

Introduction

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This special issue of *Jewish History*, devoted to the history of Hasidism, marks another step in the realization of an idea that originated with Arthur Green, David Assaf, and Ada Rapoport-Albert in 2001 and was reinvigorated by scholars who participated in the *Hasidism in Poland: New Perspectives* conference at Wrocław University in 2004. The idea began to take on concrete form during the academic year 2007–2008, when the Hebrew University's Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) hosted a research group led by David Assaf, entitled, like the present volume, "Towards a New History of Hasidism." This group laid the foundation for the proposed new comprehensive history of Hasidism by enabling more than a dozen scholars to pursue various directions in hasidic research and to present their findings to their specialist colleagues for discussion, critique, and refinement. Many of these scholars, reinforced by additional researchers, presented their work in progress at a conference held at University College London in 2009—again titled "Towards a New History of Hasidism." Most of the articles assembled here originated in papers first presented at that London conference.

The first comprehensive scholarly history of Hasidism was authored by Simon Dubnow. It was based on a series of articles he published in Russian in the late nineteenth century, and eventually appeared as a book, first in Hebrew and soon after in Yiddish and in German.¹ In the eighty to one hundred years since, numerous studies have appeared covering various aspects of Hasidism; new sources have been discovered, new methods developed, and new perspectives articulated. Together, these contributions have created what effectively amounts to a new academic school of hasidic studies, which has

¹Simon Dubnow, *Toledot hahasidut*, 3 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1930–31), *Geshikhte fun khasidizm*, 2 vols. (Vilna, 1930–33), and *Geschichte des Chassidismus*, 2 vols. (Berlin 1931–32). The only attempt so far to update and expand this foundational work is Jean Baumgarten, *La naissance du hassidisme* (Paris, 2006).

elaborated a fuller portrayal of hasidic history, different in many ways from Dubnow's pioneering endeavor.

In Dubnow's telling (which still resonates in popular circles today), the Besht left behind him a court that served as the center of an institutionalized mass movement based on novel doctrines that attracted followers from the scholarly, semi-learned, and plebeian classes all together. After something of a struggle among some of his disciples, leadership of this movement was inherited by the Besht's associate, Dov Ber, the Great Maggid of Mezerich [Międzyrzec Korecki], who refined the doctrines, moved the court to a more central location and sent out missionaries to actively recruit new followers. Upon his death in 1772, Dov Ber's disciples spread out, each founding an autonomous court in a different place which he organized and led according to his own lights while adapting it to the needs and inclinations of the Jewish population in his area. The flexibility and adaptability which this decentralized organization afforded ensured the tremendous growth of the movement and its success in dominating large swaths of Jewish eastern Europe, particularly in Ukraine and Poland, by the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was so despite the implacable and occasionally violent opposition to Hasidism on the part of the more conventional traditional elements, called *mitnagedim* (lit., opponents).

According to Dubnow, these three generations—the Besht, the Maggid, and the Maggid's disciples—constituted the classic period of Hasidism. From approximately 1815 on, the story of this movement need not be told, as it is one of decline and degeneration.²

Over the past two generations, the intensive study of all aspects of Hasidism has altered this picture radically. It is now apparent that the Baal Shem Tov was more a continuator than an innovator who did not consciously set out to start a new movement. He established no new institutions and did not author a systematic ideology. The Maggid did head a court (*hatser*) and did attempt to articulate a consistent doctrine, but he did not inherit a leadership position nor stand at the head of an institutionalized movement. It was only at the very end of his life, in response to the opposition fomented by the Gaon of Vilna, that he and his associates and disciples began to think of their style of Hasidism as having a distinct identity, and of their loosely associated, evanescent circles as constituting a discrete group. The two generations after the Maggid's death were engaged in perfecting this differentiation, while the following periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—overlooked

²Simon Dubnow, *Toledot hahasidut*; cf. Moshe Rosman, "Pesak dinah shel hahistoriografyah hayisre'elit al hahasidut," *Zion* 74 (2009), 144–6.

by Dubnow and the historiography that followed him—were when the mature movement made its considerable impact on Jewish society, religion, and culture.³

The ramifications of this new conception of the early development of Hasidism have still not been fully explicated; hence the proposal for a new history of Hasidism. This history would not merely supplement, correct, expand, and update Dubnow, covering the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which Dubnow had excluded. It would also present a richer, more nuanced, and more comprehensive portrayal of what some have come to view as the longest lived, and perhaps the most successful, of the movements that emerged in modern Judaism. This will be a collaborative work, written by a team of scholars growing out of the IAS research group.

Hearing of this initiative, Kenneth Stow, then editor-in-chief of *Jewish History*, invited us to fashion the present issue so as to make this latest research available to the academic public, to serve as an indicator of the state of the field, and to provide a platform for the launch of the projected comprehensive history.

