

HAREDI COUNTER HISTORY: SOME THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Nahum Karlinsky

Haredi (so-called ultra-Orthodox Jewish) society and culture, despite the wealth of important scholarly works devoted to it, still poses a conundrum for many. An important component of Haredi culture and society that contributes to this society's enigmatic nature is its dynamic transformative character, comprised of a unique blend of strictly traditional tenets on the one hand and manifestly modern elements on the other.

Haredi historiography—a distinct literary genre that sets out to record the history of this society—may serve as a fascinating and useful analytical tool for a better understanding of the Haredi phenomenon. Furthermore, by examining the origins of Haredi historiography, we may be able to identify some basic components of this unique manifestation of Haredi life and, consequently, isolate essential elements of the Haredi enigma.

The State of Research

The term *Orthodox historiography* (read: Haredi historiography) was first coined by Israel Bartal more than twenty years ago. Reviewing the three-volume memoir and history of nineteenth-century non-Hasidic Haredi society, *Zikbron Ya'akov*, written by the Haredi activist and journalist Jacob Ha-Levi Lipschitz, a disciple and personal secretary to the eminent rabbinical

scholar and Haredi leader, R. Isaac Elhanan of Kovno, published posthumously in 1923–1930, Bartal defined this work as “Orthodox historiography.” Bartal’s main thesis is that in their efforts to stanch the infiltration of modernity in Orthodox society, Haredi historians adopted modern methods of historical writing in the hope that by so doing they could beat

LABELING THESE MAINLY HAGIOGRAPHICAL WORKS AS ORTHODOX HISTORIOGRAPHY, ASSAF DEFINED THE GENRE OF THESE WRITERS AS A “RECRUITED LITERATURE,” I.E., A “LITERATURE THAT IS DELIBERATELY COMMITTED TO SERVE CERTAIN INTERESTS, OVERT OR COVERT.”

modernity on its own turf. Bartal also showed that Lipschitz’s strategy was not an isolated case and that Haredi society employs the same approach in regard to other cultural spheres as well. At the same time, a common assumption is that this has been a split-level adoption, in which only the “shell”—the “instrumental” or “value-free” aspects of these institutions and concepts—was embraced. The content, i.e., the ideological or philosophical underpinnings of the adopted customs, it is claimed, have been discarded.

Subsequent to Bartal’s study of the Lipschitz memoir, other scholars devoted important studies to Orthodox historiography. Immanuel Etkes described and analyzed the beginnings of historical writings in the Vilna Gaon’s circles and later on dealt with the attitude of Haredi

writers towards the Gaon and his role in the struggle of the *mitnagdim* against Hasidism. Ada Rapoport-Albert studied the historically oriented writings of the Chabad leader R. Joseph Isaac Schneerson (1880–1950), and concluded that they were “hagiography with footnotes.”

Zeev Gries maintains that for Chabad, historical writing has been a recurring phenomenon of this movement’s literary output. David Assaf showed that other Hasidic dynasties were engaged in historical writing as well. Assaf listed various literary strategies that were employed by the wide range of writers who retold the stories of the

famous nineteenth-century Hasidic rebbe, R. Israel of Ruzhin. Labeling these mainly hagiographical works as Orthodox historiography, Assaf defined the genre of these writers as a “recruited literature,” i.e., a

“literature that is deliberately committed to serve certain interests, overt or covert.” Recently, Haim Gertner has suggested that under the rubric of Orthodox historiography, traditionalist researchers, who in the course of mid-nineteenth-century Europe were engaged in the writings of the traditional historical genre of chronography, should also be included.

Thus, it is clear from the above short appraisal that the study of Haredi historiography is still young; we still lack a comprehensive survey and analysis of this phenomenon. In addition, and this would be the focus of this article, it is apparent that a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of Haredi historiography requires a clearer definition of the terms employed in this discussion, especially Haredi,

Orthodox, and historiography, in addition to some clarification of the relations among them. Thus, I maintain that in discussing Haredi historiography, in contrast to discussing the variegated ways Haredi society narrates its past, the term historiography should be limited to its accepted use in any other historical field, namely to the notion of modern, secularist-oriented form of telling the story of the past. Following to some extent Samuel Heilman's and Menachem Friedman's characterization of Orthodoxy as a contra-acculturation movement, we may characterize Orthodoxy as a modern Jewish movement that has struggled, in the face of the secularist threat of the modern world, to sustain Judaism in its traditional form. Haredi society will be defined here as the most conservative branch of Orthodox Judaism, one that refuses to consciously adopt any form, and especially any value, from the modern world.

What will follow would be a brief discussion and characterization of one example of Haredi historiography—the first Haredi-Hasidic history book, *Beit Rabbi*. In light of this discussion I hope to be able to add another ingredient to the above definition of the Haredi phenomenon, one that would address this society's dynamic—and hence most enigmatic—character.

Beit Rabbi

Published in Berdichev in 1902, this book, written by a Chabad Hasid named Hayyim Meir Heilman, intended to present an official,

authoritative and up-to-date biography of the Schneerson family from the time of its founder R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi onward. The author's effort to make *Beit Rabbi* look like a modern, contemporary history is evident both in content and form. *Beit Rabbi*, like a modern, secular history book, attempts to present facts and dates accurately, to provide reliable—and, preferably, new—

Notwithstanding these elements, *Beit Rabbi* is not a history book in the modern, secular sense of the term. What distinguishes it from modern historiography, and gives it its Haredi flavor, is the inclusion of hagiographical tales of zaddikim as an integral part of the book's "historical" narrative. How can one explain this inclusion? I suggest that the hagiography in *Beit Rabbi* serves as a fundamentalist barrier against modernity.

