For Kinneret,

on her eighteenth birthday

may you find both piety and rebellion in everything you do

Contents

Acknowledgments

Most of the essays in this volume were written over the course of about twenty years. At Brandeis University, where I completed my doctorate, I was privileged to study with Michael Fishbane who taught us how to read canonical texts both creatively and subversively in a way that made these essays possible. During that time, I was privileged to teach at three institutions of higher education; Rice University, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and Indiana University/Bloomington. Each institution gave me distinctive perspectives on the nature of scholarship more generally and on the work included in this volume. Those I would like to thank at these three institutions, colleagues and students, are too numerous to list. I do want to acknowledge Martin Kavka, Steven Hood, and Adam Black who attended my first on-going seminar in Nahman of Bratslav during my tenure at Rice from 1994–1996, each offering insight into their own thinking about this Ḥasidic master. I would also like to mention Talya Fishman and David Nirenberg, colleagues at Rice who welcomed me into academia and whose insights still resonate with me more than twenty years later. At JTS I greatly benefitted from many of my colleagues including Neil Gilman and Seth Schwartz who were constant conversation partners in the cafeteria and beyond. To the many rabbinical students who attended my seminars in Kabbalah and Ḥasidism at JTS, you have taught me much that I retain to this day and your work continues to inspire me as I follow your careers. Thanks to Aubrey Glazer who has always offered his unique perspective and caused me to re-think mine. At Indiana I have greatly benefited from many of my colleagues and students, including Steven Weitzman, Jeffrey Veidlinger, Mark Roseman, Michael Morgan, Constance Furey, Winnifred Sullivan, Sarah Imhoff, Barbara Krawcowicz, Jessica Carr, and Brian Hillman. I want to thank Menachem Butler for his encouragement and to Daniel Reiser and Don Seeman for inviting me to a conference in Warsaw on R. Kalonymous Kalman of Piasczeno that I could

not attend but inspired me to write an essay on his wartime Torah. Elliot Wolfson continues to be a friend, an inspiration, and a source of support. To Aryeh Cohen, a constant *havruta* in all manner of work and life, and to Pinhas Giller, Eric Jacobson, and Eliyahu Stern for their sharp insight and enduring wit. To Eden Pearlstein for his poetry and passion, and to Basya Schechter for the soundtrack. I want to thank Nathaniel Berman for the years of learning on Fire Island including the pre-dawn study of the works of Nathan of Gaza. Thanks to Susannah Heschel for inviting me to teach at Dartmouth as the Brownstone Visiting Professor of Jewish Stusies and for all her support. I want to acknowledge Nancy Levene for the years together when some of these essays took shape. Her critical eye is on many of these pages.

The prehistory of these essays takes me back to my years as a *ḥaredi* Jew in Boro Park, Brooklyn, and Jerusalem where I was fortunate to learn from both teachers and friends. First of all, Dovid Din, my first teacher in Ḥasidism who I followed into the labyrinthine world of his own imagination, Moshe Mykoff, Baruch Gartner, today both great teachers of Ḥasidism, and master of Kabbalah, R. Mordechai Attiah with whom I studied Lurianic Kabbalah for three years in Jerusalem. And to R. Chaim Brovinder for his guidance and wisdom and for never letting us take ourselves too seriously.

Most of these essays have appeared in scholarly journals or collections and I want to thank each one for giving me permission to re-print these essays in this volume. They include NYU Press, Eerdman's Press, Indiana University Press, Harvard University Press, Ben Gurion University Press, and the Jewish Quarterly Review.

Thanks go to Igor Nemirovsky and Alessandra Anzani of Academic Studies Press for their undying support and special thanks to Hila Ratzabi for her keen editorial insight and poetic hand.

To my mother, who is always there for us, in all ways, my children Yehuda, Chisda, Miriam, Kinneret, Danielle and Galil, you are the true source of blessing. To Annette Yoshiko Reed, whose encouragement knows no bounds, and whose love exceeds all limits. This book would not have existed without her.

