

“Hallow the Everyday”

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Hasidism: A New History

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Religion, Jewish religion, said Leora Batnitzky [2011], is a modern concept that evolved in Western Europe against the backdrop of Protestant Reformation during the time of the *Haskalah* (enlightenment) in the mid-eighteenth century. Before modernity Judaism was characterized by a certain, regionally defined, unity; and with the onset of modernity, Judaism diversified. In Western Europe, a reform movement took hold, spearheaded by Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), which was influenced to some extent by the Protestant Reformation; and in Eastern Europe, the diversification affected orthodox Judaism and gave rise to the Hasidic movement.

Today *Hasidism* evokes images of a vanished world, as presented by Roman Vishniac or told in the stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer, or it relates to its renaissance in the United States, in Israel, and elsewhere. Non-observant Jews and Gentiles may associate *Hasidism* most readily with Martin Buber's tales about the *Tsaddikim*, the Hasidic spiritual leaders, tales which Buber and others collected, edited and rephrased before emigrating to Palestine. These tales, reissued by Buber or Samuel Agnon, strike a chord in our understanding of, and modern yearning for, religion and spirituality. But it was not only the

tales that moved us: the fathers of the movement of *Hasidism* struck a chord with Jewry of the eighteenth century, or at least with sizable portions thereof, because *Hasidism* flourished soon after its inception within larger parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The new, extensive compendium traces the development of this movement up to modern times. In close to 900 pages various aspects of *Hasidism* are covered: its historical origin, geographic spread, ethos and rituals, its institutions, the various dynasties, daily life, connections to state authorities and non-Jewish neighbors, antisemitic persecution and pogroms, et cetera; and there is even some discussion on the economics of the Hasidic *Shtetl*. In other words, a volume as thematically broad as “Hasidism: A New History” offers various opportunities of reading, and I shall confine myself in the following to a subset of themes that lie within the social sciences. In particular, I shall not cover, except very briefly, modern *Hasidism* which is treated within the last third of the volume.

Hasidism, a pietistic movement within Judaism, evolved in the mid-eighteenth century in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Its founder is said to have been *Ba'al Shem Tov* (Israel ben Eli'ezer, c. 1700-1760), and it grew in influence throughout the nineteenth century (and beyond). *Hasidism* provided a different outlook on Judaism and placed its emphasis less on the *Halakbah*, the law, or on study, than on living religiosity, on prayer. Its emergence as a movement may have had two bases: economic-political and spiritual. Its spiritual base is central for many who study this movement, but without a corresponding economic-political core, it could not have emerged.

Leora Batnitzky characterizes premodern Judaism as a unity encompassing religion, culture and nationality. In the Diaspora, Jews lived next to, or among, other groups as part of multiethnic empires in semi-autonomous settings where a distinction between nationality and religion was meaningless. This unity was as yet untouched by the concept of the modern nation-state that came into being only after the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), which helped to end the European wars of religion between the various Christian denominations. The Treaty eventually opened doors for several individualizations, affecting notions of belonging, communal allegiance, and sovereignty, which together seemed to have had, in Batnitzky's words, a “Protestantization” effect on Judaism in its emerging modern form. As the book points out, *Hasidism* was more than an intellectual (or anti-intellectual) movement:

“It was also a set of bodily practices, including praying, storytelling, singing,

dancing, and eating, all performed within the frame of the reciprocal relationship between rebbe and Hasid. The very *physicality* of Hasidism played an enormous role in transforming it from an elite to a popular movement [...], a movement of mass religiosity that would take its place side by side with more secular movements as part of the complex phenomenon of Jewish modernity” [2].

Historically, Jewish communities were assigned semi-autonomous roles within feudally governed societies. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jewish population within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had grown by roughly a factor of twenty-five, in spite of occasional pogroms; Jews were actively recruited by Gentile authorities to fill “middlemen” functions in trade, administration and various professions, and were allowed to reside in a Pale of Settlement outside the larger urban centers. In that decentralized context, the *Kahal* (the community governing board) of the *Kehilah* (the Jewish community) governed the community’s internal affairs (of religious service, schooling, ritual slaughter, trade or professions [*Havurot*], burial, etc.), but it also had to collect communal taxes besides those for the regional authorities. This opened opportunities for competing Jewish congregations at the same or neighboring localities and led to interactions with Gentiles and encounters with the new currents of secularism, which together enabled the emergence of Hasidic communities.

