

Hasidism and Its Response to Change

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Abstract The article has two distinct parts. The first reviews the current state of scholarship on Hasidism and its history, especially the changes that have taken place over the course of the past two decades. The second is a discussion of theological reflections on change and creativity found in the early sources of Hasidism. The movement's creators were willing to make far-reaching assertions about the legitimacy of generational change, even considering it an obligatory undertaking. This call is a familiar part of youth culture in many diverse settings. The author suggests that early Hasidism was indeed largely led by young men shaping a revivalist religious movement that called for throwing off the shackles of mere traditionalist behavior. At the same time, it is notable that this potentially powerful radically revisionist claim was in fact used to make only minor changes in the actual patterns of religious behavior, setting the stage for the ultra-conservative wave that was to overtake Hasidism after 1800 and the beginning of its battle with modernity.

Keywords Hasidism · Eastern Europe · Eighteenth century · Religious radicalism · Youth culture

This essay consists of two separate sections, united by their dealing with changes in viewpoint. I open with some reflections on the state of hasidic historiography, highlighting recent changes in scholarly approaches to the subject. I then turn to consideration of an internal question in hasidic thought, the legitimacy of generational change.

I

In 1988 a conference in memory of Joseph Weiss convened in London. Devoted to a reconsideration of the phenomenon of Hasidism, the deliberations there eventually took the form of a memorable volume called *Hasidism Reappraised*, which was published in 1996.¹ Much has been written about Hasidism since then, and broader cultural, intellectual, and historiographical trends have come to the fore. The time has come to reappraise the reappraisal and to assess what we think, write, and teach about the history of Hasidism today.

¹Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed., *Hasidism Reappraised* (London, 1996).

The most immediately noteworthy feature of the 1988 conference was that it represented a generational shift. Gershom Scholem, Isaiah Tishby, and Raphael Mahler were all discussed as figures of the past, even by those who had been their students. This was a gathering of a mostly younger generation of scholars, people then in early or early mid-career, including Immanuel Etkes, Ada Rapoport-Albert, Gershon Hundert, Moshe Rosman, Moshe Idel, Rachel Elior, Zeev Gries, and others. While the volume eventually included essays by distinguished representatives of the previous generation, theirs were not the main voices at that conference.

Several other items are worthy of note as we look back at that event and volume. As perhaps befitted a gathering in Weiss's memory, Hasidism was discussed chiefly as a religious and intellectual movement,² and the sources under consideration were almost entirely internal, indeed almost all of them were published Jewish texts that had been available to prior generations of scholars as well. Rosman's and Hundert's contributions were among the early efforts of a new generation of Jewish scholars who were training themselves to read Polish and to gain access to other bodies of literary and archival source material, but this was certainly secondary in the minds of most, including those writing in the area of social history. Although the published volume included essays by a few senior scholars who had been born in pre-war eastern Europe, such as Chone Shmeruk, Mendel Piekartz, and Shmuel Ettinger (whose passing shortly after the conference is noted in the preface), it is fair to say that the bulk of the volume represented a generation of scholars of Hasidism who had little real contact with the lands, and hence with the non-Jewish cultural settings, within which Hasidism dwelt before the great destruction of the Holocaust era. We knew Ukrainian, Galician, Polish, or Hungarian Hasidism from a distance—mostly from documents, but also from contact with surviving communities now violently exiled far from their original homes and the towns that still bore their dynastic names. The conference took place, we should recall, before the fall of the Berlin wall and the opening of Eastern Europe that followed in its wake. Also noteworthy is the presence in the volume of essays by two scholars, Yehoshua Mondshine and Naftali Loewenthal, who are members of hasidic communities as well as scholars of hasidic history. This happily represents a crossing of bounds that probably could not have taken place in the previous generation.

Now, a generation later, the study of Hasidism is developing in a different atmosphere. Let me present, in outline form, a few of the factors that may account for the major differences as I see them.

²This same approach may be seen in Weiss's posthumous collected essays, appearing at nearly the same time (although most had been published within the author's lifetime). See Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism* (London, 1997).

1. Access to archives, governmental sources, caches of materials preserved in places that were behind the former Iron Curtain, collections once thought to be lost, etc.—all of them rife with the promise of new discoveries. These relate especially to social, political, and economic aspects of hasidic life.³
2. Hasidic manuscripts, a few preserved in libraries but many more in the possession of hasidic courts and individuals. These include better versions of well-known texts (*Shivhei habesht*,⁴ *Igeret habesht*,⁵ etc.), but occasionally also entirely new materials. A number of documents once considered esoteric and intentionally kept from the eyes of outsiders have now become public.⁶ The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, of anti-hasidic written materials, both mitnagdic and maskilic.⁷
3. New and refined approaches to religious life, including phenomenological and comparative studies. The use of cross-traditional typologies has added much to our understanding of religious phenomena as well as to the dynamics of social life in religious communities. In the comparative realm, access to documents and cultural artifacts of the surrounding non-Jewish populations may have more to tell us about Hasidism's spiritual character than once was thought. Scholem's dismissal of Yaffa Eliach's

³The use of such archival sources was key to Moshe Rosman's pioneering *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (Berkeley, 1996) and has since characterized the work of many scholars, including, among others, David Assaf, Gershon Hundert, Yohanan Petrovsky, and Marcin Wodziński.

⁴See Yehoshua Mondshine, *Shivhei habesht: Faksimil miketav hayad hayehidi hanoda lanu veshinuyei nusahav le'umat nusah hadefus* (Jerusalem, 1982); Avraham Rubinstein, *Shivhei habesht* (Jerusalem, 1991). For an English version of this work, see *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, trans. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome Mintz (Bloomington, 1970). For analyses of the historical provenance and usefulness of this text, see Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, 2005), "The Historicity of *Shivhei Habesht*," 203–48; Moshe Rosman, *Stories That Changed History: The Unique Career of Shivhei habesht* (Syracuse, 2007). The listings in this and the following footnotes are intended to be exemplary rather than exhaustive.

