

INTRODUCTION: NEW WORLD HASIDIM

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Hasidism has come of age in the New World. The controversies that surround Hasidic Jews command headlines, their parochial ways capture the artistic imagination, their Old World values surface in popular culture. A good example of their prominence is the publicity occasioned by the ninetieth birthday of (the now-deceased) Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe—spiritual leader of Lubavitcher Hasidim. One can readily understand why the event was covered widely in Lubavitcher publications and parochial Jewish newspapers, but what about the *New York Times Magazine* lending its cover page to the occasion (Asnin 1992)? Stories about the Rebbe and the messianic fervor surrounding his birthday appeared all around the country, including such unlikely places as the “Society page” of *Newsweek Magazine* (Woodward and Brown 1992) and feature page of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (Davis 1991; *Las Vegas Review-Journal* 1992). In my own community of Las Vegas, a city not renown for its piety or *Yiddishkeit*, the Mayor enthusiastically proclaimed April 14, 1992, the Rebbe’s ninetieth birthday, as “Education and Sharing Day” (*Las Vegas Israelite* 1992:3).¹

The Hasidim’s influence has been rising steadily, reflecting their high birthrate and growing political savvy. Hasidic Jews can

This chapter has benefitted immeasurably from the helpful comments of Dmitri N. Shalin, David R. Dickens, Zalman Alpert, and Ira Robinson, as well as Joel Schwartz and his colleagues at the Council of Jewish Organizations of Boro Park.

be heard delivering benedictions to the United States Congress.² Their leaders caucus with presidents and serve on blue-ribbon panels.³ Hasidim enjoy much political clout in Brooklyn, where many of their groups are headquartered. Thanks to their extensive lobbying efforts, the community has benefited handsomely from federal and metropolitan programs, including CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Act) dollars, Headstart and HUD grants, and Sections 8 and 202 housing assistance (*Forward* 1992a; Winerip 1994; Hoch 1993). Since Hasidic Jews vote in high numbers, they are courted by candidates running for political office. The Lubavitcher Rebbe alone commanded anywhere between 15,000–20,000 votes in his corner of Brooklyn.⁴ It is also widely believed, though Rabbi Schneerson denied the rumors, that the Lubavitcher leader's political influence extended beyond his Crown Heights neighborhood all the way to Israel. In April of 1990, the Labor Party failed to form a coalition when two of their members suddenly withdrew their support after placing a phone call to Lubavitcher headquarters in New York. Public outrage over the Lubavitchers' perceived interference was widespread, and it was roundly deplored by *Yediot Aharonot*, an Israeli newspaper, that lamented the plight of a nation whose lot is "in the hands of a rabbi who lives in Brooklyn, who has never set foot in Israel" (Mintz 1992:358).⁵

Once a little-known religious sect, Hasidim are known in and outside of the Jewish community. Hasidic Jews emerge as protagonists of Hollywood films and T.V. movies.⁶ "A Stranger Among Us," the Disney production picture starring Melanie Griffith as a detective operating undercover in a Hasidic community, is but the latest example of Hollywood's fascination with the subject (Koltnow 1992). Hasidim have long been popular characters in short stories and novels. Nobel Prize winners I. B. Singer and Elie Wiesel have written extensively about Hasidism. Philip Roth, Chaim Potok, and Woody Allen have popularized the humor and pathos of Hasidic Jewry for readers who might not have recognized a Brooklyn Hasid from a Pennsylvania Dutch Amish. For many of their nontraditional Jewish brothers and sisters, the Hasidim's lifestyle has come to symbolize "authentic" Judaism. In the attempt to lead more meaningful lives, scores of nonobservant Jews, known as *baalei teshuvah*,⁷ have joined the ranks of Hasidim. Perhaps the most unexpected instance of the Hasidim's influence on American culture—"I thought someone was putting me on,"

exclaimed Assemblyman Dov Hikind, who represents the Hasidic neighborhood of Boro Park (Associated Press 1993)—is the discovery of Hasidic garb by the haute couture fashion industry. Inspired by the “elegance and purity” of Hasidic Jews (Newsweek 1993), Italian fashion designer Fabio Inghirami recently unveiled his “Hasidic-theme men’s collection”—“Talmudic scholar with panache,” as he described it (Associated Press 1993). Inghirami’s Hasidic line has been a hit with fashion critics and will be sold in stores around the country.

To be sure, not all portrayals of Hasidim and Hasidic life have been favorable. Just in the last few years, Hasidic communities have been rocked by controversy and scandal: accounts of child and drug abuse (Dugger 1992; Haas 1991), fraud (Nordheimer 1992; Hays 1991; Malnic and Chazanov 1993; Goldberg 1993a), racism (Treadwell 1991; Hevesi 1991), violence (Goldberg 1992; *Forward* 1992b), kidnapping (Myers 1993), succession battles (*Forward* 1993a; Goldberg 1993b), and debates on the separation of church and state (Greenhouse 1993a, 1993b; *Forward* 1993b; Savage 1993) have found their way into the media. One particularly tragic event occurred in the summer of 1991 when a vehicle driven by a Lubavitcher Hasid accidentally struck and killed a Black child (Lee 1991; Kifner 1991b, 1991c; Barron 1991).⁸ The strife between the Black and Lubavitcher residents of Crown Heights precipitated a prolonged period of strife that was reported on for some time (*Las Vegas Review-Journal* 1991; Kifner 1991a; Gonzalez 1991; Logan 1993; Tabor 1992a, 1992b; Beck 1991; New York Times 1991a; Barbanel 1991; Finder 1992).⁹

To understand American Hasidism, its lifestyle, religious precepts, and influence on our nation’s culture and society, it is vital to have a sense of the Hasidim’s historical roots and present-day community life in America. In the sections that follow, I will try to convey the richness of the Hasidic tradition, the diversity of contemporary Hasidic life, and the ethnographic scholarship that illuminates it.

