



Rabbi Aharon Kotler delivers a lecture in the Bialystoker Synagogue on New York's Lower East Side, late 1950s.
(Courtesy Beth Medrash Govoha)

Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, and the Remaking of an American Jewish Prophecy

ZEV ELEFF

In 1937, Rabbi Moses Yoshor published a Yiddish biography of his sainted teacher, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen. For Orthodox Jews, Rabbi Yisrael Meir of Radun was an all-important figure of deep piety and esteemed learning, known by the title of one of his works, the *Hafetz Hayim*. From 1912–1915, Yoshor had studied at the *Hafetz Hayim's* yeshiva in the small Belarusian town and then at several other schools before migrating to the United States. He settled in Brooklyn, a socioeconomic step up from New York's Lower East Side.¹ There, Yoshor enjoyed a long career in the rabbinate and as a successful public scholar and writer.² That he set out to chronicle the *Hafetz Hayim's* life is understandable. By his own account, Yoshor had “enjoyed the master's confidence on many an occasion, had free access to his personal correspondence, and was considered one of his household.”³

1 This article is written in honor of the seventieth birthday of my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter. It is my dutiful pleasure to acknowledge the insight and comments of colleagues Gavriel Bachrach, Dovid Bashevkin, Menachem Butler, Paul Stieglitz, as well as this journal's anonymous reviewers and its editor, Dana Herman. Their careful reading of earlier drafts did much to improve the present article.

See Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 9–49.

2 For a brief biography on Yoshor authored by his son-in-law, see Chaim Henoch, “Ha-Rav Ha-Ga'on Rabbi Moshe Meir Yoshor,” in *Ha-Ramban ke-Hoker u-ke-Mekubal* (Jerusalem: Makhon Harry Fischel, 1982), 3–6.

3 Moses M. Yoshor, *Saint and Sage* (New York: Bloch, 1937), xvii. See also, “Saint and Sage,” *Palestine Post* (6 June 1937): 5.

But Yoshor's decision to live in the United States, given his devotion to the late sage of Radun, is somewhat curious. In the 1890s, the Hafetz Hayim had published an entire book to deter Jews from journeying to the New World, warning his coreligionists of the spiritual dangers that awaited them there. He feared for Jews' ability to maintain kashrut standards and abide by the myriad other religious regulations in the American religious "wastelands."⁴ Yoshor did not avoid addressing the apparent contradiction between his teacher's position and his own American predicament. In fact, he devoted a full chapter of his multivolume work to the Hafetz Hayim's anti-America efforts. Toward the end of that section, Yoshor reconsidered the context of his teacher's position. He pointed to the numerous rabbis and scholars who had settled in the United States in recent years and improved Sabbath observance, increased the level of Torah study, and "halted the spirit of lawlessness" among America's Jews.⁵ Yoshor suggested that the Hafetz Hayim would have revised his view of Jewish life in the United States had he been still living and apprised of the current religious conditions across the Atlantic.⁶ Yoshor intended to reclaim the Hafetz Hayim from Eastern European leaders who still used Rabbi Yisrael Meir's writings to discourage Jews' attempts to escape the Nazi persecution on the eve of World War II. To bolster his point, Yoshor concluded with the following legend:

It is regrettable that some of the great leaders refrained from legitimizing what Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin had predicted over a century ago: that America would become the center of Judaism and the Torah would find in America its host, the last stop along the ten exiles, according to the

4 See Arthur Hertzberg, "'Treifene Medina': Learned Opposition to Emigration to the United States," *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (1984): 1–30. See Yoshor, *Saint and Sage*, 270, in which the author minimized the extent of Rabbi Yisrael Meir's opposition to migration to the United States.

5 Moses M. Yoshor, *Dos Leben un Shafen fun Hafetz Hayim*, vol. I (Brooklyn: Shulsinger Bros, 1937), 238.

6 According to Yoshor's descendants, the Hafetz Hayim cautiously advised Yoshor to relocate to the United States and improve the conditions of traditional Judaism there. Email correspondence with Gil Yashar, 9 April 2019.

tradition. After it had already passed through these nations: Babylon, Africa, Egypt, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Poland and Lithuania—America will be the last Torah center [before the Messiah].⁷

Rabbi Hayim ben Yitzhak was the founder and *rosh yeshiva* (school head or dean) of the Etz Hayim Yeshiva in Volozhin. Established in 1802, the Volozhin yeshiva set the standard for Torah study—Torah for “its own sake”—in Lithuania and other parts of Eastern Europe.⁸ Young men of considerable promise learned in yeshivot while others worked to support these schools or, at the very least, celebrated them from afar. The rank-and-file revered the yeshiva heads such as Rabbi Hayim and the men who succeeded him. Rabbi Hayim held a special station as the architect of the yeshiva movement. As a champion of Torah for its own sake, Rabbi Hayim stressed that Talmud study—even the more technical discussions on torts and damages—was a means to draw close to God. Scholarship was transformed into a devotional ritual.⁹ In Volozhin and the academies created more or less in its image, hundreds of promising scholars pored over Talmud folios and rabbinical codes, reinforcing Lithuanian Orthodox Judaism’s total commitment to Torah study above all other religious activities.¹⁰ Furthermore, the prominence of these rabbinical schools elevated its leaders in the public mind. In short order, the *roshei yeshiva* replaced many local community rabbis at the forefront of Lithuanian religious life.¹¹

7 Yoshor, *Dos Leben*, 238.

8 See Shaul Stampfer, *Lithuanian Yeshivas of the Nineteenth Century: Creating a Tradition of Learning*, trans. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz (Oxford: Littman Library, 2012), 15–47.

9 See Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (New York: Ktav, 1989), 73–87.

10 The Lithuanian yeshivot that flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries modeled themselves after this, though some schools augmented their curriculum with *mus-sar*, or moral instruction. See Shlomo Tikochinski, *Torah Scholarship, Mussar and Elitism* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2016), 76–132.

11 See Immanuel Erkes, “Authority and Autonomy: The Rosh Yeshiva in the Lithuanian Yeshiva and His Disciples,” in *Yeshivot and Battei Midrash*, ed. Immanuel Erkes (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2006), 209–242; and Shaul Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2010), 277–302.

Yoshor's was one of the first recountings of the Rabbi Hayim story in the United States. Eventually, the legend emerged as the foundational myth for the so-called Yeshiva World, the Orthodox Right in the United States. By myth, I do not mean to pass a judgment on whether Rabbi Hayim revealed such a prophecy in his lifetime. Rather, I aim to highlight how this brief story supplied a "usable past" for this Orthodox Jewish group. It foretold and justified their American efforts. Others rehearsed the tale, emphasizing that Rabbi Hayim began to weep after issuing his prediction. According to the earliest iterations, Rabbi Hayim cried because he purportedly intuited the rampant assimilation that would overtake American Jewry.¹² Rabbi Hayim apparently foresaw this. He grieved over the collateral damage done as pioneering scholars and students worked the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual American terrains to grow them into a self-sustaining Torah center.¹³ The raconteurs of the tale interpreted this as a worthy sacrifice. All parts of this version focused on the United States: its potential, its weaknesses, and, ultimately, its eschatological purpose. Just like Moses Yoshor, the legend's transmitters understood it as enough to offset the hesitation of a new wave of Eastern European immigrant rabbis around the turn of the twentieth century. Rabbi Hayim's tears over assimilation assuaged the discomfort of American Jews and helped them come to terms with their religious disenfranchisement from their brothers, sisters, and children. Despite the anguish and attrition, the viability and importance of the United States as a Torah center implied that the American cultural soil could be tilled to nurture a so-called authentic traditional Jewish environment.¹⁴

However, this attitude did not last. The narrative was challenged by a later migration of Eastern European *roshei yeshiva*. They supplanted the earlier version of the myth.¹⁵ In its place, a new iteration appeared as a

12 On the religious conditions of Orthodox Jews in this period, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 84–108.