This book is dedicated to my daughter Kinneret for her eighteenth birthday. As you go out into the world I hope you find your passion, and may the words on these pages find some small place in your heart and in your life. May you always travel this world with both piety and rebellion.

September 17, 2018
Erev Yom Kippur
Lebanon, New Hampshire

Introduction

My Way to (Neo) Ḥasidism[1]

I

Alterity

Alterity. For me, as a young secular Jew from the flesh-pots of the New York suburbs, from Jewish Workman Circle summer camp and a mixed-race public school where popular culture was all that was sacred, that is what Ḥasidism and ḥasidic life represented: the promise of alterity. Of course, I had never even heard the word "Ḥasidism" until I was at least ten or eleven and, even then, only in books. The word was never uttered at home. Perhaps it is more accurate to say, then, that as long as I can remember, alterity more generally was something that intrigued me, the notion of living or being "otherwise," as Levinas taught me many years later. I saw myself as different, but not different enough to feel alienated, just different enough to feel like the suburban life I was experiencing was not all there was, and also was not enough. But being alienated was part of the counterculture I was reared in, so that alienation was itself that which produced cohesiveness.

It was in my teens when I first read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and came to realize alterity was something people actually embodied. It was a

1 I am intentionally not discussing my personal life in this introduction, including marriage and children, as I want to focus on the trajectory that brought me to Ḥasidism, led me away from it, and then brought me back again. This introduction seeks to frame the trajectory that led to the essays in this volume that were written over the course of the past twenty years or so.

short time between that first reading of Kerouac and when I drove off in my 1972 Volkswagen minibus on New Year's Eve 1977 that took me literally "on the road" to the mountains of New Mexico with no purpose other than to experience the feeling of being unbound, what I later came to know as the notion of "*lishma*": that wonderful experience where there is no place of arrival other than where you happen to stop at the end of the day. Of course, such freedom, even the possibility of such experiential liberation, is a privilege of a middle-class life with a safety net that was not fool-proof but strong enough so that you needn't worry that you would end up homeless and destitute with no one to call—the way Neal Cassidy ends up in flop houses on the Bowery or on the streets of Denver in *On the Road*. I did not have the courage to take it to that extreme but I played around the edges. Not exactly a hitchhiker with a credit card (there were plenty of those too) but certainly one with a phone number where people who loved you would likely answer, scold you, and then wire the necessary money to get you out of a jam. I remember some of those calls with both trepidation and gratitude. For some reason when I left home all my father gave me was a gas credit card, hoping, I assume, I would not run out of gas on some abandoned road on the fruited plain.

But the road to Jewish alterity for me began even earlier in my childhood, if only in my imagination. My paternal grandmother, an immigrant from the Pale of Settlement, used to take me on annual trips to places outside the bubble of New York. One year we visited what was then called "Amish country" in Pennsylvania. What struck me a child of the gilded suburbs was the simplicity—what the Amish call "plainness"—of their lives. It was perhaps my first real experience that it was possible to live "otherwise." The smell of hay, the rural rolling green hills, shoofly pie (an Amish delicacy made of molasses and pie crust), and the horse-drawn carts offered a world I hadn't known existed. The second memory was during trips to visit relatives in Brooklyn. We would often take the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway which runs right under the ḥasidic enclave of Williamsburg. As a child I recall getting glimpses of *ḥasidim* stroll on the overpass as we sped by underneath wondering who they were and how they lived. I knew I was a Jew and they were Jews but I could not understand what tied us together. The connection between *ḥasidim* and the Amish, and Christianity, remained strong throughout my childhood and even into adulthood, when I discovered Thomas Merton and became enthralled with monastic Christianity, or when I published an essay on the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.

