



David Assaf. *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism.* Translated by Dena Ordan. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010. xxiii + 336 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-861-0.

Reviewed by Marcin Wodzinski (University of Wrocław)

Published on H-Judaic (November, 2011)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

Scandalous Episodes in the History of Hasidism

David Assaf ranks among the best-known scholars of nineteenth-century East European Jewish history and is recognized as one of the most important historians of Hasidism. His numerous publications have contributed to the canonical body of contemporary literature on the issue; some have set the discipline's developmental trajectory. His biography of Israel of Ruzhin (Różyn), one of the most famous nineteenth-century *tsadikim*, *The Regal Way* (Hebrew, 1997; English 2002), was among the first monographs to extend the scholarly exploration of Hasidism beyond the caesura of 1815, i.e., the date canonized by Simon Dubnow as the limit of the movement's creative existence. Similarly, the bibliographies prepared by Assaf on the Bratslav and Polish Hasidism introduced the basic-research source material necessary for the advanced study of Hasidism.

Assaf's *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism* is an English translation of a work that in its Hebrew original (2006) proved, once again, to be an important publication broadening our understanding of the movement in question. At the same time, this volume appeared scandalous in Jewish ultra-Orthodox milieus. This was expressed by, *inter alia*, thousands of posts appearing in Web forums, which discussed almost every single aspect presented in the book (Assaf was proud to have identified as many as 62,000 entries in one such forum alone). That the book was a great success and, simultaneously, a great scandal is not particularly surprising: such was actually the intent behind writing it and is the result of the very subject matter it tackled. The author's idea was namely to investigate the "crisis and discontent," that is, the moments in the Hasidic movement that Hasidim themselves already considered controversial, if not scan-

dalous, which they had either hidden away or white-washed with reinterpretations. Thus, Assaf may be said to have dealt now with the best-tested script to ensure his publication's commercial success.

However, Assaf's was not only inspired by the mere curiosity of what might have been slyly hidden and passed over in silence. The underlying stimulus was as much a deliberate methodological decision to integrate the atypical, the marginal, and the controversial into a more general historical narrative in order to learn more about the typical and uncontroversial. Further, these stories have much to teach about the ways in which the collective memory of a community narrates, processes, or suppresses such troublesome episodes so that the community's collective identity can be established and reinforced. As the author explains in the introduction, "[t]his 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" (p. xx). Even more strongly than he did in his earlier publications, Assaf introduces a methodological consideration of the relation between the sources used in writing various historical works on Hasidism and the image of Hasidism that resultantly emerges. His book proves that these images can significantly vary from one another depending on what is being read and how. Hence, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim* is a worthwhile attempt to introduce novel sources, be they unknown or concealed, which have traditionally been subject to censorship. Primarily, however, the book analyzes how this may imply an altered image of Hasidism.

Assaf's intention for the project is explained in detail in chapter 1, the book's most theoretical part and a sort of extensive introduction to the remaining

chapters. Assaf analyzes the ways in which Hasidic communities refer to difficult moments in their past, while also theorizing on the methods used by the contemporary Hasidic community in tackling similar difficulties. Assaf enumerates the strategies of concealment: making vague references, denial, and offering alternative narrations “correcting” known historical facts. He also analyzes the anatomy of deliberate misinformation campaigns, the function of new electronic media, censorship, bans, and the physical destruction and burning of interdicted books. He uses a series of fascinating examples to illustrate self-censorship methods, cases of omitting troublesome fragments in subsequent editions, and instances of controversial texts being replaced by their “amended” versions in a number of present-day and earlier publications.

By analyzing the controversy around the inheritance of leadership in one Hasidic group (Toldot Aharon) as an example of the conflict between “honor” and “truth” with which Hasidic narrators of this particular, and any similar, event are bound to struggle, Assaf shows how apparently scholarly methods of description and argumentation (publishing facsimile copies of documents, graphologists’ declarations, and the like) are used to defend specific interests rather than for the search for the truth. In so doing, Assaf opens a clear window for understanding the remaining chapters of the book in which six episodes bothersome to the Hasidic memory are analyzed. Assaf carefully and meticulously (sometimes perhaps obsessively) reconstructs the history and evolution of the narrative record(s) of these events.

In a certain sense, the book is quite postmodern as it focuses as much on the historical past as on the ways of remembering it. Of special interest to me personally are the sections where, alongside the thicket of narrative strategies and historiographic interpretations, the author reaches for the historic realities of Hasidic life and shares with the reader his observations concerning the social history of the Hasidic community in nineteenth century. Yet, I do comprehend and appreciate this postmodern fascination with the story of a tale, especially since at times it provides important insight.

Chapter 2, one of the book’s genuine pearls, gathers and analyzes the available information concerning the conversion of Moshe, the eldest son of Shneur Zalman of Liadi who was the founder of one of the mightiest Hasidic dynasties known as Habad. Assaf has managed, among other things, to access Moshe’s

medical documentation which unambiguously establishes his mental health problems. Juxtaposed with a very detailed analysis of other (mainly, Maskilic) testimonies, this chapter makes quite essential and highly plausible factual corrections about the life and conversion of Moshe of Liadi. This chapter also treats the ways in which memory of Moshe and his conversion was conveyed, shaped, and used in the Maskilic tradition, in Christian missionary milieus, the writings of Jewish historians and, lastly, in the Habad tradition.

