

# Succession in Contemporary Hasidism

Who Will Lead Us?

## ZADDIKIM OR REBBES

When the modern Hasidic movement first emerged in the late eighteenth century, it was led mostly by charismatic men, commonly called *zaddikim* (loosely translated as the saintly or pious), who were themselves the successors of *ba'aley shem* (wonder masters of the name of God or healers) and their counterparts, the *maggidim* (itinerant preachers).<sup>1</sup> While the *ba'aley shem* were said to possess the mystical knowledge of Kabbalah that enabled them to invoke and in shaman-like fashion manipulate powerful, esoteric names of God in order to heal people, do battle with their demons, or liberate the human soul to unify itself with God, powers they used on behalf of those who believed in them, and while the *maggidim* were powerful preachers and magnetic orators who told tales and offered parables or sermons that inspired their listeners, *zaddikim* had a combination of these qualities and more. With *ba'aley shem* they shared a knowledge of how to apply Kabbalah to the practical needs of their followers and to perform “miracles,” using their mystical powers ultimately to help their Hasidim (as these followers became known), and from the *maggidim* they took the power to inspire and attract with stories and teaching while inserting into these what their devotees took to be personal messages tailored just to them. With both, they shared the authority of charisma.

Charisma, Max Weber explained, should be “applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart

from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.”<sup>2</sup> Whether the supernatural was an essential aspect of early Hasidism has been debated, but what is almost universally accepted is the idea that the men who became its leaders were viewed by their followers as extraordinary and exceptional. Those who believed in them were convinced that they had qualities “not accessible to the ordinary person” and in the context of Hasidic Judaism regarded these leaders as being “of divine origin” or at the very least “exemplary” and worthy of emulation.<sup>3</sup>

*Zaddikim* were endowed with what their Hasidim considered remarkable personalities and righteous character that they could and would use for the good of others. While perceived as having a powerful connection to and association with the Almighty God as *mysterium tremendum*, the *zaddik* (or “rebbe,” as he often came to be called) was a category of leader that challenged the Weberian notion of what a mystic was supposed to be. To Max Weber, a mystic was one who withdrew from the world and became a passive vessel of the divine, one for whom “the extrusion of all everyday mundane interests is always required.”<sup>4</sup> Some *zaddikim* did indeed seek withdrawal—cases in point are Abraham (the so-called Angel) (1740–76), the short-lived son of Dov Ber; the Maggid of Mezherich, who led the life of an otherworldly ascetic Kabbalist; and Menachem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotsk (1787–1859), who for the last twenty years of his life locked himself away and was seen only very rarely by a few family members and disciples.<sup>5</sup> Other Hasidic leaders isolated themselves at least during prayer or spiritual exercises, a process called *hitbodedut* (self-seclusion).<sup>6</sup> Yet most of the *zaddikim*, in contrast to the classic mystics, were seen as using their Kabbalistic powers and essential religiosity to serve *this-worldly* ends by helping their followers to smooth the naturally rough path of life in the real world. In short, these men (they were always men) were charismatic mystics or Kabbalists who were “active in the world” and worked not only on behalf of individuals but for the sake of the entire community of their followers, if not for the entire Jewish world, seeking to intensify spiritual life in the process.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the more staid and predictable scholars and rabbis, the *zaddikim* emerged as important figures on the eastern European Jewish scene and gained followers. Replacing the *maggidim* and the *ba’aley shem*, they challenged the monopoly on religious leadership that scholar rabbis held.<sup>8</sup> Although exceptional intermediaries between God and their Hasidim, rebbes inserted themselves, spiritually and practically, into the

this-worldly, mundane lives and demands of their followers. They did all this not with asceticism (although some would invoke that) but with charisma and practices that opened up the esoteric elements of the mystical to all Jews who were devoted to them. They used public prayer, song, dance, the communal breaking of bread, and a host of other methods to connect the human with the divine, turning even profane activity into a means of spiritual ascent. Some Hasidim understood these practices more deeply than others, but all were expected to be transformed by the encounter with the rebbe, and therefore attached themselves to him, voluntarily submitting to their rebbe's authority and even giving it ascendancy over the rule-based dominance of traditional Judaism.

Ultimately, Hasidim viewed their leaders as model individuals to be emulated and embraced with devotion (*dveikut*). In return, the rebbes would (sometimes miraculously) provide for their followers the blessings of children (*bonei*), health (*chayei*), and livelihood (*mzonei*). Hasidism held that the material and spiritual well-being of the entire community was part of the rebbe's responsibility.

So attached did Hasidim become to their rebbes that they sought to spend as much time as possible with them, basking in their presence. Celebrating around the table (*tish*) with the rebbe, toasting him with "L'chaim!" (To life), singing or dancing with him, even eating his leftovers (*shirayim*), enhanced the relationship as much as praying or studying with him. At the heart of the *tish* were the rebbe's words, a *maymer*, or discourse by which those listening to and learning from him believed they came closer to God.

In some cases, even the rebbe's smallest gestures were judged as having cosmic significance, and his Hasidim dwelt endlessly on the meaning of them.<sup>9</sup> They might watch the rebbe to see, for example, "how he brought his spoon to his mouth, whether he bent his mouth close to the food or whether he brought the food up to his lips, whether he tasted only an olive's bulk [the ritual minimum] . . . and left the remainder for *shirayim*" for them to eat. "How much did he eat and how much did he drink? How did he sit—erect or bent over?" And of course, what tunes did he choose to sing?<sup>10</sup> Every detail mattered in this drama, in which both the observers and the observed were certain heaven was involved because the *zaddik* was after all able to ascend spiritually to the highest regions and powers.

