

The Struggle for the Jewish Soul

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last week I wrote about the vast divide between communities of Jews totally at odds religiously and politically.

But there is another divide much closer to the home of those of us who live and value Jewish religious and spiritual life and wish to maintain it. Although it is not as catastrophic, it is still very troubling. It is an ideological divide, rather than a political one, within the Haredi world.

There is a magazine called *Mishpacha*, which deals with Orthodox and Haredi issues. Recently an article appeared claiming that Hasidism is responsible for the revival of Jewish religious life around the world, because it is warm, lively, and inspirational. Whereas the rest are just preoccupied with study and obedience. While there is some merit in that claim, if you want to talk about some Hasidic groups, it is simplistic and disguises a lot that's wrong with Hasidism.

The article met with a fierce rebuttal from non-Hasidic Haredi rabbis who claimed as much credit for the increase and point to their own exponentially growing communities. The trouble is that each variation of the Orthodox world believes it is the authentic voice and any other is not. This is, of course, typical of all intense communities, whether religious or secular, everywhere. The smaller the differences, the more they fight.

A very brief recap:

In the 18th century, mainstream European Ashkenazi communities looked alike in terms of practice, religious system, and rabbinic authority. Sure, not all Jews were observant, and there were signs of assimilation. The Enlightenment was beginning to have an impact, particularly in Western Europe.

In the East, suffering from rabid and violent antisemitism, a group of remarkable men began to reach out to the poor and uneducated Jews who felt rejected by the autocratic rabbinic leadership. They emphasized mystical experience, song, dance, and a sense of belonging to a community that valued and cherished them. The Safed mystics were their inspiration and models in action and writing. They were called the Hasidim (the Pious). Hasidism flourished as it catered to the oppressed Jews of the ghettos and the Pale of Settlement.

Slowly this movement grew, and as it did the established leadership opposed it. Calling themselves the Mitnagdim (the Opposition), their leader was the famous Gaon of Vilna. This turned into a mighty battle, with excommunications and turf warfare. Over the next century, Hasidism evolved. It became a more formal movement. It attracted a much wider audience.

As it spread, it divided up into local dynasties with different charismatic leaders, rebbes, setting up their own courts. There was often bitter rivalry

between the masters and their variations on mystical themes. But initially it was innovative and fluid, with a lot of movement between dynasties. The more successful rebbes gathered thousands of followers and often great wealth. Some dynasties focused more on study, others on piety. Some adulated their rebbes. Others simply admired them. Some turned inwards. Others looked out and proselytized. But there was always fierce rivalry between the sects. As there is to this very day, often resulting in fisticuffs and worse. The one thing that they all had in common was to separate themselves both from the rest of the Jewish world and from the non-Jewish world in dress, behavior, and custom.

The Mitnaged movement responded to the challenge of the Enlightenment by emphasizing deep intensive study of traditional texts in newly established large yeshivot, academies that replaced the more informal tutorial groups and heders as a way of passing on Jewish knowledge. The yeshivot also responded to the need to add a spiritual dimension to study by introducing the study of Mussar as a spiritual alternative to the study of Hasidus. It too emphasized a personal experience of God, in addition to living a life committed to religious practice. Hasidism added extra layers of customs, uniforms, celebrations, emphasized mystical texts as much as Talmudic, and had a preference for amulets, blessings, charms, ancient prophylactic, not to say weird, minority kabbalistic customs.

As with all movements, over time Hasidism lost much its initial creativity and became more fossilized and conformist. As political and social forces began to pull European Orthodoxy apart and mass migration detached many Jews from their roots, religious life in general began to wither. The currents of Orthodoxy in Europe continued to flow, but the prognosis did not look good. Increasingly, Hasidism was regarded as primitive and irrelevant. Rationalism tended to relegate mysticism to the fringes. And given the massive loss of Hasidic Jews in the Holocaust, no one in the 1940s and 50s could have predicted that Hasidism would revive so spectacularly in America, Europe, and Israel.

This growth was not so much one of ideology as massive birth rates, which was encouraged specifically as a response to Hitler and destruction of Eastern Europe. The more the children, the more the dead were avenged. But the rise in social welfare and health insurance made sustaining such numbers feasible as never before. Whereas in 1948 the number of full-time yeshivah students in Israel numbered a few hundred, now there are hundreds of thousands, and there are similar numbers of the pious in the USA.

