"Sabbath" from Holy Days*

Genesis rives an account of God creating the world in six days and then resting on the seventh. Judaism has traditionally set aside one day in seven, the Sabbath, as a day for rest and religious activity, free of secular pursuits. In the Hasidic communities of Brooklyn, New York, the ritual of the Sabbath is strictly followed to this day. This reading describes the observance of the Sabbath by a modern-day Hasidic family from one of those communities.

Six days shall you labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto the Lord your God, on it you shall not do any manner of work . . . for the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it.
(ExoDus 20:9-11)

It is one of the curious mists of history that the Hasidim, once considered the enemies of Orthodoxy, today consider themselves its bulwarks. Besieged from every direction by what they perceive as a decadent, morally bankrupt world, they shun its preoccupations, rebel against many of its social conventions, spend as much time as possible in their neighborhood fortresses, and devote themselves to perpetuating the ideals of Jewish religious life. This is especially evident on the eve of the Sabbath. To wander along Kingston Avenue, where the Lubavitchers do most of their marketing, as I did one Friday afternoon some weeks after my first visit to the Konigsbergs, is to enter a world whose rhythms are dictated solely by religious custom and ritual. Like most of her neighbors, Sheina had completed some of her Sabbath preparations the night before, but she still had sonic last-minute shopping to do, and invited me to accompany her. She was in a good mood.

"I live from one Shabbos to the next," she said. "I look forward to it all week. We almost always have three or four guests. Sometimes they're neighborhood friends; at other times it's just family, but we're often asked by some official to provide a congenial Shabbos for someone who is traveling or for students who have no other place to go. In the last month we've had people show up from England, Iran, and South Africa; the door is never closed. It's totally unlike what I was used to growing up in Bloomfield Hills. Saturdays were a drag when I was a child. I didn't really understand what the Sabbath was about; no one ever talked about it. We observed it only in a half-hearted way, and neither my two brothers nor my sister and I ever really understood why we were doing any of it. In fact, I hardly understood anything about the deeper levels of Judaism until I became a baalat teshuvah [Hebrew for 'one who has returned']."

No one knows exactly how many baelei teshuvah there are, but in recent years a surprisingly large number of Jews have "returned" to Orthodox ways, and each year hundreds of them join the Lubavitcher world. Some have been sought out. Unlike other Hasidim, the Lubavitchers are unabashedly committed to bringing as many Jews as possible back into the fold. Some, like Sheina, found their own way.

"What was life like in Michigan?"

"It was like everywhere else: aimless. It would probably be hard to find a community whose values were more different from those of a Hasidic community than the one that I grew up in. Most of the people I knew were fairly well-to-do and self-absorbed. They really never gave two thoughts to their spiritual life."

In a corner fruit store, Sheina handed a short shopping list to a swarthy man in a yarmulke who filled a bag with fruits and vegetables as we talked. From time to time, the shopkeeper and Sheina discussed the comparative merits of various fruits. Sheina's voice was unusually even as she talked with him and the man seemed to be struggling with a powerful urge to fawn which, one surmised, he must have learned from experience would embarrass this customer. There were three other women in the store. All of them knew Sheina and came over to chat. Across the street, a "Glatt Kosher Cafeteria" (glatt means smooth; originally the word referred to the lining of an animal's lung, which was not considered kosher if wrinkled; it has come to mean assiduous) had signs in the window for cold borscht, mushroom barley soup and noodle pudding, and nearby a dark tiny store called "Benny's of Boro Park" offered ladies' clothing.

The general store down the block, where Sheina stopped next, was piled high with cartons. Customers sidled around the boxes and each other, flattening themselves to avoid physical contact, and generally acting like contortionists as they strained to reach boxes of Landau's Puffed Wheat, jars of Rokeach Gefilte Fish and cans of Season Sardines. Cartons of Shefa brand kosher milk filled the refrigerator cases. Little knots of Hasidim stood about talking, gesticulating, laughing, arguing, creating complex roadblocks. Shopping definitely played second fiddle here to conversation. Most of the conversations were in Yiddish, a few were in English. No one passed Sheina (whose command of Yiddish, she confided somewhat ruefully, was tenuous) without at least 'a nod, or, more often, "Ah, Sheina, how are you?" followed invariably by "Baruch Hashem, fine. And you?"

There were many Yiddish accents and much of the English spoken reflected Yiddish syntax. Almost everybody used the word "by" for "at," for example, as in, "I was staying by Hannah last week." Except for the thin veneer of modernity represented by the refrigeration, the plastic food wrappings, and the fashionable wrappings of

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the women, the store seemed to have been freshly transported to Brooklyn from Sholem Aleichem's Kaserilevke.

