

When Rebbes Fight

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Talmud (Yoma 23a) says, "Any Talmid Chacham who does not strike and attack like a snake, is no Talmid Chacham." Perhaps this explains why religious leaders tend to fight. Is it because they care so much? Are the issues so important they are worth fighting over? Too often they are over power, succession, or money. When this infects men who are supposed to be of a higher spiritual and ethical order, one is bound to wonder how spiritual they really are. Chief rabbis are appointees and appointees are usually involved in politics to get elected. Perhaps that's why some of them end up in jail. But Chasidic leaders are not elected. Are they any better?

Professor Samuel C. Heilman has just published a fascinating book on this very issue. In *Who Will Lead Us?: The Story of Five Hasidic Dynasties in America*, He describes the battles for control that have and continue to divide the Chasidic world—often resulting in fistcuffs, hired goons, and court cases. The book is about Chasidic rebbes in the USA. But a similar book could be written of just as many similar struggles in Israel. It raises the question as to whether theirs is the best way of appointing the moral leaders of Chasidic dynasties.

Chasidism started in the eighteenth century as a controversial, charismatic movement, based on the character and magnetism of the rebbe. The rebbe assumed virtually superhuman qualities and powers. He was the vehicle that enabled simple, uneducated Jews to feel a connection with God. Just proximity to a rebbe, like visiting the Temple, was the core of religious life. Chasidism incorporated many mystical ideas, including the idea of the Tsaddik, the saintly person, closer to God. Opponents within Orthodoxy saw rebbe-worship as a form of idolatry and indeed heretical. They were banned, put into Herem, by the Great Gaon of Vilna. That battle has now been lost. Nowadays Chasidism, in all its varieties, from Chabad to Na Na Nachman of Braslav to Satmar, is sweeping all before it in Jewish religious life.

The original movement that was founded by the Baal Shem Tov spread. It split and split again into different sects, based largely on location, each with its own rebbe. The courts of the rebbes were often not just measured by the number of adherents, but also by their wealth in real estate and tithes. Their courts really were like those of medieval monarchies, with protocol, attendants, secretaries, ministers, and intermediaries, all vying for the rebbe's ear, power, influence, and status. Some rebbes chose power and wealth as their defining characteristic, others piety and devotion. Competition was (and still is) fierce.

By the nineteenth century most Chasidic courts were dynastic. The rebbe was a descendent of the previous one, regardless of whether he was remarkable or not. Many were. Instead of charisma, it was "holy seed" that became the criterion for elevation. Clearly some were less suited than others to lead. Often rival candidates, all tracing their lineage back to holy men, competed

for the throne. The battles were often brutal and vicious and involved betrayal and violence.

The post-holocaust revival, indeed the resurrection, of Chasidism from near extinction in the Second World War is nothing short of miraculous. Both in Israel and America primarily, but also Antwerp and the UK. With huge birth rates and massive support from social welfare (thanks to socialist secular values they despise), their numbers are overtaking all other denominations in Judaism, even with a significant drop-out rate. If you have ten children and two go their own ways, you are still way ahead on the birth rate. Chasidism is the powerhouse of the Haredi world and exercises a dominant influence on all other sects of Orthodoxy. Even the Lithuanian, the Misnagdim (the followers of the Vilna Gaon), are now completely subservient to them, imitating them in their enthronement (and effective worship) of their religious leaders. And their dedicated stand against everything secular, cultural, and political (unless they can make a profit out of it).

Courts sprang up from nowhere in the post-war years. Single-minded men like Rebbe Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar, violently anti Zionist (despite being saved from the Nazis by them) and antagonistic to any denomination less strict than him, started to build intensely controlled, tight, inward-looking communities that focused on establishing numbers and wealth. Others, like Habad, concentrated on outreach and spreading the word that one could live in the modern world and still be a devoted Hasid. They both succeeded. Chasidic real estate holdings run into billions, some say hundreds of billions.

But there's another side. In their drive for success, many of the faithful have been convicted and imprisoned for tax and insurance fraud, real estate crimes, misusing government funds, and bribing politicians and judges. The rebbes themselves are almost always shielded. Middle-men take the fall. There is a powerful subculture of survival that all Chasidic and non-Chasidic religious groups turn a blind eye to, which takes advantage of political and commercial systems. And it clearly pays off, to which the arrest this week of six very Orthodox (non-Chasidic) Jews in Lakewood attests.

Nowadays in America, rebbes who can command thousands of voters to do their bidding are courted by politicians of all parties, who will promise anything to get votes. They will even overturn laws restricting minority Chasidic practice (for example the Chasidic custom of sucking the wound at circumcisions that has led to cases of infection), if the rewards are great enough.

With so much at stake, no wonder rivals fight for succession. It is machiavellian and deeply disturbing. Spirituality too often gives way to the worship of Mammon. Personalities are suppressed and destroyed. Battles for control are, ironically, reminiscent of Darwin's "survival of the fittest". In some dynasties, like Satmar, two rival sons have now split the movement into two. Others, like Chabad, avoid choosing a successor altogether.

I have been privileged to have first-hand experience of several Chasidic houses, mainly in Israel. In each, the best man for succession did not get it. Political maneuvering and other factors decided over meritocracy. Once

there were rebbes who approved of secular education. Some sent those of their followers not suited to study, into the Israeli army. Now, sadly, almost all of them have retreated into obscurantism and fundamentalism. The enlightened rebbe is virtually extinct. Each new incumbent asserts his authority by being stricter, more obscurantist and hardline than his predecessor.

Their increasingly rigid outlook is widening the gap and dissonance in Judaism between very Orthodox and moderate Orthodox, and between Orthodox and Reform in its various guises—small as Judaism already is. Yet, surprisingly, more and more non-observant Jews support and contribute to these movements as a kind of insurance policy for the World to Come. Chasidism offers a powerful, often spiritual paradigm of Jewish life that makes all others pale and insipid in comparison. Professor Heilman's book gives examples of the other face of Chasidism.

Nothing in life is either black or white. Not even black is completely black. Undercurrents of individuality and modernity are beginning to be seen and felt. Many Chasidim are already choosing not to obey their rebbes on many issues. Even if the majority opt to stay officially within the secure, supportive (but very conformist) atmosphere of Chasidic life. And rebbes are too worried about their positions to stand up to the more extreme of their followers. Fortunately, religious moods go in cycles. Change is in the air. Hopefully for the better. It may take time, perhaps not in my lifetime, but it will happen. The core will be preserved but the attitudes will change.