

Untold Tales *of the* Hasidim

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DAVID ASSAF

Untold Tales *of the* Hasidim

Crisis &
Discontent
in the
History *of*
Hasidism

Translated from the Hebrew
by Dena Ordan

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And thus you will comprehend what an ordeal child rearing is for these zaddikim; for this is their greatest trial. For while they proclaim the name of God, blessed be He, in the world, and stand in the breach and return individuals to the straight and narrow path, in their homes a foreign growth develops, the very antithesis of the essence of their task to expand the boundaries of and spread holiness . . . And this prevents them from disseminating sanctity, and counters their aspiration to intensify sanctity and reveal the divine aspect in the world, when it is thrown up to them: “Look at your own sons, look at how they behave; how can you demand of others to observe the Torah and the commandments?”

—*Zikaron misheli*, introduction and preface by the admor [Ben-Zion Rabinowitz] of Biala (Jerusalem: Megamah, 1989), 199

Contents

Preface to the English-language Edition	xi
Translator's Note	xv
List of Abbreviations	xvii
Introduction	xix

1	“Lies My Teacher Told Me”: Hasidic History as a Battlefield	1
	Orthodox Historiography's Strategies of Memory and Repression	7
	“I Too Am Not Objective”: History as It Should Have Been	27
2	Apostate or Saint? In the Footsteps of Moshe, the Son of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady	29
	“Would That My Parents Had Been Cruel”: Straying Children of Zaddikim and Rabbis	30
	“And to Anger You I Will Convert”: Parent-Child Relations and Conversion	31
	Polemic and Apologetic Memory	34
	“He Has Regained His Former Strength”: Moshe Prior to His Conversion	35
	Leon Yulievich or Piotr Aleksandrovich? The Archival Testimony	40
	“He Had Done So in Sane, Sound Mind”: Maskilic Memory Traditions	48
	“He Was in His Right Mind”: The Apostates' Testimony	58
	In the Historian's Workshop	64
	“The Time Has Come for Moshe's Story to Be Revealed”: Hasidic Memory Traditions	76
	“He First Lost His Mind and Then Left His Faith”	91
	“It Never Happened”? The Ongoing Struggle over Memory Traditions	94
3	One Event, Multiple Interpretations: The Fall of the Seer of Lublin	97
	“A Flame Hovering over His Head”: The Seer of Lublin in His Hasidim's Eyes	97
	“This Was No Simple Matter”: The Fall of the Seer in Hasidic Memory Tradition	99
	“Foolish and Ignorant”: The Seer of Lublin in His Opponents' Eyes	102

- Ma'asei harav* or *Sefer nekiyut uferishut*: The Satire's Transmission and Its Author's Identity 104
- Sefer nekiyut uferishut*: Structure and Content 108
- "From Drunkenness and Heavy-headedness I Fell": Tracing the Maskilic Version of the Fall 111
- The Seer's Fall: A Suicide Attempt? 116
- 4** "Happy Are the Persecuted": The Opposition to Bratslav Hasidism 120
- Three Waves of Persecution 120
- "A Fearful, Soul-shaking, Bone-shattering, Dispiriting Scene": The Maskilic Testimony 122
- "Per the Hooligans' Code": The Talne Hasidim's Anti-Bratslav Campaign 126
- The Rzhishchev Affair and the Edict Forbidding Zaddikim to Travel 128
- "The Bratslav Hasidim Eat *Treyf*": The Teplik Scandal 137
- "They Are Not Beholden to Any of the Leaders of Our Time": The Clash over Obedience 142
- "God Seeks the Persecuted": The Reflection of the Persecutions in Bratslav Historiography 144
- The Persecutions Continue 149
- "Legacy of a Mistake": An Epilogue? 152
- 5** "Excitement of the Soul": The World of Rabbi Akiva Shalom Chajes of Tulchin 154
- From Foe to Friend 154
- Chajes's Literary Legacy 155
- "Out of My House, Impure One!" Rabbi Akiva Chajes in Light of Memoir Literature 157
- Rabbi Akiva Chajes's Change of Heart 164
- Rabbi Akiva Chajes's Appointment as Rabbi of Dubova and the *Kadavar* Controversy 170
- In the Thicket of Memory 173
- 6** "How Times Have Changed": The World of Rabbi Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itscan 175
- Hasidism and Philosophy 175
- Biography 177
- Literary Legacy 180
- "Religious Zeal Is a Plague Recounted in the Torah": Between Innovation and Conservatism 193
- Disregard or Polemic? *Hatov vehatakhlit* 197

A Humanist among Hasidim? 200

“What Befell the Rebbes’ Grandchildren Who Left the Fold”? 202

“It Is Forbidden to Uphold This Book” 204

7 “Confession of My Tortured, Afflicted Soul”: The World of Rabbi Yitshak
Nahum Twersky of Shpikov 206

Shpikov Hasidism 206

Biography 207

“Freedom, Freedom!” The Twersky Sisters 210

“A Sacrifice on My Mother’s Altar”: Taking Stock of the Confession 215

“The Spirit of the Times”: The Confession’s Historical Context 216

“My Tiny, Ugly World”: The Text of the Confession 218

Notes 237

Works Cited 311

Index 325

Preface to the English-language Edition

In every respect a historical study, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim* also seeks to tell a compelling tale. True, this book has all the trappings of critical academic writing, including notes and a detailed bibliography, yet it also possesses features of mystery, drama, and tragedy, whose spellbinding powers I hope can be glimpsed among the lines, words, and letters, placing matters in a new and surprising light.

While writing this book, I found myself on more than one occasion overstepping the bounds of the circumscribed field of the historian who deciphers papers and documents, reconstructs events from a variety of sources, and interprets and evaluates facts. Alongside moving experiences—especially while tracing the tragic fate of Moshe, Shneur Zalman of Lyady’s youngest son, or reading the heartfelt confession of Rabbi Yitshak Nahum Twersky—I found myself swept into a craft whose affinity to that of the historian I had never before considered: detective work. I saw myself as a sleuth who illuminates dark corners with his flashlight, looks for the faded hand- and footprints of forgotten figures, seeks treasures hidden from every other eye and ear, pokes around in smoking ruins and destroyed cabins, and tries to fit tiny mosaic stones into the rough outline and fine tracery of the picture of the past.

As Yaacov Shavit put it: “The detective seeks to prove—after the requisite winnowing—that no fact is fortuitous and that every fact has ‘meaning’ within a given system. Both detective and historian seek to portray a chain of events over a given time span in a specific location and to bestow an explanation and ‘meaning’ on these events . . . The detective—like the historian—believes that it is possible to describe and restore the past ‘as it really was.’”¹ In setting out to assume the detective’s mantle, the historian proceeds without weapons or search warrants, armed only with self-assurance and the optimistic belief that it is possible to reconstruct what others have tried to obscure. Confident in his ability to analyze and reconstruct, and in the overt and covert knowledge he has amassed on the topic of his study, he utters a prayer that he will neither fail nor lead others astray. Although admittedly

demanding, the task of the historian-detective is one of the most satisfying ones in the realm of historical study.

The seven chapters of this book treat the hidden and the forgotten—or, perhaps more precisely, what has been concealed or deliberately suppressed. They describe anomalous individuals and dramatic episodes from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were pushed to the sidelines of the glorious history of Hasidism. Ignored by the spokesmen and writers of this large movement, they were consigned to some hidden corner. All because of the discomfort they aroused, and in line with the popular aphorism: “Don’t air your dirty laundry in public.”

Testimony of the extent to which concealment and silencing made entire chapters vanish from the history of Hasidism comes from early-twentieth-century remarks by Rabbi Yehuda Leib Zlotnik (Avida) regarding the terrible Sabbath desecration attributed to Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk (he supposedly doused the candles, and some say he made heretical pronouncements at the same time): “Yet something occurred in Kotsk of which nary a soul dares speak. Everyone knows there is some truth to this matter, yet the heart does not divulge it to the mouth. *I wonder, if anyone living today knows what actually occurred*, and when the remaining hasidim from the past generation come to the Kotsk episode, they look heavenward, fearfully stutter ‘hmm . . . hmm . . .,’ and fall silent.”²

But no one can keep the dirty laundry hidden forever. It has a habit of fermenting, bubbling over, and loudly bursting forth; any attempt to clap a lid on the boiling kettle is doomed to failure. Self-appointed watchmen have restrained and tried to suppress the embarrassing truth or “knowledge”—no matter what its nature or interpretation—but to no avail. And when concealment failed and an unpleasant truth burst forth to ostensibly threaten the faithful, a variety of tactics were employed in the Sisyphean struggle over “memory”: disregard or denial, erasure and blurring, twisting and rewriting, alternative interpretations, and even the creation of a new fictional story with the polemical power to undermine the dangerous “false truth” and replace it with a different, acceptable, holy truth.

Originally published in Hebrew in 2006 by the Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History (with the title *Ne’ehaz basevakh: Pirkei mashber umevukhah betoldot hahasidut*), this book aroused immediate interest, and a second printing appeared only a month after the original publication. Articles in popular newspapers, reviews in academic journals, lively debates on Internet forums, and rumors and recommendations by word of mouth all brought enhanced interest, among the ultra-Orthodox camp in general, and the hasidic one, in particular. Given this intense attention, the appearance of an English edition was natural. To my delight, Brandeis University Press decided to publish the English version of this book. Special thanks are due to

Sylvia Fuks Fried for her initiative and support throughout, and to Phyllis Deutsch, editor in chief, University Press of New England. I also thank Jeanne Ferris for her close reading and sharp-eyed copyediting of the book, and Jeffrey K. Weiss for preparing the index.

The English and the Hebrew versions of this book are not identical; various changes have been introduced in order to adapt this version to the needs of the English reader. The chapters are ordered slightly differently, and appendixes containing texts and documents have been omitted, as has one chapter that appeared elsewhere in English.³ Moreover, long footnotes have been shortened or cut out entirely, particularly those containing detailed bibliographical information in Hebrew or in Yiddish, intended for the reader with expertise in this material. Alongside these deletions and abridgments, I have made corrections and added new data that have come to my attention since the publication of the Hebrew version.

The English version was translated by Dena Ordan, of Jerusalem. Words do not suffice to describe her good taste, knowledge, meticulousness, and devotion to this difficult task. I owe her a debt of gratitude. There is inadequate space to list all the names of the teachers, colleagues, and students who have helped me on this path, supplying bricks and mortar, pointing out mistakes, or bringing new and old sources and studies to my attention. I thank them all. I must also express my appreciation to the Zalman Shazar Center and its director, Zvi Yekutieli, for their full agreement to this book's publication in English. Finally, my profound gratitude to my wife, Sharon, and our four children—Avishag, Netta, Hillel, and Mishael—is not readily translated into words. To you, my beloved ones, I dedicate this book by paraphrasing the words of the famed poet Shlomo ibn Gabirol: You are my rock and my refuge . . . morning and night.