Attachment to a rebbe became so pervasive that Hasidim were expected to travel, repeatedly if necessary, to be near him in order to request his advice and counsel or seek blessings and spiritual support.

No matter was too small or too complex for his help and guidance.<sup>11</sup> The longing to be near him even competed with the Hasid's attachments to his own family, and often attachment to the rebbe and the other Hasidim trumped family obligations, so that men left home, wife, and children to spend extended time near their master. To be sure, the attachment to a particular rebbe and court did not happen overnight. Hasidim might feel attachments to a number of *zaddikim* who shared a common forebear.

The Hasidim who were attached—really, who belonged—to the rebbe saw him as a projection of their attachments to one another and to God. He became a “collective representation,” a collective symbol.<sup>12</sup> Hasidim often measured their rebbe by the intensity and power he could demonstrate. The more Hasidim he could sustain, the more supported him, in a synergy that led to rebbes being like royalty and Hasidim competing against other groups of Hasidim over whose king was greater.

The Hasid's ultimate goal was a *personal* relationship with his rebbe. It might be confirmed by the rebbe's gaze into his eyes at a *tish* or his shaking the Hasid's hand (either in reality or in a gestural way). A blessing, in a personal letter from the rebbe or a message sent by a *shaliach*, an emissary, might also suffice. But it was expressed most powerfully through a direct one-on-one, face-to-face private meeting with him called *yechidus*, *praven-zich*, or *gezegenen-zich*. Hasidim treated this moment as akin to an encounter with the numinous, if not the otherworldly. They might prepare for it with ritual immersion in a *mikveh* to purify themselves or other spiritual exercises.

Paradoxically, newcomers might be offered this sort of direct encounter, which also served as a kind of recruitment strategy. In many accounts Hasidim report how transformative their first meeting with the rebbe was for them and how it led to their personal attachment and life-changing experiences that were religiously meaningful in the extreme. Perhaps the best-documented such encounter is found in the autobiography of Solomon Maimon.<sup>13</sup> At least initially this encounter aroused not only “admiration” for the *zaddik* but “a desire to belong to the group of Hasidim connected to him.”<sup>14</sup> Reports such as these, passed by word of mouth or letters, as well as propaganda by Hasidim, whose enthusiasm for their master was often infectious, served to encourage more young men to join. For those who were already Hasidim, seeing newcomers become attracted to their rebbe reaffirmed their own attachments.

Often direct meetings with the rebbe were accompanied by a *kvittel*, a note of supplication the Hasid brought along with hopes that the rebbe would accept it and intercede on high on his behalf. The note,

accompanied by a *pidyon nefesh* (sometimes called acronymically a *PaN*), a monetary “ransom” of one’s soul (essentially atonement for sins, almost like a papal indulgence), cleared the way for the rebbe’s blessing or prayers to work.<sup>15</sup> In addition, among confirmed Hasidim there emerged the custom of giving *ma’amad*, a standing donation to the rebbe, equivalent to about 5 or even 10 percent of the Hasid’s income. The more Hasidim a rebbe had, the more *pidyon* and *ma’amad* he received. As *pidyon* and *ma’amad* become a routinized aspect of the rebbe/Hasid relationship, they not only symbolized moral purification but came to play a growing economic role in the *rebistve* (a rebbe’s reign or career).<sup>16</sup>

In time, beyond spiritual guidance and blessing, a whole array of services that the rebbe provided for his Hasidim developed, institutionalizing the economic relationship that bound them together. These might include the certification and therefore the provision of kosher meat—an important source of income for the certifier—or the provision of matzah for Passover, another staple that was paid for by users. These became an income source for some rebbes, especially if these leaders were also appointed official rabbis of a town or community, as was often the case in Poland and Galicia—a reason why many Hasidic rebbes sought such a position.<sup>17</sup> At the outset only the official rabbi could control these sorts of certifications and services, but by the time Hasidism had relocated to America and Israel particular rebbes acquired this entitlement as well, and with it important economic and hence political power. Later, after Hasidic yeshivas and other institutions (*mosdos*) became established features of the community, they became a critical conduit for funds and a cadre of new Hasidim.

As a Hasid and his family would go to their rebbe’s schools, eat the meat and foods he certified as permissible, or look to him for approval over whom to marry and how to live, this strengthened his authority and power. His control over their personal lives became extraordinary and intimate. As they shared their troubles and hoped for his blessings, they elevated him over almost everyone in their lives. Rebbes, Hasidism, and Hasidim became a formidable economic, commercial, social, and political force wherever they established communities.

### THE HASIDIC COURTS

All this became institutionalized in the formation of Hasidic courts, with their own set of practices, customs, and organizations, along with administrative personnel. “The court of the Maggid of Mezirech, which

was active from the mid-1760s until the Maggid's death in 1772, was, as far as we know, the first Hasidic court."<sup>18</sup>

The term *court* refers to the physical enclosure in which the Hasidic leader lived, prayed, and received followers and visitors. Life at the court regulated contact between the leader and the Hasidim.<sup>19</sup> Some who lived near the rebbe populated his court regularly. Others who lived at a distance might make regular pilgrimages to it, often on special days, commonly holy days and the month leading up to and including the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur or days of significance in the life of the rebbe.

