Hasidic Judaism

Hasidism is a populist, mystical, Jewish religious movement that originated in the Polish province of Podolia with the disciples of the charismatic teacher and faith-healer R. Israel ben Eliezer Baal Shem Tov of Medzibozh (ca. 1698–1760), popularly known by his acronym, Besht. The disciples of the Besht, most notably the Magid (preacher) Dov Ber of Mezeritch (d. 1772) and his many students, spread Hasidism’s revolutionary, optimistic, mystical teachings that celebrated the immanence of God and His closeness to even the simplest, most uneducated Jews, throughout Eastern Europe during the last half of the eighteenth century. R. Dov Ber’s disciples became charismatic Hasidic masters (known as isadikim, or rebbes) who established courts throughout Eastern Europe from the Russian Pale of Settlement to Austria-Hungary.

Hasidic life centers on the joyful worship of God through ecstatic prayer, song, dance, and feasting, all performed in the ambience of the rebbe’s court. Unlike conventional rabbis, who are essentially teachers and adjudicators of Jewish law, the Hasidic rebbes are personal spiritual guides to whom are attributed great, even supernatural powers to intercede with God.

The emergence of Hasidism provoked a strenuous, organized opposition from the established Jewish communities and their rabbis, who became known as the Mitnagdim (opponents). The Mitnagdim, whose power base was in Lithuania, believed that the Hasidim’s emphasis on prayer and religious ecstasy was a threat to traditional rabbinic Judaism, which placed Torah study at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of religious values, so they excommunicated the Hasidim and banned the rebbes’ courts.

Despite this opposition, Hasidism spread very rapidly, largely because of its popularization of Jewish mysticism’s most optimistic and joyful doctrines and its celebratory approach to religious life. Hasidic courts, where the rebbes held forth royally, sprouted all across Eastern Europe, serving as community centers where the Hasidim gathered, especially on Sabbaths and Jewish holidays, to worship and celebrate in the presence of their revered masters.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Hasidim accounted for a majority of Eastern Europe’s fervently Orthodox Jews. Though suffering some attrition to the rapid modernization and urbanization of Jewish life in Eastern Europe since the mid-nineteenth century, dozens of Hasidic sects blossomed until World War II. On the eve of the war, Hasidic life was concentrated almost exclusively in Eastern Europe, which was home to more than 90 percent of the world’s Hasidic population.

The Hasidic world was devastated by the Holocaust. Although a few of the most prominent Hasidic rebbes managed to escape the Nazis, approximately 95 percent of Europe’s Hasidim were murdered during the war. Because of their distinctive appearance and general ignorance of European languages and customs, hiding from the Nazis or escape from war-torn Europe, while never easy, was more difficult for the Hasidim than for more assimilated European Jews. The Holocaust decimated hundreds of Hasidic communities across Europe, not one of which remained intact.

Most Hasidic Holocaust survivors emigrated to Palestine or America, where they tried to regroup, when possible, in accordance with their prewar Hasidic court affiliation. The largest Hasidic sects to reestablish themselves after the war were Ger, Vizhnitz, and Belz in Israel, and Lubavitch, Satmar, and Bobov in the United States. Significant Hasidic communities were also established in London, Antwerp, and Montreal. The large majority of Hasidim who found refuge in the United States settled in New York City. The first major Hasidic communities there emerged in the Williamsburg and Crown Heights sections of Brooklyn.

In the 1960s, as living conditions in those neighborhoods rapidly deteriorated, many Hasidim fled to the middle-class Boro Park section of Brooklyn. Nonetheless, at the insistence of their rebbe, the Lubavitcher Hasidim remained in Crown Heights. Similarly, the Satmar rebbe
and most of his Hasidim stayed in Williamsburg. In the 1970s, Boro Park had the largest Hasidic population in the country, numbering approximately 40,000 (Mayer 1979). Currently, about 12,000 Hasidim, mostly Lubavitchers, remain in Crown Heights (Fishkoff 2003), and some 50,000 Hasidim, mostly Satmar, live in Williamsburg (Rubin 1997). There are also some sizable suburban Hasidic enclaves, including Kiryas Joel, New Square, and Monsey, all about 30 miles northwest of New York City. Smaller Hasidic communities exist in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Milwaukee.

Hasidism in America before the Holocaust

Prior to the Holocaust, there were only three bona fide rebbes with Hasidic congregations in the United States. The Boyaner Rebbe, Mordechai Shlomo Friedman (d. 1971), emigrated from Eastern Europe in 1927 and settled in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The Stoliner Rebbe, Jacob Perlow (d. 1945), arrived there in 1929, as did the Kapitshinitzer Rebbe, Abraham Joshua Heschel (d. 1967), in 1939. All three maintained only minor congregations in lower Manhattan.

