The Secularization Of Jewish Spirituality: Hasidism Reinvented

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1. Hasidism and Jewish Historians

In the early 1920s, Eliezer Steinmann, then a young fervent Jewish pioneer in Palestine, characterized his fellow halutzim (Heb., pioneers) at their newly founded Zionist kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley:

Do we not see here a continuous thread leading directly from the students of [Rabbi Shimon] Bar Yoḥai, who see the world in its entirety engulfed in flames? Is this not a remnant of the burning ember from the periods of Hasidim and Cabalists?¹

For the rebellious Hebrew writer of the socialist camp, the kibbutz founders were the spiritual grandsons of hasidim in Poland. Ironically, it was the secularist pioneers who took up the spiritual energy of Polish mystics. Years later, Steinmann published his anthology Be’er Ha-hasidut (The Well of Hasidism), presenting the features of a highly modernized hasidic movement. Let me offer Steinmann’s Zionist interpretation of hasidic influence as a starting point for my brief comments on the project that re-invented hasidism—a project that has survived two centuries of intellectual trial and ideological disquisition. This reinvention changed the shape of hasidism from the earliest polemic works of the Jewish Enlightenment through the cultural creativity of modern Jewish nationalism. For two hundred years, all major Jewish modernist trends coped with hasidism, and attitudes toward it fluctuated between aversion and enchantment. Jewish movements either rejected its lore and morals, or aspired to co-opt them into a modernist agenda. In any case, Jewish modernism was not ready to take hasidism in its ‘traditional’ form: as a spiritual movement whose values and ethics were far removed from any modernistic worldview.

The conflict with hasidism started in Eastern Europe with a bitter clash between followers of the mystical movement and small groups of maskilim. Maskilim were the region’s earliest exponents of Western philosophy, values, and ethics. Alarmed, in partitioned Poland, by what they regarded as a vulgar corruption of Jewish religious tradition, the maskilim followed the hasidim closely, documenting their rites and customs and spreading findings about the new religious movement throughout Europe. In numerous reports, maskilim tended to present hasidism as the anti-modernist arch-enemy of Jewish society. In short, they regarded hasidism as a major obstacle that prevented the regeneration of traditional Jewish society.

Haskalah views dominated ‘non-traditional’ Jewish writing on hasidism until very late in the nineteenth century. Only in the last decade of the 1800s was a new perspective adopted, an outlook that might roughly be called ‘neo-romantic’. Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature both began to present idyllic images of the hasidic community and transmitted their versions of the movement’s lore. The Yiddish writer Yitsḥak Leibush

Peretz (1852–1913) was a major contributor to this new phase. And at the beginning of the twentieth century, Martin Buber—a native of Galicia, though regarded by many as a German Jew—began to spread revised versions of hasidic tales by translating or actually revising hasidic stories.

Another aspect of the historical reshaping of hasidism took place at the end of the nineteenth century, when the movement first encountered Jewish political radicalism. A new secular approach to the religious movement was born: hasidism was now cast as social opposition to the dominant Jewish elite. Furthermore, hasidic lore and teachings were interpreted as an infra-structural culture that reflected social and economic relations in East European Jewish society. In sum, the Jewish past was exposed to a mixture of socialism and nationalism, whether in the forms of Zionist socialism, Yiddishist populism, or even Soviet Jewish communism. To the extent that Jewish ideological currents grew more radical, they became more inventive in terms of Jewish culture. Jewish radicals read into hasidism many aspects that were totally alien to the original movement and far removed from its teachings.²

Last, but not least, was the strong creative encounter that took place between hasidism and Jewish nationalism. Nationalist-minded historians read into hasidism Zionist activism or religious nationalism, and depicted hasidim as the forerunners of Zionists. Zionist historiography even presented hasidism as a prelude to the secularization of traditional Jewish messianism, a transformation that led to the establishment of a new modernized, Jewish community in the land of Israel.³

I have briefly mentioned four currents that emerged from the beginning of the nineteenth century; these trends were quite influential until the 1950s and even into the 1960s. However, only very late in the twentieth century did scholars begin to take the words of the hasidim seriously (I state this ironically), and have tended for the first time to ‘believe’ that the hasidim really meant what they said. In this latest stage in historiography, hasidism was analyzed by new scholarly methods, and a more critical reading of its documents led to new conclusions. Some scholars, such as Israel Halpern (1910–1971) and his disciple Chone Shmeruk (1921-1997) contributed to this shift in works written mainly in the years 1945–1965.⁴

Yet another stage should be considered before we briefly analyze the intriguing search for the re-invention of hasidism. That stage saw the emergence of a Jewish Orthodox response to modernist Jewish historiography. A peculiar branch of Jewish historiography, it has had a meteoric revival since World War II. Its origins go back, however, as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. Orthodox historiography evolved with some hasidic writers affiliated with Lubavitch hasidism, who had published some seminal histories in the late decades of the nineteenth century. However, the revival and elaboration of Orthodox historical creativity in Israel and the United States in the last

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² The most influential student of Hasidism of the ‘radical’ school was Raphael Mahler. His *Hasidism and Enlightenment*, published first in Yiddish (New York, 1942), and in an expanded version in Hebrew (Merhav’ya, 1961) and English (Philadelphia, 1985), represents the best of Marxist historiography on the movement.

