The Regal Way: The Life and Time of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin

(David Assaf; Stanford University Press, 2002, 480pp.)

Martin Buber remarked that, of all the mystic movements with which he was acquainted, it was only Hasidism that in a short space of time produced hundreds of spiritual masters, each with a unique teaching.

It is in fact the position of the master, the tzaddik, that is one of the defining characteristics of Hasidism as a movement. While respect for a great teacher is common in the tradition, the Hasidic rebbe played a unique role. He was part of a special elite who was able to approach heaven in ways that were foreclosed to most Hasidim. By attaching oneself to a rebbe, one touched a connecting link between heaven and earth.

Israel of Ruzhin represents a particular development of this attitude. His biographer, David Assaf, rightfully entitles his book "The Regal Way," since more than any other tzaddik before him, Israel behaved like a prince. He cultivated wealth and lived like a nobleman; in fact he owned a castle, lived in a villa, journeyed in a carriage pulled by stately horses, dressed in silk, and ate with silver. He was the butt of attacks by *maskilim* who saw him as the symbol of corruption, but he was also the revered master of one of the largest Hasidic courts. Thousands attended services in his kloiz, and he exercised unique political authority among Jews of Galicia and Podolia. Even non-Jews sought his advice and blessing.

He was born to his position. As a descendant of the Maggid of Mezeretich, Israel Baal Shem Tov's successor and most renowned disciple, he belonged to one of the most honored Hasidic families.

His father died when he was six. His elder brother died when Israel was sixteen, whereupon Israel became Rebbe, a "*yenuka*" as his father and brother each had been, the teacher and spiritual master of a distinguished Hasidic court. All the reports about him are that he was not especially learned, and surviving documents demonstrate that he could hardly sign his name. Assaf believes that he was dyslexic and therefore had difficulty reading and writing. But he seems to have had no self-doubt. He ascended to his role with bravado, assuming a position of Hasidic and communal authority, appointing rabbis and *dayanim*, negotiating with governments and international figures.

Assaf remarks on a document in which Israel distinguishes between a rabbi who decides matters of ritual purity and Jewish law and one who decides "the law of the people." Israel of Ruzhin is the archetype of the Hasidic master who is able to speak to the hearts of his people, understand their humanity, and provide for their needs. Everyone who came to his court could partake of the communal meal he provided. His Hasidism could vicariously participate in the holy redemption of the material world. They knew that he was involved and interested in their lives. They believed him when he said that his role was to remain humble in the face of wealth.

Assaf is an ideal biographer of this man. It is easy to reduce Israel of Ruzhin to caricature, but Assaf attempts to describe the inner life of the Rebbe and to provide a measure of understanding of Israel's charisma.

Appropriately for Ruzhin, the book is beautifully published. David Louvish does a felicitous job of translation. In rendering the book from the Hebrew, the work has been edited so that it is accessible to the English reader, with many scholarly discurses omitted. There are moments when the book is even a page turner — it includes a murder mystery: the Ruzhiner was arrested because of an accusation that he had ordered the murder of two Jewish informers. The case eventually came to the attention of both the czar of Russia and the emperor of Austria and for a moment resulted in a tug-of-war between them.

Assaf's "Regal Way" is a delightful example of the contribution the academic study of Judaism can make to our understanding both of communal history and spiritual phenomena.

Edward Feld is Rabbi-in-Residence at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and is author of The Spirit of Renewal: Faith After the Holocaust.

Sh'ma
P. O. Box 267
New London, NH 03257
Change Service Requested

Non-Profit
US Postage
PAID
Permit No. 401
Frederick, MD