

## Chapter 6

# Tosh, Between Earth and Moon: A Hasidic Rebbe's Followers and his Teachings

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### Introduction

The “Hasidim of the earth” and the “Hasidim of the moon”—these are the witty and evocative terms formulated by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern (2006) to highlight a split within the academic study of Hasidic Judaism.<sup>1</sup> This is the chasm between scholars with a sociological or social-historical perspective, on the one hand, and intellectual historians working with Hasidic texts, on the other. For example, Glenn Dynner’s *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society*, largely based on archival research and interested in economic and political questions, illustrates the “earth” approach to early Hasidism (2006). Rachel Elijor’s *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, with a focus on Hasidic texts about spirituality and theology, epitomizes the “moon” approach (2006).<sup>2</sup> In more recent scholarship, a modern Hasidic leader, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is depicted very differently in Heilman & Friedman’s (2010) sociologically oriented historical biography and Wolfson’s (2010) text-based study of Schneerson as a mystical thinker.<sup>3</sup>

On its own, each of these two approaches is likely to lead to distortion. Neglecting Hasidic texts makes for an incomplete picture of a highly literate and textually prolific community. Texts in themselves, however, can be subjected to almost any reading. Therefore, when Hasidism is treated as a body of texts, it lends itself to creative misinterpretation.<sup>4</sup> Scholars focused on written Hasidic sources have often been critiqued as promoting their own ideas in Hasidic guise.<sup>5</sup> Some of these pitfalls might be avoided by studying Hasidic

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<sup>1</sup> See, in print, Petrovsky-Shtern 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Note Dynner’s (2010) own critique of Elijor’s book: “Hasidic leaders are not treated as real personalities inhabiting diverse places in Eastern and East-Central Europe.” At the same time, Dynner acknowledges that, “As some recent treatments have tended to avoid Hasidic texts altogether, Elijor’s reminder of the potency of those texts is quite welcome.”

<sup>3</sup> Note Wolfson’s critique of Heilman & Friedman for describing Schneerson’s years in Paris without reference to his scholarly diaries of the period, in Cohen 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Jane Enkin for this insight.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Lewis 2009, 42-5, and HaCohen 2008, on Martin Buber, and the critiques of Faierstein 2005, 165 and Nadler 2006, 281-82, on Shaul Magid.

books with attention to the communities in which they are produced and first read. According to literary critic Stanley Fish, texts receive meaning as they are read, through the assumptions and approaches to reading shared by specific “interpretive communities” of readers (1980, 167-73). In today’s Hasidic world, an author and his intended readers are typically members of the same Hasidic group, often residing in the same locale. In this context, the “interpretive communities” of interest to the researcher are identifiable groups of Hasidic people. Thus, “*The concept of interpretive community provides a bridge between literary studies and the social sciences*” (Darnell 2008, 102, italics in original).

Taking up Petrovsky-Shtern’s implied challenge to bridge “earth” and “moon,” this paper, co-written by a sociologist, William Shaffir, and a textual scholar, Justin Jaron Lewis, takes what we believe to be an innovative approach to the study of Hasidism by exploring the published teachings of a living Hasidic rebbe in the context of his community’s use of and response to these teachings.

### **The Tosher Rebbe**

The only Hasidic rebbe (spiritual master with a community of followers) currently based in Canada is the Tosher Rebbe, Rabbi Meshulim Feish Lowy.<sup>6</sup> He lives among many of his followers in Kiryas Tosh<sup>7</sup> (or simply “Tosh”), a thriving, primarily Yiddish-speaking, completely Hasidic suburb of Boisbriand, Quebec, near Montreal. Born in Hungary in 1921, the Tosher Rebbe descends from a line of holy men; his great-grandfather was a disciple of the famous Rebbe Isaac Ayzik of Komarno (1806-1874).<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Lowy came to Montreal as part of the post-holocaust influx of Hungarian Hasidim, but left the city in 1963 and established a yeshiva for teenage boys in what was then a rural area. There, he was gradually recognized as a rebbe (rather than merely a rabbi) and the group of Hasidim connected with the yeshiva grew, by in-migration and a high birthrate, into the present Tosher community of a few thousand. Hasidic visitors come to Tosh from New York and elsewhere to ask for the Rebbe’s blessing, and there are Tosher congregations in Montreal, Brooklyn, and London, England. Several volumes of the Rebbe’s teachings and stories are in print. This article is based primarily on Justin Jaron Lewis’ reading of these books, and on a visit to Kiryas Tosh by both authors of this

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<sup>6</sup> On rebbes in Canada in earlier periods see Lapidus 2004.

<sup>7</sup> *Kiryas Tosh*: “Tosh Town.” Tosh (or “Tash” or “Tush”) is the Yiddish name of the Hungarian town Tas or Nyírtass, where the Rebbe’s great-grandfather lived.

<sup>8</sup> On this rebbe see Faienstein 1999, 261-93. The rebbes of the Tosher lineage begin with Rebbe Isaac Ayzik’s disciple, Meshulam Feish Segal-Loewy, father of Elimelech Segal-Loewy, father of Mordechai Segal-Loewy of Demecser, father of the present Tosher Rebbe.

article in summer 2009.<sup>9</sup> During this visit, William Shaffir, who has authored sociological articles about Tosh,<sup>10</sup> asked a dozen Tosher men about the Rebbe's books and the role of his teachings in the community.<sup>11</sup>

### The Rebbe's Books

The books of teachings and stories ascribed to the Tosher Rebbe, published between 1993 and 2009, are collectively titled *Avoydes Avoyde*,<sup>12</sup> "the service of the service," a phrase from Numbers 4:47 alluding to the Rebbe's descent from the Tribe of Levi. The first volume, *Sikhes Koydesh* (Holy Conversations, hereafter SK)<sup>13</sup> consists mainly of stories about Hasidic rebbes. It is in Hebrew, the sacred language of Hasidic literature, in a clearly legible font. The subsequently published work was a two-volume set, *Imres Koydesh* (Holy Sayings, hereafter IK I, IK II), in Yiddish, the Tosher vernacular, consisting primarily of teachings based on the weekly Torah portions read in synagogue.<sup>14</sup> This was followed by another two-volume set of teachings on the weekly Torah portions, this time in Hebrew, in Rashi script,<sup>15</sup> titled *Dibres Koydesh* (Holy Words, hereafter DK I, DK II).<sup>16</sup> The physical size of these volumes increased from one compilation to the next, reflecting the greater prestige of what was regarded as more scholarly reading matter. In 2009, however, an expanded edition of *Sikhes Koydesh* appeared, this time in two volumes, the same size as IK. The first volume is identical in content with SK, based on talks delivered from September 1988-September 1990. The second (SK II) is previously unpublished material, based on talks from September 1990-September 1992.

Dedications in the end matter of these books indicate that their publication was financed by donations, a common procedure in religious Jewish publishing. They are available for sale at the publisher's home in Kiryas Tosh and at the bookstore there. They can also be found in Hasidic bookstores in New York, and through the online bookseller nehora.com.<sup>17</sup> We did not get a clear answer about how many are in circulation, but all but the newest have been printed more than once.

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<sup>9</sup> Credit is also due to Allyson Lee, research assistant to Justin Jaron Lewis at an early stage of this project.

<sup>10</sup> See Shaffir 1998, Shaffir 2000, as well as Shaffir 2010, a website about Tosh.

<sup>11</sup> Some of these conversations took place in Yiddish, others in English; the English is usually non-standard, since the informants' first language is Yiddish.

<sup>12</sup> Transliterations are based on the YIVO system for Hebrew words in Yiddish.

<sup>13</sup> Published 1993/4 (Hebrew year 5754), third printing 2002.

<sup>14</sup> 1996/7 (5757) and 1997/8 (5758), second printing 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Rashi script is a font traditionally used to distinguish commentaries from the main text of the Torah or Talmud, and somewhat harder to read than standard Hebrew fonts; it marks these books as intended for a religiously literate readership.

<sup>16</sup> 2002/3 (5763), 2003/4 (5764).

<sup>17</sup> See <http://nehora.com/index.cfm/product/7631/avodas-avodah---sechos-kodesh-mtosh.cfm>.