⁵See Etkes, *The Besht*, 272–88; Yehoshua Mondshine, "Nusah kadum shel igeret aliyat hane-shamah lehabesht," in *Migdal 'oz* (Kfar Habad, 1980), 119–26; Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, 97–113; Haviva Pedaya, "Igeret hakodesh labesht: nusah, hatekst utemunat ha'olam—meshihyut, hitgalut, ekstazah veshabeta'ut," *Zion* 70, no. 3 (2005), 311–54.

⁶See Zvi Mark, *The Scroll of Secrets: The Hidden Messianic Vision of R. Nachman of Breslav*, trans. Naftali Moses (Brighton, 2010).

⁷See e.g. Uriel Gellman's edition of *Sefer hasidim: hibur ganuz bigenutah shel hahasidut* (Jerusalem, 2007).

claims⁸ (actually first suggested by Torsten Ysander⁹) about the parallels between Hasidism and local Christian sectarianism are open once again for re-examination,¹⁰ this time by a much better-equipped and less-biased scholarly community.

4. Growth of internal historical consciousness among today's *hasidim*. Although often uncritical and quasi-apologetic, it is nevertheless significant. Oral traditions as well as documents are still preserved in the surviving hasidic communities, and their publications, including various in-house journals,¹¹ are often based on these.
5. Broad interest in Hasidism. Hasidism is in the news: Hasidism in the political life of Israel, "conversions" to Hasidism, defections from the hasidic community, scandals, all arouse great press and public interest. Hasidism is frequently (and occasionally well) depicted in film,¹² a medium that makes a great impression on the public mind. There is much interest in women in the hasidic communities, including scholarly treatments

⁸Yaffa Eliach, "The Russian Dissenting Sects and Their Influence on Israel Baal Shem Tov, Founder of Hasidism," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 36 (1968), 57–83. For Scholem's rejection of her thesis, see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), 362 n. 37.

⁹Torsten Ysander, *Studien zum Bceštschen Hasidismus in seiner Religionsgeschichtlichen Sonderart* (Uppsala, 1933).

¹⁰See Igor Tourov, "Hasidism and Christianity of the Eastern Territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: Possible of [sic] Contacts and Mutual Influences," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 10 (2004), 73–105 as well as Moshe Idel's ongoing comments, most recently in his "R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov 'In the State of Walachia'," in *Holy Dissent: Jewish and Christian Mystics in Eastern Europe* (Detroit, 2011), 69–103, as well as other essays in that volume.

¹¹For some random examples of these journals, see *Nahalat tsevi* (Bnei Brak, 1989–), published by Vizhnitz circles but devoted to a wide array of hasidic sources and topics; *Heikhal habesht* (Monsey, 2002–), a Habad organ devoted to publishing and analyzing unknown or rare hasidic texts; *Kovets beit aharon veyisra'el* (Jerusalem, 1985–), published by the Karlin-Stolin *hasidim*; *Kovets kerem shelomoh* (Brooklyn, 1977–), circulated by the Bobover hasidic community; *Kovets mishkenot ya'akov* (New Square, 1993–), devoted to the Skvira/Chernobyl tradition; and in English, *The Hasidic Historical Review* (Brooklyn, 1995–8), edited by Shaul Shimon Deutsch. For a critical survey of the growing awareness of historiography in hasidic literature, see Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism," *History and Theory* 27, no. 4 (1988), 119–59.

¹²Examples of such popular films (as distinct from documentaries, which also abound) include Boaz Yakhin's *A Price above Rubies* (1998), Giddi Dar's *Ushpizin* (2004), Kevin Asch's *Holy Rollers* (2010), and Eve Annenberg's *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish* (2011).

like those of Ada Rapoport-Albert,¹³ Nehemia Polen,¹⁴ and Nathaniel Deutsch,¹⁵ but also popular presentations, works of fiction and fantasy, etc.¹⁶ The messianic outburst that took place within Habad¹⁷ created an unpredicted and dramatic moment in the history of Judaism, watched by scholars of religion everywhere. The growth of neo-Hasidic phenomena, including the posthumous rehabilitation of Shlomo Carlebach in Orthodox circles¹⁸ as well as the ongoing development of clearly heterodox neo-Hasidism,¹⁹ have all been fascinating to see.

These recent developments can lead in diverse directions, often complicating tremendously the historian's attempt to get a clear picture of Hasidism.

¹³See Ada Rapoport-Albert, "On Women in Hasidism: S.A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition," in *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein (London, 1988), 495–525.

¹⁴See Nehemia Polen, "Miriam's Dance: Radical Egalitarianism in Hasidic Thought," *Modern Judaism* 12 (1992), 1–21; id., "Rebbetzins, Wonder-Children, and the Emergence of the Dynastic Principle in Hasidism," *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York, 2007), 53–84; Malkah Shapiro, *The Rebbe's Daughter: Memoir of a Hasidic Childhood*, trans. N. Polen (Philadelphia, 2002).

¹⁵See Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Maiden of Ludmir: A Holy Woman and Her World* (Berkeley, 2003).

¹⁶Scholarly and popular non-fiction presentations include Evelyn Kaye, *The Hole in the Sheet: A Modern Woman Looks at Orthodox and Hasidic Judaism* (n.p., 1987); Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women and their World* (Boulder, 1994); Bonnie J. Morris, *Lubavitcher Women in America* (Albany, 1998); Stephanie Levine and Carol Gilligan, *Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey among Hasidic Girls* (New York, 2004); and Ayala Fader, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* (Princeton, 2009).

