

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 Bratslavavers. 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 רצו לראות סתירתם בזה
 מקום וזמן] וחפשוהו עד אחר איזהו שעות הלך הרב החסיד מו"ה ליזר מחמעליק
 חתן הה"ל הפרוש איש מופת רבי לבי הירשלי מסמאשיב. והלך סביב להבית

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 שמע מפיו.

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

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.