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► **To cite this version:**

Jacques Gutwirth. Hassidism and Urban Life. *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, 1996, 32/2, pp.105-113. hal-00523069

HAL Id: hal-00523069

<https://hal.science/hal-00523069>

Submitted on 4 Oct 2010

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Thanks to Judith Freedman
For the HAL OAI consent

THE JEWISH JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY

Published by Maurice Freedman Research Trust Ltd

VOLUME XXXVIII : NUMBER 2 : DECEMBER 1996

CONTENTS

Religion, Feminism, and Professionalism:
The Case of Rabbinical Advocates

RONEN SHAMIR, MICHAL SHITRAI, and NELLY ELIAS

The Jewish Community of Liverpool

MERVYN GOODMAN

Hassidism and Urban Life

JACQUES GUTWIRTH

Anglo-Jewish History

MAX BELOFF

Moshe Davis 1916–1996

Book Reviews

Chronicle

Editor: Judith Freedman

HASSIDISM AND URBAN LIFE

Jacques Gutwirth

THIS paper springs from reflections triggered off by a television serial which had been produced for Austrian television; it was entitled *Hiob* (Job) and was based on the accomplished 1930 novel of the same title by Joseph Roth.¹ The novel is set at the turn of the century and one of its heroes is Jonas, one of the sons of the *melamed* Mendel Singer — an ultra-Orthodox schoolteacher living in a rural, agricultural environment in the (fictitious) area of Zuchnov in Eastern Galicia. However, the Jewish inhabitants of that village were not agriculturists but shopkeepers, artisans, and market traders. But Jonas was passionately devoted to horse-riding and had friendly relations with the local Gentile peasants; finally, he enlisted in the Tsarist army.

This tale struck me as uncharacteristic of the Hassidic life-style after the end of the Second World War, according to the historians of Hassidism and to my own fieldwork experience among Hassidim over a period of more than thirty years. Hassidim nowadays are essentially urbanized and rarely live cheek by jowl with rural Gentile inhabitants. They are both physically and intellectually quite remote from peasant culture, from pastures or fields or farms; most of them live in the heart of cities — be it in Montreal, Antwerp, Jerusalem, or Brooklyn (one of the five boroughs of New York). In their case, more so than in the case of other Diaspora Jews, nature and culture are at opposite ends of their spectrum.

The Jews as Town Dwellers

Max Weber commented in 1923 that Western Jewry's culture was an urban culture and that post-exilic urban Pharisees looked down on 'ignorant' people as *Am Ha-aretz*, literally people of the land, and he pointed out that a town or city is not defined primarily in geographical spatial terms but in economic terms — mainly as a seat of commerce, industry, and artisanship.² He rightly stressed that the determining parameters of Jewish life in Europe since feudal times, if not since the early Middle Ages, were commerce and artisanship, urban residence, and of course membership of a community which was ruled by Jewish

The Jewish Journal of Sociology, vol. 38, no. 2, December 1996

105

law and religion and by religious observances. The historian Irving Agus based his analysis of *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe* on *Responsa* literature and went even further than Max Weber: he asserted that Western civilization is an urban civilization and that in Catholic Europe Jewish communities were without doubt the first settlements of urban type, with a structure which prefigured the French *communes*, the town council, etc.³ Moreover, since the Crusades, when Jews in French and German towns were subjected to persecution, the kings of Poland and of Lithuania welcomed them within their borders and granted them a measure of autonomy, in particular in their 'private towns', in order to encourage Jews to develop a merchant economy.

On the Edges of Urbanism: The Advent of Hassidism

Hassidism was established in the eighteenth century and grew strongly during the nineteenth, while on the other hand the official Jewish community (the *kahal*) was becoming weaker and weaker under the influence of various factors — especially the ideology of the *Haskala*, the Enlightenment; the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789; and the growing urbanization of many Jews who were joining the ranks of the proletariat and were being influenced by socialist theories.

Raphael Mahler noted that at the beginning of the nineteenth century there were three Galician towns where commerce and trade were predominantly Jewish activities: Lemberg (Lublin), Tarnopol, and Brody. This last city had a population of 19,000 in 1820; 88 per cent of its inhabitants were Jewish and were largely under the influence of the Enlightenment movement, which fiercely opposed Hassidism. Admittedly, during that period the Hassidim lived either in rural areas or in small towns, but their gainful occupations there were mainly as innkeepers, petty traders, and sometimes bailiffs for the nobility; but many Hassidim were poor and indeed some of them were even beggars.⁴ The streets of these villages and of some small towns at that period were often muddy and the inhabitants had to wear boots; some ultra-Orthodox Hassidim attempted later to preserve that tradition and advocated the wearing of boots even nowadays in modern cities with paved or asphalted roads. (I am told that some London Hassidim wear boots even now in the 1990s.)