All the canned goods and cartons were marked with a 0 (for Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America) or other little symbols signifying that the product had been approved as kosher by various rabbinical boards. No Hasid will buy any prepared food that does not bear this stamp of rabbinical approval, and one supervising rabbi may be deemed more trustworthy than another. We nearly made it to the fish store across the street without stopping to talk with anyone, but at the entrance a gray-bearded man stopped Sheina to ask her how the two Iranian girls he had sent over to her were doing. Sheina explained that more than nine hundred Iranian Jewish children had been sent to America by their worried parents, who feared for their lives because of the political unrest in that country. Almost all of them were taken in by Lubavitcher families, who were doing their best to cope with communications problems (few of the children spoke anything but Persian) and the characteristically indifferent religious background of their charges. Although the children were grateful for the Lubavitchers' help, most had shown little interest in pursuing a more religious life. The man who stopped her was in charge of the Iranian project. She told him that the girls were doing fine. "They keep to themselves a lot, but they try to enter into our customs as best they can." One of the chief characteristics of the Lubavitchers that distinguish them from other Hasidim is their Jewish social consciousness. Helping Jews of every stripe has traditionally been a Lubavitcher preoccupation.

In Raskin's Fish Store, the clerks, all in Yarmulkes, joked a lot with their customers. The fish was piled in huge heaps and the atmosphere evocative of an oriental bazaar. Most of the women had made the traditional Sabbath food, gefilte fish, the night before, but for those who had not had the time or the inclination, Raskin's sold its own gefilte fish, frozen. I saw no one buying less than five pounds of fish. In my neighborhood in Manhattan, at least half the late Friday afternoon customers were young working women buying the modest provisions for dinner with their boyfriends—two artichokes, two fillets of something, two candles, and so forth. There were obviously no intimate soupers a deux being planned here. The books of Leviticus (Chapter 11) and Deuteronomy (Chapter 14:3-21) list the animals, fish, and fowl that are considered kosher, or fit to be eaten by Jews. Only sea creatures that have both fins and scales are considered kosher, so no lobster, clam, oyster, crab, or shrimp is ever seen in a kosher fish store. Other foods that are proscribed by Jewish law include meat from animals that do not both chew their cud and have cloven hooves, twenty-four kinds of birds (many of them birds of prey); insects, amphibian creatures or any creature that crawls "upon the belly"; any "winged swelling thing," rodent, or lizard; or any product that might come from these creatures, such as milk, eggs, or oil. Animals that are considered clean are cows, sheep, goats, deer, chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks, and doves. Other forbidden foods include pigs, camels, herons, storks, hawks, ravens, pelicans, ostriches, eels, snails, rattlesnakes, ants, and rock badgers.

Eating kosher food and meats that have been slaughtered in the ritually prescribed manner is one of the basic disciplines of Jewish religious life. Reform Jews, who believe that the dietary laws are antiquated and serve no practical function, point out that they are a major factor in separating Jews from the rest of their fellowmen. The Hasidim are opposed to joining the mainstream and, citing the scriptures, point out that God never intended that they should: "I am the Lord your God who have set you apart from the nations. You shall therefore separate between the clean beast and the unclean beast and the unclean fowl and the clean. " If the Hasidim's habits and customs alienate outsiders, they are unconcerned. Unlike most Jews, who tend either to shrug off, compartmentalize, or firmly reject any idea of their exoticness, the Hasidim accept it as part of their role. In fact, it is a source of pride. As one religious author put it, "What narrower minds look upon as a picayune concern with trifling kitchen matters is really an example of how Judaism elevates the mere physical satisfactions of one's appetite into a spiritual act by its emphasis on the everpresent God and our duty to serve him at all times." So much ritual is associated with eating in Orthodox homes that it sometimes seems that the table is a form of altar. In fact, one unnamed Talmud scholar mentioned in a curious tome that I came across, called To Be a Jew, by Rabbi Hayim H. Donin (one of many such everything-you-wanted-to-know-aboutJudaism-but-were-afraid-to-ask volumes that have recently become popular in the booming spiritual-affirmation business), went so far as to suggest that the table has come to replace the Temple altar: "When the Temple stood, sacrifices would secure atonement for an individual; now his table does."

