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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

English Department

**Hasidic Judaism in American Literature**

by

**Eva van Loenen**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2015



UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

**ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF YOUR HUMANITIES

English Department

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**HASIDIC JUDAISM IN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Eva Maria van Loenen

This thesis brings together literary texts that portray Hasidic Judaism in Jewish-American literature, predominantly of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Although other scholars may have studied Rabbi Nachman, I.B. Singer, Chaim Potok and Pearl Abraham individually, no one has combined their works and examined the depiction of Hasidism through the codes and conventions of different literary genres. Additionally, my research on Judy Brown and Frieda Vizel raises urgent questions about the gendered foundations of Hasidism that are largely elided in the earlier texts. The thesis demonstrates how each text has engaged with Hasidic identity, thought, customs, laws, values and communities in its own particular way, creating tensions between the different literary interpretations. Furthermore, the thesis is structured chronologically and contributes to a cultural historical understanding of a people that has been threatened by modernity, nearly annihilated by the Nazis and uprooted from their motherlands in order to survive, and in fact thrive, in the United States. This historical development is described in the various texts used in this thesis, which belong to different genres from the short story, to the novel, to online Life writing. My research has been truly interdisciplinary, which is reflected in the use of different methodologies belonging to different academic fields such as history, sociology, anthropology, theology, Western esotericism and literary studies.

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# DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Eva van Loenen.....

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Depictions of Hasidic Judaism in Jewish-American Literature .....

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. [Delete as appropriate] None of this work has been published before submission [or] Parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

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Date: .....

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Finally, I would like to posthumously thank Chaim Potok, to whom this thesis is dedicated; his work has truly transformed my life and led me to this moment.

## Introduction

### Introduction to the Research Project

Hasidic Judaism is a faith that is based on the ancient pillars of Talmud and Kabbalah; its origins date back to the second century B.C.E.<sup>1</sup> It was cultivated in the *shtetls* of 18<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe and remained largely unaffected by modernity and *Haskalah*.<sup>2</sup> Hasidism was nearly eradicated by the Nazis in the Second World War, but managed to survive, transplanted into the New World. In North America, far away from its roots, its intellectual and religious homes, living not in isolation but in big, open cities, Hasidism managed to endure and thrive; the very old became encapsulated in the very new. This thesis brings together literary texts that depict Hasidic Judaism in Jewish-American literature, predominantly of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. My research connects the texts of Rabbi Nachman, I. B. Singer, Chaim Potok, Pearl Abraham, Judy Brown and Frieda Vizel to present a history of the portrayal of Hasidic thought,<sup>3</sup> identities, customs, laws, values and communities in Jewish-American literature. The PhD offers a range of case studies, which establish how Hasidic Judaism has been understood and represented from within and without. What these case studies demonstrate is that although Hasidic communities remain secluded, Jewish writing on the Hasidim is not totally disconnected from wider cultural and literary shifts, hence these approaches reflect cultural trends such as the movement towards secular and gender studies and contemporary forms of writing. Furthermore, as my thesis is structured chronologically, each text describes different stages in the narrative of survival and renaissance, thus contributing to a cultural history of Hasidism.

My thesis will address a number of questions: how has literature, which the Hasidim perceive to be a secular medium, depicted the identity, religious thought and experience of the Hasidim? How can this piece of the Old world, exist, even bloom, in such a new society? What is the place of this faith and its people in Jewish-American literature, a very new genre that came into being in the New World? What does the literary portrayal of Hasidism reveal about the place of Hasidic Judaism in American society? How has Hasidism changed from

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<sup>1</sup> Where we find the first reference to people called Hasidim, they organized the resistance against Hellenization in the land of Israel. See Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*. (Berkeley, CA: U of CP, 1996, 28).

<sup>2</sup> The Jewish Enlightenment

<sup>3</sup> With Hasidic thought I mean Hasidic philosophy based on Kabbalah and religious thought based on Talmud and Musar literature.

pre-war Europe to present day New York? How has Hasidic storytelling changed from the Hasidic tales to online texts? How has tradition been challenged, has it been weakened or reinforced? What tensions are evident within and across the texts under discussion?

In order to answer these questions, I will examine a wide range of texts, using different methodologies most suited to each particular work. Different methodologies are necessary as each author will present a different depiction of Hasidic Judaism, which is based on the place and time they were born, their geographical location at the time of writing their text, the year of publication, their relationship to Hasidic Judaism (are they members, former members or outsiders to this faith?), their gender, their proximity to both Hasidic thought and the secular world and their personal experiences.<sup>4</sup> As every author approaches Hasidic Judaism differently, they will emphasize different aspects of Hasidic Judaism; some texts focus on Hasidic storytelling, others on identity, Hasidic philosophy or gender. Some authors take a more critical position and some have a tendency to romanticise, which creates a tension between each text. Moreover, the authors discussed in this thesis have written in different genres, I shall discuss hagiographical tales, short stories, novels, online blogs and online essays. As a result of the different genre and approach of each text, I have used different methodologies relevant to each work. These various tensions and differences mean that every chapter reads like a separate case study, although I examine their respective relationships to each other and compare each perspective in the conclusion.

There can be no doubt that these texts belong to Jewish-American literature, as they describe a branch of Judaism that has become a fundamental part of Northern America. Yet, I have chosen to leave existing scholarship on the depiction of secular Jewish identity in Jewish-American literature out of this thesis. Based on my research, these types of identities are too different to be compared for the outcome to be of use to this thesis.<sup>5</sup> Secular Jews have abandoned all of the religious traditions that demarcate Hasidic Judaism and subsequently developed their own secular Jewish culture, which could not be more dissimilar to the culture of Hasidic Jews. Solely the fact that both groups are Jews connects these people, but their respective Jewishness means something completely different. There is no existing scholarship on the depiction of Hasidic Judaism in Jewish-American literature. Nora Rubel's *Doubting the Devout* is the only work that could be compared to my thesis. In one sense her work is broader; she examines ultra-Orthodox

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<sup>4</sup> To clarify, although the author's autobiographical details inform their writing to a greater or lesser extent, I am more interested in how their identity affects their text and their depiction of Hasidic Judaism, rather than how the text shapes and defines their Jewish identity; only the final chapter examines Life Writing.

<sup>5</sup> In my perspective, Hasidic Jews are closer to the Amish than the secular Jews of Philip Roth.

representations of Jews (which include Hasidim but also non-Hasidic *charedi*). Furthermore, she does not restrict herself to literature, but includes television and film. Yet, her work is also more limited: her focus is on ultra-Orthodox women. Besides, she predominantly considers Hasidic identity, paying little attention to other aspects of Hasidic Judaism such as Hasidic philosophy, religious observance, values, customs and laws. There is not much overlap, because although she references Potok's *The Chosen* (a key work in my thesis) the only text actively used in both our research is *The Romance Reader* by Pearl Abraham. There is only a small body of work within Jewish-American literature that is concerned with Hasidic Jews, hence my choice of texts is slightly limited, simultaneously, it makes this thesis more comprehensive, all though by no means completely exhaustive.

My original contribution to scholarship on Jewish-American literature is first of all, my exclusive focus on the portrayal of Hasidic Judaism. Secondly, it is my holistic approach encompassing the illustration of Hasidic identity, thought, customs, values, laws and experiences. Thirdly, it is my examination of the relationship between Hasidism and modern literature. Fourthly, it is the scope of my work, which comprises a great variety of texts, allowing my research to be relatively broad. Fifthly, it is the use of different methodologies, which yield the largest amount of data and enable greater depth. Since I did not base my research on existing scholarship on Jewish-American identity as depicted in Jewish-American literature, I build my thesis on historical, sociological, ethnographic and theological studies of Hasidic Judaism, which I refer to in each chapter as and where appropriate.

This thesis comprises five chapters. I will give a brief overview of each chapter and its methodology. Chapter one begins with a short introduction to the foundation of Hasidic literature: the Hasidic tales.<sup>6</sup> This chapter analyses pre-war depictions of Hasidic identity, customs, communal life and religious thought, including theology and Kabbalah. It gives an insight into the inner world of the Hasidim. It also examines the preservation and continuation of motifs from the Hasidic tales in modern Jewish-American literature. To this purpose I will give a close reading of two of Rabbi Nachman's tales<sup>7</sup> and two of Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories. I will critically analyse the Kabbalistic nature of "The

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<sup>6</sup> My research is based on the collections of Martin Buber. *Tales of the Hasidim: the Early Masters* and *Tales of the Hasidim: the Later Masters* Trans. Olga Marx. New York: Schocken Books, 1947 and 1948

<sup>7</sup> I will use the translation by Arnold J Band. *Nahman of Bratslav, The Tales*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

King and the Emperor” by Nachman and compare it to Singer’s “Yentle, the Yeshiva Boy.”<sup>8</sup> I examine the way both stories treat the subject of crossdressing and the breach of gender-boundaries. Subsequently, I demonstrate how Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool”<sup>9</sup> is informed by Nachman’s “The Clever Man and the Simple Man.” My methodology will predominantly consist of close reading, which is the interpretation of a brief passage that is part of a text. In this process close attention is paid to the meaning of individual words, syntax, punctuation, the relationship between the consecutive sentences and the idea(s) expressed in the passage.<sup>10</sup> Since close reading forms the foundation of literary textual analysis, this method is used throughout my thesis.

Chapter two investigates the portrayal of Hasidic Judaism during the Second World War and its aftermath in *The Chosen*<sup>11</sup> and *The Promise*<sup>12</sup> by Chaim Potok. Potok examines the clash between Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish communities in *The Chosen* and various conflicts between Reform, Orthodox and Hasidic Jews in *The Promise*. By contrasting Hasidic identity with other Jewish identities, its boundaries are clearly demarcated. The chapter analyses the challenges Hasidism faces in post-modern society and to a broader extent, the place of Orthodoxy in post-war America. I will make use of sociological studies (e.g. Solomon Poll,<sup>13</sup> Jerome R. Mintz<sup>14</sup>), numerous interviews<sup>15</sup> with and existing scholarship on Potok (e.g. Kathryn McClymond,<sup>16</sup> Sanford Marovitz<sup>17</sup>) to aid my analysis.

Chapter three analyses Hasidic esoteric thought, informed by Kabbalah, in Potok’s *The Book of Lights*.<sup>18</sup> Potok, who forms the heart of this thesis, had a deep, lifelong fascination with Hasidism and this translates into his work. In addition to *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, he wrote a novel profoundly inspired by Kabbalah. The foundation of *The Book*

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<sup>8</sup> I.B. Singer. “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” trans Marion Magid and Elizabeth Pollet. *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982. I have also read the Yiddish original, “Yentl, der Yeshiva-bocher.” *Mayses fun hintern oyvyn*. Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz Publishing House, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> I. B. Singer. “Gimpel the Fool,” trans. Saul Bellow. *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982. Yiddish original: Isaac Bashevis Singer. “Gimpel the Fool”. *Gimpl Tam un Andere Dertseylungen*. New York: Central Yiddish Culture Organization, 1963.

<sup>10</sup> There is some debate on who developed this method first, whether it was I.A Richards and William Epsom or the New Critics, yet none can deny its central place in post-modern literary analysis. Joseph North. "What's "New Critical" about" Close Reading": IA Richards and His New Critical Reception." *New Literary History* 44.1 (2013): 141-157.

<sup>11</sup> *The Chosen*. New York: Penguin Books, 1967.

<sup>12</sup> *The Promise*. New York: Penguin Books, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg*. New York: Schocken, 1962.

<sup>14</sup> *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> “The Chosen”, *Chaim Potok: Confronting Modernity Through the Lens of Tradition*. Ed. Daniel Walden. Philadelphia: Penn State Press, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Marovitz, Sanford E. "Freedom, Faith, and Fanaticism: Cultural Conflict in the Novels of Chaim Potok." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-1986): 129-140.

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Lights*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1981.

of *Lights* is Kabbalist philosophy and this chapter will draw out and critically analyse each Kabbalist motif and examine the overall function of Kabbalah within the novel. Kabbalah lies at the core of Hasidic Judaism, hence although the novel does not contain Hasidic characters, it is crucial to my work. Furthermore, the chapter explores the relevance of Kabbalah to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also analyses the relationship between literary fiction and religious texts and the similarities between Kabbalah and literature. I will utilise major Kabbalist works (e.g. *Sefer Yetzirah*,<sup>19</sup> *Sefer ha-Zohar*,<sup>20</sup>) Hasidic theological texts (e.g. the *Tanya* by Shneur Zalman of Liady<sup>21</sup>) and discuss existing scholarship on Potok's *The Book of Lights* (e.g. Sanford E. Marovitz,<sup>22</sup> Will Soll<sup>23</sup>).

Chapter four explores female perspectives on Hasidic Judaism in *The Romance Reader*<sup>24</sup> by Pearl Abraham and Judy Brown's *Hush*.<sup>25</sup> It analyses the patriarchal nature of Hasidism and Hasidic theological treatment of the female body, which is based on Talmud. It also exposes the most problematic aspects of Hasidic Judaism, which are predominantly (but not exclusively) experienced by women. Brown and Abraham's perspectives are similar yet diverge and I will investigate the differences in the depiction of Hasidic female identity. In my methodology, I will draw on Jewish feminist criticism (e.g. Judith Plaskow<sup>26</sup>, Blu Greenberg<sup>27</sup>, Susan Jacobowitz<sup>28</sup>) and ethnographic studies of Hasidic women and family life (e.g. Ayala Fader<sup>29</sup>, Lisa Harris<sup>30</sup>, Stephanie Wellen Levine<sup>31</sup>).

Chapter five examines contemporary Hasidic storytelling and female identity in the online autobiographical stories of Judy Brown and Frieda Vizel. It analyses how Hasidic storytelling has changed since the Hasidic tales and investigate the influence of the internet on Hasidic life. It also examines how Brown and Vizel perceive their former Hasidic identity

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<sup>19</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah*. Trans. Isidor Kalisch and Knut Stenring Book Tree, 2006

<sup>20</sup> *The Zohar*. Trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon. London: The Soncino Press, 1931.

<sup>21</sup> Norman Lamm. *The Religious Thought of Hasidim*. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1999

<sup>22</sup> "The Book of Lights': Jewish Mysticism in the Shadow of the Bomb." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-1985): 62-83.

<sup>23</sup> "Chaim Potok's 'Book of Lights': Reappropriating Kabbalah in the Nuclear Age." *Religion & Literature* 21.1 (1989): 111-135.

<sup>24</sup> *The Romance Reader*. New York: Riverside Books, 1995

<sup>25</sup> Eishes Chayil. *Hush*. New York: Walter and Company, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> *Standing Again at Sinai*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

<sup>27</sup> *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981.

<sup>28</sup> "Hardly There Even When She Wasn't Lost': Orthodox Daughters and the 'Mind-Body Problem' in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22.3 (2004): 72-94.

<sup>29</sup> *Mitzvah girls: Bringing up the next generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

<sup>31</sup> *Mystics, mavericks, and merrymakers: An intimate journey among Hasidic girls*. NYU Press, 2004.

and how their lived experience shapes their perspectives on Hasidic Judaism. The methodology will utilise narrative inquiry, which uses autobiographical texts in order to examine a person's construction of their own narrative.<sup>32</sup> This method appears most appropriate for the autobiographical stories I analyse in this chapter. I also employ recent scholarship regarding online narratives (e.g. Barbara Benjamin<sup>33</sup>, Volker Eisenlauer and Christian Hoffman<sup>34</sup>) and Life Writing (e.g. Marilyn Metta<sup>35</sup>, Tara Diane Hyland-Russell<sup>36</sup>, Hans Render<sup>37</sup>).

There is an apparent dichotomy or at least a tension between religious ideas contained in secular literary texts. One could argue that the difference between a religious text and a literary text is only superficial, after all many read the Bible as a piece of literature. Auerbach determined that the key difference between secular and literary texts (the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament) is the author's intent. Whereas Homer wished to entertain, to offer his reader pleasure and distraction, the Elohist wished to communicate religious truth.<sup>38</sup> Despite the difference in intent; religious texts and literary texts are both defined by their textuality. Both recognise and employ the transformative power of (written) language. Breaking free from the restraint of the theological canon, but using religious language and making references to theological concepts and texts, literary authors can explore, question, analyse, defend and define religion, without coming to a definite conclusion, in a way that is impossible outside of the literary realm. Literature can function as a vessel holding the sacred, even if that vessel is slightly broken or imperfect. Consequently, a scholar of these texts performs a kind of exegesis in their textual analysis. Through the layers of fictional entertainment, one tries to uncover the religious truths conveyed by the text. This concept works differently in each chapter. In chapter one, the 'divine sparks' are clearly visible contained in the Hasidic tales, which are primarily religious texts, but also in Rabbi Nachman's parables. I will draw out Nachman's use of

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<sup>32</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000, 98–115.

<sup>33</sup> "The case study: storytelling in the industrial age and beyond." *On the Horizon* 14.4 (2006): 159-164.

<sup>34</sup> "Once Upon a Blog... Storytelling in Weblogs" in *Narrative Revisited : Telling a Story in the Age of New Media*. Ed. Christian R. Hoffmann. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory : Lifewriting as Reflexive, Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice*. Berne, IN, USA: Peter Lang AG, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> *The storied nautilus: life writing, narrative therapy and women's self-storying*. University of Calgary, 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Hans Renders. "Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing: Where Biography Shifts into Life Writing," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*. Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003, 13-15.

Kabbalist themes and examine their function in a literary text. In Singer's short stories, Nachman casts long shadows onto 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction. I will trace Nachman's influence on Singer and examine to what extent the sacred is still present in his stories. Chaim Potok's *The Book of Lights* is one of the best examples of a literary work that brims with sacred questions and themes. I will demonstrate how Jewish mystical ideas can be expressed in literary fiction, which in turn can contribute to contemporary Kabbalist philosophy. In the texts of Pearl Abraham and Judy Brown, religion is present not in the shape of Kabbalist references, but in questioning religious laws, the religious institution and the place of women within it.

In short, literary texts can express the inner world of the Hasidim, describe Hasidic customs, laws and values and depict Hasidic identity, philosophy and communal life. Literature can preserve and pass on illustrations of Hasidic communities which no longer exist yet at the same time, literature is critical, it interrogates and shapes its subject. When literature is read by the people it depicts, whether they accept or reject its content, it helps to define their identity. The perspectives of outsiders to Hasidic Judaism are similarly informed, since literature is one of the few places that allows the outsider to look into these communities, which are usually closed to non-Jews (including academics). This thesis explores the significance of Hasidism to modern literature and provides a literary history of the Hasidim.

## **Introduction to Hasidic Judaism**

Since I have written a literary analysis of Hasidic Judaism and not many people are necessarily overly familiar with this movement and its origins I will provide a brief historical and sociological introduction. Contrary to popular belief Hasidism did not come into being ex nihilo during the 18<sup>th</sup> century or as a result of its most famous leader, the Ba'al Shem Tov.<sup>39</sup> The origin of the word hasid is *chesed*, which is one of the twelve sephirot<sup>40</sup> and

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<sup>39</sup> A title which means, 'master of the good name'. He is also referred to as the Baalshem, or the Besht, both variations on his title, while his real name is Israel.

<sup>40</sup> A Kabbalist concept which comprises twelve, originally ten, vessels or emanations of God, together forming the 'Tree of Life'. The first mention is in the *Sepher Yetzirah* or the Book of Creation (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century) which is one of the earliest texts in Kabbalah and in the Renaissance this mystical concept has been developed by Isaac Luria (1534-1572).

means 'loving-kindness'.<sup>41</sup> The first reference to Hasidic Jews comes from the Bible where a person who loves God and is loved by Him is referred to as 'hasid'.<sup>42</sup> This love is expressed through the fulfilment of *mitzvot*, commandments. There are other references to Hasidim throughout Jewish history beginning with the people who first organized the resistance against Hellenization in the land of Israel in the second century B.C.E.<sup>43</sup> In the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries we find the Hasidei Ashkenaz; a mystical, ascetic group situated in Germany, whose leader was Rabbi Judah Hasid.<sup>44</sup> In the late sixteenth-century, there were groups in Israel who were profoundly inspired by Kabbalist thinkers such as Isaac Luria (1534-1572) and Moses Cordovero (1562-1625). They formed 'holy associations' and adhered to strict ascetic and mystical practices.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, there was a renaissance of the ideals and practices of the Hasidei Ashkenaz in seventeenth century Germany and Poland.<sup>46</sup> Kabbalah<sup>47</sup> appears to be a common denominator in all of these cases<sup>48</sup> and it is an important aspect of post-Ba'al Shem Tov Hasidism as well. Asceticism is another binding factor, as well as the influence of Mussar<sup>49</sup> literature, which is arguably as significant to the movement as Kabbalah. In fact, attempting to combine ethics and mysticism is essential to Hasidism and constitutes its most original element. Considering this brief historical overview and the shared characteristics of the various groups, one can see why scholars such as Moshe Rosman argue that Hasidism "was an outgrowth of an already existing religious orientation and not, as many have suggested, a radically new phenomenon that came as history's response to a crisis of Judaism or of Jewish society."<sup>50</sup>

However, the historical and political situation of the Jews in 18<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe should also be taken into consideration when reflecting on Hasidism's expansion into a popular and widespread movement. Moses Gaster writes rather lyrically about the difficult circumstances of Eastern European Jews: they lived "entirely cut off from the rest of the world, the landlords were feudal lords, there was no middle class worthy of the name and the peasants were almost ground to dust by the exactions of their feudal masters... They

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<sup>41</sup> Interestingly enough, the word 'metta', an essential concept in Buddhism has exactly the same meaning, 'loving-kindness'.

<sup>42</sup> Moshe Rosman. *Founder of Hasidism*. Berkely, CA: U of CP, 1996, 27.

<sup>43</sup> Rosman 28.

<sup>44</sup> Rosman 28.

<sup>45</sup> Rosman 28-29.

<sup>46</sup> Rosman 29.

<sup>47</sup> The word means 'received' or 'receiving', as in received knowledge. Kabbalah is the main esoteric movement in Judaism.

<sup>48</sup> Apart from the first group in the second century B.C.E. when even *avant-la-lettre* Kabbalah did not exist yet.

<sup>49</sup> Ethical literature written by rabbis, philosophers and Kabbalist thinkers beginning from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>50</sup> Rosman 39.

were driven in upon themselves.”<sup>51</sup> The isolation, oppression and poverty of most Jews living in small *shtetls* in the countryside were fertile grounds for people longing for change. Additionally, Jewish communal self-government in Poland declined, as in 1746 the government buckled under the pressure of a large part of Polish society who wished to cease the recognition of the authority of autonomous Jewish institutions such as the *Kahal*.<sup>52</sup> To many, this had been a sign of the weakness of Poland’s central government, which allowed for alternative authority figures to gain influence. The rise and subsequent failure of the Sabbatian movement<sup>53</sup> may have also encouraged the growth of Hasidism. Sabbatianism, a Messianic movement that had arisen earlier on in the 17<sup>th</sup> century had left many Jews disillusioned, yet ready for innovation. These three circumstantial aspects of Eastern European Jewry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are considered ‘crises’ by scholars such as Ettinger and Dinur and one can understand why. Hence, although the religious motives of Hasidism *sensu lato* had existed all through Jewish history, a sense of urgency seems to have accompanied its rise into a fully-fledged and established movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

These conditions can to some extent explain the success of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic movement. Yet above all, the success of the movement has traditionally been ascribed to its most prominent leader, the Ba’al Shem Tov. Even though it remains unclear how important he was to the movement at the time, he is now remembered as the founder of Hasidic Judaism. Before the rise of the Hasidic movement, smaller groups of pneumatics<sup>54</sup> lived on the periphery of Jewish society and for a while these groups existed simultaneously until the breakthrough of Hasidism. According to Weiss, some two generations after the Baalshem “saw the gradual disappearance of the independent circles or rather their merging into the rapidly spreading Hasidic movement, with the name of the Baalshem surviving in the historical consciousness of Hasidism as that of a founder and central leader.”<sup>55</sup>

The Ba’al Shem Tov had humble beginnings; he was born in a small village in Podolia, Poland around the year 1700. He became orphaned as a young child. Fortunately,

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<sup>51</sup> M. Gaster, “Foreword” in *Leaders of Hassidism* by S.A. Horodezky. Trans. Maria Horodezky-Magasanik. London: Hasefer, 1928, x.

<sup>52</sup> A *kahal* served as a Jewish community council, it was an executive board that was elected to run an autonomous European Jewish community administering religious, legal, and communal affairs.

<sup>53</sup> Founded by Shabetai Tsevi who proclaimed to be the new Messiah until he converted to Islam.

<sup>54</sup> A term borrowed from Gnosticism, a pneumatic longed to escape from the material world and become (re)united with God in the highest pleroma, the highest layer of the divine sphere. Here it can be translated as mystic.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph Weiss. *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism&Hasidism*. Ed. David Goldstein. London: the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997, 4-5. Other scholars who hold similar opinions are Jacob Katz. (*Tradition and Crisis*. New York: Schocken Books, 1961) and Simon Dubnow (“The Beginnings: The Baal Shem Tov (Besht) and the Center in Podolia” in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP, 1991).

Israel was well taken care of by his community and they saw to it that he received a proper education in a *heder*<sup>56</sup> or *talmud torah*.<sup>57</sup> The boy was certainly intelligent and showed an aptitude for learning, but ultimately he could not bear the restrictions of the school routine, “he would study for a few days, and then he would stay away from class.”<sup>58</sup> Instead, he would sit in the forest all by himself in the manner of the young Buddha. In his novel *The Chosen* Chaim Potok invokes this image of Israel, “...he would walk under the trees, look at the flowers, sit by a brook, listen to the songs of the birds and to the noise of the wind in the leaves. As often as his teachers brought him back, so often did he run away to these woods, and after a while they gave up and left him alone.”<sup>59</sup> This remained the most important object in his life: quiet contemplation of God in nature. Yet, before long when Israel became a beadle at the *beit midrash*<sup>60</sup> he also began to study esoteric texts, Lurianic Kabbalah, Chaim Vital and anything else Jewish mysticism had to offer. This was quite in line with the founders and members of earlier Hasidic groups. However, alongside his investigations into the nature of God, Israel also wanted to help people and at the age of thirty-five after he had married and subsequently spent seven years in solitude (without his wife) in the Carpathian mountains he revealed himself to be a holy man, a kabbalist, a miracle worker, in short, a *Baal Shem* (master of the name). He remained a *Baal Shem* for ten years, travelling, performing miracles, exorcising demons, writing amulets, healing people and teaching them<sup>61</sup> like other *Baalei Shem* of his time. Yet, soon it became evident that the Besht was not an ordinary *Baal Shem* and he received the name *Ba'al Shem Tov* (master of the good name), which became his special title.

After ten years, another transformation took place as the Besht became a spiritual teacher; he ceased his travels, settled down in Miedzyboz, Podolia and concerned himself with the community he established. Interestingly, he also began experiencing altered states of consciousness which guided him in his teachings. Even though he was a representative of a different type of Judaism, initially there was less antagonism between the Hasidim and the Orthodox Jews than one would expect. Rosman and Ettinger <sup>62</sup> argue

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<sup>56</sup> Private elementary school.

<sup>57</sup> Charity school.

<sup>58</sup> Dubnow 27.

<sup>59</sup> Chaim Potok. *The Chosen*. New York: Penguin, 1966. 108.

<sup>60</sup> Study hall in a synagogue or yeshiva.

<sup>61</sup> S.A. Horodezky. *Leaders of Hassidism*. Trans. Maria Horodezky-Magasanik. London: Hasefer, 1928, 5.

<sup>62</sup> Moshe Rosman “Social Conflicts in Miedzyboz” in *Hasidism Reappraised*. Ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996.; Shmuel Ettinger “Hasidism and the *Kahal* in Eastern Europe” in *Hasidism Reappraised*. Ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996.

that rather than opposing the *kehalim*,<sup>63</sup> the Baalshem engaged and even cooperated with them, albeit in later years conflict would arise.

The Besht is said to have died on the first day of Shavuot in 1760. He had appointed one of his greatest disciples, Dov Ber of Miedzyrzecz, as his successor,<sup>64</sup> but he did not leave behind any textual doctrinal work. The 'gospel' of the Baalshem, the *Shivhei Habesht*, was first published in 1814 in Kapost and contains about 250 tales about the Besht and his circle. Its author is the aforementioned Dov Ber, who heard the stories from various people and collected them, placing them in the order he saw fit.<sup>65</sup> Whether through these stories or his person the Baalshem made a definite impression: by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hasidism had become a major movement in the greater part of the East European communities in the Ukraine and Eastern Galicia, Poland, White Russia, Rumania and Hungary, and they formed a small minority in Lithuania.<sup>66</sup>

From the beginning of its 18<sup>th</sup> century rebirth Hasidism underwent many changes. Inevitably, esoteric elements disappeared as Hasidism institutionalised and the study of Talmud once more took precedence over the study of Kabbalah; a process that was reinforced by the conflicts with the Mitnaggedim<sup>67</sup> over the neglect of Torah study.<sup>68</sup> A large, popular movement hardly ever retains the esoteric knowledge it began with, because its size and organisation requires the knowledge taught to be accessible, conventional and exoteric. Soon after the Baalshem's death different leaders arose, each forming their own school of thought. The principal three are Bratslav<sup>69</sup>, Chabad Lubavitch<sup>70</sup> and much later Satmar.<sup>71</sup> Gradually, the position of tzaddik<sup>72</sup> became hereditary in most Hasidic schools and over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century leadership crystallised into a

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<sup>63</sup> Members of the *Kahal* see footnote *Kahal* page 12.

<sup>64</sup> Horodezky 17.

<sup>65</sup> Rosman 203. Most scholars agree upon it not being a very reliable, historical account but belonging to hagiography. For more on the *Shivhei Habesht* see Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht*. (Trans. Saadya Sternberg. Waltham (MA): Brandeis UP, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Benzion Dinur. "Origins of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Foundations" in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. Ed. David Hundert. New York: NYUP, 1991, 86. Although, according to Joseph Weiss, it was Dov Ber who managed to transform the scattered groups of Hasids ('pneumatics') into a popular movement. See: *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism & Hasidism*. Ed. David Goldstein. London: the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Ultra-orthodox Jews, or 'opponents' of Hasidism.

<sup>68</sup> Mordecai L. Wilensky. "Hasidic-Mitnaggedic Polemics" (in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP, 1991, 266).

<sup>69</sup> Non-dynastic, founded by the great Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810).

<sup>70</sup> Founded by Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the great-grandson of Judah Loew (the Maharal of Prague), who was the youngest and one of the most prominent members of Dov Ber.

<sup>71</sup> Founded by Joel Teitelbaum (1887-1979) a Hungarian rabbi who managed to escape Nazi occupied Hungary on the Kastner train.

<sup>72</sup> Head of a Hasidic dynasty.

network of dynasties, transmitting authority from one generation to the next and thus preserving each dynasty's distinct character and identity.<sup>73</sup> The Lublin denomination, named after the famed 'Seer of Lublin,'<sup>74</sup> conceived the role of the tzaddik in a new light: he primarily became a guide who leads his Hasidim to Torah and to God.<sup>75</sup> This means that although in the early days of Hasidism each and every Hasid had to strive for communion with God (*devekuth*) and consequently live the life of a strict ascetic, after the Seer of Lublin Hasidim would adhere to their tzaddik who would adhere to God.<sup>76</sup>

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, rural poverty drove many Jews to the cities where they became exposed to Zionism and *Haskalah* ideology, which meant that they were in greater danger of assimilation. Joseph Dan describes how the situation of the Hasidim further deteriorated.

This was followed by the pogroms of the 1905 revolution which further undermined the existence of Hasidic communities in Russia; new ideologies [arose] and many youngsters responded by deserting their Hasidic families. This erosion culminated with the upheavals of the First World War, the Russian Revolution and civil war, and the annihilation of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union under Stalin. The traditional basis of the Hasidic movement was completely wiped out, and the Jewish *shtetl* of the nineteenth century vanished without a trace. From every point of view, it seemed that Hasidism could not survive as a spiritual force in post-1917 Europe.<sup>77</sup>

Hasidic Jews in Poland, by then the largest concentration of Hasidim found anywhere with over three and a half million Jews by 1939, continued to endure severe discrimination and political anti-Semitism. A result of this was mass emigration from Russia to the United States – which had already begun in the 1880's – despite the fact that Hasidic leaders dissuaded their followers from moving as they were apprehensive of the relatively open and

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<sup>73</sup> Ada Rapoport-Albert "Hasidism after 1772" in *Hasidism Reappraised*. Ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996, 103.

<sup>74</sup> Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz.

<sup>75</sup> Raphael Mahler. "Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment" in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP, 1991, 453.

<sup>76</sup> Shmuel Ettinger "The Hasidic Movement – Reality and Ideals." in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP, 1991, 232.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Dan, "Hasidism: the Third Century" in *Hasidism Reappraised*. Ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996, 418.

secular societies in the West.<sup>78</sup> Yet, Hasidism managed to survive outside of Russia in neighbouring countries, especially in Hungary and Romania, where it swelled and thrived. Hasidic courts that had been banished from Belorussia and Ukraine established new homes in Warsaw and other Polish cities. The tzaddikim set up new synagogues and schools for their followers disregarding the presence of Jewish secularism all around them.<sup>79</sup>

In 1939, by far the greatest disaster struck Hasidism and other Jewish denominations: the outbreak of the Second World War and the onset of the *Shoah*. The *Shoah* imperilled the physical existence of Hasidic Jews, yet it also tested their devotion and fidelity to the Hasidic way of life as the tzaddikim and their adherents all went through the hardest trial of their faith. Pesach Schindler, who has done extensive research on Hasidic Judaism and the Holocaust, asserts that between 1939 and 1945 the majority of the Hasidim and their leaders were annihilated. By and large, the tzaddik refused to be parted from his community and continued to kindle the faith of his Hasidim serving as a source of comfort and strength during a crisis which shook the foundations of the Hasid's physical and spiritual being.<sup>80</sup>

The rigid religious beliefs of the Hasidic Jews turned out to be essential in retaining self-respect and maintaining the integrity of one's personality in the face of the perpetrator's best efforts to destroy it. Schindler states,

The general frame of faith, the specific concepts, and the social units may have served as the type of shock absorbers and defences reported by Bruno Bettelheim in his psychoanalytic studies of concentration camp inmates. He noted that the more substantial and sustained the realm of 'private behaviour', the more bearable and, possibly, meaningful was the trauma of Holocaust events.<sup>81</sup>

In addition, the original element of Hasidic Judaism: the centrality of mysticism may have helped Hasidic Jews live with or endure the trauma of the *Shoah*. Schindler quotes two scholars on this point: first of all Baruch Kurzweil, who states that "the tragic personality is an entity sealed up within itself, whereas emphasis of the self within an entity higher than

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<sup>78</sup> Stephen Sharot. *Messianism, mysticism, and magic: A sociological analysis of Jewish religious movements*. University of North Carolina Press, 1982, 189.

<sup>79</sup> Dan 4:18.

<sup>80</sup> Pesach Schindler. *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought*. New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, 1990, 17.

<sup>81</sup> Schindler 120.

itself characterizes the mystic personality.”<sup>82</sup> Since the whole life of a Hasid revolves around adhering to God through *devekuth* or adhering to God through his tzaddik, Kurzweil makes a valid point. Steinman has a similar theory, arguing that replacing the narrow-minded focus on one’s own life with the permanent view on God, allows “a sense of trust emanating from a soul which originates in the Holy Source... and arouse [the] courage inspired by a Holy Spark (*azut dekedushah*).”<sup>83</sup>

There were, however, Hasidic Jews who survived World War II outside of the concentration camps. While in Poland, very few had lived through the Nazi massacres and the death camps, some Hasidim were able to survive by having been forgotten. Jacques Gutwirth shares this astounding story.

Having taken refuge in the area of Poland occupied by the Soviet Union shortly after the German invasion of the country in 1939, [Hasidic Jews] were required either to return to the Nazi-occupied zone or to become Soviet citizens and live more than 100 kilometres away from the border. Some Hasidim chose to return to the places (under German occupation!) from which they had come, which paradoxically saved their lives because the Soviet authorities deported everyone who made this choice to Siberia. The former group thereby escaped the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and despite many hardships the majority of them managed to survive.<sup>84</sup>

More Hasidim survived in Hungary since it was not occupied until 1944 because of its allegiance with Germany. This meant that systematic deportations to concentration camps did not begin until March 1944. Since these deportations commenced so late in the war one third of Hungarian Jews survived. In Rumania, Jews suffered from persecutions by their own government, as they had done in Hungary, but they were not subjected to Nazi tyranny. The surrender of Rumania to the USSR in 1944 prevented the deportation plans prepared by the Nazis. Furthermore, there were small Hasidic communities in Palestine, England and the United States who were fortunate enough to remain outside of the grasp of the Nazis.<sup>85</sup>

After the war, the remaining Hasidic communities were transplanted to the United

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<sup>82</sup> Schindler 121.

<sup>83</sup> Schindler quoting Steinman 221.

<sup>84</sup> Gutwirth 13.

<sup>85</sup> Gutwirth 13.

States and Israel.<sup>86</sup> Most Hasidim who entered the United States after WWII settled in New York in three Brooklyn boroughs: Williamsburg, Borough Park and Crown Heights. Nowadays, most Satmar (one of the most insular communities with about 30.000 adherents) live in Williamsburg and the Lubavich (the largest and most open community with 250.000 members) have their centre in Crown Heights. New York also has several minor Hasidic groups such as Bratslav, Stolin, Vishnitz, and Bobov; most have fewer than one hundred families.<sup>87</sup>

It is unsurprising that after the Second World War, when Hasidic communities were already drastically reduced, Hasidism did not continue to grow as exponentially as it had before. The relatively open societies of the United States and Israel, which had no legal or political discrimination and were far less anti-Semitic, offered the chance of assimilation and many other opportunities Eastern European Jews never had. This also forced the remaining members of Hasidism to become more consciously introverted, since the majority of the Hasidim now live in large cities which include substantial social and cultural diversity.<sup>88</sup> Turning inwards and firmly regulating any contact with the outside world has its downsides. Some members feel they have no choice but to live according to the Hasidic lifestyle, even if they wish to follow a different path. Although the core of the religion can be described as joyful devotion to God the actual day to day practice means the strict obedience of severe rules, which can be oppressive to women and arguably to all members. Yet most Hasidim stay; Sharot explains that “the Hasidim have no formalized procedures for the acceptance and expulsion of members, but they have achieved great success in maintaining their distinctive way of life... This success may be [due to] three sets of mechanisms: insulation, commitment and social control.”<sup>89</sup> The combination of these three factors may keep members in their respective congregations, but it certainly comes at a steep price, as does the choice to leave, which invariably means ending nearly every friendship and breaking all family ties – the complete and utter abandonment of the community.<sup>90</sup> As to the spiritual core of the present movement the question is whether there continue to be new mystical or intellectual leaders like the Baal Shem Tov, Dov Bear, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and others who guided the first expansion of Hasidism. According to Joseph Dan and Marc-Alain Ouaknin the answer is

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<sup>86</sup> Schindler 17.

<sup>87</sup> Sharot 505.

<sup>88</sup> Sharot 512.

<sup>89</sup> Sharot 504.

<sup>90</sup> See Helen Winston’s *Unchosen: the Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebbels* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005) and *Unorthodox* by Deborah Feldman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

negative. Dan remarks that "...the search for the spiritual or ideological foundations of the present revival of the Hasidic movement has yielded virtually nothing. Not only are new ideas apparently absent, but the old spiritual teachings are giving way to a new emphasis on the external features of Jewish life."<sup>91</sup> While Marc-Alain Ouaknin comments, "From the outside Hasidism is still alive, it has many followers, but it lacks what created the Hasidic revolution: the strength to renew and to be inventive."<sup>92</sup> Dan and Ouaknin make valid points; Hasidism is becoming as traditional as Orthodox Judaism was at the time of the Baalshem. Perhaps the lingering threat of the *Shoah* caused people to be more cautious and conservative, to preserve the little they managed to save instead of adding and reinventing – and perhaps in time this will change. Moreover, it appears that adherence to the hereditary tzaddikim was the key factor, if not the only one, which secured the preservation and renewal of Hasidism after the mayhem of recent history.<sup>93</sup> The hereditary tzaddik proved to be the strongest link with past communities and presently it is the 'cult' of the tzaddik and faith in his redemptive powers that form the main distinctive qualities separating Hasidism from Ultra-orthodox Judaism. Joseph Dan's inevitable question, "is there a form of Jewish mysticism that is alive today?"<sup>94</sup> can be answered with: the belief in 'mystical leadership', an inherently modern Jewish phenomenon, which came to its fullest expression in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This brief historical and sociological discussion of Hasidic Judaism should provide enough background information to support the literary interpretations that are to follow in the rest of the thesis.

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<sup>91</sup> Dan 421-422.

<sup>92</sup> Marc-Alain Ouaknin *Ouvertures Hassidiques*, Paris: Jacques Grancher, 1990, 92. Original "de l'extérieur, ce hassidisme est encore vivant, il compte de nombreux adeptes, mais il manque ce qui fit la révolution hassidique : la force de se renouveler et de s'inventer."

<sup>93</sup> Dan 423 .

<sup>94</sup> Dan 426.

## Chapter One

### From the Hasidic Tales to I.B. Singer: an illustration of the pre-war Hasidic spirit

#### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the continuity between the beginning of Hasidic literature, the Hasidic tales, including the stories of Rabbi Nachman and I.B. Singer's short stories. It examines which themes have been preserved in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature and what has changed.

Barbara Benjamin defines storytelling as "a way to transfer knowledge from the storyteller to others, a way to help people look at reality and formulate ideas and ideals."<sup>95</sup> This definition is implied in the origin of the word. The Indo-European word 'ueid' contains the root of the word story, it means: look at, see, and object of vision. The word made its way to India where it appears in Sanskrit as 'veda', meaning knowledge; as in the sacred texts of Hinduism. In Greece the word appears as 'eidōs', meaning form, an idea formed in the mind, an ideal.<sup>96</sup> Stories have been used to make sense of reality, to define our existence, our identity, to differentiate ourselves from other cultures and strengthen ties to our own tribe or community, to grasp our relationship to the divine. Stories can function as significant cultural tools, teaching morals and values, passing these down from generation to generation,<sup>97</sup> like a handbook that guides and teaches. They transmit the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the culture.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, stories help to shape a collective, distinct and sometimes (such as in the case of the Jewish people) an isolated identity.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Barbara Benjamin. "The case study: storytelling in the industrial age and beyond." *On the Horizon* 14.4 (2006): 159.

<sup>96</sup> Benjamin 159.

<sup>97</sup> Benjamin 160-161.

<sup>98</sup> Benjamin 161.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin 161.

Hasidic storytelling was born with the Hasidic tales. Hence, my thesis will start here and my first chapter will begin with a brief discussion of the first stories told about the Hasidim.<sup>100</sup> These stories were predominantly transmitted orally from the beginning of the movement (mid-18<sup>th</sup> century) until they were collected and written down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The printed version of these legends are the end-product of years of oral transmission, they constitute a record of oral storytelling. The tales teach us about the heart of the Hasidic movement at its creative prime during the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Moving forward in time, we encounter the first author of Hasidic fiction, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810). Unlike the Hasidic tales, his stories were not printed anonymously: Nachman claimed authorship over his fictional creations, which were written with a clear literary intent, despite their religious nature. I shall analyse one of his stories, “The King and the Emperor”, to understand the esoteric layers of this ostensible fairy tale.

Finally, arriving at 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, which comprises the largest part of the body of my thesis, we find Singer, who presents us with his own version of Hasidic folktales. In order to examine the continuation between the Hasidic legends, Nachman’s tales and Singer’s short stories I shall make a comparison between “Yentle, the Yeshiva Boy” and “The King and the Emperor”. In addition, I will compare Singer’s “Gimple the Fool” to the story it is informed by: Nachman’s “The Simple Man and the Clever Man.” Together, these three sets of narratives begin to sketch a picture of pre-war<sup>101</sup> Hasidic Judaism as conveyed through Eastern European and Jewish-American literature.

## **1.2 Introduction to the Hasidic Tales**

After the disastrous failure of the Sabbatean movement and the conversion of its illustrious leader, Sabbatai Zevi, to Islam in 1666, the Jews of Eastern Europe had largely lost faith in Messianic movements. Hasidism, which grew to its full strength in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, had not forsaken the idea of the Messiah, but the tzaddikim realised that the key to enduring life and attaining redemption was finding pleasure in the everyday. Buber, who collected many Hasidic tales, describes this rather poetically, “[Hasidism] kindled both its simple and intellectual followers to joy in the world as it is, in life as it is, in every hour of life

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<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately there is no space in this chapter to go into a full analysis of each story, but I will explain their general content and context.

<sup>101</sup> Singer wrote most of his stories post-war, but the communities he depicts are pre-war.

in this world, as that hour is.”<sup>102</sup> Obeying the laws of Torah continued to remain of supreme importance, but now fulfilling the mitzvot became an act suffused with joy. Not only religious acts, but ordinary every day activities were rendered sacred by a ‘mindfulness’ typically associated with Zen Buddhism. As Rabbi Pinhas tells us in one of his stories: “Every word and every action contains all of the ten *Sephirot*, the ten powers emanating from God, for they fill the entire world.”<sup>103</sup> The walls between the profane and the sacred, like the walls between exoteric and esoteric knowledge, were torn down. The aim of this was to lift the divine sparks residing in every human up to the creator and thus redeem them. In fact, fulfilling the mitzvot and performing every day activities with joy and *kavvanah*<sup>104</sup> (holy intent), not only redeemed your own soul, but it was believed to be an act of *tikkun*,<sup>105</sup> bringing about the reunion of the *Shekinah* (God’s divine presence on earth) with God. Once that has been achieved, the Messiah will come to earth. By concentrating on every day acts, instead of the future, living every hour as it should be lived, one hastens the coming of the Messiah, without growing fixated on this possibly distant event. Instead of hoping for better times to come, one should be joyful in the present. However, one should primarily find joy in worshipping God and admiring His creation, not in earthly pleasures. Buber explains, “do not be vexed at your delight in creatures and things! But do not let [joy] shackle itself to creatures and things; through these, press on to God. Do not rebel against your desires, but seize them and bind them to God.”<sup>106</sup> Through your joy in God, you will find personal joy and redemption. That is one of the core principles of Hasidic faith.

The Hasidic tales told by the leaders of the Hasidim, the tzaddikim, primarily revolve around the holy deeds and words of former tzaddikim, their masters and their masters’ masters. In turn, these tales would become holy acts themselves. According to Hasidic belief, “the primeval light of God poured into the tzaddikim; from them it poured into their works, and from these into the words of the Hasidim who relate them. [Until] the words in themselves became events. And since they serve to perpetuate holy events, they bear the consecration of holy deeds.”<sup>107</sup> Hasidic leaders taught by word of mouth, their speech would become an act of teaching<sup>108</sup>, which would become a tale to be passed on to future

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<sup>102</sup> Martin Buber. *Tales of the Hasidim: the Early Masters*. Trans. Olga Marx. New York: Schocken Books, 1947, 3.

<sup>103</sup> From “Sephirot”, Buber 122.

<sup>104</sup> Buber 3.

<sup>105</sup> The repair of the world, repairing the *sephirot*, the holy vessels that broke at creation, because of *tzimtzum*, God’s contraction to make space for the world.

<sup>106</sup> Buber 4.

<sup>107</sup> Buber, v.

<sup>108</sup> Buber ix.

generations and the retelling of the tale a holy event in itself.<sup>109</sup> This is how the stories serve as the corner stone of both sacred and profane Hasidic life.

Joseph Dan provides another explanation for why many of the tales are anecdotes from Hasidic leaders. Homiletics had been “a central vehicle for expressing Jewish religious ideas for nearly two millennia and became the dominant literary form in Eastern Europe in the centuries preceding the appearance of Hasidic literature late in the eighteenth century.”<sup>110</sup> The traditional form of homiletics was used to emphasize the continuity with previous Jewish literature and thus enhance its authentic claim to truth. “It is quite natural for an innovative, revolutionary movement to emphasize its adherence to tradition rather than to emphasize its new departures.”<sup>111</sup> The form would be traditional, it would feel familiar but the content was innovative, therefore telling a story could be a subtle way of smuggling in radical ideas.

Some stories are parables, which record daily events that demonstrate a tzaddik’s character or convey direct teachings from the tzaddikim, but a small proportion of the stories are miracle tales, which contain magic or otherworldly creatures. The Hasidic Rabbi Jacob Kranz, the Maggid of Dubno, has an explanation for this, which appropriately is presented in the form of a short story:

Rabbi Truth and Rabbi Folktale had always been good friends and spent a lot of time together. One day, Rabbi Truth came to his old friend in tears. ‘People don’t want me anymore!’ he complained. ‘Everywhere I go, people shut their doors and run away from me as fast as they can. Is it because I’m old and wrinkled?’ ‘Of course not,’ answered Rabbi Folktale, ‘I am as old and wrinkled as you are, but for me doors open wide. But tell me, my friend, do you always go about so completely naked?’ ‘Yes, I am the naked truth.’ ‘Well then, no wonder people run away from you, they must be frightened when they see a bare naked man! Here, take my colourful coat.’ said Rabbi Folktale. ‘People love beauty and want to be seduced by beautiful things.’

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<sup>109</sup> One might think of making a connection to Speech Act Theory here, after all Austin defined a ‘performative utterance’ as ‘doing something’ rather than ‘reporting something’, yet Austin and Searle excluded literary language from their Speech Act Theory because from a pragmatic standpoint it is void. In the case of the Hasidic tales, the entire story is an ‘act’ or ‘event’ and it is not a single utterance, a specific locutionary or perlocutionary verb that serves as a ‘que’ or indicates a specific single action. Even though the whole story as such can hold a certain illocutionary force as they bring about a change in circumstances, it is on a much broader level.

<sup>110</sup> Joseph Dan, “Preface” in *Nahman of Bratslav, The Tales*. Trans. Arnold J. Band. New York: Paulist Press, 1978, xiii.

<sup>111</sup> Dan xiii.

From that moment on, Rabbi Truth and Rabbi Folktale travelled together in gorgeous clothes and everywhere they went, they were kindly received.<sup>112</sup>

This story helps to clarify why tzaddikim would put part of their teaching, their wisdom, into a folktale. Sometimes when their teachings were difficult to convey, fiction was the only medium they could use to convey the truth in a way people would understand and accept. Hasidic theology is difficult to explain to people who have received little Talmud education; using a story entertains the tzaddik's disciples and simultaneously teaches them Hasidic doctrine.

Kabbalah,<sup>113</sup> one of the key religious theories in Hasidism that is most difficult to comprehend, is central to the Hasidic tales. The language of the tzaddikim was infused with Kabbalist references. To give a brief example, the Baalshem allegedly said that “when a Hasid spoke in praise of the tzaddikim, this was equivalent to dwelling on the mystery of the divine Chariot which Ezekiel once saw.”<sup>114</sup> Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov, a tzaddik of the fourth generation and a friend of the ‘Seer of Lublin’ added that “For the tzaddikim are the chariot of God.”<sup>115</sup> This is a modified statement taken from the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 47:6): “The Patriarchs are Truly the Chariot.”<sup>116</sup> The founder of Chabad Lubavitch, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, offers a Kabbalist explanation of this statement in his magnum opus the *Tanya*, (“Likkutei Amarim”, chapter 34): in the first book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel beheld a vision of a chariot (*merkavah*), the chariot symbolized the capacity of each individual to accommodate the *Shekinah*<sup>117</sup> and fulfil God’s purpose in the world.<sup>118</sup> The Patriarchs bound their minds and souls to God, with such total surrender that this would result in self-

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<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Gottfrid van Eck. *Chelm is Overal*. Zeist: Uitgeverij Christoffor, 2003, 9. Original text: “Rabbi Waarheid en rabbi Sprookje waren al lange tijd vrienden en trokken veel met elkaar op. Op een dag was Waarheid in tranen en bezocht zijn oude vriend. ‘De mensen moeten mij niet meer,’ klaagde rabbi Waarheid. ‘Overal waar ik kom worden deuren gesloten en loopt men hard voor mij weg. Zou het komen omdat ik oud en gerimpeld ben?’ ‘Welnee,’ zei rabbi Sprookje. ‘Ik ben net zo oud en rimpelig als jij, maar voor mij gaan alle deuren juist wagenwijd open. Maar vertel eens vriend, ga je de laatste tijd steeds zo bloot over straat?’ ‘Ja, ik ben een naakte waarheid.’ ‘Geen wonder dat iedereen voor jou op de loop gaat, want de mensen schrikken zich een hoedje als ze zo’n bloterik zien! Hier, neem een van mijn kleurige mantels,’ sprak rabbi Sprookje. ‘De mensen houden van schoonheid en willen graag verleid worden door mooie dingen.’ Vanaf dat moment reisden Waarheid en rabbi Sprookje samen rond in prachtige kleren en ze werden overal even vriendelijk ontvangen.” *All translations in this thesis are mine.*

<sup>113</sup> Judaism’s esoteric school of thought. The word literally means ‘received’, as in received knowledge.

<sup>114</sup> Buber v. Ezekiel sees God’s *Merkabah* in Ezekiel 1.

<sup>115</sup> Buber v.

<sup>116</sup> Norman Lamm. *The Religious Thought of Hasidim*. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1999, 223 fn 9.

<sup>117</sup> God’s divine presence on earth.

<sup>118</sup> Lamm 223 fn 9.

nullification and absorption into God, which would allow them to become 'chariots'.<sup>119</sup> Rabbi Rymanov took this statement and made it relevant to his Hasidim by replacing 'patriarchs' with 'tzaddikim', who formed the new spiritual elite. Speaking praise of a tzaddik, such a simple, commonplace thing, became a vehicle for a Kabbalist concept.

One of the Baalshem's stories is a straightforward explanation of *Hekhalot* mysticism. *Hekhalot* literature was written and redacted in the first centuries C.E.<sup>120</sup> and describe the heavenly ascent (or descent) of the mystic, the *yored merkavah*<sup>121</sup>, through the divine palaces, culminating in a vision of God's throne located in the seventh palace of the seventh heaven.<sup>122</sup> Heavens are usually seen on top of each other, planes through which one ascends, but the palaces-system is concentric and hence, the innermost hall is the 'highest' palace. However, it is not quite as simple as setting out to find the hall that is directly at the centre: the hall could be anywhere; one can only find it when one is worthy and God shows mercy. In the following story from the Baal Shem Tov, the Baalshem explains this theory by means of a narrative:

The Baalshem told: A king once built a great and glorious palace with countless chambers, but only one door was opened. When the building was finished, it was announced that all the princes should appear in front of the king who sat on his throne in the last chamber. But when they entered, they saw that there were doors open to every side which led to winding passages in the distance and then there were more doors and more hallways and no end stood before their bewildered eyes. Then came the king's son and saw that all the labyrinth was a mirrored illusion and he saw his father sitting in the hall before him.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Lamm 223 fn 9. Rabbi Shneur Zalman explained this midrashic saying further in chapter 23: when the organs of the human body perform a commandment of the Torah, such that the divine soul's faculty of action is immanent in it at the time, they become a vehicle ('chariot') for the Supreme Will.

<sup>120</sup> According to Scholem, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries (*Origins of the Kabbalah*, 19), according to Wolfson, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries ("Jewish mysticism: a philosophical overview", 395). *Hekhalot* scholar Rachel Elior admits that the dating could be anywhere from the 2<sup>nd</sup> till the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century ("Merkabah Mysticism: A Critical Review", 235).

<sup>121</sup> Literally: one who descends to the chariot. Peter Schäfer. *The Hidden and the Manifest God*. Trans: Aubrey Pomerance. New York: State University of New York Press, 1992, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Wolfson 393. Scholem argues that this divine realm of the throne is comparable to the *pleroma* in Neoplatonism, Gnosticism and Hermetism. Hence, Scholem's assumptions on the Gnostic origins of Kabbalah. Indeed, a heavenly journey that springs to mind when examining the *Hekhalot* texts is the *Corpus Hermeticum* from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>123</sup> Martin Buber. *Die Legende de Baalshem*. Frankfurt: Literarische Anstalt Rutten und Loening, 1908, 10. Original text: „Der Baalshem erzählte: Ein König baute einst einen großen und herrlichen Palast mit zahllosen Gemächern, aber nur ein Tor war geöffnet. Und als der Bau vollendet war, wurde verkündet, es sollten alle Fürsten erscheinen vor dem Könige, der in dem letzten der Gemächer thronete. Aber als sie

The king in this story is God and his son the worthy mystic who is able to see God.<sup>124</sup>

The stories do not only contain esoteric knowledge, some stories have an esoteric function in and of themselves. Certain tzaddikim experienced moments of enlightenment, perhaps even *devekuth*<sup>125</sup> and would find it difficult to speak of what had happened. That is because the knowledge they accessed in that instant is a type of *gnosis*: supreme knowledge of God and the self, revelatory in nature and observed beyond sense or reason, which cannot be verified or communicated.<sup>126</sup> Tzaddikim are teachers first and foremost, hence they would try to convey their experience and the only form in which they knew how to do this was through a story. Buber refers to these kind of experiences when he writes “something happened to the soul [of the tzaddikim] and it had such an effect; by communicating the effect, tradition also reveals its cause; the contact between those who quicken and those who are quickened, the association between the two.”<sup>127</sup> Buber suggests that something of the tzaddik’s experience would be passed on to the disciple. That is the underlying reality of the true legend. Elimelekh of Lizensk, the brother of Zusya of Hanipol, reiterates this idea in, “The Impure Fire”, “the way cannot be learned out of a book, or from hearsay, but can only be communicated from person to person.”<sup>128</sup> By telling a story, the tzaddik shows his disciples the way.

