

took on its own magical power in later Hasidism, but the intellectual creativity of the early movement had atrophied. For Scholem, the long history of Jewish mysticism came to an end with eighteenth-century Hasidism.

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The powerful narrative represented by these scholars, who were born in the latter part of the nineteenth century and flourished mainly in the first half of the twentieth, provides the crucial backdrop for this book, crucial because the counter-narrative that we will present challenges many of its assumptions and conclusions. As we shall see and as the latest research demonstrates, a “hasidism before Hasidism” arose before the eighteenth century, largely independent of Sabbatianism. Hasidism’s sources lay not only in Lurianic Kabbalah, as Scholem thought, but in a diverse library of Kabbalistic texts going back to the thirteenth-century Zohar and other late medieval and early modern mystical-moralistic tracts. Ascetic in nature, this mystical movement differed from later Hasidism, but it still furnished the later movement with texts, ideas, and potential followers.

As a movement that borrowed eclectically from many sources, Hasidism cannot be reduced to one, homogeneous doctrine. It incorporated both ascetic negation of the material world and antiascetic affirmation of the material, as well as messianic and antimessianic tendencies. For some Hasidic teachers, *devekut* meant the union of the worshipper with God, while for others, it meant less self-effacing communion. Some Hasidic teachings are almost explicitly pantheistic, while others emphasize God’s transcendence. Some rank prayer higher than study, while others see them as equally holy. Some doctrines are imbued with *halakhah*, while a few flirt with antinomianism. Each *tsaddik* offered his own interpretation of the “philosophy” of Hasidism. Not one, but the full range of these ideas must count as constituting Hasidism.

There have been repeated attempts, most recently by Moshe Idel, to find sources of influence for Hasidic ideas in non-Jewish sources, such as in ecstatic religion in the Carpathian Mountains. It is possible that the emphasis on certain kinds of prayer, cults of holy saints, and pilgrimages to their graves all have their parallels, if not roots, in similar phenomena in the protean world from which Hasidism sprang. Although the proof remains elusive, we wholly endorse the idea that Hasidism must be understood not as hermetically sealed but as a part of its environment. Certainly, the attraction of Eastern European noblemen and peasants alike to the *tsaddikim* and their courts that we find in the nineteenth century testifies to how embedded Hasidism was in its world. So, too, does the way Hasidic tales reflect motifs from folklore generally and Eastern European folklore in specific. That some Christians regarded tombs of *tsaddikim* as sites of veneration and that there were Jews who assigned theurgic power to some contemporary Christian figures speaks volumes about the complex relations between the two religions. Although the Hasidic masters at times disparaged the Christian world in terms of Kabbalistic dualism, the day-to-day interactions between Hasidim—as well as other Jews of the time and place—and Christians were marked not only by antagonism but also by symbiosis.

Returning to the movement's origins, we claim, against the prevailing arguments of the earlier scholarship, that it was not crisis that gave birth to Hasidism but instead developments within the religious and social life of Polish Jews. By the early eighteenth century, the Jewish communities of Eastern Poland (present-day Ukraine) were deeply engaged in the process of reconstruction following the pogroms of 1648–1649. The communal structure was still quite strong; the crisis of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lay in the future. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov was not an unschooled radical who sought to overturn either the values or social structure of his time. A functionary of his community, he did indeed gather a small circle around him, but this circle was drawn from the learned elite. And the sources do not demonstrate that he intended to found a movement: the “founder” of Hasidism acquired that role only retrospectively two or three generations later. Rather, it is apparent that he and his followers saw themselves as operating within the bounds of conventional mystical pietism.

It was Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritsh, a member of this group, often portrayed as the Besht's anointed successor, who formed the first court—that is, a place where Hasidim and other admirers of a rebbe made pilgrimage to receive his blessing and imbibe his teachings (others of the Besht's circle also established something like courts around the same time). When Dov Ber died in 1772, his disciples created a multiplicity of courts in multiple locations.

