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**THE CURIOUS CHASIDIC PILGRIMAGE TO LELOV, POLAND**

**By**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses a Chasidic pilgrimage movement focused on Lelov, which lies south of Cracow. Pilgrimage has always been a major part of Jewish tradition, but for many years during the Cold War it was possible only for a devoted few to return to Poland. With the collapse of Communism, however, pilgrimage sites in Central and Eastern Europe have become much more accessible and consequently ultra-orthodox Jews have created a 'return movement'.

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**The Curious Chasidic Pilgrimage to Lelov, Poland.**

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**Introduction**

Until recently, the Lelov movement has been a relatively little known force within Chasidism. Historically the group's leadership and social dynamics led to it vanishing gradually into the melting pots of Israel and America. Recently, however, the renewal of its pilgrimage movement to Poland has put the Lelov group back on the Chasidic map, drawing the attention of ordinary people to traditions and customs that otherwise would have remained largely forgotten. What is happening with the Lelov group is particularly relevant because many contemporary ultra-orthodox groups, for example Braclav and Ger, are also re-discovering their European roots leading to the establishment of other pilgrimage movements.

Generally, ultra-orthodox Jews are understood to be fastidious followers of tradition and ancient rituals. They do not pretend to be as flexible as any modernised Jews and do not hide any external signs of their Jewishness, such as a yarmulke or adherence to dietary laws. As members of a group which is not just Orthodox but ultra-orthodox, they maintain extremely high standards of faith and observance.<sup>1</sup> They are also known by the biblical term *haredim / haredi* i.e. those who keep the law and observe it. In Israel, *haredi* are perceived as the adversaries of modernising Judaism, living in insular communities sometimes with limited contact with the outside world. Although the word *haredi* is derived from the biblical Hebrew term *harada*, which means 'fear' and suggests that the *haredi* 'tremble in awe of God',<sup>2</sup> many believe ultra-orthodox Jews actually tremble in fear of the external world.

For Orthodox Jews, Judaism, as the only truthful way of life, cannot be exposed to the temptations of the secular world and hence they dispense with televisions, the internet, and non-religious or non-*haredi* publications—or at least that is how some of the rabbis behave. Undoubtedly some of the groups do follow these rules word for word, either seeing themselves as defenders against the birth of new liberal forms of Judaism or else deliberately remaining ignorant of non-*haredi* ways. Ironically, ultra-orthodox Jews such as the Hasidim

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<sup>1</sup> S. Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (University of California Press, 1999), p. 12

<sup>2</sup> *The Torah, The Five Books of Moses*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 2005), Isaiah 66:2, 5.

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do not generally use the term: *haredi*. They are more likely to call themselves the pious Jews or virtuous Jews, or simple *Yidn*, a Yiddish<sup>3</sup> term for a Jew.

History and heritage are highly significant in traditional Jewish mentalities and societies. Here, the future is important only because it offers the possibility of a restoration of past values or of messianic redemption.<sup>4</sup> In a sense, therefore, Chasidic Jews are preoccupied with the past, but their perception of it differs from the way the past is perceived in Western Europe. The past provides a powerful myth that helps develop their contemporary sense of identity. Like many conservative religious communities, ultra-orthodox Jews tend to use history to invoke a better, purer time. Chasidic men, for example, dress as if they were living in historical Poland in order to associate themselves more closely with this time.

In a sense, traditional Jewish society (including ultra-orthodox communities) can be seen as a postfigurative culture. According to Margaret Mead,<sup>5</sup> such cultures permit their younger generations to appropriate most of their education from the collective experiences of their forebears. Their Jewish identity needs the values and practices of the past to be preserved and passed down the generations as a changeless continuity. Their observance creates a pure kind of Jewishness in which those who maintain traditions speak the voices of the past and with holiness. The *tzadik*<sup>6</sup> plays a significant role in giving voice to the will of God as expressed in the past and repeated in the present.