The Hasidic tales teach us about the special relationship between the tzaddik and his disciples. The community of Hasidim belonging to a tzaddik, especially the close-knit circle of those who are often with him, is felt as a powerful dynamic unit.<sup>129</sup> Buber asserts, “the teacher helps his disciples find themselves, and in hours of desolation the disciples help their teacher find himself again. The teacher kindles the souls of his disciples and they surround him and light his life with the flame he has kindled.”<sup>130</sup> The tzaddik functions as ‘helper’ and guide, aiding in profane matters, little cares and sacred matters, since they are

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eintraten, sahen sie: da waren Türen offen nach allen Seiten, von denen führten gewundene Gänge in die Fernen, und da waren wieder Türen und wieder Gänge, und kein Ende stand vor dem verwirrten Auge. Da kam der Sohn des Königs und sah, dass all die Irr eine Spiegelung war, und sah einen Vater sitzen in der Halle vor seinem Angesicht.“

<sup>124</sup> Although it should be noted that traditionally the crown prince is the Messiah.

<sup>125</sup> The highest goal in Jewish mysticism, clinging to God and hence being as close to God as possible.

<sup>126</sup> This is a vital concept in Western Esotericism and Kabbalah is part of this tradition. See Wouter J. Hanegraaff. "Reason, faith, and gnosis: potentials and problematics of a typological construct." *Clashes of Knowledge*. Springer Netherlands, 2008. 133-144.

<sup>127</sup> Buber 1.

<sup>128</sup> Buber 256.

<sup>129</sup> Buber 9.

<sup>130</sup> Buber 8.

all bound up together. His mere presence, the fact that he is there, aids and guides his Hasidim.

Hebrew is the language that is traditionally reserved for the religious sphere of Jewish life, yet the tzaddikim preached and told their tales in Yiddish. An unexpected result was a new veneration towards Yiddish, which although it contains Hebrew words<sup>131</sup> was designated for everyday use, not for the synagogue. Shlomo Berger explains “Hasidic leaders preached in Yiddish, because that was the language the people understood. However, because the leader of the Hasidic movement preached in Yiddish and he received the status of a saint, the Yiddish language received a halo as well.”<sup>132</sup> The first collection of Hasidic tales which contains stories about the Besht, the *Shivei Ha-Besht*, was published in Hebrew because the language enjoyed a higher status in the Jewish world and hence, it would increase the status of the stories about the Besht.<sup>133</sup> Yet soon after the first edition of the Hebrew *Shivei Ha-Besht*, a Yiddish edition appeared.<sup>134</sup> Two generations later, the stories of Rabbi Nachman, the grandson of the Besht, were printed in Hebrew and Yiddish, Hebrew at the top of the page, Yiddish below. Yiddish became a language that could be the carrier of the sacred as well. In a sense it is the perfect language for Hasidic literature; holding both the holy (Hebrew) and the profane (Yiddish). The Hasidic tales recount daily events, but also Kabbalist philosophy and religious or esoteric experiences: there is no division between the secular and the sacred. The stories demonstrate how literature can function as (albeit a broken) vessel holding the sacred, a concept that has a central place in my thesis. Furthermore, the fact that these tales were told in Yiddish, a more informal language, allowed for a greater freedom on the side of the narrator. As Ben-Amos points out, traditionally, “tales in Hebrew script and print adhered more to the ideal Jewish ethos; but narrators who used Yiddish were able to loosen the ties to Jewish tradition and explore contacts with European narrative traditions.”<sup>135</sup> This will turn out to be especially relevant to Rabbi Nachman’s tales.

One tale, “Generations”, is of particular relevance. It is part of the collection of stories concerning Moshe Leib of Sasov, a tzaddik who was said to carry the sorrows of others as his

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<sup>131</sup> Religious and legal words are borrowed from Hebrew.

<sup>132</sup> Shlomo Berger. “Jiddisj Tussen Heilig en Profaan“. *Archief Bibliotheek Universiteit van Utrecht*. <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/sg/2007-1206-202805/c4.pdf>, 71. Original text: “Chassidische leiders preekten in het Jiddisj aangezien dat nu eenmaal de taal was die de mensen verstonden. Maar omdat de stichter van de chassidische beweging in het Jiddisj preekte en hij de status van heilig kreeg, kreeg ook de Jiddisje taal een aureool.”

<sup>133</sup> Berger 71.

<sup>134</sup> Berger 71.

<sup>135</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, Dov Noy and Ira Shander. *Folktalkes of the Jews, Volume 2 : Tales from Eastern Europe*. Dulles (VA): Jewish Publication Society, 2007, xxi.

own.<sup>136</sup> I shall briefly paraphrase this story: the Baal Shem Tov was a healer as well as a preacher and in order to cure sickness, the Baalshem knew he had to recite the secret words, bring a special candle, carry it into the woods and attach it to a specific tree and the cure would succeed. His disciple the Great Maggid had forgotten the meaning of the secret words, but he still knew all the actions and the cure still worked. Moshe Leib no longer had the power to carry out the actions, he only remembered the story, but even telling the story acted as a cure.<sup>137</sup> This tale functions as an analogy that explains what happened to the mystical content of Hasidism now only the stories of the great tzaddikim are left to us. The tale also demonstrates that words and stories can hold power and how in passing them on, from generation to generation, their redeeming power is preserved. A story similar to “Generations” is “And the Fire Abated”: there was a fire on the Sabbath, but young rabbi Zusya said “Is it not written: And the fire abated!’ At the very same moment the fire abated.”<sup>138</sup> In turn this story put out another fire. William Samarin’s statement comes to mind; “In religion perhaps one finds the most explicit expression of belief in the power of language as a force in its own right,”<sup>139</sup> which makes studying religious language in literature, one of the flagships of secularism, so fascinating.

The Hasidic tales have remained an inspiration not only to the Hasidim, but to other Jews (and even non-Jews<sup>140</sup>) as well.

Whatever the motivation— be it ridicule, admiration, nostalgia, or appreciation— non-Hasidic Jews told Hasidic tales during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The Hasidic narrative tradition was so pervasive it became an integral part of the folk-literary repertoire of storytellers. In non-European Jewish communities, the figure of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (known as the Besht), the legendary founder of Hasidism, became the subject of many tales.<sup>141</sup>

Secular authors such as Norman Mailer, Walther Rathenau, Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács were all moved by the Hasidic tales collected by Buber. The quote below illustrates the power of the Hasidic tales to unite Jews and give them a shared sense of belonging, despite

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<sup>136</sup> “His Own Suffering” *Later Masters* 86.

<sup>137</sup> *Later Masters* 92-93.

<sup>138</sup> About Zusya of Hanipol but from Yitzhak Eisik of Kalev, *Late Masters* 103.

<sup>139</sup> William J. Samarin. “The Language of Religion” in *Language in Religious Practice*. Ed. William J. Samarin. Rowley (Mass): Newbury House Publishers, 1976, 11.

<sup>140</sup> The stories have found a strange home in Dutch protestant churches.

<sup>141</sup> Ben-Amos xxxiii.

(or perhaps because) of the secularization of Judaism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many Jews felt disconnected from Talmudic Judaism, but the Hasidic tales resonated somewhere deep.

The American writer, Norman Mailer noted that when he read *The Tales of the Hasidim*, "it was like an orphan discovering that in fact he had a beautiful mother." ...Close to fifty years earlier in Berlin Walther Rathenau was so inspired by Buber's *Die Legende des Baalschem* that he resolved to learn Hebrew in order to be able to read the wisdom of the *tzaddikim* in the original. Rathenau's contemporaries, Ernst Bloch and Georg Luckacs were also for a time enamoured of Buber's Hasidic stories, regarding themselves as secular disciples of the Baal Shem. With elliptical reference to Buber's writings, Bloch opened an essay on the Jews with the exuberant declaration: "The pride of being Jewish has been reawakened" ("Neu erwacht die Stolz, juedisch zu sein.") Such enthusiasm was quickened by the image of Judaism they found in Buber's writings, an image with which they could feel comfortable; Bloch referred to the Baal Shem as a symbol of the anti-bourgeois principle inherent in authentic Judaism.<sup>142</sup>

This passage affirms Walter Benjamin's theory on the true value of a story, it "preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day."<sup>143</sup> Whenever the Hasidic tales were read, regardless of by whom, they managed to contain their original impulse.

### **1.3 Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's Literary Explorations**

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav aligned himself with an already existing tradition of Jewish folk tales, but he became the first real storyteller in Hasidic Judaism. All the earlier Hasidic tales were created anonymously, but in Rabbi Nachman's stories we find personal intention and authorship for the first time. Furthermore, they are a completely unique literary

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<sup>142</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr. "Martin Buber's reception among Jews." *Modern Judaism* 6.2 (1986): 113.

<sup>143</sup> Benjamin 366.

phenomenon, merging fairytale with Kabbalah rather spectacularly. Hence, one could argue that Rabbi Nachman was the first Hasidic writer and Hasidic Jewish literature begins with him.

I shall give a brief biographical overview of this remarkable man. Nachman was the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, born in Medzhybizh and desired to re-instigate the spiritual flame in the Hasidic community<sup>144</sup>, but his own relationship to God had not always been easy. From Buber's biographical introduction to Rabbi Nachman's tales we learn that his childhood had been troubled; he had tormented himself, fasted and avoided rest in order to feel a connection to God and experience a religious altered state of consciousness:<sup>145</sup> “.. he ran at night to some place empty of men and spoke to God in the language of the people, in that tenderly blunt, melancholy, and bitter idiom that the European calls jargon. But God did not answer him.”<sup>146</sup> It appeared to him as though God had paid no attention to him and did not want Rabbi Nachman for his services at all. Yet, “the storm of despair overwhelmed him and shook him until in the deepest despair ecstasy was kindled and the boy felt the first shudder of rapture.”<sup>147</sup>

Nachman married, according to Jewish customs of the time at fourteen and settled down in the village where his father-in-law lived. Here for the first time he came close to nature, and it moved him deeply.

After a childhood lived in the confinement of the city, the Jew who emerged into the free country was seized by a nameless power unknown to the non-Jew. A thousand-year heritage of strangeness to nature had held his soul in bonds. And now, as in a magical realm, instead of the pale-yellow walls of the streets, forest greenery and forest blooms surrounded him; the walls of his spiritual ghetto tumbled down at once upon contact with the power of growing things.<sup>148</sup>

Here, like his grandfather before him, he found God in all things, even in the songs of the plants and he came to love everything that was living and growing.<sup>149</sup> From the village, he moved into a small town where he began to instruct one disciple after another, until he

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<sup>144</sup> Due to structural problems, there was a period of decline after the first three generations of Hasidism.

<sup>145</sup> Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*. Trans. Maurice Friedman. London: Souvenir Press, 1974, 21.

<sup>146</sup> Buber 21.

<sup>147</sup> Buber 21.

<sup>148</sup> Buber 23-24.

<sup>149</sup> Buber 25.

gained recognition, yet he resisted becoming like the other tzaddikim of his time; living for fame and profit.<sup>150</sup> Horodezky affirms, “R. Nachman of Bratslav also realised that Ukrainian Hasidism is in decline and he, R. Nachman, wanted to restore it back to honour, to make it to one, imperishable thing.”<sup>151</sup> He thought the key to its permanent renewal lay in Kabbalah:

What the Kabbalah had never been, it should now become: the teaching should go from mouth to ear and again from mouth to ear steadily expanding itself out of the compass of the still unborn words, borne by an incessantly self-restoring band of messengers, awakening the spirit in each generation, rejuvenating the world, ‘turning the wilderness of the hearts into a dwelling-place for God.’<sup>152</sup>

In Bratzlav, Nachman gathered and taught many students. Teaching for him was a mystery and communication was rare and wonderful, like something newly created.<sup>153</sup> According to Rabbi Nachman, first there is teaching and then come the words. As Buber describes,

The drive to narrate was for Rabbi Nachman the feeling that his lessons ‘did not have any clothes.’ The stories were supposed to be the clothes for his lessons. They were supposed to ‘awaken.’ He wanted to plant a mystical idea or a truth of life into his students’ heart. But without having had this in his mind, his narrative took shape in his mouth, grew beyond its purpose and forced its tendrils of blossoms, until it ceased to be a lesson, and instead became a fairy tale or legend. The stories did not lose their symbolic character because of this, but they became quieter and more spiritual.<sup>154</sup>

Nachman’s stories are unique in the Hasidic tradition. First of all, the other Hasidic tales that have been recorded largely belong to hagiography; they describe specific historical individuals, the leaders of the various Hasidic groups and they recount their deeds and their teachings. Sometimes, magical incidents take place or otherworldly characters appear, but these are exceptions, not the rule. In Rabbi Nachman’s tales, his characters

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<sup>150</sup> Buber 25.

<sup>151</sup> S. Horodezky. *Religiöse Stromungen in Judentum*. Berlin: Ernst Bircher Verlag, 1920, 142-143. Original text: „R. Nachman Brazlawer sah auch ein, dass der ukrainische Chassidismus im Sinken begriffen seid, und er, R. Nachman, wollte ihn wieder zu Ehren bringen, ihn zu einem ‚Unvergänglichen Dinge‘ machen.“

<sup>152</sup> Buber 25-26.

<sup>153</sup> Buber 29.

<sup>154</sup> Buber 44.

include kings, princesses, pirates, giants, warriors and forest-spirits. Nationality or even religious identity often appear irrelevant, as in most other non-Hasidic fairytales. We know that nearly all of the main characters are Jewish, but only because when a character is not Jewish, this is explicitly mentioned; their religious identity is not evident from their actions. Consequently, the stories have a superficially universal, as opposed to specifically Jewish, quality. Superficially, because only those who are not capable of understanding their true meaning would mistake them for non-Jewish stories. This is the result of Nachman's blatant disregard of realism. As Nachman-scholar Arthur Green comments, "*The Tales* are fantastic in that their entire world, at least on the face of things, makes no pretence of being anything other than the spinning forth of their teller's imagination, using whatever elements of the folk or Kabbalistic traditions he may have absorbed."<sup>155</sup> Nonetheless, they seem to contain profound truth, "the combination of folk-motif and intentional symbolism here lends to the tales a quality only to be described as *mythic*."<sup>156</sup> The stories may take place in a dimension of reality different from our own. At the same time, this reality claims to have a higher status or represent a deeper truth than the world that is the object of our everyday experience.<sup>157</sup> Rabbi Nachman's tales impart Kabbalist doctrine that is part of the foundation of the worldview of Hasidic Jews,<sup>158</sup> which may not be perceived in the Hasid's day-to-day existence or a description thereof.

While the tales and their mystical content were undoubtedly very important to Buber, in fact, as Lilian Weissberger states, "the mysticism displayed in these Hassidic tales was supposed to underscore Buber's own view of the regeneration of *Judentum* by Hassidic thought,"<sup>159</sup> I have chosen to use Arnold Band's translation, since he has aimed to stay closest to the original source. The stories are not easy to comprehend and there has been much debate about their meaning. Joseph Dan writes in his introduction to Band's collection that "Even the closest disciples of Rabbi Nachman who wrote commentaries on these tales – Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov and Rabbi Nachman of Tcherin – claim that they do not understand many elements in these tales."<sup>160</sup> I do contest his assertion that "if there was any didactic purpose to these stories, they should be regarded as an attempt which had failed completely. [Their value] should be found in their literary characteristics, rather than in any

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<sup>155</sup> Arthur Green. *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*. Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1980, 343.

<sup>156</sup> Green 343.

<sup>157</sup> Green 344.

<sup>158</sup> God's origins, the relationship between God and his creation, the path to redemption.

<sup>159</sup> Liliane Weissberg. "Philosophy and the Fairy Tale: Ernst Bloch as Narrator" *New German Critique*: 55 (Winter, 1992), 38.

<sup>160</sup> Dan xiv.

particular ethical or theological message which they supposedly carry.”<sup>161</sup> Alongside the very modern, expressionist and existentialist content of the stories, there is a didactic purpose indeed, primarily to explain Kabbalist philosophy to Nachman’s disciples and that is their theological message. Dan states that “reading [the stories] is primarily a literary experience.”<sup>162</sup> Of course, the stories can be appreciated for their literary merits, but that is the tip of the iceberg. The reality is that for Hasidic rabbis, fiction becomes a necessary means “only when other systems of communication and expression have been proven to be inadequate; [since] otherwise, fiction is superfluous.”<sup>163</sup> Hence, the mystical content of these stories was poured into the form of fairytales, only because Nachman could not find any other way to convey his teachings, which was important considering the fact that he wished to re-kindle the mystical spark of Hasidism through Kabbalah. Therefore, the stories could never have been pure literary self-expression, *l’art pour l’art*; they had an important purpose to fulfil. These stories are an excellent example of why the ostensible dichotomy between literary fiction and religious text is rather deceptive; sometimes a text can fulfil both functions equally.

The reason why the – often Lurianic<sup>164</sup> – Kabbalist components are difficult to discern is because ideas were first internalised and then, transformed by Nachman’s mind, they came back through his mouth in the tales. Yakov Azriel provides another rather curious reason for why Rabbi Nachman cloaked his esoteric teachings in fables. Nachman believes that like the Torah, Kabbalah can be a dangerous medicine when applied directly and undiluted.<sup>165</sup>

His dilemma is how to administer the medicine (namely, the knowledge and teachings of the Kabbalah) without hurting these people. Rabbi Nachman’s solution is extremely innovative: he had decided to teach the Kabbalah not in its esoteric and philosophical terminology, but rather in an indirect manner by wrapping and disguising Kabbalistic concepts and ideas in the

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<sup>161</sup> I also disagree with Joseph Weiss who considers them predominantly a personal mystical expression. Dan xiv-xv.

<sup>162</sup> Dan paraphrasing Weiss xv.

<sup>163</sup> Dan xvi.

<sup>164</sup> Dan xvii.

<sup>165</sup> Yakov Shammai Azriel, extensively quoted Rabbi Nachman *Likkutei Moharan* I:164 in *The Quest for the Lost Princess*. Doctoral thesis. University of South Afrika, 2003, 16.  
<http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/1159/Thesis.pdf?sequence=1>

garments of stories, fables and fairy-tales, thereby making the Kabbalah more palatable and [comprehensible].<sup>166</sup>

Certainly, the Bratslaver Hasidim, followers of Nachman, believe in their didactic value, since the thirteen tales, told between 1806 and 1810, are still studied by them as scripture.<sup>167</sup> The tales were “recited in Yiddish but recorded in both Hebrew and Yiddish, these tales are usually printed in bilingual editions – Hebrew above and Yiddish below.”<sup>168</sup> Joseph Dan recapitulates the Bratslaver theory about the content of the tales:

1. The ‘lofty and hidden concepts’ found in tales of other people, be they Jews or Gentiles, are parallel to the ‘holy sparks’ that fell into the created world at the time of the catalytic act of creation.
2. The tales themselves underwent a process similar to the Lurianic ‘breakin of vessels’ at the time of creation; they are therefore confused, ruined, disorderly, and their original meaning has been lost.
3. The inspired tzadikim, in this case the Besht [Nachman], is endowed with the power to reveal the holiness hidden in the stories by restructuring them according to their original, proper order. In this sense the tzadik ‘repairs’ the story.
4. Once the story has been repaired, it assumes enormous religious, even theurgic power and a tzadik like the Besht [Nachman] can use the story to ‘unite the unities’ that is, to reunite the *sefirot* (*tiferet* and *malkhut*) which had been split asunder in the act of creation.<sup>169</sup>

The first point seems a little peculiar, but since Nachman believed God’s presence was everywhere, it was in non-Jewish tales as well. Nachman argued that “‘in the tales which other people tell there are many secrets and lofty matters, but the tales have been ruined in that they are lacking much.’”<sup>170</sup> However, he did not want to create a seamless tale from different traditions, he ripped open all of the seams and started over.<sup>171</sup> To produce the perfect camouflage that would hide the tale’s mix-matched nature would defeat his purpose,

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<sup>166</sup> Azriel 17.

<sup>167</sup> Arnold J. Band. “Foreword.” In *Nachman of Bratslav, The Tales*. Trans. Arnold J. Band. New York: Paulist Press, 1978, 3.

<sup>168</sup> Band 3.

<sup>169</sup> Band 33.

<sup>170</sup> David Roskies quoting Nachman. *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*. Harvard University Press, 1996, 26.

<sup>171</sup> Roskies 27.

which was to signal the real meaning of the tale. "That meaning was coded into the story's deviation from the norm. The more difficult the tale – in its details, its plotting, its bizarre symbolism – the more redemptive weight it carried. The more aberrant the tale, the more obvious the fact that it did have a hidden meaning."<sup>172</sup> Nachman broke the non-Jewish tales, removed the outer shell (*kelipot*) to reclaim the holy spark hidden inside.

Dan's explanation above, an amalgam of Nachman and Nathan's ideas, derives from Nachman's own theory concerning the relationship between the telling of stories and the details of *sefirotic* structure.<sup>173</sup> According to the Bratslav, there is a threefold classification of the tales, which is found in the 'Patah Rabbi Simeon' sermon<sup>174</sup>. First, there are standard tales with no particular *sefirotic* function, second, there are tales classified as 'in the midst of days' and hence associated to the lower spheres of the sephirotic tree and tales classified as 'of the years of antiquity', thus connected to the three upper spheres.<sup>175</sup> The tales in the second group relate acts of divine interference in the past, such as the stories from Torah. They are connected with the lower spheres since they present accounts of incomplete redemption, a fact attested to by our experience of this imperfect world. Tales in the third group predict the great act of redemption in the future. They are logically associated with the upper three spheres, but since the final redemption has not yet taken place and the Messiah has not yet come, these stories are usually left unfinished,<sup>176</sup> such as 'the Seven Beggars' and 'the Loss of the Princess'. These tales from 'the years of antiquity', the 'Ur-tales' represented,

the most archaic memories, hidden fears, and unspoken fantasies of the self, as well as those of the universe' [and they] predicted the great act of final redemption that for Nachman still lay in the future. In mending the disorder of Jewish and European fairy tales, Nachman discovered the language of pure myth.<sup>177</sup>

Furthermore, we have lost one layer of interpretation since as Wolfgang Iser points out, "meaning is [not] an object to be defined, but it is an effect to be experienced."<sup>178</sup> The way Nachman told his tales was undoubtedly replete with physical language, facial

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<sup>172</sup> Roskies 27.

<sup>173</sup> Band 33.

<sup>174</sup> A classical Bratslav homily based on the introductory passage of the Idra Rabba of the Zohar to the *Naso*, the second Torah portion of the Book of Numbers from the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>175</sup> Band 34.

<sup>176</sup> Band 35.

<sup>177</sup> Roskies 29.

<sup>178</sup> Wolfgang Iser. *The Act of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 10.

expressions, emphasis on certain words and even his presence could mean that what his disciples primarily remember was not the exact details of the story, but the feeling they had listening to him.

This also leads to the question as to whether Nathan was a reliable narrator, telling the stories exactly as he had heard them. Buber claims that this was not the case, arguing that Nathan did not write them down immediately and he forgot things. ““They assimilated the word that he had spoken to their own thoughts.””<sup>179</sup> Yet, Band argues that Nathan did write the stories down as Nachman had spoken them.

Since these tales were considered sacred by Nachman’s closest disciples and pregnant with Kabbalistic secrets which only their tzaddik understood properly, Nathan Sternhartz would have to have been a supreme confident man to foist upon his colleagues falsified or garbled version of these tales, even if he had been elected the tzaddik’s legitimate heir – which was not the case.<sup>180</sup>

On the one hand, Buber could have used his argument to explain why he himself retold the tales when he translated them, without adhering to the original text. On the other hand, Band could wish to enhance the authenticity of the stories he has translated, yet his argument is more convincing than that of Buber. The fact that the stories were written down shortly after they were first told marks a departure from the Hasidic tales, which survived orally for much longer. According to Walter Benjamin’s definition, Nachman’s stories belong to the ‘short story’, which “has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings.”<sup>181</sup> In this sense Nachman’s stories are closer to modern short stories, which are printed soon after they are written.

It is too simplistic to state that every story is autobiographical and Nachman is every main character, be it prince, King or viceroy, as suggested by Arthur Green.<sup>182</sup> However, on one level, many stories read as Nachman’s search for God, most obviously in “The Loss of the Princess”, where the protagonist struggles to find a place that he is told over and over

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<sup>179</sup> Buber 46.

<sup>180</sup> Band 45.

<sup>181</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” *An Anthology of Criticism and Theory 1900-2000*. Ed. Dorothy J. Hale. Malden (Mass): Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 368.

<sup>182</sup> Green 348.

again, could not rationally exist.<sup>183</sup> Yakov Azriel suggests that the “growing power of rationalism, which Rabbi Nachman feared would lead to secularism, atheism and heresy,”<sup>184</sup> influenced Nachman’s motivation to write new religious tales. For, as Nachman wrote, ““through these tales the heart is awakened and yearns with the strongest possible yearning for God.””<sup>185</sup> In that sense, Nachman’s tales attempt to provide answers to problems that Orthodox Judaism has not been able to give. In the same way, that “in the nineteenth century, literature promised solutions to problems that could not be solved by the religious, social, or scientific systems of the day.”<sup>186</sup> The tales not only relay Nachman’s struggle to find God, but also serve to confirm his faith and that of his Hasidim. This way, Nachman’s teachings are moving away from dogma and towards a more therapeutic use of storytelling. He created his own religious stories in order to understand and define God, Hasidic doctrine and his own beliefs.

I have chosen two stories of which I will give an in-depth analysis. One of the most remarkable tales is “The King and the Emperor.” It is unorthodox in its content and will later serve as a comparison to Singer’s “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy”. Its main character is female, understood to be the *Shekinah* and instead of being a helpless object, she takes charge of her situation and her destiny with courage and ferocity. Instead of waiting to be reunited with the prince, the Messiah, she actively pursues him, which is highly unusual behaviour for the *Shekinah*. Gender-role reversal is one of the key themes of the story and has been interpreted as a pro-feminist standpoint (for example by Ora Wiskind-Elsper<sup>187</sup>). This is plausible yet unlikely, as for all Nachman’s doubts, he remained a Hasidic Jew, adhering to ultra-Orthodox dogma and laws. Nonetheless, the princess not only dresses as a man but demonstrates traditionally masculine traits and behaviour, challenging Orthodox notions of gender identity, which is unique in Hasidic folk tales. However, it is not unique in Yiddish storytelling. One sixteenth-century story from Danzig may indeed have served as an inspiration to Nachman,

The first recorded Yiddish folktales, found in a Cambridge manuscript, are from the German-speaking cities of Danzig (now Gdansk, Poland), Mainz, and Worms and date to the beginning of the sixteenth century. They build

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<sup>183</sup> In Hasidic Judaism God is sometimes referred to as *makom*, place, because, as Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz explains: “Man should go into God, so that God may surround him and become his place”, Buber 124.

<sup>184</sup> Azriel 22.

<sup>185</sup> Azriel quoting Nachman 23.

<sup>186</sup> Iser 6.

<sup>187</sup> Ora Wiskind-Elper. *Tradition and fantasy in the tales of Reb Nahman of Bratslav*. SUNY Press, 1998, 111-112.

on themes that, though not entirely new to Jewish tradition, did not necessarily uphold the moral values the Rabbis advocated. For example, the story from Danzig is about disguise, romance, and deception. A beautiful Jewish seamstress searched for her husband, who had travelled to a distant land. She arrived in the city disguised as a young man, but there the king's daughter fell in love with her and insisted on marriage. As a solution to the conundrum, the wedding took place; but to uphold the deception, the disguised woman's husband spent the night with the princess. In the morning the Jewish couple fled the city.<sup>188</sup>

Nachman's story will prove to have a similar plot.

At the beginning of the tale an emperor's daughter and a king's son<sup>189</sup> were promised to each other at birth and they fell in love, "The emperor sent his daughter to study. The king, too, sent his son to study. And they both chanced upon the same teacher. They fell deeply in love, and agreed that they would marry each other."<sup>190</sup> This is the first unusual event, the daughter of the emperor is sent away from home to study and not at a finishing school, but with a teacher who instructs male heirs to a kingdom, suggesting that the princess did not receive a gendered education as was traditional in Orthodox Judaism. The lovers are happy until the emperor changed his mind about the engagement. However, the princess had developed a strong, independent personality and was not easily persuaded to give up her love. The lovers were kept away from each other, until the king wrote to the emperor about the promised match and the emperor, out of guilt, asked the son to be sent to him, so his governing skills could be tested. The prince arrived, "and the king's son longed very much to see the emperor's daughter, but he could not see her. Once, he walked near a mirrored wall and he caught sight of her and grew faint."<sup>191</sup> Fainting is usually associated with delicate women, not strong men; hence it presents the first case of gender expectation reversal. The mirrored wall is an interesting detail; it may refer to Ezekiel's vision of God's glory. In *Re'iyot Yehezkel* ('Visions of Ezekiel'), a mystical midrash dated around the fourth century C.E., Ezekiel is described as seeing God through a mirror,<sup>192</sup> considering the fact that the princess is supposed to symbolize the *Shekinah*, this would be an apt comparison.

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<sup>188</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, Dov Noy and Ira Shander. *Folktalkes of the Jews, Volume 2: Tales from Eastern Europe*. Dulles (VA): Jewish Publication Society, 2007, xx.

<sup>189</sup> Both men had been unable to conceive children until they received their respective daughter and son.

<sup>190</sup> Band 67.

<sup>191</sup> Band 68.

<sup>192</sup> Meira Polliack. "Ezekiel 1 and its Role in Subsequent Jewish Mystical Thought and Tradition." *European Judaism* 32.1 (1999): 73.

Taking on the role of rescuer, the princess found the worried prince and comforted him by saying she would marry him no matter what. They escaped by ship and arrived at a shore, after which they lost each other due to complications involving a ring<sup>193</sup>.

The princess, during her search for the prince, decided to dwell by the seashore, whilst the prince, who had lost his way too, had found a settlement where he became a servant. Meanwhile, the princess was noticed by a merchant's son with a boat, he "saw that the emperor's daughter was sitting there, and told her to get down. And she told him she did not want to embark upon the ship, unless he promised her he would not touch her until they came home and married legally."<sup>194</sup> Yet, this was all but an elaborate ploy to steal his ship: when they approached the merchant's son's home, she tricked him to go ashore to inform his father and friends about their coming and she told him to get the sailors drunk to celebrate their engagement. He did as he was told and the sailors became so inebriated they fell off the ship, which allowed the princess to take it and sail off. The merchant exiled his son "and the emperor's daughter sailed upon the sea."<sup>195</sup> These actions show her intelligent, resourceful and unruly nature – so unlike the female characters in other Hasidic tales.

The princess came to sail past one of the palaces of a commitment-phobic king, who for many years had been unable to choose and commit to one woman. However, when he saw the princess he instantly wanted to make her his wife and lured her to his home. Again her character falsely appears to be nothing more than the object of a man's desire. The king gave her eleven ladies in waiting to keep her company (or mind her), but she escaped again by intoxicating her eleven ladies while they were with her on the ship. She untied the ship and sailed off. The king received a grave punishment for having lost the eleven daughters of noble men; he was disposed of and exiled.

The princess and her ladies sailed near an island with twelve robbers who desired to kill the women, but the princess persuaded them to rob and marry them instead; another ploy, because she gave the robbers wine to celebrate the 'impending marriages' and they fell over. However, they were not left to sleep in peace; the drunken robbers were slaughtered by the ladies in waiting ("Now go and slaughter your men,"<sup>196</sup>) who stole their treasure to boot. "And they decided not to dress as women anymore, so they sewed for themselves men's clothing in the German style, and sailed on with the ship."<sup>197</sup> First of all, 'German style'

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<sup>193</sup> The prince lost the princess's wedding ring and went back to the beach to search for it. The prince went from place to place until he lost his way and could not return. Band 68-69.

<sup>194</sup> Band 70.

<sup>195</sup> Band 71.

<sup>196</sup> Band 74.

<sup>197</sup> Band 74.

appears to refer to dressing like non-Jews, which is interesting in itself and second of all, cross-dressing is explicitly forbidden in Torah, "A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the LORD thy God." (Deuteronomy 22: 5<sup>198</sup>) The princess, generally interpreted as the *Shekinah*, and her ladies in waiting, understood to be the eleven *Sephiroth*, should according to this law be abominations. Yet, their behaviour is perfectly acceptable in the story and they do not suffer God's wrath.

Drunkenness due to copious quantities of wine seems to be a major theme; according to Azriel, in traditional Judaism wine is not good or bad, but dualistic in nature, it can be sanctified and when drunk in moderation serve holiness, but when wine is abused, it can make a person forget God and consequently, become a source of harm and tragedy.<sup>199</sup> In the bible, Noah became drunk which led to undignified behaviour (he revealed his nakedness) and he fell asleep (Genesis 9: 21-24<sup>200</sup>), like the characters in Nachman's tale. When consumed in moderation, wine is associated with joy and thus might be used to lift up the divine sparks from the *kelippot*.

The princess and her crew sailed on until they saw a prince on a neighbouring ship making a fool of himself by showing off, climbing on top of the mast in only his shirt. The princess "waited till he reached the very top of the mast, and took her burning lens and directed it at his brain until it burned his brain and he fell into the sea."<sup>201</sup> She killed the foolish prince ingeniously with a binocular using the rays of the sun. The gender-reversal is enforced by the prince's death through penetration with a phallic object. In a twist of events, the princess presented herself to the people on the ship of the prince as a doctor and she diagnosed him after he had died. "And they were astonished that the doctor had been so accurate."<sup>202</sup> The company asked the princess to become their king's doctor, but she refused. Then the noble men devised a cunning plan of how to make the doctor king by marrying the prince's widow; they would kill the old king (they were too afraid to tell him his son was dead) and they would have a new, very wise king instead. "The noblemen approved of the idea that their queen should marry the doctor, because of the great wisdom they found in him."<sup>203</sup> The reader knows that in part this 'wisdom' is false, the princess knew how the

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<sup>198</sup> Hebrew Bible. <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0522.htm>.

<sup>199</sup> Yakov Shammai Azriel. *The Quest for the Lost Princess*. Doctoral thesis. University of South Afrika, 2003, 78. <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/1159/Thesis.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>200</sup> Hebrew Bible. <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0109.htm>

<sup>201</sup> Band 75.

<sup>202</sup> Band 75.

<sup>203</sup> Band 75.

prince was killed because she killed him, but describing a woman as being in a position of authority, possessor of great knowledge, is unusual for a Hasidic narrator.

The noblemen held a banquet in the doctor's honour, who gave them generous amounts of wine and while drunk, the noblemen floated the idea of the marriage and everyone, while drunk, agreed. When they arrived in the kingdom, they found out that the old king had died anyway, hence the marriage and coronation could go ahead promptly. Nachman's reader must have been either slightly shocked or indeed bemused by the idea of a homosexual marriage, considering the general consensus on this issue at the time, but Schleicher suggests that the awareness of the false identity of the princess and the cowardice of the ministers, should transfer to guilt on the part of the listener and encourage him or her to cast a closer look at their own, possibly not entirely truthful nature.<sup>204</sup>

The doctor had decided to invite everyone in the whole world to his wedding to the queen. She also had pictures of herself installed at every fountain and everyone who stared at this picture too long was to be imprisoned. Her true love, the merchant and the exiled king were all captured and brought before the princess who had now become king, since they had been found guilty of staring at the picture. The exiled king received his noble ladies back and the merchant received his ship. Her true love, the prince, is rather bluntly ordered to come home with her, thus they returned home.

The princess or the *Shekinah's* behaviour can be explained in different ways. Aryeh Kaplan, a Bratslaver Hasid who translated *Sippurey Ma'asiyot* and published a book called *Rabbi Nachman's Stories*, provides a Kabbalist explanation for the gender-reversal. The *Shekinah's* turn to assertiveness is caused by her transformation into the *Mashiah ben David*, who according to Kaplan she will be in the world-to-come.<sup>205</sup> This makes no sense. First of all, if the princess is the *Mashiah ben David* then who is the prince, who is understood to be this person? Unless he is the *Mashiah ben Yosef*, but that does not work within the story's narrative or logic. Secondly, the story is not set in the world to come; it relates the journey of *tikkun* leading to the world to come. Thirdly, this supposed transformation is not indicated anywhere in the text, had it been part of the plot, Nachman would not have neglected to mention this, overtly or covertly. Kaplan's theory appears to be a mere excuse to justify the powerful female character and her gender-subversive behaviour in orthodox terms. Additionally, Kaplan mentions that in the *Zohar* I,232a, *Malkuth* (Kingdom), another side of the *Shekinah* and traditionally female, becomes male when she bestows blessing upon the

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<sup>204</sup> Marianne Schleicher. *Intertextuality in the Tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*. Leiden: Brill, 2007, 165.

<sup>205</sup> Schleicher paraphrasing Kaplan 165.

world.<sup>206</sup> This argument is still reductive. Why should the female appearance of God become male when bestowing blessings, do good actions solely belong to the male domain? The loving reunion of the princess and the prince should also be seen in a different light if they are both male. In short, Kaplan's theories sound like Orthodox apologetics.

According to Schleicher, the message of the tale is the 'confrontation of evil and *tikkun*' which is "uniquely Nachmanic" since Nachman believed both necessary to bring about the coming world.<sup>207</sup> The *Shekinah* forced people to change their ways to achieve the coming of the Messiah, in order for her to be with God again. The wealth obsessed merchant and the king who could not commit to one woman (which could symbolize committing to Torah) were turned to God through exile and the *Shekinah* can now be merciful, whilst the frivolous king and the twelve robbers have been eliminated altogether. "Confronting evil, elevating and gathering sparks within it, while evil as such is destroyed, is a blessing to the world."<sup>208</sup> Furthermore, the tale could have been told to serve as a source of amusement, bringing joy and lifting spirits, or indeed to question set roles of any nature (not only gender) in Nachman's society.

Either regarding or disregarding Nachman's original intent, the story remains exceptional in its complex structure and original content. In fact, it fits well with Wolfgang Iser's theory that literature is a form of communication; it intrudes upon the world, upon prevailing social structures, and upon existing literature.<sup>209</sup> For in general, literary texts constitute a reaction to contemporary situations<sup>210</sup> and Nachman's tales cannot be considered entirely outside of their Hasidic context. When continuing along Iser's line of thought, Nachman could have employed overdetermination (*avant-la-lettre*) "to enable[ ] the reader to break out of his accustomed framework of conventions, so allowing him to formulate that which has been unleashed by the text... the literary text releases the reader from the pressure of his normal experience."<sup>211</sup> This would allow the resurfacing of that which has hitherto been repressed, or considering Nachman's purpose, break down the shell, remove the dross and reclaim the holy sparks.

Nachman anticipated Walter Benjamin's views on storytelling, according to Benjamin, the storyteller can be a traveller just returned from far away countries, but he can also be the resident master of local tales and traditions; each forms their own 'tribe' of

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<sup>206</sup> Schleicher paraphrasing Kaplan 165.

<sup>207</sup> Schleicher 173.

<sup>208</sup> Schleicher 166.

<sup>209</sup> Iser, ix.

<sup>210</sup> Iser 3.

<sup>211</sup> Iser 50.

storyteller.<sup>212</sup> “The storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers [which] is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.”<sup>213</sup> Old and young would gather to him and listen to his stories to understand how to continue their own lives. Stories also shaped the collective memory of a people, as memory functions like a chain passing on events from generation to generation<sup>214</sup>. Benjamin, a contemporary of Jung, refers to this as the collective experience the storyteller draws upon,

All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image of a *collective experience* to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier.<sup>215</sup>

In part as a result of his modern angst, Nachman began to tell stories to gather people together and bring them closer to God. He was both rooted in the soil of Hasidic Judaism, a master of Hasidic traditions, yet through his explorations of non-Jewish tales, he was equally a mercurial figure just returned from his travels, ready to share his remarkable experiences with his followers. In addition, he is one of the storytellers who helped to shape the collective memory of Hasidic Judaism, a well for future generations, such as Singer, to tap into.

Nachman moved to Uman in 1810, it is unclear why he moved there knowing that his days were numbered, although Buber suggests that he wanted to lift the souls of Jews who had died there during a massacre.<sup>216</sup> As Hordezky describes,

From then on, Hasidism begins to fossilize. The Hasidim have indeed increased, but Hasidism has frozen: no new ideas, no deepening, no imagination were newly supplied, it fed itself only from its great past. The core, the foundation of Hasidism, created by its old masters, has certainly

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<sup>212</sup> Benjamin 363.

<sup>213</sup> Benjamin 364.

<sup>214</sup> Benjamin 368.

<sup>215</sup> Benjamin 373.

<sup>216</sup> Buber 33.

remained, but without the momentum, without the deep feeling of the idealism of its heyday.<sup>217</sup>

Rabbi Nachman may have failed, but not without giving us a lasting model of his Hasidism in the shape of his tales. Scholem reminds us of the parable told by Rabbi Bunham, on the cure that was a tale,

You can say if you will that this profound little anecdote symbolizes the decay of a great movement. You can also say that it reflects the transformation of all its values, a transformation so profound that in the end all that remained of the mystery was the tale. That is the position in which we find ourselves today, or in which Jewish mysticism finds itself. The story is not ended, it has not yet become history, and the secret life it holds can break out tomorrow in you or in me.<sup>218</sup>

Again, the power of stories is emphasized, they do not only recount events that have passed but can inspire and change the present.

Nonetheless, Torsten Ysander warns us we should not stare ourselves blind on the tales and forget the rather constrictive reality of the everyday life of the Hasidim. Although the rich and beautiful Hasidic tales merit from scholarly research, they only show one side of Hasidism. The expression of the life of piety is of great importance, but not only interpretation but also critical penetration is worthwhile and more research is needed that is willing to shed a light on all aspects of Hasidism, also those aspects that are more primitive and belletristically less presentable.<sup>219</sup> Modern literature will allow us a more realistic insight into Hasidic life and the identity of Hasidic Jews. In the rest of this chapter, I shall examine the legacy of Nachman's tales and their mystical content within modern fiction.

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<sup>217</sup> S. Horodezky, 143. Original text: „Von da an beginnt der Chassidismus zu erstarren. Die Chassidim haben sich zwar vermehrt... aber der Chassidismus ist erstarrt, kein neuen Gedanken, keine Vertiefung, keine Phantasie wurden ihm neu zugeführt, er nährte sich nur von seiner Großen Vergangenheit. Der Kern, die Grundlage des Chassidismus, die seine altern Meister geschaffen, ist zwar geblieben, aber ohne diesen Schwung, ohne das tiefe Gefühl des Idealismus der Blütezeit.“

<sup>218</sup> Scholem 350.

<sup>219</sup> Torsten Ysander. *Studien zum B'eštschen Hasidismus in seiner religionsgeschichtlichen Sonderart*. Inaugural Dissertation. Trans. Ilse Meyer-Lüne. Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift, 1933, 11.

#### 1.4 Continuity in I.B. Singer

In an interview in *Encounter*, Singer declared that although the Jews of Poland had died, "something—call it spirit or whatever—is still somewhere in the universe. This is a mystical kind of feeling, but I feel there is truth in it."<sup>220</sup> In his writing, Singer wished to preserve this spirit, which is why he became known as "the chronicler of a lost European culture, of the lost Jewish villages, towns, and urban enclaves in Poland."<sup>221</sup> These are the places he himself had fled in 1933, not long before the Nazis threatened to invade the country and obliterate its Jewish inhabitants. Yet, he lived in Poland for the first thirty years of his life, which made an indelible impression on him. In an interview he said, "Well, about Poland, the truth is that I am still living there. I lived there my first thirty years; and, you know that your experiences in childhood are the most important for a writer. So for me the Poland of my youth still exists."<sup>222</sup>

Singer was firmly rooted in the Hasidic tradition described in the Hasidic tales. His father and his grandfather had both been Hasidic rabbis and this upbringing greatly influenced his writing. As he commented; "The main thing is that I heard stories told in my father's house."<sup>223</sup> However, his maternal grandfather had been a *mitnaged*. Hence,

there was always a conflict between my father and my mother about Hasidism because my mother was a little bit of a sceptic where that was concerned – especially about the *tzaddikim*, 'the wonder-rabbis'. My father always used to say that if you don't believe in the *tzaddikim* today, tomorrow you won't believe in God. My mother would say, it's one thing to believe in God and another to believe in a man. My mother's point of view is also my point of view.<sup>224</sup>

His mother appears to have been very important to him, Singer derived his pen name 'Isaac Bashevis' from her name, Bathseba.<sup>225</sup> In 1917, he, his younger brother Moshe and his mother moved to Bilgoray, his mother's hometown, due to the adversities the family met

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<sup>220</sup> "My Brother and I: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer" (Feb. 1979).

<sup>221</sup> Mark Spilka. "Empathy with the Devil: Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Deadly Pleasures of Misogyny." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. 31.3 (Summer, 1998) 431.

<sup>222</sup> Singer in an interview with Marshall Breger and Bob Barnhart. "A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer" in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, 36.

<sup>223</sup> Singer 42.

<sup>224</sup> Singer 12.

<sup>225</sup> Singer in an interview with Joel Blocker and Richard Elman "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer" in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, 9. His real name is close to his penname, Yitzhok Hersh Zinger.

during the First World War. The four years Singer lived in Bilgoray would prove to have an enduring influence on his life and work. Singer writes about his experience,

... This town was very old-fashioned. Not much had changed there in many generations. In this town the traditions of hundreds of years ago still lived. There was no railroad nearby. It was stuck in the forest and it was pretty much the same as it must have been during the time of Chmielnicki. I learned a lot about Jewishness in this town. The town was called Bilgoray... I could never have written *Satan in Goray* or some of my other stories without having been there.<sup>226</sup>

In Bilgoray, Singer perceived to experience the reality of a transmigrated soul: “In this world of old Jewishness I found a spiritual treasure trove. I had a chance to see our past as it really was. Time seemed to flow backward. I lived in Jewish history”.<sup>227</sup> Here, he studied the Talmud, the Bible, Kabbalah, even though it was forbidden: “According to the Law, a man should not study Kabbalah before he is thirty, but I used to remove the books from the study house. In fact, I almost stole them. I took them to my house and read them often. I was fascinated by the Kabbalah.”<sup>228</sup> A fascination that did not leave him, as Irving Malin remarks, he “delights in references to the Kabbalah.”<sup>229</sup>

As a young man, Singer studied to become a Rabbi, but after a year he abandoned his studies because he “began to doubt, not the power of God, but all the traditions and dogmas.”<sup>230</sup> Still, he remained a religious person,<sup>231</sup> in fact he said, “God for me means the plan of the world – in other words, whatever happens in the world seems to me like a part of a huge universal plan. This authority of planning I call God. It is the Power behind all the happenings not only on this earth but everywhere.”<sup>232</sup> Apart from God, Singer firmly believes in other supernatural forces. His visit to Bilgoray, which had remained frozen in the seventeenth century, revealed to Singer that “the past is not past and that ghosts can exist and even thrive in the twentieth century.”<sup>233</sup> This explains Singer’s fascination with

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<sup>226</sup> Singer 15.

<sup>227</sup> Buchen quoting Singer 9-10.

<sup>228</sup> Singer 15.

<sup>229</sup> Irving Malin “Introduction” in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, xii.

<sup>230</sup> Singer 12.

<sup>231</sup> Singer 18.

<sup>232</sup> Singer in an interview with Marshall Breger and Bob Barnhart. “A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer” in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, 41.

<sup>233</sup> Irving Buchen. *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past*. New York: NYP, 1968, 9.

Spiritism, “if there is any field of knowledge in which I am some kind of scholar, it is psychic research...I’ve read all the classic works of Spiritism and Occultism.”<sup>234</sup> For instance, he read the illustrious Madame Blavatsky,<sup>235</sup> founder of the Theosophical Society,<sup>236</sup> which aimed “to master the higher powers and faculties that lie latent in everyone.”<sup>237</sup> Singer resembles a *fin-de-siècle* occultist, combining traditional religious knowledge (from Orthodox Judaism) with Kabbalah and other esoteric and pseudo-scientific data,<sup>238</sup> although it is questionable whether he believed in thus constructing a modern grand narrative. In that sense, his stories demonstrate a departure from Rabbi Nachman, since wisdom, the “epic side of truth”<sup>239</sup> is present in Nachman’s tales and Nachman’s world relies on truth and wisdom. That is no longer the case for Singer, he does not set out to convey wisdom, nor does he hold one coherent truth-centred world-view, in fact, one of his most famous quotations is ‘the truth is twofold’.<sup>240</sup>

Returning to Singer’s fascination with Spiritism, his stories correspondingly emphasize the demonic and the supernatural, not only because it occupies his thoughts, but because he uses these folk elements as modes of expression.

It helps me to express myself. For example, by using Satan or a demon as a symbol, one can compress a great many things... For another thing, the demons and Satan represent to me, in a sense, the ways of the world... Demons symbolize the world for me, and by that I mean human beings and human behaviour; and since I really believe in their existence – that is, not only symbolically but substantively – it is easy to see how this kind of literary style was born.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Singer 23.

<sup>235</sup> Singer 23.

<sup>236</sup> This society was set up by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, and William Quan Judge with five specific aims: (1) ‘To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, cast or colour’. (2) ‘To promote the study of Aryan’ (which then primarily meant originating in Northern India, the place where Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha came from), (3) ‘To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the psychic powers of man’. J. Jeffrey Franklin quoting Henry Steel Olcott in *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire*. Cornell University Press, 2008, 64.

<sup>237</sup> Jocelyn Godwin. *The Theosophical Enlightenment*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 292.

<sup>238</sup> Egil Asprem. “Kabbalah Recreated: Reception and Adaptation of Kabbalah in Modern Occultism.” *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*. 9. 2 (2007), 135.

<sup>239</sup> Benjamin 364.

<sup>240</sup> I.B. Singer “The Unseen” 78.

<sup>241</sup> Singer 23.

Combining these different elements, Singer's short stories are a heady mixture of folk elements from Hasidic tales, the everyday reality of the Polish Hasidic milieu of Singer's childhood and his own mischievous imagination. The tension Singer creates between this conservative, modest and controlled environment and the fantastic and lustful events is exactly what draws the reader in.<sup>242</sup> "A strange world is made stranger by the incongruous and the unexpected."<sup>243</sup> Thus, "Artfully naïve, [Singer] enters the world of the folk tale, in which the supernatural is very much part of the texture of reality."<sup>244</sup>

After the war, Singer was one of the last great novelists left who wrote in Yiddish. "Yiddish literature was, in its prime, a body of work which was very close to the masses by whom it was read – in language, in point of view, and in drawing from a common base of experience. The annihilation of six million Jews during World War II changed all that drastically."<sup>245</sup> Yet, Singer boldly states, "I always knew that a writer has to write in his own language or not at all."<sup>246</sup> Personally, I disagree with that statement,<sup>247</sup> but his conviction meant that he was one of the few carriers left to bring this European language that originates in the Middle Ages (1000 C.E.) to the New World where it might be preserved. Perhaps Singer was so preoccupied with Spiritism and chose to continue to write in a dying language because he longed to somehow hold on to the ghosts of Polish Jewry, to believe they still existed somewhere and that through continuing to use their language and write about Polish Hasidic Jews in his literature, they would not disappear from this world entirely. Continuing along those lines and by taking a somewhat Jungian view of his writings, it might be argued that Singer's work could have its origins not in his 'personal unconsciousness', but in a sphere of unconscious mythology whose 'primordial images' belong to the heritage of the Jewish people, their 'collective unconscious.'<sup>248</sup> Like a well of Hasidic Jewish experiences that Singer tapped into when writing his stories. "In each of these images there is a little piece of human psychology and human fate, a remnant of the joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in our ancestral history."<sup>249</sup> A well of images that had but few minds left to draw from.

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<sup>242</sup> J.A. Eisenberg. "Issac Bashevis Singer, Passionate Primitive or Pious Puritan?" in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, 49.

<sup>243</sup> Eisenberg 49.

<sup>244</sup> Karl Malkoff. "Demonology and Dualism: the Supernatural." in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, 151.

<sup>245</sup> Joel Blocker and Richard Elman "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer" in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, 3.

<sup>246</sup> Singer 17.

<sup>247</sup> I am writing this thesis in English after all.

<sup>248</sup> Carl Gustav Jung. *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*. London: Routledge, 1984, 80.

<sup>249</sup> Jung 82.

Buchen writes that “Singer’s return to the past is, from the Jewish point of view, not a form of retreat but a form of return.”<sup>250</sup> Ultra-orthodox Jews may have a stronger cyclical view of time due to the fact that they adhere to the religious calendar with all its festivals that have to be celebrated in exactly the same manner as generations before. Every year again one celebrates Rosh Hashanah, Purim and Pesach, to name a few; time is a constant return, not a going forward. Even when the Messiah arrives, this cycle might not be broken. That is why Buchen believes that Singer does not only long for his Hasidic past, but the biblical past, “hearkening back to biblical origins and promises became intertwined with the similar yearnings of all previous generations and served as the binder of collective identity.”<sup>251</sup> Singer demonstrates evidence of this longing in “The Little Shoemakers”. What makes Singer’s case particularly poignant is that he cannot return to the Eastern European Jewry of his youth, their world has all but vanished, only in his writing he can return and relive once again. In his stories, “the prodigal son returns home but as a transmigrated soul.”<sup>252</sup>

One way in which Singer was incapable of escaping his Hasidic upbringing is revealed in his depiction of female characters. Mark Spilka has investigated Singer’s lifelong struggle with misogyny most thoroughly in “Empathy with the Devil: Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Deadly Pleasures of Misogyny.” He writes, for example,

Then the narrator intrudes with a bit of helpful sexist wisdom: Who can understand the feminine soul? Even an angelic woman shelters within herself devils, imps, and goblins. The evil ones act perversely, mock human feelings, profane holiness....It is all part of the perversity so characteristic of the female's nature. (67) Though Singer writes here with tongue in cheek, he half-believes his concluding maxim.<sup>253</sup>

Irving Buchen concurs,

Part of the traditional cast of Singer’s vision appears in his acceptance of the subservience of women. He frequently reminds readers that woman was created second, out of Adam’s side, and dependent. [And] when she breaks free of masculine tyranny, woman, Singer reminds us, often recovers her

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<sup>250</sup> Buchen 203.

<sup>251</sup> Buchen 202.

<sup>252</sup> Buchen 204.

<sup>253</sup> Mark Spilka, quoting from “The Shadow of a Crib” in “Empathy with the Devil: Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Deadly Pleasures of Misogyny.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. 31.3 (Summer, 1998), 437.

original role as temptress. Indeed, as an evil force she is such a scourge that the Devil appears benevolent by comparison.<sup>254</sup>

Misogyny is not only characteristic of Singer's work; it is ubiquitously present in the Hasidic tales. Its portrayal of women is rather disturbing to a contemporary audience, since they are often depicted as gossiping, nagging, mean-spirited and ignorant, with but few exceptions.<sup>255</sup> A comparatively positive anecdote is, "a woman can receive the honours due her nowhere save her home,"<sup>256</sup> which, however, is still rather denigrating by modern standards. Perhaps its misogyny should be taken as understood, simply part of Hasidic culture, but critical discussion of this issue is lacking in current scholarship. One explanation for the negative portrayal of women could be that they serve to signify 'the Other', the 'opposite'. Through these polemics the tzaddik is able to demonstrate his saintly qualities and correct Jewish conduct, as opposed to the behaviour of women, which is usually wrong. Judith Plaskow reiterates this idea,

Women have been associated with sexuality in Jewish law and legend (Torah), and this association has been the chief manifestation of women's Otherness both in Torah and in the community of Israel. Women have been separated from the (male) community in public prayer because of their supposed danger as a source of sexual temptation. Identification of women with sexuality, goddesses, and paganism contributed to the emergence of male God-language.<sup>257</sup>

Men need to distance themselves from sexual, pagan women and this removal is demonstrated in the Hasidic tales and in the stories of Singer.

The following analysis will demonstrate the continuity of Hasidic motifs in Singer's short stories. First, I shall examine "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" and draw a comparison to the above "The King and the Emperor". Subsequently, I will undertake a comparison between "The Simple Man and the Clever Man" from Rabbi Nachman and Singer's "Gimpel, the Fool". I have read both of Singer's stories in the Yiddish original and the English translation and shall comment where necessary on any discrepancies. To begin with Yentl; she is brought up by her father who secretly studied Torah with her as he believed that his daughter truly

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<sup>254</sup> Buchen 118.

<sup>255</sup> See "The Wish" from Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev 211 or "The Turning Point" from Abraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apt, *Later Masters* 111.

<sup>256</sup> "Women's Wear" from Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rymanov *Later Masters* 127.

<sup>257</sup> Judith Plaskow. *Standing Again at Sinai*. San Francisco: HarperSF, 1990: 170.

possessed the soul of a man. “‘Yentl- you have the soul of a man.’ ‘So why was I born a woman?’ ‘Even Heaven makes mistakes.’”<sup>258</sup> When he died, Yentl decided she could not bear the idea of being a good Jewish housewife, married to a man, baking his bread and mending his socks night and day; therefore she escaped dressed as a male yeshiva student.

