The Americanization of the Jews

Cohen, Norman S., Seltzer, Robert

Published by NYU Press

Cohen, Norman S. and Robert Seltzer.
The Americanization of the Jews.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76217.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76217

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2688043
PART SIX

Three Modes of Religiosity
An issue underlying much of the Jewish experience in the New World has been whether acculturation can be accomplished without assimilation. In America, religion and state are separate, and systematic or state-sanctioned exclusion absent, giving minorities like the Jews opportunities to enter the mainstream. American Jews for the most part embraced these opportunities to become part of their host culture, which, in spite of some practical obstacles, stood open in principle to their full participation. To what extent could they enter the mainstream without giving up their separate identity as Jews? To be sure, this issue was, by the nineteenth century, also a concern of many European Jews who took advantage of the changes that have come to be called “emancipation.” In America, however, the question of acculturation and assimilation was there for Jews from their arrival on these shores.
Jews who held onto tradition tenaciously and perceived themselves as Orthodox were less comfortable than other Jews with the process of cultural change that America prompted. Indeed, while the Orthodox came to America, they did so with great reluctance. For them, it remained a Jewish wasteland, a *trefe medina*, an unholy place. Many stayed in Europe at the wellheads of tradition until they were destroyed in the Holocaust. When the Orthodox did plant themselves in America, many accommodated to American ways while simultaneously trying to hold onto the punctilious observance of ritual and tradition. They adapted their appearance and dress to look like Americans, accepted English as their language to sound like Americans, sent their children to day schools and universities to receive a secular education like Americans, and entered professions and adopted lifestyles that put them firmly into American culture. They even tacitly accepted pluralism in Jewish life as is sanctioned in American society. These people, who have come to be called “modern American Orthodox Jews,” by all estimates make up the majority of American Orthodoxy.

Yet there were other Orthodox Jews who refused to endorse the cultural change, pluralism, and direction that American society seemingly specified. At the outset, these other Orthodox appeared little more than refugees of a lost world. A huge proportion had been destroyed in Europe, where they had stayed in compliance with the directives of leaders who warned them that America would be the death of their way of life. Stunned and disoriented, many arrived in America not understanding what had happened to them. How could their leaders and religious instincts have been so wrong? Coming to America just before, during, and after the Second World War, many of the most traditionalist Orthodox defined their existence as a way to demonstrate that they had not been abandoned by God or Jewish history. They recreated the yeshivas of Europe in America, replanted the surviving rabbinic leadership on American soil, and developed new religious leaders who were *in* America but not *of* it. Given the acculturative environment, these efforts entailed considerable struggle. In the end, this type of Orthodoxy, which resisted assimilation and was wary of acculturation, has sustained itself, seeking vehicles to abet its existence and encourage its adherents to remain steadfast in their contra-acculta-
tive efforts. Nothing helped more to accomplish this end than traditions like the *daf yomi* (daily page) discipline that had its origins in the pre-Holocaust way of life.

On an unseasonably warm evening in late April 1990, on Rosh Hodesh (new moon) of the Hebrew month of Iyyar 5750, an event took place that was to be the culmination of 2711 consecutive days of preparation. During that interval, thousands of Jews from all over the world had spent each workday of every week covering one page at a time of the “Shas,” an acronym for the “*Shisha Sedorim*” (six divisions) and sixty-three tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. For the ninth time since 1931, when the first such daily cycle was completed, Jews would celebrate a *siyum*, the formal culmination of one more cycle in this never-ending course of study.

Some had reviewed their pages of Talmud in small study circles in synagogues; others had gathered to *lern* during morning or afternoon breaks or at home in their after hours. Some had even studied by telephone, calling up “Dial-a-Daf,” the 24-hour hotline that provided an expert teacher in English or Yiddish who could guide the student through each day’s allotted, complex, often digressive, and rather recondite page. Tonight, thousands of these students were to gather in the time-honored ritual of Jewish study and celebrate their having gone through the entire Talmud at a mass meeting in Madison Square Garden, the huge arena in the heart of Manhattan.

The idea of reviewing one page a day, “*daf yomi,*” was formally introduced at the first international Congress of Agudat Israel in Vienna in 1923 by Meir Shapiro, a former member of the Polish parliament and rabbi from Lublin. Still a young and relatively fragile union of Orthodox Jews, Agudat Israel was searching for activities that would bind its members together and to the Jewish tradition as defined by Orthodoxy. In spite of their opposition to Reform and assimilative trends, there was also much that divided the Jews who shared the Agudah’s Orthodox sympathies. When Shapiro, head of the Agudah’s Orthodox Education Committee, “pointed out that Jewish unity is visible on every page of Talmud, which includes a Mishnah written in the land of Israel, a Gemara written in Babylonia, the codes of the Rif written in Morocco, Rambam written in
Egypt, Rashi and Tosafos written in France and the Maharan written in Poland,” and proposed that every Jew undertake each day to study one identical page of the Talmud, the project struck many as an idea around which all could rally. Everyone would symbolically be united in a single class without walls. As Orthodox Jews, none could oppose the idea of daily study of that most important text that served for centuries as the pinnacle of Jewish scholarship.  

A few years after Rabbi Shapiro died in 1934 at the age of forty-seven and on the eve of the Second World War, a crowd reported at twenty thousand assembled at the yeshiva in Lublin to celebrate the second siyum of the daf yomi program. After the war, the relatively few who had survived the Holocaust tried to resurrect the practices of Jewish life in the new soil in which they had been transplanted in America and Israel, but daf yomi was difficult to restart. Many thousands of dedicated Talmud students and scholars had been wiped out and those who remained were often, in those early years, among the walking dead. For a while, only a relative few had kept up the practice of reviewing the daily page. In 1945, at the third siyum, only three thousand were reported to have assembled in Tel Aviv, site of the main celebration.