Though viewed as steeped in spiritual vitality and religious meaning, goings-on there also became routinized and ritualized. The tension between the routine and the numinous was always present, so certain moments were made to seem extraordinary. The entrance of the rebbe at the *tish* or moments of *yechidus*, as well as any rite of passage in his family, stood out. Of course, those on pilgrimage were less affected by the routine than family members, those who spent more time at court, or the administrative staff, *gabbaim* (aides) or house *bochurim*, young Hasidim serving as butlers or footmen. The latter lived not only *for* the sake of the *rebistve* but also *off* it, financially depending on it. Of course, the rebbe also lived *for* his calling as well as *off* it.<sup>20</sup>

### THE POWER OF REBBES

Unlike the biblical prophets who in Jewish tradition felt called by God to speak to the people, one might say rebbes were those whom the people called on their own, believing them to have abilities far beyond those of mere mortals to arouse the human spirit in the service of heaven and to move heaven to reciprocate. Yet, as with the prophets, when a rebbe engaged in extraordinary behavior many of his followers believed that it was as if “the holy spirit descended upon him.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, there were those who asserted that a *zaddik* was only apparently selected by his followers but in truth was chosen by God.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly in the early years of Hasidism's emergence, this belief in rebbes' extraordinary thaumaturgic powers was encouraged by some of the leaders themselves. No less a leader than the Maggid of Mezherich (d. 1772), the man some have called the first true *zaddik*, a direct disciple of the reputed progenitor of modern Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer (d. 1760), the so-called Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht), asserted that his followers had to believe that “a *zaddik* can modify [the higher and lower regions] at any

time he desires,” and his great-grandson, Yisrael Friedman of Ruzhin (1796–1850), was said to have claimed, “Had I wanted to, I could make all barren women fecund, even those whose menses have ceased.”<sup>23</sup> Meir Horowitz of Dzikov (1819–77) insisted on the power of the *zaddik* “to resurrect the dead and to create heaven and earth.”<sup>24</sup> While these and similar claims may seem extreme, the conviction widely held was that these leaders were endowed with *ruach ha’kodesh*, the Holy Spirit. Some went so far as to assert that “the spirit of Moses, the master of all prophets, the redeemer of Israel, beat in the souls of the *zaddikim*.”<sup>25</sup> The rebbe could help followers “acquire spiritual and religious perfection.”<sup>26</sup>

With supreme confidence and power projected on them by their Hasidim, rebbes acted as agents of God, dispensing blessings, effecting miracles, even looking into the hearts of human beings. While Hasidim may have affirmed the rebbe on their own by virtue of his charisma and powers, spiritually and metaphysically his appointment, no less than that of the prophets, was increasingly seen as coming from on high.<sup>27</sup> The closer the Hasid was to his rebbe, the more he shared in the rebbe’s reflected grace. That was why the personal encounter was so vital.

#### THE PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION

It was in the nature of such powerful beliefs in and attachment to these charismatics that few if any Hasidim imagined that their rebbe would die. And if the *zaddik* himself did think about it, he was unlikely to stress that prospect, for to do so would undermine the confidence of his followers in him as an instrument of God. But, like all mortals, rebbes did die, although in the language of Hasidism they were sometimes said simply to have “departed” in what was known as *histalkus* (leavetak-ing). They were described as having simply thrown off the human limitations of the earthly realm and mystically returned to God, with whom they had such a special relationship.<sup>28</sup>

In line with the Talmudic dictum (Berachot 18b) that “*zaddikim b’motam nikrain chain*” (the righteous in their death are called living), some Hasidim tried to maintain their relationship with the departed *zaddik* as if he were still guiding them and acting on their behalf from the world beyond, a continuation of an old tradition of praying at the graves of the righteous and hoping for their intercession on high. In some cases this made a Hasidic leader’s tomb a place of pilgrimage.<sup>29</sup>

But graves could not do what a living master could. To maintain attachments, those left behind had to find a *memaleh makom* (stand-in)

to act as a channel between the departed leader and the Hasidim, sometimes operating on the basis of instructions left behind. It was not unusual for a body of texts (recorded talks) associated with a particular rebbe to become increasingly important after his passing.<sup>30</sup>

During Hasidism's earliest period, the view that there would be some designated or logical successor of a departed rebbe "had not yet gained currency."<sup>31</sup> The aftermath of the first generation of leaders was rather characterized by a "loose affiliation of distinct communities connected . . . by a common legacy" of teachings and attachments but no clear notion of succession.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the Maggid of Mezherich, in the generation of leaders following the Besht, "actively worked to promulgate Hasidism as a decentralized movement, with no thought of bequeathing a unified body of followers to his own biological heir."<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, most of those emergent courts that survived the death of the Maggid in 1772 were led by disciples, students, or those who had been close to him and shared his approach to Judaism and some charismatic qualities rather than blood descendants. Forcing Hasidim to follow all sorts of others after a leader died was seen as a mechanism that could spread Hasidism's influence into a wider domain than would be possible with a succession to a court led by a son in one place.<sup>34</sup>

A close reading of events suggests that early Hasidim did not think in terms of succession.<sup>35</sup> If we speak of the Maggid as the successor of the Besht, it is not because there was some formal process by which he inhabited the position or office of his preeminent predecessor. Rather, it is that through his personal charisma he was able in a few short years to fill a vacuum and emerge as a leader in his own right who became renowned and ultimately was considered a preeminent leader of Hasidism. Having come to his preeminence this way, the Maggid likewise encouraged his disciples to contend for followers in various Jewish communities. In the emerging Hasidic scene, the field was open. People were drawn toward a rebbe by his charisma and not his pedigree.