Singer gives a telling description of Yentl’s physical appearance; she “was unlike any of the girls in Yanev – tall, thin, bony, with small breasts and narrow hips.”<sup>259</sup> It is evident that Yentl’s body is supposed to demonstrate her ‘male’ soul, which considering Singer’s references to Schopenhauer in some of his other stories<sup>260</sup> makes one suspect that he adheres to Schopenhauer’s theory that when women chase masculine pursuits, they will lose their femininity and begin to resemble a man.<sup>261</sup> Linking a woman’s intellectual capabilities directly to her physical appearance, a greater intellect making her less ‘womanly’ and vice versa is a controversial statement and not all that far removed from measuring skulls. Singer, who is rather fixated with women’s sexuality,<sup>262</sup> has effectively removed any stereotypical sensual features to indicate to the reader he is not describing yet another vile Lilith-based character, but an ‘intellectual’. By dismantling Yentl’s outward sexuality (as perceived by Singer) she has become ‘safe’; a man, as opposed to the dangerous ‘other’. The belief in the danger and ‘otherness’ of women pertains to the portrayal of women in the Hasidic tales as discussed above, demonstrating the continuity of thought.

Yentl was not made for “chattering with silly women”<sup>263</sup> and as a yeshiva boy she noticed “how different [the talk of young men] was from the jabbering of women.”<sup>264</sup> From this one may deduct that Yentl was certainly not feminist, as she failed to realise it was not gender but *education* that made the difference in conversation. Whereas the princess never spoke badly of her own gender, or dressed as a man in order to escape the society of fellow women, Yentl wanted nothing to do with her own sex. Furthermore, the princess in Nachman’s tale was bold in her disguise, she seemed not to question or care whether

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<sup>258</sup> I.B. Singer. “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy” trans Marion Magid and Elizabeth Pollet. *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982, 149.

<sup>259</sup> Singer 149.

<sup>260</sup> See for instance in “Caricature”, 1961.

<sup>261</sup> One could equally make a comparison to Virginia Woolf who argued that a writer needs an androgynous soul in order to create (*A Room of One’s Own*) but this statement might stem from Woolf’s discomfort with being a feminine author. The idea that a woman has to tone down her femininity in order to be taken seriously as an author or a scholar might have been relevant in Woolf’s day and age, but has largely lost its significance now.

<sup>262</sup> See for instance “The Gentleman from Cracow”, where a pre-Lolita 10 year old girl is the city-whore.

<sup>263</sup> Singer 150.

<sup>264</sup> Singer 150.

anyone would discover she was truly a woman, but for Yentl her cross-dressing is a source of constant anxiety since discovery of her true identity would mean being forced to go back to leading the life of a woman, which the princess had no issue with. This may be explained by the fact that, as Green commented, the story bears no relation to Nachman's world, "The King and the Emperor" is not a direct commentary on early nineteenth century Hasidic communities or the plight of women in said society. In the world of the princess, women are as powerful as men.

The situation became more complicated when Yentl fell in love with her good friend Avigdor, who knew her as Anshel. Avigdor had his own problems with women, the woman he loved, Hadass, was forced to break off their engagement under pressure from her family. Avigdor was subsequently forced to marry an unattractive-looking widow ("a cow with a pair of eyes"<sup>265</sup>), because no one else would have him and he needed a woman to satisfy his 'evil urges'; in his own words, "I'd marry a she-goat."<sup>266</sup> Awkwardly, Avigdor asked Anshel whether he did not have 'evil urges'<sup>267</sup> too. Yet, since Anshel is actually a woman, Singer makes it appear as though Anshel could not even begin to imagine having 'evil urges'. Her feelings for Avigdor were purely romantic, because in Singer's mind, virtuous women do not have the same physical desires as men. Singer may indeed be suffering from the Madonna-whore complex.

The story takes a surprising turn when it transpires that Hadass (Avigdor's ex-fiancée) had transferred her affections to Anshel. At first Anshel appeared attracted to Hadass, but she remained hesitant.

Anshel looked at her as she stood there – tall, blond, with a long neck, hollow cheeks, and blue eyes, wearing a cotton dress and a calico apron. Her hair fixed in two braids, was flung back over her shoulders. A pity I'm not a man, Anshel thought.<sup>268</sup>

Nonetheless, for some reason, Hadass was beautiful enough to make her reconsider, as she told Hadass, "I, too, want you."<sup>269</sup> Singer appears to be ascribing lesbian feelings to Anshel. "She knew very well she was getting entangled in evil, but some force kept urging her on."<sup>270</sup> However, this is not a story about two women discovering their feelings for each other; it

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<sup>265</sup> Singer 153.

<sup>266</sup> Singer 154.

<sup>267</sup> Singer 152.

<sup>268</sup> Singer 154.

<sup>269</sup> Singer 156.

<sup>270</sup> Singer 156.

serves as a cautionary tale. “Only now did Yentl grasp the meaning of the Torah’s prohibition against wearing the clothes of the other sex. By doing so one deceived not only others but also oneself. Even the soul was perplexed, finding itself incarnate in a strange body.”<sup>271</sup> The text shows inconsistency here, after all, if Yentl’s behaviour and mind were explained by her possessing a ‘male soul’, her soul should feel right at home in her new ‘male’ body.

In the Hasidic tales we find descriptions of two tzaddikim who develop a very close friendship and this is what happened to Avigdor and Anshel. Avigdor said to Anshel “It’s like the story of Jacob and Benjamin: my life is bound up in your life,”<sup>272</sup> which is a concept that is quite prevalent in the Hasidic tales.<sup>273</sup> However, this friendship is complicated due to Anshel’s romantic feelings for Avigdor. Yet, it was too late to undo what she had set into motion. “She grew more and more attached to Avigdor, and could not bring herself to destroy Hadass’s illusory happiness... Her only justification was that she had taken all these burdens upon herself because her soul thirsted to study Torah.”<sup>274</sup> The text appears more sympathetic to Yentl, giving explanation for the mess she had created, although this could be because her soul is in fact ‘male’ (again contradicting the above). At this point, it also becomes clear that Anshel’s unnatural desires will not lead to a happy ending.

The wedding came and went, the wedding night passed seemingly unproblematic. “Anshel had found a way to deflower the bride. Hadass in her innocence was unaware that things weren’t quite as they should have been.”<sup>275</sup> The Yiddish original informs us that Anshel literally found a way to “rip apart” Hadass’s hymen, but Singer is too modest to make mention of how this happened exactly. Either way, all was well the next morning when Anshel’s mother-in-law stormed into the bedroom with her posse, tore the sheets from underneath the newly wedded couple, found the required spots of blood and joyously danced around outside in the snow with the bloody sheet.<sup>276</sup> Apparently this intrusion of marital intimacy and the complete humiliation of the bride should be taken as a compliment on the wife’s adherence to *tsnius*.<sup>277</sup>

However, the beginning of the end was in sight. The townspeople became more and more suspicious of Anshel still not sprouting a beard and continually finding excuses to avoid the *mikveh*<sup>278</sup> on Friday. Anshel’s conscience increasingly pressed on her, “Lying with

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<sup>271</sup> Singer 155.

<sup>272</sup> Singer 159.

<sup>273</sup> See “Joint Penance”, from “Zusya of Hanipol”, Buber 241.

<sup>274</sup> Singer 160.

<sup>275</sup> Singer 161.

<sup>276</sup> Singer 161.

<sup>277</sup> Laws pertaining to modesty and contact between the genders.

<sup>278</sup> Ritual bath.

Hadass and deceiving her had become more and more painful. Hadass's love and tenderness shamed her."<sup>279</sup> Until finally, she decided to reveal her secret during a trip to Lublin, "Avigdor had joked: what sort of secret could it be? Had Anshel discovered a hidden treasure? By studying Kabbalah, had he created a dove?"<sup>280</sup> Even when Anshel undressed for Avigdor to prove she was a woman, Avigdor feared she wanted to "practice pederasty."<sup>281</sup> It was necessary for Avigdor to learn the secret so he could provide evidence in court in order for Hadass to be allowed to divorce. Avigdor swayed between being appalled and wishing he had known sooner, so he could have married her.

If I had only known this before, he said to himself. In his thoughts he likened Anshel (or Yentl) to Bruria, the wife of Reb Meir, and to Yalta, the wife of Reb Nachman. For the first time he saw clearly that this was what he had always wanted: a wife whose mind was not taken up with material things...<sup>282</sup>

It is unclear whether Avigdor wished for women to be allowed to receive an education equal to men, or to find the one woman like Anshel who was an anomaly; essentially to have his cake and eat it too. Yet, Anshel said marriage would not have been right, "No – it wouldn't have been good. I'm neither one nor the other,"<sup>283</sup> implying that her hunger for knowledge and great intellect had made her a hermaphrodite, because a woman cannot possess those qualities, again echoing Schopenhauer. Singer's notions regarding gender roles and the differences between men and women are very rigid, most likely based on Talmud, hence he perceives studying Torah as gender-subversive behaviour that would turn a woman into a man. Yentl knew she would be Avigdor's housewife if she did marry him, "I wanted to study the Gemara and commentaries with you, not darn your socks!"<sup>284</sup> Avigdor was confused, "All Anshel's explanations seemed to point to one thing: she had the soul of a man and the body of a woman,"<sup>285</sup> Avigdor contradicts himself by insinuating that it is impossible for a woman to be a scholar, despite having wished for a scholarly wife and having compared Anshel to other scholarly women in the previous sentence.

Yentl and Avigdor remained friends for the few days they had left in Lublin,

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<sup>279</sup> Singer 162.

<sup>280</sup> Singer 163.

<sup>281</sup> Singer 163.

<sup>282</sup> Singer 165.

<sup>283</sup> Singer 164.

<sup>284</sup> Singer 165.

<sup>285</sup> Singer 165.

continuing their discussions as they always had. "It seemed strange at first to Avigdor to be disputing holy writ with a woman, yet before long the Torah had reunited them"<sup>286</sup> – if only Torah had not divided them in the first place. The only problem was that Avigdor longed for Yentl even though she had caused him to sin; "he could no longer meet Anshel's eyes. He began to enumerate Anshel's sins and saw that he too was implicated, for he had sat next to Yentl and had touched her during her unclean days."<sup>287</sup> He continued to gently persuade Anshel to marry him, but Anshel was decided on not becoming a housewife "I wasn't created for plucking feathers and chattering with females."<sup>288</sup> Anshel would live out the remainder of her years as she was, not a man and not a woman, trapped not by the physical body of a woman, but by the equally solid gender expectations of her faith and her time. Eventually, Avigdor accepted Yentl's choice and married Hadass. Singer does not allude to Anshel's ending, but it probably was not as in Barbara Streisand's film: Yentl leaving for America, a country that would allow her slightly more freedom. The reader is supposed to suspect the worst: Yentl would have to pay a steep price for her unnatural desires – "and let that be a warning!" you can almost hear Singer shout. It is evident that Yentl had to deal with the very real consequences of her gender-subversive behaviour, whereas Nachman's princess, because she inhabits a world that is not ruled by Talmudic law, could do whatever she pleases.

Buchen gives an interesting explanation for Singer's misogynist vision,

Behind the bloodlust of Risha and the homosexually inclined scholarship of Yentl, there lurks the ultimate perversion: the refusal to be dependent and vulnerable. To Singer a man truly achieves his manhood and a woman her womanhood only when both realize such goals are unachievable alone. Singer values the traditional subservience of women not because he is a male chauvinist or wishes to perpetuate the evil image of Eve but because that capacity for dependence and surrender created a model for men. But when men forget to be men and good fathers, the women understandably throw off their yokes and ape the dislocated freedom of their mates.<sup>289</sup>

The message is clear, women create a model for men; women serve men, which is why they exist. Both in Singer's fiction and in Buchen's comment, we see the effects of masculine

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<sup>286</sup> Singer 165.

<sup>287</sup> Singer 165.

<sup>288</sup> Singer 164.

<sup>289</sup> Buchen 202.

insecurity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One can see both authors struggle with questions such as, what is our place in this world now women are competing with our position? How do we continue to define ourselves as male? One can see them shake their heads and think, it is all wrong, women 'aping' 'masculine' behaviour; women should continue to be dependent and 'surrender', because it creates a 'model' for men – and all a woman is and does should be *for* men, how did it all go so wrong?

Dismissing Singer's intention, one could say Singer lost control over his material and the text could resemble a journey of soul-searching in an Orthodox context. After all, the story most people remember is not one about a woman committing sin, but Barabara Streisand in *Yentl* questioning her position in society and the limited life of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman. Yet, when adhering closely to the actual text, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" can hardly be read as a social commentary; the story appears to be a joke about how God made a mistake: He put a 'male' soul in a female body. For all its apparent gender-bending and liberalness, it is a religious tale that serves as a warning to women. This interpretation is much more in line with the rest of Singer's work, which, as mentioned, treats its female subjects rather dubiously. Nachman's "The King and the Emperor", even though it was written more than a century earlier, is far more progressive and allows for an open interpretation instead of being a cautionary tale. The princess never suffered ill consequences due to her cross-dressing, if nothing else she obtained her goal and reclaimed her prince. Literature is an excellent place to challenge and even change Orthodox perceptions, but Nachman does this more successfully than Singer.

Finally, to touch on the greatest difference between the two tales, "The King and the Emperor" is not anchored to reality and its key interpretation is Kabbalist, hence comparing "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" to this story is rather difficult, their nature is so different. It should be noted that despite Singer's fondness for Kabbalah, "Yentl" does not work on a Kabbalist level and bears a greater resemblance to a traditional Hasidic tale, or one of Nachman's non-*sephirotic* tales, which can at times be rather straight-forward with one simple message.

To continue with two tales that are both more traditional and straight-forward: "The Simple Man and the Clever Man", a Nachmanic tale without a *sephirotic* function, and "Gimpel the Fool" by Singer which is loosely based upon the former.<sup>290</sup> To begin with Nachman's tale, once upon a time there were two rich men who each had one son who studied in the same *yeshiva*, but one was very clever (*hakham*) and the other was ordinary

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<sup>290</sup> Although, Arnold Band likes to emphasize that 'the simple man' is not a fool, he was just "ordinary" instead of scholarly.

(*tam*).<sup>291</sup> The ordinary man learned the trade of shoemaker, but the clever one decided he wanted to travel the world. However, after several years travel no longer satisfied him, hence he decided to learn a craft, but he was so clever that whichever craft he began to study (goldsmithery, gem-cutting), he would master very quickly and they all left him dissatisfied. He resolved to study medicine, for which he first had to learn Latin and study philosophy and again, in a short time he became a great doctor and philosopher and he was erudite in all the sciences. "Afterwards the world began to seem like nothing in his eyes. Because of his wisdom, because he was a great craftsman and such a wise man and a doctor, every single person in the world seemed to him like nothing."<sup>292</sup> Nachman comments upon the (perceived) arrogance of scientists who have lost their sense of wonder and see everything as something that can be explained by science.

At last, the clever man decided to return home to show the people in his village what a great man he had become. In the meanwhile, the simple man had learned to become a shoemaker, which had taken him a considerable amount of time and he had married a woman. His livelihood was meagre and he barely had time for anything, because he constantly had to ply his craft. Yet, he was always happy, "full of joy"<sup>293</sup> and he felt he had everything he needed. This is the picture of a good Hasid, full of joy, which is of utmost importance, and content with his situation. The simple man just pretended that he lived in luxury; he would command his wife to give him kasha, meat and beer and although she gave him bread and water, to him it tasted like the food he had ordered. Equally, he ordered his wife to give him his finest clothes and when she would hand him his pelt, he pretended it was a beautiful kaftan. His wife was none too pleased with his meagre earnings, a theme that is very common in the Hasidic tales, but he took her complaining and continued to happily order her about as if she had not said anything. "And he was only full of joy and gladness at all times. Yet for the world he was a laughingstock, and they enjoyed his company since they found in him someone to joke about to their heart's content, because he seemed like a madman"<sup>294</sup> Nevertheless, he did not care one bit, he just said, "So what if you are more clever than I? You will still be fools!"<sup>295</sup> The simple man understood the true value of living a simple life filled with joy that goes beyond worldly gain.

When the two friends were reunited and the clever man came to stay with the

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<sup>291</sup> Band 143.

<sup>292</sup> Band 145.

<sup>293</sup> Band 146.

<sup>294</sup> Band 147.

<sup>295</sup> Band 148.

simple man, he was not impressed with his friend. The clever man continued to practise his various crafts and his medicine, but it only made him miserable because in that small village, his fancy crafts were like pearls before swine. “And so he was always full of suffering.”<sup>296</sup> The ordinary man took pity on him and said “May the Lord bring you up to my level,”<sup>297</sup> but for the clever man this was clearly ridiculous, “It is possible that I should reach your level, that my reason, God forbid, will be taken away from me, or I will be ill and become mad. Since what are you? A madman. But that you shall reach mine? It is completely impossible that you shall become as clever as I am.”<sup>298</sup> To the clever man, secular knowledge is the highest good, the utmost someone can strive for, whereas for the simple man it is living joyfully. Thus the simple man lives with the joy of God, but the clever man lives only with his own intelligence which neglects to provide him happiness. Besides, as many tzaddikim like to remind us, pride comes before the fall.

The story begins its significant turn when the king, who is supposed to represent God,<sup>299</sup> heard about the clever man and the simple man and he requested them to come to the palace. The simple man responded to the king’s invite forthwith. The king was in need of a new governor and decided that a simple man would rule the country with truth and justice, since he would not know any clever tricks and inventions,<sup>300</sup> thus he decreed the simple man to become governor. “And so he governed everything with truth. And the people of the country loved him very much.”<sup>301</sup> The simple man was even taught languages and science, which he did not object to and the king was so pleased with his wise and simple governor that he made him prime minister. Evidently, there is no harm in learning secular knowledge, as long as one is able to put its value into perspective and not turn it into a golden calf, worshipping at its altar.

Whereas the simple man answered God’s calling without hesitation, the clever man reasoned after much deliberation that it was so unlikely that the king would send for him, the king cannot exist at all. This is an overt reference to the fact that the clever man, by directing his mind solely towards secular knowledge, had lost his simple faith and could not believe in God on the basis of rationality. In fact, the clever man, like many a contemporary scientist, resolved to set out to prove there was no king at all. The clever man began his investigation by seeking empirical proof he knew would not exist. He asked whether anyone

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<sup>296</sup> Band 150.

<sup>297</sup> Band 150.

<sup>298</sup> Band 150.

<sup>299</sup> The king in Nachman’s tales is always a symbol for God.

<sup>300</sup> Band 152.

<sup>301</sup> Band 153.

had ever seen or met the king and none of the people he spoke to could say they had, which confirmed the clever man's hypothesis. Yet, while undertaking this research, he had lost all of his possessions, because he did not work, thus he was forced to become a beggar; that is what all his intelligence had let to. He kept wandering around until he came to the city where the simple man lived, and at last they met again. The clever man tried to convince the simple man that there was no king at all, but the simple man cried out: "What are you talking about? I myself have seen the king!"<sup>302</sup> To the simple man, God's presence is manifest all around him, the Hasidim see God as unfolding in His creation, although in a panentheist rather than a pantheist fashion. The clever man, who intellectualised God, was unable to see this.

The end of the story tells us that the clever man was taken by the devil and he was tortured for many years, until a nearby *Baal Shem* rescued him per request of the simple man. "And the *Baal Shem* did what he did. And [he] discovered [he was] on dry ground and there was no mire there at all. And those demons became just dust. Then the [clever man] saw and was forced, against his will, to admit everything: that there was a king, and a true *Baal Shem*, etc."<sup>303</sup> Of course the clever man had been tortured and held captive by the devil for many years previously; the devil had used secular knowledge to keep the clever man away from God.

The moral of the story it would seem, is that choosing the path of secular wisdom brings discontent and suffering and the path of faith brings joy. As Schleicher reiterates, "the wise one sets out on a journey that depicts the increasing decline of Judaism and the estrangement to his own religious tradition,"<sup>304</sup> which leads to loneliness, isolation, restlessness, misery and social decline. Whilst the path of simple men leads to a joyous experience of life, delight in small things, divine sustenance, a 'cleansed imaginative faculty', supernal wisdom, access to primordial Torah and social elevation.<sup>305</sup> A sceptic could argue that Nachman invented this story to vent his frustration with atheists, who were growing in number in his day and age, but it is more likely that Nachman himself was afraid of being lured away by secular knowledge which might lead to atheism. Hence, he conceived this story as a warning, encouragement and source of comfort for himself and his followers. The wise man and the clever man represent two side of Nachman's soul: faith versus doubt is a recurring theme in nearly all of Nachman's tales.

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<sup>302</sup> Band 158.

<sup>303</sup> Band 161.

<sup>304</sup> Schleicher 355.

<sup>305</sup> Schleicher 355-356.

Singer must have found this story inspiring because he decided to create his own version – as he did with a Hasidic tale about the *shofar*, which he turned into a children’s story,<sup>306</sup>– because his character Gimpel is very close to that of the simple man. Poor Gimpel was an orphan who was first raised by his grandfather and then by a baker. Already as a child he was mocked for his simple-mindedness; he would believe anything anyone told him. “Like a golem I believed everyone. In the first place, everything is possible, as it is written in *The Wisdom of the Fathers*,<sup>307</sup> I’ve forgotten just how.”<sup>308</sup> He derived comfort from the advice a rabbi gave him, “It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil.”<sup>309</sup> The Hasidim definitely ascribe to the ‘ignorance is bliss’ philosophy. Gimpel did not attend a *yeshiva*, this might indicate that his simple faith was not clouded by intellectualising God, instead he worked as an apprentice in the bakery. The town’s people persuaded Gimpel to marry a cripple “whore” with a bastard, but Gimpel went along with it, because “when you’re married the husband’s the master, and if that’s alright with her it’s agreeable to me too.”<sup>310</sup> However, his wife refused to obey him and had a child with someone else. Gimpel was not amused and asked his adulterous wife, “how can you make such a fool,” I said, ‘of one who is supposed to be the lord and master?’<sup>311</sup> Conversely, his wife insisted that it was his baby. In the meanwhile, his wife refused intercourse with Gimpel, “You know what women’s excuses are. I had a bitter time of it. It was rough.”<sup>312</sup> Again we find the motif of the deceiving woman seducing men with their sensuality and their cunning, leading them to misery. In Singer’s stories women either use their sexuality for evil, or will deny men their husbandly pleasure. Women do not appear to want (or not want) sex because of their own physical desires; sex always revolves around ensnaring men and making them suffer, it is merely a tool, a source of power.

After having caught his wife with another man Gimpel decided to go to the Rabbi and petition to divorce his wife, but then Gimpel changed his mind, arguing

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<sup>306</sup> Gottfrid van Eck. *Chelm is overal: en andere joodse verhalen*. Uitgeverij Christofoor, 2003, 7-8.

<sup>307</sup> This contains an English translation of the *Pirkei Avot*, the Chapters of the Fathers, with a selected commentary. It is one of the Mishna's sixtythree tractates and presents a collection of maxims, sayings of the Synagogue Fathers from the Men of the Great Assembly (sometime between the latter half of the fifth and the third centuries B.C) down through descendants of Rabbi Judah and Prince in the third century of the Common Era. These maxims are a record of the Fathers' preoccupations, their emphases and values, and their epigrammatic formulation of reflections on what constitutes God-fearing civilized conduct and thought.

<sup>308</sup> I. B. Singer. “Gimpel the Fool,” trans. Saul Bellow. *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1982, 3.

<sup>309</sup> Singer 4.

<sup>310</sup> Singer 5.

<sup>311</sup> Singer 6.

<sup>312</sup> Singer 8.

“Women are often long on hair and short on sense;”<sup>313</sup> implying that it was probably her female stupidity that made her cheat on him, the puny female brain is easily misled. Eventually, Gimpel reached a conclusion, “I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What’s the good of *not* believing? Today it’s your wife you don’t believe; tomorrow it’s God himself you won’t take stock in.”<sup>314</sup> The last sentence nicely paraphrases Singer’s father’s saying on his belief in tzaddikim. Furthermore, Sheldon Grebstein makes an astute comparison between Elka and Gimpel and Adam and Eve, “Elka’s promiscuity signifies Eve’s untrustworthiness. Gimpel’s credulity signifies Adam’s inherent capacity for faith.”<sup>315</sup> In that sense, “Gimpel the Fool” resembles a traditional folktale in which good (Gimpel) and bad (Elka) are near-absolutes. This is quite different from Nachman’s tale, which is more concerned with human error and doubt rather than ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

The rabbi permitted Gimpel to keep his wife, even though he was highly sceptical of her, “You owe your thanks to the Yanover rabbi. He found an obscure reference in Maimonides that favoured you.”<sup>316</sup> A snippet of the great wisdom of Maimonides is favoured over common sense: Singer hereby questions the value ascribed to Maimonides and conventional Orthodox knowledge, and Gimpel is allowed to go home to his wife. She was in bed with the apprentice, but cunningly distracted Gimpel by asking him to check up on the goat. “I have forgotten to say we had a goat. When I heard she was unwell I went into the yard. The nannygoat was a good little creature. I had a nearly human feeling for her.”<sup>317</sup> Singer was very public about his choice of being a vegetarian;<sup>318</sup> in this sentence we can recognize a bit of Singer in Gimpel.

Like Eve and many sinful women following in her footsteps Gimpel’s wife received her come-uppance; she quickly became sick and died and in the meantime Gimpel had come to own the bakery and was considered somewhat of a rich man. Things seemed to be looking up when all of a sudden the ‘Spirit of Evil’ came to visit him; an example of the recurring theme of otherworldly spirits which appear both in Singer’s work and in the Hasidic tales. The ‘Spirit of Evil’ attempted to persuade Gimpel that there is no world to come and God does not exist, there is nothing more than “a thick mire.”<sup>319</sup> The spirit nearly

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<sup>313</sup> Singer 9.

<sup>314</sup> Singer 9.

<sup>315</sup> Sheldon Grebstein. “Singer’s Shrewd ‘Gimpel’” in *Recovering the Cannon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. David Neal Miller. Leiden: Brill, 1986, 60.

<sup>316</sup> Singer 10.

<sup>317</sup> Singer 11.

<sup>318</sup> Richard Burgins and Isaac Bashevis Singer. “From Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer.” *The Hudson Review* 31.4 (1978): 628.

<sup>319</sup> Singer 13.

managed to persuade Gimpel, but then his wife came back in the shape of a ghost with a black face (presumably from the soot of the fires of hell) to warn him.<sup>320</sup> “‘You fool!’ she said. ‘You fool! Because I was false is everything false too? I never deceived anyone but myself. I’m paying for it all, Gimpel.’”<sup>321</sup> Like the clever man in Nachman’s tale, Singer’s wife has ended up with the devil in hell, but there was no *Baal Shem* to save her and turn the demons to dust. In Nachman’s tale, the polar opposite of a simple man of faith is an atheist scholar, in Singer’s story it is a cunning, deceitful woman. Both authors attempt to soothe their atheist anxiety with their stories in which God is real, hell exists and those of simple faith are rewarded.

There and then Gimpel decided to leave Frampol. Here, Gimpel and the author seem to merge, as Gimpel is described going from place to place telling tales of devils, magicians, windmills and the like.<sup>322</sup> The longer Gimpel lived, “the more [he] understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn’t really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn’t happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year.”<sup>323</sup> Then Gimpel famously concludes, “No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world,”<sup>324</sup> this oft quoted sentence has come to define Singer as an author because in his fiction, the supernatural exists side by side with our world and reveals fundamental truths about our society. Even though, on the whole Singer’s ironic stories are much less morally assured than Nachman’s existential parables, the conclusion is one of such solid faith, Nachman would have been envious; “When the time comes I will go joyfully. Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived.”<sup>325</sup>

Singer said, “You know, many of my Yiddish readers complain that I am too Jewish. They say: ‘We have already forgotten about all these things.’ ‘You remind us of things we would like to forget.’”<sup>326</sup> That is exactly what Singer does, he has revived the world of the pre-war Hasidim in his short stories, drawing inspiration from various texts and experiences, his own, those of his family and perhaps those of a people, in order for them not to be forgotten. Literature is the perfect medium for this, as Iser asserts, “In reading we

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<sup>320</sup> Singer 13.

<sup>321</sup> Singer 13.

<sup>322</sup> Singer 14.

<sup>323</sup> Singer 14.

<sup>324</sup> Singer 14.

<sup>325</sup> Singer 14.

<sup>326</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer in “An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer” in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Ed. Irving Malin. New York: NYUP, 1969, 3.

are able to experience things that no longer exist and to understand things that are totally unfamiliar to us.”<sup>327</sup> Yentel and Gimpel show a world quite different from ours, a reality that is controlled both by Talmud and the supernatural. The rational laws of Torah are forced to leave space for the mystical and the pagan; both exist next to each other in Singer’s stories and in the Hasidic tales. They illustrate the texture of Hasidic life and romanticise exactly that which makes Hasidic Judaism such a peculiar and wonderful denomination of Judaism.

## 1.5 Conclusion

From the holy actions and teachings of the tzaddikim in the Hasidic tales, to Nachman’s wondrous world of quests and Kabbalah, to Singer’s humorous and supernatural portrayal of Hasidic communal life, this chapter has demonstrated pre-war literary depictions of the Hasidic world and Hasidic thought. It has shown a continuity of motifs between the Hasidic tales, Nachman’s and Singer’s short stories, motifs that might inform or inspire later Jewish-American literature.

This chapter has not demonstrated accurate, faithful literary representations of pre-war Hasidic communities, the authors do not subscribe to literary realism and are not interested in mirroring superficial daily life, but it is an illustration of the Hasidic spirit and the Hasidic outlook on the world. Each author romanticized Hasidism in their own way and critical examination of the Hasidic community with all its flaws and pitfalls was lacking, but in all of these stories you can sense the original, singular, innovative Hasidic soul which was born into modernity, an unexpected child, ill-suited to its surroundings but with enough chi to revitalise a somewhat stilted Jewish community.

In the next chapters, I will examine authors who have studied and described the post-war Hasidic communities from a different literary perspective, Potok is the outsider looking in, contrasting Hasidic and Orthodox identity in chapter two and offers a Kabbalist literary novel in chapter three. In chapter four Abraham and Brown provide a more critical perspective from a feminine point of view. Chapter five will return to Hasidic oral storytelling, but this time online, giving a contemporary outlook from within and without the Hasidic community. Together they may answer one of the core questions of my thesis: something of the Hasidic spirit has survived in the broken vessels of modern literature, in stories, in novels and in blogs, but how did it survive, how has it changed and what is it?

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<sup>327</sup> Iser 19.

## Chapter Two

### Hasidic versus Orthodox Identity in Potok's *The Chosen* and *The Promise*

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will analyse Potok's portrayal of Hasidic Jewish identity and its conflict with Orthodox identity. Chaim Potok (1929 – 2002) is one of the most prominent authors regarding the portrayal of Hasidic Jews; hence his work is crucial to my thesis. His novels have created windows through which his reader is able to look inside Hasidic communities, which has allowed Jews and non-Jews to discover and relate to Hasidism. I shall examine two of his novels, *The Chosen* (1967) and *The Promise* (1969) whose narratives focus on the friendship between two young men, a Hasidic boy named Danny and an Orthodox boy named Reuven, attempting to negotiate their respective relationships to secular society. I shall discuss Potok's motivations for writing these two novels, give a close-reading of crucial passages and discuss one of the major themes in both works: silence. Furthermore, the chapter will investigate Potok's perspectives on Hasidic and Orthodox Judaism and his observations of Hasidic life in late 1940's Brooklyn, New York.

Potok offers a near-insider's perspective on Hasidic life and identity because of his own proximity to Hasidic Judaism; Chaim Potok's mother was a descendant of Hasidic Rebbes who belonged to the Reizener dynasty and Potok's father was also from one of the "greatest" Hasidic sects in Europe.<sup>328</sup> Potok's father moved from Poland to America after the First World War and lived in the Bronx; "although he did not wear the prescribed garb, [he]

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<sup>328</sup> Potok in an interview with Barry Vogel "Radio Curious: Chaim Potok" in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed. Daniel Walden. University of Press of Mississippi. Jackson, 2001, 109-110.

considered himself a Hasid.<sup>329</sup> Herm Harold (Chaim Tsvi<sup>330</sup>) Potok grew up “in a Hasidic world without the beard and the earlocks”<sup>331</sup> yet was raised an Orthodox Jew, which allows his perspective more critical distance than someone who has grown up within Hasidism. To some extent Potok himself is caught between his two characters, Danny and Reuven, between Hasidic and Orthodox Judaism, yet rejecting both. Potok attended the Orthodox Talmudic Academy High School of Yeshiva University in Washington Heights, Manhattan,<sup>332</sup> during this period Potok chose to leave Orthodox Judaism in favour of Conservative Judaism, resulting in losing a decade of friends in the process.<sup>333</sup> This rupture forms one of the main themes of many of his novels: the decision to leave or stay inside one’s religious community. After yeshiva, Potok entered the Jewish Theology Seminary of America in New York City to study for the Conservative Jewish rabbinate.<sup>334</sup> Potok volunteered as a combat chaplain in the war against Korea after which he was appointed Jewish studies instructor at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. In 1958 Potok married Adena Sarah Mosevitsky, a psychiatric social worker from Crown Heights and he began his graduate work in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. He received a position as scholar-in-residence at Philadelphia’s Har Zion Temple.<sup>335</sup>

Potok felt compelled to become a writer when he was fourteen and read Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*. Its narrative informed Potok’s first two novels and his perception of himself. As Sternlicht comments,

This story about the life of a religious, aristocratic English Catholic family seen through the eyes of an outsider who wanted to be part of that secure and appealing life – his best friend’s life – influenced Potok’s view of himself as an outsider to American life: one wanting to participate in that culture while remaining true to the traditions and values of his own heritage.<sup>336</sup>

*The Chosen* and *The Promise* echo this storyline in which an Orthodox Jew (Reuven) becomes friends with a Hasidic Jew (Danny) and finds himself captivated by this mysterious movement that is culturally and religiously so different from the rest of

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<sup>329</sup> Sanford Sternlicht, *Chaim Potok, a Critical Companion*. Westport (CT): Greenwood Press, 2000, 2.

<sup>330</sup> His Hebrew name.

<sup>331</sup> Leslie Field. "Chaim Potok and the Critics: Sampler from a Consistent Spectrum." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-1985): 4.

<sup>332</sup> Sternlicht 3.

<sup>333</sup> Field 4.

<sup>334</sup> Sternlicht 4.

<sup>335</sup> Sternlicht 5.

<sup>336</sup> Sternlicht 3.

Orthodox Judaism. Another novel that would influence Potok's writing profoundly is Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; Potok's core-to-core confrontations are likely to be inspired by Joyce, as Potok remarks, "Joyce was very close to what I'm trying to do."<sup>337</sup> He is concerned with "an individual at the heart of his Catholicism encountering elements from the very heart of Western [secular] civilization."<sup>338</sup> Similarly, in Potok's novels, individuals at the centre of Orthodox Judaism encounter elements from the core of non-Jewish Western society. The result is that these characters are forced to negotiate their religious identity in order to be able to participate in the secular world. From smaller to larger transgressions: going to the cinema, reading non-Jewish literature, pursuing a career in the secular world, dating a non-Orthodox girl, they all require breaking certain religious laws, jeopardising your relationship to your community. The question is how many laws you can break and how far you can remove yourself from your community until you realise you have broken away, either intentionally or unintentionally. Like an elastic band, the more you stretch it moving towards and participating in non-Jewish American society, the more likely that the band will snap and you are unable to return. Yet if you choose to maintain the segregation between secular American and Orthodox-Jewish society, you may feel like an eternal outsider, a foreigner in your own country, excluded and potentially missing out on its culture. Potok experienced this dilemma himself when he considered leaving Orthodox Judaism and felt the consequences when he eventually left. What remained was Potok's fascination with the struggle to find one's true sense of self versus the place one holds in one's community. Potok comments, "You are an individual but your destiny was determined for you by the group of people into which you were born. But the sense that you can create your own destiny apart from the community is a very modern idea. Those four letters S-E-L-F are intrinsic to the modern adventure..."<sup>339</sup> This tension between developing a sense of self and maintaining a place in your community underlies both *The Chosen* and *The Promise*.

Not only did Waugh and Joyce inform his writing, they showed him the transformative powers of literature. Reading *Brideshead Revisited* changed his life, "I lived inside that book with more intensity than I lived inside my own world."<sup>340</sup> Similarly, *The*

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<sup>337</sup> Potok in an interview with Elaine M. Kauvar "An Interview with Chaim Potok" in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 66.

<sup>338</sup> Potok/Kauvar 66.

<sup>339</sup> Potok in an interview with Tim Sebastian, "HARDtalk: Chaim Potok" in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*, Ed. Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 164.

<sup>340</sup> Potok quoted in "A Conversation with Chaim Potok" interview conducted by Harold Ribalow in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*, Ed. Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 6.

*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* became as much part of his growing up as the Bible and the Talmud, “resident in the deepest springs of my being.”<sup>341</sup> Potok realised that literary fiction cannot only entertain; it can shape people into who they will become. Hence, as Sanford E. Marovitz remarks, “He intentionally conveys a sense of moral truth in his fiction and wishes it to serve as a means of guiding his readers, especially American Jews, toward developing some form of meaningful commitment in their lives.”<sup>342</sup> On a larger scale it can even create (and recreate) an entire world, *Brideshead Revisited* made Potok realise that “you could really create the world out of language,”<sup>343</sup> knowledge which he promptly applied in his work.

Potok is deeply fascinated with Hasidic Judaism; in fact, Potok’s desire to understand and love the Hasidim is a major motivation for Potok as a novelist.<sup>344</sup> Simultaneously, Potok understands and has a deep appreciation for Western secular culture; his synthesis between religious motifs and secular themes makes his work distinctive. Marovitz made a remark along a similar vein, Potok has the ability to “fuse his Hebrew learning and faith with the most worthy features of secular humanism into a kind of spiritual-intellectual bridge and mediate between them.”<sup>345</sup>

This ‘mission’<sup>346</sup> is noticeable in *The Chosen* in which Potok teaches the reader about various aspects of Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism; he explains how Talmudic study works, he gives a brief history of Hasidic Judaism, including the biography of its founder, the Ba’al Shem Tov, he explains what *gematriya* is and whenever he uses a Hebrew term, he translates it. The book is divided into three sections, each section is introduced by a quotation; the first is from Proverbs, the second from the Zohar and the third from the Talmud, representing the three fundamentals of Hasidic Judaism: the Bible, the Zohar and the Talmud. Additionally, as noted by McClymond, “the book is organised into eighteen chapters, eighteen being the numerical value of the Hebrew word for ‘life’, ‘chai’.”<sup>347</sup> Potok intends to take his reader deep into the world of Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism, teaching and transforming them in the process, as he had been transformed by reading Waugh and Joyce.

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<sup>341</sup> Chaim Potok. “The First Eighteen Years,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-1985), 1.

<sup>342</sup> Marovitz quoted by McClymond 21.

<sup>343</sup> Mike Field. “Potok Has Chosen to Create Worlds from Words.” in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 100.

<sup>344</sup> Sternlicht 7.

<sup>345</sup> Marovitz 131.

<sup>346</sup> Potok quoted by McClymond 20.

<sup>347</sup> McClymond 12.

Although not as critically acclaimed as Malamud and Bellow,<sup>348</sup> Potok is a literary author of equal calibre; yet unlike these authors he writes from within an Orthodox Jewish context. A remarkable feat, as noted by novelist and literary critic Philip Toynbee, “few Jewish writers have emerged from so deep in the heart of orthodoxy; fewer still have been able to write about their emergence with such an unforced sympathy for both sides and every participant.”<sup>349</sup> Similarly, Lilian Kremer commented

‘Whereas the assimilated American Jews of the fictions of Saul Bellow and Philip Roth retain only peripheral connection to Jewish institutions, Potok’s characters, like those of Joyce, are at the core of their cultural and religious heritage. They preserve the languages, traditions, and beliefs of Orthodox Judaism, even when they enter the secular professional world. Unlike most of the characters in the writings of Bellow, Malamud, and Roth, who leave the religious life for the secular, those of Potok’s novels bring the secular life into the religious.’<sup>350</sup>

Simultaneously, Potok draws the religious into the secular by writing about a religious group, a religious world in his literary fiction. Potok’s novels allow readers to relate to those living inside strictly religious communities. He produces stories about a people that does not tend to write their own literature. Literary fiction is very much part of the secular world and most Hasidic Jews would consider it *goyische*<sup>351</sup> frivolity. Why should one waste time reading fictional stories, when one can study the fundamental truth of Talmud? Fiction is merely entertainment for the *goyim* offering distraction from their meaningless existence far removed from God. Nevermind reading, writing imaginary tales is potentially an even larger waste of time. Consequently, the majority of Hasidim are outsiders to the literary world, but Potok draws them inside.

## 2.2 *The Chosen*

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<sup>348</sup> See McClymonds discussion on Potok’s literary reputation in “The Chosen”, *Chaim Potok: Confronting Modernity Through the Lens of Tradition*. Ed. Daniel Walden. Philadelphia: Penn State Press, 4-5.

<sup>349</sup> Philip Toynbee. Review of *The Chosen*. *New Republic* 156 (June 1967): 21.

<sup>350</sup> McClymond quoting Lillian Kremer, “Dedalus in Brooklyn: Influences of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* on *My Name is Asher Lev*,” in Walden, *The World of Chaim Potok*, State University of New York Press, 1985. 27.

<sup>351</sup> A goy is a non-Jew. Plural: goyim.

*The Chosen* was written whilst Potok worked on the last year of his doctorate in Jerusalem. It is set in Brooklyn, New York in the spring of 1944 and details the story of an unlikely friendship between an Orthodox Jewish boy, Reuven and a Hasidic boy, Daniel (Danny). The brilliant Danny, possessor of a perfect memory, will inherit the position of tzaddik<sup>352</sup> from his father, but his heart truly lies with psychology.<sup>353</sup> Reuven, the narrator of the novel, wants to become a rabbi, although his father would like him to be a mathematician, a lecturer at a university. Danny commented, “‘It’s really funny. I have to be a rabbi and don’t want to be one. You don’t have to be a rabbi and do want to be one. It’s a crazy world.’”<sup>354</sup> Reuven has the freedom to pursue a secular career but is committed to dedicating his life to Judaism. This dedication is expected from Danny who instead desires a secular career. *The Chosen* follows the lives of these two boys throughout their high school and college years, describing their struggles with life-altering decisions whilst the aftermath of the Holocaust and the foundation of the State of Israel are ever present in their lives. *The Promise* (1969) continues this story, following the young men to university and illustrates the effect of the post-war influx of *Haredim*, the ultra-Orthodox, on Orthodox Judaism in Williamsburg. Nathan Glazer, quoted by Solomon Poll, explains,

‘In Williamsburg in Brooklyn, in a small area containing about 20,000 people, three-quarters of them Jews, an Orthodox revival took place... After the war, as the more ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic element arrived, the ‘native’ Jews moved out and gave room to the new influx. Soon, the ‘natives’ of Williamsburg, who had prided themselves on their Orthodoxy and considered themselves the most Orthodox element in American life, found themselves outflanked by even more Orthodox elements from Europe.’<sup>355</sup>

One of the reasons *The Chosen* and *The Promise* are pivotal to my thesis is that they depict this particular turning point in Jewish-American New York, the battle between Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox and Hasidic; its characters representing the different camps.

To briefly set out the differences between Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism: Orthodox Judaism came to define itself as such during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when *Maskilim*, Jews inspired by the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment sought to

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<sup>352</sup> Religious leader of the Hasidim.

<sup>353</sup> Potok 73.

<sup>354</sup> Potok 86.

<sup>355</sup> Poll quoting Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, 143), 27.

modernise and reform Judaism. Jews who resisted this modernisation were distinguished as 'Orthodox', because they continued to believe in the absolute sanctity of the Torah, divinely authored, given to Moses by God himself on Mount Sinai. They also upheld adherence to all of the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) as described and interpreted in the Talmud. At the beginning of the Hasidic movement in the late 18<sup>th</sup>, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hasidism differentiated itself by the emphasis it placed on Jewish mysticism, the study of Kabbalah and the joyous worship of God, which was meant to go hand in hand with the observance of the Law. Orthodox Jews were suspicious of the centrality of mysticism and the study of Kabbalist texts, however, as Hasidism institutionalised the study of Talmud and strict adherence to the minute details of the Law took precedence.<sup>356</sup> In their battle against the *Mitnagdim* (Orthodox opponents of Hasidism) they lost the original, esoteric core of the movement. Hasidim are in fact described as ultra-Orthodox because they are stricter in their religious practice than Orthodox Jews. Orthodox Jews have always been more integrated in their respective non-Jewish societies and although they observed Jewish law, they wore contemporary fashion and spoke the language of the country they inhabited. Hasidic Jews were seen as old-fashioned, in pre-war Europe they tended to lack education and their professions were quite simple, they were poor farmers and merchants selling their wares door to door.<sup>357</sup> Solomon Poll emphasises the religious cleavage between the Orthodox and Hasidic Jews in Hungary, although the situation was not dissimilar elsewhere: "In the year of 1896 it was even thought that the Hasidim would separate from the central Orthodox corporate."<sup>358</sup>

In the late 1940's, the situation had remained unchanged. The first sentence of *The Chosen* hints at this chasm between Hasidism and Orthodox Judaism, which is at the heart of the novel. "For the first fifteen years of our lives, Danny and I lived within five blocks of each other and neither knew of the other's existence."<sup>359</sup> Despite their geographical proximity and the fact that they belong to the same religion Reuven and Danny had never met or even seen each other, their two branches of Judaism are strictly segregated. Kathryn McClymond notes that:

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<sup>356</sup> Mordecai L. Wilensky. "Hasidic-Mitnagdic Polemics" *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP, 1991, 266.

<sup>357</sup> Solomon Poll. *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg*. New York: Schocken, 1962, 17.

<sup>358</sup> Poll 18.

<sup>359</sup> Chaim Potok. *The Chosen*. New York: Penguin Books, 1967, 11.

Within the first two pages of the book Potok sets up an unexpected opposition. It is not the Hasidic Jews who are 'alien' to mainstream America. Rather, the more liberal Orthodox community is 'alien' to the Hasidic community. In this particular corner of American Judaism Reuven is marginalized, not for being too Jewish in the eyes of non-Jewish Americans, but for not being Jewish enough. Potok re-orientes the reader so that she sees the world through Reuven's eyes, committed to Orthodox Judaism, but also committed to some level of participation in American life. This brings him into conflicts with other Jews, most significantly the Hasidic world of Danny and Rebbe Saunders.<sup>360</sup>

Like most Jewish and non-Jewish readers, Reuven has an outsider's perspective on Hasidic Judaism, although he is Jewish, he is not "Jewish enough." He does not obey Jewish law according to the Hasidic standard. His life is far less insular than that of Hasidic Jews: he participates both in his Jewish community and, to some extent, in non-Jewish American society. Before continuing to explain this chasm, Potok takes great care in describing the world of the Hasidic Jews living in Williamsburg. "Danny's block was heavily populated by the followers of his father, Russian Hasidic Jews in sombre garb, whose habits and frames of reference were born on the soil of the land they had abandoned."<sup>361</sup> The 'old world' from which they came had been transplanted into the 'new world' and the new geographical location had seemingly little impact: in their daily actions and frame of reference, the community still lived in Russia. Poll comments, the Hasidim "tried to transplant the entire Hasidic culture into the new setting... they transplanted most of their cultural values and tended to adhere to old traditions to an even greater extent than they had in Europe."<sup>362</sup> This is illustrated in *The Chosen*: "They drank tea from samovars, sipping it slowly through cubes of sugar held between their teeth; they ate the foods of their homeland, talked loudly, occasionally in Russian, most often in a Russian Yiddish."<sup>363</sup> Yiddish is a distinguishing factor in *The Chosen*, Hasidic Jews speak Yiddish<sup>364</sup> and Orthodox Jews speak English, which

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<sup>360</sup> McClymond 6-7.

<sup>361</sup> Potok 11.

<sup>362</sup> Poll 35.

<sup>363</sup> Potok 11.

<sup>364</sup> Yiddish was the language spoken by (predominantly Eastern) European Jews. It began to develop as a separate language from German around the 11<sup>th</sup> century; hence it has a long tradition. Tradition is generally valued by Hasidic Jews, furthermore the fact that they were segregated from non-Jewish society and lacked in secular education meant most Hasidic Jews in Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish. This language was perhaps one of the few things American Hasidim were able to preserve from the 'Old World', hence it is no surprise they continued to speak it.

reflects their respective attitudes to their environment. Orthodox Jews are committed to participate in secular American society; they find it necessary to learn to speak English. To Hasidic Jews, their new environment had little impact on their behaviour. In fact, before the War Hasidic sects in Hungary were not integrated in Hungarian society either; they spoke “broken Hungarian and only a few had Hungarian schooling.”<sup>365</sup> They merely traded one non-Jewish society for another; the only difference is that secular American society was considered even more corrupted and sinful. As Hasidim had no interest in participating in said society they continued to speak the language their community had spoken for many centuries in Eastern Europe. It should be noted that many of the Hasidim who moved to the US did not have much choice in their emigration; they either fled before the war or felt that they had no future in Europe after the war. Coming to the US was the last option to survive somewhere, somehow. That is why they might not be as committed to participating in their host culture, hoping to preserve what had been destroyed in their fatherland.

Potok continues to sketch the lives of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn: they are poor and nearing desperation; the Depression hit them hard. “On a Shabbat or festival morning, the members of each sect could be seen walking to their respective synagogues, dressed in their particular garb, eager to pray with their particular Rabbi and forget the tumult of the week and the hungry grabbing for money which they needed to feed their large families during the seemingly endless Depression.”<sup>366</sup> This sentence alludes to the fervour, the religious passion that burns within the members of each Hasidic sect and the redemption praying with their tzaddik, who is the centre of their lives, will bring. Many Hasidim believe that their tzaddik might even be the Messiah, it is taught that “the Messiah will be a human being who lives among us,”<sup>367</sup> someone who will ‘reveal’ himself as the Messiah when God has decided the time has come. One can imagine how this would make the Hasidim cling to their tzaddik as though their lives, their souls, depended on it.

The passage also indicates that by and large the Hasidim belonged to the poorer strata of American society and that they had large families. Poverty might be a result of the lack in secular education (in favour of Torah study at a yeshiva) which would disadvantage Hasidic men in the job market, whilst women were barely allowed education or jobs at all. The large families are due to the restriction on birth control, Hasidim believe that you should have as many children as God is willing to grant you.

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<sup>365</sup> Poll 16.

<sup>366</sup> Potok 11.

<sup>367</sup> Jerome R. Mintz quoting Rabbi Krinsky in *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1992, 354.

Subsequently, the text highlights differences between Orthodox and Hasidic Jews. Every Orthodox Jew sends his male children to a yeshiva<sup>368</sup> and the differences between Danny, the Hasidic Jew, and Reuven, the Orthodox Jew, are set out by underlining the differences between their respective yeshivas. Reuven's yeshiva, where Reuven's father, David Malter,<sup>369</sup> taught Talmud, "was somewhat looked down upon... it offered more English subjects than the required minimum, and it taught its Jewish subjects in Hebrew rather than Yiddish. Most of the students were children of immigrant Jews who preferred to regard themselves as having been emancipated from the fenced-off ghetto mentality typical of the other [yeshivas] in Brooklyn".<sup>370</sup> Jews who sent their sons to Reuven's yeshiva did not want to completely segregate themselves from American society, they saw themselves as more worldly, enlightened and assimilated than other Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews. Danny, on the other hand attended a small yeshiva established by his father, which was strictly ultra-Orthodox.<sup>371</sup> It is worth noting that Danny belongs to the fictional Ladover Hasidim; Potok admitted that they are based on Lubavich Hasidic Jews,<sup>372</sup> who are considered to be the most progressive and assimilated of the Hasidic sects.

This difference in Orthodoxy is reflected in their yeshivas' baseball teams, which were assembled for a baseball competition in order to demonstrate the fitness and 'Americanness' of yeshiva students – it was important for Orthodox Jews to be recognised as American during WWII. Reuven's team was led by a non-Orthodox gym instructor, Mr Galanter, "who taught in the mornings in a nearby public high school and supplemented his income by teaching in our yeshiva during the afternoons."<sup>373</sup> Mr Galanter was not so much concerned with God and Talmud-study, but wanted to convey the "patriotic awareness of the importance of athletics and physical fitness for the war effort."<sup>374</sup> Conversely, Danny's team was led by a Rabbi who spent all of his time reading a religious text instead of coaching. The baseball game between Reuven's and Danny's team at the beginning of

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<sup>368</sup> Potok 12.

<sup>369</sup> David Malter is also from Russia, like the Russian Hasidic Jews described above. Although they have the same origin, their level of commitment to participating in American non-Jewish society is widely different.

<sup>370</sup> Potok 12.

<sup>371</sup> Potok 12.

<sup>372</sup> Potok in an interview with Harold Ribalow, "A Conversation with Chaim Potok" interview conducted by Harold Ribalow in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*, Ed. Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 17.

<sup>373</sup> Potok 13.

<sup>374</sup> Potok 13.

the novel serves to illustrate the antagonistic relationship between Orthodox and Hasidic Jews. As Potok explains,

In that baseball game you have two aspects of Jewish Orthodoxy in contention. You have the Eastern European aspect, which prefers to turn inward and not confront the outside world. You have the Western European more objective scientific aspect within the core, within Orthodoxy, that is not afraid to look at the outside world that produces scientists. These are in interaction with one another inside the core. That's the baseball game.<sup>375</sup>

His point is demonstrated in the description of both teams. First of all, there is their physical appearance, starting with Danny's,

...they were dressed alike in white shirts, dark pants, white sweaters, and small black skullcaps. In the fashion of the very Orthodox, their hair was closely cropped, except for the area near their ears from which mushroomed the untouched hair that tumbled down into the long side curls. Some of them had the beginnings of beards, straggly turfs of hair that stood in isolated clumps on their chins, jawbones, and upper lips. They all wore the traditional undergarment beneath their shirts, and the *tzitzit*, the long fringes appended to the four corners of the garment, came out above their belts and swung against their pants as they walked. These were the very Orthodox, and they obeyed literally the Biblical commandment *And ye shall look upon it*, which pertains to the fringes.<sup>376</sup>

This passage describes the traditional garment of Hasidic Jews, although since they are playing sports they are not wearing a kaftan or a hat. This is juxtaposed against the description of Reuven's team, "in contrast, our team had no particular uniform, and each of us wore whatever he wished... Some of us wore the garment, [*tallit katan*] others did not. None of us wore the fringes outside his trousers. The only element of uniform that we had in common was the small, black skullcap which we, too, wore."<sup>377</sup> The differences in attire express the variations in religious thought and their respective attitudes towards the outside world. Hasidic Jews are dressed according to the way their ancestors, the first

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<sup>375</sup> Harold Ribalow, "A Conversation with Chaim Potok," in Walden, *Conversations with Chaim Potok*, 13.

<sup>376</sup> Potok 16.

<sup>377</sup> Potok 16.

Hasidim, dressed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; as tradition is the cornerstone of Hasidic belief, wearing traditional garment is very important, even when that tradition only began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, believe that clothes are subject to (secular) fashion and not an essential part of one's Judaism, bar wearing the skull cap and perhaps the *tallit katan* which are required by Jewish law.

The novel indicates that Danny's baseball team was expected to be formed of students much more concerned with studying Talmud than practising sports, yet they transpired to be fierce contestants. A friend of Reuven remarked that "they don't only play to win. They play like it's the first of the Ten Commandments."<sup>378</sup> Apparently, their tzaddik, Danny's father, had "ordered them never to lose because it would shame their yeshiva"<sup>379</sup>. The game turned personal before it even began; when the Hasidic team were preparing for the game their coach (who is not a gym-instructor but a rabbi) told his players in Yiddish, "Remember why and for whom we play."<sup>380</sup> Danny explained later that the Hasidic team were ordered to beat the 'secular' Orthodox Jews at what they were best: *goyishe* frivolities. As mentioned above, Orthodox Jews are more assimilated, more integrated into their host country, in this case America; therefore they are considered to be closer to the secular world of non-Jews. The Hasidim judge them for not keeping their *yiddishkeit*,<sup>381</sup> but compromising their *yiddishkeit* in favour for assimilation. The mutual hostility is further illustrated when Reuven commented that his father had 'no love at all' for Hasidic communities, their rabbinic overlords and their zealousness,<sup>382</sup> expressing the Orthodox aversion towards religious fundamentalism.

Danny knew about Reuven's father and his 'progressive' ideas through hearsay, "Your father is David Malter, the one who writes articles on the Talmud? I told my team we're going to kill you *apikorsim* this afternoon."<sup>383</sup> *Apikorsim* is the plural of *apikoros*, meaning Jewish heretic or apostate. Danny implied that because Orthodox Jews do not follow the letter of the law to the Hasidic standard, they are *apikorsim*. Moreover, Reuven's father used the scientific method, a secular text-critical method, to study Talmud, which made him an even greater *apikoros*<sup>384</sup>. It was clear to Reuven what the source of Danny's antagonism was, he remarked to a fellow player: "We're not holy enough."<sup>385</sup> In return,

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<sup>378</sup> Potok 15.

<sup>379</sup> Potok 15.

<sup>380</sup> Potok 18.

