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Changes in *Ashkenazic* Haredi Culture -
A Tradition in Crisis**

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JEWISH CONTINUITY IN THE
MODERN ERA

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The Lost Kiddush Cup: Changes in Ashkenazic Haredi Culture—A Tradition in Crisis

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A Rift in Tradition

A binding attachment to tradition is perhaps the hallmark of Haredi Judaism within the framework of postwar Jewish society. This phenomenon is reflected above all in the affinity for and attitude toward primary symbols of personal and collective identity: dress, appearance (beards, sidelocks), and language. Obviously, I do not contend that all Haredi Jews wear the traditional Eastern European garb, grow beards, and speak Yiddish, but more of them than ever before have adopted all or some of these identity symbols. I do claim that such symbols are perceived as an a priori expression of wholeness, whereas deviation from them is at most tolerated a posteriori.

However, affinity for these external symbols of identity is no more than a manifestation of the Haredi historiographic conception, which undoubtedly exists even if no systematic written evidence thereof is available. Moreover, I believe that this conception constitutes the basis of the perceived confrontation with other Jewish identities common to all varieties of Haredi society. From a point of view that is simplistic—although adequate for our purposes—we may note that Haredi society divides Jewish history into two main periods, of which the first arguably commences with the Patriarchs, receipt of the Torah, or perhaps the mishnaic and talmudic eras and concludes with the inception of the

Haskalah. According to Haredi historiography, there was only one kind of Jewish identity during this period, one whose sole legitimate expression was unconditional commitment to Halakhah, as interpreted by approved scholars, generation after generation. The saying attributed to Rabbi Saadia Gaon, "Our nation is only a nation by virtue of its Torah (both the Written and Oral Law)," is quoted frequently by Haredi leaders to express the complete and legitimate Jewish identity. Contrasting with this age of fulfillment and wholeness is the modern period, which began, as indicated, with the Haskalah. This period was marked by a substantial and fundamental rift, as great masses of Jews abandoned the traditional Jewish identity and unconditional commitment to Halakhah yet considered themselves legitimate Jews nonetheless. Today, a decisive majority of Jews do not consider themselves bound by Halakhah in any way. Haredi society perceives this historical development as a process accompanied by a cruel and painful social and cultural struggle of good versus evil, of the weak versus the strong, and the many versus the hapless few. The contemporary mythology of Haredi society may well be based primarily on this interpretation of historical realities during the age of schism. The rift was so vast and so dramatic that even those who remained loyal to the values and customs of the previous age, to that consummate world of Jewish fulfillment, were somehow affected by it, whether consciously or not. Haredi society hardly perceives its own situation as an ideal one, but rather as a distorted reflection of the prerift world. Awareness of flaws, of incompleteness relative to the previous era, is a central component in Haredi society's self-perception. The traditional society which preceded the Haskalah, especially that of eastern Europe, is therefore considered a frame of reference (in the sociological sense), a way of life which Haredim aspire to maintain.

Awareness of the rift, and the perceived incompleteness of both individual and collective Jewish life, introduce tension and dynamics in the structure of Haredi society. Paradoxically, however, this conception also enabled Haredi society to adjust to modern realities while relating to tradition differentially. The perception of the contemporary situation as one of catastrophic crisis, with inevitable consequences, engenders a tolerant attitude toward deviance from tradition, on condition that one recognizes the situation of crisis and realizes that such deviation represents a compromise, a manifestation of post factum behavior. In other words, using Haredi terminology, deviation should not become *shitah* (literally 'method'), that is, it must not be accorded full a priori ideological justification within the overall traditional *Weltanschauung*.

This analysis elucidates the extensive variety of customs and lifestyles in Haredi society, based on differential acculturation to modern Western culture and society and on the Haredim's self-awareness of their social uniqueness qua Haredim facing the surrounding Jewish world. Perhaps the best example of this characteristic mechanism of adjustment and acculturation to modern realities may be seen in Haredi attitudes toward the German neo-Orthodoxy established by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. Without discussing this complex issue in detail, I note that Haredi society did perceive Hirsch's community as an integral part of the history and mythology of the struggle between the giants of religious-traditional Judaism and the Haskalah. The facts, however, are ignored and Hirsch's efforts are perceived as an a posteriori act.

