

Feminism and neo-Hasidism



Jericho Vincent

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Neo-Chasidic ideas, which have increasingly saturated progressive Jewish communities, are too often presented without incorporating feminist concerns. Chasidism sprouted primarily in small towns spread across eighteenth century Europe, a milieu rich in tradition and spiritual innovation, but shaped by cultural assumptions that are ethically problematic when imported wholesale into the modern day. This is the case with many ancestral practices. To analyze Chasidism through a feminist lens is not to reject it: identifying problematic elements within these traditional ideas creates exciting opportunities to elevate an already profound form of Judaism.



I cannot speak fairly about Chasidism without situating my perspective. [1] While family legend has it that one side of my family descends from Reb Pinchus of Koretz, a beloved student of the Baal Shem Tov, on the other side of my family, I am related to the Vilna Gaon, [2] who, in the late eighteenth century, famously placed all members of the nascent Chasidic movement into *chirem* (excommunication). The child of a prominent Yeshivish rabbi, I attended a Lubavitch elementary school, soaking in Chasidic ideas, while at home we mocked our Lubavitcher teachers and classmates. [3] I moved through the first two decades of my life as a very proud *misnaged* (descendent of the opponents of Hasidism).

Secondly, in my late twenties, I worked as a community organizer in the ex-ultra-Orthodox community. I bore witness to testimonies from refugees leaving Chasidic communities of experiences of emotional, physical, and sexual violence. The sexual violence perpetrated against young boys was particularly chilling. [4] It was dismaying to learn that prominent members of these communities (including, sometimes, the rebbes) enabled predators and dismissed victims.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my personal investment in Chasidic wisdom. As a genderqueer post-ultra-Orthodox student in a neo-Chasidic rabbinical program, I believe that Judaism is enhanced by many of the ideas in Chasidism. I am deeply grateful for the Chasidic wisdom that permeates my own life, and I am invested in ensuring that healthy Chasidic wisdom thrives.

Now, to name some of the problems particular to Chasidic wisdom: In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Eastern European Jewish life flourished in families planted in particular villages, towns, and cities. Men and women worked trades and built families. Boys might study with the local rabbi and a rare few might be called to devote themselves to the rabbinate, but most would become cobblers, tailors, and shopkeepers, working alongside their sisters, and later their wives. The year was punctuated by Jewish holidays that families celebrated together, gathering for *davening* (praying) with their community in the local *shule* (synagogue), where less literate women would often be led in their prayers by the female *zogerke*, as the male *chazzan* led the men. Although the home and the *shule* were problematically patriarchal, women did play valued complementary roles in each, and men and women's lives were sewn together to create the fabric of Jewish life.

The Chasidic movement disrupted this social structure. When men joined a Chasidic movement they were joining a fraternity, and their bonds of loyalty were cut from their families and neighborhoods and re-sewn to the rebbe of their sect. Early Chasidic life was almost exclusively built around men, so much so that some scholars [5] have insisted that one cannot even speak of a female Chasid, but only wives of Chasidim. I find this particular argument problematic: Chasidim were initially reviled enough that to marry a Chasid marked a woman— even without her participation in the rebbe's court. But it is also clear that the central organization and ritual of early Chasidic life was almost always exclusively male.

When we consider Chasidism, we have to question what impact this new social order had on women's lives. As a social revolution, Chasidism rejected the authority of the male scholar class, instead imbuing with spiritual meaning the simplest of daily actions performed by the simplest of Jews. One might argue that this democratization of holiness might have allowed Chasidic women to more deeply feel that their mundane actions now had sacred meaning. But at what cost? For the average Jew, ongoing Jewish life was not scholarly but familial, with women co-creating Jewish experiences. What is lost when Judaism is transformed from a family enterprise situated in a particular lived setting to a men's group cut free from geographical roots? In Chasidism, the heartbeat of a man's Jewish life was in his relationship with his rebbe, a relationship that seems to have excluded his wife to, at most, a peripheral witness of her husband's ecstasy.