<sup>381</sup> The essential quality of being Jewish, the Jewish way of life, including all its customs and practices.

<sup>382</sup> Potok 19.

<sup>383</sup> Potok 25.

<sup>384</sup> Potok 143.

<sup>385</sup> Potok 26.

Reuven accused Hasidic Jews of believing in superstition, as he told David: “‘Rub your *tzitzit* for good luck.’”<sup>386</sup> Reuven had never really had any personal contact with Hasidim before. “My father had told me he didn’t mind their beliefs. What annoyed him was their fanatic sense of righteousness, their absolute certainty that they and they alone had God’s ear, and every other Jew was wrong, totally wrong, a sinner, a hypocrite, an *apikoros*, and doomed, therefore, to burn in hell.”<sup>387</sup> Reuven felt himself growing ever angrier at being called an *apikoros*, “it was at that point that for me the game stopped being merely a game and became a war... a conflict between what they regarded as their righteousness and our sinfulness.”<sup>388</sup> Reuven was not the only player that noticed the hostile atmosphere. “Sometime during that half inning, one of the members of the yeshiva team had shouted at us in Yiddish, ‘Burn in hell, you *apikorsim!*’ and by the time that half inning was over and we were standing around Mr Galanter near the wire screen, all of us knew that this was not just another ball game.”<sup>389</sup>

The novel reaches a significant turning point when tension built and Danny shot the ball straight into Reuven’s eye, which would ultimately change his perspective on Hasidism. Reuven’s Orthodox background impaired his ability to view Hasidism objectively; yet his temporary physical blindness would eventually lead to a more balanced and accurate vision of Hasidic Judaism through his friendship with Danny. This turn of events appears unlikely, but when Reuven was in hospital recovering from his eye-surgery, Danny came to visit him. Danny who was there to discuss why he had felt the urge to kill Reuven, was “dressed like a Hasid, but he didn’t sound like one... I was fascinated just listening to the way perfect English came out of a person in the clothes of a Hasid... the few times I had ever talked with a Hasid, he had spoken only Yiddish.”<sup>390</sup> Again, the fact that most Hasidic Jews do not learn to speak English fluently indicates their marginal level of assimilation. It also indicates that Danny is not an average Hasidic boy. This fascination the boys have for each other would form the basis of their friendship. Of course, Danny apologised, not only for having hit Reuven in the eye, but also for having called him and his teammates *apikorsim*, “‘I’m sorry about that. It’s the only way we could have a team. I sort of convinced my father you were the best team around and that we had a duty to beat you *apikorsim* at what you were best at.’”<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Potok 25.

<sup>387</sup> Potok 30.

<sup>388</sup> Potok 31.

<sup>389</sup> Potok 31.

<sup>390</sup> Potok 72.

<sup>391</sup> Potok 75.

Despite their growing friendship, Reuven continues to be referred to as an *apikoros*. By Danny's third visit, when all had been forgiven, Reuven said, "My face must have mirrored my happiness at seeing him because he broke into a warm smile [and said] 'I *must* be the Messiah. No mere Hasid would get a greeting like that from an *apikoros*.'"<sup>392</sup> The apparently generally accepted mutual hostility between Orthodox Jews and Hasidic Jews is reinforced throughout the novel, such as when Reuven remarked, "I wondered what any of my classmates would think if they saw me walking with Danny. It would become quite a topic of conversation in the neighbourhood."<sup>393</sup> Reuven is also referred to as a *Mitnaged*, the singular of *Mitnagdim*, which means 'opponents of Hasidism'. The *Mitnagdim* were the ultra-Orthodox Jews who fought Hasidism most vigilantly when Hasidism first began to spread across Eastern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. When Danny said to Reuven, "You're nice. For a *Misnaged*,"<sup>394</sup> – giving the letter ט (tof) the Ashkenazic (Yiddish) pronunciation ט (sof) – it denoted the historical underpinning of the mutual enmity. Yet, Hasidim and *Mitnagdim* belong to the same ultra-Orthodox group called the *Haredim*. As previously mentioned, the actual theological differences between the Hasidim and the *Mitnagdim* are marginal nowadays. However, old enmities are not easily forgiven.

Yet, Reuven is most certainly not an ultra-Orthodox Jew as is made clear not only by his father's use of 'scientific criticism' and the yeshiva he attended, but also by the description of their synagogue. "[Our] synagogue... had once been a large grocery store... [it] was attended mostly by men like my father – teachers from my yeshiva, and others who had come under the influence of the Jewish Enlightenment [*Haskalah*] in Europe and whose distaste for Hasidism was intense and outspoken."<sup>395</sup> The fact that these Orthodox Jews were inspired by the *Haskalah* indicates that they were on the 'liberal' side of the Orthodox Jewish spectrum. It was the *Maskilim*, supporters of the *Haskalah*, who sought to modernise Judaism and embraced new scientific and philosophical developments. This brought them into conflict with the *Mitnagdim*, who were averse to any type of change. The distaste of the Jews attending Reuven's synagogue for 'backward', 'superstitious' Hasidism is in part explained by their own relative modern and liberal background. Where the *Maskilim* sought progress, the Hasidim appeared to go back in history, to a (according to the *Maskilim*) medieval type of faith and worship, rejecting modernity all together.

A short history of Hasidic Judaism, or in fact a short history of Jews in Poland was

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<sup>392</sup> Potok 82

<sup>393</sup> Potok 118.

<sup>394</sup> Potok 153.

<sup>395</sup> Potok 115.

given by David Malter in order to provide a better understanding of Hasidic faith and culture. This also aids the reader's understanding of the characters: "it was really in Poland, or, more accurately, in the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe, that Danny's soul had been born."<sup>396</sup> David Malter's history lesson ended with the decline of Hasidism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "Secular literature was forbidden, and the Hasidim lived shut off from the rest of the world. Anything that was not Jewish and Hasidic was forbidden. Their lives became frozen. The clothes they wear today, for example, are the same Polish style clothes they wore hundreds of years ago. Their customs and beliefs are also the same as they were hundreds of years ago."<sup>397</sup> In short, Potok describes a people who although they lived in the 'New world', in 'the land of freedom', remained frozen in 18<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe. As though someone had used a time-machine and transported this people from 18<sup>th</sup> century Lubavitch to 20<sup>th</sup> century Brooklyn, New York. David Malter made a key statement: "There are even Hasidic groups that believe their leaders should take upon themselves the sufferings of the Jewish people. They believe that their sufferings would be unendurable if their leaders did not somehow absorb these sufferings into themselves."<sup>398</sup> Arguably, it is the tzaddikim who believe this and place the burden upon themselves. Either way, this statement serves as foreshadowing: it becomes evident that Reb Saunders, Danny's father, is one of those tzaddikim who felt the need to carry the sorrows of all the Jewish people. Reuven's father must have known this, as he commented "'Reb Saunders... carries the burden of many people on his shoulders. I do not care for his Hasidism very much, but it is not a simple task to be a leader of people."<sup>399</sup> Considering the historical context in which this statement is made, right before the end of World War II and news of the ghettos, *Judenräte* and concentration camps had reached America, one can feel its weight.

Subsequently, the text explains why Danny's father had come to America and what being a tzaddik signifies. Danny's father had had to endure much hardship and suffering himself. His wife and children were shot by a band of marauding Cossacks; he was left for dead and found by a Russian peasant who nurtured him back to health. That is when he decided to save the remaining members of his community (many more were murdered by the Cossacks) and bring them to America in 1918.<sup>400</sup> Reuven was astonished upon hearing this story from Danny, "'They all followed him?' I asked. 'Just like that?' 'Of course. They

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<sup>396</sup> Potok 105.

<sup>397</sup> Potok 111-112.

<sup>398</sup> Potok 112.

<sup>399</sup> Potok 148.

<sup>400</sup> Potok 120.

would have followed him anywhere.' '...I didn't know a rabbi had that kind of power.' 'He's more than a rabbi,' Danny said. 'He's a tzaddik... He's a kind of messenger of God, a bridge between his followers and God.' 'I don't understand it. It almost sounds like Catholicism.'"<sup>401</sup> Reuven's point is astute, because to some extent tzaddikim appear to resemble Catholic saints, they are not mere mortals; they have a special connection to God and sometimes they have extraordinary powers. There are more similarities between Hasidism and Catholicism. Both Hasidic Judaism and Catholicism emphasize the significance of the religious community, individuality is subjugated to the needs and demands of the community, whereas Protestantism, like Orthodox Judaism, values individual religious practice as equally important to the communal aspect of religion. On the other hand, Hasidism's accent on 'joyous worship' brings to mind Evangelical Christianity which is a much more community-oriented branch of Protestantism.

Reuven was taken further and further into the Hasidic world. He was invited to attend a Hasidic Shabbat service led by Reb Saunders. On his way to the synagogue, Reuven noticed the differences between his neighbourhood and Danny's. The street where Danny lived was much poorer, the houses were unkempt and dirty, "cats scrambled through the garbage cans that stood in front of some of the houses, and the sidewalks were strewn with old newspapers, ice cream and candy wrappers, worn cardboard cartons, and torn paper bags".<sup>402</sup> The comparative poverty of the Hasidic Jews in Williamsburg indicates the economic difference between the Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who lived there. Similarly, Hasidic prayer-rooms, also called *shtiblach*, are described as "badly lighted, musty rooms, with benches or chairs crowded together and with windows that seemed always to be closed,"<sup>403</sup> signifying how Hasidic Jews attempt to shield their world from external people and ideas.

However, not just the difference in wealth, but everything in this world seemed strange to Reuven and bewilderingly so.

Women in long-sleeved dresses, with kerchiefs covering their heads, many with infants in their arms, others heavily pregnant, sat on the stone steps of the stairways, talking loudly in Yiddish. The street throbbed with the noise of playing children... all with their fringes and earlocks dancing wildly in the air and trailing out behind them... The liquid streams of racing children, the

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<sup>401</sup> Potok 121.

<sup>402</sup> Potok 121-22.

<sup>403</sup> Potok 115.

noisy chatter of long-sleeved women, the worn buildings and blotched banisters, the garbage cans and the scrambling cars all gave me the feeling of having slid silently across a strange threshold, and for a long moment I regretted having let Danny take me into his world.<sup>404</sup>

This passage emphasises how alien the Hasidic world is to Reuven, despite their relative religious proximity. Yet, things would become stranger still. Outside of Danny's synagogue, Reuven and Danny approached a group of about thirty black-caftaned men who formed a solid wall. Danny took Reuven's arm with one hand and tapped his other hand upon the shoulder of a man on the outer rim of the crowd. "The man turned... a middle-aged man, his dark beard streaked with grey, his thick brows edging into a frown of annoyance and I saw his eyes go wide. He bowed slightly and pushed back, and a whisper went through the crowd like a wind, and it parted, and Danny and I walked through."<sup>405</sup> Not only did an older member of the community bow to Danny, his whole company parted out of respect and veneration for Reb Saunders' son. It was not a pleasant experience for Reuven, "It was as if a black-waved, frozen sea had been sliced by a scythe, forming black, solid walls along a jelled path. I saw black- and greybearded heads bow toward Danny and dark brows arch sharply over eyes that stared questions at me and at the way Danny was holding me by the arm... I felt myself naked and fragile, an intruder..."<sup>406</sup> This feeling was reinforced when Reuven was inside Danny's *shul*, as Reuven remarked: "I feel like a cowboy surrounded by Indians."<sup>407</sup> Reuven felt that he was surrounded by a completely different people, wholly separated from the Jews in his community. This can be read as a (non-politically correct) slight towards Hasidim: Reuven is not the Indian, he is the cowboy, the Westerner who possessed more 'advanced' knowledge of the world than the relatively 'primitive' Hasidim.

Reuven's strange adventure continued when Danny's father walked into the *shul*: from a state of chaotic, throbbing noise the synagogue grew silent in an instant. "The noise inside the synagogue ceased so abruptly that I felt its absence as one would a sudden lack of air. It stopped in swift waves, beginning at the rear of the synagogue and ending at the chairs near the podium... The silence that followed had a strange quality to it: expectation, eagerness, love, awe."<sup>408</sup> The silence was filled with the feelings the congregants held towards their tzaddik and "as he passed each row of seats, men rose, bowed slightly, and sat

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<sup>404</sup> Potok 122.

<sup>405</sup> Potok 122.

<sup>406</sup> Potok 123.

<sup>407</sup> Potok 125.

<sup>408</sup> Potok 127.

again. Some leaned over to touch him.”<sup>409</sup> The service, during which Reb Saunders stood with his back to the congregation, was followed by a meal and then a sermon. Reb Saunders made a special effort for Reuven by showing his *gematriya* skills.<sup>410</sup> An interesting detail is that in one of Reb Saunders examples, he referred to the world to come as a ‘hall’, which resonates *Hekhalot* literature and hints at Hasidism’s Kabbalah-centred origins. The climax of the evening was the weekly quiz between Reb Saunders and Danny. In every sermon, Reb Saunders would make an intentional mistake and after the sermon, he would ask Danny what that mistake was, which would lead to a quiz on Talmud and its commentaries.<sup>411</sup> This is not necessarily standard Hasidic practice; it may well be the product of Potok’s imagination as it serves a particular function in the novel: to illustrate the odd, strained relationship between Danny and his father. All in all, Reuven was rather shaken by his experience, but not unwilling to return.

Danny’s feet were not firmly planted in his Hasidic world as one foot was in the secular world. In fact, although Danny looked like a Hasid, at times he was the one who sounded like an *apikoros* to Reuven.<sup>412</sup> Reuven even questioned whether Danny believed in God. After Danny had told him of his illicit secular reading, which included Hemingway, and his feeling that human beings are nothing but ants, Reuven said, “You don’t sound like what my father says Jasidim<sup>413</sup> are supposed to sound like. You sound almost as if you don’t believe in God.”<sup>414</sup> Although Danny denied this, he had admitted earlier that he was not sure what God wanted.<sup>415</sup> Reuven was astonished to hear that Danny would want to become a psychologist, “I didn’t know much about psychoanalysis, but Danny Saunders, in his Hasidic style clothes, seemed to me about the last person in the world who would qualify as an analyst.”<sup>416</sup> Yet, there is a lot more to Danny than meets the eye. David Malter said to Reuven “Reb Saunders’ son is a terribly torn and lonely boy. There is literally no one in the world he can talk to. He needs a friend. The accident with the baseball has bound him to you, and he has already sensed in you someone he can talk to without fear.”<sup>417</sup> Reuven is exactly the friend Danny needs, someone from within Orthodoxy, who would prevent him from leaving Orthodox Judaism all together, but someone outside of the Hasidic community and a

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<sup>409</sup> Potok 127.

<sup>410</sup> Potok 135.

<sup>411</sup> Potok 137-141.

<sup>412</sup> Potok 85.

<sup>413</sup> Potok spells it here with a J.

<sup>414</sup> Potok 85.

<sup>415</sup> Potok 83.

<sup>416</sup> Potok 73.

<sup>417</sup> Potok 113.

relatively liberal Orthodox Jew.

Danny is forced to question his perspective on Hasidic Judaism after reading Graetz's *History of the Jews*.<sup>418</sup> Graetz's slanderous account of Hasidic history and its leaders upset him deeply, "what an image it gives me of myself."<sup>419</sup> For the first time, Danny saw Hasidism the way an Orthodox Jew might. Accordingly, Danny became very embarrassed about his Hasidic appearance. "I had grown accustomed to people staring at Danny, at his beard and his side curls. But Danny had become increasingly self-conscious about his appearance ever since the time he had read Graetz on Hasidism."<sup>420</sup> Not long after reading Graetz, Danny discovered Freud and the subconscious. Consequently, he taught himself German in order to be able to read Freud in the original language. Freud shocked and disturbed Danny still more than Graetz did. Even Reuven, after listening to Danny, was rather distressed,

We sat at our table, Danny in his dark suit, his tieless shirt, his fringes, his skullcap, his long earlocks, and his beard, which was thick and full now, almost an adult beard, and me in my sport shirt, summer trousers, and skullcap, and we talked about Sigmund Freud... Freud contradicted everything I had ever learned. What I found particularly upsetting was the fact that Danny didn't seem to have rejected what Freud taught. I began to wonder who it was possible for the ideas of the Talmud and the thinking of Freud to live side by side within one person.<sup>421</sup>

That is the most critical issue in this novel, how to combine one's religious beliefs with knowledge of and participation in the secular world. McClymond comments, "Danny and Reuven never consider abandoning their Jewish identity; rather, their choices centre on how to integrate their religious identities in relationship with secular modernism."<sup>422</sup> This question is not only relevant to Orthodox Jews; non-Jewish Americans are able to relate to the religious crises described in *The Chosen*. "Potok speaks to general readers wrestling with how to integrate their religious identity with secular modernism,"<sup>423</sup> which is one of the reasons the novel is so widely read.

Danny's conviction to become a psychologist grew the more he studied Freud. He

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<sup>418</sup> Potok 153-154.

<sup>419</sup> Potok 155.

<sup>420</sup> Potok 221.

<sup>421</sup> Potok 194.

<sup>422</sup> McClymond 19.

<sup>423</sup> McClymond 19.

could no longer imagine assuming his father's place as tzaddik. Technically, his brother could become a tzaddik instead, but he had not received the proper training. Furthermore, according to Hasidic custom, Danny was promised to the daughter of one of his father's followers. Breaking off the engagement would cause serious problems for everyone involved. Potok has been accused of romanticising Hasidism, but he shows quite frankly how suffocating this religion can be. In this passage, Danny describes his father's intellectual prison and the feeling of being trapped.

'I admire him. He's a great man... And I pity him, too. Intellectually, he's trapped. He was born trapped. I don't ever want to be trapped the way he's trapped. I want to be able to breathe, to think what I want to think, to say the things I want to say. I'm trapped now too... It's the most hellish, choking, constricting feeling in the world. I scream with every bone in my body to get out of it. My mind cries to get out of it. But I can't. Not now. One day I will, though. I'll want you around on that day, friend. I'll *need* you around on that day.'<sup>424</sup>

As McClymond points out, "These conflicts, whether easily identifiable by non-Jewish readers or addressed with more nuance to Jewish readers, always come back to the core problem: Danny's increasing alienation from the life expected from him as Reb Saunders' son."<sup>425</sup> The greater the gap becomes between his father's expectations and Danny's own dreams and wishes, the more he suffers.

I have already introduced Hasidism's suspicion towards the secular world. Reb Saunders illustrates this point with much passion, "The world kills us! The world laughs at Torah! And if it does not kill us, it tempts us! It misleads us! It contaminates us! The world is Amalek!"<sup>426</sup> By contrast, two pages later, Reuven gives his views of the world: "I didn't agree at all with [Reb Saunders'] notions of the world being contaminated. Albert Einstein is part of the world, I told myself. President Roosevelt is part of the world. The millions of soldiers fighting Hitler are part of the world."<sup>427</sup> These opposing statements demonstrate the two contrasting views Orthodox and Hasidic Jews have on secular or non-Jewish society. As explained, Hasidic Jews see secular society as sinful and evil, they wish to keep their distance and guard their unique religiosity as much as possible. Orthodox Jews, such as Reuven, have

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<sup>424</sup> Potok 200.

<sup>425</sup> McClymond 13.

<sup>426</sup> Potok 134.

<sup>427</sup> Potok 136.

a slightly more nuanced view, they see themselves as both separate and part of the non-Jewish world, they wish to preserve their Jewish identity and religiosity, but they also wish to participate and interact with said society.

Reb Saunders' intense distrust of the *goyische* world is put in a different light when a few days after the end of the Second World War in Europe (May 7<sup>th</sup> 1945) news arrived of the concentration camps.<sup>428</sup> The initial response to this horrifying news is the same for both the Orthodox and the Hasidic characters: soul-shattering grief. Yet, the conclusions that are drawn from this event are different. David Malter, although he saw a great responsibility with American Jews to safeguard Judaism, decided at the same time that "we cannot wait for God"<sup>429</sup> to give the Jews a safe homeland and he became actively involved in Zionism. Danny's father appeared to spend most of his time crying; Danny explained to Reuven, "Six million Jews have died... I think he's thinking of them. He's suffering for them."<sup>430</sup> Even though Reb Saunders was destroyed by grief and sadness, he did not believe in a Jewish state founded by non-Orthodox Jews, not based on Talmudic law and finally he accepted the Holocaust as the will of God, even though he did not understand why. "How the world makes us suffer. It is the will of God. We must accept the will of God.' He was silent for a long moment. Then he raised his eyes and said softly, 'Master of the Universe, how do you permit such a thing to happen?'"<sup>431</sup> When Reuven told his father that Reb Saunders' had said this, David replied bitterly, "If there is an answer, we must make it ourselves... Six million of our people have been slaughtered... It is inconceivable. It will have meaning only if we give it meaning. We cannot wait for God."<sup>432</sup> David meant that the *Shoah* could only have meaning if one of its consequences was the founding of the State of Israel, a safe homeland for all Jews so they would never need to fear persecution again. Yet, when Reuven mentioned to Reb Saunders that some Jews believed the time had come to reclaim Palestine it was as though he

had thrown a match onto a pile of straw... Reb Saunders stared at me, his eyes suddenly wild with rage... 'Who are these people? Apikorsim! Goyim!

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<sup>428</sup> After the American and British troops had liberated concentration camps in Germany and Austria in April and May 1945 and delegations of journalists and Congress members travelled to the camps to witness the Nazi atrocities, reports reached America not long after. "The photographs of skeletal survivors and stacked corpses, and the wrenching accounts of mass murder became a staple of American publications and newsreels. By May 1945, eighty-four percent of Americans polled believed that Germany had slaughtered millions in its camps and in other operations." Lawrence Baron. "The Holocaust and American public memory, 1945–1960." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17.1 (2003): 65.

<sup>429</sup> Potok 191.

<sup>430</sup> Potok 198.

<sup>431</sup> Potok 190.

<sup>432</sup> Potok 191.

Ben Gurion and his goyim will build Eretz Yisroel? They will build for us a Jewish land? They will bring Torah into this land? Goyishkeit they will bring into the land, not Torah! When the Messiah comes, we will have Eretz Yisroel, a Holy Land, not a land contaminated by Jewish goyim! For this six million of our people were slaughtered? That we should forget about the Messiah, that we should forget completely about the Master of the Universe?'<sup>433</sup>

Reuven had touched a raw nerve; a secular Jewish state would be a sacrilege, a violation of the Torah in Reb Saunders' eyes.<sup>434</sup> As indicated by Reb Saunders, one of the largest problems is the role of the Messiah in the founding of the state of Israel. As Mintz explains,

Orthodox law and established religious myth support the concept of a redeemer who will rescue and restore the Jews from exile. Orthodox Jews believe with full faith in the coming of the Messiah. Conditions, however, are not conducive to a mass delusion, and the Orthodox maintain a quotient of logic, scepticism, and disbelief that enables them to live with the contradictions and ambiguities of the real and mythic worlds.<sup>435</sup>

Although Orthodox Jews such as David Malter still believe in the Messiah, they are also willing to be pragmatic. Malter understood the urgency for a Jewish state after the *Shoah*, with or without the Messiah.

Zionism is a leading motif in the novel from this point on as it illustrates the different perspectives of Hasidic and Orthodox Jews. Danny and Reuven entered Raphael Hirsch Seminary and College to obtain their *smicha* (rabbinic ordination), Danny also studied psychology and Reuven studied philosophy. In the college there were many different Zionist groups, who would come into conflict with the anti-Zionists. One day in the lunchroom, "one of the Hasidim accused a member of the Revisionist youth group of being worse than Hitler. Hitler had only succeeded in destroying the Jewish body, he shouted in Yiddish, but the Revisionists were trying to destroy the Jewish soul."<sup>436</sup> By turning Jews away from the Messiah, away from God, Zionists effectively jeopardised the eternal souls of its Jewish members, whereas Hitler only destroyed the temporal body, according to the anti-Zionist Hasidim. However, as David Malter pointed out in a speech he wrote for a Zionist rally at

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<sup>433</sup> Potok 196-197.

<sup>434</sup> Potok 197.

<sup>435</sup> Mintz 366.

<sup>436</sup> Potok 224.

Madison Square Garden,<sup>437</sup> to him “the slaughter of six million Jews would have meaning only on the day a Jewish state was established. Only then would their sacrifice begin to make some sense; only then would the songs of faith they had sung on their way to the gas chambers take on meaning; only then would Jewry again become a light to the world, as Ahad Ha’am<sup>438</sup> had foreseen.”<sup>439</sup> The founding of the State of Israel would give the death of so many Jews some sort of purpose, in David’s eyes they had not died in vain.

Danny is once again caught in between the expectations of his father and his community and his own desires.

As I expected, Danny did not join any of the Zionist groups. Privately, he told me he wanted to join my group. But he couldn’t. Did I remember his father’s explosion over Zionism? he wanted to know... Besides, he added, the anti-Zionists among the Hasidic students looked upon him as their leader. How would it be if he joined a Zionist group... He was trapped by his beard and earlocks, he said, there was nothing he could do.<sup>440</sup>

Danny’s identity is not his own, it belongs to the community and is safeguarded by outer marks of this identity. It keeps him trapped living a Hasidic life, making choices that are not his own. As long as he looks like a Hasidic Jew and is known as his father’s successor, he cannot lead a life that is true to his authentic self.

David Malter’s affiliation with Zionism destroyed Danny and Reuven’s friendship. After Reb Saunders heard of David Malter’s speech for the rally, Danny was not even allowed to speak to Reuven anymore, trapping Danny even further,

Reb Saunders had drawn the line not at secular literature, not at Freud – assuming he knew somehow that Danny had been reading Freud – but at Zionism... [He] didn’t mind his son reading forbidden books, but *never* would he let his son be the friend of the son of a man who was advocating the establishment of a secular Jewish state run by Jewish goyim... Not Freud but Zionism had finally shattered our friendship.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> This rally took place the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1946, it was a protest meeting to demand the opening of Palestine to Jews. <http://www.jta.org/1946/03/06/archive/20000-at-madison-square-garden-meeting-protest-british-policy-in-palestine#ixzz32Gnu5ncn>

<sup>438</sup> A prominent early Zionist thinker and founder of cultural Zionism.

<sup>439</sup> Potok 226.

<sup>440</sup> Potok 225.

<sup>441</sup> Potok 228.

The term 'Jewish *goyim*' might sound contradictory yet its use amongst the ultra-Orthodox is rather common. Poll writes that the Orthodox Jews who had lived in Williamsburg before the great influx of Hasidim were frequently called 'goy' by the Hasidim and nearly bullied out of their own neighbourhood.<sup>442</sup> Non-Jews are often referred to as *goyishe goyim*, but Jews who do not observe Jewish law to the Hasidic standard are called *Yiddishe goyim*.<sup>443</sup> David and Danny Malter are *Yiddishe goyim* in the eyes of Reb Saunders.

Reuven was distressed over having lost his best friend and exceedingly angry with Reb Saunders for his fundamentalist views. "He is such a – a fanatic!' I almost shouted."<sup>444</sup> Yet Reuven's father placed Reb Saunders' fanaticism in a more positive framework. "Reuven,' my father said quietly, 'the fanaticism of men like Reb Saunders kept us alive for two thousand years of exile. If the Jews of Palestine have an ounce of that same fanaticism and use it wisely, we will soon have a Jewish state."<sup>445</sup> David Malter saw Reb Saunders' anger as evidence of his passion to protect the Jewish people the best way he could. Reb Saunders continued his anti-Zionist fight with fervour. "He had organised some of the Hasidic rebbes in the neighbourhood into a group called The League for a Religious Eretz Yisroel... Its aims were clear: no Jewish homeland until the coming of the Messiah. A Jewish homeland created by Jewish goyim was to be considered contaminated and an open desecration of the name of God."<sup>446</sup> It had little effect on the historic event that followed: the UN's vote on the Partition Plan, which would end the British Mandate and advised the creation of independent Arab and Jewish States. This secured a Jewish homeland in Israel. It was an emotional moment for David Malter, who kept saying, over and over again, "the death of the six million Jews had finally been given meaning... It had happened. After two thousand years, it had finally happened. We were a people again, with our own land."<sup>447</sup> Reb Saunders felt the exact opposite, as he explained on the last pages of the novel "I found my own meaning for...the six million. I found it in God's will, which I did not presume to understand. I did not – I did not find it in a Jewish state that does not follow God and his Torah... they could not have died for such a state."<sup>448</sup> Reb Saunders believes that if the Jews who died during the Holocaust helped the creation of the State of Israel through their deaths, they had died in vain.

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<sup>442</sup> Poll 27.

<sup>443</sup> Poll 41.

<sup>444</sup> Potok 229.

<sup>445</sup> Potok 229.

<sup>446</sup> Potok 231.

<sup>447</sup> Potok 236.

<sup>448</sup> Potok 278.

The increase in violence against Israeli Jews that followed this event quieted the anti-Zionist Hasidim and as the lives of the characters mirror the religious groups they represent, Danny was allowed to be friends with Reuven again. "And one day in the late spring of that year, while I was eating lunch, Danny came over to my table, smiled hesitantly, sat down, and asked me to give him a hand with his experimental psychology."<sup>449</sup> Reuven had been invited back into the land of the living. "'It feels good to be kosher again,' I told him, not without some bitterness in my voice."<sup>450</sup> The irony of an Orthodox Jew feeling unkosher is not lost, it indicates the way in which Jews can make each other feel unkosher when they do not observe Talmudic law to their particular standard.

The most significant theme that runs throughout the novel is silence, which has special significance to Hasidic Judaism: silence is the path to one's soul and a way to communicate with God. In fact, Danny was raised in silence; his father only spoke to him when they studied Talmud together. "'We don't talk anymore, except when we study Talmud... My father believes in silence. When I was ten or eleven years old, I complained to him about something, and he told me to close my mouth and look into my soul. He told me to stop running to him every time I had a problem. I should look into my own soul for the answer, he said."<sup>451</sup> For Reuven, silence only received negative connotations when Reb Saunders forbade Danny to speak to him. Instead of the Hasidic association of silence with the divine, Reuven associated silence with death: the absence of the sounds of life, a state devoid of any senses. "I hated the silence between us and thought it unimaginable that Danny and his father never really talked. Silence was ugly, it was black, it leered, it was cancerous, it was death."<sup>452</sup> Reuven had to endure more of that black, bleak silence after his father's second heart-attack, "for the first few days the total silence inside the apartment was impossible for me to take."<sup>453</sup> It was only relieved temporarily by Danny's silent communication with him, "he passed me in the hallway, his face a suffering mask of pain and compassion. I thought for a moment he would speak to me, but he didn't. Instead, he brushed against me and managed to touch my hand for a second. His touch and his eyes spoke the words that his lips couldn't."<sup>454</sup>

Danny began to slowly understand the importance of silence.

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<sup>449</sup> Potok 253.

<sup>450</sup> Potok 253.

<sup>451</sup> Potok 168.

<sup>452</sup> Potok 230.

<sup>453</sup> Potok 239.

<sup>454</sup> Potok 238.

Over lunch one day I told Danny a mild anti-Hasidic story I had heard, and he laughed loudly. Then without thinking, I mentioned a remark one of the students had made few days back: 'The tzaddik sits in absolute silence, saying nothing, and all his followers listen attentively,' and the laughter left his lips as suddenly as if he had been slapped, and his face froze. He smiled faintly. 'There's more truth to that than your realise,' he murmured. 'You can listen to silence, Reuven. I've begun to realise that you can listen to silence and learn from it. It has a quality and a dimension all its own. It talks to me sometimes. I feel myself alive in it. It talks. And I can hear it... It has a strange, beautiful texture... sometimes it cries, and you can hear the pain of the world in it. It hurts to listen to it then. But you have to.'<sup>455</sup>

This little joke about the tzaddik who sits in silence is reminiscent of the Ba'al Shem Tov, who spent much time during various parts of his life in nature, listening to the silence. Moreover, being able to hear the pain of the world in silence is important for someone training to become a tzaddik, especially for the kind that is supposed to take on the suffering of all the Jews. Of course, David Malter did not understand this at all. When Reuven asked him what his father knew of raising ones child in silence, his response was, "'Hasidim!' I heard him mutter, almost contemptuously. 'Why must they feel the burden of the world is only on their shoulders?' ...it was practised in Europe by some few Hasidic families,' His voice went hard. 'There are better ways to teach a child compassion.'<sup>456</sup>

David Malter touched on the principle that guided Reb Saunders in his parenting methods: how to turn his son into a compassionate man. When Danny was but four years old, Reb Saunders came to the conclusion that he had no soul, only a mind, he was a person consumed by his mind, unaware and not tending to his divine core. Reb Saunders clarified,

'A man is born into this world with only a tiny spark of goodness in him. The spark is God, it is the soul; the rest is ugliness and evil, a shell. The spark must be guarded like a treasure, it must be nurtured, it must be fanned into a flame. It must learn to seek out other sparks, it must dominate the shell. Anything can be a shell, Reuven. Anything. Indifference, laziness, brutality, and genius. Yes, even a great mind be a shell and choke the spark.'<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Potok 259.

<sup>456</sup> Potok 263.

<sup>457</sup> Potok 273.

Reb Saunders makes reference to a well-known Lurianic Kabbalist theory: the shells (*kelipot*) of the broken vessels (*sefirot*) form the material world in which the divine sparks of God are contained; this is a central motif in *The Book of Lights* which I will discuss in chapter three. Reb Saunders had seen how the shell of genius had choked the divine spark of his older brother, he'd had a brilliant but cold mind, "almost cruel, untouched by his soul." Since he was consumed by his mind he left the Hasidic community and became a mathematician in Paris. He died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Although, Reb Saunders was broken by grief over his brother, most of all he hoped that before his brother died, "he learned how much suffering there is in this world... It will have redeemed his soul." Perhaps this may sound strange, however, Reb Saunders' own father had said to him, "One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain... by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul. And it is important to know of pain, he said. It destroys our self-pride, our arrogance, our indifference toward others."<sup>458</sup> Silence is a path into your soul, into that pain that breaks you open and allows for compassion to enter your heart. Reb Saunders' explained,

'my father himself never talked to me, except when we studied together. He taught me with silence. He taught me to look into myself, to find my own strength, to walk around inside myself in company with my soul. [And] of all people a Tzaddik especially must know of pain. A Tzaddik must know how to suffer for his people... He must take their pain from them and carry it on his own shoulders. He must carry it always.'<sup>459</sup>

To raise his son as he himself had been raised seemed the only option to him, "I did not want my Danny to become like my brother...and I said to myself, How will I teach this mind what it is to have a soul? How will I teach this mind to understand pain? How will I teach it to *want* to take on another person's suffering?"<sup>460</sup> Especially, since Danny did not live in a fenced-off *shtetl* in Eastern Europe, but in America and he knew that all the knowledge Danny ever desired would easily be available to him. "I knew already when he was a boy that I could not prevent his mind from going to the world for knowledge. I knew in my heart that it might prevent him from taking my place. But I had to prevent it from driving him away completely from the Master of the Universe. And I had to make certain his soul would

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<sup>458</sup> Potok 275.

<sup>459</sup> Potok 275.

<sup>460</sup> Potok 275-276.

be the soul of a tzaddik no matter what he did with his life.”<sup>461</sup>

Hence, when four-year old Danny became a little older, Reb Saunders drew himself away from him, as his father had done to him. The phrase “I drew myself away from him”<sup>462</sup> resonates the Kabbalist concept of *tzimtzum*: God contracted Himself, withdrew Himself to make space for his creation. That is why His face appears hidden from humanity now. When Reb Saunders withdrew from his son, silence ensued and “in the silence between us, [Danny] began to hear the world crying.”<sup>463</sup> Potok gives his explanation of the metaphor of silence in *The Chosen*,

There's something going on that Danny doesn't understand, and it's the metaphor for precisely what it is that the religious person does in terms of his relationship to God in the twentieth century. Something is going on, and we don't understand it. There's a silence between the Jewish people, or indeed all religious people, and God in this century. But whatever it is - and I don't understand it - the silence is not a break in communication. It's a communication of a different kind, and what we try to do is tap into it and see what it's all about.<sup>464</sup>

In the twentieth century, people seemed to turn away from God and God remained silent throughout the greatest crisis in Jewish history. To many this is utterly incomprehensible, but Potok offers an attempt to make this silence meaningful, at least to himself and perhaps to his readers. For Potok, silence is another way in which God tries to communicate with us. Of course, this is not a novel concept, for thousands of years mystics have found God through the path of silence (contemplation, meditation), but it remains relevant today.<sup>465</sup>

Potok himself is predominantly silent about the Holocaust in *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, even though it shapes both narratives. With few exceptions, his characters virtually never discuss the concentration camps, the deaths of so many fellow Jews, the utter shock and horror of this genocide, except for in relationship to Zionism. Any discussion of the Holocaust seems almost utilitarian, serving to explain both Zionist and anti-Zionist

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<sup>461</sup> Potok 276.

<sup>462</sup> Potok 276.

<sup>463</sup> Potok 277.

<sup>464</sup> Chaim Potok quoted in Elaine M. Kauvar “An Interview with Chaim Potok” in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 80.

<sup>465</sup> For instance, during the Second World War, a protestant named Roger Schutz founded an ecumenical monastery in the south of France, called Taizé, which places a strong empathy on silence; silence forms the core of every service. This monastery became a place where thousands upon thousands of Christians from all different denominations now gather to find a new path to God.

sentiments. In an interview with Lilian Kremer Potok explained the silence around the Holocaust in his work. He disclosed that he hesitated writing a novel about the Holocaust because he was uncertain how to handle the material. Even though he lost the whole European branch of his family, he never experienced it “on his own flesh”.<sup>466</sup> Potok also felt guilt-ridden for not having been able to do enough to “get the thing stopped, or to protest it.”<sup>467</sup> Ultimately, he did not know whether he could “get the distance needed to handle it aesthetically.”<sup>468</sup> Potok’s hesitation echoes questions surrounding the limits of Holocaust representation,<sup>469</sup> moreover, since Potok was a young and inexperienced author when he wrote *The Chosen*, it may be understandable that he avoided writing directly about this unimaginable trauma he never underwent. This does not mean that Potok conveniently ignores the Holocaust, it is always present in the background, alluded to both overtly and covertly, as in most Jewish writing post-1945. Instead of concentrating on the Holocaust itself, Potok places the emphasis on the post-war restoration of Judaism in America, which he had been part of. Kremer comments, “Potok’s survivors bear witness to the Holocaust through their determination to live religiously pure lives, to live according to the commandments, to defend the Torah, and to revitalize the *yiddishkeit* (Jewishness) that the Nazis sought to destroy. Against the Nazi program of death and destruction, these Jews defiantly stand for the sanctity of life. Potok’s survivors are engaged in the restorative process, regenerating Judaism and the Jewish people.”<sup>470</sup> This restorative process is fraught with tension between the different branches of Judaism, who each have their own vision of their faith’s future, which is central to both of his novels.

The novel ends with a surprisingly tidy resolution: Reb Saunders’ accepted his son’s decision to become a psychologist, “Let my Daniel become a psychologist. I have no more fear now. All his life he will be a tzaddik. He will be a tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a tzaddik.”<sup>471</sup> Reb Saunders had already known his son might not be able to succeed him; his only goal had been to ensure that Danny would have the soul of a tzaddik regardless

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<sup>466</sup> Potok interviewed by Kremer, “An Interview with Chaim Potok”, *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed. Daniel Walden. University of Press of Mississippi. Jackson, 2001, 39.

<sup>466</sup> Potok 277.

<sup>467</sup> Potok interviewed by Kremer 38.

<sup>468</sup> Potok interviewed by Kremer 39

<sup>469</sup> For recent publications on this issue see Berel Lang. *Holocaust representation: Art within the limits of history and ethics*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000). Michael Rothberg. *Traumatism Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). , Brett Ashley Kaplan. *Unwanted beauty: Aesthetic pleasure in Holocaust representation*. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

<sup>470</sup> Kremer, S. Lilian. *Witness Through the Imagination: Jewish-American Holocaust Literature*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989, 306.

<sup>471</sup> Potok 277.

of his eventual profession. Danny is committed to remaining an Orthodox Jew, an observer of the Commandments, even though he will have to give up his Hasidic appearance. As he said to Reuven, “can you see me practising psychology and looking like Hasid?”<sup>472</sup> This entire scene could of course only take place on Passover, the festival that celebrates the freedom of the Jewish people, their escape from slavery and their entry into the forty years of wilderness, the years of wandering in the unknown. As the Jews remembered and celebrated their freedom, Danny celebrated his: his shackles were finally released and he was ready to set out into the unknown. Although, when asked the question by David Malter whether he would raise his own son in silence, Danny answered “Yes ... If I cannot find another way.”<sup>473</sup>

Thus each found their own answer to the struggles with which they had been grappling. Danny was able to find a compromise by becoming a Hasidic psychologist, whereas Reuven, who had a fairly secular way of looking at the world compared to most Orthodox Jews, rather daringly reconstructed a problematic Talmud passage using ‘scientific criticism’, an approach rejected by traditional Orthodoxy. Yet, it is remarkable that neither chose to leave his faith. McClymond comments, “While Danny and Reuven make choices that disappoint, pain, and even anger each other and their families, the conflicts centre on different interpretations of religious identity, not their fundamental allegiances, and no irreparable breaks occur.”<sup>474</sup> Potok was not interested in writing a story about people breaking away from Judaism, but about people finding a way to preserve their faith, accommodating their beliefs, remain members of their community and still individuate.<sup>475</sup>

### **2.3 The Promise**

*The Promise* begins where *The Chosen* ended; five years after the war Reuven and Danny were both continuing on the path they had carved out in *The Chosen*. Reuven is preparing for his *smicha*<sup>476</sup> and Danny is working with psychologically troubled children at a residential treatment centre as part of his graduate research in clinical psychology. *The Promise* expands on similar themes, but in this novel, it is not only Orthodox and Hasidic

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<sup>472</sup> Potok 264.

<sup>473</sup> Potok 281.

<sup>474</sup> McClymond 15.

<sup>475</sup> See ‘individuation’, C.G. Jung, “The integration of the personality.” Oxford, England: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939.

<sup>476</sup> Orthodox Rabbinic Ordination.

Judaism that are in contention, they both face the threat of Reform Judaism: Jews who identify with the Jewish people and Jewish culture, but no longer subscribe to all Jewish theological ideas. This group is represented by Abraham Gordon, a Jewish philosophy professor, who wrote books which were “scorned and despised by the rabbis in [Reuven’s] Orthodox school.”<sup>477</sup> Abraham confronted his reader with difficult questions, which boil down to “How might one not believe literally in the Bible and still remain a traditional Jew? Are total believe or complete abandonment the only available choices, or is possible to reinterpret ancient beliefs in a way that will make them relevant to the modern world and at the same time not cause one to abandon the tradition?”<sup>478</sup> *The Promise* also illustrates how European Hasidic (and non-Hasidic Haredi) Jews who had survived the *Shoah* rebuilt their lives and their communities in Williamsburg, New York, including all the consequences their presence bore on Orthodox Judaism. Bravely, the Hasidim regrouped and began their recovery. “Families had been destroyed; they remarried and created new families. Dynasties had been shattered: elders met and formed new dynasties. Children had been killed; their women now seemed forever pregnant.”<sup>479</sup> Slowly, Hasidic Jews fresh from the boats with which they had fled Eastern Europe began to alter Reuven’s neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood changed. In the years before the Second World War, the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn had been inhabited by only a few Hasidic sects. By the fifth year after the war, the neighbourhood seemed dark with their presence. They had come from the sulphurous chaos of the concentration camps, remnants, one from a hamlet, two from a village, three from a town, dark, sombre figures in long black coats and black hats and long beards, earlocks hanging alongside gaunt faces, eyes brooding, like balls of black flame turned inward upon private visions of the demonic. Here, in Williamsburg, they set about rebuilding their burned-out world.<sup>480</sup>

Reuven equated these new Hasidic Jews with darkness, referring not only to their black-clad appearance but the depressing circumstances from which they had emerged. Furthermore, Reuven associated their ultra-Orthodox beliefs with a medieval kind of darkness that stood in contrast to his own relatively more modern, enlightened ideas. The Hasidim colonised and overtook the area in which Reuven lived and it became “filled with their bookstores and

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<sup>477</sup> Chaim Potok. *The Promise*. New York: Penguin Books, 1969, 13.

<sup>478</sup> Potok 70.

<sup>479</sup> Potok 11.

<sup>480</sup> Potok 11.

bookbinderies, butcher shops and restaurants, beeswax candle stores, dry-cleaning stores, grocery stores and vegetable stores – the signs in Yiddish and English, the storekeepers bearded and in skullcaps.”<sup>481</sup> The non-Jewish Italian, Irish, German and Spanish refugees had all moved from the neighbourhood.

Reuven was now surrounded by Jews, yet he felt a strong sense of alienation, “there were many Hasidim on the street and I listened to their Hungarian<sup>482</sup> Yiddish and they seemed strange to me, so far apart from me, though they were my own people and we shared the same distant origins and studied the same Torah.”<sup>483</sup> Although Reuven’s Orthodox community and the Hasidim shared the same beginning, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they had taken different paths, which led in diverging directions. Yet fate had brought them back together, at least geographically.

I walked past the synagogue where my father and I prayed and on past the block where Danny’s father lived and thought how these remnants of the concentration camps had changed the face of things. They were the remnants, the zealous guardians of the spark... They had changed everything merely by surviving and crossing an ocean. They had brought that spark to the broken streets of Williamsburg.<sup>484</sup>

The Hasidic Jews are the guardians of the spark, since they obey the commandments of the Talmud most strictly and they keep Kabbalah as the living core of their faith. Potok contrasts the words ‘merely’ and ‘surviving’, as surviving the Holocaust is no mere thing, but neither is changing American Orthodox Judaism, which they indeed did ‘only’ by surviving the destruction of Europe and fleeing to America. They had not actually *chosen* to move to a more secular, open society, they had no intention to assimilate and change their habits or their faith. Yet, Orthodox Jews felt that they could not defend their Judaism against these newcomers: “No one... would fight them because the spark was precious, it was all that was left after the blood and the slaughter, and you dimmed it when you fought its defenders... I had not really seen it until now.”<sup>485</sup> Again, as in *The Chosen*, Reuven gained a new perspective, he had been blind to the reason why none of his fellow Orthodox Jews would stand up to them until that moment of realisation.

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<sup>481</sup> Potok 11.

<sup>482</sup> Most of the Hasidic Jews who survived the *Shoah* were Hungarian, see Jacques Gutwirth. *The Rebirth of Hasidism*. Trans. Sophie Leighton. London: Free Association Books, 2005.

<sup>483</sup> Potok 179.

<sup>484</sup> Potok 179.

<sup>485</sup> Potok 179.

The immigration of Hasidic Jews was not only difficult for the Orthodox Jews, obviously it was very trying for the new Haredi too. Rav Kalman, a non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox Jewish teacher at Reuven's rabbinical school, was a Holocaust-survivor who had committed heroic acts in order to escape his persecutors and moved to America a few years after the war. Rav Kalman did not understand America because he had only lived there for two years and since he resented his new country he had not made a huge effort to learn to understand his new world. Therefore, he was afraid that when the Rosenbergs were tried for spying against the United States, it would have ramifications on American Jewry and *pogroms* would follow, because that would have happened in Eastern Europe. Reuven reassured him,

'No. There won't be any trouble for Jews. There will be no pogroms because of the Rosenbergs.' He looked at me in disbelief. He had been in the country about two years and he still didn't understand what it was really all about. He was unable to put aside his blood-filled parcel of memories. 'A strange land,' he murmured, shaking his head. 'So much goodness and so much ugliness all in one land...How can you be sure?' 'A strange land,' he murmured again. 'How does one learn to live in such a land?'<sup>486</sup>

Rav Kalman felt conflicted about living in America, since on the one hand it appeared to be Sodom and Gomorrah and on the other, he had never known as much safety and security. The country was both evil and protecting him. Poll explains, "America meant liberty because the Americans were the liberators of Jews from the various German concentration camps in which many of the Hasidim had been confined and tortured during the Nazi regime. America, on the other hand, stood for unconfined, uncontrolled, and loose behaviour."<sup>487</sup> Even though on the outside it appeared as though the Haredim simply rebuilt their entire lives on new lands, inwardly it brought a lot of confusion and conflict. They could never entirely let go of their past or their sense of alienation in this new world and many, like Rav Kalman were unwilling to adapt. To many ultra-Orthodox, "there was no other Jewish existence except that of their own convictions and their own religious practices for which their parents and forefathers had suffered during the Nazi atrocities."<sup>488</sup> This is exemplified in an argument between Rav Kalman and his colleague Rav Gershenson, when Rev

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<sup>486</sup> Potok 289.

<sup>487</sup> Poll 37.

<sup>488</sup> Poll 38.

Gershenson shouted: “It is a different world here! You cannot –”<sup>489</sup> Rav Kalman interrupted him, “It is a corrupt world! I will not be changed by it!”<sup>490</sup> The effect of the Haredic immigration was that “everything traditional was being drawn towards that [ultra-Orthodox] zealousness”<sup>491</sup> but it also widened the gap between the newcomers and those unwilling to be dragged into ultra-Orthodoxy. As the novel progresses, this is felt more and more astutely,

Walking to and from our synagogue every Shabbat was becoming an increasingly uncomfortable experience for me. It was like moving back through centuries to a dead world that came to life once every seven days... On Shabbat, when I could feel them making the very air tremulous with exultation... it was particularly strange and I felt myself to be an uncomfortable outsider who had somehow been transported to a world I once thought had existed only in the small towns of Eastern Europe or in books about Jewish history.<sup>492</sup>

Again, this passage illustrates the literal transplantation of the Eastern European Hasidic world into Brooklyn. Had it not been for the Holocaust, this world may have gradually ceased to exist, swept away by modernity, but because it was so brutally destroyed, the few surviving members of its communities held on to it with fierce determination. Although the ultra-Orthodox world of the Hasidim was not foreign to Reuven, it became more and more difficult to relate to these fellow Jews. This is partly because Reuven felt pulled towards Professor Gordon’s modern perspective on Judaism, which seemed to allow ‘fresh air’; new interpretations and ideas. Even his past encounter with Hasidism appeared odd to him now, which he felt acutely as he walked past Danny’s synagogue, “so much of my life had once been tied to the things I had experienced inside that synagogue and all of it seemed strange to me now, quaint, almost exotic, as if it were a movie set or something I were watching an author describe in a historical novel.”<sup>493</sup> As Reuven progressed into modernity, he left Hasidism further behind him.

The reason for Reuven’s visit to Reb Saunders’ synagogue was Danny’s engagement to the niece of Abraham Gordon, Rachel. Reuven’s father joined him and as they approached

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<sup>489</sup> Potok 254.

<sup>490</sup> Potok 254.

<sup>491</sup> Potok 179.

<sup>492</sup> Potok 228.

<sup>493</sup> Potok 185.

the synagogue the two of them felt “swallowed by Hasidim,”<sup>494</sup> this image correlates to their perception of their neighbourhood being taken over by Hasidim. By that point, Reuven’s aversion towards ultra-Orthodox Judaism had reached new heights as he sensed his whole world was jeopardised by them. Amidst the merriment of the engagement, Reuven felt great antipathy towards the people celebrating with him.

We danced around Danny... and I looked at [him] and felt a part of myself slide out of the dance and look coldly at what I was doing and heard it telling me how strange it was to be dancing with Hasidim, whose way of life I disliked, whose ideas were so different from mine, whose presence was destroying my world. I continued dancing, but for the rest of that night that part of me remained outside it all, watching.<sup>495</sup>

Yet, Reuven was determined not to let the Haredim who antagonised him tell him what to believe and how to be a Jew. He studied for his *smicha*, using text-critical methods, emending Talmudic passages in his head whilst buying his meat from the Hasidic butcher, buying his vegetables from the Hasidic greengrocer and his bread from the Hasidic baker. While Hasidic boys shouted at him and called his father a ‘goyische Talmudist’, Reuven sought out contradictions in the Babylonian Talmud (which according to the ultra-Orthodox cannot exist) and formed his own opinion on the Talmudic discussions he revised.

Reuven perceived Rav Kalman’s ultra-Orthodoxy as oppressive. Like the Hasidic Jews in his neighbourhood Kalman was associated with darkness, “for the room was always pervaded by the peculiar darkness that Rav Kalman brought with him whenever he came through the door.”<sup>496</sup> Rav Kalman was steeped in the medieval darkness of his ideas, a choking heaviness that would not allow the light of new ideas or the light of reason, so vital to Reuven whose ideas were influenced by the *Haskalah*. David and Reuven Malter saw the Talmud not as something that was fixed, final and sacred in its perfection, but as “containing almost a thousand years of ideas and traditions that had been in flux; we saw the text of the Talmud as fluid, alive, like a body of rushing water with many tributaries leading into it and from it.”<sup>497</sup> Their text-critical method of studying Talmud was considered a threat by Rav Kalman and his peers.

After the Holocaust, this threat was felt even more keenly, as David Malter

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<sup>494</sup> Potok 291.

<sup>495</sup> Potok 297.

<sup>496</sup> Potok 108.

<sup>497</sup> Potok 314.

remarked, “When your world is destroyed and only a remnant is saved, then whatever is seen as a threat to that remnant becomes a hated enemy.”<sup>498</sup> David and Reuven were both threats to the ultra-Orthodox way of life and their core belief-system. Rav Kalman had defended himself and Torah during the Second World War, “he was not one of those who believed in going willingly to the crematoria. He was with the partisans and killed German soldiers for Torah. Now he defends it with words.”<sup>499</sup> For Rav Kalman the physical threat of the Nazis was replaced with the theological threat of secular, Reform and Conservative Judaism, which needed to be fought with equal strength to preserve Orthodox Judaism. Furthermore, all of Rav Kalman’s friends, family and students died during the Holocaust and they died Orthodox Jews, holding fast to their faith, which makes the defence of the remainder of ultra-Orthodox Judaism even more important to him.

Rav Kalman could not accept a secular type of Judaism that is founded on ideas rather than the laws of Torah, in his eyes it would mean that his friends died in vain. He said about Abraham Gordon, “he found an idea. When we went to our deaths to sanctify the Name of God, we died for an idea? My students died for an idea?”<sup>500</sup> Somehow Rav Kalman saw his students as martyrs, dying for their faith, even though the Nazis did not make any distinction between religious and secular Jews. Consequentially, he expected American students to make a firm choice “for Torah,”<sup>501</sup> because only that way, Maidanek, where his students died, would have meaning. He forced Reuven to choose: to stop using his secular methods of studying Talmud or not take his *smicha*. Abraham Gordon was sympathetic to Rav Kalman’s views, as he commented, “He is trying to save what is left of his world... The concentration camps destroyed a lot more than European Jewry. They destroyed man’s faith in himself. I cannot blame Rav Kalman for being suspicious of man and believing only in God. Why should anyone believe in man?”<sup>502</sup> Although it is equally incredible Rav Kalman managed to hold on to his believe in God.

According to Poll Orthodox Jews can be divided into four categories based on their religious behaviour, the Jews in the fourth category are called ‘Obgehitene Yiden’ or *Guardian Jews*, (as referred to above by Potok ) they ‘guard’ the spark of Judaism by observing the *Shulhan Aruch*<sup>503</sup> in the most minute detail. They are also overtly identifiable as Jews, they wear “beards and/or special traditional clothing for the exclusive

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<sup>498</sup> Potok 281.

<sup>499</sup> Potok 255.

<sup>500</sup> Potok 283.

<sup>501</sup> Potok 155.

<sup>502</sup> Potok 288.

<sup>503</sup> The Code of Jewish Law: the most widely accepted compilation of Jewish law ever written.

purpose of being externally identified as Jewish.”<sup>504</sup> Rav Kalman saw himself as a fellow guardian of the spark, “the Hasidim are not the only ones who guard the spark. I too have an obligation,”<sup>505</sup> an obligation to keep Torah and the observance of its laws alive.

Abraham Gordon stated that he saw “a great deal of beauty”<sup>506</sup> in the faith of Hasidic Jews. His wife, Ruth, on the other hand, could not get past the “blind Orthodoxy” of the Hasidim, their ‘blind’ rejecting of facts.<sup>507</sup> David Malter argued that the beauty of Hasidic faith can only be preserved when that blindness is maintained, as he explained to a complaining Reuven, “I wish they weren’t so afraid of new ideas.’ ‘Will new ideas enable to them to go on singing and dancing?’ ‘We can’t ignore the truth, abba.’ ‘No,’ he said ‘We cannot ignore the truth. At the same time, we cannot quite sing and dance as they do.’ He was silent for a moment. ‘That is the dilemma of our time, Reuven. I do not know what the answer is.’”<sup>508</sup> The dilemma is how to give oneself fully to God and worship with the same joy and devotion as the Hasidim, yet without closing one’s eyes to new ideas and scientific discoveries that may shed a different light on one’s beliefs.

