Shma
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Hasidic Dynasties

NEHEMIA POLEN

Hasidism is the revivalist and mystical movement that arose in eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, emphasizing ecstatic prayer, the awareness that God is everywhere, and the centrality of extraordinary leaders known as *tzaddikim*. The dynastic system in Hasidism (that is, the inheritance of a Hasidic master's leadership role, generally from father to son or son-in-law) is widely considered a central feature of the movement; this was not always the case. Neither the Baal Shem Tov (d. 1760) nor Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezhirech (d. 1772), founded a dynasty, although some latter-day descendents of these illuminated masters would come to claim the spiritual prestige of their illustrious ancestors. The Maggid of Mezhirech promulgated Hasidism by cultivating and empowering a cadre of notable disciples, but gave no thought to bequeathing a community of followers to his son. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's leadership position was not assumed by a family member; rather, a prominent disciple took on the role of caretaker, publishing the discourses and tales of the master. Moreover, the Bratslav Hasidim regarded their leader's death in 1810 as unreal; they consider the founder as an ongoing living presence. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (d. 1810), one of the most beloved and influential of all early masters, left no family successor as the "Berditchever Rebbe."

So how and why did the pattern of dynastic succession take hold in so many instances? It has been suggested that the inheritance of Polish-Russian noble estates served as a model,[1] but external models attract attention and exert influence only when they resonate with some internal need. Why did dynastic aristocracy hold no allure during Hasidim's initial stages, and what intervened to make that aristocratic model appear compelling at a later period?

The Hasidic leader, the tzaddik or rebbe, is a spiritual master who conveys illuminated teachings to his disciples and is a conduit of blessings. His person — his physical body along with his spirit — is where heaven and earth touch. The tzaddik is endowed with gifts that transcend the natural order, with powers that enable him to intervene on behalf of the sick, the poor, and the unjustly accused, and, on occasion, even to shield the Jewish people from the violence of exile. The capstone of his endowments is the ability to read souls, to discern an individual's previous lifetimes, and to offer direction on how he might best fulfill the goal of his current journey on earth. This was the way the early Hasidim looked to the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezhirech, and it remains true in attenuated form for every later generation through the present.

The popularity of the Baal Shem Tov (known as the Besht) and the Maggid rested not only in their having all these gifts, but in having them in ensemble, as a coordinated unity of personhood. The Besht and the Maggid taught sublime mystical concepts and were shamanic adepts. These domains not only resided in the same person, but were mutually reinforcing: The powers confirmed the truth of the teachings, while the mystical Torah provided the theoretical framework for the paranormal gifts. It is no wonder that people of all social classes flocked to them for a wide variety of reasons — material, social, and spiritual. The diverse and rich texture of the Hasidic community was a mirror reflecting the all-embracing wisdom and reach of the master.

When the earliest Hasidic leaders died, no one saw the Hasidic community as a collective entity that might be — indeed, ought to be — preserved and inherited. A community's self-consciousness took time to ripen, no doubt fostered by ties of pious loyalty that emerged over several generations. While the Hasidim were discovering bonds of affiliation to a Hasidic family based on memory, place, and a growing body of teachings, stories, melodies, and practices, the master's family came to realize that it, too, had a strong interest in preserving the community that had grown around the departed tzaddik. Not inconsequentially, a Hasidic residence was a clearinghouse for the distribution of charity funds left by grateful devotees. An entire theology grew up around these donations, which were seen as analogous to gifts to the Temple in biblical times, and which assured the Hasid's soul-connection to the master. While most funds were distributed immediately, some were quite legitimately directed to expenses of the household, which came to comprise not only the tzaddik's family, but resident Hasidim on stipend, visitors on pilgrimage, widows and orphans absorbed into the household, and many

[1] See Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change," in Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised* (Littman Library, 1996), pp. 76-140

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workers — kitchen staff, maintenance crew, supervisory personnel.[2] In short, the Hasidic court became a complex enterprise, a center of economic as well as spiritual activity upon whom many people depended.

Once the Hasidic house was seen to be a spiritual, social, and economic *asset*, there was a strong motivation to preserve it after the death of the master. Loyalty of the devotees was indispensable for the success of this project, but the central actors were the members of the family. And, while only male heirs could actually sit on the previous master's seat and assume titular authority, it was frequently the women of the family working behind the scenes who influenced the process in crucial ways. In Hasidic households, women — the master's wife, mother, daughters, or daughters-in-law — were often the ones directly involved in running the household, supervising the staff, and managing the accounts. Perhaps more than anyone, they understood what was at stake in assuring continuity. They recognized that were a successor not named quickly, the community would become vulnerable to dissolution. The Hasidim who had followed the master would search for spiritual guidance from another tzaddik. The dispersal of the court would leave the family adrift, but a smooth succession would ensure a secure and honored position for them in the court of the new master, their close relative.

