''An interview with the head of the Charedim''

By Jeffrey M Cohen

''Don't expect the *Rebbe*
To greet you as an equal,
Or this meeting to be followed
By the granting of a sequel;
He's agreed to this interview
As a public-relations ruse –
But, in dealing with outsiders,
He has a short fuse.

''His *shammes*, or side-kick,
Never leaves his side,
And, if you try to best him,
Or your tone becomes snide,
In an instant, the interview,
He'll swiftly terminate,
On the pretext that,
For Minchah,
The *Rebbe* can't be late!

''Now, when your interview appears
In the *JC* or *Jewish News,*
With you attempting to denigrate
Any of his views,
Or expose the weakness
Of an argument he adduced,
He'll reject your version out of hand
And you'll find yourself traduced
In the Yiddish newspapers
Or notice boards, displayed,
With no future interviews with them
Being okayed.''

With that warning, my mentor,
A journalist, shrewd and bright -
Still bearing the scars of battles
Over being too forthright
And challenging the establishment
In many a communal fight -
Dropped me off at the head office
Of the Union of Charedi Shuls,
With a parting shot – ''Remember,
They don't play by our rules!''

''*Sholom Aleichem, Reb Yid*, *Kum arayn*,''
The *shammes* drawled,
With a Chasidic intonation
That had me quite appalled,
As my home or school background
Bequeathed me not one Yiddish word –
To conduct a probing interview,
I feared would be absurd!

Ushering me down a dark hallway,
I entered the *Rebbe's* room;
Floor-to-ceiling volume-covered -
The epitome of gloom.

Seated at his desk,

Beard brushing his Talmud's page,
He raised his head slowly,
As if loath to disengage.

''*Sholom Aleichem, Reb Yid*,''
He said;
O, dear; no; not again!
An unintelligible monologue!
A waste of time! a pain!

Scrutinising me carefully,
I felt I could read his mind:
What does this fellow want of my life?
This visit, I should have declined!
Well, on that point, I was sure,
Both of us agreed -
Of my reporter's scribbling pad,
I knew I'd have no need!

Expecting the Rebbe to address me
In Yiddish beyond comprehension,
The awe of his presence and his piercing eyes
Fed my apprehension;
So, imagine my astonishment
When the accent with which he spoke
Was that of cultured Englishmen,
And true gentlefolk!

''Now, my young man, I understand
You have some questions to ask;
I'll try to answer them fully
If I'm up to that task!''

I gazed at the Rebbe's face,
To probe his attitude,
And detected, behind his smiling eyes,
A benign, good-humoured mood.

''I thank you, *Rebbe*, for your time,
I'm sure you've much on your plate;
But, the *J.C*. and *The Jewish News*
Have been perplexed of late.

''Their readers, of every religious hue,
Seek to understand
Why your Chasidim so glibly defy
The dictates of our land.

''Does not the Talmud itself declare,
'The law of the land is the law;'
So, is there not an inference here
For your community to draw?

''I refer especially to Covid,
And the laws put in place to prevent
The spread of this fearful plague -
Which you Chasidim circumvent!

''It's no secret that recorded deaths,
In this area have tipped the scale,
And the pleas, for social distancing
And masks, were of no avail.

‘‘Even when Rav Pinter,
Whom you all revered the most,
Was admitted to hospital,
With Covid, diagnosed -
And within a few days,
Surrendered up his soul,
Adding another number
To your community’s death-toll -
It didn’t stop your followers
In their well-trodden track;
The loss of their leader
Seemed a minor setback!

‘‘You all ignore the reality
That Covid doesn’t care,
But sinks its spiky death-fangs
Into those that don’t beware,
Or who ignore the guide-lines
That the government provides,
But which your community
Blithely derides!

‘‘You crowd together,
Without a care,
When learning or attending
Daily prayer;
At weddings and Bar Mitzvahs,
You dance and celebrate;
At funerals, mobbed by thousands,
Inflating the death-rate.

‘‘You gather outside
The male ritual-bath;
Shoulder-to-shoulder,
On its narrow path;
We’ve watched you all
And photographed
Your wives outside your schools;
All huddled together –
No thought for Covid’s rules,
Or for the hostile feeling
That your conduct fuels
On the part of the gentiles
Whom you must take for fools!

‘‘You Charedim have no access
To media of any kind,
While your Yiddish publications
Keep you secularly blind.
No NHS guidance;
No awareness of danger;
To death’s grim reality,
Every one of you a stranger.

‘‘It seems that you’ve created, sir,
A state within a state;
Replacing our English law
With the *Rebbe’s* dictate;
So, freedom of thought,
Science and the Arts,
Can gain no entry

To Chasidic minds and hearts.''

