Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History
Dan, Joseph

Published by NYU Press

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76270.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76270
CHAPTER 12
HASIDISM AND THE MODERN PERIOD

I

GERSHOM SCHOLEM studied the modern Hasidic movement in several articles. Founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Besht (ba’al shem tov), the acronym for the traditional Hebrew term for a magician and popular healer,¹ as the latest phase in the development of Jewish mysticism, which began with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. It continued with the intensification of Jewish messianism and the emergence and spread of the Lurianic kabbalah; it became a major historical crisis for Jewish culture with the Sabbatian movement. Hasidism was one of the answers that the Jewish religious community, suffering from the effects of the Sabbatian heresy and faced with modern challenges, developed to confront the physical and spiritual circumstances of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century.

Scholem was concerned with the reliability of the sources concerning early Hasidism. There are very few historical references to Hasidism in non-Hasidic sources before the great
controversy and the anti-Hasidic polemic which began in 1772. Most of the Hasidic material concerning the early period is relatively late. The Besht's legendary biography, which is a collection of hagiographic stories, was published in 1815, 55 years after his death. Its value as a historical source is very doubtful. Scholem dedicated his efforts to discovering early evidence concerning the emerging Hasidic movement in non-Hasidic sources, and looked for early opposition to Hasidism in the writings of Jewish preachers and in Hebrew ethical works from the middle of the eighteenth century. His work presented the Besht as a charismatic leader, who attracted a certain type of preacher and religious thinker by his ideas. According to Scholem, there were probably proto-Hasidic groups in some major cities of eastern Europe before the Besht began his traveling and preaching (about 1736). Some of them probably were connected in various ways with Sabbatian groups which operated in the same geographical areas and the same social strata. The Besht's innovative ideas were, therefore, part of the cultural and historical setting of that period, and should be viewed as such. Also, the legendary biography Shivvey ha-Besht (In Praise of the Besht) contained, according to Scholem, some historical material obscured under the fictional and late legends.

Scholem dedicated to Hasidic theology some important studies which were incorporated in his thematic essays concerning major problems in Jewish mystical thought. As these essays are constructed in a historical sequence, describing the subject chronologically from ancient times on to modern, Hasidism is usually the concluding subject.

Scholem's one comprehensive description of Hasidism was
HASIDISM AND THE MODERN PERIOD

published in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* as the brief concluding chapter.\(^4\) Two of his most important discussions of central problems concerning Hasidism were written in the framework of a controversy with his colleagues Isaiah Tishby and Martin Buber. A brief analysis of these controversies will enable us to examine Scholem’s most important ideas about the Hasidic movement and its role in the history of Jewish mysticism.

II

In the chapter on Hasidism in *Major Trends*, Scholem discussed the position of Hasidism concerning messianism, especially compared with the heretic messianism of the Sabbatian movement and the older messianism of the Lurianic kabbalah. Furthermore, Professor Ben Zion Dinur (Dinaburg) claimed that the Hasidim, and especially the Besht, were intensely messianic, and that Hasidism intended its teachings and its organization to enhance the coming of the messiah.\(^5\) Dinur relied on a letter by the Besht, published in Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoi’s *en Porat Yosef* in 1781,\(^6\) in which the Besht told his brother-in-law in Eretz Israel about a mystical experience he had had. The Besht met the messiah when his soul ascended to heaven. During this meeting he asked when the messiah would come. The answer he received was interpreted by Dinur to mean that the messiah would come when the Besht’s teachings had spread to all the Jewish people.

Dinur’s interpretation was not accepted by many. Martin
Buber, in his many works of Hasidism, took an opposite view, explaining that the Hasidic movement saw redemption in everyday life, rejecting completely Sabbatian messianism. Buber, however, did not support his views with a detailed scholarly study of the sources, and his presentation relies on impressions rather than an exhaustive examination of the documents.

Scholem disagreed with Dinur. He believed that Hasidism neutralized the intense messianic pressures upon Judaism from the Sabbatian movement, and channeled them to new religious paths. The new ways involved the concept of communion with God, so important and central to Hasidic thought and life. This was in fact a transformation of the Lurianic teachings concerning the *tikkun* and the “uplifting of the sparks.” The new ways also involved the belief that the Zaddik was an intermediary between the Hasid and God, fulfilling a messianic function by protecting the Hasid from divine punishment, helping him to achieve complete repentance, and as assisting the acceptance of his prayers before the throne of glory. In these and other central elements in Hasidic theology Scholem saw a neutralization of the messianic drive. Hasidism, according to him, presented a theology which found divine revelation and contact with the divine in the everyday performance of man’s religious and human duties, thus making the pressure for a universal, national redemption less acute.