In a review of Batnitzky’s book, “How Judaism Became a Religion” [Herbst, 2016], I characterized religion as a triad: as an attempt to explain the world; as an edifice of ethical doctrines; and as communal cultures. With the onset of modernity and the rise of modern science, the first of these three pillars of religion, the attempt to comprehend the world, lost its significance. On the other hand, modernity also brought to the fore new complexities which called for explanations. In that ambivalence, there was room for a reinterpretation of handed-down notions, and *Hasidism* assumed that role within Judaism. These time-honored notions allowed the natural impetus to wrest meaning from the unexplainable and to fight a view which Wittgenstein eventually had addressed (much later) in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” [translation by Charles Kay Ogden]¹. Indeed, *Hasidism*’s outer-scientific focus on, and yearning for, comprehension provided continuing opportunities to create a culture to deal with life’s mysteries and to attempt to resolve them in the form of stories and parables, or in practices,

¹ *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*; or: “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” [translation by David Pears and Brian McGuinness].

rituals, dance and music. Similarly, *Hasidism's* focus on physicality paralleled developments in medieval as well as contemporary alternative medicine.

Within practical philosophy, there is an old but ongoing discussion on the dialectic between ethos and praxis. Judaism appears to tend to focus on the first and to view the second as derivative: this seems to be the foundation of the divine origin of the law (*Halakhab*). Modern anthropology would indicate, however, that ethos and praxis coevolve, and that there is no Jewish ethos, and there are no *Mizwot* (commandments), which are not grounded in praxis. This should apply also to the emergence of *Hasidism*, which evolved on the bases of jurisdictional and class conflicts. The first arose when the Gentile authorities started to collect taxes from the Jewish communities directly (and not through the *Kehilah* any longer); and the class conflicts arose when an “affluent elite [within the *Kehilah*] wielded political power” and when “those who were not affluent [enough] to have a vote, but did have a voice”, were looking for alternatives:

“Hasidism offered an alternative, forging an ethos that afforded common people a feeling of empowerment and involvement” [29].

Hence, the emergence of *Hasidism* appears not that dissimilar from the rise of a civil rights movement.

As a new socio-religious movement *Hasidism* had to offer not only communal access and equal rights but also an alternative culture; or, worded differently, without a new praxis of Judaism *Hasidism* would not have had a chance to establish itself as a mass movement next to, and apart from, conventional Judaism. It grew out of social strife and a decentralized folk orientation, and a magical-mystic, ascetic and older Kabbalistic culture gave it impetus. *Hasidism* established itself as a religious current largely through informally elected *Tsad-dikim* (religious leaders) and their respective constituencies.

As the movement spread, it reached new strata of the Jewish population, and moved from representing the underprivileged to the entire spectrum of Jewry, including the affluent. *Hasidic* courts, through their adherents and associated market impact, gained economic importance, and were solicited by authorities to locate in particular places through incentives of various kinds, such as tax privileges or the provisions of land and building plots:

“[The] aristocrats understood that the presence of a Hasidic rebbe could do much for the town's economy and they therefore invited them to live on the premises and awarded them land and buildings as a gift” [406].

From today's perspective, a number of features of past *Hasidic* culture appear noteworthy or familiar. A familiar feature of *Hasidism* (apropos the contemporary's preoccupations with celebrity of various shades) is the regal court, the focus on the extrusive role of the rabbi and the associated exaltation of the *Tsaddik*. Another familiar trait the focus on earthly joys (music, dancing, eating, socializing, praying), assisted even by alcohol or (sublimated) sexuality. In many ways, *Hasidism's* non-orthodox understanding of the divine, as expounded in the famous tales, for instance, has a modern ring, appealing to secularists, environmentalists and conservationists in their struggle to come to grips with overconsumption, environmental degradation or global warming, and intellectual emptiness:

“[H]allow the everyday [...] [T]he hassid reach[es] God by hallowing everyday actions [...] [O]ne goes to see the rebbe not to hear his teachings but to watch him tie his shoes” [564].

