

INTRODUCTION

Changing the Narrative of the History of Hasidism

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS INTRODUCTION is fourfold. The first section is intended to explain the historiographical context in which Ada Rapoport-Albert's research has been conducted. By understanding the scholarship which preceded her, readers may come to a better appreciation of how her work has altered the narrative of the history of hasidism. The second purpose is to provide links between the essays presented in this volume. While they were originally written and published independently I think they fit together in shaping a new perspective on hasidism. By articulating how they do so I hope that this anthology will take on the aspect of an integral book with a consistent argument and point of view.

In addition, the essays have been summarized and the larger import of each highlighted. There are no footnotes, which should provide readers with a straightforward roadmap through the sophisticated scholarly oeuvre this volume presents. Virtually every point referred to in this introduction can be found in the text or footnotes of the essays themselves.

The introduction concludes by alluding to Professor Rapoport-Albert's academic work beyond the studies published herein.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

When Ada Rapoport-Albert began studying hasidism in the mid-1960s, several figures towered over academic hasidic scholarship. The first was Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) whose classic history of hasidism, based on his late nineteenth-century work in Russian, appeared in both Hebrew and German editions in 1931. In his book Dubnow proposed a construction of

hasidic history that still influences both academic and popular notions of how hasidism arose and developed.

The Dubnovian Paradigm

For Dubnow the key element in the background of hasidism was crisis. This crisis began with the 1648 uprising of Cossacks and Ukrainian (Ruthenian) peasants against Polish rule of Ukraine, led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky, subsequently a Ukrainian national hero. The rebels made Jews a main target of their attacks, and approximately half of Ukraine's 40,000 Jews were killed while thousands more were wounded or uprooted. For Jews, Khmelnytsky was a villain and these events were referred to as *Gezerot Tah-Tat* (the persecutions of 1648–9). They segued into a series of invasions and wars, and, Dubnow claimed, resulted in an overwhelming multidimensional crisis for Polish Jewry lasting well into the eighteenth century and constituting the context for the rise of hasidism. Dubnow emphasized that the first half of the eighteenth century had witnessed 'a frenzy of blood libels'. This corresponded to the lifetime of Israel ben Eliezer, the *Ba'al Shem Tov*, usually credited with founding the hasidic movement. He was often identified, using the acronym of his title, as Israel Besht, or simply the Besht.

The term *ba'al shem tov* means 'master of the good [i.e. divine] name'. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov was indeed someone who knew how to communicate with God and use the divine name in incantations, amulets, and mystical rituals in order to help people with their physical ailments, material poverty, and social problems. As such he ranked low in the hierarchy of religious functionaries and scholars who enjoyed prominence in the Jewish community. Dubnow, however, insisted that the Besht was actually a sophisticated religious innovator who applied 'mystical pantheism' to everyday Judaism. With common conversation, stories, and folk sayings as his tools, he forged a religious ethos based on love, spirituality, joy, religious emotion, and ethics. Dubnow contrasted the Besht's warm, practical approach to Judaism and Jews with the legalism and insensitivity of the establishment rabbis. He proffered psychological and spiritual healing (*tikun*) and relief from the collective melancholy that gripped the persecution-weary Jews. The rabbis thought only of pedantic religious texts and rituals, ignoring people's real problems. The Besht's personality and *modus operandi* attrac-

ted a huge following and, as Dubnow told it, by the time of his death in 1760 on the festival of Shavuot, he had launched a new, original, authentically Jewish mass movement, complete with doctrines and organization. It drew on the semi-learned and unlearned for its membership. It was they, together with the Besht's disciples at the time, who composed the first generation of hasidism.

For Dubnow the second generation of hasidism began when Dov Ber, the Magid (preacher) of Mezhirech (Międzyrzecz), became the leader of the new hasidic movement, having inherited the Besht's mantle. He moved his court away from the Besht's town, Międzybóž, to the more centrally located Mezhirech. The Magid sent out young men to recruit new souls to the movement. In addition he propounded its doctrines, which seemed to compete with different ideas set forth in a series of three books authored by the Magid's supposed rival for the movement's leadership, Jacob Joseph of Połonne (d. 1784), another disciple of the Besht. Jacob Joseph's books quoted hundreds of sayings in the name of the Besht as well as presenting interpretations of the Torah inspired by hasidic teaching. These books were the first steps in the formation of a hasidic literary canon.