The rupture in German Jewish society was so vast and so comprehensive that it was impossible to turn back the clock. Therefore, it was necessary to salvage whatever one could, to compromise and adjust to the modern reality. It was thus possible to perceive neo-Orthodoxy as a legitimate part of the Haredi traditional heritage and at the same time to dissociate oneself virtually absolutely from the application of its norms and values in prewar eastern European religious-traditional society and in present-day Haredi communities alike. A similarly tolerant attitude prevails today in Israel regarding practices of American Haredim which deviate from accepted eastern European Haredi tradition, especially in the spheres of general education and modesty for women, which are justified by the formula: "It's permissible for THEM."

As indicated, this adjustment mechanism originated in the tensions which developed between an awareness of the rift and a perception of prerift traditional society as the epitome of complete Judaism. From this same point of departure, the postwar Haredi society developing in the West began to manifest tendencies toward stringency and extremism in both the ritual and social spheres, reflecting a kind of dialectic attitude toward tradition. Here, I emphasize the fact that traditional society considers stringency, especially in the halakhic-ritual sphere, to be no less dangerous than laxity, as attested to by numerous cases in halakhic literature. The best example may be found in the polemics against Hasidism. In an early record of the dispute between Hasidim and Mitnaggedim, a letter sent by Rabbi Avraham Katzenellenbogen to Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, he decries the changes (i.e., restrictions) in Ashkenazic tradition which were introduced by the Hasidim, such as adoption of a variant prayer liturgy (that of the Ari, known as *Nusah Sefarad*) and differences in methods of ritual slaughter. Rabbi Katzenel-

lenbogen asks, "How can you find fault with [the practices of] our forefathers?"¹ His argument is only significant and valid within the framework of traditional society. One who seeks to change time-honored customs in favor of a more stringent halakhic perspective is effectively declaring that the religious practices of our holy ancestors (in traditional society, all ancestors are holy) were inferior to our own. This strikes a severe blow at the very foundations of traditional society. Or, as Rabbi Katzenellenbogen wrote, it necessarily "finds fault with our forefathers."

All who challenge [a practice as contrary to Torah law or as lenient where it should be stringent] should realize that our ancient forefathers and sages, whose esteem is immeasurably greater than our own, were not unapprised of the reasons for their customs. It would be better to ascribe the challenge to a deficiency in one's own knowledge than to a shortcoming in our ancestors and sages, whose wisdom was as vast as the earth and as deep as the sea.²

The vast social phenomenon under consideration here is called "religious extremism," as expressed in the dynamics of stringency in the Halakhic-ritual sphere, combined with occasional intentional deviation from the traditions of one's ancestors within the framework of a society which demands commitment to tradition. I now seek to determine how such deviation was rendered possible from a structural point of view. I address this question through analysis of a story concerning a *Kiddush* cup which was lost, found, and then lost again for eternity.

The Lost *Kiddush* Cup

The story is told by Dov Genachowski, a well-known journalist, talmudic scholar, economist, and amateur researcher of the history of Jerusalem. Dov is the scion of a Lithuanian family of rabbis and scholars. His father, Rabbi Eliyahu Moshe Genachowski, was a member of Knesset on the ha-Poel ha-Mizrahi list. The Genachowski family lived in Bnei Brak, in the Givat Rokah neighborhood, near the home of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, better known as the Hazon Ish.³ The Genachowski family was friendly with the Hazon Ish, and Dov, as a

¹ Simon Dubnov, *Toldot ha-hassidut* (A History of Hasidism) (Tel Aviv: Debir, 1967), 251–351.

² Menahem ben Solomon Meiri, *Magen avot*, I. M. Last (ed), London, 1909, p. 10.