13 Zev Eleff, "A Far-Flung Fraternity in a Fertile Desert: The Emergence of Rabbinic Scholarship in America, 1887–1926," *Modern Judaism* 34 (October 2014): 353–369.

14 See Zev Eleff, *Authentically Orthodox: A Tradition-Bound Faith in American Life* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 1–26.

15 For other cases of American Jewish mythologies rallying around "Holocaust" and

cultural production of an antimodernist rabbinic impulse that recast the legend in European terms because it could not tolerate any indulgence of acculturation. In these later versions, Rabbi Hayim shed tears for the six million Jews who had perished in the Holocaust, as well as the devastation that would eradicate so many of the yeshivot that, to these scholars, represented the most essential attribute of European Orthodox Jewish life. Told in this guise, America was removed from the story's focus. Instead, the legend emphasized the regeneration of European Orthodox Judaism on top of a spiritually blank and intellectually insignificant American surrogate. In this revision, the United States was not just negligible; it was altogether negated by Europe and its bygone Torah academies.

Accounting for Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin's Prophecy

It is not possible to verify the historicity of the legend. Rabbi Hayim did not record it, nor is the account mentioned by his disciples in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Jews in Eastern Europe were vaguely aware of the American Revolution but had little contact with the fledgling American Jewish communities and the one thousand women and men who inhabited them.¹⁶ European Jewry's awareness of their American counterparts significantly increased in the second half of the nineteenth century, long after Rabbi Hayim may or may not have predicted America as an eventual destination for Jewish life and Torah study.¹⁷

Rabbi Hayim, born in 1749, was an ideal candidate for such a legend. To cite one historian, Rabbi Hayim "emerged as the most commanding and authoritative personality in Russian Jewry."¹⁸ He was the

"Rebirth," see Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 132–136.

16 See Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585–1984* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 237.

17 See Israel Bartal, "Heavenly America: The United States as an Ideal Model for Nineteenth-Century East European Jews," in *Following Columbus: America, 1492–1992*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Felton (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 1996), 11–22.

18 See Lamm, *Torah Lishmah*, 3.

primary disciple of Rabbi Eliyahu, the famed Vilna Gaon. The Gaon of Vilna—literally, the “genius” of Vilna—was one of the formative figures of Lithuanian Jewish history, reorienting and reemphasizing Torah scholarship as the primary goal of traditional Jewish life and leadership.¹⁹ Rabbi Hayim deepened and popularized the Gaon’s mantra, “Torah for its own sake” (though the phrase has its roots in the Talmud) and established the first modern yeshiva with a vision to create an academy for large numbers of high-level students to study Talmud in a methodical fashion. From the vantage points of location, curriculum, instruction, and even fundraising, the Etz Hayim Yeshiva differed from preceding yeshivot and set a standard for later schools that arose in Lithuania during the 1800s. His reputation as a scholar, accomplishment as an institution builder, and link to the Gaon placed Rabbi Hayim at the top of traditional Jewish leadership.

Given Rabbi Hayim’s high station, it is very reasonable that a legend linking him to an American Orthodox community that placed significant value on Torah study would accrue considerable currency as a “usable past” and foundational origin story—or prehistory.²⁰ In this respect, the account of Rabbi Hayim’s prediction of the cultivation of America as a Torah hub parallels other “historical memories” that helped Jews in the United States claim a sturdier foothold in their adopted New World milieu. From the second half of the nineteenth century onward, American Jews told tales to legitimize their American Jewish heritage. Many rabbis, for instance, marked Thanksgiving and Independence Day with sermons that merged the teachings of Judaism with the messages of those national holidays, sometimes claiming that Protestant America derived the lessons of those occasions from Jewish

19 See Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 10–36.

20 In Hasidic circles, a similar legend exists, that Rabbi Hayim Halberstam (1797–1876) of Sandz had predicted that the “American exile” would be the final stage before the arrival of the Messiah. The claim appears in the late edition of a collection of Halberstam’s sayings and traditions. See Rafael Tsimetbaum, *Kol Ha-Katuv le-Hayim* (Jerusalem, 1962), 165–166. See also David Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 638.

sources.²¹ As well, Jews sometimes embellished the role of businessman Haym Salomon—and other Jews who might have stood out in the annals of well-trodden American history—to support their compatriots in the War for Independence.²² There are instances of efforts to claim Columbus and his shipmates as Jewish.²³ On occasion, Jews linked their origins to Native Americans—some claimed Native Americans were the biblical Ten Lost Tribes—and colonial America, a trend popular among several Christian denominations.²⁴ These examples amounted to a “form of cultural production” that helped stabilize American Jewish life.²⁵ Likewise, the Rabbi Hayim tale harmonized American and Jewish destinies by highlighting the perspicaciousness of a leading rabbinical figure in the age of Jefferson.

Perhaps the most detailed reliable source of the Rabbi Hayim legend appeared more than 150 years after the protagonist had died. In 1975,

21 “That our Republic is the flower of the Hebrew seed, is universally acknowledged,” wrote Moses Yoskor, the Hafetz Hayim’s America-embracing biographer mentioned at the opening of this introduction. “The American Liberty Bell with the Biblical inscription thereon, ‘Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof,’ is a symbol of the Jewish genius.” Moses M. Yoskor, “Wit and Wisdom in Jewish Folklore,” *Jewish Forum* 19 (April 1936): 89. There were some unsuccessful attempts in the postwar period within the Orthodox Right camp to embrace an earlier American Jewish heritage. See, for example, the articles included in the bicentennial issue of the *Jewish Parent* 28 (April 1976).

22 See Beth S. Wenger, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1–14.

23 See Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Mythical Jewish Columbus and the History of America’s Jews,” in *Religion in the Age of Exploration: The Case of Spain and New Spain*, eds. Bryan F. Le Beau and Menachem Mor (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1996), 81–95.

24 See Abraham Melamed, “The Discovery of America in Jewish Literature of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Following Columbus: America, 1492–1992*, ed. Miriam Eliav-Felton (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 1996), 443–464; André Neher, *Jewish Thought and the Scientific Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: David Gans (1541–1613) and His Times*, trans. David Maisel (Oxford: Littman Library, 1986), 119–135; and Robert Tracy McKenzie, *The First Thanksgiving: What the Real Story Tells Us About Loving God and Learning from History* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 146–171.

25 See Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture,” *Jewish Social Studies* 5 (Autumn 1998–Winter 1999): 52–79; and Jacob J. Schacter, “Facing the Truths of History,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 8 (1998–1999): 200–273.

Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik of Chicago included the legend in his remarks to an assembly of Orthodox educators. According to Soloveichik, the “remarkable story” was transmitted to him through a line that began with Rabbi Itsele of Volozhin, the son of Rabbi Hayim. Rabbi Itsele was reportedly present at his father’s Sabbath afternoon discourse sometime between when the yeshiva opened in 1802 and when Rabbi Hayim died in 1821. Rabbi Itsele allegedly relayed it to his son-in-law and successor, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin. Berlin told the tale at the bar mitzvah of his great-grandson, Moshe Soloveichik. He then passed it on to his son, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik (they spelled their surnames slightly differently) and the latter repeated it on a number of occasions.²⁶ Other members of this noted rabbinic family rehearsed the tale in near-exact fashion, also tracing the story to Rabbi Itsele.²⁷

In Soloveichik’s retelling, slightly different from Yoshor’s, Rabbi Hayim insisted that Torah would have to cycle through every major geographic location before the Messiah’s arrival. David Tevele, one of the most outstanding students in Volozhin, interrupted his teacher to ask where the final station would be.

“In America!” responded Rabbi Hayim.

At that point, recounted Soloveichik, Rabbi Hayim “burst out into hysterical crying.” The students were taken aback by the outpouring from their normally stoic master. Neither Tevele nor anyone else had the nerve to press further.

After the close of Sabbath, Rabbi Hayim’s son checked in on him. “Everyone was amazed that you cried. Why did you cry?”

“Can you not understand why it was that I cried? Remember that in order for America to become a center of Torah it will be necessary to endure enormous suffering and tremendous self-sacrifice,” answered Rabbi Hayim. “Who knows how many Jews will be found who will have the fortitude and the courage to demonstrate this self-sacrifice and to endure all this suffering.”²⁸

26 See “Address by Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Brisk of Chicago,” *Jewish Parent* 27 (August 1975): 9.

27 See Dov Eliach, *Avi Ha-Yeshivot: Toldot Hayav u-Mishnato shel Maran Rabbenu Hayim Volozhin* (Jerusalem: Makhon Moreshet Ha-Yeshivot, 2012), 16–18.

28 “Address by Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik,” 9.



Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik (center) with students at Hebrew Theological College in the late 1960s.
(Courtesy Hebrew Theological College)

The legend gained traction because it appeared to fit rather neatly into Rabbi Hayim's broader rabbinic schema. First, the notion of ten exiles and Torah sojourns has roots in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 31a). Second, Rabbi Hayim did not need to know much about Jews in the United States to have issued this claim. It was enough that he was likely aware of the relatively recent American Revolution, and his fear about attrition and assimilation would also have been a sensible concern. If Torah needed to traverse through every part of the globe to fulfill Judaism's eschatological mission, it would have to travel to the United States, as well. In fact, Rabbi Hayim wrote something similar about "time" that would have jibed with the above formulation about "place." Rabbi Hayim posited that there must be someone engaged in Torah learning at every moment. If not, the world would lose its spiritual scaffolding and implode into its primordial state.²⁹

29 See Hayim ben Yitzhak, *Nefesh Ha-Hayim*, ed. Yissakhar Dov Rubin (Bnai Brak, 1989), 269–270.

Soloveichik told this version of the Rabbi Hayim myth many times, emphasizing his extended family's sacrifice and determination to cultivate Torah learning in the United States:

The Talmudic style of Rav Chaim [Soloveitchik] was brought to the United States by his son, Rav Moshe, who was married to Pesha Feinstein, daughter of Rav Eliyohu Feinstein and first cousin to Hagaon Rav Moshe Feinstein. After serving as Rav of Rasein, Chaslawitz, Antepolia, and Warsaw, Rav Moshe was appointed Rosh Yeshiva and Dean of Yeshiva Rabbi Isaac Elchanan, a post which he held from 1929 to 1941. Thus the tradition of Torah scholarship which was rooted in Brisk and Volozhin was revitalized on American soil.³⁰

At least one other scion connected to Volozhin received this tale in Eastern Europe and took its message very seriously. Rabbi Hayim Ozer Grodzinski was the preeminent rabbinic figure in Lithuania in the decades leading up to World War II. Several sources report on the factors that Grodzinski considered when issuing a limited number of visas to rabbis who could resettle in the United States. In May 1924, the U.S. Congress enacted the Johnson-Reed Immigrant Act, which imposed severe restrictions on migration from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe. Anticipating the continued demand for religious leaders hailing from Europe, Congress included Section 4(d) to permit exemptions for "ministers of any religious denomination" as well as "professors for colleges and seminaries."³¹ On several occasions, Grodzinski was queried whether Jewish communities should help attain travel visas for young and inexperienced rabbis or renowned and aged rabbinic scholars. Grodzinski was unequivocal: send the older rabbis more expert in Torah learning because they will do more to help fulfill the prophecy of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin.³²

30 See *An Epic of Torah Learning: The Story of Yeshivas Brisk of Chicago* (Chicago: Yeshivas Brisk, 1980), 7. See also Noson Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol* (Jerusalem: Hamesorah, 2002), 190–192.

31 See Jonathan D. Sarna and Zev Eleff, "The Immigration Clause that Transformed Orthodox Judaism in The United States," *American Jewish History* 101 (July 2017): 357–376.

32 See Aharon Sorasky, *Rabban shel Yisrael* (Bnai Brak: Netzah, 1931), 261–262; Pinchas

Contextualizing the Rise and Fall of American Orthodox Messianism

The Rabbi Hayim legend is not without American precedents. In fact, Jews in the United States had a long history of clinging to mystical customs and tales that endowed their lives in the Jewishly remote New World with significant eschatological purpose. Colonial Jews, for example, believed that their presence in the Americas fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that the Israelites would be scattered to the "four corners of the earth."³³ Applied from the writings of Menasseh ben Israel, this sentiment elevated American Jews' role in bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven. Much later, the throngs of Jews who emigrated from Europe to the United States in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century heard a lot about the coming of the Messiah, particularly in the context of Zionism.³⁴ Moreover, many rabbis and laypeople who resettled in the New World hailed from Lithuania, where scholarly elites were well known for their eager anticipation of the messianic redemption.³⁵ Leading figures such as the Hafetz Hayim published pamphlets to

Hirschprung, *Fun Nazishen Yomertal* (Montreal: Eagle Publishing Co., 1944), 236; and *Iggerot Rabbi Hayim Ozer*, vol. 3 (Bnai Brak, 2010), 466. For an English rendering of Hirschprung's account, see Pinchas Hirschprung, *The Vale of Tears*, trans. Vivian Felsen (Toronto: The Azrieli Foundation, 2016), 245. Hirschprung reported the vision belonging to Rabbi Hayim Soloveitchik of Brisk. I can think of two possibilities for the error. First, perhaps the tale was not as well known in Europe as it would become in America. Second, it is possible that Hirschprung confused the story with an America-related tale involving Rabbi Hayim Soloveitchik. On this, see Meir Bar-Ilan, *Mi-Volozhin ad Yerushalayim*, vol. I (Tel Aviv, 1939), 246–251. In addition to the above, see the account about Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman in Aharon Sorasky, *Or Elhanan: Sipur Hayav u-Ketzot Derakhav shel Rabbenu ha-Ga'on ha-Kadosh Rebbe Elhanan Bunim Wasserman*, vol. II (Los Angeles: Yeshiva Ohr Elchonon, 1978), 242.

33 See Laura Leibman, "Sephardic Sacred Space in Colonial America," *Jewish History* 25 (February 2011): 13–41; and Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Mystical World of Colonial American Jews," in *Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World, Essays in Honor of Michael A. Meyer*, eds. Lauren B. Strauss and Michael Brenner (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 185–194.

