A Closer Look at Hasidic Jews

by

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The Hasidim are a religious movement within the framework of Jewish laws and practices, but possess their own unique customs and traditions. Their everyday lives are dictated by religious ideas and principles which differentiate them from non-Jews and Jews alike. Although the Hasidim are Orthodox Jews, all Orthodox Jews are not Hasidic. The distinction between Hasidic and non-Hasidic lies primarily in the intensity of their beliefs and practices, by their close association with their leader, and by their social structure.

What is commonly referred to as the Hasidic community is a number of different groups, each with allegiance to a different rebbe. The goal of keeping the integrity of Orthodox Judaism alive is shared by all groups, but they are widely divided on a variety of other issues. There are, however, similar facets of their life which are common to all. When one thinks of a tight knit group like the Hasidic Jews, the thought of community immediately comes to mind. Theirs is a community bound not by physical isolation, but rather by social barriers. There are some fundamental institutions that keep the community alive: the family, the synagogue, and the Yeshiva. It has been my aim to take a closer look at these aspects that are of such importance in the life of a Hasidic Jew. Description of and a greater knowledge of their life has been my goal. By describing these different institutions I will show the importance each play in the continuity, strength, centrality of the community. This paper examines their history, problems in studying this little known group, distinguishes between the two largest sects of Hasidism,

the role the rebbe plays in the community group, and a focuses on the dynamics of a Hasidic family with an emphasis on the role of the women.

A Brief History of Hasidism

Although the modern Hasidic movement goes back to eighteenth century Poland, Hasidism has roots in Biblical times. The Hebrew word Hasid literally means "pious one".[1] The Book of Psalms and the Book of Maccabees One and Two both mention the word.[2] In Palestine, a group calling themselves the Hasideans partook in a revolt against the Hellenized Syrian Antiochus Epiphanes, who was trying to Hellenize the Jews during the second century B.C.[3] This group of Jews was not considered to be any different from other Jews, as Hasidic Jews now are, but rather were known for their purity, saintliness, and strong convictions even when faced with persecution.[4]

Another resurgence of Hasidism prior to modern Hasidism was during the twelfth century in Germany. This early movement never achieved the popularity it did in the eighteenth century, but nonetheless flourished from about the middle of the twelfth century to the middle of the thirteenth century.[5] Even though twelfth-century and eighteenth-century Hasidism had little in common, both movements helped bring together a pious people in

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[1] Lis Harris, Holy Days (New York: Summit Books, 1985), p. 32.

[2] ibid., 32.

[3] ibid., 32.

[4] ibid., 32.

[5] ibid., 33.

time periods known for violence and persecution.[6]

The modern Hasidic movement began in the extreme south-east of Poland and Lithuania and was shaped by the political tension prevalent in Jewish society at the time. This was due in part to the breakup of the country. This stress, combined with the problems stemming from the Chmielnicki and Haidamack massacres, reshaped the framework of the shaken Jewish leadership.

Israel b. Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov appears to have been one of the leaders known for ecstatic behavior and anti-ascetic outlook and is credited with being the founder of the modern Hasidim. Rabbi Israel was born in 1698 in the Ukraine in the province of Podolia, which at the time belonged to Poland.[7] In Hasidic circles, he is usually referred to as the Besht which is an acronym of Baal Shem Tov or "Master of the Good Name".[8] He was a popular leader to whom people were attracted by his use of magic potions, spells, visions, and for his personality. People were drawn to him and came to him for guidance and thus came to be the leader of Hasidic circles. Both he and his followers were convinced of his powers to exorcise demons and believed in his visions. At his death he left behind a closely knit group, a circle of devoted disciples, and a broad group of devout admirers.

The impact Baal-Shem had on the history of the religion is largely due to the way he lived. He did not proceed from a teaching, but moved to a teaching in a way that made life a teaching.[9] Of the words we have of Baal-Shem, he says it is not

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[6] ibid., 33.

[7] ibid., p. 47.

[8] ibid., p. 47.

[9] Martin Buber, The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 25.

the objective content that is significant, but their character of pointing to a life. Of the little information that exist on Baal-Shem, if we trust the that tradition has been passed down faithfully, he was supposedly a man of high spiritual rank and many great men paid him reverence. He was not a sharp-witted, well-versed ascetic, but a pure and unified man who was active in the life of his people.

The Besht's teachings, which form the core of all Hasidic belief, emphasize the mystical presence of God in all things--eating, praying, social intercourse, and lovemaking.[10] Hasidism is not merely a teaching, but also a way of life. Moreover, the Hasidic way of life is not to be regarded as a "realization" of Hasidic teaching, but rather it is a new way of living that moves toward a theological explanation.[11] This is one aspect of Hasidism which makes it so unique and great: an introduction to a new way of life.[12]

After a brief period of uncertainty (1760-66), the leadership of the second generation of the movement passed to Dov Baer of Mezhirech. Although he was opposed by many of Baal-Shem's disciples and circle of friends, he nonetheless took up active leadership and Hasidism continued to spread. Unlike Baal-Shem, Dov Baer was not the charismatic man that attracted people and thus had many missionaries who went forth attracting scholars to Hasidism.

The basic pattern of Hasidic leadership and succession emerged in the third generation of the movement (1773-1815) and

[10] Harris, Holy Days, p. 49.

[11] Buber, The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, p. 24.

[12] ibid., p. 26.

with it assured the victory of Hasidism over its opponents and perpetuated its spread throughout Europe. The spread and growth of Hasidism, both geographically and in numbers, the diversified leaders, each with their own style of teaching and interpretation of the Hasidic way, the breakup of former lines of communication caused by the break up of Poland and Lithuania, and last, the pressure on the communities to survive amid growing opposition to them-all these factors contributed to the decentralization of leadership of the Hasidic world. From this generation onward, there were a number of contemporary leaders each claiming the allegiance of their followers. Both leadership and allegiance were handed down from generation to generation from which the dynasties of Hasidic *zaddikim* arise. Zaddick, is a term reserved for a holy and righteous man, such as the rebbe.[13]

By the 1830's the main surge of the spread of Hasidism was over. From a persecuted sect it had become the way of life for the majority of Jews in the Ukraine, Galicia, central Poland, and Hungary.