There were even some who solved the problem of a rebbe's death by ignoring it. The followers of Nachman of Breslov, known as the "dead Hasidim," continue even today to consider him their only and current rebbe. At the time of Nachman's death in 1810, the norm—if there was one—was for the group who had come together around a particular rebbe to simply scatter upon his demise and look for another to whom to attach themselves. What made the followers of Nachman stand out was their decision to try to remain together *even after his death*. One of them, Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov, collected and disseminated



Nachman's writings, teachings, and stories to help the Hasidim stay unified.

Some *zaddikim* who died around the same time—perhaps most notably the well-known Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (d. 1809)—did not have successors, and their followers did not remain together. Thus there were no Berditchever Hasidim who after Levi Yitzchak's death remained united and continued gathering followers, even though two of his sons tried unsuccessfully to succeed him.<sup>36</sup> While his life and tales about him continued to influence Hasidism, and his writings are studied still, as is the narrative of his life, the issue of succession was not essential to his leadership.

### THE EVOLUTION OF SUCCESSION

Ultimately, however, succession became critical to Hasidism. While this book will look at succession in the present, to do so requires an understanding of its evolution. As long as there was no mechanism to keep Hasidim of a particular rebbe together, the open competition among would-be rebbes for followers continued apace. In line with a “tradition of non-centralist communal organization,” characteristic of European Jewry, whose communities had been self-governing for centuries, Hasidism at first likewise maintained a “pluralist pattern of communal organization.”<sup>37</sup> It was not unusual for a Hasid to travel to more than one rebbe, sharing loyalties rather than being attached exclusively to one man.

However, as rebbes established courts with their special customs, rituals, administrative personnel, and institutions and as they developed clearly marked territories of influence, the formerly pluralistic competition for Hasidim was challenged by the notion of loyalty to a *particular* rebbe. Gradually, the “norm which required of every hasid that he should be ‘connected’ to his own *rebbe* and no other” became dominant.<sup>38</sup> For Hasidim, their rebbe became essential to their identity. They were not simply “Jews”; they were *Hasidic* Jews. Moreover, they were not just Hasidim; they were Hasidim *of* a particular rebbe. In a changing world—and as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth and twentieth, change became endemic—that particular Hasidic identity became a singular constant in their lives. Hasidim became what Richard Werbner has called “a charismatic fellowship.”<sup>39</sup>

Long after some Jews left the precincts of Jewish traditional practice, those whose parents or grandparents had been Hasidim might still identify themselves by saying they came from a Hasidic background, often specifying the court of a particular rebbe. What that meant might vary,

but it usually signified attachment to certain customs and practices associated with those Hasidim and a feeling about the power and authority of the rebbe. At the very least, it signified a kind of nostalgic set of spiritual attachments.

After their rebbe's death, the charismatic fellowship wanted to remain together. Leaving was less attractive, particularly when they had begun to identify themselves through their Hasidic allegiances and fellowship. They shared a soulful bond, *dvekut*, not only with the rebbe but also with one another.<sup>40</sup> This worked against the breakup of the Hasidic group and its dispersion after the *zaddik*'s death. For "orphaned" Hasidim to depart as individuals in order to find someone new became considered undesirable—even a kind of betrayal. Moreover, if one was particularly attached to one's rebbe, had grown up with him, was close with the family, and had risen in the court to a position of some seniority, one might be reluctant upon the rebbe's death to go in search of another court, where, as a new Hasid, one would suddenly find oneself a neophyte or newcomer, low in the hierarchy, and with a new identity.

If, on the other hand, all the Hasidim remained in the same court with an agreed-upon successor, the charismatic fellowship would remain intact and the senior Hasidim, who linked past and future, might even retain the higher status of those who had been close to the departed leader. A clear line of succession might mitigate the inherent instability of charismatic authority. A living stand-in could provide minimal instability, as long as he was agreed upon by all. As for the remaining family and staff, they could share in the charisma of the rebbe, deriving from him not only their social position and identity but also some of his gift of grace. They eagerly embraced the practice.

As Hasidism became a mass movement that swept across eastern European Jewry, the thought of being without a rebbe became unimaginable to Hasidim. Committed Hasidim were unprepared to simply melt back into the non-Hasidic world or to lose the connection to the others who shared their attachments to the rebbe. Succession became essential. The question now became: Who constituted a worthy successor?

#### **WHO IS A SUITABLE SUCCESSOR?**

Would the successor be any charismatic who made a claim? Was the "market" open to all comers, as it had been at the dawn of Hasidism? What would a successor need in order to hold on to the Hasidim and lead the court? Would he need to be a disciple who was particularly

close to the rebbe and had shared some of his special knowledge, one who might even have aided the rebbe in the past and could teach what he had learned to those left behind, as seemed so often to have been the case as Hasidism first began its spread throughout eastern Europe? Or would the successor need to be a relative of the *zaddik*, either a son, a brother, or a son-in-law? Could that person even be the widow of the leader? These were questions that began to emerge as the eighteenth century drew to a close and questions of succession emerged.

Could it be only someone designated by the rebbe as his heir—either while he was still alive or in a moral will (a will that functions not to legally distribute assets but to offer counsel to those left behind, in a kind of teaching)? Did such a designation have to be explicit, or could it be implied? If implied, who would be the ones to infer the truth and act upon it, and with what authority?

