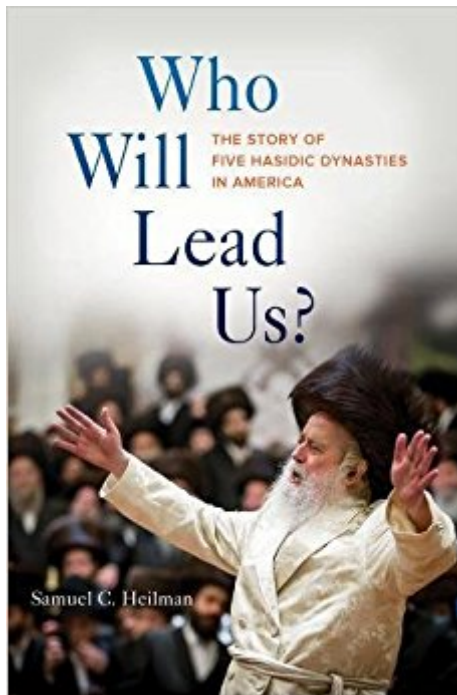




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Who Will Lead Us?: The Story Of Five Hasidic Dynasties In America



Synopsis

Hasidism, a movement many believed had passed its golden age, has had an extraordinary revival since it was nearly decimated in the Holocaust and repressed in the Soviet Union. Hasidic communities, now settled primarily in North America and Israel, have reversed the losses they suffered and are growing exponentially. With powerful attachments to the past, mysticism, community, tradition, and charismatic leadership, Hasidism seems the opposite of contemporary Western culture, yet it has thrived in the democratic countries and culture of the West.

How? Who Will Lead Us? finds the answers to this question in the fascinating story of five contemporary Hasidic dynasties and their handling of the delicate issue of leadership and succession. Revolving around the central figure of the rebbe, the book explores two dynasties with too few successors, two with too many successors, and one that believes their last rebbe continues to lead them even after his death. Samuel C. Heilman, recognized as a foremost expert on modern Jewish Orthodoxy, here provides outsiders with the essential guide to continuity in the Hasidic world.

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Customer Reviews

This detailed study of changes in leadership in the major communities of the Hasidic movement--Munkacs, Boyan and Kopyczynitz, Bobov, Satmar, and Chabad--is not aimed at the same general audience as sociology professor Heilman's acclaimed other works (*The Rebbe; Sliding to the Right*); instead, he focuses on "the patterns and processes of contemporary Hasidic succession." Heilman presupposes some familiarity with Hasidism, which

centers on charismatic leaders who inspire intense devotion among their followers; indeed, the disputes about whom should lead some Hasidic groups often devolved into violence. The descriptions of those physical altercations are just some of the warts-and-all aspects of the tradition that Heilman is able to provide as a result of his remarkable access to insiders, including influential Bobover rebbe Shlomo Halberstam, who brought the Bobov Hasidic dynasty to the U.S. after WWII, and Nachum Dov Brayer, current rebbe of the Boyan Hasidic dynasty. The centrality of the rebbe to his adherents makes the stakes high when he dies, and Heilman traces what happens when there is no successor, when there are competing successors, and when, as with Chabad/Lubavitch, there is denial that a successor is needed (in this case, because they believe the late Rabbi Schneerson did not really die and will return as the messiah). This is an invaluable addition to the ranks of objective studies of a Jewish movement that continues to flourish in the U.S. even as more modern denominations decline. *Who Will Lead Us?* (June) -- Publishers Weekly Ultimately, one marvels at the unlikely fact that succession has "occurred in a place and time when all the accepted wisdom suggested that Hasidism as a way of life would be impossible." Heilman explains this paradox as a process of "reanimation," when a successor is chosen and the community feels a renewed connection to both its revered past and its promising future through a larger-than-life leader. *Who Will Lead Us?* is an academic study but an accessible read. Anyone interested in Jewish history mixed with a bit of palace intrigue will enjoy this book. -- Jewish Book Council *Who Will Lead Us?* Heilman has drawn on many sources which he presents to us for the first time. He writes like a novelist thus making this a book that is hard to put down. We are taken back to the "political intrigue and the hidden machinations that enabled a handful of individuals to assume incredible power over their communities of followers", It is this power that makes a Hasidic rebbe the most important figure in the world for his followers, "a leader who is their intermediary with God - a kind of pope, in a way, who is indeed just a couple of rungs below divine". *Who Will Lead Us?* Reviews by Lassen "One might expect to find these riveting succession stories of the rebbes of the Munkacs, Boyan and Kopyczynitz, Bobover, Satmar, and Chabad Lubavitch dynasties in a TV mini-series rather than in a work of sociology and history. While fueled by an enormous amount of research, they read more like page turners where the obsession is not sex, but succession." (Moment 2017-05-15)