³ For a sketch of the life and career of the Hazon Ish, see the preceding essay by Lawrence Kaplan.—ED.

young man, would often spend time at his home. The families already knew each other in Lithuania: Dov's mother's grandfather, Rabbi Shneur Zalman Hirschowitz (an outstanding student of Rabbi Israel Salanter), was once the *havrutah* (study partner) of the Hazon Ish's father, Rabbi Shmaryahu Karelitz, the Rabbi of Kossovo.

During the early 1950s, a new Halakhic concept began to spread throughout Haredi society: the *shiur* (measuring standard) of the Hazon Ish. Within a very short time, the concept became so entrenched that in halakhic applications, the *shiurei Hazon Ish* have become an accepted norm among nearly all sectors of Haredi society. The concept of *shiur* and its halakhic implications are as follows: A *shiur* is a measure of volume, area, length, or width which is critical to the performance of major precepts.

The first Mishnah of tractate *Beṣa*, for example, recalls a dispute between the house of Shammai and the house of Hillel concerning the *shiurim* relating to observance of Passover: "The house of Shammai says: a *kezayit* (olive's measure) of sourdough or a *kekotevet*, (dried date's measure) of a leavened product [violate the prohibition against possessing leavened products on Passover]; the house of Hillel says, a *kezayit* of either." Because sourdough is unfit for consumption and is only used as leavening, one does not violate the prohibition against possession of leavened products on Passover unless one possesses AT LEAST a *kezayit*. In contrast, according to the house of Shammai, the prohibition on eating leavened products is only violated if one has eaten at least a *kekotevet*. The House of Hillel is more stringent and claims that in both cases, the minimum size is a *kezayit*. Similarly, one must eat a *kezayit* of matzo at the Seder to fulfill the commandment to eat matzo on Passover (a positive injunction from the Torah).

Another such measure is the *kebeisah* (egg's measure), the minimum quantity of food mandating Grace After Meals, or the *revi'it*, (a measure of volume, one quarter of a *log*.) Referring to Sabbath eve *Kiddush*, the *Shulhan Arukh* declares that "One must drink . . . most of a *revi'it* [-sized glass of wine]" (Laws of the Sabbath, 271:13). These three measures, the *kezayit*, the *kebeisah*, and the *revi'it*, are related in a fixed ratio: a *kebeisah*, is equal to two *kezayits* and a *revi'it* is equal to one and a half *kebeisais*.

The *kezayit* and *kebeisah* are based on products of nature. However, the Sages also defined the ratio between them and even offered several alternative means of measurement. Hence one would not have anticipated the differences of opinion regarding their relative size that subsequently emerged. Comparison of the results of experimental measure-

ments yielded a marked incompatibility. The first to notice the incongruity was Rabbi Yehezkel Landau (the Nodah be-Yehudah) of Prague, in the eighteenth century.⁴ Others who repeated his experiments likewise noted discrepancies. To solve the problem, the Nodah be-Yehudah raised the possibility that today's eggs are only half as large as the average egg was in talmudic times, invoking a phrase first coined by the tosafists in an entirely different context: "Nature has changed." Rabbi Israel Meir Hacoen (the Hafetz Hayim), author of the *Mishnah Berurah*, cites the dispute on this matter and declares that "some people who are very strict about *shiurim* have proved that the eggs of our time are half as large." The Hazon Ish had no doubt, declaring axiomatically that "today's eggs are smaller." The Hazon Ish's views were first formulated in the "Booklet of *Shiurim*" which concludes his book *Hazon Ish* (Laws of the Sabbath). At first glance, they seem to be part of an ordinary difference of opinion, as is common throughout halakhic literature. Moreover, the Hazon Ish appears not to have stated anything particularly innovative, as the Nodah be-Yehudah and other halakhic experts had also suggested that "Nature has changed" and that our eggs are smaller than the average eggs of the talmudic era. Nevertheless, a substantive change has indeed taken place.

Previously, such disputes were essentially theoretical alone, argued purely for the sake of Torah study. In contrast, the Hazon Ish's stipulation was also of practical significance, as it created a new halakhic norm, the *shiur Hazon Ish*, which is accepted today by almost all Haredi society and even by some non-Haredi religious Jews. In most if not all Haredi homes, the volume of *Kiddush* cups (at least a *revi'it*), the *kēzāyit* of matzo eaten on Seder night, and even the dimensions of the *tallit qatan* worn by men all conform with the *shiur Hazon Ish*.