If the choices the Maggid of Mezherich made were to be the standard, then the preferred choices for a successor would be disciples, not descendants. They were the best informed about what the rebbe taught and because of their intense involvement with him were best suited to continue what he had begun. Yet some argued that the succession from the Maggid to his disciples—like the Maggid's assumption of office following the Besht—was the consequence of offspring who were particularly unsuited charismatically.

Those who in contrast argued in favor of succession by blood descendants, most prominently sons, did so out of a presumption that the rebbe was a holy man and his spirit so sublime that “at the time of conception” of his offspring this act “would bring down an exceptional soul from heaven and that a child conceived and brought up in holiness would himself be holy.”<sup>41</sup> The “term ‘holy seed’—*zera kodesh*—occurs frequently” in rebbes' characterizations of their offspring.<sup>42</sup> The Besht reputedly told his son, “I know that I gave you a holy soul, for when I joined in union with my wife the heavens shook.”<sup>43</sup> This concept also empowered sons-in-law, for their seed, impregnating the holy offspring of a rebbe, could join and even strengthen the rebbe's bloodline and perceived holiness and could produce a grandchild who was also *zera kodesh*. To make sure that no pollutants entered into the holy seed, rebbes' daughters would commonly be matched with sons of other rebbes, not infrequently with their cousins, thereby keeping the holiness in the family.

Like all royalty, Hasidism evolved “a theology of genealogical sanctity.”<sup>44</sup> One succeeded not only to the position of rebbe but also to family leadership, and often inherited family property and control over

precious objects like manuscripts or Judaica freighted with the iconic power of leadership.<sup>45</sup>

This did not happen all at once. In the early years of Hasidism, competition between those who favored distinguished disciples and those who favored family as successors was complicated by the existence of many distinguished disciples, no less than the presence of a number of sons or brothers or even sons-in-law who were potential successors. Indeed, as Uriel Gellman has shown, between 1772 and 1815 only 22 rebbes out of the approximately 120 active *zaddikim* at the time were sons or sons-in-law of their predecessors.<sup>46</sup> As succession became normative following the rebbe's demise, the identity of the "natural" successor was at first not obvious and the potential for conflict and tension was great, regardless of whether the choice was a disciple or a blood relative.

At first, the absence of set procedures offered some flexibility. To be sure, precedents of succession based on traditional Jewish norms of primogeniture and rules of inheritance were powerful influences. Yet the fact that there were many locations where younger sons could go to establish a following helped defuse tensions over who would succeed. A loser in one place could still try to become a rebbe elsewhere, developing a court that might be very much like the one from which he came, yet not really competing with it because of the geographic distance or the fact that his new followers were not yet connected to a particular Hasidic tradition and practices. Given the geography of Hasidism and the difficulties of travel, a relatively small distance might suffice to set up a new court. Moreover, a younger son or a disciple could capitalize on his ties to the older rebbe. Thus a single rebbe could have a number of successors, part of a single core dynasty, who coexisted in time but not in place. This allowed for the emergence of masters who led by dint of their own charismatic gifts even as it reinforced the idea of a dynasty. Perhaps the most famous Hasidic dynasty of this type was the Chernobyl one founded by Menachem Nachum Twersky (1730–97), student of the Besht and disciple of the Maggid of Mezherich, whose son, Mordechai (1770–1837), was succeeded by all of his eight sons, each of whom became a rebbe in a different city.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, successors would have to possess personal magnetism and offer evidence of charisma. As the teachings and practices of Hasidism reached the point of saturation among Jewry in the nineteenth century and became increasingly similar if not standardized, so that the variations among many courts became matters more of nuance than of obvious distinctions, the advantage of family ties to a *zaddik* increased,

leading to kinship as the preferred basis of succession. Occasionally a rebbe's surviving brothers might become the chosen heirs (as happened in the Gerrer dynasty), impervious to the generation-advantaged sons.

So important did blood ties become that in some cases even a minor child, called a *yenuka*, might be made the rebbe, just to keep the *rebitve* in the family. Perhaps the first such was Abraham (1787–1813), the fifteen-year-old son of Shalom Shakhna (1769–1802), the grandson of the Maggid of Mezherich, who had become rebbe in Prohobitch, Ukraine. Almost immediately after the burial of his father, Abraham sat down in his father's place and assumed the position of leadership.<sup>48</sup> In so doing (perhaps at the urging and encouragement of his mother, Chava, who came from the Chernobyl dynasty and well understood the advantages of keeping the crown within the family), he kept his father's Hasidim from dispersing and the succession from going to another.<sup>49</sup> Later, when Abraham died, his younger brother, who would become Yisrael Friedman of Ruzhin, repeated the same seizure of position. The child-rebbe thus became a leader not primarily because he demonstrated a wisdom beyond his years or was greater than any of his father's disciples but because he was "holy seed." Choosing a son—even a young child—kept family members (especially the dowager *rebbetzin*, his mother) and some of his father's staff or relatives (who often acted as regents) in the ranks of the elite and powerful—something that would not happen if leadership went out of the family to a disciple.