¹⁷See Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem M. Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton, 2010). For a very different perspective on this figure, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (New York, 2009). David Berger's interesting, if openly polemical, study of the recent messianic outgrowth of Habad is also worthy of note. See David Berger, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London, 2001).

¹⁸See, for example, Yitta Halberstam Mandelbaum, *Holy Brother: Inspiring Stories and Enchanted Tales about Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach* (Northvale, 1997).

¹⁹See the writings of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the leading figure in neo-Hasidism, particularly his *Paradigm Shift* (Northvale, 1993) and *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, with Daniel Siegel (Bloomington, 2006). Schachter-Shalomi continues to publish at an impressive rate. The past two years have seen the appearance of five new volumes of collected teachings. The present writer is also active in this area. See most recently my *Radical Judaism* (New Haven, 2010) and "A Neo-Hasidic Life: Credo and Commentary" in *Personal Theology: Essays in Honor of Neil Gillman* (Boston, 2013). A key figure in the earlier history of Neo-Hasidism is Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942). See my selections of his writings as well as my biographical introduction in *Hasidism for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Ramsey, 2012).

The same period, the same figure, sometimes even the same historical event, can be seen in a number of different ways when reflected through the very different prisms of homilies published at or near the time, archival sources, and documents or oral memory preserved within the specific hasidic community or family. The last mentioned sources often result in later publications generally referred to as tales, but in fact containing a variety of materials, comprising letters (some authentic), personal testimonials, and more mundane texts, including a great number of fund-raising appeals. Such personalities and events are also re-created in the later neo-hasidic imagination.²⁰ Since we scholars do not live entirely closed off in a document-strewn ivory tower, all of these, including contemporary events and attitudes, necessarily have some effect upon our understandings of Hasidism. The fact that Hasidism remains an active and often controversial force in contemporary Jewish life, especially in Israel, surely affects the lens through which we view its history.

It is too easy but almost never right for those who see themselves as custodians of one category of source materials, representing one point of view, to dismiss the others. “Oh, the Polish sources! What can they tell us about Hasidism? They were written by outsiders whose view was superficial and ill informed. They took things at face value, without knowing how to probe them more deeply.” Or “Those later hasidic sources, published only in the twentieth century! How can one take them seriously? They were obviously written to answer the needs of a later generation.” Even the seemingly most original hasidic sources can be challenged. “These were published as collected sermons, translated into Hebrew from the oral Yiddish versions. Probably they were polished up to appear more learned, to give the *tsadik* respectability in the eyes of the learned reading public.” Can you trust them to represent what Hasidism was *really* like?

None of these objections is entirely without merit. The critical student of Hasidism has to note and digest them all, yet not dismiss any fragment of evidentiary material, as long as it is used judiciously and in conjunction with others.²¹

²⁰The later neo-hasidic imagination may include attempts within the ultra-Orthodox community (notably by Artscroll Press and several parallel enterprises) to produce hagiographic works in English or Hebrew, as well as writings that are frankly imaginative reconstructions. Note Zalman Schachter-Shalomi’s *Wrapped in Holy Fire: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters* (n.p., 2003) in which he has included tales recently created to provide a role for women unlike anything found in earlier hasidic sources.

²¹For this reason I reject the rather divisive and polemical tone taken by my onetime student Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern of Northwestern University, in his “*Hasidei De’ar’a and Hasidei Dekokhvaya: Two Trends in Modern Jewish Historiography*,” *AJS Review* 32, no. 1 (2008), 141–67, where he has sought to caricature efforts in the field of intellectual and religious history as “star-struck” (a particularly unfortunate translation of his artifice *hasidei dekokhvaya*).

Hasidism is a complex religious and social phenomenon, with high degrees of internal differentiation, running across place, time, and particular authors, schools, and dynasties. If we are going to be able to say anything about the movement as a whole, we will have to fully acknowledge that we are dealing with a history stretching over a quarter of a millennium—noting the recent 250th anniversary of Israel Baal Shem Tov's passing (in 2010)—and covering a tremendous variety of times, places, personalities, religious phenomena, teachings, attitudes, social structures, and a great deal more. Indeed nothing is more interesting to the historian of Hasidism than the radical changes the movement has undergone in the course of its existence. This applies to Hasidism as a whole: the change from persecuted and marginalized revival movement to bastion of conservative respectability, from dangerous source of radical and threatening religious teachings to exemplar of extreme ultra-Orthodoxy, from backward, small-town remnant of a dying past to well-organized, highly politicized critic of modernity, from penniless, bedraggled survivor of persecution and genocide to powerful, largely self-supporting, and sometimes aggressive player in issues affecting the Jewish people and its future. But it also applies within individual schools and dynasties. Note some of the radical transformations that have taken place within Habad/Lubavitch and Bratslav before our very eyes in these past several decades.²²

The term implies, and indeed Petrovsky-Shtern also says quite directly, that treatment of Hasidism as intellectual and religious history is necessarily, or at least usually, ungrounded in concrete historical and textual evidence. He accuses those who study Hasidism as a religious phenomenon of ignoring the Eastern European setting of the movement, of reading homiletical sources without regard for complex problems of editing and publication, of treating hagiography uncritically as history, and of caring nothing for the context in which ideas grew and took root. Petrovsky-Shtern's unfortunate conflation of serious comparative and phenomenological studies with some of the more apologetic inner hasidic writings on the past aggravates the problem and calls forth this unhappy response even from one as usually non-polemical as myself. I was particularly shocked to read that "by the end of the late twentieth century, most scholars agreed that Hasidism was a popular movement triggered by the economic breakdown of Polish Jewry, directed against the legal authorities, and led by mystically oriented leaders with no significant rabbinic pedigree or deep knowledge of traditional Jewish sources" (p. 142). I certainly am not a member of this alleged community of "most scholars," and I daresay others represented in the present volume would also demur sharply, especially at the claim that Hasidism's leaders lacked "deep knowledge of traditional Jewish sources." Such a characterization might work nicely for Frankism, but hardly for Hasidism.