Returning to Dov Genachowski's story: Rabbi Eliyahu Moshe Genachowski had two *Kiddush* cups which were brought from "home" in Lithuania. The first was given to him on his wedding day by Rabbi Meir Simha Hacoen (the Or Sameah), Rabbi of Dvinsk (Duenaburg), Latvia, a relative of the bride. The second cup kept by the Genachowski family belonged to Dov's grandfather, Rabbi Shneur Zalman Hirschowitz, who was, as indicated, an outstanding student of Rabbi Israel Salanter and the *havrutah* of the father of the Hazon Ish. Neither of these cups held a *revi'it* according to the Hazon Ish's calculations.

⁴ *Salah* (Šiyun le-Nefesh Hayah, ad *Pesah*. Prague, 1783), 109a.

When the concept of *shiur Hazon Ish* began gathering momentum in yeshiva circles, Dov Genachowski was a typically audacious young Sabra. He took the *Kiddush* cups out of the closet and presented them to the Hazon Ish at the latter's home. The Hazon Ish refused to react, but would not relent, either. Numerous anecdotes circulate in the religious community concerning the Hazon Ish's "revolution." For example, Rabbi Yitzhak L. Rabinowitz remembered the daughter of the Hafetz Hayim complaining that her sons would not use their grandfather's cup for *Kiddush* because "it doesn't hold a *shiur Hazon Ish*." The Hafetz Hayim, it should be recalled, was the author of the *Mishnah Berurah*.

I proceed to analyze the social significance of institutionalizing the *shiur Hazon Ish* in Haredi communities in the context of the following question: How did a religious change of such significance, one which concerns key Jewish religious ceremonies, gain acceptance and popularity so simply and rapidly within a society for which awareness of continuity of eastern European traditions is a central component of its self-identity?

The *Kiddush* cup is not only a ritual object. More than any other artifact, it symbolizes tradition, the affinity between past generations and the present one. The *Kiddush* cup is passed down as a legacy: "Grandfather's cup." Consider an extended family in a traditional community, gathering to celebrate the Passover Seder. The table is set and the elder of the family, the grandfather, sits at the head of the table, with a *Kiddush* cup before him. The cup would usually be one passed down from a previous generation or generations. It symbolizes the family's common roots and expresses its solidarity with generations gone by. The cup thus embodied not only religious significance, but also social significance of the highest level. It was generally given to the eldest or favorite son on the father's demise, as a sign of his assuming the role of head of the family or as a token of some special relationship. The *Kiddush* cup is thus bequeathed as a legacy, reflecting attachment to former generations and consequently also mutual affinity for one another. There are indeed other sacred artifacts of similar significance, but the *Kiddush* cup is outstanding among them because of its function in important ceremonies which express family solidarity and attachment to ancestral tradition: the Sabbath Eve meal and the Passover Seder. The Genachowski family's cups were stored in the closet, together with the Passover dishes, and were indeed present before the family on Seder night. The fact that most Haredi families now have relatively new *Kiddush* cups hints at a dramatic change in history and in the structure of Haredi society.

One explanation of the "lost cup" situation concerns the structure of Haredi society, which, like all Ashkenazi Jewry, is a society of immigrant-survivors. Until the Second World War, Jews emigrating from eastern Europe were relatively young people who left their extended families behind them, as well as their *Kiddush* cups, which, as indicated, were of great symbolic value. Furthermore, Holocaust survivors were usually unable to salvage *Kiddush* cups and similarly symbolic artifacts from destruction. Consequently, a considerable part of Haredi society did not experience a direct confrontation with tradition (represented by their families' *Kiddush* cups from their destroyed ancestral homes) when a personality of high halakhic standing, such as the Hazon Ish, enjoined them to use cups holding at least a *revi'it* based on his calculations.