HASIDIC ORIGINS

In the long history of Judaism, Hasidism is a fairly recent phenomenon. It sprang to life in mid-eighteenth-century Eastern Europe as an alternative to traditional rabbinical Judaism:¹⁰ The Hasidic

movement sought to transform rabbinical Judaism from what was perceived by its followers as a rigid, overly scholastic faith into a teaching and lifestyle based on egalitarianism, charismatic leadership, and ecstatic devotion to God. Hasidism arose from the ashes of eighteenth-century Poland, where Jewish culture and society had deteriorated into political anarchy, financial impoverishment, and spiritual malaise.¹¹ As such, it can be best understood as a revitalization movement, or “a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (Wallace 1965:504).

Hasidism was by no means the only charismatic Jewish movement in Europe of this period. A number of false messiahs, notably Jacob Frank and Shabbatai Tzevi (in the seventeenth century), sought to wrestle the mantle of leadership from traditional Judaism, promising their followers the world to come. Yet, these attempts at salvation only led Eastern European Jewry (also called Ashkenazim) further down a ruinous path. By contrast, the Hasidim, or the “pious ones,” were remarkably successful in their goal of rejuvenating Jewish life. The Hasidic movement had its share of disappointments and setbacks, but in the end it emerged triumphantly as the first major Jewish current since the diaspora to create a distinctive ethos and world view.¹²

Hasidism was founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1700–1760), the Baal Shem Tov (the Master of the Good Name), also known as the Besht. A renowned storyteller and popular healer, he had a special appeal to the simple folk. The Besht taught his fellow Jews that God was omnipresent and that the Divine could be served not only through study and prayer, but also through an uplifting melody, a spirited dance, or an inspiring story, if the Almighty was praised. Hasidism radically democratized Jewish worship by legitimizing nonscholarly forms of communion and upgrading them in importance to the level of formal Torah study. The highest Hasidic ideal was *devekut*—communion or attachment to God. According to the Besht, *devekut* should not be seen as an esoteric domain accessible to only the mystic, but as the spiritual precondition for all religious observance, in other words, as practical mysticism to be mastered and performed by each and every individual. Authentic spirituality, taught the Besht, could be attained by the common folk, the *am haaretzim*,¹³ provided one is willing to worship the Almighty with humility (*shiplut*), joy (*simchah*), and enthusiasm (*hitlahavut*). These spiritual qualities could

endow human activity with sacred significance, turning seemingly mundane exercises into a genuine *mitzvah* (good deed, divine commandment).

Under the Besht's successors, his teachings were systematized and new social forms patterned. Dov Ber of Mezeritch (1704–1772), the Besht's immediate successor, was an erudite Talmudic scholar and charismatic individual who devoted his life to codifying the master's teachings and inspiring followers to proselytize on behalf of the burgeoning movement. The ensuing proliferation of Hasidism marked a novel form of religious leadership hitherto unknown among Ashkenazic Jewry—the Hasidic rebbe. The ascetic mystic or Talmudic scholar was no longer regarded as the sole exemplar of religious virtuosity. First and foremost, a rebbe's authority was based on his piety and charisma; his key task was to bring Hasidim to God and God's grace to Hasidim.

The rebbe's authority grew more routinized with time and eventually became dynastic, as the mantle of leadership was passed from father to son.¹⁴ By the third and fourth generation of Hasidic leaders, a colorful array of personalities had come forward to propound imaginative world views. In the Northeastern part of Eastern Europe, where Rabbinism was predominant, Lubavitcher Hasidim made strong inroads. The founder of this Hasidic branch, Shneur Zalman, undertook to synthesize the Besht's principles with traditional Rabbinic teachings. He originated the school called "*Chabad*," an acronym based on *Chochmah* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding), and *Daat* (knowledge), which reinstated rational Torah study on par with ecstatic prayer, an emphasis still central to Lubavitcher Hasidim. In the South, Hasidism evolved in a different direction. Two types of Hasidic communities and leaders came into prominence here, one emphasizing humanism, the other, the miraculous (Dubnow 1971:750). Both schools accepted the role of the rebbe who intercedes on behalf of his Hasidim with the Almighty. The former type of Hasidic role model is Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, who is best remembered for his tireless appeals to God for the benefit of humanity. Barukh of Mezhibish, the Besht's grandson, is better known for the splendor of his court and his ability to perform miracles. The Bobover court today reflects these qualities to a considerable degree: elegant garb, elaborate ritual performances, and aesthetic flair are among its most prominent characteristics. The Hasidism that sank roots in Poland had still other prominent fea-

tures. Faithful to their origins, Polish Hasidim eschewed abstract theory for simplicity of thought and action: "Attributes of modesty, love among Jews, and the essential ethical virtues became integral parts of the Hasidic personality" (Lipschitz 1967:53). The present day Gerer community exemplifies these ideals.

