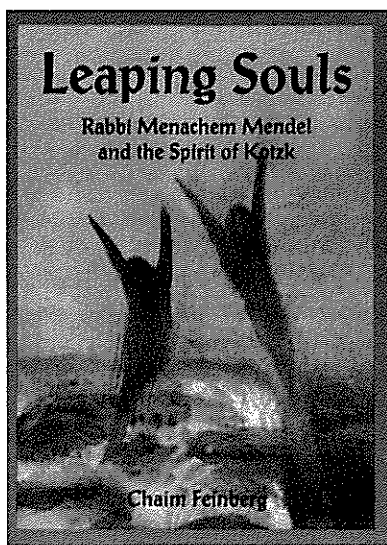


Life On a Razor's Edge

Nehemia Polen *defines the soul-searing world of Kotzk in the context of Polish Chassidus in this review essay of Chaim Feinberg's Leaping Souls.*

The history of the Chassidic movement begins with the Maggid of Mezerich and his disciples. It is true that Chassidism traces its origins back to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (d. 1760), known as the Baal Shem Tov, but that uniquely gifted mystical teacher and healer, for all his paranormal abilities, outward popularity and inner mystery, never began a movement. It was Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezerich (d. 1772), with his combination of dazzling charismatic power, depth of traditional Talmudic learning, and astute organizational ability, who created a formidable movement which spread rapidly beyond the confines of its Podolian and Ukrainian origins, and soon conquered almost all of the Eastern European Jewish world.

Almost nothing in Chassidism is new. There is hardly a Chassidic teaching, term, or theological belief that cannot be traced back to earlier sources in Kabbalah, Midrash, Talmud and Bible. That having been said, it is also true that Chassidism breathed new life into the ancient words and traditions of Judaism. The major concerns of Chassidism are simply stated. These include a focus on love of God, Torah and Israel, ecstatic fervor in prayer and study, and a theology of divine immanence: the teaching that all the universe is permeated with His Glory — the indwelling Presence of the Divine — so that “no place is void of Him.” Also important is the doctrine of the *Tzaddik*, the Righteous One who, like Moshe and the other biblical prophets, stands in the breach between God and man, mediating between the two, bringing his *Chassidim* closer to the Divine by their association with him. The *Tzaddik* is human, not a semi-divine figure. For all that, the sanctity and sublime elevation of his soul, the inexhaustible resources of his mind, heart, and spirit, and his ability to perceive and respond to the



Leaping Souls: Rabbi Menachem Mendel and the Spirit of Kotzk
By Chaim Feinberg
Ktav, 1993

needs and inner lives of his *Chassidim*, all served to foster the perception that the *Tzaddik* is another kind of human, a unique category of being who, if sought out in humble pilgrimage, would confer blessing by his word and holiness by his proximity.

There are no generic *Chassidim*, only *Chassidim* of particular *Rebbeim*. One can be a Lubavitcher, Satmarer, Gerer, or Vizhnitzer, but one cannot simply be a *Chassid*, unaffiliated and unattached. This pattern begins with the Maggid of Mezerich and his disciples, each of whom staked out a certain territory — spiritual as well as geographical — within the Jewish world. The *Tzaddik* R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk (LiZENSka)(d.1787), for example, was instrumental in bringing Chassidism to southeastern Poland and Galicia. It is said that when R. Elimelekh passed away, he “bequeathed” his eyes to the Seer of Lublin, his power of speech to the Apter Rebbe, his mind to R. Mendel

of Rymanov, and his heart to R. Israel of Kozienice (KOZHnitz). This tradition suggests how one great early Chassidic master engendered both a geographical dispersion and a spiritual diversification of the message of Chassidism.