Rachel Ertel noted in 1986 that one *shtetl* which she describes merged at its periphery with the area of the rural Gentile community in Poland in the twentieth century, while in the more central streets and in the market-place the interactions and dealings with the Gentile peasants were numerous and long-lasting: they were linked with the trade in wood from the surrounding forests, leather tanning, wool spinning, etc.⁵

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, Hassidism had gained a foothold among the population of medium-sized towns of Eastern

Galicia, including those mentioned by Mahler: Lemberg, Tarnopol, and Brody. Until the eve of the Second World War, the Hassidim and their rebbes, their charismatic leaders, remained mostly in urban areas but rarely lived in large cities. The rebbes of Belz, of Wischnitz (Vijnita), of Ger, and of Satmar (Satu Mare), for example, did not live in large cities and indeed until the Second World War none of the renowned hassidic leaders were inhabitants of such cities as Prague, Budapest, or Warsaw — nor did they even live in larger towns such as Cracow or Bratislava. Hassidim would not have been at ease in such urban centres which had Jewish citizens who were generally non-observant or even anti-religious and who generally followed the life-style of their Gentile neighbours. Moreover, until a little after the Second World War, the millions of Jews in the United States — whether they were themselves migrants or the second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants — were somewhat hostile to the hassidic movement, and this was the case even in districts with a very dense Jewish population such as the Lower East Side in Manhattan or the Maxwell district of Chicago.

Most Jews in the United States until the late 1960s wished to follow the 'American way of life' and before the Second World War the Eastern European rebbes discouraged their adherents from emigrating to the United States, which they feared would be particularly harmful for those who were to follow a hassidic life-style. Thus, except for one case, there were no hassidic settlements anywhere in Western Europe: none in Paris, in Brussels, in Amsterdam, or in London, for example. The one exception was Antwerp, in Belgium, where several hassidic groups were established in the 1920s and the 1930s; there, the diamond manufacture and trade were predominantly in the Jewish domain⁶ and those Jews in these occupations were mainly pious or at least observant Jews — which meant that Hassidism found in Antwerp a favourable milieu. Moreover, the manufacturing techniques of Antwerp were still rooted in artisanal crafts while trading practices were based largely on old-style bargaining and honest dealing where one's word was one's bond — practices which were therefore similar to the commercial usages of the small towns of Eastern Europe. After the Second World War, Hassidim became active in the diamond industry not only in Antwerp but also in Manhattan in New York City as well as in Ramat-Gan in Israel.

The Fifth Phase of Hassidism

Simon Dubnow distinguished in 1931 four phases in the history of Hassidism;⁷ the fourth according to him started in about 1870 and was a period of decadence: the movement had by then lost its creativity, its prestige, and a substantial number of its followers. In Poland, harsh economic conditions had driven the Jews to the larger cities, where they joined the proletarian masses and, as noted above, came under the

influence of socialist and irreligious ideologies. America was in economic terms a 'promised land' to which millions of Eastern European Jews were flocking but American cities were not areas where a hassidic life-style could prosper — as was shown in the television serial based on Joseph Roth's novel.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Hassidim of Byelorussia and the Ukraine were not free to lead openly a hassidic observant mode of living under Communism, while the hassidic groups who were still thriving in Eastern Europe were slaughtered during the Nazi genocide of the Second World War; hassidic dynasties, rebbes and their adherents were massacred. By the end of the war in 1945, there were only pitiful remnants: survivors living in Rumania and Hungary and Polish Hassidim who had been deported by the Soviet authorities to Siberia and to Soviet Asia, as well as some survivors of concentration camps. Most of these Jews came together later in camps for Displaced Persons and eventually they emigrated — mainly to the United States, to Canada, to Belgium, and to the new State of Israel.

