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General Introduction

This book offers a corrective to the popular impression that early Hasidism was incorrigibly, blithely, and profoundly unintellectual by presenting annotated translations of selected passages, arranged according to topic. The introductory sections provide an overview and a context for the subject matter of each chapter. The General Introduction aims to do the same for the entire volume, sketching the historical background of the early Hasidic movement and charting the central ideas in their intellectual context. We must also consider the nature of the Hasidic literature itself, in order to evaluate the significance for Hasidism, and for the history of Jewish thought in general, of the texts and ideas in this book. Our discussion will furthermore make explicit some of the reasons underlying the choice of passages included here, in the light of current scholarship.

ORIGINS: THE BESHT AND HIS APPEAL

(usually referred to by the acronym)

Of the founder of the Hasidic movement, R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (the Besht), little is known for certain. Even the authenticity of the few letters ascribed to him is debated. The scanty information at our disposal testifies to a youth during which his spiritual powers were concealed, followed by a revealed stage, beginning in his late thirties, during which he was active at various sites in Eastern Europe (primarily in present-day Ukraine) until his death (1760) in his early sixties. His disciples, to whom we are indebted

(the most reliable is his letter to R. Gershon Kutover; see the last selection in chap. —).



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for the transmission of his teaching, were no doubt overwhelmed by his personality; yet his contemporaries did not, so far as we know, refer to him, in their written works, by name. Posthumous reports make it possible to reconstruct his ideas, and suggest what books were important to him. Yet the original intent of the movement, like the biography of its charismatic founder, remains shrouded in mystery.

Among several phenomena proposed by historians as major factors in the rise of Hasidism, with a continued effect on its ideology, two deserve our attention. The first is the Sabbatean debacle of 1666. The late Professor Gershom Scholem, in particular, insisted on the pervasive impact of this episode. The belief in the Messianic claims made on behalf of Shabbetai Zevi swept the Jewish world. The Sabbatean fervor was accompanied by kabbalistic views tinged with antinomianism, the conviction that, under eschatological conditions, traditional halakhic imperatives no longer outweighed other norms. When the candidate, scheduled to inaugurate the final redemption, was instead converted to Islam, a profound disillusionment set in among most Jews.

At the same time, Sabbatean tenets survived in certain mystical circles. This was obvious with respect to the Donmeh, Turkish disciples who followed Shabbetai into apostasy, and the Frankists in mid-eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. The latter group struggled for recognition, in the eyes of Gentile authority, as a legitimate Judeo-Christian sect; according to legend, the Besht, in his old age, confounded them in debate, and otherwise labored mightily against them. But others hid their Sabbatean leanings in

public, although they entertained the discredited views in private. The atmosphere of suspicion was dramatically illustrated through the 1750s, when the eminent R. Jacob Emden of Altona accused the at least equally distinguished chief rabbi of Prague, R. Jonathan Eyebeschutz, of subscribing to the Sabbatean heresy, setting off a controversy that pitted the highest authorities against each other.

How did this situation affect Hasidism? Fear of antinomianism indisputably contributed to the distrust with which Hasidim were regarded in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hasidic practices, particularly during prayer, that appeared to take lightly standard halakhic strictures, overridden for the sake of greater emotional realization, took on an ominous quality; any activity that segregated Hasidim from others could not fail to arouse suspicion. On Scholem's view, however, the ideological consequences of Sabbateanism on Hasidism went far beyond this. Here we must note two interrelated but distinct effects, both of which are open to question.

1. Scholem postulated substantial Sabbatean influence on Hasidic thought. He maintained that there was significant continuity between the early hasidim and the underground currents of heresy. When Hasidic practice seems to deviate from the established Halakhah, whenever Hasidic masters throw out antinomian hints, such as the notion that sin may serve to bring man closer to God, we are, according to Scholem, coming into contact with the dark, rebellious spirit of heresy, albeit in an attenuated form, capable of surviving the hostile post-Sabbatean environment.

Scholem's history, by arguing for Sabbatean influence on

Hasidism, thus magnifies the discontinuity between Hasidism and conventional Jewish piety oriented to halakhic norms. ^{This} ~~his~~ depiction of the background to Hasidism can be challenged from two directions. One would demonstrate that the radical elements in Hasidism may be less prominent than one might initially assume. To take the most conspicuous example: the Sabbateans held that sin could serve as a vehicle of redemption. Hasidic writers too speak of yeridah tzorekh aliyah ("descent for the purpose of ascent") and the like. The Hasidic masters, however, do not advocate the prospective justification of transgression: the "sanctification of sin" is generally applied retrospectively and limited in scope---to sins committed in thought rather than action, to sins resulting from the decision of the saintly individual to become involved with the masses, and so forth. This is a far cry from the radical antinomianism of the Sabbateans.