Along with this diversification came, at times, a certain contentiousness, as *Chassidim* of different *Rebbeim* each claimed his master to be the greatest, and as *Rebbeim* vied with each other for disciples and influence. By the fourth generation of the movement, for example, Polish Chassidism was riven by a split between the followers of the Seer of Lublin and Rabbi Israel of Kozienice, on the one hand, and an upstart group of young rebels led by Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak of Pshyshche (PSHISka), known as the Yehudi, on the other hand. The Seer and the Kozienicer were perceived as representing an older, more popular brand of Chassidism which emphasized miracle working, and which appealed to the masses on the basis of unconditional acceptance and love.

The way of the Yehudi, (who was known as the “*Yid hakodosb*”, the “Holy Jew”) in contrast, was characterized by intellectual acuity and excellence in talmudic studies. The yearning for miracles was contemptuously rejected as a weakness of spirit and a religious embarrassment. When the Holy Jew passed away in 1814, his most intense *Chassidim* chose as his successor not his son R. Yerahmiel, but a follower, R. Simcha Bunim, a master of Talmudic literature who was also knowledgeable in secular sciences (and a licensed pharmacist). When R. Simcha Bunim passed away in 1827, some *Chassidim* looked to his son as successor, but the most outstanding *Chassidim* gravitated to the brilliant and penetrating personality of R. Menahem Mendel Morgenstern, who at the time resided in Tomashov.

R. Menahem Mendel attracted an elite group of young scholars, who, together with their enigmatic and formidable master, raised the Pshyshche tradition of Chassidism to new heights of spiritual intensity and achievement. Eventually R. Menahem Mendel would move to Kotzk, and he would enter the pages of Jewish history as the Kotzker Rebbe.

The bedrock foundation of Kotzk was Talmud study. Talmudic knowledge was pursued with single-minded determination and focus. It is said that R. Mendel would lead study sessions that might last ten hours at a sitting.

Along with this went a relentless search for inner truth, a gazing at the world with an eye that detected and swept away all pretense, affectation, posturing and deceit, especially self-deceit. This led to an atmosphere which many outsiders interpreted as excessive and extreme; it was said that Kotzker *Chassidim* had no use for social graces and showed no respect for anyone, not even famous talmudic scholars or Chassidic masters. Their insistence on inner truth over outer form led to laxity with regard to the halachically-mandated fixed times for prayer; one simply could not pray if the moment was not ripe and if one's soul was not truly awake. In the view of R. Menahem Mendel, Chassidism had become overly structured, predictable, domesticated. He wished to return the movement to the vitality of its early days, but with the difference that in the place of the early emphasis on love and warmth, the Kotzker style of leadership was based on a ferocious intensity which engendered stark fear on the part of the *Chassidim*.

But instead of driving followers away, the Kotzker's utter earnestness and all-consuming concentration of energies created a mystique which attracted the very best young minds and hearts of early nineteenth-century Polish Jewry. Among these extraordinary figures was Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Rothenberg Alter, celebrated as the prodigy of Warsaw, who was later to be known by his work as the "*Chiddushei ba-Rim*", and as the founder of the great Chassidic dynasty of Ger. In

his early years, R. Yitzhak Meir was a close disciple of the Kozienicer Maggid, and his departure from the house of Kozienice in favor of the bold new Chassidism of Kotzk was perceived to be a severe blow to the venerable and greatly respected Kozienicer dynasty.

The list of Kotzker *Chassidim* and disciples reads like a *Who's Who* of prominent Eastern European rabbinic families.¹ These included the son and grandson of the chief Rabbi of Warsaw, the author of *Chemdas Shlomo*; the son-in-law of R. Yaakov Lorbeerbaum of Lisa, author of *Nesivos HaMishpat* and *Chavvos Daas*; and the grandson of the author of *Ketzos HaChoshen*. The young men came usually against the wishes of their families. One of these was R. Leibele Eiger, son of the noted talmudic scholar R. Shlomo Eiger, and grandson of R. Akiva Eiger, arguably the most penetrating and masterly halachic mind of the age, whose writings are studied assiduously and admired to this day for their combination of clarity of focus, elegance of argument, and absolute control of the talmudic corpus.