David Assaf
Jerusalem, 2010

Translator's Note

Each translation project in the field of Judaica presents its own set of difficulties and decisions. No system for spelling or transliteration of personal and place names meets the complicated need to remain true to the original, yet to provide a reader-friendly text. In this book, personal names of rabbinic and other figures appear in their Hebrew, and not in their Anglicized or Yiddish forms (thus Moshe, not Moses or Moishe). An attempt has also been made in the text to use more familiar forms that do not indicate a final *heh* or the *shwa na*, for example (Shlomo, not Shelomoh). As for geographical names, this book uses the familiar Jewish (or English) spellings (thus Apta, not Opatów), based mainly on Gary Mokotoff and Sallyann Amdur Sack's *Where Once We Walked: A Guide to the Jewish Communities Destroyed in the Holocaust* (rev. ed., Bergenfield, N.J: Avotaynu, 2002). The transliteration system for Hebrew makes no distinction between *aleph* and *ayin*, between *het* and *heh*, or between *kaf* and *kuf*, on the assumption that the reader who knows Hebrew will recognize which is appropriate. The letter *tsadi* is rendered *ts*, and no hyphens separate the definite article *ha* (or other particles) from the rest of the word. In addition, *shwa na* is not always indicated, nor are letters with a *dagesh* doubled. The transliteration of Yiddish follows the system on the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research website. Words like “zadik” that have entered the English language appear in their usual English forms. Unless otherwise indicated, all emphases in the quotations are the author's.

Abbreviations

BT	Babylonian Talmud
CAHJP	Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People
IMHM	Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts
NLIS	National Library of Israel
PT	Palestinian Talmud

Introduction

Two entwined themes crisscross and bind the chapters of this book: one is the anomalous, strange, and aberrant individuals who did not keep to their predecessors' straight and narrow path, but chose to carve out their own instead; the other is literary "memory wars," the battles ostensibly fought over persons, events, phenomena, and processes between various, often opposing, traditions. It is also possible to define this study as an attempt to pinpoint the delicate phase at which their preservers and interpreters recast unconventional biographies or closed historical events, reshaping them at will.

Many individuals—prominent and ordinary, scholarly and ignorant, impassioned and vested—stand at the crossroads of the twisted paths of human memory. To date, the always dramatic, sometimes tragic, stories of the individuals (or groups) caught in the thicket of family, community, or tradition are but dimly illumined in the broad study of Hasidism—as is the price they paid for being "other." All of this book's protagonists either fell on the margins of their society or found themselves between worlds, achieving neither tranquility nor fulfillment in the frameworks the hasidic and ultra-Orthodox settings offered (and mainly imposed on) their children. The disquiet their aberrance aroused among their contemporaries also reverberates in the means used to shape collective memory and internal historical writing. A combination of truth and fiction, these means are uncovered here through corroboration by, and contrasts with, many additional sources. The interpretive categories of "polemical" and "apologetic memory" are also employed; they serve to identify reactions—defensive and offensive alike—to alternative constructions of memory. Not only are these various memory traditions (including maskilic ones and those emerging from critical and academic research) acquainted with each other, but they also converse among themselves, both overtly and covertly.

Each of these chapters of crisis and discomfort stands as an independent unit. Readers of this book could justifiably inquire, what links the Seer of Lublin's fall from the window of his house in 1814 with the conversion, six years later, of Moshe, the son of the first Habad rebbe? Or what connects the

cruel persecution of the Bratslav Hasidim in the 1860s and Yitshak Nahum Twersky's heart-rending early-twentieth-century confession? My answer is that they share not only the status of aberrant or discomfiting events, or the fate of those rejected or made other, but also the masking of these events. This book aims to reveal the hidden, both to disclose what actually happened and why, and also to demonstrate how the truth was obscured or endowed with an alternative interpretation.

To some extent, this is also the tale of individuals born into prominent hasidic families who failed to find their place: Moshe, the emotionally disturbed son of Shneur Zalman of Lyady, who converted to Christianity and thereby shamed his family and Habad Hasidism; Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itskan, a scion of the Ruzhin dynasty, who devoted his life to hopeless mediation between Hasidism and Western culture; and Yitshak Nahum Twersky of Shpikov, a descendant of the Chernobyl dynasty, whose soul was rent by an existential conflict that time alone cured. The story is sometimes one of a large group, notable for its oddity—such as the Bratslav Hasidim, who took comfort in being the victims of their hasidic brethren's scorn—and sometimes one of marginal individuals, who pushed their way or were forced into the eye of the storm—such as the brilliant scholar Akiva Shalom Chajes of Tulchin, who fought Hasidism his entire life, even after he joined its ranks. All paid a price for their aberrance. Linking them is the fascinating human tale that emerges from the historian's joining of scattered and shattered sources.

Emerging from this book's examination of the aberrant is another feature that connects some of the chapters: a unique, defined social group that can be termed the "scions of hasidic rebbes" (referred to in hasidic circles as *benhem shel kedoshim*—the sons of saints). Dov Sadan first noted this phenomenon in his introduction to the collected poems of Yaakov Friedman, the son of the zaddik Shalom Yosef of Mielnica: "This poetry's birthplace comes from within the reality and symbolism of the hasidic world and from the tension between adherence to, and the struggle with, Hasidism. This phenomenon applies to a worthy group of poets, the grandsons and great-grandsons of hasidic rebbes, who transmuted their ancestors' dominion over souls in matters of faith for their own kingdom, where they rule over the spirits of artistic freedom . . . *But the question of what befell the rebbes' grandchildren who left the fold is a serious one.*"¹

Sadan returned to this issue in 1976: "I was sitting [at a lecture] in the dining hall of Kibbutz Merhaviva looking over the audience, with whose family origins I was acquainted, and they included descendants of Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, and of Levi Yitshak of Berdichev, and of Hayyim of Chernovtsy, and of the Maggid of Zalozits, and of the 'Holy Jew,' and of Shlomo of Radomsk, among others . . . and if I picked them out one by one their numbers

would be legion. *And the question is whether these great numbers, their blessing, and their multibranching nature, are accidental.*"²

Following in Sadan's footsteps, I tried to determine if it was indeed possible to find shared characteristics among the descendants of rebbes "who left the fold," particularly those who longed for poetry, art, and beauty. Was their similarity fortuitous, or was it the logical outcome of the stresses of their upbringing as the children of hasidic rebbes?

A leading premise of this book is that this was not simply a chance occurrence. Yet its multiple manifestations are not necessarily a product of Hasidism or of their upbringing, but are mainly the fruits—sweet or sour, depending on the observer's perspective—of the contrary trends shaping the world of Eastern European Jewry from the late eighteenth century until the Holocaust. If there is a common, elemental experience shared by all Jews in the modern age it is the tortuous, contradiction-filled encounter between the preservers, guided by glorification of the past and preservation of tradition, and the innovators, whose vision of a future Jewish society leans both on a fresh interpretation of tradition and on the secularizing forces of modernity. Dozens of sources, books, and studies describe this always tense, crisis-laden encounter. This book, however, examines its presence in less likely, and ostensibly more protected, venues: within the hasidic way of life, among its rebbes and their followers. By no means a marginal sect, Hasidism was a powerful, high-status group with massive influence on Jewish life. But even within the supposedly stable world of the zaddikim and their devotees, some were incessantly tossed between tradition and crisis, between old and new, between the conservative forces of religious and familial authority and the enticing, destructive forces of modern life. In touching upon disquieting and discomforting episodes, the chapters of this book attempt to break down these sweeping statements into discrete components.

The opening chapter, "'Lies My Teacher Told Me': Hasidic History as a Battlefield," sets the background for this book. It poses the question of how ideologically oriented groups approach embarrassing episodes, and it demonstrates some of the historiographical strategies employed to confront such affairs in various ultra-Orthodox circles, including hasidic ones.

Chapter 2, "Apostate or Saint? In the Footsteps of Moshe, the Son of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady," is the longest in the book. Devoted to reconstruction and examination of one of the most disconcerting episodes in hasidic history—the conversion to Christianity in 1820 of Moshe, the beloved son of the founder of Habad Hasidism, Shneur Zalman of Lyady—the bulk of the chapter traces the convoluted paths of memory and the various interpretations of this episode as absorbed by hasidim and maskilim, apostates and historians, each with its own polemical and exegetical cast.

Chapter 3, "One Event, Multiple Interpretations: The Fall of the Seer of

Lublin,” treats the different explanations attached to a strange event: the fall of the famed zaddik Yaakov Yitshak Horowitz, known as the Seer of Lublin, from the window of his house, which led to his death nine months later, in 1815. Was this fall the result of the Seer’s mystical efforts to hasten the advent of the messiah, as the hasidim claimed? Was it due to inebriation, as the maskilim asserted? Or was it perhaps a failed suicide attempt?

Chapter 4, “‘Happy Are the Persecuted’: The Opposition to Bratslav Hasidism,” surveys the history of the internal struggle against an anomalous group within Hasidism: the Bratslav Hasidim. This struggle, which has accompanied the history of this unique hasidic group from its inception to the present, assumed particularly violent dimensions in the 1860s. The decoding of this strong antipathy showed its source to be the Bratslavers’ refusal to accept any leading hasidic authorities other than their own already deceased leaders. This chapter also reveals the *modus operandi* of Ukrainian zaddikim and the unique patterns of hasidic “takeovers” of Jewish communities.

Chapter 5, “‘Excitement of the Soul’: The World of Rabbi Akiva Shalom Chajes of Tulchin,” is devoted to the enigmatic figure of Akiva Shalom Chajes of Tulchin (1815–68), a fierce mitnaged who, in his youth, apparently composed mocking diatribes against the zaddikim, but upon reaching maturity changed his stripes and became a hasidic rebbe in the small town of Dubova. His multifaceted, contradictory personality has been subjected to prejudicial treatment in various sources, each with its own agenda—from works by the writer Micha Yosef Berdyczewski to family, local, and hasidic memory traditions—which try to crack Akiva’s secret and explain his change of heart. This consideration also reveals the nature of some strange controversies that divided various hasidic groups in the southern regions of the Pale of Settlement, first and foremost, the *kadavar* controversy.

Chapter 6, “‘How Times Have Changed’: The World of Rabbi Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itscan,” describes the unique world of Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itscan (1879–1933), and his literary output, entirely devoted to naive, harmonistic mediation between the hasidic world and European philosophy. This thoroughly modern activity amazed the surrounding hasidic society, which found this bizarre phenomenon hard to swallow. The chapter surveys several of his unusual treatises as well as his problematic acceptance in hasidic memory, which ranges from total disregard or a hidden polemic against him to a call to do away with his books.

The final chapter, “‘Confession of My Tortured, Afflicted Soul’: The World of Rabbi Yitshak Nahum Twersky of Shpikov,” focuses on an extraordinary document, a letter penned in 1910 by Yitshak Nahum Twersky of Shpikov (1888–1942), the son of an eminent zaddik. What occasioned this letter was Twersky’s imminent departure from his seemingly sheltered Ukrainian court for Galicia, in order to meet (for the first time) and wed his prospective

bride: the daughter of the famed Belzer rebbe. In surprisingly rich language, this piercing, intimate, historical and psychological document unfolds Twersky's convoluted emotional paths and dual existence within the hasidic court that he so hated and despised. The chapter explores the familial, social, and historical context of this rare document, and provides a full translation of the confession.