The Magid's disciples, such as Elimelekh of Lizhensk (Leżajsk), Levi Isaac of Berdichev (Berdyczów), Abraham of Kalisk (Końszki), Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (Witebsk), and Shneur Zalman of Liady, were, for Dubnow, the third hasidic generation. After the Magid's death they spread, but also split, the heretofore unified movement by founding their own autonomous courts in far-flung areas of the Russian Jewish Pale of Settlement and Poland. They managed to maintain organizational and doctrinal loyalty to the birthright they had received from the Magid (and the Besht); still, each developed a distinctive leadership style and doctrinal inflections. According to Dubnow, this decentralization of both structure and doctrine made hasidism more accessible to an ever-growing swathe of the Jewish community, until it soon came to rule the Jewish street, at least in the southerly reaches of what had been the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The price, however, for this absence of a central authority was a lack of standards and oversight, sowing the seeds of later degeneration.

Dubnow considered these first three generations of the movement's leadership—the Besht, the Magid (and Jacob Joseph, Pinhas of Korets, etc.), the Magid's disciples—to be the classic period of hasidism. During this time the movement was at its creative peak and virtually free of

corruption. Scholars adopted the term ‘early hasidism’ to denote the activity beginning with the Besht’s ‘revelation’ as a bona fide *ba’al shem* circa 1736 (preceding his move to Międzybóź) until 1815, by which year all of the Magid’s students had died.

After 1815, something scholars have called ‘late’ (i.e. non-classic) hasidism set in. The movement divided and subdivided into numerous dynasties and their tributaries, whose leaders could do—and order their followers to do—as they pleased. Dubnow called this *tsadikism* (from the word ‘*tsadik*’, denoting the leader of a hasidic court), a perversion of the original movement now being led by shallow, and even corrupt, men of no ideological inspiration or theological depth. What energy they had was largely misdirected to a vain struggle against modernity in the form of the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment). After 1870 the degeneration became even worse and Dubnow called it ‘the period of absolute decline’.

Opposition from traditionalist circles (*mitnagedim*) to the new hasidism was the subject of almost a third of Dubnow’s history. He asserted that opposition accompanied the new movement virtually from its inception in the 1740s. The opposition became organized and intensive in 1772 under the leadership of Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, the Vilna Gaon (1720–97). However, after initial successes it subsided somewhat, to be succeeded by two more periods of acute opposition: 1781–4, mainly in reaction to the publication of Jacob Joseph’s books; and 1797–1801, initially in response to the outrageously disrespectful behaviour of some hasidim at the news of the Vilna Gaon’s death on Sukkot of 1797.

Dinur’s Twists

Dubnow’s saga of hasidism and the halo of its influence was somewhat modified by the one-time dean of Israeli modern Jewish historians, Ben-Zion Dinur (1884–1973). Dinur agreed with Dubnow’s paradigm of a three-generation classic movement. Also like Dubnow, he was convinced that hasidism arose within a context of crisis; however, unlike Dubnow, he considered the crisis to have been rooted in the corruption of the Jewish communal institutions, including the rabbinate. Corruption caused those institutions to malfunction and the leadership to lose its legitimacy. Into the breach rushed the hasidic leadership, deriving its legitimacy from charisma and introducing voluntary rather than coercive institutions.

These were leaders who believed in social justice and fought for the simple Jew. Hasidism turned out to be a vehicle for coalescing and activating opposition to a corrupt establishment.

Buber–Scholem Hasidism

Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) were intent upon locating the essence of hasidic doctrine. Their fundamental question: wherein lies the innovation of hasidism? Buber's answer: hasidism is 'kabbalah become ethos'. This meant that hasidism converted mystical truths into righteous action without, however, crossing halakhic red lines. The charisma of hasidic leaders served to animate their followers' routine behaviour, shaping it into the contours of a just society.

Scholem gave multiple responses to the question of the innovative essence of hasidism. He considered the movement to be 'the latest phase' of Jewish mysticism. It differed by neutralizing the acute messianism that had infused the Lurianic kabbalah which preceded it, yet preserving those aspects of kabbalah with the potential for inspiring the masses. At one time Scholem apparently agreed with Buber that the charismatic hasidic tsadik translated the kabbalah into ethical values suitable for application through halakhic means in common people's everyday life. Later he decided that Buber was mistaken. The actual mission of hasidism was to introduce novel kabbalistic ideas.

Chief among these was the concept of *devekut*, communion with God. The idea of *unio mystica*, mystical union with the Divine, was a foundational concept of all religious mysticism, not least kabbalah. According to Scholem, the Ba'al Shem Tov had profoundly changed the place of *devekut* in the Jewish religious quest. For traditional Jewish mystics, *devekut* was a remote ideal that only a select few adepts might realize after completing the arduous, at times Sisyphean, task of distilling the sparks of holiness dissolved in the materiality of this world. It was the ultimate state of being, to be attained—if at all—only after a lifetime of spiritual striving.