At the Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in August 1965, Isaiah Tishby delivered a major paper on the problem of the messianic element in Hasidism. Tishby did not accept Dinur’s view that messianism was the real motive behind the Hasidic movement, but he also rejected
Scholem's view that Hasidism neutralized the messianic element.\textsuperscript{8}

Scholem later published his most detailed paper on Hasidism as a response to Tishby's paper.\textsuperscript{9} In this response Scholem clarified his views concerning the nature of Hasidism as a conservative, nonrevolutionary movement which transformed the messianic drive to a kind of personal and communal mystical experience that replaced the apocalyptic redemptive vision. This explained, according to Scholem, the Hasidic attitude toward emigration to Eretz Israel, which they did not encourage after an initial enthusiasm,\textsuperscript{10} and the fierce opposition of most Hasidic leaders to Zionism and even to emigration to the New World. Salvation and redemption were to be reached in exile, but within the community, by the process of devekuth, "communion," and close contact with the leader of the community, the Zaddik, and not by the historical activity demanded by the Sabbatians and their many followers.

\section*{III}

Scholem's controversy with Martin Buber was centered around the value of Hasidic stories as a historical source and their relevance for understanding Hasidic thought.

For Martin Buber, the true characteristics of Hasidism and the teachings of each individual Zaddik could be gleaned from an inspired reflection upon the stories and the sayings of the teachers of Hasidism.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, according to Buber there was a popular and intuitive element in this movement; it did not
present its teachings in the systematic, theological manner of earlier Jewish mystics. He regarded it as somewhat remote from the kabbalah. Buber did not rely in his presentation of Hasidism on the voluminous collections of sermons by the Hasidim; he preferred the brief anecdotes, the homilies, and the hagiographic stories that the Hasidim told about their rabbis. He even went so far as to draw some parallels between Hasidism and Zen Buddhism, claiming that the two movements were united in their use of stories and anecdotes that are seemingly incomprehensible, but which convey, in a most profound and paradoxical manner, the true essence of Hasidism. The Zen koan was similar to the Hasidic anecdote in that they both contained in a concentrated form the innermost vision of the teacher. The Hasidic story is a pedagogic instrument by which the intuitive truth is transmitted from teacher to disciple. No scholarly analysis of historical texts will reveal what Hasidism really says and means, according to Buber. The reader must concentrate his reflection on the stories and glean from them undreamed-of levels of human and religious truth.

Scholem rejected Buber's approach. According to Scholem, Buber's methods relied almost completely on the intuition of the reader, thus making every conclusion basically a subjective one. Scholem could not accept Buber's disregard for the main literary and ideological tool of the Hasidic teachers: homilies published in special collections. Thousands of volumes of Hasidic homiletics have been printed, and Scholem collected them carefully. While Buber published a version of the stories of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, the Besht's great-grandson and one of the most profound Hasidic teachers, which
he translated from Hebrew into German and reedited, cutting out whatever he did not like,\textsuperscript{13} Scholem collected the scattered works of Rabbi Nahman and published a definitive, thorough, and detailed bibliography of them.\textsuperscript{14}

The comparison Buber suggested between Hasidism and Zen Buddhism was completely erroneous, according to Scholem. Zen Buddhism can be studied by its koans, because that is the major vehicle used by the Zen scholars to express themselves. The Hasidic teachers, on the other hand, expressed themselves in great length in their homiletical works, while most of the stories and the anecdotes were written by disciples a long time later, and published in unreliable collections.

It seems that this is the one field in which, to date, Scholem’s views have not been accepted by the wide public, and Buber’s still prevail. While all historians of Hasidism adopt Scholem’s historical approach, the public still follows the Buber approach. The popularity of Buber’s \textit{Hasidic Stories} and the identification of this movement with nostalgic pictures of the Jewish past in Eastern Europe which was destroyed, seem to make scholarly, methodical study of Hasidism far from popular.

\textbf{IV}

Scholem regarded Hasidism as the last phase in a long process of development. On the one hand, Hasidism was a direct continuation of the chain of tradition and innovation of Jewish mysticism, which started a millennium and a half before the eighteenth century and the Besht. On the other,
GERSHOM SCHOLEM

Hasidism was the modern stage in the long historical process which started in the fifteenth century and made Jewish mysticism a historical force, influencing and sometimes shaping the fate of Jewish communities facing the non-Jewish world.

Hasidism returned to devotional mysticism, based on the idea of *devekuth*, communion with God, which seemed to weaken the gnostic element in the Hasidic kabbalistic world view. Hasidism continued the use of kabbalistic gnostic symbols, but their most radical meanings lost their edge when the emphasis was put on individual perfection and closeness to God.¹⁵

Hasidism also preserved one of the most radical Sabbatian ideas, that of the intermediary between the divine world and the earthly one. In Sabbatinianism, the task of redemption was laid on the shoulders of the messiah, Sabbatai Zevi, who received from his believers their faith and transformed this spiritual power into a force to overcome evil and bring forth the messianic age. Hasidism, which did not believe in the presence of an individual messiah in the world in the present time (with the exception, perhaps, of believers in Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav),¹⁶ still held to the idea that there is an intermediary force between the divine world and the Hasidic community—the Zaddik, the rabbi of the Hasidic community. The Zaddik is conceived as a redeemer, an earthly revelation of a supreme divine spark. His mission is not the redemption of the whole people of Israel, but only that of the Hasidic community which adheres to him.