There is yet another important, tragic, and tortured figure whose story merits telling, but who does not take his rightful place in this book devoted to crisis and discontent in the history of Hasidism: Dov Ber (Bernyu) Friedman of Leova (1820/21–76), a son of the famed zaddik Yisrael of Ruzhin. In 1869, disgusted with his followers, Bernyu resigned from his hasidic throne, the first rebbe to do so. Kidnapped and brought forcibly to his brother's Sadigura court, he was rescued by local maskilim. Bernyu remained for a time in nearby Chernovtsy, in the home of a radical maskil, where he desecrated the Sabbath, ate nonkosher food, and published an open letter in the Jewish press voicing his aversion to Hasidism and announcing his affinity for Has-kalah. His shocking story aroused much public interest but ended with a whimper. Several weeks later, Bernyu returned to the Sadigura court, where he remained in isolation until his death in 1876. The dramatic twists and turns in the life journey of this zaddik, a son of a zaddik—which resonated in the contemporary press, numerous polemical tracts, and lampoons—opened a Pandora's box that discomfited all the branches of Ruzhin-Sadigura Hasidism and sparked an intensely violent dispute in the hasidic and Orthodox worlds of the 1870s. Bernyu's biography and the history of the Sandz-Sadigura dispute merit separate study of a scope beyond that of this volume. I hope to have the opportunity to tell their stories in the future.

I “Lies My Teacher Told Me”

Hasidic History as a Battlefield

It is unnecessary to publicize the inadvertent sins of the great, worthy rabbis. Of these sins, only a modicum should be revealed and the majority hidden, especially as these rabbis are now in the “world of truth,” and would certainly find this revelation disturbing. —*Beit Rabbi*¹

In 1995, in a book titled *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, James W. Loewen debunked axioms long held dear in American history textbooks.² For me, this book sparked the question of how graduates of hasidic institutions would react if given the opportunity to subject the history of their movement—as marketed by the mechanisms shaping and preserving their society’s collective memory—to critical review. Naturally, this question applies to all ideologically oriented educational systems, in every time and place; my spotlight, however, is trained on the hasidic and the ultra-Orthodox systems.

Were hasidim dismayed by the fact that admired rabbis and zaddikim, like Yisrael of Ruzhin, Moshe of Kobrin, or Shmuel of Salant were unable to write?³ Did they find the claim that the Seer of Lublin’s fall from his window was a drunken accident, and not the result of his attempts to hasten the messianic era, embarrassing? And what of Moshe, the son of the founder of Habad Hasidism, who converted to Christianity, or Bernyu of Leova, who joined the ranks of the radical maskilim? And this is but a partial list.⁴ In other words, how does hasidic society confront unpleasant facts (assuming that they are not wicked or libelous accusations), and what are the ramifications for a society such as the hasidic one of tackling disconcerting aspects of its history?

How, for example, would an inquisitive Belz or Chernobyl hasid react to

the astounding confession found in this book's final chapter, which remained hidden in manuscript form for some ninety years? In it Yitshak Nahum Twersky of Shpikov, a scion of a celebrated hasidic dynasty, openly bares his tortured soul and his dual existence in his much-hated hasidic court: "I constantly have free thoughts, but I am obliged to observe my ancestors' most minute stringencies of observance; I have good taste and love beauty, but I am obliged to wear the clothing of the uncivilized"—referring to the *shtrayml* and *kapota*, still worn by present-day hasidim who might read his words. Twersky continues: "Thus do I live out my life here, a dark gloomy life, without a spark of light, without a shadow of hope."

About to travel to Galicia to wed a young woman he has never met, he imagines the Belzer court as a madhouse ruled by bestial fanatics: "They are frozen, fossilized, standing constantly on the same level as our ancestors in Poland three hundred years ago. And if they have developed . . . they have done so only in the sense that they have heaped more restrictions on their ancestors' restrictions and added stupidity to their stupidity." He goes on with a graphic, harsh description of the narrow, petty, and ugly hasidic world, from which he longs to escape.

Until recently, what was known in Belz and Chernobyl circles regarding the young rebbe of Shpikov was simply the fact of his marriage to the daughter of the renowned Belzer zaddik, Yisakhar Dov Rokeah. Twersky did not serve as a hasidic rebbe and chose to be a communal rabbi instead, but this was by no means unusual. In Belz and Chernobyl collective memory, Twersky and his family—consumed by the Holocaust—retained the image of martyrs and paragons. How would a hasid raised on admiration of the past and the sanctity of the zaddikim respond to the revelation of Twersky's dark, hidden side?

The educational and collective-memory systems of ultra-Orthodox society possess the ability to readily encompass such "embarrassments." Consciously or unconsciously guided by the principle subsumed by the ancient Talmudic saying "whoever says that David sinned is merely erring" (BT *Shabbat* 55b), the ultra-Orthodox consider sins of the outstanding individuals of each generation—and naturally, each period and each circle has its outstanding leader—to be nonexistent, but even if they do exist, they can be reduced, rationalized, or reshaped as meritorious. This glorification of the past receives an antithetical portrayal in a story involving the Besht's contemporary Rabbi Nahman of Kosov. The story goes that upon coming to a certain community, not only did Rabbi Nahman lead the prayers without prior permission, he even diverged from the time-honored Ashkenazic prayer rite. Although irritated by his presumption, "when they heard words sweeter than nectar and honey issuing from his mouth, they took pleasure in it and kept silent." But, when he finished, they furiously demanded, "How

did you dare to stand before the ark without permission and to change the order of the prayers from that followed by our fathers and forefathers who were the leaders of their generations?" To which Rabbi Nahman provided the somewhat anarchistic answer: "Who says that they are in paradise?"⁵

But such radical or critical comments are rarely heard at present. An uncontested consensus reigns: our forefathers, the leaders of their generations, are in paradise, and their honor is sacrosanct. Notwithstanding the winds of change blowing in contemporary *haredi* society, and its increasing exposure to international and secular trends, *haredi* society erects barricades against the indiscriminate penetration of sensitive, enticing, or dangerous information into its midst.

Seen from this perspective, in the hands of irresponsible outsiders, history in general—and the history of Hasidism in particular—not only threatens but also constitutes a weapon against tradition. Wielding this weapon are unscrupulous and ignorant scholars, who follow in the footsteps of the detested maskilim, Hasidism's brazen opponents. To these scholars, the faithful ascribe a desire to innovate at any price and an avid search for sensationalism. Witness the following diatribe by the Habad researcher and bibliographer Haim Liberman against modern academic research, as personified by Gershom Scholem and his disciples:

Hasidism has now acquired the "merit" of being a topic of scholarly inquiry. Articles and entire books devoted to the study of Hasidism have recently been published. But *by all rights this topic should be handled by experts: namely, the hasidim themselves*. As members of the inner circle, born and bred in Hasidism, imbibing it with their mother's milk and living in a hasidic environment, all the paths, methods, and streams of Hasidism are clear to them; they possess expertise in its literature, customs, and oral traditions. Only they have a true sense of Hasidism and for them alone is it proper to undertake its study. It is to be regretted that outsiders and unripe students educated in a foreign environment and possessing extrinsic attitudes toward Hasidism, who derogate the honor of the eminent leaders of Judaism, have chanced upon this field . . . They bring their prejudices to the study of Hasidism, deliberately and incorrectly attributing to it aspects of their own imagination. They introduce distortions, and reach vain conclusions through empty casuistic discussion. Even though they lack the training to study Hasidism, they pretentiously adopt the stance of men of science, and pretend to be governed only by neutral, unbiased academic standards and to show no favoritism.⁶

This is not the place to reconstruct this controversy's reverberations. I simply note a fact that speaks for itself: on the one hand, the scholars Liberman critiqued largely accepted his comments regarding specific points.⁷ On the other hand, his generalization regarding empty casuists, ignoramuses, and distorters among academic researchers might also have been favorably re-

ceived if all the hasidim dealing with historical writing had also come to the field without bias. But the intensive, recent study of what is termed Orthodox historiography provides countless examples—some of which will be discussed here—of ignorance and rancor; of crude or sophisticated cover-ups, both overt and covert; of forgery and prejudicial rewriting; and of denial of unpleasant facts employed by the “experts: namely, the hasidim themselves.”⁸

This well-entrenched stance, according to which critical study improperly reveals aspects of Hasidism, continues to guide internal hasidic historiography. Here is another example of a hate-filled diatribe against academic scholarship. In the editors’ introduction to a 1991 reprint of a well-known 1805 letter by Rabbi Yehezkel Panet describing the learned circle active in the court of Menahem Mendel of Fristik (afterward at Rimanov), they bemoan the decline of the generations, which has been so severe that only select individuals comprehend this holy document’s immense importance. Much to their chagrin, this letter has also sparked interest among scholars of Hasidism. In their dismay, they lump together all researchers, “both *haredi* and secular”:

Recent years especially have seen the rise of so-called researchers of Hasidism, both *haredi* and secular, even including some who have left the fold, heaven forbid, who distort the original image of Hasidism, treating hasidic works as if they were academic books, in which each researcher does as he pleases: takes things out of context, places mistaken emphases, and stresses what he seeks to link to his erroneous notions. And whereas *haredi* researchers do their work privately and are satisfied with the *haredi* press, dressing their remarks in the guise of the history of Hasidism, or as the delineation of a particular rebbe’s personality . . . the secular researchers and other afflictions *who study Hasidism in the impure universities* have transformed Hasidism into a political party, the rebbe into a party chief, the rabbis into activists, and the hasidim into rank-and-file supporters (and even this letter has become a historical document, and as a propaganda letter for Hasidism and for the writer’s rebbe, it is not to be mentioned).⁹

While the harsh words directed at the “impure universities” are nothing new, the spotlight trained on students of Hasidism from the *haredi* camp requires explanation. Who are these researchers? If up until a generation ago, Habad hasidim were in the forefront of historical activity, a similar awareness of the past has recently developed among additional hasidic groups. Many hasidic courts boast research institutes, publishing houses, and periodicals in which amateur historians publish manuscripts, documents, and other material relating to the hasidic past. This essentially modern activity is often couched in conservative ideological terms: as a struggle to preserve the sanctity of the past and to prevent external distortion of the

truth. Note the following typical polemical quotation from a hasidic periodical originating among the Skvira hasidim (of New York), which discusses the importance of the project devoted to the zaddikim of the Chernobyl dynasty: “It has a necessary aim: to preserve its way of life, *so that strangers will not come and defile it* by writing treatises on the history of the zaddikim which discontent Torah scholars, and because of our manifold sins *such treatises are many, written by coarse fools whose uncircumcised hearts do not reach the slightest comprehension of the holy zaddikim’s greatness . . .* and regard them as ordinary people.”¹⁰

The history of Hasidism accordingly resembles a battlefield on which two opposing armies are deployed: defenders of “holy” history and “coarse fools” who seek to despoil and defile that history. Is a dialogue, or coexistence, possible between these two worlds? Ostensibly, this is unthinkable. Recent scholarly studies, like their maskilic and heretical predecessors over the past two centuries, are taboo and are not available in *haredi* bookstores. Only individuals drawn to external wisdom read them—in secret, far from prying eyes. But notwithstanding this apparent enmity and distrust, the situation is not nearly so dichotomous. Indeed, any academic involved in the study of Hasidism can point to a few, God-fearing hasidim who are their most faithful readers. Motivated by their love of the secrets of the past, they permit themselves a taste of forbidden honey. More than any other audience, they respond intelligently, correct mistakes, and provide additional sources, new and old, according to their expertise. Thus, the publication of this book in Hebrew sparked dozens of such responses—in writing, by telephone, and in e-mails.