''Let me stop you,'' said the *Rebbe* -
A pained look on his face –
''*Shammes*,'' he entreated,
Glancing at his bookcase:
''Our guest must be thirsty
After his lengthy oration,
Which hardly calls, on our part,
For any ovation!
But, refreshment, we must offer
Our most welcome guest,
So he may recite a *brochoh*
To Hashem, may He be blessed!''

From the bookcase, the *shammes*
Retrieved a bottle of schnapps;
Poured three glasses, and offered me
Some home-made gingersnaps.
When I chose to decline,
Said the *Rebbe*, with a smile,
''They're fully kosher; Take my word;
Not just 'Kosher style!'.''

When the chuckles had subsided,
His serious look returned:
''By your allegations,
I'm really most concerned;
You go by the name 'Joe' -
Am I correct? -
Then let me call you Yoseph,
Because it'll connect
With the advice I wish to give you,
On which you might reflect.

''Because, Yoseph, son of Jacob,
Through his evil report,
Caused his brothers to contrive
That, to Egypt, he be brought;
And its repercussions –
As I'm sure you know well –
Were that the Jewish people
As slaves there
Had to dwell.

''So, my advice, dear Yoseph,
Is, don't follow your name-sake,
To report of our community
News that might be fake!

''Now, our sages tell us, Yoseph,
When a number of questions are posed,
Our replies should follow the order
In which they were composed.

''Well, the Torah states that God allots
To the average man,
A period of some seventy-years
As his life-span;
But, that, some are blessed
To extend their years
By reason of extra strength;

Though it's the quality of our lives
That counts,
Not merely their length.

''So, we reject the suggestion
That we can affect another's fate.
Hashem - as I said at the outset -
Is the One to allocate
The brevity or the length,
And the quality, of our lives,
And whether, or not, within us,
Any virus thrives.

''All that Hashem determined
As our *Rebbe's* role in life,
He achieved most admirably,
Dissipating strife;
Teaching God's Torah
With joy and clarity;
Plumbing the depths of its wisdom
With profundity.

''So, even without Covid,
His time had arrived;
Had it really been Hashem's wish,
The *Rebbe* would have survived!

''*The Lord gives and takes away*,
Deciding, anew,
Our fate, each day;
Whether Covid will strike,
Or be held at bay,
Or if we'll succumb
In some other way.

''He decides who'll die by water,
And who by war;
Who by fire,
Or the wild beast's claw;
Who by famine,
And who by drought;
Who, by natural disaster,
Will be caught out;
Who will die by plague,
And who by strangulation;
Who by stoning,
Or assassination?

Who by a driver's
Rash decision;
Causing a sudden,
Fatal collision;
Who by a drug
Overdosed;
Who by illness,
Undiagnosed;
Who by a terrorist's
Bomb or gun;
Slaying a parent,
Daughter, or son?

''Who shall be calm,

And who shall be stressed;
Who shall be harried,
And who shall have rest?

‘‘Who shall be poor –
In their own eyes,
Or brimming with confidence
Up to the skies;
Whose wealth shall grow
Over night;
And who shall suffer
Penury’s plight?

‘‘Which public figure
Shall fall from grace,
And which shall become
A national face?

‘‘The prophet, Bilaam,
Said of us –
Intending it as a curse –
That we’re a people
That dwells alone;
Among nations,
Regarded the worst.

‘‘But he didn’t know
That, that was our strength,
So we wouldn’t assimilate;
But were left alone
To seek out our God,
And, upon His will,
To wait.

‘‘We’ve lived by our faith;
We’ve lived by our wits;
We’ve lived by the skin of our teeth;
We’ve lived with a suitcase
Ready packed;
With a prayer book,
Resting beneath.

‘‘We may have had only
A morsel of bread
In our small and rickety homes,
But our shelves held
A treasure, unique –
A set of Talmudic tomes.

‘‘We Chasidim live
To study God’s law;
It’s the air that we breathe;
It’s the music that stirs our soul –
The eternity we bequeath.

‘‘So, don’t call us insular,
Or mock our attire;
There’s nothing from the outside world,
That any of us require.

‘‘We provide for our community
All of its needs;

Our shops are stocked
With every food -
From meat and fish
To seeds.

''We have our own butchers
And those that bake our bread;
We have our own hairdressers;
We bury our own dead.

''We have dress shops that sell
Only modest clothes;
And Chasidic entertainers –
Really fine maestros!

''We have tailors and cobblers,
Plumbers and odd-jobbers;
Cleaners, electricians,
And skilled dietitians;
Nurses, social workers,
And obstetricians;
Mechanics, opticians,
And a host of technicians;
We have builders and plasterers,
Doctors and teachers;
Publishers, printers,
And thousands of preachers!

''These professionals, in the main,
Converted over the years;
And study Torah hours a day
While servicing their careers.

