

## CHAPTER 16

# R. Levi Yizḥaq of Zelichow and His Quest for Leadership in the Early Hasidic Movement

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The emergence of the Hasidic movement as a major force in eastern European Jewish life, and in what was to emerge as Jewish modernity altogether, was almost entirely the creation of the circle of disciples around Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch. It was they who turned outward, during their master's lifetime but even more fully after his death, to extend the Hasidic message over broad areas of territory, and to articulate its message. In the years following 1772, that message was made accessible to ordinary Jews, as well as to the sort of learned and enthusiastic devotees to whom the Maggid had originally addressed himself. In the various controversies and debates about Hasidism, lasting until the end of the eighteenth century, it is always the Maggid's disciples who are in the foreground. Almost all of the major schools and dynasties that came to dominate Hasidic life have their ultimate origins in Mezritch.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Such non-Mezritch-based figures as R. Ya'akov Yosef of Polonnoe and R. Mikhl of Zlochov are denounced in the *ḥaramim*, to be sure, but their "crimes" are either publication or local activities, not active movement-building. For discussion of the early spread of Hasidism, see Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change," in her edited volume *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: Littman Library, 1996), 76–140 and Arthur Green, "Around the Maggid's Table," in English in my *The Heart of the Matter* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2015), 119–166 and in Hebrew in *Zion* 78, no. 1 (2013): 73–106. My own views differ slightly from those of Rapoport-Albert. While I agree that there was no center of authority in the spread of Hasidism, I place greater emphasis on the closeness and mutual support of those who saw themselves as disciples of the Maggid, and on their key role in the movement's spread and success. I also see an ongoing rivalry between the Mezritch circle, mostly as a defined group, and other, mostly less intellectual, Hasidic circles. Eventually, that line-up changed,

Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, the Hasidic bibliographer Aaron Walden offers a list of thirty-one figures whom he describes as Dov Ber's disciples, based mostly on quotations from the Maggid as "my teacher" in their writings. We do not know how close the discipleship of each was, nor do we have any idea how frequently each of them visited the Maggid's court, or how long he stayed.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to identify the key figures in this group, as it existed before the Maggid's death, are also problematic. Often they rely either in the success of the disciple's reputation for written texts, collections of sermons published only decades later, or on his role in the later growth and spread of Hasidism, either through disciples or descendants who themselves became *rebbe*s in the early nineteenth century.

The Maggid's circle included a wide range of personality types, religious attitudes, and degrees of traditional learning. A few of them were ordained rabbis and served in the professional capacity of city or town rabbinate. In addition to Levi Yizḥaq, these included the brothers R. Pinḥas and R. Shmelke Horowitz, who were to leave the Hasidic heartland altogether and serve in the distinguished central European communities of Frankfurt and Nikolsburg.<sup>3</sup> R. Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad school, clearly had the erudition and reputation to have served as a town rabbi, but chose not to do so, in order to devote himself fully to the spread of Hasidism. Most, however, were learned in the aggadic and mystical traditions, but less so in talmudic law, and thus followed their master's example and served as *maggidim* or communally appointed preachers. These included R. Menaḥem Mendel of Vitebsk, R. Aharon of Karlin, R. Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl, and R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir. Still others, to whom almost no learned teachings are attributed, were more like folk-figures, known in the Hasidic tales as personal exemplars of great piety, but not as teachers. Best known among these are R. Zusya of Anipol<sup>4</sup> and R. Leib Sarahs. R. Elimelekh of

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and such Mezritch disciples as Avraham Kalisker and Shlomo Karliner joined with the latter group, which came to be led by Barukh of Miedzybozh.

- 2 Neither the frequency with which the Maggid is quoted nor the precise way of referring to him ("my teacher," "our master and teacher," and so forth) in their writings is a good indicator. These matters are largely the work of editors, not the original preachers. Regarding one on the list, R. Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarash, we know from his testimony that he visited the Maggid's court only once, and was more closely linked to the group around R. Yeḥi'el Mikhl of Zloczow.
- 3 Others include R. Yissachar Ber of Zloczow, who was close to Levi Yizḥaq from their youth, and R. 'Uzi'el Meisels, who served as rabbi of Satanov and authored several halakhic works in addition to his Hasidic *Tiferet 'Uzi'el*.
- 4 There is no early book of Zusya's teachings, and there are famous Hasidic tales accounting for that. But I note that he was regularly sought out for *haskamot* (unlike R. Leib Sarahs and R. Barukh of Miedzybozh, for example), including by R. Shne'ur Zalman for the *Tanya*. This makes me wonder whether the image of him as unlettered might be exaggerated.

Lizhensk, the brother of R. Zusya, was also one who clearly might have served as a communal *maggid*, but chose, like R. Shne'ur Zalman, to be supported by his disciples, so that he could devote himself entirely to cultivating them as future leaders and to what we moderns would call “building the movement.”

Despite our lack of certainty about how central each of these was to the Maggid's court, there is good reason to assume that Levi Yizḥaq,<sup>5</sup> thirty-two years old at the Maggid's death, played a pivotal role in this group. There are three reasons for making such a claim.

The first fact to be considered is that Levi Yizḥaq is the chief object of attack in the persecutions of early Hasidism, except for those of the Maggid's students who chose to go northward and face the anti-Hasidic bastion of Lithuania, arousing the wrath especially of R. Eliyahu of Vilna. Levi Yizḥaq was driven from the rabbinate of Zelichow in central Poland (c. 1771 or 1772) and possibly from Pinsk in Polesia (c. 1784) apparently for the “crime” of using his rabbinic post to spread Hasidic teachings and customs, before accepting the position in Berdichev in 1785. He was also the one who stood up to R. Avraham Katzenellenbogen in the most famous Hasidic/Mitnaggedic debate, held in Warsaw in 1781.<sup>6</sup> He was probably chosen (or “chose” himself) because he was considered the most respectable spokesman that the Hasidic forces could muster.

