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Introduction to Special Cluster: Tiberian Hasidism

Aubrey L. Glazer, Ariel Evan Mayse, and Nehemia Polen

In the year 1777, a group of Eastern European Jews set sail in search of a promised land, far away from the internal and external conflicts plaguing those souls seeking the infinite within this finite world. Some who set sail identified with the burgeoning Hasidic movement. Others seem to have come along just for the ride, perhaps excited by the vibrant energy of the Hasidic masters or tempted by messianic expectations.¹ Historians debate the motives that led to this minor *aliyah* [immigration] to the small Yishuv in the Land of Israel.² But what is clear is that, notwithstanding the considerable socioeconomic and geographic challenges, some members of this emigrating group sought to establish a new center for a burgeoning Hasidic ethos. Nothing found in the sources produced by this community suggests any sort of national or pan-diasporic aim, and in this way their group should be differentiated from later modern movements of political renewal. But the Hasidic émigrés maintained a close link with their communities in Eastern Europe, stretching the intimate relationship between master and disciple across thousands of miles. Their letters reveal a hope that the impact of this small mystical fellowship and its rich devotional life would radiate outward from its renewed center in the Holy Land in Palestine.

Our knowledge of the 1777 emigration derives from many sources, mostly internal, including Hasidic homilies [*derashot*], prayer commentaries [*be'urim*], and a large collection of letters [*iggerot*]. While many scholars have studied this latter body of correspondence, the correlation between sociohistorical structures and theological records of mystical experience has often gone unappreciated. The full ideational theological import in these letters of correspondence as it relates to the social structure of their authors' mystical communities is only beginning to be understood.³ Our ongoing project is thus meant to redress,

by means of, contextualization, annotated translation, and commentary, the overarching theological implications and innovations as well as through rigorous analysis of the teachings, and careful comparison of the emergent theologies evidenced in the texts nascent to this Hasidic *aliyah* of 1777. Scholars thus far have mostly obscured the differences between their teachings (either in terms of the Tiberian masters, or much of early Hasidism more broadly). This special volume of *Shofar* serves as a preliminary analysis of the insights received and shared at the recently convened seminar on Tiberian Hasidism at the forty-eighth annual conference of the Association for Jewish Studies in San Diego (2016). At this meeting scholars in the academy as well as the Haredi world came together to read texts critically and to share a range insights as part of a community willing to cross disciplinary, intellectual, and sociological boundaries.

The scholarly roadmap for our analysis of Tiberian Hasidism has, of course, been established by the wealth of research on Hasidism in general, and its Tiberian iteration in particular.⁴ Our work engages in particular with the works of Joseph Weiss, Ada Rapoport-Albert, Gershon Hundert, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Ze'ev Gries, Moshe Rosman, Immanuel Etkes, Haviva Pedaya, Glenn Dynner and Philip Wexler, whose exemplary research and distinct methodologies have opened the field to examining the Hasidic social milieu as a subject of interrogation.⁵ Their scholarship provides a lens for reading hagiographic records in correlation with Polish and Russian archives, providing contributions that have had a major impact on the field. However, we do not wish to lose sight of the crucial theological issues, and must equally acknowledge the pioneering work on the Mezritsh circle by Moshe Idel, Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, Rachel Elijor, Arthur Green, Naftali Loewenthal, and Rapoport-Albert.⁶ At the same time, the hitherto binary framing of these issues—that is, as either purely historical or theological—may have contributed to some missed moments of correlation,⁷ with the exception of Elliot Wolfson's recent scholarship on Habad Hasidism, which proffers a comparative phenomenological approach to mysticisms Jewish and beyond, and challenges such binary thinking.⁸

We must applaud the remarkable contributions of Habad Hasidism—often understood as a more cognitive- or cerebral-based Hasidism of contemplation—and its willingness to put into practice what they see as the Ba'al Shem Tov's legacy. This has included commitment to the mass dissemination of Hasidic homilies (including semi-critical editions), extensive hagiography, and even archival-based historiography. Yet it is precisely for this reason that it is now so important to highlight another important and very different voice of early Hasidism that was emerging simultaneously around the Maggid's table.⁹ This stream of Hasidism, more heart-centered in its devotional tenor and mystical yearnings, is lesser-known but of crucial historical and scholarly importance. Its theological textures are made clearer when we examine the works of those who consciously chose to leave Eastern Europe to live in *Eretz Yisrael* in the city of Tiberias. The purpose of the current investigation is to explore more deeply their choice to immigrate to such an isolated and vulnerable area of Palestine, leaving Eastern Europe far behind, in light of the many historical, sociological, and theological implications.

