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## Tasting a Watermelon by Its Peel

A Report on the Field Trip to the Hasidic  
Community in Brooklyn, New York City

Tetsu Kohno

Over the East River my J-train now lumbered into Brooklyn. Since my arrival in New York over a year ago I had been told that I could do nothing much there by myself. Today I could do something, at least walk around free from anxiety in a group of reliable classmates, all properly attired to evade the slightest tinge of obtrusiveness. Somehow having arrived earlier than anybody else, I stood alone at the prearranged rendez-vous point just below Marcy Ave Station stairway, and was immediately thrilled at an uninterrupted view of Caftan-clad Hasidim, some of them wearing very conspicuous Genghis Khan style fur-edged hats called "shtreimlech". Years ago in Tokyo I came by Vishniac's photo-album *Polish Jews* and was impressed by a picture of an emaciated semi-hunchback old man, shabbily clad, shaggily bearded, plodding wearily, yet with books firmly under his arm and something indefatigable and even defiant in his gaze. Though as indefatigable and even defiant as ever, his modern American Hasidic scions in Williamsburg have nothing to do with shabbiness or shagginess. Dressed neat and tidy, they keep even their side curls well groomed. They never plod, but stride along with their somewhat Westpointish gait.

At sight of their good appearance and fresh complexion which is a far cry from the undernourished emaciation pictured by Vish-

niac, a question welled up: With a complicated series of religious services always in their minds, how could they manage to earn a living for themselves and dependents? I answer myself: a fresh complexion does not always reflect a high living; more often it is a result of plain living and high thinking. Consider the Zen Buddhists I witnessed at a famous mountain temple near Fukui City and not far from the shore of the Japan Sea. Equally attired in black and white, they used to move always with snap and energy. Their faces shone with health despite of a very simple and plain diet strictly based on vegetarian principles. But Zen Buddhists are without any dependents, are they? Well, some Hasidim, if intelligent enough, could be remunerated by teaching at innumerable "yeshivot"(religious schools)in the community or by serving as "sofrim" (scribes). And for a community of this size to survive with their tradition intact, there must be a very delicate device of mutual support, some sort of "allied industries" to take care of their own. The poor could expect "tsedakah" (charity) from inside, and from outside such a considerably organized plan of training Hasidim as IBM computer programmers. No doubt the mental gymnastics involved in Talmudic studies must have put a good shine on their logical minds. Since the IBM machines should be kept running around the clock, newly trained Hasidic programmers can arrange a most convenient 40-hour week and manage to attend all religious services.

Such infusion of modernity seems inevitable and actually was in evidence before our eyes. A most up-to-date and brand-new Hasidic housing complex stood a few blocks off Lee Avenue, the main street of Williamsburg, in dazzlingly white rows in good contrast with decaying brownstone tenements nearby, and the pious residents in traditional attire themselves made, for that matter, as beautiful a contrast with the ultramodern surroundings. In an unlevelled vacant lot between the apartment houses and the bordering street was a "sukkah"(tabernacle) the size and structure of a bunkhouse, where young and old in their Sabbath best were quiet-

ly dining or reading.<sup>(1)</sup> From the way old and young were harmoniously together, it was hard to detect any kind of generation gap or identity crisis or what have you. Young and old, but all male. In a guidebook to Jewish observance, Rabbi Donin's *To Be a Jew*, it is added that women and children before puberty "are excused from the obligation of eating in the "sukkah". "To be excused from something" is sometimes a democratic expression of "to be kept clear of it".

Without much expectation I started reading Psychoanalyst Theodor Reik's book *Pagan Rites in Judaism*. Surprisingly enough, he traces, as I wished he would, the origin of the sukkah, the custom of the booths, not only to Canaanites, Babylonians or Egyptians, but much further to "the Semitic tribes of the Neolithic age in the forests of Arabia" who were "not too remote in their customs and ideas from the Australian and African aborigines"; in other words, Reik considers the origin traceable even to the dawn of history when the recession of the last icecap had *not* changed the rich tropical lands of the Sahara and the fertile Arabian regions into arid soil and then into deserts. (This surely explains the use of palm leaves and branches for the sukkah. Since the Hebrews led by Moses did not dwell in booths but in tents during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, it might