The year 1772 is also crucial because it marks the first *herem*, or ban, against the Hasidim. Hasidism's opponents (*Mitnaggdim*) mocked its claim to be a form of pietism by calling the followers of what they took to be a movement as *mit'hasdim*—those who *pretend* to be pious. In this way, the opponents tried to distinguish the new “Hasidim” from the older “hasidim”, even if the former at least initially saw themselves as only a variant of the latter. It is therefore possible that these opponents, led by Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna, played a key, if unwitting, role in forcing the Hasidim to see themselves as a movement. Just as Hasidism provoked a movement of opposition, so the opposition helped to catalyze Hasidism into a movement. Hasidism as a movement was therefore the product of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Yet its followers remained few in number. The courts of the tsaddikim probably numbered dozens or, at most, hundreds of Hasidim each. And not every Hasidic leader necessarily formed a court. But something new was unquestionably happening. The tsaddikim constituted new types of leaders. While some also served as communal rabbis, they generally extended their geographical influence beyond specific towns. A new pattern of religious life developed where Hasidim who lived at a distance from their rebbes made pilgrimage to the Hasidic courts one or more times a year. This geographic development would have a profound effect on how Hasidic Jews saw their relationship to place. It also created a social and leadership structure that would serve the traditional community well in the face of the dislocations of modernity.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Hasidic leadership developed increasingly in the direction of dynasties and institutionalized courts—something, we argue, that was not true of the Besht and his followers. As we noted earlier, Dubnow

saw in nineteenth-century Hasidism a movement in decline, but, even so, he clearly believed that more needed to be said about the later movement. (In the preface to his canonical history, he laid out the parameters and sources for a second volume, while he admitted that old age prevented him from undertaking the task.) We have heeded Dubnow's call for work on the later movement even as we depart from his narrative of decline. We argue instead that Hasidism of this later period was entering its first golden age (the second began in the last decades of the twentieth century). Spreading rapidly into Congress Poland, Galicia, Hungary, and Romania, as well as in its eighteenth-century strongholds in Ukraine and Belarus (White Russia), the movement became increasingly numerous and influential. If it did not win over a majority of East European Jews, Hasidism nevertheless claimed a mass following. It fought for and often gained control over local communities. One of the key stories that we will tell involves the life of the Hasidim in the shtetl—that is, far from the courts of the tsaddikim.

It was in the early nineteenth century that many important Hasidic texts from the eighteenth century were edited and published, a process that actually started in the 1780s. The editors of these texts thus put their stamp on their progenitors in the eighteenth century, turning the Ba'al Shem Tov retrospectively into the “founder of Hasidism” and projecting their conception of a dynastic movement backward by a half-century and more. Because of the paucity of historical sources about the Ba'al Shem Tov, the relationship of later Hasidism to its putative founder resembles that of the early Christian Church to Jesus, whose teachings also remain shrouded in mystery. The way in which later generations of Hasidim shaped the image of the Besht is therefore of critical importance in understanding their own definitions of the movement.

Far from lacking in intellectual creativity, nineteenth-century Hasidism spawned a variety of schools and new ideas that unfortunately have attracted less scholarly attention than their eighteenth-century predecessors. The theological creativity of eighteenth-century Hasidism underwent important changes as the movement became both more popular and more institutionalized. While some tsaddikim, such as those of Zhidachov and Komarno (Komárno) emphasized Kabbalah, other nineteenth-century Hasidic leaders, notably Israel of Ruzhin, explicitly scorned the Kabbalistic theology of the early movement in favor of a more practical, nonintellectual form of Hasidism. A new kind of leadership emerged, especially in Galicia and Hungary, of rebbes who functioned simultaneously as tsaddikim and as traditional rabbinical legal authorities. Other creative innovations were not lacking, from the antinomian speculations of Izhbits Hasidism to the extreme and idiosyncratic asceticism of Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. At the same time, archival evidence suggests that nineteenth-century Hasidism may not have been primarily a movement of the poor and unlettered any more than it was in the eighteenth century. It also attracted merchants who found the widespread social networks of Hasidic groups useful for commercial as well as religious purposes.