Pilgrimage has always been a major part of Jewish tradition, but until the end of the Cold War, only a devoted few could undertake trips back to important sites in Eastern Europe. Once Communism disappeared and the sites became more readily accessible, the *haredi* were among the first to create 'return movements' and became leaders in the re-discovery of Jewish history in that part of the world. For them, these European sites have become important signifiers of the Jewish past.<sup>7</sup>

But what exactly is the significance of these pilgrimages? Do they mean the *haredi* still consider themselves to be in exile? Are they important because sometimes the state of Israel is seen only as a temporary solution to Jewish problems which ultimately will be solved by the arrival of the Messiah? Or do they just provide evidence of a curiosity to visit

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<sup>3</sup> Yiddish: language of Ashkenazi Jews. It developed as a fusion of German dialects with Hebrew, Aramaic and Slavic languages.

<sup>4</sup> F. Furman-Kerner, *Beyond Yiddishkeit: The Struggle for Jewish Identity in a Reform Synagogue* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> M. Mead, *Culture and Commitment* (New York: The Natural History Press, 1970), p. 1

<sup>6</sup> *Tzadik* (*tzadikim*): a Chasidic leader or holy man.

<sup>7</sup> Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith*, p. 75

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places that once were filled with Jewish religion and culture? Although there is a small literature analysing the issue of memory and the construction of identity among Jews based in countries which once were behind the Iron Curtain, very few discuss the creation of pilgrimage movements among ultra-orthodox groups.<sup>8</sup> The journeys to Lelov that were initiated in the early 1990's (and which currently are being recognised as a pilgrimage movement typical of the kind of activity Chasidic communities had undertaken before 1939) are critical to the way the group is shaping its identity and defining its membership.

### **The origins of Lelov's Chasidic pilgrimage**

Lelov, an otherwise quiet village populated by two thousands inhabitants, is the burial site of *Rebbe*<sup>9</sup> Biederman, the founder of the Lelov Chasidic sect, mystic and guarantor of salvation to his followers. Although today the town is quite an ordinary place, it has a rich history. An historic market square together with St. Martin's Catholic Church dating back to medieval times suggest as much. There is also a local inn called *Lelowianka*. Its menu includes *ciulim*, a dish with an interesting cultural history. It is based on a traditional Ashkenazi dish, *cholent*, which typically was eaten on the Sabbath at midday, having been prepared the day before (Friday) and left to cook overnight. *Cholent* contains a mixture of beans, grains, potatoes and occasional pieces of meat, although originally many Jewish families could not afford meat and so the meal was served in a vegetarian form. Lelov's Polish inhabitants have adapted this culinary idea, renaming it *ciulim* and adding pork ribs (which of course were banned as part of the Jewish diet). To commemorate this unusual cuisine, today Lelov's local council actually organises an annual 'Feast of *Ciulim*' which takes place on the first Saturday and Sunday of September. During this event, representatives of the Chasidic pilgrimage movement prepare *cholent*, the Polish inhabitants of Lelov *ciulim*, and the meals are served together at the feast.

The explanation of this culinary history lies in the fact that historically about 45% of Lelov's population was Jewish. It was not, however, until about 30 years ago that, after almost 150 years of absence, the first ultra-orthodox Jews returned to Lelov. A detailed investigation managed to locate the former Jewish cemetery and even ascertained that *Rebbe*

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<sup>8</sup> Exceptions are A. Goldman, 'Rosh Ha-Shanah Journey to Hasidic Master's Tomb', (1998) and S.M. Lowenstein's 'The Jewish cultural tapestry: international Jewish folk tradition' (2000).

<sup>9</sup> *Rebbe* (Yiddish: sometimes: *rebe*): literally 'master', religious teacher. The term '*rebbe*' is often used by Chasidic Jews to refer to the leader of a Chasidic movement.

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Dovid Biederman's grave was located under a local shop. With this, a whole new chapter of Jewish history in Lelov began.

