

THE RENAISSANCE OF HASSIDISM

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(*Review Article*)

JACQUES GUTWIRTH, *The Rebirth of Hasidism: 1945 to the Present Day* (translated from the French by Sophie Leighton), vii + 198 pp., Free Association Books, London, 2005, £19.95 or \$35.00, paperback.

JACQUES Gutwirth is a veteran ethnographer whose anthropological research on hassidic Jewry is extensive. We first met in the early 1970s when he came to Montreal to study the city's hassidim. I was then in the midst of my Master's research on some of the sects in that city and was still comparatively naïve about collecting data which would help to generate what C. Geertz identified as 'thick description'.¹ Gutwirth understood that approach only too well: it was hard not to be impressed by his ability to produce detailed observations after a visit to a hassidic establishment or neighbourhood.

The Rebirth of Hasidism documents what is indubitably an unexpected and remarkable success: the regeneration of Hassidism after the Second World War. Hassidic communities had been very nearly destroyed by the Nazi genocide in Europe: only some 20,000 of their members had survived by 1945. Today, there are between 350,000 and 400,000, with about half that total living in Israel. Gutwirth gives a vivid portrait of their major centres — in Antwerp, New York, and Paris as well as in Jerusalem and Bene Beraq(*sic*). He stresses that while apparently uniform to the untrained eye, hassidim are divided into distinct sects of dynasties, each owing allegiance to a charismatic leader, a *rebbe*. He focuses on such matters as the social and political contexts of the various communities, the range of institutional supports available to the followers, the activities of the *rebbe*, gender relations, and various social control measures to limit contact with the secular world. The result is a rich overview of hassidic life today. Perhaps paradoxically, the hassidic success has strained the economic and

social resources which are necessary to sustain their growth. The long-term consequences flowing from this development will impact negatively on their social cohesion: they will be increasingly required to move beyond their own institutions for support — thereby weakening the boundaries which insulate their enclaves.

After an outline of the history and development of Hassidism, the author proceeds to examine the various centres of the movement. He starts with Antwerp, the Belgian city where he conducted his doctoral research, which resulted in his outstanding *Vie juive traditionnelle: ethnologie d'une communauté hassidique*.² During the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, Jewish survivors of the death camps and other displaced Jews from Poland, Hungary, and Rumania found temporary refuge in Belgium. Gutwirth estimates that there are now no less than 950 hassidic households in Antwerp, with a total of between 4,750 and 5,700 individual members. They account for at least one quarter of Antwerp's Jewry. The chapter on that city serves as a blueprint for the others: a complete understanding of the hassidic lifestyle must necessarily examine interactions with Jewish and Gentile neighbours as well as involvement in the local (and even sometimes in the national) political life.

In the following chapters, Gutwirth concentrates on three Brooklyn areas in New York state which are home to hassidic dynasties: Williamsburg, Boro Park, and Crown Heights. Williamsburg is the bastion of the Satmar sect: some 40,000 hassidim live there (p. 28) including half of all American Satmar hassidim. That Satmar total has been estimated to number 5,000 to 6,000 households in the United States and Gutwirth notes that there is an average of six persons per household — two adults and four children. The three regions of New York state where they reside are home to some 30,000 to 36,000 individual followers of Satmar — who have experienced a dramatic expansion since the end of the Second World War. He draws particular attention to their anti-Zionist ideology. They are active in the kasher industry and the provision of religious equipment — working as ritual slaughterers, supervisors to oversee the preparation and production of food, and scribes for the Hebrew inscription on parchments for Torah scrolls and phylacteries — but they are also employed in secular occupations: photographic equipment, bookbinding and printing, photography, electronic sales and computer programming. An increasing number of men and women work outside the boundaries of their enclaves and are therefore not subject to all the social-control measures which regulate the Satmar who remain within.

In the early 1970s, the Satmar established the Kiryas Yoel community in a rural area some 80 kilometres from New York city. The expansion of the sect in Williamsburg necessitated the provision of another settlement to house the overflow and it was decided to found

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a satellite settlement in an environment removed from the distractions of urban life. The first name of the recently-deceased *rebbe* at the time was Yoel and the new enclave was called KiryasYoel in his honour. In recent years it numbered 1,322 households totalling about 7,500 residents. The leaders of this autonomous township have had to engage in political negotiations in order to ensure that the Satmar residents remain tightly insulated from secular influences but might also secure various advantages.