In Scholem's conception the Besht and his successors, basing themselves on the zoharic notion that *leit atar panui mineh*, no place is devoid of God, emphasized God's radical immanence. Holiness suffused and infused everything everywhere and might be engaged at any time. What was required was merely the individual's decision to seek out and commune

with the godliness that surrounded him. *Devekut* was not an objective; it was a mode of existence. It was available to anyone willing to commit to it.

Scholem's framing of hasidism as advocating such a 'democratic' approach to the religious life, making the highest form of spirituality available to everyone, echoed Dubnow's image of a folksy yet profound Ba'al Shem Tov who ministered to the downtrodden, persecuted masses. It also matched up with Dinur's early hasidism, which took up the cause of the common people against the oppressive, corrupt establishment; or with Buber's hasidism, which turned the elitist kabbalah into an ethical way of life for the masses.

Scholem, in addition to highlighting what many came to accept as the doctrinal essence of hasidism, *devekut*, also anchored Dubnow's claim that the opposition to hasidism began in response to the Ba'al Shem Tov's activities. Scholem published texts which he thought expressed criticism of the new Beshtian hasidim as early as the 1740s.

In the mid-1960s Ada Rapoport-Albert came to the study of hasidism. At first she served as the student amanuensis of Professor Joseph Weiss, an assignment that soon transformed into a unique tutorial with the erudite, intense, creative scholar. Lacking background in the subject, she was faced with a fully articulated portrayal of the rise and development of the hasidic movement in the eighteenth century. Its main points, which were to be most relevant to her subsequent research, were:

- Hasidism arose in response to some crisis.
- The Besht started a centralized, institutionalized, mass religious-social movement.
- The three-generation chronology of the Besht, the Magid, and the Magid's disciples constituted early or classic hasidism.
- The Magid inherited the leadership of the unified, centralized movement from the Besht; it then split into various courts in the third generation.
- Opposition to hasidism began in the generation of the Besht and became institutionalized in the generation of the Magid.
- The key theological doctrine of hasidism was the conversion of *devekut* from an ultimate objective to be achieved through a lifetime's striving to

a mode of living which any person might commit to. It meant that, with the inspiration of the tsadik, even simple people could become spiritual experts and be connected directly to God. It ‘democratized’ spirituality.

- Hasidism was primarily a popular movement, aimed at raising the status of the common people, enhancing their lives, giving them a voice. It even exhibited certain democratic tendencies.

There was one other dimension of hasidism that, consonant with the reigning assumptions and prejudices of the time, had been virtually ignored by the main academic scholars but which had gained at least one famous treatment. This was the issue of the place of women in the history of the movement.

Only Samuel Abba Horodetsky, scion of prominent hasidic families, Zionist intellectual, and writer of popular histories, had turned scholarly attention to the relationship of hasidism to women. In 1923 he asserted that ‘the Jewish woman was given complete equality in the emotional, mystical religious life of Beshtian hasidism’. Expanding on a short 1909 article he had written in Russian concerning Hannah Rachel Verbermacher, the so-called Maid of Ludmir, who had briefly functioned as a hasidic quasi-tsadik, Horodetsky extolled hasidism as having promoted women’s position in both the family and the community. First of all, it enabled women to establish a direct relationship with the hasidic master, the tsadik who led their particular hasidic group, paralleling that of men. Secondly, it fostered the development of a Yiddish religious literature which offered women the possibility of becoming religiously literate hasidic Jews, like men. Finally, and most dramatically, it allowed talented, learned women to become leaders within the movement, even assuming the role of tsadik, like Verbermacher, the Maid.

Horodetsky’s pronouncement of the elevation of women in hasidism to parity with men was influential. It became a common, if unexamined, assumption of both scholarship and popular lore. The reigning assessment of hasidism incorporated it as one of its secondary themes.

Beginning with the fresh perspective of a newcomer to the study of hasidism, Ada Rapoport-Albert immersed herself in the subject. Since the 1970s she has been subjecting the conventional assessment to critical examination. As a result she has been a main partner in the profound trans-

formation of the history of hasidism that has taken shape over the past generation or so. No one has done more to effect such a transformation than she. The essays in the present collection represent her oeuvre in this field.

