism.

13. For those doubting the use of this term in this context see "Kantres etc." op. cit. pp. 245-247.

14. See the valuable material on the relationship of R. Pinbat of Koretz and the Yalder to the Maggid gathered by Abraham J. Heschel in *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985) pp. 15-29.

15. Part of the critique was also based upon a claim that some members of the boyf were "soft on Zionism," which in practical terms meant anything from speaking Hebrew to embracing a Beit Yaboe education for girls. Some readers may find this disturbing but it must be emphasized that in certain Hassidic circles (primarily Hungarian and Galician) anti-Zionism and spiritual sincerity went hand in hand.

16. This theme that a Rebbe is primarily concerned with spreading his "party's" popularity and cementing his adherent's loyalty as opposed to looking after his or their spiritual state is commonly heard among disgruntled Hassidim today. In fact, most Hassidim would view the Rebbes of other groups in this fashion, while denying their own leader's guilt. The legitimacy of this criticism is hard to assess. How does one measure the degree of any individual's inner commitment to various enterprises?

17. The two cases are different on many accounts. We have oversimplified a bit for brevity's sake.

18. The tale of Satmarer defecting to Lubavitch in the late seventies is another relevant and fascinating saga.

19. R. Moshe Dov Beck, see above note, is an example of a rightist dissident who has actually gathered a small following.

20. R. Leibowitz's writings were cited above in note 9.

21. The Satmar case against the group is long, well documented and fascinating reading. It can be found in the pamphlet *Da at Torah* (No publisher given. No place given, 1988) and the book *M'tei Shav* (Ofi, Monroe, 1986).

22. The Rabbis in Modern Orthodox yeshivas are for the most part disdainful of the movement's philosophy seeing it as inferior to yeshivishism. (One of the leading Roshei Yeshiva at Yeshiva University recently gave a lecture there entitled "Torah U'Madab: Lebachilah or B'deved" and concluded that it was largely the latter. Others on the faculty have spoken in a similar vein. One wonders if the Superintendent of West Point would deliver a talk entitled "Duty, Honor Country: Lebachilah or B'deved" about his institution's stated motto?) On the other hand the movement's synagogue clergy are at a loss as to how to present a Judaism of greater attraction to their congregants

than twentieth century capitalist despotism.

23. R. Mordecai Shoshon of Lubavitch, *Mot'ei Shav* (Sentry Press, New York, 1973) pp. 540.

24. R. Gershom Hanoch Henoch of Radzitz, *Sod Yesharim* (Simcha Graphics, Brooklyn, 1962)

335. See also pp. 328-331. Also see *Torat Avot*

for a fresh perspective on the time limitations of leadership in the Shtetl: see *Chofetz Ben Avraham Slonim*, Jerusalem, 1965) pp. 236-239.

25. On at least enough time given to recite it!

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