In 1989, a Chasidic representative supported by the Nissenbaum Foundation engaged in a series of talks with Lelov's municipal authorities in order to purchase the plot which had been identified as the grave of the *tzadick*.<sup>10</sup> After the war, this area had been given to the local co-operative which turned it into a business site by building shops and warehouses. Initially, only the grave of the *tzadick* was to be extracted and separated from the shop, but negotiations proved lengthy and difficult on account of a fully-functioning business existing on the site. To make matters worse, the shop could only be sold if all the members of the co-operative agreed and, more chaotically still, at the time Poland was undergoing major political changes that left many local organisations in turmoil.

Eventually the co-operative received an unknown amount of financial compensation. Thereafter a major project was embarked upon which included historical analysis, excavation of the tomb, the purchase and building of a separate entrance to Dovid's tomb and the grave's preservation by the installation of a metal box cover, all of which was paid for by the Nissenbaum Foundation.<sup>11</sup> Later, a new iron door with the Star of David on it was added, as was a special catafalque surrounded by a low iron fence. With this, the tomb was ready to become the focus of an annual Chasidic pilgrimage.

According to pious Jewish belief, a person's soul returns to the place where he or she is buried on the anniversary of his or her death. It follows that making a pilgrimage on that date sustains a connection with the deceased. For Chasidic Jews, this is a religious obligation, or *mitzvah*.<sup>12</sup> Throughout history, Eastern European Jews have participated in three kinds of pilgrimages: to the graves of ancestors to pray, to Israel and, as in the case of Lelov, to visit their master.

Pilgrimage provides an opportunity for prayer and for the pilgrims to petition on behalf of individuals or communities. The practice reflects the belief that deceased relatives or spiritual leaders might act as agents between Heaven and Earth in order to assist the living. Unsurprisingly, pilgrimages became increasingly popular during times of hardship when people felt particularly in need of divine protection. It was not uncommon for ultra-orthodox men to undertake several pilgrimages a year, often travelling long distances on foot. Many

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<sup>10</sup> Anon. *Lelov—Z'Shevat* (Jerusalem: בלעלוב החיים בות להאלת הועד, 2005) 15. The term *tzadick* indicates a religious leader who epitomises superior knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> Anon. *Lelov—Z'Shevat*, p. 16

<sup>12</sup> *Mitzvah* (*mitzvah*): commandment; a moral deed performed as a religious duty.

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would be away from home for weeks on end in order to attend their *rebbe*'s court, participate in prayer or kabbalistic rituals, and to consult their spiritual leader on religious and non-religious matters. A special term was coined, 'ascending to the Temple in Jerusalem', which emphasised the importance of such practices. Jews would also come to ask their deceased spiritual leaders for assistance over important issues in their lives. As a result, the *rebbe*'s grave would be covered in thousands of small pieces of paper each bearing a request from the faithful (called *kvitleh*)<sup>13</sup> as well as candles sent by those who could not make the pilgrimage in person.

Since the end of the Cold War, Chasidic pilgrimages have gained a further dimension. With access to Central and Eastern Europe possible once again, they involve a reaffirmation of historical identity and ethnic roots, all of which can be fuelled by nostalgia for an idealised and glorified past. Polish shtetls have become sites for pilgrimages such as these too.<sup>14</sup>

Today, private Chasidic pilgrimages have become a kind of tourist industry and there are highly specialised travel agencies offering all-inclusive services to would-be pilgrims. This development, in fact, provides proof that even the Chasidic world is not completely frozen in time as Chassidim from Israel, America and Europe book their places on charter flights from Tel Aviv, New York, London or Amsterdam. They are organised groups of travellers all dressed in black, and all excited to embark on a journey to their 'roots'. Hundreds of kilograms of kosher food can be transported along with them. Apart from the usual prayer books, Torah scrolls and thick clothes and boots for the Polish winter, each pilgrim carries on average ten to fifty candles to be lit on behalf of those who either cannot or are not allowed to travel (for example, Chasidic wives). As a result of the pilgrimages, Dovid's catafalque and the surrounding floor will be covered with flickering candles and piles of *kvitleh*.