There is one other consideration: by the time of Hasidism's third generation (roughly, after 1772), the wives of noted masters were typically daughters of other masters. This inbreeding of Hasidic aristocracy meant that, even though a woman could not directly inherit a Hasidic lineage, she had the indispensable role of transmitting royal lines both as wife and daughter. It was in her womb that "sacred seed" grew to term. The child to whom she gave birth would bear the legacy of two noble families, thus enhancing the likelihood that the young scion would be favored by divine grace and inherit spiritual power in two different modalities. We thus arrive at a surprising conclusion: While women were generally kept in the background in Hasidic communities, out of sight and away from the gaze of outsiders, they played key roles in the rise of Hasidic dynasties and kept alive a dynastic vision over generations.

Hasidic dynasties have shown remarkable tenacity and resilience, retaining distinctive identities despite historical trauma and geographical displacement. The system was very functional and it fostered a diverse religious culture with a wide variety of ritual expression and spiritual style, thus providing each tzaddik with the opportunity to place the stamp of his personality on the received tradition in ways authentic yet individual. Each dynasty tried to cultivate a reputation for excellence in at least one particular area, such as Torah study, prayer, Hasidic tales, melody, acts of kindness, intercession, and so on. The dynastic system ensured the spread of Hasidism to ever wider geographic locations in Eastern Europe, and later to *Eretz Yisrael*, the Americas, and throughout the world. It satisfied the need of the Jewish masses for an aristocracy of their own, providing dignity, self-confidence, and pride. It gave the individual Jew and, eventually, families, towns, and regions, a sense of identification and rootedness, a rich spiritual identity that transcended the lifetime of any one individual.

The extraordinary postwar revival of Hasidism is astonishing, far exceeding what most people could have foreseen, given the decimated Hasidic communities in 1945. Yet this very success now leads to challenges and tensions.

The renaissance of Hasidism after the Holocaust is largely due to the dynastic principle. In cases where a particular rebbe survived and resettled in Israel or America — Lubavitch, Satmar, Ger, Bobov, Vizhnitz, and Belz — the Hasidic group reconstituted itself. Other notable dynasties whose royal families suffered near-total annihilation at the hands of the Nazis, such as Aleksander, have not yet returned to anything like their pre-war strength.

The extraordinary postwar revival of Hasidism is astonishing, far exceeding what most people could have foreseen, given the decimated Hasidic communities in 1945. Yet this very success now leads to challenges and tensions. Many dynasties have grown to such an extent that they may be too large to be led by one individual, especially with the personal touch and intimacy that was once the hallmark of Hasidic leadership. The problem generally emerges with particular force after the death of a leader, with rifts in the community sometimes rising to the level of violent intensity. The Satmar Hasidim have undergone a bruising and embarrassing succession struggle that was taken to the secular courts. On the other hand, the passing of the Bostoner Rebbe, Rabbi Levi Y. Horowitz, in 2009, was followed by an apparently amicable arrangement by which his

[2] See David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, translated from the Hebrew by David Louvish (Stanford University Press, 2002); Nehemia Polen, "Rebbetzins, Wonder-Children and the Emergence of the Dynastic Principle in Hasidism," in *Shtetl: New Evaluations*, edited by Steven T. Katz (New York University Press, 2007).

three sons each inherited one location of influence and associated institutions: Har Nof in Jerusalem, Boston, and Boro Park (Brooklyn).

The greatest succession drama of the contemporary period may be the Lubavitch lineage, where the seventh rebbe left no successor, yet the mission of his emissaries continues with unabated vigor throughout the world. The widespread predictions of disillusionment and collapse after the death of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson in 1994 failed to be realized, and the Chabad movement is stronger and more influential than ever. Like the Bratslav Hasidim, Chabad-Lubavitch may be on the path to discovering that no succession plan is needed when the fervor and devotion of followers keep the master's presence as an active, dynamic force guiding their lives.

In the end, this is what we have always known: It is the Hasidim who make the rebbe.

Leadership in Transition:
The Business of Families

BRUCE ELLMAN

In a noted talmudic parable, Rabbi Eliezer takes a contrary stance on a matter of Jewish law. To demonstrate his halakhic authority, he wills a tree to jump, a spring to flow, and the walls of the *beit midrash* to bend inward. These miracles are accompanied by a divine proclamation that validates Rabbi Eliezer's opposing opinion. Defiantly, one of his rabbinic colleagues stands up and declares, "It is not in the heavens [to decide]." When asked for God's response, the prophet Elijiah replies, "He was laughing and saying, 'My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me.'" (*Bava Mezia* 59b)

What generally tears family-managed enterprises apart is the unwitting enactment of unresolved family dynamics within the business environment.