²²The transformation of Habad into a mass movement concerned with outreach toward less observant Jews has been well documented in the work of Heilman and Friedman, Deutsch, and Wolfson. The Bratslav community began to shift in the 1970s with the publication of translations of Bratslav classics into English, French, Russian, and other languages. This change continued as the Breslov Research Institute was developed by a group of primarily newly religious Jews who have been attracted to Hasidism later in life. The self-presentation of Bratslav also changed with the appearance of several diverse communities within its orb, often with

II

There is little question that Hasidism was a highly successful religious and social movement in the period of its great expansion, say from 1780 to 1850. Both Marcin Wodziński²³ and Glenn Dynner²⁴ have taken important steps towards measuring and accounting for this success, especially its later phases in the Polish territories, but much more is yet to be done, particularly on the Russian side.²⁵ However, this success in numbers and influence has everything to do with the ability of hasidic leaders in the fourth to sixth generations of the movement (1815–40) to transform both its image and its message to suit the needs of a radical anti-modernist stance. The figures at the center of this transformation were primarily founders of dynasties that stood a generation removed from R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk (Leżajsk), mostly via Rymanów and Ropczyce.²⁶ I have in mind such typically Galician dynasties as Belz [Bełż], Dynów, and Sanz [Nowy Sącz]. In the memoir of R. Yitshak Nahum Twersky of Shpikiv [Szpików] (1888–1942), David Assaf has given us a rare latter-day insider’s glimpse into the deep differences between the Hasidism of the original Ukrainian heartland, dominated by the Twersky and Friedman clans, and that of the reinvigorated and somewhat crusading (if such a word may be used among Jews!) spirit of the Galician movement.²⁷

The ability to change with the variation of times and places, even when such changes may appear regressive in the eyes of modern critics of the movement, accompanies Hasidism in the later phases of its history as well. Such innovations as adjustment to new urban environments, organization into

controversy, distance and hostility between them. Recent developments with Bratslav await a major scholarly study, but for the time being, see Zvi Mark, “The Contemporary Renaissance of Braslav Hasidism: Ritual, *Tikkun* and Messianism,” in *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival*, ed. Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva, 2011), 101–16.

²³ Marcin Wodziński, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict*, trans. Sarah Cozens with Agnieszka Mirowska (Oxford, 2005).

²⁴ Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford and New York, 2006).

²⁵ See David Assaf and Gadi Sagiv, “Hasidism in Tsarist Russia: Historical and Social Aspects,” in the present volume. See also David Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, trans. David Louvish (Stanford, 2002); Gadi Sagiv, “Hasidut tshernobil: toledoteihah vetoroteihah mereshitah ve’ad ‘erev milhemet ha’olam harishonah,” (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2009).

²⁶ R. Elimelekh died in 1786, rather early in the history of Hasidism, but he was the father of dynasties that spread to both Poland and Galicia. The primary transitional figures between him and Galician Hasidism were his students R. David of Lelov (1746–1813), R. Menahem Mendel of Rymanów (d. 1814), and R. Naftali of Ropczyce (d. 1760–1827).

²⁷ See David Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism*, trans. Dena Ordan (Waltham, 2010), 216–35.

political parties, and educational reforms, including education for women, all emerged within hasidic circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the post-Holocaust decades, the ability of hasidic leaders to rebuild centers, educate large groups of the faithful, and establish networks of financial support is a phenomenon that has yet to be fully studied or understood.²⁸ In Israel this path has been eased by significant government underwriting, but it is especially remarkable on the seemingly unsympathetic American and western European landscapes.²⁹

Adopting for the moment the categories coined by Petrovsky-Shtern in his recent polemical article,³⁰ none of this is hard to understand from the perspective of *hasidei de'ar'a* ("earth-bound," i.e., tending to use archival sources) scholarship. Leaders and groups want to maintain and expand their influence and therefore do what is necessary to survive and thrive. New circumstances and contexts call forth appropriate responses. There is nothing surprising about that. The more interesting question here belongs to the "star-struck" (*hasidei dekokhvaya*): investigators of hasidic religious thought and ideology. How does a seemingly so tradition-bound movement find the elasticity to change, even in drastic ways? Is there something within Hasidism that enabled it to undergo such radical transformations and internal diversification while still seeing itself as continuous with its own traditions, faithful to the path set out by the Baal Shem Tov, whom *it* sees, whether we agree or not, as the movement's founder?

Here I would answer in the affirmative, pointing to an element of hasidic thought going back to the movement's earliest sources that may have played a key if often unstated role in its ongoing history of self-reinvention. I refer to the twin doctrines of the need for generational relevance in reading and teaching of Torah, and of the role of the *tsadikim* in determining that relevance and hence the true meaning of Torah for their times. The penchant of hasidic preachers for seeking the contemporary relevance of Torah is well known. "Torah is eternal. . .," these passages often begin, introducing an attempt to find some meaning in a particular verse or portion—often one that no longer applies to contemporary Judaism, such as a verse dealing with the

²⁸For examples of studies examining the regeneration of postwar Hasidism, see Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, ed., *New World Hasidism: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America*, (Albany, 1995); George Kranzler, *Hasidic Williamsburg: A Contemporary American Hasidic Community* (Northvale, 1995); Jerome Mintz, *Hasidic People: A Place in the New World* (Cambridge, 1992); Solomon Poll, *The Hasidic Community of Williamsburg: A Study in the Sociology of Religion* (New Brunswick, 2006).