By midafternoon on Friday the streets of Crown Heights are filled with women laden with shopping bags, hurrying home to finish their preparations for the Sabbath. By late afternoon the women have all disappeared and the landscape has become entirely masculine. As the shadows lengthen under the maples and lindens of President Street, dark-hatted men in somber clothes, alone or in groups of two and three, are taking pains to reach home before sundown, when the Sabbath begins. Many of the men work half days on Fridays, others leave work by midafternoon. If an employer will not permit an early departure on Friday, a Hasid will not work for him. On Friday afternoon the men go to the mikvah, or ritual bath, to purify themselves for the Sabbath. Many of them exchange their business suits and ordinary fedoras for knee-length black silk caftans and velvet yarmulkes. Crowds of men mill outside 770 Eastern Parkway. The look of boredom or patient endurance one sees so often on their faces in the workaday world has vanished. Their expressions are lively, and the talk is animated. It is a pleasing scene—a tableau vivant that cannot have looked much different two hundred years ago. Few of these men have attended college. In the Hasidic world, secular education has traditionally been viewed as a threat to

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religious life. In the past decades, this view has changed in certain, communities. There has developed what the sociologist Egon Mayer, in his study of the Boro Park religious community, referred to as a dual status system. Upwardly mobile young men and women have tried (helped by laws protecting them from religious discrimination) to achieve distinction in secular careers and still satisfy the demands of a religious life. In these communities, being a good doctor or lawyer has come to mean as much as being a good Jew. This change has never occurred in Crown Heights. It is no surprise, therefore, that there are few professional men in the crowd in front of the synagogue. The conspicuous lack of interest in careers that the anthropologist Jerome R. Mintz observed among Hasidim in the nineteen-sixties and wrote about in Legends of the Hasidim (a study of Hasidic life based on modern Hasidic tales) still prevails among the Lubavitchers of the nineteen-eighties. Some of them, like the Konigsbergs, appear to make a good living despite this handicap, but many do not. "A Hasid," said Mintz, "does not have a 'career', he is concerned simply with earning a living in a way which will not interfere with his religious duties. Most Hasidim . . . belong to the ranks of skilled workers. They are employed in the diamond center as cutters, polishers, and dealers; they hold jobs as sewing machine operators, pattern cutters, watchmakers, linotype operators, electricians, carpenters, and upholsterers . . . a small but ever increasing number have established small packaging and wholesale businesses, often in response to the particular needs of the Hasidic community. Because of their disdain for what they consider inadequate precautions in fulfilling the ritual law, a number of Hasidim have succeeded in establishing enterprises concerned with matzoh, meat, milk, cheese, bread, noodles, salt, sugar, mayonnaise, and vitamins. Hasidic manufacturers and wholesalers can assure their customers that no condition will be permitted which might render their products impure. Still other concerns supply religious books and other articles. . . . A number of Hasidim have become ritual slaughterers or have opened highly successful butcher shops. Some have opened groceries, vegetable markets, fish stores, dry goods stores . . . . These retail ventures are assured of a measure of success because of the customary endorsement of their Rebbe and the patronage of their own courts."

At the Konigsberg house, twenty-five minutes before sundown, Sheina, dressed in an elegant tan silk blouse and tweed skirt, was preparing to light the Sabbath candles. Her afternoon coiffure of short, feathery Titian curls had been completely transformed into a long, swelte pageboy in the few minutes it took her to change upstairs. I briefly entertained the idea that I might have been encountering my first kabbalistic wonder, then recollected that for reasons of modesty, married Hasidic women cut off most of their hair and wear wigs. She had merely changed wigs.

According to custom, Sabbath candles are lit twenty minutes before sundown. The meal had been cooked, the table elaborately set, the heavily ornated silver candelabrum polished, and the family and some guests were milling around the living room. The guests included a South African rabbi and his wife and two daughters; Moshe's second-oldest daughter, Chanah, who was pregnant; and her husband, Isaac, a small redhead man with intelligent, laughing eyes, who told me that they were about to depart for Virginia to help organize the Jewish community there; the two almond-eyed Persian girls, Gita and Azita Medizhadi; and a young girl who had recently decided to abandon her secular life and live in the dormitory the Lubavitchers run for young baalot teshuvah. Several minutes after the guests were introduced to one another, the women crowded around the candelabrum. According to Jewish custom it is the obligation of married women to usher in the Sabbath by lighting the candles. At least two candles are lit, symbolically representing the fourth commandment, to "remember" the Sabbath, and the twelfth verse in Deuteronomy, Chapter 5, to "observe" it, but Sheina also lit additional candles for her children and so did the rabbi's wife. Without saying anything, Sheina handed me several candles and invited me to repeat the blessing for lighting the candles after her, which I did somewhat awkwardly. I had never done it before. When I was young, I had seen my grandmother, a plump, rosy Austrian beauty, light Sabbath candles once or twice. But my mother, an adamantly modern soul who thought that such rituals belonged in the same category as curtseying and child labor, put the traditions of four thousand years behind her without a backward glance. Now, watching the peaceful, absorbed faces of the women in the glow of the candles, I felt a rush of nostalgia and something like a sense of loss. It passed quickly, however, when I realized that because of the prohibition against using the phone on the Sabbath, I would be unable to call my son to wish him goodnight.