A significant number of hassidim settled in Boro Park in the 1960s: by the twenty-first century, there were about 60,000 of them, with the Bobover sect constituting some 10,000 to 12,000 or 15 to 20 per cent. While Williamsburg is dominated by one sect, that of the Satmar, Boro Park is home to about 20 hassidic dynasties who are mainly of Polish origin. Financial difficulties in housing and in catering for a rapidly-expanding population have obliged the leaders of these various communities in Boro Park to establish jointly the Council of Jewish Organizations in Boro Park (COJO) to promote economic development. That has resulted in the emergence of a number of local entrepreneurs to whom local and state politicians increasingly turn for electoral support.

Crown Heights in Brooklyn is inhabited mainly by one sect: the Lubavitcher hassidim, who number 12,000 to 16,000 residents. It is the headquarters of the Lubavitch movement which is also known by the acronym of Habad — *hokhma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding) and *da'at* (knowledge). Its famous *rebbe* (who died in 1994 and has not been replaced by an acknowledged new *rebbe*) for several decades was Menachem Mendel Schneerson. He had acquired (in addition to his yeshiva studies) secular knowledge: he had been a student at the University of Berlin (where he studied philosophy, mathematics, and physics) and in Paris he was enrolled at the higher institute of civil engineering (p. 65). This highly unusual accomplishment for a leader of a powerful hassidic movement had led to his influence on unobservant Jews who were persuaded to sponsor the Lubavitcher. Hassidim generally refrain from close contact with secular Jews but the Lubavitch seek them out and proselytize; Gutwirth documents their innovative measures — such as radio and television programmes, video cassettes, billboard advertising, and the development of sophisticated websites. He comments that while ‘the other Hasidic leaders have misgivings about radio and are opposed to the use of television and the internet because of all the “obscurities” that these media transmit, the *rebbe*, probably influenced by his technical knowledge and his interest in technology, did not hesitate to use it for “positive” ends’ (p. 69). The chapter also describes the active rôle of the Lubavitch in local and in Israeli politics — as well as their dramatic (but controversial) media blitz in the late 1980s asserting that their charismatic leader, Rabbi

Schneerson, was the Moshiach (the Messiah). In the event, the *rebbe* had a stroke which left him speechless for more than a year and he died in 1994 in a New York hospital.

There are two chapters on hassidim in Israel; the majority live in Jerusalem and in Bene Beraq. In Jerusalem, they are concentrated in Mea Shearim, an area packed with synagogues and *shteebleh* (plural of *shteebl*, typically a one-room prayer hall), as well as ritual baths, religious schools and yeshivot interspersed with numerous shops for food, religious articles, clothing, and religious literature. Mea Shearim is home to the 'trendy' Bratzlaver hassidim and has pockets of Belzer, Gerer, and Satmarer; it is also the seat of Toldot Aron, a group commonly labelled as the most extremist hassidic element owing to its strident opposition to the Jewish State in Israel. Finally, in that chapter, the author examines the institutional expansion of the Belz and Ger communities and their involvement in Israeli politics.

The next chapter deals with Bene Beraq, which has 145,000 inhabitants; some 85 per cent of the residents are ultra-Orthodox — unlike the case in Jerusalem, where the ultra-Orthodox constitute only a minority of the Jewish population. Not all the Bene Beraq ultra-Orthodox are members of hassidic sects, but the multitude of synagogues and yeshivot there are a magnet for both hassidim and *mitnagdim* ('the orthodox opponents of Hasidism', p. 189); the latter are mainly of Lithuanian and Russian origin. A main focus of this chapter is on the Vishnitz hassidim, whose enclave houses some 6,000 followers. Both in Jerusalem and in Bene Beraq, a large proportion of the households live below the poverty line. The chapter also describes several other hassidic pockets: in Tel Aviv, the Lubavitch settlements in Kfar Habad and Nachlat Har Habad; a hassidic centre near Natanya, Kiryat Sanz, established by the Klausenburger *rebbe*; and a few settlements on the West Bank.