The door to Jewish alterity may have first appeared to me explicitly as a child of about ten or eleven when I read Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher*

Lev at the behest of my mother, whose suggestion was based on artistic talents that I exhibited as a burgeoning adolescent. At that time, and perhaps until about 16, if I seriously thought about my future it was likely as a painter. Inadvertently, *Asher Lev* also introduced me to the strange and compelling world of Ḥasidism. But also, Ḥasidism as rebellion, not against the world but against itself. The final scene in the book, the ultimate moment of ḥasidic rebellion, was when Asher Lev, having already left his ḥasidic world for the art world in Greenwich Village, paints a large crucifixion. And the man hanging on the cross is none other than his ḥasidic father. Many years later I would publish a book, *Ḥasidism Incarnate*, and use Marc Chagall's "Yellow Crucifix" as the cover, having no recollection of that final scene in *Asher Lev* that was so arresting to me as a young boy.

This sense of Ḥasidism as alterity occurred to me, decades later, soon after I moved to Boro Park, Brooklyn, to study in *yeshivah* and begin my life as a *ḥaredi* Jew. I was walking down a side street one evening in autumn and happened upon one of the many ḥasidic synagogues in the neighborhood. On the outside wall there was a sign announcing a *shi'ur* (Torah class) by a well-known rabbi. In English and Yiddish the sign read: "Come hear this great sage, Mozei Shabbos, parshat Noah." What struck me was not the rabbi, who I had never heard of, or even "Mozei Shabbos" which in Boro Park is simply Saturday night. What struck me was there was no date given except "parshat Noah." I realized that in this world, time was marked not by the English calendar and not even by the Jewish calendar but by the Torah reading that will be read in synagogue that week. All the Jews in Boro Park knew the date by the *parashah* of the week. A non-Jew passing by, or even a secular Jew from the outside, would not know the date of this lecture. There was an experience of alterity in that moment that was exhilarating. Time marked only by Torah—in the middle of New York City.

II

Macrobiotic New Mexico, the Holy Land, and the Holy

After a brief stint living in Albuquerque after dropping out of college in 1977, I moved north near Santa Fe, and I found myself living in a macrobiotic impromptu commune of sorts in the small hamlet called Galisteo, populated mostly by Native Americans, Mexicans, a few old-timers, and hippies. It was in Santa Fe where I came to know Bill Rosenberg, a New York Jew who was a practicing acupuncturist and macrobiotic healer who had lived

for a short time in Denver, where he came across Rabbi Shlomo Twersky, an iconoclastic ḥasidic rabbi who had attracted many *ba'alei teshuvah* to his small circle. The Twersky family rose to notoriety in Chernobyl in the late eighteenth century with a ḥasidic master Menahem Nahum Twersky. The dynasty then migrated to Tolne, Skvere, and other locales before settling in America and Palestine/Israel. In America one branch of the family settled in Milwaukee and then moved to cities like Pittsburgh and Boston. Rosenberg had touched Judaism lightly in those days, and being the only two Jews in our small circle we bonded and remain in touch to this day. Bill is now Ze'ev Rosenberg, an Orthodox Jew who teaches Eastern medicine at the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in San Diego. Rosenberg played an important role for me because he gave me what was perhaps my first Jewish book in about 1977, a copy of the recently published *Fragments of a Future Scroll* by a rabbi named Zalman Schachter (later Schachter-Shalomi). A meandering hodgepodge of reflections, translations, and inspirational writing, *Fragments* was my first entry into the literary world of Ḥasidism , admittedly through a neo-ḥasidic lens. Studying macrobiotics and oriental medicine had primed me for what was to come, but it was *Fragments* that made me decide to take my minibus back east and make some money to visit the strange country called Israel that I knew nothing about.

I returned to Manhattan some time that spring. Working as a street messenger by day and a dishwasher in a macrobiotic restaurant by night and sleeping on a futon on the floor in my parents' modest Manhattan apartment, I soon saved enough to buy a one-way ticket to Israel with no definite plan to return. As a child I knew nothing about Israel. My family were Workman Circle people and much of what I knew about being Jewish came from attending the Workman Circle Camp Kinder Ring on Sylvan Lake, near Hopewell Junction, NY. We rarely if ever spoke about Israel, learned Yiddish and not Hebrew, and knew more about socialism than Zionism. So when I boarded the plane to Israel I carried no ideological baggage at all, something friends later have attributed to the ease with which I was able to adopt a leftist political stand on matters of Israeli politics and policies.