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(1) The day of our visit fell on the fifth or sixth day of the nine-day-long Feast of Tabernacles(Sukkot) which begins on the 15th of Tishri (Sept. - Oct.). Our group of eight students from Yiddish Folklore class at Columbia University tried to find out what this Feast is about and what a "sukkah" is like. To quote from *A Guide to Jewish Knowledge* by C. Pearl and R. Brookes: "The Sukkah is a temporary structure especially built either in the yard, in the garden, or on the roof of the house. It is not covered from above with board but with detached branches so that the sky may be seen. The insubstantial nature of the physical structure symbolizes more clearly the dependence of man on God's protection. The historic significance of the Sukkah serves as a reminder of the booths or temporary dwellings in which Israel dwelt throughout its momentous journey in the Wilderness."

be called an anachronism to consider the Feast of Tabernacles as a logical sequel to Passover and Pentecost which commemorate Exodus.) As a possible thought-association of any Australian aboriginal observing a modern sukkah erected, say, in the upper-Manhattan yard of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Reik mentions "Männerhaus" (men's house), the hut in which pubescent boys spent many months fulfilling rigorous and often cruel initiation requirements and on completion receiving instructions in the secret tribal rituals. As its later developments we have "Männerbünde"(clubs) and even temples. The process from "Männerhaus" to "sukkah" occurred, if it ever did, long after the Hebrew tribes became a confederacy going through Yahwism, reforms by Moses and replacement of "Männerhaus" by a temple.

In *The Jewish Catalogue—a do-it-yourself kit* we come across this instruction: "Store the (sukkah) material for next year's festival with the understanding and hope that you may not need it again. For if the Messiah comes before next Sukkot, we will sit together under the Sukkah of Shalom(Peace) and partake of the Great Feast of Leviathan." This means the Jewish privilege of sitting in the sukkah that God will fashion from the skin of the Leviathan killed by Him prior to the coming of the Messiah. One cannot but wonder how the Leviathan, the sea monster of the abyss, has something to do with the sukkah, even if it be God's will. Quoting James Fraser's description of a Papuan hut for initiation rites which is exactly the size and shape of this monster and equipped with adornments representing its great eyes, hair and backbone, Reik again connects the inside of the monster with the hut in the forest where boys must remain in strict seclusion for months without any contact with women. (According to Donin, "a sukkah built under a tree or under some permanent roof such as a porch is invalid and disqualified." The temporary and non-weatherproof quality of the roof or the ceiling could be attributed to the need to commemorate the ancestral hardships in the wilderness or, as *The Jewish Catalogue* suggests, "the old warning of

the way fortune changes". Reik's ur-sukkah, the booth for initiation rites, was as uncomfortable as could be for boys to sleep or eat in, for it was located in the middle of the woods or the jungle very far from other houses, and built only with leaves and branches, exposing pubescent candidates to all the elemental threats. In such an anthropological and psychoanalytical vein, the agricultural aspect of Sukkot marking the completion of harvest is just one of "the late adaptations to the civilizations or religious rites of the people in whose midst the Hebrews lived".) And what is more shocking, Reik refers to the passage from the prophets dealing with the war the Lord will wage against Gog and Magog at the end of days, and questions "what has this belligerent prediction to do with the Festival of Tabernacles?" He again goes back to the puberty rites "at the conclusion of which the boys went out to fight hostile tribes. The fathers encouraged the young men to kill many enemies." It was natural that I should call to mind the first chapter of Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen*, where Hasidic yeshiva boys display an open animosity towards "apikorsim" (unbelievers) in their baseball match with another team from a loosely orthodox community. Danny the hero smashes the ball direct to the opponent pitcher's face, breaking his glasses into smithereens.

Well, after reading such an evolutionary or rather devolutionary macrohistory of the sukkah, the age-old traditional instructions on the Sukkot observance and sukkah erecting are bared of their mysterious veils, and reduced to a micro-history of "later adaptations or assimilations" in Jewish cultural and social developments. The colorful ornaments hanging from the ceiling and ready-made "ushpizin" posters stuck on the walls with the seven Biblical names as favorable guests etc. just confirm the same impression. Well aware of the imaginary flamboyance peculiar to psychoanalysis, and with due respect to the rich accumulation of Jewish traditional heritage, I was so much fascinated with the hypothesis of the primal sukkah as "Männerhaus" that I had to search the "Männer-

haus" elements somewhere else than in an artistic showpiece of a modern sukkah.

