

How the Ba'al Shem Tov Changed the World: Major Concepts in Hasidic Thought

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Unit 1 – Beginnings

Historical, social, religious context | Trends in the study of Hasidism | Core concepts and modes of reading

R. Moshe Hayim Efraim of Sudilkov, *Degel mahane efrayim*, Yitro

'And all the people saw the sounds' (Ex. 20:14). So I heard from my grandfather (the Baal Shem Tov) – a parable. There was a musician who played so beautifully, with such sweetness that all who heard his melody could not restrain themselves. They danced nearly up to the ceiling in pure pleasure. And the closer one drew to hear the sounds flowing from his instrument, the greater was the enjoyment, causing one to dance yet more intensely. By and by, a deaf man came along. He could hear nothing of the wonderful melody, but he saw the others dancing with all their might. He thought they were mad, and muttered to himself, 'What are they so joyous about?' Truly, though, had he been wiser and more discerning, he would have realized it was all from the power of the music, and he would have danced too. The meaning of the parable is clear.

דגל מחנה אפרים פרשת יתרו

וכל העם רואים את הקולות וגו'. יש לומר בזה על דרך ששמעתי משל מן אדוני אבי זקני זללה"ה, שהיה אחד מנגן בכלי זמר יפה מאוד, במתיקות ועריבות גדול, ואותם שהם שומעים זה לא יכלו להתאפק מגודל המתיקות והתענוג עד שהיו רוקדים כמעט עד להתקרה מחמת גודל התענוג והנעימות והמתיקות, וכל מי שהיה קרוב יותר והיה מקרב עצמו לשמוע קול הכלי זמר, היה לו ביותר תענוג והיה רוקד עד מאוד, ובתוך כך בא אחד שהיה חרש שאינו שומע כלל קול של הכלי זמר הערב, רק ראה שאנשים רוקדים עד מאוד, והם בעיניו כמשתגעים, ואומר בלבבו כי לשמחה מה זה עושה, ובאמת אילו היה הוא חכם וידע והבין שהוא מחמת גודל התענוג והנעימות קול של הכלי זמר, היה הוא גם כן רוקד שם, והנמשל מובן.

1. The early period of Hasidism in historical context

1150-1217	R. Judah He-Hasid German Pietists - <i>Hasidut Ashkenaz</i>
1492	Expulsion of Jews from Spain
1534-1573	R. Yitzhak Luria (the Holy ARI), Safed
1648-1649	Chmielnicki Cossack pogroms – <i>Gzeyres takh ve-tat</i> ת"ח – ת"ט
1666	Shabbetai Zevi converts to Islam
1698-1760	R. Israel Baal Shem Tov
1772	Rabbinic ban on Hasidism – <i>Herem Vilna</i>
1704-1772	Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch

2. Trends in research

a. Social history – Simon Dubnow (1860-1941) and Ben-Zion Dinur (1884-1971)

in: Rachel Elijor *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism* (2006), 4-5

The first historians to seek an explanation for this unprecedented expansion tied the rise of hasidism to economic and social conditions and crises. Simon Dubnow and Ben-Zion Dinur, both eminent historians of Jewish eastern Europe, believed that hasidism had emerged in response to the severe crisis experienced by Polish Jewry in the first half of the eighteenth century; however, they differed in their interpretation both of the crisis and of the nature of the response.

Dubnow saw the background for the rise of hasidism as the social and economic distress of Polish Jews following the Chmielnecki uprisings of Ukrainians against the Poles in 1648–9 and the associated pogroms perpetrated against the Jews. The decline in Polish power following the uprisings led to a decline in the institutions of Jewish self-government that the Poles had supported. Despair among the Jews at these events was compounded in the 1670s by the failure of the Shabatean messianic movement, leading to spiritual decline and to alienation from the traditional values upon which communal relationships depended. The inability of the rabbis to provide proper leadership at a time of such social and political instability led to a general perception among the uneducated masses that religion had failed them. Hasidism, in this view, was a response to a spiritual vacuum; in Dubnow's words, a response to 'the deep needs of the despondent soul', which provided answers in the wake of 'the terrible despair that came after the defeat of the messianic movement'. For Dubnow, the 'great and wondrous success' of hasidism was the way in which it responded to the individual's need for contact with the divine, thanks to the innovations of its founder, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov.²