Prior to the pilgrims' arrival, Simcha Krakowski, the Chasidic co-ordinator and president of the Chassidim Lizhensk (Leżajsk) Poland Foundation (which organises the pilgrimages), together with the Nissenbaum Foundation, sends a letter to Lelov's municipal government with an estimated number of pilgrims expected that year. This gives the town time to prepare its facilities, organise the venue and respond to any specific demands the pilgrims might have. When the Nissenbaum Foundation finally acquired the grave in

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<sup>13</sup> *Kvitleh*: written petitionary prayer given to a *rebbe* or disposed at his grave

<sup>14</sup> D. Gitlitz, and L.K. Davidson, *Pilgrimage and the Jews* (Westport CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), p. 56.

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February 1989, there was nothing there except for the basic structure of the grave or *ohel*.<sup>15</sup> The burial site had a fence, but was surrounded by an industrial site with heaps of rubble and a dilapidated warehouse which, subsequently, was turned into a celebration hall. By 1989 there was no longer a ritual bathhouse (*mikvah*), likewise a kosher kitchen or any other religious buildings. When, in 1990, the first group of pilgrims arrived, they could only be accommodated in a hall in a local community centre which was also used in later years.<sup>16</sup> The pilgrims still prepare kosher meals in the same centre and in the celebration hall itself. Sometimes, they also make meals in private homes.<sup>17</sup> The ultra-orthodox Jews only buy a few carefully selected items of food locally, mainly local eggs and tomatoes, in order not to violate kosher rules. The remaining food, including fish, flour and meat, is brought with them, first on the charter flight and then by special lorries which bring everything to Lelov.

Naturally the pilgrimage revives memories in the local community. An older inhabitant of Lelov recalled how Poles and Jews had always co-existed peacefully: the Jews had their *boznica* (Polish term for synagogue), while the Poles had their church. Typically for a small town, everyone knew everyone else. Jews celebrated on Saturdays, and the Poles celebrated on Sundays, and of course the communities celebrated different holidays. In this way, the pilgrimage provokes curiosity about a world that no longer exists, in the process encouraging both sides to learn something new about their cultures and about the similarities and differences between the two. In the past, Osias (Ozjasz) Thon, an early Polish Zionist and activist, once commented that Poles probably knew more about the Japanese than the Jews.

In sum, Jewish presence in Lelov is anchored deeply in the memories of members of the older generations who often recall it sentimentally. It is not however, based on any firm recollections of the Chasidic past in Lelov; and for all generations, the current Chasidic pilgrimage is a complete novelty.

### **The Day of the Pilgrimage**

It was late January and Lelov was covered in snow. The streets were almost deserted as the temperature had dropped to minus twenty degrees. A shabby half-frozen bus stopped. Passengers peeped inquisitively through the steamed up windows pushing their noses against the glass. On the street, there appeared, frozen to the bone, group of men dancing. They were

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<sup>15</sup> *Ohel*: literally: tent; a structure built over a Jewish grave

<sup>16</sup> Janusz Strzelczyk, *Chasydzi zatancyli*. *Dziennik Zachodni*, (2004, 2nd Feb), p. 8

<sup>17</sup> Janusz Strzelczyk, *Jada chasydzi*. *Dziennik Zachodni* (2003, 29 Dec), p. 16

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all dressed in sable hats, white socks and dark caftans<sup>18</sup> with white fringes hanging from beneath their overcoats and with tightly twisted side curls of hair hanging down over their ears. They had long, curled up beards as required by tradition. It was an unusual sight for a small, provincial Polish town. You might have thought it was a theatrical event or maybe a scene from mysterious drama or historical documentary. In fact, however, as the local community knew, it was the 196th Anniversary of the death of Dovid Biederman and so the dancers were some of the 400 or so pilgrims who travel to Lelov annually from all over the world, not least from New York, the Netherlands, Ukraine and Israel.