We were told that the Rebbe's books are widely owned and read in Tosh and beyond. As one Tosher said, "*In shtub, yeder hot dos*"<sup>18</sup> (Everyone [in Tosh] has [the book] at home)." One longstanding member of the community showed us the Rebbe's books on his shelf, deliberately in a handy location. He commented, "I don't lie to people—I should look [into the Rebbe's books] more... But my children learn more, and so does my wife." Another Tosher told us, "In all the shuls"<sup>19</sup> from Tosh, when everybody sits down for *shaleshudes*<sup>20</sup> we're reading the Rebbe's Torah."<sup>21</sup> In the yeshiva, adolescent students made sure that we saw SK II which had just appeared in print. One close follower of the Rebbe stated that these books are widely studied among various groups of Hasidim. He had seen the Rebbe's books in two Hasidic synagogues in Israel, even though the Rebbe has not visited there for many years.

### Intended Readership

The Rebbe's motivation for offering his teachings, as stated in his books, is his loving concern for his Hasidim, particularly the yeshiva students: "All of us are a holy fellowship, 'brothers and friends' [Psalm 122:8]. I love you and I am seeking your own good; that is why I must speak to you" (IK I, 36). According to Hasidim who were involved in producing the books, the initial intended readers were former students in the Tosher yeshiva now living elsewhere:

We have so much *talmidim*<sup>22</sup> around the world that was already passed here five years, ten years ago, who remember, not seeing the Rebbe any more—it will give them a reminder of what the Rebbe said, they will feel back like they're in yeshiva.

Like most Hasidic literature, these books are thus intended for Hasidic men, adolescent or adult. (As one Tosher noted, "If you read [the Rebbe's] books, most of them don't apply to girls." The Hasid who mentioned that his wife studies the Rebbe's books quickly added, "My wife is a *frume neshome*"<sup>23</sup>... not standard!")

Over the last several years, we heard, the Rebbe has been in failing health. He is no longer teaching or storytelling—scarcely speaking at all. In this context, his books can act as reminders of his presence for those living in Tosh

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<sup>18</sup> Our transliterations of Yiddish generally follow the standard YIVO system rather than reproducing Tosher pronunciation, which reflects the Yiddish of prewar Hungary. —Yiddishists will note the non-“standard” word order here, increasingly characteristic of Hasidic Yiddish; see Newman (forthcoming), section VII.

<sup>19</sup> Shul, shuls: synagogue(s).

<sup>20</sup> *Shaleshudes*: The third, or final, festive meal of the Sabbath.

<sup>21</sup> “The Rebbe's Torah”: in Hasidic usage, his spiritual teachings.

<sup>22</sup> *Talmidim*: Students.

<sup>23</sup> *Frume neshome*: A pious soul.

as well. One Hasid mentioned, “Today, the Rebbe doesn’t talk like he was talking before, [so] at the *shaleshudes* we read this in the shul.” Another stated,

Whoever reads the Rebbe’s books and knows the Rebbe feels that the Rebbe is talking to them... You remember the motions he was doing when he talked... It’s so close, the language that you’re reading, the way he was talking, it’s unbelievable!

According to Hasidim we spoke to, another purpose of publishing the books was to respond to a desire beyond Toshi circles to access the Rebbe’s words: “The rest of the world started to ask—we are also a human being, we need this, and it was such a big demand of this, so many people were asking for it.”

### **The Goal: Experience of Divine Light**

Life in Tosh, as in most Hasidic groups, is marked by behavioural expectations regarding eating, prayer, marital relations, holy days, clothing, and so on, which set the group apart from non-Jews, more secularized Jews and even, to some extent, from members of other streams of traditionalist Judaism.

The restrictiveness and conservatism of Hasidic life in our time has often been contrasted with the revolutionary energy of the beginnings of Hasidism in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe.<sup>24</sup> Many observers see this “deepening conservatism” as diminishing spirituality, in contrast with the early Hasidic cultivation of “mystical consciousness based on a heightened awareness of divine immanence” (Nadler 2005, 611).

A turn away from spirituality is not to be found in the Toshi Rebbe’s books. Within a context of restrictive behavioural assumptions, the teachings in these books are presented as spiritual direction, advice on how to get close to God. As the introduction to IK notes, the Rebbe was accustomed to saying during his discourses, “The essence of the whole lesson is... for us to see from it how we can be drawn closer to the Father in heaven” (I, 6).

In Eastern European traditional Judaism, Torah study—the study of holy books, especially the Talmud—was the most respected religious activity. Some early Hasidim de-emphasized study in favour of prayer, but this did not last. Tosh itself was founded around a yeshiva. The Rebbe’s perspective on Torah study, however, is distinctly Hasidic, emphasizing spiritual experience:

The essence of the purpose of the Torah is for a person to merit to feel the “pleasantness of the Lord” [Psalm 90:17] while occupied with Torah, for as a person is studying Torah, the light of God, hidden in His Torah, is revealed within him (DK II, 88).

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<sup>24</sup> A further increase in stringency and rigidity has been noted since the Holocaust; regarding this trend among Hasidim in Canada, see Lapidus 2004, 17.

In general, the Rebbe's books speak in experiential terms which recall the "heightened awareness of divine immanence"<sup>25</sup> associated with early Hasidism:

Thus a person will feel sweetness in his prayers.... and he will feel the One Above all day long. Wherever he goes, the light of God will shine for him; he will feel sweetness all day long (IK II, 22; cf. IK I, 56; SK, 18).

On different occasions in the past, each of us has been briefly presented to the Rebbe to receive his blessing. We met a small old man with bright eyes and a beautiful smile. His blessing left us with feelings of happiness. It seems entirely plausible that he has achieved the clarity and joy described in his teachings: "Oh! How sweet it is when you feel the One Above" (IK I, 42).

### **The Means: Subduing the Body to the Soul**

Haym Soloveitchik, in an influential article on late-twentieth-century Orthodox Judaism, argues that with the unconscious acculturation of Orthodox Jews into consumer culture came "the gradual disappearance of the ascetic ideal." For centuries rabbis had advocated "constant exercises in self-denial;" beginning in the mid-twentieth century, increased prosperity led to an increased acceptance of self-indulgence: "The thousand-year struggle of the soul with the flesh has finally come to a close" (Soloveitchik 1994, 80-81).<sup>26</sup>

This does not apply to the teachings of the Toshiel Rebbe. How is one to attain the sweet consciousness of feeling divine light? The Rebbe advises immersion in spiritual life through liturgical and personal prayer, Torah study, and helping others with their spiritual endeavours, combined with ceaseless struggle against the body's greed and laziness. His teachings are based on a body-soul dualism, qualified by the notion that the body can be subdued to the soul. As we read, in phrases drawn from biblical, rabbinic and Hasidic sources:

The soul is completely pure, as we say every day [in morning prayers], "My God, the soul You have placed in me is pure." It is hewn from under the Throne of Glory, it is a portion of God on high. The body, however, made of dust, is vulnerable to all kinds of impurity. But if a Jew nullifies his body, [subduing it] to the will of the soul... then the body itself also becomes pure, like the soul (IK II, 18; cf. SK, 234).<sup>27</sup>

In light of this dualism, life becomes a relentless combat with the body:

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<sup>25</sup> For this quote see the reference on the previous page (Nadler 2005, 611).

<sup>26</sup> Soloveitchik acknowledges that some Hasidic groups are still teaching ascetic practices, but argues that "these aspirations and directives are kept secret" from outsiders (119 n. 48). This does not apply to the Toshiel Rebbe's books.

<sup>27</sup> The Rebbe's teachings are addressed only to Jews; it is likely that he accepts the view of the classic early Hasidic work *Tanya* (a book he frequently cites), that only Jews have a "divine soul."

This is a great and fundamental principle which a Jew must know: each person can come to the point of feeling the hidden light. The One Above wants to illuminate each Jew with this light; it is only blocked, and one has to work and labour to attain it. One must work, in a spirit of self-sacrifice, against the body. One must conquer [the body's] resistance, jumping out of bed early even if it is difficult, even if the body will not allow it. One must break one's desires when eating<sup>28</sup> and subdue one's earthboundness.

