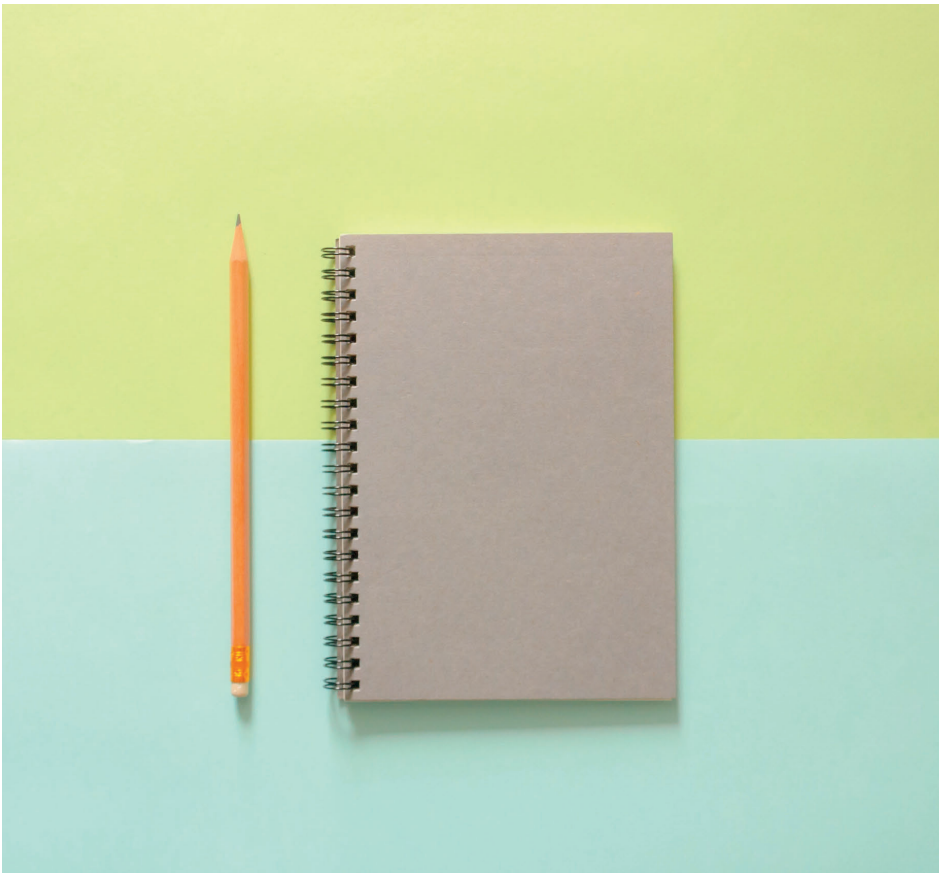
GALERIE D'OUTREMONT

EDUCATIONAL BOOKLET

Texts by Jessica Roda



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The transliteration of Hebrew terms follows
the usual standards in English and French.

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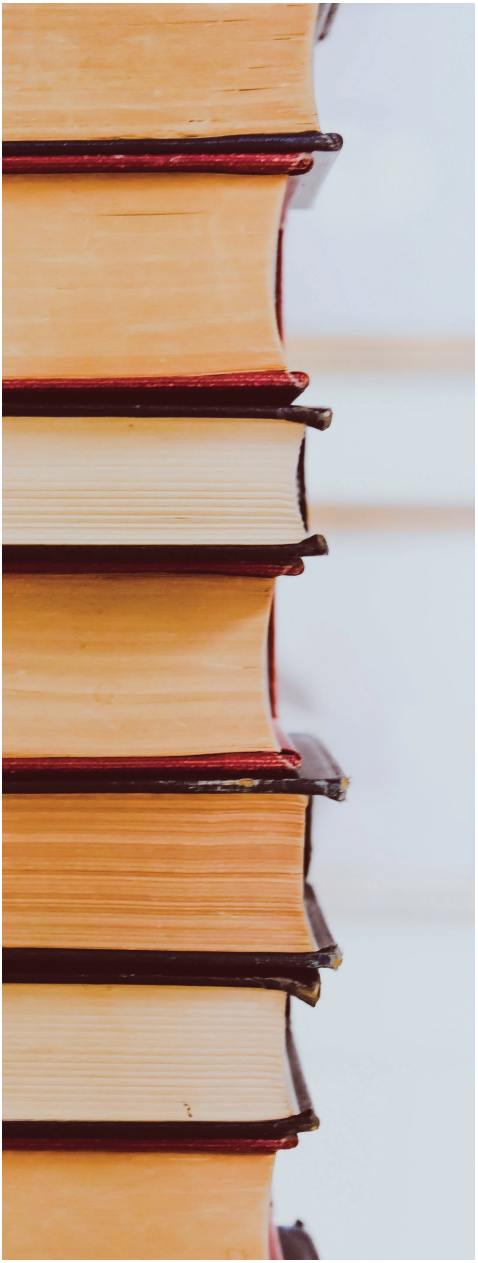