The articles published here largely reflect the new scholarship on Hasidism. Traditionally, the history of the movement was conceived as the history of its leaders and their doctrines, concentrating heavily on eighteenth-century materials and on the ideas associated with the early hasidic masters. Relations with the non-Jewish authorities were seen to be primarily negative, and conflict was mostly what outside hostile forces (*mitnagedim*, *maskilim*, *goyim*) initiated. As the section headings of this volume indicate, our approach is different. The articles stress methodology and the ways in which a variety of disciplines, notably, history, sociology, anthropology, geography, demography, gender studies, and philosophy, contribute to understanding the evolution of Hasidism. Larger contexts and material factors like geography and politics are counted as major determinants of hasidic history, as are differential gender roles. Relations with outside forces are seen in a more nuanced light, and intra-hasidic conflicts are also placed on the table.

The section on the teachings of Hasidism treats such intellectual and spiritual issues as the stance on Redemption, techniques for binding oneself to God's holiness, faith challenged by the Holocaust, the capacity for and attitudes towards change, as well as approaches to those who are religiously

³Rosman, "Pesak dinah," 149–73 and the detailed bibliography cited there; see esp. Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London, 1996), 76–140. For a survey of the history, teachings, and literature of Hasidism, see the articles by David Assaf and Joseph Dan in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New Haven, 2008), 1:659–73 and passim, according to the "Synoptic Outline of Contents," 2:2169–82.

non-observant. Some of the articles in this section move beyond the ideas themselves, to probe their effects on social realities, for example, examining the relationship between radical spirituality and conservative halakhic behavior, or the degree to which inclusive ideology challenges exclusivist practices. The section is appropriately titled “Doctrines *and* their social implications.”

The sections on geography and social and political history introduce new kinds of sources and methodologies. The articles in them both supplement and challenge internal hasidic sources by analyzing Jewish and non-Jewish archival records and by examining government reports, legal court proceedings, newspaper articles, statistics, and maps as well as utilizing the theories of social science. Together with the opening essay on methodology, they represent attempts to develop a historical, systematic, contextual, and, above all, critical approach to the hasidic sources.

By contrast to the conventional historiography on Hasidism, these two sections focus on the nineteenth century, with some treatment of the twentieth, rather than exclusively on the eighteenth; on *hasidim* more than *Hasidism*; on the history of life more than the history of ideas; on conflicts *within* more than *with* Hasidism; on the complex relationship between hasidic groups and the political authorities; and on hasidic groups as a whole, not just their leaders. All the articles in these sections emphasize the different potentials inherent in hasidic relations with the authorities and the multi-dimensional political activities of *hasidim*. They also illuminate the demographic changes and geographic shifts that had profound political, social, and organizational implications for hasidic groups. In particular, the trend toward urbanization gave rise to new hasidic lifestyles, as those hasidic institutions that existed somewhat independently of the rebbes, like the local *shetibls*, or the very names adopted by each of the proliferating hasidic courts, took on growing importance.

The articles in the section on gender investigate the distinct social, cultural, and sexual roles of men and women in society—and especially in hasidic society—as a means of understanding Hasidism as a whole. Gender roles fundamentally affected how Hasidism was framed and organized as a kind of male confraternity. Gender is also a prism that facilitates the examination of hasidic responses to the exigencies of modernization. Indeed, the construction of gender and sexuality contributed to the construction of various types of hasidic elitism. The perspective of gender on Hasidism has only recently begun to develop and this section advances the discussion considerably.

It might be useful to think of each article in this volume as answering a question. Moshe Rosman ponders which stance relative to hasidic sources is the appropriate one for researchers of Hasidism. Should the scholar be asking the sources for reliability or usability? How might reliability or usability for

any given source be established? On the basis of three sources associated with the biography of the putative founder of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov: The Holy Epistle, his sayings as quoted in the books of Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, and the stories in *Shivhei habesht*, Rosman argues that the ultimate criterion for evaluating sources should be “usability” rather than “reliability.”

Marcin Wodziński and Uriel Gellman want to know what the geographic distribution of the *hasidim* in a given period was and how it changed over time, or in other words, what was the developmental map of Hasidism? Based on an original, extensive database of hasidic centers, the authors examine the dynamics of the expansion of the movement. They portray the shift of hasidic centers from Podolia and Volhynia in the eighteenth century to Galicia and the southeastern provinces of Congress Poland in the nineteenth century, and subsequently to Hungary and Romania in the twentieth century. Finally, they illustrate the “metropolization” of hasidic leadership after 1914.

Shaul Stampfer seeks to resolve a paradox. How was it that Hasidism spread among the masses even though most of its adherents probably did not fully understand the ideas of the movement and did not maintain regular direct contact with the *tsadik*? The article demonstrates the importance of the *shtibl*, a radical innovation that by combining synagogue with social club, created an attractive venue for *hasidim* to gather, to spend leisure time, and to attract new adherents.

Samuel Heilman asks, “What’s in a name?” and explores the importance of hasidic court or dynasty branding in contemporary hasidic life. Examining several dynastic conflicts over titles derived from the east European localities, Heilman shows that the geographic limitations of contemporary hasidic life have made ownership of the name an important part of the story of succession and power building.