The activities proscribed for the Sabbath either by the Bible or by post-Biblical decree seem mind-boggling to outsiders. They include cooking; baking; washing laundry; chopping; knitting; crocheting; sewing; embroidering; pasting; drawing, painting; writing; typing; fishing; hunting; cutting hair (or cutting anything else, with the exception of food); building or repairing anything; gardening; carrying or pushing anything farther than six feet in public; riding in cars, planes, trains, or buses; boating; buying or selling; horseback riding; playing a musical instrument; switching on any electrical apparatus, such as a TV set, phonograph or radio; handling any objects whose use is forbidden on the Sabbath, such as money, tools, or pencils; exercising or playing any sport; or traveling, even by foot, more than a short distance from the place where one is ensconced on the Sabbath. I asked Sheina how she felt about having her activities so restricted each week. Surveying the dinner table approvingly, as the men filed out the door to go to their evening service, she replied that she didn't think of it that way.

"I feel that I'm getting a break," she said, as she placed a heavy water pitcher on the table. "Once you get some of the more complicated things out of the way, like cooking the food in advance and setting a large urn of hot water on a metal
cover over a low burner so that everybody can have coffee and tea to drink on Saturday, and covering some of the light switches so that no one will accidentally turn the important lights off, it feels more like a holiday. What if you were flown to a quiet tropical island every week? Wouldn't you be pleased if you were permitted, even obliged, to just put aside your everyday burdens and everyday chores? I don't really know what other people's lives are like, but I doubt that most families get the chance we do to just sit around and talk to one another every weekend. On weekends most Americans seem to play as hard as they work . . . The Sabbath is also a time when I can study Torah in an unhurried way, and we almost always have guests who have interesting things to say about life."

"You mean Jewish life, of course."
"Well, yes."
"Are your guests ever gentiles?"
"No. I'm aware that there are some fine gentile people; but their world is not our world. I may see an occasional play, or concert, or TV program—most of the people in the community don't have TV's, by the way, and don't go to the movies—but these are not the important activities in my life. Being a Jew and fulfilling the commandments is my life, and it's Moshe's. It takes up all our time. The rhythms of my life over the weeks and months follow those of the Jewish calendar. [The Jewish year is made up of twelve lunar months, with an extra month added every few years to make up for the annual eleven-and-a-quarter-day discrepancy between a lunar year and the solar one.] It's the same for everyone here, so it follows that the people that we see are going to be involved in the same kind of life."

"You don't feel that you're cutting yourselves off from any of the richness of life by shutting things out just because they're different?"
"No, I don't. I can't imagine a richer life than the one I'm leading. Anyway, we're not all that shut off from the world. Moshe and I travel."
"You do? Is that common here?"
"Well, it's quite common to go off to another city or county to help start or build a Lubavitcher center, but people here travel for pleasure, too. We went to London last summer."
"What did you do there?"
"We visited Lubavitcher families and the yeshivas in and near the city, but we also went to see the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Tower of London and Madame Tussaud's. Of course, when you do these things, you can sometimes get into trouble; we certainly did when we went to the Tower of London on a Friday," she said, smiling.
"What do you mean?"
"There was a tube strike while we were there, and even though we left the tower at four o'clock in the afternoon in order to be sure to make it to the friend's house we were staying at in Golders Green by nine, when Shabbos began, we very nearly didn't make it. You could only move around by bus—you couldn't find a taxi. We had to change buses several times and the queues were endless. At seven-thirty, we were still standing at the end of a long queue at Oxford Circus and there were no buses in sight. Moshe said, 'Let's walk.' We were both exhausted by then and pretty frantic, and there didn't seem to be any chance that we could make it, but off we headed toward Golders Green, which was about an hour away by bus. I nearly started to cry. Then Moshe just bent over to a fellow who had stopped his car at a light and told him that he was a religious Jew and that we simply had to be at our friend's house by sundown. He told him that he'd give him whatever amount of money he wanted if he would drive us there. The man looked at Moshe as if he were crazy at first, but it turned out that he was a religious Catholic. He was surprised that we couldn't get a special dispensation because of the strike; he could have, he said, but he agreed to take us, and we made it. He didn't even want to take any money in the end, but we insisted because it didn't seem fair to have him go out of his way for nothing."

"Why do you think that people really aren't supposed to work on the Sabbath?" I asked. "Why does it honor God more to desist from work than to work?"

Sheina bit her lip. "Ask Moshe when he comes back, he knows more about things like that than I do."

