

analyzing a subculture — the hasidic jews

Name _____

Class _____

Date _____

America contains a wide variety of subcultures. In this reading, a writer for *National Geographic* visits a Hasidic Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. Read the article and then answer the questions which follow.

Maybe we should have parachuted in. That would have seemed much more appropriate somehow for two travelers dropping out of one world into another. Instead, photographer Nathan Benn and I took the subway, boarding on Manhattan's Lower East Side and emerging ten minutes later into a setting that looked for all the world as if some errant stagehands had mixed the scenery for two different plays — one about a decaying tenement neighborhood in today's Brooklyn, the other about a pre-World War II rural Jewish village, or shtetl, of Eastern Europe.

"Welcome to Williamsburg in Brooklyn," Nathan said. "Or to Sätmar in Old Hungary. It depends on how you look at it."

Passing shop windows hieroglyphed with square-block Hebrew letters, we entered the extraordinary world of Williamsburg's Hasidic Jews, or Hasidim — meaning "pious ones." Here, wedged amid Brooklyn's ethnic hodgepodge, sprawls a 40-block enclave of ultra-orthodox Judaism, where most of the men wear flowing beards and dangling earlocks in accordance with God's command in the Book of Leviticus 19:27: "Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard."

Here, a single subway stop from Manhattan, children learn Yiddish as their native tongue, and rarely if ever see a television show or movie, or read a novel. Nor for that matter are they likely to drift into delinquency, experiment with drugs, or rebel against the value system of their elders.

For here the mitzvahs, or commandments, which God on Mount Sinai charged His people to obey, are honored as rules of living with a devotion so vibrant that the tablets of the law might have been carried down by Moses to Lee Avenue this very morning.

No fewer than 613 such mitzvahs are enunciated in the five books of Moses comprising the Torah, or Pentateuch. They range from the Ten Commandments and such sublime moral precepts as "thou shalt love thy neighbour as

thyself" to so technical a regulation as "neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woolen come upon thee . . ."

To these Brooklyn streets after World War II came several thousand Hasidim, remnants of a widespread movement within Judaism that flourished in Eastern Europe from the mid-1700's until — but only until — the Nazi catastrophe. The survivors arrived in America and Palestine with blue concentration camp numbers tattooed on their forearms and the searing horror of Hitler's death camps branded on their souls.

The Hasidic mode of life, with its wide range of behavioral and educational restrictions, makes holding many kinds of well-paying jobs extremely difficult.

"We are part of the capitalist society," Rabbi Albert Friedman, a community leader, said. "We take jobs that do not interfere with our way of life. Yes, we have some wealthy men whom God has blessed with financial success, and they share — are expected to share — with the others."

A great many Hasidim work in jobs that fill the exacting and specialized needs of the community. Meat, for instance, must not be simply kosher but glat kosher, that is, kosher beyond any conceivable question. The Hasidim frankly distrust any food that they themselves have not subjected to the most rigorous conformance with Jewish dietary law.

You'll find no doctors or lawyers among the Sätmar Hasidim, since they don't acquire the education needed for the professions. Besides, going to college is frowned upon — a waste of time in a life devoted to the study of the Torah and its vast exposition, the Talmud.

Teenage boys often arrive at their school, or yeshivah, to begin study at five in the morning and, what with a day of study and prayers, don't arrive home until eight in the evening. A few hours in the afternoon are spent on what the Hasidim call "English" — meaning not just the English language, which many children first learn in school, but all the curriculum required

to meet minimal New York State educational requirements; subjects such as math, history, and geography.

Hasidic girls get a much more rounded education, by American standards, than the boys. Not encouraged to study the Talmud, they need learn only the traditional practices required of a Hasidic housewife in running a completely orthodox home. Hence, they have vastly more time for worldly studies, and in speech, manner, and appearance often seem more Americanized than the men.

On the Sabbath, the woman's role as queen of the household comes to the fore. As wife and mother she lights the Sabbath candles — an act of utmost sanctity that leaves no doubt as to her vital position in the family. Often, when not tied down to the little ones, she takes a job to supplement the family income.

If their lot seems a far cry from women's liberation, I found few complaints. "Nothing is more satisfying than a Jewish life lived in the Hasidic way," one housewife told me.

With the outside world, the Satmar Hasidim seemed to me to live not so much side by side as back to back.

Police detective Nino Marano, whose beat has been Williamsburg for years, told me: "The Hasidim rarely bother other people, and would just as soon other people didn't bother them."

Nearly all Hasidim take pride in becoming American citizens, which allows them to vote.

Although the Satmar Hasidim share to some degree in community funds made available by various government agencies — they pay taxes, after all, like everyone else — they prefer self-help to reliance on outsiders. They not only run their own school system out of Satmar funds, but also operate a walk-in clinic, a nursing service, a private community bus service, a summer camp system, an employment agency, and a free-loan society. They very definitely care for their own.

When I toured a Satmar school for girls, the principal, Rabbi Naftali Hertz Frankel, pointed out how reverently the children repeat the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Almost all of them are grandchildren of concentration camp survivors," he said. "They know how much America and its freedom means. To them, the Pledge of Allegiance is almost a kind of prayer."

Vocabulary. Use a dictionary to find the meaning of the following words:

- errant _____
shtetl _____
Hasidim _____
Yiddish _____
kosher _____
Torah _____

Searching for Social Patterns

1. What tragic event forced the Hasidim to leave their homes in Eastern Europe? _____

2. Do Hasidim consider the Torah's 613 mitzvahs folkways or mores? Explain your answer. _____

3. What is the primary role of the Hasidic woman? In what ways are Hasidic women different from Hasidic men? _____

4. What are two ways in which the Hasidim participate in American culture? _____

Committee Members:

You have been asked to serve on a school committee that's goal is to create unity among the student population. Consider a few of the subcultures and countercultures on campus. What would be your committee's recommendations to the principal which would create a school atmosphere where every student would feel included? Be specific in your recommendations.

