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The Hasidic Pedagogical Revival in Poland

by Glenn Dynner,
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In his book, Dynner depicts the rebirth of Hasidism after World War I and its growth throughout the inter-war period. This renewed Hasidic movement emerged with a focus on education, appealing to Jewish youth and providing a counterweight to secularism, Zionism, and socialism. In the excerpt featured below, Dynner discusses the contributions to this Hasidic resurgence in education and Torah study made by the esteemed Rebbe Ben Tzion Halberstam of Galicia.

*Consistent with the style of *The Galitzianer*, this excerpt is published without endnotes, which are extensive in the book. As indicated in those endnotes, many of the quotes attributed to R. Halberstam in this segment come from his commentary *Kedushat Tziyon*, which was redacted by his son, R. Shlomo Halberstam.*

IN THE AFTERMATH of the First World War, the Bobover Rebbe, R. Ben Tzion Halberstam, managed a veritable “resurrection of the dead in the towns of Poland,” according to one Bobover witness. His first feat was to reestablish his shattered court and Etz Hayyim Yeshiva in Bobowa, a small town in the Carpathian foothills of western Galicia, then part of the Second Polish Republic.



R. Ben Tzion Halberstam (1874–1941), center; Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York

“This was a delightful town,” recalls a former resident. “The buildings were kind of ramshackle and set on crooked streets of dirt and cobblestone. The streets were filled with bearded Jews and children playing. Dogs ran barking after wagons and blue woodsmoke hung about the rooftops. Bobowa was a quiet place.”

However, the yeshiva itself was anything but quiet. Upon its reopening in 1922, it drew hundreds of students from both Hasidic homes and the “outside,” all united in clamorous, full-time study. Halberstam would go on to establish at least 33 Etz Hayyim branches across Galicia in the face of formidable challenges.

Galvanized by Challenge

Halberstam was driven by a sense of cultural embattlement. The recent successes of Zionism and socialism, he believed, had only been made possible by the wartime destruction of Torah institutions, as a result of which “misguided ideas had entrenched themselves day after day in the Jewish street; and profane movements, organizations, and parties had cast their nets and ensnared numerous innocent souls in their idolatry, derived from the profane teachings of every Gentile land.”

At the same time, the Polish state was beginning to mandate a highly ethnonationalist public primary school education in an attempt to Polonize and “civilize” the country’s Jewish and other minority children. Halberstam believed that the Jewishness of adolescents could only be salvaged by means of full-time, closed-circuit, advanced Torah study in a protected yeshiva environment.

An American named Isaac Blau was so impressed during his 1922 visit to Halberstam’s Etz Hayyim yeshiva that he established a society for its upkeep upon his return to New York. Etz Hayyim would vie successfully with iconic, non-Hasidic yeshivas, Hebraist and Yiddishist secondary schools, and even universities, demonstrating how the era’s daunting challenges to Hasidism could prove more galvanizing than demoralizing.

The Fight against “External Wisdom”

For Halberstam, secular education, or “external wisdom,” represented the gravest current threat to Jewish survival. Increasing numbers of youths were enrolling in secularist gymnasia (high schools) and had “distanced themselves from the ways of Judaism.” But after speaking with Halberstam, they would often abandon that path and enter his yeshiva. Those who lacked the requisite background were brought up to speed by fellow students, sometimes working in shifts.

Halberstam guided every aspect of his students’ lives, monitoring their behavior and dress, finding them matches, underwriting their weddings, and teaching them potent mystical techniques like weeping in isolation (*hitbodedut*). “When a youth emerged from his own room, his eyes were swollen from all the sobbing and outpouring of emotion,” according to one account. When he poured out his heart before the rebbe, revealing all his hidden sins, the student would declare his willingness to accept whatever self-mortification the rebbe prescribed. Halberstam rejected any

penances that “sadden a person,” however, insisting only that the penitent adopt “great perseverance” in his Torah studies. The intensive study regimen was enhanced by prayer and chants (*niggunim*) that produced “rivers of tears” and transported students into a state of divine communion (*devekut*).

Halberstam also drew frequently upon an age-old xenophobic strain in Jewish mysticism. The hidden purpose of the Gentiles’ external wisdom, he explained to parents and students, was to draw Jews away from God whenever physical torments of Jews proved insufficient. External wisdom could take either Christian or secular forms; it was all the same as far as he was concerned. When Christian missionaries sent a package of books to his yeshiva, for example, Halberstam ceremoniously burned the books, performed a new chant, and fulminated against reading *any* external wisdom or “debating with secularists of *any* kind,” for they all sought to divert Jewish souls.