The Kapitshinitzer Rebbe was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Moshe Heschel, while the Boyaner Rebbe was succeeded by his son, Rabbi Israel Friedman. Neither of these prewar American Hasidic sects has maintained a viable community. Kapitshinitzer Hasidism is today all but extinct, while the majority of Boyaner Hasidim live in Israel. A few dozen Boyaner families remain in New York, scattered in various neighborhoods from Manhattan’s Upper West Side to Boro Park. While there remains a Stoliner synagogue in Boro Park, the current rebbe and most of his followers are today in Israel.
Habad-Lubavitch in America

Since its founding by R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi (1745–1813), two characteristics have set Habad (also known as Lubavitch, after the town in Byelorussia where R. Shneur Zalman’s son, R. Dov Ber, established the Habad court in 1815) apart from other Hasidic sects. The first is its unusual combination of radical mysticism with intense intellectualism. Hence the acronym for the movement—Habad—which stands for Hokhma, Bina, Daat, Hebrew for knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. The other distinction of Habad Hasidism is its evangelism and commitment to spreading Hasidic doctrine to Jews the world over, no matter what their Jewish education or level of religious observance.

At the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Poland, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Joseph Isaac Schneerson (1880–1950), fled the Warsaw ghetto to Riga, Latvia, from which he finally managed to escape to America in 1940 with help from the U.S. State Department. Before the war, R. Joseph Isaac had been the most prominent Orthodox leader of beleaguered Soviet Jewry. Upon arriving in America, he immediately established a synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, which remains the world headquarters of the Lubavitch movement today.

R. Joseph Isaac died in 1950 and was succeeded a year later by his son-in-law, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994) who, after an unprecedented career of almost half a century, passed away, leaving no successor. R. Menachem Mendel raised Habad evangelism to new heights, transforming Lubavitch from a small, rather insular, Brooklyn-based sect into a powerful, well-endowed, and well-oiled international religious movement with branches in almost every city, town, and hamlet in the world in which there are Jews. It is estimated that Habad-sponsored programs currently reach more than a quarter of a million Jews worldwide (Fishkoff 2003; Feldman 2003).

Schneerson’s success in expanding Habad Hasidism was largely due to his willingness to enlist modern technology and social theory in the service of a premodern mystical theology, as well as his refusal to exclude any Jews—no matter how geographically or religiously distant—from his vision. Unlike most other Hasidic leaders, who have insisted on sealing their adherents off from every aspect of American life to ensure their piety, Schneerson was never intimidated by modernity. Unique among Hasidic leaders in having received a higher secular education—in philosophy at the University of Berlin and mechanical engineering at the Université de Paris—before being appointed Rebbe, Schneerson directed his followers to establish a major presence on all the major American university campuses through the creation of Habad Houses. These campus outposts offer courses in basic Judaism and Hasidism in addition to providing college students with kosher meals and a variety of religious, social, and psychological services.

Schneerson’s pragmatism and his activist approach have inspired the Lubavitchers to develop an effective network of shlichim (emissaries), dispatched from the sect’s Brooklyn headquarters to disseminate Habad doctrine throughout America. The shlichim are today a highly visible presence in dozens of cities, spreading Hasidism from their “mitzvah-mobiles,” Habad’s trademark Winnebago synagogues-on-wheels, on hundreds of America’s main streets.

Long before Schneerson died in 1994, the majority of his followers had become possessed by the belief that he was the Jews’ long-awaited Messiah. When he passed away without having groomed an heir, and after many years of Messianic preaching followed by a four-year, stroke-induced silence, many observers predicted that the Lubavitch community would either be torn asunder between majority Moshiakhists (messianists) and the small number of more rational Lubavitchers who accepted the rebbe’s death, or that the Moshiakhists’ faith would not be able to survive the trauma of their “savior’s” death.

Despite these dire predictions and a clear ideological split within the community, and despite the absence of a new Rebbe, Habad/Lubavitch has continued to flourish during the decade since Schneerson’s death. More than one hundred new Habad synagogues and campus Habad Houses have been established, including multimillion-dollar facilities in Bal Harbor (Florida), Las Vegas, Pittsburgh, San Diego, Washington D.C., and Tennyson. During this same period, more modest Habad centers have been established in such far-flung Jewish communities as Anchorage, Des Moines, El Paso, and Little Rock. The Habad population continues to grow, thanks to its high birthrate and the continued attraction of “ba’alei teshuva” (“returnees”) responding to Habad’s outreach work across the land.