Succession by a disciple would replace the family with the disciple's family, leaving the rebbe's widow and children as well his staff dislocated from a life in which they were not only treated as special but also supported financially. But having a son take over affirmed their gift of grace and allowed them to continue to partake in its benefits. Absent such succession, the dowager *rebbetzin* would become just another widow, her children mere fatherless children—all with "uncertain prospects."<sup>50</sup> Women therefore had a vested interest in seeing to it not only that their husbands held on to their Hasidim but that their sons inherited them as well. Sons-in-law or brothers of the late rebbe were not quite as good, for their own mothers or wives often outranked and displaced the dowager.

#### THE CHABAD CASE

No case better illustrates many of these issues than what happened following the death in 1812 of Schneur Zalman of Lyadi (1740–1812).

When Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730–88) decided to move, with approximately three hundred of his followers, from Europe to the Holy Land, he appointed his disciple Schneur Zalman as a day-to-day guide for those of his Hasidim who remained behind. But Menachem Mendel’s plan for maintaining his active leadership this way failed. The distance to the Holy Land was simply too great, while Schneur Zalman’s powers and charisma were too impressive. Consequently, the latter evolved into a rebbe, founder of ChaBaD Hasidism. (For an explanation of the acronym ChaBaD, see chapter 6, note 2.)

Father to three sons and four daughters, he became very popular, with his own prime disciple, Aaron HaLevy Hurvitz, who often served as an intermediary between the rebbe and his Hasidim. Aaron even tutored the rebbe’s son, DovBer. When Schneur Zalman died, his followers were not ready to break up. The question was who would continue to lead them. The choice devolved to either Aaron or DovBer, with each man having his supporters. Part of the conflict resulted from the fact that although he surely realized he would not live forever, the Alter Rebbe (Yiddish for the “old rebbe”), as Schneur Zalman came to be known, left no clear will as to who, if anyone, should succeed him. Some Hasidim might have been forgiven for assuming it would be Aaron because of all the tasks of leadership he had carried out during the Alter Rebbe’s lifetime.<sup>51</sup> As preeminent disciple, Aaron, in his words and actions, blurred “the boundary between one who acts on behalf or on the authority of his *rebbe* and one who acts on his own authority.”<sup>52</sup> Hence some Hasidim imagined that the rebbe had been grooming Aaron as his successor, especially because he would not have asked Aaron to instruct his son DovBer in the ways of Hasidism if he had not trusted that the former, eight years older than the boy, knew what needed to be known. Moreover, it was no secret at court that Aaron urged the boy forward whenever he struggled over some difficult idea, leading to the younger man’s dependence on his teacher, who in writing referred to him as “my dear brother.”<sup>53</sup> Hasidim might therefore legitimately believe that Aaron would be the one to lead not only the rebbe’s children but all the Hasidim who had been orphaned by their master’s death.

But there was no definitive proof. Given that DovBer ultimately became successor, ChaBaD sources—in retrospect—claimed that “following the death of his father, our grand rabbi, may he rest in peace, most of our fellows [the Hasidim] set their eyes on [his son] to succeed his father . . . for that was the opinion of our grand rabbi.”<sup>54</sup>

There was an alternate argument, reportedly found in Schneur Zalman’s opinion of who should succeed the Besht. A well-known tradition

(probably untrue) claims that during an 1808 visit between Baruch of Medzibezh (1782–1811), the latter’s grandson, and Schneur Zalman, the two argued over “how the authority of the leader was to be transmitted, whether from father to son or from teacher to disciples.” In that argument, Baruch was purported to have argued for heredity (“I am the grandson” and therefore “I should be shown respect”), while Schneur Zalman argued for discipleship (“I, too, am the grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, his spiritual grandson, for the great Maggid [of Mezherich] was an outstanding disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and I am the disciple of the Maggid”).<sup>55</sup>

But in the wake of Schneur Zalman’s passing, heredity succeeded. Championing DovBer were first and foremost the members of the family. Shterna, the widow, heavily involved in the affairs of the court, pressed to have Aaron forced into exile.<sup>56</sup> Others in the family uniformly argued for DovBer. In return, he reportedly swore at his father’s grave that he would continue to support the family, a promise that undoubtedly helped hold their loyalty.<sup>57</sup> Yehuda Lev, Schneur Zalman’s brother, aware of this undertaking, took the most public lead in trying to persuade the Hasidim that the Alter Rebbe had always meant to have his son lead the court next, arguing that “there is none among his brothers [including Aaron, who may have called him ‘brother’] who is greater than him.”<sup>58</sup> In the end, DovBer held on to the office, and Aaron left town with a small group of followers, but his once-prominent leadership within ChaBaD ultimately declined. In spite of his assertion that DovBer “was mistaken and fostered mistakes in all that was connected to serving God in accord with Schneur Zalman’s instructions,” DovBer and the family won the day.<sup>59</sup>

The contest may have seemed ideological or personal, but in fact it was structural and economic. Schneur Zalman had “eighty-thousand hasidim,” many of whom were teachers of other Hasidim, and “each one had a charity box for him.”<sup>60</sup> Those were resources the family was unwilling to give up to a stranger, even one as prominent as Aaron, who would be unlikely to share with them. So in fact succession was driven as much by a desire of the family to hold on to the Hasidim and the economic and political power of the court as any matter of ideology or spiritual development.