Over the course of a few months travelling alone and with some people I met on the way, I came upon a small group of young *yeshivah* students very much like myself, who happened to also be macrobiotic. On their prodding I attended a few classes in a run-down yet charming building that housed the Beit Joseph Novordok *yeshivah* on Shmuel ha-Navi Street in Jerusalem. The *yeshivah* where I was attending—known as "Brovinders," led by an American rabbi, Chaim Brovinder—was renting space from the Novordok

yeshivah which consisted of a few dozen seemingly ill-adjusted pale-skinned students who seemed to come straight out of a Roman Vishniac photograph. The founder of this group was an ascetic man in Russia named R. Yosef Yuzel of Novordok (1847–1919), a by-product of the Mussar movement of R. Israel Salanter. Known for their ascetic practices and introverted piety, Novordokers were strange birds even in a fairly strange world. My most vivid memory of them was that fifteen minutes before *minḥah* (the afternoon prayer recited at 1pm in many *yeshivot* before lunch) they would close their *gemaras* (talmudic tractates), gather in the front of the cavernous sanctuary, and engage in an act of collective crying. It was actually quite startling to witness a group of young men crying together, bemoaning their unworthiness and blemished selves, imperfect servants of God trying to stay away from the temptations that swarmed all around them. Many of us Americans smirked at such overt piety but I secretly admired it.

I began to attend classes in the *yeshivah* more frequently until I enrolled full-time and moved in with the group of friends living in a small apartment in new *ḥaredi* neighborhood, Sanhedria Murkhevet, about a 20-minute walk from the *yeshivah*. Without realizing it I had become a *yeshivah* student, cut my hair, removed my earring, and delved into the bizarre and fascinating world of the Mishnah and Talmud. I came with no background in Hebrew and thus struggled massively during that period, but those around me were kind, helpful, and compassionate. In particular, Rabbi Brovinder become a mentor for me; his intellectual rigor and biting sense of humor kept us sane in a world that otherwise appeared like a parallel universe to many of us. He taught us how to "learn," how to think inside a talmudic *sugya*, and also how to not take ourselves too seriously, the last being the most challenging for many of us. In those years (the late 1970s) the *ba'al teshuvah* movement was still in its heyday, Jerusalem was an open city (walking through east Jerusalem at night was not something we worried about), Israel was cheap (it had not yet moved from the Lira to the Shekel), and private telephones were rare. We had no televisions, and radio was useless since we were not yet fluent in modern Hebrew. We felt blessedly cut off from our American roots and lived a kind of reflexive orientalist existence in a world that resembled that of our great-grandparents and not our parents. I smelled the fragrance of alterity in the multi-ethnic Jerusalem neighborhood of Bukharim where we hung around after classes ended, a neighborhood that housed both the austere Novordok *yeshivah* and the hedonistic Turkish baths.

The four or five people I lived with became close friends. They were all students of some enigmatic and mysterious ḥasidic rabbi who lived in

America named Dovid Din. They spoke of "Dovid" with a rare combination of intimacy and reverence, telling stories about his intense pious behaviors, such as praying the morning service for three hours or his long daily immersions on the mikveh, and about his bad teeth. Tales of his brilliant Torah discourses that spanned the spectrum from the sixteenth-century kabbalistic teaching of Isaac Luria to the poetry of William Blake or the Sufi poet Rumi. He was also a strict macrobiotic. He had sent his "boys" (as he called them) to Jerusalem to become literate in Talmud and codes. Intrigued by these stories I became a kind of vicarious student to this unknown teacher, and after some time I realized I needed to meet him.

