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Dealing with Desire: The Transformation of Hasidic Asceticism

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Introduction

On the holy Sabbath eve, after Kiddush, a dream I saw.

I was in a certain city, which in the dream appeared to be very large. A *tsaddik* of olden times came along, one who was considered a very great *tsaddik*. Everyone was going out to him, and I too went along. Then I saw that when they reached him, everyone passed him by and nobody stopped to greet him. It seemed that they were doing so intentionally. I was most astonished at their audacity, for I knew the man to be a great *tsaddik*. Then I asked how it was that they had the nerve not to greet such a man. I was told that he was indeed a great *tsaddik*, but that his body was made up of various unclean parts, despite the fact that he himself was a great man. He had taken it upon himself to redeem this body, but since “one should not greet one’s fellow man in an unclean place,” no one offered any greeting to him.¹

While parables are not capable of fully representing religious movements, they are useful in garnering information concerning the character of a community.

Hasidic Judaism spoke in the language of parables, and the character of their communities is shown directly through these rabbinic anecdotes. The parable above demonstrates the importance of the body, and in doing so, conveys the necessity of its purity. The motif of the pure body will be seen throughout this paper, and while all Hasidim strived for this idea of the pure, their practices in order to gain such purity differed greatly, resulting in unique ascetic structures which governed much of the movement.

From its inception in the mid-eighteenth century, Hasidic Judaism has been accurately described as a revival movement. Hasidism emerged during a time of great economic hardship for Jews living under restrictive governments across Eastern Europe. Opportunities for prosperity within and beyond Jewish communities were scarce. Additionally, the practices of Judaism were extremely

¹ David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, eds. “The Dream-Talks of Nahman of Bratslav,” in *Rabbinic Fantasies*, trans. Arthur Green (Philadelphia: JPS, 1990), 341.

fragmented across Eastern Europe. Failed messianic figures such as Sabbatai Zevi had previously attempted to unify this fragmentation, though as will become evident, many considered his efforts to be hollow, heretical, and to no avail.

A considerable portion of the Jewish population during this period was waiting for a pious, verifiable, and mystical leader to bring society into a golden age of religious prosperity. That leader, some believed, was Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer, a mystical healer from Podolia commonly known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht). The Besht emerged as the foundation of Hasidim, the cornerstone of the movement. As the founder of Hasidic Judaism, the Besht set the religious precedent for the movement as a whole. A brief summary of his religious principles shows that a central tenet for the Besht was his idea of elevating the mundane; his goal was to give meaning to even the most earthly of objects and desires. The Besht did not wish to rid himself of the body but glorify it. Joy and ecstatic worship permeated his teachings.

The historical surroundings that gave rise to Hasidism will be examined in a way that highlights the power structures and influences that prompted the Besht to establish a new form of Judaism in eighteenth century Eastern Europe. Before addressing these instances, however, I will present a clear definition of “asceticism” in order to maintain a certain amount of semantic consistency throughout this work.

While it was common in academic spheres for asceticism to be defined as practices of self-denial, such a limited definition does not account for more recent scholarly ventures into ascetic theory. In its most unalloyed sense, asceticism

literally means training, or exercise. The word dates back to the Greek “ασκησις” (askesis), relating to the physical training of athletes.² Asceticism, then, can connote the training of the body in a general sense. There can be no doubt that practices of self-denial play a large part in what constitutes certain ascetic behaviors, though I would be remiss to not acknowledge the flip side of asceticism. One must view religious asceticism as lying on an arc of bodily training. On one side of this arc, world-affirming ascetics train themselves to delight in worldly pleasures in order to achieve mystical ecstasy through their actions; on the other, world-denying ascetics perform acts in order to achieve a similar mystical “being-with-God” as the world-affirming, though their acts are defined by a retreat from the world and a renunciation of its pleasures, not an embrace and acceptance of it.

This theoretical arc of asceticism holds true when considered within the context of the Hasidic movement. The ascetic qualities of the Besht, on the whole, place him on the world-affirming side of the arc. Therefore, the Hasidic movement was initially founded upon world-affirming practices. Despite its foundations, as Hasidism grew and developed, a number of Hasidic masters began to expand their teachings to include aspects of ascetic self-denial, and in many cases, the asceticism of these masters took on extreme forms of restraint and renunciation. In this paper I trace the chronological arc of ascetic practice through Hasidism by focusing on the leaders of the movement, noting the transformations of their teachings and practices with regard to the body. By juxtaposing the later ascetics and their practices with those of the Besht, a better understanding of why

² See Plato *Protagoras*, 323.

and how certain strands of Hasidism shifted toward observances more firmly rooted in self-denial will emerge. Through the ensuing analysis of the body within Hasidism, perspectives of the Hasidic movement from the mid-eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century will expand, illuminating the importance of asceticism within the movement.³

The figures I focus on are varied geographically, spanning from Breslov to Kotzk, and spiritually, differing in levels of asceticism. This paper is organized chronologically, examining figures through the rise and spread of Hasidism. To begin, an extended look at the Ba'al Shem Tov is necessary, paying special attention to the society of which he was a product. From there, the inner circle of the Besht will be explored. Important figures from this group include: the Besht's primary disciple, Rabbi Dov Ber "The Maggid" of Mezeritch, and Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro Koretz, who in many ways contravened the established leadership of the Maggid of Mezeritch.