When the contest was over, ChaBaD accounts stressed the charisma and holiness of the winner as being decisive; they even suggested that he had won not because he was simply a son but because he—not Aaron—was really his father’s top disciple. From then onwards, ChaBaD power and leadership (as we shall see later in these pages) remained within the

family, and succession went from fathers to sons and sons-in-law who, by virtue of cross-cousin arranged marriages, were also members of the family by blood—albeit always with the proviso that the successor was also spiritually superior to all other possible claimants.<sup>61</sup>

The line of succession might go via a daughter if there were no male lines available, but the successor would always be male, even if he was informally governed by a woman—commonly a dowager *rebbetzin* (his mother or mother-in-law). “The situations surrounding the succession of a Rebbe have been as varied and as complex as family life itself, and decisions have turned on struggles within rabbinic families and between court factions, and on emotions as generous as love and willingness to sacrifice, or as onerous as jealousy and avarice.”<sup>62</sup>

The Hasidim and their loyalties were ultimately decisive. Additionally, “The value of lineage and ancestral merit was one of east European Jewry’s most ancient Ashkenazic legacies,” and however revolutionary Hasidism might have been at the outset, it would in time fit back into traditional forms of that Jewry.<sup>63</sup>

One of the hallmarks of Schneur Zalman’s Hasidism was his willingness to share widely Kabbalistic knowledge, what is called *toras ha’nistar*, or secret mystical teachings. He had done so in his seminal work, the *Tanya*, and in many of his addresses. This had been criticized by some other Hasidic leaders. DovBer announced that he would continue this tradition and “would not limit those loyal to him” from learning a thing that his father shared with him, including the hidden (*nistar*).<sup>64</sup> That decision, combined with his family tie to the *zaddik*, ensured his succession to the leadership. And when DovBer’s knowledge of the ways of his father was published in pamphlets and volumes distributed to his Hasidim, he essentially used these publications to buttress his position—a practice all the succeeding rebbes of ChaBaD would embrace. In the interests of continuity, they were simply willing to reveal the unrevealed to the widest possible audience, often claiming that this was what the Messiah had always meant in his famous apocryphal conversation with the Besht in heaven when, in response to the question of when he would come, the Redeemer replied: “Through this you will know—when your teachings are publicized and revealed in the world and your wellsprings will be spread to the outside—that which I have taught you, and which you have grasped [will be understood by those you have taught,] and they too will be able to make ‘unifications’ and ascents like you.”<sup>65</sup> While perhaps the Besht understood in the Messiah’s reply “a striking demand for the communication of esoteric



power to the people” and a need to delineate the mysteries of Kabbalah so that “every man should be able to make spiritual ascents just like his,” ChaBaD Hasidim took this as a mandate to pass their message to the Jewish people and to carry out his mission to prepare the ground for the imminent arrival of the Messiah and Jewish redemption.<sup>66</sup>

The successful aspirations of Schneur Zalman’s son to succession essentially served to centralize leadership. The more that efforts like DovBer’s succeeded, the more they served as a model for others. For those Hasidim far from the rebbe, his emissaries grew in importance, as did the idea of regular pilgrimage to the court. Tensions were created, however, when rebbes established courts in the territory of another *zaddik*.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the aforementioned argument between Baruch of Medzibezh and Schneur Zalman over who would succeed the Besht was actually a territorial dispute, with the former wary if not angry about the latter’s visit, which he considered an effort to create a presence and levy a tax (*ma’amad*) on Hasidim in an area that Baruch considered his.<sup>68</sup> The visit ultimately resulted in the eviction of Schneur Zalman and his followers from Podolia.

The complications and conflicts over succession also reflect the classic pattern of what happens when new religious experiences and movements enter the stage of routinization and become part of established religion. As Richard Werbner points out, “After the peak of religious enthusiasm, fragmentation follows.”<sup>69</sup> However, when life in a court is routinized, the idea of succession by a son is aided. On the other hand, particularly charismatic and innovative larger-than-life rebbes who have long worn the crown, especially those who embraced an *après moi le deluge* attitude, make it much harder for would-be successors to lay claim to their position. It takes time to become larger than life, and some never manage to do it: the offspring of great fathers who take over at a young age have an especially hard act to follow.

Rebbes with a more forward-looking view and organizational understanding sometimes made matters easier by announcing their wishes regarding a successor in the form of a moral will, describing what qualities a true successor should have (but leaving out names to avoid unleashing the “evil eye” on the chosen one or to allow some flexibility by not necessarily specifying exactly who they had in mind). Sometimes of course a father was unable or reluctant to choose among his possible successors, or he loved all of his sons and wanted them all to follow in his footsteps. The rebbe Yisrael Perlow of Karlin left such a will, which on his death in 1922 was opened. He left the following directions for

choosing his heir: “And this will be the sign verifying who among my sons [should be my heir], the one who has all the following qualities: He will not be a bootlicker, nor double-faced, he will keep himself away from lies and not mingle with good-for-nothings. . . . Rather, he will join the company of God’s faithful. He won’t send his children to [public] school, even if it is a Jewish one. He will make no efforts to gain the leadership. He is the one who should be your head and leader.”<sup>70</sup>

As it turned out, among the rebbe’s sons, six considered themselves qualified to reign by their father’s criteria, and a royal battle broke out among them, until the Karlin Hasidic elders sided with Avraham Elimelech, the fifth son, while the fourth son, Moshe, set up a court in Stolin. The third son, Yaakov Hayim, emigrated in the early 1920s to the United States, becoming one of the first Hasidic rebbes there, initially in Williamsburg, New York, and then in Detroit. The youngest son, Yochanan, was too immature to ascend to a leadership position upon the father’s death but, once he married he set out to the Vohlin district in Europe and established his own court in Lutczek, far away from both Karlin and Stolin. Homogeneity gave way to diversity, aided by geography, which allowed each contender to find his place. As for his material inheritance, that was decided by a Polish court.<sup>71</sup>

