

The 'Disco Rebbe'

Jeannette Kupfermann encounters a Chasidic phenomenon

Even in Israel, where saving souls has become almost a national pastime, with more yeshivot for *Ba'ale teshuva* (penitents) than pizza parlours, Rabbi Yitzhak David Grossman is something out of the ordinary. And it's not merely that he does his saving in Galilee settlement towns like Migdal Emek that were once notorious for their criminal and low-life element, and which now bloom with neat villas, model citizens and even that arch symbol of bourgeois bad taste, an empty revolving tower restaurant.

Known popularly as the 'Disco Rebbe,' who has in his time donned his wife's sheitel to disguise himself as a hippie in order to find sinners in some of Haifa's sleazier dives, Rabbi Grossman has now taken his own brand of reform into the prisons, has set up a network of schools, rehabilitation centres and even computer training programmes to prepare his reformed citizens for the new micro-chip technology. Rabbi Grossman, who among other things has involved himself with recently arrived Ethiopian Jews, is that rarest of rare birds—a forward-looking Chasid.

I was curious to see how the Rebbe did it; not least since his sponsors included non-Jews whose eyes glazed over as they spoke of the man. Chasidim are not known to attract an international following of this kind. But as soon as he came through the swing-doors of the Great Western Hotel, Paddington, peyot and coat-tails flying, I could see why. It wasn't just that he

laughed with real merriment when he talked about his 'bad boyiz' but that he looked me, a mere woman, straight in the eye, with a gaze as intense as Svengali's.

Several months later in Israel, after a whirlwind tour of prisons, schools and other centres in the presence of this phenomenal energy, I knew I had encountered a social worker extraordinaire.

'When I have time I give a jump in,' he informed me blithely—and what a jump, whether he was rescuing a converted Chilean girl from the clutches of the Hare Krishna sect in the middle of the night, or giving a pep talk to some of his 'bad boyiz' in Tel Mond prison, near Netanya, who visibly lit up as he walked into their cells and gave each one an affectionate hug and kiss.

Like all good therapists, he recognises the power of physical contact, especially with the most unwanted and unloved. Children and hardened criminals alike seem to melt. He also knows about humour, laughing gleefully as he describes the enraged prostitution racketeers who had threatened his life, but whom he'd managed equally to terrify with his own Cabalistic formulae to the extent that they either crossed to the other side of the street or they offered to join him. Fighting fire with fire seems to be his *modus operandi*.

Though he quickly rejects claims that he's a *Wunder Rebbe*, an aura of magic still surrounds Rabbi Grossman, partly due to his tall, gaunt

appearance — thin to the point of anorexia (and I do believe he lives on air and guidance from above, since I never once saw him eat). One of his American admirers offered him a hundred dollars for every kilo he gained but it doesn't seem to have proved much of an incentive.

Nevertheless, he is very insistent that other people's bodily needs should be catered for. 'How can a man be a *mensch* without a good meal and clean clothes?' he insists. His store-room of clothes for the often ragged urchins who arrive at his school is his pride and joy.

Beauty also has its place: (a most unchasidic virtue this), and his school synagogue has stained glass windows to rival Chagall's. To those who carp, the Rabbi replies that, 'when the children told me that the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen was the church in Nazareth, I knew I had to provide them with something beautiful and Jewish.'

Like all charismatic figures, the 'Disco Rebbe' is not without his critics: the prison warden, for instance, who complained that the prison staff did all the donkey work while the Rabbi just put in an occasional, inspirational appearance. Inspiration, however, is a rare commodity these days, especially when it comes in the form of a man who can show enough tolerance to let his computer students work without wearing yarmulkas and can redesign prison compounds as well as housing estates for people who don't want to live in little boxes.



Rabbi Yitzhak David Grossman — a whirlwind making contact with the young



Irit Sapir

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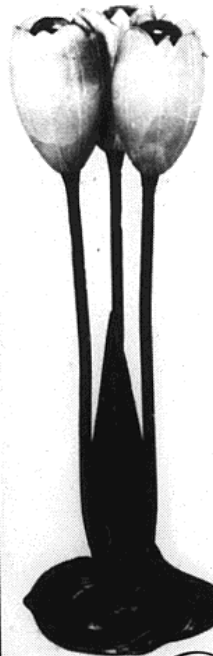
This rare portrait of Ibrahim Adil Shah II, the Sultan of Bijapur (1576-1627), was formerly the property of the first Governor General of India, Warren Hastings. The same collection provided twenty other fine Moghul miniatures which will also be sold



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Long derided as a kind of huge coastal convalescent home, Bournemouth nowadays presents a more vigorous image, notwithstanding the fact that the Jewish community is eighty this year. Certainly the upswing encountered by Chaim Berman on his visit has been confirmed since by the emergence of two hotels offering kosher holidays. Meanwhile, as the resort awaits a Passover boom we take a distinctly youthful look at the festival. And in this season of biblical adventure stories, how about the claim by a respected French architect that the Bible contains a code concealing remarkable technological plans? Another architect oft disposed to reach heavenwards — in his case by filling the London landscape with skyscrapers — is Colonel Richard Seifert, who tells Mira Bar-Hillel that he is now more down-to-earth, while Charles Spencer reveals another prominent feature of the metropolitan scene — the Jewish-owned art gallery. Further afield, we look to North America and Israel for stories and pictures to provide a suitably stimulating supplement to your *Haggada*.

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