If unity had been one of the underlying themes of the daf yomi program at its onset, after the war survival became its leitmotif. With the center of Agudah activities shifting to the Land of Israel, those assembled in 1945 heard an address by Joseph Kahaneman, head of the Ponovezh Yeshiva (by then relocated from Lithuania to Bene-Berak), who asserted that the study of the Torah and daf yomi were the best and only true insurance for Jewish survival. The occasion was more like a funeral for the millions lost than a celebration of study. To those who could not but ask themselves why so few of the faithful had survived the gas chambers, Rabbi Kahane man’s declaration was a call to Talmud as a way of demonstrating that one continued to keep faith with the tradition. The depleted crowd dramatically underscored the losses the people of the book had suffered, yet the fact that a siyum could be celebrated more or less on time was also not ignored.

To be sure, daf yomi was not seen by everyone as the ideal vehicle for resistance to acculturation. Leaders of the yeshiva world who made study of the Talmud their life’s task argued that re-
viewing one page a day was not sufficiently serious and absorbing; it was to Jewish learning what a quickly mumbled prayer was to true worship. They therefore eschewed quick fixes like a page a day, and focused rather on creating yeshivas and supporting them, a goal that most Orthodox Jews made a central concern of their organized existence both in Israel and in the Diaspora.\footnote{6}

For those who claimed that “the pressures of work and community involvement leave insufficient time for extensive periods of in-depth [Jewish] learning,” but who nevertheless wanted to resist the seductive influence of non-Jewish life and sought moorings that attached them to the protective tradition, \textit{daf yomi} was of growing importance. It allowed for an ongoing contact with the world of talmudic scholarship through limited but institutionalized ritual study.\footnote{7} And it provided an identity: “We’re a \textit{daf yomi} home,” the participants could proclaim, including not only the man who does the actual studying but also, as one person put it, the “wife [who] encourages me to set aside evening and weekend time to catch up with the \textit{daf}.”\footnote{8} Participation in the program—joining a daily study circle, reviewing a portable mini-volume of Talmud on the train, listening to cassettes that rabbis have recorded of each day’s page—and especially coming to the public event of the \textit{siyum}—became a way of displaying openly a relatively high level of continuing Jewish commitment.

\textit{Daf yomi} became perhaps an ultimate step in the democratization of the once elite practice of studying Talmud. What had been the province of the relatively few scholars who labored over every word was now something that masses could accomplish on the side and at an unprecedented speed. As one \textit{daf yomi} supporter put it, “It enables everyone to achieve the Jewish dream of completing the entire Shas.” Perhaps that too was a reason why the yeshiva people were at best ambivalent about it. For these champions of an intellectual elite of Torah, the idea that anyone could in a few minutes a day complete the entire Shas was a debasement of what true scholars did. Still, as the event at Madison Square Garden would illustrate, \textit{daf yomi} would become a symbol of much more than a quick reading of an intricate text and would make even a \textit{rosh yeshiva} into a grudging supporter.

After the war, the numbers gradually grew. In 1953, ten thousand
were reported to have gathered in Jerusalem's Me'ah She'arim; in 1960 large celebrations were held in Israel, while the Americans met in a Catskill Mountains resort hotel. For nearly a generation, American Jewry's celebrations of the *siyum* remained in the shadow of Israel's. Nevertheless, Jewish life in the United States and Canada had not become the wasteland that many in Europe predicted it would when they warned the devout to stay away. In America, Orthodox Judaism—even its *haredi* forms—was far from disappearing. Venerable European institutions of Jewish learning were replanted on American soil and new ones were founded. Orthodox Jews made their presence felt in other ways. Kosher food became ubiquitous. Popular magazines written from the Orthodox viewpoint were published in English. Thousands of kits were distributed, assisting Jews in performing everything from lighting Hanukkah candles to counting the forty-nine days between Passover and Shavuot; Jewish calendars were mailed out, ostensibly as fundraising devices but also as signals that Orthodoxy was alive and well. Orthodoxy made sure that everyone learned it was not losing its young in the same proportions as the other movements. Some gains were even made in attracting newcomers to traditional piety beginning in the 1960s.

Perhaps nothing so epitomized religious continuity after the Holocaust as the emphasis on universal daily study symbolically captured by the *daf yomi* idea. Jewish people who continued to review their Talmud demonstrated that they had not been chased away from their cultural core and religious treasures by the events of the twentieth century; the more who did this, the more dramatic their cultural resistance.

Nowhere was the connection to the Holocaust more clear than in America, the new center of the Diaspora. If the European concentration of Jews had ended in the death camps, the new one would not end thus. At a gathering in Manhattan in 1975 that about four thousand attended—a number far in excess of what many believed possible thirty years before—the Mo'etzet Gedolah-Torah (Council of Torah Sages) of the American Agudah formally declared the *siyum* to be a memorial for the Six Million. That the huge hall was overflowing and the turnout included not only
survivors from among the old sages but also some of the new ones born or raised in America presumably reassured many of the future continuity of their way of life.

By 1982, as over five thousand squeezed into the Felt Forum, survivalism was evolving into an Orthodox Jewish triumphalism, a sense that “the people of the Torah were blessed with eternal life.” \(^\text{10}\) A hall usually reserved for far more profane activities of American culture was filled beyond capacity with Jews who claimed to have studied Talmud every day for seven and a half years. Here Jews showed the world that a new generation of Americans—not only wizened elders—was increasingly absorbing itself in Torah rather than being absorbed by contemporary American society.

The organizers recalled the remarks of the Klausenberger Rebbe at the last such gathering, when the rebbe “related how, when he had announced an award of $25,000 for anyone who could pass an examination on all of Shas with Tosafos [the major medieval commentary on the Talmud], he was called by a young man who said he was prepared to take the test but would need to have the questions asked in English because he knew no Yiddish!” The message was clear: the study of Talmud in the Diaspora had survived the transition to America; despite a switch from Yiddish to English, the essence remained.

Now the question was how to go “from strength to strength,” as many put it. What would be an even greater triumph? The decision was made to meet in the main arena of Madison Square Garden itself, the tabernacle of profanity. Prefigured by the 1982 crowd at Felt Forum, the 1990 gathering in the main arena had to be more than a siyum. As many involved in the planning surely recognized, this raised the stakes. Failure to gather a much larger crowd would be tantamount to conceding the weakness of Orthodoxy in America, so the siyum was meant to be a sign of triumph. Success was not a foregone conclusion; only by making it clear that Orthodox vitality itself was being celebrated could the organizers from Agudat Israel hope for a very large turnout. Seven and a half years later at the auditorium from which the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus had to be displaced and where the National
Basketball Association Playoffs were about to begin, twenty thousand Jews assembled for what the organizers claimed was "the largest gathering for Torah ever seen in the Western Hemisphere."