Hasidism emigrated to the United States within the great Jewish migration of 1880-1925, where they generally formed part of the larger body of pious immigrant Jews. Following World War Two surviving Polish and Hungarian Hasidim came to the U.S. The Hungarian Hasidim showed no interest in winning over other Jews and remained self-segregated and concentrated themselves in New York City. A particular group of Hungarian Hasidim settled in Williamsburg, a section of Brooklyn. Others also made New York City their home and claimed Boro Park and Crown Heights as their

[13] George Kranzler, Williamsburg, A Jewish Community in Transition, (New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1961), p. 297.

Hasidic neighborhood.

The Lubavitcher and the Satmarer Hasidim

Within the Hasidic movement exist numerous groups, the largest two being the Lubavitcher and the Satmarer. The American Hasidim are divided into a number of subsects, depending on the rebbe to whom they owe allegiance. The Lubavitcher sect is the most numerous, and trace their beginnings to Poland. They are considered more worldly and sophisticated.[14] The Satmar are of Hungarian origin and are considered to be more conservative. The basic difference between Lubavitcher and other orthodox Jews is the Lubavitcher's close ties with their Rebbe. When asked to comment on what characterizes a Lubavitcher, all emphasize the recognition of the Rebbe as the central figure in their life and their willingness to accept his views.[15] A Lubavitcher is expected to pattern his life as closely as possible to the Rebbe's teaching and instruction. One Hasid describes what what it takes to be a Lubavitcher:

> "It's hard...what makes a person a Lubavitcher. It's simply someone who decides that the Rebbe is someone he will look up to and he will follow his advice and his directions, and he tries to take on custom of Lubavitch as much as he can. It doesn't necessarily mean that he does everything in one day....The main idea is, I would say, following the Rebbe."[16]

Unlike other Hasidic groups which attempt to minimize contact with non-orthodox Jews, the Lubavitch philosophy teaches that all

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[14] Morris N. Kertzer, Today's American Jew, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), p. 159.

[15] William Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston of Canada, 1974), p. 58.

[16] ibid., p. 58.

Jews must be brought into the orthodox fold and that it is their duty to see that this is done:

> "However the Jew must not think only of himself. The commandment "Love thy fellow as thyself" demands the same attitude toward the fellow-Jew. No Jew should ever be given up. It is necessary to kindle in him that pure and holy light, even if it appears to be good only for no more than one day; for even that in itself is worthwhile, and more,--it will steadily grow from day to day, and gradually illuminate his whole life.(Teachers Programme:97)[17]

To accomplish this, Lubavitchers organize different activities that are meant to attract non-orthodox Jews. Lubavitchers invite outsiders to their home and to other social and religious occasions. Because outsiders are welcome to associate with the Lubavitchers, there is less social constraint and looser boundaries separating the outsider from the Lubavitcher than the Satmarer.[18]

Problems in Studying Hasidic Jews

The Hasidic Jews, long known for their self-imposed separation from their fellow man, make it difficult for an outsider to gain entry into their community. People making an effort to study this reclusive group are often rebuffed due to the fact they do not live in the neighborhood and upon entrance are regarded with suspicion. Prospective interviewers normally do not wear Hasidic clothing and lack the traditional beard and earlocks that most men of the community wear. Most sociologists, regardless of a Jewish

[17] ibid., p. 72.

[18] ibid., p. 72.

background, are considered outsiders. The Hasidim feel that if a interviewer were one of them, then there would no need to know what Hasidism is. They feel that there is no reason why one should ask questions about them for if one is not one of them it should be no concern of how the Hasidim live. One Hasidic Jew, when turning down an interview, told the man, "only a Hasidic Jew has a right to write about Hasidism". Still another interviewer, when being rebuffed, remembers being told by a Hasidic Jew:

> "Don't you believe in human decency? Don't you believe in privacy?...These people are pious and holy. There are certain things in life that are indescribable and that should be kept that way. You have absolutely no right to come in here and disturb or even ask about the conduct, behavior, and form of life these people are leading. This form of life is their whole existence, this is their totality of being. You dare touch that? You cannot do it...You should not do it."

The group is careful to guard against sensationalistic journalism because many newspaper reporters have taken advantage of the Hasidim. Thus, many are reluctant to share information about themselves for the fear of being misrepresented. One article in Life aroused much dissatisfaction among the group that described them with "uncomplimentary remarks". The article read as follows:

> "Carryovers from the archaic Jewish way of life can be seen today in a shabby looking section of Brooklyn called Williamsburg. There, amid drug stores, service stations, and delicatessens, move strange figures that seem to belong to another age--bearded men with side curls and long black coats."[19]

[19] "Life", No. 24, (June 13, 1955), p. 38.

Also, the group as a whole does not speak English. Some of the Hasidim claim to speak a little English, but words such as "yes", "no", "okay", and "business" can hardly be considered adequate in general conversation, much less interview form. The Williamsburg group as a whole speaks Hungarian Yiddish, which was a distinct benefit to the interviewer and author, Solomon Poll, who attended a Hasidic rabbinical school in Hungary with some Hasidic Jews who now live in Williamsburg. His knowledge of their language immediately gave him a common ground with them and they exclaimed "Oh, you speak Hungarian", which immediately identified him as someone who was not a complete outsider.[20]

Although admittance into a Hasidic community is difficult, Poll eventually was able to gain acceptance and admittance into the Hasidic community of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, New York. He made his first contact with a member of the Hasidic community with the help of what he called a "reference person".[21] This reference person was a non-Hasidic Jew who was open to Poll's quest for information. After Poll had talked with him and developed a good rapport with him, he asked his newfound acquaintance to introduce him to a Hasidic friend, which this man did. After Poll had again developed a relationship with this person, he asked him to introduce him to yet another friend of theirs, which most people agreed to do. He asked each person with whom he was talking to say favorable thing about him or his study and to assure this suspicious stranger that Poll actually was trustworthy. He found

[20] Solomon Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), p. 271.