"Who Will Lead Us? brilliantly demonstrates that the remarkable resurrection of Hasidism has been due to its capacity for maintaining the charismatic authority of its dynastic leadership. This is by far the most insightful study of the social, economic, and political dynamics of Hasidim today." -- Ada Rapoport-Albert, Professor Emerita of Jewish Studies at University

College London “What happens to dynasties when they meet America? This is a fascinating tale of the struggles over succession that plague today’s Hasidic communities. Told with a richness of detail and insider knowledge that only Samuel Heilman could muster.”

• Art Green, Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University

“Once again, Samuel Heilman has opened the opaque world of contemporary Hasidism to his readers. With a rare blend of historical depth and sociological breadth, he offers up five case studies that explore the fraught process of leadership transition in Hasidic courts. This is a gripping story about Hasidic Jews, but it is also about religious leadership more generally in the modern age.”

• David Myers, Sady and Ludwig Kahn Professor of Jewish History at UCLA

Who Will Lead Us is one of the best books I have read in a long time. Samuel Heilman has spent decades studying the Hasidic world as a sociologist, and has become the go-to scholar for anyone seeking to understand the “black-hat” world that is at once so visible and so hard for an outsider to penetrate. But it is not just Heilman’s encyclopedic knowledge of Hasidic Jewry that makes this book so hard to put down – he also has the novelist’s eye for the telling detail, the key piece of information that turns an account from a one-off anecdote into a window that illuminates a larger narrative. Who Will Lead Us draws back the curtain on the political intrigue and the hidden machinations that enabled a handful of individuals to assume incredible power over their communities of followers – power that makes a Hasidic rebbe the most important figure in the world for his followers, a leader who is their intermediary with God – a kind of pope, in a way, who is indeed just a couple of rungs below divine. Take, for example, Heilman’s riveting account of the rise of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson. Like many of the figures in the book, he was not the obvious or widely-accepted crown prince, but rather a young man who may have played down his Orthodoxy while exploring the university world in Europe, and then came to America with dreams of becoming a successful engineer. Heilman lines up compelling pieces of historical evidence to show that Schneerson’s growing interest in jockeying to become the rebbe coincided with his realization that his engineering dreams might not quite turn out as he had envisioned. Or how about the fact that Lubavitchers wear fedora-like hats even on the Sabbath, while most other Hasidim wear the fur streimels. Ever wonder why? Who Will Lead Us reveals that was because of a clever political move on Schneerson’s part. In fact, up until Schneerson became the rebbe, the Lubavitchers had also worn streimels. And it had

always been a tradition for the new rebbe to inherit the streimel of his predecessor. The ascent to the throne was accompanied by the rebbe being crowned, quite literally. But the widow of the previous rebbe Schneerson's mother-in-law backed a rival candidate to become the new rebbe, and refused to surrender her late husband's streimel to Schneerson. No problem, he declared: From now on, we Lubavitchers no longer wear streimels!

Heilman is a gifted storyteller, weaving facts into a rich tapestry that had me reading this book deep into the night for several days running. I give *Who Will Lead Us* my highest recommendation, not just for readers who are already familiar with the Hasidic world, but for anyone who has ever wondered what is going on beneath the surface of these unusual communities. One last note. I have read and enjoyed Heilman's previous books about Hasidim. Those have attracted a fair bit of controversy, especially on various blogs and social media and around the internet. I am sure this book will be no exception, and some of the other reviews here already show indications of that. This is not surprising. For Hasidim, who view their rebbes as so close to God, and almost infallible (again, like popes), the publication of an account that reveals their leaders to be human, fallible, sometimes driven by ego, sometimes not all that holy for those Hasidim, an account like this is tantamount to apostasy, and needs to be beaten down and delegitimized. I have encountered numerous Lubavitchers who denounced Heilman's previous book about Schneerson, "The Rebbe," without having read it. Of course they did not read it because they were afraid to, and perhaps forbidden to read it. I wonder, though, whether some of them are not sneaking off to the nearest public library to see what the story is. Anyway, take their denunciations with a grain of salt, and see for yourself. I guarantee you *Who Will Lead Us* is a great read.