Halberstam was acutely aware of the practical allure of external wisdom, warning, “Days have come in which ‘the boisterous voice of the people’ [Ex. 32:17] declares that it is necessary to learn the languages of the Gentiles and their wisdom...for according to their base opinion this is a source of livelihood in these times.” Nevertheless, secular education should be avoided as much as possible. “Everyone knows their children’s fate,” Halberstam said of parents of gymnasium and university students. “In the end their children’s ‘feet slip’ [Psalms 18:37] and they become obstinate towards their parents; they distance themselves more and more from their parents and become estranged.”

Halberstam admitted that some advanced “external wisdom” was necessary in the current economy. Rather than forbid it completely, therefore, he imposed a strict hierarchy. External wisdom should only be a servant to Torah learning; and only choice “servants,” that is, those absolutely

necessary for learning a trade, should dwell in the same tent as the “master,” Torah knowledge. The order was crucial: “First, instill in them a fear of Heaven and knowledge of commandments ... afterwards, teach them a craft or wisdom with which to support themselves.” Reversing the order would “estrangle them by leading them into bad culture.” A father must fortify his son with Torah, that is, “stuff him like an ox” (Talmud Ketubot 50a), and only afterwards provide him, as briefly as possible, with vocational education.

Halberstam was occasionally approached by an older penitent who had “returned to God with all his heart to mend the distortions from his days of concealment” but who had, alas, already educated his children in gymnasia. The penitent would weep profusely, citing, “I raised children and reared them but they went astray and rebelled against me” (Isaiah 1:2). There was little Halberstam could do but “weep and weep for the generation that is perverted beyond repair and will face future divine judgment.” In the end, the only way to ensure that one’s son would become a “fitting” Jew was to educate him according to “the old ways of the prior generations, the ways of our fathers and their fathers’ fathers, and not, God forbid, in the manner of the innovators.” In any case, the Torah contained “all kinds of wisdom, and when he is filled and adorned with the wisdom of Torah he will not be deprived of the other wisdoms.”

Halberstam’s tolerance for vocational education might seem to permit gymnasium and university study, which could be construed as vocational. But he left no room for doubt. The knowledge offered there was “contaminated with deceptive opinions and heresy.” The Evil Urge supplied clever rationales, such as “medical training and the like,” but Jewish youths emerged as sinners, rebels, and transgressors. It might happen that a Jewish youth became, say, a lawyer, and actually returned to full observance. But this was just another ruse of the Evil Urge, for now other parents would say to

themselves, “Is that lawyer not Torah observant? So why should I withhold my own son from that profession?” And their own children would fail to withstand the test.

“Why do you want to make your son a Goy?” Halberstam chided a widow who was contemplating sending her son to a gymnasium, employing a crude term for a non-Jew. “I will make him a Torah scholar.” His quip managed a deft mental inversion: it was the secular-educated Jew, not the traditionalist, who lacked refinement.

Other Hasidic leaders resorted to xenophobic rhetoric as well. A Belzer Hasidic author attempted to grapple with the undeniable achievements of non-Jewish scientists and scholars by explaining that secular wisdom, science, rationalism, and foreign languages were fine for Gentiles, immersed as they are in the natural world, but argued that such knowledge only debased holy Jewish souls. Socialism and communism were particularly misguided, he added, because they claimed that there is no difference between Jews and non-Jews.

Some rhetoric was explicitly racialized. The Gerer Rebbe reminded his listeners that all Jews have a “form in the likeness of God thanks to the forefathers, for the forefathers implanted holiness into Israel so that their bodies would also be holy.” His theory echoed that of R. Isaac Jacob Rabinowicz, the Bialer Rebbe: “The four elements and substance of Jews are different from the substance of the nations of the world,” Rabinowicz explained. “And even though it appears that [the Jew] is clothed in a body like the rest of the nations, if he cultivates holiness he will see that even his bodily essence differs from theirs.” As such notions collided with a basic tenet of Judaism, conversion, Rabinowicz hastened to add that when a Gentile converts to Judaism, “his nature is completely transformed, and his entire body and all his 248 limbs are transformed, as well.”

From Safe Haven to Spiritual Exile

Most interwar Polish Hasidic leaders nevertheless nurtured an image of Poland as a “kingdom of mercy” in which Torah study had been allowed to flourish for centuries. Just as God had commanded Israel to pray for the peace and prosperity of the city in which they dwelled (Jeremiah 29:7), Halberstam argued, Polish Jews must pray for Poland’s peace and prosperity. Poland was not like ancient Egypt, which had possessed great wealth but had brutally oppressed the Israelites. Poland was “run by good people and many respected ministers whose hands extend to act mercifully with us, and it is incumbent upon us to pray for the kingdom’s peace.” It was not conventional patriotism, but the gratitude of a long-term guest.