And that rebbe. Here again, Chasidic innovation sticks in the craw of the feminist. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish authority was relatively diffuse. Although religious authority largely lay in the hands of men, there were many rabbis and different scholars who became well known for different areas of expertise or emphasis. Rabbinic power was further

diluted by wealthy individuals who wielded economic and therefore communal power. And women did have some role to play: There were wealthy women who accessed authority through material means, midwives whose medical practice, based in a mix of Jewish female lore and local medicinal expertise, gave them some authority, and there were small spiritual roles for women as well, including the aforementioned *zogerke*, the *rebbetzin*, the *gabete* who would oversee the public charity, and the *klogerns* who were hired to wail at funerals.

The rebbe partially co-opted and so diminished the importance of all of those roles. He assumed a position similar to the Pope: a gatekeeper to Heaven, an absolute authority, a conduit of Divine miracles, a single human representing God on earth. Now not only was God fashioned in the image of man and not woman, there was a new Divine figure who was also fashioned in the image of man, not woman. Woman was further distanced from God by one more layer of male spiritual hierarchy. When we celebrate human male rebbe figures without acknowledging this sorrowful loss, we reify this further diminishment of female power, female power that had already been so diminished by the existing patriarchy intrinsic in Jewish culture.

Notable female figures are not completely absent from stories of early Chasidic life. Most famously, Channah Rachel Verbermacher, who became known as the Maiden of Ludimer, made herself into a kind of rebbe figure, receiving petitioners and presiding over a *tisch* (table), sharing words of Torah and passing out her sacred leftovers to her followers. But Verbermacher achieved this status while rejecting her feminine role, refusing to marry and studying texts and practicing rituals traditionally restricted to men. She also faced fierce backlash from the Chasidic establishment. Some saw her gifts as evidence of her having been problematically possessed by a righteous male soul, [6] and others pressured her to relinquish her role as a Chasidic master and marry, which she eventually did (although it seems that neither the marriage nor the relinquishment of her position lasted long).

There is also the story of a woman known as Yente the Prophetess, who, legend says, was so dubbed by the Baal Shem Tov himself. But not much is known about this woman, and neither she nor Verbermacher established a court that survived their own deaths. Most of the remaining women who are scattered in Chasidic hagiographies are the mothers, wives, or daughters of rebbes. It is hard not to read their stories as mere mirrors for the men whose lives anchor their own, or, perhaps more expansively, as a reflection of the wider range of rights that is frequently granted to women of the elite class in any patriarchal society.

Chasidic theology also troubles the feminist. It features and elevates the feminine in the Divine, which, at first blush, seems a move worth celebrating. However, it was men who re-introduced the Divine feminine, in male-developed teachings transmitted in male-only sessions of learning and praying and meditation. Sacred femininity was thereby detached from the corporeal female body. It no longer dwelled in a man's wife. Instead it dwelled in the *Shechina* (Divine Feminine), which was accessed with the help of a male rebbe, most intensely in the company of masses of other male Chasidim. If heterosexual men experienced sanctified spiritual-erotic femininity through the rebbe, how did that impact how they viewed their wives? Did all of the disturbing judgments of the female body that litter traditional Jewish law and lore come to rest on woman's earthly form, while all pleasure and reverence were displaced onto a disembodied Divine? One cannot help but wonder if these might be the theological roots for the policing of women's bodies that is found in Chasidic communities today more than in any other Jewish environment,

with certain sects forcing married women to keep their heads shaved [7] and others heavily restricting contact between man and wife. [8]

I offer these critiques not to push people away from Chasidic wisdom, but to urge them to name and heal that which is toxic in Chasidic tradition so that the tradition might better thrive. If we want to claim a portion of Chasidic wisdom as our own, we must avoid an over-romanticized vision of Chasidic ideas, rebbes, or ways of life. We must intervene to find correctives to feminist concerns. I do not intend this as a combative stance. The Talmud says that love without rebuke is not love. [9] Articulating the problems in Chasidic wisdom is a form of deep respect.