The book is a sociology study on Hasidim, a society dispersed all over the world, comprising of strictly ultra Orthodox Jews, who follow a few leaders who are descended from royal families. Hasidim, loosely translated as "followers," Initially meant "the pious ones," denoting, doing above and beyond of what is required of them. Authored by the celebrated sociologist, Samuel Heilman, told through the stories of a selected five Hasidic American sects, interviewing its leaders, analyzing its history and its current status. The first two dynasties cannot find any leaders, the next two dynasties have too many leaders fighting each other, the last dynasty is left completely leaderless, living through

Messianism. Samuel Heilman is a world renowned professor of Sociology in Queens College CUNY. And the chair of Jewish studies at The Graduate Center of CUNY. Himself a descendant of Hasidim, he does great justice to this subject. Seems like he infused the two of his life long fields, sociology and Judaic studies, to construct a comprehensive monumental guide book on Hasidim. Heilman has been forever the utmost authoritative voice on Hasidim, not only because of his diligent academic work, but also due to his own faith of Judaism, that inspires him to give narrative, motive, and context, to Jewish life. Being a teacher he is a constructive critic, often very frank and open. Heilman is a prolific writer and a provocative thinker, his columns are regularly published in many major journals and newspapers. He has authored more than ten books. His latest one, before this one, generated much attention, also from the Hasidim defending their leader, their Rebbe, trying to guard his elevated status as pious, from Heilman's claims, supported with documents and family interviews, from his youth, - otherwise. This new book is a direct out birth of his last one, and runs on the same theme, applied to the whole collective of Hasidim. With input from different dynasties and sects. And accesses other leaders' lives and histories as well. It is also a remarkable renaissance story. As it argues that Hasidim should have been extinct after the Holocaust. Yet it is alive bigger than ever. Despite its own leaders, giving up on an American Judaism, never mind an American Hasidism. How did it happen? This book spells out the right answer. And in the process, captivates the reader with this miraculous account. Turns out the Holocaust was not at all a detriment. To the contrary, it fueled the evolution of Hasidim today. As a professional sociologist and anthropologist the author breaks into this hermetically closed knit isolated Hasidic people, to produce a structural crystal clear scientific case, of how Hasidim's mass and energy, is constantly gaining ferocity and strength, in the orbits around their leaders, the Rebbes. He captures not only the personal struggles of those endeared leaders - the Rebbes. But proves, how their intensity, their punch is felt by the collective. The leaders' most private setbacks or conquerings, reverberates into the public sphere of their flock, the followers, the Hasidim, affecting and shaping them. Hasidim are a society apart, yet are deeply entrenched in the broader society surrounding it, through geography, economics, politics. Still they are estranged and hidden from their closest neighbors. This book will teach you the fundamental sociological underlying stirrings like, Collective Effervescence, Charisma and Conflict. That made and sustains Hasidim, in such a uniquely powerful society unparalleled in history. Hasidim are directly affecting and influencing the world, since they live at the heart and vortex of the most modern place on earth, New York City, and in other strategically important places. They change the way of living. Primarily through their

block-vote power, as Hasidim vote in huge united blocks, which is most powerful, to choke the individualistic interest from the general electorates, they wield tremendous sway to win out on social policy, that often defy reason, science, health, and even education, when it clashes with their own rituals, beliefs and traditions. Hasidim, primarily the men, are ubiquitous in the broader society. With their unique attire, mostly bespectacled; bearded; *Payos* - hairlocs adorning the two sides of their forehead; and traditional garb; black hats; black coats, - even in the scorching heat; white shirts, etc. - They seem to be everywhere. Even the women, who are less a presence in the workforce, except as secretaries, but more allowed to flout colors on their bodies, being a patriarchal society. You see them shopping with baby carriages in all the malls. - Hasidim stand out wherever you go. This sociology book reckons with its vibrancy and dominance. It is a highly objectively balanced work of research, evenly sourced, and referenced very extensively. It's based on so many other books before it about Hasidim. No doubt It will be the accepted lasting fundamental textbook, for many generations to come, to study Hasidim. The book is sculptured, by the many leaders themselves, the Rebbes, *input*. And their followers, the Hasidim's collaboration, albeit a few of them anonymously as the book explains why in the prologue of the book. But they all have been interrogated by Heilman first hand, Many on the record, very few off the record, all trusting him to balance the big picture while documenting it. Two of those interviewed very well respected leaders have just recently already died after he has written the book, and some are sick and old, and many will be with us for a long time, - all find their unique voices interwoven to form this great Hasidic sociology anthology, written down to history by the master of sociology, Samuel Heilman, who makes all the right calls, and hard decisions, which arguments and narratives gets credence, and which are voided. There are other dynasties by Hasidim. The author chose to delve into these five mainly, because he felt, as he makes the case very succinctly, that they best explain Hasidim on a whole, thru each of their very unique vibrant transforming powers that exemplify Hasidim at large currently: 1. The dynasty of Minkatch was an especially conservative sect, that crowned a third son for its leader, instead of his father, because the later embraced too much modernity. 2. The dynasty of Boyan left behind the American way of life that the whole leader's family chose to live, and instead plucked out a young teen, to shoo him off to Israel dogmatizing him with right wing Judaism to be their leader. 3. The dynasty of Bobov, initially rebuilt in America on charisma, song, holocaust nostalgia. Only to subsequently split off into royal family feuding. 4. The Satmar dynasty best exemplifies Hasidim. They are the most fervently fanatically attached to their traditional faith, yet materially very successful. They are the largest and most diverse group, having multiple leaders, splintered with sectarian strife, fighting to better