Throughout our inquiries we maintain that it is not possible to truly disentangle the theological from the sociohistorical.¹⁰ An important step in this trajectory is exemplified in the scholarship of R. Avraham Avish Shor, who correlates nuances in history and mystical theology through fieldwork and scholarship on scarcely treated and unpublished materials. While his scholarship is relatively unknown in most academic circles, Shor edits the Karlin-Stolin journal *Beit Aharon v'Yisrael* and exemplifies the hybrid direction of recent research.¹¹ (His work, published thus far only in Hebrew, will figure more fully in our forthcoming volume).¹² While important work has been done in both historical and theological realms, Shor's more robust and integrated approach to what we are calling *Tiberian Hasidism* has yet to be fully appreciated. This special issue is a step in that direction.

This understudied chapter in Hasidic and Yishuv historiography has been treated in several monographs deserving of further attention by historians.¹³ These works help avoid an essentialist reduction of *Eretz Yisrael* to the historical founding of the modern state in 1948 and a common

reduction of all early modern yearnings for the Land of Israel as ancillary to political or cultural Zionism; these Hasidic sources bring awareness to the longer, complex historical arcs of cohabitation and religious meaning that preceded it. Yet after a decade-long project of coediting an annotated translation, commentary, and critical reader's guide to much of this understudied period of the 1777 emigration, we continue to notice a distinct historiographic bias among both internal Haredi and external academic scholars toward the varieties of Hasidism that flourished in Eastern Europe, a preference that has come at the expense of close investigation of Tiberian Hasidism. Scholars have been deeply engaged with fundamental questions regarding Eastern Europe: How did Hasidism emerge? Who were the critical players? What was their relationship to one another? Are their nuanced distinctions in their theology and practice? How did Hasidism relate to the questions and frameworks of modernity, including secularism, changing political circumstances, geographic shift, and so forth? Few, if any, of these foundational questions have been applied to the literatures of Tiberian Hasidism, seen mostly as a fringe movement of lesser historical and intellectual importance. This evident preference impedes serious reflection on Tiberian Hasidism, which included such luminaries as Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, Rabbi Avraham ha-Kohen of Kalisk, and Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Smorytzch—pioneering figures whose correspondence, homilies, and emigration stories continue to challenge contemporary readers. The essays in this special issue of *Shofar* on Tiberian Hasidism begin to redress this imbalance.

This investigation does not come without its challenges, especially considering that no group in the current Hasidic landscape explicitly sees itself as the lineal descendant of the Tiberian legacy. Yet the leaders of Karlin-Stolin, Slonim, Rizhen (Ruzhin) do see themselves, in varying degrees and modalities, as influenced by the Tiberian classic sources and the teachings of the *tzaddikim* discussed herein. The depth of their connection to the Tiberian wellsprings is visible in conceptual influence and frequent citations from the teachings of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk—and his successors—but without claiming to be their sole inheritors or the exclusive possessors of Tiberian traditions. Our ongoing

research within the written literatures of Hasidism, and in fieldwork within these living Hasidic communities in which the imprint of early Tiberian Hasidic masters and texts is very much alive and felt, dovetails with a resurgence of interest in recovering and reclaiming some of the devotional fragments that keep the fires of Hasidism ablaze. Over the past four decades there has been an inner-Hasidic awakening in the modern State of Israel, one in which certain important leaders and communities have looked to the intensive mystical teachings of the early masters like the Maggid—and his disciples that moved to Safed and Tiberias—in charting a path of contemporary spiritual renewal.¹⁴ The essays in the current collection focus primarily on one of the most understudied testimonies to the 1777 *aliyah*—the *'igrot*. While Rosman and Dynner have contributed a “thick description” to the rereading of Hasidic historiography,¹⁵ much work remains to be done. Several interdisciplinary extrapolations have emerged since their pioneering research, such as in Eli Rubin’s essay below, which employs a social-historical approach to the analysis of this neglected chapter in Hasidic history.¹⁶

The essays presented herein emerged from our international seminar, which was specifically devoted to examining the letters written in Tiberias to Hasidim who remained in need of spiritual direction in Eastern Europe. Many of the insights in the present special issue emerged from the conversations generated during that three-day seminar, discussions that ranged well beyond the initial papers and sparked entirely new ideas and lines of inquiry. A particularly fertile initial “round” of peer review was thus built into the very fabric of these essays. Our time was spent in generative debate, and more than occasional disagreement, but the seminar also cultivated a sense of scholarly *communitas* and shared investment in seeking new ways to read the sources. Such gatherings offer a vital model for collaborative scholarship, perhaps one that is particularly befitting of the subject of our study.¹⁷