The third chapter is devoted to a well-known episode in the history of Polish Hasidism: the fatal accident of the *tsadik* Yaakov Yitzhak Horowitz (1754?-1815), known as the Seer of Lublin, who fell from a window and died some nine months later. Again Assaf diligently gathered the testimonies of Hasidim, Mitnagdim, and Maskilim concerning the incident, reconstructing in this way the history of this story and its variations, finally offering a new hypothesis as to what really occurred in Yaakov Yitzhak’s Lublin chamber on Simchat Torah night 1814 (5575). The newly provided sources are not nearly as significant as Moshe of Liadi’s medical records. Nonetheless, Assaf manages to formulate an intriguing hypothesis which differs dramatically from the Hasidic legend of Satan preventing Yaakov Yitzhak from bringing the messiah unto the world, as well as from the Maskilic version which suggests that inebriation led the Seer to a fall through the window while urinating. Assaf’s thesis is that the fatal fall was a deliberate suicide attempt (and not the first in the rabbi’s life). However, the chapter concludes with a caveat: “it is highly unlikely that the actual circumstances of the Seer’s fall will ever come to light, nor is it important that they do so” (p. 119). This is due to the author’s concern for discovering “the convoluted paths of memory building, which are not always guided by the truth as it was.” I am not quite sure whether this statement ought to be accepted as a creed or an act of surrender for, as I have already said, the finest and most appreciable passages of this book are those where the author has managed to get closer to “the truth as it was.”

Such is the fourth chapter which focuses on the persecutions suffered by followers of the *tsadik* Nachman of Bratslav. This section of the book differs from the previous ones in two aspects. First, as opposed to any other chapter, it focuses on a collective agent. Second, more than a story of the development and use of a tale, it deals with the conflict’s social realities and

with social issues beyond its immediate sphere. Assaf thereby reveals his strength as a social historian, not only presenting a story about three consecutive waves of persecution exercised against the Bratslav Hasidim by other Hasidic groups, but primarily, penetratingly analyzing the functioning of this group, its relations with the other groups, the mechanisms of expansion of Hasidic courts in the nineteenth-century Ukraine, and the structure of power and internal Hasidic geography of influences and effects. This absolutely fascinating story expands our understanding of how Hasidic courts and communities actually functioned in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 5 studies Akiva Chajes of Tulchyn. Once a fervent Misnaged, this controversial figure became a leader of the Hasidic community in a small Ukrainian town. This section is devoted to reconstructing various versions of the memory of this individual: that which can be gleaned from works he authored, the recollections of several memoirists (including Micha Josef Berdyczewski), and Hasidic versions of Chajes's history. In this sense, chapter 5 resumes the book's prevalent formula, i.e., reconstructed memory of individuals (not infrequently marginal) and episodes in the history of nineteenth-century Hasidism.

The following two sections, devoted respectively to Menahem Nahum of Itskan (chapter 6) and Yitzhak Nahum Twersky of Shpikow (chapter 7), are linked through their shared crucial topic: individuals who struggle with the social roles imposed upon Hasidic leaders and the conflict between the anti-modernization ethos of the Hasidic community and the challenges of the modern world. Thus, both chapters introduce the theme of crisis in the Hasidic world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, its struggle with modernity, and a deepening sense of loss, which also affected the Hasidic leaders. Both figures are absolutely marginal and the story of their vicissitudes is not particularly attention-grabbing. Nonetheless, Assaf makes quite a successful attempt at explaining a key historic phenomenon through dealing with marginal individuals.

The book's methodological assumption is thus positively validated.

To sum up, this book is a successful combination of academic analysis in the domain of history and a readable piece of writing. It is also of significant importance. It helps us understand what was typical of nineteenth-century Hasidism, through analyzing what was atypical and marginal. It is also an important correction to the too-rosy picture of Hasidism shaped by the tradition dating back to Martin Buber and the nostalgic publications from the circle of neo-Hasidism. The Hasidic community was stricken with internal conflicts and was not internally homogenous. The biographical episodes from the life of Moshe of Liadi, the Seer of Lublin, Akiva Chajes of Tulchyn, Menahem Nahum of Itskan, and Yitzhak Nahum Twersky of Shpikow, as well as the history of persecution of the Bratslav Hasidim, serve as excellent examples here. At the same time, however, this book ought to be read in the context of a broader knowledge of Hasidism, so that the ugly face of Hasidic conflicts and meanness of the Hasidic world do not obscure the remainder of the picture. Read in this way, David Assaf's monograph reveals a Hasidism that is much closer to what we intuitively know, after all, of any social community: that this community was not uniform; that it was torn by internal conflicts; that apart from elevated purposes, small-minded goals also appeared within it; that Hasidim were reluctant, as they still are today, to share the knowledge of embarrassing moments of their lives and their past. Assaf has found the way to share with us the knowledge of those moments and to make it both interest-sparking and enlightening.

And for those who have been attracted by these stories of controversial moments in the history of Hasidism, I have good news: Professor Assaf is about to release his monograph on Dov Ber of Leova's desertion and the conflict between the Hasidim of Sadigora and Sanz (NowySącz), perhaps the greatest Hasidic scandal ever.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Marcin Wodzinski. Review of Assaf, David, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31067>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.