Dinur likewise saw the rise of hasidism in the context of 'two severe crises in Judaism: the failure of the Shabatean movement and the attenuation of Jewish self-government in Poland'.³ In his view, the increasing domination of communal institutions by despotic figures led to the emergence of an alternative leadership of preachers proclaiming a new social message; in other words, hasidism was a response to social oppression and economic exploitation by a corrupt leadership. But he also recognized a fundamental messianism in the ideology of the hasidic movement, a reaction to the spiritual crisis stemming from the failure of Shabateanism and its promise of imminent redemption. In sum, he

² Dubnow, *History of Hasidism* (Heb.), 35, 36.

³ Dinur, 'The Origins of Hasidism', 86.

Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader* (2005)

In studies published in the first half of the twentieth century, Hasidism is described as a movement that from its earliest stages was manifestly populist in nature. Furthermore, Hasidism's populism was associated with dissent and rebellion against the religious and social elites. Hasidism purportedly gave vent to the distress of the simple Jew, who was suffering under the onus of strictures imposed upon him by the rabbinic establishment. Hasidism, for its part, supposedly championed the aspirations of the masses, those who were subject to the oppression and exploitation of a corrupt community leadership.

A long line of studies published since the late 1950s, however, has challenged the image of Hasidism as a popular movement that arose in revolt against the religious and communal establishment.¹ Today, scholars are in agreement that during its initial stages, the phenomenon of Hasidism was narrow in scope, centering around a new approach toward religion and spirituality. The transformation of Hasidism into a broad movement, embracing many from the popular classes as well, was thus a gradual process that occurred over an extended period of time.

b. Hasidism and the History of Ideas

Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1945), 326

Lurianic Kabbalism, Sabbatianism and Hasidism are after all three stages of the same process. As we have seen, a proselytizing tendency was already inherent in the first. The distinguishing feature of Lurianic Kabbalism was the important part played by the Messianic element. Lurianism, as I have said before, appealed to the masses because it gave an expression to their yearning for deliverance by emphasizing the contrast between the broken and imperfect state of our existence and its perfection in the process of *Tikkun*. In the Sabbatian movement this urge for redemption *in our time* became the cause of aberrations. Great as was the influence of Sabbatianism, it was bound to fail as a missionary movement. Its extravagant paradoxicalness, which overstressed the fundamental paradox inherent in every form for mysticism, remained an affair of comparatively small groups. Hasidism, on the other hand, broadly speaking represents an attempt to make the world of Kabbalism, through a certain transformation or re-interpretation, accessible to the masses of the people, and in this it was for a time extraordinarily successful.

Hasidism: A New History, ed. David Biale, et.al. (2018), 5

Gershom Scholem, although part of this movement of romantic recovery, insisted on rigorous standards of historical scholarship. Scholem reconstructed the history of Kabbalah—Jewish mysticism—from its origins in antiquity through Hasidism. He agreed with Dubnow and other earlier historians that Hasidism was a response to a crisis, but he located the crisis elsewhere. For Scholem, Hasidism was “the latest phase” of Jewish mysticism arising out of the failure of Shabbetai Tsvi and his seventeenth-century messianic movement. He argued that Israel Ba’al Shem Tov possessed certain Sabbatian manuscripts and that his movement needed to be understood as a response to Sabbatianism. Like the Sabbatians, Hasidism gave priority to charismatic spiritualists over Talmudic scholars. But where Sabbatianism veered into violation of the law as a result of its acute messianism, Hasidism “neutralized” messianism, fully embraced Jewish law, and redirected Sabbatianism’s mystical energies from the national plane to the individual.

c. Hasidism as mysticism

Rachel Elior, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism* (2006), 6

Hasidism originated in a mystical awakening that altered conceptions of the relationship between man and God. It was the product of an eruption of charismatic piety that drew its legitimacy from a consciousness of contact with superior realms.⁸ This awakening occurred in the first half of the eighteenth century in ascetic circles of men known as hasidim who followed the practices developed by the kabbalistic disciples of Isaac Luria of sixteenth-century Safed, known by the acronym formed from his Hebrew title, Ha’elohi Rabi Yitshak (‘The divine Rabbi Isaac’), as the Ari (‘Lion’) or even the Ari Hakadosh (‘Holy Lion’). Like their predecessors, these groups ascribed great importance to mystical experiences and recognized the authority of visionaries. They came into being as a result of the wide dissemination of kabbalistic literature, with its paradoxical image of the kabbalist as simultaneously the conservator of sanctified tradition and an inspired innovator.⁹ This image appears to have attracted would-be kabbalists to withdraw from everyday life in order to reach higher levels of consciousness through mystical practices.