[21] ibid., p. 271.

that when using this method of using a friend to introduce him to someone new reduced the suspicion because this new person associated Poll with someone who was already accepted and trusted in the community, which made Poll, in a sense, semi-acceptable or at least worthy of being considered. The fact that he was introduced by a person whom the informant knew well was an indication that Poll was not a complete stranger.

Poll found that most people felt free to talk at festive occasions such as wedding and bar mitzvahs. It would be at these festivities that he would drop names in casual conversation with strangers about people of various and often influential people within the community that he had met. This also inclined the strangers, if not to trust him, to at least listen to what he had to say.

He also found it beneficial to create situations that would put him in a position to do a Hasidic Jew a favor, such as contributing to an organization or lending him money. This then made the Jew obligated to reciprocate in some way, preferably in repayment of conversation.

A favorite pastime of the Williamsburg community is what Poll calls "politicking," or talking politics about the numerous Hasidic rebbes.[22] Much time is spent arguing as to which rebbe is the holiest man on earth. Upon gaining information about who was a faithful follower of one rebbe and who pledged their allegiance to another, he proposed challenging questions that many could not resist from answering. Once the Hasidic Jew began talking, it became evident that he liked talking about himself and about

[22] ibid., p. 274.

topics he felt were important.[23]

Poll found it beneficial to appear to be a bit naive in his knowledge and his questions, but not too much so that the informant would worry his answers would be misunderstood. Thus the informant again had a chance to instruct Poll on what he knew and had the chance to talk of himself and his opinions, which many people find gratifying when able to instruct and teach the less-learned.

Poll did not conduct standardized interviews but rather relied on informal "interviews" which many saw merely as simple conversation. Without a structured list of questions he was able to guide the conversation but yet maintain a high level of flexibility. He then evaluated the accuracy of each person's statements simply by conversing with other Hasidic Jews to see if they had heard the same things. All facts, except those about the informant's personal life were confirmed by the other members of the community.[24]

Beside interviewing, Poll visited the various synagogues and observed Hasidic activities. Although he participated in many of the Hasidic activities, he never gained full admittance into the community at Williamsburg and ultimately achieved the status of only an "author who is going to write about the Hasidim."[25] Because he was not seen as a threat and had been in and out of the community for thirteen years, he was tolerated and considered relatively harmless. It was through these tactics that Poll was able to produce the most encompassing firsthand view of Hasidic

[23] ibid., p. 274.

[24] ibid., p. 276.

[25] ibid., p. 277.

Jews and their community that I encountered throughout my research.

Hasidic Community

One hesitates to define "community" in terms of any shared values, for even the most casual observer will note that Jews differ considerably on a variety of issues. However, nearly all Jews share the conviction that Jews must survive as a distinct group. Some place greater emphasis on the survival of religious aspects while others stress cultural forms. Regardless of the differences, most would agree that Jews must survive.

This necessity to endure and continue is at the core of the Hasidic movement in the formation of community. All Hasidic Jews lead an individual life, but it is their community which continually renews their spirit. Each community lives a brotherly life and continues to be able to do so with the help of a leader who "[brings] them closer together by bringing them closer to that in which they believe".[26] Some communities are more closely bound to their leader than others, but all activity is influenced by their contact with their master. Buber, however, claims the Hasidic communities are by no means model communities and their leaders are not what in Christianity one would call a saint.

Saint or not, every Hasidic community is lead by a rebbe which in Yiddish means rabbi, teacher, or master.[27] The nature of a Hasidic rebbe's authority is unlike that of a rabbi who is ordained only to decide on question of ritual law. While the

[26] Buber, The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, p. 27.

[27] Kranzler, Williamsburg: A Jewish community in Transition, p.293.

rabbi is respected for his learning and education, he is not regarded by his followers as possessing unique powers. The rebbe, however, to his followers, is believed to be endowed with extraordinary powers of perception and wisdom.[28] Most recognize the centrality the rebbe holds in their life and practice a willingness to accept his views. Few Hasidim will engage in an important event without his consent.

The rebbe is not considered to be employed by the religious congregation. He considered the "totum factum"; he is the congregation.[29] He does not receive a salary, but instead receives *pidyan,* literally meaning "redemption" or "delivery" from his followers.[30]

The Rebbe's influence over his followers is closely related to the economic activities of the Hasidim. In a community where behavior is guided by religion and where religion is the single most important factor in the lives of the community, it is inevitable that religious leaders will assume the highest social position. The rebbes, described by the Hasidic community, are "engaged in leading and directing the members toward the way of righteousness."[31] Because the Rebbes do religious counseling and because almost every aspect of Hasidic life falls within this realm, they have a monopoly over religious values. They define the Hasidic values. They then must also prescribe activities and behavior to complement and reinforce these values. Furthermore, the community must supply religious goods to reinforce these

[28] Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, p. 58.

[29] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p.118.

[30] ibid., p. 118.

[31] ibid., p. 127.

values that will also be sanctioned by the rebbe. For example, in order to appropriately observe dietary laws, the community must provide food sanctioned by the rebbe, which is prepared and sold by members who are also deemed acceptable to the rebbe.[32] Thus the Rebbe consents to the use of a product and may formally sanction specific items to have religious significance. This process strengthens the community's economic activity by keeping the exchange of money within the community which in turn helps the group to remain isolated.[33]

The religious life of Jews is based on the Torah. It is in the Torah where the Jew finds no fewer the six hundred and thirteen commandments, proscriptive and prescriptive, which touch on every imaginable aspect of life: dietary, religious and sexual habits.[34] Moreover, Jews have never lived by Torah alone, except in biblical times. They rely on Rabbinic authorities to interpret and refine Mosaic rules.[35] There are rules for what the first words uttered at the start of each day, how many steps one can take from one's bed before washing ones's fingers, at what age men should marry (no later than eighteen according to the rule), and how a woman should purify herself after her monthly menstrual cycle. These are but a few examples of the rules and schedules that dominate Hasidic life.