What follows is an ethnographic account of the event. Describing the task of ethnography and the study of cultural behavior, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss explained, "Exploration is not so much a covering of surface distance as a study in depth: a fleeting episode, a fragment of landscape or a remark overheard may provide the only means of understanding and interpreting areas which would otherwise remain barren of meaning." As a practitioner of this discipline, I am always in search of such events, of what Milton Singer called cultural dramas where one can not only see the "concentrated expression of the whole collective life" but can also find the point where it can be "readily examined by the detached observer." The *daf yomi* gathering at the Garden was such a moment of concentrated collective life when the essential character of traditionalist American Orthodoxy was performed in a cultural drama of high order.

The ethnographer's goal is "to impress his experience of what he has seen so strongly, so vividly, on his readers that they cannot doubt its veracity." To do that he must make them see what he has seen. Description is key, for "it is the visual that gives authority." "Ethnographic writing as a rule subordinates narrative to description," Mary Louise Pratt observes, but it grows far more vivid when it combines "personal narrative and objectified description." Thus, while the account that follows is interpretive, it is also narrative, because both together offer the reader a better chance to see the coherence, order, and meaning of the celebration through the ethnographer's eyes. Observing the event on the canvas of ethnographic experience and description, the reader will begin to see this Jewish group's response to America, acculturation, modernity, and the Holocaust.

**The Event**

The Jewish invasion of the Garden began with thousands of men with beards and black hats streaming along West Thirty-Fourth Street. Subway trains from Brooklyn and Queens were filled with
Orthodox Jews headed for Manhattan. Buses loaded with yeshiva students jammed the avenues and pulled up at the entrances of the Garden. Many of those coming were the sorts of people who seldom if ever came to the Garden; when they parked their cars in nearby garages, they often asked for directions to their destination. “What’s going on there tonight?” one of the attendants asked as I gave him the keys to my car. The stares on the subway, the questions by bystanders, all reinforced the feeling that this was a remarkable event.

Just before 6:00 P.M. scores of obviously Orthodox Jews milled about trying to find an extra entry ticket. Tickets for a seat on the court floor, at one hundred dollars each, had been sold out weeks in advance, and even the upper decks, reserved for the women, were full. Some people stood around chatting with friends, while others read the handbills and billboards. Printed in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, one advertised a new edition of the Talmud. Another announced a new yeshiva in a distant county where “there are 18,000 Jewish youngsters of high school age, the vast majority of whom do not know the Aleph-Beis and are bereft of Torah and Mesoras Avos [the tradition of our fathers],” a school that “needs your support to grow and expand.” Some bearded and sidelocked guardians of religion handed out fliers to the clean shaven, warning them in Hebrew and English that “according to all [rabbinic] opinions, there is an absolute prohibition to use of the Norelco Lift and Cut shaving machine or others like them, since the device contains knives that make direct contact with the skin and therefore is no different than a razor.” (Orthodox Jews knew using razors was prohibited by Jewish law.) The handbill added a phone number to call “for more information” and an appended page with essential quotations from ten prominent rabbis, all of whom forbade shavers. This was a good place to market stringent interpretations of Jewish law.

Throughout the event, the emphasis was not only on what was to happen but also on the fact that it would occur for everyone to see in the center ring of the main arena of the major capital of contemporary culture. In an immense pleasure dome, where many of the profane amusements of the contemporary world take place, the “Greatest Show on Earth” and the basketball championships were being displaced in favor of Torah. This was a miracle. How
could the *daf yomi* people, who represent a way of life so antithetical to circuses and sports events, dream of capturing the arena? That they—so often called fossils—could do it was proof, as the program put it, of the "siyata deshmaya," the help of Heaven. Only thus could the success of such an attack on contemporary hedonistic culture be explained. This event was a "kiddush ha-Shem [sanctification of God] of unparalleled dimensions" and "an effective proclamation before the eyes of the world—and, most importantly before the eyes of all Jewry—of the centrality of Torah-learning to Judaism and Jewish life." To be sure, it also took earthly power and the "aid of a major Orthodox Jewish figure in the business community" (a member of the Reichman family, an entrepreneur whose wealth was legendary and whose attachment to Orthodoxy was well known), a man who, according to gossip spread that evening, spent $150,000 to rent the Garden and five thousand more to have the smell of the circus elephants eliminated. Power and influence in the service of the tradition could, if not topple, at least temporarily neutralize the powers of hedonistic darkness; that was the message at Madison Square Garden that night.

The imagery was not lost on *Jewish Week* reporter Jonathan Mark: "The Garden traditionally hangs a banner from its ceiling proclaiming '613,' the number of victories by Knicks basketball coach Red Holzman, but on this night the packed arena understood that number to mean only the number of commandments in the Torah." This was the sanctification of the profane, a victory far greater than any ever celebrated in the Garden. Even the arena refreshment stands offered only kosher snacks for the night.

Organizers had bussed in lots of yeshiva students, including many from the more moderately Orthodox schools who were not full-time participants in *daf yomi* but were sent to bear witness to Orthodox revival. Like the rest of the crowd, they were proof, many asserted in a proverbial verse repeated throughout the evening, that "in the multitude of people is the King's glory."