The other challenge to Scholem's theory draws on the impressive research of Mendel Piekartz. Piekartz submits that the presence of unconventional themes detected in the early Hasidic literature implies, not contact with Sabbateanism, but continuity with pre-Sabbatean ideas amply documented in popular mainstream works like Shenei Luhot ha-Berit, by the sixteenth-century kabbalistic R. Isaiah Horowitz, as well as a number of unpublished texts. If these concepts attract attention and criticism when mouthed by Hasidim, it is because their employment by Sabbateans rendered them improper rather than because of any substantive theological impropriety. In any event, contemporary scholarship has become skeptical of Scholem's appeal to pan-Sabbatean causation in this area.

2. Scholem spoke of Hasidism as the "neutralization" of the Messianic impulse. This means that Hasidism internalized and spiritualized the external political goals, ~~that are~~ inseparable from tradition eschatology: The Messianic redemption is realized, if only partially, when the individual existence becomes a redeemed one. The idea of a Hasidic "neutralization" of eschatology promised a reintegration of low Jewish morale, which had been crushed by persecution and hardship, and ~~been~~ inflamed to fever pitch by the speculation that resulted in Sabbateanism. This transformation of Judaism's historical-political ideals inhibits the advent of another false Messiah.

While Scholem's position has not gone uncriticized, especially by those who stress Hasidic commitment, theoretical and practical, to the physical redemption of the Jewish people, his fundamental thesis has fare well in recent scholarly discussion. Yet, contemporary events in the Hasidic world offer a challenge to Scholem's thesis on Hasidic messianism. Note the powerful emotions engendered by the Lubavitch (Habad) movement encapsulated in their ~~ubiquitous~~ slogan, "We want Moshiach [Messiah] now!" and pleading with the Lubavitcher Rebbe to "reveal" himself as the Messiah.

Much has been made of the Hasidic movement as a response to the low morale engendered by the social and educational structure of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe, during the first half of the eighteenth century. In this account, the rabbinic establishment basks in its intellectual elitism, oblivious to their disenfranchised brethren; one recalls the anecdotes about R. Gershon of Kutov's initial contempt for his "ignorant" brother-in-

law, who is, of course, one other than the Besht. Scholars like Dubnow in the early twentieth century, who are fond of castigating the elitist rabbinic attitude, tend to identify it with halakhic stringency and existential gloominess.

Surely many passages in the Hasidic literature express a vigorous resentment of rabbinic learning when it is detached from genuine piety; R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye frequently calls such scholars shedin yehuda'in ("Jewish demons"). The Besht's predilection for teaching by parable and anecdote enabled him to reach a larger audience than a more formal approach, though there was no lack of itinerant preachers who addressed the broader community throughout his lifetime. The propensity of Hasidic thinkers to utilize kabbalistic theosophical categories to shed light on man's spiritual psychology points to a "democratic" concern for existential relevance. And the Hasidic proclivity to "serve God in joy" was remarkable enough to attract the arrows of their opponents, who accused them of various excesses.

Yet some features of this picture need to be modified. Jacob Katz has argued that the standards of rabbinic training in this period were in decline, so that the gap between scholar and layman was narrowing, making it more difficult for the people to accept their authority. True, Hasidism championed broad involvement in Jewish mystical literature, and devoted a great deal of time to prayer and other nonintellectual manifestations of service to God. But this did not imply rejection of conventional Torah study, with its focus on Halakhah. Even less was Hasidism consistent with a relaxed attitude to the scrupulous observance of halakhic law.

And Weiss has identified the Maggidim -- the itinerant preachers -- as the emerging leaders of the movement.

Katz suggested that Hasidism initially attracted an intellectual engaged segment of the community, though not the elite leadership. The typical Hasidic disciple was thus likely to come from the ranks of the schoolmasters and the ritual slaughterers. It is such men who formed the original constituency for the discourses excerpted and presented in this book.

SUCCESSOR GENERATIONS: THE PROBLEM OF TRANSMISSION

The second generation of Hasidic leaders was dominated by the Besht's two major disciples, R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye and R. Dov Baer ("the Maggid") of Mezherich. R. Yaakov Yosef is best known today for his four volumes of discourses on the Torah. The Toledot Yaakov Yosef, which he published during his lifetime (1781), was the first Hasidic book to see print. Like most subsequent Hasidic text, the Toledot, despite the atypical involvement of the author in the publication and the complex structure of many of the discourses, is a book less composed than compiled. The source for the material is clearly oral, presumably words spoken at the Sabbath table. The written version is thus derived from the face-to-face encounter.

