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Early Hasidism: Some Old/New Questions

ARTHUR GREEN

THE following are some general remarks on the question of where we stand in the historiography of hasidism at present, and especially after the conference of which the present volume is the proceedings. I would like to suggest, only half tongue-in-cheek, that the proceedings, dedicated to the memory of Joseph Weiss, should have been entitled '*Via Negativa* in Early Hasidism'. That seems to me an appropriate characterization of the present scholarly situation. In reopening the two great questions—hasidism's origins and its success—contemporary scholarship has negated almost all the once clearly established answers. We can no longer say that hasidism began because of persecution, especially not that it arose in reaction to the Chmielnicki massacre a century earlier or its long aftermath, as was once widely claimed.¹ Nor can we say that hasidism was primarily or necessarily a reaction to Sabbateanism.² We certainly do not think of it as a *necessary* reaction to Sabbateanism, as Gershom Scholem once suggested.³ Studies included within this volume serve to diminish the importance of the Turkish–Podolian connection with hasidism's origins. We have long known that we can no longer take *Shivhei haBesht* and its account of the early days at face value as a source for how hasidism began. Our use for historical purposes of the tales included in that work is ever being refined.⁴

Hasidism's success can no longer be attributed to poverty or oppression, as was once a commonplace in the literature. We can no longer say that the Besht and his circle rep-

¹ See S. Dubnow, *Toledot haHasidut* [Tel Aviv, 1930–1] (Tel Aviv, 1960), 8 ff.

² Ibid. 24 ff; M. Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York, 1960), 29 ff. See the important rethinking of this view in I. Tishby, *Netivei emunah uminut* (Ramat Gan, 1964), 226, where hasidism's origin is described as 'an inner shift within Sabbateanism itself' rather than as a movement born of anti-Sabbatean reaction. This is also the general position already taken by J. G. Weiss in 'Reshit tsemitah shel haderekh haHasidit', *Zion*, 16 (1951), repr. in A. Rubinstein (ed.), *Perakim betorat haHasidut veteledoteihah* (Jerusalem, 1977), 122–81.

³ *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), 328 f.

⁴ Pioneering historical studies based on the material in *Shivhei haBesht* include those by B. Dinur in his *Bemifneh hadorot* (Jerusalem, 1955), the above-mentioned essay by J. Weiss, and the several studies on early hasidic figures by A. J. Heschel, now translated in his *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov*, ed. S. H. Dresner, *Studies in Hasidism* (Chicago, 1985). Some more recent contributions include A. Rubinstein, 'Sipurei haHitgalut besefer *Shivhei haBesht*', *Alei sefer*, 6–7 (1979), 157–86; id., 'He'arot lesefer *Shivhei haBesht*', *Sinai*, 86: 1–2 (1980), 62–71; Y. Elbaum, 'HaBesht uveno shel Rabbi Adam', *Mehkerei Yerushalayim befolklor yehudi*, 2 (1982), 66–79; I. Bartal, 'Aliyat R. Eleazar me'Amsterdam le'Erets Yisrael bishnat 1740', *Mehkarim al toledot yahadut Holland*, 4 (1984), 7–25.

resented the lower classes, because the earliest roots of the movement appear to defy any social stratification. Nor was hasidism a rebellion of the unlettered—not with scholarly leaders such as R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye or Shneur Zalman of Lyady. We know that hasidism was not spread particularly through its books, but rather through oral teaching. It was clearly not the novelty of its ideas that caused the movement to grow. We also know that hasidism was not successful either because it was or was not messianic!

What, then, is left us by way of explanation? We have cleaned out a lot of cobwebs—a lot of claims that had long lain unexamined, but were still taken as truths because we all learnt them from Dubnow and Horodecky—whose name, interestingly, has hardly been mentioned here—the writers we all read on hasidism thirty or more years ago. Many of their explanations are finally gone, yet the questions about the beginning and success of hasidism still remain with us.

I would like to mention four of these questions. Although they are not the only questions to be answered, they seem the four most important. How and why did hasidism begin? What was the secret of its great success and rapid spread? What, if anything, is new in hasidism? How are the parameters of the movement to be defined—who is and who is not a hasid? From the perspective of the current state of research, and acknowledging our *via negativa*, I would like to say something brief about each of these questions, identifying our present stand and pointing to where I think we should go in considering them further.

Regarding the origins of hasidism: we have lost much of our confidence in the historical explanations proffered by the scholarship of the past. I think that is to the good, because it forces us to turn to a question too long avoided by the historians of hasidism. I refer to the phenomenology of the religious experience of the Baal Shem, the Maggid, and those around them. What types of mystics were they? What kinds of inner experiences did they have and seek to express? Can we read their homiletic or aphoristic writings in such a way that we will achieve some greater insight into the nature of their inner world?

