

AJS Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/AJS>



Additional services for **AJS Review**:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



Assaf. Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010. Paperback. 336 pp.

Benjamin Brown

AJS Review / Volume 36 / Issue 02 / November 2012, pp 352 - 354

DOI: 10.1017/S0364009412000268, Published online:

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0364009412000268

How to cite this article:

Benjamin Brown (2012). AJS Review, 36, pp 352-354 doi:10.1017/S0364009412000268

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

David Assaf. *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010. Paperback. 336 pp. doi:10.1017/S0364009412000268

Early in 1910, a young Hasid, the son of a Hasidic rebbe, wrote a rather unusual letter to Yaakov Dineson, considered at the time one of the veterans of modern Yiddish literature. The young man, Yizhak Naḥum Twersky, son of the Rebbe of Shpikov, penned the letter on the eve of his wedding to Batsheva, daughter of Issachar Dov Roke'ah, the Rebbe of Belz. The letter is a unique and extremely poignant document. Twersky presents himself as a tormented, almost desperate young man, who feels he is not in control of his destiny. He yearns for the wider world, for what he believes are the realms of knowledge and beauty, though he must live trapped in a "tiny and ugly" Hasidic world. He is about to be married to the daughter of the Belzer Rebbe, a girl he has never met. Moreover, among Hasidic rebbes her father is one of the most conservative and detached from the modern world in all eastern European Jewry. The Belzer Rebbe's court was known for its meticulous practice of esoteric customs; their conservatism led them to shun even the use of electricity. Twersky was destined to be a rebbe like his father and lead a Hasidic court of the type he found so detestable. He imagined himself as one whose life would be over before it had even begun, but who could not escape his lot for fear of aggravating his mother.

The chapter devoted to this rare document is, in my opinion, the high point of David Assaf's book *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, the English translation of the original Hebrew *Ne'eḥaz ba-sevakh: pirkei mashber u-mevukhah be-toldot ha-Ḥasidut* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2006). Assaf offers the reader the full text, a dramatic and emotional narrative. He also relates what befell its author: Yizhak Naḥum did indeed marry Batsheva and settle in Belz, and the marriage appears to have been a success. He did assume the position of rebbe; however, after the upheavals of World War I he did not return to it, but rather served as communal rabbi in the Galician town of Rawa Ruska. Early in 1942 he was murdered along with his family, apparently in the Belzec concentration camp.

The chapter on this figure is the last of the book's six chapters, each of which Assaf devotes to the story of a Hasidic figure living in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Assaf has won for himself a place as the pioneer historian of later Hasidism. In contrast to most historians before him who focused on the more "interesting" Hasidism of the first generations (up to circa 1815), paying little, if any, attention, and then only sporadically, to the later generations, Assaf sees the Hasidism of this later period as historically important and worthy of attention. This virgin territory was ripe for new findings. His first book, *The Regal Way* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), a critical study of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin and his time, was the first academic biography of a nineteenth-century tzaddik. His most recent book, *Heziz ve-nifga'* (Beguiled by Knowledge: An Anatomy of a Hasidic Controversy) (Haifa: University of Haifa Press and Yedioth

Aharonoth Books, 2012), is a kind of sequel to the first, and relates one of the most turbulent chapters in the history of Hasidism, one that embroiled Israel of Ruzhin's descendants. Between books, Assaf has published numerous articles about individual personalities and groups in Hasidic history. Although the book at hand brings together some of these varied studies, it constitutes a cohesive and integrated work. Assaf's mastery of Hasidic history makes this book an important scholarly work, and his fluid writing makes reading it an enjoyable literary experience.

