



## Terumah

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### ***Letter to the Editor: About "An Empty Place at the Jewish Table: Why Are Young Jews Dropping Out?"***

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Steve Lipman's article, "An Empty Place at the Jewish Table: Why Are Young Jews Dropping Out?," in the most recent edition of The Lehrhaus is on the whole well-grounded, sensitive, and balanced. But it contains at least two gaping omissions, which are at least partially related to each other.

The first omission goes to Lipman's implicit definition of what it might mean to be ex-

Orthodox. His focus is on the child from an Orthodox home who decides at some point in his or her life to "no longer consider themselves Orthodox" and therefore "no longer keeps Shabbat, eats kosher, cares much about Israel, or identifies as Torah-observant." But this is a false dichotomy. There are plenty of Jews, some with Orthodox upbringings, who might call themselves Conservative, "traditional," "traditional egalitarian," or just plain "observant," who are not Orthodox, but who emphatically do keep Shabbat, eat kosher, care about Israel (along with many non-observant Jews), and follow a Halakhically-oriented Jewish life as they understand it. These Jews' commitment to religious observance oriented to the mitzvot is deep and sustained; it is simply that their interpretation of Halakhah differs, often only in some specific way, from the

contemporary Orthodox consensus. Lipman's piece makes one passing reference to an ex-Orthodox Conservative family, but his anecdote comes nowhere near describing these observant non-Orthodox Jews. Indeed, it's worth noting that some Jews who fall into that "observant non-Orthodox" category are *more* halakhically observant in their personal practice and commitments than many Jews who have remained in the Orthodox fold institutionally but whose personal practice is decidedly more relaxed.

This raises a couple of important questions. One is empirical: How many ex-Orthodox Jews fall into this category of "halakhically observant though no longer Orthodox"? The number might be significant, or it might be trivial. I would love to know, if only because it would tell us a good deal not only about the actual attrition rate in religious commitment, but also about the full texture of contemporary American Jewish life.

Another question is normative: Can the Orthodox community appreciate the level of commitment displayed by these Jews, or will it simply lump them in indiscriminately with those who have actually fallen away from a halakhic life?

The second gap in Lipman's piece is, as I suggested, related to the first. Lipman catalogs various reasons that the children of Orthodox families might leave the fold. All those reasons — most notably that such folks "no longer believe ... in the sanctity of the *mitzvot*" — are categorical. But he ignores the possibility that some Jews might leave

Orthodox for more specific, more granular, reasons. The most obvious is that they cannot accept the standard Orthodox rejection of the equality of women in religious life. Historically, some Jews left religious observance entirely because they could not live within those strictures. But many Jews today find a home in settings that recognize the equality of women, and justify that equality through careful halakhic analysis, while maintaining and even enhancing their observance. That is one reason that they end up calling themselves "traditional egalitarian," "observant," or the like, though no longer Orthodox.

Mr. Lipman is entitled to whatever views he holds about the practices of religiously observant but non-Orthodox Jews. That I can respect. But he should not implicitly deny the existence of such Jews. Nor should he ignore the full range of reasons they might have for their religious choices.

An addendum: Orthodoxy has chosen to draw a red line on more-complete women's equality. Indeed, some parts of mainstream Orthodoxy have been slow to accept even the movement to ordain women who seek to take on rabbinic or quasi-rabbinic roles while maintaining separation of the sexes and the traditional limits on women's liturgical leadership. Yet why that should be the make-or-break question, as opposed to all the other variations in Orthodox understandings of halakhah and religious life, is unclear. So, imagine if Orthodoxy were willing to accept even more fully egalitarian Jews as within the fold, more

broadly defined. How might that change both Orthodoxy's view of who is "off the *derech*" and the self-perception of some Orthodox young people struggling with their own place in the religious world?

I hope that Mr. Lipman might write a follow-up article addressing some of these important questions.

Sincerely,  
Perry Dane

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I recently published an [article](#) in *The Lehrhaus* that I thought was nuanced and well-argued, although I understood that it dealt with a sensitive and possibly controversial topic. Unbeknownst to me, two [brief, highly critical letters](#) were published in response.

These letters did not accurately represent what I had written, and imply assertions that I did not make. My primary response, before addressing specific points, is to request the interested reader to read what I actually wrote.