Rejecting the notion that all hasidic groups in a given country shared some essential character, David Assaf and Gadi Sagiv ask what the distinctive features of the various Russian hasidic groups were. They discuss relations between hasidic centers and peripheries, Hasidism and the Russian administration as well as hasidic responses to modernity and the extended crisis of the First World War, Bolshevik Revolution, and the Civil Wars that followed.

Rachel Manekin’s question grows out of the dissonance between the flourishing of Galician Hasidism evident in the sources and the claim in conventional historiography that *hasidim* under the Austrian regime suffered restrictions and persecution. She powerfully argues that the Galician *hasidim*, like other Habsburg Jews, enjoyed the benefits of the Austrian policy of religious toleration, so long as they did not contravene civil law. Despite attempts by several individuals, mainly *maskilim*, to define Hasidism as *Religionschwärmerei* (religious enthusiasm), and thus to prohibit *hasidim* from

performing their religious rituals, the Government consistently refused to discriminate against the *hasidim* relative to other groups.

Moshe Idel asks what the Baal Shem Tov meant by “cleaving to the letters.” Did he experience the holy letters of the alphabet visually only or were there other dimensions of the letters that invited engagement? Idel contends that the Besht’s concept was predominantly informed by the oral dimension of the letters, namely, the articulation of their sound, thus suggesting a more active engagement than the quietistic posture previously assumed.

Arthur Green probes an irony of Hasidism: how did a young men’s revivalist movement with religiously radical potential wind up laying the infrastructure for an ultraconservative style of piety? As he demonstrates, the potentially radical revisionism of eighteenth-century Hasidism, very much resembling the radicalism of many youth cultures, ended up making only minor changes in the actual patterns of religious behavior, thus leaving the revivalist potential unfulfilled.

Immanuel Etkes proffers a new examination of a venerable question: Was Hasidism an expression of messianism? By revisiting the well-known episode of the sinking of a ship transporting one group of *hasidim* to the Holy Land in 1777, Etkes argues against a messianic explanation of this early hasidic migration, stressing the traditional motives of the hasidic migrants, who followed the pattern of many other individuals or small bands, usually belonging to the spiritual-religious elite, whose immigration was motivated by a desire to sanctify themselves through the sanctity of the Land of Israel.

Gershon Greenberg attempts to comprehend a conundrum: hasidic confidence during the Shoah that a positive outcome was imminent, an optimism that continued among many hasidic leaders even after the results of the catastrophe were apparent. Greenberg shows that there were also other, pessimistic, and passive responses among hasidic leaders, but the period during and immediately after the Holocaust was dominated by optimism and faith-activism. Among the most prominent representatives of this trend, he analyzes writings of the *tsadikim* of Alexander (Aleksandrów), Bobov, Gur (Góra Kalwaria); and Kalonymus Kalman Shapira of Piaseczno (Warsaw).

Naftali Loewenthal seeks the hasidic roots of Habad outreach activities while asking how Habad managed to maintain its Ultra-Orthodox credentials despite preaching and practicing an inclusivist ethos. Loewenthal asserts that early Hasidism was distinguished by its inclusivism, which was reversed only in the nineteenth century in response to the challenges of modernity. As he argues, the Habad movement in the twentieth century attempted to revive elements of the inclusivist ethos, leading to its dominant contemporary mode of expression, namely, Habad’s “outreach.”

Marcin Wodziński poses the fundamental question: Could women join the hasidic rank and file? Were women actually *hasidot* (that is, female *hasidim*)

or were hasidic groups all male associations? Notwithstanding the influence of Hasidism on the lives and ideas of many women, especially those sharing households with male *hasidim*, Wodziński questions the identification of such women as female *hasidim*. As he demonstrates, women were actively excluded from all formal activities of the hasidic communities, and until the twentieth century, they were never considered members of the hasidic movement either by others or by themselves. Above all, the very concept of female *hasidim* emerged from the erroneous definition of Hasidism as a sect, which in turn led to a misconception of the social boundaries of Hasidism.

For Ada Rapoport-Albert, the question is how far the last two Lubavitcher Rebbes went, not only in investing their female constituents with the sense of belonging to the Habad movement as full-fledged *hasidot*, but also in appearing to place them at the very heart of Habad's hasidic *cum* messianic project.

Benjamin Brown wants to understand how the elitist ideal of *kedushah* (severely restrictive sexual practices) became the theological and practical norm in several hasidic groups. Brown analyses *kedushah* in three post-Holocaust hasidic groups, Gur [Góra Kalwaria], Slonim [Słonim], and Toledot Aharon, showing how it contributed to identity building and to invigorating a new revivalist spirituality.

The articles assembled here thus present a sample of the research that the by-now ongoing comprehensive hasidic history project has generated, research that is yielding significant results which will expand and modify our understanding of the entire movement. These articles also offer a view of the methods, materials, and frames of reference informing the project, so that the present volume may be read as both a collection of cutting edge studies on Hasidism, and also as a representative sample of the extensive laboratory work that will undergird the projected new history and which it will reflect.