Many of the pilgrims had already visited Poland a number of times. It was January 2010 and some of them, in fact, had been coming over for twenty years now, usually making a short pilgrimage that involved arrival by plane either at Cracow (Polish: Kraków; Yiddish: Kroke) or Warsaw (Polish: Warszawa; Yiddish: Varshe) followed by a bus trip to the relevant cemeteries. Among their destinations, typically, have been Tchenstochov (Polish: Czestochowa), Radomsk (Polish: Radomsko), maybe Sieniawa or Lancut, and finally Lizhensk (Polish: Lezajsk). Normally the pilgrims would follow the same routine: evening prayers at the cemeteries, a celebration in Lelov and a final celebration in Lizhensk. Their purpose was to undertake a spiritual journey of devotion and dedication in order to experience religious ecstasy and inner unity. They were aiming to marry their souls to God, to experience Dovid's love and perhaps to experience a miracle as well.

Chasidic rules can discourage, even forbid, contact between men and women who are not members of the same family, and the Lelov dynasty is no different. It is well-known for its traditional life-style, its strict following of religious rules and a clear distinction between men's and women's worlds. You will not meet any female pilgrims in Lelov. Many of the Chassidim only speak traditional Yiddish no matter where in the world they live. Their communities are close-knit and often have only limited interactions with the outside world. They observe the Torah conscientiously in the belief that anyone who lives by the Torah will be happy and that happy individuals make for a happy community.

With the temperature still dropping, the dancing group moved towards the former warehouse (a rather sad, scruffy building), now turned into the celebration venue. The main hall was long and cramped. It was painted green and ill-lit by lamplight, yet thronging with men dressed in black. Their hats and fur caps rocked back and forth enhancing their religious

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<sup>18</sup> Caftan (Polish: *kaftan*): a long, black jacket traditionally made of silk or satin worn by the ultra-orthodox Jews, preferably black.



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experience. At a time like this especially, women could not enter the building, a rule which also applied to local on-lookers including myself. All we could do was stand on a heap of snow and watch through a steamed up, dirty window.

Slowly, some men in black and white caftans started to twirl; others grabbed each others' hands and rushed into a dance. A small boy with ginger hair and side-locks was hopping next to an older man whose fur hat sat crookedly on his grey head. A few adults kept rocking in the corners of the hall, their eyes closed as if they were asleep or trying to avoid the harsh fluorescent light. At commemorative feasts such as this, the Chassidim aim to ascend to the highest reaches of heaven to worship God with pure joy and excitement. Traditionally the celebration starts with a quiet melody known as *nigun*, which grows slowly into louder singing accompanied by fervent dancing and an atmosphere which becomes increasingly one of ecstasy. The character of the celebration can be understood by referring to the sanctification of the traditional Chasidic *rebbe's* meal, known as *tish*.<sup>19</sup>

This is a most significant and sacred ritual which originates in the earliest Chasidic traditions.<sup>20</sup> It is generally believed that Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chasidic movement, began the tradition of gathering his followers for a meal (*tish*). The Chasidic *tish* underpins ideas of community and identity through intense interaction between all those present as they eat, drink, sing, dance and, not least, discuss spiritual matters. The event underlines that the *rebbe* is from the masses and that he should develop deep personal relationships with his followers so that he does not simply know their names and family origins, but also so that he can read their minds and see into their hearts.<sup>21</sup>

Often the *tish* was also understood to be an opportunity to meet those with whom you had differences but who might also be seeking the *tzadick's* advice. Disciples and opponents ate and drank together, unified in the intimacy of the sacred meal. Those who won a special place in the *rebbe's* thoughts were sent a piece of food from his plate, a practice known as *shirayim*.<sup>22</sup> During the *tish*, the *tzadick* acted a charismatic teacher and high priest. His status was symbolised by his place at the head of the table and a throne-like chair often covered with gold upholstery and decorated with a carved headrest. It was a common practice to serve

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<sup>19</sup> *Tish* (Yiddish: *tisch*): usually, a gathering of the ultra-orthodox Jews around their *rebbe*, a meal at the *rebbe's* table

<sup>20</sup> L. Greenspoon *et al.*, *Food and Judaism* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 2005), p. 195

<sup>21</sup> G. Dynner, *Men of silk: the Hasidic conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 119

<sup>22</sup> Greenspoon *et al.*, *Food and Judaism*, p. 197

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just one meal, very often *kugel* (a casserole-like dish containing egg noodles or potatoes) or fish. And it was indeed the smell of fish that welcomed us to the celebration hall in Lelov.