### TERRITORY AND SUCCESSION

Territoriality, as already hinted, became part of Hasidism. To signal their attachment to the rebbe, his Hasidim would identify themselves with the name of the locale of his court, which would become their brand. Hence the *zaddik* was often identified by a place-name: Dov Ber the Maggid of Mezherich, Baruch of Medzibezh, Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, Levi of Berdichev, Elimelech of Lyzhansk, Yisrael of Ruzhin, and so on. Sometimes the only way to solve the problem of succession when there were several potential candidates was to find a new locale for each potential successor. Names at first were easy to come by, for it was the rebbe who was the center of attachments, and wherever he came to establish himself and his court, that place-name would in time come to denote him and his followers. The rebbe gave the place its importance. A would-be leader who sought to obtain followers or to establish a court but found it impossible to do so in one locale (either because of competition, hostility, or inaccessibility to large numbers of followers) might find another location where such obstacles did not exist and might establish (or reestablish) himself there (either via a formal rabbinic appoint-

ment or by making himself prominent in other ways) and thereby attract the needed followers. If he succeeded, he and his followers eventually became known by the new place-name, or more precisely by a Yiddish variant of it. As mobility throughout Jewish Europe became easier during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the spread of Hasidim reached its apex. The number of rebbes multiplied with the popularity of Hasidism; new names grew in number.

This geographic dispersion and the names associated with it provided positions for a number of leaders from the same dynasty simultaneously. Geographic dispersion and the availability of new names as brands could mitigate conflict and competition over succession when there were several claimants to a throne, all the while also spreading Hasidism to new corners of Jewish life. While hard feelings and some elements of rivalry might have remained, the fact that a *zaddik* could establish himself in another place and be known by that name allowed all members of the family to retain some element of a *rebistve*, even if some of those who moved away from where their father the rebbe lived lost the advantages of the home court.

A rebbe's geographic location and accessibility to his followers mattered. Of course, a *zaddik* with extraordinary power and charisma could make a little town grow by attracting Hasidim, but one located near many Jews often fared far better than one in a distant village. Yet a significant rebbe would want to be located in a significant place. Surely the importance of Yitzchak Meir Alter was related to the fact that he established his court in the town of Ger (Gura-Kalvarya), just twenty-five kilometers southeast of Warsaw, where many Jews were concentrated.<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, a synergy between a dynasty and a place arose, so that importance flowed in both directions: from *zaddik* to place and from place to those who succeeded to the *rebistve* there. Only later would the place-name become more, a brand name, over which successors fought.

With new locations and names to match, a particular dynasty might enlarge its influence, with sons (or sons-in-law or even stellar disciples) establishing a new court related to the original, like a branch to the root. Such dispersed succession also allowed for divergence and differentiation in ways that did not necessarily lead to conflict and tension. Thus, for example, the Ruzhin Hasidic dynasty founded by Yisrael Friedman dealt with the fact that several of his offspring chose to pursue the "family business" and become rebbes in their own right by evolving offshoots, including Bohush (led by Friedman's grandson Yitzchak), Sadigura (led by a son, Avraham Yaakov), Boyan (led by another grandson, Yitzchak,

son of the Sadigura Rebbe), Chortkov (led by a son, Dovid Moshe) and Husiatyń (led by a son, Mordecai Shraga).<sup>73</sup> While each of these could and did compete for prominence and prestige with the others, their dispersed locations diminished intrafamilial tension over matters of leadership, economics, and prominence. Moreover, the fact that none of these place-names had yet established a brand distinction of its own allowed for the competition to be gradual. Finally, because geographic distances mattered more at a time when travel was more complicated, the competition among rebbes in different locales for followers and influence was minimized, since the choice to attach oneself to someone elsewhere required an often difficult and expensive journey.

#### **SUCCESSION, THE CHARISMA OF OFFICE, BRANDING, AND INHERITED IDENTITY**

In time, however, certain place-names became brands with cachet and standing of their own, endowing the one attached to them with authority and esteem beyond what he brought personally to his position as rebbe. In part, such names offered inherited prominence, or what Max Weber called “the charisma of office.” As Weber explained, the holder of “genuine charisma . . . would be ennobled by virtue of his own actions,” which generated a personal following. **But** to someone who had charisma of office, legitimacy and prominence came by virtue of inheriting the position or title that had become the institutionalized expression of the charisma possessed by its previous incumbent.<sup>74</sup> When a successor became the Rebbe of Ger or of Bobov or any such illustrious title, he was enhanced by bearing that title.

With the institutionalization of succession, charisma of office became an inalienable part of leadership. Simultaneously, place-names associated with renowned Hasidic groups took on iconic power and deeper meaning. The leader *and* the place-name became a single entity of symbolic import, a focus of cohesion and a source of identification. So important did these names become that geography became secondary. Thus, even after the court moved to Rostov, Leningrad, Riga, Otwock, or Crown Heights, the famous Lubavitcher Rebbe (whose dynasty was once headquartered in the Byelorussian town of Lubavitch [Lubovici]) and his Hasidim never chose to call themselves anything other than Lubavitchers—so important had the name become. The same was true for many other Hasidic groups. Once the place-name had become iconic it was an identity and not a denotation of where the court was.