Once the Besht's Hasidic attitudes had been disseminated beyond his inner circle, ascetic practice began to change. Rabbis began to subject themselves to intense and demanding lifestyles of self-denial, lifestyles the Besht likely would not have endorsed. These figures include R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk, R. Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl, R. Nahman of Breslov, R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, and Hannah Rokhl, the Maid of Ludmir. While discussing these Hasidic

³ In gaining these understandings, one can begin to approach larger questions more pertinent to the general state of Hasidism, similar to that which Joseph Fox presents. "Are the changes in the course of human affairs due mainly to the influence of the leader, who gives rise to a new set of accepted ideas, or to the impacts of the peculiar conditions of the age and environment that produce their spokesmen?" See Joseph Fox, *Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk* (Brooklyn: Bash, 1988), 39.

masters, a watchful eye will continually be kept on the previous Rabbis, noting the transformations of attitudes toward the body throughout the history of the movement.

In considering Hasidism throughout multiple centuries, one must be cognizant of the number of disparate and divergent doctrines found within the movement. By attempting to formulate a so-called “narrative” of Hasidim through an ascetic lens, one runs the risk of both leaving out and misrepresenting integral figures. Scholarly consensus can exist, though it should not necessarily be a determining factor of whether something is deemed to be “true.”

Rather, the scholar should work within two contexts: the context of the figure and the context of the paper. Both are significant in how meaning is derived, and both should be seen in relation to each other. As an example, one must not handpick a specific teaching to further an argument, doing so runs the risk of misinterpreting the original context. At the same time, a judgment call has to be made on whether using such a teaching in order to advance an argument is acceptable. While the teaching might not necessarily be representative of the figure’s overall doctrine, it can still be used as a relevant piece. As such, with the sheer number of theories and assessments of Hasidism, one is certainly not limited and confined to a single set of research guidelines. Martin Buber described the Hasidic movement as capable of living with paradoxes without the need to resolve them.⁴ The same can be said for scholarly attitudes toward Hasidism.

⁴ Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 58.

In looking at approaches to the study of Hasidism, one must take into account the perspectives of scholars Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, whose competing theories set up a binary. Buber found the essence of Hasidism within the people of the movement, not necessarily its leaders. Scholem, on the other hand, understood the Hasidic *tzaddikim*, the righteous leaders of Hasidism, to be the focal point of the movement. Scholem believed that it was the *tzaddik*, the so-called pillar of Hasidism, who stood for the movement as a whole. Instead of attempting to judge the validity of these two distinct theories, my research has left open the opportunity to explore both avenues. Significant overlap exists between the role of the *tzaddik* and the role of the layman, which leads to the question of individualism. On the one hand, some doctrines, like that of R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk, position the *tzaddik* as an intermediary between man and God, “through whom all spiritual and physical needs are met.”⁵ On the other, some *tzaddikim*, such as the Jew of Przysucha, gave the responsibility of attaining spiritual perfection back to the individual Hasid.⁶ Just like any other component of Hasidism, the doctrine of the *tzaddik* was not axiomatic. Universality did exist in the importance of the *tzaddik*, though different dynasties and leaders emphasized distinctive roles for the *tzaddik* to perform. Moving forward through this paper, it will become clear how asceticism developed and became the primary function of the *tzaddik*, as well as the function of Hasidic society as a whole.

⁵ Morris Faienstein, “Personal redemption in Hasidism,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), 215.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

Historical Background

Before exploring the principles of the Hasidic movement, one must be acquainted with the historical, economic, and social contexts surrounding the establishment of the movement. In his book *Messianism, Mysticism, and Magic*, Stephen Sharot deconstructs many important sociological factors surrounding the beginnings of Hasidism, creating a narrative for the historical background that fostered the beginnings of the Besht.

Hasidism arose amid years of turmoil and tumult in the Pale of Settlement, a region designated for Jewish populations under Imperial Russia. The Pale extended far enough west to include regions of both modern-day Poland and Ukraine. Specifically in Poland, economic decline and political disintegration slashed into Polish society in the latter part of the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth centuries.⁷ The power of the Polish state had been significantly reduced as a result of a number of political episodes. The uprising of the Ukrainian Cossacks and peasants in 1648, the invasions of Russia (1654-1667) and Sweden (1655-1660), the Great Northern War (1701-1721), and the subsequent civil wars in Poland all contributed to this reduction of power.⁸

Many Jews at this time worked as mercantile middlemen, positioned between wealthy Polish nobles and poverty stricken peasants. While more urban centers such as Lemberg, Volhynia, and Vilna were home to a number of urban Jews, life in Podolia was much less metropolitan. According to a census of Polish Jewry in 1763-1764, the Ukrainian region of Podolia, along with much of Eastern

⁷ Stephen Sharot, *Messianism, Mysticism, and Magic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

Poland, consisted of villages and small towns, as opposed to larger Jewish communities of over 6000 in the western areas of the Pale.⁹ An overwhelmingly large number of these village Jews primarily worked in leaseholding and innkeeping.¹⁰ It was in these Jewish villages (*shtetlekh*) where Hasidism first began to take hold.

