

Hasidim: A Brief Introduction

Arthur Green

Hasidism is a religious revival movement that arose among Eastern European Jews in the late eighteenth century and has played a major role in both the Jewish polity and the Jewish imagination ever since. It may be said to have two major goals: the rejuvenation of Jewish spiritual life at its most profound core, in the spirit of joyous and wholehearted devotion, and the strengthening and protecting of traditional Jewish praxis and lifestyle against all challenges, opposing every shred of change or innovation. These two primary values, adopted at different points in the movement's early history, have lived fully in tandem for two centuries. Hasidim¹ view them as identical, the one wholly inseparable from the other. Only for those standing outside the bounds of Hasidism do they seem quite distinct, perhaps even contradictory. Typically, those who love Hasidism tend to focus on the former value, while Hasidism's detractors and those who fear its influence have their eyes set upon the latter.

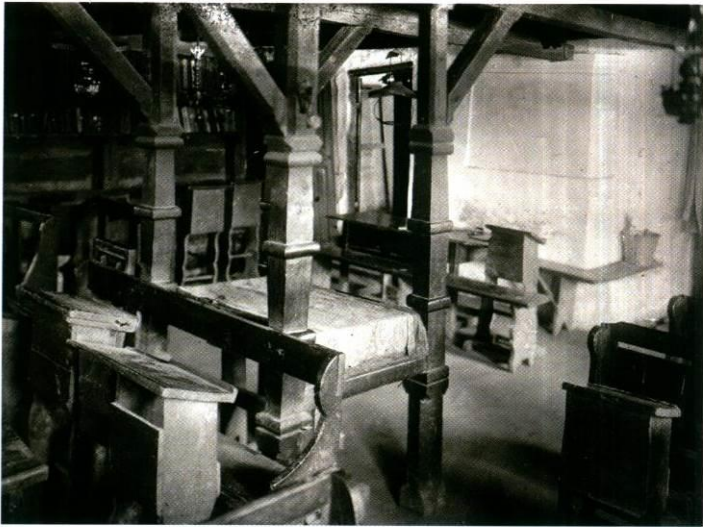
Hasidism first appears on the historical scene in the early 1770s. Word had reached the rabbinic authorities, across a wide swath of territory reaching from Lithuanian Vilna to Brody on the Russian-Austrian border, that a new and dangerous Jewish sect was beginning to spread. Well remembering the terrible effects of the messianic Sabbatian movement (beginning in 1666) that sowed turmoil among European Jewry, and especially its very recent Polish phase led by Jacob Frank, rabbis and communal leaders gathered in 1772 to pronounce a series of fierce bans against these suspicious innovators. Heaven and earth were called upon to cry out against the sinful upstarts. But as one reads the bans, it becomes clear that beyond wild innuendo, specific "crimes" were hard to prove. They have challenged local custom, the bans say, praying according to the Sephardi rather than the Ashkenazi rite. They recite their afternoon prayers after the sun has gone down! They have accepted a different view from within the law regarding the sharpening of knives for ritual slaughter. Most seriously, perhaps, they have been heard mocking scholars.

What was it, really, about the teachings being disseminated by the disciples of Dov Baer of Międzyrzec (ca. 1704 – 1772), the primary creators of Hasidism as a historical force, that so roused the authorities' fear and ire? The final charge mentioned, that of mocking scholars, was certainly part of their concern. The Hasidic teachers were reviving an ancient stream of folk-Judaism, especially strong within the Ashkenazi spiritual legacy, that praised simple faith, love of God, and inward balance over the heights of Talmudic learning which defined the religious elite of Eastern European Jewry. They were also drawing deeply on the language and teachings of Kabbalah, but leaving behind its overly complex symbol system to make it accessible even to the most ordinary and unlettered Jews. Dov Baer liked to explain *tzimtzum*,

Opposite: A Hasid walks along the street in Tarnów, before World War II

Pages 22–23: The Jewish cemetery in Kutu, established in the 18th century and in use until World War II, photographed in 2005

¹ The word *hasid* (plural *hasidim*) literally denotes someone who is devout or pious to the point of fervor. Its earlier use in Jewish history has been eclipsed by its modern meaning: a member of the Hasidic movement and, specifically, the Hasid (i.e., devoted follower) of a particular teacher.