Who are these readers? Hopelessly infected by insatiable historical curiosity, these amateur historians come from all sectors of *haredi* society. Their fields of interest encompass the history of the Torah world, the rabbinate, and Hasidism. Armed with broad knowledge, sometimes arcane and sometimes piquant, they are conversant with all branches of traditional literature, both exoteric and esoteric, as well as with some academic studies. Not only have they developed protective mechanisms to grapple with the critical view of Jewish history, at times they seemingly derive particular pleasure from exposing controversies, disputes, and embarrassing events. Yet these individuals would never consider recording or publishing these comments within their own camps.

This ambiguity toward uncomfortable moments from the past (and even more so toward embarrassing moments in the present) is not restricted to relatively closed sectors of society, but can also be identified among open communities fearful that contending with failure may threaten the rightness of their vision or the integrity of their path. The ability to handle unpleasant episodes in a critical fashion and the willingness to consider change, or even

to pay a price for mistakes, mark an optimistic, proud, and confident society. A society in crisis, or one suffering from a lack of confidence or self-esteem, tends to adopt a defensive attitude toward criticism and a hesitant one toward the past, viewing the exposure of its secrets as posing a mortal danger to its stability.

The U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis once commented: “Publicity is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants; electric light the most efficient policeman.”¹¹ He made this statement not as a historian seeking the truth but as a concerned citizen, based on his conviction that the masking of wrongdoing, evil, and corruption harms society, whereas public transparency is not just beneficial but also possesses healing, restorative powers. Yet the magnitude of the emotional response evoked by these questions in different circles does not simply reflect extroversion and innovativeness as opposed to introversion and conservatism, it also highlights great sensitivity toward symbols of the past and the group ethos, whether celestially or terrestrially sanctified. Seen from this perspective, the past is not neutral. We cannot relate to it simply as “what was, was.” Rather, it constitutes a dynamic basis for the formation of a shared social identity. A society engaged in a constant struggle to maintain its values and on the defensive against snares, which compulsively defines the borders of identification with its past, will be content with nothing less than a sanctified, pure history.¹²

Encounters with a disconcerting past or with the memory of discomfiting events give the community of rememberers doubts about their path, and the bitter taste of failure. For historians—especially historian-detectives—whose research is not aimed at meeting group spiritual needs and who certainly bear no responsibility for the shaping of collective memory, these events pose a special challenge. Such historians seek to unravel the mystery and to arrive as closely as possible at the truth, both as it was and as it was interpreted. Fueling their attraction to the dramatic and dark sides of history, to hidden or downplayed events, is neither spite nor an overarching morality, but rather the intense allure of the concealed.

It is precisely those discomfiting events and aberrant individuals, which some have sought to erase or to hide from prying eyes, that spark the imagination of the writer, poet, and historian-detective. An understanding of the mechanisms of suppression reveals the complexity of ostensibly straightforward events and contributes to a more refined portrayal of individuals who have been perceived as one-dimensional, holy saints from birth. It also un-masks the sensibilities of those who choose to hide the truth, the clumsy or elegant steps taken to this end, and their strategies for dealing with the sudden revelation of data that elude the silencing mechanisms.

Orthodox Historiography's Strategies of Memory and Repression

What appears in the above-mentioned book regarding the dispute between our holy rabbi of Lublin . . . and the Holy Jew of Pshishkha . . . are words that should not be heard, let alone uttered, and certainly not printed. A word to the wise is sufficient.

—Hayyim Elazar Shapira, *Divrei torah tinyanah*¹⁵

Each chapter of this book considers at length the strategies employed by hasidic traditions of memory to address embarrassing episodes. The attempt to formulate a cohesive interpretive framework for these episodes conjures up the scholarly term “Orthodox historiography,” widely used to refer to various means of recording the past commonly found in *haredi* circles.¹⁴ Essentially, Orthodox historiography differs little from other branches of ideologically biased historiography or any other official histories. Does *haredi* historiography possess characteristics that distinguish it from maskilic, communist, and right- or left-wing historiography? In my opinion, the differences inhere not in the historiographies’ essences but in their tones or styles. All share a programmatic agenda that seeks to sanctify, and to promote, specific insights, explanations, or values, and all use varied means to restrict the ability of their opponents or rivals to achieve a fair presentation of their views. All view the quest for truth or restoration of the past as it was not as an end in and of itself, divorced from other important values, but as an additional means of opposing antagonists and forwarding the group’s agenda. Nonetheless, Orthodox historiography, the focus of this book, does possess unique literary features, some of which will be discussed below.

Present-day *haredi* society, to which Hasidism belongs, functions within a modern democratic environment whose mass media exhibit an ever-growing interest in this society. Accordingly, its members face, on occasion, the danger of public revelation of embarrassing incidents involving the *haredi* elites, or exemplifying the undermining of old-world values, whether these assume the form of financial corruption, theft, fraud, domestic abuse, sexual aberration, or rape. The memory-agents of current *haredi* society are not just, as in the past, the life stories of eminent individuals, or the oral traditions passed from father to son, or the authoritative rebbes, rabbis, and teachers in various educational settings. In the thick of those who shape *haredi* collective memory, we also find *haredi* political figures—who receive wide coverage in the secular press—and *haredi* journalists and other media personalities.

More than any other force, the flourishing *haredi* media of the last generation, both printed and broadcast, have shaped their consumers’ agenda. But they are not guided by the masthead logo of the *New York Times*: “All the

news that's fit to print." Essentially recruited media, they do not see their role as disseminating information at any price; indeed, at times their function is actually to conceal. Well-attuned to their mission to nurture, preserve, and protect the values of the *haredi* society with which they identify, these media are moreover self-appointed to provide the *haredi* answer to prying eyes. The secular press, paradoxically accused of prejudicial one-sidedness, has in some respects become for the *haredi* media the heir and partner of maskilic literature, on the one hand, and of academic historiography, on the other hand—seen as possessing destructive, and not curative, tendencies.

Investigative reporters' interest in episodes of corruption, financing of yeshivas, police records and courts, forces the *haredi* media—even its independent, politically unaffiliated branches—to take a stand on how to present embarrassing facts. Heightening these dilemmas is *haredi* society's profound dependence on the kosher *haredi* press for news of their circles (alongside oral rumors, still a strong alternative communication route). Barring exceptional cases, the *haredi* media largely utilize a dual memory strategy: they overlook defects and flaws within the holy community, creating the facade of a harmonious society that obeys traditional authorities, notwithstanding its multilayered stratification; and they also aggressively trumpet the holiness of the surrounding society. The *haredi* media will never report the arrest of the son of a *rosh yeshiva* for election fraud, or the sexual abuse of young men by the head of the *kolel*, or the wife beating of a rebbe's son, but they do highlight secular society's hedonism and moral corruption.

However, the picture is far from simplistic. At times, internecine hatred and dissension in the *haredi* world, despite its largely shared worldview and lifestyle, has the opposite effect. An uncontrollable desire to blacken the opposite side unleashes inhibitions and overrides the desire to silence or hide. Polemical tracts, hate-filled placards, and provocative wall posters (known as *pashkevilim*), both signed and anonymous, are an accepted, long-standing method of disseminating subversive, disconcerting material, at times with the blessing of the authorities backing one side or another. The result is public broadcasting of embarrassing information, which would ordinarily have been silenced or made to disappear. The sophisticated, complex, and conspiratory nature of this information indirectly contributes to the undermining of the ostensible solidity of the accepted descriptions of the past, characterized by simplicity, naiveté, and harmonistic tendencies.

Between "Honor" and "Truth": The Toldot Aharon Inheritance Dispute

A recent example comes from a bitter inheritance dispute between twin branches of one of Jerusalem's most fanatical and insular hasidic sects: the Toldot Aharon group. This controversy not only sparked a nasty wave of vio-

lence but was also accompanied by the issuing of publications containing harsh mutual accusations. Each of the rival parties—followers of the two contesting brothers, the sons of the rebbe Avraham Yitshak Hakohen Kohn, who died in 1997—publicly accused the other of having forged the dead rebbe’s will. Alongside strong personal vilification, these accusations were backed by photocopies of documents and other supporting evidence grounded in modern scientific methods, such as statements by graphologists and police investigators. As put forth in its introduction, the rationale for the publication of the first treatise, *Nes lehitnose* (To fly a banner), turns out to be a surprisingly modern historiographical aim: the disclosure of truth for its own sake and, ostensibly, not for practical advantage:

The purpose of this book is not to change the reality created after our rabbi’s death . . . nor is its purpose to make financial claims. Its main goal is simply “so all shall know”; it aims to uncover the ways of a zaddik and the pure truth of our rebbe’s will, and to restore our rabbi’s honor, may his memory protect us, and to unmask the hypocrites who pretend loyalty to our rabbi . . . and to his will, and impute wrong to others . . . This book and the revelation of the truth of the will and testament will give the forgers no rest . . . But it is obvious that they will stoop to any means, perverted as it may be, to preserve their lies. We are also aware that they have great power and can unbalance people . . . Therefore, we announce in advance our intention not to be dragged into provocation. There will be no further response regarding the matter of the will beyond what is written in this book. To all arguments, rationales, announcements, letters, lampoons, etc. issued by the other side, the reader will find the answers in this book.¹⁵

This book’s editors attempt to grab the stick of historical writing by both its modern and conservative ends. On the one hand, they portray themselves as guided by a search for the pure truth, which they seek to uncover as it is, even if this leads to the embarrassing conclusion that the will was forged;¹⁶ on the other hand, they pretend that, for them, the ramifications of this truth hold no practical interest. Also, by committing themselves in advance not to respond to the expected counterattack, they prepare a strategic path of retreat. And this counterattack was not long in coming: another book appeared in response. Feeling themselves the injured side, its authors place no trust in their opponents’ self-righteous stand, and lament: “Indeed, the results . . . are most embarrassing, though they feel that they have achieved their aim thereby: *they have ground the honor of the Torah into the dust; openly trampled the honor of the rabbinic court; mocked Torah scholars as if they were vain, empty members of our people . . . Whence all the commotion? . . . Why scabble at this rehashed issue, which is accompanied not only by controversy and dispute but also by burning hatred, and which accomplishes nothing.*

But no, they roll pious eyes heavenward and display their kosher hooves, as if their entire aim were to arrive at the truth . . . Are all means of vilification acceptable?!”¹⁷

This quotation’s juxtaposition of “honor” and “truth” is not accidental. Preservation of the “honor of the Torah” or of “Torah scholars” is not just a fundamental value of conservative Orthodoxy, it is also a defensive (or, in this case, offensive) mechanism against the tempting, authoritative voice of history (as a representative of the “truth”) and against those who scabble in it. It is noteworthy that the other faction also refers to the concept of honor; however, it associates the rehabilitation of the dead rabbi’s honor with the revelation of historical truth.