Danny had attempted to marry his Hasidic beliefs to the theories of Freud, thereby being able to become a psychologist and participate in the secular world as well as remain a Hasidic Jew. Certain compromises had to be made, “before entering Columbia he had removed the visible indicators of his Hasidic origin – the sand-coloured beard, the flowing earlocks, the dark suit, the caftan, the open-necked tieless shirt, the dark hat he wore on week-days, and the fur-trimmed cap he wore on Shabbat and festivals. He had glowed in his new freedom.”<sup>509</sup> This ‘freedom’ should not be underestimated: one of Poll’s interviewees said “with my appearance I cannot attend a theatre or movie or any other places where a religious Jew is not supposed to go.”<sup>510</sup> By changing his appearance to that of an Orthodox Jew, Danny was able to move about in the secular world like a non-Hasidic Jew. Danny’s evolving beliefs are expressed in his ideas about the soul. He said to Reuven: Freud, “would begin to teach you how to become aware of yourself. That’s what the soul is, I think. Self-awareness... The crust is self-delusion. The soul is self-awareness.”<sup>511</sup> This is similar to the concept of the divine spark and the *kelippot* as Reb Saunders had explained in *The Chosen*, the divine spark of God, the soul, is surrounded by a hard evil shell, the *kelippot*.

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<sup>504</sup> Poll 25.

<sup>505</sup> Potok 165.

<sup>506</sup> Potok 301.

<sup>507</sup> Potok 300.

<sup>508</sup> Potok 297.

<sup>509</sup> Potok 71.

<sup>510</sup> SFJ quoted in Poll, 65.

<sup>511</sup> Potok 259.

Although Danny had finally succeeded in remaining a Hasidic Jew yet living according to his authentic self, Reuven had found it much more challenging to stay within Orthodoxy. At Danny's wedding he had a moment of realisation,

I... found myself thinking of my father and his book and Rav Kalman and felt suddenly drained and hollow with the realization that months of seesawing between the two worlds had finally ended for me this night with nothing but an awareness of how deep the separating chasm really was and how impossible it seemed to bridge it – unless you were a Danny Saunders and were rooted deeply enough in one world to enable you to be concerned only about the people of the other and not about their ideas.<sup>512</sup>

Reuven could not remain unaffected by post-modern secular ideas, which pulled him away from Orthodoxy. A Hasidic Jew interviewed by Mintz made a similar comment, “You need strong roots within your traditional life in order to be able to survive and not to become acculturated.”<sup>513</sup> Reuven and David Malter had no ‘living relatives’,<sup>514</sup> which made Reuven's traditional life less secure. He was not part of a large family of Orthodox Jews with whom to celebrate Shabbat and the holidays, keeping him in place. It could also function as a metaphor, Reuven lacked strong ties with ‘tradition’ as he lacked strong ties to his family. However, Abraham Gordon told Reuven not to think lightly about abandoning Orthodoxy “don't abandon it until you're certain you have no alternative. First be absolutely certain you're in an intolerable situation and that you cannot alter it. Otherwise you'll be torn the rest of your life.”<sup>515</sup> Once you break away it is difficult to return, as to a country that used to be your home but cannot be your future.

Eventually, Reuven decided he would try to change Orthodoxy from within Orthodox Judaism. Gordon reminded him that “if everybody who had brains and doubts left Orthodoxy, we would be in a great deal of trouble.”<sup>516</sup> Simply because you choose to remain within Orthodox Judaism does not mean you cannot be critical of it at the same time. Hence, Reuven forced his Talmud teacher Rav Kalman to make the choice to take *smicha* for him: will you accept my Orthodoxy as it is or will you not? David Malter agreed with Reuven's choice, “You will fight him from within. That is the only effective way to fight a man like Rav

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<sup>512</sup> Potok 245.

<sup>513</sup> Mintz quoting an interviewee, Menachem M. Brayer, 235.

<sup>514</sup> This is oddly not explained anywhere in either of the novels.

<sup>515</sup> Potok 284.

<sup>516</sup> Potok 285.

Kalman.”<sup>517</sup> Reuven can be seen as representing Modern Orthodoxy, which attempts to combine Torah observance and engagement with the secular world, without fear of new scientific ideas and secular knowledge. Hence, it came to pass that Reuven took his *smicha* and was ordained Rabbi.

I was part of the chain of the tradition now, as much a guardian of the sacred Promise as Rav Kalman and the Hasidim were, and it would be a different kind of fight from now on. I had won the right to make my own beginning. And I thought I might try to learn something from the way Rav Kalman and the Hasidim had managed to survive and rebuild their world. What gave them the strength to mould smoke and ashes into a new world?<sup>518</sup>

He and his father chose to fight for Torah in their own way.<sup>519</sup> If the Hasidim had the strength to rebuild their worlds, Reuven would have the strength to change his. The fact that Reuven received his *smicha* from Rav Kalman had great significance. Abraham Gordon explained to Reuven, “You know what *smicha* is to people like [Rav Kalman]? It’s the link between them and Moses at Sinai.”<sup>520</sup> In the end Reuven received his *smicha* because despite his secular methods of studying Talmud, Rav Kalman could hear *Ahavat-Torah*, the love of Torah, in his voice.

The theme of silence is repeated in *The Promise* and becomes an even more important motif in the narrative. Danny, who had begun his work as a psychologist, attempted to use isolation as a method to cure one of his patients. The patient, Michael, Rachel’s cousin, was resisting treatment by refusing to speak about his mental problems. Danny said “there’s a thick shell around him and I can’t get through it.”<sup>521</sup> Again, this is a reference to the *kelippot*, surrounding the divine spark of God. Reuven, understanding the reference, commented, “you want to get through to his spark of a soul? You sound like your father.”<sup>522</sup> As Reb Saunders had predicted, Danny had become a ‘tzaddik for the world’. Danny’s theory was that if Michael was placed in absolute silence and isolation, the silence would be so oppressive; eventually he would release and reveal his psychological problems, which would allow Danny to treat him. Reuven played a role in this method as well, since Michael appeared to trust and open up to him. During the novel’s climax, Reuven

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<sup>517</sup> Potok 325.

<sup>518</sup> Potok 326.

<sup>519</sup> Potok 182.

<sup>520</sup> Potok 327.

<sup>521</sup> Potok 187.

<sup>522</sup> Potok 187.

is called in to the treatment centre to attempt to speak with Michael, who at that point refused to say anything at all. When Reuven entered Michael's isolation cell, he was surrounded by pure silence "Silence, utter silence, filled the room, dense, thick, pressing against the window and the walls. I could feel it, I could actually *feel* it pushing against me."<sup>523</sup> Reuven compared the isolation cell to a tomb, again making the associating with death. So he decided to speak, "I talked on and on, quietly, my voice shaking, using the words to push away the silence and fill the room with something that was truly alive, with words, driving out the silence with words, beating against the silence with words."<sup>524</sup> According to the Kabbalah, the world was created through the twenty-two letters of the alphabet;<sup>525</sup> hence words are able to create something where there is nothing, to create life which fills the void. Potok himself said that literature (not Kabbalah) revealed to him that "you could really create the world out of language."<sup>526</sup> At last Reuven unintentionally said something that shocked Michael, which managed to penetrate Michael's shell. That is when the gates opened, the shell cracked and Michael was finally able to express what caused him to feel so angry and upset. As Marovitz has also noted, Danny's secular use of silence as a psychological treatment for Michael is similar to his father's Hasidic treatment of silence.<sup>527</sup> There is a strange silence surrounding Reuven's mother, the only thing mentioned about her is that she died soon after Reuven's birth. Her name is not mentioned, Reuven and David Malter never discuss or refer to her, Reuven never appears to think of her. The cause of her death is not revealed either. She is dead, but even her memory is not kept alive, it almost makes one suspect she committed suicide. Potok was perhaps still getting to grips with writing female characters in his early novels. In *The Chosen* women hardly feature at all and if they do, they are described as someone's mother or sister, mentioned only in a domestic context. In *The Promise*, there are two female characters who might shed some light on a woman's views of Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism. First of all there is Rachel, raised by secular Jewish parents "free and sophisticated"<sup>528</sup>, yet willing to learn and embrace Hasidism for her future husband's sake, willing to make compromises, even compromise herself, because of love. Although she is described as a very intelligent student, she will only attend graduate school until she becomes pregnant. Clearly, choosing

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<sup>523</sup> Potok 332.

<sup>524</sup> Potok 334.

<sup>525</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah* 1.1. Trans. Isidor Kalisch and Knut Stenring Book Tree, 2006, 14.

<sup>526</sup> Mike Field. "Potok Has Chosen to Create Worlds from Words." in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed Daniel Walden. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001, 100.

<sup>527</sup> See also Marovitz 137.

<sup>528</sup> Potok 264.

to wait to have children until after she has finished her education (or not having children at all) is out of the question. Ruth Gordon, Rachel's aunt, Abraham's wife, is unable to understand why her niece would choose to become a Hasidic Jew. "She did not like the medieval subservience of Hasidic women. She did not like the meekness with which they accepted their secondary roles. She did not like the patriarchal aura of the Hasidic family."<sup>529</sup> The text appears to describe a feminist who is able to see beyond the Romantic view of Hasidism, to the grim reality most Hasidic women experience. Yet, the text quickly points out that she, Ruth had given up her own ambitions, "had given away her freedom and joined herself to the destiny of a man whose deepest dreams she would help bring to life."<sup>530</sup> In a way, Ruth had given herself a secondary position, different, but not all that different from Hasidic women. She was her husband's equal, but it was his career she worked for, editing everything he wrote. Hence, even though Potok may have wished to offer female viewpoints, he did not do this successfully. In chapter four and five I will explore the perspective and experience of Hasidic women, shining light on female authors who do more justice to the feminine perspective.

## 2.4 Conclusion

*The Chosen* and *The Promise* portray the struggles of Hasidic Jews in the post-war years and their conflicts with Orthodox and Reform Judaism. Furthermore, they explore the effort to make one's life meaningful, to live a life that is authentic and true to oneself. Marovitz remarks that Potok wished "to convey through the presentation of manifold possibilities, how one might live a rich, meaningful, and worthwhile life in the midst of a largely secular culture characterized by egocentricity, materialistic values, the compulsive demand for novelty, a dearth of spiritual vitality, and – as Saul Bellow has often said – apparently endless distraction."<sup>531</sup> Like Nachman, Potok sought answers to questions that cannot fully be solved by Orthodox Judaism. Like Nachman, Potok used his literature to come to a better understanding of God and our relationship to him. Potok's characters represent the different ends of the Jewish spectrum, each with their own answer. Reb Saunders represents Lubavich Hasidism, Rav Kalman the non-Hasidic Eastern European Haredi,

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<sup>529</sup> Potok 300.

<sup>530</sup> Potok 302.

<sup>531</sup> Marovitz 131.

Danny is a liberal leaning Hasid, Rav Gershenson is mainstream Orthodox,<sup>532</sup> David and Reuven Malter are Modern Orthodox,<sup>533</sup> Abraham Gordon represents Reform Judaism,<sup>534</sup> and his wife Ruth Gordon is a secular Jew. Each character makes different choices about the extent to which they are willing to accommodate secularism or their religious beliefs. It is not a one-way street: Danny and Reuven may have become more liberal but Rachel Gordon abandons secular Judaism to become a Hasidic wife, attracted by Danny's sincere religious passion. Potok attempts to represent each choice as equally valid and dependent on the character of that person. Moreover, Potok demonstrates that despite various difficulties, one can preserve one's religious identity, remain a committed member of one's religious community and take part in secular society. He also illustrates that this struggle may be worthwhile; perhaps in our contemporary society it would be easier to abandon religion all together, but Potok is determined that there is value to living a spiritual life. Marowitz comments,

[Potok] believes that there is a need of and a place for faith in the contemporary world and that it does not have to be compromised in order to remain viable. He shows, however, that faith is something to be understood as well as accepted and that such an understanding cannot be achieved without confrontation, struggle, and pain. Nor can it be either acquired or sustained by ignoring the additions to knowledge that are a part of the modern world.<sup>535</sup>

Danny made certain adjustments but remained firmly rooted in the Hasidic world as his authentic self, a Hasidic Freudian psychologist. After all, he told Reuven, "I haven't seen anything outside that's better... Nothing I can't use and still stay inside."<sup>536</sup> His perspective is that of the Lubavich Hasid today, instead of moving out into the secular world, he takes the valuable parts of secular society and draw them inside. His friend Reuven also chooses to stay within Orthodoxy, determined to change it from the inside. Through Danny and Reuven, Potok has demonstrated how those who are exposed to secular culture, who think

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<sup>532</sup> He questioned Reuven's text-critical method of Talmud study but was not vehemently opposed to it like Rav Kalman.

<sup>533</sup> Their beliefs may actually be closer to Open Orthodoxy or Conservadox Judaism, but these branches did not exist at the time of Potok's writing.

<sup>534</sup> Although his Jewish identity is the least explicit, my interpretation of him is Reform but others have seen him as Reconstructionist or Conservative.

<sup>535</sup> Marowitz 138.

<sup>536</sup> Potok 245.

and question can still belong in Orthodox Judaism and how Orthodoxy can still belong in post-war American society.

## Chapter Three

### Hasidic Thought in the *The Book of Lights* by Chaim Potok

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will examine how Jewish-American literature has engaged with and given expression to Hasidic philosophy by analysing Chaim Potok's *The Book of Lights* (1981). In *The Chosen* and *The Promise* Potok portrayed Hasidic identity, contrasting it with Orthodox identity; *The Book of Lights* does not contain Hasidic characters yet it is strongly motivated by Hasidic philosophy which forms the architecture of the entire narrative: through this novel Potok investigates the relevance of Kabbalah and Hasidic philosophy to twentieth century post-war existence. *The Book of Lights* is critical to my thesis as a whole since it touches upon many of its central themes and answers one its key questions: how do 20<sup>th</sup> and

21<sup>st</sup> century Jewish American authors engage with Hasidic thought – an ostensible anomaly in post-modern society? *The Book of Lights* represents a world that is completely broken, destroyed by nuclear bombs, yet it invites the reader to experience the shards of light within the brokenness, much like Hasidic Judaism attempts to find sparks of light after the *Shoah*. Simultaneously, *The Book of Lights* explores the relevance of literature in a post-war Kabbalistic context: literature mixes up categories of good and evil, continually repeating the question of meaning without ever arriving at a final black and white conclusion. With this novel, Potok challenges the idea of literature as a secular art form, which is part of the intention of my thesis.

To give a brief summary of the narrative plotline, the novel depicts the lives of Gershon Loran and Arthur Leiden as they attend a non-Orthodox Jewish seminary in New York and are subsequently coerced into becoming army chaplains in Korea.<sup>537</sup> Arthur's family belongs to the intellectual elite of America, his father helped Oppenheimer build the atomic bomb and hence they were able to pull their son out of service. Gershon Loran, a student of Kabbalah, who lived with his aunt and uncle in a poor part of Brooklyn ever since his parents were killed in Israel, had no such luck. However, his experience as a chaplain in Korea would draw out the man he needed to become. In the third part of the novel, Gershon and Arthur visit Japan on a journey changing both of their lives.

I will discuss this novel thematically in order to demonstrate in which way Potok has used Kabbalah to shape the narrative marrying Jewish mysticism and the atomic bomb. First of all, the title, *The Book of Lights*, refers to the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, which translates as 'The Book of Splendour', an appropriate title since Potok quotes extensively from this canonical Kabbalist work. Furthermore, one of the two epigraphs Potok has chosen is a short excerpt from the Zohar. The second one is a quote from Einstein, who in fact plays a small role in the novel. These epigraphs indicate two of the overarching themes of the novel: Kabbalah and physics.

To aid the understanding of my analysis, I will begin by introducing the main Kabbalist texts that are cited and referred to throughout the novel. Potok heavily draws upon a group of texts called *Hekhalot* or *Merkavah* literature, meaning 'palace' and 'glorious throned chariot' respectively. This corpus was written and redacted in the first centuries

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<sup>537</sup> One had to become a chaplain if one wanted to stay in the seminary where Gershon and Arthur were studying for their rabbinate.

C.E.<sup>538</sup> and describes the heavenly ascent (or descent) of the mystic, the *yored merkavah*,<sup>539</sup> through the divine palaces, culminating in a vision of God's throne located in the seventh palace of the seventh heaven.<sup>540</sup> The symbol of the divine chariot is derived from Ezekiel chapters one and ten, which goes back to the sixth century BCE.<sup>541</sup> Another important text in this literature, chronologically placed towards the end, is the Third Book of Enoch, which describes God's 'residence' or *Shekhinah* (presence) on the throne.<sup>542</sup> The *Shekhinah* used to reside in the world, but was exiled either through the breaking of the *sefirot* (which is called *shevira*) or the destruction of the Temple – depending on the theological paradigm. In the Third Book of Enoch, the human mystic, whilst on his heavenly journey, is transformed into the angel Metatron and once enthroned next to the *Shekhinah* he is able to see what is hidden from human perception.<sup>543</sup> Apart from heavenly journeys, the adjuration of angels forms an important motif; its goal is to draw down the angel Sar-Torah (or Sohar-Torah) who teaches the practitioner the secrets of the Torah.<sup>544</sup> God's presence on the throne is most clearly and physically described in the group of texts called the *Shi'ur Qomah*,<sup>545</sup> where the reader is given graphic details of the divine figure's limbs.<sup>546</sup> Despite the esoteric nature of these texts, they are not as peripheral to exoteric, mainstream Judaism as one might suspect. Rachel Elior notes that the Levitical temple culture formed a major inspiration for *Hekhalot* literature, informing both its language and its liturgical sections.<sup>547</sup>

Potok also cites and borrows themes from Kabbalah's seminal work the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, which was written in thirteenth century Castille.<sup>548</sup> The composer or redactor is most likely Moses de Leon. The *Zohar* is a large collection of books which integrates *Hekhalot*,

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<sup>538</sup> According to Scholem, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries (*Origins of the Kabbalah*, 19), according to Wolfson, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries ("Jewish mysticism: a philosophical overview", 395). Hekhalot scholar Rachel Elior admits that the dating could be anywhere from the 2<sup>nd</sup> till the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century ("Merkabah Mysticism: A Critical Review", 235).

<sup>539</sup> Literally: one who descends to the chariot. Peter Schäfer. *The Hidden and the Manifest God*. Trans: Aubrey Pomerance. New York: State University of New York Press, 1992, 2.

<sup>540</sup> Elliot R. Wolfson "Jewish mysticism: a philosophical overview." *Routledge History of World Philosophies Volume 2* (1997) 393. Scholem argues that this divine realm of the throne is comparable to the *pleroma* in Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism and Hermetism. This explains Scholem's assumptions on the Gnostic origins of Kabbalah. Indeed, a heavenly journey that springs to mind when examining the *Hekhalot* texts is the *Corpus Hermeticum* from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>541</sup> Wolfson 393.

<sup>542</sup> Schäfer 127.

<sup>543</sup> Wolfson 397.

<sup>544</sup> James R. Davila. "Exploring the Mystical Background of the Dead Sea Scrolls." *The Oxford Handbook of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. (2010): 435.

<sup>545</sup> Wolfson 397.

<sup>546</sup> Wolfson 398.

<sup>547</sup> Rachel Elior. "From Earthy Temple to Heavenly Shrines: Prayer and Sacred Song in the Hekhalot Literature and Its Relations to Temple Tradition." *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 4.3: 224.

<sup>548</sup> Another work that is ascribed to a second century rabbi, another case of pseudoepigraphy.

proto-Kabbalist and Kabbalist literature, most notably the *Sefer ha-Bahir* ('The Book of Brightness') and the *Sefer Yetzirah* ('The Book of Creation'), combining Jewish theosophy and mythological symbolism. It presents itself as a mystical Midrash which provides symbolical interpretations of the Bible. Gershom Scholem comments "the Torah is conceived as a vast *corpus symbolicum* representative of that hidden life in God which the theory of the *sefirot* attempts to describe."<sup>549</sup> The framework of the various esoteric treatises is a narrative which comprises the experiences and spiritual adventures of a group of sages whose leaders are Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai and his son, Rabbi Eleazar.<sup>550</sup> Any subject imaginable is included in this huge collection of texts, not only a discussion on the *merkavah* and the *sefirot* but historical events, the phases of human life, the rituals of the Jewish Sabbath, and the festivals are all integrated into a vast picture<sup>551</sup>. Joseph Dan observes, "Everything is a metaphor for everything else. All this is presented as a secret message, a heavenly revelation to ancient sages, using conventional, authoritative methodologies"<sup>552</sup>. For centuries the book remained an eminent text, ranked on par with the Bible and the Talmud and in the eighteenth century the text would become crucial to the Hasidic movement. Rabbi Phineas of Koretz, a Hasidic Tzaddik (died 1791), would praise and thank God that he had not been born in a time before the *Zohar*, "for the *Zohar* helped me to remain a Jew."<sup>553</sup>

### 3.2 Analysis

Keeping this in mind I will now begin my analysis of *The Book of Lights*. One of the tropes Potok uses from the beginning of the novel is the idea that God can be discovered in the details. As Gershon's Kabbalah teacher, Jacob Keter, told his students: "Pay attention to details; tiny details in a work can give a light to a large darkness, to our understanding of the meaning of that work and its location in place and time. *Der Liebe Gott Lebt im Detail*. The beloved God can be found in minute details."<sup>554</sup> When one pays close attention to the details of *The Book of Lights*, the central theme of light becomes apparent. Every part of the plot, every landscape, every description is infused with light, both natural and artificial: the

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<sup>549</sup> Scholem 209.

<sup>550</sup> Joseph Dan. *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006, 31.

<sup>551</sup> Dan 33.

<sup>552</sup> Dan 33-34.

<sup>553</sup> Original: "denn der Zohar hot mich derhalten bei Jiddishkeit," Scholem 157.

<sup>554</sup> Chaim Potok. *The Book of Lights*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1981, 92.

morning sun shining upon pigeons, thin shafts of sunlight breaking through the trees, the light of a lamp on Arthur's hair, the pale beam of a flickering flashlight, the jewelled light of the stars, flickering fluorescents, the snow described as frozen bits of cold dead light, light 'caught' by ruts and bumps of asphalt, diffused sunlight on lacquered wood in a Korean chapel, Arthur's face lit up by uncontainable joy, the scattered lights of a city and the death light of the atomic bomb, seen even by a blind girl. The world Potok portrays is broken, yet dispersed with light; in fact it is a modern description of how a Kabbalist would view creation: the shells (*kelipot*)<sup>555</sup> of the broken vessels (the *sefirot*) form this material world capturing the holy sparks. The founder of Lubavitch Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady wrote in his seminal work, the *Tanya*, that there are four different *kelipot*, three completely unclean *kelipot* and the *kelipot nogah* which is an intermediate category between the unclean *kelipot* and the holy.<sup>556</sup> On this level light is intermingled with the shell and can be redeemed by man. These sparks of light also dwell in the Jewish soul, as Zalman explains: "It is written, *In Thy behalf my hearth hath said, 'Seek ye My face (panai)'* (Ps. 27:8). [This may be interpreted to mean] 'Seek the inwardness (*penemiut*) of the heart.' ... [This inwardness] is, rather, an aspect of the illumination of the Supreme Chokhmah, which transcends Binah and Da'at<sup>557</sup>, and in which is vested and concealed the actual light of God..."<sup>558</sup> This spark of divinity, the *Shekinah*, exists in every Jewish soul.<sup>559</sup> Yet in *The Book of Lights* not all of the light appears divine, the death light of the atomic bomb is an uncomfortable problem asking questions concerning the inner divinity of man and the goodness of God. Hence it is the relation between the divine light from the broken *sefirot* and the death light of the atomic bomb that Potok makes a study of in the *Book of Lights*. The two main characters, Gershon and Arthur reflect this; Gershon is a student of Kabbalah whereas Arthur is the son of a physicist who worked with Oppenheimer on the atomic bomb. Arthur's father, making the connection, asked Gershon "We have a mutual interest in light then, don't we?"<sup>560</sup> To which Arthur's mother, an art-historian specialised in Japanese art, replied "Very different sorts of light."<sup>561</sup>

That is not the only time the study of physics and Kabbalah are directly compared, in

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<sup>555</sup> Hard, evil shell.

<sup>556</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liady. *Tanya*, "Likkutei Amarim", chapter 7, quoted in Norman Lamm. *The Religious Thought of Hasidim*. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1999, 329.

<sup>557</sup> R. Shneur Zalman reverted back to the pre-Lurianic view of the sefirotic tree identifying the highest three sefirot as Chokmah, Binah, Da'at (as opposed to Lurianic Keter, Chokmah, Binah). Chabad is an acronym for Chokmah (wisdom), Binah (understanding) and Da'at (knowledge).

<sup>558</sup> Shneur Zalman of Liady. *Tanya*, „Iggeret ha-Kodesh“, chapter 4, quoted in Lamm 518-519.

<sup>559</sup> Lamm 520-521.

<sup>560</sup> Chaim Potok. *The Book of Lights*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1981, 72.

<sup>561</sup> Potok 72.

one of his classes, Keter asked his students whether they could find a relation between the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the elements of physics and chemistry. The connection is that Kabbalists believe the universe was created through the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (and the ten *sefirot*) as described in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (the Book of Creation).<sup>562</sup> Hasidic scholar Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polennoye reiterates this, “everything in nature (*ma’aseh bereshit*), whether small or large, was created through the letters of the ‘231 gates’, as is well known from the [*Sefer Yetzirah*].”<sup>563</sup> The number 231 refers to ‘a combination of letters’ of the Ten Utterances,<sup>564</sup> forming a mystical parallel to the 118 chemical elements.

Keter had wanted to become a physicist, until one day he had a vision “that science in our century would lead to death,”<sup>565</sup> a premonition of the atomic bomb. Keter concluded, “And so I decided instead to explore the demonic that leads to life, rather than the demonic that leads to death.”<sup>566</sup> Aptly, ‘Keter’ is the first *sefira* of the sefirotic system (according to the Lurianic model) and means ‘Crown’. It is associated with light because of its proximity to the *Ein-sof*, the hidden, transcendent divine source, the source of light that flows through the *sefirot*. Since it was Keter who introduced Gershon to the light of Kabbalah, in Gershon’s mind he is closely connected to this light – as I will discuss further towards the end of this chapter.

Yet, nothing is black and white: light is not only a symbol of Kabbalist thought, of God, a source of life, but also a force of destruction, causing inferno where the atomic bomb explodes. One could argue that natural light made by God (such as the sun and the stars) is good, whereas man-made light (the fluorescent lights hurting Arthur’s eyes, the Atomic bomb) is evil, but one summer whilst receiving military training, Gershon was burned so severely, he blistered and was in pain for days,<sup>567</sup> evidently even God-made light can be dangerous and harmful. I would reason that the duality of natural light indicates the quality of evil, which according to Lurianic Kabbalah, God has always possessed: *Din* or *Gevurah*,

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<sup>562</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah* 1.1. Trans. Isidor Kalisch and Knut Stenring Book Tree, 2006, 14. The *Sefer Yetzirah* has been dated anywhere from the 3<sup>rd</sup> till 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. depending on whether one dates the final redaction or the earliest parts of the text.

<sup>563</sup> Yaakov Yosef of Polennoye, *Toledot Yaakov Yosef to Aharei* quoted in Lamm 244.

<sup>564</sup> The explanation is given by Lamm in the footnotes of page 244: the nine times in Genesis when ‘God said’ and the initial ‘in the beginning God created’, the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet can be arranged in two-lettered variations yielding 462 permutations (22x21). Of these, half are the exact reverse of the other half, hence there are 231 two-letter combinations in direct order and the same number in reverse.

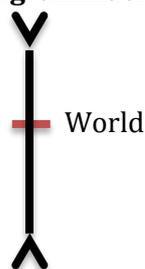
<sup>565</sup> Potok 126.

<sup>566</sup> Potok 126.

<sup>567</sup> Potok 61.

severe judgement is one of the ten *sefirot* signifying God's dark or evil side. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady explains in the *Tanya*<sup>568</sup> that God possesses two fundamental qualities, *Chesed* (loving-kindness) and *Gevurah* (strength or severe judgement), these are represented by the two major names of God: the Tetragrammaton, the holy ineffable YHVH ('the Lord'), and Elohim ('God'). The Tetragrammaton represents the quality of *Chesed*, infusing and sustaining all of creation.<sup>569</sup> This can be regarded as the divine light flowing from the *Ein-Sof*<sup>570</sup> into infinity, but if this light flowed infinitely in all directions, nothing would exist apart from God. Therefore there is a divine counteremotion which curbs and limits the light, *Gevurah*, represented by Elohim, allowing creation, space and time to exist. This curbing of the light is referred to as *tzimtzum*, God contracts in order to make space for the world; a concept first taught by Isaac Luria.<sup>571</sup> Through *tzimtzum* the light of the *Ein-Sof* is clothed in the quality of *Malkuth* ('kingdom' or 'kingship'), the last *sefirot* in the *sefirotic* tree.

#### Tetragrammaton (*Chesed*)



#### Elohim (*Gevurah*)

This ambiguity inherent to Kabbalah is a second key theme: Gershon is uncomfortable with any type of certainty and struggles to make clear decisions throughout the novel. Gershon's father warned him when he was little, "yes, it's a beautiful world. But you must learn to make smart choices or it will hurt you."<sup>572</sup> It was a wrong decision that killed Gershon's parents. They were visiting Tel Aviv and had been warned the streets were dangerous, but they decided to go out anyway, "they made a poor choice and were killed,"<sup>573</sup> caught in crossfire between Jews and Arabs. Gershon's fear of making unambiguous decisions prevents him from truly feeling passionate about anything, whether it his studies

<sup>568</sup> *Sha'ar ha-Yihud v'eha-Emunah* chapter 7.

<sup>569</sup> R. Shneur Zalman, *Tanya*, "Sha'ar ha-Yihud v'eha-Emunah", chapter 7 quoted in Lamm 10.

<sup>570</sup> The concealed eternal source of God prior to his manifestation.

<sup>571</sup> Lamm 7

<sup>572</sup> Potok 4.

<sup>573</sup> Potok 4.

or his long-term girlfriend Karen.<sup>574</sup> Keter told Gershon he lacks *éntheos*, “the feeling of possession by the divine. There is no fire burning in you.”<sup>575</sup> Yet, Gershon has seen what fire, a third predominant theme, can do. Gershon grew up in a poor neighbourhood in Brooklyn where the sound of fire engines echoed nightly as buildings went up in smoke. In his own building, “something had gone awry from the very beginning,”<sup>576</sup> a reference to the ‘first sin’:<sup>577</sup> the furnace was defective “and tended to die when it was most needed.”<sup>578</sup> The janitor was absent; hence Gershon’s uncle was often forced to light the furnace early in the morning. He also collected the rent for “the owner no one ever saw,”<sup>579</sup> according to Will Soll a reference to the absence of God.<sup>580</sup> Fire had scared Gershon ever since he was little.

When I was a kid I used to be afraid our apartment house would burn down. For some reason I had the notion that my uncle might one morning shovel too much coal into the furnace and set the whole place on fire. In school, whenever I heard fire engines, I always thought that it was our house burning and that I would go back and turn the corner and see the place a smoking ruin.<sup>581</sup>

In short, fire, whether burning a house down or burning inside of you, leading to poor decisions, can have catastrophic consequences.

Only when Gershon lived in a country destroyed by war, in the midst of the rubble caused by poor choices, he learned how to decide.

In the weeks that followed he made a number of choices. This was during the period of time when in the outside world Eisenhower decided again to run for the presidency, Syrian anti-aircraft fire brought down an Israeli

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<sup>574</sup> A typical Potok-woman, highly intelligent and described as wearing modest, loose-fitting clothes and no make-up, like most of Potok’s female characters. Also, technically Gershon tells Karen she is the only thing he cares about, but the reader knows that’s a lie.

<sup>575</sup> Potok 19.

<sup>576</sup> Potok 3.

<sup>577</sup> ‘The Fall’ is a Christian concept introduced by Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Judaism would refer to Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge as ‘the first sin’, but it does not have the same implications.

<sup>578</sup> Potok 3.

<sup>579</sup> Potok 3.

<sup>580</sup> Will Soll. "Chaim Potok's" Book of Lights": Reappropriating Kabbalah in the Nuclear Age." *Religion & Literature* 21.1 (1989): 117.

<sup>581</sup> Potok 37.

plane, a cold wave in Europe killed 919 people, four Swedish jets flew into a hill, and New York City was buried in a monstrous blizzard.<sup>582</sup>

Gershon realised that whether or not he made decisions, terrible things would happen nonetheless. Therefore he chose, he chose to keep his 'goy' assistant Roger Tat, he chose to ignore his fear and set up a schedule of services in a dangerous, difficult to reach area of Korea and he did not request to be transferred to safe, comfortable Seoul, but to remain with his battalion, even if he did not know why. Slowly, in Korea, Gershon changed, "in ways mysterious to him others were seeing in him what he could not see in himself: a strength he knew he did not have, a certainty he knew he was far from possessing."<sup>583</sup> Slowly, Gershon developed *éntheos*.

Not only the world is broken, but Gershon is broken. Every time people break away from him – when his parents passed away, his cousin died, when his high school friend who had convinced him to enter the seminary with him left him to go to Columbia and many years later when he was forced to move to Korea, leaving Arthur behind – he is overcome by a "swamping sense of abandonment."<sup>584</sup> In Korea, after having been transferred against his will to a different division (retribution for having made the decision to stand up for his battalion) he felt overwhelmed once again by the disconnectedness of the shards of the broken shells: "too many abandonments. Too much pain and the feeling of the breaking apart of things."<sup>585</sup> Gershon personally recognised and felt the consequences of *shevira*.<sup>586</sup> Yet in the utterly broken world of Korea, Gershon learned to overcome his inability to act instead of remain passive. After he broke down and rebuilt himself, "he sensed he had conquered something inside himself. He did not know what it was, but he was certain it lay vanquished."<sup>587</sup>

Gershon's last name is Loran, a navigating instrument developed in WWII.<sup>588</sup> This is relevant since when Arthur arrived in Korea for their visit to Japan, Gershon had finally found the constancy to live up to his last name and navigate Arthur through Japan. Arthur's last name is Leiden, German for 'to suffer',<sup>589</sup> representing his immense guilt over the

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<sup>582</sup> Potok 159.

<sup>583</sup> Potok 382.

<sup>584</sup> Potok 198.

<sup>585</sup> Potok 108.

<sup>586</sup> The breaking of the *sefirotic* vessels.

<sup>587</sup> Potok 217.

<sup>588</sup> "'The art of steering' is a biblical synonym for 'wisdom' (Prov. 1:5)", Soll 123.

<sup>589</sup> And the name of one of the most famous Dutch universities, although Potok may have been unaware of this. It is appropriate considering Arthur comes from a highly educated family, belonging to America's intellectual elite.

consequences of the actions of his father, the man who had helped to create the atomic bomb. Arthur, unlike Gershon, is possessed by a great passion: to see Japan, more specifically: to see Kyoto, the city his mother had helped to save by having it taken off the list of possible A-Bomb targets, and Hiroshima, the city his father had helped destroy. Once in Japan, Arthur fell in love, “clear and palpable love...like a morning sun.”<sup>590</sup> It is ironic that the only time Arthur displayed love is in the country that had been ‘the enemy’ and had suffered indirectly from the hands of his father, another paradox carefully constructed by Potok signifying the paradoxical nature of the world.

Not only Arthur, but Gershon was moved by the beauty of Japan and like Potok, who had been an army chaplain visiting Japan himself,<sup>591</sup> Gershon felt that “he was being taught the loveliness of God’s world in a pagan land.”<sup>592</sup> Suddenly, Gershon was made to question the relevance of Judaism, travelling in a world that is completely unaware of the Jewish people and their God, as Judaism is not one of the major religions in Asia. Before his visit with Arthur, Gershon visited Tokyo with a Christian friend, John, a fellow chaplain. Here, he saw a man praying in a temple, he wore a hat and he had a long white beard, as he prayed he swayed back and forth, in his hands a prayer book. Based on the description, the man could have been an Orthodox Jew from Gershon’s synagogue and this is what Gershon thought as he asked, “Do you think our God<sup>593</sup> is listening to him, John?” “I don’t know chappy, I never thought of it.” “Neither did I until now. If He’s not listening, why not? If He is listening, then – well, what are *we* all about, John?”<sup>594</sup> The text indicates that Gershon’s faith is not excluded from his nagging uncertainty. Part of Japan’s beauty was how it appeared to have maintained the unity between man and nature, “How they fused together nature and man! All one flow of world. No separations.”<sup>595</sup> As a result, Gershon recognised God as a panentheistic<sup>596</sup> power in the nature around him. At the Kegan Falls, a splendid roaring waterfall, Gershon had been so moved; his lips had formed words without him being aware of which words. The next day, he had remembered that moment whilst reading from the

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<sup>590</sup> Potok 333.

<sup>591</sup> Gershon’s recognition of God’s beauty in a pagan land and realizing Judaism’s insignificance in Asia is really Potok’s experience. “In an ironic way I began to really discover... the beauty of God’s world through paganism... I discovered another paradox. I had been brought up to believe that Judaism made a fundamental difference in the world and I ended up in a world in which Judaism meant nothing.” Chaim Potok in an interview with S. Lilian Kremer, “An Interview with Chaim Potok” in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed. Daniel Walden. University of Press of Mississippi. Jackson, 2001, 37.

<sup>592</sup> Potok 263.

<sup>593</sup> The use of the word ‘our’ is interesting, as it indicated that despite the differences between Judaism and Christianity, Gershon believes they worship the same God (not including Jesus Christ).

<sup>594</sup> Potok 262.

<sup>595</sup> Potok 338-339.

<sup>596</sup> The belief that God is present in nature.

*Zohar* commenting on Exodus 20:14 “And all the people perceived the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the voice of the horn, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled, and stood afar off.” To Gershon “sound and sight had yielded a single vivid representation of power and beauty; it had lifted him from himself;”<sup>597</sup> God’s voice had become *visible* in the landscape around him. Hasidic philosophy largely sees God as panentheistic as well: all is within God and God is within all.<sup>598</sup> Yet the idea of the transcendence of God was never abandoned.<sup>599</sup> Rabbi Zalman clarifies that God relates to the world in two ways: *memallei kol almin* (He who fills the world) and *sovev kol almin* (He who surrounds the world). *Memallei kol almin* specifies the divine illumination which is drawn into all of creation through the Ten Utterances. Thus the word of the Lord is en clothed within each category (human, animal, vegetable, mineral) and they each receive their own degree of vitality.<sup>600</sup> Conversely, *sovev kol almin* signifies the divine illumination which encompasses from above.<sup>601</sup> This makes sense when taking into consideration the *sefirotic* tree which allows God’s divine light to flow from the hidden transcendent *Ein-Sof* through the ten *sefirot* emanating from force into form manifesting itself in *Malkut*. Ironically, it is in Japan that Gershon recognises this fundamental Hasidic philosophy.

Potok connects the Jews and the Japanese through their suffering during Gershon and Arthur’s next visit to Japan. In Hiroshima, Arthur, consumed with the feeling “to say or do something” to redeem, to repair, to atone for his father’s decision, recited the Kaddish, the sacred public affirmation of God, in front of the monument for the atomic bomb. Reciting the Kaddish for non-Jewish departed souls is inappropriate in an Orthodox Jewish context, but Gershon who found Arthur praying near the monument, could not help himself but respond and say ‘Amen’, as “without a listener’s response the Kaddish was meaningless; the response was the soul of the Kaddish, its living centre.”<sup>602</sup> That afternoon, Gershon read again from the *Zohar*,

‘Rabbi Yoshi then discoursed on the verse: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and weeping, Rachel weeping for her children because they are not’. We have learned that on the day when the Sanctuary on earth was laid waste and Israel went into captivity with millstones around their necks and

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<sup>597</sup> Potok 262.

<sup>598</sup> This differentiates from pantheism, God **is** everything.

<sup>599</sup> Lamm 5.

<sup>600</sup> R. Shneur Zalman of Liady ‘Likkutei Torah to Re’eh, s.v. ani le-dodi, 33a-b quoted by Lamm 33.

<sup>601</sup> *Memallei kol almin* is symbolized by the Torah, providing nourishment for the soul. *Sovev kol almin* is symbolized by the *mitzvot* providing garments for the soul.

<sup>602</sup> Potok 352.

their hands bound behind them, the Community of Israel was banished from the house of her Husband to follow them; and when She came down She said: 'I will go in front and weep for my home and my children and my Husband.' When She came down and saw her home devastated and the blood of the saints spilled in its midst and the holy shrine and temple burnt, She lifted up her voice, and the higher and lower angels trembled, and the voice ascended to the place where the King dwelt, and the King was minded to turn the world into chaos again. Thereupon many armies and hosts went down to meet her, but She would not accept consolation. Hence it is written, 'voice is heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children because they are not'; or, as we should rather translate, 'He is not' referring to the Holy King who had gone aloft and was not in their midst.'

The text speaks of the Jewish people, but since Gershon read this excerpt in a city that had been 'laid waste', its houses devastated, the blood of its people spilled, its holy shrines and temples burned, Gershon and Arthur understood how its content can easily be applied to the suffering of the Japanese. The last sentence indicates both people feel as though they have been deserted by God. This extract is also a classical example of Rabbinic (and Kabbalist) theology: the *Shekinah*, God's divine presence on earth was forced into exile as a consequence of *shevira* and wanders the earth longing for her Husband, the King.<sup>603</sup>

*Tikkun*<sup>604</sup> is a powerful motive in *The Book of Lights* and that is how Arthur's recital of the Kaddish is to be interpreted. Not only Arthur, but his creator, Potok, feels guilt about the atomic bomb and the need for repair, it is his voice we hear in Einstein's speech: "[The atomic bomb] ended a terrible war. But also it stained us forever. All that cannot be undone. It is damage human beings have done to themselves that cannot be repaired... Perhaps it was a choice between evils. Perhaps it is the nature of all serious acts of choosing. Nevertheless, I feel we are all stained."<sup>605</sup> This speech is connected to a statement Arthur's father made further on in the novel: "We were searching for a bomb to kill the Germans before the Germans killed us. Simple, yes? Good and evil. They used to post the daily casualty lists from the war fronts on our bulletin boards. We were happy slave

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<sup>603</sup> Rabbi Shneur Zalman offers a different explanation in the *Tanya*: the *Shekinah* used to dwell in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Temple was destroyed and the Jews expelled from Israel, the *Shekinah* went into exile with them. The only way to the *Shekirah* a home is to build sanctuary by engaging in the study of Torah. (*Tanya*, "Likkutei Amarim, chapter 34, quoted in Lamm 223-224).

<sup>604</sup> Repair of the world, restoring it to primordial harmony.

<sup>605</sup> Potok 113-114.

labourers to our own dream. Invent the bomb, punish the Germans, save American boys, end the war. A benevolent apocalypse.”<sup>606</sup> However, once again the situation is a lot more ambiguous. Soll remarks that the “the bomb is created to produce a ‘righteous judgment’, but becomes a judgment gone completely out of control.”<sup>607</sup> Once more this echoes the Lurianic explanation of evil, God always contained evil (*Din/Gevurah* severe judgement (‘Elohim’)) and goodness (*Rahamin/Chesed*, compassion (YHWH))<sup>608</sup>, but as a consequence of *tzimtzum*<sup>609</sup> *Din* was no longer subsumed under *Rahamin*.<sup>610</sup> The creation and dropping of the atomic bomb is a repetition of the original breaking of the vessels (*shevira*).

One of the defining statements of the novel is a sentence Arthur wrote in a letter to his parents, just before he died in a plane crash: “all the world, it seems is a greyish sea of ambiguity, and we must learn to navigate in it or be drowned.”<sup>611</sup> Gershon recognised this ambiguity that appears inherent to creation. It is the reason he loves Kabbalah but is disinclined towards Talmud. His Talmud teacher is Nathan Malkuson,<sup>612</sup> Gershon occasionally experiences visions and in one of them Malkuson described the study of Talmud as “smooth, clear, coherent, with a depth that was three-dimensional and lovely. Not the murkiness of Kabbalah with its bizarre flights of fancy...”<sup>613</sup> As between their disciplines, there is friction between Malkuson and Keter. Keter remarked, “Talmud tells us how the Jew acts; Kabbalah tells us how Judaism feels, how it sees the world.”<sup>614</sup> These statements sum up Gershon’s sentiments towards both disciplines. Yet, Malkuson admitted to Keter in one of Gershon’s subsequent visions that they have much in common “you too seek to reconcile contradictions, restore fragments. We are both of the rational world.”<sup>615</sup> In his research Keter restores fragments of mystical texts, which can be read as some form of textual *tikkun*: rebuilding a text, discovering its initial meaning, returning the text to its

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<sup>606</sup> Potok 247.

<sup>607</sup> Soll 122.

<sup>608</sup> This is strongly reminiscent of the theories of Jacob Boehme (c 1775-1624), who despite being a simple shoemaker and had never read Kabbalah came to the same conclusion.

<sup>609</sup> The voluntary self-contraction of God in order to make space for the world, this caused the *sefirotic* vessels to shatter.

<sup>610</sup> Ibn Tabul, *Kerem Hayah*. Cf. id., *Gavhei Shamayim*, British Museum MS Or. 10627, fols. 78b-79a, quoted in Lawrence Fine. *Physician of the soul, healer of the cosmos: Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship*. Stanford UP, 2003: 126-127. It is unsurprising that evil (*Din*) is feminine, while goodness (*Rahamin*) is male. In Kabbalah the feminine is usually associated with evil, or the potential for evil, whereas the male is associated with compassion and goodness. Perhaps this explains why in Judaism the woman should be submissive to the male.

<sup>611</sup> Potok 378.

<sup>612</sup> His last name is similar to the last *sefira*, ‘*Malkut*’, meaning ‘kingdom’ or ‘kingship’; as a Talmud scholar he is concerned with the laws of the kingdom.

<sup>613</sup> Potok 20

<sup>614</sup> Potok 24.

<sup>615</sup> Potok 28.

original, perfect state.

Gershon does not wish to abandon the legal tradition of the Talmud. However, as Soll observes “Gershon expresses dissatisfaction with what happens when this tradition is not humanized and vitalized by the irrational.”<sup>616</sup> When confronted with the “smug superiority of those certain of salvation”<sup>617</sup> in a wealthy, Ultra-Orthodox Jewish soldier in Korea – who appeals to Gershon’s ‘tribal loyalty’ in order to get what he wants, – Gershon “ponders the similarity of his Yeshiva Talmud study and army regulations.”<sup>618</sup> As his ‘goy’ assistant brought him his mail, administrative newsletters of information for the division; Gershon felt the emptiness of the words in front of him. “Words, dead words, built of dead letters.” He had felt the same way before his test for ordination at his Yeshiva: “a freighted joylessness; everything known, the mapped road of reading marked and memorized, no lights, no lights, not bursts of surprises, no ascent from the choreographed landscape of texts and commentaries.”<sup>619</sup> Conversely, Kabbalah expresses the ambiguity and uncertainty of the world.

[These texts are] really records of religious imagination... God originally as sacred emptiness<sup>620</sup>; ascents to God that are filled with danger<sup>621</sup>, as if you were going through an angelic minefield; creation as a vast error; the world broken and dense with evil; everything a bewildering puzzle... I especially like the ambiguities... Yes. Ambiguities. You can’t pin most of it down the way you can a passage of Talmud. I can live with ambiguity, I think, better than I can with certainty. Doubt is all that’s left to us.”<sup>622</sup>

This passage does not only express Gershon’s feelings of doubt after the personal losses he has suffered, but it also indicates how Gershon perceives Jews to feel after the *Shoah*.

Since this chapter is on Hasidic thought, it would be interesting to compare Gershon’s views (who is not a Hasidic Jew) to the Hasidic response to the *Shoah*. This subject has not been researched widely, but a key scholar emerging in the field is Pesach Schindler. Schindler argues that the Hasidic response is in part based on the aforementioned Lurianic concept of evil, however, instead of observing evil as the furthest

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<sup>616</sup> Will Soll. "Chaim Potok's "Book of Lights": Reappropriating Kabbalah in the Nuclear Age." *Religion & Literature* 21.1 (1989): 124.

<sup>617</sup> Potok 155.

<sup>618</sup> Soll 124.

<sup>619</sup> Potok 156.

<sup>620</sup> This refers to the Ein-Sof, Ein, also spelled ‘Ayin’ meaning ‘nothing’.

<sup>621</sup> As described in the *Hekhalot* literature.

<sup>622</sup> Potok 308.

removed from God's light, the Hasidim conclude there is no real distinction between good and evil.

Evil is conceived as either a perversion or a 'stepstool' of good, rooted in the divine. 'It is merely the lowest rung of the absolute good.' This produces a distinctly quietistic strain in Hasidic doctrine where suffering becomes irrelevant, and the subjective distinctions between God as Judge and God as a source of compassion dissolve into the supreme religious experience where all that is, is God, and all that is God is good."<sup>623</sup>

Evil is also seen as a disguise for good<sup>624</sup> (though this argument may be difficult to maintain in the light of the *Shoah*), furthermore, evil and suffering have to be embraced to achieve a *yihud* ('unification') which would nullify *Din* and transform it into *Rahamim*.<sup>625</sup> God may be seen as suffering with man (the *Shekinah* is suffering with the Jews in their shared exile), this realisation should remove suffering because one would know to be near God during times of sorrow.<sup>626</sup> The question remains how one is to remove evil from this world. According to the Lurianic model<sup>627</sup> redemption is only achieved by performing the *mitzvot* and praying with *kavvanah*.<sup>628</sup> This enables the trapped sparks of divine light that are inside the *kelipot* to ascend.<sup>629</sup> The divine light sustains the evil of the lower realms, because nothing can live without the light of God, including evil. When all the sparks have been redeemed, evil will have no source of light and cease to exist. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady comments on this giving a slightly different explanation: the divine sparks are elevated through the study of Torah. "Every Israelite is able to reveal secrets of wisdom, i.e. to reveal and to discover a new insight, whether in *Halakhah* or in *Aggadah*, in the revealed or in the mystic parts of the Torah, according to the level of his soul's root..."<sup>630</sup> Every word of the Torah, especially on of *Halakhah*, is a spark of the *Shekinah*, i.e. the word of God.<sup>631</sup> This means that studying the Torah is performing *tikkun*.<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>623</sup> Schindler 13.

<sup>624</sup> See Baal Shem Tov, as cited in *Pitgamin Kaddishin*, Jerusalem: Lewin-Epstein, n.d., 3a. quoted in Lamm 460-463.

<sup>625</sup> See R. Yakov Yosef of Polennoye, *Toledot Yaakov Yosef to Ekev*, sec 2. quoted in Lamm 470-471.

<sup>626</sup> See R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Tanya*, "Iggeret ha-Kodesh", chapter 22a quoted in Lamm 472.

<sup>627</sup> Luria partly bases this theory on *Zohar* Vol. 3: *Idra Zuta* 294a-b.

<sup>628</sup> Holy intent.

<sup>629</sup> Shaul Magid. *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008 19. The parallels to Gnosticism are quite overt in Lurianic Kabbalah.

<sup>630</sup> Zalman *Tanya*, „Iggeret ha-Kodesh, chapter 26 quoted in Lamm 230.

<sup>631</sup> Lamm 230-231.

<sup>632</sup> Chabad Hasidism is more intellectualised than other Hasidic schools of thought.

It is extraordinary how some Hasidic rebbes managed to maintain their notions of suffering and evil in the direst circumstances. Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro who served his Hasidim in the Warsaw Ghetto from 1940 till 1943<sup>633</sup> taught Hasidic doctrine and dealt with the problems of evil and suffering in his lectures delivered in the ghetto before its destruction.<sup>634</sup> In his talks on the weekly Torah portions he approached evil and suffering in different ways, four of these are:

1. Whatever emanates from God must be just.
2. Suffering is a form of *chesed nistar* (hidden love) and by means of prayer and study it can be transformed into *chesed nigleh* (open love)
3. Suffering leads to an appreciation for non-suffering
4. Suffering should be accepted joyously, for the *Shekinah* suffers with the Jew in his calamity, and it is incumbent upon the Jew to pray and repent so that the *Shekinah* will be relieved of its pain.<sup>635</sup>

It seems rather incomprehensible how someone might still see suffering in such a positive God-ordained way, but perhaps when the worst possible has happened, clinging on to ones beliefs is the only way to cope, to continue to have hope and faith.

According to Schindler, the Hasidic responses to the *Shoah* reveal four major themes: 'justification', 'man's relationship to God during crisis', 'questioning the Holocaust events' and 'the purpose and consequences of suffering'<sup>636</sup>. The first two themes and the last theme focus on acceptance, but the third theme questions God's actions: "Is it possible that the purpose of suffering is to strengthen faith? What meaning has suffering if faith is destroyed in the process? Is the purpose of the Holocaust to bring about repentance? Is repentance indeed possible under Holocaust conditions?"<sup>637</sup> In short, even though most Hasidic rebbes (the few who survived) believed that the suffering brought about by the *Shoah* should be accepted, there is room for doubt, as expressed by Gershon.

The sense that our world is fundamentally broken is reinforced throughout the novel. Watching the first snow fall one December morning, Gershon watched the "tiny particles drifting downward and slowly, lazily revolving through the opalescent light of the winter day. As he watched, the snow thickened and a wind blew the particles in white

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<sup>633</sup> He was murdered in Poland in 1943.

<sup>634</sup> Lamm 459.

<sup>635</sup> Lamm 459.

<sup>636</sup> Schindler 19.

<sup>637</sup> Schindler 25.

waves.”<sup>638</sup> His right hand was on the cold window sill tingling vaguely and Gershon recalled that that was the hand with which he had shaken Arthur’s father and Harry Truman’s hand: “he had respectfully shaken the hands of the man who had helped to build and the man who had given the order to drop the first atomic bomb. He felt cold and weary with a strange and looming dread.”<sup>639</sup> Again, he came to sense “the disconnectedness of things. Nothing seemed truly a part of anything.”<sup>640</sup> To Gershon the world appeared as “separate bits and pieces floating and whirling. All seemed to him discrete entities. Particles. Bits of cold dead light”<sup>641</sup>. This light is not described as ‘holy sparks’ of ‘divine light’, it is cold and dead, indicating the separation rather than the unity of things. It also brings to mind the particles of the universe as studied by physics, a cold, scientific outlook. Furthermore, Marovitz states that this passage suggests “the floating ashes from [the] atomic holocaust (at Hiroshima in particular)”<sup>642</sup>. It is interesting that Marovitz should mention the ashes of the ‘atomic Holocaust’, for at the same time, ashes are reminiscent of the death camps. Although these two kinds of destruction are not essentially connected, the ashes, which were a product of both are a symbol of the utter destruction that was the result of the death camps and the nuking of Hiroshima (and Nagasaki). This connects the suffering of the Jews and the Japanese: both have faced complete annihilation.

Conversely, in Korea the world had not only been broken, it kept breaking constantly: “people who always walked with great care, placing their feet on tested patched of land, now trod on earth that blew them to pieces. Enlisted men were blown up near the huts of whores. One day a child was brought to the battalion, a girl with an arm gone. There was no war, but people kept crashing into shards of the world that broke their lives.”<sup>643</sup> The shards of the vessels, the hard evil *kelipot*, kept breaking people’s lives, preventing them from rebuilding their lives.

Yet, in that brokenness, the grittiness of reality, there is beauty. As Potok said in an interview with Elaine Kauvar, “The central metaphor in *The Book of Lights* is the mystery and the awe that some of us sense in the grittiness of reality.”<sup>644</sup> I would argue that this central metaphor is based upon Hasidic philosophy. Schindler comments, “one of the major creative contributions of Hasidism, and underlying the substrata of Hasidic thought, was

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<sup>638</sup> Potok 77.

<sup>639</sup> Potok 77.

<sup>640</sup> Potok 78.

<sup>641</sup> Potok 78.

<sup>642</sup> Marovitz 78.

<sup>643</sup> Potok 170.

<sup>644</sup> Potok in an interview with Elaine M. Kauvar. “An Interview with Chaim Potok” in *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Ed. Daniel Walden. University of Press of Mississippi. Jackson, 2001, 68.

[the] *Avodah Begashmiut*. This concept directed man to serve and experience God *within* the mundane, the imperfect, and even the immoral realm forever; there will the divine spark be found.”<sup>645</sup> Lamm agrees adding a critical note, “this worship through corporeality implies not the sacralisation of the material world itself but (contrary to Buber) ‘binding oneself’ to the divine immanence, the spiritual element, within the natural order. It is thus not Nature, but the spirituality that inheres in it that is the focus of *Avodah Begashmiut*.”<sup>646</sup> The Besht himself appears to have introduced the idea of the ‘vitality’ (the indwelling presence of God) in everyday objects, which one benefits from when eating, drinking or wearing said items.<sup>647</sup> By doing this the fallen sparks present in the object are repaired, allowing them to return to God. The Besht reasons, “for the strength that he acquired from that garment or meal or whatever, he now uses to serve God, thus causing their repair [*tikkun*].”<sup>648</sup> Rabbi Zalman expanded upon this idea in the *Tanya*, referring to the *kelipot nogah* in his explanation: vitality from wine and beef originating in the *kelipot nogah* can be distilled and ascent to God (like a burnt offering or a sacrifice) if used to serve the spiritual, which means to fulfil the *mitzvah* of the enjoyment of the Shabbat and the holy days.<sup>649</sup> Given special care and attention any ordinary action can lead to redemption even amidst the bleakness of everyday reality.