Then one can feel something, and only in this way is this possible; without this, it is not possible. Even if a person has a regular schedule of prayer and Torah study, that in itself is not enough; he must still work inwardly not to give in to the body, breaking his desires and his nature... One needs to remember that all one's service of God depends on breaking one's desires; therein lies the entire secret (IK I, 16, cf. IK II, 20).

A longer passage, from DK I (296), sums up the Rebbe's approach:

A person's material body is made of dust, and its nature is always to draw a person after material desires, to fulfill his desires in excessive eating and sleeping, "like a horse or a mule" [Psalm 32:9].

It is constantly bringing up various desires and drives in a person's heart. For example, it inclines a person to desire honour and pride, wanting to be honoured and glorified and raised up. If he is not honoured appropriately, or if anyone does something against his wishes, he becomes stirred up with anger and impatience, and sinks into sadness and melancholy, and feels disgusted with his life...

And the body, by its nature, is always drawn to being immersed in the news of the world, always loving to talk and converse about everything that is happening in the world, as if that were the essence of one's life. Torah study and the service of God become secondary in a person's eyes. Then he does not want to be immersed in Torah and worship, studying for hours on end, or standing in a regular place at the time of prayer. Rather, at every moment he is turning this way and that, because he has to look and see who is coming in and who is leaving, and he cannot live even a day without hearing or reading the news of the world.

All this is in the nature of the material body. But a human being has descended into this world in order to subdue these bad natural traits of the body. So one must always carry on a great war with one's material body, to habituate it, against its will, to serve God.

For habit becomes second nature, and one needs to habituate the body to agree to submit to a schedule, to go to bed at a set time<sup>29</sup> and to rise early at a set time, to be immersed in Torah and worship in a spirit of self-sacrifice, not to follow the desires of the heart in excessive eating and sleeping.

All day and all night a person must overpower his body with his soul, making the pursuits of the soul the essence of his life, while all bodily pursuits become secondary and subdued to the pursuits of the soul. Through

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<sup>28</sup> This may include "interrupting one's own eating for the sake of breaking desire" (DK I, 156).

<sup>29</sup> On the importance of going to bed on time see e.g. SK II, 258.

this he will merit, bit by bit, to transform his matter into spirit, subduing it to the will of the soul. Then the holy Shekhinah [Divine Presence] will dwell within him, and he will feel “the pleasantness of the Lord” and the nearness of God. And when he feels this, he will lack for nothing in this world.

This path in life includes helping and supporting others in their spiritual endeavours:

Each person must elevate the low parts of himself... lifting up his low body and transforming it... so that the body will become like the soul... And in the same way, a Jew must labour to elevate the low levels of others as well, drawing near and elevating other Jews too to the service of God... And likewise, every Jew must be ready to receive from others with humility... [learning from] anyone who is less involved in physicality, less attentive to the demands of the body... When each of us is humble before the other, to be influenced or to influence, this will bring to all Israel the presence of the Shekhinah, with great light. As Scripture says, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself, I am the Lord’ [Leviticus 19:18]: when Jews love each other and are humble with each other, the One Above says, “I am the Lord,” I dwell among you (IK I, 234-36, cf. IK II, 83-5).

The struggle with the “body’s” inclinations is especially important before marriage, when the (male) Toshiy Hasid is studying in yeshiva full-time, and “the power of desire is strongest in a person” (DK II, 117). This is a time of great opportunity but also of great danger:

Dear students, please make the effort to fill every hour and every moment of the days of your youth with Torah and worship, because it is possible to achieve so much in these years of your youth, when you have the ability to devote all your thoughts to Torah and worship... [If not,] maybe under the wedding canopy you will remember what you have lost!<sup>30</sup> (SK, 17).

Especially in the years of youth, if a person is not immersed in study, heaven help us!... His blood is boiling, he cannot rest, he wants ever more of the material world, more self-indulgence... Not even to mention if someone ‘blemishes the covenant’ [through nocturnal emissions or masturbation], heaven help us—what is he doing to himself! He is actually committing suicide... He will suffer through several transmigrations—who knows when he will be allowed into Gehenna,<sup>31</sup> if only they would let him in! (IK II, 146).

While male masturbation is sternly forbidden in the traditional codes of Jewish law (*Shulhan Arukh, Even HaEzer* 23:1) and even involuntary emission of semen is seen in many sources as laden with guilt and impurity, commanding teenage boys to avoid these “sins” seems to take the concept of struggling against bodily nature to an impossible degree of intensity. Yet this is

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<sup>30</sup> This sentence appears in Yiddish rather than translated into Hebrew.

<sup>31</sup> Gehenna (Hebrew *gehinnom*): the Jewish equivalent of hell or purgatory.



a recurrent theme in the Toshier Rebbe's books—consistently with many earlier Hasidic sources<sup>32</sup> and with the classics of Kabbalah which the Rebbe explicitly refers to:

Look in the holy Tiqunei Zohar and in the holy Zohar... there it is explained that someone who does not conduct himself in holiness, who “blemishes the covenant,” heaven help us, is extirpated from this world and the next... He will not be included in the resurrection of the dead... He detains all Israel in exile... Even unwillingly or accidentally, it is very bitter. It is too terrible even to repeat it all; look it up there and you will see how far the effects of this sin go (IK I, 37).

Conversely, subduing the body to the soul, which allows individuals to feel the divine light, will ultimately bring about a collective Jewish experience of light and closeness to God, that is, the messianic redemption. Scholars have debated to what extent Hasidism has “neutralized” messianic aspirations by emphasizing individual spiritual experience rather than collective redemption.<sup>33</sup> In the Toshier Rebbe's teachings, these are not opposed concepts; rather, one leads to the other:

Praising and exalting the One Above through Torah study and prayer—that is what satisfies the soul, that is what gives life. And through this... we will be lifted up with the building of the Holy Temple and Jerusalem, we will soon go out of darkness into light, and out of slavery into redemption (IK I, 66).

The hardship of exile grows stronger every day, with doubled and redoubled darkness, and we are standing and watching, exhausting our eyes, for the coming of our righteous Messiah. It is in our power to hasten his coming by serving God with inwardness of the heart (SK II, 152).

### **The Hasidic context**

Is the Toshier Rebbe's approach to spiritual life distinct, or generically Hasidic? One of our informants, asked about the Toshier Rebbe's teachings, stated that they are no different from Hasidic teachings in general.<sup>34</sup> Another, however, knowledgeably alluded to several different Hasidic groups, each with a distinct approach to spiritual life, before summing up the Toshier Rebbe's teachings (much as we have discussed them above).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Biale 1995, especially 58-9.

<sup>33</sup> See Scholem 1971, 176-202, and Altshuler 2006, 3-4, 201-12.

<sup>34</sup> Magid notes that the thought of recent rebbes can be characterized as having been influenced by Neo-Platonic metaphysics, with an emphasis on devotion, prayer, and asceticism; this certainly applies to the Toshier Rebbe's teachings (2006, 206).

<sup>35</sup> It is also said among Hasidim that some rebbes today expect no more of their followers than to follow the accepted norms of Orthodox Judaism and Hasidic customs; in these groups there would presumably not be a distinct spirituality at all.

Our general impression is that the Toshier Rebbe's books do not contain many unique, original ideas, but do present a distinctive selection or highlighting of particular aspects of Hasidic thought. Thus, our summary of the Rebbe's teachings would not equally accurately describe the thought of other Hasidic groups, such as Breslov, Ger, Lubavitch or Satmar. The fact that the Rebbe's ideas are mostly not original to him is to be expected since Hasidism has long emphasized continuity with the past. On almost every page of *Avoydes Avoyde*, this continuity is acknowledged as the Rebbe, or editors' notes, cite classical Jewish sources, Hasidic books and oral traditions.

Occasionally, aspects of this continuity are *not* acknowledged. The Rebbe's teachings on spontaneous personal prayer, in one's own language, as a daily practice strikingly resemble those of Rebbe Nahman of Breslov (see e.g. DK II, 240-41; Kramer & Mykoff 1989, 137-65). Rebbe Nahman is not cited, however, nor does his name appear in the books' indices, perhaps reflecting the historically controversial nature of Breslov Hasidism.