Context

Pilgrimages and Holocaust

Throughout the history of their movement, Hasidic Jews in Eastern Europe established a tradition of pilgrimages that is distinct from mainstream Jewish pilgrimages. These Hasidic pilgrimages take place at the former of residence and at the graves of deceased *rebbes*. They are made mainly by men on major Jewish holidays or on the anniversary of a *rebbe*'s death (*Yahrzeit*).

After the Second World War, when Eastern Europe fell under Communist rule and the surviving Hasidic Jews of the Holocaust were mainly in Israel and North America, pilgrimages were restricted and sometimes banned. It was only after the collapse of Communism that the tradition was revived and is now linked to a shattered past that some cherish and are trying to revive.

Today, Hasidic Jews sometimes visit Holocaust memorials during these pilgrimages. Although the vast majority of them are descendants of survivors, visiting the camps is not their main purpose. When they go to Poland to meet their spiritual leaders, who are buried there and who gave birth to their movement, they sometimes make a detour to the death camps to remind us that they have succeeded in commemorating this devastating past.

The place of women in the public space and the concept of tzniut

The Hasidic Jewish world is dictated by a strict separation of the sexes. Socialization between men and women outside the family is very limited. According to this way of life, gender roles are clearly defined, especially with regard to the occupation of what is considered public and private space. Male and female behaviour in relation to space is conditioned by the concept of *tzniut* (pronounced *tznius* by Hasidim), often translated as modesty or discretion. *Tzniut* is understood as a set of practices of modesty and discretion that are reinterpreted over time and according to the environment. It focuses on the shaping of bodies – young and old – into a ritualized and normative performance of self and gender that changes according to the intimacy or exposure of the performance of self.

The concept has historically applied to both men and women, but is now much more prevalent among women. For the latter, the conventions of *tznius* in the Hasidic world have resulted in the very rare presence of women as public figures. Furthermore, the exposing of women's faces and bodies remains exclusively confined to women's public and private spaces. As a result, very few photographs of Hasidic women are available to the general public.

Terms

Bris

The *bris* is the Yiddish name given to the *brit milah*, the Jewish ritual of circumcision. The ritual is performed eight days after the birth of a boy by a *mohel* (a specialist trained to perform circumcision according to Jewish customs), and is followed by a festive meal. This practice is a central commandment in the Torah (Genesis 17:10-14) in which God commands Abraham and his male descendants to perform circumcision as a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Chuppah and Kallah

Jewish weddings are celebrated under the bridal canopy, the *chuppah*. The *chuppah* is made of a sheet, cloth or *tallit* (prayer shawl), spread out or supported by four pillars, and is open at all four corners. It symbolizes the home that the couple will have to build. In the Hasidic world, it is customary to perform the ceremony entirely outdoors, where the *chuppah* will be stretched under the sky. Under the *chuppah* are the *kallah* (the bride) and the *chatan* (groom), as well as the rabbi and close family members of the bride and groom.

Hanukkah

Hanukkah (Festival of Lights) is a post-biblical holiday celebrated between late November and December (25 kislev). It commemorates the victory of the recovery of Judaism over forced assimilation by the king of the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus IV. For eight days, at nightfall, candles or small oil lamps are lit on the *chanukiah*, a nine-branched candelabrum. The purpose of this lighting is to proclaim the miracle of the cruse of oil that burned for eight days instead of one. It is customary to place the *chanukiah* in a place where it can be seen from outdoors.