The idea of beauty coming from broken, gritty reality is echoed several times in the novel, for instance in the following passage set in Korea: “This twilight armistice, this no-war and no-peace, was a special hell of paperwork, boredom, low morale, a pervasive sense of things having broken down irreparably. In the midst of this he had somehow completed the chapel, and wherever he travelled now they had heard of the chapel and cheered him for it.”<sup>650</sup> Within the ambiguity of the war situation, a war which had broken Korea, perhaps, irreparably, in the hell of paperwork (associated with that dead sense of legality referred to earlier) Gershon had managed to build a chapel and create a thing of beauty. One of the defining passages of the novel has a similar theme. The initial spark of interest in Kabbalah, which lay buried under the embers for years and years, was a moment of *gnosis* which Gershon experienced when he was sixteen. It was the night the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Gershon had climbed up to the roof to think. There, on the

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<sup>645</sup> Pesach Schindler. *Hasidic Responses to the Holocaust in the Light of Hasidic Thought*. Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1990, 13.

<sup>646</sup> Lamm 324.

<sup>647</sup> The Baal Shem Tov, *Zava'at ha-Rivash*, no 109 quoted in Lamm 325.

<sup>648</sup> Lamm 325.

<sup>649</sup> Lamm 329.

<sup>650</sup> Potok 166.

cracked and reeking tar paper, “near a cluster of pipes, vents, and bubblelike protrusions,”<sup>651</sup> alluding to the broken, ugly world, he had witnessed a bitch whelping her pups.

He had never seen life born before. He knew the street talk about pricks and cunts, had read the porno books passed around in school yards, seen the photographs of various positions. But the birth of these pups stirred him in a strange way. He saw them emerge from the organ that he and his friends would talk about with leers on the street. But here on this roof the bitch and her body seemed filled with a singular *radiance*. He felt all caught up in the life of heaven and earth, in the mystery of creation, in the pain and inexhaustible glory of this single moment.<sup>652</sup>

In that moment, much like Jacob Boehme seeing the beam of light in his pewter dish, Gershon recognised the holy sparks in the *kelipot*. The memory never left him, in fact he felt that if that moment ever returned, “he would be changed in some extraordinary way”<sup>653</sup> and “he began to wait for it”<sup>654</sup>. Towards the end of the novel, in a hotel room in Japan, Gershon’s passion for Kabbalah is finally expressed and understood:<sup>655</sup> “Sometimes when I read those [Kabbalistic] texts I am on the roof of that building again”.<sup>656</sup>

There were two moments in which Gershon had similar experiences, now guided by Kabbalah. The first time was after he had been transferred to a different battalion in Korea and he had felt that “swamping sense of abandonment”<sup>657</sup>. The next day he dressed and prayed the morning prayers. His roommate, a Catholic chaplain, sensed “the small sacred space Gershon carved out around him as he prayed”<sup>658</sup>. John left for breakfast and Gershon continued praying,

The words hovered before him, the letters shimmered. He could climb the letters, yes, and enter the sixth firmament and wander for the remainder of his time here through the Chamber of Healing and the Chamber of Building and on through the million lights in the Chamber of Glory, where

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<sup>651</sup> Potok 6.

<sup>652</sup> Potok 6-7.

<sup>653</sup> Potok 7.

<sup>654</sup> Potok 7.

<sup>655</sup> Part of the passage quoted above, page 308.

<sup>656</sup> Potok 308.

<sup>657</sup> Potok 198.

<sup>658</sup> Potok 199.

sat the most perfect of beings on the most exquisite of thrones. And what of those here? To hell with them! What was he to Korea and Korea to him? To hell with all of them!

Gershon, whilst he climbed the sacred letters of the Hebrew alphabet (a reference to a special meditation technique used by Luria in order to attain *devekut*<sup>659</sup>) described the *Hekhalot*, the heavenly palaces the mystic wanders through in order to find the *Merkavah*, the Chariot, as depicted in *Hekhalot* literature. Gershon is one of the few chosen mystics who, with the grace of God, is allowed to witness the *Merkavah* on which is seated “the most perfect of beings”, the *Shekinah*. Essentially, Potok writes that Gershon saw God. Potok is unclear as to whether Gershon’s vision is to be taken as a real event or as the product of his imagination, then again, in many esoteric movements imagination is considered a creative force in its own right. Either way, Gershon had to choose: to stay in the heavenly palaces or to return to earth.

He opened his eyes. The room – desks, chairs, beds, bookcase – leaped into view. He saw on Meron’s desk the envelope with the letter he had written the night before, and he took it down with him to breakfast. “Thank you, chaplain. Appreciate it. A lot on my mind this morning,” said Meron. “Where are you going? Join us.” “I’ll be back in a minute. I’ve got to teach the mess sergeant how to feed a card-carrying Jew.”<sup>660</sup>

Gershon chose not to shirk his responsibilities as a rabbi, as a Jew, the duties he has towards ‘the Kingdom’, but to return and help his people in the brokenness of reality.

Gershon’s experience corresponds not only with Kabbalist, but with (a simplified) Hasidic doctrine on how to reach *devekut*. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polennoye teaches that “serving God through Torah study and prayer consists of attaching yourself to the letters of [the Hebrew alphabet] which are called *nefesh* (‘soul’) as is stated in the Zohar and in the *Tikkunim*... By drawing vitality from Above into the letters, man is able to elevate them to their roots, and thereby can elevate his own soul, by way of his attachment to the letter. That is the true purpose of learning Torah [or praying] for its own sake (*lishmah*)...”<sup>661</sup> Similarly, Zalman states in the *Tanya*, “every individual spark of the Shekinah, inherent in the soul of every Jew, emerges temporarily from its exile and captivity during the momentary life –

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<sup>659</sup> See Louis Jacobs. *Hasidic prayer*. London: Taylor & Francis, 1993, 74-78.

<sup>660</sup> Potok 199-200.

<sup>661</sup> R. Yaakov Yosef of Polennoye, *Ben Porat Yosef to Vayera*, s.v. u-neva’er pasuk quoted in Lamm 183.

meaning prayer. The service of the heart [emerges] from the depths of the heart, i.e., from the aspect of the innermost point.”<sup>662</sup> Through prayer one descends into the heart, which is where the *Shekinah* dwells in the Jewish soul. Presumably, this is what Gershon did during his prayers.

At the end of the novel, Gershon’s “waiting” finally appears to come to an end. One night, there was a fire in Gershon’s neighbourhood and the sweltering heat kept Gershon awake, until suddenly, he found himself up on the roof again. The night was black as ink, “no stars, no pinkish glow of cloud cover.”<sup>663</sup> It was the hour the ‘dark presence’ would visit him. “Passages moved through him, and he felt the gentle pull of the words.”<sup>664</sup> Not Gershon, but the words from the passages of Kabbalistic texts pulled him and he began the first part of his journey. “He began the ascent, slowly, through the darkness of this sky to the darkness of the next and on to darkneses beyond all imagining. This was no surprise, all was now sealed to him.”<sup>665</sup> After having navigated every darkness beyond imagination, Gershon returned to the roof, where he felt a messenger from the other side, the *Sitra Achra*, waiting for him. This messenger had tormented him many times during his life; in the blackest hours of the night he would disturb him asking four AM questions, trying to convince Gershon that there is nothing but death. Now, he had joined Gershon on the roof and as Gershon descended further into himself, the messenger joined him.

Then he began a slow and determined descent into himself. This he did with the fiercest of concentration, moving with great care past fears and angers, past faces and shadows, deep and deeper still toward the silent, central, secret point of himself. And he sensed as he moved that someone had brushed by him on the roof and had entered him, and now they were together.<sup>666</sup>

Potok describes the descent of the mystic into the *Hekhalot*, heavenly palaces, in order to behold the *Merkavah*, as a psychological process. As Gershon moved on towards his centre, he found the messenger beside him whispering in his silken voice. “Good morning, Gershon. Yes, this darkness is morning... What can you find in here that you did not find out there?”<sup>667</sup> Yet, at his core, Gershon found another voice “and the voice had a face, and it was the face of

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<sup>662</sup> R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, *Tanya*, “Iggeret ha-Kodesh”, chapter 4 quoted in Lamm 520-521.

<sup>663</sup> Potok 385.

<sup>664</sup> Potok 385.

<sup>665</sup> Potok 385-386.

<sup>666</sup> Potok 386.

<sup>667</sup> Potok 386.

Arthur Leiden, and the voice was saying very softly, There must be something we can say or do, dear Gershon. There can't be nothing."<sup>668</sup> From within his centre, Gershon heard distant words "echoing from far beyond where he was now, words in Aramaic, and the words made the journey, and he listened, and the words were the words of the Kaddish, the sacred public affirmation of God."<sup>669</sup> Gershon waited for someone or something to answer, the voice of Arthur said 'Amen' but Gershon maintained, "No... others must answer. This is for you, for us, for all the broken ones of our generation and the ones to come... so we can somehow mend the world or hold it together and then have it broken again in new acts of creation."<sup>670</sup> It seems Gershon was waiting for a divine inner force to answer the 'Amen', for God to affirm his own existence. "All his years and dreams he now brought to this waiting... And from darkness came the halted and agitated response of the silken voice. 'Amen.'"<sup>671</sup> The messenger from the *Sitra Achra*, who had attempted to persuade Gershon that there is nothing, no God, no light, no meaning to anything, only darkness and death, affirmed the existence of God. Marovitz notes that

This climactic 'Amen' is of special consequence to Gershon at the time because only a few days earlier he had visited Malkuson, who upon learning of Arthur's death, expressly admitted that nothing beyond ourselves may exist: "We have always acknowledged that as a possibility. What is important is that if indeed there is nothing, then we should be prepared to make something out of the only thing we have left to us – ourselves.

Not only the Talmud scholar, but Keter had shared the same worries earlier on in the novel. "I cannot come to terms with our mortality. ... It is all one vast obscurity, one vast hopelessness. A veil. We know nothing, we can hope for nothing. Nothing."<sup>672</sup> Taken together the remarks of Gershon's two mentors, with their rational and purely academic approach to Judaism, represent an intellectualised version of Judaism, devoid of the spiritual element that pulses at the core of and emanates through the Torah, the Talmud, and the Kabbalah alike.<sup>673</sup> Yet this 'nothing' they both fear could be taken as the sacred nothing 'Ayin' from which God himself begins, another Kabbalist ambiguity.

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<sup>668</sup> Potok 386.

<sup>669</sup> Potok 386.

<sup>670</sup> Potok 387.

<sup>671</sup> Potok 387.

<sup>672</sup> Potok 126.

<sup>673</sup> Marovitz 80.

Apart from his mystical journeys, there are more reasons to believe that Gershon is not only a student of Kabbalah, but a mystic himself. Fire is a recurring motif in Kabbalah and despite Gershon's fear of fire, he was also attracted to it. In the beginning of the novel, when Gershon was first studying Kabbalah, he read a mystical text for Keter's class, "he felt attracted to the frequent images of fire. 'When God decided to create the world, He first produced a flame of a scintillating lamp. He blew spark against spark, causing darkness and fire, and produced from the recesses of the abyss a certain drop which He joined with the flame, and from the two he created the world...'"<sup>674</sup> This is an abstract from the Zohar I 15a.<sup>675</sup> However, the motif of fire can also be found in the *Hekhalot* literature: *Enoch 3*, also known as *Sefer Hekhalot*, which as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter recounts the story of the heavenly traveller Enoch who is transformed into Metatron.<sup>676</sup> Metatron is described as being made out of fire,

'When the Holy One, blessed be He, took me to serve the Throne of Glory and the wheels of the Chariot and the needs of the Divine Presence, my flesh was immediately changed into a fiery flame and my sinews to a burning flame and my bones to fiery coals and the skin of my eyelids to the radiance of lightning and my eyes to a torch and the hair on my head to a fire and flame, and all my organs to wings of burning fire, and my body to a smouldering flame...'<sup>677</sup>

Marovitz argues that Gershon identifies with Metatron,<sup>678</sup> despite the fact that up until the end of the novel, he did not possess fire himself. It is most likely the fear of his ultimate destiny that made Gershon dread fire. Indeed, his heavenly journey in Korea, when he saw God on the *Merkavah*, parallels Enoch's journey, after which Gershon was ready to accept his role as divine messenger. Shortly after this journey Gershon had felt he had "conquered something inside himself."<sup>103</sup> Apart from having learned to make decisions and bear the consequences, this heavenly journey made Gershon understand why it was his duty to act instead of remain passive. This does not mean, however that Gershon lost his preference for ambiguity. In Japan Gershon read to Arthur from the Zohar, "The nearer a thing comes to the realm of the hidden and undisclosed, the less it is made mention of... On the same principle,

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<sup>674</sup> Potok 15.

<sup>675</sup> *The Zohar, Vol I*. Trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon. London: The Soncino Press, 1931, 63.

<sup>676</sup> Gershom Scholem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken Books, 1946, 67.

<sup>677</sup> Joseph Dan quoting the *Enoch 3* in *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism*. Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1993, 119.

<sup>678</sup> Marovitz 67.

the Divine Name Sublime, the essence of the hidden and unrevealed, is never uttered... Thus it is throughout the Torah, which contains two sides: a disclosed and an undisclosed. And these two aspects are found in all things, both in this world and in the upper world.” This idea is echoed in the *Tanya*, which also refers to the revealed and the mystic parts of the Torah.<sup>679</sup> Gershon would for ever recognise and appreciate the ambiguous nature of the world; the difference is that he learned to act and make decisions nonetheless.

Another way in which his mystical nature is highlighted throughout the novel is the powerful visions Gershon experiences. Especially visions of Keter and Malkuson are frequent, but he also has visions of his aunt and uncle<sup>680</sup>, or of Israel.<sup>681</sup> The most remarkable of these visions is of Jacob Keter. One night, outside of his Jamesway in Korea, he saw “clearly outlined in the darkness, the tall, thin, trim figure of Jakob Keter. He stared and shivered and closed his eyes. When he opened his eyes, Keter was gone. But there remained in the space he had occupied the faintest of luminosities, a dim pulsing bluish light, like the light of a distant cluster of suns. It faded slowly before Gershon's astonished eyes”<sup>682</sup> This resonates the Lurianic concept of *tzimtzum*, God withdrawing into Himself in order to make space for the world, but in the dark space leaving behind the light of the ten *sefirot*, again reinforcing the *sefirotic* implications of Keter's last name.

Soll suggests a further overarching theme in this novel, that of Genesis and especially the initial verses,<sup>683</sup> represented by the motifs of light, water, wind and birds. I have already discussed the motif of light, which is certainly the most pronounced of the four, but it is true that water in its various shapes and forms is often mentioned as well: the Hudson, along which Gershon and Karen liked to take frequent walks, Gershon's parents left him to go to Israel by boat and that is his last memory of them, surrounded by water, the aforementioned Kegan waterfalls in Japan, the Japanese harbour described as a “watery delta-world with off-shore islands, slow moving vessels,”<sup>684</sup> the last word also bringing to mind the *sefirot*. Wind is mentioned less frequently, but Keter appears to take notice of the wind on more than one occasion.

Birds feature repeatedly in descriptions, especially combined with the motif of light or water: pigeons perched on a ledge in the late morning sun, sea gulls circling overhead, birds flying over the river. According to Soll “They can symbolize our aspiration for

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<sup>679</sup> Zalman *Tanya*, „Iggeret ha-Kodesh, chapter 26 quoted in Lamm 230.

<sup>680</sup> Potok 149.

<sup>681</sup> Potok 69.

<sup>682</sup> Potok 182.

<sup>683</sup> Soll 115.

<sup>684</sup> Potok 314.

freedom.”<sup>685</sup> One afternoon whilst sitting under an autumnal tree, Gershon heard a few pigeons cooing nearby, instantly, a passage from the *Zohar* came to mind explaining that birds refer to “Raphael who is charged to heal the earth, and through whom the earth is healed so as to furnish an abode for man, whom also he heals of his maladies.”<sup>686</sup> Birds are equated with healing and in that sense birds are a symbol of *tikkun*, like the dove bringing an olive branch to Noah on his ark (Genesis 8:11), indicating God had withdrawn the flood and desired to make peace with his people. Equally, the absence of birds is taken note of, such as the masses of birds that were killed during the atomic bomb experiments in Los Alamos<sup>687</sup> and the absence of birds in the harbour of Hong Kong.<sup>688</sup> When birds are killed or absent, it is in indication that there is something wrong, there is a sickness. Soll remarks astutely that,

the effect of this and much other descriptive material in Potok's novel is to render the world as a strange, wonderful and terrifying place. By evoking this ethos, and by concentrating on imagery that has strong connections to the biblical creation account, Potok opens doors between the upper and the lower worlds. These doors are perhaps only slightly ajar and soon close, yet the shafts of light and power that slant through them alert us to an ever-present connection.<sup>689</sup>

‘As above, so below’ is an essential Kabbalist concept.<sup>690</sup> The *Zohar* states, “Come and see: the world above and the world below are perfectly balanced.”<sup>691</sup> Zalman expands on this idea in the *Tanya*,

Although God is beyond time and space, He is nevertheless also found below, in time and space; i.e. He unites with his attribute of *Malkhut*, from which space and time are derived and come into existence... His essence and being, which is called by the name of *Ein-Sof*, [it] completely fills the whole earth temporally and spatially. In the heavens above and on the earth below and in all four directions, all is equally permeated with the

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<sup>685</sup> Soll 115-116.

<sup>686</sup> Potok 74.

<sup>687</sup> Potok 295.

<sup>688</sup> Potok 294.

<sup>689</sup> Soll 116.

<sup>690</sup> Though it can be found in other esoteric doctrines as well, most notably in the Emerald Tablet (origins unknown, first mentioned in a book dated 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) a key text in European alchemy. This indicates again that Kabbalah is firmly part of the wider European esoteric tradition.

<sup>691</sup> *The Zohar Volume 2*, Trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon. London: The Soncino Press, 1931, 176b.

light of the Ein-Sof, since He is on earth below exactly as in the heavens above.<sup>692</sup>

Potok attempts to illustrate this concept in *The Book of Lights*.

The theme of Genesis could also be relevant in the post-war context; perhaps Potok considers how to make a new beginning, how to start creation again, whether the birth of a new post-Holocaust, post-atomic warfare world is possible. This resonates Gershon's words after he inwardly recited the Kaddish on the roof, he needed the 'Amen' from someone outside of himself, "so we can somehow mend the world or hold it together and then have it broken again in new acts of creation"<sup>693</sup>.

Related to this theme of Genesis is the paradisiac imagery at the beginning and at the end of the novel in Keter's apartments. His flat in New York is filled with flowers and plants, "philodendron, bleeding heart, purple passion, wander jew, jade,"<sup>694</sup> which according to Soll signify "mystical knowledge"<sup>695</sup> and on the last page when Gershon has joined Keter in Israel to study Kabbalah with him, Gershon sat "in the light and shade amid the yellow jasmine and purple bougainvillea and the red and white roses of Jacob Keter's Jerusalem garden, waiting."<sup>696</sup> After the trials and tribulations of Gershon's stay in Korea and Arthur's death, paradise appears restored. At last *Malkut* and *Keter* are united as Gershon sets out to study with 'the Crown' in 'the Kingdom'.

### 3.3 Conclusion

*The Book of Lights* exemplifies how Kabbalah and Hasidic philosophy are still relevant to contemporary post-war society. The novel demonstrates how these ideas can still be applied to explain the confusion of post-modern existence. Secular experiences can be understood through mystical, religious texts and secular fiction can convey religious and esoteric ideas. Potok skilfully weaves concepts and fragments from *the Zohar* and *Hekhalot* literature into

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<sup>692</sup> Zalman, *Tanya*, "Sha'ar ha-Yihud v'ha-Emunah", chapter 7 quoted in Lamm 13.

<sup>693</sup> Potok 387.

<sup>694</sup> Potok 90.

<sup>695</sup> Soll 125.

<sup>696</sup> Potok 389.

his text which questions the idea of literary fiction belonging to the secular domain in the first place. In fact, his book proves that fiction can be a source of mysticism in its own right. In a sense, *The Book of Lights* is reminiscent of the Hasidic tales discussed in chapter one, which serve various purposes: to entertain, to comfort, to teach and to question. A delightful fictional narrative can still hold valuable didactic information. Potok, who is a rabbi as well as a literary author, cannot provide solid, definite answers which tell us why suffering and evil exist or what the meaning of our lives is, but he can offer interpretations that allow for ambiguity, stirring his reader's thoughts, opening their minds to new possibilities. In fact, both Kabbalah and Hasidic philosophy teach us that ambiguity is as much part of the secular as of the religious experience. Hasidism tells you to not only study religious texts written thousands of years ago, but to look at your own life and see how you can make a difference within this limited, mundane context. Literature has a similar purpose, taking large, abstract ideas and seeing how they might work in particular, everyday situations, in the lives of ordinary people. *The Book of Lights* is a crucial work in my thesis as it truly shows how much Hasidic Judaism and secular literature really have in common, despite appearing thousands of miles apart.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Contemporary Female Perspectives on Hasidic Judaism**

#### **4.1 Introduction: Foundational Problems**

In this fourth chapter I shall examine two novels that explore contemporary female perspectives on Hasidic Judaism. As I have explained in previous chapters, the male and female experience of Hasidism is vastly different due to the highly patriarchal nature of ultra-Orthodox Judaism which insists on distinct gender roles basing itself on Jewish theology. The primary focus will be the depiction of Hasidic women and the ways in which the female Hasidic body is used as a site of struggle for control over sexuality and female identity. However, I must note that Abraham and Brown each offer only one depiction or interpretation of Hasidic women and their views are not universal.

In order to understand the position of women in Hasidic Judaism, I will first give a brief introduction. One of the leading scholars who has re-examined Jewish theology from a feminist perspective is Judith Plaskow. In *Standing Again at Sinai* she argues that "the need

for a feminist Judaism begins with hearing silence. It begins with noting the absence of women's history and experiences as shaping forces in the Jewish tradition."<sup>697</sup> In Biblical narratives women's shadows are often assumed in the gaps of the text. As a woman it is easier to read the Bible from a male perspective than question how the foundational stories have been distorted by our absence.<sup>698</sup> Women are Jews, but do not define Jewishness as their experiences are not recorded and what is recorded formulates their experiences in male terms.<sup>699</sup> God, the Torah and Israel are all constructed according to male views. Plaskow states, "Torah is revelation as men perceive it, the story of Israel told from their standpoint, the law unfolded according to their needs."<sup>700</sup> Israel is the male collectivity, because despite the fact that Jacob had a daughter, his sons became the twelve tribes.<sup>701</sup> God's description corresponds to male imagery; he is a father, king and warrior: "God as husband and father of Israel demands obedience and monogamous love. He repays faithfulness with mercy and loving-kindness, but punished waywardness, just as the wayward daughter can be stoned at her father's door (Deut. 22:21)."<sup>702</sup> Israel, the bride or harlot depending on her behaviour, must submit to her male God. Yet Israel is male in the self-perception of the community, creating a homo-erotic relationship to God. The relationship between God and women is only implied in Genesis, assumed by the text, because women are not perceived as normative Jews<sup>703</sup>. Most of the laws that pertain to women only attempt to control a woman's sexuality, handle her 'abnormal' biology or explain who 'owns' her virginity (her father, her betrothed or her husband).<sup>704</sup> According to Plaskow, women are either 'Other' or invisible:

Entry into the covenant at Sinai is the root experience of Judaism, the central event that established the Jewish people. Given the importance of this event, there can be no verse in the Torah more disturbing to the feminist than Moses' warning to his people in Exodus 19:15, 'Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.' For here, at the very moment that the Jewish people stands at Sinai ready to receive to covenant – not now the covenant with individual patriarchs but with the people as a whole – at the very moment

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<sup>697</sup> Judith Plaskow. *Standing Again at Sinai*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990, 1.

<sup>698</sup> Plaskow 1.

<sup>699</sup> Plaskow 3.

<sup>700</sup> Plaskow 3.

<sup>701</sup> Plaskow 3.

<sup>702</sup> Plaskow 7.

<sup>703</sup> Plaskow 6.

<sup>704</sup> Plaskow 4.

when Israel stands trembling waiting for God's presence to descend upon the mountain, Moses addresses the community only as men. The specific issue at stake is ritual impurity: An emission of semen renders both a man and his female partner temporarily unfit to approach the sacred (Lev. 15:16-18). But Moses does not say 'Men and women do not go near each other'. At the central moment of Jewish history, women are invisible.<sup>705</sup>

This is the foundation of Judaism which will help to explain Hasidic attitudes. Moreover, it may explain, at least in part, why and how Judaism became so arch-patriarchal.

Susan Jacobowitz discusses Jewish patriarchal attitudes summing up the views of Aviva Cantor and Blu Greenberg. Aviva Cantor's theory states that one of the reasons why Jewish patriarchy oppressed women so vehemently was because of the emasculation of the Jewish male. "As minority populations residing within host countries that were often hostile, Jewish men were often rendered incapable of defending their communities and families and forced into positions of inferiority and subservience... Having been powerless, Jewish men imposed the same kinds of conditions upon women, rendering them 'object' and 'subject.'"<sup>706</sup> Hence Jewish women suffered from a double oppression, one that came from without and one that came from within. This inequality between men and women is felt acutely. Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg proposes that the problem may lie with the fact that according to Halachic law women are exempt from observing the 'fixed-time' *mitzvot* (considered unpractical due to childcare obligations). Women are also not considered part of the *minyan*.<sup>707</sup> Tractate Kiddushin 29a in the Nashim states that "All affirmative precepts limited to time, men are liable and women are exempt."<sup>708</sup> Greenberg notes that "the phrase subtly suggests that, in the eyes of the *Halakhah*, women shared with slaves and children a status lower than the adult free male. Not lost on women, surely, was the realization that individual slaves and male children could grow up or out of these ascribed categories, but the entire class of women forever retained a status of 'exempt,' 'released,' 'unaccountable.'"<sup>709</sup> Rabbi David Abudraham ("The Abarbanel"), a well-respected 13<sup>th</sup> century commentator explains that a woman's primary role is to serve her husband

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<sup>705</sup> Plaskow 25.

<sup>706</sup> Susan Jacobowitz. "'Hardly There Even When She Wasn't Lost': Orthodox Daughters and the 'Mind-Body Problem' in Contemporary Jewish American Fiction." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 22.3 (2004) 83.

<sup>707</sup> Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981) quoted by Jacobowitz 75.

<sup>708</sup> *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, Kiddushin 29a, 89. <http://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Kiddushin.pdf>

<sup>709</sup> Greenberg quoted by Jacobowitz 75-76.

(subjugated to fulfil his needs) and take care of his children; if she were to both serve God and her husband, there may be room for conflict.<sup>710</sup> In return her husband will keep all the time-bound commandments. A woman serves God through her husband, a man serves God directly.

A particularly bleak view is expressed by Jacobowitz herself as she suggests that a Jewish woman is merely a body, a vessel for future Jewish generations and more importantly Jewish men.<sup>711</sup> This is especially the case in Hasidic Judaism, “some have suggested that there are no Hasidic women, only mothers, wives and daughters of Hasids.”<sup>712</sup> This judgement sounds rather harsh, but when carefully observing the duties and qualities an ultra-Orthodox woman is supposed<sup>713</sup> to possess, one is forced to conclude that she is never valued as an individual or allowed to be her own person. A Hasidic girl is born to be a good daughter; protecting her modesty, *‘tsnius’* to preserve herself for her future husband is one of her main duties, as is helping her mother with household chores and raising her brothers and sisters. As soon as she marries, she must be a good, obedient wife and a selfless mother, willing to have as many children as God gives her even if those pregnancies destroy her health. A Hasidic woman’s life is entirely dedicated to other people, not a minute of it belongs to herself, because isolated from her relations (or obligations) to her family she has no value, she does not really exist or has the right to exist.

Apart from running the household, a Hasidic woman is also supposed to negotiate the secular world. She forms a buffer between the Hasidic world of men filled with Torah study and the evil *goyische* world filled with temptations from the *sitra achra*. By requiring women to fulfil any necessary participation in the *goyische* world (by having jobs to provide an income, doing groceries, learning English etc.) Hasidic men are protected from it. Ayala Fader reiterates this point; female engagement with the secular world “enables them to create a sheltered cave for boys and men who study Torah and later also join the workforce.”<sup>714</sup> Yet paradoxically the streets in the neighbourhoods occupied by the Hasidim “belong to men”<sup>715</sup> and women have to be invisible in order not to provoke lustful thoughts in Hasidic males. That could mean crossing the street in order to avoid walking on the same

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<sup>710</sup> David ben Joseph Abudraham. *Sefer Abudraham*. Warsaw, 1877,18.

<http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=26840&pgnum=18>

<sup>711</sup> Jacobowitz 77.

<sup>712</sup> Jacobowitz 78.

<sup>713</sup> “Suppose” is rather a crucial verb here because practise might differ from theory. Please not the use of “suppose” and “supposed” in the following paragraphs.

<sup>714</sup> Ayala Fader. *Mitzvah girls: Bringing up the next generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn*. Princeton University Press, 2009, 2.

<sup>715</sup> Fader 150.

pavement or avoiding leaving home all together when men are on their way to pray in the synagogue. This illustrates the point raised above: everything a Hasidic woman is supposed to do is in service of Hasidic men and their children; it is never for her own sake.

Hasidic rabbis do not even acknowledge this problem; they will only quote Talmud, failing to engage with the very notion of female emancipation. Consequently women continue to be invisible within their own community. Instead, it might be worthwhile to consider how Orthodox rabbis have responded to Jewish theological clashes with feminism, even if their beliefs are somewhat removed from those of Hasidic men. The Modern Orthodox rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a student of Soloveitchik, wrote a chapter on this subject in the book *Orthodoxy Confronts Modernity*. Riskin argues that although continuity is imperative to the survival of Judaism, responding to present conditions is equally vital. “Religion, if it is to be alive and meaningful, cannot be based on continuity alone. There must always be a readiness to respond to a present challenge.”<sup>716</sup> Isolating the importance of gender equality as a concern that is only significant presently makes it seem like a temporary problem, when this issue (though unacknowledged) has always existed. Yet, of course due to the slow march of female emancipation this matter has not received the attention it is due until the last decades.

Riskin begins with an unfortunate statement, “it is clear to anyone who reads the Bible that in terms of value women are granted equal status<sup>717</sup> with men.”<sup>718</sup> It is easy to say that women have equal value if you do not define what that value is. Furthermore if this equal value does not result in equal rights and privileges, it means very little. Yet Riskin does not shy away from a more critical approach discussing the place of women in Judaism. He appears to believe the problem lies not with the Bible itself, but those who have interpreted it; biblical exegesis has predominantly been an obligation and responsibility of men. This brings forward a key issue: the question of whether women should be encouraged or even allowed to study Torah, “if women are given equal opportunity to study Torah, then eventually they will be able to take an equal place in determining the course of Torah,”<sup>719</sup> which directs the course of Judaism. The Talmudic tractate Kiddushin 29b refers to a verse of the *Shema*, “And you shall teach them to your children.”<sup>720</sup> In Hebrew the word ‘children’ is *beneikhem*, which could translate as children or as boys. The sages, men with a

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<sup>716</sup> Shlomo Riskin. “Women and Judaism: The Keys Issues” in *Orthodoxy Confronts Modernity*. Ed. Jonathan Sacks. London: Ktav Publishing House, 1991, 87.

<sup>717</sup> By which Riskin means that they were both created in God’s image.

<sup>718</sup> Riskin 89.

<sup>719</sup> Riskin 89.

<sup>720</sup> Riskin 89.

tendency for misogyny, have chosen to interpret this word as boys. Hence, girls are not obligated to study Torah, but does that mean they are not permitted to do so? There are two interpretations, in the Mishna in Sotah 20a Ben Azzai rules that “A man is under the obligation to teach his daughter Torah”<sup>721</sup> However, Rabbi Eliezer counteracts, “Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her obscenity.”<sup>722</sup> The latter opinion has been adopted as normative by *halakhah* because it is much easier to control your women if you keep them uneducated. Rishkin also takes Maimonides views into account who pronounced that “an individual may not teach his daughter Torah’ [because] ‘the majority of women do not have their minds trained for study and they will extract from words of Torah words of emptiness’.”<sup>723</sup> Maimonides admits that the problem lies with the lack of education that women receive, but this in itself he considers unproblematic. However, since female emancipation brought secular education to women, a number of rabbis have changed their minds on this issue. Rishkin mentions that R. Israel Meir Kagan and Rav Soloveitchik both argued in favour of women studying Torah; since they now receive secular education it is only correct they should be taught Torah as well. However, since this has only been a recent development, the interpretation of the Torah is still very one-sided, only taking into account the male voice. Moshe Halbertal reiterates why this is problematic.

Since Jewish culture evolved through interpretation of the canon, and authority was attached to knowledge of the Torah, this discrimination against women had far-reaching effects. The unequal distribution of knowledge deprived women of the opportunity to gain power and influence resulting from engagement with the text. Women hardly participated in shaping the culture, and their voices were unrecorded. In text-centric communities, policies of distribution and access to the text are therefore crucial.<sup>724</sup>

Rishkin and Halbertal both believe that greater gender equality will be achieved when woman are allowed to study Torah, however the real problem is that women, even when allowed to study Talmud are not considered equal authorities. For one, women can still not be ordained as rabbis within Orthodox Judaism, their interpretations will always be

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<sup>721</sup> *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud* 20a, 65. <http://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Sotah.pdf>

<sup>722</sup> Sotah 20a.

<sup>723</sup> Riskin 90.

<sup>724</sup> Moshe Halbertal. *People of the book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*. Harvard University Press, 2009, 7.

considered secondary, as they are secondary Jews.

Riskin continues to discuss two other areas which could allow for more gender equality, namely making women eligible candidates for election in religious councils and the problem that women are not able to initiate divorce. Riskin's primary aim is to demonstrate that "Jewish law can be developed to realise the rights of women"<sup>725</sup> and one does not need to break with tradition in order to do so.

Of course there is quite a difference between Riskin's Modern Orthodox views and those of the Hasidim. Hasidic men are unapologetic about the fact that they consider themselves to be intellectually superior to women and hence own the right to submit women under their leadership. This point is illustrated by Moshe, a Hasidic man interviewed by Lisa Harris for her ethnographic study of the Hasidic family. He said the following when asked what he believed to be the main difference between men and women: "Women rule the heart, men the intellect,"<sup>726</sup> his wife nodded her head in agreement. A clear case of stereotypical retrograde misogyny: the idea that women are 'too emotional' to be considered rational creatures has always been popular amongst chauvinists.<sup>727</sup>

Riskin, Halbertal and Moshe imply another reason for Judaism's 'militant' patriarchy, Judaism strongly emphasis the intellectual, the rational, which according to Orthodox Judaism, men have a greater capacity for. That is why men make all the laws, are allowed to study Talmud (which contains these laws about both women and men) and are permitted to become scholars and individuals in their own right. Only men have the capacity for learning, analysis, deduction, reflection, critical thinking, which is esteemed so highly. Since women were deemed inept at rational thought they never stood a chance for equal treatment to begin with.

Understanding this, we can begin to examine what exactly the perspective of Hasidic women on their own condition is. Obviously there is a wide range of different views on this matter, depending on each individual woman. Some women embrace their status as priestess of the home without reservation. Sheina, Moshe's wife, appeared to derive a great deal of satisfaction from her position as a woman. "I've come to understand that, like all Jews, I'm here for a purpose... To see the beauty and holiness in everyday things. To try to elevate ordinary life. The key is in the Torah and the way to get there has been shown us in a

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<sup>725</sup> Riskin 95.

<sup>726</sup> Harris 189.

<sup>727</sup> Not only amongst Hasidim but leading scientists today this view still holds sway. Only in June this year Nobel-prize winning biochemist Tim Hunt was recorded saying that women cause problems in the lab because they cry when you criticise them.

practical way by the mitzvoth....When the Jews accepted God's challenge to follow His ways, He gave us the *mitzvoth* so that we'd know how to do it."<sup>728</sup> Sheina beautifully sums up the dual core of Hasidic Judaism: to recognise the holy spark in the everyday and to follow the Law of God devotedly. Sheina's 'every day' is her domestic life, hence she senses that her religious duty is no different from that of men, but it requires a different set of tasks. This is of course not the view all Hasidic women hold and I will discuss the more negative and critical observations below.<sup>729</sup>

#### **4.2 The Romance Reader**

In the next part of this chapter I will examine literature that has given expression to the Hasidic woman's mind presenting us with her views and experiences of the world. I have specifically chosen female authors and texts in which the protagonist is female.<sup>730</sup> Pearl Abraham's *The Romance Reader* is a sympathetic coming-of-age story of a girl who never quite fits inside her community. Part of the strength of the novel is Pearl Abraham's capability of explaining this strange world to her secular readers, a world she herself is all too familiar with. Abraham was born in a Satmar Hasidic community in Israel and lived alternately in Monsey, New York and Jerusalem from the age of five. Her father was a rabbi and like her character Rachel, she was fond of secular literature (forbidden or at least frowned upon in the Hasidic world). She was lucky to attend an Orthodox yeshiva school because the education she received was much better and more liberal (it allowed her to study English literature) than a Satmar education would have been. After secondary school she began attending Rockland Community College in secret. She found a boyfriend, who was part Jewish, and decided to follow him to the State University at Stony Brook, after which

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<sup>728</sup> Lisa Harris. *Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995, 20.

<sup>729</sup> These critical views on Hasidic Judaism may be held by a minority of women, or the majority; it is difficult to determine whether most female Hasidim are genuinely happy and proud of their assigned gender roles or not. However, it is important to keep in mind that there are many different views which each may be more or less critical. This chapter is not "the definitive views of Hasidic women on their own gender roles."

<sup>730</sup> I recognise that other novels written by the authors discussed could have been part of the thesis, such as Abraham's *The Seventh Beggar* which is informed by Nachman's stories. However, *The Seventh Beggar* features a male protagonist and thus does not fit into this chapter about the female experience of Hasidic Judaism.

she attended Hunter College and subsequently New York University where she obtained a Master of Fine Arts. Although she broke away from Hasidism during her college years, she insists she has not rejected it.<sup>731</sup> Her unique position as a former insider who has developed a critical distance from the community allowed her to write an accurate yet critical account of growing up as a Satmar teenager. It is important to note that Satmar is one of the strictest, most right-wing Hasidic sects, hence Rachel's story is quite specifically Satmar apart from also being Hasidic.

Rachel Benjamin, grows up in a suburban non-Jewish community, which is a popular holiday destination for Hasidim during the summer months but is abandoned the rest of the year.<sup>732</sup> Isolated from the Satmar community to which she belongs and envious of the endless amount of freedom non-Jews appear to enjoy, she comes to question whether she wants the life of a Hasidic wife. Since Rachel watches her mother struggle and suffer periods of depression, she may not clearly see the benefits of the life intended for her.

Rachel's father was not satisfied living with other Hasidim in Williamsburg, praying with a tzaddik like his peers, he wanted to *be* the tzaddik, hence he had to move away to establish his own synagogue. This made his wife, Tova, terribly unhappy; she never foresaw a life living in the middle of nowhere: surrounded by *goyim*. At several points during the novel she seems driven to desperation, "I want to live either in Williamsburg or Jerusalem<sup>733</sup>... I want to live around my own kind. I do not want to live where I'm always a stranger... Why do I have to be unhappy all my life, tell me? Why can't I have a little joy, like other mothers, like my mother? I don't deserve this. I work hard enough, raising seven children. Why do I have to live in hell, a burning hell?"<sup>734</sup> Her husband, Dov Ber, is unmoved by his wife's laments; he remains silent and refuses to engage with her, to either listen to her complaints or defend his position. He treats his wife as though she is invisible, her thoughts and feelings are of no consequence. He knows he will not change his mind and move to Williamsburg regardless of how lonely his wife feels. Tova knows this and the utter feeling of powerlessness actually leads her to threaten to kill herself. The gender roles dictated by Hasidic Judaism make it difficult for a woman to live a solitary life. Among her

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<sup>731</sup> Pearl Abraham to Dinitia Smith in "An Author's Hasidic Roots Become Her Inspiration." (NYTimes.com. 8/02/ 2005. Accessed 05/05/2014.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08/books/08pear.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/08/books/08pear.html?_r=0) ).

<sup>732</sup> The novel is set in 'Monhegan', but it is unclear whether this is the island Monhegan or a fictional place since no mention is made of the fact that they live on an island; even though the family takes trains and buses, they never seem to go on a ferry when they visit New York or other places, Brooklyn for instance is only a bus ride away.

<sup>733</sup> Which is where the majority of Satmar Hasidim live.

<sup>734</sup> Pearl Abraham. *The Romance Reader*. New York: Riverside Books, 1995, 99-100.

few joys and comforts is the company of other women, who are able to understand the hardship of raising seven children and dedicating yourself to running a household singlehandedly, without any help from your husband, without being allowed to have a private life or any personal ambitions. In the end Dov Ber agrees to buy his wife plane tickets to Israel so she can visit her family. Tova makes it clear that she is not just putting on a show. “If you don’t buy tickets tomorrow, I’ll hang myself. I’ll hang myself on the step from the hall to the new room. Your children will come home from school and find their mother hanging there.”<sup>735</sup> This is a terrible thing to say especially since she said it in front of her children, but it is the only threat Tova could make that seems to carry enough weight to be taken seriously. Tova has no power and cannot make any fundamental decisions about her own life, the only decision she could possibly make, the only power she has, is whether she chooses to live or die. Only by the destroying herself would she suddenly become visible as no one would be there to perform her wifely and motherly tasks, through her complete and utter absence, she would make herself noticed: suddenly there would be a Tova-shaped hole. There is a gender divide between the three oldest children, Rachel, David and Leah when they discuss their mother’s actions.

“David shakes his head, ‘She has us, and Father comes home for Shabbat. You should see how my rebbe’s wife respects her husband. She knows he’s the man in the house. He doesn’t always go home during the week either. She never raises her voice. She’s a true *eishes chayil*... Ma needs a lesson. If she respected Father more, then maybe things would be better. A good wife and mother doesn’t threaten to leave her husband and children.’ ‘If I were Ma, I wouldn’t just threaten,’ Leah says. ‘I’d stay away until Father learns his lesson.’”<sup>736</sup>

*Eishes chayil*, meaning ‘woman of valour’, is a poem that is sung at the beginning of the Shabbat to honour Jewish women in the home. It is also an important concept in Hasidic Judaism, an *eishes chayil* is the perfectly selfless, caring mother and wife; she is a martyr for her family, dedicating each minute to the physical and spiritual well-being of her husband and children. This type of (fictional) woman is praised and honoured, held up as an (impossible) standard for all Jewish women. It is clear that Rachel’s younger brother David has been thoroughly indoctrinated by Hasidic beliefs regarding a woman’s duties and

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<sup>735</sup> Abraham 101-102.

<sup>736</sup> Abraham 120.

purpose. His father is 'the man', i.e. the boss in the house and his mother is supposed to meekly submit to him, catering to his every need. By the sheer perceived 'value' of his gender he believes he can criticise his mother's actions even though he is her child.

Similarly, David believes that he can reprimand his older sister for singing, which is forbidden according to Talmudic law. He dictates, "Sha. No girls singing."<sup>737</sup> His younger brother Levi supports him, "It's a sin' Levi says, and he and David cover their ears."<sup>738</sup> As a male child David studies Talmud hence he assumes he has the right to admonish his sisters for not obeying the Law. Rachel's father is more lenient about his daughter's singing, in fact he sometimes asks her for help. "I was having a hard time with that tune.' He hums it and gets stuck again, the way he did during the service. I start him off again and sing it through past where he keeps getting stuck. He nods and hums. He's got it now."<sup>739</sup> Dov Ber does not mind his daughter's singing but knows this can only be appropriate in the privacy of their home. He comments on Rachel's gender restrictions. "If you were a boy, I'd keep you near me during services. You could help me."<sup>740</sup> This confuses Rachel, "I don't know how to answer this. I'm a girl. Should I wish I were a boy?"<sup>741</sup>

Rachel is well aware of the limitations of being a Hasidic girl due to her gender, yet her ideas about what she would like her life to resemble are still very much confined to her narrow perception of what it means to be a woman; to her it predominantly means being thin and beautiful. Rachel questions whether she wants a family but only because she believes that her body will look thinner (and hence 'better') if she does not have children. "I don't know if I want a family. I'd rather go to the store and buy sandwiches... I don't want to cook. I don't know if I want babies. That's how you look good after you're married."<sup>742</sup> In the Hasidic world, a woman's outer beauty is just as important, if not more so, as in the secular world. A man is not allowed to marry a woman without having seen her first, lest he come to resent her afterwards (Kiddushin 41a).<sup>743</sup> The Talmud thus validates the importance of outer beauty of Jewish women, while a woman may marry a man unseen because to her male attractiveness cannot be of such importance that she would come to resent him for it. Women are objectified in much the same way, compared to jewels that need to be wrapped

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<sup>737</sup> Abraham 22.

<sup>738</sup> Abraham 22. It is forbidden for women to sing because it can provoke lustful feelings in men, hence there is something perverted about a young child telling his older sister not to sing.

<sup>739</sup> Abraham 44.

<sup>740</sup> Abraham 44.

<sup>741</sup> Abraham 44.

<sup>742</sup> Abraham 16.

<sup>743</sup> "A man may not betroth a woman before he sees her, lest he [subsequently] see something repulsive in her, and she become loathsome to him." *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nashim, Kiddushin 41a, 2.* <http://halakhah.com/rst/nashim/30b%20-%20Kiddushin%2041a-82b.pdf>

up and kept hidden. This idea is based on psalm 45 line 14: "Kol kvoda bas melech pnima": all of the respect of a Jewish woman is on the inside, one would think that this psalm makes reference to a woman's inner beauty, but somehow this is taken to mean outer beauty, which needs to be kept under wraps at all times. The comparison to an object is rather astute, since women are not considered to be allowed to have any agency. Much like the Victorians, Hasidim like their unmarried women to resemble statues of the Virgin Mary; beautiful, thin, gracious, untouched, devoid of carnal desire, wrapped up from head to toe and placed on a very high pedestal. Apart from being modest, she has to be thin (an American size 6/UK size 10 verges on unacceptable), dressed up in expensive clothes, wearing heels, a full face of natural looking make-up, which will make men believe they are naturally beautiful and foreseen of plastic-surgery where necessary, all to make a woman more marketable. Yet her beauty should remain hidden and she should never attract male attention through her looks, except for she does because otherwise she will not find a *chassan*, a husband. Especially when a woman has reached the age of 18 and her family will actively be looking for a *shiduch* she needs to be seen in the most expensive, elegant clothes her family can afford, dressed up like a doll, smiling gracefully, in order for someone to notice her and say, "I know a nice young man for you." *Tzinius* is fetishized, which means that Hasidic women are sexualised in the same way as their non-Hasidic sisters. When women are not seen as individuals, as persons, but as objects, their outer beauty quickly becomes their most prominent feature. Rachel understands the catch-22 Hasidic women find themselves in: they have to be thin and yet after they are married they ought to have as many children as God intends to give them; maintaining a slim figure while always being pregnant or just recovering from pregnancy is virtually impossible. Rachel concludes that the solution is to be married but not get pregnant.

It is not exactly clear what else Rachel wants from life, but she expresses her desires most explicitly when she is dipping her toes in the sea on a family holiday. The sea gave her a sense of liberation, "When I grow up, I will live here. Alone and free, without anyone."<sup>744</sup> What Rachel wants more than anything is to live an independent life that does not require constant permission from other people. The text gives a sense of Rachel's suffocating world when Rachel plans a secret trip to the library, which involves some elaborate scheming. The library is forbidden because it contains *goyische* literature, but it is these non-Jewish novels Rachel finds so captivating. They describe a life very unlike her own, they transport her to a different place and reading becomes her most beloved pastime, despite (or in part because)

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<sup>744</sup> Abraham 85.

of the possibility of getting caught. Rachel also buys romance novels (which the title of the book refers to) from a local shop, she devours them and her ideas about romance and men are shaped through these books, which give her rather a distorted view of love and relationships.

Not only her habit of reading *goyische* literature, but her fashion choices cause conflict with her parents, who accuse her of acquiring a reputation for being 'loose'. To put this in perspective, one of the major fights Rachel has with her parents is about what kind of stockings she should wear. Rachel's stockings are not the prescribed thick, opaque coloured ones donned by most Hasidic girls, but opaque beige or taupe (black would be too sexual crossing several lines). They also do not have a seam running down the back to clearly indicate that these are stockings not her bare legs (even though the thick opaque beige makes this abundantly clear). The type with the seam is worn by the most Orthodox of Hasidic women. Rachel is called a whore for wearing seamless stockings. The matter is so important that Rachel's father goes all the way to Williamsburg and visits the principal of the Satmar girls' school to discuss the issue of his daughter's stockings with him. Then, based on the recommendations of the principal, he buys the appropriate stockings. From the outside this seems peculiar and even Rachel thinks the whole issue and how her father handled matters is ridiculous. "He went to Williamsburg to talk to a man about girls' stockings. Two men talking about what I should put on my legs."<sup>745</sup> To ultra-Orthodox men, a woman's body is a problem, it needs to be contained, controlled, regulated and covered-up. Women (lacking the necessary intellectual capacity to study Talmud) cannot be trusted to do this themselves. It is also worth to remember Jacobowitz's theory that to ultra-Orthodox Jews a woman is merely a 'body'; paradoxically, that which poses the largest problem is also the most essential.

As time passes, Rachel sees her future becoming ever narrower. At seventeen she seems to have no choice but to marry the first man suggested to her by the *shadchan*.<sup>746</sup> Hasidim are not allowed to choose their own partners, they are chosen for them by their parents with the help of a matchmaker, *shadchan*. Once a potential match, *shidduch*, has been found, the child has the opportunity to reject the proposed spouse after their first meeting, but you are only allowed a few rejections before you either have to accept or become unmarriageable. Besides, you do not know who the next candidate will be, he or she might be worse than your first proposed match. Rachel's parents are both very

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<sup>745</sup> Abraham 138.

<sup>746</sup> Matchmaker.

anxious to marry off their impossibly unchaste, rebellious daughter before she can do more damage to her (and consequently her family's) reputation. Besides, her brother David, the crown jewel of the family, cannot marry before his older sister and therefore Rachel's father wants to hurry Rachel into a marriage as soon as possible so he can direct his attention to his more worthy second child.<sup>747</sup> Rachel knows this all too well, "I'm only a daughter, and not one who will bring honour to this family. He wants to get to David. For David he can choose from the best."<sup>748</sup> A match for sixteen year old David, who is a good *yeshiva* student, is quickly found, but he is not even informed of his engagement, lest it distract him from his studies. In Hasidic Judaism, a man is not allowed to choose his partner either, although at least he will not have to obey his chosen wife once they are married.

In the meanwhile, Dov Ber's anxiety continues to grow and he appears ready to accept any man for his little 'harlot'.

'We'll have to be satisfied with whatever comes. The first that comes... The Talmud says a father has a responsibility: he must give his daughter to a scholar and to a good family. It doesn't say anything about a daughter who's given herself a reputation, a daughter who's made things impossible for her father, a daughter who's better known to strangers than to her own father.' He speaks of me the way the prophets speak of whores. As if I've walked the streets, invited men into my bed.<sup>749</sup>

This passage stresses the limitations of a woman's agency; a father *gives* his daughter to another man, wedding your daughter is like managing the sale of your property, you have a great deal of control over it. According to the Talmud (Yevamoth 107a), a father is entitled to marry off his daughter when she is a minor without her consent<sup>750</sup> or even sell her into slavery.<sup>751</sup> To the Hasid, it is a father's duty to make sure his daughter fulfils her primary purpose as a Jewish woman and marries a Jewish man. The way Dov Ber speaks to Rachel makes her feel even worse than just his property, even though Rachel is still a virgin and she

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<sup>747</sup> Children are married off according to their age, from the oldest to the youngest child. If you pass the oldest child (or any of the other children in their particular order) they will be considered much less desirable, it will seem like the reason they were not married before their sibling is because there is something wrong with them.

<sup>748</sup> Abraham 200.

<sup>749</sup> Abraham 204-206.

<sup>750</sup> *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, Yevamoth 107a, 2. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/24f%20-%20Yevomos%20-%20107a-122b.pdf>

<sup>751</sup> *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Sotah 23a, 76. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/28%20-%20Sotah%20-%202a-49b.pdf>

has not so much as touched a man; her father describes her as damaged property, beyond repair. The idea that women are the property of men is further emphasized by the fact that in the Talmud (*Seder Nashim*; Ketubot 39a-40b) rape is predominantly considered a crime of theft and a crime against a woman's reputation, which could be erased by paying a fine<sup>752</sup> to the woman's father.<sup>753</sup> His property, his daughter's hymen, has been stolen, her reputation has been compromised and hence he deserves a payment for his financial loss: his daughter's value has declined due to the fact that her hymen is broken. The value of the statutory fine is fixed (50 shekels) but the compensation for 'indignity' (causing shame) and 'blemish' (injury to the woman's reputation) depends on the woman's 'market value,'<sup>754</sup> nicely commodifying a woman's virginity.<sup>755</sup> Moreover, the rapist has to marry his victim, according to the age old notion that if you break it, you buy it.<sup>756</sup> The Mishna in Ketubot 39a says, "The [rapist] must drink out of his pot."<sup>757</sup> At least the *Gemara* allows the victim to refuse marrying her rapist,<sup>758</sup> although this might condemn her to eternal singlehood.

Rachel, conversely, sees her reputation as something that could benefit her. "There's a lot to be said for reputations. My reputation will help the *shadchan* find someone for me, not Father. How else would he know whom to bring?"<sup>759</sup> She is more concerned with finding a relatively 'liberal' husband than what people may think of her. There is also a definite double standard, because men will be forgiven if they go through a rebellious phase and it does not need to affect their marriage prospects. A Hasidic girl interviewed by Stephanie Wellen Levine comments, "Boys, you come back, you learn six months in 770 [the synagogue], and everything's great. He's great. He experimented a bit perhaps, but then everything dies down and people respect him again. Whereas the girls, her quote unquote reputation will follow her."<sup>760</sup> Men will be more likely to forgive other men, or look the other way; they can bend the rules a little for their own gender as long as the boy in question repents. Men stipulate that women should have a spotless reputation; because men are in a

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<sup>752</sup> Actually he has to pay four types of fines: the statutory fine, compensation for causing the girl to feel shame, compensation for 'blemish' (damage to the girl's reputation) and a fine for the pain caused by the rapist.

<sup>753</sup> *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*, Ketubot 39a-40b, 38-44.

<http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/25b%20-%20Kesuvos%20-%2029a-54a.pdf>

<sup>754</sup> Ketubot 40a-40b, 41-43.

<sup>755</sup> She should be considered as a "bondswoman", a slave, sold in the market place. Ketubot 40a, 42.

<sup>756</sup> In this case the fine should be paid to the victim, if she is considered to be of age (after the age of twelve years and six months). If she is underage the fine will go to her father.

<sup>757</sup> Ketubot 39a,38.

<sup>758</sup> Ketubot 39b-Ketubot 40a, 40-41.

<sup>759</sup> Abraham 206.

<sup>760</sup> Rachel quoted by Stephanie Wellen Levine in *Mystics, mavericks, and merrymakers: An intimate journey among Hasidic girls*. NYU Press, 2004, 93.

position of power they can make this demand. Furthermore, women are supposedly on a 'higher spiritual plane', hence they are held to a higher standard, therefore "boys will be boys", but girls cannot make mistakes. As men make ('interpret') all the laws, they can choose whatever is most convenient for them.

Since Rachel's body is covered nearly every second of the day (she must even get dressed in a way that prevents her being naked) and because she is always taught to feel ashamed about her body, she feels somewhat divorced from it. This could have led her, like many other female Hasidim, to ignore her body completely, but instead she wants to become closer to it. Even though Rachel is insecure about her figure, she likes the idea of being comfortable in her own naked skin. This is one of the main reasons Rachel takes lifeguarding lessons: as a lifeguard she will be able to spend many hours in just a bathing suit, this thin single layer of fabric which only covers part of her makes her feel closer to her body. "We'll spend most of the day undressed, near our bodies. People who live near the ocean are always near their bodies; they must get so used to it they're unashamed. It could happen to us this summer."<sup>761</sup> Of course as soon as her mother finds out she is once again literally called a whore bringing shame to her family.<sup>762</sup> It is a tough battle, but she manages to persuade her father (it's about rescuing Jews from drowning!) who permits her to be a lifeguard as long as she restricts herself to working the women-only hours in the swimming pool. However Dov Ber's attitude changes when people find out about 'naked' Rachel's new hobby and the gossip begins. He demands that his daughter gives up her job as the gossip damages the family's reputation. Rachel hits the proverbial nail on the head when she tries to defend herself, "You're just proving that the law<sup>763</sup> has nothing to do with being a Jew. It's all about people. What will people say? What will people think? That's what you worry about more than the Torah."<sup>764</sup> Hasidic Jews hold themselves to the highest religious standard, but they constantly check whether their neighbours are as pious and devout as they are. To Hasidic Jews piety is the most crucial part of their identity and the reputation of being pious is their most important asset; it needs to be protected and nourished constantly. In Rachel's case, she may be doing the right thing, helping Jews, but if her father (the main source of patriarchal power) deems that it damages her reputation because of what other people think, it becomes more important *to be considered* to be doing the right thing by

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<sup>761</sup> Abraham 169.

<sup>762</sup> Abraham 183.

<sup>763</sup> The law is short for Halakhic law: the 613 *mitzvot*, subsequent Talmudic and rabbinic law and the customs and traditions compiled in the *Shulchan Aruch* ('Set Table', also known as the Code of Jewish Law).

<sup>764</sup> Abraham 179.

giving up her job.