There were a variety of reasons I first left Jerusalem that spring but meeting Dovid was certainly one of them. Returning to Manhattan I had no immediate plans and spent some time studying shiatsu massage at the Shiatsu Center in Manhattan. I was also able to get the address of a place where Dovid was teaching in Brooklyn and made my way there to meet what for me had already become a mythic figure. My first memory of him is a bit vague. He was giving a class in an unaesthetic study house in Flatbush with oil-cloth tablecloths and fluorescent lights. He was indeed an ethereal figure, almost transparent, dressed in Satmar-style ḥasidic garb (including stockings and knee-length pants) and wearing a scarf in the early summer. After the class I went to introduce myself. He seemed to recognize my name as my Jerusalem friends must have mentioned me, but he made no indication of any interest in who I was. Just another traveler passing through, he assumed. "Ah yes, I heard about you," he almost whispered. "*Shalom aleikhem*," he said, and put out his white, bony, and very feminine hand.

I was resolute to make myself known to him and began attending meetings more frequently, befriending some of the misfits and vagabonds who often frequented his classes. It was a ḥasidic underworld of sorts, lost souls wandering the streets of lower Manhattan looking for some Jewish satori. Then there were a few middle-aged female university professors who saw something in Dovid that we didn't. A few of them became his benefactors. There were also some "normal" ḥasidic Jews who came as well, but they showed little interest in us and we had nothing really to say to them. In their world we were interlopers, Dovid serving as the bridge that each crossed with caution to meet the other. Even then those ḥasidic enclaves had an underbelly, those who occupied the margins, looking for something more than what their communities could offer.

After a month or two I realized I had to make a decision. I was still living with my parents in Manhattan and spending more and more time in Brooklyn. I had been toying with religious observance but wasn't sure it was

something I could maintain. It was ḥol *ha-mo'ed* (the intermediate days) of Sukkot, 1979. I woke up in a sweat with a high fever. Sitting up suddenly in bed it hit me. My time here was over. I needed to move to Brooklyn and immerse myself in the world of Torah.

III

The Ḥasidic Underground and Yeshivah Life

Life in Boro Park, Brooklyn, was a macabre experience of living in an alternative universe that was a subway ride away from a city that offered everything. I lived in a dilapidated house in a mixed ḥasidic and Hispanic neighborhood on the outskirts of Boro Park that Dovid had one lived in with his family before moving to the other side of Boro Park. They may have been evicted. One was never quite sure who was actually living in that house. Some of those I knew from Jerusalem had returned and then a variety of other stragglers, vagrants, hangers-on, or those simply travelling through inhabited that house at various times. If there was space on the floor we could accommodate one more. Both the ḥasidic and Hispanic neighbors were equally baffled as to who we were and what we were doing there. We were robbed many times, but the intruders eventually gave up because we had nothing worth stealing. One of the most memorable robberies happened while we were eating the third meal on Shabbat, singing ḥasidic *niggunim* together as the sky darkened. Little did we know that as we were singing, burglars had broken into a back room and stolen the backpack of someone who had just arrived from Jerusalem. The only thing of value, or that which we most lamented, were some tabs of LSD that were lost forever. I hope our Hispanic brothers and sisters had a nice trip.

I first began studying in a small study house in Crown Heights with a young Lubavitcher *ḥasid* named Baruch Wertzburger. I was contemplating moving to Crown Heights to attend Yeshivat Hadar Torah. Ḥabad seemed liked a logical choice as it was much more structured than the more diffuse world of Boro Park, mirroring the more disciplined and conformist world of Ḥabad and the more free-flowing world of Polish Ḥasidism. I even packed all my things in my small Mazda to move into the dorms in Crown Heights. I arrived late at night, parked my car on Eastern Parkway and spent the night in the *yeshivah* without unpacking. In the morning I walked around and decided it wasn't for me. So instead of unpacking my

car I just pulled away and drove back to Boro Park. Ḥabad Ḥasidism was compelling and uplifting, but there was something about the rebbe worship in Ḥabad that turned me off. I attended numerous Farbrengens with the Lubavitcher rebbe and the intensity was enormous as he carried the room with his charisma, but day-to-day Crown Heights just seemed too cultish for me. Boro Park was more eclectic and more dysfunctional. I liked that. I continued coming to Crown Heights daily to Wertzburger's small classes in Ḥabad Ḥasidism, beginning with *Sefer ha-Tanya* and then reading through some of the present rebbe's *siḥot*. My Hebrew was getting much better and I began to get the map of the terrain of ḥasidic texts.