As Hasidism gained a following throughout Eastern Europe, it encountered resistance from "normative Jews" who dubbed themselves "Misnagdim" or "opponents," of the Hasidim. Misnagdim accused the Hasidim of many a sin, including the latter's insular lifestyle, contempt for the Torah, unseemly shouting, singing, and dancing during prayer, excessive feasting and merrymaking, the "cult of the rebbe"—as well as of the frivolous innovations in the liturgy, prayer sequence, and the method of ritual slaughter. The Misnagdim fought the Hasidim tooth and nail. Some sought support from gentile authorities, burned Hasidic books, flogged and jailed their supporters, excommunicated them, and drove Hasidic leaders from town. Economic, political, and kinship sanctions were levied to further isolate the pariahs.¹⁵

The staunch opposition to the first generations of Hasidic leaders was one factor that drove their successors closer to traditional Judaism. In Poland and Lithuania, Torah study was reinstated as a prime religious virtue. The most cogent synthesis of Hasidism and Rabbinism was developed within the Chabad school by Shneur Zalman. Conceding that Torah study was equal to the observance of all *mitzvot* combined, he recast Jewish learning as the Hasidic ideal of *devekut*. Moreover, in a complete aboutface, some Hasidim joined forces with the Misnagdim in criticizing their own leaders for their opulent courts and outlandish ritual displays. Hasidism had turned full circle. By 1830, writes Schatz-Uffenheimer,

the main surge of Hasidism was over. From a persecuted sect it had become the way of life and leadership structure of the majority of Jews in the Ukraine, Galicia, and central Poland, and had sizable groups of followers in Belorussia-Lithuania and Hungary. (1971-72: 1394)¹⁶

Hasidism has been rightly perceived as the first Jewish religious movement with a distinctive lifestyle and mode of worship since the destruction of the Second Temple (*ibid.*). Its sovereignty, however, was shortlived. Unlike traditional Rabbinism, which evolved for three quarters of a millennium in a Polish cradle of

political tolerance, the Hasidic movement had very little time in which to mature. After revolutionizing Jewish life in one corner of the diaspora, Hasidism assumed a more conciliatory stance. Hasidim closed ranks with their once mortal enemy, the Misnagdim, to combat a far greater foe—secularism—which was threatening traditional Judaism under the banners of the Haskalah,¹⁷ and later, Zionism, Nationalism, and Socialism. Many of those individuals who had withstood the forces of assimilation later became victims of Europe's world wars—unmitigated disasters for Hasidism. During World War I, the communities lying in the paths of warring armies were destroyed, their inhabitants scattered throughout Europe, isolated from their coreligionists and deprived of spiritual guidance. The Holocaust dealt a final blow to the remaining Hasidic centers of Europe. Some Hasidim managed to survive the Nazi death camps only to emerge from the ashes with the embers of their heritage still smoldering. These survivors resettled elsewhere and struggled to reclaim the glory of the old European courts. The new habitats, Elie Wiesel reminds us, are inextricably bound to the old Hasidic masters and extinct Hasidic communities:

They live in America but they belong to Lizensk, Mezeritch, or Rishin. There are no more Jews in Wizsnitz, but there are Wizsnitzer Hasidim on both sides of the ocean. The same is true for the other Hasidic branches or dynasties. Ger, Kossov, Sadigor, Karlin—these kingdoms have but transferred their capitals. Lubavitch is everywhere except in Lubavitch; Sighet and Satmar are no longer in Transylvania but wherever Satmarer and Sigheter Hasidim live and remember. (Wiesel 1972:38)

COMMUNITY LIFE IN AMERICA

Hasidism today is a global religious phenomenon. Sizable Hasidic communities can be found throughout Europe (particularly in England, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, and France), South America, and Australia. The Lubavitcher Hasidim, known for their missionary zeal, even boast of a "Chabad House" in Kinshasa, Zaire (Lubavitch International 1992a).¹⁸ While Hasidim can be found on all inhabitable continents, the centers of Hasidic life are located in Israel and North America, most notably in metropolitan New York.

The history of Hasidim and Hasidic communities in North America begins in the late nineteenth century. Contrary to common wisdom, writes the historian Ira Robinson, "Jewish immigrants from Hasidic areas were lacking in neither spiritual leadership nor organizational elan" (1990:4). Congregations of Hasidim were well served by those whom Solomon Poll (1962:63) has termed "*shtikl rebbes*" (the Yiddish expression for "a bit of a rebbe")—persons claiming a distinguished ancestry or descent to established Hasidic leaders, or in some cases, noted for their charismatic authority. The historical record reveals that as early as 1875, Rabbi Josua Segal, known as the "Sherpser Rov," arrived in New York City and subsequently became the "Chief Rabbi" of some twenty Hasidic congregations known as "Congregations of Israel, Men of Poland and Austria." Toward the end of the century a few more Hasidim emigrated: A rabbi from Moscow, Rabbi Hayyim Jacob Vidrovitz, arrived in New York City in 1893 and proclaimed himself "Chief Rabbi of America" while ministering to a handful of small Hasidic congregations (Robinson 1990:5); in 1896 Rabbi D. M. Rabbinowitz, one of the first Lubavitcher Hasidim to have come to the United States, made the city of Boston his home when he became the rabbi of Agudat ha-Sefardim (Robinson 1990:4).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, minor rebbes and emissaries from established Hasidic courts emigrated to America. In 1912 a descendant of Rabbi David Twersky, the Talner Rebbe, settled in New York City. A year later Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, the Tarler Rebbe, arrived in Toronto (Robinson 1990:6–7). In 1903 a nephew of the Lelover Rebbe, Rabbi Pinchas David Horowitz, was directed by his uncle to come to America. After a number of mishaps and detours, he established the first "American" Hasidic court in Boston in 1916, calling himself the Bostoner Rebbe (Teller 1990:13).¹⁹ After World War One, yet another wave of Hasidic leaders arrived in North America, settling in communities along the Eastern seaboard and in the Midwest.²⁰