³ On the impact of Zionism on the study of Palestine, see J. Barnai, *Historiografya ve-L’eumiut* (Historiography and Nationalism) (Jerusalem, 1995).

⁴ Most of the studies were collected into two volumes: I. Halpern, *Yehudim ve-Yahadut be-Mizrakh Eyropa* (Jews and Judaism in Eastern Europe) (Jerusalem, 5729 [1969] –IB); Ch. Shmeruk, *Ha-kriah le-Navi* (The Call for a Prophet), edited by I. Bartal (Jerusalem, 1999).
decades have made these views part and parcel of the post-Holocaust Orthodox experience. Orthodox hasidic historiography presents hasidism as one segment of an elaborate alternative historical conceptualization of the movement. In some ways very modern and even post-modern, it responds to a variety of modernist presentations of hasidism and unifies them into one large package, described, ironically, by Orthodox writers as *Haskalah*. What they call *Haskalah*, however, has nothing to do with the nineteenth-century concept of that movement. They actually have in mind a modernist, secular way of presenting hasidism.

Although the non-hasidic interpretation of Haskalah did not produce significant historiographical works on hasidism, it did lay some foundations for a first, ‘external’ European modernist trend that aimed to reshape hasidism from a critical perspective. The Jewish Enlightenment created several images of hasidism, many of which appeared in early nineteenth-century texts. The impression of hasidism’s ‘irrational’ economic activity is one of them, with its claim of ‘passivity’ and the so-called ‘backwardness’ or ‘non-productive nature’ of hasidic social-economic conduct. One could trace the roots of images related to social aspects, such as the use of religion in internal Jewish community politics or the sources of the idea that hasidim were the enemies of the centralized empire (the absolutist state played a key role in the minds of nineteenth-century Jewish followers of the Enlightenment). And, last but not least, from the Haskalah point of view the hasidic order of things had to be reversed. The Haskalah stressed social order first, and felt that economics and politics were more important than the spiritual aspects of the movement. Hasidic teachings were the least important due to their anti-progress nature and context. Thus for maskilim, hasidism promoted a kind of blindness, and was regarded as the product of a perverted religious elite that blinded the eyes of East European Jews and put obstacles on their way towards acculturation and political integration.

All in all, the Haskalah regarded hasidism as an anti-reformist movement; it was regarded as responsible for the miserable shape of the Jewish people in Poland. Hasidic religious leaders were blamed for contributing to the shaping of the long-detested ‘Polnischer Jude’ (Ger., Polish Jew) who embodied the worst aspects of all cultures. This viewpoint changed, however, when Jewish historiography was transformed in its later stages, though some negative images survived and resurfaced in later portrayals of hasidism. Paradoxically, it was the treatment of hasidism from without that immortalized old images and preserved previous patterns. Some of the Haskalah’s anti-hasidic images were reversed by later historiography. Neo-romanticism, nationalism, and social radicalism preoccupied much of the Haskalah’s interest in Hasidism. Yet later writers transformed the ‘negative’ traits into more ‘positive’ ones. By reversing meanings but not the traits themselves, they were actually still responding to those Haskalah images and following the outlines of the Enlightenment. A major obsession of many Jewish historians until the second half of the twentieth century was the idea that hasidism contains something that hasidim themselves have not been able to understand. That ‘something’ has been a kind of ‘sub-current’, a hidden motif, or an underground stream.

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known only to the academic scholar. In the best tradition of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, scholarship has aimed to decipher the hidden script and to break the secret code of the hasidic text.

The claim of such currents in hasidism has been shared by both Jewish radicalism and nationalism, and does not consider the essence appearing in the texts themselves. Rather, scholars in this vain have stressed the ‘undercurrent’, which they regard as the ‘real thing’, a feature not necessarily understood by hasidim themselves. The craving for the return to the Land of Israel, for example, a sentiment made central in some of the religious-nationalist writings on hasidism, has been discovered and brought to daylight especially by writers of the political group that produced a body of texts on hasidism’s forms of ‘Zionism’ from the 1940s to the 1960s. It did not matter much if that ‘Zionism’ was not apparent in the hasidic text; it was the ‘hidden current’ that these writers stressed. Yet Israel Halpern proved in his master’s thesis on early hasidic immigration to Palestine (published in book form in 1947) that in famous letters sent by hasidim from Palestine to Eastern Europe, one could hardly discern expressions of ‘Zionism’.

2. Modes

The changes in attitude toward hasidic images, following the four stages of Jewish historiography, has cast itself in three modes from the late nineteenth century to the present, and applies both to hasidic texts and hasidic history. One mode reads an alien and external message into the hasidic text. Historians have read the text but also have read into the text. The mode of reading Zionism into late eighteenth-century hasidic letters sent from Palestine has been popular among writers of the National Religious School.