Hasidism neutralized the fierce messianism which accompanied the idea of the intermediary in the Sabbatian movement by limiting the role of the Zaddik as redeemer only to
HASIDISM AND THE MODERN PERIOD

his time, his place, and his specific community. In this way, the redemption brought by the Zaddik is not universal or cosmic, but everyday, step-by-step redemption. The Zaddik helps his adherents absolve themselves of sin, repent, and make their prayers accepted in the divine world before the throne of glory; he protects them from historical upheavals and the persecution of their non-Jewish neighbors, helps them in their material need, and prays with them for the birth of sons and for good health and long life. In exchange for this daily religious and material care, the believer in the Zaddik supports him with his faith and materially cares for his worldly needs.

This ideology created very strong Hasidic communities, united around their leaders and completely faithful to them in the belief that they represented a divine power which protected and assisted them; but these communities, unlike the Sabbatians, were not oriented toward historical change and radical activity. Their orientation was toward daily existence in tolerable religious and material circumstances. This proved to be one of the strongest forces in modern Jewish history. The decline of Hasidism was announced by their opponents and by scholars from early in the nineteenth century onward. Hasidism, however, paid no heed to the prophecies of its decline and disintegration, and proved its durability when its communities overcame crisis after crisis, preserving their identity in Russian labor camps and in Nazi deathcamps, overcoming the upheavals of being transferred from continent to continent, and always regrouping in their own neighborhoods, constructing their schools and social institutions, preserving their belief in their Zaddik, and bringing forth a new
generation of Hasidim. Even today, a century and a half after Hasidism was announced to be an anachronistic remnant of medieval superstition rapidly declining in the modern age, Hasidism is still the strongest, best-organized group within orthodox Judaism, and, as far as one can judge, is destined to remain so for a long time to come.

Scholem also saw in Hasidism the modern stage in the long process of spreading the kabbalah. When the kabbalah emerged in the end of the twelfth century it was practiced by very small, closed, and esoteric groups of mystics who kept their mystical experiences and writings a secret. During the Middle Ages interest in the kabbalah and its cultural impact gradually increased, but it was still restricted to closed circles of the elect. After the expulsion from Spain the kabbalah spread rapidly, especially after the Lurianic revolution, but still it was part of Jewish intellectual life rather than the belief of the masses. Sabbatianism brought kabbalistic terminology to almost every Jewish household, but the emphasis was on messianic expectations and not on mystical symbolism. With Hasidism, the kabbalah reached the stage in which every homily in the synagogue, every table discussion in the court of the Zaddik, was based on its terminology and symbolism. Only in the modern period did Jewish mysticism become an integral part of Jewish everyday experience and belief.¹⁷

But above all, Scholem saw in Hasidism a stage in the historical drama which began on the eve of the expulsion from Spain, when the messianic element in the kabbalah increased rapidly and the historical message of Jewish mysticism for the people as a whole became more and more mean-
HASIDISM AND THE MODERN PERIOD

ingful. The Lurianic kabbalah was the culmination of this process, when the people of Israel were regarded as collectively toiling to bring forth a dramatic change in the history of the universe and their own fate. Sabbatianism concentrated this energy around the figure of the messiah, and changed Jewish life and self-image in the most radical manner. Hasidism, according to Scholem, was the next step, in which the kabbalah, in self-defence against Sabbatian extremism, neutralized the messianic element and returned to individual, devotional mysticism, organized in the Zaddik-led communities and fortified by the Sabbatian idea of the intermediary between the world of the divine powers and the earthly communities, but concentrating on immediate, day-to-day redemption rather than on an apocalyptic, cosmic one.

While the controversy concerning the messianic element in Hasidism still goes on among scholars, the general outlines of Scholem’s studies is almost universally accepted. Hasidism is no longer regarded by historians either as a reactionary remnant of the Middle Ages, nor as a romantic reminder of a nonexistent past. It is the modern aspect of creative Jewish mysticism and it has become a major force in the shaping of Jewish religion and culture.