In the course of convening the seminar, we went to great lengths to look beyond the usual academic circles to enlarge the scope of discourse—in critical, historical, and experiential terms—drawing in experts from the Hasidic-Haredi field who are crossing devotional and

academic boundaries. By engaging in critical discourse with scholars from Karlin-Stolin, Habad, and other Hasidic-Haredi circles, we have discovered a treasure trove of materials within and beyond the known letters of correspondence, including *derashot* on weekly scriptural readings, prayer commentaries, and emigration tales [called *sippurei ma'aseh*], all of which, from time to time and with appropriate critical lenses, can refract light onto this nearly lost historical moment. Previous work of critically sifting through “constructions of construction,”¹⁸ from Hasidic hagiography to Podolian tax records, has revealed unseen aspects of a Hasidic *Sitz im Leben* [social context]. The present essays seek to challenge scholars of mysticism and historians alike by offering a lens in which theology and social situatedness are approached as mutually constructive.

Building on the work of Rosman, Glenn Dynner has interrogated reigning assumptions about the role of the *tzaddik* [spiritual leader] in relation to the Hasid and the imbedded experience of worship through corporeal realities. His reading of one elliptic letter, clarified through meticulous archival research and historical contextualization, is of particular relevance to our subject. The occupation of Jewish tavern-keeping in Eastern and East Central Europe posed a unique challenge to the Hasidic conception of worship through corporeality, and Dynner shows how one letter concerning tavern-keeping bans lends itself to a larger, thick description of a Hasidic datum concerning both R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady.¹⁹ Nuancing R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk's dismissal of bans on Jewish liquor, since the occupation was in any case a business “of ill repute and impervious to all blessings,”²⁰ Dynner suggests yet another motivation behind the Hasidic emigration of 1777—the widespread bans on a Jewish occupational mainstay—alongside previously known factors such as opposition from factions of Mithnaggedim; messianic impulses; hopes of founding a center for Hasidic praxis in the Holy Land; and the effects of dwelling there on spiritual practice.²¹

The cowritten essay by Nehemia Polen and David Maayan, entitled “Theology, Succession, and Social Structure in the Dispute between Rabbi Abraham Kalisker and Rabbi Shneur Zalman,” frames the discussion of

Tiberian Hasidism in contradistinction to a more rigid definition of the *tzaddik* in R. Shneur Zalman's *Tanya*. Polen and Maayan suggest that this rigidity may contribute to the rise of the hereditary principle: the essential nature of the *tzaddik* cannot be lost, does not dissipate, and therefore is preserved and transmitted. The state of being a *tzaddik* is so rare, so unique, and so nearly impossible to achieve, that when it appears it endures and remains in a steady state. The *tzaddik* is thus a singleton who bequeaths his status to his biological heir. In contrast, R. Menahem Mendel and R. Avraham in Tiberias conceive the individual *tzaddik* as having a complex, multilayered spiritual life. At times the service of the *tzaddik* is completely selfless, devoted entirely to God; at times he is focused on his own spirituality. Yet one approach is nestled in the other; everything, including *tzaddik* status, remains in flux, variable, and is distributed in a more multilayered spiritual life.

Polen and Maayan's close reading of key letters, especially the letter of Tiberias Hasidism after the passing of R. Avraham of Kalisk, dated *Shevat* 5571/1811—concerning the continuation of the *ma'amadot*, or vigils—suggests a collective community with a more evenly distributed leadership not vested in any single individual, but rather based on love and mutual bonding. While the distribution of funds was certainly a major concern and became a flashpoint, Polen and Maayan argue that one should not diminish the significance of principled theological views on the nature of Hasidism in fueling the split between R. Avraham of Kalisk and Rabbi Shneur Zalman. The latter was an extraordinary leader, gifted with genuine charisma and a commanding intellect, who led a large and expanding network of followers. R. Avraham of Kalisk, by contrast, chose to immigrate to the Holy Land and cultivate a small, intimate circle that, in his view, more authentically reflected the early Hasidic ethos. His views on Hasidic theology and social structure work hand in hand; they are consistent with an integrity, depth, and power that must be understood and evaluated on their own terms, and read in respectful contrast to the spiritual approach of R. Shneur Zalman.