ADA RAPOPORT-ALBERT'S ESSAYS



CONCEPTUALIZING LEADERSHIP

'God and the Tsadik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship'

'Confession in the Circle of R. Nahman of Bratslav'

In these two early essays, written in the 1970s, Rapoport-Albert lent a new perspective on the role of the tsadik in hasidism. She insisted on reading the primary sources, especially Jacob Joseph's material and Nathan Sternharz's written records of Nahman of Bratslav's teachings, *tabula rasa*, independently of the interpretations of previous scholars. What she discovered both contradicted some of the key points of the Dubnovian paradigm delineated above and qualified Gershom Scholem's famous conclusion with respect to *devekut* as the essence of hasidism.

Rapoport-Albert emphasized how the Besht and his associates all believed in the dichotomy between the 'men of matter' (*anshei homer*) and the 'men of form' (*anshei tsurah*). Most people were 'men of matter' and could never hope to secure the status of 'men of spirituality', a condition reserved for the spiritual elite, the tsadikim, alone. It was not democracy, but hierarchy: 'Received from the Besht: Each man should conduct himself according to his own rank. For, if he adopts the conduct befitting another man's rank, he fails to comply either with his own or with the other man's standard.'

Hasidism, then, began as an elitist movement, not popular and certainly not populist. Techniques for attaining the state of *devekut*, such as 'worship through corporeality' (*avodah begashmiyut*) and bonding with the inner holiness of the letters of sacred texts, could only be mastered by members of the spiritual elite. *Devekut* itself was out of reach of common people.

Hasidism did, however, offer the 'men of matter' something new. They

could transcend their corporeality and maintain contact with the Divine not by emulating the spiritual elite, but by cleaving to it. Their objective should not be communicating with God, but rather attaching themselves to the holiness of the men of spirit, the *tsadikim*. As Rapoport-Albert put it, ‘Just as God is the focus of the *tsadik*’s religious life, so the *tsadik* is the focus of the ordinary person’s religiosity.’

This notion of the *tsadik* as a surrogate for God in the *hasid*’s life reached its apotheosis with Nahman of Bratslav. He went so far as to project some of God’s attributes, such as ‘withdrawal’ (*tsimtsum*) and inaccessibility, onto himself. Perhaps the ultimate expression of the *tsadik*’s substitution for God was the role of confession in Nahman of Bratslav’s court. Confession, to Nahman, was not a sign of atonement, prompting the *tsadik*’s prescription of a course of penance. Rather, the very act of confession to the *tsadik* brought absolution from the sin and enabled the person confessing to approach the ‘state of the World to Come’. This innovation assigned the *tsadik* quasi-divine power.

Rapoport-Albert’s conception of the *tsadik* and his relationship to his *hasidim* did confirm that hasidism raised the status of the common person. It did so, however, by making him the object of spiritual attention on the part of the spiritual elite, the *tsadikim*. There was no democratization of true spirituality, which remained the province of the elite. *Devekut* may have changed from life goal to mode of living, but it was not a mode available to everyone. Early hasidism did not abolish spiritual—or, in its wake, social—hierarchy.

BECOMING A MOVEMENT

‘Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change’

By implication, the 1970s essays undermined the conventional, Dubnow-originated portrayal of hasidism. In her pivotal study ‘Hasidism after 1772’ Rapoport-Albert attacked the old schema head-on: she proved that the three-generation construct was untenable, because there was nothing that could be termed a new hasidic ‘movement’ until the end of the Magid’s life (December 1772) and the onset of the so-called third generation. Thus the ‘early’ pristine versus ‘late’ decadent hasidism dichotomy was outmoded and most of the rest of Dubnow’s paradigm collapsed alongside it.

Rapoport-Albert demonstrated that in the time of the Besht and for most of the Magid's period there was no self-conscious, collective group identity, no articulated institutions, no unique hasidic ideology, no proprietary hasidic customs, and no literary canon. Thus it was anachronistic to speak of an eighteenth-century centralized, institutionalized, popular mass movement founded by Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, which he headed as formal leader and which was further developed by the Magid. All such descriptions were a later reading into the eighteenth-century *Sitz im Leben* of characteristics of the mature nineteenth-century hasidic movement. In the mid-eighteenth century hasidism was amorphous and embryonic. It was only as it emerged as an identifiable entity in the late eighteenth century that the Besht and the Magid were assigned the role of its founding leaders.