As Hasidism won an ever-wider circle of adherents, its earlier Orthodox opponents gradually came to accept the movement as a legitimate part of the traditional world, especially when that world came under assault by Jewish Enlightenment activists known as *Maskilim* (singular: *Maskil*). These intellectuals, who were at first a tiny minority in the Jewish world, established alliances with the Russian and Habsburg states

as well as with other forces of modernization. In their satirical writings, the Maskilim found a ready target in the tsaddikim as corrupt charlatans and their Hasidim as gullible obscurantists. In the pages that follow, we will focus more than previous historians on the ways in which Hasidism itself evolved precisely as the result of its conflict with the forces of Enlightenment. The Hasidim embraced modern strategies of political organizing and lobbying, often winning important concessions by the Russian, Polish, and Habsburg authorities against attacks by their Jewish and non-Jewish enemies. Like other modern religious movements of tradition, Hasidism drew much of its sustenance from the struggle with the Enlighteners. Just as it is impossible to think about the Jewish Enlightenment without its attacks against Hasidism, we argue that it is impossible to think of Hasidism without its use of new weapons against secular modernity.

The mass emigration of Jews from the Russian Empire that began in 1881 and lasted until the 1920s siphoned off millions of potential adherents, many of whom abandoned religion when they left the Old Country. Urbanization shifted the centers of population from the small market towns in which Jews were often the majority, to cities, especially Warsaw. Although Hasidism remained rooted in small towns, with the onset of World War I, a number of important courts migrated to the cities. At the same time, the railroad made it easier for Hasidim to travel to the court of the rebbe. Always a geographically dispersed movement, with its groups drawing their adherents from beyond the local community of the rebbe, Hasidism was ideally positioned to benefit from new forms of transportation. In the late twentieth century, the Hasidim made similar use of the airplane—and in the twenty-first century, we see a parallel process, among some Hasidic groups, with the use of the Internet.

In the early twentieth century, Hasidism faced a new and less hospitable landscape. World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution shattered Jewish society and radically destabilized the movement's social infrastructure. So, too, did the rapid secularization and acculturation of the Polish Jews between the World Wars. Ideologies like Zionism and Communism competed for the loyalty of young Jews. On the eve of the Holocaust, Hasidism was very much besieged. And what these other forces had started, the Nazis finished by murdering an incalculable number of Hasidic leaders and their followers. By the end of the war, the idea that the movement was finished was not unreasonable. Hasidism was but a pale ghost of its former self—many rebbes and their Hasidim dead or scattered to the winds.

When Simon Dubnow wrote his history in 1931, he reported having just heard that the Soviet authorities had destroyed the tombs of the Ba'al Shem Tov and Nahman of Bratslav, two of the main sites of Hasidic pilgrimage. Himself in exile from Russia, Dubnow clearly despaired about the future of the Jews in that part of the world that was their historic heartland. From his vantage point, the history of Hasidism appeared to be coming to an end. Yet after the devastation of the Holocaust, which claimed Dubnow as one of its early victims, the phoenix has risen from the ashes in ways and in places that would have astonished its first historian.

While earlier Hasidism was almost exclusively an Eastern European phenomenon, the postwar movement had to reroot itself in new and radically changed circumstances

in relatively small areas of settlement, primarily in North America and in what would become the modern State of Israel. A new concept of Hasidic place took hold. Hasidism came to see itself in exile from its original home in Eastern Europe, preserving the place names where it originated as the names of its rebbes' courts. Eastern Europe became an imagined space, the site of hallowed memory. With the fall of Communism and the end of travel restrictions in the former East Bloc, holy sites, especially the graves of rebbes, have resurfaced and today have become destinations of Hasidic pilgrimage.