²⁹For studies of this phenomenon in Israel, see Menachem Friedman, *Hahevrah haharedit: mekorot, megamot vetahalikhim* (Jerusalem, 1991); Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (Berkeley, 1992).

³⁰See above, n. 21.

tabernacle, with Temple-based purity laws, or with the sacrificial system—and that therefore has to be re-read in some different way.³¹

Of course hasidic sources are not the first in the long history of Jewish homiletics and interpretation to seek contemporary relevance in a biblical passage. Preachers of every age need to do that. But there is a new tone of insistence on the legitimacy of this quest, sometimes accompanied by a near-petulance that peppers the opening lines of many a hasidic homily. Torah was given for every generation. How could it *possibly* say things that are instructions only addressed to Noah for building an ark or to Moses for building a tabernacle?³²

This challenge is sometimes answered with a highly developed awareness of the crucial role to be played within Torah by the act of human interpretation, including constant reinterpretation. Not surprisingly, this will be associated with the long-established role of *torah shebe'al peh*, the ongoing oral tradition. We begin with a passage from the *Degel mahaneh efrayim* by R. Efrayim of Sudilkov [Sudyłków], the Besht's grandson:

Moses diligently sought out the goat for the sin-offering (Lev. 10:16). The Masorah notes that these words, “diligently sought” (*darosh darash*) are the midpoint in a letter count of the Torah. One needs to understand what is meant by this, what difference it makes. In my humble opinion, [it is as follows]: We know that the written and oral Torahs are all one, that neither can be separated from the other. Neither is indeed possible without the other, since the written Torah reveals its secrets through the oral interpretation. The written Torah without the oral Torah is incomplete. It was like half a book until the Sages came and interpreted Torah, lighting up our eyes and revealing its hidden secrets. Sometimes they would uproot something from the Torah, as is the case with regard to [punishment by] lashes. The Torah says: “He shall be stricken

³¹Ron Margolin's *Mikdash Adam* (Jerusalem, 2004) is a very important study of the ongoing spiritualization of literary/religious motifs across the history of Judaism, culminating in Hasidism. Concentrating on the re-interpretation of the tabernacle passages in Exodus 25ff., he is quite aware of this oft-expressed Hasidic insistence on contemporary spiritual “relevance” of Scripture. See also my recent treatment in “The Hasidic Homily: Mystical Performance and Hermeneutical Process,” forthcoming in the Norman Lamm Festschrift.

³²To name only a few such examples, see Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezerich [Międzyrzec], *Magid devarav leya'akov*, ed. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer (Jerusalem, 1976), 13; id., *Or torah* (Brooklyn, 1972), Vayetse; Efrayim of Sudilkov, *Degel mahaneh efrayim*, (Jerusalem, 1963), Bereshit, 1, s.v. *Od yesh lomar*; ibid., Lekh lekha, 10–1, s.v. *Vayomer YHVH el avram*; ibid., Tetsaveh, 114, s.v. *Velo yizah*; Ze'ev Wolf of Żytomierz, *Or hame'ir* 1999, Hayei sarah, 38, s.v. *Vayomer YHVH elohei avi*; ibid., Toledot, 44–5, s.v. *Bemikra'ei kodesh*.

forty times (Deut. 25:3), but the Sages reduced it by one.³³ They did all this by the manifestation of their holy spirit, because the blessed Lord was manifest upon them (*al yedey hofa'at ruah kodsham, shehofi'a aleyhem ha'adon barukh hu*). [This enabled them] to see the root of everything written in the Torah in its true state, empowering them to do this. The wholeness of the written Torah is thus dependent upon the oral. Therefore one who says: "This inference from major to minor [declared by the Sages] does not derive from the Torah,"³⁴ or one who disputes a single statement of the Sages is like one who denies the Torah of Moses, for everything depends upon the Sages' interpretations; they constitute the wholeness of the written Torah . . .³⁵

R. Efrayim must have been particularly proud of this comment on the pentateuchal portion of Shemini, because he (or perhaps his editor, as Zeev Gries³⁶ would remind us; the *Degel* was published a decade after his death) quotes it again ("we begin with what I said . . .") in his homily on the portion of Bereshit.³⁷ But here he adds a crucial line:

This is true of each generation and its interpreters. They make the Torah complete. Torah is interpreted in each generation according to what that generation needs. God enlightens the eyes of each generation's sages [to interpret] His holy Torah in accord with the soul-root of that generation. One who denies this is like one who denies Torah, God forbid.

This is an important claim of interpretive license. Parallels to it can be found in a number of early hasidic works. Its seemingly obvious purpose was to defend the often radical interpretive license taken by hasidic authors, who read Torah texts precisely in ways intended to shock their hearers. This was part of the revivalist practice of Hasidism, a device to awaken the listener out of his conventional mindset by offering a seemingly simple and yet totally

³³B. Makkot 22b.

³⁴Based on B. Sanhedrin 99a, and cf. Sifrei on Numbers 15:31. See also Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah min hashamayim be'aspaklaryah shel hadorot* (Jerusalem, 1962), 2:100–23.

³⁵Efrayim of Sudilkov, *Degel mahaneh efrayim* (Jerusalem, 1963), Shemini, 165, s.v. *Od yirmoz al derekh de'ita bamasoret*. The force of argument used by this and other hasidic sources was most fully articulated by the Kabbalists Meir Ibn Gabbai and Isaiah Horowitz. See the sources quoted by Gershom Scholem in his "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), 298–303.

³⁶See Zeev Gries, "The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, 141–55.

