

The Battlefields of Hasidic History

Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism

BY DAVID ASSAF
Brandeis, 364 pages

Reviewed by GIL STUDENT

THOUGH much of contemporary popular culture seems to have been drained of even the slightest remnant of modesty or restraint, there are still some sectors where respect for the memories of the deceased and the privacy of the living, and concern for the ideological underpinnings of society, serve as powerful deterrents to candid tell-all histories. The Hasidic movement is one such culture. Though its history is as replete with complex personalities as any, it has been told for the most part through tales about its leaders that leave little room for questions about faith or personal rectitude.

David Assaf, in *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, digs deep into a pile of scandals from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The book's title promises tantalizing details that will

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remove the veil of righteousness from the pious. But this is no mere scandal sheet about a religious group that has jealously guarded nasty secrets from public scrutiny. It is a demanding exercise of historical study that exhaustively analyzes all the evidence surrounding some controversial episodes in an attempt to arrive at a balanced, if belated, truth.

Hasidism is a rigorous sect, demanding fealty to a tight regimen of beliefs and practices. Any sizable community with such tight constraints will inevitably lose frustrated members. Assaf documents some startling losses among its royalty, the families of its rebbes. His longest and most provocative chapter is about the reported conversion to Christianity of the son of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1812), the founder of Chabad Hasidism. Moshe's royal apostasy was an embarrassment for Hasidim and a propaganda tool for their opponents. Assaf traces the rumors and reports about the incident that have been surfacing for more than a century, carefully attempting to locate sources and noting where political agendas have influenced the account. Finally, utilizing Russian archival material that has appeared within the past decade, he concludes that the converted son was mentally ill, unsuccessfully treated by doctors across the

Continent, initially rejected by the church because of his sickness, and finally accepted for conversion as a political pawn.

He writes also of Menahem Nahum Friedman of Itskan, a rebbe who was philosophically current and utilized broad secular knowledge in remarkable treatises that have largely been erased from Hasidic memory. Another rebbe, Yitzhak Nahum Twersky of Shpikow, complained bitterly in writing in his youth about the stifling nature of Hasidic life. Dov Ber Friedman of Leova, son of Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzhin, went over to the secular camp and then returned in shame to a life of solitude among the Hasidim.


Looking at these incidents as a whole, we see a portrait of Eastern European Jewry struggling with the many forces competing for the allegiances of Jewish minds and souls. The destabilizing intellectual and cultural winds that swept through the shtetl, even blowing through yeshiva study halls, did not bypass the Hasidic courts. There is nothing surprising about any of this, especially considering that the Hasidic world was able to largely hold its own in this era.

Still, while any movement might be shaken by defections, they were an even greater threat to Hasidim because of the nature of one of its essential traditions: stories that teach lessons of faith. The Hasidic story is a devotional tool, not a history tutorial. It serves to inspire the masses and instill proper Hasidic beliefs. Historical accuracy is, at best, a mere afterthought. The distinction between devotional story and historical lesson, between true story and something that might be based on a true story, is often lost. Because the dismissal of some Hasidic stories might put at risk their entire pedagogical enterprise, Hasidim have always found it necessary to deflect

such potentially devastating blows.

Assaf shows that the Hasidim did have something to worry about, since their 19th-century opponents, the traditionalist Mitnagdim and the secularizing Maskilim, were intent on discrediting their tales of holiness. Assaf looks at the mysterious death of Rabbi Yaakov Yitshak Horowitz, known as the Seer of Lubin. Hasidim claim that his fatal fall from a window in his home was a failed attempt to bring the messiah; others contend it was a drunken mishap while vomiting or relieving himself out the window. (Assaf, rather irresponsibly, speculates that it was a suicide.) Through Assaf's deconstruction of the frequently distorted Maskilic reports and exaggerated Hasidic hagiography, we see how history has been used as a weapon to delegitimize a religious movement.

The underhanded tactics of their opponents set Hasidim free, they believed, to reject inconvenient truths. After all, why should Hasidim alter what they consider to be their unsullied narratives of history based on an evidence pool that the Maskilim tainted with lies? Indeed, Assaf notes that many Chabad devotees responded to the original edition of his book, published in Hebrew in 2006, by claiming that the records of the conversion of Shneur Zalman's son Moshe, retrieved from anti-Semitic sources, had been forged or signed under duress. This is weak deflection, driven not by a desire for factual accuracy but by an instinct for self-preservation.

History has rightly relegated the scandals Assaf analyzes to footnotes, notable exceptions on the margins of the Hasidic narrative. In *Untold Tales of the Hasidim*, Assaf corrects those footnotes and provides a lesson in the danger of historians with social or political agendas. 

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