Second, of all the disciples who remained in Hasidism's expanding heartland, he was the one who held the most prestigious posts, and hence was most publicly noticeable, both by supporters and enemies of Hasidism. Pinsk was a distinguished rabbinic seat, the southernmost extension of what was considered the Lithuanian rabbinate's sphere of influence. Berdichev, in the eighteenth century, was the most prosperous Jewish community in the Ukraine, as has been shown.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the rabbi of these communities preached the new Hasidic doctrine, largely that of the Maggid, had to be noticed.

Third, there is an unusually high degree of overlap of both content and style between teachings attributed to Dov Ber and Levi Yizḥaq, master and disciple.<sup>8</sup> The abstract mystical teachings attributed to the Maggid, centered

5 He was still referred to as the Zelichower many years after he left that town. Hence the use of that designation in the title of this article.

6 Texts relating to this debate are included in Mordecai Wilensky, *Hasidim u-Mitnaggedim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1970), vol. 1, 115–118 and n. 4 there, 122–131.

7 Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, “The Drama of Berdichev: Levi Yitshak and his Town,” *Polin* 17 (2004): 83–95.

8 I leave aside here the problematics of defining the Maggid's corpus itself, distinguishing it from the larger body of early anonymous Hasidic teachings. I am thus tentatively assuming such works as *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'aqov* (1781) and *Or Torah* (1804) to belong to “*kitvei ha-maggid*.” See the discussion of sources in Ariel Evan Mayse, *Speaking Infinites: God and*

mostly around the possibility of attaining self-negation (*bittul*) by entering into the divine *'ayin*, are found almost unchanged in the sermons of Levi Yizḥaq. This central but highly abstruse part of Dov Ber's oeuvre is not to be found to nearly the same degree in the writings of most other members of the circle.<sup>9</sup> Another key item, both doctrinal and practical, is the role of the *zaddiq* and his relationship to the divine will. In this matter, Levi Yizḥaq will proceed to expand on his master's teaching, expressing it in even more radical language. But at root his ideas on this subject are very much those of his teacher, and expressed in similar language, more so than is the case with most others.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, it has been claimed that Levi Yizḥaq was to some degree the scribe of the Maggid, or at least a key recorder of his teachings. This claim began with the 1899 publication of a work called *Or ha-Emet*, a partially new (though much overlapping with three prior collections) group of teachings belonging to the Maggid or his immediate school. The editor of the volume introduces it with a complicated tale of his grandfather, supposedly a disciple of Levi Yizḥaq (though his name is not one we know from elsewhere) who had preserved a precious manuscript, including his own copying from another manuscript, supposedly written by Levi Yizḥaq himself, of the Maggid's teachings. Current scholarship has no way of confirming or disestablishing this claim.

Another important document that makes a claim of great importance regarding Levi Yizḥaq's early views was published in Warsaw in 1938, on the eve of Polish Jewry's destruction, under the title *Shemu'ah Tovah*, and attributed in its entirety to the Maggid and Levi Yizḥaq. It was primarily copied, its editor tells us, from a manuscript that was included in the library of the *zaddiqim* of Kozhenits, a collection that was lost during the ensuing catastrophe. The short teachings that comprise the bulk of this volume are parallel versions to texts previously published in collections attributed to the Maggid, under the titles *Kitvei Qodesh* and *Or ha-Emet*. They may or may not have been taken from the same manuscript from which these earlier collections had been copied. In any case, they are another rendition of known teachings, associated with the Maggid. But

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*Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritsh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 235–253. The ideological affinity between Levi Yizḥaq and the Maggid will be demonstrated at greater length in my forthcoming book *Defender of the Faithful* (coauthored with Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern).

9 It is largely absent, for example, from the *Me'or 'Einayim* and the *Or ha-Me'ir*. In the writings of R. Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi, it is indeed present, but significantly reworked. In this matter (though not in some others), Levi Yizḥaq is closest to R. Avraham, the Maggid's son, and R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk.

*Shemu'ah Tovah* includes two other items, published for the first time. One is a group of longer sermons, each of them dated to 1773 and 1774, the two years following the Maggid's death. It also contains a page of questions and answers, mostly on Kabbalistic subjects. There are each headed: "I asked our lord and master," a typical way of referring to a Hasidic rebbe.<sup>10</sup> In two places, the question-and-answer texts are signed by the initials LY, leaving little reason to doubt their origin.

The sermons cover most of the Torah portions from Numbers and Deuteronomy, tied to passages from *Pirkei Avot*, which means that they were delivered in the summer months of those two years. They are written in a florid and repetitive rabbinic prose, and are marked by lengthy and highly detailed parables. They give the impression, unlike most Hasidic sermons, of having been written out in detail by their creator, perhaps in preparation for their oral delivery. What we seem to have here are sermons by a young rabbi, not yet confident enough to rely on his rhetorical skills, needing to write out every word in advance. These sermons too are quite clearly by Levi Yizḥaq, as can be shown by a comparison of both themes and specific biblical and rabbinic quotations repeated in later (and shorter) versions of them to be found in the *Qedushat Levi*. These sermons represent the earliest stages in the development of both his thought and his style of expression.<sup>11</sup>

I shall have occasion elsewhere to deal with the theology of those sermons and their significance in that regard. But here we are interested in proposing historic settings for three particular sermons: one on *parashat Be-Ha'alotekha* in 5533,

10 Levi Yizḥaq refers to the Maggid in this way in various pages of the *Qedushat Levi* on Hanukkah and Purim, which he published in 1798. See, for example in the edition edited by Michael Aryeh Rand, *Qedushat Levi* (Ashdod: Makhon Hadrat Hen, 5765 [2004–2005]), vol. 2, 288, 350, 349, and 366. The Zoharic phrase *buzina qadisha*, "holy lamp," is often added.