While walking around Williamsburg streets, I saw many signboards bearing the name of Satmar, apparently the appellation of the dominant sect there. For any Japanese the first association recalled by it must be the Satsuma clan, a pre-modern fief that ruled a southernmost rich region of Kyushu, approximately Kagoshima prefecture of today. The Samurai, a privileged warrior-elite standing at the top of the old pyramidal caste system, had their own androcentric code of behavior. Androcentrism is characterized by subjugation or separation of women with a concomitant variety of taboos on women, especially on their uncleanness. The Samurai of Satsuma, called Satsuma-hayato (meaning men of temerity), were of course as androcentric as any other of the same class all over Japan. The association of Satsuma with Satmar is an interlingual phonetic coincidence and nothing more, yet the fact remains that the militarily- and religiously-oriented communities are both distinguished by androcentrism. After describing the Crow Indian custom of reciting the names of all his lovers since the last combat on the night before a raid on the enemy, Anthropologists Tiger and Fox have this to say: "At dawn these men must stand together against their enemies; they must fight together, and possibly die together. So on this evening they reaffirm their bonds as men, asserting that their relationship as warriors in a war party supersedes all others, and in particular their relationship with women. Once a man has recited his list of names, he is free forever from retaliation on that score: the slate is wiped clean. . . . War and fighting and the hunt have always been the business of human males, just as the protection of the troop is the business of male primates. Women are always a potential source of disruption to the unity, loyalty and trust necessary to comrades in arms. Far from belittling the strength and importance of women, this affirms it." (*The Imperial Animal*, p. 57)

We can forget about the similarity in smart or stately walking

gaits and in sharp or defiant gazes between Japanese Samurai and Williamsburg Hasidim, but there should be some other common factor. "The protection of the troop" (or of the traditional community, in our context) could be one. The undivided male devotion to this duty necessitates precautions against women as a potential source of disruption, as suggested in the above quotation. So far as Hasidic communities are concerned, however, the women's understanding as to the men's business seems to be perfect. A quoted passage in *Life Is with People* by Zborowski and Herzog is very suggestive: "His wife accepted it (*i. e.* the husband's visit to the Rebbe's court which may take more than a week's journey) as natural. In fact she used to encourage it. She believed that if her husband went to the Rebbe he would come home and bring her a blessing from the Rebbe which was worth far more than food and money." (p. 171) If this spirit is still prevalent in Williamsburg as it used to be in East European "shtetlech" (villages), then the entire Hasidic community there depends on male religious services for their "protection", solely spiritual as it may be. We could say that they really mean it if the separation, not to say subjugation, of women has been peacefully observed and still is.

Even in a most androcentric medieval society, says Art Critic Kenneth Clark in his book *Civilisation*, women knew how to "get their own back" and "were well able to look after themselves". The husband-wife interactions inside Hasidic families could not be much different from those in the outside world. When I looked admiringly at neatly dressed Hasidim on Marcy Avenue, I thought that their good appearance should largely owe to the resourcefulness and industriousness of their pious wives, and that "far from belittling female strength and importance" they should in some way or other acknowledge it. But publicly at least, men and women remain puritanically separated. When I went to elementary school in pre-war Japan, Confucianistic morals were still prevalent, and males and females had to walk or be seated separately after the age of seven, but in Williamsburg they have to at the



age of three. I came across some male-female couples, but all apparently of the same family. No billing-and-cooing young couples visible as around the Columbia campus. So long as appearance is concerned, Hasidic and non-Hasidic ladies were not so distinguishable. Hasidic women wear long-sleeved dresses with kerchiefs on their heads, and attire in general was of correctly restrained color. In spending several hours in such a severely tradition-bound community, it was a cinch for a nervous but careless outsider to make some bungle, major or minor. Well, when I boarded a bus for Boro Park, another Hasidic area in Brooklyn, I had not been informed of the most important traffic rule in Williamsburg. I took, in all innocence, one of the leftside seats strictly kept for ladies. A young lady on a front row turned toward me with her chin set—"No, not here!" Phyllis Franck writes in her essay "The Hasidic Poor in New York City" that "if a woman social worker knocks on the door and a man is the only one home, he will probably slam the door in her face." No wonder an equally stern treatment should be meted out by a hasida to an unobservant alien male. Even in Boro Park, supposedly less rigorous than Williamsburg, the female members of our group were not let into either of the two "bote-medroshim" (houses of study) we visited. Males enjoy a monopoly of the community's study-rooms and reject females as a distraction to whatever they should devote themselves to. Judging from these admirably executed separations of sexes, Lionel Tiger's theory that all men of all nations in all times are organized into exclusively male groups, proves 100% valid in any Hasidic community, a copybook maxim almost.