Eventually I needed a bigger *yeshivah* with more subjects of study. I stumbled upon a new *yeshivah* in Flatbush run by two *roshei yeshivah*, one a Lakewood-trained *rosh yeshivah* named R. Chaim Friedman, proficient in the Lithuanian style of learning, and the second a Satmar *ḥasid* named R. Yizhak Ashkenazi. Here I spent a little more than two years really honing my skills in Gemara and *halakhah* and continued studying Ḥasidism and Kabbalah with Dovid and his circle (of which I had become by that time an inside member). Learning the Lithuanian method of Talmud by Rabbi Friedman and the broader rather than deep method popular among *ḥasidim* was illuminating. Rabbi Ashkenazi was perhaps the first person I met who really knew the entire Talmud by heart. He was from the Aleksander ḥasidic dynasty—people referred to him as the Alekser Rebbe—and he set up a small ḥasidic shul in the basement of his house. The Alekser dynasty was founded by R. Shraga Feivel of Gritsa, who was student of R. Yizhak Worka, a contemporary of R. Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. R. Ashkenazi's family had drifted to Satmar in America, but he retained the stature of ḥasidic aristocracy and was viewed by others with reverence. *Ḥasidim* often wandering in the *yeshivah* to ask him questions or ask for money. He took a special liking to a few of us, especially me, perhaps because he knew Dovid and also saw I was heading in the ḥasidic direction, whereas most of my classmates were not. My clothing had become more and more ḥasidic in style, I wore a black hat and suit and white shirt all the time, and unlike many others in the *yeshivah* I was interested in Ḥasidism. I was appointed his driver, mostly because I was the one who had a car and had the proper dress for the occasion. We spent many evenings traveling around Brooklyn and sometimes to New Jersey and Monsey, New York, a religious town in Rockland Country, to raise money (what is called *schnorring*). R. Ashkenazi was a master. On one occasion we sat at an ornate dining room table of a rich Jew in Monsey. Conversation ensued but the topic of money was never mentioned. Then at one point, the man took out a checkbook, wrote

a check, and slid it across the table. Without a break in the conversation R. Ashkenazi looked at the check and with no expression, slid it back to the gentlemen. The conversation continued. This went on two or three times until R. Ashkenazi put the check with the "right" amount into his pocket. Then we got up, shook hands, and left. That is how it is done.

One other person worth mentioning from that *yeshivah* was a rabbi named Yona Frankel, probably in his thirties, a modern Orthodox rabbi who lived in Long Beach, Long Island, but traveled every day to Boro Park to teach *ba'alei teshuvah*. He viewed it as something wondrous, and I felt this was his kind of *pro bono* for the cause of Torah. I studied Mishnah and Talmud with him for about a year, and his patience still remains with me. My most vivid memory of him was the time he asked me to drive him to deliver a *hespid* (eulogy) for an elderly woman who had died. We entered the chapel in the funeral home and I took a seat in the front and began reciting psalms, which is the custom. R. Frankel began delivering a long and impassioned eulogy for this woman. At some point I turned my head to the audience behind me. There was only one woman sitting there, the dead woman's caretaker. The rest of the chapel was empty. R. Frankel had been delivering this passionate eulogy for this one woman, or maybe not even for her. I had never encountered such a person growing up.

At this time, my relationship with Dovid was deepening and I become one of his close disciples. I use the term "disciple" carefully, as that is what we were. He served as a rebbe and spiritual guide and we treated him as such. We did constitute a "family" of sorts and, in retrospect, we probably would have met the bar of being considered a cult, but we were so integrated into the *ḥaredi* community around us no one really noticed. Except one person.