For this the press, the eyes and ears of the world, had been invited as witnesses. Organizers wanted not just the parochial Jewish press but also major television stations and newspapers to pass the word everywhere. To make certain that the "right" message was reported, organizers prepared press packets for outsiders to the
world of Agudat Israel. Attached was a list of eighty cities, most in America but some in Canada, Mexico, and Great Britain, from which representatives had come: the phenomenon was not only a New York but a national, even an international, movement. Inside the folder were neatly printed English pages, their style and much of their contents decidedly in contrast to the overwhelmingly Yiddish speeches that would be heard throughout the evening. In terms that outsiders could grasp, organizers provided “suggested angles for stories” that were supposed to help outsiders comprehend the meaning of the event. Under the heading of “human interest” were suggestions to stress the “unending quest for knowledge” that was “not restricted to rabbis and full-time scholars” and a story on the “people who do daf yomi,” including those who have done it for more than one cycle. Another sheet explained that the daf yomi exemplifies the “living transmission of Jewish law and practice” and that “it was followed by an estimated one million Jews before the Holocaust and is enjoying tremendous resurgence today.” Under the heading of “sociological perspectives” was the suggestion that “people who study [Talmud] with each other for years form unique relationships [and become] virtual family members sharing in life’s problems, sorrows, and joys” and that daf yomi serves as the “instant connection anywhere in the world” when participants discover one other. The publicists suggested that daf yomi could also form an “inter-generational link.” Finally, there were remarks about the ways in which modern technology was enlisted in daf yomi as well as a suggestion that the press write about the “central role of Torah study in Judaism” and its capacity to play a part in “shaping the Jewish mind.”

Were these assertions arrived at only for a press release or were they part of the event itself? At the very least they were declarations of faith and reflections of a self-conscious awareness by the organizers that to be resolutely traditional and Orthodox in an age that appeared fashioned from other stuff was no small matter. Telling the story in the terms that outsiders could understand and perhaps could sympathize with was part of the effort to thrust tradition into active contention with modernity, while utilizing the mechanisms of the very modernity against which it strived. The assembly at Madison Square Garden was, therefore, from its
inception an act freighted with meaning. It offered those who came together an opportunity to experience what anthropologists call a major “cultural performance,” a chance for the assembled to make “visible, audible, and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments, and psychological dispositions that cannot [otherwise] directly be perceived” but that are held in common by all those who shared the *daf yomi* experience. Attendance was an emblematic deed meant to signal clearly, if not to establish, the participants’ identification with the process of Jewish study as the permanent center of Jewish life, evoking “unifying sentiments of loyalty and identity.” After seven and a half years, the gathering at the Garden would allow these people who had studied alone or in small groups, who had taken time out of the daily humdrum of profane existence, to feel and show themselves to be a part of a mass movement and living Jewish counterculture.

For all the general celebration of traditionalist Jewish culture, the evening left the participants with a great deal of room to stamp this triumph with their own template of what it meant to be a traditionalist. It allowed them to reinterpret the meaning of what they were doing according to their various needs, which they did, seizing upon their incipient or developed differences and displaying continuity with the past and differentiation in the present. Under the blanket of black suits and white shirts and beneath the broad umbrella of their wide-brimmed hats, the various groups in attendance displayed many colors.

*The Spectacle*

As each ticket holder entered the arena, he was given a copy of a souvenir booklet that outlined the program for the evening. The crux was the collective review of the final lines of the last tractate *Niddah* and the beginning of the first *Berachot* that together would mark the conclusion and commencement of the ceaseless cycle of Torah review characterized as an endless attachment to Jewish ways. The formal program also included recitation of psalms, speeches and sermons, songs and prayers to shape the event so that it resonated with the sacred and momentous. Madison Square
Garden would be made into a sanctuary larger than any in American Jewry.

Around all this activity was the informal but no less important matter of seeing and being seen, walking about, conversing and commenting—in short, the performance of what might be called “active assembly” that turned the giant amphitheater into a meeting room and inserted intimacy into it. This also made outsiders feel even more alien. For some who came only as observers—as was the case with many of the members of the press—the result was awe and estrangement. One Jewish reporter, writing for a general circulation newspaper, said that as he looked around him he felt as if he had entered a place where everyone came from somewhere else. He was right, of course. They came from a world of different values and alternative explanations. They had snatched their adherents from the world to which the reporter reported, and they wanted that story told.

Upon entering the arena, many participants rented little transmitters and headphones to be used for the simultaneous translations of the Yiddish, Hebrew, and English speeches to come. As people found their seats, shepherded into place by the many ushers who were part of the arena regular staff—personnel who seemed alternately bemused and overwhelmed by this odd crowd so unlike the Garden regulars—they seemed ready for the game that was about to begin.19

The Game

If tonight’s proceedings had been a basketball game, the start would have probably come with an introduction of the players and the singing of the national anthem. That is the way tournaments that normally take place in Madison Square Garden begin. Yet even though the siyum was a game of an altogether different order, there was something strangely parallel in the way it started out. Perhaps it was the venue: place does have a way of shaping behavior and framing meaning. Seated in front of a phalanx of about 150 dignitaries and arranged in a line along an extended dais placed at midcourt and festooned with a long banner were the great rabbis and sages
who would deliver the speeches. Although each of these luminaries would have his name and affiliation flashed in bright lights on the scoreboard when he stood to speak, the program listed them as well.

I asked the man seated next to me, an editor of one of the Agudat Israel publications, how it had been decided who would speak and when. "With great difficulty and after many hours of discussion," he replied with a grin. If the details of the order were not worth explaining to an outsider, it was necessary to point out that there was indeed an order. Tonight's game was neither random nor unplanned. The figures who would speak were chosen not only because of who they were but also because of what they symbolized.

First was Zvi Spira, the Bluzhover Rebbe, the recently ascended incumbent of this hasidic chair. Why the Bluzhover? To remain an important organization of the traditionalist Orthodox world, Agudat Israel needed to include within it representatives of the hasidic community, because hasidim made up perhaps the largest segment of those who these days maintained Jewish tradition. However, over the years, many of the hasidim had turned away from the organization, seeing it as too close to cultures they spurned. Besides, hasidim by and large did not need umbrella organizations like the Agudah, since each court was its own organization. This was certainly true in America, where hasidim found funds and support without the intervention of Agudat Israel. Here appeals by hasidic groups could be made directly to the Jewish Federations or to the local legislative or city council representatives.