In 1648, the Jewish communities in Poland suffered their most severe and calculated defeat during the Khmelnytsky uprising. The Cossacks, a semi-peasant class in Poland, organized and led an uprising against the Polish *szlachta* (nobles) and their Jewish agents. A universal figure is hard to come by, though it is generally argued that a quarter of Polish Jewry was destroyed, along with a sizable chunk of Ukrainian Jewry. Still, the social, economic, and emotional annihilation was far more devastating than any figure can suggest. The pogroms never officially ceased and continued to affect Jewish communities well into the middle of the eighteenth century.

In addition to the pogroms that inflicted a pointed destruction upon Jewish communities across Eastern Europe, Jews living in communal settings across Poland were burdened with high taxes and large economic restrictions, causing many to flee urban areas for more remote settings. The proud institutions of Jewish autonomy eroded during this process, and in 1764, the Council of the Four Lands (the supracommunal governing body of Polish Jews) disbanded.¹¹ As Sharot explains, despite this move to the countryside, many Jews were no better

⁹ Ibid., 132. For more on census data of Polish Jewry, see Raphael Mahler, *History of the Jewish People in Modern Times*, Vol. 1, bk. 2 (Merhavaya, 1954-1976), 269.

¹⁰ Sharot 133.

¹¹ David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 123.

off than they were in the city. The migration of Jews to the villages increased the competition for leases and provided the nobles with an opportunity to increase rents. This situation was exacerbated by the poorer nobles, who saw leaseholding as a means of retaining some measure of gentility. Lacking any means of livelihood, the number of wandering, destitute Jews increased.¹² The slow deconstruction of Jewish communities in Poland due to outside forces of militia, taxation, and social stratification diminished the strength of these communities, thereby increasing the inner hostility among the inhabitants.

The aftermath of the Khmelnytsky uprising and the successive economic external pressures of Polish society led to a significant decline in *yeshiva* standards, rabbinic ordination, and religious unity.¹³ As a result, the religious distance between the rabbinic elite and the masses began to widen: the *pilpul* (rabbinic discussions relating to the Talmud) were remote from the daily life of the masses, and many rabbis rebuked the people for their failure to observe increasingly strict demands for religious observance.¹⁴ This palpable disparity between the elites and the masses fed directly into the beginnings of the Hasidic movement.

Having discussed the historical and societal factors surrounding the rise of Hasidism, it is necessary now to look at Hasidism's specifically religious

¹² Sharot 134. Bands of Jewish robbers grew during this period. Jewish thievery as a means to survive occurred with greater frequency.

¹³ Ibid., 135. The external pressures pressing against the insular Jewish communities led to corruption among the religious elite. Rabbinic ordination was now able to be purchased. As such, improper rabbis occupied teachings positions in these declining *yeshivos*.

¹⁴ Ibid., 135.

influences. The ways in which Kabbalism and Sabbateanism preceded and influenced the Ba'al Shem Tov will be addressed here.

Despite Kabbalism's long and tangled history, one can make note of the concepts that shaped the doctrine of the Besht and the later Hasidim. Kabbalism itself is not easy to define; nevertheless, important Kabbalistic aspects that will aid in understanding Hasidic Jewry will be addressed, namely, certain aspects of the *Zohar* and the school of Isaac Luria.

Gershom Scholem attributes the origins of the Kabbalistic movement to the system of Abulafia, founded in Eastern Spain around the year 1200. In Kabbalism, Scholem says, "Teaching by word of mouth and implication rather than assertion, was the rule. The numerous allusions found in this field of literature, such as [...] 'this is only for those familiar with the secret wisdom' are not mere flights of rhetoric... In many cases, whispers, and that in esoteric hints, were the only medium of transmission."¹⁵ While Kabbalah was said to have emerged during this time, there is debate as to why and how Kabbalism became so popular. Heinrich Graetz argues that the mystical movement grew out of a need to create a distance from the rational aspect of Medieval Judaism (Maimonides), while Scholem argues that Kabbalism was simply a continuation and reemergence of mystical Judaism, drawing off of its Gnostic predecessors.¹⁶ Nevertheless,

¹⁵ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 120.

¹⁶ For more on Gnosticism within Kabbalah, see Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1987). For more on Medieval Judaism and its relation to Kabbalah, see Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 4 (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1891-1898). These two distinct theories do not have to be viewed as mutually exclusive.

Kabbalism grew from its principal foundations in the 1200s to become a mystical movement that would have profound effects on the later history of Judaism.