34 See Kimmy Caplan, *Orthodoxy in the New World: Immigrant Rabbis and Preaching in America (1881–1924)* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2002), 254–302.

35 On the Orthodox Lithuanian migration to the United States, see Shaul Stampfer, "The

admonish Jews to become proactive and prepare for the Messiah—“one cannot wait for Elijah the prophet.” Rabbi Yisrael Meir and others connected recent social and political upheaval in Europe to the eschatological visions of scripture and rabbinic texts.³⁶

America’s Orthodox Jews were well acquainted with this messianic excitement. In the late 1930s, one of the Hafetz Hayim’s disciples, Rabbi Elhanan Wasserman of Baranovichi, embarked on an extended fundraising mission to the United States.³⁷ Wasserman traveled to major Orthodox hubs and was received with significant enthusiasm. Often, he shared his thoughts on the impending arrival of the Messiah. During his American sojourns, Wasserman published a pamphlet on anticipating the “footsteps of the Messiah.” He relayed that the rampant Jewish nonobservance in the United States that had concerned the Hafetz Hayim, however counterintuitively, fulfilled the prophecies of traditional religious texts. Writing in Yiddish to ensure that Eastern European-born laypeople could read it, Wasserman declared that at the “end of days” Jews would spend much time in theaters and other “impure” sites.³⁸

Geographic Background of Eastern European Jewish Migration to the United States before World War I,” in *Migration across Time and Nations: Population Mobility in Historical Contexts*, eds. Ira A. Glazer and Luigi de Rosa (New York: Holmes & Meir, 1986), 220–230. On the messianism of Eastern European rabbis at this historical juncture, see Gershon C. Bacon, “Birth Pangs of the Messiah: The Reflections of Two Polish Rabbis on Their Era,” in *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era: Metaphor and Meaning*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 86–99; and Motti Inbari, “Messianic Expectations in Hungarian Orthodox Theology before and during the Second World War: A Comparative Study,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 107 (Fall 2017): 506–530.

36 See Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen, *Tzipitah li-Yeshuah* (n.d.). For other citations of messianism in the Hafetz Hayim’s writings, see Elkanah Schwartz, “The Chofetz Chaim on Moshiach Consciousness,” *Jewish Observer* (October 1974): 9–11.

37 See Sorasky, *Or Elhanan*, vol. II, 173–217. On Wasserman’s reliance on the Hafetz Hayim in the former’s messianic writings, see Gershon Greenberg, “Elhanan Wasserman’s Response to the Growing Catastrophe in Europe: The Role of Ha’gra and Hofetz Hayim Upon His Thought,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 10 (2000): 174–204.

38 Elhanan Wasserman, *Ikveta de-Meshiha* (Tel Aviv: Tzi’erei Agudat Yisrael, 1961), 26–27. The solution, which would beckon the Messiah, was to follow trusted rabbinic leaders, forsake other evil “secular” influences, and repent. See *ibid.*, 36–39.

But the Rabbi Hayim myth was popularized at a moment in which America's Orthodox Right pivoted away from messianic thought. In the post–World War II period, the Yeshiva World deescalated the messianism that had animated earlier generations. To be sure, not all Orthodox Jews underwent this change. For instance, religious Zionists' messianic anticipation increased after the establishment of the State of Israel and spiked after Israel's seemingly hard-to-explain victories in the Six-Day War.³⁹ Of course, the Orthodox Right still believed in the eventual arrival of the Messiah, although they no longer expressed it so aggressively.⁴⁰ This matched concurrent trends among Christian millennialist thinking in the United States.⁴¹ The Yeshiva World was far more accustomed to listening to their rabbinic leaders discuss the paramount commitment to Torah learning “for its own sake,” made famous by Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin.

Several examples of the turn from Messiah-related discourse are illustrative. Consider an exceptional case among the Orthodox Right that proves the rule. Before and after he returned to Europe, Wasserman charged a young Baltimore-based rabbi, Shimon Schwab, to continue his effort to educate American Jews on how their deeds and piety might help bring the Messiah.⁴² In 1941, Schwab anonymously published a thin volume on the Messiah, applying rabbinic and kabbalistic sources to the Nazi terror and the “antireligious” spirit of Communist Russia. Both items, for Schwab, suggested that the Messiah would arrive soon.⁴³

39 See, for example, Michael Rosenak, “The Miracle of the Israeli Realism; Notes on the Six-Day-War,” *Jewish Life* 34 (July-August 1967): 5–13. In addition, see other editorials and articles published in this Orthodox Union issue.

40 I examined and conducted a digital search of sermon manuals, collected writings, and rabbinical journals (mainly *Hapardes*) available via HebrewBooks.org and Otzar HaHochma. The exception that proves the rule is Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Chabad. Schneersohn settled in the United States in 1940 and for the remaining ten years of his life published many sermons that invoked messianism.

41 See Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 327–366.

42 See Wasserman's letter to Schwab reproduced in Shimon Schwab, *Beit Ha-Sho'evah* (Brooklyn: Hadaf Printing Inc., 2008), 10–11.

43 See, for example, *Beit Ha-Sho'evah* (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1941), 54–55, 70–71.

In 1967, Schwab reprinted this work under his own name, but, tellingly, removed the passages that connected recent events to traditional texts.⁴⁴ Perhaps Schwab deleted these sections with the understanding that his rabbinical colleagues in the United States tended to eschew talk of the Messiah. Moreover, Messiah-laden discussions remained absent from American rabbinical journals and the published sermons of influential leaders such as Rabbi Aharon Kotler of Lakewood's Beth Medrash Govoha. In the 1970s, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky astonished a large audience at the annual Agudath Israel convention when he announced that the Messiah would arrive within ten years.⁴⁵ A decade later, Kamenetsky returned to that same Agudath Israel forum to explain his miscalculation, conceding that "people are asking," apparently still somewhat startled by Kamenetsky's Messiah prediction.⁴⁶

Messianism was not an afterthought among the Yeshiva World. Yet, it was certainly secondary to Torah for its own sake. For this reason, the Rabbi Hayim tale was very useful. The prophecy directed adherents to refocus their energies to establish Torah centers in the United States while suggesting that, however it might happen, the Messiah would arrive afterward. No formulation of the story suggested straightforwardly that increased Torah study would bring the Messiah. Instead, the legend acknowledged Judaism's Messiah-driven mission while refocusing the more urgent need to reinforce traditional Torah study.

Furnishing a Foundational Myth for the So-Called Yeshiva World

More than anyone else, Rabbi Aharon Kotler was responsible for this reorientation among America's Orthodox Right. Kotler enhanced the

44 See Shimon Schwab, *Beit Ha-Sho'evah* (New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1967). Despite this revision, Schwab continued to focus more on anticipation for the Messiah than many of his rabbinic colleagues in the United States. See, for instance, Shimon Schwab, *Selected Writings* (New York: C.I.S. Publishers, 1988), 113–115, 144–146; Shimon Schwab, *Selected Speeches* (New York: C.I.S. Publishers, 1991), 15–29, 37–48; and Shimon Schwab, *Selected Essays* (New York: C.I.S. Publishers, 1994), 83–84.