We students of hasidism sometimes forget that we are dealing with *mystics*, people who see the inner life as primary and who come to 'know God' through inner experience.⁵ If we are dealing with mystics, we are dealing with people whose inner lives not only are the *product* of the cultural world from which they come, but also *affect* the culture that they create. It is time for scholars of hasidism to study the psychology of mysticism and to familiarize themselves with typologies of mysticism that can be drawn from a broad study of world religions. Hasidism is an outbreak of radical immanentist mysticism in eighteenth-century Ukrainian Judaism. Rather than look for its cause exclusively in political or social history (the writings of Dubnow and others), or in the

⁵ I recognize the well-known reticence of Jewish mystics to write of personal experiences as well as the highly traditional nature of Jewish mysticism and the interpretative form generally taken by its literature. Such emphases within scholarship have at times led, however, to an inadequate appreciation of the essential pneumatic quality of hasidism, that which drives both its social and its intellectual/literary efforts. Cf. M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), 241 ff. The range of phenomena, whether described as *devekut*, as *da'at*, as *bitul*, or as a *nekudah penimit*, depending on schools or generations within hasidism, is to be taken as primary. I am suggesting that the striving for and attainment of such inner states should play an important role in any explanation of hasidism on the 'outer' historical plane as well.

religious-literary history of ideas (Scholem), let us take this outbreak as a phenomenon and try to understand what it is by considering its parallels in other contexts, places, and cultures. Then we might ask how such a religious phenomenon—a radically immanentist mysticism that borders on pantheism and is closer to nature mysticism than is usually the case among Jews—interacted with a new selective reading of the sources of Judaism to create a movement ideology.

Like medieval Jewish philosophy and kabbalah before it, hasidism represents a new selection and interpretation of earlier Jewish sources, reread in the light of a particular set of life experiences, and particularly inner experiences. While hasidism theoretically sanctified everything in the tradition it had inherited, there were some elements of this tradition that it quietly set aside. The detailed system of Lurianic kabbalah was revered but mostly ignored.⁶ Medieval Jewish philosophy, with some exceptions, was put aside and sometimes even denounced—though it was selectively mined for terminology.⁷ There were other elements that acquired greater importance than in former ages, such as certain aggadic traditions, especially those relating to the notion of the zaddik.⁸ As we all know, there were certain pages of the talmudic aggadah that were very well worn in the Gemaras owned by hasidic authors. Those key passages are quoted again and again. On the other hand, one can manage to read hasidic literature perfectly well without knowing certain other pages of the Talmud, sections on which little if any comment is offered in hasidic works, at least not until the later and often more scholarly Polish authors. We have to learn to study how the inner experience that was the core of the early movement and the selection it made from the readings of Judaism interplayed with one another in creating the particular and often elusive religious texture of hasidism.

On the success of hasidism: hasidism is a typical revival or revitalization movement, marked primarily by its charismatic leadership, and its success is comparable to the success of other charismatically led revival movements—the Great Awakening, Methodism, southern United States revivalism after Reconstruction, and so forth. It may even have some features in common with revivalism in Iran in recent times. This is not to say that all these movements are the same. But one can learn something about hasidic revivalism as a religious phenomenon and understand how it spread by studying revivalism and revitalization movements in other cultures, through a study of the rather extensive anthropological literature on these matters. An examination of other revival movements and their characteristics will also provide a new background against which that which is distinctive in hasidism will stand out in clear relief.

In Judaism, which is among the most verbally self-conscious of humanity's cultural

⁶ See Scholem, *Major Trends*, 337 ff.; J. G. Weiss, 'The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 9 (1958), 163–92 (repr. in id., *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford, 1958), 95–125); A. Green, 'Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat', in P. Berger (ed.), *The Other Side of God: A Polarity in World Religions* (New York, 1981), 110 ff.

⁷ On hasidic (and esp. Bratslav) opposition to philosophy see my *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University of Alabama Press, 1979), 285 ff. On some of the uses made of philosophical vocabulary in hasidism see J. Dienstag, 'HaMoreh nevukhim veSefer hamada besifrut haHasidut', in *Sefer yovel likhvod harav Dr Avraham Weiss* (New York, 1964).