No doubt Hasidic male groups have been organized for predominantly religious purposes. I have been too much imbued with the idea of religion as a private affair to understand their particular togetherness as a group. Perhaps the inseparable connection of the former with the latter would create such hardly imaginable existence as anomie-free individuals or communities. Perhaps I have taken an anomic state of mind too much for granted. The

most likely way to save oneself from anomie would be total immersion, religious or artistic or whatever. It is, to quote from Kenneth Clark again, "a means by which we can lose our identity in the whole and gain thereby a more intense consciousness of being." How could Hasidim attain to this state of total immersion if ever they did? Their concentration upon religious services and studies could never have been so genuinely undivided, had it not been for an enthusiastic ecstasy called "hitlahavut" — the inner enkindlement through which the profane is sublimated into the sacred. I had the first faint inkling of it while listening to a radio broadcast of Hasidic melodies: an invigorating choral "nign" (melody) vocalized into "ai-ya-ya-ia", a sprightly dance music which causes an immediate upsurge from every bone even of a total stranger's body, and also some internally glowing tunes which, in spite of their Middle Eastern and Slavic derivations, sound like the more refined of Japanese love ballads. I cannot help respecting the people blessed with such melodies. Not until I get immersed in the heat of their "hitlahavut" by attending their dancing and singing rapture, and acquire an actual sensation of their joyous outpouring of love for whatever they praise, could I ever pass any heartfelt judgment on Williamsburg Hasidim. Only then could I write a better sequel to this report. To borrow an Oriental saying, our first field trip to Williamsburg was little better than "tasting a watermelon by its peel".

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For several weeks since our trip to Williamsburg, the Satmarer Hasidic community has been ever-present in my mind. The enchanting Hasidic melodies notwithstanding, I have been unable to dispel gradually gathering suspicions. Perhaps because I had been told that the eclectic and ecumenical trends in the American religious circles should have facilitated communication and contact between individuals of different backgrounds, and furthermore I am not the type who can really comprehend what Erich Fromm called an "X

experience", that is, a mystical encounter with any numinous being, or the following words from the pen of Martin Buber: "Only through the primal certainty of divine being can we come into contact with the mysterious meaning of divine becoming." (*Talks on Judaism*) Without this "primal certainty" could no comprehension be gained of a strong centripetal force driving a religious person or group toward something in the very center. People are atheistic or agnostic because their faces are still turned to an apparently limitless world of centrifugal adventures, whether sensuous or intellectual. In default of such venturesome escapes from iron gravity of traditionalism, they fear, one would have to live in a static world, say, like that of the Houyhnhnms. One would rather remain a bestial Yahoo than become a statically rational equine dominator, so they presume. In his study of *Gulliver's Travels* entitled "Politics vs Literature", George Orwell compared the dominated Yahoos to the ghettoized Jews under Nazi rule. Then what are the Houyhnhnms as "Herrenvolk" like?

As with perpetually enslaved Yahoos, there is no upward socio-economic mobility for lower-class Houyhnhnms, incarcerated in an immutably hierarchic setup with the dynastic elders on top. Their elders arrange all marriages and dispense all kinds of education not according to individual impulses, but with sole regard to communal stability. These traits seem to be shared with Hasidim, too. And Hasidic efforts to keep their age-old customs goyim- and apikorsim-rein (clear of aliens and unbelievers) are not too far wide of the Houyhnhnm policy of seclusion. Typically in some Hasidic synagogues a pledge must be given that one will not have television or radio in one's household, and a certain Hasidic girls' day school regulates, "Children who (and whose parents) go to movies, theaters or public libraries are not accepted." (as quoted in Solomon Poll's essay "The Persistence of Tradition") The Houyhnhnms are so often compared with or rather polarized from the Yahoos in respect of behavioral propriety or rationality and of eating habit (Yahoos devouring carrion in contrast to Houyhnhnms

satisfied with grain, herb and milk), but more than anything else as regards cleanliness.

To quote from Solomon Poll's treatise again, "according to Jewish law when a community has insufficient means with which to provide a synagogue, a Torah and a mikvah (ritual bath), the last takes precedence over the other two. A synagogue or a Torah scroll may even be sold to provide funds for the mikvah." How alike both Hasidic and Houyhnhnm communities are obsessed with hygiene! It is no wonder that after living among Houyhnhnms for years our Gulliver should fall in a swoon when hugged by his smelly wife back in England, and therefore prefer to stay with his always neat equine friends and enjoy speaking the mostly laryngeal Houyhnhnm language in the aromatic stable. This in turn reminds me of the sternest possible words uttered by a strictly observant Jewish husband to his menstruating wife, "Mach den Tische rein!" This has nothing to do with cleaning the table, but just means "Leave us!" or "Go away now!" (Theodor Reik, *op. cit.*, p. 81) Why did the Houyhnhnm General Assembly reject Gulliver's supplications for letting him stay with them, irrespective of his admirably consistent adherence to Houyhnhnm proprieties? By all means had their community to be kept Yahoo-*rein*, however far better he might look or behave than the aboriginal ones. What would happen to a modern pro-Hasidic but non-Jewish Gulliver if he implored the rebbe's court for membership in their community? Would a negative verdict be rendered to keep the community goyim-*rein*?

