

A Different Hasid

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

All revolutionary movements lose their original inspiration. Power and pragmatism dull the fire. So it is with religion, and so it is with Hasidism. I identify with the Hasidic movement, in principle, and admire its passion and desire to elevate every individual and to inspire through joy. But nothing, no one, is above constructive criticism.

My brother, [Mickey Rosen](#), has just produced a very important book, [The Quest for Authenticity: The Thought of Reb Simhah Bunim](#), published by Urim. Anyone who wants to know what is wrong with Orthodoxy today, need only to read it.

It is about the “court” of Przysucha (often called Peshischa) in Poland under its leading eighteenth and nineteenth century charismatic leaders, the Yehudi (died 1814), Simhah Bunim (died 1827), and Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (died 1859)—charismatic, fiercely honest individuals who were opposed to blind faith and conformity. The rest of the Hasidic world didn’t much like Simha Bunim, in particular because he had trained as a chemist, supported himself financially, had traveled, spoke many languages, and (crime of crimes) wore normal western dress. And the Kotzker had a brilliant intellect, no patience for fools, and an acerbic wit.

Sadly, the rest of the Hasidic world closed ranks against them. The movement was suppressed by what has become most (though, thank goodness, not all) of current Hasidism, with its exaggerated veneration of rebbes regardless of actual qualities, its hereditary dynasties, its reactionary antirational, conformist mysticism and its wild and too often aggressive excesses. Yet Hasidism now dominates much of ultra-Orthodox Judaism.

It is so ironic, because Hasidism itself started out as a challenge to conventional religious norms. It was strongly opposed by the great Vilna Gaon as “dumbing down” Judaism and spreading popular Kabbala. Those who rejected Hasidism were known as the Mitnagdim, the “opponents”. The movement was excommunicated by the Jewish establishment in Eastern Europe twice in 1772.

Yet a hundred years on, it did virtually the same to its own radicals. Moves to officially excommunicate Peshischa were initiated in 1820 and 1822, but in practice it was not necessary to ban the movement to suppress it. Some argue it was the tempestuous and then reclusive character of the brilliant Kotzker rebbe that ceded the territory to the more stable and controlling, if reactionary, Chidushei HaRim of Ger (he more than anyone else responsible for the dress codes). Whatever the reason, creativity and nonconformity lost out. What’s new in radical movements!

The Baal Shem Tov (died 1760), founder of the Hasidic movement, wanted to reach out to the masses of Eastern European Jews who were not scholars, lived predominantly in rural communities, and suffered a sense of isolation and alienation in the wake of the terrible Cossack pogroms from 1648 to 1680.

There was a tremendous gulf between them and the rabbinic authorities, who tended to ally themselves with and marry into the small wealthy oligarchy of most Jewish communities.

Mysticism was one response to this need, with its emphasis on experience and charisma, feeling rather than study, and the messianic belief in imminent redemption. The latter, although an attractive antidote to desperation, had already led to a spate of false messiahs. Indeed, having a charismatic rabbi as an intermediary or representative was very attractive, too. The Baal Shem Tov although not the simple schoolteacher as is often made out, made use of his charisma and powers of healing to reach out to the masses, but by all accounts this was peripheral to his primary message of the individual struggle to find a direct relationship with God.

When he died he passed his mantle on, not to a son, but to two other great leaders the Maggid of Mezrich and Yaakov Yosef of Pollonoye, and an unofficial group of others. Despite the opposition, Hasidism clearly met a growing need, for it spread like wildfire and then branched out into different, distinct zones and styles. In the next generation, Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk expanded the idea of the tzadik and the rebbe beyond the inspirational to the level of an iconic representation of God on earth, imitating Kingship with Royal Courts and having powers others could not aspire to except through dynasty. One might even see the influence of Christianity at work. Hence genealogy became a central ideology of Hasidism.

Peshischa, on the other hand, demanded self-analysis, honesty, and a sincere attempt to establish a direct relationship with God. Its detractors accused it of being too free and easy with ritual demands, but in practice it was as committed to Torah and to Halacha as any other Hasidic group. However, in restricting the worship of the tzadik and minimizing the importance of miracles, it threatened the powerbase and, indeed, the financial underpinnings of the Hasidic movement.

As a result of the campaign against Peshischa, leadership based on charismatic meritocracy, lost out to the hereditary empires of rebbes who would get you into heaven and cure all your ills (and a nice donation would help). This led to a leadership that notoriously failed, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to offer any solution to social, political, or theological challenges, other than conformist passivity.

In practice, it worked as a social mechanism for control over the masses of Eastern European Jews who had neither the time, nor the inclination or the education to engage theologically or philosophically. The security of belonging was enough. Indeed, one might argue that that was what the post-Holocaust world required. But it is far removed from the world of Simha Bunim. Reading this book only makes one sadder that his movement was suppressed. For it represented the very features of a great spiritual tradition that so many Jews find missing in the public face of Judaism on almost all levels today.

Nowadays Hasidism has effectively taken over the whole of the Orthodox world. Even Lithuanian rabbis behave the same way Hasidic rebbes do, with their

courts, their handlers, protocol, moneymaking machinery, and hereditary succession. It is sad how conformity rules.

You need to read this book to realize it doesn't have to be the way it is. My brother has done a great service in making sure the real Peshischa is not forgotten.