11 The overlap between the *Shemu'ah Tovah* homilies and material found in *Qedushat Levi* is extensive. The *parashat Devarim* sermon in *Shemu'ah Tovah* is found in abbreviated form in *Qedushat Levi, Liqqutim*, vol. 2, 262–263, linked to the same *Avot* passage. The second sermon on *Va-Ethanan*, beginning with *atah horeita*, is found in *Qedushat Levi, Ve-Zot ha-Berakhah*, vol. 2, 182, though with a sharper anti-Gentile tone, perhaps caused by Levi Yizḥaq's experiences in the course of his career. The lengthy sermon on *yire'ah* in *'Egev* is repeated in shorter form in *Qedushat Levi, 'Egev*, vol. 2, 121–125. The theme of giving pleasure to God, strongly stated in connection with the passage from B. Pesahim 112a ("More than the cow wants to nurse ...") is a major theme in *Qedushat Levi*, witnessed, for example, in *Va-Yera*, vol. 1, 67; *Re'eh*, vol. 2, 130; *Liqqutim*, vol. 2, 257–258. The intimacy of kissing between friends, described quite passionately in *Shemu'ah Tovah, 'Egev* 23b, is strongly echoed in *Qedushat Levi*, vol. 2, 418. The second sermon in *Ki Teze*, beginning on 35a (linked with the *Avot* passage in the preceding sermon), is found in shortened form in *Qedushat Levi, Liqqutim*, s.v. *ve-lo kol ha-marbeh*. This is probably the clearest example of the abbreviation of both sermon text and parable. Further parallels are likely to emerge through close comparative study.

May or June of 1773, about five months after the Maggid's death; the second a year later, delivered for *parashat Qorah* in the summer of 1774;<sup>12</sup> and a third (actually the opening text of the collection) on *parashat Massa'ei*, undated, but almost certainly also from summer of 1773. In this period, Levi Yizḥaq is rabbi in Zelichow, but there is no indication of where—or whether—these sermons were delivered orally.

In the first of these sermons, he speaks of a matter we know from his later homilies as well, the importance of spreading the Hasidic message to others, rather than devoting oneself to the cultivation of private piety alone:

Hillel says: “Do not separate yourself from the community, do not believe in yourself until the day you die, and do not judge your fellow until you reach his place. Do not say anything that cannot be heard [in public], for in the end it will be heard ...” (M. Avot 2:5).

In a simple sense, this seems to be a warning for those who seek to partake of God's holiness and to purify themselves, to step up to Torah and God's service. Such a person should not say: “Peace upon you [that is, “Rest easy”], my soul! I read scripture; I study the teachings. These suffice to fulfill my obligation.”<sup>13</sup> Such a one does not place it as his goal to turn toward the community of Y-H-W-H, bringing the many back from sin. He declines to teach them the ways of God in which they should walk, to be earnest in His worship, with awe, love, and attachment [*devequt*]. To these, Hillel says: “Such is not the way in which the light of wholeness shines. This is not how you awaken the spirit of holiness and purity upon yourself, as was truly intended.”

A person who serves his Creator fully out of love, with no intent of receiving reward, but only to bring pleasure to the Creator, will never stop or rest with his own service alone, but will work constantly toward the goal of “If only all the people of Y-H-W-H were prophets, as He places His spirit upon them!” (Num. 11:29).

12 These two sermons, plus one other, are printed near the end of *Shemu'ah Tovah*, 84a–87, not in the order of the others. The reason for this is not indicated. They are not as elaborately written out as are those printed at the head of the volume. My guess is that they were intended for a different audience, preached in a more informal setting.

13 *Shalom 'alayikh nafshi*, in connection with separating from the community's needs, is found in B. Ta'anit 11a.



This issue, that of serving as an example and reprovener (but always in a positive spirit) for others, was crucial to Hasidism's vision for the transformation of Jewish life. In pre-Hasidic Ashkenazic culture, the *zaddiq* was generally understood to seek anonymity. Certainly self-proclamation as a "righteous one" would have violated all the norms of modesty. There was a strong folk-belief in hidden *zaddiqim*, sometimes numbered thirty-six, by whose merit the world continued to exist.<sup>18</sup> *Zaddiqim* who were already gone from this world could indeed intercede on behalf of the living, and supplication at their graves was an established practice, especially in the post-Safed generations. But living *zaddiqim* were not easily to be sought out.

Hasidism represents a transformation of this norm, the call to which is found in the Maggid's own writings and in those of his disciples. This particular text is significant because of its date, indicating that Levi Yizḥaq was urging efforts at outreach immediately after the Maggid's death. *The words "to teach them the ways of God in which they should walk, to be earnest in His worship, with awe, love, and attachment" is precisely a call to build the Hasidic movement, to carry its message out to the broader public.* I am suggesting that Levi Yizḥaq is addressing himself directly to his colleagues, fellow members of the Maggid's circle, though he never says so explicitly. There were those in the group, including the Maggid's only son, R. Avraham "the Angel," who were inwardly focused. They would have been content to allow Mezritch to remain another *kloiz*, on the earlier proto-Hasidic model—a place where intense piety was cultivated for a small group, but not serving as the font of mass movement. Levi Yizḥaq is speaking for the other side of this argument. "We cannot separate ourselves from the broader community of Jews. We need to teach them the ways of *yire'ah*, *ahavah*, and *devequt*"—which is the essence of the Hasidic revivalist message.