In fact, the long tables covered with white plastic table cloths were remarkably empty. You might have expected a flamboyant celebration with tables overflowing with food and drink, but instead it was hard to see anything apart from fish, baked bread rolls and bottles of red wine all spread over the tables rather sparsely. It was not the sacred event you might have expected.

According to Martin Buber, an Austrian born Jewish philosopher and Chasidic theologian, pilgrimages to Lelov used to be regular occurrences during Dovid's lifetime. Buber's interpretation might have been rather a sentimental and artistic reconstruction of what had actually taken place in Lelov, but nonetheless it gives us an insight into Chasidic rituals and customs. In his essay 'My road to Chasidism'<sup>23</sup> he describes how, as a child, he accompanied his father on a visit to Sadogora, Galicia where he became fascinated by exuberant Chasidic celebrations. This experience informed his later stories about the *tzadickim*.

What happened in modern Lelov certainly resembled Buber's romanticised tales. Loud chatter was interwoven with Yiddish singing and expressive gesticulation with constant rocking back and forth, all adding to an overwhelming impression of an ecstasy-filled event. An elderly man accompanied by a boy with ginger hair squatted by the entrance to the celebration hall singing a song under their breaths. A few yards away, on the stairs covered in dirty snow, a group of men in their twenties were reading aloud from black unbound books. They were surrounded by abandoned plastic plates, fish leftovers and burned bread rolls. Everyone seemed oblivious to their surroundings, including a local journalist snapping photos and the increasingly large groups of local residents interested to see what was happening. Inside, the hall was like a buzzing beehive as the Chassidim prepared for the end of the Sabbath.

We took a prime spot on a pile of frozen snow. The crowd of Chassidim gathered inside the hall was even bigger than the one thronging around and in the shrine. Everyone wanted to be close to the top of the festive table so men, all dressed in black with either velvet black or big fur toque-like hats, were pushing and shoving. (Chasidic dress is a sign of affinity and religious identity which distinguishes the group. Chasidic fur-trimmed hats also

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<sup>23</sup> M. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*. New York: Routledge Kegan Paul Ltd, 1958), p. 55

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are given meaning by the law of *shaatnez*<sup>24</sup> which prohibits Jews from wearing clothes containing wool or linen.) The windows were obstructed by white prayer robes known as *tallis* and prayer books piled high on the windowsills. A man in a white caftan sat at the top of the table, his eyelids drooping heavily, his lips moving fast in silent prayer. I was told this was the new *rebbe*, just selected that same evening. The previous leader, Shimon (Simon) Natan (Nathan) Biederman, the Great *Rebbe* of Lelov, Bnei Brak and Karlin had died suddenly in September 2009. Three of the late *rebbe*'s sons were sitting at the long table covered with the white cloth. One of them, dressed in a white silk caftan, was the great *tzadick* of Lelov, *rebbe* Aharon (Aaron) Biederman.<sup>25</sup> He had just been appointed officially.

The new *tzadick* of Lelov, a man with a long grey beard, recited the blessing over a candle and a crowd of Chassidim stretched their hands towards the flame. Next, the *tzadick* extinguished the flame with a little plate onto which some sweet red wine has been poured. Many eager hands—so eager that they nearly over-turned the saucer—instantly dipped their fingers in the wine, believing it to be sanctified.

Prayers seemed to have finished by the early evening and all the long tables were being pushed against the walls when a man with long black side locks and a golden silk caftan pushed his way through the crowd and began to dance. In the background, a small band including a clarinettist and pianist began to play. Referring to biblical passages, *Rebbe* Nachman of Braclav, Dovid's contemporary, once said that it is a great duty always to be joyful and to encourage joy.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, whenever sadness and misery enter one's heart, divine presence is expelled. Hence the emotional and exuberant experiences, including engaging in music and dance, are important elements in Chasidic ritualism.<sup>27</sup> Some also believe that music and dance can heal broken bodies and souls. According to Chasidic lore, Dovid of Lelov was lame, but could regain his full bodily powers during a dance. Moreover, dancing and music were also perceived as mystical acts in which, through immersion in melody and fervour, souls could rise to a higher spiritual level to become united with God's presence, *Shechinah*.<sup>28</sup> For all those reasons, music quickly became an integral part of