Robinson points out that the remarkable success of an American Orthodox community transformed this continent, in the eyes of many Hasidim, into a logical place to settle, or in the very least, to visit. Such distinguished rebbes as Rabbi Israel Hager (the Radutzer Rebbe), Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (the Lubavitcher Rebbe), and Rabbi Mendel of Visheff (son of the Vishnitzer Rebbe), made extensive tours of North America in 1914, 1929,

and the 1930s, respectively, when they visited with their followers and other Jews. "A prewar North American community," writes Robinson,

did exist and did enjoy a spiritual leadership....When, during World War II and its aftermath, the surviving remnants of Hasidic life in Europe took refuge in the New World, they did not find a *tabula rasa*. Hasidism and Hasidic leadership existed already in North America. The prewar Hasidic pioneers had provided a base, upon which the new Hasidic immigrant would proceed to build their communities. (1990:17-18)

It was not until after World War II, however, that Hasidim and their rebbes massed upon these shores. The revered Satmarer and Klausenberger Rebbes were among those who settled in Williamsburg; the Lubavitcher Rebbe sunk roots in Crown Heights; the Stoliner Rebbe along with others took up residence in Boro Park (Mintz 1968:37); and the Bobover Rebbe settled on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. By the mid-sixties, the Hasidic population in New York was believed to be between 40,000-50,000 adherents strong, with Satmar at 1,300 families and Stolin, Bobov, Klausenberg, and Lubavitch having between 100 to 500 families between them (*ibid.*:42).

Thanks to the Hasidic community's high birthrate (the average family has about five or six children)²¹ and a growing number of new adherents, the Hasidic population has doubled in the last twenty years. It is estimated that there are 250,000 Hasidim in the world, of which 200,000 live in the United States, with 100,000 residing in New York State alone (Harris 1985:12).²² While one can point to a handful of *shtieblech* (Hasidic prayer rooms) in Manhattan,²³ the majority of American Hasidim reside in Brooklyn, particularly in the neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Williamsburg, and Boro Park.

Crown Heights is the capital of Lubavitch Hasidism, its supporters there claiming 15,000 members (*ibid.*:13). Lubavitch is perhaps the most visible Hasidic group, famous for its aggressive outreach campaign that was spearheaded by the world-renowned rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Lubavitch runs several schools for *baalei teshuvah*, "returnees" to Judaism, in Crown Heights and New Jersey (Alpert 1980). They also maintain a fleet of "Mitzvah Mobiles"²⁴ that troll the streets of New York and other cities with large Jewish populations to encourage Jewish

men to don *tefillin* (phylacteries) and Jewish women to light *Shabbat* (Sabbath) candles. At 770 Eastern Parkway, where Lubavitcher headquarters are located, the celebrated *farbrengen* (get-together) attracts the faithful as well as the just plain curious who come by the thousands to hear the Rebbe discourse on *Hasidut* (Hasidic philosophy) and partake in the singing and good fellowship. Outside of New York City, Lubavitch is known for its Chabad Houses (community centers/synagogues) whose mission is to “turn-on” Jews, mainly college students, to Judaism.²⁵

Some three miles from Crown Heights, across the Williamsburg Bridge from the Lower East Side, is the community of Williamsburg. With a Hasidic population around 45,000 (*ibid.*:12), this neighborhood is home to most of the city’s Hungarian Hasidim. While Sighet, Pupa, Klausenberg, and other communities maintain synagogues there, the area is dominated by the Satmarer Hasidim, one of the largest Hasidic communities. Satmar has built an impressive organization: it operates a *Bikur cholim* which arranges visits to the sick, an employment agency, the largest Jewish school system in the United States, a clinic, and a pharmacy (Alpert 1980). In addition to its main synagogue on Rodney Street, Satmar supports seven branches in Williamsburg, with additional ones in Boro Park; Lakewood, New Jersey; as well as in their own village of Kiryas Yoel in Monroe township, New York.

The Satmarer Hasidim are well-known for their virulent anti-Zionism, which has pitted them against the more moderate Lubavitcher Hasidim,²⁶ as well as for their insular and uncompromising lifestyle. Until 1979, the community was led by the late Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, whose self-appointed mission was to preserve the law and customs of his forefathers in all their pristine purity.