To show that it still included all Orthodox Jews, the American Agudat Israel, however, still needed prominent hasidim at its celebration. Among its stars was the Bluzhover Rebbe, a special sort of hasid. When Zvi Spira's father, the previous rebbe, came to America as a refugee from Galicia and a victim of the war, he was—like many other Galician hasidic leaders who had been spared the fate of less fortunate hasidim who had not survived—a broken man without many followers. Rabbi Spira had, however, reestablished himself here, building a curious following. Many of his new American hasidim were people who had in practice left behind the hasidic way of life, though they retained a nostalgic, compartmentalized attachment to it. Others were Jews who had never really been hasidim but who, especially after the destruction of European
Jewry, felt a vague affinity for the idea of "rebbe." These orphans of history became part-time hasidim, people who lived and worked in contemporary America but yearned for a romanticized hasidic world that existed as much in their imaginative reconstruction of the past as it did in reality. The Bluzhover Rebbe became a tzaddik for these people, who could be hasidic vicariously through him. Although his supporters were not full-fledged hasidim, they were devoted to him, and no one doubted that he himself was a full-fledged hasid. When he died in 1989, he was the oldest American rebbe; no one questioned his legitimacy—even the New York Times called him the oldest "hasidic rebbe in America." He had been part of the Agudah. This evening his son stood in his place. To fill the void left by his father's passing, he would try to offer everyone a chance to feel like a hasid, if only for the few moments that he led them in the recitation of the Psalms, a kind of opening anthem.

Next was Chaskel Besser, chairman of the Daf Yomi Commission and an official of Agudat Israel. Besser represented the organization and would preside over the proceedings, introducing each of the speakers. He was the master of ceremony.

Rabbi Moshe Neuschloss, one of the oldest sages in America and a Holocaust survivor, would offer divrei brocha, "words of blessing." (It was not incidental that the program, printed in English, referred to these remarks and the others in Hebrew terms, in the language of the Jews rather than the verbal envelopes of the Gentiles.) Representing a convergence of various populations, Neuschloss, by virtue of his age and origins, stood for continuity with the prewar world of European Jewry. As a halakhic authority, a rosh yeshiva and decisor of Jewish law, a man who was a member of the Skver hasidic community, a group affiliated with some of the most insular and rejectionist elements in Orthodoxy, he could be placed at the crossroads between legalistic rabbinism and pietistic hasidism. Finally, as someone who reestablished a yeshiva in America after the war, he represented the phoenixlike resurgence of traditional Jewry.

Yosef Harari Raful, rabbinic head of the Ateret Torah Yeshiva, was the lone representative among the evening's speakers of the non-Ashkenazi Orthodox Jewish world. To the untrained eye, the bearded Raful in black coat and fedora looked like all the other
sages on the podium; his years of education in Ashkenazi yeshivas had obviously cast him in their image. But Raful spoke in Hebrew, the only person to do so among the speakers, most of whom used Yiddish. His presence was meant to demonstrate that East and West were brought together this evening. To be sure, Raful was now in America and that even further mixed his identity and affiliations. In the Orthodox world, especially this evening, the melting pot was not an irrelevant metaphor.

Yaakov Perlow, the Novominsker Rebbe, was another of the ambiguous hasidic rebbes. There were few if any Novominsker hasidim, making him a rebbe not very different from the Bluzhover. As one of the relatively few hasidim in the crowd explained to me in Yiddish: “Er is nisht kayn rebbe” (he is not a rebbe). Perlow was American born, a graduate of the Chaim Berlin Yeshiva, an institution far from being hasidic. He was said as well to be a product of Brooklyn College and had studied at the bastion of Litvak (Lithuanian Jewish) thinking, Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey. For years Perlow had been affiliated with a yeshiva in New York City’s Washington Heights that the German Neo-Orthodox community—a far cry from hasidim—had established. Perlow was an amalgam of opposites. For the Agudah, he was the right blend, an exemplar of what American traditionalist Orthodoxy had wrought: a sage who was trained in a Lithuanian-style yeshiva who now headed such an institution but who called himself a rebbe even though he had few hasidim. He sat on the Mo’etzet Gedolay Ha-Torah, the Council of Torah Sages, which itself was a blend of blends. Yet unlike earlier sages whose positions on the council were reflections of their influence, Perlow’s influence, many claimed, came from the fact of his being on the council.

Next was Rabbi Simon Schwab, for many years the rabbi of the Washington Heights Orthodox community, Kahal Adath Jeshurun. As emissary of this remnant of German Neo-Orthodoxy and now emeritus, Schwab was one of the last links in a chain that began with Samson Raphael Hirsch and his son-in-law Solomon Breuer, a cofounder of Agudat Israel. A native of Germany, product of Lithuanian yeshivas, and survivor of the Nazi terror, Schwab was a synthesis like so many of the new Americans. He was also the quintessential community rabbi. From his first post in Ichen-
hausen, Germany, as well as during more than twenty years of service in Baltimore and finally in Washington Heights, he had led Jewish laity. Schwab's position on the program was to play the role of a bridge connecting the yeshiva and the lay community. The only congregational rabbi to speak this evening, he represented those for whom the primary nexus was the community synagogue. Schwab's would be the first full-blown address, really a sermon. He spoke in English.

The other formal address this evening came from Rabbi Elya Svei, a leading member of the American Mo'etzet Gedolay ha-Torah, a celebrated rosh yeshiva. If Schwab stood for the lay congregation, Svei embodied the rabbinical elite in the American incarnation of the Old World Lithuanian yeshivas. These were people who studied more than a page of Talmud each day and “meditated on it day and night.” Born in Lithuania, Svei came as a child to the United States. Enrolled in American yeshivas, he was most prominently a product of Beth Medrash Govoha, the successor institution of the famed Slobodka Yeshiva. Even though (or perhaps because) he was a product of America and its putatively latitudinarian ways, Svei had become known as a zealot of the yeshiva world.22 The Philadelphia Yeshiva, a sister institution of Lakewood, which he cofounded about thirty years earlier, was renowned as uncompromising in its religious demands on its students.23 Svei was an indigenous gadol, an exemplar of what could be fashioned in America's yeshivas, proof that this postwar new Jewish America was not a Torah wilderness.