In the 60s, evangelical movements such Chabad and Breslav amongst Hasidim and Aish Hatorah and Ohr Sameach amongst the Mitnagdim all raised the profile of an intense, passionate Orthodoxy that came to be known under the umbrella term Haredi. Nowadays many people fail to appreciate the differences. In some ways the Mitnagdim have adopted certain Hasidic traits. All they see are black masses who seem to share a theocratic kind of agenda and an antipathy to secularism. But this recent debate in *Mishpacha* proves that the divides are as strong as ever.

Haredi Ashkenazis have tended to ignore that simultaneously there was a

massive revival in Sephardi Judaism, both of the mystical and the rational. It really flourished in Israel, were most of them moved when driven out of Arab lands after 1948. In fact, both in the Sephardi and Ashkenazi world we have seen a massive resurgence in nonrational, even superstitious Judaism, and a certain triumphalism that denigrates rationalism and any hint of modernity.

I am the poster-child of the fluidity of modern Jewish life. My paternal grandparents were Hasidic. My maternal were more Mitnaged. My father was brought up in a Yeshivish Mitnaged world. He studied in Mir in Lithuania, the center of the Mitnaged world. And he was a devotee of Mussar. He gave me the Hebrew name of the great Mussar preacher of Mir, Rav Yeruchom Levovitz. He later wrote a thesis on "Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement." When I was a teenager, he sent me to a very Mitnaged Mussar yeshiva in Israel, which had a profound effect on me.

Yet towards the end of his life he became a devotee of Chabad Hasidism. I remember him telling me that Mussar prioritized, "Turn from evil and do good" (Psalms 34:15), but it spent too much time turning from evil and not enough doing good. Hasidism, on the other hand, prioritized, "Do good and turn from evil." It emphasized doing good and spirit, rather than preoccupation with harsh self-discipline. Now of course with all respect to my father, whom I worshipped and still do, this was not actually always the case. Having lived and studied in both, I have chosen to try to take the best of each without committing myself totally to any side. As in any community, there is good and not-so-good.

That is why this current spat over who is to take credit for the rise of Haredi Judaism is so juvenile. Hasidism accuses the Mitnagdim of being dry killjoys, whereas they are fun-loving, hard-drinking and -dancing mystics. And it is mystical passion that is winning the day. The Hasidim claim that the overemphasis on Talmudic study drives too many people away, and it is not for every mind. But look closer at the intense Hasidic communities. They might have a lot to commend them in terms of kindness, charity, and mystic devotion. But they are also claustrophobic, narrow-minded, aggressive, often corrupt, and can resort to violence to reign in any disagreement. They also put a lot of emphasis on materialism and consumerism (without giving their children any secular education to help those who are not businessmen earn a decent living). For anyone with a spark of individuality, these conformist communities create massive problems for a small, though increasing, number of dropouts. If you have ten children and two leave, you will still grow exponentially more than the rest of the population. Similar criticisms can be leveled at some *Mitnaged* communities, too.

This ignores another growth story that has confounded the doomsayers. The modern Orthodox divide into two camps. There are the nationalist Haredi Jews who play an increasing role in Israeli civic and political life. They are often confused with the settler movement in Israel, and many of them certainly veer towards the right in their commitment to Israel's survival and the Promised Land. They too extend throughout the Jewish world and the overlapping wider Modern Orthodox communities—those who combine a deep commitment to Torah in its widest sense with a rational and cultured

perspective.

Both of these were once thought to be losing their children to the left and the right. Yet they too are growing, even if they tend to have four and five children rather than nine and ten. The one thing that differentiates them from the Haredi camp is their passionate devotion to Israel and its institutions—which is also a feature of the increasingly powerful Sephardi world in Israel and the Diaspora, since they know full well what it was like to live under Arab and Muslim regimes. (This whole debate is notorious for ignoring the Sephardi world with its unique characteristics.)

The fact is that our whole is the sum of our parts. Haredi, Orthodox Ashkenazi and Sephardi, and some progressive communities are united by a commitment to the halacha, to the constitution of the Torah. Some more intensive than others. It is heartwarming that while Jews are increasingly coming under pressure around the world and antisemitism continues to metastasize, our religious life has never been stronger in 2,000 years. Each one of its components has plusses and minuses, and none has a monopoly on truth.

In a free and open society, each one can and should enter the open market, present their goods, and let the fittest survive. I like freedom of choice. It is up to us to make the effort to discover what Judaism has to offer and to choose from all the variations and degrees. I regret the loss of those who cannot see its beauty. But I also I regret the arrogant, intolerant, fundamentalist attempt to rubbish others. As the Talmud says (Kiddushin 70b), "Whoever finds fault in others, it is because something is at fault in them." *"Kol Haposel BeMumo Posel."*