

EARLY ON in *Holy Days*, her absorbing portrait of Lubavitcher Hassidim in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, Lis Harris writes that "I never encountered a single Jew who didn't have a strong opinion about the Hassidim." The Jews she knew, writes Harris, either "did not like them ... [or] shared a kind of wistful, idealized view of Hasidic life."

As soon as I read these lines – in the *New Yorker* magazine, where *Holy Days* was first serialized – I recognized in myself both feelings: a yearning, sometimes, for what Harris calls the Lubavitchers' "closeknittedness"; and a long-standing uncomfortableness with their narrow definition of the religious life. Harris's sensitively balanced account evoked, and embellished, both reactions.

A gifted writer, she depicts the private and public aspects of Hassidic life with a delicate sense of flavour and texture, of gesture and mood; and she is engagingly open and undefensive about her sometimes confused or ambivalent reactions. Her book is a profile of one Lubavitcher family – pseudonymously, Moshe and Sheina Konigsberg and their children and close relations – and of their community in Crown Heights, focusing on their celebration of the various Jewish holidays in the course of a Jewish year. There is also a useful short introduction to the history and philosophy of Hassidism.

Harris has a wonderful eye for the

# Light and darkness

**HOLY DAYS** by Lis Harris. New York, Summit. 266 pp. \$18.95.

Robert L. Cohen

playful and absurd, a feel for the apt phrase, and a painter's talent for vivid description: the bustling energy of men and women preparing, separately, for *Shabbos*; the atmosphere of "weary benevolence" at *shul* as the long Yom Kippur day lingers; guests appearing at a *succa* "like unannounced visitors in a Chekhov play"; a kitchen (Sheina's) "so orderly looking I would not have been surprised to find the cans on the shelves in alphabetical order."

Though a self-described secular Jew, she is open to new experiences: to the taste of *matza shmura* (repellent, she finds); to being wafted atop an ocean of bodies at the Lubavitcher synagogue on Rosh Hashana; and to immersion in a *mikve* even if, spiritually, she seems ready at this point to get little more than her feet wet.

But she is sympathetic even when she feels, or thinks she should feel, distant, and she appreciates the appeal of the Lubavitchers' "little

Utopia": the strengths of their family life, about which she is quite perceptive; their manifest devotion to other Jews; and their single-minded sense of purpose – "the extraordinary sense that everything they did counted."

ALAS, THE dark side of this vigorous self-confidence is a collective self-absorption disturbingly reflected in the closed blinds and drawn curtains that Harris astutely observes in her first daytime visit to Crown Heights.

It is expressed in Sheina's peculiar impression that life is "aimless" everywhere but in the community in which she personally found meaning, and in the persistent representation by Lubavitchers of their customs and beliefs – with respect to decorating *succot*, for example, or women's dress, or restrictions – as identical with Jewish law and belief generally. (Such distortions unfortunately found both the author and her *New Yorker* editors somewhat credulous – a major source of the numerous errors in an otherwise conscientiously researched book.)

Along with this attitude is a "self-congratulatory tone" (Harris's words), a Messianic impatience complete with bumper stickers ("We

Want Moshiach Now!"), and an evident inability to live with uncertainty.

The Lubavitchers want sureness, and they have it – but the price is high. They believe (in the words of the Lubavitcher *Rebbe*) that the theory of evolution "has not a shred of evidence to support it," and that women are not aroused by men's singing (in the century of Presley, Sinatra, and the Beatles!) – whereas men are likely to be stirred by a female concert pianist!

PERHAPS MOST disquieting are the significant contradictions, understated in *Holy Days*, between Lubavitcher behaviour and the Lubavitcher ethos and self-image.

Thus, Moshe suggests in his first conversation with Harris that "maybe we [Lubavitchers] pay more attention to the holiness of things in the physical [natural] world," but it is hard to see this evident in Crown Heights' conspicuous crabgrass, in the general disparagement of physical exercise, or in the exasperated refusal of a Lubavitcher teacher to understand why "a bunch of stupid grapes" (apparently they are not so holy, after all) might make a *succa* more festive and inviting.

God "rejoices when His children [Israel] are joyful," taught Hassidism's founding father, yet most of the young men Lis Harris observes look unhappy and depressed.

And though Sheina speaks of the purpose of Hassidic living as "to

elevate ordinary life," her husband finds his work meaningless and spiritually irrelevant, and no one in the Konigsberg family takes the slightest interest in any aspect of the author's life.

(With considerably less benign neglect, a non-conformist Lubavitcher young man in *Holy Days*, who takes an interest in the public library, karate, and advanced education courses, is eventually disowned by his family.)

One must turn, perhaps, to Heschel, to Samson Raphael Hirsch, to Rav Kook to find in developed *Weltanschauung* the values Lubavitch affirms but seems unable to implement.

When she leaves *shul* in Crown Heights after the conclusion of Yom Kippur *Neila*, Lis Harris speaks of the congregation entering "the darkness of the everyday world." Her image is again, I think, an apt one – for the Lubavitchers appear to experience the "outside" world as a place of unmitigated darkness, and virtually everything non-Jewish as idolatrous.

But the task of the Jew is precisely to illuminate the everyday world with the light of Tora – to engage in the world and invest it with *kedusha* (holiness). The Lubavitchers, with their strong communal life, their fervour and wholeheartedness, may help some of their adherents to survive the world – but it is difficult to see how their example can help us save it. □