It is of utmost importance to the Hasidim that their tradition is carried on. One way in which Hasidim counter

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[32] ibid., p. 127.

[33] ibid., p. 127.

[34] Egon Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), p. 4.

[35] ibid, p. 4.

American society is by making everyday practices a sacred ritual. Unlike some Protestant sects of withdrawal like the Amish or Mennonite, Hasidim do not deprive themselves of technology, but rather put the material world to use in order to promote their religious norms. For example, although the automobile may be seen as a potential danger to the unity of the society because it takes people away from the community, it becomes a means by which to bring their children to the Yeshiva, where they study Torah and Talmud. It is in this way that the car, which could be regarded as a goyish mechanism, in an indirect way becomes a tool for them in that it furthers the education of their children who in turn ensure the preservation of their tradition. The refrigerator, instead of being an example of modernity and of the outside world, becomes an aid in their dietary observances. Likewise, the automatic timer, instead of being a symbol of modern technology, becomes a religious object making the observance of the Sabbath easier. Therefore, American culture has not yet endangered the entity of Hasidic Jews because they have successfully formed a system allowing them to accept these objects and weave them into their creeds.[36]

Asceticism is not part of the Hasidic culture. The Hasidic Jews consider wealth and secure economic resources as necessary for the proper observance of religion.[37] This is in accord with Max Weber's view that "inner-worldly asceticism was absent in ancient Israel". Weber states further that "pharisaic (rabbinic) Judaism was also far from rejecting wealth or from thing that it be dangerous. Wealth was, indeed, considered prerequisite to

[36] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p. vii.

[37] ibid., p. vii.

certain priestly functions".[38] The American value of hard work, has greatly influenced the Hasidic Jews, driving them to reach economic success.

Another technique the Hasidim use in trying to preserve their identity is to direct their members' lives so that they conform to certain standards or sets of expectations. Often, communities make use of certain identifying features such as dress, isolation, language and a common history, to make its members feel unified.

The Hasidic style of dress is an important identifying symbol and also serves as a tangible distinction between community members and outsiders.[39] The clothing of the Hasidic Jews is regarded to be the traditional Jewish garments once worn by all Jews.[40] The type of Hasidic clothing varies from class to class, and to the degree they are associated with their the Hasidim.[41] Their clothing also acts not only as a physical distinction of their social class but also of their status in the community, both economic and religious.[42] Their external appearance may be seen as a status symbol, but these symbols must be consistent with the intensity of their religious behavior.[43] For example,the less Hasidic men , ones who are less involved with the community and whose religious performance is less intense, wear clothes that reflect western society. Likewise, the most observant Hasidic Jews are also identifiable by their clothing. Unlike certain

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[38] Max Weber, Ancient Judaism, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1952), p. 3.

[39] William Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, p. 49.

[40] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p. 65.

[41] ibid., p. 65.

[42] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p. 74.

[43] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p. 68.

Hasidic groups such as the Satmarer, who insist their members dress in the same manner as their ancestors, the Lubavitcher Hasidim have also adapted a western standards.[44] This is not to say that all Lubavitcher Hasidim don the latest fashion; men are still expected to wear dark colored clothing and women are supposed to be conscious of dressing modestly.[45]

There are two factors that are key to a Hasidic Jew's external appearance. One is the Hasidic garment and the other is the beard and ear-locks.[46] Even the least observant Hasid wear the beard and earlocks. The earlocks are allowed to flow freely only within the community, but are tucked behind the ears once they leave the boundaries of their neighborhood.[47] Other clothing items associated with the Hasidim are slipper like shoes and white knee socks, fur hats, long silk coats, and large brimmed hats made of beaver pelts.[48] The most observant, such as the Rebbe, are the only ones who, without exception, wear the articles mentioned above for wearing such clothing is in itself a religious act.[49] As one Jew stated: "Looking like a Jew with the image of God upon one's face" helps to guard against sin.[50] Other articles are worn by members of the community depending on rank, generally the lower the status in the community, the fewer Hasidic articles are worn.

Women's clothing , like that of men's, is traditional and

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[44] Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, p. 49.

[45] ibid., p. 49.

[46] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p. 66.

[47] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p. 73.

[48] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p. 67.

[49] ibid., p. 68.

[50] ibid., p. 65.

modest. They have their elbows and knees covered and show no cleavage. The wearing of pants is taboo.[51] Married women are also required to wear a wig when in the presence of anyone but their husband.

Another technique used by the Hasidim to preserve their community is using a common language. The Hasidim, in general, will not speak English unless they are forced to. Their everyday language is Yiddish. Many are unwilling to learn English for they feel that if they learn the English language they will begin to act in way that are in accord with the greater American society. However, this unwillingness to learn another language is not uniform through all Hasidic groups. The Lubavitchers, for example, are more likely to speak English for they feel it is their duty to maintain contact with Jews of varying degrees of religiousness.[52] Also, in some Hasidic groups, there are parents who will not allow their children to attend the Yeshiva until a certain age so it is not uncommon to find five-year-olds who can neither speak nor understand English.[53]

Another mechanism practiced by the Hasidim, as well as other religious groups, to maintain and continue their religious tradition is isolation. When religious groups live in physical isolation, maintaining their identity and beliefs is relatively easy. Many Hasidim, however, live in densely populated urban areas, making the task of preventing assimilation a difficult one. Particularly in New York City, where various peoples of different cultures interact, it is difficult to maintain isolation. Even a

[51] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p. 73.

[52] Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, p. 60.

[53] ibid., p. 51.

