

Reclaiming His Past

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ON “THE CHASSIDIM” (1887)

IN THE HISTORY OF Western Jewish treatments of Hasidism, Solomon Schechter’s 1887 essay “The Chassidim” has a unique place.¹ It stands at a firm distance from the great disdain for Hasidism evinced by Heinrich Graetz and other key figures in the German-centered *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, in which Schechter himself was regarded a key figure, indeed its leading proponent in the English-speaking world. It is also not yet the romantic recreation of Hasidism to be undertaken by Martin Buber, Y. L. Peretz, and others a decade later. Schechter is writing contemporaneously with the early studies by Simon Dubnov, the first historian to examine the Hasidic movement with a dispassionate scholarly eye. But Dubnov saw Hasidism primarily as a social movement and had little interest in the specifics of its teachings.

The first impression one gets from reading Schechter 128 years later is that of his deep concern for inward religion, or matters of the spirit. He goes beyond caring about abstract theological questions and is obviously moved by expressions of personal piety. He senses a spiritual nobility in the original teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples and conveys it with all the impressive power of his elegant English prose. While he confesses at the outset that “there was a time when I loved the Chassidim as there was a time when I hated them” (p. 3), the former of these is much more in evidence than the latter.²

1. Originally published in three installments in the *Jewish Chronicle*, November–December 1887, and reprinted in the first volume of *Studies in Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1896), 1–55.

2. Likely he alludes here to the two parodies of Hasidism he authored that Peretz Smolenskin published in his Hebrew periodical *Ha-Sbaḥar* in 1876 and 1877. It is noteworthy that Schechter was a student in Vienna of Adolph Jellinek, one of the first *Wissenschaft* scholars to pay serious attention to Jewish mysticism

As his Hebrew name Shneur Zalman indicates, Schechter was himself the scion of a Chabad hasidic family. His parents were migrants from Belorussia, the heartland of Chabad, to Foscani, Romania, where Schechter was born (his father was employed there as a *shohet*). This was a community of very mixed Jewish population, including both Hasidim and Maskilim, Ashkenazim and Sephardim. But the intellectualized Hasidism of Chabad was unusual, probably making young Schechter stand out in the Romanian setting.

The “time when I hated them” surely refers to the years of Schechter’s own rebellion against his parents’ hasidic worldview and that of his early association with critical scholarship. Surrounded by *Wissenschaft* and Haskalah scholars, he surely picked up the regnant negative view of Hasidism. But Schechter’s coming of age came in fact toward the end of the long and fierce battle for the domination of Jewish spiritual life in the nineteenth century. The first great call for a truce in that battle was Eliezer Zweifel’s *Shalom ‘al Yisra’el*, published between 1868 and 1873. Zweifel, the central figure in the modern-oriented rabbinical seminary in Zhitomir, was also a maskil originally from a Chabad background. Young Schechter published a review of Zweifel’s later work,⁵ making it more than likely that he read this book as well. Zweifel, who quotes early hasidic sources copiously, almost certainly served as Schechter’s chief source of information about Hasidism and its main ideas.

Schechter’s essay begins with an extensive retelling of the life of the Baal Shem Tov, whom he sees as the singular font of all that was original in Hasidism. (This is viewed very differently by scholars today, who understand that the hasidic movement actually began only after the Besht’s passing, bearing his name.) The account he offers is taken directly from the pages of *Shivḥe ha-Besht* (1815), the classic work of hasidic hagiography. Schechter tells the tale with a sweet naiveté, reminiscent of the way he would later recount the teachings of the early rabbis. He wears the mantle of believing narrator, calling for a suspension of disbelief by the Western reader. One has a sense that he has read many folktales and *Märchen* in German and perhaps Romanian renditions and is trying to affect the romantic tone of the tellers of those tales. But there is also the sense that for his non-Jewish English reader he is recounting the *gospel* of Israel Baal Shem Tov. As though to underscore this, Schechter (quite

(though not Hasidism). I am most grateful to David Starr for this and several other notes.

3. Solomon Schechter, “Sanegor: A New Defence of Judaism,” *Jewish Chronicle*, February 19, 1886, 18.

accurately) chooses to note that “Baalshem is not a man who established a theory or set forth a system; he himself was the *incarnation* of a theory and his whole life the revelation of a system” (p. 4; emphasis mine).

When he sets aside narrative and turns to the central teachings of Hasidism, Schechter is clear, crisp in articulation, and precise in his reporting. Here one gets a strong sense of Zweifel’s influence, combined with Schechter’s own sense (or was it what he assumed in the Christian reader?) of deep personal piety. What is described is not the rather particular world of Chabad in which both these men were raised, but something of a mainstream early hasidic theology as one might encounter it in the homiletic and devotional writings of Dov Baer of Mezritch and his leading disciples.