Following the two addresses from the rabbis came two speakers from dissimilar Orthodox worlds. Selected presumably for their ability to stir the assembled to an emotional pitch, their role was to offer what the program called Divrei Chizuk, “words of encouragement and support.” First was Osher Greenfeld, a rabbinic leader of the Vizhnitz hasidim posted from his native Israel to the Vizhnitz community in Montreal. While Montreal was not a major center of Vizhnitter hasidim, whose two primary communities were in Bene-Brak, Israel, and Spring Valley, New York, there was no question about Vizhnitz representing a major hasidic dynasty. Greenfeld, however, was on the program not only because of those affiliations but also because, as a press release put it, “through his outstanding
leadership and dynamic oratory he has become known as one of the bright lights of a new generation of Torah scholars here in North America."

For those who could not get fired up by Greenfeld’s Yiddish remarks, there was the tall and imposing young Aharon Dunner from Great Britain. A dayan (rabbinic judge) for the religiously right-wing Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, the Hisachdus Kehillos Ha-Haredim, in Britain, as well as a congregational rabbi in the Tottenham section of London, he was also a product of postwar yeshiva Orthodoxy. Studying in England and later at Ponovezh in Israel, he had undergone Lithuanian yeshiva indoctrination and now was back serving the Jews from whom he had sprung. Like Greenfeld, Dunner was supposed to be a young and inspiring speaker, a representative of uncompromising Orthodoxy’s capacity to regenerate itself. He spoke in English.

Finally, there would be those who would lead the prayers and offer songs. Indeed, while the focus was on text and the program was overwhelmingly composed of speeches, the prayers and songs seemed to move the crowd most. There would be no national anthems to start the game; these were “golus Jews,” persons who had made exile a central existential element of their being and collective consciousness. America was at best a temporary refuge and Israel an unfulfilled hope. This was a crowd celebrating a refusal to acculturate, people who knew that “achieving a sense of golus in a world of freedom is extraordinarily difficult, for golus is not merely a set of observances but a state of mind [that] demands from every Jew not only a sense of estrangement from the secular world in which he lives but also a constant sense of unfulfilledness.” No singing of the “Star Spangled Banner” or “Hatikvah” would change that; their sole anthem was prayer and study, which was why they began the evening with a mass recitation of the afternoon prayers, mincha, and ended with ma’ariv, evening prayers. With more than twenty thousand people frozen into place, the sports arena was transformed into possibly the largest synagogue in America.

So overwhelmed were some that they saw the occasion in prophetic terms. A participant from Brooklyn, Meir Winkler, would later write that, as he ended his prayer and readied himself for what would follow, he sensed he was a witness to a "partial fulfillment"
of the Talmud's interpretation (B.T. Megillah 6a) of the prophet Zechariah's promise that "in a foreign land, Judah shall be like a chieftain (7:6)," meaning that in the theaters and circus "arenas of the Gentiles . . . the princes of the Jewish people will eventually teach Torah to the multitudes."25

The Start of the Play

Because many people were still trickling into the hall during mincha, something more was needed to galvanize the crowd. That something was the Bluzhover Rebbe's impassioned recitation of two chapters of Psalms, echoed verse by verse by the multitude. Chapters 20 and 130 were both affirmations of trust in the power of the Almighty and pleas for salvation and redemption. Both psalms were part of the liturgy, the first recited near the close of the daily morning prayers and the second before the open ark during the Days of Awe, from Rosh Ha-Shanah through Yom Kippur. Together they could elicit the diurnal and extraordinary features of prayer.

As the Bluzhover Rebbe's voice broke over several verses that the scoreboard proclaimed were being intoned for the sake of Russian Jews in great peril, many in the crowd were visibly moved. No more holocausts. Everyone seemed to repeat the words, even echoing the leader's cadences and melody. As they did, they abandoned the passive role of observers and were drawn into an active role in the proceedings.

Now came the speeches. Setting a tone that the throng should share in a full awareness of the gathering as continuity with the past, Rabbi Besser reminded them that they were engaged in an extension of what the Jews had encountered at Sinai, a historic demonstration of Jews' acceptance of God's Torah. "Just as those who stood at Sinai for the honor of the Torah, so we do it honor here." We were heirs of the ancients and guarantors of the future, links in an unbroken chain. Our steadfastness would lead to the ultimate reward: the redemption. This was not simply another conclave; it was an act encircled in messianic hope. Besser concluded, "May we have the privilege of having the Messiah conclude the next Shas."

For the aged rabbi from Skver, Moshe Neuschloss, it was im-
Important to bear witness that from where he came, daf yomi was a part of daily hasidic life, with many filling the “cracks in their day with study of the day’s daf in small impromptu groups, during the break before tekias shofar [the blowing of the shofar] on Rosh Hashanah, in the few minutes before the Rebbe joins them.” Rabbi Raful reminded the crowd of its existential dilemma: “We stagger about in the exile.” For Rabbi Perlow, Torah study transformed Jewish passivity as victims and exiles into activity of a higher order. If devotion had been demonstrated by Jews in their service at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, now that “we do not have the Temple, we still do have the Torah.” After the catastrophe of destruction, it became “the great monument of the Jewish people’s survival in exile.”26 And there was a more recent destruction: the Holocaust, the latest of the never-ending catastrophes to befall the Jews. The turn toward Jewish study, Perlow asserted, had signaled a refusal to accept the finality of Jewish destruction. We were, as Perlow said once before, “a nation of orphans” who could find solace “only in God and his Torah.”27

Perlow was assigned the task of completing the last lines of the Talmud. He briskly read through the text, a copy of which was in the program. This was a symbolic rather than an intensive, focused review. In a few moments he reached the last statement in the text, which reaffirms the religious logic that stands behind daf yomi: “Everyone who reviews halakhot [Jewish laws] each day has secured for himself the World to Come.” “Mazal tov,” he concluded. Congratulations echoed through the hall.