So how to grapple with feminist concerns about Chasidic wisdom? A colleague of mine shared that a teacher of hers once began a course on Chasidism by saying: “Yes, there are feminist concerns with Chasidism, but putting those aside for now...” and then dove into the teachings, never acknowledging those concerns again for the entire semester. Although it’s commendable to at least raise the issue, surely our devotion to spiritual and intellectual integrity can move us to take more challenging action than this. I offer eight suggestions as invitation for further conversation and experimentation:

1. Applying the Kranjec Test,[10] we can ask that every class on Chasidism that draws on more than two sources include a source that is not male. It may be hard to find appropriate sources written by women. We may need (or want!) to include non-textual sources that at first glance don’t seem directly related to our topic, such as music, recipes, or images of clothing. We might also invite our female (and genderqueer) colleagues, teachers, and students to create texts that we could include in our teachings.
2. Much of Chasidism is built around mythologies of rebbes of long ago who have come to represent spiritual archetypes. Perhaps we might have the chutzpah to feminize these characters in the spirit of Yael Kanarek’s *Toratah*. [11] And maybe this isn’t too much of a fabrication. After all, for every Baal Shem Tov surely there was an unrecognized Baalah Shem Tovah whose miracles and insights were never recorded.
3. Alternatively, acknowledging that rebbes have come to play archetypal roles for our culture at large, we could fill out our pantheon of rebbes to include women who have played important mystical roles throughout Jewish history, such as Inés of Herrera, Rabbi Asnat Barzani, or Francesa Sarah. We could teach the stories and wisdom of these women alongside those of Chasidic rebbes, alternating tales of the Lubavitcher Rebbe with the Herrerer Rebbe.
4. When presenting a lesson in Chasidic thought, our spiritual insights might be deepened if we bring a feminist lens to the ideas. For example, humility, an oft celebrated *middah* (quality) is an important quality, but it is far more relevant to cis men than to other Jewish populations. In fact, one might argue that the opposite of humility is the more sacred *middah* for Jews who are not cis men. To urge female students to humility is to ignore the ways that they have been brutally “humbled” by society already, causing not spiritual growth, but spiritual damage. Examining each piece of wisdom with a gender lens and acknowledging how it might have to be inverted for women could broaden the spiritual truth of Chasidic thought.
5. Those who seek to practice neo-Chasidism in their lives in a way that accords with feminist principles might be inspired by Tsippi Kauffman’s analysis of the Yemima Method as a Chasidic female movement. Kauffman points out that rather than delivering transcendent spiritual experience to her followers, movement leader Yemima (who Kauffman posits

played the role of a Chasidic rebbe) focused on her students' everyday relationships and most mundane behavior, and through this route her students frequently had spiritual experiences. Rather than a patriarchal, top-down rebbe-Chasid hierarchy, where the rebbe cleaves to the Divine and transmits his exalted experience to his lowly followers, Yemima inverted that flow to facilitate grassroots, Chasid-generated, bottom-up spiritual revolution. A devotee of neo-Chasidism might explore how such a shake-up could be incorporated into the structure of one's practice, focusing less on a rebbe's exegesis of text as a the pathway to God and more on how washing the dishes and changing diapers and commenting on social media in their own lives might be portals to spiritual experience.

6. One might explore how to re-embody the feminine divine in female corporeality. Neo-Chasidic practitioners who are women or who engage in sexual intimacy with women could develop new mystical-sexual practices. [12] Both men and women might incorporate the prayer pose of Judean pillar figurines, ancient sacred Jewish ritual objects with hands held beneath their breasts, into the Chasidic spiritual trance of *devaikus*. We could explore how re-embodying the Shechinah might transform our practices around female body hair, menstrual cramps, female diet culture, and postpartum care into ecstatic spiritual expressions of Chasidic wisdom. The Kohenet movement has done potent work in this arena. Neo-Chasidism might explicitly weave in Kohenet wisdom or echo it utilizing Neo-Chasidic sources.
7. Sabbateanism, the seventeenth century spiritual and social precursor to Chasidism, centered women in its theology and practice in ways that were radical for its time and far more advanced than in the Chasidic movement that it seeded. [13] While many thought that the Sabbatean movement ended in outcry and disappointment, it may be worth revisiting what of value may be extracted from the practices and theology developed by its many members, who number among our biological and spiritual ancestors.
8. Finally, we can celebrate and highlight courses, books, and lectures that offer a vision of Chasidism that is expanded and elevated to address feminist concerns.