The spread of Habad influence is not entirely unproblematic, as it has created many religious and political challenges to the American Jewish establishment. Perhaps the
most conspicuous example is the Jewish First Amendment debate triggered by the array of Hannukah menorahs that the Lubavitchers annually erect in prominent public places throughout America, including the White House lawn. Though these religious displays have been challenged by many established Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, and by prominent Jewish communal leaders and scholars as a breach of the constitutional “wall of separation” between religious and state, this has not deterred the Lubavitchers. Additionally, Habad’s support of the far right in Israel, rooted in Schneerson’s long-standing opposition to ceding so much as an inch of Israel’s territory to the Palestinians, has created significant tensions with the American Jewish establishment as well as successive Israeli governments.

As the menorah campaign and other Habad initiatives (such as the Lubavitchers’ vocal advocacy of prayer in public schools and their opposition to the legalization of abortion in America) indicate, the Lubavitchers have no regard for secular American values, but at the same time do not shy away from using any contemporary political device at their disposal to help advance their evangelical, politically rightist agenda.

In 1986, the Lubavitchers’ evangelical passion and desire to make American society more religious reached unprecedented levels, as the Rebbe initiated a campaign of religious proselytizing to the gentiles to ensure their observance of the seven Noahide laws, which are binding upon all gentiles. This new religious universalism, unheard of in traditional Judaism since biblical times, largely explains Habad’s use of such non-Jewish venues as public access cable television, highway billboards, and full-page ads in the New York Times to promote its agenda.

Habad’s apparent modernity, its high-profile evangelism, its striking messianic claims about Rabbi Schneerson, and its outspoken support of the political far right in Israel have all been the source of contempt for the group on the part of America’s more conservative Hasidic communities, most notably the largest and most religiously extreme sect, Satmar.

Satmar
Unlike Habad, with its long history and distinctive mystical teachings, Satmar Hasidism—notorious for its open hostility to Zionism and the State of Israel—is a relatively new movement forged largely by one man, Rabbi Joel Moshe Teitelbaum (1888–1979). Satmar Hasidism was established only in 1928, when Teitelbaum left his native town of Sighet in Carpathian Ruthenia to become the rabbi of the small Romanian city of Satu Mare (Satmar). The rapid rise, catastrophic destruction, and spectacular postwar growth of the Satmar sect are all the result of Teitelbaum’s personal charisma, political leadership, and strong survivalist instincts in the face of the most tumultuous and tragic era of Hasidism’s history.

While the majority of Hungarian Hasidim were killed during the Holocaust, a larger percentage of them survived than did the Polish, Belorussian, and Galician Hasidim, for the deportations of Hungarian Jewry to the concentration camps did not begin until May 1944, almost five years after the deadly persecutions had begun against the Jews of Poland. In December 1944, while his Hasidim were being rounded up by the Nazis, mostly for deportation to Auschwitz, the Satmar Rebbe escaped from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp to Palestine, ironically enough on the transport arranged by the Zionist leader Rudolf Kastner.

In 1947 Teitelbaum left Jerusalem, where he had become one of the leaders of the radically anti-Zionist Neturei Karta sect, and settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. There he found a tiny Hasidic community of fewer than a hundred families. Most were Hungarian and Czecho-Slovakian survivors from a variety of prewar sects whose rebbes had perished in the camps. Teitelbaum immediately filled the vacuum of religious leadership to become the spiritual leader of these orphaned Hasidim. He was single-minded in his determination that Hasidic life would flourish in America exactly as it had in pre-Holocaust Europe, and he quickly established a Satmar synagogue, yeshiva, mikvah (ritual bath), kosher slaughterhouse, and matzah bakery, as well as a large charitable foundation devoted to helping Jewish refugees settle in his community.

Teitelbaum’s success in re-creating Satmar Hasidism in the new land exceeded all expectations. From the few hundred Hasidic families that Teitelbaum found in 1947, the Satmar community of Williamsburg today numbers almost 40,000 (Mintz 1992). In 1974 the Satmars established a satellite suburban center adjacent to the town of Monroe in Rockland County, New York, named Kiryas Joel in honor of the Rebbe. Although it began with just a few
dozen families, Kiryas Joel today has a population rapidly approaching 20,000 (Mintz 1992) and is the location of Satmar's central yeshiva. There are also smaller but not insignificant Satmar communities in Boro Park, Los Angeles, Montreal, London, and Antwerp.