Slightly stooped, Simon Schwab, a frail and aging man, sat down in front of the microphone. He looked as if he might barely be able to speak, but his voice thundered. According to him, Torah study and this siyum were nothing less than an opportunity for each person to accept the Torah again from on high. Schwab asked rhetorically, where was this happening? He answered, scanning the sea of faces as if caught up in the wonder of it all, “Right here in the heart of New York City.” The Torah was being received and honored in a place where no one could have believed it possible. Who was responsible? Schwab, community rabbi and champion of the lay learner, suggested that those who engaged in study not as a vocation (as yeshiva people did) but for the sake of “Torah leshma,
for no ulterior motives,” were the heroes. When we recite the Talmud, Schwab told the crowd, we are not quoting someone who lived long ago; whenever we repeat their words and follow their logic, the disputants “are still having that discussion.” More than just reading literature, this was personal engagement with a text. “The Mishnah and Gemara are really talking to me.” The words are “going right into our hearts.”

Schwab told his audience that once he encountered a student from one of those “other seminaries,” schools that did not share this relationship with the texts and tradition, places corroded by acculturative tendencies. Schwab asked the student what he was learning. “I am doing Baba Kama,” the young man answered, naming one of the most popular of the Talmud’s tractates. “I said to him,” Schwab continued, sounding as if he were a hasidic rebbe repeating a parable, “I have never done Baba Kama, but it has been doing something to me for a long time.” The crowd loved it.

What could the *daf yomi* do to us, who studied it properly and faithfully without ulterior motives? It could bring us closer to one another. “The *daf yomi* can remove the mekhitza [partition] that divides one Jew from another.” Those who review the same text and come together to celebrate their common experience create a commonality. There are no orphans, no lonely people, among the *daf yomi* crowd. Booming applause filled the arena.

If Simon Schwab played the role of community rabbi, Elyia Svei took the part of rosh yeshiva. He opened his Yiddish address by asking, who was really responsible for tonight’s celebration? As he saw it, the true progenitor of Torah in America was his teacher, the late Rabbi Aaron Kotler, a pioneer and visionary who had seen the possibilities for Jewish study in this alien land. What Rabbi Kotler taught us—Svei shouted so loudly that his words often became distorted over the loudspeakers—was that while *daf yomi* was a fine thing, it was not enough. The message was clear. Laymen who satisfied themselves with little more than a brush with Talmud were not truly doing what the Jew was called upon to do by God. Only those who followed Rabbi Kotler and the rest of the yeshiva into a dedicated life of Jewish study were fully living up to their obligations as Jews.

Svei spoke for too long or perhaps his message was not one that
this hall, filled with laymen, happy with their daf yomi experience, wanted to hear. Restless, offering misplaced applause or shouting “amen” at the end of every sentence, the audience began to signal that he should end. Svei subtly shifted his message to one that everyone could accept. The Torah had been given to this generation in flames, but the survivors of the Holocaust—by now all those in the hall could see themselves either as real or symbolic survivors—had created the possibility that exile could be an honor for God. They had done that by their activities on behalf of Torah. This was their consolation.

Those who tried to make sense of the suffering in the Holocaust so often asked, what of the silence of heaven during the horrors? Svei confronted the question implicitly with the best answer a man whose entire life is one of Torah study could give. The courage of those who steadfastly reviewed Torah under the most adverse conditions, risking torture and death, was indeed repaid by God. God had not been silent. “When a person prays,” Svei informed his audience, “he talks to God, but when he reviews Torah, God talks to him.”

As if on cue, the focus shifted to a black-hatted singing group, the Friends of Regesh, who began to chant in Hebrew in four-part harmony:

Look down from the heavens and see,
For we've suffered scorn and contempt from other nations,
Thought to be like lambs to the slaughter,
To be slain and destroyed,
Assailed and shamed.
And yet, despite all this,
Your name we have not forgotten,
Please, forget us not!

The words, carefully selected from the immense Jewish canon, delicately mingled a plea for divine attention and its consolations for a person with a special relationship with God along with resentments connected to the memory of Jewish suffering. “Like lambs to the slaughter” was the phrase often used to refer to the victims of the Holocaust, especially the most religious among them. Sung to a plaintive tune in a minor key, these lines from the morning prayers resonated Scripture from Isaiah to the Psalms, and reminded those
present of the losses mourned this evening, ending with the call to God to look down upon those people who had remained faithful to Him.

For those who could read between the lines, there was something else, perhaps, embedded in this song. Not only had other nations looked upon these Jews with scorn and derision. Had not other Jews also looked down with contempt on those who had remained faithful when God turned away? Had not many of the Zionist pioneers, the warriors, accused the Orthodox Jews, who had so disproportionately been casualties of the Holocaust, of having acted too much like “lambs to the slaughter”? These Jews, who were like goyim, would now have to pay attention. Those here would not be forgotten. The last verse was repeated again and again.

Several hours had passed and the crowd was getting fidgety. A number of the day-school students in the upper decks, brought by their Talmud teachers to witness the evening’s celebration, had already begun to leave. They were unmoved by the long speeches in a Yiddish few of them understood and that fewer chose to follow over their headphones. For them, the sea of black and white was largely foreign waters. The proceedings were already far too long for those who had come directly from a full day at school and had missed supper. This, they discovered, was not really their party.

But for Osher Greenfeld of Vizhnitz, the party was not yet over. With all the passion he could muster, he picked up on the songs sung by the Friends of Regesh and assured everyone that they could not imagine what an impression this evening and all that had led up to it made in Heaven. It remained for Aharon Dunner of London to fire up the congregation again for a final expression of solidarity and faith. He told stories of the rabbis that repeated the message that the only way to keep the faith was with constancy. Each day and each page had its appointed hour. “You think you will catch up what you have missed?” he asked, and answered in his British Yinglish, “You will never catch it up.”

It was time to begin the penultimate part of the evening’s formal play: the opening of the first volume of the Talmud, the tractate dealing with the proper hour for reciting the Shema, the testament of faith the Jew must repeat morning and night. Elya Fisher, a Gerrer hasid and head of its kollel, would perform the task, but first
he reminded his listeners how the study of these texts protected them from the corrosive influences of America. It was a message characteristic of Ger, which had always emphasized scholarship and concern about the offensive temptations of lust that surrounded all those who made their way into the world outside the four cubits of Jewish life. “We here in America,” Fisher warned, “have to protect and insulate ourselves from the corruption and sensuality of the world.” How could one be so protected if not by the act of Talmudic review? The person in the subway who protects himself from the assault against his eyes by looking into his volume of Talmud, the constant students of Talmud who keep themselves from becoming otherwise engaged—all were bringing about a “spiritual sunrise.” And with a new day dawning on Jewry came the opening words of the Talmud, whose first Mishna recalled that the evening Shema must be said before the twinkling of the dawn.