In a number of ways, the Toshier Rebbe's teachings appear cautious compared to some early Hasidic traditions. His approach to the body and soul reflects moderately ascetic trends within Hasidism and pre-Hasidic Judaism, rather than the affirmation of physical enjoyment found in some early Hasidic teachings.<sup>36</sup>

At one point, the Rebbe cites a teaching ascribed to the Baal Shem Tov, the founding figure of Hasidism, which in its original context refers to magical powers. According to midrashic teachings, the divine light of the first days of Creation, by which one could "see from one end of the world to the other" was "hidden away for the righteous" [Genesis Rabbah 12:6 and parallels]. The Baal Shem Tov states that this "light" means the magical power of seeing at a distance through meditation on the Torah [*Degel Mahaneh Ephraim, Bereshit, s.v. vayar' Elokim et ha-or ki tov*] The Toshier Rebbe's gloss on the Baal Shem Tov's saying lacks the magical element. Rather, it emphasizes an emotional experience: "The righteous... who put great effort into studying the Torah in holiness and purity will come to be able to feel the hidden light in the Torah" (IK I, 301).

Likewise, the Toshier Rebbe's descriptions of spiritual life do not suggest mystical experience narrowly defined, i.e. merging with God or with the universe. The key Hasidic term "*dveykes*" is defined by Rachel Elior as:

Total devotion to God to the extent of renouncing the realities of the material world and transcending one's self in order to enter the domain of nothingness and achieve true communion with the divine through higher levels of spiritual apprehension (2006, 211).

In the Toshier Rebbe's usage, *dveykes* seems to be not a mystical term but a synonym for intensity and enthusiasm:

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<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Lamm 1999, 163.

*Di kiyem hatoyre umitsves zol zayn mit harts, mit dveykes... di avoyde zol zayn mit harts, mit dveykes* (keeping the Torah and the commandments should be with heart, with *dveykes*; worship should be with heart, with *dveykes*—IK II, 11, 12).

The Rebbe's teachings do, however, include at least one radical element of earlier Hasidism, which shocked early opponents of the movement and has fascinated scholars. This is the tendency to dethrone God's commandments and Jewish law as spelled out in sacred texts from their position of ultimate importance and authority,<sup>37</sup> in favour of something more inward and less definable.<sup>38</sup>

The Tosher Rebbe advances this view, for example, in comparing the beginning of Passover, marked by the Seder meal with its many rituals, and the end of the holiday, which is holy time without such specific and unusual ritual content:

At the beginning of the holiday, we draw [divine] light by keeping the commandments of the Seder night, such as eating matzah and bitter herb and drinking four cups of wine, and so on... But on the seventh night of Passover we do not have these commandments. During this holy time, we must draw the light through something higher than keeping the commandments. This is self-sacrifice: taking it upon ourselves to be nullified before the Blessed One completely... Our essence will be nullified before Him, blessed be, so that we will not have any other will but the will of the blessed Creator (DK II, 39).

This is related to the Rebbe's teaching that the body can be transformed into a spiritual entity, which will automatically desire the will of God. This idea is found regarding biblical figures and holy men but also with regard to the ordinary Hasid:

The holy tsadikim [righteous people; Hasidic rebbes] managed to purify and cleanse themselves from the sin of Adam,<sup>39</sup> so that there was no impurity of the body in them at all; indeed, truly, their bodies shone like souls (SK II, 210; cf. IK I, 87).

Our father Abraham was completely nullified before the One Above; all of his limbs were transformed, so that they wanted, of their own accord, to do the will of God with burning enthusiasm (IK I, 45; cf. IK II, 188).

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<sup>37</sup> The traditional non-Hasidic position is beautifully expressed in the daily liturgy: "So, as we lie down and as we get up, we will speak of Your laws and rejoice in the words of Your Torah and in Your commandments forever, for they are our life and the length of our days..." (*Ahavat Olam*, blessing before the evening *Shema*).

<sup>38</sup> See Magid 2003, 205–48.

<sup>39</sup> The Jewish analogue of "original sin" in this passage has roots in the Talmud Shabbat 146a and the Zohar.

Through this kind of Torah study [constant, emotional, self-sacrificingly intense]... one's body too becomes purified by the holiness of the Torah, until it feels on its own what to do and what not to do (SK, 11).

The controversial element in such teachings is the possibility that one might determine on one's own what to do, in quest of "something higher than keeping the commandments," which could lead to transgressions against Jewish law. We were told, as it happens, that before his recent ill health the Rebbe used to say all the prayers of each day—the morning, afternoon and evening services—late in the evening. This is an extreme example of the non-normative practice, ascribed to many Hasidic rebbes of past generations, of delaying the liturgical prayers past their set times.<sup>40</sup> We were told that the Rebbe emphasized that the community in general should not delay prayer in this way:

*Der rebe flegt zogn zeyer shtark, lernen zeyer shtark, az der oylem tor dos nisht ton* (The Rebbe used to say very strongly, teach very strongly, that people were not allowed to do this<sup>41</sup>).

As will be mentioned later, however, he did have the yeshiva students join him in this practice on a rotating basis.

On the whole, with their demanding and highly emotional teachings, their consistent emphasis on transformation of consciousness, and their hints of antinomianism, the Tosher Rebbe's books make their own distinct statement and are worthy companions to the classics of Hasidic literature.

### **Do the Books Accurately Represent the Rebbe's Teachings?**

The Hasidim we spoke with emphasized various aspects of the Rebbe's teachings, which often echoed our overall impressions of the books. One Hasid stated:

The way of the Rebbe in most things is *shvires hamides*<sup>41</sup>, to break the bad natures. Everybody was born with it—somebody is very angry, somebody likes to steal, somebody likes to say lies, somebody likes to sleep, somebody likes to eat, somebody likes just to be mean; everybody—you should work on yourself.

Another Tosher quoted the Rebbe himself as saying,

In Poland there used to be a yeshiva where... it was known that whoever goes into this yeshiva doesn't feel any taste in life anymore. They were learning over there all the time only about the *gehinnom* and about how everybody's going to die one day, so disconnected from the world you don't feel anything anymore. And *I* say: Everybody who will learn Torah from

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<sup>40</sup> See Jacobs 1972, 46-53, and Wertheim 1992, 134-43.

<sup>41</sup> *Shvires hamides*: Breaking (overcoming) one's [bad] traits.

HaShem<sup>42</sup> will feel a taste in life every second of every minute of life! ...  
You're supposed to enjoy!

On the other hand, some aspects of the Rebbe's teaching are not as dramatically represented in the books as in the experience of his followers. For example, one close disciple told us,

If someone would ask me, what is the main thing you can see in the Rebbe?... The Rebbe's mission in life is what? To teach everybody who is next to him, and everybody, to forgive... Not [just] when you're wrong and you fight, when you're right a hundred percent... Say right away, "Hashem, I forgive him, I want to forgive him. It's not him, he's not bad..." This is the whole thing about the Rebbe... A teacher with his class, with a businessman with his workers, with a man and his wife, a father with his children, a business partner with his business... just forgive! Hashem is the nature of forgiveness...

While the Rebbe's books certainly speak of forgiveness, it had not struck us as a major topic, and it does not appear in the topic index of any of the books. Asked directly about the books, the Toshers we spoke with agreed that they accurately represent the Rebbe's approach to spiritual life—except that some of his most demanding teachings were left out because they were seen as being addressed only to an earlier, spiritually stronger generation.

In response to the query whether people *interpret* the Rebbe's teachings in conflicting ways, the—perhaps naïve—consensus of our informants, whether they otherwise expressed critical views or not, was that the teachings "are so clear" that they do not allow for any diversity of interpretation. As one Tosher put it, "Basically the *Avoydes Avoyde* is very clear, and what the Rebbe wants from us is written there. Can you interpret it differently? I don't think so."