The choice of Numbers 11:29, the verse where Moses reproves Joshua for his concern over the unchecked spread of prophecy (the case of Eldad and Medad) is also quite significant. Levi Yizḥaq could easily have chosen a scripture that dealt with the fear of God, or some other more innocent religious emotion. This verse says that the task of the one who takes on this role of leading the community is to encourage religious enthusiasm or "prophecy," precisely of the sort that early Hasidism sought to inspire and also was the source

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18 See Arthur Green, "The *Zaddiq* as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism," included in his *The Heart of the Matter* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2015), 204–226; and Gershom Scholem, "The Tradition of the Thirty-Six Hidden Just Men," in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 251–256.



of much controversy.<sup>19</sup> The dispute between Moses and Joshua here may be read as saying that we should not hold back, following Moses's view that it is more important to spread this spirit of "prophecy" than it is to restrict it. Note how *devequt*, mystical "attachment" to God, has casually slipped into the well-known pair of *ahavah* and *yire'ah*, love and awe, and that something akin to prophecy is to be spread among the masses as well, "all of God's people."

The final statement in Levi Yizḥaq's argument is that your own merit depends on this. This is no time for merely cultivating one's own inner religious life. He uses Hillel's words in a strong and demanding way, claiming that one who does not reach out to others has to worry about the status of his own piety as well.

No less interesting, however, is the central section of this same sermon (partly ellipsed above, for the sake of order). Here Levi Yizḥaq takes a stand against competition for piety—a typical problem among younger devotees in enthusiastic religious groups—and also against backbiting, people sniping against one another by saying things they would not dare to express in public:

If one's companions [fellow-servants of the master mentioned above] are more competent and attentive in their devotion than he is, attaining higher rank and greater glory than his, he should not resent them out of jealousy. He should take great pleasure and joy in the delight that his master has from their service. He should rather reprove his own self at his shortcomings, feeling shame that he has served less well than his fellows. When he sees other servants fall short, he should reprove them directly, showing them the way to get back on track toward more wholehearted service... .

He [Hillel] then goes on to warn the person never to turn away from the fear of God, even for a moment, but rather to practice "I place Y-H-W-H ever before me" (Ps. 16:8), as R. Moshe Isserles says in the *Orah Hayyim* (1:1), in the name of Maimonides, as

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19 The question of "prophesying," without any clear definition, was around even prior to Hasidism, in the circle of R. Naḥman of Kutny. R. Naḥman was capable of prophecy (the term is not clearly defined), but the members of the circle had agreed to avoid it, most likely a reaction to the widespread phenomenon of prophecy in Sabbatian circles, where both the act and the term were welcomed without hesitation. See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov: Studies in Hasidism*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 116. The later conflict between R. Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi and R. Avraham Kalisker, where the latter was accused of have stirred up the first opposition to Hasidism, may also relate to the place of prophet-like forms of extreme behavior.

is known. On the verse “He tells a person what he speaks” (Am. 4:13), our sages taught: “Even in lighthearted conversation.”<sup>20</sup> This is the meaning of [Hillel’s] “Do not say anything that cannot be heard, for in the end it will be.” Anything you would be embarrassed to say publicly [lit.: “into people’s ears”], do not say even in your innermost chamber. Scripture says: “[Even] of the one who lies in your bosom, take care” (Mic. 7:5). The reason is that it will come out in the end. Not only is it the case that you are removing yourself from fear and shame before the One whose “glory fills all the earth” (Is. 6:3), but at the time of judgment you will be told what you have said. Woe for that shame and disgrace! That thing you would not say publicly before those who, like you, dwell in earthly darkness, is now revealed in heaven as your sin. It will be proclaimed before the assembly above and all the righteous! So be careful about everything you say and every move you make. Never turn aside from the awe and shame you feel before your Creator, and it will be well with you.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, it is possible that Levi Yizḥaq is addressing some *other* group in which competition and backbiting are taking place. It is also theoretically possible to say that these admonitions are to be read as nothing more than good moral advice. Indeed, if we were to come across them in such a more general collection as the author’s *Qedushat Levi* on the Torah, that is how we might read them. But the *dating* of this sermon suggests otherwise. The Maggid is dead less than half a year, and these are the issues on young Levi Yizḥaq’s mind. It seems entirely likely that he is addressing concerns within the circle of disciples (to whom he refers as *haverekha*), struggling among themselves to find leadership

20 B. Hagigah 5b.

21 *Shemu’ah Tovah*, 84–85. אשר בזה יגיעו ממנו. אבל יהי לו זאת לשעשוע ועונג. גדול הנחת אשר אדוניו מקבל מעבודתם. רק שיוכיח את נפשו ויכלמנה על קיצורו בעבודה מחבריו. ולעבדי המלך המקצרים בעבודה. יוכיחם על פניהם ויורם את הדרך אשר בה ישובו להזדרז בעבודה על תכלית השלימות. [...] עוד בא להזהיר את האדם לכל יסור יראת ד’ מעל פניו אף רגע אחת אבל יעשה כמשייה שויתת ה’ לנגדי תמיד וכמשייה הרמ”א ז”ל בא”ח (ס”א) בשם הרמב”ם כנודע. ואמרו רז”ל מגיד לאדם מה שיהו אפי’ שיהו קלה וכו’ וז”ש ואל תאמר דבר שא”א לשמוע. ר”ל דבר שהיית בוש מלהשמיעו לאזני בני אדם אל תאמרנהו אפי’ בחדרי חדרים. וכמשייה משכבת חיקך שמור וכו’ וטעם הדבר שסופו להשמע. ר”ל זולת זאת שהוא ית מלא כל הארץ כבודו ואתה מסלק בזה המורא והבשת מעליך. עוד גם שבשעת הדין יגיעו לך שיחתך זאת ואוי לאותו בושא וכלימה אשר יגיעך אז שהדבר אשר לא היית מדברו בפני בני אדם יושבי חושך כמותך שוכני בתי חומר גלו שמים עוונך ויפססוהו לעיניך בפני פמליא של מעלה וכל הצדיקים ולכן תהי’ זוהר בכל דבורך ותנועותיך ותמיד על יזו מורא בוראך ובושתך ממנו מעליך וטוב לך.

and direction in the period following their master's passing, and stumbling into conflict with one another, competition for demonstrations of piety, leading to some shameful secret tale-telling. Some bit of nastiness—the details of which we will never know—has broken out within the group, and Levi Yizḥaq is speaking out against it.