V

Scholem thought that the Sabbatian crisis and the antinomianistic and nihilistic attitudes present among its eighteenth-century believers were directly instrumental in opening Jewish culture to European enlightenment and that the
Jewish enlightenment movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was to some extent the result of the Sabbatian upheaval. Scholem's reasoning was unlike that of other historians who believed that Jews always craved to be integrated into the culture around them, that they were prevented from doing so because of the discrimination and persecution of the Jews by the non-Jewish authorities and communities. He believed that in the seventeenth century the Jews were not interested in and had no ambition to become part of European culture, even if they had the opportunity. In order for this integration to occur, progress had to be made not only toward the emancipation of the Jews, but also the wish to emerge from the walls of the ghetto had to be evoked from within Jewish culture itself.

According to Scholem, the Sabbatian crisis caused the walls of the Jewish cultural ghetto to be broken from within. Old certainties, the belief in eternal Jewish values which were superior to non-Jewish ones, were weakened in the face of the Frankist nihilistic phenomenon and the existence of a secret Jewish messianic underground within Judaism. The unfamiliar sense of freedom which Sabbatian antinomianism brought forth, and the doubts it cast concerning the eternity of the commandments of the Torah, opened new vistas for Jewish intellectuals. This internal crisis within the Jewish world opened the eyes of Jews to events in the outside world. When the movement toward lifting the legal prohibitions which had kept Jews locked within the ghetto began in Europe, the opportunity was seized by Jewish intellectuals to cross the lines and create the Jewish enlightenment movement. There is no doubt that Jewish historiography will study exhaus-
HASIDISM AND THE MODERN PERIOD

tively the questions of enlightenment and Sabbatianism that Scholem raised, because of their far-reaching historical consequences for the understanding of modern Jewish history. Is Jewish culture to be viewed as self-oriented and self-sufficient because of the historical circumstances in the Middle Ages and early modern times, which prevented Jews from studying European languages, going to European universities, and accepting the cultural norms of the non-Jewish world around them? Or should it be understood as a culture developed by Jews in order to sustain them in their sense of their special historical mission, which is separate and independent of the cultural trends around them? Is the cultural ghetto the result only of external oppression, or was there an element of choice and national preference in the closed world of Jewish ethics, homiletics, halakhah, and kabbalah?

Scholem believed that the image of Judaism waiting impatiently for the approach of emancipation in order to leap into the outstretched arms of German and French enlightenment was not historically substantiated. He believed that the Jews were motivated by drives inherent in their own culture, and that the major developments in Jewish thought were caused by needs springing from the heart of Jewish fate and its understanding of its own mission and message to the world. Sabbatian theology, which cast doubts on the most basic and eternal elements of Jewish self-image, weakened the self-sufficiency of Jewish religion and culture and made it possible for some intellectuals of the age to seek answers outside the ghetto walls. Scholem saw Sabbatianism, not the French revolution and emancipation in Europe, as the watershed between the Jewish Middle Ages and modern times. He be-
GERSHOM SCHOLEM believed that Jewish history was to be understood by events within Judaism, rather than by historical developments outside of it.

**Notes**


6. Ben Porat Yosef (Koretz, 1781).
7. See esp. Martin Buber, Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut (Tel Aviv: Davir, 1945).
10. There was a Hasidic immigration to the land of Israel soon after the Besht’s death, in 1764, led by R. Nahman of Horodenka, and another major one in 1773, led by R. Menahem Nahum of Vitebsk and R. Abraham of Kalisk, which enhanced the establishment of Hasidic communities in Safed and Tiberias. See I. Halperin, The Hasidic Immigration to Palestine during the Eighteenth Century [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1946).
12. This has been studied with great insight by R. Schatz in her essay “Man’s Relation to God and World in Buber’s Rendering of the Hasidic Teaching” (Hebrew), Molad 144–45 (1960). [English version in P. A. Schilpp and M. Friedman, eds., The Philosophy of Martin Buber (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1967).]
14. Scholem’s bibliography was published in a separate booklet, Quntras 3’Eleh Shemot Sifrei R. Nahman vesifrei talmidov vetalmidei talmidov (Jerusalem: Azriel, 1928). See the supplement to this list in Kiryat Sefer, 6 (1930), pp. 565–70.
16. Scholem’s only study on Bratzlav Hasidim is the bibliography he compiled (see above, n. 14). He did not accept the notion of a marked messianic element in the teachings of R. Nahman as discussed in recent studies on the latter. See J. Weiss, Meḥqarim be-Hasidut Braslav (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1974); M. Piekarz, Hasidut Braslav (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1972); J. Dan The Hasidic Story [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 132–87. See also A. Green, Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman
17. It is important to emphasize that the opponents of Hasidism were no less devoted to the kabbalah than were the Hasidim—perhaps even more. They did not tend to popularize the kabbalah as much as the Hasidim, but their rabbis, beginning with their leader, the Gaon Elijah of Vilna, were noteworthy scholars in kabbalah. The attitude towards the kabbalah was not an issue in the controversy between Hasidim and their opponents.