The Songs

Since the Bluzhover Rebbe’s responsive readings, the assembled had remained passive. Announcement was made repeatedly that the evening would conclude with “one united minyan for ma’ariv,” the evening prayers. Leading into those prayers was the recital of Kaddish, repeated “for the six million kedoshim (sanctified).” Everyone stood. Then, in mournful tones, Cantor David Werdyger sang El Mole Rachamim, the traditional paean for the souls of the departed. Finally, Heshy Grunberger, a Holocaust survivor, stepped to the microphone and led the crowd in the repeated singing of Ani ma’amín, “I believe,” the credo of faith in the Messiah’s coming. The tune was one that had come to be associated with the Six Million; survivors had reported having heard the melody and words sung softly in the barracks at night. It was the faithful believers’ anthem of their survival in the death camps.

At first few voices joined Grunberger’s. But as he repeated the song three, five, seven times, the number of voices grew. By the end, nearly everyone seemed to be singing and a united mass of humanity swayed with the slow beat. Long after people would forget the speeches, they would recall the spine-chilling experience
of the repeated singing of this testament of faith in a final redemption. As one participant put it, “That was definitely the highlight.”

The blessing of ma’ariv was a coda to the song, a long, hushed sigh ending with the silence of the Amidah prayer, as a forest of thousands swayed and bowed silently toward Jerusalem. Then it was over.

The Aftermath and Conclusion

The thousands who had stayed until the end of the prayers streamed toward the exits, pressing into one another. Being swept up in this mass of humanity made the experience of being one with all those present vivid and palpable. Many found it hard to depart, and they lingered in groups on the street, touching and being touched. Others climbed onto the more than one hundred buses ringing the arena. Dozens of police on foot and horseback controlled traffic, while passersby on the busy street watched in wonder. For the contra-acculturative Orthodox Jews once thought to be a disappearing breed in America, the stares were sweet, for they reflected a realization by the world that “we are here and there are many of us.”

The daf yomi and its celebration had transformed Talmud study from an activity with an inherent meaning that flows from scholarship itself and from meditation on the text into an act whose primary importance was symbolic. What was specifically being studied was not in itself important either this evening or at any other point in this page-a-day program. Content was secondary to the symbolic fact that something was being studied and that the entire Talmud had been reviewed nonstop. Substance became symbol.

If the daf yomi was the symbol of successful contra-acculturation and the triumph of religion in the profane palace, one victory did not necessarily mean the culture war was won. No image captured this better than something that caught my eye as, walking away, I took one last look back at the Garden. There, over the entrance, was a large electronic marquee announcing the night’s event. In flashing lights were the words, WELCOME TO THE 9TH SIYUM HA-SHAS OF THE DAF YOMI. This was the glory of the King of Kings. On top of
the sign were bigger, brighter lights that would remain lit no matter who took over the Garden for the night. They spelled out BUD, KING OF BEERS.

Who was the real king in America? Which culture would win the war here: daf yomi or Bud? Had the celebrants who took time out for a page of Talmud and their King triumphed by taking over Madison Square Garden, or, in the end, would those who took time out for a Bud, the king of beers, swallow the former, turning tonight into just one more ethnic event on the calendar of New York extravaganzas? The traditionalist Orthodox Jews believed they and their King would ultimately win in the place where Bud was king. Only time would tell which king would have the final glory in this contest of cultures.

Notes

2. Stephen Sharot suggests that many of those first-generation immigrants to America that in the three-generations hypothesis have been labeled Orthodox were not really that observant—that is why they were willing to come to the New World—and that indeed much of Orthodoxy and its institutional life is a post-Holocaust phenomenon in America. See Steven Sharot, “The Three-Generations Thesis and American Jews,” British Journal of Sociology 24 (1973): 151–64.
6. As William Helmreich has catalogued these schools in America, they included places like the Telshvil Yeshiva, founded in Cleveland in 1941; Beth Joseph, founded in Brooklyn in 1941; Beth Medrash Gevoha, founded in Lakewood, New Jersey, in 1943; Chofetz Chaim, founded in New York in 1944; the Mirrer Yeshiva, founded in Brooklyn in 1946; Beth Ha-Talmud, also founded in Brooklyn in 1949; and the Philadelphia Yeshiva, founded in 1953.

8. Ibid., 13–14. There has also been a move to encourage women to begin a modified form of *daf yomi* study (*Jewish Observer*, May 1990).


15. Program, 16.

16. Program, 15. Whether the gossip was true or not, it was part of the spectacle, for, like everything else, it attested to the immensity of the event.


19. See Kenneth Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior* (Glendale, Calif.: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1955), 44–48. Pike makes use of the terms "spectacle" and "game" to organize his analysis of public events such as that which I am considering here. Yet while Pike uses these terms as metaphor, the events in Madison Square Garden seemed to make metaphor and reality merge.


21. Even though he was by this time the voice of German Orthodoxy, Schwab had not always been accepted in Washington Heights as a genuine heir of the German tradition. When first proposed for the post,
he was opposed by some of the Kahal Adath Jeshurun leaders who felt that a graduate of Lithuanian yeshivas could not fully share in their communal ethos. To accept him as the moreh d’asroh (community leader) seemed less than ideal. But the Breuer family, among others, endorsed Schwab’s candidacy and that carried the day. They argued that, after the war, the Lithuanian-German divergences seemed moot. Indeed, a pious scholar and sensitive man, Schwab, in time, came to represent successfully everything the Orthodox Jews of Washington Heights and Agudat Israel believed themselves to be.

22. William Helmreich discusses the “right-wing” and haredi character of Svei, among others, in *The World of the Yeshiva*, 318.


28. For an analysis of the cultural meaning of this practice, see Samuel C. Heilman, *People of the Book*. 