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<sup>24</sup> A. Verthaim, *Law and custom in Hasidism* (New Jersey: Ktav, 1992), 291

<sup>25</sup> Traditionally, *tadicks* used to wear white caftans, called *bekhishe*, on the Sabbath. The custom has been abandoned by all but a few groups, including the Lelov community. Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA in association with the Keter Publishing House, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> M. Buber, *The tales of Rabbi Nachman* (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1988), p. 219. A relevant passage is: 'On the ten-stringed instrument...You have given me joy with Your acts, Oh God'.

<sup>27</sup> Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 198

<sup>28</sup> *Shechinah*: literally: 'dwelling'; the presence of God in the world.

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Chasidic culture, merging elements of religious belief and spiritual experience with the need for expression and performance. Anyone could participate, whether poor or wealthy, educated or uneducated.

Inside the hall, an exuberant dance had started, transforming the room into a theatre in which the Chassidim were clapping, cheering and starting to join in. The *rebbe* was watching while the elders gathered around. Someone lost his shoe which was not greatly surprising since on the Sabbath, the Chassidim wear slip-on moccasins since tying laces is forbidden. When a tired Chasid could not dance anymore, his comrades grabbed him by the arms and pulled him back into the dancing circle. Then the dancing procession moved towards the exit and emerged suddenly into a cold, starry night. The shrine built over *tzadick* Dovid's grave was only a few yards away but the ecstatic men took their time to get there, twirling in the snow. By this time the crowd had grown very dense. It only parted at the entrance to the *ohel* to let *Rebbe* Aharon approach the iron fence that encloses the burial site. Every second, one of the followers came up to kiss his hand. Some men were still dancing, some moving rhythmically in a trance whispering their prayers, while others just wandered around in the snow, their silk caftans too thin to give them any shelter from the freezing temperatures of the Polish night.

Everybody was convinced that on a night like that, the *rebbe's* soul was with his Chassidim, in their hearts, minds and voices. When asked if Lelov meant anything to them, they simply repeated: '*tzadick, tzadick*'.

### **Polish - Chasidic relations**

Today, not a single Jew lives in Lelov. Older residents remember their pre-war neighbours pretty well; they also recall former Chasidic pilgrimages. Many welcomed the renewal of Chasidic tradition in Lelov. One of the older residents of Lelov admitted that he had not got used to seeing so many Jewish pilgrims in his village. The lack of Jewish presence during most of the year remains in marked contrast to their overwhelming temporary presence. As a result, the collective imagination of the locals is much more densely and consistently populated by Jews than are the streets of Lelov.

Even before the Second World War, the Poland's Jewish community had become a target of aggressive propaganda pedalled by right-wing nationalist groups that were growing in strength. Often, these presented the Jews as a mortal threat to the Catholic people and to the Polish state. They were said to corrupt cultural, political and economic spheres of life, to

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be a branch of Freemasonry, to be a cabal of world financiers and even to be a Bolshevik fifth column. This 'knowledge' usually was put together using generalisations, distortions and omissions and since the Polish state did not teach the history of Poland's Jews and very little was written in the press about them, there was a lack of reliable information to counter-balance all the lies.

Today, however, it is hard to overlook the growing renaissance of interest in Jewish themes, for instance awareness of Lelov's pilgrimage and the annual Festival of *Chulent* (*cholent*) are some of its manifestations. It is leading to a dialogue between the two cultures and a readiness to repair Polish-Jewish relations, not least because Lelov's Polish locals understand the economic benefits of the pilgrimage.

### **Conclusion**

When asked, Chasidic Jews admit they would be unlikely to travel to Poland had the cemetery and the *tzadick's* shrine not been found in the late 1980s. Although for centuries Jewish and, later, Chasidic communities flourished there, without the shrine a town like Lelov would be just another Polish *shtetl* destroyed during the German occupation. The importance of Lelov for Chasidic Jews reflects the fact that it was home to a Chasidic master who lived and died there, not that the town had a Jewish past *per se*.