### **What is lost in translation**

Though the books may accurately present the Rebbe's ideas, much of the experience of hearing him teach has inevitably been lost:

*Vi der rebe hot dos gezogt, dos ken men nisht mazbir zayn... er hot gebrent vi a fayer!* (How the Rebbe said it—that cannot be communicated... He was like a burning fire).

Most of the Rebbe's teachings were first offered to his yeshiva students. In the twilight atmosphere of the close of the Sabbath, he would speak quietly to a group of perhaps 60 or 80 at any given time (though there would be larger crowds if many visitors were present for some special occasion).

These students knew the Rebbe in a context of spiritual intimacy. On a daily basis, nine of them would fast all day (since one is not supposed to eat

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<sup>42</sup> Hashem: God (literally "The Name"); "Torah from Hashem": God's Torah.

before praying) and then make a minyan<sup>43</sup> with the Rebbe for his prayers, said late in the evening. In rotation, all the yeshiva boys would thus accompany their Rebbe in an unconventional spiritual practice. This is a striking example of the bonding which the Rebbe cultivated with his students.

In this context, the Rebbe excelled as a personal teacher, who offered himself as a personal example. When a young Hasid asked about how to deal with anger, the Rebbe answered: “You’re next to me for a reason; just see what I am doing when I have to get angry... I’m a little older than you, listen, listen.” Several Toshiers recalled the Rebbe’s gentleness and evident caring when he offered guidance to individuals.

When we mentioned to one Hasid the demanding strictness of the Rebbe’s teachings, he answered, “*der rebe hot es gezogt mit aza libshaft!* (but the Rebbe would say it so lovingly!)” To another, we mentioned the harsh threats found in the Rebbe’s books against those who do not follow the right path, such as “Anyone who acts out of desire, heaven forbid, is kindling the flames of Gehenna for himself, buying a choice place for himself there” (IK I, 148). The Hasid answered, “yes, he’d say those things, but he said them so sweetly!”

### **The Books as Symbolic Substitutes for the Rebbe**

Much has thus been lost as the Rebbe’s words have been put into print—especially since he has ceased to speak with his followers. We heard much about the sense of loss felt by members of the community who experienced the Rebbe’s presence before the decline in his health. A Hasid observes, “In the past... every Shabbos everyone would go to the Rebbe.” Another states, “I grew up with the Rebbe, and the Rebbe was... like my father! For my son, it’s different.”<sup>44</sup>

As the Rebbe’s health has declined, his son Meylekh has taken on much of the communal and religious leadership of the community, but, we were told, he is regarded as the *rov*, the rabbi, not as a rebbe. People do not come to him for blessings as they would (and still do) come to the Rebbe. We also heard that Meylekh has not taken on his father’s practice—understood to be wrapped in spiritual mysteries—of saying the daily prayers late in the evening. As one Hasid put it, “There’ll never be somebody to replace the Rebbe.”

In this context, the Rebbe’s books have become a substitute for his active presence. As one Hasid expressed this thought, “*Undzere kinder hern nisht dem rebn zogn, di eyntsik zakh... iz di sform* (Our children no longer hear the Rebbe speaking... the only thing [left] is the books).” The use of the Rebbe’s books at the *shaleshudes*, the communal meal at the close of the Sabbath, is a

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<sup>43</sup> Minyan: Prayer-quorum of ten Jewish males aged 13 or older.

<sup>44</sup> From an economic perspective, for many years the yeshiva boys, and many Toshiers, were supported by the yeshiva—in effect, by the Rebbe. This has changed as the Rebbe’s son has assumed more leadership and the community has continued to grow; residents are responsible for more of their own expenses and the Rebbe’s financial role as a father figure has ended. (Thanks to Daniel Eltes for this insight.)

rather clear example: the Rebbe's son, Meylekh, conducts the *shaleshudes*, but rather than offering his own teachings, "he teaches the *Avoydes Avoyde*. He takes out the book, *Avoydes Avoyde*, and he reads it."

In other ways too, the books seem to be woven into the fabric of Tosher life in areas where the Rebbe's personal presence would previously have been central. Hearing that I read the Rebbe's books, one Hasid advised me to read the Rebbe's stories of holy men on Saturday night after the Sabbath. He cited a saying of the Baal Shem Tov that stories of holy men at that time are "*a zgule oyf parnose un oyf ale gute zakhn* (efficacious for livelihood and all good things)." A reason he did not mention, but which seems equally significant, is that the Rebbe would tell these stories at that time. A Hasid reading the Rebbe's stories on Saturday night would be reenacting the experience of hearing the Rebbe tell them.

In the yeshiva, where the Rebbe's presence was most central, we were told that the books are now studied on a daily basis. One Tosher told us, "Here everybody in the yeshiva, in the schools, will learn it every day before davening,<sup>45</sup> we have a *shiur*<sup>46</sup> in this." Another stated, "*Farn davenen lernt dos yeder bokher mit der khevruse* (before prayers, every boy studies [the books] with his study partner)."<sup>47</sup>

The school for younger boys was under the Rebbe's direct supervision; today, his books are used by teachers there. A Hasid told us:

For the teachers it's very easy with this *seyfer*<sup>48</sup>... to give in [to] the younger children a way how you should be in your life, how you should fight with your body, how you should fight with the challenges of life.

Formerly, fathers would take sons to the Rebbe for a blessing; today, a Tosher asked if fathers study the books with their children answered with an emphatic yes.<sup>49</sup>

In some ways the books seem to be used, to borrow an expression from one Hasid we spoke with, as the "flag" of Tosh.<sup>50</sup> As this Hasid noted, "When we write anything,<sup>51</sup> we always quote *Avoydes Avoyde*." A community newsletter which we picked up included selections from the Rebbe's books.

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<sup>45</sup> Davening: Liturgical prayer.

<sup>46</sup> *Shiur*: Lesson.

<sup>47</sup> These are slightly different pictures of how the book is studied: in a group lesson (*shiur*) or between study partners. We did not have a chance to observe whether either or both are the actual practice.

<sup>48</sup> *Seyfer*: Religious book.

<sup>49</sup> Asked if this applied only to boys or also to girls, some Hasidim answered that the books in Yiddish can be studied with girls also. Conversely, a long-time resident with connections to the Tosh school system told us that the Rebbe's books are not part of the curriculum in the girl's school.

<sup>50</sup> His reference to a flag was not directly to the books, but to a general sense that what is left of the past greatness of Hasidism is more symbolic than actual.

<sup>51</sup> This may have been a reference to wedding invitations, for example.

Asked directly whether, in the absence of personal interactions with the Rebbe, the books are becoming a substitute for his presence, one longtime member of the community answered: “For a lot of people, sure. Of course. And they will probably be so, until the coming of *Meshiekh*.”<sup>52</sup>

### **How the Books were Written—Transformations from Orality to Print**

We spoke with several individuals involved in, or familiar with, the production of the books which play such important roles.<sup>53</sup> Like most books ascribed to Hasidic rebbes, the Toshiel Rebbe’s books are not written by him but compiled by disciples based on his oral teachings. In former generations, Hasidic books were mostly based on disciples’ memories of the Rebbe’s words. The Toshiel books, products of more technologically advanced times, began mostly, that is “90 or 80 percent,” as transcriptions from tape recordings of the Rebbe’s talks.

The Rebbe would speak to the yeshiva students at *shaleshudes*, the final Sabbath meal, on Saturday evening. After the Sabbath, on Saturday nights, he would tell stories of his holy ancestors or other Hasidic holy men whose *yortsayt* (death-anniversary) had been observed during the previous week; the Rebbe was extraordinarily steeped in these stories. Tape recording is forbidden on the Sabbath, but the *shaleshudes* would continue after dark on Saturday night, at which point a Hasid could end the Sabbath for himself only, and begin tape recording the Rebbe. Approval for this procedure was obtained from respected rabbis.

Each book then involved enormous amounts of work transcribing the Rebbe’s words from the recordings. “Each week’s *parsha*<sup>54</sup> takes weeks of [work by] big *talmidey khakhomim*,<sup>55</sup> big *talmidim*<sup>56</sup> of the Rebbe.”<sup>57</sup> We heard from one of those involved in this work that transcriptions of some material were shown to the Rebbe, who called for some corrections and additions. This is mentioned in the introduction to SK (5) as well. It does not seem that the Rebbe actually edited the books in any detail. In IK I, 7, the text states that he gave some advice on the order of the discourses, and DK I, 1, quotes him as

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<sup>52</sup> *Meshiekh*: The Messiah.