''Crime among us is unknown,
So, we don't meet the police;
And disputes rarely occur -
For we're all pursuers of peace.

''The point I'm making
Is that our proximity
Is restricted to those
In our community;
So, no infections do we share
With those that live outside;
And our own will accept them
As divinely justified.''

With that, the Rebbe signalled
To the Shammes, once again;
The schnapps he poured me
Now tasted high octane;
And I felt the niggling
Of a migraine.

''As to your point,''
He continued,
''About the law of the land:
If you knew any Jewish law,
You'd fully understand;
So, Yoseph, let me tell you
That that rule doesn't apply
When secular law collides with

The Torah on which we rely.

‘‘Now, the Book of Devarim is quite clear,
To our own judges we must adhere;
Turning, neither, to left or right,
Trusting their wisdom and insight;
And, to them, alone,
Are we to turn,
If God’s will
We would discern.

‘‘And what reward is promised
In Psalm ninety-one?
Protection and security,
Second to none:
For He will save you
From any trap set,
Or plague that catches
Thousands in its net.

‘‘This is in store
For the righteous alone,
Whereas those that stray,
To affliction are prone;
And you need but look
At the behaviour of man
To see he’s defied
God’s sacred plan.

‘‘Now, to your allegation
That we cause rancour and frustration
In the hearts of gentiles
For our lives of isolation -
Your attitude doesn’t chime
With the situation of our time;
It betrays ignorance of the fact -
By current statistics, clearly backed -
That, half of London’s communities
Comprise ethnic minorities!

‘‘They speak their own languages,
Carry memories of ravages,
Pillage, disadvantages.

‘‘Many still wear their native dress,
And, like us, disdain chattiness;
They’re ill-at-ease with the whites,
Access-barred to all their rights.

‘‘But, can you imagine *their* local press
Causing one of their groups
Shame and distress,
In the way the *JC* and *Jewish News*,
Target our community,
And demean our views?’’

Though my migraine was getting worse,
As a journalist I’m not averse
To stopping people in their tracks,
Observing how my critique impacts.

‘‘*Rebbe*,’’ I said, in the constricted tone

To which many migraine sufferers are prone,
''I respect your right to your own belief,
And have no wish to add to your grief,
Yet, I cannot accept your attitude,
And your mindset that would exclude
Not only the gentiles
Who inhabit these shores,
But fellow Jews
Whose history is yours!

''It was your community
That suffered the most,
After Adolph Hitler left it a ghost
Of its large and vibrant former state –
With his 'Final Solution' for our fate:
To hunt us down and incinerate -
A shared bond should this not create;
Should love and respect
Not be our mandate?''

I feigned not to observe
The Shammes refilling my glass;
Having just referred to 'respect,'
I suppressed the wish to pass!

''Yoseph'' –
His voice seemed to come
From somewhere afar -
''It may well strike you
As somewhat bizarre,
But you've just put your finger
On the emotional scar
That members of our community
Collectively bear,
And which shall ever remain
Our persistent nightmare.

''It's that Holocaust spirit
That destroyed our lives,
And which, in a similar guise,
Still survives;
And hence our withdrawal
Into our own cocoon;
And why the good will of 'others',
We're quick to impugn.

''And, if you imagine
That we're overreacting,
Just read your own papers,
And the news you're attracting;
Each week you report
On countless anti-Jewish crimes –
Reminiscent of Germany
In its Third Reich times.

''Jewish students on campus,
Becoming objects of hate;
Charged with being spies
For the Jewish State.

''Speakers being welcomed
From around the globe,

And even from Israel
If they come to probe
And to critique
Its every policy,
And to call into question
Its legitimacy;
But, if they're invited
As ambassadors of good will,
They'd be as welcome
As a bitter pill.

''Not to mention the UN,
Gaza and Iran;
North African countries,
And Pakistan;
At one with the European's
Dislike of Jews;
In league with the Palestinians
On most issues.

''So, are we really being naïve
When we doubt how safe we are;
And, with our slain grandparents,
Put ourselves on a par?
Perhaps, now you'll appreciate
Why we remain aloof,
When, for our future survival,
There's such meagre proof!''

Perhaps, because of my fuzzy head,
I struggled to reply;
Or was it the cogency of his case
That I couldn't deny?
My head, by now, was thumping;
It also felt quite hot;
I wondered if this interview
Had been my editor's plot
To constructively remove me
From my long-time post,
For some young journalist
Who, much less money, grossed!

Putting this thought
To the back of my mind,
To quit this stuffy room,
I was inclined;
But, one more issue,
I'd been told to raise,
On the assumption that
It would truly faze.

First, I asked for some water,
To clear my head
And moisten my throat;
Hoping I'd finish this interview
On a confident and high note.

''*Rebbe*, one last question -
And I don't wish to keep you too long -
Relates to some Chasidim
Who appear cheeky and headstrong.