Beyond his energy and talent for leadership, the key to Teitelbaum's success was his zealous resistance to any innovations or changes in the traditional way of life of his Hasidim. Satmar remains the most segregationist and ultraconservative of Hasidic sects, having remained hermetically sealed from all aspects of modern society other than those necessary for financial support.

The Satmar Rebbe was most notorious for his fierce struggle against Zionism, the inheritance of pre-Holocaust Hungarian Jewish ultra-Orthodoxy. The extent of the Satmar Rebbe's impermeability to the cataclysmic events of Jewish history in recent decades was remarkable. The eradication of Hasidic life in Eastern Europe and the subsequent rise of the State of Israel had a devastating, transformative effect on many religious leaders who had previously opposed any secular political solution to the "Jewish problem," that is, Zionism. But the trauma of the Holocaust and emergence of Israel, while converting most of these prewar Orthodox opponents of Zionism, had absolutely no effect on Joel Teitelbaum. He remained steadfast in his commitment to the old passive political posture of East European Jewry. Moreover, with each of Zionism's successes, his opposition to it became fiercer. In response to Israel's dramatic victory in the June 1967 Six Day War, Teitelbaum wrote an angry polemical tract entitled Al ha-Geulah ve-al ha-Temurah (On the Redemption and Its Displacement), in which he argued that the Israeli military victory was a cosmic catastrophe engineered by Satan himself. The Satmar Rebbe's insistence on maintaining the prewar strategy of isolation from the outside world and his demonization of Zionism have not, however, hampered the growth of Satmar Hasidism, which today has far more adherents than before the Holocaust.

Thanks to the prominent role of charitable giving in the Satmar community, it is exceptionally well-organized, boasting myriad institutions that see to the welfare of each and every member. These include a very effective refugee assistance board, a fund for those in need of food for the Sabbath, a highly subsidized kosher meat market, and a medical fund providing full health coverage for the needy.

The United Jewish Organizations (UJO) of Williamsburg, established as an intercommunal institution in 1966 by the Satmar Rebbe's right-hand man, Rabbi Lipa Friedman, today assists many other Hasidic sects while remaining firmly under Satmar control. The UJO is concerned with the community's economic and social well-being and has succeeded in attracting federal funding for increased housing subsidies for the Hasidic community. It negotiates the very tense relations with Williamsburg's majority Latino community, with whom the Hasidim are in fierce competition for the neighborhood's scarce housing and social services.

The Satmar community is also remarkable in the way it safeguards the physical needs of its members. The Hatzolah ambulance network, while today serving Jews and gentiles in all five boroughs of New York City, was originally established by Satmar in Williamsburg to serve the needs of ultra-Orthodox who spoke little English. The Shomrim is an all-Hasidic security patrol that has developed a reputation for swift and tough justice.

Despite its deep isolationism, the one realm in which Satmar has maintained a high and aggressive public profile is its opposition to Zionism and the State of Israel. To the dismay of most American Jews, the Satmar Hasidim regularly engage in public protests against Israel, issue press releases, and take out prominent advertisements denouncing Zionism. The Satmar Hasidim also frequently battle the other major Hasidic sects, most notably Lubavitch and Belz, both of whom R. Joel Teitelbaum accused of modernist tendencies and Zionist sympathies.

The Satmar Rebbe died in August 1979 and was succeeded by his nephew, Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum (b. 1915), who had previously served as the Sighet Rebbe in Boro Park. He possessed neither the scholarship nor the personal charisma of his uncle, and the Satmar community began to experience numerous dissensions, which would have been unimaginable during the iron-fisted reign of R. Joel. A number of Satmar Hasidim refused to accept the new rebbe and pledged their allegiance instead to the late rebbe's widow, Feiga Shapiro, who resides in Kiryas Joel. Due to R. Moshe Teitelbaum's recent failing health, the Satmar community has become bitterly divided between the followers of his two sons, R. Aharon of Kiryas Joel and his younger brother, R. Zalman Leib of Williamsburg. Over the past decade, there have been numerous theological and civic disputes between the two brothers' followers,
occasionally resulting in violence. There are even two competing Satmar Yiddish weekly newspapers, both published in Brooklyn: Der Yid, which supports R. Zalman Leib, and Der Blatt, which endorses R. Aharon’s leadership. Despite these divisions, the Satmar community continues to thrive in apparently blissful isolation from the rest of American Jewry.