Halberstam’s gratitude seems genuine, for whenever followers would seek his permission to move to safer and more prosperous places like Germany, Belgium, France, or America, he would warn them that it would be a grave mistake to leave Poland, a place of vibrant Torah study, for a “land of great drought” (Hosea 13:5). A person should never endanger his own soul and the souls of his offspring—not even for a “huge amount of money, gold, and precious gems.” For who could be sure they would withstand the pressure to assimilate? Preserving the body meant little compared with preserving the soul, he emphasized, reaffirming a conviction that many traditionalist leaders would retain, tragically, down to the Holocaust.

Such pronouncements undercut the suggestion that Jews were clamoring to escape Poland throughout the interwar period. To the contrary, Jewish traditionalists often engaged in a kind of counter-migration, fleeing to Poland from places like the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany and Austria while eschewing safer, more prosperous countries that seemed to pose a different kind of threat.

It was only after the death of Marshal Józef Piłsudski [a Polish political leader] in 1935, when a more hostile Polish regime began to “decree evil and hard decrees to remove the livelihood of Israel,” that traditionalist leaders would begin to question Polish hospitality. Now the rhetoric became alarmist.

According to a 1938 sermon by R. Israel Shapira, the Grodzisker Rebbe, the Polish government continuously devised ways to “banish the name of Israel from the world, God forbid” by means of two distinct tactics: by “decreeing evil decrees for Israel to embitter their lives, God forbid, or by means of rapprochement, to make Israel equal to them legally [that is, by emancipation] so that they will assimilate with them, God forbid. And this second way is more dangerous for Israel.” The biblical Moses had been barred from entering the Promised Land because he had failed to completely renounce his Egyptian identity, Shapira explained. “How great is the sin of those who are [voluntarily] educated by the Non-Jews,” he concluded.

R. Yehuda Aryeh Leib Blokherovitch, writing in 1939, conceived Polish Jewry as inhabiting two kinds of exile, bodily and spiritual:

Bodily exile is when the haters of Israel torment the Jews by means of bodily torments, with bodily beatings and instigating pogroms against Israel, instituting heavy taxes and levies, and the like. But *spiritual exile* is the weapon that the more wise haters of Israel use to harm them, for they know that the children of Israel are members of a chosen people and a holy nation and that there is no weapon which can succeed; so they seek to lead them astray from their divine service without tormenting Israel at first by means of bodily torments but, to the contrary, they befriend Israel like beloved neighbors and sneakily seek to seduce and lead them astray by establishing schools for Israel in which they teach them their manners and ways and the like.

Polish schools enticed only light-minded Jews, Blokherovitch concluded; yet they too would eventually endure bodily torments.

Polonization and Discrimination

While such rhetoric was undeniably xenophobic, Polish educational reformers were quite explicit about their assimilationist aims and were quite xenophobic themselves. Their unabashed goal was Polonization—first and foremost by means of mandatory public primary schools.

“Every non-Pole in the Polish State must be raised under the influence of Polish culture, a culture of great tolerance, with which he will be easily reconciled, and his lawful aspirations will never be thwarted,” explained a prominent educational theorist. Polish primary schooling would exert a magnetic influence over the minorities’ weaker cultures, promised Stanisław Grabski, minister of religious beliefs and public education.

Minister of Education Kazimierz Bartel did warn against “any forceful imposition of outward attributes of Polishness in schools...anything that may bear the features of national oppression.” But his successor, Janusz Jędrzejewicz, explained paternalistically that the role of primary schools was to teach all non-ethnic Polish citizens “what is the common good for everyone,” that is, Polish Catholic values.

Years later, the Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004) reflected on the outcome of these Polonization efforts:

Such a school, by replacing a many-cultured heritage with national attitudes cut according to the latest fashion, must also have laid the foundations for antisemitism among its pupils. The Jewish religious literature that sprang from this part of Europe was translated into many languages and won recognition all over the world. One has only to pick up the first good anthology of religious thought that comes to hand to run across Hasidic proverbs and to start

thinking with respect about the wise men in out-of-the-way small towns—the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Nachman from Bratslav, Rabbi [Yitzhak] of Lublin, and Rabbi [Pinchas] of Koretz, men who had reached the summits of evangelical love. Here too, later on, Yiddish secular prose and poetry were born, with their unique tragedy and inimitable humor. But we, in the very city where those books were printed, knew literally nothing about them. Several fell into my hands many years later when I bought them in New York—I had to learn English in order to make contact with something that had been only an arm’s length away.