³⁷Efrayim of Sudilkov, *Degel*, Bereshit, 6a, s.v. *O yomar zeh sefer*.

original understanding of the well-known biblical or talmudic passage.³⁸ If the quotations in the writings of Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye [Połonne] are to be believed, this practice went back to the Besht himself.

It is significant, however, that the example given by R. Efrayim involves halakhic practice, not just the homilist's claim of interpretive freedom. The reduction of the lashing penalty, already recorded in the Mishnah, is one of several examples one could give (others involve the death penalty) where the early sages openly demurred at a practice commanded by the Torah text. In commenting briefly on this Mishnah, the Talmud quotes Rava, the third-century Babylonian sage, as saying: "How foolish are most people who stand up before a Torah scroll but do not stand in the presence of a great man. The Torah said 'forty lashes' and the sages came and removed one."³⁹

R. Efrayim of Sudilkov's choice of this example was probably not accidental. Hasidism was out to proclaim the right of its charismatic leaders, among whom the holy spirit was manifest even in their own day, to change certain practices that had venerable status in the community, if not actual laws. The hasidic *tsadik* was heir to the "great man" (*gavra raba*) whom the Babylonian Talmud mentions here, and indeed, in the anti-hasidic bans of the late eighteenth century, the *hasidim* were being accused of "changing the customs of our ancestors," and much worse.⁴⁰

Here is the hasidic defense. One *must* believe in the right of each generation's leaders to re-interpret, even to change practice to some degree; to do otherwise is to deny that the presence of revelation that justifies the oral Torah is still alive and active. That is denying Torah itself.

It may also be that R. Efrayim's choice of this example had to do with the well-known tendency of Hasidism to reduce the ascetic burdens that prior generations of kabbalists and Jewish pietists had taken upon themselves, including voluntary whip-lashings (*malkot*), reaching a crescendo in eastern Europe of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁴¹ Here the author

³⁸Hasidic authors sought precedence for this practice in the midrashic tale of Rabbi Judah the Prince, who mentioned in a homily that one woman in Egypt had borne 600,000 offspring (referring to Jochebed, whose son Moses' soul included those of all Israel!), making this claim in order to rouse his audience from sleep. See *Shir hashirim rabah*, ed. S. Dunsky (Tel Aviv, 1980), 1:64; Cf. ed. Vilna, 15:3.

³⁹B. Makkot 22b.

⁴⁰See Mordecai Wilensky, *Hasidim umitnagedim: letoledot hapulmus shebeineihem bashanim 1772–1815* (Jerusalem, 1970), 1:28–9, 102–21.

⁴¹Ben Zion Dinur, "The Origins of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Foundations," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present*, ed. Gershon Hundert (New York, 1991), 86–208. See also Mendel Piekarz, *Biymeit tsemihat hahasidut: megamot ra'ayoniyot besifrei derush umusar* (Jerusalem, 1978); Joseph Weiss, "Reshit tsemihatah shel haderekh hahasidit," *Zion* 16 (1951), 46–105; repr. in *Perakim betorat hahasidut vetoledoteihah*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem, 1977), 122–81.

shows that latter-day sages have a right to act precisely in this area where Hasidism was controversial, having compassion upon the sinner to reduce his burden of punishment.

The radical nature of this claim to new authority, if not sufficiently clear in the words of R. Efrayim of Sudilkov, is presented much more boldly by R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir [Żytomierz], one of the most interesting religious figures in the circle of the Maggid of Międzyrzec, in a homily on the Song of Songs in his *Or hame'ir*:

Moses spoke and god answered him in a voice [lit: “in thunder”] (Ex. 19:19). Our sages were aroused to say: “in Moses’ own voice.”⁴² We have to understand their words. The point is that Moses drew Torah forth from the level of [pre-verbal] “voice” to that of “speech.” Those were the Ten Commandments. But a Jew might say that it is impossible for a human being to comprehend the exalted divinity and the awesome, wondrous secrets it bears other than by means of creativity, by creative interpretation of Torah (*ki im bivehinah mehudeshet, al yedey mah shemehadeshim batorah*). The light within it is revealed by means of the souls of the righteous who creatively interpret Torah’s secrets in each generation, according to their needs and those of the people subject to them, doing so in a goodly way, all by means of permutations that they use to re-interpret the Torah.

It might appear, however, that once Moses drew Torah forth from the realm of voice to that of speech, “the word of the king cannot be retracted” (Esther 8:8)—now that it has been said it cannot be said again. This is what they were hinting at when they said “in Moses’ own voice.” Just as then, so too now, whoever has consciousness of his Creator (*mi sheyesh bo mida'at kono*) is called Moses, as in “Moses, you have said it well” [as one of the sages said to another].⁴³ Great love is manifest among them; God’s grace responding as it did to Moses, now too responds in voice to the righteous of the generation. This gives them the power to restore the category of speech to that of voice, according to the need of each generation, for the service appropriate to that time. Out of that voice new permutations may be formed, renewing God’s pleasure as well.⁴⁴

⁴²Heb. *bekolo shel mosheh*. See B. Berakhot 45a; Zohar III, 7a and 264b.

⁴³B. Shabbat 101b.

⁴⁴Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or hame'ir* (Korzec, 1798), 2:25a, s.v. *Lehayav ka'arugot habosem*.

Today's sages have the same power as Moses to reach into the divine pre-verbal realm, (the *sefirah* of Tif'eret, in Kabbalistic terms) and to re-form the wordless essence of Torah, bringing forth words and teachings appropriate to the devotional needs of those around them. Their creation or articulation of Torah is specifically comparable to that which Moses brought forth in the Ten Commandments! Here the work of the *tsadikim* goes beyond re-interpretation of a fixed text. It is living revelation, in no way inferior to what happened at Sinai itself. This ongoing religious creativity is not a challenge to divine authority but rather a source of continuous divine pleasure.