We do not know where or whether this sermon was preached orally. It is possible that it was distributed in writing among those to whom its author wanted to deliver the message. But it is clear that pronouncing these words was an act of taking on the mantle and the risk of leadership within the group. Either Levi Yizḥaq already had that role of leader in the year following the master's death, or these statements of warning and reproof are evidence of his attempt to assert such a role within the now bereft and leaderless circle.

A year later, in the summer of 1774, he again preached a sermon that most likely had a clear “address” within the emerging Hasidic community. The Torah portion was *Qorah*, where the question of rivalry over leadership is the key theme. As in all these summer season sermons, he begins by quoting from *Avot*, which is being publicly read on Shabbat afternoons:

“Be warmed by the fire of the sages, but be careful of their coals, lest you be burned” (M. Avot 2:1).

We should first take note that Moses our Teacher, peace be upon him, said “If they [Qorah and his followers] descend alive into Sheol, [you shall know that these people have rejected Y-H-W-H]” (Num. 16:30) ...<sup>22</sup>

Our sages taught that “Qorah was a clever person. [They asked] what, then, he saw in this folly (of rising up against Moses)? [They replied that] it was his eye that led him astray.”

Qorah's controversy with Moses did not come about because he was a fool. He wanted to become high priest in order to bring forth the flow of divine bounty (*shefa'*) instead of Aaron. He too was a great man, but he wanted to bring forth the *shefa'* in a different manner, as has been explained elsewhere. But [if he was] such a great person, one in whom intellect shone, how could he not have understood that he should not sin against Moses and against the blessed Creator?

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22 Here follows a lengthy digression concerning the judgment of body and soul.

The fact is that the intellect he possessed was not due to his own self. “He rather saw a great dynasty proceeding from himself.”<sup>23</sup> The source from which his soul was drawn was [also] great and powerful. But when a person like this wants to rise up to that source, and is unable to do so, because he does not know the order of such ascents, he is uprooted from the world... .

The sage is called “wood” [lit.: “a tree of the field”] and the holy Torah within him is the fire attached to that wood or coal, of which scripture says: “the Torah is light” [or “fire”].

... In matters of Torah, opposing views are good, when the intent is to come to the true conclusion. The heat [of argument] makes for increased learning. But if the opposition to a sage becomes personal, the one opposing will get burned by the sage’s coal. This is the meaning of “Be warmed by the fire [of the sages].” Stand up to the fire within them, their Torah. But of the coal, which is the sage’s own person, be wary, lest you be burned... .<sup>24</sup>

Once again, it seems likely that there is a contemporary situation in the background here. Levi Yizḥaq is a preacher, not a biblical interpreter; there is a reason why he chooses to read *parashat Qorah* this way. Someone is coming forth to make a rival claim of leadership, and the fight has gotten nastily personal. Levi Yizḥaq is speaking out, here perhaps as a defender of the Maggid’s school, against someone he sees as a usurper. He is being somewhat nasty himself, saying that the claimant is less great than his illustrious ancestors and that he hopes his offspring might be. While one cannot say for sure toward whom this barb is being turned, I believe there is a most likely candidate. I want to suggest—for that is all one can do—that he is referring to R. Yehi’el Mikhl of

23 All this, including the word *shalsholet*, is taken directly from Midrash *Tanḥuma, Qorah* 5.

24 *Shemu’ah Tovah*, 85–86. נקדים. [שלא תכוה]. והוי מתחמם נגד אורן של חכמים והוי זהיר בגחלתן וכו’ [שלא תכוה]. והנה ארזייל לשום לב אל מ״ש משה רב״ע וירדו חיים שאולה [וידעתם כי נאצו האנשים האלה את ה’...]. והנה ארזייל קרח שפקח ה’ מה ראה לשטות זה. עינו הטעתו וכו’ כי הנה ענין מחלוקת קרח שחלק על מרע״ה לא שהי’ שוטה רק שרצה להיות כה״ג שסבור שהוא יוריד השפע הקדוש ויהי’ במקום אהרן. כי ה׳ ג״כ אדם גדול. רק שהי’ רוצה להביא השפע באופן אחר כמבואר במקום אחר. אך הנה אדם גדול כזה שהשכל מאיר בו מצד קשה עליו איך לא הבין שלא יחטא נגד משה והבורא ב״ה אך הענין שהשכל שהי’ לו (בו) לא הי’ בו מצד עצמיותו רק שראה שלשלת גדולה יוצאה ממנו ומקום מחצב נשמתו ה׳ רב ועצום ואדם כזה כשהוא רוצה לעלות למקום מחצבו ואינו יכול מחמת שאינו יודע סדר העליות הוא נעקר מן העולם. [...] והנה הת״ח נקרא עץ השדה וגחלת והתורה הקדושה שבו הוא האור הנאחז בהעץ הוא הגחלת כמ״ש ותורה אור. [...] בד״ת ההתנגדות הוא טוב כשהכוונה הוא לעמוד על אמיתת הדין שמהחיסום הוא רווחא שמעתתא כנ״ל. אבל אם ההתנגדות הוא לעצמות גופו של הת״ח יכוונה המתנגד בגחלתו כנ״ל. והוי מתחמם כנגד אורן וכו’ ר״ל הוי מתנגד להאור שבו זו התורה ומהגחלת הוא עצמיותו הזהר שלא תכוה כנ״ל.

Zloczow, a leading figure of Hasidic literature who stood outside the Mezritch circle.