Hasidic Jew, as soon as he leaves the synagogue is exposed to aspects of American culture which encourage assimilation. For example, the automobile can be seen as a potential evil because it takes the Jew away from the community. The Hasidim must therefore devise a scheme with which they can keep the community intact, thus allowing the Hasidic Jews to maintain their identity and insuring the transmission of their culture to future generations. Because physical isolation in large cities is next to impossible, the Hasidim must establish social barriers for its members. Their purpose is to keep contact with the outside world to a minimum and to discourage ideals, values, and goals contrary to their own from infiltrating their community.

The Institution of Family

The act of selecting a prospective mate for marriage is done someone who acts as a marriage broker, or *shadchan*.[54] A young man's or woman's choices are limited to those people who have been approved by the family and who meet Hasidic requirements.[55] The concept of "dating" is inconceivable to the Hasidim because they feel a marriage reached by courtship is based on sin. They feel American courtship patterns are a series of sins each "more intensive then they preceding one in the severity of its religious violation."[56] Poll gives us an example of this concept in The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg:

> "For a young Hasidic man to 1) "commit the sin of walking with a girl on the streets, 2)to repeat this

[54] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p. 52.

[55] ibid., p. 52.

[56] ibid., p. 43.

> sin by continuing to take a girl out, 3) to take her to a movie where obscenity is heard and seen in symbolic figures, or 4) to attend a theater where obscenity is heard and seen in live presentations. These are dark places which lead to even greater sins. Men and Women may even 5) touch each other and 6) meet in private. Even if they do no enter into a very intimate relationship, 7) the 'thought of sin' in itself is dangerous since it may lead to 8) physical impurity."[57]

The Hasidim is a group where gender separation is one of the most important community norms, and their behavior and thinking reflects reflects this value. To accept American customs of dating would lead to impurity. [58]

The final decision, however, rests with the young couple. If a father has an eligible daughter, the shadchan finds a match, *shiduch*.[59] The young couple usually meets through the marriage broker and in most cases the shadchan comes to the house of the young girl and tells her parents about the particular prospect he has in mind for their eligible daughter. Her parents then try to acquire as much information as they can about this man. For example they will try to learn of his family background, the Yeshiva he attended, the grades he earned in the Yeshiva, and his financial standing. After this information is obtained, and he is deemed sufficient, the parents arrange for the two people to meet which usually takes place in the house of the girl. One Hasidic woman remembers the procedure:

> "My husband and I were first introduced at a wedding, but the young couples usually meet for short time in a house or in some other place. The

[57] ibid., p. 43.

[58] ibid., p. 52.

[59] ibid., p. 53.

> following morning the shadchan called. He wanted to know what had happened. The young man seemed to be interested. The shadchan tried to arrange another meeting. My parents asked me if I wanted to meet the young man again. After we met for the second time, the shadchan call on my parents and told them that the young man was "definitely interested"; therefore, "Let's get down to business...."[60]

One shadchan claims that what she does is much more than just bringing two people together: she claims to take on the role of psychologist, counselor, and social worker. She finds her role to be beneficial in that she eliminates the problem of the "rat race" and the problems that arise as a result of unscreened meetings between boys and girls. Young adults are expected to marry at an early age, preferably at seventeen or eighteen and marriages are for life. Divorce is almost non existent.[61]

Egon Mayer, in his book From Suburb to Shtetl, claims the function of the *shiduch* has changed considerably. Although match making is still serious business in the Hasidic community, its objectives are now different. Mayer explains how traditionally a primary goal of arranged marriages was to preserve *yichus*, but this no longer is of primary importance. "The shiduch was the social control mechanism by means of which yichus was protected..."[62]

The concept of yichus refers to the "purity and prestige of ones's lineage".[63] The important objective of yichus in the community is that "within the community the yichus of every member is generally known down to the last detail, and to recite one's

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[60] ibid., p.55.

[61] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p. 100.

[62] ibid., p. 81.

[63] Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, Life is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl, (New York: Schocken: 1962), p. 78.

yichus to a new acquaintance is an integral part of an introduction."[64] Some sub-communities within the larger community of Boro Park have successfully kept the tradition of yichus alive and thus it does exist in some small synagogues in the Boro Park area. The Rebbe, after all, owes his position of power to his yichus. However, in a community with a population numbering in the tens of thousands, familiarizing oneself with the lineage of others living in your community is impossible. Thus the yichus becomes a poor indicator of one's status in a large urban community and is becoming increasingly useless in the modern Hasidic community.[65]

The Hasidic Family

The Jewish family has been described as the "prototype of a patriarchal pattern."[66] The Bible has contributed much to the patriarchal structure of the family prevalent in our culture, starting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Also, the concept of "our heavenly father" or "our father who art in heaven" has perpetuated the ideology that families are to be headed by a man. From Biblical times up until the present, the traditional family, with father as the patriarch and mother as the homemaker, has been the backbone of the Hasidic life and identity.[67] The family has been and continues to be the fundamental institution of the

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[64] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p. 81.

[65] George Kranzler, Williamsburg, A Jewish Community in Transition, (New York: Phillip Feldheim, Inc., 1961), p. 117.

[66] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p. 99.

[67] ibid., p. 100.

Hasidic community.[68]

Many sociologist consider the family to be the backbone of many religious communities. There is, however, very little information or actual research on the nature of the Hasidic family. One random survey done in Boro Park describe most families as falling between the stereotypical extended family and the typical middle-class "conjugal nuclear unit".[69] Fifty-six families were interviewed and only two of these families claimed that they had no relatives living with them of in the vicinity. Twenty eight families said that apart from the nuclear family, they also had other family living with them such as aunt, uncles, in-laws and cousins living in their neighborhood.[70]

Perhaps the most basic fact of the modern Hasidic household is that most members of the family are not at home for the majority of the day. Children are at school, fathers are at work, and, increasingly, many women are also in the work force, at least on a part time basis.[71] Family connections play and important role in finding jobs for relatives or for organizing business endeavors, especially for the males.[72]

The family has also receded from its role in the socialization of the young. What is passed on to the young is more like to come from the mouth of the rebbe than from their parents.[73] The yeshiva, a school in which children or young adults

[68] ibid., p. 99.