According to Scholem, the move from the Abulafia system to the system proposed in Kabbalism principal work, the *Zohar*, was significant.¹⁷ Abulafia's school of "prophetic Kabbalism" was said by Scholem to be the most aristocratic form of mysticism, primarily due to its focus on pragmatic philosophy and cognition of God. The *Zohar*, on the other hand, catered to the *hoi polloi*. "The language of the *Zohar*," writes Scholem, "is that of a writer who has experienced the common fears of mankind as profoundly as anyone. For this reason if for no other it struck a chord which resounded deeply in human hearts and assured it a success denied to other forms of early Kabbalism."¹⁸ Similar to the beginnings of Hasidic Judaism, early Kabbalistic texts were geared toward the common people, not necessarily the rabbinic elite. Another important difference Scholem recognizes is the role of scripture in these two different Kabbalistic schools. Scholem argues that the Abulafia school was systemized yet lacked scriptural references, while the *Zohar* was bound closely to the biblical text and did not necessarily propose a one-size-fits-all system for achieving a high level of mysticism. The meditative aspects of the *Zohar* are worthy to note, for the origins of the *Zohar* appear to form a mystical system based on meditation. These meditative qualities contain ascetic elements. As one example, Aryeh Kaplan

¹⁷ The *Zohar* is the primary mystical work of Kabbalah. It is group of books explaining the mysteries of the divine though a mystical, Kabbalistic lens. Its authorship is disputed. Some claim that it was written by the second century Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, though the work first surfaced in 13th Century Spain.

¹⁸ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 205.

notes that the meditative system of the *Zohar* was meant “to release one from the bonds of one’s physical nature.”¹⁹

Within the *Zohar*, we find central features that lead into the ascetic concepts proposed by ascetic Hasidim. Sexuality is discussed at length, with certain acts and observances being both praised and denounced.²⁰ The *Zohar* places significant importance on the *mitzvah* to procreate though does not do so before articulating the potential pitfalls and sins associated with sexuality. As David Biale writes, “The *Zohar* condemns improper sexuality in such terms because of the theological importance it places on permitted sexuality.”²¹ In the *Zohar*, sex is spiritual; it is of divine meaning and should be treated accordingly. Therefore, the *Zohar* understands masturbation and nocturnal emissions to be unforgivable sins; in fact, masturbation was more wicked than murder because one is not killing other people, but rather killing one’s own sons.²²

In essence, one was meant to abstain from excessive sexual practices, for sex was meant to elevate man to the divine, and in the *Zohar*, this was not possible at all times. As an example, the *Zohar* quotes Isaiah 56:4 which states, “These are the words of the Lord concerning the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths.” As Biale points out, the *Zohar* interprets the “eunuchs” as those mystics who abstain from sex during the week. This abstention during the “material” week was

¹⁹ Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), 3.

²⁰ See Biale 115 (all shorthand citations of Biale refer to David Biale, *Eros and the Jews*). Biale specifically deals with the celebration of eunuchs who refrain from sex during the week.

²¹ Biale 110.

²² *Zohar* 1:219b. For English translation, see Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, *The Zohar*, vol. 2 (London: Soncino Press, 1984), 312.

meant to encourage and greater glorify sexual relations on the Sabbath.²³ “Taken together, the two sides of this doctrine attest to a powerful ambivalence about sexuality and a desire to reconcile the attraction of celibacy with marital obligations by subsuming the physical act of sex into a mystical theology.”²⁴ This mystical theology of some sort of union, either with God’s worldly presence (*Shekhina*) or one’s own wife, was fundamental in the shaping of Kabbalism through the *Zohar*. This is not to say, however, that some Kabbalistic men did not take sexual abstinence to an extreme.

As Kabbalism spread, a variety of views geared toward self-denial began to take shape and form theological expression. Joseph Karo, the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Jewish code of law, was one of many Kabbalists who feared the divine repercussions of sexuality and sexual pleasure. Karo was so fervent in his fears that he referred to all pleasure involved in sex as being in violation of Jewish law.²⁵ A number of Kabbalists including Karo, Elijah da Vidas, Hayyim Vital, and much of the Tzfat school were concerned with how to bypass as well as conquer sexual pleasure.²⁶

The final Kabbalistic precursor to the Ba’al Shem Tov to discuss is R. Isaac Luria “the Ari,” known as the founder of Lurianic Kabbalah, a movement out of Tzfat, Israel, formed in the mid-16th century. Most scholars view Lurianic Kabbalah as the primary forerunner to Hasidism. Though differing on a number of issues specifically regarding how to approach Hasidism, Moshe Idel explains

²³ Biale 111. For a uniquely modern mystical perspective on the Sabbath, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951).

²⁴ Biale 111.

²⁵ *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Hayim*, 240.

²⁶ Biale 115-116.

that both Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem recognized Lurianic Kabbalah as the fundamental movement out of which Hasidism grew. Idel elucidates that while both were cognizant of the influence of other prior forms of Kabbalism, the mystical elements of the Lurianic movement were too forthright to be barred from the construction and formation of Hasidism.²⁷ While there are far too many mystical nuances in Lurianic Kabbalah to be explained here, it is important to explain a few teachings that will later appear within Hasidism.