The obligatory character of faith in the ongoing authority of the sages of each generation to re-interpret and actually change the Torah, which we saw in R. Efrayim of Sudilkov, is trumpeted also by Levi Yitshak of Berdichev [Berdyuczów], who makes frequent use of this claim, which is most likely related to his central place in the controversies around hasidic innovation.

A basic principle in the service of our blessed Creator is that we Israelites are obliged to have faith in two Torahs, the written and the oral, both "given by a single shepherd" (Ecc. 11:12). [God] handed the written Torah to us through Moses, His faithful servant, engraved on the tablets in black fire on white fire. The Oral Torah was given to Moses in the form of commentary, including "what every faithful student was ever to find anew" (J. Pe'ah 2:6). This is to say that the Oral Torah was so given that whatever the righteous of a particular generation were to say would indeed come to pass. This is the great power that the blessed Creator gave to us, out of His love for His chosen people Israel. According to their will, as derived from the Torah, all the worlds would be conducted. Of this the sages said: "God issues a decree, but the *tsadik* cancels it."⁴⁵ This refers to those who serve their creator, blessed be His name, aware that He is Master and Ruler.⁴⁶

Here the claim of latter-day leaders' right to innovate, so central to the this-worldly project of the early hasidic masters, takes on a cosmic dimension. The notion that Torah and *mitsvot*, after all, have power in the upper worlds, is the essential claim of kabbalistic Judaism, reaching back to the argument of Nahmanides against Maimonides: *mitsvot tsorekh gavoha* [the Divine needs the *mitsvot*]. This is the essence of Kabbalistic theurgy, which may have roots, as my teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel tried to show,⁴⁷ in

⁴⁵See B. Mo'ed katan 16b.

⁴⁶Levi Yitshak of Berdichev, *Kedushat levi* (Jerusalem, 1958), Yitro, 134a, s.v. *O yevo'ar anokhi*. See also *ibid.*, Likutim, 306b, s.v. *Shanu hakhamim*, and many other passages.

⁴⁷Heschel, *Torah min hashamayim*, 2:33–53.

aspects of rabbinic theology of the earliest period. But if the righteous have the power to innovate, the cosmic forces themselves will need to submit to that authority. Thus “all the worlds would be conducted” must mean that the upper unifications that take place in response to human actions need to keep abreast of the new teachings of each generation, so that they can respond accordingly. Here a talmudic dictum about the power of the righteous to affect divine decrees, probably originally intended to confirm the power of their prayers to heal the sick or to avert natural disasters, is brought forth as a counter to Torah itself! The divine decree (*gezerah*) that the *tsadik* can nullify is the prior generations’ Torah!

Elsewhere Levi Yitshak compares the authority of Torah and commandments to a royal decree that, again, once issued cannot be revoked. But while the king is still issuing the decree, before he arrives at its conclusion, the generals hearing him might yet interrupt and get him to reconsider. By contrast, because God and revelation exist beyond time, His speech is never concluded; the conversation between God and Israel, especially the *tsadikim*, is continuous. Hence they may call upon Him to change His mind, to revoke the decree.⁴⁸ In yet another passage, Levi Yitshak refers to the well-known popular acronymic reading of the talmudic term *teiku* (let it stand) for an unresolvable halakhic dispute, taking it to mean that Elijah will come and resolve the dispute. “Why Elijah?” Levi Yitshak asks. He is a figure that has no association with Torah. Why does Moses himself not come to resolve disputes in interpretation of his law? The answer is that Moses has died, and no one already dead can teach what is appropriate to a yet-living generation. Only Elijah who never died can represent that possibility.⁴⁹

What we have here might be called a theology of generational change, a theological reflection on the phenomenon, not unique to the modern world, of a new generation rejecting the cultural truths passed down to it or, in the case of a very conservative culture like this one, seeking a way to recast the meaning of that legacy so that it may at once see itself as both rebellious and loyal. This area of reflection should be added to the significant list of ideas and motifs that might appear under the title “What’s new in Hasidism?” While precedents for it may be found, its centrality and radical adumbration are certainly new and intentionally startling in the hasidic context. We should note that there is nothing messianic or proto-messianic about these claims. It is not that ours is “the greatest” generation (unlike that of R. Shimeon bar Yohai in the *Zohar*, for example), but merely that *every* generation has the right and need to read Torah in its own way.

⁴⁸See *Kedushat levi*, Derush lepesah, 180b, s.v. *Inyan pesah*.

⁴⁹See *ibid.*, Likutim, 116b, s.v. *Teiku*.

I think it fair to say that the “weapon” wrought by the teachings of *Or hame’ir* and *Kedushat levi* far outstrips the uses to which they sought to put it. The authority of a new Moses or the power to change the cosmic constellations theologically went far beyond anything that even the Reformers of mid-nineteenth century Germany ever dared to claim. With such a “big-stick” authority club in their hands, you might have thought the *hasidim* would go farther than to depart from the halakhically prescribed times of prayer or switch to the Sephardic liturgical rite. Undoubtedly the immoderate tone heard in their sermons and published in their early writings only further agitated the *mitnagedim*, making them seem more dangerous than their actual innovations. But I believe this too was intentional. There was a radical fire being lit here that was set in order to capture the imaginations of a generation, especially that of the youth.⁵⁰

One of the most interesting questions for the historian of early Hasidism is that of self-consciousness or intentionality in the formation of this highly successful movement. Was a decision made, perhaps around the table of the Maggid in Międzyrzec, to create a broad-based movement? Did someone say: “You take Polesia; I’ll go to Galicia?” This is caricature, of course. But did someone ask: “How will we make this message reach large numbers of people? What will make Hasidism—perhaps not yet named as such—succeed? What is it that people need to hear, and can we deliver it to them?” Was there a “we” here at all, a joint effort of a group? Alternatively, did it just happen that each of these preachers, imbued with the revivalist spirit, set out on his own, creating a circle around himself which, after some time and in part due to shared opposition, came to be seen as a unified movement? Was it first perceived as such from without rather than from within? What role did the *mitnagedim* have in creating Hasidism as a “movement?”⁵¹