It was the Maggid, by contrast, who nurtured the third generation of Hasidic masters, including such titans as R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, R. Elimelekh of Lizensk, and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of Habad Hasidism. Less robust than the Besht, he did not travel; instead his followers regularly visited him at his "court" in Mezherich, thus instituting what became the prevalent

pattern of Hasidic leadership. His doctrines, far more ascetic than the usual portrayal of Hasidism, assumed permanent form only through the efforts of disciples.

The two major figures of the second generation, among others, conveyed many aphorisms and insights of the Besht. By the 1780s the Besht's growing reputation justified the marketing of anthologies of his sayings, such as the Keter Shem Tov. The number of adherents to Hasidism was also growing, and the movement's expansion itself became a challenge to Hasidic ideals and was a spur for the development of new ideas and modes of communication.

One major shift involved the role of the Hasidic Zaddik or Rebbe. In the tradition of the Besht, each Jew was intended to aspire to the level and attainments of the outstanding individual. Now this goal was no longer viewed as realistic. The Rebbe became the primary conduit of divine benefaction, and the individual participated in the higher spiritual life insofar as he attached himself to the Rebbe. This move is associated with R. Elimelekh of Lizensk, who established Hasidism in Galicia (roughly covering the southern Poland of today). It is often bemoaned as a symptom of decline or even corruption of the original Hasidic enterprise, in which individual striving is replaced by the cult of the charismatic leader and, eventually, the Rebbe's hereditary successors. In extenuation, we should note that the aggrandizement of the Zaddik offers a solution, though not necessarily a happy one, to an unavoidable problem, namely, the apparent inability of the ordinary Jew to attain the heights of spirituality and God-awareness.

initially reported and
Xanthopoulos visited by
R. Y. Cohen, 1911.

The question of how to educate a farflung community also affected the intellectual and organizational development of Habad. As the spearhead of Hasidism in Lithuania and Belorus, R. Shneur Zalman confronted an entrenched opposition to Hasidism. The controversy was associated with the illustrious name of R. Elijah, the Vilna Gaon, talmudic sage and kabbalist par excellence of his era. So brightly burned the antagonism between the camps that Hasidim were accused, based on misunderstanding, of celebrating the Gaon's death on Sukkot of 1795, and some Mitnaggedim ("Opponents"---the sobriquet that clung to non-Hasidic Lithuanians) were responsible for R. Shneur Zalman's arrest by the Russian authorities on charges that ranged from suspicion of heterodox theosophy to channeling funds to Russia's enemies (the latter referred to the Hasidim who had ascended to the Holy Land, where Napoleon had recently waged war, and who depended on contributions from their peers).

R. Shneur Zalman, as the principal exemplar and advocate of traditional talmudic learning among the first several generations of Hasidic leadership, was admirably suited to carry the message of Hasidism into the Lithuanian citadels of Torah learning. But his vigorous authorship was not exhausted by the composition of a major halakhic code. He struck his most powerful blow for Hasidic ideas by producing a new kind of Hasidic book, the Tanya. The book was methodical exposition of Hasidic doctrine presented by R. Shneur Zalman (albeit less esoterically than in his other Hasidic works), rather than an unsystematic record of oral discourses. This "intellectual" approach to Hasidism made direct personal contact with the Rebbe less exigent. And, in fact, the Habad court was so

arranged as to maximize the time devoted by the Rebbe to new recruits, while encouraging veteran Hasidim to fend for themselves. The choice of the systematic treatise in addition to the Torah aperçu as a mode of literary expression is the hallmark of later Habad Hasidism as well, as is the desire to spread the tent of Habad Hasidism as widely as possible. The reader of this book will soon note the orderly character of the sections from Tanya as compared with the impressionistic quality of the selections from other Hasidic texts.