Boro Park and the Bobover Hasidim
The third-largest American Hasidic sect after Satmar and Lubavitch is Bobov, based in Boro Park, Brooklyn. As with Satmar, the Bobover sect is considerably larger today than it was before the Holocaust. Bobover Hasidism was founded by R. Shlomo (b. Meir Nathan) Halberstam (1847–1905), who established a major Hasidic Court and Yeshiva in the Galician town of Bobowa. His son, R. Benzion Halberstam (1874–1944), was a popular Hasidic leader who continued to oversee the growth of Bobover Hasidism in Galicia until he and almost all his followers perished in the Holocaust. R. Benzion’s son, R. Shlomo Halberstam (1908–2000), was the sole survivor of the family and was appointed Rebbe after the war. In the early 1950s, together with the very few other survivors of prewar Bobov, he took on the daunting task of establishing the first sect of Polish Hasidim in America. The Bobovers were initially based in Crown Heights, but in 1966, responding to deteriorating urban conditions, the Bobover community relocated to Boro Park. R. Shlomo Halberstam was succeeded by his son, R. Naftali Halberstam, who passed away in 2005. His succession is being contested by his son R. Benzion Halberstam and his two nephews, R. Mordechai Unger and R. Yehoshua Rubin.

Fewer than 100 families in the early 1950s, the sect has grown to include some 10,000 adherents (Mintz 1992). Hundreds of Jews continue to gravitate to Bobov each year. Two key factors explain the rapid growth of Bobover Hasidism: the charismatic personality of the late Rebbe, R. Shlomo, and the impressive Bobover educational system he created. In rather sharp contrast to the Satmar Rebbe, whose religious extremism and isolationist vigilance kept his community intact, the source of Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam’s wide appeal was his friendly, open, and relaxed demeanor, as well as his religious moderation and studious avoidance of partisan religious politics. The Bobover attitude to Zionism and the State of Israel is a case in point. Although he was no Zionist, the Bobover Rebbe was careful never to attack Israel publicly. He was equally cautious in his attitude toward other Hasidic sects. For example, while the Bobover Rebbe disapproved of the Lubavitchers’ crowning of Rabbi Menachem Schneerson as the Messiah, he refused to comment publicly on the subject, again in contrast to the open Satmar hostility to Lubavitch messianism. For many ultra-Orthodox Jews, tired of the intrigues and dissension that have plagued Hasidic life in America, the temperate Rabbi Halberstam proved to be a highly attractive leader. They therefore chose to affiliate with his court and send their children to Bobover educational institutions.

The Bobover educational network is another major factor in the growth of Bobov. The network Yeshivas and girls’ schools operated by the sect quickly earned a reputation for high educational standards, leading hundreds of Hasidim from other sects, as well as many non-Hasidic Jews, to enroll their children. Very often, the children’s educational experiences forged a family connection to the school’s sponsoring institution and ultimately to the Bobover Rebbe himself. A major attraction of the Bobover educational philosophy to non-Hasidic parents is that, unlike other Hasidic sects, which categorically prohibit college education for their yeshiva graduates, the Bobover Rebbe tended to allow his followers to attend university in pursuit of practical disciplines that would enhance their financial security. Far from leading to assimilation and attrition as many stricter Hasidic leaders feared, this openness has actually strengthened and enriched the Bobover community. For, unlike more obscurantist Hasidic sects, the Bobovers today have their own homegrown lawyers, doctors, dentists, and architects who contribute significantly to raising the community’s economic standards.

In addition to Bobov, there are about thirty smaller Hasidic groups active in Boro Park, most with their own Rebbes, synagogues, and Yeshivot. They include Amshinover, Belzer, Bostoner, Boyaner, Bialer, Gerer, Klaussenberger, Munkatcher, Rizhiner, Sighet, Spinka, Stoliner-Karliner, and Vishnitzer Hasidim. The Council of Jewish Organizations of Boro Park (COJO), founded in 1972, represents almost two hundred religious, educational, and social institutions—the majority of which are under Hasidic auspices.
The Skverer Hasidim and Squaretown

One of the important disciples of the Magid of Mezeritch was R. Nahum Twersky of Tchernobil (1730–1798). His paternal descendants all became Hasidic Rebbe in a number of Ukrainian towns, the two most important being Talne and Skvira. The Talner and Skverer Hasidic sects were almost completely wiped out by the Nazis. But the Talner Rebbe, Meshulam Zushe Twersky (d. 1972), left Europe before the rise of Nazism and settled in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury, where he established a small shtiebel (private prayer-house). After his death, his son, Professor Isadore Twersky (1930–1997) of Harvard University’s Jewish Studies Program, officiated at the Talner shtiebel, which had been relocated to the suburb of Brookline. Isadore Twersky’s son, R. Meir, currently serves as the Talner Rebbe of Boston. But the members of Boston’s small “Talner shtiebel” are more likely to be Modern Orthodox philosophers and mathematicians than Hasidim.

