

BOOKS

An enlightening history

Eight scholars have worked to create an extensive and in-depth look at the genesis and evolution of the Hassidic movement

• BARRY DAVIS

Ask most secular Jews what they think about Hassidim and Hassidism, and the response may be a quick noncommittal shrug of the shoulders, a blank look or, possibly, something of a more negative nature. That kind of reaction might be due to an adverse personal experience with the sector, negative media coverage of some incident involving Hassidim, or simple ignorance of the movement in general.

If the latter is the case, your lack of knowledge could be redressed by leafing your way through a hefty new tome on the subject, *Hasidism: A New History*, published by Princeton University Press.

At close to 900 pages, this is no quick-fix offering, but the extensive content is neatly edited and divided into reader-friendly sections and chapter headings. You may, if you so wish, focus on Hassidism in the 19th century, which is portrayed as the Golden Age. There are also chapters on rituals, Hassidic courts, opposition to Hassidism from other areas of the Jewish domain, how modernity came into play and how relocation to pre-state Palestine – and, later, to the State of Israel – changed ultra-Orthodoxy.

In case you're not particularly impressed by tangible physical dimensions, the roll call of contributor writers might catch your eye. The multinational team of scholars features David Biale, the Emanuel Ringelblum distinguished professor of Jewish history at the University of California, CUNY sociology professor Samuel Heilman and Marcin Wodzinski, who lectures on Jewish studies at the University of Wrocław, Poland. The local team isn't too bad either, with Tel Aviv University Jewish history lecturer David Assaf, his counterpart at Bar-Ilan University Moshe Rosman and Gadi Sagiv, who serves as senior lecturer in Jewish history at the Open University, among the learned scribes.

As the dust-jacket flap text notes, "This is the first comprehensive history of the pietistic movement that shaped modern Judaism." Considering the ultra-Orthodox sector's rich lengthy annals, that is pretty surprising. "There are no books around today that provide such an extensive history of Hasidism," notes Sagiv. "That's exactly why it was written."

IT IS not exactly as if the topic has been ignored over the decades. It was more a

matter of culling some of the academic material, and presenting it in an eminently accessible and more-or-less concise manner. Mind you, in view of the aforementioned ream or two of book pages, "concise" is a matter of degree. According to Sagiv, you have to go back a long way to find anything similarly comprehensive in its coverage of different streams within world Jewry.

"In the last few years, significant progress has been achieved in research [of Jewry], there are specific research works on all sorts of related topics," Sagiv writes. But there was nothing around as wide-ranging as *Hasidism: A New History*. "If you wanted a comprehensive overview on the field, you'd have to go back to the work of Dubnow, from 1936."

The latter refers to *World History of the Jewish People*, a 10-volume opus by Jewish-born Russian historian, writer and activist Simon Dubnow, who perished in Riga during the Holocaust.

Sagiv specializes in 19th-century Hassidism but also had in hand in chronicling the cradle of this ultra-Orthodox sect, starting out, naturally, by referencing the figure who is generally perceived to be the founder of Hassidism, the Ba'al Shem Tov, or Besht, who lived most of his life in Medzyboz, in the Kingdom of Poland, and died there in 1760.

The book is clearly designed to appeal to the masses, and appears to leave no historical and factual stone unturned. As the cowriters of chapter 1, "Hasidism's Birthplace," Bar-Ilan University Jewish history professor Uriel Gellman, Rosman and Sagiv muse: "How did Israel Baal Shem Tov go from popular healer to progenitor of a social-religious movement that was to have an outsized impact on modern Jewish history?" The answer to that question and many more can be found in the following 800-plus pages.

The writers seem to have all relevant bases covered. Think of an aspect of Hassidism, or some topical confluence, across the past couple and a half centuries, and you'll probably find it in this delightfully palatable and welcoming book.

You can read up on education and the status of women in Hassidic communities, the inception and evolution of Hassidic courts, rivals to Hassidism, how Hassidism spread across Ukraine, Lithuania, White Russia and eventually pre-state Palestine, the fascinating matter of ritual across the various communities and subgroups, and the development and importance of music.



And there are even sections devoted to Hassidism and modern music – Leonard Bernstein, Barbra Streisand, Shlomo Carlebach and reggae-rocker Matisyahu get mentions – as well as the interface between Hassidism and American politics.

Sagiv harbors hopes that people who know next to nothing about Hassidism,

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whether by choice or by life circumstances, and others who may have gained a negative mass media-proffered image of the movement, may open up to it a little after perusing the contents of the new tome.

“If you know something about others, who may not have been previously familiar to you, that makes it easier to ac-

cept them,” he posits. “We present the hassidic world as a world of people, not overly holy. These are people with a defined orientation in life, but they have their everyday challenges just like the rest of us.”

At the end of the day, *Hasidism: A New History* is both informative and a good read. ■

THE DEDICATION of a new Torah scroll is ample reason for celebration.

(Marc Israel Sellem)

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