Ariel Evan Mayse's essay, "Moving Mezritsh: Early Hasidism and the Hasidic Community in the Land of Israel," also contextualizes the move

to Tiberias through a reading of the epistles' theological and ideational content. Notwithstanding their lack of much direct information about the contours of the Hasidic community in the Land of Israel—numbers, specific events, named key figures, information about their readership or reception—the letters reveal a fuller, more robust picture of the spiritual orientation of the community. These epistles, for Mayse, shed light on a crucial moment or series of moments in the development of Hasidic spirituality that emerged from the teachings of R. Dov Baer of Mezritsh (d. 1772), the teacher of these leaders and the paterfamilias of their community. The letters furthermore reveal a new perspective on the theologies of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and R. Avraham of Kalisk, illustrating the development of these thinkers across several decades and exploring their connection to other key figures in the Maggid's orbit. R. Avraham, according to Mayse, makes reference to the customs of the inner circle of the Maggid, yet makes no mention of written teachings or manuscripts in his possession. In the war over fidelity, Mayse argues, intimacy, memory, and oral traditions are the gold standard, especially as enunciated in letters that witness this burgeoning conscious community in Tiberias in relation to colleagues and disciples in the diaspora.

The late Tsippi Kauffman contributed an essay titled, “Doctrine of the Distant *Tzaddik*: Mysticism, Ethics, and Politics,” which focuses on the holy man or *tzaddik* and challenges the implicit assumption that in the *tzaddik*'s doctrine is derived from the living relationship with his Hasidim. Instead, Kauffman asks, when the *tzaddik* remains relocated at a great distance like Tiberias, far away from his Hasidim in Eastern Europe, for many years, can any “doctrine of the *tzaddik*” actually be consolidated? Since the Hasidic *tzaddik* is an outgrowth of the Kabbalistic *tzaddik* (the ascetic and, at the same time, the earthly manifestation of the *sefirah* of *yesod*), Kauffman argues that it can exist even in the absence of Hasidim. She draws her evidence in part from *Hesed le-Avraham*, a collection of homilies attributed to R. Avraham ha-Malakh, the son of the Maggid of Mezritsh, who was known as a fiercely ascetic *tzaddik* who did not gather a following of close disciples. Not coincidentally, published within the very same volume is *Hesed le-Avraham* by

R. Avraham of Kalisk—a *tzaddik* who, as successor of R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, maintained a small following in Tiberias, but also maintained a remarkable relationship with his Hasidim abroad. While R. Avraham's ethical-mystical philosophy is unique in Hasidic moral teachings (though it is more common to Hasidic stories, without the mystical conceptualization), Kauffman claims that one cannot ignore the historiopolitical context within which it arose. Conversely, while this historiopolitical context is important for an understanding of R. Avraham's teachings, one cannot ignore the uniqueness of his clear ethical voice—and herein remains the challenge.

Eli Rubin's essay, "Questions of Love and Truth: New Perspectives on the Controversy between R. Avraham of Kalisk and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady," reexamines past assumptions of historiography and the binary split between the exclusive analysis of social and mystical structures. The Hasidic communities in the Diaspora and the Holy Land were bound together in an inextricable economic and spiritual circle of mutual reliance. R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, R. Avraham of Kalisk, and R. Shneur Zalman of Liady understood the terms of this relationship in ways that are sometimes very similar and sometimes very different. Rubin examines this supposition through the prism of several key texts in order to gain deeper insight regarding such conflicting and complementary notions as mysticism and society, contemplation and faith, love and humility, and the *tzaddik* and the Holy Land. In terms of their spiritual values, it emerges that R. Avraham and R. Shneur Zalman were often in agreement. Yet these mystical masters emphatically disagreed upon the practical techniques that would hold these ideals to the divine standard of truth and personal integrity.

Given the full imbrication of social and theological realms, might the communal fabric of Tiberian Hasidism leave its imprint upon the very form and style of the letters sent back to Eastern Europe by its leaders? Aubrey L. Glazer's essay, "From Tiberias, with Love: Hermeneutics of Imbrication in Letters of Love," contextualizes the historical layers behind the hermeneutics of letter writing. While this genre of correspondence can be situated within the greater arc of Late Humanism (circa

1550–1660) that was preoccupied with letter writing as a form of enlightenment, Glazer argues that the spiritual direction here transforms the genre of correspondence in Tiberian Hasidism. The love shared between true friends knows no bounds. Friendship as an ideal inspires the passion of scholarly correspondence, and its quest for universal erudition was important for Late Humanism before its inevitable absorption into Baroque and Enlightenment cultures.²² As a precursor to eighteenth-century Galilee, such Late Humanism is marked by a “return to Stoicism, an irenic attitude towards religious conflict, literary mannerism and increasing interest in esotericism, alchemy and natural science.”²³ As we enter the eighteenth century, Glazer argues, one must consider how this ideal of friendship—so common during this period across Europe and beyond its borders through global travel and pilgrimages—becomes uniquely inflected in the Ottoman context of Palestine, specifically from 1777 onward in the Galilee region.