About an hour and a half later, Moshe, Isaac, and the rabbi from South Africa returned from the synagogue. Sheina had mentioned earlier that her husband prayed three times a day (as required by Jewish law) on weekdays at 770—which is how the Lubavitchers refer to their synagogue—where there were always so many people around that he was was sure to find the quorum of ten men needed for public prayer. On Fridays and Saturdays, however, he prayed at a shtiebl (small synagogue) around the corner. Many Lubavitchers did the same thing, she explained, because they wanted to keep the little synagogues, which were built in the first half of the century and had lost most of their congregations in the fifties and sixties, going. Moshe, resplendent in a long black caftan and velvet yarmulke with gilt zigzagging, rubbed his hands together and regarded the room and his guests with obvious satisfaction. A few minutes later, his sons and a schoolfriend rushed breathlessly into the room. When Mendel spied me, he nudged his brother. Shmuel glanced my way briefly, but stared fixedly at his shoes when he greeted me. They had made it just in the nick of time, Sheina explained, since kiddush (the prayer of sanctification) had to be recited before six o'clock. It was five to six. They had been somewhat delayed coming in from Morristown, New Jersey, where they were all students at a Lubavitcher yeshiva, the Rabbinical College of
America, and so had gone to evening prayers directly after they had arrived back in the neighborhood. The boys' friend was another visitor from South Africa. Everyone gathered around the table and the men sang the traditional "Shalom Aleichem," a hymn that pays homage to the angels that accompanied them home from the synagogue. After the song I noticed Moshe looking rather intently at Sheina and reciting or singing something. She was smiling. Later that evening she explained that Moshe had been singing the thirty-first chapter of the Book of Proverbs, which contains the well-known phrase "A woman of valor, who can find; for her price is far above rubies." This paean to what seems to be the practical virtues of Jewish housewifery was in fact interpreted by the early kabbalists as a hymn to the Shekhinah, God's female aspect. I knew that Hasidic men sing this to their wives every Sabbath, but I had somehow expected that it would be a more public, declamatory ritual. The intimacy of the moment took me by surprise. One of the guests asked where Moshe's two other daughters were and was told that the eldest, Miriam, lived in Cape Town with her husband and children and that Bassv, the youngest, who was nineteen, was with her grandmother. Bassy, a slim, spirited girl who in the secular world would probably be taken for the captain of her field hockey team, had explained to me several hours earlier, as she hastily gathered a few belongings together and headed for the door, that she spent Shabbos with her widowed grandmother, who lived around the corner. "Sometimes she comes here for Shabbos but sometimes she likes to stay at home, so I help her prepare everything and I stay overnight to keep her company." When I said that most of the girls her age that I knew would not be eager to do that, she looked genuinely surprised.

"But I don't mind at all. It's no problem. You'll see when you meet Bubbe. She's great. Actually, I've spent every night with her since she had to have one of her fingers removed because of cancer last year. It's really no big deal."

Moshe filled a silver kiddush cup to the brim with sweet wine and, holding the cup in the palm of his hand, recited the kiddush and poured everyone some wine. Then everyone trooped off to the kitchen in silence to wash hands for the meal. Like virtually every facet of Hasidic life, washing up before meals is accomplished in a ritually prescribed manner. One fills a chalice with water, pours the water first over the right hand, then over the left, then recites the benediction, "Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands." One by one, the guests returned in silence to the table. Then Moshe removed a velvet coverlet from two home-baked challah breads (two to symbolically commemorate the extra portion of manna that the Israelites were given on the first Sabbath eve of the Exodus), lifted the breads, recited another blessing, then cut off a piece for everybody at the table. Everyone dipped his chunk of bread in salt (symbolic of the salt used in the ancient Temple during ritual sacrifices) and the meal, trumpeted in by a great outburst of talk, began in earnest.

A staggering amount of food appeared at the table, but the guests seemed to like to talk even more than they liked to eat, and much of the dinner was destined to sit untouched for long lapses, on people's plates. Sheina's dinner was so copious that it would not have been a calamity if one or two courses had slipped away unnoticed, although I believe none did. The menu was inspired largely by East Europe and the suburban Midwest, with East Europe predominating. There was gefilte fish, a tossed salad, chicken soup with matzoh balls, roast chicken, braised beef, noodle pudding, a spinach-and-broccoli mold, and a nondairy ice cream pie with a walnut crust for dessert. Whiskey, wine, and cordial bottles were scattered across the length of a snowy, starched tablecloth. In front of Moshe, who sat at the head of the table with the other men seated around him, was a bottle of Chivas Regal; the boys poured each other glasses of Israeli wine, and the women sipped from a dazzling assortment of cordials—banana liqueur, Kahlua, Cherry Heering, and blackberry brandy, some of which came from miniature bottles, souvenirs, perhaps, of Purim. Over the matzo-ball soup, I asked Moshe why it was, apart from emulating the actions of the Creator, that ceasing to work on the Sabbath honored God. His sons looked at me in astonishment, scarcely believing that anyone would not know why Shabbos was Shabbos, but Moshe seemed pleased that I had asked the question.