In my study of the Belzer Hassidim of Antwerp, I noted that this group consisted in 1963 of some 74 households who were exhibiting a remarkable demographic dynamism: there was an average of 3.90 children per married couple;⁸ and in later years I saw that average rising even higher. Such a demographic pattern is also evident among Hassidim of other sects, with other charismatic leaders: in Brooklyn, in Montreal, in Jerusalem, and in B'nai Berak. However, it was not only this demographic factor which had a major role in the renaissance of hassidic communities; there were also favourable economic conditions in New York, Antwerp, Montreal, and to a lesser degree in Israel. Moreover, in the United States the early 1970s brought to an end the prevalence of the ideal of the American way of life, of Americanization. The model of the melting pot was no longer the recommended aim, and ethnic and religious modes of differentiation were now not only accepted but even sometimes encouraged. On the other hand, the Lubavitch rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson) who was established in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, led his followers to adopt a somewhat original and innovative hassidic movement: *Habad* (often spelt Chabad). *Habad's* aim was to persuade Jews to return to a more pious Judaism and hopefully to persuade them to join the ranks of the Hassidim. The Lubavitch missionaries set about this campaign with an intense zeal and they had some success in the 1970s in reclaiming those souls which had strayed to the counter-culture, in persuading secular Jews to return to the faith of their fathers. Those Jews who were in this way brought back to traditional Judaism were (and are) called *baalei tshuvah* (repenters, or returners to the faith).

The Lubavitch movement extended its activities to other countries — such as France, North Africa, and Canada. As for Israel, B'nai Berak

with 116,000 inhabitants is a remarkable bastion of ultra-Orthodox Judaism and the Hassidim play an important role in that town. Admittedly, this renaissance of Hassidism has not affected the majority of Diaspora or of Israeli Jewry; but it is, nevertheless, a renaissance and although only a proportion of the Jewish inhabitants of Brooklyn, Montreal, and Antwerp are following a hassidic way of life and are devoted followers of their own charismatic leaders, that proportion exhibits a remarkable dynamism and tenacity in its chosen style of observing Jewish precepts and of earning a living in a secular society.

As the present paper was about to be sent to the printers, *Lubavitch Direct* was published by 'Lubavitch UK 5757-1996', on the eve of the Jewish New Year. The Preface states:

The services which Chabad-Lubavitch renders to the whole Jewish community are renowned.

It is now almost fifty years since Chabad-Lubavitch started in the UK and it has grown apace. It continues to grow today. Apart from its schools, seminary and Yeshivot which cover the whole spectrum of formal Jewish education, Chabad-Lubavitch has major centres in London and the Provinces, providing adult education and outreach activities for youth, students, senior citizens, Jews on the fringe — in fact, everyone! . . .

Our efforts to assist Jews to experience the joys of being Jewish and find out more about their heritage have helped bring about a general change of consciousness in this country.

Lubavitch Direct has on the flyleaf a photograph of the late Rabbi Schneerson and states that the activities listed in the publication 'express the inspiration given by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson'.

Urban Hassidim

There is again nowadays a contrast between the areas of settlement of the majority of Jews on the one hand, and the regions favoured by the Hassidim on the other hand. Since the late 1950s, sociologists have been commenting on the most recent trend in the population movement of American Jewry: an exodus from the city centres to the suburbs and outlying districts. That is the case not only of the movement away from New York City but even more so of such cities as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Cincinnati. But the Hassidim, with few exceptions, have remained in the urban areas, especially in large cities, or in enclaves of large cities. In New York, they are settled mainly in Brooklyn, in the districts of Williamsburg, Boro Park, and Crown Heights.⁹ It is in these areas that each hassidic sect has its rebbe, with the rebbe's court, as well as the majority of the yeshivot, and the *kolelim* (plural of *kolel*) where young men continue their religious studies after being married. In Israel, most Hassidim live in central Jerusalem or in

B'nai Berak, while in Antwerp and in Montreal they are settled in the centre of the city.

The exceptions are the following: the principal base of the Satmar is in the centre of Williamsburg but they have a branch in Monroe, a small town north of New York City which in 1990 had only 6,672 residents; the Squerer Hassidim moved from New York City to Rockland County, where they established a small self-contained community in New Square — which has since 1986 become an independent municipality with 2,605 residents in 1990.¹⁰ In Israel, the Lubavitch have developed since 1949 a hassidic 'village', Kfar Habad, on the ruins of an Arab village called Safarya. As for the Belzer Hassidim, they are finding that their settlement (in central Jerusalem, in Rehov Aggripas near the well-known market of Mahane Yehuda) is overcrowded; they are now in the process of developing another area outside the city, called Kiryat Belz and they have built an impressively vast yeshiva there.¹¹

However, it is important to stress that these Hassidim who have moved out of town have most certainly done so *not* in order to be 'closer to nature', to the soil, or in order to till or farm the land. Far from it. An early attempt to engage in agriculture was not very successful in 1949, when the revered Lubavitch rebbe Schneerson had advised his followers in Israel to establish a *moshav*; but by 1970, only 7.5 per cent of the 'villagers' of Kfar Habad were engaged in agriculture: merely 13 of the 170 households. The others followed the traditional gainful occupations of Hassidim: as teachers of religion, shop assistants, or owners of commercial establishments in Tel Aviv (which is accessible to Kfar Habad residents).