The first writer makes points which, for the most part, I agree with, yet writes as if he is arguing with what I wrote. Of course, Israel needs to maintain law and order within the military. I never even hinted otherwise. He also notes the obvious point that the military police deserve the benefit of the doubt. It is not a zero-sum game; both the police and the detainees can be given the benefit of the

doubt, and stating such does not imply that the police are infallible and that everything they do should be accepted. But the police was not my topic; I was responding to the widespread media and public onslaught on the detainees. He further asserts that, "Prior to this incident, there were no complaints that the military courts were prejudiced against Israeli soldiers..." Wishing it were true does not make it so. There were endless complaints by soldiers that the MAG was tying their hands in Gaza and overly prosecuting them. (See for example [here](#) and [here](#)). While there are claims in the opposite direction as well, the perception of the soldiers is crucially important.

I never wrote that the complaint should be ignored, and the respondent's assertion that, "If the premise of the article was accepted, there would be no military discipline, and those who are looking to accuse Israel of war crimes would gain credibility," simply does not correspond to what I wrote. The letter writer was making his own points and not responding to me.

The second writer gave "tochecha," an action that does not leave much room for dialogue or multiplicity of views (core Jewish values). He saw in my article "retrospective vindication" and "a partisan voice," characterizing it as "dismissing [of] complexity" and "defensive and accusatory." I leave it to the reader to find those elements in my balanced article, as I don't see them. He suggests there was "broader reporting" of the accusations, despite there in essence being only one source that was repeated and spread far and wide. Wider dissemination does not increase reliability nor increase the number of sources. I disagree with his

statement that there is a need for “balanced empathy” when dealing with people who videoed themselves carrying out crimes too heinous to describe. They deserve basic rights – but no more.

In a final defamatory sentence, the second respondent implied that I justified sexual abuse. I did nothing of the sort and implying as such is near libel. I did not downplay the allegations nor claim that the accused should not be investigated and tried. I actually explicitly said the exact opposite.

- Ari Zivotofsky

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### ***The Essence of Education***

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### **Review of Glenn Dynner, *The Light of Learning: Hasidism in Poland on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 2023)**

“They don’t understand—a *yeshiva bokher* is not a Talmud student. A *yeshiva bokher* is one whose entire essence entails being a servant of God... The army poses a contradiction... In the army he’s a soldier, which is a different essence.”

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Shilo Fried, “A Leading Lithuanian-Haredi Rabbi: The essential reality of the army is not for a yeshiva student,” in *Yediot Aharonot* (26 July 2024).

So contends Rabbi Moshe Hirsch, head of the prestigious Slabodka Yeshiva in Bnei Brak,

articulating his opposition to the Haredi draft in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Hirsch argues that this opposition is mistakenly understood by many outsiders as concerned with the lost hours of Talmud study a *yeshiva* student-turned soldier would forgo. But at its core, he insists, the Haredi antipathy to the army is about something deeper: the IDF proposes a competing identity, offering “soldier” in place of “*yeshiva* student,” the self-conception nurtured by the *yeshiva*. It is the prospect of an alternative identity—and a world in which to play it out—that constitutes, claims Hirsch, the draft’s true threat.

The etiology of Hirsch’s understanding of the *yeshiva*’s role in forming its students’ identities can be traced to a world preceding his contemporary Israeli milieu. In *The Light of Learning: Hasidism in Poland on the Eve of the Holocaust*, Glenn Dynner demonstrates how early-to mid-twentieth century Polish Hasidic *yeshivot* and comparable educational structures functioned as powerful cultural interventions. In Dynner’s telling, these *yeshivot* comprised “total institutions,” whole worlds with unique values and aspirations, capable of contending with attractive competing ideologies. The contemporary Israeli Haredi *yeshiva*—Hasidic and non-Hasidic alike—

has adopted an analogous strategy, applying it to what they consider a comparably threatening environment (though the Zionist Israeli world, of course, stridently rejects the comparison).

Dynner traces the trajectory of Polish Hasidism as it navigated the upheavals of the First World War, a period often portrayed as a crisis of faith and identity. Accounts from the time highlight the panic over youth defections. Some left the fold entirely, while others lived double lives—outwardly donning Hasidic garb while engaging in nontraditional behaviors. In one particularly evocative image from a Shabbat Passover day in Warsaw, Hasidic youth, some draped in *tallitot*, were seen smoking and kibitzing around a table set with a sliced loaf of rye.<sup>2</sup> The history of Hasidism during this period often depicts a stagnant, if not declining, culture, far from the vitality of its origins.