Schechter understands the revivalist religion of Hasidism for what it is: an intoxicating discovery of a divine presence that fills all of being. “The keynote of all Baalshem’s teachings is the Omnipresence, or more rightly the Immanence, of God . . . The idea of the constant living presence of God in all existence permeates the whole of Baalshem’s scheme . . . God, the Father of Israel, God the Merciful, God the All-powerful, the God of Love, not only created everything but is embodied in everything . . . We should thus regard all things in the light of so many manifestations of divinity” (pp. 20–22).

This is a lovely and essentially accurate rendition of hasidic piety. While he does not yet have access to the Jamesian distinction between religious experience and religious doctrine, his lofty prose is imbued with a sense that we would call experiential. He then goes on to speak of the attitudinal, ethical, and devotional implications of this worldview, all in lofty and affirmative terms. While there is nothing one can fault as inaccurate in this rendition of early hasidic teaching, one nonetheless gets a sense that apologetics are part of Schechter’s agenda. The religion of Hasidism is a Judaism that a late nineteenth-century British divine of poetic spirit could easily come to love. It is very much the plain people’s faith, standing in contrast to the casuistry and hyperrationalism that Schechter is not afraid to expose as characterizing the rabbinate of Eastern Europe, and which one has a sense may reflect the presumed reader’s prior view of Judaism. (Schechter’s essay on R. Elijah of Vilna also reveals in tone as well as in judgment his lack of enthusiasm for Lithuanian talmudism.) But here in Hasidism one might find a folk-Judaism of untrammelled mystical spirit, one that indeed knows the experiential truth—that Schechter seems to share—of divine omnipresence.

The essay then goes on to speak of three central values of Hasidism as it lives in the world: *shiflut*, rendered “humility” (p. 30); *simḥah*, “cheerful-

ness" (p. 31); and *hitlabavut*, "enthusiasm" (p. 32). Indeed Schechter exhibits quite a bit of this latter virtue in the way describes these three. One is reminded of young Buber's 1908 essay "The Life of the Chasidim," in which he describes *kavanah*, *hitlabavut*, *'avodah*, and *shiflut* as the four pillars of hasidic devotion, probably influenced by Schechter's treatment here. Indeed *simḥab* is notably and regrettably absent from Buber's very romantic but somewhat austere presentation.

The final ten pages of the essay are devoted mostly to the theme of the *tsadik*, seen by both Schechter and later scholarship as the major innovation of Hasidism as a social movement. Given the age in which he wrote, even here the tone is quite restrained and in part highly complimentary. "The greater number of Baalshem's leading disciples, as well as [Dov] Beer's were beyond question men of pure, unalloyed piety, who would have rejected with scorn any idea of making a trade of their sacred profession" (pp. 41–42). This was less universally true in later generations, of course, and Schechter does express dismay at the petty quarreling that goes on between dynasties (he lived at the time of the fierce *bataille royale* between Sanz and Sadegora). He also notes that the movement never created firm criteria for qualification as a *tsadik*, and this inevitably led to pretense and corruption. "There is no human test of a true Zaddik except for the test of miracles; and every student of religious history knows the deceitful character of that test" (p. 44). Here the foibles of "tsadikism" are put in the context of broader religious phenomena. As we have seen false swamis—beginning to abound in the West in the late nineteenth century—spiritualists, and indeed "fakirs," Hasidism at its worst may be seen as no different from all the rest.

Finally Schechter does have to come down on the side of Haskalah for what is left of the battle. "To-day," he notes, "there is not one in ten thousand who has the faintest conception of those sublime ideas which inspired Baalshem and his immediate disciples" (p. 44). The movement had indeed reached its lowest point. But he refuses to give up on those noble truths and the movement that brought them forth. His concluding sentence begins "If Chassidism is to be reformed . . ." (p. 45), indicating that he still saw some hope for its future. This is a most revealing usage, coming from one who, at the outset of this essay, as well as frequently elsewhere, expresses considerable disdain for the "reform" of Judaism. That hope was to be realized, of course, is the century-later renewal of both Hasidism and neo-Hasidism in the aftermath of unspeakable tragedy, in ways Schechter could hardly have imagined.

The essay is most remarkable, perhaps, for its date and its language. Despite Zweifel's best efforts (published in Hebrew and in the Ukraine),

the denigration of Hasidism among Western European and American Jews was still quite universal. Writing in the most Western of all Western European languages, and in a style replete with elegant phrases and English literary allusions, Schechter dares to “come out of the closet” as a proud East European Jew, ready to deliver the message that there is nobility and depth in his own particular religious heritage. That took significant courage, but it was a step well rewarded by the increased opening to a mystical Judaism that this essay and “Safed in the Sixteenth Century” would bring about among coming generations of eager English readers, Jewish and Christian alike.