In 1969, another Lubavitch 'village', Nahlat Har Habad, was established near Kfar Habad, but by 1980, when the settlement had some 400 households, most of the adults had reverted to the traditional gainful occupations of the Hassidim, as well as work in the diamond industry — they had by then built a diamond-cutting factory.¹² As for the New Square Hassidim, the pattern is very similar to that in Nahlat Har Habad: the residents are also teachers of religion, religious officials, and small tradesmen while about a third of the wage-earning inhabitants work in Manhattan's diamond industry. Indeed, when I visited New Square, I saw that far from being a village it was in fact a suburban development. There is a regular bus service to New York, used by both men and women — of course seated in different areas of the bus, females together and males together with a curtain separating them.¹³

Thus, the Hassidim of the second part of the twentieth century lead a life which is markedly different from that led by Hassidim in the *shtetl* before the Second World War. They are nowadays much more remote from rural life than they had been in Eastern Europe. They are also much more immersed in intensive Talmudic studies; religious tuition starts at the age of four for boys in a religious kindergarten and continues

in primary school; later there are classes in a yeshiva, and then after they marry, in a *kolel*. Females receive a much less intensive Jewish education. David Landau has commented about hassidic young men that 'Yeshiva students sit in their study-hall year after year cocooned in comfortable, cloistered unreality . . .'.¹⁴

For many decades, New York City Jews have been leaving the stifling heat of the metropolis and going to the Catskill hills in the summer. Hassidic households also seek the cleaner air and the green pastures of the Catskills; they have their own area of holiday accommodation and each hassidic household lives close to the followers of the same rebbe. The women look after their young children and carry out the usual domestic tasks and have social intercourse with their female hassidic neighbours. The men come mainly for long weekends. Each hassidic group has a bungalow which it uses as a *shtibl* (a place for prayer and for religious study for males) while the young boys continue to have lessons even during the summer months. Some young Hassidim participate in a few sporting activities — this is especially the case among the Lubavitch who have many 'modernist' trends; but others, like the Satmar, rarely engage in leisure pursuits. Except for those who go for a walk after meals in the Catskills, one cannot say that the Hassidim who spend their summers there get closer to nature then.¹⁵

Thus, nowadays Hassidim combine a life-style reminiscent of the existence they had led in the *shtetl* (intensive religious tuition and meticulous observance of Jewish precepts and traditions as interpreted by their respective rebbes and distance from the surrounding non-Jewish society) but they have been settled for decades in urban locations, usually in the heart of modern cities. Their religious activities and their general culture differ markedly from the life-style of the other citizens of these towns. Moreover, their social relations within the hassidic milieu have far greater importance for them than their relations with outsiders. That situation is in marked contrast to the position of most American Jews who are increasingly dispersed in distant suburbs of cities. Some New York City Jews have migrated to Long Island, for example, while those who used to live in other large cities, as in Los Angeles, have moved even further away from their urban residences.

The Los Angeles Jews have migrated mainly to such districts as Sherman Oaks and Encino in the San Fernando Valley; but there, however, they have not created Jewish enclaves. There is some concentration of Jewish households in various districts, but those Jewish inhabitants also frequent non-Jewish neighbours, they go to the same shopping malls, and they work side by side with non-Jews in the same high-tech or audio-visual industries. One of the most obvious results of this intermingling is the very high rate of out-marriage; in the Los Angeles conurbation, 49 per cent of couples in the age cohort 18–29 years have a non-Jewish spouse,¹⁶ and it is likely that this percentage is even higher in the whole

San Fernando Valley, an area which has no Orthodox or hassidic synagogue. In Los Angeles, the only hassidic outpost is that of the Lubavitch who have a branch near the University of California at Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.) while the main centre of the Lubavitch is in the heart of a district of Los Angeles with a markedly older Jewish population; that area, like the locality around the Rue des Rosiers in Paris, has become for the half million Jewish residents of the cities a sort of symbolic *shtetl*.¹⁷ A similar situation exists in other parts of the world, although perhaps not quite so marked as in Los Angeles. The Hassidim live close to one another, while the other Jewish citizens of the region — whether it be Antwerp or Montreal — are settled some distance away.

