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***Holiness Turned into Law:***

***Kabbalistic Customs and Sexual Abstinence in Hasidism***

Hasidism is a movement that shook the eighteenth-century Jewish world with a mystical call that was addressed to the masses. However, the active mystical experience ultimately became the preserve of a small spiritual elite. The praxis that did come down to the masses was a collection of customs and other norms, mainly of kabbalistic origin. These customs, more than any experience, shaped hasidic identity for generations. Even when Hasidism underwent a thorough change that introduced substitutes for mysticism and turned it into a conservative and institutionalized movement, these customs were maintained. During the early stages of the movement they had been related to the attempt to reach the mystical experience, while in later stages they can be seen as quasi-legal norms manifesting loyalty to hasidic identity. They were no longer considered a break with the fathers' tradition, but themselves became a "fathers' tradition" that the hasid inherited from his ancestors and teachers.

Indeed, the hasidim, who often stand out against the background of modern society, are also different within the Orthodox Jewish world. Many of their customs are more demanding than those of the Halakhah (Jewish religious law), and therefore do not contradict it, but others are in direct conflict with Halakhah. To mention just a few of these customs: Most hasidim immerse themselves in the ritual bath (*mikveh*) every morning, pray late, use the *Sepharad* prayer version, lay two pairs of phylacteries (while the standard is one pair), dress in their unique garb, do not wear woolen clothes, refrain from cutting their beards, and more. Being atypical of Eastern European Jewish norms, many of these customs met with harsh opposition, but in most cases this did not lead the hasidim to change their approach. They remained loyal to their customs, which, due to their kabbalistic origin, were considered not only as legitimate, but also as means for attaining a higher religious level. With the decline of the mystical tension in Hasidism, the basis for these norms was supposedly dropped, but the adherence of the hasidim to their customs – that now had ramified and multiplied along with the growth and variegation of hasidic groups – remained and even increased, even though they were no longer attached to the ideal that generated them.

Side by side with these customs, most of which relate to the forms of fulfilling the laws of the Halakhah, Hasidism also developed norms of sexual abstinence within marriage life. Contrary to the popular image of the movement, in which it has been perceived as countenancing the body and the material life, some groups within Hasidism fostered an ideal of sexual abstinence that was encoded in the term "Holiness" (*Kedushah*). At first, Holiness was not regarded as law. Although some hasidic leaders adopted abstinence for themselves, and a few also preached it to their followers, until the beginning of the twentieth century we do not know of even a single hasidic leader who enacted these norms as a set of regulations or tried to impose them through social mechanisms. By the mid-twentieth century, however, we encounter this phenomenon in three different hasidic groups: Gur, Slonim, and Toldos Ahron. Though the backgrounds of these three groups include elements that facilitated such a development, it was nevertheless innovative. The norms of Holiness had tremendous effects on the community, above all in regards with gender relations and family life. Even though these norms were addressed only to the male hasidim (as in most of the hasidic groups women are not "hasidim" sensu stricto), they influenced women’s lives no less that their husbands. These norms, too, faced harsh criticisms, partly within the hasidic camp and mostly from the outside, and these usually focused on Gur, the largest and most extreme proponent of Holiness. Here, too, hasidic leaders and speakers needed to defend their path in terms of the Halakhah, according to which sexual intercourse is one of the husband’s obligations to his wife. Again, these criticisms did not have an impact on the on the normative standards. The norms of Holiness were institutionalized in these three hasidic groups, and became a banner and a source of pride. They did, however, have an impact on the community. Among individuals who left Gur, and particularly women, many mention the Holiness rules as one of the first issues that made them rethink their loyalty to the group.

This book examines the justifications for the new norms as presented by hasidic leaders and speakers, and evaluates them from broader perspectives: ideological, jurisprudential, and historical. It also considers possible sources of influence for these norms and parallel norms in Christianity. Thus we see that this subject is valuable not only for the research of Hasidism, but also as a case study for the institutionalization of enthusiastic religious movements, and for the relationship between mysticism, mysticism-substitutes, and religious law.

The first section of the book discusses the hasidic customs as perceived and justified by hasidic figures from the late eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. The analysis of numerous hasidic texts, some of which have not previously been the subject of academic discussion, reveals five such perceptions: (a) Hasidic custom is a personal hypernomian standard, offered to the free choice of the individual; (b) Hasidic custom is a communal enactment, similar to synagogue rules; (c) Hasidic custom is part and parcel of positive Jewish Law, and as such is a binding norm for every Jew; (d) Hasidic custom is simply a custom (*minhag*), and has a (weak) normative status similar to that of a local or communal custom; (e) Hasidic custom may be taken as a "sin for the sake of Heaven" (*aveirah lishmah*) – a category relevant only to customs that are at odds with the positive religious law, first among which is the late prayer. The meaning of these approaches is analyzed at the end of the section.

The second section discusses the norms of Holiness in marital life, as adopted in the three hasidic groups mentioned above – Gur, Slonim, and Toldos Ahron. These norms restrict the relationship between husband and wife, in particular the frequency and ways of conjugation. In Gur, these norms were enacted as "regulations" that have never been published, but which were transmitted by the marriage guides of the group. According to these regulations, sexual intercourse was restricted to twice a month and prohibited during the last three months of the pregnancy and the six months that followed it; intercourse is performed in almost full dress; the husband is instructed to distract his thought from the act; and more. In addition, the husband may not sleep at home in the afternoon when his wife is home alone; should not address her by her first name; and should not walk with her in public. In Slonim the requirements are less concrete, but the hasidim are encouraged to minimize their contact with their wives. In Toldos Ahron, on the other hand, the norms are more moderate and allow greater closeness between husband and wife. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, these norms are not published, and the discussion in this section is based on a large volume of internal documents from within these groups.

In the summary chapter, the hasidic customs and the principle of Holiness are analyzed through a theoretical model. The book suggests a series of normative circles that together constitute the entirety of the hasid's normative life. Beyond the hasidic case, this analysis can serve as a starting point for broader discussions into the concept of norm on the whole in its jurisprudential, religious, and moral contexts.