[69] ibid., p. 99.

[70] ibid., p. 100.

[71] ibid., p. 101.

[72] ibid., p. 104.

[73] ibid., p. 180.

learn religious subject matter as well as secular subjects, has taken on the job of socialization.[74]

Grandparents are of special importance to the family structure. For the most part they represent many of the old customs and traditions and practice them as they did in Europe. It is through their experience and their association with the family that the traditional values are perpetuated and carried on.[75] Few speak more than a few words of English, and so their native tongue is passed on to their children and grandchildren. Yiddish embodies the spirit of "traditional values and Orthodox life style", and through it many grandchildren are acquainted with the world their elders have left behind.[76]

One of the most important functions of the Hasidic family is having children, which is a commandment of God: "Even if a person has fulfilled the commandment of 'be fruitful and increase,' he is still enjoined not to refrain from fruitfulness and increase as long he is able for he who adds a life in Israel is as he who built a world." (Ishut 15:16). Birth control is not practiced by the majority of Hasidic women. It is only after the birth of five or six children, or without the knowledge of her husband, that a woman would use birth control. This is possible for it is conceivable to the community that after having five or six children a woman is beyond her child bearing years and is no longer able to conceive.[77]

While the subject of birth control is taboo, it is generally

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[74] ibid., p. 56.

[75] Kranzler, Williamsburg, a Community in Transition, p. 126.

[76] Kranzler, Williamsburg, a Community in Transition, p. 127.

[77] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, pp. 100-101.

assumed that Hasidic Jews do not practice it by artificial means, Egon Mayer, Boro Park bred sociologist, found almost no woman in his survey who considered herself fulfilled as a housewife. All expressed desire to be employed outside of caring for her family. With one or two exceptions, he also found no women who continued to bear children throughout their fertile years. While the most religious families tended to have more children (four to six), very few women were having children in their late thirties or forties. Egon says this finding suggests that women, after having what is considered to be a desirable number of children, practice some form of birth control. Egon also says this form is unlikely to be abstinence, for this frowned upon by Jewish law.[78]

The Hasidic family organization shows a division of labor in which the husband and father is the breadwinner and the over all supervisor of religious matters, whereas the wife and mother is in charge of the housekeeping and seeing that the Hasidic family norms are strictly followed by her children. The freedom of the woman is limited, and she has to fulfill all those roles expected of women. She may not take an active part in the labor force.[79] Personal attractiveness is not highly emphasized. The wife is not expected to be a good social companion for an excessive husband/wife relationship is discouraged.[80]

The Role of Women

"A woman of valor who can find; for her price is far above rubies" (Proverbs 31:10). A Jewish sage once

[78] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p.43.

[79] ibid., p. 53.

[80] A. E. Kitov, The Jew and his Home, (New York: Shengold, 1963), p. 59.

said: "This psalms is in praise of the woman who deliberately gives up her father's ways in favor of those of her husband; who smiles upon him even when he is angry; who honors him in poverty as well as in wealth, in old age as in youth. She is slow to leave home but quick to give bread to the poor. Though she may have many servants, she does not sit idly by, but works with them. She is attentive to those who address her, but not hasty in response. She is happy with her husband's happiness, and a source of hope to him when he is burdened with woe. Her way are seemly and she is clad in modesty."[81]

The expected role of the woman in traditional Hasidic society is repressed and subservient as noted in the passage above. This could be the reason there was so little information devoted in the various sources to the role and function of women. Neither Kranzler not Poll devote much attention to the issue. Mayer, presents a more recent interpretation of a woman's role. He claims that in traditional Hasidic communities the woman's status is based directly on the status of either her father, if she is unmarried, or her husband. Because of expanding opportunities for women in the job market, Hasidic women are increasingly emerging with personally achieved status. The status of a prospective bride is much enhanced if she herself is able to hold a job and earn an income that is adequate to support her and her husband, being that many men may be completing professional or religious education.[82]

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[81] Hayim Halevy Donin, To Be a Jew, (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1972), p. 136.

[82] Israel Rubin, Satmar: An Island in the City, (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1972), p.125.

Mayer did a study of Jewish families in Boro Park and found the women whose children who were old enough to be enrolled in kindergarten are frequently employed outside the home. His study was consistent with another similar study done among the Satmarer Hasidim of Williamsburg where they found that fifty-two percent of women whose youngest children were six years old or older had jobs outside of the home.[83] Rubin found that while newlyweds prefer to have children soon after marriage, the young wives he encountered in Boro Park all expressed a serious interest in going back to work just as soon as the first child was old enough to be able to go to kindergarten.[84] He felt these attitude clearly reflected an attitude of family planning.[85] It was clear from the comments of most of the young women that they did not intend to bear children one after the other, nor to devote their time to a life of mothering and nurturing. The women he interviewed tended to look at working as a world that they would at some time like to go back to. Rubin attribute this attitude to their level of education.[86] Almost all had been employed previous to being married and prior to having their first child. He also accredits their desire for work to the women's movement of the 1970's and also to the desire for economic stability.[87]

The unmarried Hasidic woman in not distinguishable from other members of the community. The only requirement that an unmarried Hasidic woman must meet is to dress "modestly", which consists of

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[83] ibid., p.125.

[84] ibid., p.125.

[85] ibid., p.125.

[86] ibid., p.125.