One of Meshulam Zushe Twersky’s cousins, Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Twersky, the Skverer Rebbe, came to New York after the war along with a handful of Hasidic survivors. The Skverer Rebbe was disheartened by the urban profanities and material temptations of New York City and yearned to re-create in America a rural, shtetl-like setting reminiscent of Skvira and more conducive to a life of piety. His Hasidim purchased several acres of farmland near Ramapo, New York, in 1954. The first sixty Hasidic families moved to the new settlement in 1958, and three years later—after numerous feuds over zoning and school board regulations with both the Jewish and gentile residents of neighboring Ramapo—the state Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Hasidim’s request to incorporate the Hasidic village of New Square.

Despite its deep poverty (since the late 1960s, New Square has consistently had the lowest per capita income of any township in New York State), zoning conflicts that have hindered its development, and the death of the charismatic Skverer Rebbe in 1968, the community has grown impressively under the leadership of R. Yaakov Yosef’s son, R. David Twersky. It has a large yeshiva and girls’ school, and an impressive Kolel (advanced yeshiva for married students). Today there are close to 600 families, with an average of eight children per family: in other words, a community of almost 6,000 (www.city-data.com/city/New-Square-New-York.html). New Square, New York, today has more Skverer Hasidim than ever lived in Skvira, Ukraine.

What is truly unique about New Square is the remarkable extent to which the dream of the old Skverer Rebbe has been realized; namely, to re-create the ambience of the prewar European Hasidic shtetl (Jewish village) in America. Unlike Satmar, the Hasidim of New Square are not politicized and do not publish in (or, for the most part, even read) the press. Radios, televisions, video recorders, and the Internet are absolutely banned from the town. A visit to New Square is the closest one can come to fathoming the vanished world of prewar European Hasidic life.

Hasidic Congregations outside New York City

Although New York was and remains the center of Hasidism in the United States, several Hasidic rabbis are functioning in other American cities. Though some are rabbis of sizable congregations, none of them has a genuinely Hasidic following of any significance. Moreover, over the past fifty years many small Hasidic synagogues around the country—in such cities as Detroit, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh—have closed, and the few followers of these Rebbe have tended to assimilate into the local non-Hasidic community or have gravitated to New York’s Hasidic centers. The main reason for the decline of Hasidism outside New York has been the inability of these small enclaves to maintain Hasidic schools and other essential religious institutions.

Despite the disappearance of most of these smaller Hasidic communities, there remain several interesting congregations led by American Hasidic rabbis. Unlike the highly autonomous New York Hasidic world, the rabbis of these smaller congregations are, as a rule, far more integrated into the local mainstream Jewish community and tend to participate more actively in public Jewish affairs. They have little choice, since, possessing little more than a modest synagogue, they depend on the broader Jewish community for almost all of their religious and social services.

The Bostoner Rebbe

The oldest and most significant of these Hasidic congregations outside New York, both numerically and in terms of its impact on the broader Jewish community, is Congregation Beth Pinchas in Brookline, Massachusetts. The congregation, which is also known as the New England
Hasidic Center, was originally founded in 1916 in Boston's West End (today, Government Center) by Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz, who immigrated to Boston from Palestine in 1914 and soon became known as the Bostoner Rebbe. Pinchas Horowitz was the first Hasidic Rebbe whose jurisdiction began in and was named after an American city. While in the West End, it was always a very modest congregation, with no more than fifty members. As the prospects for maintaining Hasidic life in Boston's inner city continued to diminish, Rabboi Horowitz left for New York in 1940 with his family and followers, where he died two years later. Although his elder son, Rabbi Moshe Horowitz, assumed the role of Bostoner Rebbe in Brooklyn, the few remaining, elderly Hasidim in Boston appointed his younger brother, Levi Yitzchok, to be their spiritual leader.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Horowitz returned to Boston in 1945 and pioneered a rejuvenation of Hasidic life there. In 1961, he moved his congregation from the declining neighborhood of Dorchester to larger quarters in the heavily Jewish suburb of Brookline and began to attract more members. The Boston-born Levi Yitzchok quickly earned a very positive reputation as a charming, genuinely spiritual, and deeply caring rabbi, and the majority of his Brookline congregation soon consisted of ba'alei teshuva (returnees) to Hasidism from the non-Orthodox and modern Orthodox communities.