In those days (the late 1970s) Aryeh Kaplan, who was already well known an Orthodox writer, lived on the outskirts of Boro Park. His books on Kabbalah had been published by Samuel Weiser, who owned a New Age press from Maine. This bothered some of the more conformist *ḥaredim* in Boro Park, and thus I think Kaplan's decision to live on the margins of Boro Park was more than symbolic. An ultra-Orthodox Jew of Sephardic descent, who was a *ba'al teshuvah* himself, and once served as a rabbi in a Conservative synagogue (which in Boro Park is basically the same as a church), Kaplan decided to stay on the margins of that world. A deeply pious man, he would have an open house after Friday night dinner, and we sometimes walked there to listen to him. The neighborhood was not safe at night, and thus going to Kaplan's home itself required a modicum of *emunah* (faith). His dining room was adorned with a series of bizarre oil

paintings. At some point, with no training as an artist, Kaplan decided to refrain from study for a year and devote himself to painting. After the year he stopped and never painted again. Those paintings were the product of his experiment.

He would gesture to someone to ask him a question about the weekly Torah portion and then he would just spin off of that for what seemed like hours (it probably wasn't). In any event, Kaplan emphatically did not like Dovid. It was a kind of fissure in the scene because there was a lot of overlap in those years between Dovid and Kaplan. Kaplan saw something in Dovid he didn't trust, but he didn't know what. We just never mentioned Dovid in Kaplan's presence. Many years later Kaplan's intuitions about Dovid turned out to be right. He was hiding something.

During this time, I began to integrate more into the *ḥaredi* world even as we were always looked upon as different. But we were "walking the walk" so intensely, and seeing us at the mikveh at 5:30am on a freezing January morning before *davenning* made them respect us even as they probably would not allow us to marry their daughters. The quasi-monastic life we led was very conducive to me, and I began to feel like I was living like those Amish in Pennsylvania and the *ḥasidim* walking over the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway I had seen as a child. I felt like I had found some alterity. I was living "otherwise." I once got a phone call from a high school girlfriend. It happened to be Thanksgiving and she asked where I was eating Thanksgiving dinner. "Thanksgiving?" I responded. "Oh, I didn't know that." I smiled at that remark. I had found a way off the grid. She later told me she thought I was living in a crack house in south Brooklyn. Who in America doesn't know it's Thanksgiving? Welcome to ḥasidic Boro Park.

Ḥasidism opened itself to me as a textual tradition and a lived life simultaneously. I studied the texts and tried to live the life they professed, or expected. In the classic Augustinian sense, I took my return too far. I did not have the slight cynical edge many have who grow up in that world. Texts became an appendage: we carried them around (one always had a *sefer* with them in case they had a few minutes to open it), we read them on the subway, we spoke of them to friends in the street, at airports, on lines in supermarkets, at Shabbos tables. In those years I felt that studying Torah wasn't something we did, it was part of who we were. The line separating work from leisure did not exist. That itself was a kind of alterity. And yet we also lived it in subversive, countercultural ways. We allowed our past "hippie" lives a place at the table, as long as it played by the new rules. In that sense we had a secret from those around us. They had a right not to trust us. We were also interlopers, perhaps the worst kind, because we were offering

a different rendering of their world, which seemed like a previous rendering of their world in terms of piety but a strange fruit culturally. Some of it came to the surface in culinary matters. We would bake whole wheat challah and rush it to our guests for Shabbos late Friday afternoon because we didn't eat processed flour. We introduced many *ḥasidim* to tofu, ginseng, vegetarianism, yoga, shiatsu, and health food. There were not many ḥasidic Jews in Boro Park who had tasted vegetarian *cholent* (a traditional hot Shabbat dish made of beans, potatoes, and meat) until we came around.