The revival of the pilgrimage movement in Eastern Europe is part of a wider phenomenon. Events like those in Lelov also take place elsewhere, for example in Ukraine, where Chassidim visit the grave of Rebbe Nachman of Braclav in Uman. As was the case with Lelov, in 1989 the opportunity opened up for Breclovers to travel to Ukraine more freely. Today, it is the biggest Chasidic pilgrimage in the world and attracts twenty thousand ultra-orthodox Jews each year, with number having grown significantly since the breakup of the Soviet bloc.

Yet improved opportunities for travel might only offer a partial explanation of why Chasidic pilgrimages are becoming increasingly popular. Chasidic ideology, with its emphasis on love and joy of observance, might also play a part by appealing to non-practising Jews and encouraging them to travel to Lelov too. This point also applies to Lizhensk, a small provincial town in Poland and former *shtetl*, where one of the greatest Chasidic *rebbe*s is buried. Many of those who come to Lelov, also visit Lizhensk because *Rebbe* Elimelech was a teacher of Dovid Biederman.

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According to Jackie Feldman, for many Jewish groups ‘common destiny is expressed through identification with an extended family, and shared through continuous acts of remembering, often in ritual context’.<sup>29</sup> For the Chassidim, the entire community focused on the *tzadick* functions like an extended family. Ultra-orthodox pilgrims travel to Lelov from all around the globe and although they do not necessarily know each other, they celebrate, pray and dine together like one big family.

The renewal of the pilgrimage movement has exerted an influence on Chasidic identity. The experience of a religious pilgrimage and the practice of specific rituals and customs reinforces a sense of belonging to a special group. Since there are not actually so many Chasidic groups in the whole world (they can be counted in tens or hundreds at most), it is crucial for the groups to underpin their identity through the experience. An individual Chasid can only respond to the challenges of the modern secular era within the bounds of the community. On the other hand, in some respects (and despite all its strictures) the community has to change as well in order to be able to accommodate the changing needs of its members. Currently Chasidic pilgrimages are ‘in fashion’, so in the divided and scattered world of the Chassidim, communities and their leaders have to convince their members that there is indeed a future for their group. Through pilgrimage, this future can be presented through a prism of the past.

The question remains of how the Chassidim manage to retain their identity in the modern world. Certainly this involves isolation from wider society, by avoiding unnecessary contact with it and sticking to the requirements of Jewish law. And yet the Chasidic movement also has an international dimension since many groups remain in close contact with Chasidic communities around the globe. The modern Chasidic pilgrimage can be perceived as a way of affirming these international connections since, for instance, in Lelov there is no division between the Chasidim from Brooklyn, Jerusalem or Antwerp. They are all members of the group participating in a communal pilgrimage experience.

Finally, there is the question of how representative this essay is of relations between the Chassidim and Polish communities, and what the limits to the relationship might be. Certainly local Poles understand themselves to be just observers who are prevented from fuller engagement by, for instance, the language barrier and lack of knowledge about Jewish customs and rights. In this respect, twenty years of Chasidic presence in Lelov is still limited

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<sup>29</sup> J. Feldman, *It Is My Brothers whom I Am Seeking; Israeli Youth Pilgrimage to Holocaust Poland*, *Jewish Ethnology and Folklore Review* 17, no. 1–2, (1995) p. 33.

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by a much longer prior period of absence. As a result, perhaps both the Chasidic visitors and the Polish inhabitants of Lelov are caught up in a process of re-discovering their past, in effect they are re-evaluating their distinctive identities while functioning in a globalising world. The important thing is that the two communities that once lived, worked, laughed and cried together in Lelov, meet under Chagall's two moons: shining above and mirrored in a frozen snow: on that night of Dovid's *Yortsayt*, Lelov becomes *Lo Lev*.<sup>30</sup>

### **About the author**

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<sup>30</sup> Hebrew: 'a heart'