Interior of the synagogue of the Ba'al Shem Tov in Międzyboż, before 1929

the self-contraction of divinity from primal space – surely one of Kabbalah's most profound mysteries – by means of parables about how a father contracts his mind when speaking to a small child. This was a Kabbalah that anyone could love, and many Hasidim clearly did. Even the highly erotic language of Kabbalah was shared in unguarded ways. Jews sway back and forth when they pray, some early popular Hasidic sources proclaimed, because that is the way you move your body in the act of love; prayer is described as making love to the *shekhinah*, the divine presence that takes on a pronounced female aspect in Jewish mysticism.² The established rabbis, charged with maintaining communal order and decorum, feared that the Torah would be degraded, even mocked, amid such vulgar talk. While many among them were themselves devotees of Kabbalah, they were horrified to see it taught so unguardedly to the masses.

Although rooting themselves in the mystical heritage, these new teachers were in fact quite selective in the ways they drew on it. By the eighteenth century, Kabbalah had come to be associated with an extreme ascetic regimen, an approach brushed aside by some of the new Hasidic rabbis. They proclaimed themselves to be heirs to a great Kabbalist and healer of the previous generation, one who opposed self-mortification and spoke instead of serving God with wholehearted joy. The Evil One, he taught, loves nothing better than to trip you up by some small sin, thus leading you to so much pain and guilt that you feel yourself far from God.³ Beware of those tricks, he taught. Regret your sin, turn away from it, and come back into God's loving embrace. Song and dance – maybe even with the help of a little drink – are better for the soul than guilt and fasting.

This teacher, Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov (ca. 1700–1760) stands behind the Hasidic movement as its source and *pater familias*, even though he died before it was created. All later Hasidic schools and masters, down to our own day, insist that they are authentic followers of the Ba'al Shem Tov, related either by family lineage or chains of master and disciple to those who have carried his legacy forward. Many Hasidic prayer-houses will have a printed "tree" of Hasidic descent on the wall, showing how their own master represents a branch or twig sprouting from the original living root.

The exact nature of this master's legacy is not easy to determine, since he was an oral teacher who opposed having his insights written down. The single document we can clearly attribute to him, a several-paged letter to his learned brother-in-law in the Land of Israel, reveals a man given to esoteric religious practices that enabled him to take inward journeys into a higher realm of being, where he would communicate with spirits and receive secret messages. Also a practicing *ba'al shem* (literally, master of the Name: a spiritual and herbal healer), he was concerned not only with the ailments affecting individuals, but with the ills of whole Jewish communities – whether inflicted by demons (the "germs" that brought illness in the eighteenth century), by the power of sin, or by the wickedness of temporal rulers.

² A description of this kind appears in *Tzava'at Harivash: The Testament of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov*, trans. and annot. J. I. Shochet (Brooklyn, NY, 1975), p. 21, #68.

³ *Ibid.*, #44, 56.

If we look at the teachings of the Besht (as he is often called, using an acronym of his name), as reported by his disciples, he is a master of sharp quips and radical re-readings of familiar biblical and Talmudic quotations.⁴ In his tradition, the followers began to reinterpret classical texts, especially the Torah itself, in new and often startling ways. This technique of novel exegesis, especially as presented orally at Hasidic table-gatherings, lay at the very heart of the Hasidic revival. A new and different way of seeing a word, a verse, or a passage in the prayer book was to give you a joyous jolt, one that would help you open your heart to renewed faith and prayer. This spiritual awakening by means of midrashic innovation was carried on for several generations by the most creative figures within the Hasidic leadership.



Munkács yeshivah student,
ca. 1935–38

The enemy against which their revival pitted itself was characterized by the biblical phrase *mitzvat anashim melummadah* (Isa 29:13, understood as “studied religious behavior”) – religion by rote. While continuing to live fully within the domain of traditional Jewish law (*halakhah*), the Hasidic masters continually emphasized that ritual conduct was never to be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means toward opening the heart and allowing it to fill with God’s light. Even Torah study, the highest ideal of classical Jewish piety, was not to be seen as a self-justifying activity (*li-shemah*, “for its own sake”), but rather had to be undertaken as an offering to God (*le-shem heh [ha-shem]*, “for God’s sake”).

But the fears aroused in anti-Hasidic leadership circles lay not just on the spiritual plane. It was clear that these charismatic and well-spoken leaders, themselves mostly malcontents from within the intellectual elite, bearing a respectable modicum of rabbinic learning, had a social agenda in mind as well. They quickly began to speak out for a different sort of Jewish ideal type, *tzaddik* rather than scholar, to stand at the head of their emerging communities. Jewish folk-religion had long revered the power of *tzaddikim*, righteous spiritual adepts who were able to bend the will of heaven. Ashkenazi tradition taught of thirty-six hidden righteous ones in each generation, for whose sake the world was preserved. But in these traditions the righteous were usually hidden from view. Indeed, you never knew who might be one of them, which in many a pious tale taught that everyone, especially the stranger, must be treated as a possible member of God’s mysterious elite.