Yeḥi'el Mikhl (1726?–1781), and he alone, fits the description offered here exceptionally well.<sup>25</sup> He was a person of distinguished lineage, the son of the well-known R. Yizḥaq of Drohobycz, a contemporary of the Besht involved in the emerging proto-Hasidic circles.<sup>26</sup> Meshullam Feibush Heller refers to his teacher R. Yeḥi'el Mikhl as “a *zaddiq* and the son of a *zaddiq*, of holy descent.”<sup>27</sup> The family was descended from an old Prague-connected clan, one that claimed descent from Rashi, and hence from the Davidic dynasty (as did the family of the Besht). Yeḥi'el Mikhl also had five sons, each of whom became a Hasidic *zaddiq*. They were younger contemporaries of Levi Yizḥaq,<sup>28</sup> and perhaps were already acting as Hasidic leaders. It is also fair to say that R. Yeḥi'el Mikhl's approach to Hasidism was quite different from that of the Maggid. He was indeed one who might well have sought to become “high priest” in order “to bring forth the *shefa'* “in a different manner.” His father was well known as something of a magician, an expert in holy names.<sup>29</sup> The son continued in this path, especially as a miracle worker and as a dispenser of blessings. He was the main font for the sort of Hasidism later identified with R. Barukh of Miedzybozh, who would clash with the Maggid's school in the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> We are told that R. Shlomo of Karlin, the one among the Mezritch disciples who was indeed known as a wonderworker, turned to him following the Maggid's

25 On R. Yeḥi'el Mikhl, see Mor Altshuler, *Rabbi Meshulam Feibush Heller and His Place in Early Hasidism* [Heb.] (PhD diss., Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1994), 30ff. While I do not agree with all of Altshuler's conclusions, there is much to be learned from a careful reading of her work. Without saying so directly, she does seem to point to a rivalry between these two *maggidim* and their followers.

26 On R. Yizḥaq, see Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, 162–181.

27 *Liqqutim Yeqarim* (Jerusalem, 1974), 110a. Cited by Altshuler, *Meshulam Feibush Heller*, 30.

28 R. Yosef of Yampole was the eldest of the five sons. Yitzhak Alfasi, in *Sefer ha-Admorim* (Tel Aviv: Ariel, 1961), does not list a birth date for him, but does list his brothers Yizḥaq of Radziwill as born in 1741 and Mordekhai of Kremnitz in 1746. This contradicts Altshuler's assertion (*Meshulam Feibush Heller*, 41) that R. Yosef was born only in the late 1750s, based on a story in *Shivḥey ha-Besht*. Heschel, however (in *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, 174 n. 83), suggest a date as late as 1734 for the birth of R. Yeḥi'el Mikhl. If that is true, Altshuler's dating for his son's birth would make more sense.

29 Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, 170–174. R. David of Makow (*Shever Poshe'im*, 71b, in Wilensky, *Hasidim u-Mitnaggedim*, vol. 2, 170), quotes a Hasidic tradition that R. Mikhl was a reincarnation of the prophet Ḥabbakuk.

30 R. Yosef of Yampole married the daughter of R. Barukh (Altshuler, *Meshulam Feibush Heller*, 58 n. 128). This may confirm the sense of an ongoing non- or anti-Mezritch strain within early Hasidic leadership.

death.<sup>31</sup> These “ways of bringing forth the *shefa*” were recognizably different from the more intellectualist school of Mezritch, represented by Levi Yizḥaq and Shne’ur Zalman of Liadi, among others. For them, the divine presence was to be encountered through the preacher’s clever reinterpretations of the Torah text, the Hasidic version of *talmud torah*. Read this way, our text is also the earliest usage of the term *shalshet* or “dynasty” (although taken from the midrash) to be found in Hasidic sources. In 1774, it is hard to think of any family other than that of the Zlochever to whom it might refer.

Both of these sermons show something of the atmosphere that surrounded the Mezritch circle in the period immediately following the Maggid’s death. Not surprisingly, both inner and outer forces threatened the bonds that were beginning to create a sense of shared purpose, the spreading of a doctrine and religious style that was at the earliest fragile stage of becoming a great religious movement. Levi Yizḥaq, in callswing for leadership and dedication in spreading the movement’s message, in seeking to smooth out inner conflicts, and in protecting the Maggid’s circle’s turf against a rival claimant, is asserting his own leadership within that circle, announcing himself as a central figure in the spread of Hasidism in its very earliest stage.

Now we turn to a third text, the opening page of *Shemu’ah Tovah*, as mentioned above. This, too, was delivered during the summer months, and it too opens with a passage from *Pirkei Avot*. Here Levi Yizḥaq chooses M. Avot 2:4: “An ignoramus cannot fear sin, nor can a peasant (*‘am ha-arez*) be a *ḥasid*.” In 1773, less than a year following the original bans against Hasidism, that was a lively choice for the young preacher, to say the least. The bans had used accusations of ignorance to denounce the nascent movement, which they sometime refer to as one of *mithassedim*, “self-proclaimed pietists.”<sup>32</sup> They cannot be true *ḥasidim*, so the argument goes, while being ignorant of talmudic knowledge. Levi Yizḥaq, whom no one could describe as an *‘am ha-arez*, takes them on directly. He begins, however, with an equally interesting typologization of the difference between a *zaddiq* and a *ḥasid*:

With regard to the essential meaning of the term *ḥasidut*: The difference between *zaddiq* and *ḥasid* lies rooted in the following distinction. A person called a *zaddiq* is one who makes a constant effort to justify (*le-hazdiq*) himself before his blessed Creator.

31 Avraham Abusch Schorr, *Ketavim* (Jerusalem: Makhon Bet Aharon ve-Yisra’el, 2018), especially 437–438, nn. 71–72.

32 Wilensky, *Hasidim u-Mitnaggedim*, vol. 1 or 2?, 70–83, 101–121.

He is careful not to transgress even a single one of the prohibitions or negative commandments, and fulfills the 248 positive commandments in every condition and detail. This is the whole of humanity, to perfect one's soul in every limb and sinew, totaling 613. That is why he is called *zaddiq*, because he is justified in arguing [his case] as he stands before the King who loves justice. All his deeds are just and upright, with no admixture of sin. But he does not act with lovingkindness (*lo nithassed*) to do things that are beyond the letter of the law. Thus he is to be considered a servant, one who fulfills the command of his Owner.