The Ari profoundly shaped his own doctrine on the creation of the world, which overwhelmingly pervaded his work. He postulated that in the beginning, God, the *ein sof* (no end), had to withdraw into himself in order to create the world. This act was known as *tsimtsum*. Through this act, God created the world and a Primordial Adam, an Adam prior to the one seen in the *Tanakh*. Luria claimed that in this primordial stage, vessels of the *ein sof's* light had shattered, scattering God's divine sparks among the material world and creating a chaos of sorts. Luria believed that these divine sparks, *klippot*, had to be uplifted by man in order to return the *ein sof*, and thus the world, to its rightful, primordial place. The Ari leaves the door open for using world-denying asceticism to produce a messianic period by endorsing some ascetic acts in order to achieve such messianic goals.²⁸ This line of thought will be called upon in later chapters when discussing the role of Lurianic Kabbalah within later Hasidic asceticism.

²⁷ Moshe Idel "Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem on Hasidism: A Critical Appraisal," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, 393.

²⁸ The Ari stresses that one should adhere to his theology "and its urgings for self-condemnation." See Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 129.

Moving toward an introduction to the Ba'al Shem Tov, it is important to look at one more Jewish movement that had subtle yet profound effects on the doctrine of the Besht and Jewish mysticism. Many scholars have spent careers reconstructing the life, doctrine, and influence of Sabbatai Zevi, though for the purposes of this paper, it is essential only to provide a background of Sabbateanism, highlighting the ascetic and antinomian qualities of the movement.

Zevi was from Dulcigno (modern day Ulcinj, Montenegro), and spent considerable time in the holy land (modern-day Israel). As a self-proclaimed messianic figure, Zevi began to live his life in extremes. Zevi spent years in solitude, sinking into depression and gloom. During this time, Zevi began fasting and became a celibate ascetic. His antinomian qualities involved heavy sexual asceticism, and it was only after his messianic declaration and apostasy that hypersexual practices began to disseminate through his disciples. According to Biale, legends of Zevi's dreams constantly involved fears of sexuality. As such, Zevi and his followers engaged in severe ascetic practices designed to eradicate desire.²⁹

Additionally, it has been said that Zevi did not engage in the *mitzvah* to procreate with any of his three wives.³⁰ While this might seem to be simply another antinomian quality of Zevi, this abstention (assuming it to be correct) could have in fact been his greatest transgression in the eyes of his detractors. The

²⁹ Biale 118. For dream of Zevi eradicating desire, see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 113. "When he [Sabbatai] was six years old a flame appeared in a dream and caused a burn on his penis; and dreams would frighten him but he never told anyone. And the sons of whoredom [the demons] accosted him so as to cause him to stumble and they beat him, but he would not hearken unto them."

³⁰ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, 113.

commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” from Genesis 1:28 had a profound influence on a number of ascetic Hasidim, and as will be explained, many of them (specifically R. Nahman of Breslov and R. Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl) struggled in their approaches to fulfill this conjugal obligation.

Biale claims that as eschatological anticipation grew within the Sabbatean movement, Zevi’s antinomianism and asceticism began to shift from extreme practices of self-denial to world-affirming acts. Evidence suggests that Zevi’s third wife was a prostitute who had committed adultery. Zevi had women sit together with men at many events, and even called women to the Torah, all of which deviated from *halachic* norms.³¹ Because Zevi saw himself as the end of the messianic line, Mosaic law was fulfilled and ready to be replaced. Thus, his radical antinomian principles were self-validated through his messianic presumptions.³²

As is widely known, Zevi eventually converted to Islam, forcing thousands of his followers were left to reinterpret Sabbatean tenets in a post-messianic structure. Sexual liberation became a practice of these followers, and polygamy, radical eroticism, and “erotic theology” dominated post-Zevi, Sabbatean sects.³³

Following this review of the historical phenomena leading up to Hasidism, the Hasidic figures that gave rise to and shaped asceticism will be examined. I

³¹ Being a time-bound *mitzvah*, women were not obligated, and thus barred from participating in Torah readings. For the *halacha* regarding women in prayer and Torah study, see Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 17-24.

³² Still, it is not entirely clear whether Zevi himself participated in any sexually illicit acts. See Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*.

³³ Biale 119.

will present the shifting dimensions of Hasidic theology in the upcoming sections, noting specifically how training of both the body and the mind fed into the doctrinal changes occurring among seventeenth and eighteenth century Hasidim.