45 See Yaakov Kamenetsky, "Some Thoughts on Moshiach," *Jewish Observer* 10 (November–December 1974): 9–10.

46 See Yaakov Kamenetsky, "Finding the Permanent in the Transitory," *Jewish Observer* 15 (January 1981): 15.

“Torah for its own sake” ideology, well beyond Rabbi Hayim’s intentions. Yoel Finkelman has noted that while Kotler’s forebears in Eastern Europe preached intensive Torah study as an ideal, they were “comfortable with the idea that God’s original plan was to have only a minority of full-time yeshiva students.”⁴⁷ In contrast, Kotler’s sermons displayed “discomfort with the very idea of Orthodox businessmen.”⁴⁸ To help his cause, Kotler offered the Rabbi Hayim tale. In April 1941, a few days before Passover, Kotler, the famed *rosh yeshiva* in the Polish town of Kletsk, disembarked at the port of San Francisco. Before an Orthodox delegation, Kotler declared it his mission to “do everything in our power to plant the tents of the Torah in their character, form, and size, fully and authentically, here in this land.” Kotler announced that he was summoned to the United States by a vision told “in the name of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin about the migration of Torah through its ten hosts until the arrival of the righteous Messiah. The last encampment will be America.”⁴⁹ The legend suited Kotler’s undertaking. It stressed the supreme role of the yeshiva to facilitate the Jewish future, disregarding other aspects of Eastern European life that were in any case peripheral to Kotler’s learning-focused enterprise. The tale also connected his own sojourn from Lithuania to the United States. For the next two decades, Kotler repeated the connection between his efforts to establish Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey, his support of other American Torah initiatives, and the fulfillment of Rabbi Hayim’s prophecy.⁵⁰

Kotler had help. In the late 1930s and 1940s, an elite class of rabbinical scholars made use of the loophole in the above-mentioned Johnson-Reed Immigrant Act to flee the Nazi terror. Their leadership was the

47 Yoel Finkelman, “An Ideology for American Yeshiva Students: The Sermons of R. Aharon Kotler, 1942–1962,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 58 (Autumn 2007): 319.

48 *Ibid.*, 320.

49 Aharon Kotler, *Mishnat Rebbe Aharon*, vol. IV (Lakewood, NJ: Machon Mishnas Rabbi Aaron, 2005), 190. See also “From the Archives,” *Jewish Observer* 23 (November 1990): 43.

50 See, for example, Yitzchok Dershowitz, *The Legacy of Maran Rav Aharon Kotler: A Vivid Portrait of the Teachings, Qualities, and Accomplishments of the Venerable Rosh Hayeshiva* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2005), 160; Shmuel Rolnik, introduction, s.v. “nevu’ah,” *Torat Shmuel* (Brooklyn, 2005); and Yisrael Kalman, *Harhak Ma’alyah Derakbekbah* (Lakewood, NJ, 2002), 155–156.

primary reason, cited one observer at that time, for the “rise of the Yeshiva World” in the postwar period.⁵¹ In addition to Rabbi Kotler, some of the Lithuanian scholars who arrived in this period were Rabbis Eliyahu Meir Bloch, Joseph Breuer, Moshe Feinstein, Reuven Grozovsky, Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, Yitzchok Hutner, Avraham Kalmanowitz, Yaakov Kamenetsky, Dovid Lifshitz, Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, and Shimon Schwab.⁵² This list, with few exceptions, represents the most outstanding individuals who exercised top-down leadership in the formation of America’s Yeshiva World.⁵³

Scholars have tended to define the Yeshiva World by focusing on its oppositional attitudes. Jeffrey Gurock described this group as “resisters” who “reject acculturation and disdained cooperation with other American Jewish elements” out of fear of diluting “traditional faith and practice.”⁵⁴ Samuel Heilman preferred the term “rejectionist” to describe one who “denies and hence conceptually rejects the legitimacy of his non-Orthodox contemporary” and “remains within the shelter of the traditional Orthodox world.”⁵⁵ Charles Liebman typically labeled it “sectarian Orthodox” and dwelled on this group’s separatist tendencies, although he did acknowledge the Orthodox Right’s constructive commitment to traditional Talmud study (for men) and moralistic teachings.⁵⁶ This feature was on par with America’s Protestant fundamentalists, who possessed antimodernist proclivities but also recruited adherents due

51 See Elkanah Schwartz, “Two Lecterns,” *Jewish Observer* 1 (February 1964): 12.

52 See Sarna and Eleff, “Immigration Clause,” 76.

53 See William B. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 180–193. The Modern Orthodox in the United States also valued these forms of study but made room for other religious books and texts associated Western learning and culture. See Zev Eleff, “Jewish Immigrants, Liberal Higher Education, and the Quest for a Torah u-Madda Curriculum at Yeshiva College,” *Tradition* 44 (Summer 2011): 19–34.

54 Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Resisters and Accommodators: Varieties of Orthodox Rabbis in America, 1886–1983,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 35 (November 1983): 109.

55 Samuel C. Heilman, “The Many Faces of Orthodoxy, Part I,” *Modern Judaism* 2 (February 1982): 27.

56 Charles S. Liebman, “Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” *American Jewish Year Book* 66 (1965): 91.

to the small but important positivistic aspects of their faith.⁵⁷ Owing to this, Liebman, borrowing from a vocabulary already in circulation among America's Orthodox Right, was the first to introduce the term "Yeshiva World" into the scholarly lexicon.⁵⁸

The latter matter is important. The nomenclature is useful to make a crucial distinction between the culture of Torah study in Eastern Europe and the later types in Israel and the United States. The term "Yeshiva World" does not appear, at least with any regularity, in Lithuanian rabbinic literature, nor in its Yiddish (*yeshiva velt*) or its Hebrew (*olam ha-yeshiva*) incarnations.⁵⁹ This designation would have had too far-reaching implications for the Orthodox rank-and-file. In Eastern Europe, most boys received a rudimentary religious education in *heder* and concluded their formal studies at thirteen to work and help their families. "The majority of Jews," wrote Shaul Stampfer, "such as the peddlers, shoemakers, and tailors, could not study a page of Talmud on their own. They were pious, they said their psalms, they went to hear the Midrashic sermons on Saturday afternoons in the synagogues, but they were not themselves learned."⁶⁰

The situation was different in the United States. Here, the rabbinic newcomers in the postwar era championed Jewish education for all young people.⁶¹ This is how Kotler and others figured they could ensure the "continuation of Israel's Torah tradition, brutally interrupted by Nazi tyranny."⁶² It worked. From 1947 to 1963, the number of

57 See Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88.

58 Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," 33. The sociologist William Helmreich then furthered the term's usage. See Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*.

59 My thanks to Shaul Stampfer for his guidance in determining this based on correspondence and a thorough search and mining of the Otzar HaHochma database.

60 See Shaul Stampfer, "Heder Study, Knowledge of Torah, and the Maintenance of Social Stratification in Traditional East European Jewish Society," *Studies in Jewish Education* 3 (1988): 283.

61 See Doniel Zvi Kramer, *The Day Schools and Torah Umesorah: The Seeding of Traditional Judaism in America* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1984), 13.

62 Cited in Doniel Zvi Kramer "The History and Impact of Torah Umesorah and Hebrew Day Schools in America" (doctoral diss., Yeshiva University, 1976), 30.