‘‘On arrival at their booked seat
Aboard a plane,
If they see a woman
Placed next to them,
They noisily complain;
Demanding that the stewardess
Replace her with another male,
So that, his ascent to purity,
She might not derail.

‘‘Here, again, Judaism
Is plunged into disrepute;
With those women feeling worthless,
And embarrassed by the dispute.’’

The *Rebbe* looked uneasy -
‘‘Some Chasidim’s sensitive soul
Means they reach a level of holiness
When they reject any loophole.

‘‘Now, the Talmud writes of sages
Who become really great
That they’re rendered more vulnerable
To a passionate counter-weight;
So, they know they must ever
Beware the seductive charm
Of any immoral temptress
Sitting close by their arm.

‘‘Now, to another point
About which you opined:
That Charedim are insular,
And secularly blind;
Inhabiting their own state,
With no freedom of thought;
Hide-bound by everything
Chasidism has taught.

‘‘First, know that, in our day,
The world recognises,
Over four thousand religions,
Of all shapes and sizes;
Even Scientology,
A secretive cult -
Whose practices border
On the occult -
Is viewed as a religion
By our Supreme Court;
So, why, to such derision,
Do fellow-Jews resort;
And, why do they begrudge us
Our own unique brand
Of vibrant orthodoxy
In this green and pleasant land?

‘‘Yes, Chasidim do follow
Their *Rebbe’s* faithful lead;
Before the gates of heaven,
For them, they know,
He’ll plead;
A paragon of piety,

With counsel ever wise;
On every aspect of their lives,
They know he can advise.

It's true, the secular knowledge
Of our Chasidim is scant -
And they can't tell the difference
Between Banksy and Rembrandt;
Nor know if a cat has six or nine lives,
Or name even one
Of Henry the Eighth's wives -
But, unlike those
Who spend their spare time
Watching TV or Amazon Prime,
And their weekends in pubs
Or watching spurs,
We study the teachings
Of our ancestors:
Talmudic texts that challenge the brain -
An entire culture, they contain:
Theology, history, and folklore,
Moral philosophy, ethics, and more;
Then, there's Chasidism's
Main mystical text –
Isaac Luria's, *Zohar,*
Our guide for the perplexed!

''So, tell me, now, Yoseph,
Who *are* the educated? -
And there's even something else
That we haven't yet stated:
That, by the age of seven or eight
Their vocabulary is rich
In English, Hebrew, Aramaic,
And, of course, in Yiddish!''

With that, the *Shammes*, raised himself,
And looked at his Omega watch:
''*Rebbe*, he said respectfully -
Tightening his belt a notch -
''It's already time for Mincha;
We must bid farewell to our guest;
And if I'm not mistaken,
All his questions have been addressed.''

As the interview was at an end,
I tried to rise, likewise;
But my legs ignored my mind's command -
They seemed paralyzed;
I began to see twin Rebbes
Approach before my eyes;
And my head resumed its drum-beat,
Though I didn't vocalize!

The *Rebbe* placed his hands on my head -
That, by now, was boiling hot -
Gave me a blessing, and whispered,
As a parting shot,
''Yoseph, I'm sure you'll write something
To make our community proud;
Disparaging a fellow Yid in the press,
You know, is not allowed!

Together, they took my arms,
And walked me to the road,
Where my mentor's car was waiting,
To receive its drunken load.

I slept till late the following day,
Then, to the office, made my way;
Finding colleagues busy at their wordplay,
Reports being checked to avoid cliche;
Telephones buzzing,
A response of dismay -
''Be sure to check your facts, mate;
It could be mere hearsay!''

''Joe - to my office!''
Called editor, Steve;
''Where's your first draft?' he said,
Without a 'by your leave'!
We've left, for this timely piece,
A double-page spread,
With the headline, 'Our challenge to
The new Charedi head'.''

A silence ensued,
Then confusion set in;
I knew that my position
Was one of 'no-win'.

''Steve, I'm afraid
There is no draft;
And I know it may seem
To you quite daft,
But I've no idea
To what you've just referred –
Put it down to my mind,
That a migraine has furred.''

A look of incredulity
Crossed Steve's face:
''Are you saying that your visit
To the Rebbe was a waste
Of time and money,
And our hopes
Of a scoop;
And we've let those Chasidim
Leap out of our loop?!''

Sheepishly, I answered,
''Steve, that's the sum of it;
I may not have taken notes,
But I sure took a hit!
I really can't remember
A single point discussed,
But, I can tell you that their Rebbe
Had me triply nonplussed!''

I left Steve's office
Embarrassed and ashamed;
Knowing that I'd well-deserved
To be named and blamed.

These events all occurred

A few years ago;

I'm now the Charedi presenter

Of our community's Radio.

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