Havdalah

Havdalah (Hebrew for "separation") is the ritual of separation between *Shabbat* (*Sabbath*) and the week, marking the end of *Shabbat*. The ritual takes place after sundown on Saturday night and features the blessing of a cup of wine, spices and a braided candle. *Havdalah* is celebrated at home, with family or a small group, and is accompanied by songs and prayers.

Terms

Lag Ba'omer

Lag Ba'omer (literally means the "33rd day of the Omer") is a Jewish holiday institutionalized by the rabbis, usually observed in May (18 iyar). The holiday is first mentioned in rabbinic literature associated with Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, legendary author of the Zohar (a mystical text important to Hasidic Jews), and is associated with the anniversary of his death and the celebration of the Zohar. The holiday celebrates a break in the Omer (the countdown from the second night of Passover to the holiday of *Shavuot*) and includes the holding of weddings, lighting of bonfires and cutting of hair.

Megillah

The *Megillah* is a tractate of the *Mishnah* (the first collection of Jewish oral law), the main theme of which is the reading of the Book of Esther on the Feast of Purim. The term *Megillah* is used to refer to the Book of Esther, which tells the story of Queen Esther. Esther saved the Jews from annihilation at the hands of the Persian king Achashverosh and his vizier Haman. The *Megillah* is read in the synagogue during the festival of Purim.

Peyot

Peyot are strands of hair worn on the sides of the head that some observant Jewish men, including Hasidic Jews, allow to grow. Depending on the community, the hair is cut short or shaved off the entire head except for the *peyot*. Boys get their hair cut at the age of three in a ceremony called *upsherin* in Yiddish, *halaka* in Hebrew.

This tradition comes from the rabbinic interpretation of the verse of Leviticus 19:27: “You must not cut off the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.”

Purim

Celebrated between February and March (14th day of adar), Purim commemorates the miraculous deliverance of the Persian Jews from Haman’s plot to exterminate them in the Persian Empire during the reign of Ahasuerus, as described in the Book of Esther. The holiday is seen as an occasion to rejoice in the survival of the Jewish people and to celebrate the victory over oppression. It is customary to give to the needy, send food parcels (*Mishloah manot*), read the Book of Esther (*Megillah*), wear masks and eat a celebratory meal with alcohol. The meal must be different from a normal meal, with elaborate, often meat-based dishes. The entire feast is punctuated by prayers and songs.

— *Terms*

Rebbe/Rabbi

Rebbe means “rabbi” in Yiddish, but in Hasidic communities the term is used to refer to a spiritual and religious inspirational figure, and in some contexts the leader of a particular dynasty. He is distinguished from the rabbi by his status and descent from the founding ancestors of the Hasidic movement and his dynasty. We speak of several Hasidic communities to refer to the many dynasties, each of which has its own *rebbe*. The *rebbe* and the rabbi both have a deep knowledge of the Talmud and Torah and can make decisions or rulings on matters of Jewish law (*Halakha*), but the *rebbe* is recognized as a *Tzadik* (righteous man).

Sefer Torah

A *Sefer Torah* is a handwritten copy of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) on parchment made from the skin of a kosher animal. The writing is done with pen and ink by a scribe (*sofer*). As a sacred object, it is covered with ornaments and protective velvet and kept in the *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark), a cabinet considered the holiest place in the synagogue. It is taken out of the *Aron Kodesh* for its weekly reading on *Shabbat*, as well as for certain holidays and celebrations. The presentation of a new *Sefer Torah* to the synagogue is celebrated with songs, dances and prayers.

Shabbat

Shabbat is a day of rest, prayer and reflection that commemorates the seventh day of creation. It is observed every week, from Friday evening to Saturday evening. For observant Jews, including Hasidic Jews, many rules apply, including the obligation not to work. It is customary to celebrate with a festive meal, to go to synagogue, and to visit family and friends. Married Hasidic men wear a *shtreimel* (fur hat), women wear elegant clothing, and white is worn to signify the separation between the *Shabbat* and the rest of the week.