It is said that his family sat *shivah* when R. Leibele Eiger made his decision to join the circle of Kotzker *Chassidim*. What aspect of life in Kotzk could have provoked such a drastic response on the part of the Eiger family? It could hardly have been the Kotzker commitment to Talmud study, a commitment the Eigers shared enthusiastically. The laxity with respect to mandated prayer times no doubt provoked concern and even anger, but this issue alone seems insufficient to precipitate ritualized mourning, an act of ultimate gravity and finality which would typically be enacted only in cases of intermarriage or apostasy.

It is likely that what the Eigers recoiled from in Kotzk was precisely the pattern of life which was captured in later vignettes and recollections. The impression we gain from these sources is that of life lived at the edge, of a push to the extreme in every domain: extremes of religious intensity, of intellectual achievement, of demands upon the self, of the search for inner truth. This ex-

tremism left no room for mediocrity or pretense; it made fearsome demands upon its practitioners; and its ferocious intensity could devour all those outside its circle and, on occasion, even some of those within. There was no room for manners, for common courtesies, for the trappings of domesticity. But it is precisely the web of domestic relations which maintains the social fabric that is assumed by the Torah, so that for those who did not share the Kotzker path, it likely appeared as a dangerous and self-destructive conceit which violated in principle the sober and balanced spirit of the Torah.

Those who followed the Kotzker, of course, saw matters differently. His elitism, his insistence on independent thinking and excellence captivated the religious imagination of the finest young minds in Jewish Poland. His circle of Chassidim resembled a dedicated cadre of guerillas, surviving with only the barest of material necessities (there were times, we are told, when they could not afford to purchase a postage stamp), flouting convention at every turn, mercilessly attacking the false veneer of their society, and attacking their own pretenses with even greater ruthlessness. It is no wonder they provoked fear and resentment as well as admiration.

The Kotzk *chevre* largely frowned upon normal family life. While at that time men were typically married at a very young age — as young as thirteen or fourteen — the Kotzker society had essentially no place for women or children, for the entanglements of familial responsibilities and domesticity. It was a male bastion designed for one purpose: spiritual conquest, most of all the conquest of the self. When young married men left their homes to answer the call of Kotzk, it is not surprising that their wives and fathers-in-law reacted in horror and outrage.

Some followers eventually left Kotzk, especially after the onset of the Rebbe's twenty year period of near-total isolation, during which time he lived as a recluse in his own home. But some disciples stayed on. Among these was

1. See Yitzhak Alfasi, Talmidav shel Rabbi Mendele mi-Kotzk, "Sinai" 90 (5742/1982), pp.68-78. This article lists 166 disciples of the Kotzker, many of them major figures, suggesting the powerful influence and attraction of the Kotzker. In preparation for this article, I have consulted Alfasi's many works on Chassidism for valuable background sketches on the masters.

R. Yitzhak Meir Rottenberg Alter, the aforementioned prodigy from Warsaw, who was able to temper the Kotzker's ferocity, to channel his overwhelming intensity in fruitful and productive ways. It was R. Yitzhak Meir who founded the dynasty of Ger Chassidism, which eventually became the foremost and most influential Chassidic dynasty in Poland. One of the great literary achievements of Ger is the *Sefas Emes*, a work of Chassidic Torah commentary by R. Yitzhak Meir's grandson, R. Yehuda Aryeh Leib. This work is a collection of dazzling spiritual insights, a series of polished gems whose evocative power and penetrating spirituality recall the pristine beauty and awesome majesty of the Chassidic movement's earliest days. The author of *Sefas Emes* was taken as a young child by his grandfather to visit the Kotzker. As Chassidim tell the story, the journey was undertaken in the dead of winter and there were fears for the boy's health, but R. Yitzhak Meir insisted that the young lad must have the opportunity to meet "a true Jew."