Moreover, the context of the formation of hasidism in the eighteenth century was not crisis. Like the Besht, Jacob Joseph, Pinhas of Korets, and the Magid, who were later seen as members of a distinctive hasidic movement, had originally stemmed from circles of mystical pietists, also called hasidim (their hasidism will be referred to below as 'ascetic-mystical hasidism'). These associates of the Besht continued to practise a normatively bounded style of pietistic Judaism but inflected their traditional pietism with a few unconventional features, such as rejection of asceticism and acceptance of non-elitist members. They did not attract unusual attention until the Vilna Gaon defined them as sectarian. Until then there was no organized opposition to a hasidism still barely distinguishable from conventional ascetic-mystical hasidism. The Gaon decided that what had been seen as another style of pietism should be labelled the Other.

In response to the Gaon's turning them into a targeted enemy, a chief manifestation of evil whose elimination was vital to the perfection of all society, the hasidim started to distinguish themselves in various ways from established entities. They began developing doctrines and institutions, and became conscious of themselves as a distinct group. They always continued, however, to maintain a relatively conservative halakhic stance and gradually penetrated established local Jewish institutions. Given the decentralized nature of Jewish communal life in general and the difficulty of finding technical halakhic fault with the behaviour of hasidim, on the whole their resistance to the *mitnagedim* was rather successful.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, then, did not found anything. He was prominent

and influential among a network of charismatic spiritual leaders, each of whom was not his 'disciple' but was himself surrounded by a group of disciples. Each of them was articulating some version of traditional ascetic-mystical 'hasidic' pietism. The decentralization that had been heralded by academic scholars as a hallmark of the so-called 'late' hasidism was actually present from the origins of the movement and mirrored the decentralization of the Polish Jewish community and the Polish polity as well.

Since the early movement was not centralized, institutionalized, or even self-conscious, there was never any 'leadership of the movement' to inherit—or to fight over. Early disputes and feuds among members of the network of leaders in the 1760s and 1770s concerned personal animosities and turf struggles, not doctrines or power within the 'movement'. It was only as the individual hasidic courts multiplied in the late eighteenth century that the question of leadership and its transmission arose and was contested. The issue, however, was always the leadership of a given court or dynasty. From its inception there never was a battle over some—non-existent—supreme leadership of the movement as a whole. The pluralist, non-institutionalized nature of the larger incipient movement encouraged the proliferation of many branch groups, which themselves became progressively more tightly knit, centralist, and institutionalized, while maintaining a loose non-hierarchical relationship between groups.

The greater significance of Rapoport-Albert's interpretation was that the decentralized but institutionalized hasidism of the nineteenth century was not hasidism in its degenerate period, but rather in its mature form. The Magid's disciples, who had conventionally been viewed as the 'third generation' of a movement founded thirty or so years earlier, were actually the first self-conscious generation of the new hasidic movement. There was no rooted movement united under the leadership of the Besht and the Magid. The leaders of the new hasidism in the last third of the eighteenth century were experimenting with different forms of organization and developing various doctrines that would shape their emerging movement.

In addition, as already noted, hasidism was not fashioned in response to some crisis and did not meet with opposition in the time of the Ba'al Shem Tov. It gradually differentiated itself from the existing ascetic-mystical hasidism. The opposition galvanized by the Vilna Gaon in the early 1770s, more than a decade after the Besht had died and less than a year before the

Magid did, catalysed hasidim's own leap from identification with conventional pietism to self-consciousness as a separate movement.

Paradoxically, opposition to hasidism was the crucial step in defining the new movement, and this process of self-conscious definition did not begin until after both the Besht and the Magid had made their mark. Moreover, this new hasidism maintained fundamental fealty to both the halakhah and the Jewish community.

FASHIONING THE PAST

'Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism'

Every construction of hasidic history is based on sources, but the vexing question of which ones—written and oral—are legitimate for the uses of historiography and how they should be utilized has dogged the writing of this history ever since it began. As its full title implies, in this essay Ada Rapoport-Albert explored the relationship between hasidic history and hasidic hagiography.

At the outset she distinguished between 'archaeological truth' and 'historical truth'. The former is what the evidence indicates; the latter is what collective memory has construed. It is this 'historical truth', or historical collective memory, that serves as the basis for people's beliefs and actions. Hasidic historical sources, Rapoport-Albert posited, were interested in propagating historical memory, not what she referred to as archaeological truth.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that the best-known and most utilized source for the history of the Ba'al Shem Tov and early hasidism has been the book *Shivhei habesht* (In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov). This is a collection of some 200 stories transcribed, compiled, and edited from oral sources about the Besht and his associates. The book has gone through complicated compiling, editing, and publication processes. Its title announces the genre to which it belongs: hagiography (*hagios* = holy, *graphos* = writing, i.e. writing praising holy figures). As the original compiler of the stories, Dov Ber of Linitz (Ilintz), and Rapoport-Albert both emphasized, the intention of *Shivhei habesht*, as of all hagiography, was to use the life of the holy man to

instil in readers a sense of awe and motivate them towards a life of morality and piety. It was *not* to convey history in the conventional sense, but rather to transmit to posterity a historical image that people could cherish and be inspired by.