Hasidism transformed this folk-belief into a concrete religious institution. The true *tzaddik*, its leaders proclaimed, comes out of hiding, not afraid of being defiled by contact with the public. He cares not just for his own private life of piety, but dedicates himself to others, saving them from perdition. He does this by allowing them to attach themselves to him either as disciples or as supportive followers. He then prays for them, offers them spiritual counsel, and treats their souls as though they were extensions of his own. He thus enters into the great spiritual adventure of “descent for the sake of ascent”: he lowers himself to their level, seeking out the good and holy sparks within them, in order to raise them up and allow them to share in his own

⁴ See especially R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye’s list of “Words I heard from my teacher,” published at the end of his *Toledot Ya’akov Yosef* (Korzec, 1780; Hebrew), as well as the many quotations from the Besht scattered throughout this and his three other works.

basking in the divine light. The disciple is to learn this technique from his master and apply it to all that lies within his orbit, including his own household and his worldly goods.

The emergence of these new circles of master and disciple was seen as a direct challenge to rabbinical and communal authority. Hasidim created small prayer-houses (*shtiblekh*) for themselves, each following the particular customs of its own master, usually known to followers as *the Rebbe*. Thus they broke away from the local synagogue, where the town rabbi ruled on matters of religious practice, and funds to maintain the *shtiblekh* diverted support away from existing communal institutions. Almsgiving was now directed toward supporting the Hasidic Rebbe and his court, sometimes in lavish style; the Rebbe in turn gave generously to the poor, thereby building up his own image and following. Here, too, communal charities were diminished.

The rabbinical authorities' battle against Hasidism proceeded in fits and starts, lasting some thirty years. In addition to the issuing of formal bans (there were three rounds of these, in 1772, 1784, and 1796), there were public disputations, denunciations to government authorities, and loudly whispered rumor campaigns that included all sorts of accusations, including sexual transgressions and secret adherence to Sabbatian messianism. The Hasidim did not always react to these accusations with the spiritual equanimity proposed by their own regimens of pious practice; they too could sometimes be fierce in their denunciations of the other side. The struggle between Hasidim and *Mitnaggedim* (opponents) tore deeply at many Jewish families, especially across generational fault-lines. Tales and memoirs of late-eighteenth-century Polish Jews are filled with accounts of young men defying the will of their fathers and fathers-in-law (who often sustained them) in order to seek out the company of the emerging brotherhood of disciples around one or another of the new Hasidic masters.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the fiery tone of these debates began to abate rather rapidly. Both sides had begun to look over their shoulders to discover a much more serious enemy emerging on the western horizon. By 1810, as though accompanying the Napoleonic armies in their march across Europe, ideas of western enlightenment – *haskalah* – had begun to make their first inroads into the Polish shtetl. By the time of Napoleon's defeat, many a town contained a household or two where it was said that the Sabbath was no longer strictly observed, where forbidden Hebrew books by the Berlin-centered enlighteners were read and discussed, and where children were being taught to read German or Russian as well as Hebrew and Yiddish.

In the face of this new challenge, both rabbinical and Hasidic leaders began to reconsider their mutual enmity. The Hasidim, having gained great influence throughout western Russia, Ukraine, and southeastern Poland, were extending their reach into Galicia and central, or Congress, Poland. From the rabbinical establishment's point of view, they turned out to be not so dangerous as the earlier generation had feared. Despite some odd customs, they essentially lived within halakhah, promulgated a Torah-based religious teaching, and encouraged piety among the young. Indeed their enthusiasm for the religious life was perhaps to be seen as admirable, considering the lurking alternative. The new generation of Hasidic leadership (most of the movement's founders had died by 1815) was anxious to prove itself worthy to its onetime critics and allowed Hasidism to become the spearhead of anti-*haskalah* activism.