Thus Glazer argues for a more expansive reading of the multifaceted hermeneutics of friendship within the genre of correspondence of the R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and R. Avraham of Kalisk with their diasporic disciples, and how imbrications by these masters deepen the experience of mystical friendship. From a distance, R. Avraham was able to amplify the intimacy of spiritual friendship—with disciples and colleagues alike—by deepening the principals of *love* and *respect* while fusing the *emotional* and the *moral* models of friendship into one that is uniquely Hasidic, through the hermeneutics of imbrication. While not necessarily unique to Hebrew literature, Glazer suggests that in these “Letters of Love” from Tiberias the hermeneutics of imbrication open heretofore unseen interconnections of one heart-mind to another, since deep intimacy comes despite great distance.

In conclusion, this special volume attempts to build and expand upon the scholarly research and devotional assumptions as a way of expanding the horizons of discourse. Tiberian Hasidism remains a rich field that is ripe for excavation, and the fact that the editors of *Shofar* are willing to explore this unfolding project with us is promising for the future the field.

NOTES

1. Assaf, "The Rumor Was Spread." For a critique and revision of Assaf, see R. Avraham Avish Shor, "The Group of 'the Needy.'"
2. Immanuel Etkes, *Messianic Zionism of the Vilna Gaon*. (Heb.).
3. Wexler, *Mystical Interactions*; Wexler and Garb, *After Spirituality*.
4. On the R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk's paradoxical historico-eschatological proclivities toward deep acosmicism that transcends nomos and qualia, see Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, esp. 113–29. See also Halamish, "The Teachings"; Haran, "*Shivbe ha-Rav*"; Haran, "*Atarah l'Yoshna*"; Assaf, "*Yesod Ha-Ma'ala*"; Haran, "*Mah beni'a et talmide ha-Magid*"; Karlinski, *Counter History*; Mondshine, "*Aminutan*"; Wilensky, *The Hasidic Community*; Piekartz, *The Beginning of Hasidism*.
5. Weiss, "The Origins," 97–99; Weiss, "R. Abraham Kalisker's Concept"; Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidic Studies*; Hundert, *Toward a Biography*; Petrovsky-Shtern, "Hasidei De'ar'a"; Gries, "From Myth to Ethos"; Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*; Etkes, *Ba'a'l Ha-Tanya*; Pedaya, "On the Development of the Social-Religious-Economic Model of Hasidism"; Dynner, *Men of Silk*.
6. Idel, *Hasidism*; Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*; Elior, *Mystical Origins of Hasidism*; Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*; Green, "Introduction"; and Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidic Studies*.
7. This push, of course, reflects the challenge laid out by Petrovsky-Shtern in his review essay "Hasidei De'ar'a."
8. Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 7, 389, 408, 418. Compare with the challenge to the hybrid and hegemonic models of culture, see Rosman, "Forward," viii.
9. See Green, who compares early Hasidic sermons in an effort to identify critical differences between the social and theological teachings of these thinkers. See also Mayse, "Voices of Moses."
10. See above, n2.
11. R. Avraham Avish Shor, "Karlin Hasidism."
12. Glazer and Polen, *A Collection of Tiberian Hasidism*, volume 3.
13. Wilensky, *The Hasidic Community*, 570; Barnai, *The Jews in Eighteenth-Century Palestine*; Karlinski, *Counter History*; as well as more recently, Lehmann, *Emissaries from the Holy Land*.

14. R. Avraham Kahn's republication of the Maggid's works reveals an interesting historical note about the modern Hasidic world. Sensing the decline in Hasidic spirituality and the caliber of its leadership, R. Kahn hoped that the study of this book would spark a renewed sense of mystical devotion in contemporary Hasidic society. He argues that since they have no real leaders, modern Hasidim must return to reading the works of the early masters, whose power still dwells within their words. R. Kahn felt that the teachings of the Maggid were particularly suited for this task because they serve as an "introduction to many great and precious matters"; see the unpaginated introductions to his editions of *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov* and *Likkutim Yekarim*.
15. Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*; Dynner, *Men of Silk*; Dynner, *Yankel's Tavern*.
16. Wexler, *Mystical Interactions*.
17. See above, n3.
18. Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*. 3.
19. Dynner, *Yankel's Tavern*, 35–45, 52–53.
20. *Ibid.*, 69–70.
21. *Ibid.*, 104, 108–10, 164–68, 178.
22. Reichmuth, *Murtada al-Zabidi*, xvi.
23. *Ibid.*, xv.

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