So much for a daydream of a persecution maniac which might well have been caused by those cautious sidelong glances cast on us wherever we went in Williamsburg and Boro Park. But how could one seize the meaning of their pre-modern or anti-modern intransigence vis-à-vis the current interreligious and intersectarian "dialogues" in America. In view of the otherwise unimaginable supra-partisan unison in several past campaigns for fund-raising, it is undeniable that the American Jewry in general is preoccupied with Israel — with the conspicuous exception of the Satmarer

Hasidim. Their rejection of the Israeli national flag has been frowned upon by their less Orthodox coreligionists. From the Satmarers' point of view, however, that flag is the symbol of an irrevocably secularized nation, and therefore as pollutant as television, radio and books from public libraries. This amazing separation of religion and State (or rather obliteration of State) was, however, sorely missed in war-time Japan. Since the Japanese militaristic authorities in those days were also shintoistic and held the Emperor as a living god, every Christian church in Japan was forced to and did put up Hirohito's portrait over the altar, and "holy war" slogans on both sides. Could you imagine Der Führer's or Il Duce's portraits over the Holy Ark in any Orthodox synagogue? It is hard to guess, because far more efficiently than the Japanese militarists the hotblooded Nazis set them all on fire. (An anglo-Jewish friend of mine got the better of me when he said in retort, "But they put up the portraits of Queen Elizabeth II in British synagogues." My repartee should have been, "But they cannot be Hasidic synagogues.") Anyway Hasidim in the Pale under Czarist rule proved resistant to all manners of forced conversion, and their mettle had been tried more than enough.

In Moses Hess' opinion, Reform Judaism "not only emasculated historical Judaism, ...but also substituted the eternal Jewish dream of communal redemption for the Christian message of merely individual salvation" and "it is among these communities (*i. e.* of the impoverished East European Jews and the Middle Eastern Sephardim) that the traditional communal spirit of Judaism is still alive, whereas Western Jews have been corrupted by individualism." (as quoted in Shlomo Avineri's essay "Political and Social Aspects of Israeli and Arab Nationalism") Thus Hess sees especially in Hasidic way of life "a communal togetherness transcending individual atomism." Attributed to this individual atomism are an ever higher incidence of intermarriage and an acceleratingly upward trend of assimilation into the major culture. With this crisis to Jewish continuity and survival in view, Hasidim's Williamsburg cannot

but be a spiritual Masada surrounded by an invisible (or perhaps only sociologically visible) wall which "reinforces their isolation so they may refrain from any possible sin that might result from contact with others." (Poll, *ibid.*)

As one of the remotest "others" who took a liking to the Jews as cosmopolitan searchers for internationally universal values, I was sadly shocked with their ultra-particularistic way of thinking. Should I cynically laugh from afar at their stilted piety, "Onward Jewish Soldiers" type fanaticism and jealously cherished superstitions as Isaac Joel Linetski did in *The Polish Lad*? The faintest idea of their ancestral wisdom would preclude such a playgame. Then what is left for me to do? Resurrect a "mutual understanding" myth with such a plausible appendage as "to understand is to forgive" stuff? Trying to understand is all right, but nothing is more immodest than to believe that understanding begets forgiveness. Did Adolf Eichmann's expertise in the Jewish problem and ability in Hebrew and Yiddish beget any forgiveness? To think a smattering of Hasidism would entitle one to forgive them for stiffly closing their door to others! Well, who would try to forgive Zen Buddhists for their isolation from the world? It might go one better to say, trying hard enough to understand is a way to being forgiven for one's uninvited intrusion. A determined newcomer to a Zen temple must prostrate himself before the door and keep begging for entrance until he is allowed in. It is true that Zen Buddhists are far less seclusionistic than Hasidim. Their doors are open to any eager foreign as well as domestic applicants and even to tourists of both sexes from anywhere (such contacts with the laity could serve as a trying ordeal for novices—"Do not pursue those who leave; do not refuse those who come.") Thus they let in outsiders to show some outer parts of their ascetic daily practices, and even allow them to sit together in meditation although visitors are sternly warned against misconducts beforehand. I remember young lady tourists kept gazing with rapt eyes at a handsome priest-guide who looked coolly insulated though.