The title *hasid* applies to one who does act with lovingkindness toward his Owner. His goal in all he does is to bring pleasure to his Creator. Taking care to fulfill his Creator's commands does not suffice for him. In everything he attains, [he seeks out] some possible device to draw pleasure to his Creator. He will hold fast to this and not let go of it, even though he hasn't been warned or commanded concerning this matter. This one is to be called a son; he is like a son who loves his father greatly, even wondrously, and tries constantly to seek out ways to bring his father pleasure and happiness.<sup>33</sup>

This typology is entirely pre-Hasidic, based on old rabbinic usages. *Hasid* is clearly superior to *zaddiq*, which is to say that there is no evidence at all that *zaddiq* is to be seen as the leader of Hasidic community, even as one who commands the will of God, as is widespread in Levi Yizḥaq's later writings. This old typology exists elsewhere as well in the very earliest of post-Beshtian Hasidic sources.

Then Levi Yizḥaq goes on to make his central interpretive point:

This is the meaning of "an *'am ha-arez* is not a *hasid*." The rung of *hasidut* can only be attained by one who has achieved rule over his worldly desires, separating from them and cleaving to the intellects alone. From there he rises into the secret level of knowing a bit of God's exalted greatness. Then he is lit afire and desires passionately to bring pleasure to his Creator. [Only] then he can reach the rung of *hasid* that I have mentioned. This is not true

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33 *Shemu'ah Tovah*, 5.

of one who has not yet detached himself from his material and earthly (*arzit*) desires. He cannot be a *hasid*. This is the meaning of “an ‘am *ha-arez* is not a *hasid*”: no one who is attached to *arziyyut*, earthliness, can be a *hasid*.<sup>34</sup>

Here Levi Yizḥaq has turned the tables on those who have just denounced the emerging new movement, using the rabbinic canon that he and Hasidism’s detractors so clearly share. Being a true *hasid* does not depend upon scholarly knowledge, but upon one’s ability to become detached from things of this world.

Thus we see Levi Yizḥaq acting in every way as a leader within the recently bereft circle of disciples. He seeks to keep peace among them, to fight off rival claims of Hasidic leadership from outside the group, and to respond to the fierce denunciation of Hasidism that has just been issued by the rabbinic courts of Vilna and Brody.

To these three passages in the *Shemu’ah Tovah* sermons, I wish to add a fourth text, attributed to Levi Yizḥaq in the early collection *Ge’ulat Yisra’el*. Here the preacher is defending the phenomenon of wandering *zaddiqim*, something that was new, certainly with the title *zaddiq*, in the years of Hasidism’s early spread. *Ge’ulat Yisra’el* was published in Ostrog in 1821, attributed to one Yehoshu’a Avraham ben Yisra’el. It is divided into two sections, one a collection of teachings by various Ukrainian *zaddiqim*, but featuring especially the line extending from the Maggid to Levi Yizḥaq and on to his most important disciple R. Aharon of Zhitomir. It seems likely that he was working directly from oral or written sources collected within that circle.<sup>35</sup> The second section of the volume contains the earliest printed material from the circle of R. Pinḥas of Korzec. The section of Levi Yizḥaq’s materials includes this discussion, set into the homiletic context of a dispute between king and prophet:

“Hezekiah (king of ancient Judea) said: ‘Let Isaiah come to me. Even though he is a prophet, I am the king.’ Isaiah said: ‘Let Hezekiah come to me. He may be king, but I am a prophet.’”<sup>36</sup>

This seems most surprising. How could righteous folk like these be so casual about the issue of [holding onto their] pride, which is really tantamount to idolatry!

34 Ibid.

35 The first section of *Ge’ulat Yisra’el* was republished later, anonymously, under the title *Pitgamim Qaddishin* (Warsaw, 1886).

36 B. Berakhot 10a.



The matter is like this. Truly faith and trust in God is the most essential [religious] quality. It sustains life, both physical and spiritual, life of body and soul. Our sages taught that Habakuk reduced all the commandments to one: “The righteous one lives by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

But if that is the case, how and why do we see great *zaddiqim* leaving their homes and travelling about so much? On the face of things, it appears they are doing so for their own needs, in order to earn their livelihood. But could it be said that this is the intent of such righteous ones? Do they not have faith and trust in blessed Y-H-W-H, who can sustain them fully, even as they sit in their own houses? Blessed Y-H-W-H can do anything!

The truth is that these *zaddiqim* see the strength of Israel, the holy people, diminished and weakened, due to our many sins. [Israel are unable] to be heroes in the battle of Torah, that of overcoming the evil urge, each in his own way. They require healing of soul through moral teaching and fear of heaven, good counsels in the service of blessed Y-H-W-H. That is why the *zaddiqim* of the generation, the eyes of the community, leaders of their people, trouble themselves so greatly to travel the roads, wandering from place to place through the world. [They seek to] bring merit to Israel, the holy people, causing them to return to God in a complete way, through such moral teachings and fear of heaven, goodly counsels that will bring them close to blessed Y-H-W-H, each on one’s own level and in one’s own way. This is their main intent and purpose. [Fulfillment of] their own needs and livelihood come to them incidentally, from Y-H-W-H, so that they can sustain themselves and their households, as well as perform acts of charity and good deeds.

But if someone should whisper to you: “Couldn’t the *zaddiqim* arrange that people come to them, so that they wouldn’t have to make the effort of travelling around to others?” know that there is [another] deep meaning to this [travel]. They seek to effect powerful and awesome mystical unifications. Masters of secret lore know that when a greater one goes to a lesser one, such an awesome union is performed. This is referred to as the bowing down [of the letter *heh* to the letter *waw*], as is known. That is why great *zaddiqim* trouble themselves to travel out to the common folk [scattered] around the world, to bring about many such

unifications. This is their main task in this world, by means of [teaching] Torah and [fulfilling the] commandments, bringing great pleasure and joy to blessed Y-H-W-H.