preserve their purest version of Jewishness, not giving an inch to modernity.⁵ Then there is the last dynasty, Chabad-Lubavitch, which are the polar opposite of all Hasidim, completely leaderless and engaging modernity, in order to missionize the world with their Messianic fervor to stay relevant as Hasidim without any leader whatsoever. So much, of the same narratives, repeats itself over and over in all of these five dynasties in real life. But the author chooses to recount only those which best illustrates the Hasidic full picture, more uniquely from each chapter. So to get the whole picture, the reader will have to absorb all five chapters on all the dynasties. And in order to fully grasp all its lofty concepts, and extensively discussed characters, the reader first must digest the prologue chapter, and afterwards, the final thoughts – the closing chapter, where it all comes together in one compact short closing argument concluding summary. The notes chapter guides you further to explore the issues at hand. It's engrossing looking up the sources, for the many claims, while reading the book itself, because it's based on the widest array of the spectrum. From hagiography to autobiography works. From academic critical history volumes, to religious biblical, talmudic, halachic and hashkafa, - Jewish thought writings, throughout the generations. To be honest in my assessment, with full disclosure that I am a Hasid, I must admit that in the beginning I feared him, because as he himself writes in the prologue of the book, apologising for demeaning us, he expresses regrets, that many people will no doubt be embarrassed by his work. After finishing the book, more than once, I ultimately not only forgive him, but really thank him for writing it, because I am convinced my world will be a better one through this work. I can attest that Hasidim like me are mesmerised by its dripping godly holiness, due to its putting Hasidic society under the microscopic transparency lens. It resurrects the Hasidic pulse, its heart beat. Its ailments and survival. Its aliveness, and its blind spots, - onto the written word, that is so riveting in substance and in style. It is true that Hasidim despise all academic meditations, even Jewish studies, if it's written by a general scholar, because of its dangerous modernity effects the author engraves on the reader. But this sociology study is processed by us Hasidim, because we don't want to assimilate. We want to preserve our holy tradition. This book only helps perfect this ideal quest. And as for the universal readership, due to Hasidim being a block-vote power in the western democracies all over the world, they are becoming fast, as we speak, the biggest most powerful force today, and in the immediate future. Hasidim have simply grown too large to be ignored. Too real to be denied as just another group of humans. This sociology book tells the world and history, why Hasidim exist, persevere and rule. No wonder this book is such a bestseller! As you can see in this

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Unlike other reviewers on this site, I came to *Who Will Lead Us?* with a rather limited knowledge of Hasidism and the various dynasties that Professor Heilman so brilliantly discusses in its pages. Although I have over the years learned a substantial amount about Judaism, my Jewish education pales beside that of many of my friends and acquaintances. A retired English teacher hoping to expand my horizons through reading, I seek books that are both informative and entertaining. I was thrilled to learn from Professor Heilman so much that I had never known before (and never even realized that I did not know) from a work that was very engaging and well written. The contents of this extremely detailed and comprehensive book were very accessible to me, despite my limited background in the areas it covers. I have recommended it to all of my friends, convinced that they, too, would find it to be both absorbing and eye-opening.

This book offers a compelling and insightful history of the best known contemporary Chassidic dynasties and how they struggled with the profound issue of selecting their leaders. The book reads very well and its stirring events, often shaped by the impact of the Holocaust, provide great insights as to how these insular communities emerged into the 21st Century with a new generation of leadership able to build their communities bigger and more confident than before the war. Its dramatic cover belies the rule of how not to judge a book. This one will not disappoint the reader. It is highly recommended.

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