Concern for the Torah’s honor in no way deterred the authors of the counterattacking booklet from presenting an alternative past, as it was from their perspective. Not surprisingly, the second tract also exhibits a stylistic conflation of polemical *haredi* defensive-aggressive rhetoric with testimony- and document-based historical and philological analysis. Although its authors maintain that they were forced to answer their detractors in the same coin, the outcome is similar: an amalgamation of the conservative-*haredi* and modern-historical approaches. And, almost predictably, the back cover of the book displays a proclamation signed by five prominent rabbis decrying the first book as “a lampoon, vain futility . . . the reading of which is prohibited and *which should be purged from the world.*”

There is, of course, a distinction between current events, more difficult to deny or distort, and those of the recent or distant past. Additional ethical and educational criteria influence the description of the distant past, leading to the shaping and marketing of a harmonious, fabricated past.

Arming for Battle: Lies, Bans, and Censorship

As we saw above, the dissemination and suppression of embarrassing information are intertwined. Tightening this dialectical weave of revelation and concealment is the easy access to means of publication, trustworthy or not, in the form of newspapers, independent publications, or online forums that provide maximum exposure but at the same time allow full preservation of anonymity. These conduits, both old and new, for disseminating and absorbing information and rumors somewhat counterbalance the suppressive trend and mechanisms of official censorship. The entirely new phenomenon of *haredi* Internet forums tolerates free expression on all topics, revelation of well-kept secrets, and spirited discussion between supporters and detractors alike. Even a random sampling of the dynamic, popular forums divulges the surprisingly subversive dimension of this virtual *haredi* communication.¹⁸ Chats on these forums in the wake of the publication of the Hebrew

edition of this book focused on the fate of Moshe, son of Shneur Zalman of Lyady, and reveal the difficulty that even open-minded participants experienced in accepting dismaying facts at face value, and the participants' profound need to rationalize and explain.

In late 2000 I published a comprehensive Hebrew study in *Zion* (a quarterly published by the Historical Society of Israel), titled "Convert or Saint? In the Footsteps of Moshe, the Son of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady." This study, an expanded version of which appears as this book's second chapter, treated Moshe's conversion to Christianity. Despite weak denials by Habad spokesmen, the fact of the conversion itself—whether it was of his own free will or through force and enticement—is incontestable. But the sources attest to yet another detail: Moshe suffered from mental illness. Whether or not he was of sound mind when he converted, this ostensibly supplies an excellent explanation for the conversion: as a private, contained failure, that of an insane individual, it in no way constitutes a blot on the hasidic movement. Nonetheless, Habad writers did not embrace this explanation. Indeed, their position was that if this event actually took place, it was an embarrassing blemish to be removed, hidden, or denied. Denial only intensified their discomfort, as Shneur Zalman of Lyady's failure to raise his son in the hasidic path could be attributed to the Habad movement as a whole.

The alternative-history strategies adopted by Habad historiography in response to the public airing of this episode by nineteenth-century maskilim are covered in greater detail in chapter 2. They include: (a) a strategy of vagueness—namely, no denials, but no prominent reporting of this embarrassing event either; (b) a corrective strategy—namely, the provision of purportedly true evidence that bestows a happy end on the story (in this case, stories of Moshe's wandering and repentance, without identifying his sin); and (c) the tactic of denial—that is, total rejection of the existence of the discomfiting episode and the substitution of a kosher biography for Moshe.

The prime representatives of the strategy of vagueness are Rabbi Hayyim Meir Heilman and his important study of the Habad dynasty, *Beit Rabbi*. Its adoption is readily understandable: no person would willingly tell his audience that his father, son, or rabbi had sinned. But, although Heilman did not see fit to publish everything he knew, he was also not prepared to pen any lies. Because the book's plan required that he mention all of Shneur Zalman of Lyady's descendants, his adoption of the strategy of vagueness was a natural and logical solution. Heilman also used the corrective strategy in the form of popular rumors and tales current among nineteenth-century Habad hasidim, which in this case probably sprouted from below. The outstanding representative of the tactic of denial is the sixth Habad rebbe, Yosef Yitshak Schneersohn (Rayyats). Although almost certainly acquainted both with the historical background and some of the facts of the case, he fabricated an al-

ternative biography that transformed Moshe the convert into a strong opponent of Christianity and its representatives.

An ingenuous hasid nurtured solely on internal Habad literature would certainly find such a terrible step by one of Shneur Zalman of Lyady's holy descendants unthinkable. But, notwithstanding its sensational nature, my initial publication of this episode aroused little interest in the *haredi* street. The reporter who covered the story for the local Jerusalem paper *Kol ha'ir* pressed the Habad spokesman to answer some questions about the Moshe episode—he naturally issued a strong denial—but other than that, no statements from hasidic spokesmen were forthcoming. From the hasidic perspective, this was the appropriate technique: it was certainly preferable to ignore this publication, than to enter the dark alleyways of controversy, an approach that could raise additional embarrassing queries. After all, he who is ignorant cannot ask questions. How many hasidim read *Zion* or *Kol ha'ir*? Better to keep silent and let the story return to hibernation.

But this was certainly not the case for a new, detailed three-volume work examining the personality and philosophy of the Gaon of Vilna, *HaGaon*. Authored by Dov Eliach, who belongs to the world of the Lithuanian yeshivas, its appearance on the *haredi* book market generated a tempest that has yet to die down. Although far from critical or academic, Eliach's book shows conversance with various source documents and even modern research, on which he draws copiously (but without so noting).¹⁹ There is nothing unusual about this book, except for the fact that Eliach crossed the line by devoting the third volume to the Gaon's antihasidic campaign. Not only did Eliach highlight this generally suppressed matter and cast aspersions on great hasidic leaders, he even dared to hint that, although weakened, the eighteenth-century excommunication of Hasidism, signed by the Gaon of Vilna, had never been canceled.²⁰

The ensuing storm in the *haredi* street led to the banning of the book and the excommunication of its author. A Jerusalem periodical titled *Olam hahasidut*, whose masthead reads "devoid of gossip and politics," devoted almost an entire issue (no. 88, Shevat 2002) to debate with "that scribbler who entered the public arena." Not content with decrying his bold insolence, the newspaper also imputed to Eliach ignorance and failure to understand the sources. A clear measure of the rage aroused by this book is the illustration on this periodical's front cover, which depicts *HaGaon* being consigned to the flames of a hasidic auto-da-fé.

Given the Vilna Gaon's status as one of the most admired and outstanding rabbinic figures in his and subsequent generations, hasidim certainly find his antihasidic campaign embarrassing. How could such an eminent figure not only fail to perceive the great light of Hasidism but also authorize its violent persecution? Although they attributed this failure not to Hasidism but to



FIG. 1.1. Front cover of the Shevat 2002 issue of *Olam hasidut*, showing Dov Eliach's *HaGaon* being consigned to the flames

the Gaon and the mitnagedic faction, the hasidim still sought an explanation for his stance and actions. In his study of the Gaon, Immanuel Etkes notes three main Orthodox historiographical trends in the treatment of this issue: an apologetic approach, ascribing a positive outcome to the polemic for the future shaping of Hasidism; a harmonizing approach, viewing this as a spiritual dispute in which the leaders of each faction displayed mutual respect; and intentional forgetfulness, whether in the guise of false modesty—the claim of unworthiness to treat this subject—or of complete disregard. Etkes sums up his discussion: “Most authors who have dealt with this topic from an orthodox Jewish point of view have shared this difficulty in accepting the picture of the past in which the Gaon appeared as a zealous and uncompromising warrior against Hasidism . . . So we see that, in places where the myth of the Vilna Gaon continues to play a vital role and to serve as a focus of identification, critical history is not exactly a welcome guest.”²¹

It is therefore not surprising that *haredi* society's main source of information on the Gaon, the treatise of the late *haredi* writer Betsalel Landau, *HaGaon hehasid miVilna*, first published in 1965 (Jerusalem: Usha), entirely omits the Gaon's antihhasidic campaign. (It does, however, devote a long chapter to the Gaon's antimaskilic campaign.) Naturally, Eliach suggests that Landau's book originally contained a chapter on the Gaon and Hasidism, but that internal *haredi* pressure led to its deletion.

Why a stormy reception for Eliach's book on the Vilna Gaon, and total si-

lence on my publication of the sad episode of Shneur Zalman's son Moshe? The answer lies not in contextual and stylistic features or each topic's inherent interest, but mainly in the authors' identity and authoritativeness, as well as the availability of their writings. By and large, *haredi* society takes no interest in academic studies, ostensibly stamped with bias and hatred. Not readily available in any case, these studies are not likely to come to the attention of the *haredi* public. But it is a different matter altogether when a *haredi*, "one of us," who writes in the *haredi* style, has rabbinic approbations, and even claims rabbinic backing for his literary output, is involved. The scholarly journal *Zion* is not sold or read in *haredi* Bnei Brak, Jerusalem, or Kfar Habad. It was therefore preferable in the case of Moshe to refrain from comment in hopes that this episode would remain confined to the few curious, learned individuals already in the know. *HaGaon*, on the other hand, written in a combative style by an observant Orthodox Jew and widely distributed among bookstores catering to a *haredi* audience, could neither be ignored nor forgiven.

Is the story of *HaGaon* exceptional? The following two relatively recent examples demonstrate excoriation, and excommunication, of God-fearing *haredi* authors, this time by Lithuanian mitnagedim.