<sup>53</sup> We did not inquire into the nitty-gritty of printing and distribution. One disciple of the Rebbe did mention, “I was involved in helping, in funding this.”

<sup>54</sup> *Parsha*: Torah portion, in the yearly cycle of readings; the Rebbe’s teachings generally refer to the week’s *parsha* and are arranged in the books accordingly.

<sup>55</sup> *Talmidey khakhomim*: Torah scholars.

<sup>56</sup> *Talmidim*: In this context, disciples.

<sup>57</sup> We heard different accounts as to whether the books were written by a number of different scholarly members of the community, or by one man in particular (who did not claim a starring role when we spoke with him). The introductions to each book are “signed” by two of the Rebbe’s grandsons as if they were the writers, but this could just be a matter of giving appropriate honour to the Rebbe’s family.



expressing approval of the book as it was ready to go to press. The introduction to SK II does not mention him even looking at the material, reflecting the decline in the Rebbe's health by the time of that volume's preparation.

Editing involves selection. As mentioned earlier, we were told that the Rebbe's most demanding teachings were not included in the books, for fear of alienating the younger generations of Hasidim; as one committed Hasid said frankly, "because the young people would leave." We would expect this to be most evident with SK II, because the Rebbe was no longer influencing editorial decisions when this book was produced. Indeed, it is not coincidental that none of our citations about subduing the body to the soul come from SK II. The index of this volume shows little mention of restraint in eating, and the fewest entries of any of the books on the horrors of "blemishing the covenant." The overall tone of SK II is of encouragement rather than rebuke or detailed instruction.

Choice of language is another significant editorial decision. As noted above, only the two volumes of IK are in Yiddish. They were intended, we were told, to remind former students of the Rebbe's talks in the most direct way:

[There are] only one or two *sforim*<sup>58</sup> [by other rebbes] that are in Yiddish, but we made it specially in Yiddish; that was only just really for the students that were in Tosh, to feel *mamesh*<sup>59</sup> like the Rebbe talking.

Most of the books, however, present the Rebbe's teachings and stories not in Yiddish, which he spoke, but in Hebrew. For religious/ideological reasons, this is not Modern Hebrew but the traditional language of rabbinic literature, which has a smaller vocabulary than Yiddish.<sup>60</sup> One Hasid told us that the Hebrew books responded to a demand for the Rebbe's teachings among non-Yiddish-speaking religious Jews, but this seems somewhat unlikely since these books frequently include phrases and entire sentences in un-translated Yiddish. Another Tosher noted that the sensibility of Tosher Hasidim themselves required that "a *seyfer* should be in Hebrew." The appropriate choice of language would put the Rebbe's writings on a par with other traditional religious books. In any case, translation distances the end product from the Rebbe's original words.

Even more work went into shaping the Rebbe's discourses. Typically, each teaching in the books begins with a verse from the week's Torah portion and one or more questions about it, usually drawn from traditional commentaries. This is followed by an answer, which is always presented as spiritual guidance. As a close follower paraphrased the Rebbe's intention in these teachings, "What is it meaning for us in 2010?... What is it meaning for

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<sup>58</sup> *Sforim*: Religious books (plural of *seyfer*).

<sup>59</sup> *Mamesh*: Really, tangibly.

<sup>60</sup> Note the elaborate paraphrases and Yiddish glosses of concepts like "bridge" or "train" (SK, 276-77).

me today, these things?” These discourses are carefully structured and rhetorically effective.

Apparently, however, this is very different from the experience of directly hearing the Rebbe speak. The clarity of the printed text does not reflect the fact that, as a Hasid told us, “*der rebe hot geredt a sakh mol shtil, un nisht zeyer klor* (the Rebbe often spoke quietly, and was not very clearly audible).” We were told that the Rebbe had an actual aversion to speaking in a well-organized and polished manner:

*Ven s’iz aroysgekumen tsu a sheyne toyre iz er geven zeyer tsetrogn—“s’iz geven tsu sheyn, tsu gut.”* (If a teaching came out beautifully, he would be very upset—“it was too beautiful, too good”).

Another Tosher stated,

The Rebbe was very very down-to-earth... he feels especially when he was talking, it should not be like a professional talker, professional Torah, [but rather] just to say *musar*.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, we were told, the Rebbe did not rehearse or prepare his talks in advance at all. He preceded each *shaleshudes* talk with the traditional Kabbalistic invocation of divine unity, “for the unity of the Holy One Blessed be He and His Shekhinah,”<sup>62</sup> and spoke out of the inspiration of the moment—understood as ‘channeling’ the Shekhinah. As a Tosher told us,

*Der tsadik iz “shkhine medabres betoykh groynoy” azoy vi bay moyshe rabeyne iz aroysgekumen—di shkhine redt aroys* (A rebbe—the Shekhinah speaks from his throat, as it happened with Moses; the Shekhinah is speaking through him).

Asked why the tapes themselves are not circulated, a longstanding member of the community replied:

The truth of the matter is, the Rebbe’s tapes will be very unclear... It took a lot of effort... to take these tapes and dissect them, and listen again and again and again, and then organize what the Rebbe was saying and put it on the paper.

A close disciple described the work of the editors:

It’s a very big job, actually to tell. The rebbe was talking for many hours and he would repeat everything. Like, what it says in the book, the rebbe repeated like five times to everybody... A lot of work was in this, you

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<sup>61</sup> *Musar*: Ethical rebuke or instruction, religious advice.

<sup>62</sup> The Holy One Blessed be He and his Shekhinah: Transcendent and immanent aspects of the divine. In Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions many Jewish rituals are preceded by a formulaic invocation of these aspects of divinity, dedicating the ritual to their unification and thus to the wholeness and redemption of the universe.

should understand... You take from the whole *shmues*,<sup>63</sup> what the Rebbe repeats so many times, you make it once.

## Presentation of the Rebbe

The publication of highly edited, reshaped versions of the Rebbe's teachings could be seen as another step in a process which began years earlier of turning Rabbi Lowy into a rebbe. Rabbi Lowy originally established nothing more than a yeshiva and, we were told, had no great pretensions as a holy man.

His transformation into a rebbe, to whom people turn for blessings and miracles, may have taken place simply through his personal qualities. A member of the community who takes a critical position on many issues but not on this one e-mailed us after our visit:

I believe [the Rebbe's] personality and disposition and asceticism (combined with that all-important quality, his *yikhes*)<sup>64</sup> naturally lent itself to him being viewed as a holy man whose blessing might be worth more than the usual by the students at his yeshiva, by some of the parents, and by people who knew him (and his family) from "back home" in Europe... His renown as a holy man and miracle-worker... was probably... an "organic" growth, for lack of a better word. For example, my father, who is a devoted Hasid of the Rebbe, got that way just by virtue of having been a student in the yeshiva back in the very early years and interacting with the Rebbe and perhaps equally important, with other students who felt the same. There are many others like this.

A longstanding member of the community, however, attributed the beginning of Rabbi Lowy's career as a rebbe to strategizing by individuals who were trying to keep the yeshiva financially viable. Promoting Rabbi Lowy as someone to whom it made sense to turn for blessings helped to bring visitors and donors. Our e-mail correspondent acknowledges, "Of course, the blessing and counseling business may be used (and in fact, *is* used still) as part of a fund-raising effort."

As to how this worked, skeptically inclined Toshiers suggested that "once blessings are given, the route to sainthood is short and pretty much assured... It's a 'can't lose' proposition." Any blessings that came true were ascribed to Rabbi Lowy's holiness, regardless of the use of additional resources (fertility clinics were mentioned). An unanswered request rarely becomes a story; a blessing that comes true always does. As the stories multiplied, the rabbi gained the reputation of a rebbe, and money came into the Tosher economy from the donations of visitors and sympathetic outsiders.