Women's lib fighters will do well to visit one of the most hard-core Hasidic communities. The feminists are not so much angry with male chauvinism *per se* as with hypocritical promise of sexual equality, and their impeachment will somehow oblige male hypocrites to betray themselves. But in confrontation with Hasidic men and wives, feminist visitors would not so much get stunned by the inexorably androcentric customs which they anticipate anyway, as by a subdued but tender conjugal affection à la Williamsburg or Boro Park. As vehement romantic love is kept for God alone, men and wives are satisfied with the second warmest attachment that would prove, however, less likely to be fleeting or spurious. Moreover, obeying not out of fear, but out of love, wives are entitled to scold husbands, if the latter get lax in their husbandly obligations, especially in their study of the Torah as a supreme religious duty.

"If a fool persists in his folly, he will become wise," said William Blake. Could we say in the same paradoxical vein, if males persist in their androcentrism, they will become woman-worshippers? To quote from Moses Hess again, "whereas Gentile society, be it pagan or Christian, worshipped masculinity and its attributes, in Judaism it was the feminine virtues of compassion, suffering, love and understanding, associated with the Jewish mother, that were always dominant: 'every Jewish mother is a mater dolorosa'." (One gets at a loss where to place the Christian cult of the Virgin Mary. Kenneth Clark says, "The aggressive, nomadic societies—what H. G. Wells called communities of will—Israel, Islam, the Protestant North, conceived their gods as male. It's a curious fact that all-male religions have produced no religious imagery—in most cases have positively forbidden it. The great religious art of the world is deeply involved with the female principle." (*op. cit.*, p. 177) Perhaps Hess' point was that "mater dolorosa" was actualized instead of just being idolized in the Jewish family.) Anyway unless Hasidim said no to the Hessian eulogy on "every Jewish mother" as an early Zionist's nonsense, we would have a

less-than-hypocritical worship of women among men of the most androcentric community. What necessitated Hasidic androcentrism was, as we saw before, the total devotion to religious practices, which is only feasible with the incessant supports from the female members of the family, who in turn expect their own males to bring them a blessing from the holy "besmedresh" (house of study), where the devotees should find no distraction whatsoever, especially females. With an understanding of this cyclic process which is conducive to a most general separation and regimentation of women, one could somehow look through the misleading appearances of Hasidic androcentric customs and follow Moses Hess when he says, "Judaism never severed the individual from the family..." and even "nor the family from the nation" so long as one does not take "the nation" for Medinat Israel (State of Israel), but when he proceeds to say, "nor the nation from humanity", one would find it hard to believe any longer, at least so far as Satmarer Hasidim are concerned. They simply try to keep away from the non-Hasidic (or even non-Satmarer) rest of humanity.

Giving up all hope of their communication, let alone contact, with other peoples, what could we then expect in their ties with "the nation", their own people, that is, "Bet Israel" (House of Israel)? Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, the spiritual leader of the Satmarer Hasidic community, is said to have explained the deaths of the six million Jews under Nazi rule as due punishment for their sin. (Gerald S. Strober, *American Jews—Community in Crisis*, p. 257) His sweeping condemnation against all the victims of the Holocaust has completely baffled me. Due punishment, he says, then does he imply that if the six million had not sinned, in other words, had not swerved from their strict religious observance called "Yiddishkeit", they should have survived Hitler's unswerving extermination policy? Due indignation with his sacrosanct condemnation for its absolute disregard of individual tribulations might well be aroused especially from among the survivors. Suppose he had not managed to escape from the jaws of death in 1944....., they might utter. Dur-



ing the period of incarceration in the Warsaw Ghetto, and even in the concentration camps "a communal togetherness transcending individual atomism" was not lost, I hear. But here I hit upon Orwell's criticism of Gandhi's persistence of non-violent resistance, a sort of "Indishkeit". Orwell doubts whether Gandhi dared do the same under Hitler or Stalin as he did under British rule. Orwell was partly right, but mostly wrong because he did not adequately consider the particular colonial situation under which Gandhi had to awaken the Indian mass from a chronic slave-mentality, also trying to curb any violent measures that would certainly cause a genocidal tragedy. In criticizing Rabbi Teitelbaum, too, we tend to neglect the particular critical situation under which he dared to use the victims of the Holocaust as a collective whipping boy. An interpretative scheme with which he came to make the sweeping condemnation might be found in the following words of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the very founder of Hasidism: "As long as the limbs are attached to the body, there is always the possibility of a cure. Once amputated they can never be restored. Every member of the House of Israel is a limb of the *Shehina* (Divine Presence)." (as quoted in H. Rabinowicz, *A Guide to Hasidism*, p.30) The House of Israel has been dismembered to any eye, and there is no cure. Who is to blame? All.