In 2002 Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky published a detailed, multifaceted treatise, *Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities* (Jerusalem: Hamesorah)—a two-volume work, some 1,400 pages long, on his father, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky (1891–1986). The father had been head of the Torah ve-Da'at yeshiva in New York and was considered one of the greatest twentieth-century Lithuanian Torah scholars.²² The book by his son—himself a *haredi* rabbi and teacher in a prestigious Jerusalem yeshiva—aroused great anger and was rapidly banned and taken off the market.²³ Critiques of this book, which touches on other prominent rabbinic figures as well, noted its "severely debasing remarks, derisiveness, degradation and *hotzo'as sheim ra* [defamation] against several figures among *gedolei horabbonim* [leading rabbis]," (for example, their portrayal as possessing such common personality traits as jealousy and competitiveness, overbearingness or impatience, and even a propensity for pranks). Other grounds for rejection included its infusion of "spurious opinions and incorrect *hashkofoh* [outlook]" (such as its criticism of the hushing up of the truth in *haredi* works, or the claim that great Torah scholars took an interest in additional fields of study alongside the Talmud and Halakha, including philosophy, *musar*, or Hasidism). The ban, signed by a long list of important *haredi* rabbis, including some with no knowledge of English, still stands; the author cannot reissue his book.²⁴

Another writer recently targeted by *haredi* censorship is Nosson Slifkin, a young *haredi* Jerusalem rabbi who calls himself the Zoo Rabbi. Notwith-

standing his youth, several of his books have been banned as heretical (because, for example, of his belief that the world is millions of years old and that his attempt to prove this in no way contravenes Judaism).²⁵ A manifesto issued by Rabbi Yisrael Eliyahu Weintraub accused the author of twisting rabbinic statements “so that they would be consistent with the opinions of academics, may they bite the dust—and that the author defers to them in the maskilic style of former days.” Rabbi Mikhl Yehuda Lefkowitz, an elder statesman of the Israeli Lithuanian yeshivas, added “the hope that the disseminator of heresy [Slifkin] will *burn all of his books* and publicly retract all that he has written.”²⁶

As the topic of the day in the *haredi* street, these banned books sparked a lively, fascinating debate in the *haredi* and modern Orthodox Internet forums, which disseminated the news of the ban. Individual copies of *Making of a Godol* are still sold secretly and even offered at outrageous prices on public auction sites.²⁷

Self-Restraint, Deletion, and Retouching

Books in disfavor with certain rabbis (or with activists closely associated with them) can therefore be banned and even burned or otherwise destroyed. But this is uncommon. The prevailing *haredi* modus operandi seeks to ward off embarrassment and ensuing controversy; therefore, their memory-preserving mechanisms largely employ censorship, both external and internal. The long-standing tradition of *haskamot* (approbations) for books of Torah scholarship, and the rabbinic committees and spiritual guides found at almost every *haredi* newspaper, avert the publication of works the *haredim* view as harmful to their interests. But the main method of censorship is self-restraint on the author’s part.

Self-censorship, in the Original and in Translation

One figure who reveals the policy of self-censorship is Rabbi Nosson Zvi Kenig (d. 1997). Kenig, who specialized in the history of the Bratslav hasidim and published treatises and letters from manuscripts, refers to this policy in his introduction to a book of nineteenth-century letters by Bratslavers. On his own initiative, he showed this material to “the prominent elders among our group, and consulted with them as to what should be published, what hidden things should be revealed to the public, *and what should not be printed and should remain hidden. And we deleted several letters . . . and did not print them for clandestine reasons.* Sometimes we only omitted part of a letter, marking the ellipsis with ‘etc.’”²⁸ Thus, in a letter from 1865 in which Bratslav hasidim from Teplik, Podolia, complained of their cruel persecu-

tion by Yitshak Twersky of Skvira and his followers, Kenig—himself a Bratslav hasid—consistently replaced the Skvira rebbe’s name with “etc.”²⁹

This spontaneous self-censorship was grounded not in fear of revealing Torah secrets, but in the author’s piety and sincere desire to preserve the honor of zaddikim. This trend characterizes many sectors of Orthodox writing. The best-known example is the fate of *Der Chassidismus*, written in 1901 by the *haredi* German author Ahron Marcus under the pseudonym Verus (truthful one). Many pages of the Hebrew translation were censored because they were inconsistent with the standards then current among *haredi* leaders; nonetheless, the editions of the translations differ vastly among themselves. Thus, fifteen pages devoted to the embarrassing episode of Bernyu of Leova, “mistakenly” printed in the first Hebrew translation published in 1954, were omitted from the second, 1980, edition. The rationale provided in the preface to the latter was that this certainly reflected the wishes of the author and translator, both by then deceased.³⁰

The motto “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter” (Proverbs 25:2) guides the kind-hearted concealers and censors who either act autonomously or under the aegis of their rabbis;³¹ at times, however, the hiding of “a matter” results from shifts in editorial opinion. If in the prior example, the most recent editors exercised deeper censorship than their predecessors, in the next example, the latest editor revealed what his predecessors had hidden. A Habad publisher censored the surname of the maskil Aryeh Leib Mandelstam (1819–89) from a friendly, complimentary letter sent by the zaddik Menahem Mendel Schneersohn (known as the Tsemah Tsedek). The publisher did so because he “felt that it dishonored the rebbe to publish his ‘praises’ of Mandelstam, the maskil.” But before long, this letter appeared in a Habad publication with Mandelstam’s name in full, “for the book’s editor decided that this in no way harmed the rebbe.”³²

Taking the significant differences into account, these phenomena merit comparison and contrast with the techniques of censorship and rewriting used by other indoctrinating societies.³³ If this seems harsh, additional examples follow.

Retouching and Airbrushing

Zekhut yisrael, a four-volume anthology of stories and testimonies regarding various zaddikim compiled by Rabbi Yisrael Berger of Bucharest (1855–1919), is considered an important, kosher source. In one volume, Berger printed the story of the Seer of Lublin’s mysterious fall (treated in detail in chapter 3 of this book). Naturally, Berger cited the hasidic version of this event; but he also inserted, in square brackets, the following remarks by one of the Seer’s disciples: “The holy rabbi, our teacher Yehuda Leib of Zaklikov, said that *he*

על עמדם [הה"ק מהרי"ל מזאקליקאז אמר שמי שאינו מאמין כי דבר גדול
 הי' זה. הוא בכלל מתנגד על הלדיקים כן אמר לו ר' יעקב ליב משם שהוא
 שמע מפיו. והמתנגדים התלוללו שנשחכר ונפל ולא רלו לראות סתירתם בראותו
 מקום וזמן] וחפשוהו עד אחר איזהו שעות הלך הרב החסיד מו"ה ליזר מחמעלניק
 חתן הה"ל הפרוש איש מופת רבי לבי הירשלי מסמאשיב. והלך סביב להבית

על עמדם [הה"ק מהרי"ל מזאקליקאז אמר שמי שאינו מאמין כי דבר גדול
 הי' זה. הוא בכלל מתנגד על הלדיקים כן אמר לו ר' יעקב ליב משם שהוא
 שמע מפיו.

וחפשוהו עד אחר איזהו שעות הלך הרב החסיד מו"ה ליזר מחמעלניק
 חתן הה"ל הפרוש איש מופת רבי לבי הירשלי מסמאשיב. והלך סביב להבית
 בריחוק כ' אמות ויותר. ושמע גיחווי איש. שאלו מי אתה. השיבו יעקב ילחק בן

FIG. 1.2. The text of the first edition of *Sefer zekhut yisrael hanikra eser orot* (Piotrkov, 1907), above, and the censored version (Warsaw, 1913), below. Although the retouched lines create the impression of a break between paragraphs, the censor forgot to erase the first square bracket from the original.

who does not believe that this was a great thing is an opponent of the zaddikim. This is what Rabbi Yaakov Leib of that place told him, who heard it from his mouth. *And the mitnagedim joked that he was drunk and fell, and they refused to see that their interpretation contradicts the facts in that time and place*" (*Eser orot*, 91). The italicized sentences provide evidence of another view, one that does not see the fall as "a great thing." Berger, of course, totally rejected this view. Yet someone evidently found this reference to the mitnagedic opinion objectionable, and starting with the next edition, published six years later, these lines were erased from the book.⁵⁴ As seen from the illustrations above, no graphic means were used to hide the erasure's blatant traces, and those responsible did not even notice that the initial square bracket remained in place.

This was not the sole change introduced between the first and subsequent editions of the book. In the section devoted to Yisrael, the Maggid of Kozhenits, the first edition contains a story omitted from the later ones. Because of its rarity, I cite it in full:

While I was in Kalushin for the Sabbath, my cousin, the famed zaddik Rabbi Meir Shalom, of blessed memory, told me that when Motele, the son of the Maggid, may his memory protect us, died, the Maggid said upon his return from the funeral: "In the western lands it is the custom that a marriage agreement is sealed by the man slapping his intended bride so hard that she loses a tooth, and this is the *kinyan*." And these were his very words: "he strikes her until her tooth falls out."⁵⁵

This is, without a doubt, an exceedingly strange tale. According to this story, after his son's funeral, the Maggid of Kozhenits stated that the Jews of the western lands (the Maghreb, especially Morocco) seal a marriage contract by the groom's striking the bride until he knocks out a tooth. But what is significant here is the moral of the tale: for the Maggid, the death of his son was like a divine fist in his face, and this blow constituted a marriage between him and God. But why was this story ripped out? Perhaps because of its oddity, or perhaps due to fear that naive readers might mistakenly think that this practice was real, or perhaps because someone simply denied this story and either decided that it never happened or that it was not consonant with the Maggid's memory. In any event, this story was expunged from all subsequent editions; the page was shortened, and the following section appended to the previous one.

Pasted-over Pages

The six-volume lexicon *Meorei Galicia: Encyclopedia of Galician Rabbis and Scholars*, by Rabbi Meir Wunder, bears witness to an individual's erudition, diligence, and single-minded devotion to a task. However, anyone consulting this important compendium must bear in mind the author's self-imposed restrictions, grounded in his personal religious worldview and sense of his audience's wishes; naturally, he also had to maneuver between conflicting interests and familial and other pressures (including the need to fund such a large project). Consequently, Wunder deliberately avoids any mention of controversial issues or embarrassing incidents. Nor can we expect full, detailed, objective historical descriptions from an author who declares that his book brings Jews closer to Judaism through knowledge of their past, and that it serves as a genealogical source among hasidic courts before finalizing a match for their descendants or hasidim.⁵⁶ In line with Wunder's policy, the long entry on Rabbi Hayyim Halberstam of Sandz, for example, devotes only three lines to the dramatic controversy with Sadigura, and the tragic fate of Bernyu of Leova receives a mere two lines in his entry.⁵⁷ Similarly, the participation of dozens of rabbis in this controversy is simply alluded to in their entries.⁵⁸ In a personal conversation, Rabbi Wunder confirmed the purposeful nature of this avoidance of "the negative" and noted that this principle also dictated his inclusion of the complimentary openings of missives between leading rabbis, but not of the derogatory statements found in the body of the letters.

Naturally, the definition of "negative" is open to interpretation. Despite his stated policy, in one instance Wunder was forced to make postpublication alterations. Volume one of his encyclopedia, which appeared in Jerusalem in 1978, contained a brief entry on Elimelekh Ashkenazi of Horodenka,

a Torah scholar and Chortkov hasid who died in 1916. Based on the data at his disposal, Wunder reported Ashkenazi's participation in the founding convention of the Mizrachi movement in Galicia, which was held in Lemberg, and his election as chair. Afterwards, his fellow townspeople testified that he founded a Mizrachi branch in his hometown. In all fairness, Wunder noted "an emphatic denial by Ashkenazi's grandchildren."