"What happens when we stop working and controlling nature?" he asked, peering at me over the top of his glasses. "When we don't operate machines, or pick flowers, or pluck fish from the sea, or change darkness to light, or turn wood into furniture? When we cease interfering with the world we are acknowledging that it is God's world."

The rabbi from South Africa, a robust, cheerful man with a thick, black, curly beard, added that the Sabbath was also a memorial to the exodus from Egypt.

"Once the Jews left Egypt they were no longer enslaved. But of course the ordinary workaday world always involves a kind of servitude, and for many people, especially poor people, work can be awfully grinding. But no one is the master of any Jew on the Sabbath. Every body and every soul is free on that day. Tyrannical countries have always tried to force Jews to work on Saturdays, to mock this gesture of independence. East European Jews fought anti-Sabbath edicts and statutes for centuries."

Moshe chose this moment to lead the men in a beautiful Aramaic hymn, familiar to everyone present, written by Isaac Luria, that depicted the Sabbath as a bride "adorned in ornaments, jewels, and robes. Her husband embraces her; through this gathering which brings her joy, the forces of evil will be utterly crushed." The Sabbath queen or bride is a popular metaphor in the literature of the mystics. Her husband, of course, is all Israel, that is, every Jew. Almost all religious Jews sing at the Sabbath meal. The songs they sing celebrate the joys of the Sabbath and were written chiefly

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during the Middle Ages. Lubavitcher Hasidim have their own melodies, or nigunim, most of which have been composed by their rebbes; they are sung on almost any occasion that offers itself. Among the Sabbath nigunim that were sung that weekend was one composed by the present Rebbe ("may we be united with the Supreme One in whom is the life of all things; may our strength be increased, and may our [prayer] ascend and become a [diadem] upon His head") and another composed by the first Lubavitcher rebbe ("Rejoice now at this most propitious time, when there is no sadness. Draw near to me, behold My strength, for there are no harsh judgements. They are cast out, they may not enter, these [forces of evil which are likened to] insolent dogs").

Moshe had a fine, clear voice and sang with gusto, sometimes closing his eyes to better concentrate on the song. I remarked that he seemed to enjoy singing a lot. He made a little self-deprecatory gesture and pulled on his beard, but smiled: "I come from a musical family. My grandfather played the violin for the soldiers when he was in the Red Army. My Bassy is a good pianist, too, you know." Songs were sung throughout the meal. The singing grew animated as the hour grew later. If the heavy food anchored the guests ever more deeply into their chairs, the songs acted as a kind of spiritual counterweight. Unfamiliar as I was with the songs, I felt a strong urge to join in, though I had not failed to notice that none of the women had been singing. While the noodle pudding was being passed, I asked the young girl next to me, who was studying Lubavitcher ways, if it didn't bother her to be left out of the singing.

"A little," she admitted, "but I sort of sing along to myself." "Do you know why women aren't supposed to sing?" "Well," she said, plunging a big forkful of noodles into her mouth and gazing placidly at me over a freckled nose, "women's voices can be highly arousing to men, so our sages thought it best that we didn't sing in front of them. It doesn't work the other way around though, because women have always been considered more spiritual, so a man's singing is not going to upset them or anything."

Seeing what must have been an ill-disguised expression of bemusement on my face as I gazed at the freckle-faced girl, the boys' friend from South Africa, a gentle looking pink-cheeked boy of about nineteen, said to me in a reproving tone, "Everybody thinks the modest ways of Hasidic women are absurd and unnecessary, don't they? But they're wrong. Last week a group of us were speaking about Hasidic life at one of the universities, and a student said to us, 'You know, it's really ridiculous, the way your women cover their elbows and their knees, and the way you make married women wear wigs. I'm not turned on by elbows and knees, and I'm not going to ravish anybody's wife just because her hair is beautiful.' And most of the people there either laughed or smiled. 'Well,' I said, 'it's too bad if beautiful hair and legs and arms don't arouse you. They do me.' Uh, and that's true. It takes a lot to turn people on today, because there's so much public nudity and promiscuity. People have become coarsened. No wonder the simple sight of beautiful flesh doesn't mean much. But in our world, where there is no exposure to such things and where the sexes are separated so much of the time, things are different."

Perhaps, I thought, looking around the table at the attractively dressed, carefully made-up women present. But why hair, elbows, and knees? Why not eyes, hands, napes of necks, and trim ankles? And what about mouths? Muslim women's mouths were considered so tempting that they had to be veiled.