The Bostoner Rebbe has made good spiritual use of Boston's two greatest human resources: students and doctors. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Bostoner Rebbe attracted hundreds of students from the Boston area's many colleges and universities. Special weekend shabbaton programs were aimed specifically at the city's unusually large Jewish student population. One of the most important communal services of the New England Hasidic Center is a medical referral and assistance agency known as ROFEH (Hebrew for “doctor”; English acronym for “Reaching Out Furnishing Emergency Healthcare”). Through this agency, the Bostoner Rebbe helps needy Jews who require specialized medical attention at one of Boston's famous hospitals, with referrals, hospitality, kosher meals, and financial assistance.

Despite the Bostoner Rebbe's impressive achievements as a religious and communal leader, his core community remains quite small. There are fewer than one hundred families in the Beth Pinchas congregation. Moreover, despite its official Hasidic affiliation, the majority of these members are not true Hasidim but mainstream Orthodox Jews who identify to varying degrees with the Hasidic warmth of the Bostoner Rebbe's congregation.

The Hornosteipler Rebbes of Milwaukee and Denver

The Orthodox Jewish community of Milwaukee was for many years led by the Hornosteipler Rebbe, Yaakov Israel Twerski, a cousin of the Skverer Rebbe. With his death in 1973, his son, Rabbi Michel Twerski, inherited the Hornosteipler community's leadership and has overseen its gradual growth. R. Michel Twerski's educational background and personal style have enabled him to retain the allegiance of the entire Orthodox Jewish community of Milwaukee, which consists mostly of non-Hasidim. From 1956 to 1961, he studied at the famous mitnagdic Yeshiva, Beth Midrash Gevoha, in Lakewood, New Jersey, where he was ordained by R. Aaron Kotler. In his own style of religious leadership and in fashioning Milwaukee's Orthodox community, he has retained elements of both the Hasidic and mitnagdic worlds.

Twerski is one of the founders of the city's most important educational institutions: the Yeshiva Elementary School, the Mesivta Yeshiva Gedolah of Milwaukee (a high school), and the Milwaukee Kolel (for advanced Talmudic studies). His own congregation, Beth Jehudah, also known as the Hornosteipler Shul, has about two hundred members. As is the case with the Bostoner Rebbe, very few of his congregants lead fully Hasidic lives. Another, slightly smaller Hornosteipler Hasidic community in Denver, Colorado, is led by his cousin, Rabbi Mordechai Twerski, another “modern Hasidic” rebbe who is deeply involved in general Jewish community affairs. As in Milwaukee, the vast majority of Hornosteipler Hasidim in Denver do not lead fully Hasidic lives. The nature of the Hasidic communities of these two cities serves as a reminder of the extent to which authentic Hasidic life in America today is almost entirely restricted to New York.

Women in Hasidic Communities

The role of women in Hasidic communities is almost entirely limited to their domestic duties as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Given the Hasidim's unusually high fertility rate and their ultraconservatism regarding the Jewish
laws of sexual modesty that require the strict public separation of men and women, this could hardly be otherwise. The most important public rituals of Hasidic religious life all take place in the rebbe’s court, where only males congregate during the Sabbath and holiday prayers and communal meals. In fact, according to the eminent Jewish social historian Jacob Katz in his classic work *Tradition and Crisis*, the emergence of Hasidism in the mid-eighteenth century originally had a seriously disruptive effect on traditional Jewish family life in Eastern Europe, as thousands of Hasidic men, along with their mature (post-bar mitzvah age) sons, began to journey what were often great distances to spend the Sabbath and Jewish holidays with their rebbes, leaving the women and girls at home.

The only time Hasidic women have any direct contact with the rebbe is during specially arranged, individual meetings, which are typically scheduled for Saturday night after the end of the Jewish Sabbath. A notable exception to this pattern was the innovative practice of the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of meeting periodically in the central Habad synagogue in Brooklyn with hundreds of members of the women’s organization N’Shai U-Neshot Habad (the Wives and Women of Habad) during its quarterly conferences. The Lubavitcher Rebbe also approved of greater Torah study for women, for which he was roundly criticized by the late Satmar Rebbe, Joel Teitelbaum, and the Belzer Rebbe, Yissachar Dov Rokeach.