After this volume's publication, these grandchildren, who had evidently become ultra-*haredi*, decided that any association with National Religious Zionism dishonored them and stained their grandfather's memory. They coerced Wunder into printing a new page, which he then pasted in the remaining volumes of the encyclopedia in his possession. This updated page censored the "sensitive" lines, rewriting Ashkenazi's biography not on the basis of new data but in accordance with his descendants' wishes.⁵⁹

Omissions between Editions

Reference was made earlier to the Sandz-Sadigura controversy, sparked by what the hasidim viewed as the zaddik Bernyu of Leova's shameful defecation to the maskilic camp in Chernovtsy in 1869. In its wake, Hayyim Halberstam of Sandz excommunicated all the branches of Sadigura Hasidism and demanded that Bernyu's brothers publicly denounce their sibling's ugly step. He also asked that they abandon their ostentatious customs, viewed by him as heretical and as deviating from Hasidism's original path. Like the Vilna Gaon a century earlier, this leading rabbi of his generation embarked on a merciless, but hopeless, campaign against what he saw as a group that jeopardized the world of traditional Judaism. In this case as well, the violent dispute ended only with the deaths of the protagonists in 1876. And, here too, it turned out after the fact that the leader of the campaign had erred in his assessment of the danger and failed to achieve his aims. This controversy's fascinating story requires more space than is at my disposal here, and I hope to tell it elsewhere. In any event, notwithstanding traces of this ancient hostility, at present these hasidic groups generally live in harmony. As was true for the other crises and incidents mentioned here, few references to Bernyu's fate, the steps taken by the protagonists, or the feud's accompanying conceptual and social polemic appear in hasidic—namely, Sadigura or Sandz—literature.

This is illustrated by *Rabenu hakadosh miTszanz*, a comprehensive, three-volume work published by the late Jerusalem mohel and Sandzer hasid Yosef David Weisberg (the book was ghostwritten by the above-mentioned Meir Wunder). The preface to the first edition (1976) explicitly states the author's intention to ignore the controversy initiated by its protagonist, Hayyim Halberstam of Sandz:

My object in writing the book was to enhance the glory of Heaven and to acclaim the way of Hasidism, particularly that of our saintly rabbi . . . For that reason I have omitted many things that are not likely to teach a proper, ethical way of life, or actions in the conduct of the rabbi that we do not understand, and *therefore the affair of the well-known controversy that broke out in 1869 has been omitted*, although our rabbi was involved in it with all his might and stormy nature. The imprint of that controversy was apparent in the Jewish world for many decades, *but in our own time, the rabbis have made peace among themselves, and the relations between the grandsons of the two dynasties are cordial, while both are engaged in the struggles for the strengthening of Judaism in our generations.*⁴⁰

It is superfluous to point out that this stance contradicts the self-evident axioms of historical study. To quote the historian Jacob Katz: “In principle, no aspect of a person’s life or creativity stands outside the biographer’s sphere of interest.”⁴¹ Weisberg, of course, did not view himself as a critical biographer, nor was historical reconstruction his aim. Guided by educational, not historiographical, goals, Weisberg had no qualms about using patently anti-historical tools to realize his mission.

Some twenty years later, when copies of the first edition were no longer available, its author initiated the publication of a new edition. This edition (Jerusalem, 1997) differed from its predecessor in only one respect: the preface was reset, omitting the above-cited paragraph. Now, even the author’s apologetic and justificatory rationale for self-censorship was seen as problematic and derogatory; therefore it had to go! And why? Lest the curious reader inquire what “well-known controversy” had been omitted and seek information elsewhere, thereby besmirching the honor of the zaddikim.

But this is not the sole example of censorship in the book. The editor’s stringency led him to use a method we have met before: retouching. One chapter mentions a Yiddish biography of Hayyim Halberstam by Yehoshua Rocker (Vienna, 1927). This book naturally covered the controversy with Sadigura in detail, from the pro-Sandzer viewpoint. What was permissible for Rocker, who boasted on the title page that he would cover the biography of Rabbi Hayyim Halberstam “up to the terrible controversy between Sandz and Sadigura,” was not permissible for the hasid Weisberg. The title page of Rocker’s book appeared in Weisberg’s work, but as is clearly visible in the illustration opposite, the “hazardous” words were crudely blocked out.

Similar self-censorship was exercised by Moshe Hanokh Greenfield, a Sandzer hasid who produced an edition of some one hundred of Hayyim Halberstam’s letters. Because of these letters’ importance, not just in illuminating the lives of zaddikim but also as a source of God-fearingness and other salutary qualities, he noted that he had “printed everything I could



FIG. 1.3 (right). The title page of Yehoshua Rucker’s *Der sanzer tsdik* (Vienna, 1927). The original subtitle states that the book treats the biography of Rabbi Hayyim Halberstam “up to the terrible controversy between Sandz and Sadigura.”

FIG. 1.4 (left). In the description of Rucker’s book and the photograph of its title page found in Yosef David Weisberg’s *Rabenu hakadosh miTsan* (Jerusalem, 1976, 1:370), the lines mentioning the controversy between Sandz and Sadigura were erased and retouched.

find.” At the same time, he issued the following caveat regarding “everything”: “Naturally all the letters relating to the well-known controversy so forcefully led by the holy rabbi of Sandz have been deleted. It is not for us to attempt to reach those peaks, and we must not awaken this affair, but should rather let it remain in its place.”⁴²

The Conversion of Antagonists

Finally, I note two novel strategies employed by the various branches of Orthodox historiography to address discomfiting facts. The first follows the belief that a good offense is the best defense. It is thus possible to express partial or even full agreement with the facts and, at the same time, to avoid blame either by supplying a different interpretation of the facts, or by indicting the other party. The second strategy co-opts the antagonist by embracing him and converting him into “one of us.” Here we find an interesting distinction between hasidic and nonhasidic writing. A number of examples follow.

Rabbinic Approbations for Ribal's *Te'udah beyisrael*

Elsewhere I have noted a surprising fact about the zaddik Yisrael of Ruzhin, seemingly inconsistent with our expectations of a hasidic leader. Rabbi Yisrael lent financial support to the publication of the works of the maskil Yitshak Ber Levinsohn (Ribal) of Kremenets (1788–1860), termed “the Russian Mendelssohn” by his admirers and “the devil’s spawn” by his Orthodox detractors. Although the exact nature of their relationship is unknown, Levinsohn was related to the zaddik, as he states. Yisrael of Ruzhin assisted the publication of two of Levinsohn’s works, *Te'udah beyisrael* and *Efes damim*.⁴³ This fact, which discomfited both hasidim and maskilim (other than Levinsohn, who recounted it) was either ignored or hidden and, therefore, no need to explain it ever arose.⁴⁴

But Yisrael of Ruzhin was not the only prominent rabbinic figure to support the publication of *Te'udah beyisrael*. The first edition of this book (Vilna and Grodno, 1828) contained an approbation signed by Rabbi Avraham Abele ben Avraham Shlomo Poswoler, an eminent scholar who headed the Vilna rabbinic court. How could this inescapable but embarrassing fact be explained?

As an outstandingly skilled representative of contemporary “Lithuanian” historiography, Dov Eliach neither ignores nor blurs this fact in his book *HaGaon*, discussed above. Indeed, he confronts it squarely, offering an explanation that both clears Rabbi Abele’s name and, at the same time, places the blame squarely in the maskilic camp. Without solid proof, but based on what he terms “simple logic,” Eliach unhesitatingly makes the approbation’s publication nothing but a fraud forced on the rabbi by fear of the government:

How the maskilim and the scholars that followed them struggled to portray the gaon, Rabbi Avraham Abele . . . as a moderate, with some sympathy for maskilic ideas; after all, he gave an approbation to the book *Te'udah beyisrael* . . . And it turns out, that this Ribal had supporters in the corridors of power, which he employed to accomplish his plot . . . Why then should we be surprised to find the signature of the gaon, Rabbi Abele, one of the outstanding halakhic authorities of his day—which Ribal needed in order to get an official stamp of approval—prominently displayed in the front of the book? The fear of the czarist regime was at work here . . . The story of the “approbation” represents another giant step in the maskilic campaign of impudence and forgery. After all, not only do we find here a distorted description of a given situation, but also that they themselves were responsible for manufacturing the “proof,” namely, “the approbation,” which they then turned around and used to prove their point.⁴⁵

This demonization of the maskilim, which apparently balks neither at distortion nor forgery, serves a dual function: it preserves the honor of an

eminent scholar, a student of the Gaon of Vilna, who ostensibly supported maskilic ideas, and exposes maskilic crimes—namely, their use of unacceptable means to promote their doctrines. But not only is there no evidence that Rabbi Abele granted this approbation unwillingly, this was, moreover, not the only maskilic book for which he wrote an approbation. We have three other approbations, all of which were indisputably published during his lifetime, and whose authenticity was never denied.⁴⁶

Approbations by Lithuanian Rabbis for Shlomo Dubno's *Biur*

Eliach more than successfully confronts several embarrassing facts in his book. Another illustrative example of his technique comes from his interpretation of the attitude of Lithuanian rabbis toward the maskilic *Biur* (a commentary on Moses Mendelssohn's project, the German translation of the Bible), and toward Shlomo Dubno, a distinguished scholar and grammarian, in particular.

Dubno was a member of Mendelssohn's close circle; Mendelssohn credited him with the *Biur* project and with composition of the commentary on Genesis. But in 1781, while engaged in writing the commentary on Exodus, a rupture took place between the two, perhaps against the background of a financial dispute, or perhaps due to Dubno's discomfort among Mendelssohn's disciples; the reason remains unknown.⁴⁷ Dubno left Berlin for Vilna, where he tried to reissue his commentary, replacing the German translation (which was of course unnecessary in Lithuania) with the traditional Rashi commentary and Targum Onkelos. Although this edition was never printed, Dubno did acquire approbations from important rabbis, including Hayyim of Volozhin and his brother, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman (*Zalmele*), who showered praise on both Dubno and his commentary. Shmuel Yosef Fuenn, the Vilna maskil and editor of *Hakarmel*, published some of these approbations as early as 1861.⁴⁸

Eliach, who consistently erases any traces of positive interaction between the Vilna Gaon and his disciples and the Haskalah, or between them and external wisdom,⁴⁹ refused to place credence in this document. According to Eliach, the maskil Fuenn had a vested interest in rewriting history, in order to demonstrate support for the Haskalah by the Gaon and his disciples. Therefore, even though well aware of its existence, in his biography of Hayyim of Volozhin (*Avi hayeshivot*, Jerusalem: Makhon Moreshet Hayeshivot, 1991) Eliach ignores this approbation and omits it from his list of this figure's other *haskamot*.

Recently, however, an autograph copy of these very *haskamot* by Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his brother came to light among the microfilms in the National Library of Israel. Thus, Fuenn was neither a liar nor a forger. In

an article penned with polemic fervor, Yehoshua Mondshine criticized their concealment:

This constitutes yet another example of “a generation that judges its judges.” Instead of following the light of their generation’s outstanding figures, they attempt “to cast” them in their own “light.” *And when they apprehend that he does not walk in their “paved path” they try to “return him to the straight and narrow” and to have him “toe the mark” . . . That is what they did to the Vilna Gaon, when his words were not sweet to their ears . . . and it is their intent to do the same to the greatest of his students . . . and all this is part of a general trend aimed at “rewriting” the history of Lithuanian Jewry . . . primarily of its capital Vilna, which became a center from which Haskalah spread.*⁵⁰

Here Mondshine strongly denounces biased “Lithuanian” writers of Eliach’s ilk, who retouch history to harmonize with the contemporary *haredi* outlook. There is no reason, Mondshine argues, to hide eminent Lithuanian rabbis’ ascertainable affinity for, and favorable attitude toward, Haskalah and maskilim. Whereas, in his opinion, hasidim examined not only a book’s contents but also its writer’s sanctity—and if either was found to be “flawed,” they refused to study it—adherents of the mitnagedic and of the *musar* movements followed the principle of “accept the truth from whosoever states it,” whether maskil or apostate.