⁸ I have written on this elsewhere. See 'The Zaddik as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 45 (1977), 327–47, and 'Typologies of Leadership and the Hasidic Zaddiq', in *Jewish Spirituality* (New York, 1987), ii. 127–56.

traditions, the *language* in which the desire for renewal was expressed played a vital role. Part of hasidism's success lay in its ability to communicate revitalized or novel ideas in a language that was entirely familiar and unthreatening to its hearers. Scholem has taught us that the kabbalists were more successful than the philosophers in integrating their teachings with the language of Judaism.⁹ Hasidism was similarly highly successful in expressing radical ideas in an entirely traditional language, or at least in generating daring formulations within the old language. This is something that needs to be studied. We need a greater understanding, both structural and functional, of the specific nature of hasidic homiletics within what is to a large extent an interpretative tradition. Almost all the Hebrew literature of hasidism is interpretative. We have done very little to find out how the hasidim interpreted, how their hermeneutic worked (and changed or grew?), and how they used *derush* (homilies) as an agent of social change.¹⁰ Here, too, there is much to be learnt from comparative studies: Luther and the Protestant Reformation, for example, are likely to offer interesting parallels.

What is new in hasidism? Here we tread on more dangerous ground, and I fear that we face the risk of a new reductionism in our study. In Hebrew I have a term for such reductionism: *yesh-kevar-etsel-ism*, a rush to find early parallels as a substitute for interpretation. I am not suggesting that tracing ideas to their original sources is not important. Of course it is. We should be aware, however, that this type of scholarly work is not an end, but only a beginning. Once we have recognized that a particular idea is to be found in Bahya, Abulafia, or the *Shenei luhot haberit*, we still have to deal with it in the particular phenomenological context of hasidism, which chose to incorporate rather than discard this particular idea. Often the ideas themselves change in the course of integration in a new context. We have not explained anything by saying that many hasidic themes or the terms in which they are expressed are of earlier origin.

A prime example of this is the history of the hasidic doctrine of the zaddik. As I have tried to show elsewhere,¹¹ this is an ancient doctrine in Judaism and not a new contribution of the hasidic movement. It is based on ideas, images, and attitudes that go back ultimately to rabbinic sources, and perhaps even to the narratives about Elijah and Elisha in the Bible. The concept of zaddik in hasidism is rooted in rabbinic statements on the power of the righteous who stand as pillars of the cosmos, who have the power to negate God's decrees, and so forth. I believe that the claims for Simeon bar Yohai in the Zohar are already based on these old rabbinic paradigms, and those claims in turn affected both the Safed kabbalists and early hasidism. The folk traditions also have a place in this history, including such notions as the thirty-six zaddikim, intercession by deceased zaddikim, and so forth. What is new in hasidism is the centrality accorded to what was previously a side-stream in Judaism. The doctrine of the zaddik is something that had been there for a long time but was never dominant. Faith in the power of the righteous surely had a long history among Jews, but remained secondary to faith in Torah and in the direct accessibility of God in prayer. Here Judaism's system of values

⁹ See 'Kabbalah and Myth', in his *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York, 1965), 87–117, esp. 99f.

¹⁰ In general, remarkably little work has been done on hasidic homiletic as such. See my remarks in 'On Translating Hasidic Homilies', *Prooftexts*, 3 (1983), 63–72, and some other general comments in 'Teachings of the Hasidic Masters', in B. Holtz (ed.), *Back to the Sources* (New York, 1984), 361 ff.

¹¹ Green, 'The Zaddiq as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism'.

is *reordered*, with the zaddik being given a position of supremacy. Moreover, the zaddik is *identified*. The claim is no longer that there are zaddikim about in the world who can negate the decrees of God; this claim now refers to a particular zaddik: his name is Naphtali, he lives in Ropczyce, and one can go to him, or to any one of a number of others like him. The belief in the 'zaddik-idea' is now identified with particular living individuals. It seems to me that what is new here is the *institutionalization* of the zaddik. Consequently, the teachings about the zaddik proliferate and develop much more than ever before. The thread of zaddik is drawn forth from the fabric of traditional Jewish civilization, but I would not say that the idea of the zaddik is new; the change lies rather in its centralization and its institutionalization.¹²

But this is not all that is new in hasidism. I believe there is a new religious *Gestalt* in Judaism that takes place in hasidism. It is hard to characterize but is nevertheless present. I would say that it is a focusing of Judaism on worship—a sense that the simple prayer life (I say 'simple' to exclude the *kavanot* of the kabbalists) is the very centre of Judaism. For the hasidic masters, Judaism is all about the act of devotion, and especially prayer. This is the heart of Judaism as far as they are concerned, and everything else, including both study and ritual observance, is centred around this spiritual core in a simple way, open to the unlearned as well as to the learned. This seems to constitute a core that is unique and definable, a *Gestalt* of hasidic piety as distinct from that of other Judaisms. The typology of this view of Judaism *al derekh ha'avodah* is in need of further clarification and definition.¹³