I am inspired by the vision of a world in which people who aren't men could feel as fully enveloped as men do in the possibilities and the promise of meaningful neo-Chasidic experience. I think about the strange path I've taken to arrive at a place where this is my hope and passion. When I left the community of my childhood, I spent many years wandering through other faiths, searching for a place where my soul could find a home. Distance gave me perspective, and when I looked back at where I had come from I began to understand how narrow and distorted an understanding of Judaism I'd been given as ultra-Orthodox girl. By the time I reached my late twenties and attended my first service in a neo-Chasidic shule, I was a zealous-- if mystically-minded-- atheist. As I stood in that pew on that first Friday night, taking in that strange and potent mixture of modern values and ancient wisdom, tears streamed down my face. Immediately, I had the strange but powerful sense that maybe here, finally, I had found a place capacious enough for the totality of who I was. That Friday night, I felt viscerally connected to the child I had once been, resonating with the Chasidic teachings of my Lubavitch school that I knew my family expected me to revile. I took many twists and turns from that first service until I arrived at my neo-Chasidic rabbinical school, but my experience at that neo-Chasidic *shule* was an essential milestone on my journey. I am forever grateful to it and my grappling here is an attempt to pay homage to that experience.

It is my hope that my analysis here might spur a larger conversation and practice around creating a *tikkun* for the Baal Shem Tov and his students who founded their own lineages,

deepening their wisdom so that it might hold and disseminate more Divine truth, more spiritual ecstasy, and more redemptive expansiveness for us all.

Footnotes:

[1] Situating one's perspective is a core feminist value-- and, I would argue, a core Jewish value. One of the backbone phrases of Judaism comes from Deuteronomy 33:4: *Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha Kehilas Yaacov*. The Torah was commanded to us by Moshe, a legacy of the congregation of Yaacov. God has Their Torah. We have a Torah that was filtered through Moshe and through the congregation of Yaacov. We situate our Torah.

[2] The Vilna Gaon was merely a very great-great-great-uncle, but yichus can be advantageously fuzzy like that. My family claimed the Vilna Gaon as ours.

[3] In the fifty years in which the ultra-Orthodox community has come to be, inter-faction conflict has not been uncommon. It has sometimes gotten violent.

[4] I don't think there are necessarily higher rates of pedophilia in the ultra-Orthodox community but I do think that furiously restricting all sexual expression while also denying people an understanding of the dangers of pedophilia can lead people to pedophilic actions they might not otherwise take.

[5] For example Marcin Wodzinski, as in this interview <https://chidusz.com/an-elite-mens-club-marcin-wodzinski-hasidism-key-questions-oxford-jewish-studies-poland/>

[6] For more, see *The Maiden of Ludmir: A Jewish Holy Woman and Her World* by Nathaniel Deutsch

[7] While some non-Chasidic women maintained this practice in pre-war Europe, none do today. It has become a required practice exclusive to certain Chasidic sects. See, for example, Frimet Goldberger's testimony.

[8] As reported in Tablet, one Gerer woman reported that she was trained with a community marriage guide that instructed her to turn to chocolate when she craved intimacy with her husband.

[9] Beraishis Rabbah 54:3

[10] See <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-kranjec-test/>

[11] To do this with living folks or even recently deceased folks might be problematic. This suggestion is reserved for historic characters.

[12] The pre-Chasidic Kabbalist, the Ramchal, held a mystical *ketubah* with his wife Tziporah, in which she is explicitly associated with the Shechinah. While this might seem a valuable trailhead for corporealized sacred femininity, it's important to contextualize that in the same document the Ramchal associates himself with the prophet Moses, and that he believes himself to be playing a

role in an unfolding messianic saga, so this view of his wife might reflect more on his visions of grandeur than on everyday sanctification of the corporeal feminine. Although it's certainly nice that his wife has a part to play in this imagining.

[13] See Ada Rapoport-Albert's report in the Jewish Women's Encyclopedia
<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/sabbateanism>

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