Orthodox girls attending the Orthodox Right's all-female Bais Yaakov schools increased from 1,200 to 5,000 students.⁶³ The yeshivot swelled, as well. The United States was host to a handful of these half-filled schools in the 1930s. By 1976, there were forty advanced yeshivot and a total enrollment that hovered around 6,500 students.⁶⁴ Kotler's Beth Medrash Govoha, Mesivta Chasan Sofer, Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin, Ner Israel, Telshe Yeshiva, Tifereth Jerusalem, Torah Vodaath, and Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim all took significant steps to attract young men to their yeshivot.⁶⁵

These efforts to form a Yeshiva World in the United States were an attempt to recreate the part of the Old World that these *roshei yeshiva* knew best.⁶⁶ Kotler once explained that the purpose of his Lakewood yeshiva was to replace the "typically exceptional" young men who perished in Europe by cultivating the "remnants" who had escaped to the United States.⁶⁷ To him, the yeshiva was the only way to block out the "impurities" of American life.⁶⁸ Some members of the old guard of Orthodox Judaism that had preceded this wave of rabbinic émigrés pushed back, dubbing this approach reductionist and an altogether "radical change"—but to little avail.⁶⁹ In this vision of Orthodox life in Eastern Europe, it made good sense to encourage young men to remain in yeshivot for longer durations. These schools "cannot exist

63 Leslie M. Ginsparg, "Defining Bais Yaakov: A Historical Study of Yeshivish Orthodox Girls High School Education in America, 1963–1984" (doctoral diss., New York University, 2009), 12–13.

64 See David Singer, "The Yeshivah World," *Commentary* 62 (October 1976): 72.

65 See Alvin Irwin Schiff, *The Jewish Day School in America* (New York: Jewish Education Committee Press, 1966), 61–62, 237–239.

66 See Menachem Friedman, "Life Tradition and Book Tradition in the Development of Ultraorthodox Judaism," in *Judaism Viewed from Within and from Without: Anthropological Studies*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 235–255.

67 Kotler, *Mishnat Rebbe Aharon*, vol. IV (Lakewood, NJ: Machon Mishnas Rabbi Aaron, 2005), 242.

68 *Ibid.*, 255.

69 See, for instance, Oscar Z. Fasman, "Trends in the American Yeshiva Today," *Tradition* 9 (Fall 1967): 49.

only for a few,” asserted one of Kotler’s disciples about the burgeoning Yeshiva World. “They exist for all.”⁷⁰ One perceptive observer offered the following:

Jewish popular mythology to the contrary notwithstanding, not all students of Talmud are geniuses, and the yeshivah is not that exclusive preserve of brilliant minds that it has been made out to be. This was true in the European past as well as in the American present, but with one important difference. In Lithuania the yeshivot were elite institutions that catered to the few—a fairly select group of motivated and talented young men who, in the midst of grinding poverty, dared to aspire to scholarship. Not everyone achieved this goal, but the elite nature of the academies created an environment in which a good number actually did. In America, on the other hand, the relative prosperity of Orthodox Jews has brought a yeshivah education within reach of almost everyone. At the same time, the heads of yeshivot have increasingly come to view their schools less as temples of pure learning than as instruments for inculcating Orthodoxy in a secular society, and this has led them to adopt much less stringent admissions policies than in the past. Some good has come from the resultant democratization, but it has also led, inevitably, to a lowering of the standards of study.⁷¹

The leaders of the Orthodox Right reimagined their communities through their own Yeshiva World perspective rather than through the routine and the more common lives of, to borrow from Stampfer, the unlearned “peddlers, shoemakers and tailors.” As the Yeshiva World symbolized, these schools became the essential cultural anchor for the Orthodox Right. As the community’s lifeblood, the yeshiva was the nucleus for social networks, a reference point for shared experiences, and the seat of the most powerful leaders in this faith-based enclave.

70 Competition still existed in these environments, and students who outshined their peers were rewarded with increased status. Still, without grades or other indicators of performance, the Yeshiva World tended to measure a student’s “success” based on the hours he spent in the study halls rather than his ability to master a rabbinic text. See Helmreich, *World of the Yeshiva*, 180–193.

71 Singer, “Yeshivah World,” 72.

The Yeshiva World moniker caught on as more of its male adherents could claim stature and experience studying in these academies. It is also common for women to identify with this designation even though the traditional yeshiva is an exclusively male space. Women, just as much as men, identify as “yeshivish.” In addition to particular modes of dress, language, and other behaviors linked to this religious group, women’s efforts to earn a living to support their husbands engaged in full-time Torah study and to raise sons who will one day enroll in advanced yeshivot make these women integral—not just honorary—members of the Yeshiva World.⁷² All members of the Yeshiva World, then, had a stake in fulfilling Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin’s prophecy to bring Torah study to the United States.

The Counterculture of Antimodernism

Sociologist Charles Liebman was aware that widespread access was a crucial feature of the Yeshiva World. But in the 1960s, Liebman still figured that this community “lack[ed] the intellectual-philosophical perspective to broaden its appeal.”⁷³ He was wrong. To date, the Yeshiva World currently comprises three-fifths of the 500,000 Orthodox Jews living in the United States and is poised, thanks to a birthrate of more than 4.1 children per household (compared to the Jewish average of 1.9 and 2.2 for the general American public), to increase in numbers.⁷⁴

72 See Sarah Bunin Benor, *Becoming Frum: How Newcomers Learn the Language and Culture of Orthodox Judaism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 111–117; and Laura Shaw Frank, “Yeshivish Women Clergy: The Secular State and Changing Roles for Women in ‘Haredi’ Orthodoxy,” in *You Arose, a Mother in Israel: A Festschrift in Honor of Blu Greenberg*, ed. Devorah Zlochower (New York: Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, 2017), 103–109.

73 Liebman, “Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” 91.

74 The fertility rate for American Orthodox Jews is reported at 4.1 children per household. That figure is decreased slightly due to the Modern Orthodox, who have fewer children and comprise thirty percent of the overall Orthodox population. No specific rate is listed for the Orthodox Right. See Alan Cooperman et al., *A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews: A Further Analysis of the 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2015), 11. See also Samuel C. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 62–77.

What accounts for this resilience? The Yeshiva World appealed to many searching Jews as a “viable choice,” a countercultural brand of Orthodox Judaism that featured a “radical non-conformity to the values, attitudes, and life style of the ‘modern’ world.”⁷⁵ The Lithuanian extracts who emerged as the leaders of the Yeshiva World—not unlike other leaders of the American religious right—offered their followers a more insular form of religious instruction that stressed piety of conduct.⁷⁶

The Yeshiva World paralleled historian George Marsden’s definition of Christian fundamentalism: “militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism.”⁷⁷ Both religious groups vigorously opposed all things “modern,” a trend that tended to resonate with segments of American Christians who no longer recognized religious ideologies in the politicalized statements of their “liberal” leaders.⁷⁸ Instead, these disenchanted Protestants of the 1970s were taken by the “Right’s ability to balance biblical rigidity, pietism, and separatism.”⁷⁹ The antimodernists within American Protestantism had emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as the vigorous opponents of ministers and theologians who believed in the “conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture.” In contrast to the religious modernists who tended to see God in “human cultural development” and believed that “society is

75 See David Singer, “The Case for an ‘Irrelevant’ Orthodoxy: An Open Letter to Yitzchak Greenberg,” *Tradition* 11 (Summer 1970): 78; and M. Herbert Danzger, *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 71–95.

76 On Jewish and general cases of religious counterculture in this period, see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain Folk Religion, Grassroots Politicians, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: Norton, 2011), 326–361; Preston Shires, *Hippies of the Religious Right* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 39–55; and Mark Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 96–129.

77 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 4.