Finally, the question of borders: who is in and who is out of the phenomenon we call hasidism? Scholarship is well aware that there are certain borderline figures—R. Hayyim of Chernovtsy and R. Baruch of Kosov come to mind. It would be useful to characterize the relationship of such figures with hasidism. Surely, not everyone who could be defined as a zaddik was necessarily a follower of hasidism. There were also some hasidim without a *rebbe*, especially in Erets Yisrael. There, it was possible to be a *hasid* (pietist) without necessarily being a *hasid* (disciple) of someone. After the Holocaust, certain hasidic groups whose ruling dynasties had died out became 'hasidic' in this sense, without a *rebbe*. There are individuals who consider themselves hasidim, who follow the hasidic liturgy, who wear a *gartel* and perhaps even a *shtrayml*, but who do not have a *rebbe*. Our phenomenological description of hasidism has to include them, too. For a working definition of the movement I would suggest a *traditionalist Jewish pietism bound by the authority of both halakhah and aggadah that traces its spiritual lineage to the Baal Shem Tov*. The person who declares that his spiritual lineage goes back to the Besht, whether his own *rebbe*'s ancestry goes as far back as a disciple in the second generation or no further than, say, R. Ahreleh Roth, accepting the authority of halakhah and aggadah as well as something of the style of hasidic life, is, I suggest, a hasid. It seems to me that this is as close as we are going to get to a good working definition at present.

¹² See my remarks in 'Typologies of Leadership', 127–56.

¹³ On this level the most profound readers of hasidism are still Martin Buber and Hillel Zeitlin. Nothing in contemporary Jewish theological writing has surpassed them. For Buber, I believe it is his earlier essays (esp. 'The Life of the Hasidim', included in his *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York, 1958)) that are most insightful. Zeitlin's 'Yesodot haḥasidut', in id., *Befardes haḥasidut vehakabalah* (Tel Aviv, 1965), 11–52, is also very useful.

One final remark: I certainly agree with Joseph Dan about the need to consider later hasidism and even present-day hasidism as an integral part of what we study.¹⁴ This is an important revision of the earlier historiography of hasidism. I would demur, however, at Dan's remarks on the vitality and creativity of the contemporary hasidic community. While I agree that contemporary hasidism is vital, I believe there is room to question its creativity. Most of its efforts seem directed, as is quite understandable, to rebuilding communal infrastructure and debating degrees of accommodation to life in a new environment, one hostile to hasidism in new and different ways from the hostility that may have existed in the Polish or Hungarian countryside.

Hasidism today displays two sorts of vitality. One has allowed it to continue to exist and to recover after the Holocaust. Here I have in mind the postwar dynasties in Israel and America: the Bobover Rebbe, for example, who seemed to be struggling for survival after the war with a very few surviving hasidim, has now rebuilt a tremendous following. The history of this extraordinary recovery has not yet been written. Its social, political, and religious implications for the future of Judaism may be very great.

But there is another sort of vitality rooted in hasidism. I refer to the remarkable ability of hasidism to inspire people who are either altogether remote or estranged from hasidic practice. This includes non-Jews as well as Jews. It is significant, for example, that of the four or five major theological figures in twentieth-century Judaism, two—Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel—were nourished primarily by the vision of hasidism. The two fiction writers who have been recognized by the international community as the greatest Jewish novelists of the twentieth century—S. Y. Agnon and I. B. Singer—came from a hasidic milieu and were clearly inspired by hasidism. Hasidic influence or inspiration can be observed in virtually every field of Jewish creativity—in music, art, poetry, and theatre. The impact of hasidism on the non-hasidic Jewish community in the twentieth century has been tremendous. This, surely, testifies to the vitality of the hasidic tradition from its earliest beginnings. I urge scholars to take notice of this vitality and the ability of hasidism to affect Jews and others beyond its own borders. Of course, the product created in the course of such influence is not properly to be called hasidism. It clearly stands outside the definition suggested above. But in evaluating the importance of hasidism and its place in Jewish history, this influence beyond the movement's borders cannot be ignored. The Besht devoted himself to the uplifting of fallen and lost souls. What is more appropriate than to consider his influence on people like ourselves, who are far removed, in many ways, from the inner world of the historic hasidic community, but yet have been uplifted—and perhaps even transformed—by our study of it.

¹⁴ See Ch. 26 above.

HASIDISM REAPPRAISED

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