Definitely decisive of the dismemberment of the House of Israel was the Diaspora, which has infinitely added to "due punishments". On the other hand, their world-wide dispersion and concomitant tribulations have enabled the Jews to teach us that their fate is also the fate of all men. It is no less than this message about the underlying unity of the human race that Marx and Freud elucidated in their respective social and psychic analyses. When Marx was connected with Jewish messianism and Freud with Jewish mysticism, Jewish traditional thought was held in all the deeper respect. With this ancestral sagacity in support of globally craved democratic rights, the Diaspora Jews became a hope and paragon for all the alienated and persecuted of the world. The Jews as experts on all

manners of nationalistic follies and injustices would help me find out something to live and struggle for, I had presumed. Therefore, a few months after my arrival in the United States when I saw a lavatory graffito at Columbia saying, "I am proud of being Zionist", I naturally felt rather offended. I wondered what would happen to the universal prophetic justice which is Jewish *par excellence*, if Jews stuck together to give Israel a chauvinistic boost especially in her autistic diplomacy towards Arabs. Now that the idea of Jewish identity has gradually dawned on me, I could calmly advise the doodler to keep his pride internally, and also would admit merits of Zionism so long as it pays efforts to keep its particularism universalistic. Moreover, I am in better sympathy to those particular elements contained in the "mitzvot" (commandments), such as the ban on intermarriage, observance of the Sabbath and "kashrut" (dietary laws), celebration of the Festivals etc. Yet without those empirically universalistic elements of Jewish teaching on justice, mercy, truth, liberty and peace, all surely included in the same mitzvot, I would never have been won over to an abiding interest in Jewish studies. I still miss Moses Hess' proclamation that "Judaism has never severed.....the family from the nation, nor the nation from humanity"—even as regards Williamsburg Hasidim. (Lubavitcher Hasidim seem to be somewhat different. With the largest membership and the greatest influence of all the Hasidic sects, their "habad houses" certainly engage in missionary work on a global scale, but the non-Jewish rest of humanity are clearly outside of their purview. Lubavitcher campaigners handing out their pamphlets on the necessity of observing dietary laws, address themselves only to white and Jewish-looking passers-by, asking each target if he or she was Jewish or not.)

Given their ultra-particularistic *raison d'être* as strongholds of Yiddishkeit, Hasidic communities will be more and more centripetally solidified. A. M. Greeley writes in his book *Unsecular Man*, "...all religion involves social forces, and all religion labors through the difficulty of being something less than authentic." (pp.7-8)

Then, in spite of themselves, Satmarer Hasidim reflect and supply a model for the general trend not only in the United States but all over the world to stronger nationalism and weaker universal democracy. One could presume from such an ethnically-oriented tendency that even Reform Judaism would expand their bridgehead of inalienable traditionalism. For a religion to survive and prove its serviceability, a sort of radical reconstruction seems to be in order. Also in order, especially at sight of religions more and more localized to particular ethnic groups, is the following quotation from Will Herberg's *Protestant Catholic Jew*: "We are always prone to idolize ourselves and our works, to attribute quite uncritically final significance to our interests, ideas, and institutions, to make of our achievements an instrument of pride, power, and selfaggrandizement." (p. 254).

As if to curb such pride, power and self-aggrandizement, there stand amidst the impregnable Satmarer Hasidim two Christian churches. I have no idea when they were erected—presumably earlier than the Hasidic occupation of Williamsburg after World War II. Anyway I was amazed at the dauntless spirit of the Christian missionaries stationed there, though both edifices looked as alien and bleak as the American and British Embassies in Tokyo during the Pacific War. (Or one might compare either of them to an outflanked Maginot Line.) With this seemingly peaceful coexistence of both religions in clear view, I could not help asking myself: Are specifically Jewish moral teachings really all specifically Jewish? Are there not more similarities than differences? Apart from the Mount Sinai story and the Easter myth, what differences are so great as to be a matter of life and death? In Judaism one finds more emphasis on life this side of the grave; very uncommon Sages, Seers and Rabbis; the Apocrypha, the Talmud and the Midrash. Very Jewish indeed, and after all the Christian church is historically an offshoot of the Jewish synagogue, isn't it? But....., my universalistic ur-motive never stopped wriggling.