Today, we were told by a longstanding member of the community, even though the Rebbe is scarcely speaking any more,

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<sup>63</sup> *Shmues*: Informal discourse.

<sup>64</sup> *Yikhes*: Lineage, pedigree (the Rebbe is descended from holy men).

the *gaboyim*<sup>65</sup> deserve the credit; they're camouflaging and making the presentation so that someone who doesn't know him well and comes to visit the first time doesn't notice much...

Visitors are brought to the Rebbe by an attendant, who speaks to the Rebbe about the visitor's request for a blessing; the Rebbe answers with "amen,"

and you'll find tomorrow a person will promise you that the Rebbe talks. Because he doesn't know how much the Rebbe usually talked, and he did a little talking to him—he heard the word "amen."

Summing up, this informant stated,

You can see from that, that will teach you a lesson, how important, how fundamental the Rebbe's presence is—that they're doing everything in the world to keep his image as much as they can.

It seems to us that the "presentation" of the Rebbe's teachings in his books is, in part, another dimension of this same process. The "organic" demand from students and others to read the Rebbe's words was certainly an essential factor in their publication. The way in which they have been edited, however, presents the Rebbe to the world as a clear and eloquent teacher to multitudes of potential readers. This adds another dimension to his existing reputation as a holy man, and potentially allows his teachings to have an influence well beyond Kiryas Tosh. Economically, while it is unlikely that sales of the books realize any significant profit, they can spread awareness of Tosh in the broader Hasidic world, attract visitors, and bring in donations.

As a close disciple told us,

What I was noticing by the Rebbe was very interesting, that a lot of people coming in to the Rebbe from New York, they didn't even know nothing [about Tosh], they would say, "Rebbe, Friday night on the *shabes tish*<sup>66</sup> we read your *seyfer*, and we want to thank you, how much the children are changing and how much [our life] is different just from [reading your *seyfer*]."

### **Do Tosher Hasidim Live their Lives according to the Rebbe's Teachings?**

The answer to this question, integral to our desire to place the Rebbe's texts in context, is not an unequivocal "yes." In fact, when we first received a set of the Rebbe's books from the publisher, they came in boxes originally used for shoes made in Germany and tequila made in Mexico—evidence,

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<sup>65</sup> *Gaboyim*: Personal attendants who, in Hasidic tradition, manage a rebbe's interactions with the public.

<sup>66</sup> "On the *shabes tish*": At the Sabbath table.

perhaps, that the Rebbe's Hasidic enclave is not completely isolated from the non-Jewish world, and that his followers indulge in some material pleasures.

There are Hasidic groups which tend to focus on their rebbe's greatness rather than placing high expectations on ordinary Hasidim. The Tosher Rebbe, however, emphasizes each Hasid's personal responsibility and relationship with God. On subduing the body to the soul, he notes "*s'iz nisht keyn frume oder a rebe'she zakh* (this is not a pious or 'Rebbe-ish' matter):" it is obligatory on everyone to whom his instructions are directed (IK I, 39, cf. IK I, 63-4).

Yet, in a Hasidic community, as in any other, there will be a range of intensity in individual religious commitment (Levine 2003, 52-3).<sup>67</sup> The Tosher Rebbe's insistence that his demanding instructions are not only for the "pious" suggests that they, in fact, might reach beyond the generally accepted norms of his own community.

As we asked questions about this and related issues, our starting point was the overarching approach to spiritual life presented in the Rebbe's books. Our interlocutors, however, often mentioned specific directives or rules issued by the Rebbe or required by the community at various times. They did not make a distinction between such directives and the Rebbe's instructions for spiritual practice, which indeed include very specific rules. Newspapers are not to be read, for example (SK, 14) and any unnecessary conversation is to be avoided, especially on the Sabbath: "On the Sabbath, the first foundation is not to talk" (IK II, 167; regarding weekdays, see SK, 16).

A number of comments we heard suggested that the level of attempted compliance with such instructions has declined over time. For example, one Tosher stated, "It was very common [in former times] that boys would not talk on Shabbos at all." Today, he implied, such restraint would be unusual.

Some Hasidim related this decline to the general state of the world:

Even what was applicable twenty years ago—you know: I want to fit in, and I'm ashamed to do otherwise [than the accepted norms], and it doesn't fit my society—all that is starting to crumble, and it is crumbling here as well, [though] probably delayed a little bit in this society.

Others, however, emphasized that since the Rebbe has no longer been in a position of active leadership, compliance with his instructions has declined precipitately. As a longstanding member of the community summed up,

A close<sup>68</sup> community is one thing, but the leadership is the factor that helps the closeness to have an effect... As long as the power and the feeling of

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<sup>67</sup> Levine's research examined the lower and upper limits of socially acceptable piety among adolescent girls in a Lubavitcher community.

<sup>68</sup> We think that "close" (in the sense of "intimate") is an accurate transcription from the tape-recorded interview, but the subject under discussion had been Tosh as a "closed" community; there seems to have been a movement of ideas between "closedness" and "closeness."

respect and admiration to the Rebbe was a tangible force, the society here would be in a certain structure. That's all evaporated, so anybody doing anything is doing it of his own desire.

One committed Hasid mentioned that "everybody who lives here has special rules that they are following if they want to live here." A critically minded member of the community, however, described these rules as another area where the "desire" or free choice of individuals is all that counts today:

Part of those aforementioned *tekonos*<sup>69</sup> that all needed to sign, in the olden days, are a prohibition of couples walking [together] on the streets ... ban on talking during any part of davening in shul... to mention a few. *None* of those are heeded [today] by those who would like to portray themselves as clear and devoted disciples.

This informant acknowledged that there still are, for example, Tosher couples who will not walk side by side on the street, but argued that these are people who would follow the same stringencies whether the Rebbe wanted them to or not.<sup>70</sup>

In former times, when the Rebbe was actively in charge, a long-standing member of the community recalls him intervening directly if anything did not suit his sensibilities:

I remember when the Rebbe called me, "I hear the boys have 'type-a-writers.' This cannot be!" He was talking about tape recorders... So we made an inspection at night, and we confiscated, without question. That was the Rebbe's teaching.<sup>71</sup>

This is no longer happening. Even in the old days, however, some informants suggested that the Rebbe's instructions had to be followed, but the community felt free to ignore the intentions behind them. The Rebbe banned bicycles in Tosh. They are not seen on the streets or used by children, but there are adults now who openly own bicycles. This, however, is not such a drastic change, we were told: "The difference is, once upon a time it was totally secretive... You'd always have people driving down [outside Tosh] to rent a bike and go for a ride."

Why were bicycles banned from Tosh in the first place? One informant suggested that this reflected the question being asked in a maladroit manner:

Why would the Rebbe say no? Because whoever asked the Rebbe a question [said] "there's this *goyishe*<sup>72</sup> thing, it's called a bicycle, and the children want to ride it, is the Rebbe *maskim*?"<sup>73</sup> What would he say!?

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<sup>69</sup> *Tekonos*: Rules, regulations.

<sup>70</sup> From an e-mail received after our visit.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. SK, 15, where tape recorders are explicitly banned from the yeshiva, "for sometimes this can destroy in one moment a great deal of Torah and good deeds."

<sup>72</sup> *Goyishe*: Gentile, un-Jewish.

This statement is probably not historically accurate; a long-term resident of Tosh told us that bicycles were known, and “despised,” in the Hasidic community in Hungary where the Rebbe grew up: “A shochet<sup>74</sup> that would have a bike, he would lose his license, or lose his acceptance; it was considered a step to modernism.” But other anecdotes we heard support the idea that how things were worded to the Rebbe was of great importance in coping with his old-fashioned sensibilities. For example, “the famous story of the French fries,” told to us by a Tosher who began by recalling his days as a yeshiva student:

When I went to the Rebbe to ask for *musar*, I wasn’t overweight like I am now, but I wasn’t very skinny, I was just regular. And the Rebbe would tell me, “You’re so skinny, you need to eat! Not cake, cake is *tayves*.<sup>75</sup> Eat bread and meat, eat chicken.”