**Education**

Today, the curriculum at most Hasidic Yeshivot is largely indistinguishable from that of traditional non-Hasidic Orthodox, or mitnagdic, Yeshivot, where the focus is almost exclusively on Torah (with the classical rabbinic commentaries), Mishnah, and Talmud. There is very little formal instruction in the classical, esoteric Hasidic mystical texts, which are mainly studied by adults or by yeshiva students under careful adult supervision, during the Sabbath and holiday afternoons. Hasidic girls’ schools offer a more limited curriculum of religious studies in which only those aspects of Jewish law (halakha) relevant to women (e.g., the laws of kashrut, child-rearing, and ritual purity) are taught. A notable exception is the curriculum in the Habad network of Yeshivot, known as Tomchei Temimim (Supporters of the Pure), where there is a strong emphasis on the study of *Likkutei Amarim: Tanya*, the work of Hasidism by the Habad founder, R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, and where girls are taught classical Jewish texts such as Torah and Mishnah. For the purposes of governmental accreditation by the states’ departments of education, the minimally mandated curriculum of general studies is offered at all Hasidic schools but is usually treated perfunctorily.

**Occupations**

Because university education is generally proscribed in Hasidic society, very few Hasidim work in the legal, medical, or scientific professions. A notable exception is to be found among adult *ba’alei teshuva* (returnees) to Hasidism, many of whom are professionals and academics. Also, there are a significant number of university-trained members of the Bobover Hasidic community due to the Bobover Rebbe’s more lenient attitude toward university education. Most Hasidic men work in a variety of retail businesses, and a large number are shop proprietors in Hasidic neighborhoods. The Hasidim are very highly represented in the diamond and clothing industries in New York City. However, since the high-tech revolution, many Hasidim have entered almost all aspects of the computer industry, and quite a few have made significant fortunes in computer programming as well as hardware and software manufacturing and retailing.

**Conclusion**

By all social, demographic, and religious indicators, the Hasidim in America constitute a secure and growing community in a country that only a generation ago was considered completely inhospitable to traditional Judaism. Unlike the mainstream American Jewish community, the Hasidim are not confronted with the specter of diminishing numbers in their ranks due to increasing levels of assimilation and intermarriage. To the contrary: attrition from the Hasidic community is far less common today than it was just twenty years ago.

Although the exact number of Hasidim—who are notoriously mistrustful of polls and who generally refuse to count their own numbers in accordance with a halakhic prohibition against “counting the heads of the children of Israel”—is very difficult to ascertain with any measure of precision, it is generally estimated that there are today
more than 200,000 Hasidic Jews in the United States, the large majority residing in the New York tri-state area. The remarkable growth of the American Hasidic Jewish community since the end of World War II has defied the expectations of almost all Jewish historians, sociologists, and demographers. Given the unusually high Hasidic fertility rate, the young age of Hasidic marriages, and the very low rate of attrition from the Hasidic community—all contrasted with the diminishing general American Jewish population—the proportion of Hasidim in American Jewry will grow exponentially for the foreseeable future, as the Hasidim remain its fastest-growing sector.

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References and Further Reading

Women in the Development of American Judaism

In the years since the ordination of the first American woman rabbi in 1972, female access to religious leadership has brought far-reaching change to American Jewish religious and cultural life. Opening the male club of the rabbinate brought forth a revolution of increased participation, the impact of which extends well beyond the relatively small number of women who have become rabbis or cantors. Changing ideas and expectations for women have opened new possibilities in every American Jewish denomination. Women have found a place in the once male-dominated arena of public Jewish worship through the creation of new ceremonies (such as baby naming), the adaptation of existing ceremonies (such as adult bar mitzvah), and the revival of traditional female ceremonies that had fallen into disuse (such as celebrating the new moon). Moreover, when women rabbis broke open men's control of Jewish spiritual leadership, they expanded access to Jewish leadership and learning for both men and women. As striking as these changes have been, they do not represent a new pattern in American Judaism. In fact, much of the growth and development of the American Jewish community over the last two hundred years has been keyed to women's evolving religious roles.

Historically, female Jewish religiosity has been most actively identified with home observance. Myriad rituals and practices that are critical to traditional Jewish life—from marital purity, to the laws of kashrut, to preparing holiday meals—fell within the purview of women. Overall, although a minority of American Jews have always maintained strict standards of personal observance, American Jewish life has been marked by laxity in religious observance, with mainly symbolic attention accorded Jewish law and life. In every era, however, women's choices, particularly among immigrants, have greatly influenced the varied levels of personal observance main-