The particularism vs universalism business is really a chronic

headache, likely to develop a symptom of low-level schizophrenia. I grew skeptical of Hasidic customs and practices because they seemed to run counter to our all too familiar items of democratic belief. Where could I locate the autonomy of one's own decisions with all of one's actions bound to Tradition? And more than anything else, how could there be any freedom of learning whatever one may want to and of communicating with others of different communities if all outside mass media have been actually banned? How could they get in touch with the realities of the present hour? Or are the leader and his entourage alone exempted from the ban as a necessary communal feeler? A mere feeble feeler that I was! It took several hours of field work and many more weeks of groping to dimly perceive their community as pietistic totality only recognizable by voluntaristic participants, and also to conceive that one man's commonsense could be another's nonsense and vice versa. I should have reminded myself earlier that Judaism might not have survived had it not been for such monolithic covenant communities as of Hasidim and other very Orthodox groups that have assumed a persistent commitment to a common code of values and laws.

If one's religion is absorbed in much the same way as one's language, as Greeley says, then this suggests *ipso facto* the unshakable particularity of a religion. For example, in order to fully understand the Mount Sinai story which is self-evident for any believing Jews, a non-believing stranger must have their meaning system interpreted and their spiritual modality explained in the same way as enjoying stereophonic records entails switching over modality to a proper position. And on the other hand, possibilities of such interpretative and explanatory efforts would also suggest the universality of the religion, in whatever mystery it may be wrapped for the moment. Ultra-Orthodox Hasidism cannot be an exception, either.

Whereas I cannot yet wholly withdraw my comparison of Williamsburg Hasidim with the fictional Houyhnhnms, it should be

added in the same breath that the latter's simplistic persistence of indiscriminate truth does not pertain to the former. Since there was no Houyhnhnm word denoting lying, Gulliver had to translate it into "telling what is not" or something such. Orwell made fun of Swift's lack of the imagination with which to forge any quoteworthy Houyhnhnm poetry. Nothing should ever become dull in any genuine Hasidic speech or action, not to speak of singing and dancing, where pathos is ethos and vice versa. The rational horses were after all not so rational because it cannot have occurred to them that "evil is the chair on which rests the good." In the same way, eros could be the chair on which rests agapê.

No writer has been under stronger Hasidic influence than Isaac Bashevis Singer, and as his short story "Gimpel the Fool" suggests, there is correlation and even interchangeability between a saint and a fool, just as between diamond and coal, both of which are carbonic. A moment of chemical change decides the molecular structure of either, which is hardly changeable once crystallized. Thus all of us tiptoe on what Irving Buchen calls "tightrope of duality". At the Devil's instigation, Gimpel the baker poured his urine into the dough in revenge for all the deceptions practiced on him by the townsfolk, then he saw in a dream his once perfidious and now dead wife calling to him from hell: "What have you done, Gimpel? I never deceived anyone but myself. I am paying for it all." He comes to himself: "I sensed that everything hung in the balance. A false step now, and I'd lose Eternal Life." The line of division between the holy and the satanic is as thin as a hair. Lots of such ever fresh insights into subtle chemical changes in human nature could be traced back to Hasidic stories, parables, anecdotes and folk sayings. The ever-present consciousness of "a false step now..." must have been central to Hasidic way of life. I must admit that it will be extremely hard to abide by such a tense autonomous principle so long as one follows the humanist way which allows standards of behavior to vary from individual to individual. To use a Blakian paradox again, if one persists in

being particular, one will be of universal value, though of course it depends on what one persists in and how.

Now it dawns on me that any serious assessment of particular-turned-universal values would entail digging up their roots. While doing so, I might have to courageously let a tremendous centripetal force drive myself God knows where. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" I know, but have been afraid of disconnecting my centrifugal counterweight. "*Yim poga, nogah*" ("If one touches, one may be touched") is an eternal warning of danger to those interested in mysticism. Not that I am ready to be swept away by centrifugal rushes to varieties of sensuous and intellectual adventures with a concomitant ceaseless expansion of my own consciousness. With neither outward nor inward pull in full action, I might have to content myself with tasting a watermelon of my own mind by its peel, let alone of Hasidic spirit by its its juicy center.