I consult with family businesses in which parents and children negotiate power. Years of financing small and large businesses, as well as advanced degrees, provide the skills and experiences that enable me to assist family organizations in the succession process. But what inspired me to pursue this work was something else altogether: a fascination with the biblical accounts of family dynamics, years of therapy, and my father's unsuccessful attempt to integrate his other sons into his financial organization.

Families are complex, intense, and confusing systems. Though historically formed primarily for economic purposes, modern families focus their energies on developing generative characteristics — security, loyalty, support, relational constancy, and lifetime membership. These goals are often at odds with the principal motivations of business — profit, efficiency, fact-based strategies, and earned membership. In typical times, managing the inherent conflicts between family and business values are challenging. When the organizational structure is altered through the transfer of power (i.e., succession planning), an already highly charged environment becomes more volatile, similar to the way in which life events — marriage, birth, or death — exacerbate existing family relationships. Too often, succession within a family business is like war: At least one party is defeated. But unlike God, no one is laughing.

Family-managed enterprises rely on a web of intrafamily relationships. The most frequent impediment to smooth succession planning is both independent of monetary issues and outside the awareness of family members. What generally tears family-managed enterprises apart is the unwitting enactment of unresolved family dynamics within the business environment.

The family organization is a fertile and powerful stage upon which decades of family dynamics are replayed. Like Jacob and Esau, siblings compete for parental love and approval while vying for financial or hierarchical rewards. Some children are favored (like our patriarch Joseph); others labor for years only to feel deceived and exploited (Jacob). Festering marital issues can grow into a silence like the one Sarah and Abraham endured after the binding of their son. Parents who want to control their children's lives tend to micromanage, and oversupervised children often rebel with chronic lateness and subpar performances.

The real danger is not the existence or even the intensity of these primal feelings and emotional undercurrents; it's that they are played out unknowingly within the context of the business. Family members working together often lack the

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שמע Sh'ma

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Inside
Leadership Succession

Legacy, transmission, inheritance, succession — these are emotionally charged words connected to the complex process of making the transition from one leader to another. Sometimes retirement is imposed, but rarely do term limits exist for leaders in Jewish life. How, then, does the mantle pass from one generation to another — especially today, when elders live longer, healthier lives? Who actually owns our organizations? How do governing boards track tenure and retirement? What factors influence a personal decision to step down from an executive position? The loss of a seasoned leader can be unsettling for the individual and the organization: It may result in a weakening of institutional history, or the loss of an essential aspect of one's identity. But need it be so?

This month, *Sh'ma* offers a fascinating glimpse at what succession has meant, and still means, in Hasidic life. We also share the personal stories and inner ruminations of contemporary leaders who have let go of power. We consider how experiments in intergenerational or co-leadership work, both to transmit values and wisdom and to ensure that the "outgoing" and "incoming" leaders hear each other without judgment or defensiveness. Perhaps now, with so many Jewish institutions and individuals approaching leadership transitions, we might finally put aside that grab bag of bad retirement jokes. —S.B.

Letting Go of Power

RACHEL COWAN

On four occasions over the course of my lifetime, I have stepped down from a job. I am about to do so again. Each time, I realized that I was ready to move on to something new. Each time, I hesitated — out of fear — for quite awhile: Would I disappoint my employer? How would it feel to turn over something precious that I had helped create? And, what would it be like to face the uncertainty of what would come next? I also feared giving up the power, influence, and visibility that I had managed to accumulate with great effort. And, of course, I worried about financial security.

I must remain mindful to see fear for what it is, a construction of my mind, not a prediction of the future.

That was certainly true when I left my position as director of Jewish Life and Values at the Nathan Cummings Foundation in 2003. The position holds a certain leverage and influence. And leaving such a job, one's IQ drops 20 points, or at least that's how it feels; for suddenly you receive fewer compliments, or requests to "pick your brain," or invitations to meetings.

I was leaving to start a nonprofit. And, although the foundation had funded dozens of start-ups and grass-roots organizations, I had no idea how hard it would be to raise funds for an organization — even one whose mission clearly and, it turns out, successfully, filled a communal gap. Had I known, would I have abandoned my gorgeous office, great colleagues, reliable IT support, and steady source of income?

Absolutely! At a certain point, we know it is time to move on. After fourteen years, the Nathan Cummings board deserved a new voice, a fresh burst of energy, and a new perspective. As a funder, it was also important for me to step out into the field, to expose myself to the harsh realities of those we serve. I also wanted to help build an organization whose work and mission were completely in sync with my professional and spiritual passions.

No work has been more rewarding and satisfying than directing the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, an organization that I have led for the past seven years. Why, then, is it now clear to me that I must step down? I am turning 70 this year, and the institute needs a next-generation voice to lead it into the future. As well, my energy for the constant fundraising and administration is flagging. I want other things in my life to take precedence: teaching, writing, exploring new dimensions of work — particularly, learning and thinking about developing spiritual