This new self-definition of Hasidism grew and gained increased focus across the entire panorama of the nineteenth century, the period of Hasidism's greatest influence. The more radical theological views of some early Hasidic texts were quietly set aside. There was less talk of "raising up" distracting or even sinful thoughts, less reference to "eating, drinking, and other corporeal deeds" as ways of serving God, alongside prayer and study. Hasidic authorities

regularly chose to follow the most stringent of legal opinions on all sorts of ritual matters, building on an ancient definition of *hasid* as one who goes beyond the letter of the law. Regarding education, where the fiercest battles with *haskalah* were fought, they brooked no compromise: in curriculum and pedagogic style, the *heder* (the Jewish school for younger children) was to remain exactly as it had been in the previous century. Even in matters of dress, where the law offered fewer guidelines, the Hasidic choice was ultra-conservative. Hasidism came to be seen as utter faithfulness to “the ways of our ancestors.”

This move toward traditionalism was strengthened by a unique feature of Hasidism that had begun to emerge already in the late eighteenth century: the prevalence of dynastic leadership. The grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, Rabbi Baruch of Międzyboż (1753–1801), already claimed an inherited aura of sanctity, creating one of the first Hasidic courts. Alongside him was Rabbi Mordecai of Chernobyl (1770–1837), son of a famous Hasidic preacher, who claimed to inherit his father’s mantle and then passed it on to each of his eight sons. He was soon followed by Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin (1796–1850), descendant of Dov Baer of Międzyrzecz, whose six sons had all become Rebbes. (These latter two families, the Twerskys and the Friedmans, dominated Ukrainian Hasidic life throughout its history.) Second- and third-generation heirs to the various Hasidic “thrones” could hardly match their forebears in creativity or innovative religious daring. But they could fit precisely into the new value of Hasidism, that of ultra-conservatism. These Rebbes were indeed the guardians of the ancestral ways, glad to support every effort at preserving their patrimony. They were joined by new dynastic founders, especially in Galicia (Dynów, Zydańczow, and later Belz and Nowy Sącz), who shared their extreme devotion to tradition.

The spiritual landscape of Hasidism contained a good deal of variety, much of it due to the particular personalities and tendencies of each dynasty’s founder. Belorussian Hasidism came to be dominated by the influence of Lubavitch, or Habad, Hasidism, the creation of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (ca. 1745–1813). This was a highly disciplined and intellectually elitist Hasidism, at once devoted to a contemplative mystical path and an activist program of spreading its influence. Within Ukrainian Hasidism, a special place belongs to the small group of followers of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810), who held fast to a particularly intense form of emotional prayer-life and remained uniquely devoted to the teachings of a master who was never succeeded or replaced. In Congress Poland, a new direction emerged from two masters centered in Przysucha, which then took its sharpest form in the circle around Menahem Mendel of Kotsk (1787–1859). This may be seen as a reformist movement within the Hasidic camp: the teachers of Przysucha denounced Hasidism acquired by heritage and imitation, insisting on the rekindling of passionate struggle to engage with God by means of deep questioning and inner self-challenge. This “Polish” school also turned Hasidism back toward classical forms of rigorous Talmudic learning.

The struggle of Hasidism against the inroads of modernity lasted for more than a century, taking on a unique character in each geographical region. In Israel, its effects can still be felt today. By the late nineteenth century the Hasidim were establishing their own institutions



Postcard showing the palatial Sadagora synagogue complex of the Ruzhiner Rebbe, Israel Friedman, built in the mid-19th century. Gross Family Collection, Tel Aviv

for studying Talmud, or yeshivot (*Tomkhei Temimim* of Lubavitch) and political movements (*Mahazikei ha-Dat* of Belz) aimed at preserving tradition. In the early twentieth century, the Rebbe of Ger (the Polish town of Góra Kalwaria) and others joined with German Orthodox leaders to create *Agudat Yisra'el*, a political party devoted to defending the interests of strict Orthodoxy. Hasidism entered Hungary rather late in its spread, but there it fought a series of particularly sharp battles against modernity, assimilation, and eventually Zionism, characterized by the extremist views of Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum of Satmar (1887–1979). In the course of efforts to defend the old ways, boundaries between Hasidic and traditional rabbinical leadership began to fade. There were once-unheard-of marriages between Hasidic dynasties and leading rabbinical families and a growing number of Hasidic Rebbes who authored works of Talmudic scholarship that were respected beyond Hasidic circles.⁵

Hasidism's influence began to wane with the decline of the shtetl, increased urbanization and industrialization within Polish Jewry, and the great waves of emigration, all of which began in the 1880s. Emerging new secularist forms of Jewish identity, including both Socialism and Zionism, won the hearts of many children of Hasidic families towards the turn of the twentieth century, especially in Russia and central Poland. Of the vast number of Jews who emigrated to western Europe and America, most left their Hasidic heritage behind. Indeed the Rebbes, when asked, strongly opposed emigration, suspecting that the old life of piety could not be transferred to alien shores. The only exception was emigration to the Land of Israel, following the example of small numbers of Hasidim who settled there from the eighteenth century on.⁶ While almost all Hasidic Rebbes opposed modern Zionism, the small Hasidic enclave in the holy land, *Eretz Yisra'el*, emerged as a strong center of the movement, often in its most extreme form.