Ba'al Shem Tov

The strands of mystical Judaism discussed above fostered the environment that gave rise to the Ba'al Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name). The Besht was born in Podolia, Ukraine in 1698. His father died in 1703, leaving the Besht orphaned for the majority of his childhood. Despite these circumstances, he was raised in a traditional manner, going through *kheyder*, becoming a *melamed*, and getting married at the age of 18.³⁴ Growing up in an era of extreme upheaval, the Besht was cognizant of how antinomian groups like the Sabbateans were being persecuted and pursued by rabbinic authorities. Thus, this environment impelled the Besht to seek solitude in order to leave his tumultuous surroundings and spiritually perfect his soul. The Besht left for the Carpathian Mountains, leaving behind most of his material possessions; he engaged in a number of ascetic practices such as fasting and isolated meditation.³⁵ As Sears notes, Hasidic tradition teaches that the Besht had many mystical experiences on the mountain, including being read the whole Torah by his angelic mentor, Achiyah Hashiloni.³⁶ When the Besht returned from the mountains, he led the life of a common Ba'al Shem. In 18th century Eastern Europe, a Ba'al Shem was essentially a traveling mystic, a miracle-worker, and a healer for the commoners. A Ba'al Shem did not typically teach religious material nor exert any significant influence upon the people for whom he worked; yet because of the Besht's travels and teachings, he

³⁴ *Kheyder*: Traditional Jewish school for young children. *Melamed*: Either a teacher or tutor of a variety of Jewish subjects.

³⁵ David Sears, *The Path of the Ba'al Shem Tov* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), xvii.

³⁶ Tradition claims that Hashiloni was at Mount Sinai during the divine revelation described in Exodus 24:18.

gained a considerable following in the regions of Podolia and Volhynia.³⁷ It was this following that allowed the Besht to expand and expound his personal attitudes toward prayer, mysticism, and the body.

The defining practice of early Hasidism, *devekus*, was a teaching which the Besht sought to expand. *Devekus* (lit. to cleave or attach) is a state of deep meditation traditionally achieved during either Torah study or prayer. In *devekus*, one spiritually “cleaves” to a divine aspect of God. The Besht did not pioneer *devekus* in its original sense, though he did transform common notions of *devekus* held by his Kabbalistic predecessors.³⁸ In his work on the Besht, Immanuel Etkes identifies four important Beshtian principles that separated his teachings from the Kabbalists of the early eighteenth century. First, the Besht thought of *devekus* as a short “ecstatic mystical experience” as opposed to a constant focus on the divine. Second, the Besht advocated for a type of *devekus* that directly accessed the Godhead, as opposed to the *Shekhina*, through enthusiastic prayer. Third, the Besht’s concept of divine imminence was more literal than previous views. With his nuanced understanding of the phrase “no site is clear of Him,” the Besht believed that one could not simply eradicate the evil forces within the world, for no one object or entity was entirely evil. Finally, ascetic practices of self-denial served no use. The ascetic practices of Kabbalists were done primarily to eradicate evil and escape one’s own corporality. Because the Besht believed that sparks of goodness permeated all worldly material, he sought to uplift and elevate

³⁷ Sharot 139.

³⁸ For more on Kabbalistic notions of *devekus*, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 123, 140, 233. For Lurianic Kabbalah notions of *devekus*, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 278. For more on the interplay between Kabbalistic *devekus* and early Hasidic *devekus*, see Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*.

this material (as opposed to the eradication of the worldly) in order to release these divine sparks.³⁹ The Besht's focus on the worldly aspects of society carried over to his doctrine on *devekus*. He argued that *devekus* could be achieved outside of conventional prayer, and that spirituality was not limited to the "holy," but could also be found within the profane.

The Besht's asceticism, or bodily training, then, was world-affirming. The Besht trained himself to transform worldly materials by giving them mystical and heavenly associations. An example of the Besht's doctrine of elevation comes in his ideas concerning straying thoughts during prayer. The prevailing Kabbalistic notion claimed, "Straying thoughts originated from the forces of the Evil Side. Further, any prayer that has been tainted by such straying thoughts is kidnapped by these forces and provides them with nourishment."⁴⁰ Etkes explains that certain ascetic rituals like self-mortification were practiced among Kabbalists in order to rid straying thoughts during prayer. The Besht took this dogma and essentially inverted it; he is quoted as teaching, "It is better to serve the Lord in joy, without self-mortification."⁴¹ The Besht did not abide by traditional body-soul dualisms; instead, he sought to join the two in order to serve God. "The Ba'al Shem rejected the traditional proposition that body and soul were engaged in bitter rivalry. The body, he held, should cooperate with the soul in the service of God; therefore, its basic needs required satisfaction."⁴² The Besht disputed the Kabbalists by arguing that these straying thoughts were of divine origin, not

³⁹ Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 122-123.

⁴⁰ Etkes 144.

⁴¹ Biale 131, n. 34.

⁴² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 27.

founded in Evil. Therefore, rejecting these straying thoughts was rejecting an element of the divine.⁴³

Physical desire, too, was something that should be elevated and transformed. Lust, desire, and sexuality were all on the path toward greater spirituality and greater Torah study. Detailed writings concerning the Besht's attitude toward sexuality are sparse. Nevertheless, some of his teachings are found within the works of his disciples. Benjamin of Zaolzce taught that the Song of Songs employs physical desire, coupled with adherence to God. In "this aspect of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching, neither the body nor women are to be regarded negatively...The woman gains in status because of her physical relations with her husband: the body conveys spirituality."⁴⁴ In essence, the Besht "taught that joy indicated complete belief and trust in God, whereas fasting, self-affliction, and sorrow expressed an ingratitude to God and were impediments to cleaving to the divine."⁴⁵