Rapoport-Albert insisted, however, that the tales ‘do not set out to falsify the facts or to make them up’. Once again drawing a paradox, she asserted, ‘But it is precisely the historically casual nature of the tales, the fact that their conscious “agenda” is pietistic, not historiographical, that lends credibility to such concrete items of historical information as they still contain.’ By this she meant that names, dates, specific events, and other ‘hard facts’ mentioned in passing in these hagiographical stories should be taken at face value unless proven otherwise.

Ironically, then, hasidic hagiography may prove to be a useful source for the facts of hasidic history despite itself. At the same time, other hasidic historical sources and history-writing, while consciously attempting to mimic modern, academically sanctioned archival sources and historiographical scholarship, are nothing more than ‘hagiography with footnotes’. The bulk of the essay illustrates this thesis with two related examples: the letters of the infamous Kherson *genizah* and the extensive historiographical writings of the sixth leader, or *admor*, of Habad hasidism, Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880–1950).

The Kherson *genizah* is a collection of hundreds of letters purporting to be the correspondence of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his associates in the eighteenth century. Virtually all academic and even most hasidic authorities—apart from Habad—agree that these documents are forgeries concocted around the time of the First World War. Rapoport-Albert analysed the contents and demonstrated that the documents were carefully contrived to serve as glosses on existing hasidic hagiography and oral traditions. Keenly aware of problems with the traditional written and oral sources, the ‘letters’ attempt to resolve these, corroborating, filling in gaps, explaining inconsistencies, and harmonizing discrepancies between current hasidic practice and what seemed to obtain 150 or so years earlier as reflected in the traditional material.

The Admor Joseph Isaac, the most enthusiastic defender of the authenticity of the Kherson *genizah*, made extensive use of these documents to write what he hoped would be the authoritative history of hasidism, perpetuating the traditional image based on collective hasidic historical mem-

ory. The Admor also drew on another source: his own secret activities reinforcing Jewish religion in general and Habad in particular in the face of early Soviet repression of both.

The Admor construed his own clandestine initiatives for spreading Jewish belief and practice in the Soviet Union in the 1920s as typological activity characteristic of hasidic leaders beginning with the Besht and continuing with Shneur Zalman of Liady and his successors. Joseph Isaac thus projected what he himself had done onto the Besht, and constructed a historical Besht who appeared to foreshadow his own persona and career.

For Rapoport-Albert the key historical significance of the Kherson archive and Joseph Isaac's historiography was that both felt the necessity to dress up what was essentially hagiography to appear to be academically legitimate historiography. This was indicative of how sensitive at least some hasidic circles had become to secular critiques of the movement and how they sought to neutralize academic attacks by answering them in their own style. But more than being a response to outside criticism, the adoption of a simulated academic pose was a measure of how much modern secular values had infiltrated the traditional world, leading people to abandon it in droves. In order to retain the loyalty of their followers, religious leaders had to lend their claims authority by expressing them in terms that at least appeared to satisfy modern criteria for truth assertion. By this time many traditionally inclined people shared certain epistemological assumptions current in society at large. In order to preserve the traditional portrait of the past, the method of portrayal had to change.

WOMEN OUT?

*'From Prophetess to Madwoman: The Displacement of
Female Spirituality in the Post-Sabbatian Era'*

*'On Women in Hasidism: S. A. Horodetsky and the
Maid of Ludmir Tradition'*

The subject of women and hasidism had been sorely neglected by conventional scholarship. Horodetsky's lone study, cited above, held sway without ever having been subject to critical review. Here Rapoport-Albert engaged in a revision that was more aggressive and even more sweeping than she

had accomplished with respect to the Dubnovian paradigm concerning the origins and development of the movement.

The reader will recall Horodetsky's claim that by bringing women into the tsadik's court, providing them with religious literature, and enabling talented women to reach leadership positions, hasidism had brought women to equality in religious life. This became the common scholarly orthodoxy for some sixty years. In 1988 Rapoport-Albert challenged every one of Horodetsky's contentions in an essay which has become a classic of Jewish feminist scholarship. In this essay she demonstrated that hasidism related only to the spiritual life of men, not only ignoring women religiously but adding to their domestic burdens. Contrary to Horodetsky's statement, she proved that, notwithstanding the possibility that some individual women might have been able to gain a personal interview with a tsadik, women in general were excluded from the arenas of court activity that counted in hasidism. Again contradicting Horodetsky, she demonstrated that there was no hasidic literature for or about women before the twentieth century.