3. 'Hasidism before Hasidism'

Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (1996) 29

In the Ashkenazic Jewish communities of Germany and Poland, the seventeenth century marked a renewed commitment to the penitential ideals and practices of the Hasidei Ashkenaz. While these precepts and rituals had never lost their moral force, they were now adopted by more people as a way of life, reinforced by ideas appropriated from Sephardic sources and by the influence of Lurianic Kabbalah, with its emphasis on asceticism.⁹ Those who combined devotion to mysticism and ascetic practices were often found attached to two types of associations that served as forums for study and mystical fellowship, the *bet midrash* and the *kloyz*.

The *bet midrash* and the *kloyz* were basically institutions for advanced Torah study by people who were no longer students but independent scholars. The fundamental difference between them was that the *bet midrash* was supported by communal funds and was a public forum, while the *kloyz* was typically founded as an independent, private academy with an endowment from a wealthy individual.¹⁰ While both institutions were established primarily as places of Torah study, in practice many of the people who joined them were—in addition to being Torah scholars—hasidim. By the second half of the seventeenth century in Poland, this term denoted those who were mystical adepts, being both scholars of Kabbalah and practitioners of Kabbalistic, particularly ascetic, ritual customs. In at least some *batei midrash* and *kloyzim*, the leading figures were charismatic hasidim such as Hayyim Zanzer and Moses Ostrer in Brody and Moses of Kutów. These figures were accorded respect and status, in addition to their stipends, by the larger community. Alongside regular Torah study, *batei midrash* and *kloyzim* dominated by hasidim served as places for mystical study, prayer and contemplation, fellowship, and intensive Kabbalistic ritual practice.¹¹

4. Hasidic teaching of God-consciousness, or: A vision of radical divine immanence

Zohar 2, 57a

'When you come to be seen before Me / to see My face' (Isa. 1:12) – What does this mean? For the King's countenance is wholly hidden, deep beyond the darkness. Yet those who know how to unify the holy Name are able to break through all those shadowy walls. Then the face of the King may be seen, radiant before all. And then all the worlds, upper and lower, will flow with blessings.

זוהר ב, בשלח נז ע"א

כתיב (ישעיה א, יב) כי תבאו לראות פני, כי תבאו לראות מבעי ליה, מאי לראות פני, אלא כל אינון אנפין דמלכא טמירין בעמק' (ס"א באתר) לבתר חשוכא (ס"א דכתיב ישת חשך סתרו וכו') וכל אינון דידיעין ליחדא שמא קדישא כדקא יאות מתבקעין כל אינון כותלי חשוכא ואנפין דמלכא אתחזיין ונהרין לכלא, וכד אינון אתחזיין ונהרין מתברכין כלא עלאין ותתאין, כדין ברכאן אשתכחו בכלהו עלמין

R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye, *Ben porat yosef*, Mikets

As I heard from my master (the Baal Shem Tov) before the blowing of the Shofar, a parable:

There was a great and wise king who created illusory walls and towers and gates. He decreed that all who wished to approach him must pass through those gates and towers. At his order, royal treasures were placed at each and every gate. Some came no further than the first gate, took the treasure and left. Others pressed onward [to the second or the third, took some gold coins and retreated]. But the king's beloved son was