Eliach was caught in a trap of his own devising: on the one hand, the maskil Fuenn neither lied nor committed forgery; on the other, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin had indeed granted an approbation to a book penned by a confirmed maskil. How then could he save his rabbi’s reputation? The answer lies in the second method mentioned above: co-option. Anyone who allies Shlomo Dubno with the hated maskil Mendelssohn is mistaken; actually a pure, God- and sin-fearing individual, Dubno abandoned Mendelssohn upon realizing the inherent dangers of the latter’s path. Eliach counterposes Dubno’s *Biur* to Mendelssohn’s translation: “Dubno’s *Biur* is entirely holy, and Mendelssohn’s translation is totally secular.” As a means of separating Dubno from the maskilic coterie of Berlin, prominent rabbis adopted him; hence, the approbations by Lithuanian rabbis for Dubno’s commentary “all testify to the rejection of the Haskalah and of its founding father.”⁵¹

Eliach, now forced to acknowledge the accuracy of the statement by the much-detested Fuenn, could not resist a final attempt to lob his guilt onto his opponent’s side of the court. Having deliberately hidden Rabbi Hayyim’s approbation because it was incompatible with his doctrine, Eliach now accused Fuenn of concealing a different *haskamah* from the same booklet, that of Rabbi Shmuel, who headed the Vilna rabbinical court, because this apparently “contradicted his worldview, and was inconsistent with his orienta-

tion.”⁵² Eliach went even further in a comment aimed at members of his camp: “What a pity that even observant Jews [such as Mondshine] often display complete faith in maskilic works of this type [like Fuenn’s], even when this concerns the honor of the most distinguished Torah scholars, and do not regard them with suspicion . . . This is especially true in the case of Haskalah, which is close to maskilic hearts, about which they produce many lies and half-truths, as noted earlier. This must be distinguished from their use of historical facts, in which they have no vested, personal interest, and which can be considered free of ulterior motives.”⁵³

These remarks distil the main features of Eliach’s historiographical approach: maskilim are always suspect; only in the absence of a personal stake is their testimony reliable, like the neutral testimony of a non-Jew with no vested interest. This, of course, contrasts with Eliach and his coterie, who regard themselves as above suspicion of any personal interest and only have the honor of the distinguished rabbis before their eyes. Paradoxically, this is the very same Eliach who was accused of mocking the leaders of the hasidic movement in his book, of mentioning them “offhandedly and with typical maskilic coolness, and of applying a vulgar interpretation” to their doctrines.⁵⁴

Yitshak Satanow: A Maskil or a God-fearing Jew?

From an outside observer’s perspective, the polemic I am about to discuss, which hinges on a single vowel, is exceedingly strange. But for the scholar of Orthodox historiography, this is an intriguing test case: a fairly recent debate preserved in a series of publications, which not only cuts across traditional camps but also reveals their attitudes toward Haskalah and maskilim.

The polemic’s inception lies with one Hayyim Krauss, who thought that the traditional vocalization of the word **הַגֶּשֶׁם** in the phrase from the daily prayers **הַרְרוּחַ וּמַוְרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם** (who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall) should be pronounced with a *segol* (*e*), rather than a *kamats* (*a*). He collected approbations from important rabbis belonging to both the mitnagedic and hasidic camps and published his innovations in a wide-ranging book titled *Kuntres birkhot hahayyim* (The blessings of life). He proposes that the *kamats* was the innovation of none other than a maskilic figure—the writer, publisher, and grammarian Yitshak Satanow (1732–1804):

The source of the change in the word *hageshem* . . . is the prayer book *Vaye’etar Yitshak* composed by someone named Yitshak Halevi of Satanow. He was a member of the maskilic circle in Berlin and printed his book in that circle’s publishing house, in Berlin, in 1785 . . . These maskilim, as is well known, aimed to change tradition, and in his introduction to the above-mentioned prayer book, Satanow uses abusive

language toward the ancients, who certainly do not deserve such remarks. Nonetheless, I cite several lines from this work . . . Indeed, it is known that “that man” of Satanow was not just a grammarian, and not just a maskil, but somewhat more . . . and this is what appears regarding him in G. Kressel’s *Cyclopedia of Modern Hebrew Literature*.⁵⁵

Here Krauss cites Kressel’s lexicon at length and determines the untrustworthiness of “that man” (a term usually used to refer to Jesus). Krauss goes on to quote Israel Zinberg’s denotation of Satanow as “half a believer and half a heretic.”⁵⁶ Krauss collected concrete and linguistic data to prove his stance, also quoting zaddikim and rabbis who stated that anyone who uses the pronunciation *hagashem* “needs looking into.” An early-twentieth-century halakhic authority, Rabbi Shaul Rosenberg of Hungary, argued that even if the grammarians were correct, we have no desire for their “honey”: “Those that say *hagashem*, it appears that the reason for this is because the grammarians of earlier generations, most of whom leaned toward heresy, raised this matter. Accordingly, we have no desire either for their correction, or for their honey or their sting, and even if it were good, we would not follow their version in any thing.”⁵⁷

Shortly thereafter, a young Bratslav hasid named Sar-Shalom Marzel pounded Krauss into the dust. Armed with an approbation from Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, Marzel published a book titled *Kuntres mashiv haru’ah* (Who causes the wind to blow). In it, he supplies proofs to justify “our holy custom, the custom of our fathers and the great rabbis of former generations” to place a *kamats* under the *gimel*, and to say *hagashem*.

My concern here is not with the details of the polemic itself but with Satanow’s status as an authoritative source. Marzel takes issue with the claim that Satanow was a maskil. Indeed, according to Marzel, Satanow was a righteous, kosher Jew. Unaware that Kressel and Zinberg were twentieth-century scholars, Marzel innocently thought them to be nineteenth-century maskilim. In the heat of his debate, Marzel takes them to task for libelously attributing “Enlightenment” to Satanow in order to blacken his name among the God-fearing:

Especially when palpable hatred emerges from between the lines of the above-mentioned lexicon . . . and it is the person who testifies to these facts [Kressel], who must be judged. And the reason for what is found in the (external) works condemning the author of *Vaye’etar Yitshak* to death, this is because of his loyalty to God and his Torah, which aroused these demons’ anger; they therefore wrote lampoons in order to create dispute and confusion . . . so that his remarks would not be accepted by the public . . . And I *wonder greatly*, how that author had the gall to rely on something written by some writer named G. Kressel (whose identity and reputation we neither

know, and perhaps need not know), who barely reaches the ankles of the *wondrous Torah scholar, Rabbi Yitshak of Satanow*, and to thereby grind his honor in the dust.⁵⁸

The “rain” debate lived on in the form of many additional and witty tracts, whose discussions slid to additional matters (such as the nature of the grammarian Wolf Heidenheim).⁵⁹ This brief presentation suffices to show how even such a prominent maskil as Yitshak Satanow—publisher, obsessed writer, talented forger of ancient texts and rabbinical approbations, a man of indisputable maskilic leanings—could be co-opted and transformed into a religious authority, duly “converted” and drafted in favor of one or the other side in a controversy.⁶⁰

“I Too Am Not Objective”: History as It Should Have Been

The already mentioned strategies of memory and repression are by no means the only ones available; moreover, these and additional strategies rarely function in isolation but are rather mutually supportive and intertwined. I conclude this discussion of *haredi* historical writing with a unique, frank confession of the prejudicial, one-sided nature of historiographical writing in general, which accuses other authors—whether Lithuanian mitnagedim or critical historians—not only of engaging in similar tactics but also of reluctance to admit this. Yehoshua Mondshine, a Habad hasid, bibliographer, and outstanding scholar of the hasidic world, blames researchers—rightfully so, to a large extent—for directing their demand for objectivity only at hasidic sources. These sources are “prime suspects,” he complains, immediately rejected, ostensibly because of their partiality and loyalty to their rabbis and their own camps, whereas the maskilim and mitnagedim, who have their own “zaddikim,” are generally awarded uncritical acceptance. The writings of the mitnagedim—as Mondshine amply demonstrates—are definitively biased, and when necessary, their authors deliberately forge sources and distort documents. Mondshine’s essay concludes with an instructive personal confession: “Like many of my predecessors I too am not objective; unlike them, however, I admit to this fault. Of my readers I make the following request: will *you* please try to be objective!”⁶¹

The historian Immanuel Etkes responded to this appeal: “In point of fact, the critical scholar is also liable to err. The naive view that it is possible to deal with history with complete objectivity has long since faded away. However, there is a great difference between a scholar committed to discovery of the truth and to striving for it—aware of his or her limitations and of the relative character of historical research—and a scholar bound by reli-

gious or ideological commitment who declares that no research can be objective.”⁶²

Naturally, the *haredi* camp contains talented researchers of the past, endowed with both extensive knowledge and common sense. But when their wanderings in the paths of history bring them to dark alleyways, to critical points where facts may conflict with their worldview, or cause distress and dismay, they find themselves caught in a thicket of contradictions: to what extent should they seek, and reveal, the truth?⁶³

Indeed, notwithstanding its obvious nature, we cannot overlook the absence of one strategy in particular: recognition of historical truth as it was, and as reflected in the extant sources. But recognition of the truth carries innate dangers. The truth imposes itself on its discoverers, forcing them into direct confrontation with its outcomes, even if this means full or partial admission of failure. Direct, open statements of the following type—indeed, such and such an episode took place and yes, it is embarrassing and unpleasant, but let us see what can be learned from it—are largely absent from Orthodox historiography.

The mechanisms shaping and preserving historical memory among groups with a religious, ideological, political, or educational agenda (including Hasidism) do not always take an interest in history as it was but rather in a form that can be called history as it should have been. Memory is a prime educational tool, and any unauthorized interpretation can shake the foundations of an ideological world in need of nurture and protection from its enemies.⁶⁴ To this end, “special agents” are empowered to supervise and shape historical memory—to highlight or suppress some of its parts, to study it intensely or blur its traces, to censor it ruthlessly or “convert” it—in order to continuously market an unswerving picture of a pure, harmonious past. These mechanisms are not always overt; after all, this is not some dark, organized conspiracy imposed from above. Although at times governed by self-aware sophisticated mechanisms, as demonstrated above by examples from Orthodox historiography, by and large the past is shaped in a spontaneous, naive manner of which even its memory agents are unaware. But whether sophisticated or simplistic, coarse or refined, all of these mechanisms have a shared basis: the recognition that the past and how it is remembered have the power to shape both present and future.