Conclusion

Nowadays, the large cities continue to be financial world centres as well as centres of culture and of science, where usually the residents can enjoy personal freedom and where cosmopolitan life-styles are frequent — at least in the Western world. One may argue that urban Hassidim do not fit that pattern; they do not seek relations with those outside their own tight-knit community, or personal freedom, or cosmopolitan life-styles, but on the contrary they try to keep themselves to themselves. That may seem to be a paradoxical situation — until one adopts a historical perspective.

For centuries, Jews living in ghettos or in Jewish enclaves of towns were familiar to some extent with the ways of the Gentile world through trade and travel, which were their means of livelihood. Today's Hassidim wish to insulate themselves in order to preserve their own religious beliefs and practices but their economic activities — for instance in the international diamond industry — and their travels to various countries in the course of business or in order to visit their relatives or the place of residence of their charismatic leader, their rebbe (in New York, Montreal, or Jerusalem) they often acquire, willy-nilly, a degree of sophistication characteristic of the urban and cosmopolitan world, be it Gentile or Jewish.

Acknowledgements

This is a translation by Judith Freedman of the French text which was a revised version of a paper I presented at a symposium on 'Judéité, urbanité, citoyenneté'. The symposium was sponsored by the Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches et d'Etudes Juives and took place in Toulouse on 27–29 March 1995.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Roth, *Hiob. Roman eines einfachen Man* (Cologne, 1982; first edition, Berlin, 1930). An English translation was published by Heinemann (London, 1932): *Job. The Story of a Simple Man*.

² Max Weber, *General Economic History* (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), p. 317.

³ Irving A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe* (New York, 1965), pp. 9–11.

⁴ Raphael Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 8–10, 31–32; see also Bernard D. Weinryb, *The Jews of Poland. A Social and Economic History of the Jewish Community in Poland from 1100 to 1800* (Philadelphia, 1973), p. 282.

⁵ Rachel Ertel, *Le Shtetl. La bourgade juive de Pologne. De la tradition à la modernité* (Paris, 1986), p. 107.

⁶ Jacques Gutwirth, 'Antwerp Jewry Today' in *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1968), and Gutwirth, *Vie Juive Traditionnelle. Ethnologie d'une communauté hassidique* (Paris, 1970), pp. 44–54.

⁷ Simon Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus* (Jerusalem, 1969), vol. 1, pp. 69f. The first edition was published in Berlin in 1931.

⁸ Gutwirth, *Vie juive* . . . , op. cit. in Note 6 above, p. 75.

⁹ Crown Heights is a neighbourhood where the few thousand Hassidim are almost exclusively followers of the Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in June 1994. Williamsburg has many thousands of Jews, mainly hassidic and comparatively poor; Boro Park also has several thousand Jews who are largely middle-class. See George Kranzler, 'The Economic Revitalization of the Hasidic Community of Williamsburg' and Janet Belcove-Shalins, 'Home in Exile: Hasidim in the New World' in Belcove-Shalins, ed., *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America* (Albany, N.Y., 1995), pp. 181–204 and 205–36.

¹⁰ See Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992), p. 202.

¹¹ See Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside of Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York, 1992), pp. 52, 54, 56.

¹² See Morris Freilich, *Marginal Natives at Work* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), pp. 283–88. The author has disguised the name of the group, but I know from personal contact that he describes Kfar Habad. See also Harry Rabinowicz, *Hasidim and the State of Israel* (Rutherford, 1982), pp. 217–20.

¹³ Freilich, op. cit. in Note 12 above: here again, he disguises the name of the community.

¹⁴ David Landau, *Piety and Power: The World of Jewish Fundamentalists* (New York, 1993), p. 170.

¹⁵ See George Kranzler (with photographs by Irving I. Herzberg), *The Face of Faith: An American Hasidic Community* (Baltimore, 1972), pp. 105f. and Landau, op. cit. in Note 14 above, pp. 273–76.

¹⁶ See Bruce Phillips, 'Los Angeles Jewry: A Demographic Profile' in *American Jewish Yearbook 1986* (New York), p. 178.

¹⁷ See Jean Brody, *Rue des Rosiers: une manière d'être juif* (Paris, 1995), pp. 129–30.