[87] Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, p. 84.

a high-necked, long sleeved dress.[88] The Hasidim believe that young Hasidic women should be taught modesty, chastity, and respect. They also feel it is important for the women to marry early in life so that they will stay with the community and not be swayed to join American culture.[89]

A duty expected of women and required by Torah is state of *niddah*. Leviticus 18:19 states a man "...shall not come near a woman while she is impure by her uncleanness to uncover her nakedness". For a full seven day period from the onset of the monthly menstrual period, the Torah prohibits all sexual relations between husband and wife. The technical term for the state in which the wife is in during the menstrual period is call *niddah* which literally means " to be removed or separated".[90] By Rabbinic edict, the Talmud extended this period of separation to "seven clean days" following the menstrual period.[91] Since the menstrual period lasts about five days for the average woman, the total period of separation that is enforced each month is about twelve days. It is interesting to note that the natural fertile period in a woman lasts about three days and this period generally falls at the conclusion of this twelve day period.[92] During this period of separation the husband and wife may not sleep in the same bed in case they may be tempted. It is for this reason that twin bed rather than double beds are generally used in Hasidic

[88] ibid., p.43.

[89] Poll, The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg, p.53.

[90] ibid., p. 136.

[91] ibid., p. 136.

[92] ibid., p. 136.

homes.[93]

A woman remains in the state of niddah until she has immersed herself in a ritual body of water (*mikvah*). This immersion is the ritual act which divides the two periods of time--the period of separation when marital relations are forbidden and the period of union when such relations are not only permissible but regarded as essential to physical and mental health.[94] The proper time for the mikvah is after nightfall, following the seventh clean day. Unless her husband is out of town, the wife is expected to visit the mikvah. At the mikvah, supervised by a woman attendant, the woman prepares herself for the ritual immersion by first cleansing herself thoroughly in a hot bath and removing all articles of she may be wearing, such as bandages, hairpins, rings, even nail polish. These articles are considered to cause a barrier between the water and all body parts.[95] The first time a women is obligated to immerse herself in a mikvah is prior to her wedding. This act removes her from the state of *niddah*.[96]

The Yeshiva

Many religious communities view public education as a threat to their unique way of life. Since public schools are a breeding ground for assimilation, the Hasidim have chosen to establish their own schools within their community. The *Yeshiva*, is a Hebrew word meaning "higher school."[97] The Yeshiva serves not only as a

[93] ibid., p. 137.

[94] Donin, To Be a Jew, p.37.

[95] ibid., p. 138.

[96] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p.80.

[97] Kranzler, Williamsburg, a Jewish Community in Transition, p. 297.

spiritual center where the Hasidim come to pray but also as a social or community center where various functions such as wedding, Bar Mitzvahs, and circumcision ceremonies are regularly held.[98] People come here not only to study and pray, but the Yeshiva is also a place where on can come to socialize. The spiritual and social activities in the shul and yeshiva are the source of their "spiritual nourishment".[99] However, The Yeshiva's main purpose is for the education of the boys and girls are not allowed to attend. The curriculum in the Yeshiva is devoted to both religious and secular studies, with each commanding three and a half hours each. The Hebrew curriculum is studied in the morning because this is considered more important than secular studies. As one teacher said "Hebrew studies are always in the morning. It's more important and the child is more impressionable then and he's more alert."[100] Another teacher said studying Hebrew in the morning is in accord with the community's religious philosophy:

> "...this is a religious outlook, the same as we say prayers in the morning. It is something like the life span of the person--the young years, the middle years, and the old years. So education is given to the young years. You don't train a child to make money and then when he gets in his thirties to get his education. First comes the foundation. It's the same way with the day. First comes the prayer, then the study and then go out to work. We would like the children to follow the same pattern when they grow up, to know that first comes the (Almighty), and then you can attend to your other needs. In the morning first comes the prayer, then the Hebrew studies, and then the secular studies for making a living."[101]

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[98] Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, p. 85.

[99] ibid., p. 85.

[100] ibid., p. 119.

[101] ibid., p. 120.

While a secular curriculum is available to both boys and girls, Shaffir has found that the norms regulating attendance of class differ between the sexes.[102] The males are expected to be familiar with many more religious precepts than are females and consequently the males focus more on their religious studies. While girls have both religious and secular studies, there are two different routes boys can take in their Yeshiva. The majority of boys do study both, but there exists a minority of "hard core" boys who disapprove of learning secular subjects and refrain from doing so and generally express feelings of disapproval for those who do not do as they do.[103]

In contrast to larger society in which school tend to separate the children from the adults, the hasidic school is utilized by both young and old. The two are continually in contact. They pray in the same shul and meet at many of the community's celebrations. The Yeshiva, therefore, is instrumental in furthering the community by instilling in their children a positive feeling toward traditional Judaism and encourages them to remain within the community as observant Jews.

Some of the main features of the Yeshiva are the shul in the basement, an auditorium, and a schoolyard which together provide virtually all the accommodations the community needs.

The Hasidic Synagogue or *shul*

[102] ibid., p. 120.

[103] ibid., p. 119.

Essentially the Hasidic synagogue is not only the house of prayer, but the focus of the entire community. Either directly of indirectly all aspects of a person's life, whether it be personal or social, are tied with the synagogue.[104] Like all Hasid's, those who can meet in the shul three times daily for services; at any times from dawn until noon they may meet for the morning prayer (Shachris) and at dusk for the afternoon and evening prayers (Mincheh and Myriv). Some arrive as early as seven in the morning to prepare themselves for the morning service. It is required that only ten men need be present to begin the service, so often times services begin an different times and sometimes overlap.[105] Even if a Hasid is unable to attend shul during the week, all attend the Sabbath service.[106]

Women generally only visit the synagogue during at special occasions or on the high holidays. Communication between men and women is virtually impossible due to "impenetrable curtains"[107] present in the synagogue. Many Hasidic synagogues have no women's section at all. Only on special holidays or for festive occasions such as a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah will they set up a section for women in the synagogue, usually partitioned only by a curtain. Otherwise the women are not permitted entry and are expected to be at home fulfilling their domestic obligations, which holds "equal religious merit"[108] .

The choice of a synagogue is determined largely by a person's

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[104] Kranzler, Williamsburg, a Jewish Community in Transition, p. 154.

[105] Shaffir, Life in a Religious Community, p. 87.

[106] ibid., p. 87.

[107] Kranzler, Williamsburg, a Jewish Community in Transition, p. 163.

[108] ibid., p. 163.

preference of the *nusach*, which is the tonal style and sequence of prayers.[109] Another reason the people of an area choose a certain synagogue is for the companionship of the people already attending. Being familiar with a certain tone of prayer and their order is of great importance of the Hasid's appreciation of his/her shul.[110] For one to be able to be included in the service, one is required to be familiar with the nusach. According to Mayer, the prayer service involves a "mutual tuning in" where the members "relive the inner time of their ancestor as well as enter into the on-going experience of their fellow men."[111] The shul then has become a means by which the community can continue to participate in the historical experience of Judaism.[112] It is in the shul that the feeling of community is experienced.

Throughout my research I was often left with the impression that the Hasidim had created for themselves a seemingly utopian society. It seemed to possess many characteristics important for a healthy community: a strong sense of family, strong religion, supportive community, sense of unity, and a common goal. It appeared almost too good to be true, and I often found myself wondering if possibly theirs was a community that truly worked. But yet what about the elements of American society that we struggle with everyday: drug and alcohol abuse, child and wife/husband abuse, theft, murder, racism, AIDS? Theirs was a seemingly isolated world. This seems all the more remarkable in

[109] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p.108.

[110] ibid., p.108.

[111] Mayer, From Suburb to Shtetl, p.108.

[112] ibid., p.108.

that they remained untainted in a city ridden with crime violence. Were they really this successful in dodging greater our western culture? Or could it be that this community is hiding something or is unwilling to admit its own shortcomings?

Dov Libov, a forty-year-old sculptor living in Brooklyn's Boro Park, tells tales of racing down the boulevard at dawn, smoking a joint and frolicking with a forty-year-old topless prostitute. He remembers getting high everyday for more than ten years. From the moment he finished his morning prayers, Dov began chain-smoking pot and experimenting with hallucinogens. He got drunk on the Sabbath because he thought using drugs would not have been appropriate. His wife, Chana preferred Valium and hallucinogenic mushrooms which allowed her to envision "beautiful dragons who loved her."

Joshua Libov, Chana and Dov's nephew, has four years of Narcotics Anonymous sessions under his belt. He is still battling a demon called crack. His aunt and uncle worry not only about his tales of killing others and himself, but about the automatic weapons he keeps in his dresser drawer.

Does this sound like a scenario from an inner-city black ghetto? Perhaps. Dov, Chana, and Joshua are all third generation Boro Park Hasidim, and they belong to a tiny group of recovering addicts living an undercover life. They believe that at least fifteen percent of the city's 150,000 Hasidim are in need of therapy, but most are too afraid to seek help. Unlike the isolated Eastern European shtetls, Hasidic communities in New York bump up against some of the worst neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Many rebbes, confronted with slum violence that threaten their

communities for which they are responsible, reject the thought of any problems within the community. However, without the consent of their sect's rebbe to receive treatment, many Hasidim continue to live in fear of being ostracized and expelled from the community.

There are no concrete statistics to support the Libov's suspicions of abuse among the Hasidim, but the number of Jews participating in the Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Person, and Significant Others Foundation (JACS) is rising daily, according to Jeff Neipris, executive producer. JACS, founded by the United Jewish Appeal Federation, recorded an attendance of 200 Jews at last year's retreat in the Catskill Mountains, of whom forty percent were Hasidic. According to Neipris, the Hasidim has been the fastest growing group in membership. Many of the Hasidic leaders are unreceptive to the organization, and Neipris compares them to the southerners during the civil rights movement. The rebbes are afraid to come to the meetings when invited for the fear that they will be perceived as having a congregation with a problem.

For Chaim Baruch, the overbearing conformity of the Hasidic Satmar sect made him believe he was truly an evil child while growing up. Looking back on his experiences he realizes he was just a "regular mixed up kid, but because of how I grew up my rebellion was front page news. In a community like Williamsburg, nonconformity is blown up until it crashes on you."

In the case of Dov Libov, it is the community's intolerance of nonreligious art that interferes with his ideal as a sculptor. All his life he has been labeled as a goy or non-Jew, which is the

ultimate humiliation and insult for a Hasidic Jew.

Kalman Rokach, a forty-two-year-old recovering alcoholic Hasidic rabbi from California, claims he is often asked by outsiders how Hasidic Jews could possibly have a problem with alcohol or drugs. They ask him, "Aren't all the answers available in the Torah or other teachings?" He tells them, "yes, everything we learn [in AA] was once taught by the [rabbis]. But modern American Hasidism, the way it is practiced by most people today, is not the same as it was intended." Rokach, whose own father was addicted to tranquilizers, believes the "spiritual component of Hasidism has been diluted." He continues,

> "After the Holocaust, when the Hasidism who were left emigrated to the U.S., they switched into a survival mode. They became too external, too concerned with behavior. The most important issue was preserving the ritual and creating new ones to keep out the outside influences. But it left a spiritual vacuum."[113]

Obviously, this piece shows indeed that the Hasidim, despite what they preach and strive for, still has not yet been able to achieve a perfect community. Greater Western culture is indeed infiltrating the closed communities of the Hasidim. Despite their strong sense of community there are obviously aspects of their lives that their community does not yet fulfill. I believe this can partially be accredited to the break down of the family structure that is so prevalent in our society. Although I may have painted a rosy picture of the Hasidic family, one must

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[113] Hass, "Hooked Hasidism" New York 24, (28 January, 1991), p.32.

remember that most of the sources I came across were printed in the 1960's, and thus not current. I have tried to present how the Hasidic family actually functions today, but was able to find information covering limited aspects. I suspect that the Hasidim and its families have as much, if not more, internal strife as the rest of America. Although the use of the matchmaker is not as prevalent as it once was, Hasidic Jews, if they intend to remain Orthodox, have a limited pool from which to catch a mate. This, I feel, poses potential problems by putting considerable pressure on young adults to marry within their community in order to keep their tradition alive.

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