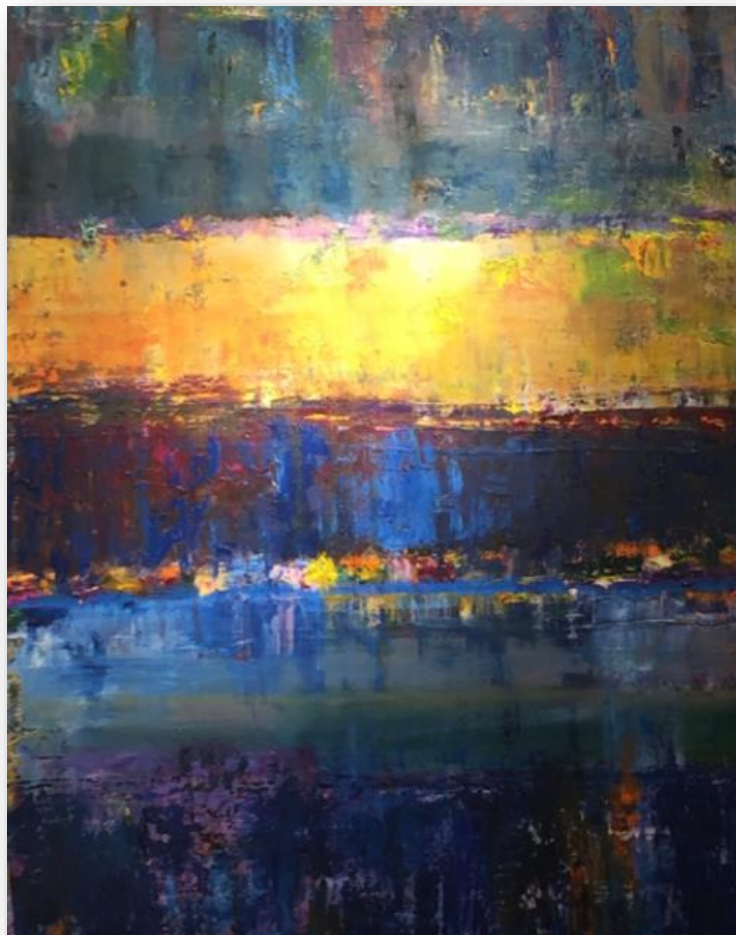
driven by longing to see his father. And when at last he overcame all obstacles and reached the king, he realized that nothing had ever stood between them. All the walls and towers and gates were an illusion. And the meaning of this is clear for those who understand hidden things.

So I heard from my master, of blessed memory: When we realize that 'the whole earth is filled with His glory' [Isaiah 6:3] and that our every movement and thought flows from God – then 'all the workers of iniquity shall be scattered' [Psa. 92:10]. Indeed, even the angels and all the heavenly dwellings – everything in existence is infused with His essence, 'like the snail, whose garment is part of itself' [*Bereshit rabba* 21.5]. Finally, with the power of this knowledge, 'the workers of iniquity shall be scattered'. For in truth there is nothing, no barrier nor veil, that separates a person from God, may He be blessed.

בן פורת יוסף בראשית פרשת מקץ

ונ"ל דכתבתי במ"א דשמעתי ממורי זלה"ה משל שאמר קודם תקיעת שופר, שהיה מלך אחד חכם גדול, ועשה באחיזת עינים חומות ומגדלים ושערים, וצוה שילכו אצלו דרך השערים והמגדלים, וצוה לפזר בכל שער ושער אוצרות המלך. ויש שהלך עד שער א' וחזר, ויש וכו', עד שבנו ידידו התאמץ מאד שילך אל אביו המלך, אז ראה שאין שום מחיצה מפסיק בינו לבין אביו כי הכל הי' אחיזת עינים. והנמשל מובן, ודפח"ח

וכן כתבתי במ"א מה ששמעתי ממורי זלה"ה כי בידיעת האדם שהשי"ת מלא כל הארץ כבודו וכל תנועה ומחשבה הכל ממנו ית', אז בידיעה זו יתפרדו כל פועלי און וכו'. א"כ כל המלאכים וכל ההיכלות הכל נברא ונעשה כביכול מעצמותיו ית' כהדין קמצא דלבושי' מיניה וביה, ובידיעה זאת יתפרדו כל פועלי און, שאין שום מחיצה ומסך מבדיל בין האדם ובינו ית' בידיעה זאת. ובזה תבין דברי תיקונים הנ"ל, אני ה' לא שנית, דמסיים שם אבל לאילין דתליין מניה ומשכינתיה לא אשתני לעולם, והבן זה .



Ruth Feldman, Goldenrod

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