In the southwestern part of Brooklyn lies the neighborhood of Boro Park. The newest among the three major Hasidic communities, Boro Park is unmistakably middle class: Its relatively low crime rate, comfortable environment, and affluent veneer make Boro Park an attractive settlement place for Jewish residents. Although a few rebbes (e.g., the Trisker, Chernobler, Skverer) settled in the neighborhood as early as the twenties and thirties, the masses didn’t arrive in Boro Park until the mid-sixties. The burgeoning Hasidic population here is estimated at just under 50,000;²⁷ it supports more than three hundred synagogues and

several dozen yeshivahs and day schools (Schick 1979:23). Among the rebbes who have built their courts in Boro Park are the Bobover, Stoliner, Bostoner (of New York), Blushover, Munkaczer, Kapishnitzer, Novominsker, and Skolyer. Quite a few Hasidim from the renowned Polish dynasties of Ger and Belz have also settled here, even though their rebbes are headquartered elsewhere. No one community dominates the neighborhood, though Bobov, which is estimated to be the third largest Hasidic dynasty in the United States, has achieved considerable influence.

Because of Boro Park's popularity, the cost of affordable housing has skyrocketed and is now out of reach for most young families. Many have chosen to move to nearby Flatbush, with a few settling further away in Staten Island. By the turn of the century, Flatbush might well evolve into a major Brooklyn Hasidic enclave.

Outside of New York City, in Rockland and Orange Counties, are the Hasidic communities of New Square, Kiryas Yoel, and Monsey. All were pioneered by Hasidim who desired a more sheltered life from America's acculturative influences. In 1954, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Twersky, the Skverer Rebbe, purchased some land near Spring Valley as the site of the Village of New Square. After years of struggling, New Square numbers over 450 families with some 2,100 members (Mintz 1992:202). In the early seventies, Satmar established a satellite community here, named after their revered rebbe who is now buried there. "Kiryas Yoel," situated in the Township of Monroe, is a thriving village with a population well over 8,000 people (*ibid.*:214). It is home to the yeshivah where the young men of Satmar study, and to the Rebbe's eldest son and future leader of Satmar, Rabbi Aaron. In Hasidic circles, however, it is well known as the residence of the late Rebbe's widow, Feiga, whose disputes with Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, the reigning Rebbe, have polarized the community.

In nearby Rockland County is the community of Monsey. Monsey emerged as a sizable Hasidic enclave in 1972 when Rabbi Mordechai Hager, the Vishnitzer Rebbe, settled there. Monsey is the most diverse of these communities. While largely Vishnitzer in composition, Hasidim from Ger, Belz, Lubavitch, Satmar, and other dynasties also reside there, having built the more than 50 shtieblech (prayer houses) that make this community a desirable residence (*ibid.*:201).

To the north, in the city of Boston, one finds the Hasidic communities of Boston and Talne. Talne is a small Hasidic enclave, distinguished by the fact that its rebbe, Rabbi Dr. Isadore Twersky, is the Littauer Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University. His congregation is not typically Hasidic either, for it counts among its members the Rebbe's graduate students. Boston is also home to the New England Chassidic Center that was established by the Bostoner Hasidim under the spiritual guidance of their rebbe, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak Horowitz. It is one of the oldest Hasidic dynasties on the continent, having been founded in 1916 by the Rebbe's father. It is also distinguished for being the first dynasty to have adopted the name of an American city. Like Lubavitch, Boston is well known for its accessibility to outsiders: All Jews are welcomed to experience a *Shabbaton* (Sabbath get-togethers at the synagogue) with the Rebbe and his Hasidim. In the Hasidic world, Boston is recognized for its medical service program, called ROFEH.²⁸ This agency provides medical referrals for patients who come to Boston for treatment, as well as lodging, transportation, and interpreters for their family.

Outside the Atlantic Seaboard, Hasidim and rebbes are scattered throughout the continent. Montreal is the home of the Tasher Rebbe. In Milwaukee, Rabbi Michel Twersky, son of the late Hornistaypler Rebbe, maintains a synagogue.²⁹ The Denver following of his late brother, Rabbi Shlomo Twersky, is currently led by the Denver rabbi's son, Rabbi Mordehai Twersky (Alpert 1980:242). Lubavitch is the most widespread Hasidic community, with one or more Chabad houses in most states. Touting it as their "Northern Exposure," after a popular television program, Lubavitch has recently founded a Chabad House in faraway Anchorage, Alaska (Lubavitch International 1992b:12).

The largest Hasidic communities outside of metropolitan New York are found in Montreal, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Shaffir estimates that there are some 4,000 Hasidim in Montreal, Canada's largest Jewish community. It is comprised of ten dynasties, with Lubavitch being the largest at 225 families. In Chicago, most of the Hasidim are either Lubavitch or Hungarian Hasidim who are led by a number of shtikl rebbes. Los Angeles is home to the largest Hasidic community west of the Appalachians. Not surprisingly, Lubavitch is the main Hasidic presence. One exuberant Lubavitcher Hasid recounted to me more than twenty Lubavitcher institutions in the city, including Chabad Houses, schools, syna-

gogues, and a drug rehabilitation center, as well as Iranian, Russian, and Israeli outreach programs. Coexisting with Lubavitch are a number of Gerer and Satmarer families, estimated to be about thirty each, and various shtikl rebbes.

THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF AMERICAN HASIDISM

Although Hasidism has been the subject of historical, philosophical, and popular accounts dating back to the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* school, the social scientific study of Hasidism is far more recent (Belcove-Shalin 1988). As late as 1958, the sociolinguist Joshua Fishman lamented, "What about the recently formed Hasidic enclaves in sections of Brooklyn? They are still virtually unknown to the American social scientist" (1958–59:98). A few years after this observation, and little more than a decade after the Satmarer Rebbe settled in Brooklyn, George Kranzler (1961) and Solomon Poll (1962) published ethnographies on the Hasidim of Williamsburg.