Yet Dynner challenges and nuances this narrative, arguing that both Hasidism and traditionalism remained more resilient than often assumed. This resilience was due in no small part to the educational interventions his book examines. Until World War I, and unlike their *misnagdic* (non-Hasidic traditionalist) counterparts, Hasidim tended to learn in small groups in their local houses of study (*kloyzn*). The embrace of the *yeshiva* model—by the Hasidic courts of Bobov, Radomsk, Lubavitch, Piaseczno, Ger, and Slonim, among others<sup>3</sup>—served to create formal,

totalizing institutions that housed not only books and tables, but entire cultures.

One of Dynner’s key arguments is his attention to Hasidic education as a response to oppression, “physical and spiritual pogroms” alike. The expansion and institutionalization of Hasidic *yeshivot* were not merely defensive maneuvers against the encroachment of secularism or the state’s regulatory pressures, such as compulsory public schooling and Polonization. They were creative, adaptive efforts to reinforce Hasidic identity in a changing world. This response was both innovative and deeply traditional. The formalization of *yeshivot* marked an embrace of modern institutional structures—Hasidic leaders recognized that a more systematic framework was necessary to sustain their communities. At the same time, turning to education was entirely in keeping with the longstanding Jewish tradition of (re)turning to Torah study at moments of existential threat.

Dynner’s project is itself an act of resistance. He resists the all-too-common depiction of interwar Hasidism as an irreversible decline, a world degraded from its original fervor into a stale, behavioristic remnant besieged by external pressures and overshadowed by the allure of secular ideologies. Against this “lachrymose” narrative—Salo Baron’s celebrated critique of tragedy-centered Jewish historiography—Dynner restores a sense of vitality, adaptation, and agency

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<sup>2</sup> Dynner, 20.

<sup>3</sup> See Table 2.1 in *ibid.*, 89.

to the Hasidic figures of the period.

While the book begins by outlining the challenges Hasidism faced, and later chapters focus heavily on the politicization of Hasidism through Agudah and other channels, Chapters II and VI—devoted to educational interventions—will be especially arresting for readers interested in education. Chapter II, aptly titled “A Higher Education,” nods both to the advanced scholarly pursuits within and to the elevation of their value over the alternatives offered outside the *yeshiva* walls. The rise of Hasidic *yeshivot* emerges in the context of internal Jewish currents—Hasidism positioning itself contra Bundism, Zionism, and secularism—alongside external cultural and political pressures. What began as small-scale educational initiatives soon blossomed into a vibrant ecosystem of Hasidic *yeshivot* and centers of learning.

One of the most remarkable innovations of this period, and one that granted new agency to a previously neglected population, was the work of Sarah Schenirer. Her founding of the Bais Yaakov school—and ultimately the Bais Yaakov movement—revolutionized Hasidic girls’ education. As Naomi Seidman observes, Bais Yaakov embodied a dual character: “the forces of charisma and institution, revolution and routine, center and periphery, operated in tandem even after the institutionalization of the movement.”<sup>4</sup> This insight highlights the paradoxical nature of Hasidic modernization and mirrors the broader institutionalization of Hasidic *yeshivot*, which

transformed into formidable centers of continuity and adaptation.

On one level, Hasidic *yeshivot* offered a kind of escape from the world, refuges from the vicissitudes of external life. These structures held self-contained worlds, functioning as spiritual enclaves indifferent to physical and material hardships.<sup>5</sup> This move has deep roots in the rabbinic tradition, echoing the tale (*Shabbat* 33b) of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his son retreating into a cave to escape Roman oppression. Rejecting Roman contributions—marketplaces, bridges, bathhouses—they stripped away the physical world, burying their bodies (though not their heads) in sand and immersing themselves in Torah study.

Consider, too, another talmudic hero-educator (*Bava Metzia* 85b): Rabbi Hiyya. Confronted with the challenge of preserving Torah study in the face of possible extinction, he devised an ingenious pedagogical system. He sustained orphans, prepared parchment, wrote sacred texts, and taught Torah and Mishnah to groups of children, instructing them to continue learning from one another in his absence. His method—equal parts resourcefulness, devotion, and communal empowerment—ensured that “Torah will not be forgotten from Israel.”

This narrative resonates profoundly with the Hasidic response to the interbellum crisis. Education was not merely a practical necessity but

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, 172.

a sacred mission, an active defiance of historical forces threatening to erode religious life. Like Rabbi Hiyya, Hasidic leaders had to provide not only educational substance but the material infrastructure: buildings, dormitories, grounds, tuition, staff salaries, and meals. This contrasts vividly with the informal *kloyz* structure, where students slept on benches or floors and relied on *essen teg*—rotating meals in community members’ homes. Unlike Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, they had no miraculous carob tree; they fundraised relentlessly to sustain their students.