This book focuses almost entirely on the first three generations of the Hasidic movement, up to R. Shneur Zalman's death while fleeing the French invasion of Russia in 1813. [1812?] The two main exceptions are R. Zevi Elimelekh of Dinov (the Benei Yissakhar^S), who was still a young man at that time, and the seminal R. Zadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin, who lived to the end of the nineteenth century. R. Zadok is the highly creative representative of a significant trend in nineteenth-century Polish Hasidic intellectual life. This tradition is most often associated with R. Simha Bunem of Prshisha and R. Mendel of Kotzk, whose period of greatest impact began in the 1820s. (se)

This Hasidic approach is generally identified with a streak of radical individualism and a ruthless stripping away of false motivations. It was the fate of the enigmatic Kotzker, who left no writing, to attract about his name a rich collection of sharp anecdotes and aphorisms. An apparent crisis in his life, precipitating his withdrawal from the active leadership of his Hasidim (ca. 1840), became the subject of fascinated and horrified.

speculation. The furious quest for integrity, to some writers on Hasidism such as Buber, appeared like a desperate effort to regain the authenticity of the Hasidic movement, compromised by the ineluctable process of routinization and the abdication of individual responsibility engendered by the cult of the Zaddik.

Now the Kotzker's extant statements, like those of R. Simha Bunem, put enormous emphasis on conventional Torah study. The Kotzker's closest disciples, his son-in-law R. Abraham Borenstein of Sochatschov (the Avnei Nezer) and R. Yitzhak Meir of Ger (Hiddushei ha-Rim), are best known for their halakhic works. Their descendants and heirs continued to pursue a full integration of talmudic training and Hasidic originality. From one point of view, that which is indifferent to traditional Torah learning as the centerpiece of Jewish spiritual and intellectual life, this development is irrelevant to the Hasidic message, perhaps even another symptom of routinization. From another perspective, forcefully articulated by ~~R. Kook~~ ^{Abraham Isaac} ~~R. Kook~~, this tendency, like the intellectual orientation of Habad, bespeaks a higher synthesis of Hasidism and "mainstream" ^{rabbinic} Judaism. If that is the case, then the Kotzker imparted the insight that no authentic religious community can long abide on devotional power alone; the intellectual gesture, specifically the intellectual energy generated by Torah study, is essential for the perpetuation of genuine religious passion in Judaism.

R. Zadok of Lublin, in any event, was a disciple of the Izbicer, who had begun his career as a student of the Kotzker. While he took from his teacher a propensity to deterministic psychological and

historical analysis somewhat out of keeping with the Kotzker legacy, his remarkable posthumous writings need to be viewed in the context of the developments outlined above.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WRITTEN WORD

For the past century and longer, most Western readers have become familiar with Hasidism through collections of tales about the founders of the movement, some of which, e.g. Buber's and Elie Wiesel's, have attained wide circulation. This is not the place to discuss the provenance of various stories, their content, and the problems of utilizing them as historical sources, let alone a detailed analysis of the manner in which the compilers of the tales shaped the material in the light of their own preoccupations. Naturally, such an analysis would support our reliance on early written works as a source for the first three generations of Hasidic masters, if only because the reported tales are much further removed, chronologically, from the figures portrayed.

But what is a stake in our desire to know Hasidic ideas through the recorded thoughts of the founders is more than merely the historian's congenital preference for what is primitive over what comes after. For an emphasis on Hasidic thought and exegesis arrives at a somewhat different Hasidism than that arising from the later narratives alone. Where Buber, for example, could downplay the centrality of traditional study and commitment to performance of the mitzvot in favor of a stress on the communal values that Buber himself preached, the early Hasidic texts themselves testify

to a much more traditional community, both in its commitment to Halakhah and in its intellectual life. Furthermore, the primary Hasidic texts also depict a community engrossed in the language and concepts of Kabbalah, thus confirming another strong continuity between the ideas of the Hasidic movement and prevailing currents in pre-Hasidic and non-Hasidic Judaism.

The difference in perspectives between the literary and the narrative orientations to Hasidic intellectual history has implications for several focal concepts discussed in this book. Take the notions of devekut (attachment to God) ~~for~~ avodah be-qashmiyut (worship through corporeal activities). From the Buberian standpoint, buttressed by his retelling of Hasidic stories, the idea that man can serve God and become close to God through everyday activities amounts to the assertion that the sanctification of everyday actions and human relationships is the true and ultimate goal of Hasidic teaching. But, as Scholem argues, the literature supports a very different reading, according to which involvement in worldly activities is not the end of Hasidic fulfillment, but rather a means toward an otherworldly religious consummation.

Is the picture of Hasidism presented in this book truly representative of the movement and its contribution? One can easily imagine some disappointed reader insisting that our version of Hasidism is not radical enough, that, by relying on the Hasidic "classics," it makes too much of the continuities between Hasidism and its "Orthodox" opponents, that it encourages the reader to assimilate what is new and astonishing in Hasidism to "mainstream"