Studies of Hasidic community life came into their own during an important paradigm shift in the social scientific study of Jewry, and, I hasten to add, in turn helped establish a new trend in the social sciences. Until the 1970s, an implicit theme of American ethnography was society's inexorable march toward assimilation and ethnic homogenization (Heilman 1982:141; Zenner and Belcove-Shalin 1988:24). This perspective is well articulated in *Protestant—Catholic—Jew*, a classic study in the sociology of religion in America by Will Herberg. Herberg writes:

Insofar as the "Americanness" of religion in America blunts this sense of uniqueness and universality, and converts the three religious communities into variant expressions of American spirituality...the authentic character of the Jewish-Christian faith is falsified, and faith itself reduced to the status of an American culture-religion.(1955:262)

For ethnographers of Jewish life, the secularization/modernization thesis was based on the assumption that as American Jews evolved into Jewish Americans, Judaism would eventually be superseded by a civil religion. Seymour Leventman succinctly characterized this transformation from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* as the move

from "Shtetl to Suburb" (1969). Orthodoxy appeared from this vantage point as a "residual category" (Mayer 1973), a "sub-cultural system within the larger Jewish order" that had become sectarian (Sklare 1972 [1955]:46). Its only appreciable value was that it "functioned as a cultural constant in the life of the disoriented newcomer, as a place of haven in the stormy new environment" (ibid.:44). European Orthodoxy, it was believed, would have to be supplanted by less parochial American religious brands. According to Marshall Sklare's classic study, *Conservative Judaism*, Orthodoxy's failure to take root in America could be understood as "a case study of institutional decay" (ibid.:43). Poll's early study of Williamsburger Hasidim, by contrast, was more balanced; the author described Hasidim as a fledgling but committed community, well adapted to the New York City landscape and the capitalistic economic system, cultural and religious diversity, and democratic institutions of their adopted homeland (1962:264). Yet even he could not help but wonder if Hasidic youth in America could withstand the temptations of the secular world (ibid.:x). Similar doubts were expressed by Kranzler, who surmised that the external symbols of Hasidic traditions, the *kapotehs* (jackets), the *shtriemels* (holiday hats), the *peyot* (side-curls worn by men), could not possibly endure: "They will not be able to make the proper adjustment, and will break completely, if the strain becomes too strong. Only a small minority will cling to the extreme pattern of their parents" (1961:240).

Poll and Kranzler's foreboding proved to be unfounded, while Sklare's predictions turned out to be altogether wrong. The secularization paradigm has been rendered obsolete by more recent studies that document the resurgence of Orthodoxy. Especially influential in this respect has been the recent research on the baal teshuvah (Aviad 1983; Kaufman 1985, 1989, 1991; Davidman 1990, 1991) and on thriving Hasidic and Orthodox communities (Mayer 1979; Heilman 1976; Lowenstein 1988; Belcove-Shalin 1989; Shaffir 1974). Chroniclers of Orthodoxy have taken note. In his 1972 edition of *Conservative Judaism*, Sklare conceded that "Orthodoxy has refused to assume the role of invalid. Rather, it has transformed itself into a growing force in American Jewish life and reasserted its claim of being the authentic interpretation of Judaism" (Sklare 1972 [1955]:264).

American Orthodoxy today exemplifies a rich and variegated belief system. In their book *Cosmopolitans and Parochials* (1989),

Heilman and Cohen distinguish three wings of American Orthodoxy: the traditionalists (ultra-Orthodox, contra-acculturative); the centrists (adaptive acculturative, modern Orthodox); and the nominally Orthodox. These communities differ primarily in their commitment to ritual observance and by the degree to which they are willing to accommodate to secular life. As a group, the traditionalists, centrists, and nominally Orthodox make up approximately 10 percent of America's six million Jews (.3 percent of the total U.S. population), some 600,000 strong—and growing.

Hasidim fall into the traditionalist camp. They distinguish themselves from the *Yeshivahlite* (yeshivah people) traditionalists, whose orientation is molded by a network of rabbinical colleges that includes Chaim Berlin and Torah Vodaath (Brooklyn), Mesifta Tiffereth Jerusalem (Manhattan), Ner Israel (Baltimore), the Telshe Yeshivah (Cleveland), and Midrash Govoha (Lakewood, New Jersey), all of which are affiliated with the Agudath Israel of America³⁰ (Heilman and Cohen 1989; Alpert 1992b). The Hasidim and Yeshivahlite differ in a number of ways, most notably in the social structure of their communities, patterns of leadership, array of customs, and ethos. Yet they share an unswerving commitment to scrupulous Torah observance and are of the opinion that all knowledge of importance (save for vocational training) lies solely within the Torah.

HASIDIC STUDIES TODAY

Since the pioneering studies of Kranzler and Poll, research on Hasidic life in North America has grown and diversified immeasurably to include a wide range of Hasidic communities and topics.³¹ When only a few years ago I reviewed the ethnographic literature on Hasidim (1988), the popular approaches—charismatic leadership, recruitment practices, cultural performance, self-identity, tradition, and social change—were few in number and traditional in their treatment. Urgently needed were new lines of inquiry reflecting the latest developments in social theory, such as feminist theory and the anthropology of religion. The present volume of original ethnographic studies helps fill the lacunae. Our undertaking serves to accomplish several objectives: it illuminates the beliefs and practices of a vital religious community; it capitalizes on and gives fresh impulse to the current surge in scholarly

and popular interest in Hasidism and Orthodoxy; and it shows how innovative theoretical perspectives can inform contemporary ethnography.