No work of the Kotzker Rebbe survives. He judged his own literary productions to be wanting, and consigned them to the flames. What we know about him, we owe to the memories of disciples. They did not record complex talmudic arguments or psycho-spiritual explorations, but rather stories, vignettes, epigrams, and one-liners (which do not always translate well from the Yiddish). Much of it was written down several generations after the Kotzker's death in 1859. This situation presents a formidable challenge for the biographer.

But this is all we have from the Kotzker. In the end, those who seek the same inner truth he sought, whose hearts are ablaze with the same fervor,

manage to intuit the Kotzker message, to reassemble its fragments and reconstitute it into a living, breathing whole. Such a

seeker was Chaim Feinberg, z"l, a brave and noble soul who sought holiness with an unrelenting intensity worthy of the

Kotzker himself. His last work, published posthumously, *Leaping Souls: Rabbi Menachem Mendel and the Spirit of Kotzk* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1993) takes the English-language reader into the realm of Kotzk spirituality, sensitively and eloquently lays bare the facets of its inner life and struggle. We are reminded by Chaim Feinberg's presentation that one is truly alive only when one is striving to transcend the limitations of the self, to stretch the soul heavenward, no matter the personal pain or the societal cost. Here are all the favorite epigrams and stories that give us a glimpse into the mind and heart of that most mysterious of Chassidic giants. Here is a philosophy to shake up a complacent society, a world of smugness, of sanctimonious self-satisfaction.

On the subject of resurrection, Rabbi Menachem Mendel once mused that it was in his power to revive the dead, but it was a greater achievement to revive the living. Chaim Feinberg's book is cause for celebration, for it not only restores to life the spirit of one of the greatest masters of all time, it unlocks the Kotzker secret of reviving the living. ■

Rabbi Nehemia Polen, Ph.D., is Associate Dean of Students and Associate Professor of Jewish Thought at Boston Hebrew College. He is the author of The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994).

From Leaping Souls

When the grandson of the Holy Jew — the Kotzker's own first Rebbe — came to see him, Reb Mendel asked: "And who are you, young man?"

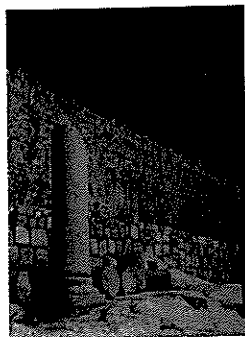
The young student answered: "I am the grandson of the Holy Jew."

Reb Mendel replied: "Another son of somebody's son — I asked you who you were, not who was your grandfather."

When Reb Shemayah the Elder lay on his death bed, his fellow Kotzk disciples asked him: "Shemayah, what about the yetzer hara (evil inclination)? Does it still trouble a man even now?"

"What a question," muttered Reb Shemayah with his eyes half closed. "Don't you all see how the yetzer hara is standing here at the head of the bed whispering in my ear: 'Reb Shemayah, say Shema Yisrael in a loud voice and draw out the Echad'?"

Reb Shemayah continued: "I recognize him — the thief — I know his intention. He is trying to seduce me to say Shema Yisrael in order that you will say after my death that Reb Shemayah left this world in a pure state, on the word Echad."



About the Cover

The ruins of the Temple Mount's southern wall have revealed exciting new historical perspectives, as described by Rabbi Leibel Reznick in "The Forgotten Wall" (page 12). This is an article to take along the next time you visit Jerusalem!

4 Letters to the Editor

8 President's Message

What is the Role of the Modern Synagogue?
Mandell I. Ganchrow, M.D.