According to an alternative explanation, the Holocaust destroyed the extended family which had gathered at the Seder table. Those who remained and migrated to the West most often did so as individuals. Thus, the large family, which was a significant and perhaps primary means of transmitting tradition from generation to generation, no longer existed. However correct this explanation may be it is insufficient and perhaps not the essential response, as it does not address the social changes which introduced the new cup into the Jewish home. The harbingers of change were members of the new Haredi generation, raised at the great postwar yeshivas of Israel and the United States.

I contend that from the outset, the higher yeshivas, as they developed in Lithuania from the second half of the nineteenth century, laid the foundation for Haredi society as we know it today. These yeshivas represented a long-standing tradition of Torah study and simultaneously reflected processes of comprehensive social change. Eventually, they succeeded in implementing many of their ideals in postwar Western society, establishing the basis for the Haredi "society of scholars." I will not examine this development in detail at present, but rather attempt to explain the background for the dialectic of tradition which enabled institutionalization of the *shiur Hazon Ish* as it accelerated other processes of religious extremism and the continual institution of new strictures.

Higher yeshivas of the Volozhin type developed in Lithuania against the background of a religious, social, and political crisis. The processes of modernization and secularization which engendered this crisis shattered the traditional Jewish community, which was an integral unit identified with the religious way of life, one which considered Halakhah and tradition, as formulated throughout the generations, as an entity which binds the individual and the collectivity alike. One reaction to these processes

was the establishment of a new type of educational institution: the higher yeshiva exemplified by Volozhin. One may consider this institution as an integrative religious community, a kind of "total institution," that is, a closed social system whose members remain under its aegis all day long for several years. As indicated, the archetype of this formula was the Etz Hayim Higher Yeshiva, established in Volozhin at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For purposes of discussion, however, I concentrate on the higher yeshiva format which prevailed at the turn of the century, under the influence of the Musar Movement. The Volozhin-type yeshiva differs from the traditional one because it transcends community boundaries, attracting students from the broad periphery. It is not a part of the community, but rather a parallel and largely isolated institution. By its very definition, it comprises a community of young people, a kind of youth society, which intentionally develops the consciousness of a religious elite, facing the crumbling external society (the rank and file or *baalei batim* according to standard yeshiva terminology). The yeshiva society is characterized by a social and economic moratorium; it is isolated from everyday affairs and maintains a direct and unmitigated affinity for religious culture, as expressed not in living tradition but in the literature of Halakhah and Musar. This closed society, which develops an intensive religious culture and considers itself an elite group, necessarily engenders a rather uniform halakhic culture which binds all students, a kind of yeshiva tradition, which is less committed to living tradition as practiced by Jewish communities than it is to the written stipulations of halakhic decisions. This tradition obligates yeshiva students with variant customs to dissociate themselves from the particularist traditions of their families and communities. In the yeshiva social system, the literature of halakhic decision-making can "defeat" family and/or community traditions. The book has become a virtually exclusive source of authority, tolerating no substantive conflict with family or community mores.

Before the Holocaust, the relatively few yeshivas were on the periphery. Most young people from traditional families did not apply to them. The economic crises compelled the young people to learn a trade and join the labor force pursuing *takhlit* (practical ends) to help support their families. The political crises, in turn, led many young people to question their future in eastern European countries. The yeshivas themselves became more and more dependent on American assistance (the Joint Distribution Committee) and found it difficult to function. Many

students left in favor of socialism and Zionism. After the Holocaust, however, a new economic and social situation emerged.