Most dramatically, she demolished Horodetsky's central thesis, based on the example of the Maid of Ludmir, that women could even be tsadikim. She showed that this one example was unique, *sui generis*, never replicated. More important, she argued, the case of the Maid actually proved the limitations on women's participation in hasidic life. Verbermacher had come to stand at the head of a following of hasidim only by virtue of her abandonment of the gender markers of femininity. Only a woman who violated the gender boundary and did not behave as a 'real' woman might lead. However, even this was not to be tolerated by the male establishment. Tremendous pressure was brought to bear upon the Maid to 'act like a woman'—first and foremost to marry (she subsequently divorced)—and thereby relinquish any pretensions to the male role of tsadik. She could not be both a 'real' woman and a tsadik. Hasidism, then, did not make women equal to men, but perpetuated and even strengthened the traditional gender hierarchy.

For Rapoport-Albert the question was, 'Why?' In her research on Sabbatianism she discovered that there actually was a tradition of messianic prophecy by Jewish women beginning in the wake of the Spanish Expulsion, flourishing in sixteenth-century Safed, reaching a climax with female Sabbatian prophets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

and continuing in some form until the last gasps of Sabbatianism in the 1800s.

In hasidism women had no spiritual agency. With the partial exception of prominent women relatives of important hasidic figures (such as Feyge, granddaughter of the Besht and mother of Nahman of Bratslav, held to be like ‘one of the prophetesses’), spiritual, prophetic women disappeared. They were replaced, in hasidic lore, by women who were possessed by evil spirits or who were sinners themselves. Hasidic homiletical literature was never addressed to women. When they did appear in the literature they were never presented as actual women. Instead they were allegorized as representing something else, like the ‘men of matter’ or the Jewish people.

Why was it that hasidism, which shared many of the characteristics of Sabbatianism (e.g. geographical location in eastern Europe, kabbalistic legacy, charismatic leadership) and pioneered new, unconventional paths to holiness, did not include the cultivation of female spirituality and leadership among its innovations? Why did it perpetuate gender hierarchy rather than an inclusive, egalitarian attitude towards women?

Rapoport-Albert’s answer, in a word, is: sex. Traditionally women were defined by an inherent sexuality. Sabbatianism in its various incarnations had shown that if women were admitted to the circle of spiritual activism, they brought their sexuality with them. This led to libertinism and sexual depravity. As it was, the enemies of hasidism libelled it as an offshoot of Sabbatianism. The hasidim dared not flirt with the sexual threat that women represented. Rather than summon them to transcend their sexual nature (a main theme of hasidic doctrine with respect to men), better to allegorize real women out of doctrinal consciousness. Meanwhile the place for flesh-and-blood women was in out-of-focus facilitative roles at home or at the margins of the tsadik’s court.

WOMEN IN?

‘The Emergence of a Female Constituency in Twentieth-Century Habad’

‘From Woman as Hasid to Woman as “Tsadik” in the Teachings of the Last Two Lubavitcher Rebbes’

We have seen how Rapoport-Albert skilfully used the example of ‘hagiography with footnotes’ to illustrate the sensitivity of at least some hasidim, and especially of Habad, to the inroads that modern sensibilities were

making into traditional society. In these two studies about women and twentieth-century Habad, she highlighted how the traditional stance towards women, elucidated in the previous section, was inadequate to the social and cultural circumstances of the twentieth century. In response, the role of women in Habad hasidism underwent a radical transformation.

In these essays Rapoport-Albert continued developing the theme that in hasidism, from its origins in the eighteenth century, there was no provision for a collective spiritual experience for women. Technically a woman could not even be a 'hasid'; wife of, sister of, daughter of a hasid, but not a hasid herself—no matter how distinguished her lineage. Even the one venue of female contact with the tsadik, the private interview (*yehides*), was restricted. Some tsadikim, notably all of the first five leaders of Habad, refused even this expedient.

The refusal to include women was only indirectly relaxed in Habad beginning with Shalom Dovber (1860–1920), who consented to his wife, Shterna Sarah (1860–1942), presenting him with the petitions of women supplicants. Eventually he decided that Shterna Sarah should found a women's philanthropic group to support the students of the Habad Tomkhei Temimim yeshiva. Still, Shalom Dovber never directly addressed women. After all, he believed that 'Satan dances among the women' and blamed them as primarily responsible for the large-scale secularization and assimilation of his day.