A chapter on the hassidim in France follows. Readers of this Journal will have seen the article by the author in the 2005 volume, describing the rebirth of Hassidism in France. The Lubavitch in that country now number between 10,000 and 15,000 followers. In the early 1960s, Jews from North Africa left Algeria and Morocco as well as Tunisia when these countries achieved independence; a large proportion settled in France and the Lubavitch were quick to help with their vast institutional structure, including an array of educational facilities. The large majority of the present-day Lubavitcher in France nowadays are the children and grandchildren of the immigrants of the 1960s.

The last chapter gives an overall assessment of hassidic life today. Gutwirth speculates about the hassidic organization as a source of psychological support for its members, the movement's projected demographic forecasts, the interplay between traditionalism and the tentative courtship with aspects of modernity; the status of women; and whether the movement is experiencing a spiritual or intellectual

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revival. Although he identifies several hassidic features which he finds unattractive (negative attitudes toward women, the rejection of secular knowledge for anything other than immediate practical purposes, and the parochial nature of its culture) he remains optimistic about the movement's prospects. He sees Hassidism as a movement offering not only spiritual nourishment, but also as a successful organization with an effective system of social assistance to provide support for the Orthodox way of life of its adherents.

However, Gutwirth's guarded optimism is perhaps not fully justified. Hassidic communities are facing major social changes whose impact may not be easily cushioned by the measures of control which were successful in the past. That is especially evident in the case of households living below the poverty line. The demographic explosion is so large that it may not be possible to raise sufficient charitable funds to meet the essential needs of the hassidim. Furthermore, it may be that the next generation of charismatic leaders will not emerge in sufficient numbers or in sufficient spirituality to attract the unqualified devotion of followers or the appeal of their predecessors to non-hassidic benefactors who seek merit in financing the ultra-Orthodox. In the absence of such support, will the hassidim be in a position to sustain their institutions and to provide for their followers' sustenance in the manner to which they have become accustomed?

The author has certainly captured the vibrancy of the present hassidic movement, as seen from the outside. But a somewhat less rosy picture is beginning to emerge from a closer viewpoint: high-speed internet is now being used for purposes other than those specifically sanctioned — thus providing the means to engage from the comfort of one's home with elements of secular culture which hassidic authorities condemn. Moreover, such forbidden contacts may be pursued in the privacy of one's room, even without the knowledge of other members of the household. Of course, that may not as yet be the case for a large proportion of hassidim — not as yet. My own recent observations have persuaded me that the gap between the idyllic representation of the hassidic lifestyle and the practices of an increasing number of hassidim is widening. The short (and long-term) consequences of this development will emerge sooner or later.

Gutwirth does acknowledge that his choice of hassidic centres is selective: he does not deal in any detail with the situation in Montreal or in London — two cities with sizable hassidic populations. But that does not invalidate the contours of his analysis. The success of hassidic Jewry in regenerating and safeguarding a way of life which had almost disappeared is quite remarkable. In spite of the reservations about the future, there is room nevertheless for some optimism. When the first young Lubavitcher came to Montreal in 1941, local non-hassidic

Jews lay bets as to whether the beards and the distinctive garb would continue to exist in the next generation. They have done so for more than two generations, as has the lifestyle.

The Rebirth of Hasidism is superbly documented, enabling the reader to consult the original sources upon which the author has drawn. However, the translation from his French text uses some awkward English phrases. There is a glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish terms, but the appendix (pp. 153–54) of little more than one page — dealing with the various methods used by the author to gather his data — would have benefited from a fuller discussion by an ethnographer of Gutwirth's skill and experience. Nevertheless, students of Hassidism will consider this volume to be an indispensable addition to their library.

NOTES

¹ Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in R. M. Emerson, ed., *Contemporary Field Research*, Boston, 1983.

² Jacques Gutwirth, *Vie juive traditionnelle: ethnologie d'une communauté hassidique*, Paris, 1970.