In short: as much as the *yeshiva* offered escape, its commitment to learning was not merely defensive. It was an act of optimism, an embrace of an authentically Jewish and Hasidic cultural activity—devotional *Torah lernen*.

With Torah study at its center, these *yeshivot* could function as what Dynner identifies as “total institutions”—spaces cultivating a Hasidic self imbued with nobility, agency, dynamism, and flourishing. The sociological concept of the total institution, attributed to Erving Goffman, describes a self-contained world that regulates every aspect of its members’ lives through structured routines, physical separation, and an overarching ideological system. This notion has been applied to prisons, monastic orders, and—tellingly (cue Hirsch)—military academies. Hirsch would recognize this phenomenon in his own *yeshiva*; only a total institution, insulated from the

outside world, could create a unified “essence” in its students.

This vision of the *yeshiva* helps explain why Hasidic leaders sought to build grand educational edifices such as Yeshivat Hakhmei Lublin. Directed by the charismatic R. Meir Shapira and his wife, the *yeshiva* embodied the dignity and refinement of a noble culture, complete with dormitory, cafeteria, and library. It provided “a singular experience of rigorous study infused with Hasidic joy.”<sup>6</sup> Such an approach aligns well with the educational philosophy of R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira—the Piaseczner Rebbe, dubbed the “Pedagogic Rebbe” by Hillel Zeitlin—who, in his writings and in his own Hasidic *yeshiva*, Da’at Moshe, sought to persuade his students of their inherent nobility and spiritual grandeur. Again, the Hasidic *yeshiva* was not merely preservationist; it proclaimed that Hasidic life was not only enduring but flourishing.

That declaration of Hasidic agency, optimism, and cultural resilience was not destined to be proclaimed only in the grand halls of Hakhmei Lublin-style *yeshivot*. In the ghettos and camps, it moved underground. Documentation of clandestine ghetto *yeshiva* bunkers and Bais Yaakov schools reveals secret cellars, accessed through hidden passageways, where the sounds of intensive Talmud study echoed defiantly.<sup>7</sup> The image is profoundly moving—a resurrection of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai’s cave, not in ancient Galilee but in wartime Warsaw. Torah study

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 174-180.

became both resistance and testimony. When a student remarked that such suffering must surely herald the Messiah, R. David Bornstein of

Sochaczew replied, “True, the Messiah may come at any moment... but in the meantime we should study a page of Talmud.”<sup>8</sup>

Dynner incorporates a wonderfully rich array of material drawn from diverse sources, enlivening the book with textured depictions of the world he reconstructs. Pictures and tables further enhance the reader’s immersion. Though at times the rush of facts can distract from the narrative, it is a small price for the breadth of data Dynner has assembled.

By reframing the story of interwar Hasidism, Dynner shifts the focus from decline to resilience. Education was not a desperate last stand against modernity’s onslaught; it was a strategic, deeply rooted response that ensured Hasidism’s continued vibrancy. These *yeshivot* set out to promote *hinukh*, famously defined by the Piaseczner not as mere pedagogy but as initiation—bringing students into the full development of their sacred core selves, or, as Hirsch might say, their “essence.”

In closing, we return to R. Hirsch. It is striking to read Dynner’s work amid the current debates in Israel regarding the Haredi draft, intensified in the post–October 7 reality and during the war in Gaza.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 181.

Presumably, R. Hirsch and his contemporaries would recognize and approve of the educational initiatives of interwar Bobov, Lubavitch, Piaseczno,

and Radomsk; indeed, I argue, they seek—consciously or not—to apply them to their own twenty-first-century context. Yet, regarding the moral and religious valence of their framing, perhaps we should end with another quote from the Piaseczner, directed in a different context as a rebuke to his fellow Hasidic leaders:

“The administration and deans of the *yeshivot*, who are totally immersed in the life of the *yeshiva* and its students and encounter only the elite of our youth, are unaware of the gravity of this problem... Poke your heads outside of the four cubits of your *yeshiva*... Should we be satisfied with merely the handful of students who attend our *yeshivot*? Is this the entirety of the people of Israel?”<sup>9</sup>

A powerful question indeed.



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<sup>9</sup> See the Introduction to R. Shapira’s *Hovat HaTalmidim*, “The Students’ Obligation.”