Rachel continues to have fantasies about running away, finding her own place, living by herself. However, when she discusses these dreams with her sister Leah she is made to understand that this cannot happen. “Seventeen-year-old girls don’t go and live by themselves,’ Leah says. ‘But why not?’ I ask. ‘Why can’t I just do what I want?’ ‘You know that’s not possible,’ Leah says. ‘You always want what’s impossible. Concentrate on what you can get.’”<sup>765</sup> What Rachel can ‘get’ is very clear, she knows that “in the Talmud, there are three kinds of virtuous women: girl, wife, and mother.”<sup>766</sup> Rachel is almost eighteen, hence she will be forced to move from the girl into the wife stage, which will most likely lead to motherhood. That will be her life, because as mentioned above, as a woman you are not allowed to be your own person.

Rachel’s marriage to the first man the *shadchan* found for her becomes more or less inevitable, since her father is determined his daughter will marry as soon as possible. It is a harsh reality Rachel attempts to come to terms with.

I used to think things would be different for me. That my life would be different. But it isn’t... I’ll get engaged like all the others. Get married. Maybe it’s better doing things the way everyone does. You know exactly how it goes. Besides, I don’t even know what I really want to do that’s different. Or what there is to do. Even modern girls get married eventually. They just do it later. They go out on dates instead of sitting in. Then they get engaged and married. I thought there’d be more things a person could do, more choices. But there’s nothing else.<sup>767</sup>

Rachel does not realise that ‘modern girls’ do other things besides getting married, they go to university, they travel, they work on their chosen career, they pursue their passions, they move to a different country, they take up extreme sports, they try three different jobs, they take up a hobby and drop it again, they have a string of boyfriends or decide to be single. The huge number of choices many women make in their twenties may be causing them stress, but (depending on their background and education) they certainly have options. If one chooses to get married at all, finding a husband is more about finding a partner who you can share your life with, not become the centre of your universe. Your lives may converge but many contemporary women would be unwilling to become a man’s appendage or live to

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<sup>765</sup> Abraham 211.

<sup>766</sup> Abraham 225.

<sup>767</sup> Abaham 221.

cater to him. Either way, Rachel's thoughts and opinions about her upcoming marriage are wholly irrelevant and she knows this. When her parents are once again discussing her marriage she simply walks out. "I don't stay to listen. I can't stand this constant talk about whom I'll marry. No matter what I say, the talk goes on. I don't care whom I marry. Once married, I at least won't have to worry about it."<sup>768</sup>

Rachel does in fact have some idea of what other people do with their lives, or at least how other people think about marriage and love, because she is such an avid reader of secular literature. She reasons that she should have been like her friend Elke, who never reads novels. "I think it's easier for Elke because she doesn't think about love in novels. She hates reading... She thinks only about the Chassidic way, real life. For the first time, I see a reason not to read."<sup>769</sup> Literature introduces you to the worlds of other people. If you are unaware of what you forego, it makes living a small, constricted life easier. Not knowing about romantic love, it is less difficult for Elke to accept her pre-arranged marriage. Similarly Rachel realises that her intelligence and eagerness to learn makes her a more difficult daughter. "They would have liked us better if we were less smart. We would be easier to manage. We would have been more obedient, the way girls should be."<sup>770</sup> Boys benefit from being smart (as long as they are not too independent-minded) because it will help them achieve great honour as a Torah scholar. Even when a man displays wayward behaviour, if he is also brilliant Torah scholar his recalcitrance might be accepted, if not admired.<sup>771</sup> For a woman there is really no reason to be clever; at best it will make you frustrated with the limitations of your religious study and crave the intellectual life of Hasidic men.

Yet even her mother Tova is beginning to hold more liberal views on certain fronts. One day she announces that she has decided to work in a fabric shop, because she wants more freedom. Shockingly, she wants part of her life to be her own. She tells her husband: "I want my own money, so I don't have to wait until you pull out your torn wallet. And I want to get out. I'm a human being too. You run around all day, even when you're home. To the bank, to the lumberyard, the water department. You have a car and you go. Why shouldn't I get out a little?"<sup>772</sup> Her husband disagrees, "Think how it looks," he says. "A mother of seven children, a Chassidic mother, selling fabric. A saleslady... Your mother and grandmothers

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<sup>768</sup> Abraham 204.

<sup>769</sup> Abraham 221.

<sup>770</sup> Abraham 189.

<sup>771</sup> Levine 92-93.

<sup>772</sup> Abraham 196.

never thought of going out to work. They stayed home all their lives and took care of the house, of their husbands and children. They knew they had everything a woman could want.”<sup>773</sup> Dov Ber looks back into the past and points out to his wife that previous generations of women did not go out to work, hence his wife cannot either. Pre-Holocaust rural existence in Eastern Europe (the ‘alte haym’) is glorified and the previous generations of Hasidim are held up as a shining example, as they are considered to have been more religious than the Hasidim today<sup>774</sup>. Dov Ber’s understanding of what women may want is predictably very limited, predominantly because he has never considered what it would be like to be a woman; he has never put himself in his wife’s shoes. He does not even care that much about really getting to know her, which is illustrated early on in the novel when Dov suggests to his children that they should have a goat. “We all know what Ma would say to a goat near her house. Father doesn’t think of that. He’s been married to her for years, but still he doesn’t know her the way we do.”<sup>775</sup> Women fall in such a different category, so completely outside of the framework of his mind that it would not even occur to Dov that if he tried he could learn to understand his wife. For once Tova decides to ignore her husband’s opinion and make up her own mind. Rachel has taken up a teaching job at the Orthodox girl’s school and Tova has even become more lenient about Rachel continuing her job after she is married. “If Rachel likes teaching, she can continue doing it after she’s married. Even after she has a baby. Nowadays young women work after their first baby. They get a baby-sitter. It’s better than staying at home all day, cleaning and cooking. Laundry can wait. Besides, with a husband who studies, the money has to come from somewhere.”<sup>776</sup> As discussed earlier, this is actually quite common in Hasidic families (as long as the wife has a job, not a career and her family always comes first) since as Tova points out, if the husband spends all of his time studying Torah, someone is going to have to provide an income.

As her parents discuss marriage options with the *shadchan*, Rachel is torn between two different emotions; on the one hand, she associates marriage with increased independence. “I’m beginning to want things of my own. I want to live on my own. Married is the only way I can be on my own. I have to become Mrs. Someone.”<sup>777</sup> She realises the paradox, in order to have things of her own, live by herself, she needs to become someone’s

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<sup>773</sup> Abraham 196-197

<sup>774</sup> Fader 122.

<sup>775</sup> Pearl Abraham. *The Romance Reader*. New York: Riverside Books, 1995, 15.

<sup>776</sup> Abraham 202.

<sup>777</sup> Abraham 209.

wife. Her dependence on her husband is emphasized by the fact that she says 'Mrs. Someone', she will give up her own last name, representative of her (single) identity and become her husband's appendage. On the other hand, she sees her own bleak future when watching her best friend Elke unpack gifts for her new home. "I look at her, a bride dressed in pale-peach chiffon, carrying a shiny beige vacuum cleaner;"<sup>778</sup> a depressing image evocative of the classic Stepford wife. Elke, who used to be a bit of a rebel herself, seemingly has her personality sucked out of her and is transformed into a docile bride-to-be, all sparkly eyes believing herself to be in love with her *chassan* who she has only met once. The fact that Elke and Rachel used to experiment sexually with each other is swept under the rug. When Rachel accepts the first match proposed to her, a young man named Israel Mittelman, Rachel attempts to persuade herself that when she is married, she will be able to be true to herself. "Married, I'll do and wear what I want. I'll be who I am,"<sup>779</sup> even if she is not quite sure who that person is. What she does not appreciate is that she is removing one shackle and replacing it with another, equally severe. Her mother believes that once Rachel is married she will do whatever her husband asks because she is so in love with him, which in Tova's mind is something that comes after the first wedding night. "A smart boy asks right after the first night; it's the best time to get a girl to agree."<sup>780</sup> This statement appears at odds with Hasidic sexual practise, which neglects and ignores female pleasure. Considering the fact that in Hasidic Judaism foreplay is considered sinful frivolity and the sexual act is reduced to a husband simply lying on top of his wife while she is still wearing her nightgown and penetrating her (using lube as recommended by his Rabbi,) it is hard to imagine that sex is going to make a woman feel all happy and in love. Rachel is rather sceptical about Tova's ideas as well, "as if sex with a man is supposed to make you softer, better, more religious. Ma thinks that after I'm married I'll start wearing seams if Israel asks me."<sup>781</sup> Again, one of Rachel's biggest flaws, her refusal to wear seamed stockings, returns in the discourse. Rachel is mainly concerned with how she will look after she is married, but sometimes she expresses surprisingly feminist ideas. "I don't even want to wear a wig. I think if all women refused to shave and cover their heads, the rabbis would have to rethink the laws, change them. But I don't know anyone who agrees with me."<sup>782</sup> Since Rachel does not know any other Hasidic women who have such unusually emancipated views, she often feels like there

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<sup>778</sup> Abraham 208.

<sup>779</sup> Abraham 204.

<sup>780</sup> Abraham 219.

<sup>781</sup> Abraham 219.

<sup>782</sup> Abraham 219.

is something wrong with her. As a child she thought that her 'sinful', unconventional desires must come from a dybbuk and she even asked her brother to exorcise her. Being possessed by a dybbuk would neatly explain why she does not fit in, why she has these weird desires of living on her own, wearing stockings without seams and not having to ask permission for every single thing she wants to do.

Rachel's anxiety grows as the day of her wedding approaches. She fantasises about getting a divorce, she worries about getting pregnant year after year. Her mother was only allowed to use the rhythm method after having had seven children and her Rabbi was particularly lenient. Even her divorce fantasies are not all that comforting, she wishes she could move away and live on her own without having to get married and divorced first. "Not this way... not married and possibly pregnant. Why not before? Whole. Unused. Not having slept with a man. After, I will be older, taken."<sup>783</sup> To some extent Rachel has been indoctrinated by the misogynistic sexual discourse around her, she associates virginity with being 'whole' and 'unused'. Yet perhaps this signifies how she wants to keep all of herself to herself, to not have to give any part to a man in order to eventually break free. She finds it difficult to feel excited about the wedding day itself as she knows that no matter how beautiful the day, married life will be grim. "A wedding should be ugly, to suit what comes after. A beautiful wedding is a lie. It shouldn't be beautiful like in a book. Novels are lies, lies upon lies."<sup>784</sup> Rachel sees the wedding day as a false promise of what is to come, the way books are a false promise of what life could be, a promise Rachel used to believe in but now feels terribly disillusioned with.

Rachel has some idea of what will follow after the wedding from speaking with her friend Elke. They talk about sex ("the first night it hurts and you bleed, then every time it gets better"<sup>785</sup>) and shaving your hair, a tradition mainly upheld in the Satmar community ("the hair was nothing... she didn't even think about it"<sup>786</sup>). Elke reveals that one can bend the rules a little when it comes to sexual intercourse, "He took my nightgown off on the first night... He says he was lucky because he studied with his oldest brother, who's been married for twelve years. His brother said not to pay attention to what those rabbis tell young men, new grooms. They concentrate on all the things you shouldn't do. They never describe what you can do. As if a boy would know without someone telling him."<sup>787</sup> Still, Rachel is further

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<sup>783</sup> Abraham 235.

<sup>784</sup> Abraham 236.

<sup>785</sup> Abraham 236.

<sup>786</sup> Abraham 237.

<sup>787</sup> Abraham 237.

disillusioned, the idea that men only do certain things in the bedroom because they were told or told not to strikes her as unromantic. In the books she read the hero always knew exactly what to do to make his woman melt. She wants Elke to persuade her that her husband will make her happy, that she will enjoy having sex with him, she would try to believe Elke, but Rachel is afraid to discuss her fears surrounding marriage and she does not trust the adults who keep telling her that this is the happiest time in her life. Rachel wants to be happy with her husband, to be satisfied with the life of a Hasidic woman, to not have to go through a divorce and cause more problems with her parents, but she is doubtful this will be the case.

The day of her wedding Rachel's anxiety has reached a climax, she is terrified about the fact that her wedding is actually taking place and that she might become pregnant soon.

I don't want to become pregnant. My mind wanders. I should leave all this. When the wedding's over, I should go away. I should get up now and announce that it's over, that it was all a big mistake... I didn't think I'd ever be sitting in this chair. I was sure something would stop this wedding. That it wouldn't happen to me, that I'd be saved. I thought the Mittelmans would find out about me and break off the engagement; I thought of ways to make them break it off. Mornings, I prayed for a miracle.<sup>788</sup>

Rachel gives the impression of a lamb being led to the slaughter, unable to prevent or change the sequence of events urging her forward into married life. Amidst all of this Rachel perceives her environment with ever more critical eyes, "a woman isn't allowed to hand things to another man directly. To avoid temptation. To avoid spilling seed. Men must be so easily tempted."<sup>789</sup> She sees how religious observance has been pushed to the extreme, to the point of absurdity, in order to make sure all the minute details of the law are obeyed. The ceremony, which had seemed so beautiful to her before is now subject to her new feminist scrutiny and she discerns how it only serves to affirm male dominance.

The cantor sings, and I circle Israel seven times. This has always been my favourite part of the ceremony. The slow, sad song, the groom looking serious and scared, swaying hard in prayer, the bride turning round and

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<sup>788</sup> Abraham 244.

<sup>789</sup> Abraham 244-245.

round her husband the way she's expected to live the rest of her life,  
around her husband, like the moon around the earth.<sup>790</sup>

This observation is rather astute, but Rachel can only observe, she has no power. Women can make observations about the law and their condition, but they have no power to change anything, unless they leave Hasidism. Her new husband pronounces, “‘with this ring you are holied and bound to me by the law of Moses and Israel.’ I don’t want to be bound to him by any law. But I remain silent, nothing is expected of me at this ceremony.”<sup>791</sup> No explicit consent from the bride is required, hence at the *moment supreme* she is unable to refuse her marriage.

The wedding night is a surreal experience, which is unsurprising considering Rachel has never even been touched by a man and is suddenly required to have sexual intercourse with someone she has only met twice before. She describes the experience of her husband Israel bluntly placing himself on top of her and attempting to penetrate her as “either too real or completely fake”<sup>792</sup>. Rachel is unable to place sex within a context that makes sense to her; all her life she has been alienated from her own sexuality, taught to be ashamed and guilty, to never think about it and now suddenly she has to be penetrated by a relative stranger. The act is unsuccessful because Israel, being a virgin who presumably only has very little knowledge of how sex works, is unable to penetrate his wife before light begins to come through the window and he has to cease his activities since it is only allowed in the dark.

What follows is a much more traumatising experience, Rachel’s mother Tova comes to visit the next morning to shave Rachel’s head, to which she has strong objections but cannot seem to get out of. In the Satmar community utmost chastity requires that a woman should not even have hair to cover. By removing that which could potentially arouse lust in men, a woman’s sexuality is neutralised. Still, women are expected to cover their bald heads with wigs and preferably a hat on top of the wig, just to make extra sure they do not tempt men with their absent (imaginary) hair. Rachel is frightened by her new bald head in the mirror. “I look like a boy without *peyos*. I’ve never seen my head like this. Round and small. Bumpy. Like Jews in concentration camps.”<sup>793</sup> Rachel is not the only one to make that comparison; sociologist Lis Harris, Deborah Feldman (ex-Hasidic author of *Unorthodox*) and ex-Hasidic blogger Frieda Vizel have each made similar comments, expressing disbelief,

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<sup>790</sup> Abraham 246.

<sup>791</sup> Abraham 247.

<sup>792</sup> Abraham 252.

<sup>793</sup> Abraham 256.

apprehension and aversion towards this practice. It is strange to think that this particular humiliation which Jews had to endure in the concentration camps is still afflicted on Satmar women today and by fellow Jews. It is difficult to imagine that Satmar Hasidim do not have these connotations and it is more difficult to see shaving someone's head as anything other than humiliating.

Shortly after this Israel calls and informs Rachel he will be spending the day with her father. Rachel knows that they will discuss their failed sexual intercourse and her father will give advice on what to do. This disturbs Rachel. "...I think about Father's advice, telling Isreal how to do it properly, how to penetrate me, his daughter. Why not have him in bed with us, to show us, to just do it to me, and what then do I need Israel for, lying in bed uselessly beside me?"<sup>794</sup> Israel cannot discuss his sexual problems with his wife, because that would be sinful, but he can with her father, the Rabbi. Ultra-orthodox Judaism seriously struggles with how to treat sex; in their fear they manage to twist and turn it into something completely unnatural, mechanic and unhuman. This quotation has obvious Freudian undertones, which are probably intentional. Abraham does not overtly superimpose her own views on Hasidism on the text, the way she criticises Hasidism is by illustrating the most problematic parts and letting the reader make up her own mind.

From the first day after the wedding it becomes clear that Israel is simply a puppet controlled by her parents. Rachel's illusions of breaking free from their control and being able to make her own decisions as a married woman are shattered. Israel immediately demands to know why Rachel is not covering her new wig with a hat like her parents want her to. He tells Rachel that it is not just her parents, but he, her husband, who is asking her to cover her wig. Yet, Rachel finds it easier to stand up to her husband than it was to her parents and flat out refuses. "I look at him. He thinks he can tell me what to do, that he is taking Father's place. He thinks that because he's a man, I'll listen."<sup>795</sup> Rachel never saw much validity in the legal power men hold in Orthodox Judaism, she did not plan to obey her husband. It dawns on Rachel that Israel only married her in order to be close to her father, to be part of a Rabbinic family. Jacobowitz remarked, "Through her body, [the groom's family] are able to have access to a connection with her father's mind."<sup>796</sup> She decides to confront Israel, "What my father wants is not the same as what I want. Who do you think you married, me or my father?" [Israel replies] 'Your father warned me that you'd try this,

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<sup>794</sup> Abraham 258.

<sup>795</sup> Abraham 263.

<sup>796</sup> Jacobowitz 83-84.

that you'd want to be modern. I gave him my word that I would stand firm."<sup>797</sup> Still Rachel is treated like a child instead of a responsible adult with her husband and parents conspiring against her to make her behave, or at least look, like a pious Satmar woman. However Israel's admission was a tactical error, now he has openly divulged that he will do whatever Rachel's parents require him to do, Rachel will never listen to him. She only married because she wanted to escape her parents. Now she is more certain than ever that she wants a divorce. Everything requires permission from her husband and hence indirectly from her parents. They could permit her small things like a radio, but Rachel is sick of other people 'allowing' her to do something. "Why do I have to depend on other people's letting me? Will permission not to wear a kerchief satisfy me? Will a radio on the night table be enough? They're steps, tiny steps. I want to leap the whole staircase and be done with it."<sup>798</sup> Rachel feels that her whole life is wrong, a mistake and she is constantly on the verge of tears. As Rachel suspected, Israel discusses all the details of their continuing failed sex life to her father, who in turn tries his best to control it and make his daughter lose her virginity. After the young couple visited Israel's parents, Israel tells Rachel, "I know your father will say it's important that we're home Sunday night,' he says, and then I understand. Father wants him to consummate our marriage before my period begins. This is why it's important that we're home Sunday night. I decide to say I'm menstruating when he comes to my bed."<sup>799</sup> A law that was created to control the female body, a man may not touch a woman during the time that she is menstruating,<sup>800</sup> is here used against Israel (the source of patriarchal power over Rachel) out of recalcitrance.

Sometimes Rachel thinks that perhaps she could accept her life. "I could try being happy, I could try sitting under a tree like other women, embroidering. This could be the test. If when I finish this crewel I'm still not happy, I'll leave."<sup>801</sup> Yet as soon as Rachel thinks she could get used to being a Hasidic married woman she remembers why she cannot. "I don't want to fight for anything. I just want to be and do, with no one saying they're letting me."<sup>802</sup> The final drop is when Israel asks her to wear seamed stockings, which had been a point of debate with her parents since her childhood. It is evident that Israel will never take her side or stand up for her, he will only ever try to enforce her parents rules upon her. The

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<sup>797</sup> Abraham 261.

<sup>798</sup> Abraham 266.

<sup>799</sup> Abraham 277.

<sup>800</sup> *The Soncino Babylonian Talmud*. Niddah 2a, 1. <http://halakhah.com/pdf/taharoth/Nidah.pdf> This whole tractate deals with menstruating women, 'nidahs', it is one of the most serious ethical matters in the whole Talmud.

<sup>801</sup> Abraham 280.

<sup>802</sup> Abraham 280.

fact that he is so honest about this infuriates her. "I could grab him by the throat and choke him. 'And you have the store address right in your pocket, don't you? My father wrote it down for you on a piece of paper.' He nods, and I stand there looking at him. He's a pure idiot."<sup>803</sup> If Israel had played his cards right and not told Rachel that he takes strict orders from her parents, he could have maybe succeeded. "I am a woman. Everyone expects me to obey my husband. Father must think Israel can accomplish more than even he has in all these years."<sup>804</sup> However, Israel is the classic 'fool' from Yiddish literature, honest and stupid, like Gimpl in Singer's "Gimpl the Fool", who fails to understand that his clever wife will never cooperate. Rachel comes to associate men with subjugation, "I want to live in a world with no men: with no fathers, no husbands; a world free of men."<sup>805</sup> A world devoid of men would mean a world in which Rachel could exist freely without being oppressed. She decides to leave her husband on the bus ride into New York where they would buy a radio and seamed stockings. Israel falls asleep in the men's section of the bus and Rachel gets off expecting Israel to follow her, but he never does and suddenly, she is free.

After Rachel spends a few nights in a hotel by herself there is a gap in the narrative and we find that Rachel has returned home to her parents, a divorced woman. The *get* was probably not that difficult to obtain since the marriage had never been consummated. Israel most likely understood that he received much more than he had bargained for. Now Rachel is divorced, her mother openly calls her ex-husband a *tembale*, derived from the word '*tam*' which means a 'fool' or a man 'wholeheartedly for God'. Her family had pitied Rachel for being married to an idiot, but they would only have seen her as 'an unfortunate sacrifice'. Back home Rachel finally plans the escape she had always dreamt of, but where she will go or what will become of her the reader does not find out.

### 4.3 Hush

A novel that is comparable to *The Romance Reader* is *Hush* by Eishes Chayil ('a woman of valour'), the pen name of Judy Brown. Brown is another ex-Hasid who wrote this book while she was still a Hasidic Jew, but has left her community since. It is unclear to which Hasidic sect she belonged, she has chosen not to reveal this because of the sensitive nature of her

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<sup>803</sup> Abraham 285.

<sup>804</sup> Abraham 286.

<sup>805</sup> Abraham 286.

book, but she grew up in Borough Park, Brooklyn, which contains a mixture of various sects.<sup>806</sup> Her novel portrays a fictional Hasidic group called the 'Yushive' Hasidim, chosen because the actions the book recounts, the sexual molestation of a young girl who commits suicide, are based on true events. The author has said in an essay published by the Huffington Post, "I accidentally learned what the words molestation and rape meant at age 23, after telling a therapist I met about something I had witnessed happening to a friend when we were children."<sup>807</sup> This forms the major narrative plot line in the novel, which like *The Romance Reader* follows a young girl through her childhood and adolescence.

The narrator, Gittel who is about nine at the beginning of the novel, grows up near Borough Park, in Flatbush, a place which she romanticizes with childlike innocence, "Hashem was right there, hovering in our midst, because that's where all the *Chassidish* (and okay, even *litvish*) *Yiden* were."<sup>808</sup> To Gittel, the Hasidic Jews are recognisable by their *shtreimel*, a large fur hat which was worn by Eastern European Jews in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and is still worn by Hasidic men after marriage today in order to distinguish themselves as ultra-Orthodox Jews. In Gittel's mind the *shtreimel* is so important it has a special relationship with God, "The hat was completely holy because if a man was wearing it he carried Hashem on his head. It made the world a clear and safe place. And it taught me all I needed to know about right and wrong. If a man was wearing that hat he was right, if he wasn't, he was wrong."<sup>809</sup> Gittel is firmly taught to believe that only *goyim* are capable of evil, it is impossible for Hasidim to do bad things; this explains her community's reaction to the events that were to follow. She is told to hate and distrust all *goyim* and to love all Jews (well, predominantly the Hasidim,) which made her world a nice black and white place, comfortable and easy to move around in. Yet Gittel was rather puzzled by this, "the *goyim* around me confused me. My teachers said that all *goyim* were evil inside, and I could hardly wait for the fiery explosion of blood and hatred so I could report back to my friends. But nothing ever happened in the *goy*-filled neighbourhood, where my neighbours were quiet and clean and would smile at me when they helped me cross the street."<sup>810</sup>

This attitude towards non-Jews is not fictionalised, several sociological studies confirm the Hasidic deep-seated distrust and even open disgust towards non-Jews. As Fader

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<sup>806</sup> Levine, Stephanie Wellen. *Mystics, mavericks, and merrymakers: An intimate journey among Hasidic girls*. NYU Press, 2004, 29-30.

<sup>807</sup> Judy Brown. "Orthodox Jewish Child Abuse: Shattering a Traumatic Silence." HuffingtonPost.com. 8 January 2011. Accessed 5 May 2015. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eishes-chayil/orthodox-jewish-child-abuse\\_b\\_915557.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eishes-chayil/orthodox-jewish-child-abuse_b_915557.html))

<sup>808</sup> Eishes Chayil. *Hush*. New York: Walter and Company, 2010, 8.

<sup>809</sup> Chayil 7.

<sup>810</sup> Chayil 25.

comments, “Hasidic perceptions of [non-Jews] draw on religious beliefs in a hierarchy of peoples, a distinctive Jewish soul, and racist discourse.”<sup>811</sup> Non-Jews are considered closer to animals because they do not discipline their bodies and souls. Hence, Gittel’s friendship with her Christian neighbour Kathy is rather remarkable and had to be kept a secret. Kathy had had a nervous breakdown ten or twenty years before and had never been the same since, but Gittel liked her because “she was the only adult who was still a child, and she never lied, which all adults did.”<sup>812</sup> Gittel’s parents know about her visits but they do not know everything, she chooses which information to withhold from each parent. “I ... loved the little Mary and baby statues, which I never told my mother about, and the big black TV, which I never told my father about, and the not-so-kosher candies, which I never told anyone about.”<sup>813</sup> Kathy is sensitive to her young friend’s religion and made sure to buy kosher candy but Gittel’s mother had pronounced them “just-in-case-not-kosher-enough” because they were bought by a *goy*, who as mentioned above could not be trusted. Gittel is also aware of different types of Jews who are ‘inferior’ to Hasidim, such as her ‘sometimes-sort-of-good-friend’ Tova who is ‘modern’ and dresses immodestly; she does not cover her entire leg and wears denim “a *goyishe* material that came from the cowboys.”<sup>814</sup> Therefore Gittel and her friend Devory tell Tova that she is going to *gehenim*, hell, which apparently is an entirely acceptable thing to say when speaking to a little Orthodox girl. This illustrates the division and aversion between Hasidic and Orthodox Jews, as I have discussed previously. There are also Jews who are more difficult to categorise such as the ‘Syrian Who Was a Jew at Heart’, according to Gittel he and his family were not real Jews: they owned a dog, they wore trousers and drove on the Shabbat, they had a funny, modern Hebrew accent.<sup>815</sup> He and his family were not *frum*,<sup>816</sup> hence they were not going to heaven either. Through Gittel we learn to understand Hasidic attitudes towards non-Jews and other Jews, but also the questions she raises towards those attitudes.

Gittel’s best friend is Devory, who became the victim of rape and committed suicide. The first part of the book alternates between the years 2000 and 2008, between the events leading up to Devory’s suicide and its aftermath. This covers Gittel’s experiences as a child (2000), her letters to Devory written in 2008 and her testimony to the police in that same year. The second part of the book (2008-2010) narrates the beginning of Gittel’s married life

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<sup>811</sup> Fader 157.

<sup>812</sup> Chayil 9.

<sup>813</sup> Chayil 20.

<sup>814</sup> Chayil 14.

<sup>815</sup> Chayil 15.

<sup>816</sup> Literally ‘pious’, to be Torah-observant, usually meant to indicate ultra-Orthodox Jews.

and her coming to terms with the reason for her best friend's suicide. First and foremost, Devory is very clever, which is problematic when you grow up in a Hasidic community. "Devory was a genius. Everybody said so. She read too much for her own good, and she had the brains of the *Yushive Rebbe*. It was too bad she was a girl so she couldn't be a *Rebbe*, but she could certainly be a big teacher."<sup>817</sup> The most intellectually stimulating and prestigious job Devory and her impressive brains could aim for is being a teacher at a Hasidic girls school. Since "she read too much for her own good," one can deduce that Devory is not entirely satisfied with her limited intellectual possibilities or with being a 'good, obedient Hasidic girl' predominantly occupied with *tsnius*.

To Gittel Hasidic Jews are unmistakably different from non-Hasidim and non-Jews. She is even convinced that Hasidim do not fall in love, this is something only non-Jews do. Even though Gittel is seventeen, an age where most people are familiar with the concept if not the feeling, she is entirely confused when Kathy talks about love. "I was bewildered. 'Do gentiles have a deadline for falling in love? Like we have to get married. Is not falling in love a terrible thing? Like for us not getting married?'"<sup>818</sup> Hasidic marriages are not based on the idea of romantic love. As Fader explains, "At the heart of arranged marriages is a Hasidic critique of their perception of Gentile and secular families. This critique focuses on what Hasidic women suggest is an immature belief that marriage is about individuals rather than family status about the selfish fulfilment of passions rather than the commitment to building real love through religious discipline."<sup>819</sup> Family status is considered more important than personal happiness, peculiar from a modern point-of-view but of course this had been the same for non-Jewish aristocratic and upper-class families up until quite recently. One can be excused for being reminded of Jane Austen when reading about Hasidic matchmaking. Yet at the same time, Hasidim believe in the ultra-romantic idea of 'the One'. "In matchmaking practices women and girls search out their *basherte* 'predestined mate' (by God)."<sup>820</sup> This seems rather paradoxical. Essentially, one's *basherte* is the most socially prestigious boy or girl the family can barter for, but this person is already (unbeknownst to you) picked out for you by God. Fader describes the concept of 'true Jewish love': "as the wedding nears, girls attend formal classes for brides. Here they are taught that true Jewish love comes from a girl's ability to discipline her own body and desires as she assumes her new religious responsibilities for the laws of family purity (*tahares-hamishpukhe*), which regulate conjugal

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<sup>817</sup> Chayil 12.

<sup>818</sup> Chayil 34.

<sup>819</sup> Fader 179-180.

<sup>820</sup> Fader 180.

intimacy based on the woman's menstrual cycle."<sup>821</sup> Thus 'true love' depends entirely on a woman's capability to abstain from sleeping with her husband two weeks of every month. That is how Hasidic love is supposedly created. If you fail to fall in love with your husband it must be because there is something wrong with you or you are not obeying the laws around *tahares-hamishpukhe* to the minutest detail. For if a woman does obeys these laws, this will lead to "an intimacy and friendship with their husbands that Gentiles and the secular can't even imagine."<sup>822</sup> That explains why Gittel does not believe that Hasidim just 'fall' in love, love comes from God and/or is manufactured by correct following of the law.

To return to the issue of the significance of social status (which is affected by one's wealth), there is an interesting dichotomy between material goods acquired by non-Jews and materials goods acquired by Jews. One the one hand Gittel is taught that the festival of Chanukah is about how the Greeks attempted to force material goods upon the Jews. "Miss Goldberg explained to us that the evil Greeks tried to impose on the *Yiden* all such materialistic *goyishe* things, like guns and sports that took the soul away from holy things. *Yiden* were supposed to sit and learn Torah all day and give *tzeddakah* – charity – and not waste their whole lives on silly things like baseball and hunting."<sup>823</sup> Indeed, Hasidim often deride non-Jews for their obsession with empty materialism. On the other hand, when it comes to the marriage market, wealth certainly plays a role in one's eligibility. Fader has attempted to defend this attitude, "the concept of social class is distinctive among Hasidic Jews in that it makes materialism and religiosity complementary rather than opposed by understanding wealth as the potential to help other Jews."<sup>824</sup> This is quite a departure from attitudes towards wealth at the beginning of the Hasidic movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but as Fader suggests the argument is that a Jew can use his wealth to help other Jews, hence he gains social prestige from his financial position because this is linked to all the good deeds he can afford to do. Non-Jews are typically seen as selfish beings who would never use their wealth to help other people, certainly not Jews.

Like Rachel in *The Romance Reader*, Gittel feels apprehensive about the idea of marriage. Unlike Rachel she is able to discuss her worries and reservations with her father who actually listens to her, "'Totty,' I asked him, 'do I *have* to get married and have a baby when I grow up?' 'And Will I have to make supper every single day for the rest of my life?' '...why don't boys have babies also? The mothers could have half the babies and the father

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<sup>821</sup> Fader 180.

<sup>822</sup> Fader 180.

<sup>823</sup> Chayil 49.

<sup>824</sup> Fader 180.

the other half. All boys do is wear a hat and have a *Bar Mitzvah*, why don't girls have *Bar Mitzvahs*?"<sup>825</sup> Her father explains that "maybe it's because the boys do things afterward that girls don't, like wearing a hat, putting on the *tefillin* every morning, and *davening* and learning all day." Gittel considers this and realises that there are definite downsides to either gender; in fact she believes that it might be easier to be a girl, or at least more fun as boys are not allowed to do anything else but studying and praying. It is only after a girl marries that her hardships begin.

Being a teenage girl turns out to be rather confusing for Gittel when her mother explains to her that she will need sanitary pads for when she begins menstruating. Gittel is frightened by the idea and confused by the enormous choice in pads, convinced that she will need all of them. "I needed all those maxis, because one could not know what unexpected circumstances might require the Extra Heavy pad or the Flexiest-of-Wings as I lay somewhere and died a sad and lonely death."<sup>826</sup> Similarly, Gittel is baffled when her thirteen year old cousin told her that they could not be in the same room together because his rabbi had told him that that is how babies happen. Her mother absolutely refused to tell her why her cousin had said this. Gittel will not know how menstruation, babies and men are connected until a few weeks before her wedding. Gittel lacks education in other areas too, she does not seem to be overly familiar with religious law or its significance, she appears to believe that it is the question of whether you wear a hat or not that decides whether you go to heaven.<sup>827</sup> As a girl she is kept ignorant, because knowledge can only damage her.

Gittel's non-existent knowledge of sexual intercourse means that when Devory is raped right in front of her in the same room as where Gittel is sleeping, she has no idea what has happened, only that Devory's brother hurt her in some way. Devory and her brother Shmuli always seemed to have had somewhat of an inappropriate relationship, he is described as so caring that he "even used to bathe Devory and put her to sleep until he went to *yeshiva*."<sup>828</sup> Perhaps because sexual intercourse is seen as such a black and white matter: either it is legal because you are married and you are having sex during a woman's clean days, or you have sex in any other context which makes it illegal, that everything that falls into the 'black' category is only different shades of black. The difference between having consensual sex with an adult outside of marriage is not altogether that different from having sex with your nine year old sister (or cousin, grandchild etc.), as in they both fall into the

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<sup>825</sup> There is no *bat mitzvah* for Hasidic girls, Chayil 84-85.

<sup>826</sup> Chayil 90.

<sup>827</sup> Chayil 95.

<sup>828</sup> Chayil 112.

'forbidden' category and much distinction between different types of 'forbidden' sex is not made. What constitutes as 'legal' sex is so limited (not to mention that masturbation is strictly forbidden) that it is difficult to keep between those narrowly defined boundaries and when one strays one has more easily access to female (or male) members of one's family than a stranger. When the family member is underage it is that much easier to abuse them. This is obviously not to defend rape and incest, which also happen in non-religious communities, but to explain that Hasidism does create an environment that may be conducive to sexual abuse. Furthermore, Lisa Aronson Fontes, who has written a book about sexual abuse in Northern American cultures, notes that since male power is so absolute in Orthodox communities and "male helplessness and rage are generated by external oppression and internal conflict, conditions are ripe for abuse of that male power over those who are vulnerable and accessible."<sup>829</sup> This echoes Aviva Cantor's theory in the introduction of this chapter. Helen Winston, author of *The Hidden Lives of Hasidic Rebels*, has drawn similar conclusions and emphasises the fact that sexual abuse is seldom reported because in the Hasidic community, *mesira* (informing secular authorities) is strictly forbidden, *lashon hara* (gossip regarding fellow Jews) is condemned and so is *chilul Hashem* (desecrating God's name), which in this context means desecrating the community's name. Besides, the victim would be negatively impacted, tainted by their involvement in a sexual abuse case, carrying a stigma for the rest of her/his life, which would affect their chances of making a good *shidduch*.<sup>830</sup> In fact, the reputation of the whole family would be tainted if the victim were to ever talk to the police.

Moreover, children seem to be vulnerable for another reason: although incest (Sanhedrin 53 a-b) and the rape of a married woman (Sanhedrin 73a) are explicitly forbidden, the Talmud's discussion on rape or sexual intercourse with children is anything but clear. Usually these dialogues are held within different legal contexts; there is no straightforward discussion about whether having sex with a young child is ethical or moral. First of all, Ketubot 40a states that when a minor is raped no fine needs to be paid,<sup>831</sup> implying that this crime is not as serious as the rape of a woman who is of age. More disturbingly, engaging in sexual intercourse with a girl below the age of three is not explicitly forbidden. She can still be considered a virgin, because a three-year old girl can

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<sup>829</sup> Lisa Aronson Fontes. *Sexual abuse in nine North American cultures: Treatment and Prevention*. Vol. 11. Sage, 1995, 134.

<sup>830</sup> Hella Winston. "So Many Rules, So Little Protection – Sex & Suppression Among Ultra- Orthodox Jews" in *Lilith* (Winter 2006-07), [http://www.lilith.org/pdfs/LilithWinter2006\\_Hella1.pdf](http://www.lilith.org/pdfs/LilithWinter2006_Hella1.pdf)

<sup>831</sup> Although the minor can be married off to her rapist or sold into slavery. *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Ketubot 40a.

regrow her hymen (“it is as if one puts the finger into the eye,”<sup>832</sup>) hence she has not incurred any real injury. Sanhedrin 54b makes a similar comment about sex with a young boy, if below the age of nine when he reaches sexual maturity (or according to Samuel the age of three), the act cannot be treated as ‘pederasty’ since the person is too young to engage in sexual intercourse.<sup>833</sup> Apparently, the rapist cannot be blamed for his actions by such a young person, “only he who is able to engage in sexual intercourse, may, as the passive subject of pederasty throw guilt [upon the active offender]; whilst he who is unable to engage in sexual intercourse cannot be a passive subject of pederasty [in that respect].”<sup>834</sup> This means that the rapist is not liable and there is no penalty. Furthermore, a girl of three (and one day) may be betrothed by intercourse,<sup>835</sup> which according to modern day standards would be equal to raping her. Although the Talmud condemns marital rape,<sup>836</sup> a three year old girl can be acquired thus, the Talmud does not acknowledge that three year olds cannot consent. Rachel Adler remarks that in a society where women are considered more as commodity than as people, rape is “simply an improper method of acquisition,”<sup>837</sup> which is probably the most succinct and astute observation of the Talmudic debate on rape. Moreover, it is not as though the rabbis of the Talmud did not understand that having sex with a young girl could cause her great physical pain, because they make a distinction between the time given to a pre-pubescent girl to recover from her wedding night (four nights) and an adolescent girl (one night).<sup>838</sup> They understand that a pre-pubescent girl may become wounded during intercourse and this wound needs time to heal. It is just something the girl must endure. In short, the sexual abuse of minors is simply accepted as a fact of life, which makes it so problematic.

The text suggests that Devory suffered sexual abuse from her brother for years and she displayed many warning signs, she consistently tried to run away from home and stay with Gittel and her family when her brother was home from yeshiva. She wrote notes to her parents saying, ‘I want to die’. She wandered around school in a daze, deeply absorbed in a book, disconnected from her environment. She wanted to play games such as ‘killing things’

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<sup>832</sup> Tears will come into the eye again and again, a girl below the age of three can regrow her virginity after each time her hymen is broken.

<sup>833</sup> *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Sanhedrin 54b, 244. <http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/nezikin/Sanhedrin.pdf>

<sup>834</sup> 54b 244.

<sup>835</sup> *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Nidah 44b 208. <http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/taharoth/Nidah.pdf> . Also Kiddushin 10a, 25. <http://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Kiddushin.pdf>

<sup>836</sup> *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Eirubin 100b 466. <http://www.halakhah.com/pdf/moed/Eirubin.pdf>

<sup>837</sup> Rachel Adler. *Engendering Judaism: An inclusive theology and ethics*. Jewish Publication Society, 2001, 130.

<sup>838</sup> *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Ketuboth 6a, 19. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/25a%20-%20Kesuvos%20-%202a-28b.pdf>

or jumping off roofs. All of this behaviour is simply labelled as 'naughty' and 'rebellious' by the adults who pay no attention to her cries for help whatsoever. When Devory's mother finally asks Gittel why Devory is acting so strangely and Gittel tells her about Shmuli going into Devory's room and doing things under her blanket, Devory's mother only responds by being angry. She asks Gittel whether this was just something Devory had told her or whether Gittel had seen it, Gittel is scared because Devory's mother is so angry hence she says that Devory told her. Devory's mother decides that it is easier to pretend that Devory is making up crazy stories than actually contemplating the fact that Devory told Gittel the truth.

When Devory commits suicide by hanging herself in Gittel's bathroom, her parents pretend their daughter had been always been 'different' and 'strange' in order to spare their son. They have already lost Devory, if they were to admit to what their son had done, they would probably lose him too. Moreover, since Shmuli is a boy, he was always the more important child; he could gain honour for his family by being a gifted Talmud scholar. All Devory could do was keep in line, acquire a respectable husband and bear him sons. Devory disappointed her parents by not being a good, obedient Hasidic girl and then she committed suicide. Shmuli is now they're only hope, hence everything revolves around keeping up appearances at any cost. Gittel tells her parents in front of the police why Devory kept running away from home, her testimony could have helped to send Shmuli to jail, but Gittel's mother persuades her father to keep quiet and prevent Gittel from talking to the police. Gittel's mother is only worried about her daughter's reputation and how being involved in this police case will affect her marriage prospects. Gittel is not allowed to speak about the real reason for Devory's suicide, her teacher tells her this is *loshn harah* and everyone encourages Gittel to forget about Devory as quickly as possible. As mentioned previously, to speak evil of other Jews (even when one is speaking the truth) is forbidden, which is why it takes Gittel six years before she finally goes to the police by herself. "Hashem did not want me to go. He had stated clearly in the Torah that it was a violation of the divine, a transgression of the commandments, to speak evil of other Jews."<sup>839</sup> Kathy managed to persuade her and then she went "to spite Him, because [it was] only Hashem's [fault], how He allowed children to suffer."<sup>840</sup> Still it takes many visits until Gittel is able to write the report and confront what had really happened to Devory.

Even when the report is finished, Gittel decides to wait until she is married before

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<sup>839</sup> Chayil 21.

<sup>840</sup> Chayil 21.

signing the contract, which is to happen soon as Gittel is eighteen. The police officer asks her if she wants to get married. "That question. Always that question. 'I want my parents to love me,' I said. 'I don't have anywhere else to go. I don't want to leave.'"<sup>841</sup> It may be clear from Gittel's answer that she does not actually want to get married, she just sees this as something that must happen, unless she chooses to leave the community which would mean losing her family and friends. These are her only two options. In a letter to Devory, Gittel writes, "They say that as long as one is unmarried, one is really only half-way done. It is funny to think of oneself like that, only half-done... It is strange to think that there is a Chassid I don't know who I will raise a family with. But it seems that everyone does it, that is the only way for things to happen."<sup>842</sup> Although Gittel is not as anxious about the idea of marriage as Rachel was, she also sees it as inevitable, everyone does it; there is no escape. Besides, girls are taught that they are not 'complete' until they are married, brainwashed into believing that married is the only state an adult woman can be.

Gittel does not really understand what sex is, she is explained the biological facts in the last bridal class for Hasidic brides-to-be, but she does not actually fully comprehend it. It is not surprising considering what she was taught about sexual intercourse. The main lesson she received was that 'it' only serves the sacred purpose of procreation and "you must always remember [that] the holy presence is there, right with you."<sup>843</sup> 'It' was something Gittel should submit herself to "with a prayer on [her] lips and fear in [her] heart."<sup>844</sup> Her teacher emphasized that "the most important part of *it* is that during *it* one must pray with all one's power that one's children should be blessed by Hashem and the *Rebbe* and the angels."<sup>845</sup> The description Gittel received is midway between some sort of human sacrifice and a religious service. According to the rules, there cannot be any intimacy, foreplay, affection, pillow talk, kissing, exploration, romance, passion, pleasure, since all of that is frivolous, lustful and forbidden.<sup>846</sup> There is penetration and prayer; that is all. Essentially, the Hasidic woman sacrifices her body to her new husband and her God, in order to become a vessel for future generations of Hasidic Jews. Gittel left her class scared and confused since she had always been under the impression that Hasidic Jews do not have intercourse, they use artificial insemination; fornication is for the *goyim*. Besides, the police officer taking her

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<sup>841</sup> Chayil 215.

<sup>842</sup> Chayil 68.

<sup>843</sup> Chayil 247.

<sup>844</sup> Chayil 248.

<sup>845</sup> Chayil 248.

<sup>846</sup> Although it is up to the discretion of the couple to follow these rules and there may be a difference in how strict sexual laws are depending on the Hasidic branch.

testimony had explained to Gittel that it was rape when a man tried to force his penis into a woman. "I had never known there were two different kinds: one like *that* and one to have babies."<sup>847</sup> Gittel's apprehension is understandable since sex without affection, foreplay or pleasure is somewhat like rape as a woman's body is not ready for penetration without sexual arousal, hence a man will have to use force and most likely hurt his wife. Gittel's first experience of sex might not be that different from Devory's, except for that she implicitly consents to having intercourse with her husband because she married him. The rabbis of the Talmud expected a woman to get hurt as merely part of the process, which is why they would allow for one day of recovery before the husband would be allowed to have sex with his wife again<sup>848</sup>. A woman's physical or emotional discomfort, the fact that she is wounded in the process, is of zero consequence.

Gittel's husband Yankel knows about as much about a woman's body as Gittel does about a man's. A couple of days after he married his bride he finds one of her bras hanging to dry in the bathroom and he is outraged since he had always believed that only *goyishe* women have breasts. Being a good Hasidic husband, he did not take Gittel's nightgown off on their first wedding night and hence he did not notice that his wife indeed has breasts. Gittel tries to convince her husband that Hasidic women also have breasts, all women do, but Yankel maintains that there was no way his mother and sister also had 'that'. Gittel explains that breasts are for feeding babies but this makes Yankel only more offended. "Yankel stared at me as though I was insane and said there were cows for a reason, and a *Chassidish* woman would never let her child view such 'things' and maybe just in America they had 'that'. Things were a bit more modern here, and that in Israel, forget about it, if a woman had 'that' she would never be able to make a *shidduch*."<sup>849</sup> Only when Yankel spoke to his rebbe about the matter could he accept that Hasidic women were also 'allowed' to have breasts. Evidently, Gittel and Yankel's warped, indoctrinated minds are completely divorced from anything sexual or related to the bodily. It also illustrates how a woman's word about her own body is ignored and dismissed; one needs a male rabbi to pronounce what is correct and lawful considering a woman's sexual organs. Yankel makes another faux pas when he tries to kiss Gittel, who in horror at his sinful, *goyishe* behaviour flees to the bathroom. Gittel is in fact so distressed she calls up Yankel's rabbi in order to ask advice, he recommends Gittel to have sex with her husband three times a month instead of just twice.

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<sup>847</sup> Chayil 249.

<sup>848</sup> *Soncino Babylonian Talmud* Ketuboth 6a, 19. <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/nashim/25a%20-%20Kesuvos%20-%202a-28b.pdf>

<sup>849</sup> Chayil 272.

A rabbi needs to be consulted in all matters, even when it comes to sexual intimacy, since there are strict rules that dictate every aspect of life. The rabbi does not say that Yankel is allowed to kiss Gittel, he is gentle but he does not approve of it. In Hasidic Judaism sex is conceived as sticking a key into a baby-machine, there is no need to kiss the machine first, that would just be weird and forbidden. Of course, some couples may ignore the rules they were taught in their pre-marital classes, but problems may arise when one of the two is willing to bend the rules a little and their spouse is not.<sup>850</sup>

One night, right after Gittel found a picture of Devory, Gittel finally understands what Devory must have felt as Yankel came into her bed. Gittel has a panic attack while Yankel is performing his husbandly duty and she pushes him off her in fright. All of the suppressed trauma surrounding Devory's rape (which Gittel had witnessed) and her death come flooding back. Gittel grows very distressed and when she finally tells Yankel who the girl in the picture is and what had happened to her, Yankel only asks, 'what does rape mean?' as he could not conceive of the concept. Gittel falls into a nervous-breakdown blaming herself for Devory's death. Yankel does not respond well, in his eyes Gittel is not being a good wife and she should have kept quiet. Eventually he speaks with his rebbe and tells Gittel to forget about Devory, bringing up the subject of the Holocaust and how people who survived that, the worst, were also able to forget and move on. He throws Devory's picture in the bin, which leads Gittel to threaten him physically. A few days later when Gittel discovers she is pregnant she announces that the baby, if it is a girl, will be called Devory. Yankel is not pleased and states that he does not want his child named after a girl who committed suicide and 'was probably already crazy to begin with'. Clearly Yankel never took Devory's rape seriously. In true misogynistic fashion he blames the victim for the perpetrator's deeds. Gittel's parents accuse her of being insane when she tells them she wants to name her child Devory and visit Devory's grave to ask for her blessing. Everyone seems to blame Devory for her suicide and treats her like a nuisance who if not deserved her death at least did not *not* deserve it. In response Gittel smashes a cup, her husband Yankel walks out of the Shabbath celebrations and her mother screams at her "What is wrong with you, ruining your marriage? Over what? *Because a little girl died?*"<sup>851</sup> Only her father understands Gittel and tries to talk to her, promising he will find Devory's grave.

Yankel only believes and acknowledges Gittel's grief when he visits his rabbi for the second time and Reb Ehrlich tells him that he had known about Devory and other children

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<sup>850</sup> Jerome R. Mintz touches on this subject in *Hasidic people: A place in the new world*. (Harvard University Press, 2009), 232-233.

<sup>851</sup> Chayil 320.

like her, but had not been able to do anything. In front of Yankel, he bursts out in tears, a key moment which saves Yankel's marriage "When Reb Ehrlich cried like that to me, I knew that your pain was real, that this was all true."<sup>852</sup> Again, his wife's words, or even her feelings are meaningless, void until a male rabbi pronounces them valid. The conclusion of this book is supposed to redeem Yankel, who turns into a supportive husband and visits Devory's grave with Gittel, but the reason for his change of heart is reprehensible. A woman's word does not mean anything at all, it is like dust, unless validated by a man, preferably a rabbi.

Yankel's acknowledgement of the tragedy of Devory's death is not enough for Gittel. She decides that her story must be published, in order that everyone will know the truth. Yankel tells her that this cannot be done, "you can't change the fibres of the community. Even men can't, and you... you are just a young woman. It is you who must listen to them."<sup>853</sup> However, Gittel ignores Yankel and decides to pressure the community's newspaper editor into publishing one of her letters to Devory. She manages to persuade him and he publishes her letter, without the permission of the community's rabbis. The end of the novel sees Gittel as an activist in her community with a baby called Devory.

In the afterword of the novel, Judy Brown explains how Gittel's story is a version of her own story. In reality, it had been a young boy, "I was a young girl when I watched my friend being molested, though I could not understand what I was seeing. I was a young girl when an eleven-year-old boy from the community hanged himself."<sup>854</sup> Like Gittel, Brown was told that evil only happened in the secular world, only *goyim* were evil and if you built walls high enough you could protect yourself from them and prevent bad things happening to you, "we built them higher, thicker, wider, we forgot to look inside. We forgot that the greatest enemies always grow from within... I have used a fictitious name, Yushive, for the main sect in *Hush*. I did this because I refuse to point a finger at one group, when the crime was endemic to all."<sup>855</sup> *Hush* is like the letter Gittel published in the community's newspaper, demanding people to look inside and break the silence, the hypocrisy, the lies. Like Gittel, Brown initially did not leave her community, hence she wrote under the name Eishes Chayil, because she wanted to change it and that can only be achieved from within. Outside criticism only helps the community stay close together; it allows Hasidim to bond over their aversion towards the secular world, which is held in contempt. A novel like this would not have had any effect whatsoever had it been written by a non-Hasidic Jew, it would have

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<sup>852</sup> Chayil 328.

<sup>853</sup> Chayil 333.

<sup>854</sup> Chayil 341-342.

<sup>855</sup> Chayil 343.

been discarded as salacious slander written for profit. Brown understood this, therefore it was after the murder of a young Hasidic boy by a Hasidic man that Brown revealed that she was the author of *Hush*, she wanted to explain that her book was not fictional and that rape and murder do happen in the Hasidic community. After that it was difficult for her to stay in the community who felt she had betrayed them.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

*The Romance Reader* and *Hush* share parallel narratives, two young girls to various degrees uncomfortable with the expectations of ultra-Orthodox gender roles go through their teenage years and marry a relative stranger at eighteen, but one left her community and one stayed. Rachel struggled to find her place in her community of the utmost orthodox Satmar Hasidim, but assumed that once she was married she could bend the rules a little and open a small window to let in some air. Soon after her marriage she discovered that her husband, controlled by her parents, would always keep that window firmly shut, there would be no relief from the stifling oppression and the constant struggle for control over her body; hence she decided to leave. Gittel did not grow-up in a community or a household that was equally oppressive, her parents allowed her more freedom (she was even allowed to visit a non-Jew), her father genuinely cared for her best interest (suggesting that she should undertake a BA at the *Bais Yaakov*) and defended her against her mother on the subject of Devory. Gittel's parents did not attempt to exert control through her husband, but understood she had gained some independence after her marriage. Gittel's husband eventually (although perhaps for the wrong reasons) was willing to respect and listen to his wife. Had Rachel been in Gittel's position, it could have been possible for her to stay in her community, even if she had still been seen as rather recalcitrant. One Hasidic sect is not the other, there is much more room for leniency in Lubavitch Hasidism than in Satmar. Levine described one of her interviewees, an adolescent named Estie as, "she does what she comfortably can, trying to set progressively higher standards for herself as she matures. But if she fails at times, so be it; she has a whole lifetime to perfect herself."<sup>856</sup> Her community understands this and as long as her errors are not too grave they are accepted as part of the learning process of how to become the best Hasid you can be. Within those terms more women are able to find a way to stay in the community without suffocating.

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<sup>856</sup> Levine 82.

The authors share parallel narratives to that of their characters, Pearl Abraham had already left Hasidism when she wrote *The Romance Reader* and Judy Brown was still committed to staying within her community when she published *Hush*. Each exposes the most problematic aspects of Hasidic Judaism primarily concerning gender-roles, the secondary position of women, the obsessive control over the female body, the maltreatment of female sexuality, the neglect of sexual abuse and the involvement of a male rabbi in every aspect of a woman's life. Abraham decided that she had found enough reason to leave. Conversely, Brown saw these problems as only part of Hasidic life and made the decision to stay – that is, until she revealed herself as the author of *Hush* and was forced to leave. Each woman will have different experiences according to the branch of Hasidic Judaism, the community and the family she is in and each woman has a different character. Combined, these aspects will decide whether she is able to live with her circumstances or chooses to leave.

**Chapter Five**  
**Contemporary Online Female Hasidic Literature**

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine the most contemporary form of Hasidic storytelling in the online autobiographical stories of Judy Brown and the weblogs of Frieda Vigel, who explore female Hasidic lived experience and identity in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. In the first chapter of this thesis I briefly discussed the Hasidic tales, which are biographies (or hagiographies) about men. It seems appropriate to conclude this thesis with autobiographical stories about women. The Hasidic tales were originally transmitted orally, passed on from tzaddik to tzaddik, from tzaddik to disciple and from disciple to disciple, narrating and preserving stories about the beginning of the movement, the heart of Hasidic theology and its perception of the world. Presently, we have a new mode of storytelling: the internet. Online, on weblogs or magazines read by millions or only a handful of people, storytellers narrate their lives, recounting and preserving their experiences, memories and ideas. Judy Brown shares her stories via the online magazine *Forward.com*,<sup>857</sup> which resembles the traditional way of publishing short stories. Instead of being published in a printed magazine, the story is published in an online magazine, but it will most likely go through various editorial stages before it is published in its final form. The only difference is that people can instantly comment (anonymously) and express their views, ask for clarification or troll the author, to which the author may respond. Hence, there is a greater sense of dynamic communication between author and reader. Frieda Vigel on the other hand has published her stories on her weblog, *Oy Vey Cartoons*. Weblogs are not like traditional printed stories that are written down and then carefully edited, before they are published in a final, finished form. Weblogs record stories that are written and published instantly, to a broad audience, whose feedback may alter the story. They can be reblogged or shared on social media, passed on from website to Twitter to Facebook to online magazine. This means that the content of a blog can evolve rapidly due to the growth of its readership. The audience responds immediately in the comment section and in turn the author is able to clarify, justify and expand on the story. Those who reblog or repost the weblog may add their own comments and receive their own feedback, changing the meaning of the story.