The Belief in the Zaddik as Fundamentalist Tenet in Hasidism

Contrary to many other researchers, I find the comparison of the Haredi phenomenon with religious fundamentalism very fruitful. Three aspects of the typological similarity between Haredism and religious fundamentalism should be emphasized here. First, the consciousness of danger emanating from the modern world and its values provides both Haredi society and religious fundamentalism with a major stimulus in the crystallization of their institutional array and values. Second, both phenomena, the Haredi and the fundamentalist, have adopted the typical form of counter-societies vis-à-vis modern society. Third, both phenomena have installed a new value system that, while drawing on and perpetuating the world of tradition, has revised the prior scale of values and social order,

establishing in their stead a new order that entails the construction of a barrier against the penetration of modernity into tradition. In nineteenth-century east European Hasidic society, it seems to me, one may identify a process in which belief in the zaddik became a fundamentalist value. Regarding the



Title page of Hayim Heilman, *Sefer Bet Rabi* (Berditshov: Ba-defus shel H.Y. Sheftil, 1902).

sources, and to anchor the historical reconstruction in the familiar soil of the "corporeal" world. The author's extensive use of footnotes and his critical survey of the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* and Jewish national historical literature are other clear indications of his adoption of some forms of modern historiography.

non-Hasidic sector of the Haredi society, it seems that the study of the halakah, the renascent world of the yeshivot, and the emergence of the *Gadol* as the epitome of this world, served as a similar buffer against the values of modernity.

The Hagiography in *Beit Rabbi*

Hence, Heilman's book contains not only many "historical" documents but also rich layers of hagiographical tales. The praises in Heilman's book were placed there neither by coincidence nor to embellish the dry historical account with colorful folk illustrations. The intent in all the hagiographical stories in Heilman's book is the same: to present, alongside a formally and methodically corporeal account, the history of the founders and dynasty of Chabad as a sacred history. In other words, the main significance of Heilman's hagiographic account is its posture as the true explanation of history. I argue that the hagiographical dimension of *Beit Rabbi* is an inseparable part of Heilman's religious mindset and serves as an obstacle to historical and rational criticism of Hasidism and its worldview, that is, as a fundamentalist tenet.

A Trojan Horse

Heilman's solution has been to make a conscious effort to adopt some of the modus operandi of modernity in the service of interests and goals of tradition, while rejecting the value system that informed it. This adoption creates constant tension in *Beit Rabbi* since Heilman has to cope at all times with the risks of rational historical argumentation that uses "human" explanation and reasoning to judge a sacred realm.

Furthermore, I do not think it far off the mark to state that in *Beit Rabbi* Heilman established a historiographic model that has left visible traces in Haredi and Hasidic

historical writings to the present day. Neither in *Beit Rabbi* nor in the Hasidic historiography that follows it does this posture create a harmonic synthesis of scholarly research and faith. On the contrary: it dichotomizes the two worldviews and renders them mutually estranged. It is this very dialectic and dichotomous tension that, I believe, lend *Beit Rabbi* and the historiography that follows it their special Haredi-fundamentalist complexion.

However, the conscious rejection of the secularist value system could not prevent the Haredi historians, once they decided to adopt some devices of modern historiography, from judging the past from the perspective of a more anthropocentric *Weltanschauung*.

Thus, human reasoning and explanation took hold in areas where a theocentric *Weltanschauung* once reigned. This tendency is not confined to the field of writing history alone. A mere glance at today's Haredi society reveals its adoption of a rich variety of value-free or instrumental components of the modern and postmodern worlds—such as satellite broadcasting, juvenile literature, use of the Internet, and much more. This has occurred even as the leaders and followers of the Haredi way continue to cling to the golden days of the past—in

their dress codes, yeshiva studies, independent educational and judicial systems, etc. One must conclude that the partial adoption of modernity served, and continues to function, as a Trojan Horse inside the citadel of Haredi society. I believe that in many respects this "forked path" toward modernity—conscious rejection of modern values and "instrumental" adoption of modernity's modus operandi—can explain much of the constant change within, and the enigmatic character of, Haredi society.

Nahum Karlinsky is senior lecturer at the Ben Gurion Research Institute, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, and author of Counter History: the Hasidic Epistles from Eretz-Israel—Text and Context (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1998).

Bagels and Grits

A Jew on the Bayou
Jennifer Anne Moses

"One of the most moving spiritual memoirs I've ever read." —James Wilcox, Louisiana State University
Cloth \$26.95



Carl Schmitt and the Jews

The "Jewish Question," the Holocaust, and German Legal Theory
Raphael Gross Translated by Joel Golb

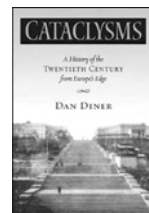
A conclusive reexamination of antisemitism in the life and work of a controversial German legal and political theorist.
The Mosse Series Cloth \$45.00



Cataclysms

A History of the Twentieth Century from Europe's Edge
Dan Diner

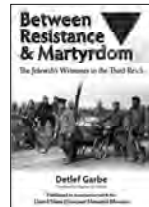
"An original and intellectually challenging interpretation."
—Fritz Stern, author of *Five Germans I Have Known*
The Mosse Series Cloth \$35.00



Between Resistance and Martyrdom

Jehovah's Witnesses in the Third Reich
Detlef Garbe Translated by Dagnar G. Grimm

"A compelling and deeply important, understudied story."
—Michael Berenbaum, author of *A Promise to Remember*
Cloth \$95.00 Paper \$39.95



At booksellers or visit our Web site
The University of Wisconsin Press
www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress