

'DAUGHTER/WIFE OF HASID' — OR:  
'HASIDIC WOMAN'?

*Naftali Loewenthal*

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## 'DAUGHTER/WIFE OF HASID' — OR: 'HASIDIC WOMAN'?

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This paper examines the question of woman as participant in the hasidic movement. Two suggestions are made: 1) the concepts 'daughters of Hasidim' and 'wives of Hasidim' become significant categories in the 20th century; 2) To some extent there has also come into being the concept of 'women hasidim'.

These categories emerge as a response to the changing conditions of modernity as it affects the hasidic community. Let us start in interbellum Poland. Does the young Jewish woman want to be the wife of a hasid, or of any kind of pietist? In the typical orthodox family it was the father, husband or brother who went to the Rebbe, leaving the women at home. The girls were very likely to attend the Polish *gymnasia* where, despite the intense anti-semitism they encountered, they could develop a strong interest in Polish literature and secular values. Deborah Weissman in her study of *Beit Yakov*<sup>1</sup> asks: where would the Yeshivah trained hasidic young men find suitable brides?

For a woman to make the choice to marry a hasid and deliberately turn her back on the attractions of Polish interbellum 'modernity' she would have to have an independent sense of religious identity. On what would this be based? Here we come to the *Beit Yakov* movement. The *Beit Yakov* schools and the parallel *Bnot Agudat Yisrael* recreational

1 'Beis Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists', in: E. Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman*, New York 1976, pp. 139-148.

organisations nurtured the growth of personal feminine spirituality, in effect creating the person who could become the 'wife of a hasid' — or indeed of the scholarly mitnaged. Organised Jewish education for girls was a novelty in Eastern European orthodoxy. Even more radical was the transformation of the young graduates of *Beit Yakov* into activists.

Dr Judith Rosenbaum, later Grunfeld, worked in the Cracow *Beit Yakov* teachers seminary with Sarah Schenirer from 1924 to 1929. She describes how 15 year old Gittel travels with Frau Schenirer to a little shtetl where a meeting of women has been organised. By pinning up her hair and wearing a long dress Gittel looks older than she really is.

..[From] the platform.. [Gittel] sees hundreds of faces staring up at her and she hears herself delivering a speech she memorized in the morning... After she has finished [Frau Schenirer] asks the audience whether they are willing to start a school with this girl as a teacher... There is an enthusiastic response. They enroll their children and contribute to the setting up of the school. Gittel remains behind to be the one and only teacher, while Frau Schenirer takes the next train [back to Cracow]...<sup>2</sup>

Fueling this activism and empowerment was the spiritual relationship of the girls with Sarah Schenirer. This included grave-visiting, which Chava Weissler describes as a significant component of the spirituality of earlier Ashkenazi womanhood,<sup>3</sup> and also ecstatic dancing. Here was being created the 'wife of the hasid', or indeed of any pietist. Weissman says that the problem was no longer finding suitable brides for the yeshivah students but rather suitable husbands for the *Beit Yakov* graduates.<sup>4</sup>

To what extent were these girls specifically attached to Hasidism, or to

2 M. Dansky, *Rebbetzin Grunfeld*, Brooklyn 1994, p. 117. Care has to be exercised when trying to use this kind of work as a source.

3 Chava Weissler, 'The Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women' in: *Jewish Spirituality, from the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green, Crossroad 1987, p. 248.

4 'Beis Yaakov', p. 144.

a particular hasidic court? Would they look for a Gerer husband, or a Belzer, following their own family traditions? More information is needed on marriage patterns within the orthodox community. It is here that we come to the concept 'daughter of a hasid'. One sees in a number of memoirs of twentieth century orthodox women a strong sense of attachment to the father, whether one is speaking of hasidic or mitnagedic families. Although the picture drawn by Sarah Schenirer presents father and daughter as living in two different worlds, there was another pattern for a minority, that of a strong positive relationship, leading the daughter to affirm the ideal the father represented: she was the daughter of a hasid, or of a scholar. Thus she saw herself and was seen by others.

Now we come to the next category: the woman who is a hasidic follower in her own right. Does she exist? Our investigation moves to the Habad school, but starts in Poland in the mid 1930s. At this point Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, was based in Otzock, a suburb of Warsaw. As described by Ada Rapoport-Albert he encouraged practical activism by women in his campaign for traditional use of the mikveh and also spoke of the need of the women of Habad to study hasidic teachings.<sup>5</sup> During the 1930's many of his talks and discourses were published in Yiddish in Riga and Warsaw. These became the basic material for a new initiative concerning women: the founding in 1937 in Riga of the organisation '*Ahot HaTememim*', followed a year later by a similar group in New York. The organisation of this was defined by Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak. Three Rabbis were appointed as '*ro'im*', guides. The girls were to be taught discourses, with a leaning towards those which make an inner demand (*maamarrei avodah*), as well as *sihot*, and were to have hasidic gatherings (*hitva'aduyot*).<sup>6</sup>

As seen in the history of the Lubavitch boys' Yeshivah the *hitva'adut* was an important adjunct in the process of internalisation of the hasidic ethos. The founding of the boys' Yeshivah in Lubavitch in 1897, called

5 A. Rapoport-Albert, 'On Women in Hasidism, S.A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition', in: A. Rapoport-Albert and S. Zipperstein (eds.), *Jewish History, essays in honour of Chitmen Abramsky*, London 1988, p. 523 n. 82.

6 *Iggrot Kodesh...* R. Yosef Yitzhak, Brooklyn 1983, vol. 4, pp. 171, 187.

Tomkhei Temimim, in which youths were taught *Tanya*, mystical philosophy and the art of contemplative prayer, had been an unusual step. The name of the girls' group *Ahot ha-Temimim* relates women as individuals to the ideals of that Yeshivah: as sisters of the *Temimim*.

R. Yosef Yitzhak corresponded directly with members of the group. One letter, to Chaya Sima Michailova, responds to her question to the Rebbe about what can she do 'to fill the emptiness of actions'. The Rebbe sent a personal tract on contemplation in study, imparting a method to 'be bonded with the soul.. with the essence' of the teaching one is studying.<sup>7</sup>

He explains that of the three garments of the soul, thought, speech and action, thought is the most intimate. Yet in thought too, there are thought, speech and action. One's goal should be to cleave to the 'thought' aspect of the thought, beyond the 'letters' which define it. Through this one comes to true union with the 'Concept' as it truly is, beyond any veil or garment, and be unified with it. The 'Concept' here means the spiritual radiance shining within the vessel of the verbal definition of the idea.<sup>8</sup> Only by going completely beyond the verbal definition does one reach the radiance, attaining union with 'the Concept as it is in itself.'<sup>9</sup>

This intensive mystical guidance from a Rebbe to a young woman is certainly unusual. However, we can ask: does it carry her away from the world, or more profoundly *into* the world? Does it lead her away from the conventional roles of womanhood? A talk given in person by R. Yosef Yitzhak to the girls of *Ahot Ha-Temimim* in Riga is instructive. The Rebbe spoke to the group about the nature of hasidic teaching, which changes people without 'breaking' them, the need for knowledge of halachah, since 'the ignorant man cannot be a hasid' (Ethics 2:5), and the special task of *Ahot ha-Temimim* at a period of confusion regarding values. However, he also gave a warning urging balance and acceptance of conventional authority. The goal is empowerment and activism — but maintaining the conventional structure of society.<sup>10</sup>

7 Ibid., p. 469.

8 Ibid., pp. 470-472.

10 *Die Yiddische Heim* (Summer 5741), pp. 18-19.

Thus the pattern was set in which girls study Habad hasidic teachings as well as other aspects of Torah and communicate directly with the Rebbe. In 1954 the seventh Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, gave a halachic basis for girls to study *Tanya* and hasidic thought. Since a woman is duty-bound to keep all the positive commands not affected by time, and all the negative commands, she must keep the 'six perpetual commands' listed in *Sefer HaHinukh*: to believe in G-d, not to believe in any power apart from G-d, to appreciate His Unity, to love Him and to fear Him, not to stray after one's desires.<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel writes that all of these are attained by knowledge of the concepts explained in hasidic teachings.<sup>12</sup> Hence, he states, it is halachically correct for girls to study them. The earlier halachic concept that it is right for a woman to study 'the laws which apply to her' had now been extended to include mystical thought.

What about empowerment? What is the effect of this study? Are the Habad women simply being educated for ignorance and passivity, as Tamar El-Or claims<sup>13</sup> about the contemporary women of Ger? Ada Rapoport-Albert has described the way the Sixth Habad Rebbe sought to create female activists for the 'women's mitzvot' in the USA.<sup>14</sup> This trend was intensified by his successor Rabbi Menachem Mendel, who clearly sought to empower the Jewish woman as a significant force in society.

This took place through close communication with individual women: by private audiences, letters, personal responses to questions (*tztelakh*) and also in more public forms. In 1956 Rabbi Menachem Mendel instituted annual Conventions for 'Women and Girls of Habad', a central feature of which would be an address by him to the women who would sit in the main hall of his Brooklyn headquarters (otherwise usually occupied by the men). His general hasidic gatherings were

11 This list appears in the author's preface to the 13th century *Sefer ha-Hinukh*.

12 *Iggrot Kodesh*.. R. Menachem Mendel, Brooklyn 1988, vol. 8, 133.

13 Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women and their World*, Boulder, Colorado and London 1994.

14 'On Women in Hasidism', p. 523 n.82.

attended by women as well as men; from the 1970s, when the weekday gatherings were phoned through to the international Lubavitch centres, these became world-wide events for women and girls as well as men.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel suggested that women have in some ways a power which surpasses that of men. In 1975 his letter to the twentieth annual Women's Convention speaks of 'the vital work... to draw Jews close to Torah and Mitzvot, notwithstanding the situation they may be in, and *not to despair* of any Jew'. The Rebbe then explained that women are particularly fitted for this, in terms of conventionally conceived virtues of womanhood, as affirmed by the majority of his hearers:

The work of drawing Jews close to *Yiddishkeit* specially concerns women, for it is understood that this work requires a special approach of empathy, good-heartedness, loving-kindness and similar. These qualities are found to a greater measure among women than men...<sup>15</sup>

A later *sihah* described the feminine approach to affecting the world as generally superior to that of the male and stated that men should learn from the example of women. The male thrust is to 'conquer' and suppress opposition; the woman has a more 'inward' approach which gains willing acceptance peacefully. Hence: 'the service of Jewish women and daughters [should] become a guide to the men and the sons, showing how they should approach their service... in an inward way'.<sup>16</sup>

A further dimension is not just activism, but *shelihut*. Here the woman becomes a *shlulah* as well as a *hasidah*. This entails being a full-time activist in a centre of Jewish population. Sometimes it means that the whole family takes up residence in a location far from the orthodox community. From the base of their home they engage in outreach activities, trying to follow the Seventh Rebbe's directive 'not to despair of any Jew'. The Rebbe encouraged the women in this role to see themselves as *sheluhot*. In the 1980s there began annual conferences in Brooklyn for male *sheluhim*; they were swiftly paralleled by those for

15 *Likkutei Sihat* vol. 12, Brooklyn 1977, p. 224.

16 *Sefer ha-Sihat 5751*, vol. 1, (Brooklyn 1992), p. 86.

female *sheluhot*. Many of the *sheluhot* — and sometimes other women — gain personal fame in the Habad world for their charismatic qualities. Like a major hasid among the men, these leading Habad women are seen by other women and girls as a source of inspiration, as spiritual teachers who expound texts, guide hasidic gatherings and provide personal counsel to the individual. An example of a charismatic *shelulah* is the late Nechama Greisman, sent with her husband to Tsfat as emissaries in 1976. She died in 1992 at the age of 39. A memorial anthology published a year later includes her writings, transcripts of her talks and essays about her. She left ten children.

Did she think of herself as a *hasid*? The anthology includes a letter she wrote describing an accident in a swimming pool and an encounter with a Jewish doctor:

Dr G., saw, for the first time in his life, a living chassid. What really surprised him was that the chassid was not an elderly Yiddish speaking man.. with a long white beard, but rather a young American girl who speaks English and goes swimming...<sup>17</sup>

The Habad woman sees herself as representing and concretising a mystical hasidic ideal. This is not an acosmist path leading away from the world. Rather it is the quest for spirituality in daily life, where both man and woman fulfil traditional roles of marriage, parenting and hospitality: yet both comprehend their lives in terms of the mystical categories presented by *Tanya* and the discourses, *sihot* and letters of the Seventh Rebbe and his predecessors.

The activism of women as of men has also a personal experiential dimension: there are intimations of profound spiritual meaning in introducing another woman to the concept of candle-lighting for Shabbat or the idea of the *mikveh*. In this context the life of the hasidic family — generally comprising many children — becomes a kind of show-case of Judaism. Through this the feminine domestic and spiritual activist roles of the *shlulah* are drawn together.<sup>18</sup>

17 *The Nechama Greisman Anthology*, ed. M. Miller, Jerusalem 1993, p. 180.

18 For the tension between the domestic and *shlulah* roles see Greisman, pp. 10-14.

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Thus we see during the course of the 20th century the enhancement of the concepts of wife and daughter of a hasid, and the creation of a new idea: the woman or girl who considers herself to be a hasidic follower and activist in her own right. In the process of social change, confronting modernity, there developed and emerged new categories in Jewish religious thought.