The financial situation of the Volozhin-type higher yeshivas, reestablished in Israel and the United States, was far better than it had been in eastern Europe. Among the primary factors contributing to this improvement were guilt feelings about Holocaust victims and the attendant obligation to preserve the memory of a tragically and cruelly destroyed traditional world, as well as the economic prosperity characterizing Western countries and the development of the modern welfare state. The yeshivas began to accept increasing numbers of Israeli and American-born students, who considered them as an idealistic counterpoint to the materialism and permissiveness of Western society. Moreover, because of the material prosperity and social security of the welfare state, Haredi parents could now afford to send their children to yeshiva, which they believed was the only way of keeping them from free and unmediated contact with the modern secular world and guaranteeing the continuity of traditional Jewish culture. The yeshiva thus represented the dominant educational pattern for boys within Haredi society. Concomitantly, the Lithuanian-style yeshiva, as a total institution, enabled its religious leadership to mold the spiritual image of virtually all Haredi youth as it saw fit. Haredi parents who sent their children to yeshivas effectively forfeited their role in the socialization of their children. I refer specifically to Lithuanian-type yeshivas, although these observations are also essentially valid regarding Hasidic Haredi circles, who in attempting to rehabilitate their status in the Western world, have adopted the Lithuanian yeshiva pattern to mold the spiritual and social image of the next generation under the conditions prevailing in the modern, open city.

This was not the end of the "revolution," however. The cultural change in Haredi society, as reflected in its transformation into a "society of scholars," was realized when the influx of students to yeshivas gave rise to the *kollelim*, institutes of advanced yeshiva studies for married students (*avrekhim*). Nearly every yeshiva student gets married while still studying and continues his education at yeshiva for at least another seven or eight years. A considerable number continue for many more years, sometimes for their entire lives. This development necessarily led to a cultural and social upheaval.

As I indicated, Haredi parents who sent their boys to yeshivas had relatively little influence on their religious socialization, because these boys were kept within the framework of a total institution, subject to

constant indoctrination and supervision. Another social development of equal significance is a rapidly developing sense of superiority among yeshiva students, who feel that they have surpassed their parents in learning, access to halakhic literature, and conformity with the norms stipulated in Musar literature. Yeshiva students in Lithuania may have felt the same, but they faced a multigenerational extended family of grandparents, uncles, and aunts. In Israel and the United States, however, the confrontation involved only a single set of parents versus a scholarly, self-confident son, backed by yeshiva custom and literature. Parents were somewhat confounded by their children, who were adopting new religious norms and challenging their accepted traditions. The children often succeeded in convincing their parents to change their customs, which they, in turn, had learned from their own parents.

The Hazon Ish did not appeal to the parents' generation. For them he was a Jew, a sage, but no more. Instead, he addressed the younger generation directly, those who studied his books, admired his scholarly acumen, and were influenced by his ascetic, authoritative personality. The young yeshiva students of the 1950s and 1960s represented a kind of "first generation of redemption," whereas their parents were the "wilderness generation." The Hazon Ish enjoined these children to fulfill the ideal of total devotion to Torah study, although many of their fathers had never studied at a yeshiva at all. It is therefore hardly surprising that they felt free to mold their religious lives without considering family traditions, particularly when the new customs were perceived as more stringent, more complete. When the Hazon Ish demanded that they eat approximately three fourths of a matzo on Seder night, which was his estimate of the requisite *kezayit* for fulfillment of the commandment, they did not view this stricture as an injustice to their sacred ancestors. Rather, they considered it a better and more complete fulfillment of the commandment, as prescribed in the literature which they accepted as a total expression of Halakhah and tradition alike. This attitude paved the way for new stringencies within a society which purports to maintain authentic tradition.

The New Rift

The *Kiddush* cups used by our forefathers in the Exile of Europe were lost in the Holocaust, along with their owners, our grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Dov Genachowski thought that he had found them and hastened to bring them to the Hazon Ish. He did not understand that

they had already been lost forever, because vessels, artifacts, and the like do not constitute tradition. Tradition constitutes uninterrupted affinity for past generations, as manifested by a living community, down through the ages, where everyone knows everyone else, young and old alike. Tradition means an extended family, in which the individual is only a part and never an independent whole, a family in which a young man inherits his father's place at the synagogue, as his grandfather lies buried in the adjacent cemetery. Tradition means a sacred community, comprising simple, ignorant Jews, ordinary *baalei batim*, and a handful of scholars who live together in harmony and share a sense of mutual responsibility. When the entire nation is composed of scholars, the power of tradition weakens and becomes the custom of *baalei batim*, of the masses. Upon the disappearance of the traditional community, the *Kiddush* cup, too, loses its power, only to be forgotten and lost for eternity.