In the Hasidic anthology *Kovetz Eliyahu*, "The Ten Principles of the Ba'al Shem Tov" are stated. While the Besht himself did not write this work, one can observe the Besht's influence among these writings. The seventh of the ten principles states, "Neither thinking about one's death nor the fear of punishment in hell will arouse a person's heart to serve G-d. But yearning to cling to the source of life and goodness will do so. And neither fasting nor self-affliction will be of any help. But forgetting oneself out of the depth of one's yearning [for

⁴³ The Besht moderated this teaching by noting that some may not have the necessary capacity to elevate such thoughts. In these cases, it was better to reject the thought than let it dominate one's prayer. See Etkes 145, n. 96.

⁴⁴ Biale 131.

⁴⁵ Sharot 139.

God].”⁴⁶ For the Besht, then, it was not fasting but losing oneself in God that dominated his Hasidic theology. This extension of the Besht’s teachings is important to note, as it will be reintroduced in the discussion of how post-Beshtian Hasidim regarded the feminine body as an obstruction to spirituality and *devekus*.

The Besht’s concept of *avodah begashmiut* (worship through corporality) set his doctrine apart from those of his predecessors. In her expansive work *Hasidism as Mysticism*, Rivka Uffenheimer alters previous conceptions of *avodah begashmiut*, primarily framed by Martin Buber, who claimed that *avodah begashmiut* worked within the limits of “the sanctified profane.”⁴⁷ Uffenheimer rejects Buber’s thrusting of a secular lens upon Beshtian Hasidism. It was not an act of simply sanctifying the concrete through contact. She writes, “One cannot imagine Hasidism coming up with a sexual formula such as that which Buber ascribed to it, according to which the very act of dialogic contact with reality is its sanctification.”⁴⁸ Uffenheimer’s defense against Buber is employed primarily to protect the spiritual and mystical validity of *avodah begashmiut*. Like that of world-denying asceticism, *avodah begashmiut* is itself a form of bodily training, one that carries very real risks of vulgarization, bastardization, and “corporal happiness.” If done appropriately, mystical experiences were said to come forth. For the Besht, eating, drinking, and sexual relations were all mystical ascetic

⁴⁶ *Kovetz Eliyahu*, trans. Yaacov Dovid Shulman ,14.

⁴⁷ Uffenheimer 57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

paths toward *devekus*, assuming one was actively intending to cleave to God during these acts.⁴⁹

In *The Path of the Baal Shem Tov*, David Sears examines the Besht's specific teachings regarding eating and drinking.⁵⁰ The Besht drew on the language of Psalm 107:5, "Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them," and applied it to the necessity of eating and drinking in order to serve God. As stated above, the Besht believed that food, like any other material, contained holy sparks which must be returned through consumption. "Thus, the verse states, 'Hungry and thirsty' – when people crave after food and drink, what happens? 'Their soul fainted within them' – [the holy sparks remain] in exile, in alien garments. For all the things one uses are actually his children, held in captivity [in these forms]." It is clear then, that eating was a necessary step in the Besht's goal to uplift the divine sparks back into the higher realms of spirituality.

The foundation of Hasidism was rooted in these Beshtian principles explained above. Worship through joy became a foundational Hasidic exercise. The Besht's Hasidic doctrine of bodily training pulsated through the early Hasidim, reaching far beyond his base in Podolia. Despite this clear early influence, many subsequent Hasidim, inspired by either historical phenomenon or individual inclination, turned away from the Beshtian teachings of joy and

⁴⁹ The Besht used aspects of the Lurianic theory of *avodah begashmiut*. See Rachel Sabath, *Dancing on a Rope: The Role of the Body in Hasidic Prayer and in the Teachings of Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 1995). See also Rachel Elior, "Joseph Karo and the Ba'al Shem Tov," (Studies in Spirituality, 2007), 310.

⁵⁰ Sears 45, n. 1.

elevation, focusing more on asceticism through bodily mortification, fasting, and celibacy. As stated by Arthur Green,

Though its period of creativity lasted for less than a hundred years (1750-1840), Hasidism produced a number of discrete schools and a vast array of distinct and idiosyncratic religious types. The writings associated with such communities as Bratslav, Lubavitch and Zydachov are at least as different from the spirit of the Ba'al Shem Tov as is he from many a "non-Hasidic" thinker of his generation.⁵¹

Through exploring a number of the later Hasidic leaders, noticeable trends will emerge regarding reasons why certain later Hasidim viewed the body with such disdain, giving rise to a plethora of individual formulations of worship and practice.

⁵¹ Arthur Green, *Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl: Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 4-5.

Maggid of Mezeritch

The first post-Beshtian figure I analyze is R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch. The Maggid set a spiritual precedent that fed off of Beshtian asceticism while introducing more aspects of self-denial and world renunciation. Little is certain about the Maggid's early life. There is no one scholarly source that outlines his upbringing. As such, much of the biographical information regarding the Maggid comes from works within the Hasidic community, usually praising as opposed to analyzing. Often times biographical information is given in the form of tales or parables, leaving much historical accuracy to be desired. Keeping this in mind, a succinct look at the early life of the Maggid and his initial meetings with the Besht will suffice.