Shacharit and Maariv

Shacharit and *Maariv* are part of the daily prayers and services observed by observant Jews throughout the week. *Shacharit* is the morning service and is seen as a way of starting the day with a connection to God, while *Maariv* closes the day with the same spiritual union. These services include prayers, Torah readings and psalms. In addition to *Shacharit* and *Maariv*, *Mincha* is the afternoon service.

— *Terms*

Shavuot

Shavuot (“weeks ” in Hebrew), called the Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks, is celebrated in May or June (6 sivan) and observes the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. It is customary to decorate the home and synagogue with flowers, fruit and green plants to symbolize the idea that the vegetation at Mount Sinai was lush when the Torah was given. Dairy products are consumed, a tradition rooted in symbolic, historical and spiritual explanations. The symbolism of the Torah being associated with milk as the nourishment and sustenance of the Jewish people is maintained.

Sukkot

The holiday of *Sukkot*, known as the Feast of Booths, is celebrated for seven days (15th day of tishri) between the months of September and October. It commemorates the 40 years the Jews spent in the desert on their way to the Promised Land after leaving slavery in Egypt. It is about celebrating the comfort of a shelter provided by God for this journey through the desert, the shelter being represented by the *sukkah*. The *sukkah* is a temporary hut built on an open porch or balcony where activities such as eating, studying or even sleeping take place.

Tashlikh

Tashlikh (Hebrew for “cast off”) is a ceremony performed during Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) in which one symbolically throws one's evil deeds into running water, such as a lake or river.

The practice is based on a passage from Micah (7:19): “You will cast (*tashlikh*) all their sins into the depths of the sea,” and is usually performed in groups. Pieces of bread or other objects are placed in the water (symbolizing bad deeds) and prayers are recited.

Yahrzeit seudah

Yahrzeit is the word used for the anniversary of the death of a loved one. It is observed every year on the Hebrew date of death. On this day, the deceased is remembered by reciting prayers and psalms in his or her memory, visiting his or her grave, and holding a meal (*seudah* in Hebrew) in his or her honour. This meal of remembrance and tribute is called a *yahrzeit seudah* (death anniversary meal).

Biography

Jessica Roda

Jessica Roda is an Assistant Professor of Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. She is an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist whose research interests include religion, music, the performing arts, cultural heritage, gender, and media. Her publications on these topics have appeared in a monograph (*Se réinventer au présent*. Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018), scholarly journals, and edited volumes in both French and English.

Her forthcoming book (New York University Press, 2024), *For Women and Girls Only, Reshaping Jewish Orthodoxy Through the Arts in the Digital Age*, tells the captivating stories of ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, as well as those who have left the religion, and their use of the arts, the digital, and technology to reshape Orthodoxy. With this book, Ms. Roda provides the first translocal ethnography of the ultra-Orthodox female art scene in North America, offering an in-depth look into a cloistered religious and artistic world and an exclusive window into alternative forms of economic, social, and cultural women's agency. The book is the result of several years of collaborative ethnography with ultra-Orthodox Jewish women and men in Montréal and New York City. For this research she received the Cashmere Award from the AJS Women's Caucus (2021) and the Hadassah Brandeis Institute Research Award (2021). In the fall of 2023, she will be a fellow at the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies (University of Pennsylvania) and start a new project on music, healing, and spirituality within ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles.

Ms. Roda has been a visiting fellow and scholar at Université de Paris (Lab Urmis), McGill University, Columbia University (Heyman Center), UCLA (Department of Ethnomusicology), and the State University of Campinas in Brazil. Her public-facing work has appeared in *The Conversation U.S.*, *The Times of Israel*, *La Presse*, *Télé-Québec*, *The Huffington Post*, *Akadem*, *Radio-Canada*, *France Culture*, *Moment*, *Glamour*, *The Canadian Jewish News*, and numerous networks in Europe, the United States, and South America.

Beyond her academic life, she is also a trained pianist, flutist, and modern-jazz dancer (City of Paris Conservatory), and grew up in French Guiana, a childhood that shaped her as a person, educator, and a scholar.

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