One of the great spaces of cultural syncretism in those years was a kosher macrobiotic restaurant on 6th street between 1st and 2nd avenue in Manhattan called Caldron's Well. It also had a small health food store right next door. These were the late 1970s when punk was widespread. On a given night at the Caldron one could find a table of *ḥasidim* talking Torah, a table of punks with pink mohawks and safety pins through their cheeks talking music, hippies with small disheveled kids, a *shidduch* date of straight-looking Orthodox Jews who had chosen the wrong kosher restaurant, a table of Hari Krishna folks, and next to them, black jazz musicians on a break from a gig a few blocks away talking Coltrane. The founder of the restaurant was Moshe Schlass, an ex-biker hippie who had become a Lubavitcher *ḥasid*, who was a kind of master of ceremonies of the bizarre syncretism he loved. He eventually moved to the Old City of Jerusalem, where he lives today, and left the restaurant to his first wife, who ran it for another decade until she had a child late in life and sold it. The Caldron was the main hangout for many of us in those years. We would sit there drinking bancha tea for hours and talk, learn, just breathe in the vibe of the East Village. We felt part of the counterculture and we secretly liked that. It was there I first met Yossi Klein Halevi, who was a one-time member of Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League and also part of the wider circle of Dovid's "boys," who had started a hip newspaper called *The New Jewish Times*. The front page of the inaugural edition in the late 1970s had a split screen photo of people at a raucous punk rock show and Friday night *davenning* at the Bobov ḥasidic synagogue in Boro park—a study in comparative contrast. We felt like we were making a mark.

When I think about my exposure to ḥasidic texts, I realize the very notion of critical study of these texts was so foreign, so utterly odd in those days, that I never thought much about it. I suppose we had the typical insider's critique that those "scholars" could not really understand these texts, because a full understanding would require living the life, being "on the path," as they say. Decades later, as I have spent a good part

of my academic career doing just that, I can still sense the difference, and there is still some small voice in me that says, "If you hadn't been *there* in some fashion, something would be missed here." I don't know if I believe it, and I also think those *there* miss something precisely because of that "thereness." In any case, I can, and do, study these texts in a variety of often contradictory ways. My own academic approach does not eschew the traditional approach in principle. In fact, in my work on Ḥasidism I try to show that, in many cases, the texts lend themselves to the undoing of the traditional ways of reading them. This is not to suggest I have unearthed any esoteric meaning or have disclosed any essential nature of Ḥasidism. Rather, it is to suggest that the texts themselves contain multivalent layers and the lens one chooses to use as a reader can yield a variety of results that the texts themselves can sustain, even though in some cases those readings may stand in contradiction to one another. Here deconstruction has served me as a useful tool. My own allergy to normative readings of these texts comes in part because at a certain time in my life I was convinced that was the only way to read them. In that sense, my readings are products of my own internal battle with normativity and innovation.

Even during my years in Boro Park and *ḥaredi* Jerusalem these texts we studied often seemed to some of us to rub against the grain of the world that used them as a template for life and practice. Perhaps that is because some of our teachers, like Dovid and Aryeh Kaplan, were teaching these texts in quite iconoclastic ways, not necessary by choice but by design. Neither had received the tradition from the inside alone, each came to it from the outside and then, gaining literacy in the tradition, began to teach themselves. Kaplan was much more adept textually and also more conservative, albeit not as pious, as Dovid. But in general, what was happening among the sub-cultural Boro Park *ba'alei teshvah ḥasidim* was a syncretistic exercise under the auspices of haredism. We were living the life, in many ways more fully than our ḥasidic neighbors, and we were spending the thousands of hours in study required to get our credentials. But we were a subculture. And although we would have denied it then, we were forming a new kind of neo-Ḥasidism.

This "movement" was being fed by Zalman Schachter, Shlomo Carlebach, the Diaspora Yeshiva Band, Ḥabad, Bratslav, and the orientalist veneration of Eastern Europe. We knew about Buber, Heschel, Gershom Scholem, and even Joseph Soloveitchik—but they didn't interest us that much. We felt we were in the belly of the beast, and their writings were for outsiders: they were modern, they were not countercultural enough. We would rather just