Gazing at the young boy approvingly, Moshe said, "Dovid came into our midst because of what people call our proselytizing campaign, although that's really the wrong word for what we do. The Rebbe started a program some years ago of sending young couples around to places where there were sizable Jewish communities, not only in our country but all around the world. He hoped that they would quicken awareness of what Judaism had to offer our people. We sent the Mitzvah Tanks [the Lubavitcher campers that carry students around asking passersby, 'Are you Jewish?'] out for the same work the other way around though, because women have always been considered more spiritual, so a man's singing is not going to upset them or anything.

"A little," she admitted, "but I sort of sing along to myself." "Do you know why women aren't supposed to sing?"

"Well," she said, plunging a big forkful of noodles into her mouth and gazing placidly at me over a freckled nose, "women's voices can be highly arousing to men, so our sages thought it best that we didn't sing in front of them. It doesn't work the other way around though, because women have always been considered more spiritual, so a man's singing is not going to upset them or anything."

Seeing what must have been an ill-disguised expression of bemusement on my face as I gazed at the freckle-faced girl, the boys' friend from South Africa, a gentle looking pink-cheeked boy of about nineteen, said to me in a reproving tone, "Everybody thinks the modest ways of Hasidic women are absurd and unnecessary, don't they? But they're wrong. Last week a group of us were speaking about Hasidic life at one of the universities, and a student said to us, 'You know, it's really ridiculous, the way your women cover their elbows and their knees, and the way you make married women wear wigs. I'm not turned on by elbows and knees, and I'm not going to ravish anybody's wife just because her hair is beautiful.' And most of the people there either laughed or smiled. 'Well,' I said, 'it's too bad if beautiful hair and legs and arms don't arouse you. They do me.' Uh, and that's true. It takes a lot to turn people on today, because there's so much public nudity and promiscuity. People have become coarsened. No wonder the simple sight of beautiful flesh doesn't mean much. But in our world, where there is no exposure to such things and where the sexes are separated so much of the time, things are different."

Perhaps, I thought, looking around the table at the attractively dressed, carefully made-up women present. But why hair, elbows, and knees? Why not eyes, hands, napes of necks, and trim ankles? And what about mouths? Muslim women's mouths were considered so tempting that they had to be veiled.

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Looking slightly embarrassed, Dovid explained that until recently he had lived with his family on a large South African cattle ranch and attended the University of Cape Town. But his conversations with Moshe's daughter and son-in-law at the university convinced him that a lot of the things that he missed in his life—a sense of purpose and commitment, a feeling of community—could be supplied by Judaism and more particularly by the Lubavitchers' way of life. He thought about it for several months and then decided to leave the university, come to New York and study at the Lubavitcher yeshiva. "It was the smartest thing I ever did," he added.

"Did your parents give you a hard time?" asked the girl with the freckles.

"Not really," said Dovid.

"Well, mine did. And they still do. They think that the Lubavitchers are some kind of weird cult, like the Moonies. They hated it when I started observing Shabbos and they hated it when I told them I really wanted to study Judaism seriously and to lead a more religious life. Sometimes I think that they'd rather have me smoke pot than pray." Everybody laughed.

"From the beginnings of the Hasidic movement outsiders have wanted to think of us as a cult or a sect," said

From Holy Days by Lis Harris. Copyright © 1985 by Lis Harris. Reprinted by permission of Summit books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Moshe. "That's why we were excommunicated in the eighteenth century. But we never were a sect. On the contrary, from the beginning the Besht intended that all Jews should be brought closer together because of his ideas. If the various Hasidic dynasties that formed in different towns after his death came to be regarded as separate entities, that was never what was intended. The Lubavitchers in particular, from our founder, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, to the present Rebbe, have always tried to reach all Jews. If we seem so different from other Jews it's more because of what has happened to them than anything that happened to us. We've stayed the same; it's they who've changed."

"You know there is a saying among Hasidim that the Messiah will come 'when the wellsprings of the Baal Shem Tov spread out'," said Sheina, as she eased generous wedges of cocoa-colored pie onto plates and passed them down the table, "that is, when everything that he taught becomes the common practice of all Jews in the diaspora. That's why the Rebbe has sent the young people around in the campers and around the world. Jews don't really stick together because there is a breach among us. He wants to heal it."