The subtitle of the English version, *Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, hints at a common theme at the core of the book. Many of us are familiar with Hasidic stories, some of which were gathered together by Martin Buber in his classic *Tales of the Hasidim* (the title of Assaf's book undoubtedly converses with Buber's). At the center of Buber's stories stand the tzaddikim, who are without exception portrayed as exalted individuals who express sanctity and piety in everything they do. Assaf chooses to present the reader with other stories, stories that reflect embarrassing, sometimes even shocking moments in the movement's history: the story of the conversion and mental illness of Moshe, son of the founder of Habad Hasidism, as revealed through documents from the Russian archives; the story of the tragic fall (or suicide?) of the Seer of Lublin; the unexplained persecution of Bratslav Hasidim in the Ukraine; the antihasidic background of Rabbi Akiva Shalom Chajes, who became the hasidic rabbi of the town of Dubova; the outlook of Rabbi Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itskan, who leaned toward enlightenment and Zionism (serious faults among Hasidim!); and the heartrending confession of Rabbi Twersky of Shpikov with which this review opened. Assaf does not hide the pleasure he takes in his role as detective, but he hints that he has an educational, perhaps even ideological purpose: to set before those interested in Hasidim the "lies their teachers told them" (1). Assaf does not, however, mean to deny that great achievements emerged from Hasidism, or that impressive personalities have come from its ranks. Indeed, he makes the point that the personalities he discusses in the book reflect mainly the "anomalous, strange, and aberrant" (xix). Like any movement, Hasidism was multifaceted and contained a variety of human types.

Why did Assaf decide to look at the darker side of Hasidism? He gives us his answer in the book's illuminating introduction: Historiography, he claims, is a "battlefield," in which the author is charged with the task of shaping the consciousness of the reader. The Hasidim who wrote the history of their movement have until now portrayed a very skewed version of it, by concealing, censoring, and sometimes even distorting the facts—all for the purpose of presenting only spiritual achievements and personalities of stature—so that today almost all the movement's other sides have disappeared. In order to know the authentic and entire story of Hasidism, both sides of the story must be told. Now is the time to tell the story of the other side (1, 4–5).

What image of Hasidism emerges from this book? As I have already noted, many "old school" scholars of the movement thought that only the first generations possessed vitality and creativity while the later generations were marked by "decadence" and "degeneracy." Given this, they assumed that early Hasidism

Book Reviews

was far more interesting than later Hasidism. Interestingly, not only scholars but also Rabbi Yitshak Nahum Twersky shared these sentiments (see, for example, pp. 222–23 and Assaf’s analysis, 214). Assaf clearly disagrees that later Hasidism is not interesting; indeed, he has devoted his career to demonstrating that it is. Neither is he in consent with the “decadence thesis.” In the introduction to his earlier book, *The Regal Way*, he explicitly expressed his reservations about the evaluation of later Hasidism as “decadent.” Alongside decline and conservatism, he contended, late Hasidism possessed spiritual and social processes of renewal and promise. In this book, however, the reader is left to decide. On the one hand, most of the book deals with personalities and episodes that strengthen the “degeneracy” theory. On the other hand, the book seems to discourage all generalizations; thus, for example, the embarrassing affair of the death of the Seer of Lublin, who was actually a central figure of *early* Hasidism; and thus, conversely, the role in later Hasidism of three of the most impressive figures in the book—Rabbi Akiva Shalom Chajes of Tul’chyn, Rabbi Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itscan-Stefanest, and Rabbi Yitshak Nahum Twersky of Shpikov. It is true that these men’s impressive personalities are set against the rather unimpressive landscape of their environment, and that their fresh way of thinking stemmed less from internal Hasidic creativity and more from their exposure to non-Hasidic and even anti-Hasidic spheres. The reader finds it difficult to decide whether later Hasidism is “degenerate” or not. This indeterminacy is part of the book’s central theme: Hasidism possessed features common to many religious movements (or, for that matter, human groups). I venture to guess that if Assaf had dealt with early Hasidism as his subject, he would have uncovered its multifaceted character, one that included “crisis and discontent.”

If up until now research on Hasidism has centered almost exclusively on the movement’s leaders, the tzaddikim, Assaf’s book attempts to broaden the circle: first, to the families of the tzaddikim; and second, to the “rank and file” Hasidim, or at least to those who stood out. Some of the great figures are diminished in Assaf’s treatment, while some of the sidelined and forgotten figures are given new life and complexity. Altogether, this book is a fine piece of scholarship (and literature), an evocative work that invites the reader to rethink received wisdom.

Benjamin Brown
Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Jerusalem, Israel



Nathaniel Deutsch. *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011. 384 pp., map.
doi:10.1017/S036400941200027X

What happens when a woman in a Hasidic shtetl to the west of Kiev, on the eve of World War I, becomes pregnant? If she sleeps a lot, will she have a girl? If