We do not yet have a clear answer to these questions, particularly as to the period from 1772 to 1810, the original period of the movement’s development and success, even in the face—or perhaps partly because of—the fierce opposition to it. Ada Rapoport-Albert has made a very important contribution to portraying the nature of hasidic leadership and fraternity in this crucial period, but we do not yet understand the dynamic by which the movement qua movement came to be.⁵² My own sense is that its original success has much to do with what might be called the dynamic of “youth culture,”

⁵⁰See Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 158–60, 175–81; Gershon D. Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley, 2004), 179–95.

⁵¹See Ada Rapoport-Albert, “Hasidism After 1772: Structural Continuity and Change,” in *Hasidism Reappraised* (London, 1996), 129–40.

⁵²My own views on this subject are expressed in “Seviv shulhan hamagid,” *Zion* 78 (2013), 73–106. I offer a summary of the early history of Hasidism in the introduction to *Speaking Torah: Spiritual Teachings from Around the Maggid’s Table* (Woodstock, 2013), 1:1–74.

perhaps comparable in some way to its emergence later in Zionism and in other phenomena that we might find much less attractive for comparison, as discussed, for example, in the works of George Mosse, Theodore Roszak, and others.⁵³ Of course “youth” in the eighteenth-century *shtetl* was quite different from that of later generations. Still, there are enough stories of the young man going off to the *rebbe* despite his father or father-in-law’s opposition⁵⁴ that we should look in this direction. The successful youth-rebellion movement needs to proclaim loudly a total transmutation of values, a rejection in toto of the old ways, even if its changes in actual ways of living might turn out—especially after an initial phase of experimentation (the *hasidei TaLK* phenomenon?)⁵⁵—to be rather modest. It would pay us to look at the Islamic world today, and the way in which ultra-conservative preachers attract the youth, as another possible parallel. I would suggest that the investigation of such sociological paradigms and comparisons might shed interesting light on early Hasidism and its success.

But here we are interested in the other aspect of Hasidism’s success: its ability to transform itself as the challenge it was facing transmuted. Hasidism in its first thirty to fifty years saw its chief enemy as what it called *mitsvat anashim melumadah* (Is. 29:13)—routinized religious behavior, devotional acts devoid of spirit. It fought this foe by enthusiasm, by passionate display of religious joy, and by faith in its new leaders, the standard-bearers of this religious attitude, and their ability to storm the gates of heaven. By 1810 or 1820 it had begun to face a much more different enemy in the weakening and questioning of religious authority, plans by well- and not so well-meaning gentiles to reform the life of Jewry, and the emergence of a new sort of Jewish intellectual life. These, it was felt, would need to be fought with very different weapons, including rigid conformity to religious practices and educational attitudes of the past and alliance with the rabbinate. The question I raise is whether the rubrics of the need to change in each generation, created by the first period of Hasidism (1772–1810), served to enable movement in an entirely different direction in the second. The same might be asked for later points in hasidic history.

⁵³See George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews: The Right, the Left, and the Search for a “Third Force” in pre-Nazi Germany* (New York, 1971); Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley, 1995).

⁵⁴For example, see R. Nathan Sternhartz, *Yemei Moharnat*, (Jerusalem, 1996), 7–8.

⁵⁵This term is used in the discourses of R. Yosef Yitshak Schneersohn to describe the wild and outrageous public antics of the *hasidim* in 1770 (the year is transcribed as “*TaLK*” in Hebrew notation), to which he attributes the genesis of the hasidic-mitnagdic controversy. See Zeev Gries, “Mimitos le’etos: kavim lidemuto shel r. avraham mikalisk,” in *Umah vetoledoteiha*, ed. S. Ettinger (Jerusalem, 1984), 55–146; Hayim Meir Heilman, *Beit Rabi* (Warsaw, 1904), 8; Rapoport-Albert, “Hasidism after 1772,” 94–101.

Of course it would be most interesting to find such pivotal latter-day figures as Tsvi Elimelekh of Dinov [Dynów], Hayim of Sanz [Nowy Sącz], or Avraham Mordechai of Ger [Góra Kalwaria] quoting or paraphrasing passages like those we have listed, using the old rubrics to justify the changes of their day. But even without such specific quotations, I think it possible to maintain that the extreme leeway for each generation's leaders called forth by the hasidic masters of the late eighteenth century allowed their successors in very different eras to help the movement continue to "live with the times" (*tsu lebn mit der tsayt*), and thus to preserve an ever-evolving version of hasidic integrity, while still claiming absolute devotion to authentic Jewish tradition (*derekh yisra'el saba*) and the religion of the Besht.

Gazing down from the "starry heights" in which we *hasidei dekokhvaya* (scholars of religious thought and ideology) dwell, I submit that an appreciation of shifting trends within hasidic thought and ideology might be of central importance in understanding the processes and motivations of a historical movement as it worked its way through a very difficult, trying, and complex history down here on earth. Ever at its heart a religious movement, Hasidism came to embrace complex political, social, and economic dynamics. In its attempts to understand and confront these, its recourse was always to its own canon, that of classical Judaism, to be sure, but very much as filtered through the writings and teachings of the movement's founders. The freedom of creative expression, in the form of interpreting tradition, demanded by those founders, forged a theology of strong leadership, one that could be taken in very different and varied directions, as history seemed to demand.