This was the intent of those righteous and humble *zaddiqim* Hezekiah and Isaiah. Each of them thought of himself as nothing and without value, when compared to the other. Each wanted to bring about divine glory, performing these unifications for God's pleasure and joy. That is why Isaiah said: "Let Hezekiah come to me," for I am less than he... .

All this was to increase and glorify Torah. "May His great name be made great and holy [*yitgadal ve-yitqdash shmei rabba*]. Amen."<sup>37</sup>

This sermon is an important historical document, when viewed in the context of Hasidism's early spread. The wandering *zaddiq* is a new phenomenon, something that has to be explained and justified. Here we have Levi Yizḥaq describing the situation as it was in the 1770s or '80s, not in the later and more established era of Hasidic dominance. Then the people indeed did

37 *Shemu'ah Tovah*, 85b–86b. אמר מלך וישעיה אמר. הגאון דאע"ג דאיהו נביא אנא מלך וישעיה אמר. הנה לכאורה יפלא. האיך אפשר אשר צדיקים כאלו יתראו לית חזקיה לגבאי דאע"ג דהוא מלך אנא נביא. הנה לכאורה יפלא. אמנם ביאור הענין כן הוא. כי הנה הן אמת שמדת האמונה ידיהם ח"ו במדות הגאות אשר הוא ממש כע"ז. אמנם ביאור הענין כן הוא. כי הנה הן אמת שמדת האמונה והבטחון בהש"ת הוא ראש לכל המדות והוא המחיה את האדם. הן בגופניות הן ברוחניות. הן בחיות הגוף והן בחיות הנשמה וכאשר חכמים הגידו. בא חבוק והעמידן על אחת. וצדיק באמתו יחיה. נמצא א"כ מה זה ועל מה זה שאנו רואים שיש צדיקים גדולים אשר זזים מביתם ונוסעים בדרך. זמן זמנים טובא משמע. ולפום רהיטא נראה שכוונתם עבור צרכיהם ופרנסותיהם. אבל הכי יאומן כי יוספר אשר צדיקים כאלו לזה שמו כוונתם. כי הלא בוודאי מאמינים ובוטחים בהש"ת באמונה ובטחון באמת שביכולת הש"ת לפרנסם בכל מכל כל אפילו כשישבו בביתם כי הוא יתברך הכל יכול. אמנם אמיתית הענין כן הוא. כי צדיקי הדור רואים אשר מגודל גלות המר בעו"ה נתמעט ומתרושש כח ישראל ע"ק [עמא קדישא] להיות גבורים בעצמם במלחמתה של תורה. ואיזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו כל אחד לפי מדרגתו ובחינתו. וצריכים הם לרפואת במוס' ויראת שמים ועיטין טבין לעבודת הש"ת. ע"כ צדיקי הדור אשר הם עיני העדה רישא דעמא מטריחים עצמן בטירחות יתירות בנסיונות הדרכים ונעים ונדים בעולם כדי לזכות את ישראל ע"ק להחזירם בתשובה שלימה במוסר ויראת שמים ועיטין טבין לקרבם להש"ת את כל אחד לפי מדרגתו ובחינתו. וזאת היא עיקר כוונתם ומגמתם. אמנם צרכיהם ופרנסותיהם ממילא באה להם מאת ה' היתה זאת כדי שיהיה להם במה להתפרנס עצמן וכו'. ולעשות צדקה ומעשים טובים. ואם לחשך אדם לומר א"כ הלא היו יכולים הצדיקים לפעול שיוואו אנשי העולם לביתם, ולא יצטרכו המה להיות מטריחים עצמן מביחם ולנסוע אל אנשי העולם. אמנם תוכן עומק הדבר הוא כי גם לזאת הוא כונתם הק'. להיות עושים ופועלים בזה יחודים גדולים ונוראים ועצומים כאשר ידוע ל"ח שבהיות הגדול הולך אצל הקטן ממנו אז נעשה אשך גדול ונורא. כי הוא כריעת וכו' כידוע. וע"כ מטריחים עצמן הצדיקים הגדולים בנסיעות אל המון העם אשר בעולם למען רבות יחודים קדושים ונוראים אשר כל זה עיקר עשייתם ופועלתם בזה העולם תורה ומצות למען רבות נחת רוח ותענוג להבורא ב"ה. וזהו היתה כונת הצדיקים העניים במדת הענוה הקדושה חזקיה וישעיהו אשר כל אחד ואחד היה בעיני עצמו במה נחשב ובטל וטפל לגבי דחבריו. וע"כ כל אחד חפץ למען צדקו שיגדיל ויאדי' התיחדו' יהודים הק' ויתרבה נחת רוח ותענוג להבורא י"ת. וע"כ אמר ישעיהו ליתי חזקיהו לגבאי כי אנא קטן מניה[...]. נמצא כל אחד ואחד חפץ למען צדקו שיגדיל תורה ויאדיר ויתגדל ויתקדש שמה רבא. אמן.



work only for the glory of God, to make whole His broken throne by returning His wayward children to him in repentance, and not to be concerned with seeking out their own livelihood by being on the road. These two sources together attest to Levi Yiḥṣaq's voice as a shaper of the movement's spread, defending the new crop of wandering *maggidim* as they spread the word among small-town and rural Jews, but also trying to exercise influence over their conduct. In a movement characterized by spontaneous growth, having no formal standards of ordination or means of quality control, Levi Yiḥṣaq, perhaps Hasidism's most respectable spokesman, is trying to make sure that the emerging *zaddiqim*—including some self-proclaimed as such—would embody the Hasidic message at its best.