At about ten o'clock the women began to clear the table. Moshe carried one or two things to the kitchen but Shmuel was still eating a second helping of dessert and the boys got into some knotty discussion of a point of Hebrew semantics just as the clearing up began. They did not resolve it until the table was cleared of everything but the still softly glowing candelabrum. Moshe entered into the discussion after a while and I noticed that though he spoke English when he talked with Sheina, he and the boys spoke to one another in Yiddish. Some of the guests lingered at the table, some drifted over to the couch and chairs at the fireplace. One of the guests, the woman from South Africa, asked Shmuel, who was seated in an armchair, his stomach protruding over his belt, how a certain friend of his was getting on. Shmuel said that he was married and that he and his wife had recently, had their second child. He looked at his shoes as he answered.

"And what about you?" the guest asked pertly. In these circles, a twenty-five-year-old is considered a bit long of tooth for bachelorhood.

"What about me?" Shmuel answered, keeping his eyes glued southward. There was a defensive edge in his answer, but also a real note of miser'.

"Oh, Shmuel will settle down when the right time comes," said her husband, looking at him evenly and drawing his wife away to look at some books across the room. Shmuel raised himself heavily from the chair with a little sigh, found a book, and retired to a quiet corner to study. Five minutes later, Mendel joined him and their heads remained bent together for the rest of the evening. During the winter months when it got dark earlier, Moshe met with a group of Lubavitcher neighbors every Friday night to study, he said, but in the months when it turned dark late he studied either with the boys or by himself at home on Shabbos. Conversation among the rest of the guests continued in an animated way until the early hours of the morning. At 2:15 I excused myself and retreated to Bassy's cheerful, frilly second-floor bedroom, which, unlike that of every other teenage girl of my acquaintance, was innocent of posters of rock godlets, photographs of boyfriends, clippings of Snoopy cartoons, or fey messages.

All that met the eye were several shelves filled with religious books and sonic neatly arranged cosmetics on top of a dresser. The sole wall decoration was a blue and white banner that (like the bumper sticker on the car I had seen in the driveway) proclaimed that "Jewish Mothers and Daughters Light Shabbos Candles." Heavily ballasted with matzoh balls and conversation, I sank into sleep almost immediately. As I pulled a soft blue and white comforter over my head, it occurred to me that not one word had been spoken about any nonreligious subject. Tomorrow, I thought, as I drifted off, a few hours later, I was awakened by a street noise. I glanced at my watch. It was 4:15. A low hum of conversation drifted up from below.

On Saturday, the conversation turned frequently to Biblical events and their relation to the lives of those assembled -at the house, to upcoming religious holidays, and to some of the Rebbe's recent talks. Subjects such as jobs, politics, movies, the environment, secular books, or the latest football scores never even entered the fringes of discussion. There was a bit of gossip, but it was mostly about who was getting married or who was having a baby. Several times I overheard Moshe mention Yitzhak and Abraham. I thought he was talking about some neighbors. It turned out that he was talking about the Biblical Isaac and Abraham. Throughout the day, I was struck by the familiar even intimate way in which Moshe, Sheina, and the others spoke of Biblical people and places. Isaac and Abraham all but hovered near the stove, miraculous deeds had more credibility than newspaper stories, and none of the Biblical heroes had lost their luster. This personal mystical connection with the literalness of the Bible serves, of course, as a kind of Jewish relic or monument to the past, its only religious monument, in fact, since, unlike other religions, most of the material relics—such as the Temple and many of the sacred books—have been destroyed. Like the shtetl Jews that Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog wrote about in Life Is With People, an anthropological study of shtetl life, the Hasidic community today "traces its line of march directly back to Creation. The Exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, are seen as steps along the way, historical events no less real than the Spanish Inquisition or the Russian Revolution."

Like their shtetl forebears, the Hasidim believe that the oral and written law, which was codified chiefly in the centuries following the exile, amount to a Magna Carta or constitution of a kind of spiritual government in exile and only the adherence of the Jewish faithful, they believe, "has enabled a weak and homeless people to survive the great empires of
Egypt and Babylon, Greece and Rome, Byzantium and Islam, and has caused their sacred books to enter into the holy writ of half the world."

If the Konigsbergs live in a kind of perpetual Biblical present, in which the events of their everyday lives are constantly being linked to their spiritual past, their rebbes have traditionally been the guides who have interpreted the interconnectedness of the two. While I watched the Havdalah ceremony (Havdalah is the Hebrew word for separation) that signaled the end of the Sabbath, Saturday night—a plaited candle is lit, wine is drunk, a benediction is said, and a spice box is passed around to raise spirits that might be saddened by the passing of the Sabbath—I remembered some of the names of former Lubavitch and other Hasidic leaders that had been evoked during the day as if they were old friends. "All, the fricrdiker [previous] rebbe used to say . . " or, "Did that happen to you? The same thing happened to the Tzemach Tzcdck [the third Lubavitcher rebbe]." The history of these Hasidic ancestors, too, is inextricably bound to the lives of their descendants.

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