With the same concern for both health and ascetic discipline, the Rebbe told the cook in the yeshiva, “Just cook bread and meat, so people have the *koyekh*<sup>76</sup> to serve Hashem.” The story continues:

So once this guy... he was always busy with the *khsides*,<sup>77</sup> so he once ran to the Rebbe, this was years and years ago, and says, “Rebbe, the cook is cooking French fries for the boys. French fries—big *tayves*!”... So [the Rebbe] calls the cook and says, “I hear you make French fries.” He said, “I do.” So he asks him what is French fries. The cook says, “Potatoes.” “Does it have a lot of sugar? Does it have salt?” “No. It’s just potatoes.” “Make them a lot! Make sure they eat it!”

So French fries remained on the yeshiva menu, with the Rebbe’s authorization—but in disregard of his intentions, since, the storyteller implied, everybody but the Rebbe understood that eating French fries *is* self-indulgent.

Regarding such contradictions between the Rebbe’s wishes and the practice of his followers, one Tosher free-thinker suggested that Hasidim do not select their rebbe or community based on anything as abstract as a program for spiritual living. Rather, they are attracted to a rebbe’s personality, the advantages of living in a close-knit community, and so on. In this context, listening to the Rebbe’s teachings may be part of one’s personal interaction with an admired father figure, and part of the ritual life of belonging to the community. The same could apply today to owning and reading the Rebbe’s books. These actions do not imply any particular commitment to live by the

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<sup>73</sup> “Is the Rebbe *maskim*?”: “Rebbe, do you agree (to allow it)?”.

<sup>74</sup> Shochet: Kosher slaughterer.

<sup>75</sup> *Tayves*: (Sinful) desires, self-indulgence.

<sup>76</sup> *Koyekh*: Strength.

<sup>77</sup> *Khsides*: Hasidism. “He was always busy with the *khsides*”: he was a pious busybody.

Rebbe's teachings. Certainly the spiritual path set forth in the Rebbe's books is not what makes a person a Tosher Hasid.

While we only heard things put this bluntly by one person, his thoughts have the ring of truth. The scholarly study of Hasidism may be skewed by the fact that the Hasidic groups which are most accessible to outsiders—Chabad-Lubavitch and Breslov—both have a substantial spiritual literature and a history of emphasizing distinctive approaches to theology and spiritual practice. These groups have also attracted many spiritual seekers, for whom teachings set out in books may be of great importance. But this is not representative of Hasidism as a whole.

Strikingly, even the publication of the books themselves, the only point of access which future generations will have to the Rebbe's teachings, took place through a process of negotiating against the Rebbe's initial wishes. Note the following remark by a Hasid involved with the production of the books:

It was not so easy... it was *very* not easy before, because the Rebbe was not looking [for publication]—he was very afraid it should not be *pirsem*<sup>78</sup>... We promised the Rebbe we will not make promotion... just who needs we'll give them.

Another Hasid stated, "The only way the Rebbe... allowed to [publish] this is because we explained to the Rebbe that the students really need it, to remind them..."

Based on the above analysis one might be tempted to conclude that the Rebbe's teachings are quite irrelevant to Toshiers. Such an assessment would need to be balanced, however, by statements which give a prominent place to his teachings, and specifically his books, in the shape of Tosher life. One Hasid remarked that you might ask people, "Are you a Tosher Hasid, do you follow the Rebbe's teachings?" and another said emphatically, "If you are a Tosher Hasid, you follow everything of Tosh!" Referring directly to the Rebbe's books, one Tosher remarked, "*zelbstfarshendlekh az dos iz undzer veg-vayzer* (self-evidently, this is our guide)."

Some Toshiers suggested, realistically, not that a Tosher must actually live according to all the Rebbe's teachings, but that one must at least *try* to follow them. "Everybody [follows the Rebbe's teachings] on his level," one informant remarked. Another explained, referring to the books,

This is what the Rebbe wants from us. If we do it... *halevay!*<sup>79</sup> Somebody tries more, somebody tries less. But if somebody wants to tell you he's a Tosher Hasid, he wants to follow the Rebbe, this is it, this what he has to do. It's very hard, sometimes it's more even hard, but he has to try.

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<sup>78</sup> *Pirsem*: Publicized. "He was very afraid it should not be *pirsem*": he was very afraid that [his teachings] would be publicized.

<sup>79</sup> *Halevay*: If only! Would that it were so!



We heard several comments suggesting that the Rebbe's teachings are an ideal, which few, if any, are expected actually to live up to. One Hasid explained, "The Rebbe's *sforim* are the way he wants us to be. Doesn't necessarily mean we are this way, but that's what he wants, that's his teachings." Another noted, "The Toshi Rebbe's teachings are so extreme, so you're not a big sinner if you say you can't follow them." On the other hand, this same Hasid estimated, "I would say there are fifty percent of the *yungelays*<sup>80</sup> and the families that live the same way that the Rebbe taught fifty years ago."

This informant also acknowledged that, in the world at large, someone who spoke only about religious topics, avoided not only TV and the internet, but even newspapers, and spent his free time exclusively in prayer and religious study, would be shunned as a fanatic. In Tosh, such people are respected for embodying the spiritual aspirations that most Tosheres used to have, in keeping with the Rebbe's wishes:

There's enough 'fanatics' throughout the group that they're strong enough not to be considered fanatics... I would admit that this is still left over, that remembering the past history, how this was the Rebbe, this was Toshi, will not permit me to laugh at somebody who has stayed that way... Even, it's respected.

Some Hasidim—perhaps in this category of "fanatics"—spoke with humility of their own inability to live by the Rebbe's teachings as fully as they wished to. One added that the attempt is nevertheless beneficial: "it's for sure, if I didn't have the Rebbe for a teacher, I would eat people in the street."

## Conclusions

This exploration of the Tosher Rebbe's books in his community is tentative and preliminary. On the key question of whether and how the books influence the lives of Tosheres, more in-depth interviews, and sustained observation, might yield additional important insights.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the foregoing examination allows us to draw some conclusions which may be useful both to students of Hasidism and to anyone interested in the relationships between communities and their honoured texts and teachings.

Contrary to a common characterization of "late" Hasidism as devoid of spirituality, the teachings of the Tosher Rebbe are guides to spiritual practice, oriented toward spiritual experience. They involve high expectations of Hasidim, not only of the Rebbe. While rooted in earlier Hasidic texts and common Hasidic traditions, the Tosher Rebbe's books express his own

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<sup>80</sup> *Yungelays*: Young men, here referring to the yeshiva students.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Stephanie Wellen Levine's insight that "in the study of the *Tanya*, adolescent girls in a [Lubavitch] Hasidic community are given a rich language for exploring their inner worlds" (Levine 2003, xiv).

approach to spiritual life, which is not identical with other Hasidic approaches. Based on moderate but unrelenting asceticism, this approach aims to clear away obstacles to a Hasid's spiritual awareness, allowing for life lived in a sweet consciousness of divine light.

Contrary to an unspoken assumption sometimes made in the study of Hasidism, however, "Tosher Hasidism" cannot be equated with this spiritual program. As we have discussed, members of the Tosher community may relate to the Rebbe's teachings as inspirational ideals rather than directives to be followed; and even when the Rebbe was actively issuing directives, they might be responded to with considerably less than wholehearted obedience.

Some of our informants identified Tosher Hasidism with following, or at least trying to follow, the teachings outlined in the Rebbe's books. A thoughtful community member suggested, however, that, for many others in the community, these teachings have little to do with their identity as Tosher Hasidim. In this context, it is significant to note the various roles, other than spiritual guidance, played by the Rebbe's books. They are nostalgic reminders of treasured times with the Rebbe; symbols and substitutes for his active presence; advertisements for Tosh in far-flung corners of the Hasidic world.

The Rebbe's books are a contemporary example of the transition from oral to written/printed transmission of culture. The re-presentation of the Rebbe's teachings in print has not been a simple matter of writing down his words, but of selectively creating clear, orderly discourses out of spontaneous talks and personal advice. Those who heard the Rebbe teach can use the books to recreate his presence in their imaginations, while those who know only the books experience him as a teacher in quite a different way.

As a new generation grows up in Tosh with no access to the Rebbe's words except through his books, much will be different in their Hasidic life.

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