An openness to Jewish literature, Miłosz believed, might have done much to banish prejudice.

Alas, officials in the fledgling Second Polish Republic were in no mood for Jewish literature. Zygmunt Dreszer, a moderate, even admitted that Jews were probably more inclined than Poland’s other minorities “to accept and feel patriotism towards the [Polish] state,” but feared that they were too numerous and distinct. “Polish policy with respect to Jews must go in the direction of the greatest possible reduction of their percentage vis a vis the Polish people, and after that—towards assimilating those who remain with us,” he advised. “The assimilation of the Jews is undesirable for eugenic reasons,” argued Karol Stojanowski, the ethnonationalist Endek [Poland’s fascist National Democracy party] leader. They must either emigrate, limit their demographic growth, or simply die out.” There was little room to hope that Polish Jews would gain acceptance as Jews in the new Poland.

Nor was there much hope of Jewish economic advancement. Officials found it unacceptable that Jews occupied certain lucrative economic niches; for example, Jews constituted only 9.5 percent of the population but 68.6 percent of all merchants in 1921. So they proceeded to Polonize the economy. They taxed Jewish merchants disproportionately; implemented Sunday rest laws that compelled pious Jews to take two days off; nationalized Jewish

niches like lumber, tobacco, liquor, salt, and the lottery; routinized discriminatory lending and licensing; barred Jews from government employment; and targeted Jewish-owned enterprises for renovations and relocations by means of “sanitation decrees.”

Ten years later, the proportion of Jewish merchants had dropped to 52.5 percent and Jewish unemployment had skyrocketed. One-third of the community languished at a subsistence level, kept afloat only by American-funded free loans. After Piłsudski’s death in 1935, the government endorsed anti-Jewish boycotts and picketing of Jewish stores and stalls, which frequently escalated into physical assaults and pogroms.

Those Jews who did embrace Polonization found their path to professional advancement and social acceptance repeatedly barred by discrimination. Abraham Rotfarb, a young Polish Jew, describes the feeling of cultural limbo:

I’m a Jew and a Pole, or rather, I was a Jew, but, under the influence of the environment, language, culture, and literature, I evolved into a Pole—I love Poland. Most of all, its liberation and the heroism of its battles for independence thrill my heart. But I don’t love the Poland that hates me for no reason, that tears at my soul, that pushes me into apathy, melancholy, and dark aimlessness. I hate the Poland that doesn’t want me as a Pole and sees me only as a Jew, that wants to chase me out of the country in which I was born and raised. That Poland I hate—I hate its anti-Semitism. You anti-Semites, I blame you for my inferiority complex and for the fact that I don’t know what I am: a Jew or a Pole....

I am already lost.

Rotfarb became a Zionist. “I can imagine the journey to the land of my dreams,” he wrote. “I can see myself walking behind a plow with a rifle on my shoulder, with a free heart, a free gait, and a proud peaceful gaze.” Most young, acculturated Jews,

like Rotfarb, resolved to “join *some* organization,” often a Zionist or Bundist youth group.

Assimilation Fueling Hasidism

The friction caused by the absurd policy of coercive assimilation amid ongoing discrimination also helped regenerate Hasidism, whose leaders had evinced mistrust of the dominant culture all along. In addition, Hasidic leaders argued that secularist Jewish alternatives merely imported alien forms of knowledge and thus further estranged the youth from authentic Jewishness. If Polish public schools yielded assimilation in Polish, they warned, Zionist schools yielded assimilation in Hebrew, and Leftist Jewish schools yielded assimilation in Yiddish. It was all the same. Secularist Jewish educators might not fully understand the danger they posed, one author allowed, but by injecting heresy and doubt into the youth, they threatened to “gradually uproot everything.”

As Torah study was deemed the only real remedy, Hasidic leaders began to build schools at a furious pace. Aguda [the Orthodox political party], for its part, established *heders* with just enough secular education to be considered acceptable substitutes for public primary schools, and sponsored schools for young women and *yeshivas* that would theoretically rival gymnasia and universities. Nearly all Hasidic leaders, whether affiliated with Aguda or not, resisted the regime and its ostensible secularist Jewish accomplices by institutionalizing Torah study on a vast scale.

Editor’s Note: Glenn Dynner is the Carl and Dorothy Bennett Professor of Judaic Studies and director of the Bennett Center for Judaic Studies at Fairfield University. In addition to *The Light of Learning*, he is the author of *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford University Press, 2006) and *Yankel’s Tavern: Jews, Liquor, & Life in the Kingdom of Poland* (Oxford University Press, 2013).