It was Shalom Dovber's son, the sixth *admor* of Habad, Joseph Isaac, who realized that women were an untapped resource that could supply much-needed human capital to reinforce the traditional Judaism that was under attack. He was the first *admor* to speak to women directly and collectively. He sought to organize women's groups promoting halakhic observance, and created frameworks for exposing them to Habad teachings in a limited way.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–94), Joseph Isaac's son-in-law and successor, went much further. He saw women as full partners in the messianic project, which more and more became the ultimate focus of Habad under his leadership. Towards that end he institutionalized women's education and roles in the movement. He often taught women's groups personally and granted many women private audiences. Initial resistance to this stance on the part of men did not deter him.

This empowerment of women as full-fledged hasidim and messianic

catalysts was also calculated to combat contemporary feminism. To Menachem Mendel feminism subverted women's divinely endowed nature and divinely assigned roles and was destructive to traditional society as a whole. Rapoport-Albert posited that by transvaluing women's traditional virtues and roles Menachem Mendel had created a powerful counter-feminism that was a key factor in the success of his movement.

Once more hasidism, or at least its Habad iteration, proved its sensitivity to the shifting modern context. It demonstrated its ability to innovate in the name of tradition, appropriating, yet transmuting, feminism—that most modern of cultural trends—as a means of protecting tradition.

CONCLUSION

Ada Rapoport-Albert has rewritten the master-narrative of early hasidic history. Thanks to her we now know that eighteenth-century hasidism did not represent the movement's 'classic period' and was not a project of democratization, ameliorating the hierarchical structuring of religion and spirituality. Evolving in a context of intense spirituality rather than of political, social, economic, or religious crisis, eighteenth-century hasidism is more accurately described as the gestational prelude to the mature movement of the nineteenth century. The new hasidism, initially neither institutionalized nor centralized, was characterized by a process of differentiating itself from conventional ascetic-mystical hasidism. Its elite leaders only became conscious of a distinctive group identity long after the Ba'al Shem Tov's death and at the very end of the Magid's career.

Ironically, this newfound consciousness emerged in response to the Vilna Gaon's demonization of the hasidim. They subsequently spent the last decades of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century experimenting with various forms of doctrine, literature, organization, leadership, and transfer of authority. The experimentation was, however, always within the bounds of halakhah and with an eye towards remaining integrated in the established Jewish community.

Somewhat surprisingly, this experimentation did not include the revision of women's status and role. Rapoport-Albert has emphasized that, contrary to the thrust of hasidism towards spiritualization of the physical, the movement persisted in identifying women with an irredeemable materiality. They could never escape their inherent sexuality and attain spiritual

heights. Therefore gender hierarchy persisted and, formally speaking, for the first 150 years or so of the existence of hasidism women were not counted as members of the group. Real women, as opposed to generic allegorized or symbolic women, were invisible in hasidic doctrine and marginal to hasidic life.

Looking at twentieth-century hasidism through the prism of Habad, Rapoport-Albert has revealed its negotiation with modernity. Understanding the changes in all post-Enlightenment people's epistemological universe, Habad's modern leaders adapted their modes of communication and rhetoric to appeal to modern sensibilities. They also responded to modernist feminism by re-evaluating and recalibrating the role of women in their movement. As they (mis-)appropriated modern rhetorical strategies to defend tradition, so did they adopt certain feminist postulates in order to create a counter-feminism that would empower women without flouting traditional fundamental gender roles.

The essays that appear here represent Rapoport-Albert's scholarship, with its felicitous combination of erudition and creativity. She has never lacked the courage to question conventions, but neither has she overturned them lightly. The rabbinic admonition of 'respect but suspect' is an apt epigraph for her approach to the scholarly legacy to which she has been heir. The conclusions of her innovative scholarship have been incorporated in the collectively authored *Hasidism: A New History*, published by Princeton University Press.

Research and writing, however, do not exhaust Rapoport-Albert's contribution to scholarship and education. As the perennial long line of students outside her University College London office testifies, she has become a figure to whom students—and colleagues—look for guidance, criticism, advice, and inspiration. Projecting a quiet authority and subtle charisma, she has made her mark in every area of academic endeavour: research, writing, teaching, editing, speaking, reviewing, evaluating, recommending, conferencing, administrating, organizing, grantsmanship, and fundraising.

The decision of the Littman Library to bring together the essays in this volume is a fitting statement of Ada Rapoport-Albert's importance to the fields of research she has undertaken, to the institutions with which she has been associated, to Jewish studies as a whole, and to the academic scrutiny of religion.

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