Place is but one dimension of Hasidic identity as it emerged in the postwar era. Hasidim turned Yiddish into a holy language, a way of preserving the vanished world of Eastern Europe. Clothing and a variety of other customs specific to each Hasidic group also assumed sacred meaning. Because they signified the Old Home, they could not be changed. In this fashion, a movement of tradition became *traditionalist*—that is, a movement whose *raison d'être* was to conserve the past. Yet, of course, traditionalism of this sort is itself modern—an artifact of the postwar world.

With the creation of the State of Israel and growth of large Hasidic communities in the United States in the last half-century, important distinctions have developed between those living in a sovereign Jewish state and those in Diaspora. In Israel, Hasidic groups, most of which were virulently opposed to Zionism, had to negotiate their relationships with a secular Jewish state. They needed to interact with other religious communities, such as the pious Jewries of Middle Eastern and North African origins. In the United States, where other remnants of East European Hasidism found refuge, they needed to learn for the first time how to thrive in a pluralistic democracy. In both postwar America and Israel, Hasidic groups that had developed at a distance from each other in Eastern Europe now found themselves living cheek-by-jowl with one another in neighborhoods like Borough Park and Me'ah She'arim. Competition for followers, always a part of the Hasidic story, became much more intense in Hasidism's new homes.

While most Hasidim of the postwar period ignore the less religious and secular Jews among whom they live, two groups, Chabad-Lubavitch and Bratslav have developed missionizing ideologies directed to the wider Jewish world. The seventh Lubavitch Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is of particular importance, since many of his followers regard him as a messianic figure. Even after his death in 1994, some believe that he continues to play an eschatological role in this world. The career of Schneerson and the ongoing vitality of his movement as well as the other surviving groups of Hasidim demonstrate that this religious phenomenon is not a mere relic of an earlier world, but continues its creative career today.

The story of Hasidism at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not, as the Hasidim themselves often insist, a story only of uncompromising conservatism, the preservation of age-old traditions in the face of punishing assaults by the secular world. In reestablishing themselves in Israel, North America, and elsewhere, the Hasidim created—wittingly or not—new forms of religious and social life. Their very conservatism, while unquestionably grounded in the nineteenth-century “invention” of ultra-Orthodoxy, took on new colorations, the inevitable result of the new settings in which

they found themselves. Far from a mere fossil of the eighteenth century marooned on the streets of Jerusalem and Brooklyn, they are a dynamic part of the modern world. Indeed, starting in the nineteenth century and continuing to today, Hasidism's very identity is wrapped up in its struggle against modern, secular culture and derives much of its identity from that struggle. It is this dialectical entanglement with its secular opponent that defines Hasidism as a modern movement. We might say that Hasidism throughout its two-and-a-half-century history represents a case of "modernization without secularization." It is the goal of this book to tell that story as part of the process by which the Jews became modern, a process in which the Jewish religion itself has changed profoundly but scarcely disappeared.

In the foreword to his history of Hasidism, Simon Dubnow spoke of the challenge of distilling the "essence" of Hasidism from the *tohu-va-vohu* ("chaos") of its teachings and from the "obscurantism" of its preachers. For our part, the challenge is not to distill an essence of what is, by its nature, a diverse and, at times, contradictory movement. But we share Dubnow's desire to rescue for the modern reader a sense of the vitality and endless originality of a religious phenomenon that continues to enthrall those who engage with it, even if they do not count themselves among its adherents.

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Note: The names of Hasidic leaders are generally listed under their last names (e.g., Twersky, Avraham of Trisk), if they have them, with cross-references to the place names of their courts and dynasties (e.g., Trisk; Chernobyl Hasidism). If there are no last names or the last names are generally not used, the leaders are listed under their first names. Names of books are generally not listed, with the exception of those discussed at length (e.g., *Shiv'hei ha-Beshit*).

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