This is the holiness embedded in tacit knowledge, in culture.

A noteworthy feature of *Hasidism* pertains to gender. In traditional Jewish culture, as in *Hasidism*, there is a clear gender hierarchy, in women's ancillary role to that of men or, as it is expressed, in the females' consent to allow men to study the Thora, to “learn”, and to participate in services. This division of roles depends on sufficiency, on relative wealth, and many men of minor means did not enjoy that privileged position (and had to make a living); and if they were able to fill their assigned role, they did so frequently because of the required female backdrop, the economic acumen or sheer work of their spouses (and perhaps their children). The original gender hierarchy was often turned on its head, for without the active role of women many Jewish families would just have starved. Thus by “promot[ing] the health, welfare, and both material and religious success of husband and children” [33], the “women were often the primary breadwinners” [412] (as it was in my own extended family).

Another feature attributed to *Hasidism* is its understanding of wealth and charity. Wealth in today's world is commonly linked to ability, to the economic judgement of the wealthy, and not to lucky circumstances; and because of that link it is said to “belong” to the wealthy. However, *Hasidim* and *Tsaddikim* who had doubts about the purported road to economic success were inclined to give greater weight to the role of luck and, as a consequence, embraced charity. But even charity was not seen as a simple redistribution measure from the wealthy to the poor, or a form of insurance, but rather as a means of empowerment, in the sense of modern development economics; charity, as stated in the book,

should “not [contain] the fish, but rather the fishing rod” [443].

As a branch of Judaism, *Hasidism* was a manifestation of the evolution of culture and the interplay between ethos and praxis. In this respect, its function has an exemplary character. It turned into a movement that at times attracted a good portion of the Jewish population, and it presented answers or stances with great appeal in today’s secular world. As the book amply shows, the movement flourished because it grew out of an interaction with its setting: this was its driving force, its implicit message. The separation of the holy from the profane, along with seeing religion as an a priori or cognitive system, as some modern exponents of Jewish orthodoxy have argued [Leibowitz, 1992], [Soloveitchik, 1983, 1986], was not, and is not, the answer. If *Hasidism* has anything to say to today’s generation, Jewish or Gentile, observant or secular, it is exactly that linking of ethos and praxis, this non-separation of the profane and the holy: Praxis should not guide ethos, mankind should not pursue everything that is technically feasible, prudence is better than greed or stupidity. But conversely, ethos should not guide praxis in unreflected ways, lest it becomes deceptive or illiberal.

Finally, a brief note on what separates the *Hasid* from the agnostic, or what sets apart a rigid orthodoxy (that rejects the notion that religion is anthropogenic) from the glowing Hasidic tales that appeal to non-observant Jews and Gentiles. It is not religion as such, or religiosity, or the search for meaning and depth, that are central to this separation: it is gnosis, particularly faith, and the implicit notion the *Hasid* has of the divine. With regard to the former, *Hasidism* has great general appeal; and regarding the latter, faith is seen as a disposition (or an inborn coping strategy) with respect to the unknown or the future, because “man by nature *has* faith” [773]. This notion of faith cannot be the stumbling block that separates the world of *Hasidism* from secular Jews. Rather, it is their belief that faith cannot be addressed intellectually (e.g. in terms of a coping strategy) and that it is tied to a given dogma (which, from an agnostic perspective, is arbitrary and has only sociological significance). In this respect, *Hasidism* does not differ significantly from Jewish or Christian orthodoxy. This becomes evident, for instance, in the assessment of the Holocaust by handed-down theological perspectives that are still common. While Christian theology may tie the Holocaust to Jews’ rejection of Jesus or view “suffering, in its most sacred sense, [as] part of Israel’s mission” [Ragaz, 1947, 66], Hasidic theology similarly sees the “Holocaust as a necessary — if horrific — corrective to the sin of assimilation” or that the “sufferings of exile were the evidence that God continued to choose the Jews” [659]. Here we find the

primary schism that separates religious agnosticism, which tries to embrace both ethos and praxis from a locked-in, faith based theological root.

References

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