78 Axel R. Schäfer, *Countercultural Conservatives: American Evangelicalism from the Postwar Revival to the New Christian Right* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 111–112.

79 *Ibid.*, 113.

moving toward a realization of the Kingdom of God,” the antimodernists eschewed attempts to draw religious meaning from human progress or modern culture.⁸⁰ They condemned modernism as a heretical sort of alchemy that interpreted religion based on in-vogue social fashions rather than the other way around. Ironically, the liberal upsurge in pluralism during the post–World War II era allowed for this conservative spirit to take root. The same religious culture also set the rise of the Yeshiva World in motion.

The antimodernism of the Yeshiva World outpaced its forebears in Eastern Europe, and for good reason. With all its lurking dangers and economic uncertainty, life in Eastern Europe was hardly utopian. There was much for the rabbinic elites in Lithuania to loathe about their indigenous environment.⁸¹ Yet, the Orthodox Right considered “America” decidedly dystopian. In the main, Eastern European rabbis believed that the United States was a nation scaffolded by unredeemable modernist foundations. While they could not point to passages in scripture or a principle of faith that life in America had unequivocally violated, these rabbis still charged that the widespread nonobservance of kosher standards and Sabbath desecration sufficed to render America incompatible with Judaism.⁸² They did not articulate such a staunch view of Lithuania or elsewhere in Eastern Europe.⁸³

The sentiment was exacerbated by the Yeshiva World in the postwar period, despite the liberties accorded to them in the United States.⁸⁴ Its leaders dismissed the location of their new residence as a dint of

80 William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 2.

81 See, for example, Yosef Salmon, *Do Not Provoke Providence: Orthodoxy in the Grip of Nationalism*, trans. Joel A. Linsider (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 11–49.

82 See Hertzberg, “Treifene Medina,” 1–30.

83 The same had long been true of groups of Protestant elites in Europe who, from the nineteenth century onward, bundled up “America” with other heresies. See, for example, Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 95–123.

84 Some of these rabbinic scholars wrote with gratitude that the United States served to them as an asylum from the conflagration in Europe. See, for example, Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe*, vol. VII (Brooklyn: Noble Books, 1985), 244.

circumstance, preferring instead to wax nostalgic and project an image of Jewish heritage anchored in a “metanarrative of the Jewish past,” tradition-minded and Lithuanian yeshiva-focused.⁸⁵ For example, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter in Cleveland, who was born in the United States but trained in the Telshe Yeshiva, which was rooted in the “blessed soil” of Lithuania, wrote about how “in Eastern Europe a large percentage of Jews was observant.” He emphasized that this community was “led and directed by greatness in Torah” and that “Torah giants of the generation put their stamp on all of life.”⁸⁶ Likewise, an Orthodox woman in New York recommended in the 1960s that schools make sure that young pupils “learn specifically what Orthodoxy lost when the Nazis invaded the dynamic Torah fortress of pre-war Europe.”⁸⁷

Gifter and other members of the Yeshiva World’s top-down rabbinic leadership supplanted the Orthodox rabbinic establishment (of mostly congregational rabbis) and guided dutiful adherents through this unabashed antimodernist lens. Often, this manifested itself as a sorting exercise of behaviors based on what fit sentimentally within Eastern European tradition as opposed to what ought to be considered “heretical” and “modern,” grounded in terms of its link to American life.⁸⁸ These forces reoriented the Rabbi Hayim prophecy. The legend’s storytellers in

85 See Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17–23; and Yoel Finkelman, “Nostalgia, Inspiration, Ambivalence: Eastern Europe, Immigration, and the Construction of Collective Memory in Contemporary American Haredi Historiography,” *Jewish History* 23 (2009): 57–82.

86 Mordechai Gifter, *Torah Perspectives* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 11.

87 Miriam A. Bloom, “Seeks Yeshiva Course on Holocaust,” *Jewish Observer* 1 (February 1964): 29.

88 See Zev Eleff and Seth Farber, “Antimodernism and Orthodox Judaism’s Heretical Imperative: An American Religious Counterpoint,” *Religion and American Culture* 30 (Summer 2020): 237–272. The *roshei yeshiva* newcomers gained a strong foothold through their charisma and Torah scholarship. For one of the first to notice this change in the Orthodox power dynamic, see Emanuel Rackman, “From Synagogue Toward Yeshiva: Institutionalized Cult or Congregations of the Learned?” *Commentary* 21 (April 1956): 352–358. The Europe-America binary was oversimplistic and sometimes inaccurate. See Chaim I. Waxman, *Social Change and Halakhic Evolution in American Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2017), 89.

the immediate postwar period grew uncomfortable with the tale's tolerance for America. It seemed to extend a license to blend Judaism with the far too imperfect modern moment. Though it did not countenance assimilation and secularization, the myth left room for milder dosages of acculturation or, put differently, Judaism's adjustment to American norms and culture.

What could be done about Rabbi Hayim's American prophecy? In the post-World War II epoch, the tale was well entrenched and could not be easily erased from the Orthodox Jewish consciousness. The next best thing, then, was to repurpose it and curb its usefulness for the modernist line of thinking. These rabbinical raconteurs therefore changed the Rabbi Hayim story to stress the destruction wrought by the Holocaust and the importance of reestablishing the European yeshivot in their most "authentic" milieus, apart from the local modern spirit and attitudes. The changed meaning of the legend suited the Yeshiva World's antimodernism and encouraged the restoration project of an idyllic European Jewish environment.

The Europeanization of Rabbi Hayim's Prophecy

The Rabbi Hayim legend took on a different form after the arrival of Rabbi Aharon Kotler in 1941. His goal in the United States was not to harmonize Torah and American life. Kotler vigorously opposed an indigenous "materialistic" culture that sapped the spirituality that he identified with his earlier life in Europe.⁸⁹ Kotler considered the American Jewish community at a decided nadir of Torah learning, especially when compared to the scholars he had known in Lithuania.⁹⁰ For these reasons, Kotler had established his yeshiva far away from the larger American Jewish neighborhoods. The site removed his students from the "toxic" culture in America and gave the venerated *rosh yeshiva* his best chance to restore, in his view, the grandeur of European Torah life.⁹¹

Kotler's repeated recountings of the tale did not focus on the second portion of the story and Rabbi Hayim's anguish over the repositioning

89 Aharon Kotler, *Mishnat Rebbe Aharon*, 148.

90 *Ibid.*, 216.

91 Finkelman, "Ideology," 314–332.

of Torah to the United States. While subsequent retellings did, they revised it to fit Kotler's ardent antimodernism. The first attempts to reorient the Rabbi Hayim prophecy to Europe and the Holocaust occurred in the late 1940s. For example, Rabbi Abba Zions, one forlorn immigrant rabbi in the United States, wrote a short essay in the pages of a popular Hebrew rabbinical journal, mourning the destruction of European Jewry and calling on his colleagues in the New World to shape the future of Orthodox Judaism. To bolster his point, Zions repeated the vision, including the part about "Rabbi Hayim wailing a great cry." Here, however, the writer did not claim a tradition to explain Rabbi Hayim's somber reaction. To the contrary, "in that time," concluded Zions, "they did not comprehend the meaning of this, exactly how it would come to pass—the development of Torah study in America—however, these matters are well-etched in our hearts, and we are awestruck."⁹² This reflected a trend among American Jewish writers and intellectuals who made it their mission to shoulder the burden of Jewish culture after the Holocaust. However, in most of these instances the intention was to take this on while concomitantly embracing certain aspects of American life.⁹³ The so-called Modern Orthodox elites shared in this vision of coalescence.⁹⁴ But the leaders of the Lithuanian Orthodox exile like Kotler did not possess such hybrid goals. Just the opposite, they desired to regenerate their world in a new location, thereby totally negating local influences.