PHOTO FEATURE 12 The Forgotten Wall *Rabbi Leibel Reznick*

JEWISH LIVING 19 Repress or Suppress? *Rabbi Abraham Twerski, M.D.*

20 Bytes and PCs Piracy on the High PCs *Barry Simon*

24 OU News Reporter Kashruth Listing

29 Our Way: Listening to Jews with Special Needs *Elissa Feldman*

CURRENT ISSUES 32 Is the ADL Right about the Right? *Toby Bulman Katz*

36 Jews and the Christian Right: An Uneasy Shidduch *Galia Bery*

HOLOCAUST INSIGHTS 40 A Generation Without Grandparents *Chani Aftergut Kurtz*

42 Afeylah a poem by Judith Rose

PORTRAIT 43 Hearing the Call of History: Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht zt"l *Rabbi Aaron J. Fink*

THE PROCESS OF JEWISH LAW 46 Divine Inspiration in Our Time? *Dr. Yaakov Elman*

48 Halakhic Decision-Making: Challenge and Responsibility *Rabbi J. David Bleich*

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY 51 Leaping Souls: Rabbi Menachem Mendel and the Spirit of Kotzk reviewed by Rabbi Nehemia Polen

JUST BETWEEN US MAILBOX 54 on "Affirming the Centrist Position"

JUST BETWEEN US 55 Advice Without Consent *Chaya Mermerstein*

Editor

Charlotte Friedland

Literary Editor

Matis Greenblatt

Editorial Assistant

Elissa Feldman

Contributing Editors

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Rabbi Emanuel Feldman

Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, Ph.D.

Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt

Rabbi Sol Roth

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter

Rabbi Berel Wein

Advertising Director

Shelley Scharf

Administrative Assistant

Penina Rosenzweig

Creative Design Directors

AD LIB Unlimited

Chavi Diamond and Ruth Folger-Weiss

Production

Devora Ehrentreu

Illustrator

Luda Stekol

Orthodox Union Publications Commission

Joel M. Schreiber, Chairman

Morton Landowne, Vice Chairman

President

Mandell I. Ganchrow, M.D.

Executive Vice President

Rabbi Raphael B. Butler

Senior Executive

Rabbi Pinchas Stolper

Chairman, Board of Directors

Marcel Weber

Chairman, Board of Governors

Dr. Marcos Katz

Honorary Presidents

Sheldon Rudoff, Prof. Sidney Kwestel,

Julius Berman, Harold M. Jacobs,

Joseph Karasick, Moses I. Feuerstein

Honorary Chairmen of the Board

Samuel L. Brennglass, Irving I. Stone

Honorary Vice Presidents

Dr. Bernard Lander, Marcus Rosenberg,

Donald B. Butler, Jack M. Nagel, Bernard

W. Levmore, Marvin J. Herskowitz,

George B. Falk, Sanford Deutsch,

Philip Fuchs, Elliott Stavsky

Senior Vice Presidents

Fred Ehrman, David Fund,

Martin Nachimson, Joel M. Schreiber,

Harvey Blitz, Jerry Gontownik,

Howard I. Rhine

Vice Presidents

Michael C. Wimpfheimer, Dr. David

Luchins, Larry Brown, Gerald E.

Feldhamer, Elliot Gibber, Carmi

Schwartz, Mark I. Bane, Allen Fagin,

Morton Landowne, Howard Tzvi

Friedman, Prof. Richard B. Stone,

Donald Press

Treasurer

Avi Blumenfeld

Financial Secretary

Avery E. Neumark

Secretary

Zev S. Berman

National Associate Vice Presidents

Dr. William Schwartz, Henry Rothman,

Emanuel Adler, Stephen J. Savitsky,

Gary Torgow

Jewish Action is published by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

• 333 Seventh Avenue • New York, N.Y. 10001 • (212) 563-4000.

Printed Quarterly — Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. ISSN No. 0447-7049. Subscription: \$18.00 per year; Canadian, \$22.00; Overseas, \$25.00. Second Class postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Jewish Action, 333 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10001.

Jewish Action seeks to provide a forum for a diversity of legitimate opinions within the spectrum of Orthodox Judaism. Therefore, opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the policy or opinion of the Orthodox Union.

Copyright 1995 by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. Second Class Postage Paid, New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices.

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.