A few words about the authors and their research topics are in order. Among the contributors to the volume are pioneers in the field of Hasidic ethnographic scholarship, as well as a younger generation of scholars. The volume's focus is on the Hasidim of North America, although the article by Loeb, which documents the influence that American Hasidim exert on Jewish communities elsewhere (in this case, the Israeli Yemenites), underscores the international appeal of contemporary Hasidism. The Hasidic communities discussed in this volume encompass the wide spectrum of Hasidic life. Loeb, Shaffir, Morris, Koskoff, and Kaufman analyze the Lubavitcher Hasidim, key exemplars of Lithuanian Hasidism, currently headquartered in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Kaufman includes in her study the Bostoner Hasidim. Epstein and Belcove-Shalin examine the Bobover Hasidim, whose roots extend back to Galicia and who are based in Boro Park, Brooklyn. Kranzler familiarizes the reader with the Hungarian Hasidim of Williamsburg, centering his attention on the Satmar dynasty.

In the past, most studies of Hasidim dealt with the Hasidic beliefs and practices of a particular neighborhood or dynasty and tended to avoid comparisons with other religious communities, Hasidic or non-Hasidic.³² By contrast, the works of Shaffir, Kaufman, and Davidman and Stocks are comparative in their main thrust. Shaffir describes the boundary-maintenance devices used by three Hasidic communities in Montreal. Davidman and Stocks analyze the gender experience and family dynamics which mark the relationship between Lubavitcher Hasidim and fundamentalist Christians. Kaufman shows how feminists and newly Orthodox Hasidic women frame their lives in "woman-identified" communities. While Kaufman focuses on the Lubavitcher proselytizing among modern American women, most of whom are Ashkenazim, Loeb explores the effects of Lubavitcher proselytizing in a traditional Middle Eastern community in Israel.

Several authors draw attention to the postmodern age in which Hasidim are forced to coexist with other groups. As Hasidim establish "traditional" nuclear families (Davidman and Stocks), homes (Belcove-Shalin), and clear-cut gender-identities (Kaufman), they work to offset the postmodern crises of values dominating our culture.

Traditional ethnographic studies of "Hasidim" typically portray Hasidic men to the exclusion of women. A number of essays in this volume explicitly redress this imbalance. Koskoff writes about women's musical performance. Davidman and Stocks explore gender roles as they relate to marriage and sexuality. Kaufman and Morris enable the reader to hear the authentic voices of Hasidic women.

The papers collected in this volume assist the reader in overcoming the popular image of Hasidim as an insular community, bent on reinventing the shtetl in America (Freilich 1962). This misconception is laid to rest in those studies which examine the political, social, and cultural links that Hasidim forge with other communities. Loeb, Kaufman, and Morris show how Hasidim work to attract newcomers; Shaffir demonstrates how they negotiate community boundaries; Koskoff offers an insight into the deliberate ways in which Hasidim appropriate alternative cultural forms; and Kranzler and Belcove-Shalin document the political and social activism among Hasidim.

If there is one theme that pervades the volume, it is the interplay between tradition and modernity. This focus is particularly central to the works of Shaffir, Kaufman, Morris, and Davidman and Stocks, who highlight a tension between the desire to maintain a distinct identity and to adopt the ways of modern culture, a tension that is endemic to Hasidic life. Each author takes issue with proponents of the secularization thesis, which casts religion as antithetical to modernity and progress.

Shaffir makes deft use of the symbolic interactionist perspective to sort out the conflicting impulses that inform Hasidic politics in the city of Montreal. The most common strategy employed by Hasidim, according to Shaffir, is that of cultural insulation. Shaffir singles out three dimensions distinguishing boundary-maintenance practices employed by the Hasidim in their interaction with secular society: institutional control (specifically in the area of secular education), negotiation strategies (useful in various public controversies), and proselytizing (among nonobservant Jews). Contrary to common wisdom, according to Shaffir, the Hasidic identity is fortified rather than diminished through encounters with the non-Hasidic world. The very necessity to clarify boundaries in the face of the indifferent or hostile world reaffirms what is unique about Hasidism and Hasidim.

The waning years of the twentieth century have been marked by a worldwide religious revival. The resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the far corners of the world as well as on Main Street U.S.A. encourages the reappraisal of traditional values and rediscovery of one's spiritual roots. Acknowledging this trend, Davidman and Stocks explore how Hasidim and fundamentalist Christians successfully construct religious societies in the postmodern world. The authors compare the diverse communities, the disparate ways in which they construct gender, marriage, courtship, and sexuality, zeroing in on the more general sociological question of how newly flourishing "traditional" religious communities create a place for themselves in the muddled context of a postmodern society. The authors argue that secularization is hardly a monolithic phenomenon. They bring to the fore the uneven impact of postmodern society on these religious communities and the alternative strategies the Hasidim deploy in maintaining tradition.