This was the point of emphasis of Rabbi Dovid Lifshitz, whose retelling of the myth placed Kotler and the Holocaust at the center of Rabbi Hayim's prophecy. Lifshitz recalled that back in the yeshivot in Lithuania, he and other luminaries were afraid to travel to the United States, even after World War I left European Jewry in a most perilous state. Lifshitz singled out Kotler as the major figure who courageously "came to America and fought on behalf of Torah to build Torah and

92 Abba Zions, "Merkhaz Ha-Torah u-Darkho li-America," *Hapardes* 21 (January 1947): 45–46.

93 See Markus Krahn, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 96–118.

94 See Gurock, "Resisters and Accommodators," 127–146.

raise her trumpet.” As for Rabbi Hayim’s weeping, Lipshitz’s version portrayed the head of Volozhin yeshiva wailing twice, each representing a different explanation of the Torah transplant to the United States: “I cry for the terrible destruction of the scholars of Europe; six million Jews will be killed until just a tiny remnant will travel to America. I weep a second time for the exile of the Torah; that it must go to such a challenging place where so many will fall as sacrifices, so many will descend. But there, Torah will be rebuilt in grand fashion.”⁹⁵ First, Lifshitz’s version of the Rabbi Hayim legend foretold the fate of European Judaism and its need to relocate to another locale. This was primarily a Europe-centered prophecy. For Lifshitz, America was not a land imbued with potential; it was a spiritually arid nation that promoted modern sensibilities alien to a traditional Torah climate. The genius of Kotler was that he had developed a plan to replant the European Torah edifices on top of the inhospitable American soil. Later rabbinic émigrés borrowed this model.

The Kotler-caused reorientation of the foundational myth changed the origin stories of others ensconced within America’s Yeshiva World. Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman preceded Kotler, emigrating from Kovno to New Haven in 1930. After several false starts there and in Cleveland, Ruderman formed Baltimore’s Yeshiva Ner Yisroel in 1933.⁹⁶ He, too, looked to and cited the Rabbi Hayim legend to help articulate his American mission. In Ruderman’s recounting at an Agudath Israel convention in 1979, Rabbi Hayim “tearfully predicted [the migration of Torah to the United States] at the laying of the cornerstone of his yeshiva in Volozhin.”⁹⁷ In this rendering, the dramatic scene of Rabbi Hayim’s prophecy suggested that the model Etz Hayim Yeshiva in Volozhin was founded in the religiously fertile Lithuanian soil to be nurtured and then removed to the barren United States. Years later, at a memorial for Ruderman, Rabbi Moshe Sherer of the Agudath Israel heralded the

95 Dovid Lifshitz, *Tebilah le-David* (Union City, NJ: Gross Bros., 1994), 127–128.

96 See Dovid Katz, “Mishmeret Ha-Levi: Kiyum li-Dimuto u-lemishmeret Hayyav shel ha-Ga’on Rebbe Yaakov Yitzhak ha-Levi Ruderman,” *Yeshurun* 18 (2006): 157–169.

97 Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, “Torah for Others—and for Oneself,” *Jewish Observer* 14 (December 1979): 16.

recently deceased *rosh yeshiva* who, along with Kotler, had anticipated the “wanton destruction of European Jewry” and “thanks to him realized the vision of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin.”⁹⁸

Some of the most recent articulations of the Rabbi Hayim legend have stripped the story of all its American-centered themes. Take, for instance, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland. In October 1989, Gifter spoke at a local synagogue about the European-focused mission of his school and the foundational myth upon which it rests:

Telshe has tried to maintain its tradition as one of the great yeshivos from overseas. The yeshiva there was one of five great Torah centers in Lithuanian Jewry, established in 1885. They did a wonderful job overseas, but Hitler brought about the job that had to be done in the United States. I doubt whether he had an idea what his destruction of Jewry would lead to.

I keep telling this story: Reb Chaim Volozhiner once burst out crying: “The last station for Torah before the coming of Moshiach will be the United States of America. One of his great disciples asked him: “So why does the Rebbe cry? What is there to cry about?” His answer: “I see how bitter it will be to create this last station.” No one understood what he was talking about. When Hitler came along, we began to understand what Reb Chaim Volozhiner had in mind.”⁹⁹

In this morbid formulation, Hitler was an instrument in moving the center of Torah from Eastern Europe to the United States. Rabbi Hayim did not envision the details of the Nazis’ genocide program but his tears were, according to Gifter, shed for the destined destruction of European Jewry. Gifter singled out his yeshiva among a handful of Talmud academies that had retained their European identity after transplanting to the United States. These yeshivot were destined to migrate to the New World but were never meant to graft themselves to the new

98 Moshe Sherer, *Bi-Shtei Einayim* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1988), 419.

99 Mordechai Gifter lecture at Oheb Zedek-Taylor Road Synagogue, October 1989, available at <https://torahdownloads.com/shiur-20827.html> (accessed 8 April 2019).

environment. Likewise, Rabbi Chaim Dov Keller of Telshe's Chicago branch recounted the tale and concluded with his own version of Rabbi Hayim's explanation for his sadness: "You don't know how much pain this will involve ... with how much suffering, anguish, and *shefichas damim* (bloodshed) this will come about."¹⁰⁰ Again, the thrust of the tale was centered on Europe and not the United States.

In the late 1970s, Charles Liebman confessed that he had underestimated the staying power of the Yeshiva World in American Jewish life. The sociologist congratulated the group that, through its fidelity to Jewish observance and rejection of modernism, emerged as the "voice of Jewish authenticity."¹⁰¹ Its leaders derived their power from their unimpeachable standing as Torah scholars and their claim, as Liebman noted, to an authentic Jewish past. In the final decades of the twentieth century, a new generation of Orthodox Jews expressed doubt about other Jews who mixed their tradition-bound faith with American sensibilities.¹⁰² The Yeshiva World's ability to remake Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin's prophecy was emblematic of a deeper capacity to formulate a religious vision that could be branded as "authentic" and, however incidentally, flourish in the United States. The desire to develop a "usable past" is therefore a pivotal part of this process, one shared by Orthodox Jewish elites and leaders of other varieties of American faiths.

Zev Eleff is associate professor of Jewish history at Touro College. He is also chief academic officer of Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, and vice provost of Touro College Illinois. His most recent book is Authentically Orthodox: A Tradition-Bound Faith in American Life (Wayne State, 2020).

100 Chaim Dov Keller, "Searching for Meaning in the Maelstrom," *Jewish Observer* 36 (December 2003): 7. For an exceptional case, see A. Leib Scheinbaum, *The World That Was: America, 1900–1945* (Brooklyn: The Shaar Press, 2004), xv. The retelling in this book retained the assimilationist explanation for Rabbi Hayim's weeping because the scope of this book ended in 1945, at the end of World War II.

101 See Charles S. Liebman, "Orthodox Judaism Today," *Midstream* 25 (August/September 1979): 20–22.

102 See also Charles S. Liebman, "Extremism as a Religious Norm," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22 (March 1983): 75–86.