The First World War ravaged the Hasidic heartland from 1914 to 1918; many a Hasidic court was forced to flee its ancestral home, never to return, and reestablished itself in such strange places as Vienna, Berlin, or even Brooklyn. The pogroms that followed the war led to further devastation and despair. Eventually the installation of a fiercely anti-religious Communist regime in the Soviet Union effectively ended the influence of an already weakened Hasidism in the Ukraine and Belorussia. Habad took the leadership in preserving what it could of Jewish life in this new and hostile setting, often at the price of great suffering and martyrdom. Hasidism continued to thrive in Poland, Galicia, Hungary, and northern Romania, though having to learn to live side-by-side, and sometimes even join forces, with secular Jews of various stripes.

The Holocaust was particularly devastating to Hasidic communities throughout Europe. The Nazis often chose special torments for these "most Jewish" Jews. Hundreds of thousands of Hasidim, including many Rebbes, were murdered; Hasidism was completely wiped out in its countries of origin. Tales abound about special acts of martyrdom performed during those dark years, attempts to convert meaningless mass slaughter into *kiddush ha-shem*, death for the sake of sanctifying God's name. Nevertheless, in the inevitable questioning of divine justice during and after the war, there were also many Hasidic Jews who lost their faith.

5 The merging of rabbinical and Hasidic "nobility" took place both in Galicia (notably in the Sandz, or Nowy Sącz, dynasty) and in Congress Poland. Hasidic masters revered for their writings on the Talmud include Rabbi Hayyim of Sandz (1793–1876) and Rabbi Isaac Meir of Ger (1799–1866), known by the name of his magnum opus *Hiddushei haRYM*.

6 Hasidic aliyah began with individuals, including the Besht's brother-in-law R. Gershon of Kutny in the 1740s – although predating the movement, he was "adopted" by Hasidism – and R. Nahman of Horodenko in 1764. The first organized group was led by R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk in 1777. Hasidic communities first grew up in Tiberias and Safed; a Hasidic presence in Jerusalem only began to develop in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, especially after the devastating Safed earthquake of 1837.

The revival of Hasidism since the Holocaust is perhaps the movement's most remarkable tale. No one could have predicted that the small bedraggled groups of survivors, bewildered by their new and alien surroundings, would within a generation recreate their institutions, produce large new families that mostly remained faithful, and widely extend their influence within world Jewry. All descriptions of the Jewish future now count upon the fact that Hasidic communities will continue to grow and flourish, constituting a rising percentage within the worldwide Jewish people. These "exotic" communities are often viewed with suspicion and even hostility by outsiders, particularly in Israel, largely because of their extremist views on matters of public policy. But it is also fair to say that in some Hasidic quarters an intense devotion to *avodat ha-shem* – true worship – still flourishes, and that the original revivalist passion of Hasidism is not extinguished.

The year 2010 marked the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Ba'al Shem Tov's death. After a quarter of a millennium, Hasidism remains a controversial movement with its enthusiasts and its detractors. Since the turn of the twentieth century, some of the most creative voices within Jewry, while standing outside the Hasidic movement, have drawn upon it as a source of inspiration. New versions of Hasidism – designed for those living outside the ultra-traditional context – were attempted in prewar Europe, especially by Martin Buber and Hillel Zeitlin, and in postwar North America by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Shlomo Carlebach. The most important postwar Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, was a product of Hasidism, and its influence is clearly seen in his writings. Descriptions of Hasidic life abound in modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, including the works of the two Nobel Prize winners Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Depictions of Hasidic life in painting and recreations of Hasidic and neo-Hasidic melodies in Jewish music have certainly enriched the cultural life of Jewry, reaching far beyond the bounds of the movement. The Hasidim themselves usually disdain such efforts, remaining faithful to the old ways. But all of this may be said, in the broadest sense, to belong to the plan of the Ba'al Shem Tov, who was always interested in reaching out to uplift the souls of even the most distant and "fallen" of Jews and to restore them to their love of God, Torah, and the holy people Israel.

A World Apart Next Door

Glimpses into the Life of Hasidic Jews

Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper

With an Introduction by
Arthur Green



The Israel Museum, Jerusalem