As this is the only chapter in which I discuss non-fiction, I need to change my methodology. To this purpose I have conducted research into the scholarship regarding online narratives (section 5.2) and autobiographical texts (section 5.3) to find the right approach.

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<sup>857</sup> The online version of the original *The Forward* newspaper.

## 5.2 Online Storytelling Methodologies

I shall begin by giving a closer analysis of online storytelling through the medium of weblogs, which is relevant to Frieda Vizel's work. Scholarship on online blogs is very recent and much ground still needs to be covered. "The rise of digital media is a phenomenon of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and we are still in the process of sorting out its impact on storytelling. The world wide web is a repository of virtually endless stories, from gossip and urban legends to case studies."<sup>858</sup> Part of the appeal of online storytelling is its ease: bloggers can make use of ready-made templates on free online platforms, which are easy to navigate for technologically inexperienced users. These templates are customisable; hence they have spawned a wide variety of different weblog genres.<sup>859</sup> Blogs can roughly be divided into three different classes: filters, personal journals and notebooks, according to Blood.<sup>860</sup> Or four different genres: online diaries, filter blogs, support groups and community blogs, as presented by Krishnamurty.<sup>861</sup> Frieda Vizel's blog falls both into the online diary/personal journal category and the community blog genre.

Online texts (such as found in blogs) differ from print texts in various ways. Volker Eisenlauer and Christian Hoffman report:

A number of linguists propose that the introduction of the Internet and the dynamics of the World Wide Web resulted in a significant shift in the traditional understanding of text as a linear and self-contained unit (cf. Storrer 2002, Bublitz 2005, Jucker 2005). In comparison to traditional print texts, computer-mediated texts escape the finite boundaries of the written document. Weblog users can choose their individual reading paths by clicking on hyperlinks and using search engines. Contrary to print-mediated texts that

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<sup>858</sup> Barbara Benjamin. "The case study: storytelling in the industrial age and beyond." *On the Horizon* 14.4 (2006): 160.

<sup>859</sup> Volker Eisenlauer and Christian R. Hoffmann. "Once Upon a Blog... Storytelling in Weblogs" in *Narrative Revisited : Telling a Story in the Age of New Media*. Ed. Christian R. Hoffmann. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010, 79.

<sup>860</sup> Eisenlauer and Hoffman 82.

<sup>861</sup> Eisenlauer and Hoffman 82.

frequently exhibit a continuous lineal structure (e.g. in scientific or novelistic texts), computer-mediated texts stand out in high fragmentation.<sup>862</sup>

Ted Nelson attempted to define the characteristics of online texts and coined the term 'hypertext', which can be described according to four pertinent features: multi-linearity<sup>863</sup>, fragmentation<sup>864</sup>, interaction<sup>865</sup> and multimodality<sup>866,867</sup>. This means that where traditional printed stories have a distinct beginning, middle and end, the temporal sequence of virtual narratives is inherently fluid. It offers the possibility of internal change stimulated by the blogger and to some extent the user.<sup>868</sup> Despite the relatively fixed structure of most weblog entries, the user is free to browse different parts of the narrative in a multi-linear way. Weblog entries are tagged by keywords, which lead to preceding entries that often include a related topic.<sup>869</sup> The user can pick from a list of titles on the content section and select which part of the story they want to hear next. The user can also browse through the comments of other readers, which aids to the interpretation and meaning of the story. This dynamic is similar to oral storytelling, where the narrator is surrounded by his audience who interrupt, ask questions, want to hear their favourite part again, skip forward, offer their observations, or heckle the storyteller much like trolling commenters do online. Sometimes several blog entries form one story and sometimes a blog is more like a collection of short stories and every story is self-contained. A weblog may also mix different text typologies<sup>870</sup>, such as food recipes, political essays, personal memories, photo reportages, or diary entries. As a result, the register may vary depending on the function of the text. Frieda Vizel accompanies her blog entries with cartoons, or rather; she draws a cartoon and writes a blog to explain the cartoon. Her blog gives her the freedom to mix these mediums in a way that traditional print would not.

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<sup>862</sup> Eisenlauer and Hoffman 87.

<sup>863</sup> A high ratio of multi-linearity leads to a versatile access to weblog stories as well as to fuzzy boundaries of beginnings, middles and ends. Eisenlauer and Hoffman 92.

<sup>864</sup> Weblog narratives usually also include a high ratio of internal fragmentation, comprising different self-contained but interrelated text units. Such text units are usually combined either visually through compositional means (lines, colours, etc.) or electronically through hyperlinks. Eisenlauer and Hoffman 92.

<sup>865</sup> Text units may be recombined and hyperlinked by users. Weblog narratives can thus be described as open-ended and context-dynamic. The narratives are openly encouraging story enhancements, retellings or subsequent discussions of users in comment sections or other weblogs. Eisenlauer and Hoffman 92.

<sup>866</sup> Computer-mediation supports and facilitates the co-deployment, accessibility and storage of multiple semiotic modes, especially in the incorporation of pictures. Eisenlauer and Hoffman 92.

<sup>867</sup> Eisenlauer and Hoffman 87.

<sup>868</sup> Eisenlauer and Hoffman 88.

<sup>869</sup> Eisenlauer and Hoffman 88.

<sup>870</sup> Anna Trosborg. "Text typology: Register, genre and text type." *Benjamins Translation Library* 26 (1997): 3.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the line between fiction and non-fiction is sometimes difficult to establish, since bloggers can suspend the tension between biography and fabrication on purpose.<sup>871</sup>

### 5.3 Approaches to Autobiographical Texts

The Hasidic stories I will examine in the body of this chapter are largely autobiographical; they contain memories, recent experiences, reflective musings and feminist criticism. The study of Life Writing has presented a number of difficulties to academic scholars. To begin with, autobiography is situated somewhere between fact and fiction, the information presented can contain a high degree of authenticity: no one understands the particular circumstances, thoughts and experiences as well as the author. On the other hand, the information is subjective and can be affected by the author's imagination. Marily Metta comments, "Imagination operates in a reciprocal relationship to memory and the construction of the self and the lived experiences in writing. Imagination allows the storyteller to select events, stories and themes to tell to a particular audience."<sup>872</sup>

Remembering is closely related to narrating, we each have stories that we tell ourselves about our past, our 'journey' (the string of experiences that has led the author to her present situation), and these stories help to shape and define our identity. Recounting a memory is narrating the story of that experience and this is affected by the author's perceived journey, she will ask: which function did this experience have? How did this change or confirm existing knowledge about the world, other people and the self? We like to explain both positive and negative events and place them within the story of our lives in a way that makes sense of these experiences. In short, we imagine each story as fitting into our journey the way it makes sense at the time of narrating the story; imagination thus allows us to remember particular events or experiences differently. Furthermore, we neglect or forget stories that do not fit into the overall narrative. Not only the past, but our perception of the present is equally affected by our imagination: it shapes our impression of a particular experience.

The consequently subjective nature of knowledge presented in the autobiography

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<sup>871</sup> Eisenlauer and Hoffman 84.

<sup>872</sup> Metta, Marilyn. *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory : Lifewriting as Reflexive, Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice*. Berne, IN, USA: Peter Lang AG, 2010, 17.

should be treated critically. There are difficulties with the truth claims made by autobiography and with the nature of the author's self-representation. The author fashions her identity with the act of writing.<sup>873</sup> Moreover, the very concept of a stable autobiographical narrator is illusory: since the notion of self is fluid, the moment at which the story is written affects the way in which the self is represented. At the same time, we cannot state that autobiographical texts do not offer any valid form of knowledge. Indeed, autoethnographical writing can share information that may be lacking in a (non-auto)ethnographical work. Judy Brown's and Frieda Vizel's texts both fall into this category, since they write about their respective Hasidic communities, incorporating their own lived experiences when commenting on Hasidic life. Through narrative inquiry, their stories can be analysed contributing to qualitative research on Hasidic Jews. By using interpretive analysis, I do not assess where these stories fall on a true-or-false scale, instead I will examine which way the author perceives herself, what these stories attempt to communicate, and what meaning is ascribed to them, taking their context into account.

I have also taken into consideration the criticism that scholars of Life Writing have received. Hans Renders argues that the problem with Life Writing is the desire to correct history, to bring to attention those who have been marginalised by society and have not received due attention by historians. According to Renders, scholars of Life Writing lack objectivity because they have this agenda in mind when they conduct their research, hence their analyses will be coloured by their ideology.<sup>874</sup> They often lack critical distance and treat their sources with too much respect, as though they would contain the absolute truth. Hence, although I acknowledge that for Judy Brown and Frieda Vizel, their autobiographical writing can be seen as feminist action, giving a voice to those who are marginalised within their community and speaking out against the oppression of Hasidic women, I will attempt to examine their sources without my own feminist bias.

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<sup>873</sup> Hyland-Russell, Tara Diane. *The storied nautilus: life writing, narrative therapy and women's self-storying*. University of Calgary, 2001, 17.

<sup>874</sup> Hans Renders. "Biography in Academia and the Critical Frontier in Life Writing: Where Biography Shifts into Life Writing," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*. Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2013, 262.

## 5.4 Judy Brown & Frieda Vizel

The diverging narratives of Pearl Abraham and Judy Brown in chapter four are also found in the contemporary non-fictional stories discussed in this chapter. Judy Brown has written several essays for *Forward* recounting her experiences as a former Hasidic woman, yet Brown is still very protective of the world she has left and describes her past life in a nuanced way. Frieda Vizel is also an ex-Hasidic Jew who draws cartoons and writes accompanying blog entries on her blog *Oy Vey Cartoons* looking back on her previous life. She is much more critical than Brown, which may in part be due to having belonged to the utmost Orthodox Satmar sect. In the last part of this chapter I will examine both sets of narratives to discover what each author can tell us about the contemporary experiences of Hasidic women.

The entry of Hasidic authors onto the online world is fairly recent. Hasidim may purchase a laptop with internet connection for business purposes potentially unaware of the Pandora's box they now hold in their hands. Some people may have been warned by their rabbis and are aware of the risks attached to letting the outside world inside through the internet, but they will convince themselves they will only visit websites that would be approved by religious authorities. Yet a few are simply not able to resist the overwhelming amount of information they suddenly have at the tips of their fingers, as we will see in the rest of this chapter. The internet, however, is a two way street and apart from retrieving information one can contribute to share opinions or ask questions. Unpious.com, a website founded by ex-Hasid Shulem Deen, offers a platform for Hasidic and ex-Hasidic Jews to post articles, essays and stories discussing aspects of Hasidic life. Tablet magazine and *Forward* have offered similar platforms, the latter set up 'The Sisterhood Blog' specifically to give women a voice.

Frieda Vizel shared her story of how the internet changed her life on Tablet Magazine, stating first of all that "I hadn't been prepared for what could happen to Hasidic life in the Internet age, because no one knew."<sup>875</sup> She soon found blogs by fellow Hasidic Jews and decided to create her own. The topics of conversation broke every taboo and every barrier, the wall dividing men and women and the even higher wall dividing those who left from those who stayed in the community. "It gave anyone a space to be heretical and outrageous without the social repercussions that usually come with it: ostracization, having your children expelled from Hasidic schools or even worse, your parents sitting *shiva* over

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<sup>875</sup> Frieda Vizel. "Breaking from Hasidism, Online". *Tablet Magazine*. 10 July 2012. Accessed 17 March 2015. <http://tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/105719/escaping-from-hasidism-online>.

you.”<sup>876</sup> During the day Vizel would be devoted to her husband and her children, making sure she pleased both but at night with her family satisfied and asleep she would read and write behind her laptop, finally able to use her own voice. As time passed she wrote less and thought more, something that felt novel and radical. Vizel explains, “I was not raised to think. I knew what I need to know: about *tsnius* and that modesty is, or should be, my most important preoccupation. I knew that striving to have seven or 10 or a dozen children and being a good and pious homemaker is the pinnacle of achievement for a woman, the thing I was brought into this world to accomplish.”<sup>877</sup> For the first time Vizel began to think about herself and her own possibilities, because in the community individuality was impossible. Wanting was considered irrelevant, you simply had to be who you were taught to be, the question ‘why’ was always answered with ‘because you have to’. Yet Vizel began to question this life, “It wasn’t right that I should keep having children, that I should never go to college, that I should decide who my son should marry upon his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.”<sup>878</sup> Vizel sensed that inevitably she was growing out of her community and her husband realised this too as one morning he packed all his things and left her for good. Vizel realised she would not be able to stop him, “I had logged into the world of knowledge, and I knew my innocence, like my marriage, was gone forever.”<sup>879</sup>

I shall examine three of Vizel’s blog entries that are indicative of her views on Hasidic Judaism<sup>880</sup> and the reactions she has received in the comments section. First of all there is “On women shaving their hair”, which Vizel describes as one of the “most humiliating and hurtful experiences”<sup>881</sup> she had as a Hasidic woman. At first shaving her head every month did not seem that significant because Vizel had just married a complete stranger and all the changes that came along with being a new bride kept her pre-occupied. Yet as she became a mother, she matured and grew into herself she embraced her womanhood and longed to have long hair which would make her feel “dignified and feminine.”<sup>882</sup> Moreover, she realised that she wanted to make decisions about her own body. People in her community soon found out she was no longer shaving her head, which could not remain without consequences. Vizel was admonished for her sinful, rebellious behaviour, accused of the recent tragedies and illnesses that had befallen the community

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<sup>876</sup> Vizel

<sup>877</sup> Vizel

<sup>878</sup> Vizel

<sup>879</sup> Vizel

<sup>880</sup> All three cartoons are in Appendix I.

<sup>881</sup> Frieda Vizel. “On Women Shaving All Their Hair”. *Oy Vey Cartoons*. 2/10/2012. Accessed 18 March 2015 . <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/2012/10/02/women-shaving-all-their-hair/>

<sup>882</sup> Vizel.

and threatened with the expulsion of her child from the local *cheder*. Vizel felt helpless and was forced to shave her head to protect her child. When she took out the shaver once again she felt she had lost her self-respect and dignity. She was no longer a child-bride but a woman with ideas, opinions and aspirations, she did not want to shave her head but she had no choice unless she was prepared to leave the community and risk losing custody over her son. The small act of shaving one's head symbolises the complete control that rabbis and husbands have over their women. Vizel astutely comments, "shaving embodies the enormous power the community has to make its rebellious women naked, humiliated, powerless and defenceless."<sup>883</sup>

The forty responses<sup>884</sup> to this essay vary; most of commenters show sympathy with Vizel and understand her apprehension towards being forced to shave her head. However, some people are downright appalled at the custom and voice their criticism rather strongly: "shaving is the fugliest thing a woman can do." Others discuss where this tradition has come from and point out that sources are difficult to find. Another commenter who previously shaved her head but now lets her hair grow without protest from her community deems that Vizel is too critical and negative about her former community: "It seems to me that you have a lot of resentment and anger towards your *chassidic* upbringing. I can't empathize with you because I didn't grow up the way you did. I feel obligated to comment that although it does have many faults, *Yiddishkeit* and *chassidishkeit* have many beautiful parts to it. Maybe you should include those in you cartoons as well?" This would be the type of response you would expect from a Hasidic woman reading this article who had not left the fold: you are being too critical and you only emphasize the negative parts. The most interesting comment is left by a man wanting advice,

I don't know in which culture (or cult) you grew up in, but I definitely came across a few women who are forced to shave there heads. And one of them I'm very close with, and that's my wife, no, her mother didn't hold a gun against her head forcing her to get shaved to day after the wedding, but it was against her feelings, back then we where both fully ultra orthodox (and yes, closed minded) chasidic teenagers, who grew up to agree to what ever the community asks to do, no matter if you like or not. Back then, I didn't really care, and I even wanted she should shave because there is an unpure spirit on a married women hair... but she was literary crying after thar. More then a

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<sup>883</sup> Vizel.

<sup>884</sup> Since all responses are anonymous I will not include the usernames.

year ago, I lost my faith, and stopped observing anything, and slowly slowly is my wife following me, about six months ago my dear wife decided to stop shaving, she didn't made an announcement about it, she just didn't shaved for 3 month's, after 3 months it start sneaking out hair, then, it was one shabbos afternoon in front of her sister's her mother start screaming on her: "what's going on with your heir, you are crazy? How do you want to raise children with such her ❖ bla bla bla, screaming like that for a few minutes. At night she came home, and was bitterly crying, but she told me she can't, and she shaved again. In my mind is this forcing, am I mistaken?

This comment is worth discussing for a number of reasons. First of all, his English is rather poor which is unsurprising since Hasidic men do not receive proper education in English as that would take time away from Torah study. Secondly, he indicates that he was very young when he and his wife married and hence it was natural for them to follow the laws of their community. Thirdly, he vaguely mentions that there is an "unpure spirit" on the hair of a married woman, which is intriguing but not further explained. Fourthly, he gives further evidence of how Hasidic social pressure works in order to keep everyone in line and how effective these measures are. Lastly, we only hear about criticism voiced against his wife's rebellion; we do not know whether his own lack of observance is causing him trouble.

Vizel could not keep in line but decided to leave, a process she describes in "On Leaving". Satmar leaders often told her that she had a choice; she could leave if she did not want to follow their rules. They made it sound so simple, knowing well it was anything but. "They aggressively don't want you to leave. That's because the Hasidic community is a social construct in which one departure pulls a thread out of the whole fabric of the community... You are sewn into its fibres by relations to friends and family you love; you have no one else. You are married before you are old enough to make a choice, and then tied to a spouse and soon children."<sup>885</sup> Even if you know you have outgrown your community, you know that this is not the right place for you to be, not the life you want to live, even when they torture and oppress you, you may still not be able to imagine yourself anywhere else. When you do decide to leave, your children will become pawns used against you, you become "ostracised, isolated, defamed and lonely."<sup>886</sup> The choice is only an illusion, as Vizel passionately points out "When our children will be allowed to have relationships with both parents, when

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<sup>885</sup> Frieda Vizel. "On Leaving." *Oy Vey Cartoons*. 21 June 2012. Accessed 18 March 2015

<http://www.oyveycartoons.com/2012/06/21/leaving/>

<sup>886</sup> Vizel.

children won't be turned against the leaving parent, that's when we'll have a choice. When family won't close their doors on their own, when a mother won't have to fight tooth and nail to retain custody of her children, that's when we'll have a choice." This way they keep their rebels caught in a Hasidic spider's web like a tiny little bug. Vizel observes that her only solace was Footsteps, an organisation aiming to help those who chose to leave their Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities based in New York.

There are twenty-six responses to "On Leaving," many people comment that this article really spoke to them and that Vizel puts their own thoughts and feelings in words. Some Hasidim who feel uncomfortable in their world obviously manage to find Vizel's blog and are relieved to find someone who has experienced the same struggle. One man is evidently going through a similar crisis,

Shpitzle this article made me crying and crying non stop because I am going thru this terrible situation right now every day is a nightmare for me I am struggling for freedom and I can't get it, I can tell u one thing, perry riech was so right when she said on dr. Phil that the chasidic community is not a religion, it's a CULT and yes I am saying it again it's a CULT!!!

This demonstrates how not only women but men struggle with their Hasidic existence and feel a certain amount of anger towards their community.

However, one could be tempted to think that Vizel is calling for the liberation of Hasidic women (and men), but this is not the case. In her essay "On Hasidic Women" she explains how many Satmar women are perfectly happy with their lives of laws and limits. They cannot choose their husbands, use birth-control, drive, make decisions about their bodies, are required to shave their heads, send their underwear to rabbis for inspection and cover themselves from neck to ankle even in mid-summer, but many embrace this wholeheartedly. Vizel compares this to Christian nuns who fast for days or Indian widows who jump into the fire, "extreme examples of women who embraced their religious, patriarchal setting and found passion and power within it. They did not want to be liberated."<sup>887</sup> Demanding that the secular world has a responsibility to save these women, not just from their men but from themselves, is rather patronising. Of course, you could question whether these women can really choose to commit themselves to an ultra-patriarchal system that limits their freedom if they have been indoctrinated to believe that

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<sup>887</sup> Frieda Vizel. "On Hasidic Women". *Oy Vey Cartoons*. 25 May 2012. Accessed 18 March 2015 <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/2012/05/25/on-chasidic-women/>

this is what God wants them to do, if they do not know there are other valid choices to be made (would a lion raised in a zoo not rather roam the savannah if he knew this was an option?) but at the same time we have all been conditioned one way or another.

Furthermore, Vigel points out that when she was Hasidic “the women were the ones who were often the imposers of the law: the Hasidic women washed my back in the mikvah and commented on the length of my shaven hair; the women criticised my open neckline or sent me letter in the mail about my deviances; the women encouraged new rules to enhance community purity.”<sup>888</sup> Hasidic women keep each other in check as much as men do and with equal conviction. They may be perfectly happy to do so, it is only when one considers leaving that all these laws and restrictions begin to feel suffocating and “the community rears its ugly head at those that test its limits. That’s an ugly side many content Satmar women who toe the line never know.”<sup>889</sup> Vigel suggests that although there are problems that exist, change can only come from within the community. She concludes that “increasing awareness and resources for Hasidic victims of domestic violence or women (and men!) who want to leave are some of the ways we can have a conversation about the problems in the Hasidic community without narrowly judging a people from the prism of our own culture.”<sup>890</sup>

The essay has another set of mixed reactions. Vigel receives a lot of praise for pointing out that a lot of Hasidic women actually enjoy their lives. One commenter speaks of her sister who is a Satmar woman living in the Hasidic village of Kiryas Joel, New York.

This reminds me of the conversation I had with one of my sisters last night. While she’s going on about her seven children and all their wonders, her kokosh cake and all its raves, I couldn’t help thinking of all the recent conversations on Chasidic women. Liberation shmiberation. My sister loves her life! She’s so damn proud of her family and her accomplishments, she often can’t help but speak condescendingly to me—someone who is liberated, but doesn’t experience the joys of diapers and the ultimate, pious Satmar existence. Like Frieda said, there are issues that need to be addressed; there are individuals in dire need of help. But the vast majority of women in places like Kiryas Joel are genuinely happy with their lives.

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<sup>888</sup> Vigel.

<sup>889</sup> Vigel.

<sup>890</sup> Vigel

She also receives much admiration for her blog and her writing style in general from devout readers. However, some disagree that Satmar women are not in need of liberation,

perfect factual observation of the culture as lived from within with an outside perspective. however the conclusion [admittedly unsaid] ;stay away liberators, we are happy and fine' is up for discussion. when a docile society follows and perpetuates their oppressors by fully submitting and enhancing upon them, does not mean that they are not worthy of being liberated. furthermore when the numbers of those feeling disenchanting keeps on growing daily, that in itself is a call for the guns to come in and break the yoke of tyranny even of those that happily bend under its burden. additional food for thought would be to think of those societies and cultures that most even semi progressive people would agree are repressive for woman. i'm sure that many of the woman of those societies also live enriching lives and might even blossom while perpetuating their own submission.

However, this commenter crucially leaves out how we are supposed to go about this liberation. Vizel gives a very thoughtful response to this comment, hitting the proverbial nail on the head, "I was trying to say that a 'grand liberation' is an attitude that smacks of lack of cultural understanding. We need to work towards improving problems in the community, but we also need to make an effort to understand that Chasidic women are not zombies and have minds of their own and they are not waiting for our liberation. Perhaps we can help, but we cannot liberate."

Like her contemporary Vizel, Judy Brown also published an essay on her introduction to the internet called "Gentiles at the Gates" and again like Vizel, she had no idea about the dangers that lay within her computer. "The computer seemed to be a rather innocuous box: glass screen; dark plastic, flat keyboard, and a cursor that moved with the touch of the strangely named 'mouse'. We couldn't have known that lurking within was the darkness of the entire planet."<sup>891</sup> Brown continues to explain that the internet defeated those impenetrable walls with wires sneaking underneath and satellites streaming overhead. "Within half a decade, the world we'd valiantly held at bay for two millennia came crashing silently inside... One day, the rabbis looked up from their holy books and there were gentiles running rampant on our streets."<sup>892</sup> The rabbis might fear that it is porn and

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<sup>891</sup> Judy Brown. "Gentiles at the Gates" *Forward*. 25 October 2012. Accessed 18 March 2015

<http://forward.com/articles/164869/gentiles-at-the-gates/?p=all>

<sup>892</sup> Brown.

violence that would ruin the Hasidic mind, but it is far more dangerous than that, the internet opens the minds of its users, it provides prohibited information, answers forbidden questions, gives access to forbidden books, forbidden worlds. “Many are leaving the community because of this. They walk away when they discover, not porn, but that their minds are theirs to control.”<sup>893</sup> Their minds are theirs to express as well and some stumbled upon the miracle called a ‘blog’ where you could reveal your opinions whilst concealing your face. Of course rabbis have spoken out against accessing the internet, but too late and their voices, for once, mean too little.

Yet, Brown believes the battle is not quite lost yet. “For every family in Boro Park there are three who have none; for every person buying an iPhone there are 10 holding cell phones with censoring devices, and for every dark flaw revealed on a blog there’s a ready and reassuring explanation to put the collective mind at ease.”<sup>894</sup> The rabbis will continue their fight because what they value is not a good scientific mind striving for knowledge, but a good Hasid. As a Bobover rebbe commented, ““The loss of a soul is greater than the gain of any knowledge.””<sup>895</sup> That is why the Hasidim by and large endeavour to resist the internet, because, as Brown states, “if we don’t, the shtetl will die. Because perhaps we gain independent minds, but we will lose our ancient souls... [and] the well-shackled mind is ultimately stronger than any knowledge thrown at it.”<sup>896</sup> The blissful ignorance of a truly religious mind has survived the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, scientific progress and feminism, so it will survive this too.<sup>897</sup> The last paragraphs illustrate that despite Brown’s critical account of Hasidism in *Hush* and in her other essays, she is still committed to her former community, using the term ‘we’ which might indicate she may still identify as Hasidic but she is not affiliated to any particular sect. Yet, it is odd that even though she wrote a whole novel on the subject, she does not seem to recognise that souls that are tortured because they do not meet the expectations of the community could benefit from being set free. Moreover, she herself is an avid user and contributor to the internet.

Brown is a great commenter and analytic of the Hasidic community, because of her nuanced perspective and her unwillingness to simply condemn and deride the entire denomination, which the following essays will demonstrate. I have chosen to discuss a number of essays that tackle the subjects of sexuality, gender and motherhood. First of all,

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<sup>893</sup> Brown.

<sup>894</sup> Brown.

<sup>895</sup> Brown.

<sup>896</sup> Brown.

<sup>897</sup> Brown.

in “Are You There, Hashem? It’s Me, Judy” she describes her fear and anxiety over developing breasts. At eleven years old she had noticed strange lumps sprouting from her chest, she had thought that they were a virus, perhaps like chicken pox, but soon she discovered they would not go away.<sup>898</sup> Her mother, without explaining, told her that it was time for a bra. This filled Brown with dread and disgust because she did not want something holding her strange lumps, she wanted the lumps to disappear completely. Since Brown was not taught about breasts or that her body would change as she would grow up, she felt completely alienated from her new shape. She was not allowed to discuss her apprehension with her sister or female friends, because it would be immodest to enquire whether they had those ‘lumps’ as well. Only when it became clear that Brown could not contain her worry her mother explained to her that the ‘lumps’ were for feeding milk to her babies once she became a mother. This did not comfort Brown at all, “I nearly died. Milk? My lumps would sprout milk? ‘But what do I do with the milk till the baby comes?’ I asked, almost in tears.”<sup>899</sup> When explained that the milk would come after the baby, Brown was more confused, why give a women breasts when they would not need them for years? “Who needed unnecessary lumps hanging around for years before they would be used?”<sup>900</sup> The only response Brown received was a ‘don’t argue with God’ and that was the end of that conversation. Brown was afraid of her blossoming sexuality and passage into adulthood because she did not properly understand it. She felt like her body betrayed her which led her to question her identity. “Who was I? All these years I’d thought that I was me, when all along I was really my mother.”<sup>901</sup> She had not been told that she would grow from a girl into a woman and her identity would grow and change with her. The eventual bra-fitting only traumatised Brown further, which again could not be discussed with her peers, because her body “was a private matter, an immodest secret.”

When her first period arrived Brown began to feel worse, she was told that this too had something to do with babies and with Eve’s curse for eating the piece of fruit. Brown’s confusion became too much and she had to ask a friend for answers. Her friend Blimi was good at providing those because she had a married older sister. Blimi explained that

in ancient times, when the world existed on a higher spiritual level, girls got married when they were just 12 or 13. The women in the past were wiser and

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<sup>898</sup> Judy Brown. “Are You There, Hashem? It’s Me, Judy.” *Forward*. 29 April 2013. Accessed 19 March 2015. <http://forward.com/articles/175503/are-you-there-hashem-its-me-judy/?p=all>

<sup>899</sup> Brown.

<sup>900</sup> Brown.

<sup>901</sup> Brown.

better than we could ever be, and therefore they were ready for marriage at a much younger age... Today, girls get married later in life because they need time to grow, she said. But the cycle of female menstruation has already been set in place; God cannot suddenly delay it by seven years.<sup>902</sup>

This explanation of how paedophilia was defined differently in ancient times finally consoled Brown. God's plan made sense after all and she could grudgingly accept her lumps. Lumps, not breasts, because "Jewish women don't have B-R-E-A-S-T-S. They have mounds, or lumps, or 'things' on the chest. They are totally different."<sup>903</sup> This echoes Yankel's confusion at the idea that Jewish women have breasts, breasts are far too sexual (which equals dangerous) for Jewish women to possess and hence they have to be categorised differently as 'lumps'.

There are fourteen comments on this essay via the Forward.com discussion section, which are definitely more crude and aggressive than the ones made on Vizel's blog. There is a discussion on whether Judaism is particularly worse at sexual education (with lots of swearwords I will leave out) and a man deriding Judy for her discomfort while he himself grew up with male breasts during puberty. In short, the discussion could have been more productive.

"A Woman's Spirituality, Measured by Hosiery" demonstrates that Brown had always been taught about modesty, even though she did not understand what she was covering up – her own sexuality. Brown had been wearing pantyhose since she was six, it is unclear whether this was to allow her to get accustomed to the idea of modesty or whether the legs of a six year old can in fact be mistaken for being sexual.<sup>904</sup> "Legs have curves. It was the basics of modesty deeply drilled into the neural hemispheres of our brains: Legs must be covered at all times, preferably in opaque beige."<sup>905</sup> Black, navy or brown were forbidden because those colours were also worn in the *goyishe* world which is why it must be sinful. Wearing these colours was a sign of spiritual denigration. "One rabbi went so far as to declare that if women would have less *yiras garbayaim* ('heavenly fear of coloured tights') and more *yiras shamayim* ('heavenly fear of heaven'), the Messiah would have long been here."<sup>906</sup> As per usual, misfortune or the failure of the coming of the Messiah is blamed on

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<sup>902</sup> Brown.

<sup>903</sup> Brown.

<sup>904</sup> A news story from 2011 comes to mind about an 8-year-old Israeli girl who was called a 'whore' and spat on for wearing trousers.

<sup>905</sup> Judy Brown. "A Woman's Spirituality, Measured by Hosiery." *Forward*. 28 August 2012. Accessed 19 March 2015. <http://forward.com/articles/161646/a-womans-spirituality-measured-by-hosiery/>

<sup>906</sup> Brown.

women's lack of modesty. Women who are perceived as being dressed immodestly are immediately betrayed to their rabbi who will then tell the husband who is instructed to scold his wife into submission. This happened when Brown wore transparent beige pantyhose that had become wet and hence their transparency had given the illusion of bare legs, pantyhose do seem to create significant problems in the Hasidic community. Those supposed 'bare legs' were spotted which is why Brown received a strict inquiry from her husband about why she had been seen outside 'with nothing on', like a careless whore. Brown did not see this telling off as a problem since it was a simple misunderstanding. "It is the way things are in the confined ZIP codes of Brooklyn, where an ancient way of life still thrives, along with its dress codes, language and tradition. Is this good? Is this bad? I do not know. It is a warm world that is suffocating yet reassuring."<sup>907</sup> Brown, as many others, clearly expresses the dual nature of the Hasidic world, its charm and its ugliness irreversibly entwined.

There were short expeditions to the outside world, going to the movies seems to be an occasional sin committed by many, in secret of course. "This is not a double life. It is, rather a coping mechanism. We, the Hasidish-ish, do not want to be secular. We just want to watch a particular movie. Then we want to go back. The distance between the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in which we live, and the 21<sup>st</sup>, in which we don't, is one 40-minute subway ride."<sup>908</sup> That is different from refusing to wear pantyhose, not wearing pantyhose is a permanent statement about your identity. Sneaking away to see a movie and then coming back two hours later is just a small digression no one needs to know about. Hence, when Brown went to see *Sex and the City* in Tribeca and her Modern Orthodox friend gave her a hard time for wearing pantyhose in the sweltering heat of summer Brown stood up to her and defended her values. "It was a moment of truth. It was a profound coming-to-terms with being the sole pantyhose-wearer in all of Tribeca. And I was at peace with that. Because when the movie was finished... I would ride the train back to There, over There, deep in the 16<sup>th</sup> century where I mostly lived, and where we all unanimously agreed that pantyhose were necessary and good."<sup>909</sup>

The essay provoked thirty-six responses in the comment section. There is much discussion (read: mud-throwing) between ultra-Orthodox Jews and those who have left their communities (OTD). People predominantly appear to want to vent about why all Haredim are backwards and crazy or why one should never go OTD. The discussion goes

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<sup>907</sup> Brown.

<sup>908</sup> Brown.

<sup>909</sup> Brown.

off-topic; Obama, Gaza and monkeys are brought in without good reason. Only one particular comment stood out as interesting and relevant: the author points out that not all ex-Hasidim leave Orthodoxy completely; some become Modern Orthodox and are rather strict in their observance. It would be interesting to conduct further research into where most ex-Hasidim go when they leave their community: do they remain Orthodox Jews or abandon all religious aspects of Judaism?

Brown goes back and forth between defending her (former) community and providing a more critical evaluation, especially regarding its expectations of women. She discusses problems around the restriction on birth control in two essays titled "Cracks in a Holy Vessel" and "I'm a Mother, Not a Baby Machine". She describes how pregnancy cannot only fill you with happiness but equally with dread and misery because you cannot conceive of how to take care of another child. Many women feel guilty when they do not have the 'appropriate' feelings when they find out they are pregnant, yet again. The guilt is overwhelming and they are powerless over their own fertility. "Birth control obstructs sperm and prevents new souls from being born. A wife who takes it is a dangerous sinner, a damaged vessel. Such a Jew does not have a place in paradise."<sup>910</sup> Eight months after her first son was born Brown discovered she was pregnant again, this time instead of bliss she felt shocked, overwhelmed and miserable. Her female friends told her that this was probably post-partum depression, which generally seems to be the scape-goat mental illness when a woman admits she does not want the pregnancy. "Everyone congratulated me. I knew I was happy, because they told me I was. I was a vessel, a holy, pure vessel, and I gave life to souls."<sup>911</sup> Jacobowitz argued that this was a Jewish woman's primary purpose in life and judging by Brown's experience, she is not far from the truth. Brown did not want to be pregnant and blamed her miscarriage on herself when eight months into the pregnancy the baby appeared to have died in her womb. "I remember the stunned shock. Because I could not make the sorrow come. I did not know how to fight the force of relief that swept through my entire being when I heard that the baby was gone... My heart had betrayed my programmed mind."<sup>912</sup> After her miscarriage her doctor told Brown that she should be on birth control for six months, after five months however, her rabbi superseded this medical advice and declared it was enough. Within two months Brown was pregnant again, she felt relief rapidly followed by panic as she collapsed on the bathroom floor. Her friend Rivky had

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<sup>910</sup> Brown. "Cracks in a Holy Vessel." *Forward*. 11 March 2013. Accessed 19 March 2015. <http://forward.com/articles/172568/cracks-in-a-holy-vessel/>

<sup>911</sup> Brown.

<sup>912</sup> Brown.

had similar feelings, but she told Brown that her rabbi had assured her that this was simply postpartum depression, “the kind that sometimes comes months before the birth instead of after.”<sup>913</sup> As might be evident, women are seriously psychologically messed up by their rabbis in order to protect unborn, or even unconceived, Jewish souls. Semen, male DNA, is protected over a woman’s body and mind. Brown realised this upon meeting Rivky a few years later: after her sixth birth,

her postpartum depression never left. It was her dazed expression, her pretty young face staring blankly at me from under the influence of tranquillizers and anti-depressants, that finally made me see the things they never told us: that motherhood cannot complete you if it consumes you, that our lives are worth more to God than any wasted sperm and that the real sin is to believe that the unborn soul is more important than any mother’s life could ever be.<sup>914</sup>

That day Brown realised that she was a person and not a vessel. “I learned the joy of children because I could finally be a mother, because I could devote my energy to the three children I had, not the ones I still needed.”<sup>915</sup> Of course this is not to say that women should not have eight children, but they should be conceived voluntarily and but few women want or are able to cope with eight children in equally as many years. Similarly, a woman should be allowed to decide not to have children. A woman’s body was made to have the option of having sexual intercourse without conceiving a child because she is only fertile for a few days every month,<sup>916</sup> but this is impossible when she is not allowed to have sex until a week after her period has ended and the date of ovulation grows near. Essentially, Hasidic rabbis keep women trapped in their own fertility using their hormonal cycles against them. Brown grieves, “for the motherhood stolen and brutalised; I grieve the loss of reason and sanity, of the lives of girls, barely women, helpless in the face of religious law.”<sup>917</sup> As soon as Brown published “Cracks in a Holy Vessel” she received a torrent of criticism from enraged Hasidim. Hence she was forced to write a second essay, “I’m a Mother, Not a Baby Machine” reiterating her points to defend the right to have a smaller family.

Discussion in the fifty-four comments is again mainly conducted between ultra-

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<sup>913</sup> Brown.

<sup>914</sup> Brown.

<sup>915</sup> Brown.

<sup>916</sup> An egg once released has the lifespan of 12 to 24 hours but sperm can survive in the fallopian tubes for up to seven days.

<sup>917</sup> Brown.

Orthodox Jews and non-Orthodox/non-religious Jews. People are accused of liberal propaganda and spreading lies. The Forward is painted as an anti-Orthodox magazine which deliberately vilifies Hasidim. Only one author attempts to rationally analyse the “baby machine” problem, but ends his/her comment by saying that Brown should go into therapy because of her attitude towards her children. The Forward comment section is rather disappointing.

In the last essay, “Sexuality on Sesame Street,” Brown describes how she finally came to terms with her sexuality as a woman. It began when she was still a good Hasidic wife with two toddlers and bought a “Sesame Street” DVD, despite her cousin crying ‘for shame’ at her. Elmo’s radio broke and for some reason a scantily clad lady came to cheer him up.

I stared at the lady’s cleavage and then worriedly at my children... and then it happened. The lady with the bare midriff, with the mini skirt and uncovered thighs swayed her entire body. She shook her hips to the right, to the left, side to side, carelessly, suggestively, and all without a shred of embarrassment... I glared with suspicion at the screen. I had always known that the secular world is filled with sex and drugs and nothing else – but on ‘Sesame Street,’ too?<sup>918</sup>

As discussed above, in the ultra-Orthodox world you are supposed to hide your womanliness so it can never be seen; not even a hint suggesting that when God created you, he created you female.<sup>919</sup> In the Hasidic mind, a woman declaring her womanliness in public (for instance by moving her hips) shows an obvious desire for sex, “which leads to evil thoughts, unrestrained sex and then drugs. More unrestrained sex and drugs. Then hell.”<sup>920</sup> Brown found herself in an alien world in which a woman’s body is not a secret to be guarded but something beautiful to be shown – if she chooses to – without feeling ashamed or in danger. “In this place, womanliness is not protected by females hiding themselves, but by men restraining themselves. I could not understand it. An entire society that refuses a morality based on what women wear.”<sup>921</sup> In the playground discussing their daughters’ ‘yucky’ sexual maturation, Brown felt a chasm widening between her and her friends. “I

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<sup>918</sup> Judy Brown. “Sexuality on Sesame Street.” *Forward*. 5 October 2012. Accessed 19 March 2015 <http://forward.com/articles/163833/sexuality-on-sesame-street/>

<sup>919</sup> Brown.

<sup>920</sup> Brown.

<sup>921</sup> Brown.

knew at that moment we have it all wrong. We do not look at our bodies with respect and dignity; we see them as things of shame, our maturation a dreaded process. When our daughters look at their breasts, they see them as ugly things, pieces of machinery necessary for feeding babies. Things that boys are lucky not to have.”<sup>922</sup> Brown questions how she can find a space between the (alleged) sexual obsession of the secular world and the intense fear of the Hasidic world. Her own child ended up teaching her as she grew up, asking questions about the vagina without any shame. At that point Brown silently made a promise to her daughter, “that she would never be a stranger to herself... that she’d know the beauty of her body, her arcs and curves, and that her sexuality is a gift: the miracle of being a woman. I wanted her to differentiate between modesty and a suppression that is just another kind of exploitation, one that shrouds women with the fear of men. We have learned to see our bodies through men’s insecurities,” and that needs to change. As Brown and Vizel demonstrate, ex-Hasidim form nuanced opinions about their former communities that show all the different shades of grey.<sup>923</sup>

## 5.5: Conclusion

Reviewing the accounts given by Judy Brown and Frieda Vizel, it is tempting to walk away with a rather negative assessment of the lives of female Hasidim. That is understandable, but I think it is important that a more balanced perspective is considered first, which is found in ethnographic studies of Hasidic women (who critically have chosen to remain in their communities and hence are unlikely to write novels or blogs about their experiences) by previously discussed Lis Harris and Ayala Fader. Sheina, interviewed by Harris and quoted earlier in the introduction, defends Hasidic gender roles and explains how in her eyes she is equal to her husband, calling herself a priestess of the home.

...since we’re both committed to the same ideals, all the practical things I do are part of what he does. We’re both equals before God; therefore we’re equals, period. Victorian men probably believed that their professional lives gave them some sort of edge on their wives, but that’s not how we think about things. Moshe’s profession isn’t the centre of his world; his relationship

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<sup>922</sup> Brown.

<sup>923</sup> The sixteen comments on this article were very similar to those already discussed.

to God is. His family life, the kind of children he has raised, and the degree to which all the little everyday things in his life are imbued with godliness are what matter to him. And what does being the priestess of the home really mean? It means setting the tone of the place where all the really practical bridges to a religious life are built.<sup>924</sup>

Sheina does not only argue that her role is equal to that of her husband, but that the home in which she serves as the priestess, is the centre of her husband's life. This reiterates a point made earlier about how the dining table has replaced the Temple altar as the centre of religious life due to the highly ritualistic aspect of Hasidic dining.<sup>925</sup> It would indeed place the wife in a position of priestess of the dining table altar.

Another point to consider is that Hasidim view themselves as pegs in a wheel created by God, they do not necessarily think about their individuality, but about their place and purpose in the community. Harris recounts how she felt frustrated with "what I at first interpreted as lack of candour but eventually came to see as a more all-encompassing mind-set in Moshe... The self he liked to talk about was a communal self. This was in keeping of course, with his view of himself as merely one among many, someone whose own ego has been submerged to serve a higher goal."<sup>926</sup> At their core, most religions will require its members to lay down their individual personalities and become a communal version of themselves; only a small part of a larger machine. An individual path to God can only be forged by a mystic and they are usually excluded or marginalised by mainstream religions. Yet, there is a curious tension between the personal inner religious experience and the exoteric communal experience in Hasidic Judaism. Hasidism was originally founded by a group of mystics and the early Hasidic movement placed a great emphasis on the personal religious experience. As the movement grew this personal connection with God became reserved for the tzaddikim; his followers would reach God through clinging to their tzaddik. That is why Moshe is solely focussed on serving his community as a good Hasid and clinging to his rebbe, the personal inner religious experience is no longer available to him. Hence, Harris concludes "the part of his past that he talked about the day we met proved to be the sum total of the personal data he felt comfortable discussing. After that, his posture toward me was that of an affable Ambassador-at-Large from the Independent State of Hasidism."<sup>927</sup> It is a position Harris struggled with until the end of her research among the Hasidim. Until

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<sup>924</sup> Harris 126.

<sup>925</sup> Harris 59.

<sup>926</sup> Harris 158.

<sup>927</sup> Harris 158.

on Yom Kippur, she “understood why the Hasidim did not mind sacrificing their identities to their communal world; that world *was* their identity and in the synagogue that day the congregation was so identified with God, his people, and the Torah that, like the Kabbalistic image of a supernal man/woman larger than the universe, it seemed to expand to fill all imaginable space.”<sup>928</sup> Truly recognising and understanding this attitude allows Hasidic women to fulfil their God-given tasks. This view is also found in Fader, “Hasidic girls’ willingness to discipline their hearts and bodies by submitting to religious authority not only fulfils their sacred obligation to the Jewish people and God, but it will also make all of their dreams come true.”<sup>929</sup> This statement sounds like wishful thinking, but a fair number of Hasidic women succeed in believing this.

The largest problem that Hasidic Judaism faces is that God (or evolution) does not use the same cookie-cutter mould to make every human. We are not all exact same copies of Adam and Eve, which means that although some men and women may find personal happiness in their designated gender roles, many others do not. Not every woman was created to be a housewife, not every man to be a Torah scholar, because one must not forget that men are trapped in the same system with disastrous consequences for those who are not capable of learning and praying every day from 5 AM till nightfall. Some men may want to stay at home taking care of their children and some women may want to study Torah all hours of the day, but Hasidism does not acknowledge this possibility because in their minds every woman was made for the same purpose and every man too. If you cannot twist and turn yourself into the role you were given, you are simply considered defective. Therefore the stories that I have read lead me to conclude that many women (although more Lubavitch than Satmar) are very happy with their safe, stable, predictable lives that have a structured routine in which they always know their value, place and purpose, but many are not. Unfortunately, Hasidic Judaism may never realise that people were not born to all act and feel the same way. Katherine, a woman who commented on the essay “On Hasidic Woman” by Frieda Vigel said: “some people (myself included) are simply crafted to serve in a different place than where they are born.”<sup>930</sup>

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<sup>928</sup> Harris 224.

<sup>929</sup> Fader 180.

<sup>930</sup> Katherine in the comment section of “On Leaving.” Frieda Vigel. *Oy Vey Cartoons*. 21 June 2012. Accessed 23 March 2015. <http://www.oyveycartoons.com/2012/06/21/leaving/>

## Conclusion

On the one hand, literature can express and explain religious thought. On the other hand literature can critique and define the religious institution. This thesis has demonstrated how Hasidic thought has been expressed and understood through literary texts, contributing to and enhancing Hasidic thought. At the same time, it has demonstrated how literature has critiqued, illustrated and even defined Hasidic Judaism; describing as much as shaping Hasidic identity and its perception. A text can have both literary and religious merit; fulfil both functions simultaneously. This thesis breaks down the barriers between these two different genres: literary texts and religious texts, the barrier between the sacred and the profane, which is comparable to what Hasidic Judaism attempts to do in its religion.

Singer recreates the world of Eastern-European Hasidim in his short stories, remembering, romanticising and satirising these communities which no longer exist. Like Nachman, he illustrates the inner world of the Hasidim, their perceptions on morality, society, God and human relations. These Hasidim lived in a realm coloured by otherworldly beings and incidents; a world where science had to give way to the logic of Talmud and Kabbalah, where folktales contained more wisdom and truth than the works of gentile philosophers. Similarly, Nachman's apparent fairytales teach about the redemption of the world and the importance of simple faith in the face of secular knowledge. Both authors describe and contribute to Hasidic thought and imagination in their own way.

Potok examines the differences between the faith in which he was raised, Orthodox Judaism, and the faith of that of his neighbours and his parents, Hasidic Judaism. He demonstrates how in post-war America, these branches diverged in their views of secular Western society, responded differently to the horrors of the Shoah and held opposing views regarding the future of Judaism. Each character in *The Chosen* and *The Promise* has a unique view on Judaism and tries to live an authentically Jewish life according to their own values. Potok illustrates and delineates the different branches of Judaism through his characters and thus attempts to make sense of Judaism's diversity, paying special attention to Hasidic Judaism which survived the Holocaust and post-modernity against all odds.

Potok demonstrates the relevance of Kabbalah to post-modern society in *The Book of Lights*. He explores the relationship between literary fiction and Kabbalist texts using

concepts taken from *The Zohar* and *Hekhalot* literature in order to make sense of the chaos and ambiguity of post-war existence. Potok elucidates the relationship between literature and Hasidic Judaism: both take abstract concepts and attempt to make them concrete; applicable to daily life. He has contributed to Hasidic thought through writing a mystical text that takes these ancient, esoteric ideas and transformed through his imagination applies them to our current world.

Pearl Abraham and Judy Brown explore and critique the position of women in Hasidic Judaism. They question Hasidism's inherent misogyny and illustrate its effects on female Hasidic identity. They examine what it means to live according to laws written thousands of years ago when you live in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In writing their novels, *The Romance Reader* and *Hush* they consider their own experience of having been adolescent Hasidic women, attempting to make sense of their position in a community that leaves them little space. They describe and define their respective Hasidic communities and question in which way women can make satisfying, meaningful lives whilst retaining their own authentic selves. Their characters mirror their own decisions; in *The Romance Reader* Rachel plans her escape while in *Hush* Gittel is able to negotiate her position, which allows her to be a good Hasidic wife without losing herself.

Frieda Vizel is one of the contemporary Hasidic authors who are reinventing Hasidic storytelling online. On her blog, she draws cartoons and writes stories reflecting her past Hasidic life and the reasons she chose to leave her community. Similarly, Judy Brown has published online essays discussing her experiences as a Hasidic Jew and her views on her community, which fluctuate as her essays are written before, during and after the process of leaving. Both authors expose the most problematic areas of Hasidic Judaism and indicate in which ways it needs to change. Their critical accounts challenge the male-oriented and sometimes romanticised views of Singer and Potok. They also contribute to the perspective of non-Hasidic Jews who read their stories and comment, asking questions, offering criticism and support.

Taking into account these myriad views I can now answer my research questions. Hasidism has managed to survive and even thrive through strict adherence to their tradition, remaining isolated from larger secular society and employing social control. Hasidim are committed to their way of life and want to make sure that other members in their community uphold the same level of commitment in order to preserve their faith. The outside world is to be shunned, except in the case of Lubavich Hasidim who may attempt to

persuade non-Hasidic Jews to join their community and become *ba'alei teshuva*.<sup>931</sup> Hasidim continue to look to their past in order to find answers for their present condition, they will train their children to ignore the temptations offered by secular society, foster devotion to their tzaddik<sup>932</sup> and live according to the ways of their ancestors. They use their singular appearance as a shield against any *goyische* temptation, such as the cinema or particular stores and buildings which Hasidim are not allowed to enter. Dressed as a Hasid, one can only go to those places where Hasidim are permitted to be seen. The tzaddik is the living heart of each community who holds his Hasidim together and offers moral and spiritual guidance. As long as his Hasidim adhere to him, his community can weather the challenges of living in a post-modern society.

Hasidic Jews are largely ignored by American society and heavily criticised by fellow Jewish Americans who see their traditions as antiquated; keeping their people trapped in the dark ages. At the same time, Hasidim are held up as the shining beacon of *yiddishkeit*, guardians of the spark of Torah, preservers of the commandments. They are both. In Jewish-American literature, Hasidim are largely absent in the works of secular authors (famous examples being Roth, Malamud and Bellow) but Singer, Potok, Brown and Abraham have attempted to redress this balance, while Vigel is finding new ways of telling stories about the Hasidim online. There is also a rising interest in OTD<sup>933</sup> writers, who have published memoirs, novels and stories about their former *Haredi* lives. It may indeed be only a matter of time before Hasidic-American literature emerges as a genre.

The literature I have discussed in this thesis has demonstrated that Hasidic Judaism has changed despite its best attempts to fight this change since Singer's pre-war Eastern European communities. Hasidic Jews now live in large cities, predominantly in New York and Jerusalem, exposed to secular culture and the temptations of technological innovation. At its core tradition is protected, but slowly and selectively little tweaks were made, the extent of which depending on each sect. Hasidim have not rejected modernity all together; they have incorporated modern appliances in their daily life. As a result, women have more time for education, which has improved over the last decades. Since women are taught carefully selected secular knowledge, they are also given designated Talmudic education, something their grandmothers never even conceived of. Lubavich Hasidim make use of mobile phones, smartphones and even the internet (though that may depend on the views of

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<sup>931</sup> Singular *ba'al teshuva*. Lit. master of return. Jews who return to God, return to Orthodoxy, keeping all the mitzvot and studying Torah.

<sup>932</sup> Who are usually referred to as 'rebbe', the Yiddish word for rabbi.

<sup>933</sup> Off the derech, lit. "off the path", someone who forsakes Orthodoxy.

each individual rebbe), which can make a significant impact depending on the usage. Despite these small tweaks, some sects such as the Satmar and Bobover Hasidim have become even stricter than the generation of their pre-war grandparents. America meant freedom from persecution, yet the threat of Western secular culture is felt more acutely than ever and subsequently Satmar has counter-acted with ever stricter adherence to the most minute details of the law, going above and beyond to make sure every mitzvah is met without the slightest hint of doubt; displaying a religious zealotry that goes beyond that of their ancestors. This may be explained by the Holocaust, because Hasidic life in Eastern Europe was annihilated the few surviving members hold are resolved to hold on to the traditions of their ancestors.

Hasidic literature has transformed as well; motives, methods and authors have all changed. The first stories were hagiographies of Hasidic leaders passed on from tzaddik to disciple in order to shape their distinct identity as a new Jewish branch and educate Hasidim on Hasidic theology. Nachman was primarily concerned with teaching his disciples and kindling their (and his own) faith. Singer is far less respectful of Hasidic beliefs and his stories hold between nostalgic reverence and ridicule; he was not motivated by a desire to educate but to create stories about a world that has vanished. Potok, not a member of the Hasidic faith, attempts to give a balanced perspective; understanding both the difficulties and appeal of leading a Hasidic life. His novels display a realism that is lacking in both Nachman and Singer. Yet, he also wrote a novel explicitly informed by Kabbalah, creating a new work of mysticism, resembling Nachman's stories. His novels spring from his deep fascination with Hasidic Judaism, which he attempted to understand through his writing. In the second half of the twentieth century, female authors emerged, describing as much as criticising contemporary Hasidic life, giving a voice to Hasidic women whose perspectives had been ignored for far too long. Vizel reinvented Hasidic storytelling on her blog, creating autobiographical stories that are easily accessible to many readers all over the world, regardless of their religious background. Her blog invites an immediate response which creates a dialogue between different Jews and non-Jews based on her stories. As interest in *Haredi* Jews has only increased I predict more Hasidic storytelling in different forms from new authors in the near future.

The original contribution of my PhD thesis is my approach to these literary texts, breaking down the boundaries between literary scholarship and religious scholarship. I have not come across studies that have used a similar methodology. Furthermore, it is my subject, the portrayal of Hasidic Judaism in Jewish-American literature, which no one has

examined before to this extent and depth. The findings presented above are all the result of original research. Based on this initial work, more research can be conducted in several areas; the overlap between literary criticism and religious studies as other literary texts could be analysed using my approach. Research on other texts portraying Hasidic Jews, more research on online blogs written by (former) Hasidim and a larger research project on the evolution of Hasidic storytelling.<sup>934</sup>

There are also limitations to this thesis; I am not a Hasidic Jew, which means that although my perspective allows for critical distance I may equally miss certain things because I have not received a Hasidic upbringing. I am woman born in the late 1980's and a feminist; even though I attempt to make my research as objective as possible it may at times be clouded by my particular background as a scholar. I feel attracted to Hasidism's mystical side; I was captivated by Kabbalah during my undergraduate degree and have continued to study it since. I was also charmed by the romantic idea of the Ba'al Shem Tov as an innovator of Judaism who shifted the focus from *pilpul* to achieving a personal, esoteric relationship with God, as described by Buber. Certain aspects of Hasidic Judaism resonate with me and I have had a deep fascination with Hasidism ever since I read *The Chosen* when I was fifteen years old. At the same time, having studied Hasidic theology critically, certain ideas, especially considering the place of women and the unequal treatment of LGBT people are deeply offensive to my liberal, feminist sensibilities. I understand, as in intellectually and emotionally, particular aspects of Hasidic Judaism very well and others alienate and infuriate me. Both will have informed my research to some extent, although it was never my aim to either idealise or demonize Hasidism. It would be interesting for a Hasidic Jew to do a research project similar to mine and compare notes on our different understandings of these texts and the way in which they portray Hasidic Judaism.

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<sup>934</sup> I have written a proposal for a research project that would be an extension of my thesis, examining Hasidic storytelling across the centuries, drawing a line from the earliest Hasidic tales, to Rabbi Nachman's stories, to Singer, Peretz, Agnon and Aleichem right up to Englander and his online contemporaries Judy Brown, Frieda Vizel and Shulem Deen, to discover what has changed in Hasidic storytelling and in Hasidic life.



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Appendix I

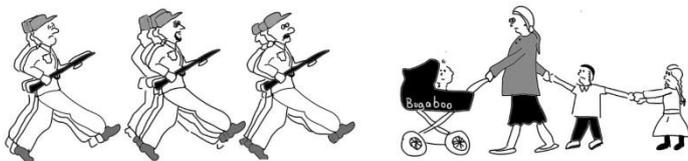


“On Women Shaving All  
Their Hair”

“On Women Shaving All  
Their Hair”



“On Leaving”



“On Hasidic Women”