A second, quite similar mode has attempted to rewrite the hasidic text. Martin Buber’s revisions of hasidic tales are instructive for understanding this mode. Even a very minute linguistic shift could channel the meaning of a hasidic tale, or that of a hasidic homily, in a totally different direction. Buber’s famous hasidic anthology *Or Haganuz* inserts a gap between his own modernist message and the hasidic intention.

The third mode shows disregard for the hasidic texts and claims that these texts in actuality have no importance for the understanding of Hasidism. Many writings on hasidism, until late in the twentieth century, ignored most hasidic literature, or based their studies not on the major books of hasidism but on one or two of its marginal texts. The most outstanding case, in my mind, is of course the positioning of *Shivhei habesht* as a prime text in the historiography of hasidism. Although some people are taken aback by that blunt observation, this text was never a major hasidic work. It was given this status in by anti-Hasidic literature of the Haskalah period, and was then rediscovered by neoromanticist writers. For good reasons—as it contains a treasure of valuable historical

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6 I. Halpern, *Ha-Aliyot Ha-Rishonot Shel ha-Hasidim le-erets Yisrael* (The First Immigrations of the Hasidim to the Land of Israel) (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, 5707 [1947]).
facts—it was established as a major text in the reconstruction of the history of early hasidism. But Hasidim themselves never regarded *Shivhei habesht* as a major text.\(^7\)

### 3. Aspects of Secularization

My final comments are devoted to certain aspects of secularization that have become common in the reinventing of Hasidism. They have, in a way, been most effective in shaping perceptions of that pre-modern movement and have transmitted it into a reflection of the modernized and secularized mind of the ‘outsider’.

1. **The claim that the hasidic text is symbolic.** I do not mean here the ‘internal’ symbols of Kabbalah; rather, the secularized neo-romantic, or nationalistic claim of hasidic symbolism, have transformed many of the original hasidic texts into something totally different.

2. **The removal of the divine.** No God is in the text; rather, the presence of human beings is the primary drive for action. Here I have in mind the effort to explain how Hasidism attracted believers on social and economic grounds, ignoring the spiritual nature of the movement.

3. **The effort to replace mysticism with rational religiosity.** Advocates try to reduce the place of the mystical and, by contrast, read Hasidism in rationalistic terms.

4. **The effort to ‘historicize’ the movement.** Most important for the historian of hasidism, this interpretation has placed the hasidic text into an historical context and has thus offered the only possible way for the external observer to cope with the hasidic past. However, such an approach is totally alien to the hasidim themselves. This reinvention of intentions severely altered original priorities and traditional concepts.

5. **The search for forerunners.** This interpretation claims that hasidim were the portenders of modern political movements, ideological currents, literary trends, or philosophical schools. Here I have in mind the Bratslaver rebbe and the way his teachings have been read in the twentieth century.\(^8\)

6. **The linguistic shift.** What happens to words? What can happen to the sacred language once it is read in a secularized manner? Let us examine one case. The Hebrew words *hamon* (multitude) and *am* (people), are read in an anachronistic way, to make the hasidic text compatible with social radicalism (applied to the masses) or with modern nationalism (people, folk, ‘*am yisrael’*).

6. **The text in its context.** It was one thing to write about hasidism in the late nineteenth-century Russian Empire and another to study the movement’s history in inter-war Poland. Context made much of the text. For his audience, Martin Buber had in mind the alienated Jewish bourgeoisie in turn-of-the-century Germany. He wrote his legends very artfully to shape the message of Hasidism so that it would cater to the needs and tastes of his addressees. Yet when Simon Dubnow read one of Buber’s earliest publications, he scribbled contemptuously:

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\(^{8}\) On the diversity of R. Nahman’s modern interpretation see D. Assaf (ed.), *Bratslav, An Annotated Bibliography* (Jerusalem, 2000).
The new scholars have gone in vain in the ways of Bratslav Hasidim, looking for a bit of idea in that heap of nonsense.\footnote{S. Dubnov, Toldot ha-Hasidut (History of Hasidism) (Tel Aviv, 1930–1931), 133.}

Try this check on text and context on any given society, from post-World War II American Jewish society, to Israeli society of the 1960s.

Much has changed in the field of Jewish History since the times of Dubnow, Buber, and Mahler. Recent scholarship has become less anachronistic and more attuned to the original voices of the Hasidim. The seminal articles of Chone Shmeruk on the social aspects of religion in hasidism, as well as some path-breaking historical studies of his colleagues, disciples, and contemporaries have established a more balanced trend of research, independent of ideological commitments.\footnote{See the works of D.Assaf, J. Barnai, E. Etkes, Z. Gries, R. Haran, G. D. Hundert, Y. Mundshine, A. Rapoport-Albert, M. Rosman, A. Rubinstein, I. Shachar.} Yet, the study of hasidism still awaits a full-fledged liberation from the burden of two centuries of a too-inventive scholarly creativity.