A typical study of Lubavitcher recruitment practices depicts an encounter between a Lubavitcher Hasid and a secular young Jew, usually of Ashkenazic extraction. Loeb's paper, by contrast, delineates Lubavitcher proselytizing activities among the traditional Habbani Yemenites of Israel. The author follows the Habbani on pilgrimage to the Rebbe in Brooklyn and shows how this experience fosters the rediscovery of ancient customs and the enhancement of religious observance: In the Habbani world view, the Lubavitcher Rebbe embodies the religious ideal of charisma which contemporary Habbani associate with their forbearers. Moreover, the New York community of Lubavitcher Hasidim symbolizes the triumph of religious living in a secular society.

Issues of gender crop up in various studies at the interface of tradition and (post)modernity. Kaufman and Morris's work challenges the common wisdom of secular Jewish women who view their Orthodox sisters as subordinate, second-class citizens. The authors amplify the voices of women that were muted by their conservative environment and antifeminist appearances. Kaufman, an active participant in the nascent dialogue on religious feminism, explores how *baalot teshuvah* (newly Orthodox women) use patriarchal religion to enhance their positions in society and acquire the high status that eluded them in secular society. These new converts to Orthodoxy may disavow the feminist movement but they remain open to the feminist discourse that they use (albeit selectively) to filter their newly found experience

and knowledge of Hasidic life. The apparent hostility to feminism that marks their pronouncements, Kaufman maintains, is not so much an antifeminist stance as an attempt to keep at bay the jarring proclivities of postmodernity that threaten their religious identity. In a similar vein, Morris provides us with an ethnohistory of Lubavitcher women's religious activism from the 1950s to the present. At a time when American society severely limited women's rights and freedom to choose, argues the author, Lubavitch was a hotbed for women's activism and educational attainment. All Hasidim, women included, were regarded as soldiers in Lubavitch's war on secular Judaism, with the *Hasidista* (Hasidic woman) positioning herself on the front line in this battle for the Jewish soul. Morris points out that although Lubavitch and the feminist movement are both concerned with the dignity and potential of women, Hasidim have rejected feminism for its perceived Eurocentric and Protestant bias and its attacks on traditional, patriarchal religion, which were construed as yet another instance of antisemitism. Lubavitcher women's activism, Morris concludes, is rooted in minority survival rather than in gender politics.

Koskoff's work is an inquiry into the performance of *nigunim* (melodies) among Lubavitcher Hasidim. She explores the role of music in Lubavitcher life—how it fosters a communal structure and the way in which it negotiates between traditional Lubavitcher values and the mores of mainstream secular society. Koskoff offers a hermeneutical analysis of the ways in which the Hasidim decode their own texts, in this case, the laws of *kol isha* (a woman's voice), and examines the rules of inference, association, and the logic of implication engendered in a musical performance. Although she treats the *nigun* as a bona fide case of Hasidic expressive behavior, Koskoff views it less as an instance of artistic virtuosity than as a cultural performance, an expression of social value. The joyful and enthusiastic performance of *nigunim* is above all a religious act that fosters repentance, self-knowledge, and a continuous dialogue between man and God.

The vitality of Hasidic community-life is a central theme in the articles by Kranzler and Belcove-Shalin. Both authors reflect on the widely successful attempts at community building by Hasidim, which run contrary to the ubiquitous skepticism among social thinkers on Hasidic survival in contemporary America. The articles cast new light on the waves of succession that doomed Jewish

communities of the past, and offer alternative models of Jewish habitation innovated by Hasidim.

The economic revitalization of the old Hasidic community of Williamsburg is the subject of Kranzler's work. He demonstrates how the Hasidim of this neighborhood became ethnic activists in their pursuit of affluence and power. The Hasidic success in these areas is all the more remarkable in light of their reclusive ways and widespread poverty. Accentuating the infrastructural role of values, Kranzler shows how the religious mores of this community account for the success of Hasidic entrepreneurship and political influence.

Belcove-Shalin traces the "quest for home" that marks Hasidic life in Boro Park as residents symbolically transfigure the physical and spiritual landscapes of their neighborhood. In our postmodern age, home serves as a key symbol of presence that anchors the Hasidim to a physical and spiritual realm. By reclaiming dynasty, family, and neighborhood, the Hasid reinstates his relationship with the rebbe and, ultimately, with God. Moreover, the Hasid fulfills a cosmic agenda in his quest for home by restoring the divine to its original wholeness. In an analysis that explores the dialectical relationship between home and exile, text and territory, Boro Park is portrayed as the latest incarnation of home, built on the precepts of Torah.

Themes of renewal are also central to Shifra Epstein's account of the Bobover Hasidim's *piremshpiyl* (purim play). As a contribution to the field of the sociology of emotion, Epstein decodes the *piremshpiyl* as a ritual that allows the community to transcend the horrors of the Holocaust. Prior to World War II, European Jews viewed the *piremshpiyl* as a time for merrymaking and mayhem; the contemporary Bobover performance, by contrast, transforms the *piremshpiyl* into a ritual of survival—a collective grappling of *Klal Israel* (the people of Israel) with the incomprehensible horrors of the Holocaust. This inversion transforms an event of near-total devastation into a life-affirming experience and serves as a culturally appropriate solution that better squares with the Hasidim's understanding of a merciful Almighty.

No volume on Hasidic life would be complete without an exposition on the Hasidic rebbe. The great scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, writes that an innovation of the Hasidic movement was the creation of a new type of leader "whose heart has been touched and changed by God" (1941:334). A rebbe was