By most accounts, the Maggid was born around the year 1700 in Lukatz, Volhynia. As a young boy, he was said to have unusually advanced abilities in the study of Torah and Talmud. He studied under R. Shlomoh Dov Baer, the Rebbe of Lurkatz, and later went to a *yeshiva* under R. Jacob Joshua Falk, famed author of *Penei Yeshoshua*.⁵² Shortly thereafter, the Maggid married and began to live a life of extreme poverty, relying exclusively on bare necessities. Despite constant protests from his wife, the Maggid maintained this lifestyle. "He lived content in his poverty and turned down several calls to become the rabbi of prominent communities."⁵³ Like the Besht, the Maggid was initially enticed by the doctrine of Lurianic Kabbalah, adopting ascetic practices such as fasting and bodily

⁵² Tzvi Rabinowicz, *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 92.

⁵³ Jacob Immanuel Schochet, *The Great Maggid* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1974), 25.

mortification. Prior to meeting the Besht, the Maggid would frequently fast from Shabbat to Shabbat while simultaneously depriving himself of sleep, spending continuous nights engaged in study, prayer, and introspection.⁵⁴ Like the Besht who meditated in the mountains, the Maggid often took long walks near ponds and lakes in order to listen to and admire the frogs whom he believed were singing to their Creator. R. Shneur Zalman of Lydy, the patriarch of the Chabad Lubavitch dynasty and a disciple of the Maggid, elucidated the Maggid's inner dialogue concerning the frogs; "'See, just see,' he (Maggid) reproached himself, 'these frogs are but inferior creatures yet they never cease to sing the praises of the Creator, even in the dark of the night; yet I should lie down to sleep?'"⁵⁵

Ironically, it was the Maggid's ascetic fervor that eventually led to his first encounter with the Besht. The Maggid came to the Besht in great despair, on the brink of death from his asceticism. He visited the Besht in order to have his physical ailments cured, though he ended up having a spiritual experience that initiated his journey into Hasidism. The story goes that in their meeting, the Besht brought out the Lurianic book *Etz Chayim* and proceeded to ask the Maggid to explain a certain verse. The Maggid explained to the best of his ability, but took a too literal approach to a passage that dealt with metaphorical, esoteric secrets to the Torah. When the Besht clarified the passage, the Maggid "evidently was witness to one of the Besht's mystical experiences, and his observation of this

⁵⁴ Schochet 26.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

event deeply impressed him. This experience was presumably ecstatic in nature...”⁵⁶

While the Maggid’s ascent within Hasidism is interesting to detail, it is better to take a specific look at the individual doctrine of the Maggid, noting ascetic practices and precursors to the later ascetics within his teachings.

Scholars of Hasidism including Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem have debated the level of influence that the teachings of the Maggid had over subsequent generations of Hasidim. Buber argues that after the Maggid of Mezeritch, there were two types of diametrically opposed Hasidic doctrines: “that of the Ba’al Shem Tov, which teaches the ‘hallowing’ of mundane life, and that of the Maggid of Mezeritch, which insists upon the gnostic spiritualization of existence.”⁵⁷ Buber understood “true” Hasidism to be based on the Beshtian principle of *avodah begashmiut* (worship through corporality), though Scholem sought a different interpretation. Scholem argued that the concept of *bittul hayesh* (annihilating the material) was more marked within Hasidism, as opposed to *avodah begashmiut*. Neither of these theories seem to be entirely plausible; rather than being one or the other, Hasidism was an amalgamation of practices, both disparate and related.

Despite Scholem’s understanding of the Maggid’s broken relation to *avodah begashmiut*, the Maggid’s attitude toward this practice is difficult to discern. He no doubt supported the system prescribed by the Besht, though his

⁵⁶ Etkes 183.

⁵⁷ Uffenheimer 32.

support was not without reservations.⁵⁸ The Maggid and his disciples wondered if only the elite should practice *avodah begashmiut* so as to avoid the concept's potential vulgarization by common Hasidim. R. Scheur Zalman of Lydy even viewed the practice with a certain amount of derision.⁵⁹ This fear shows that the Maggid worried about the spread of unnecessary corporal happiness. Whether it was because of his significant Lurianic background, or his specific environment, the Maggid's attitudes toward the body are generally regarded as more restrained than the Besht. His doctrine was said to have a far greater focus on attaining spirituality through bodily restraint and denial rather than through corporal practices stemming from worship through *avodah begashmiut*.

The quintessential piece differentiating the Ba'al Shem Tov from his disciple the Maggid of Mezeritch comes in the Maggid's interpretation of *devekus*. As seen above, the Besht saw *devekus* as a mystical state of being in which man "cleaves" to God through both prayer and corporality. The Maggid agreed with the Besht's basic conception of *devekus*, though he sought to define the practice in terms of a *union* between man and God as opposed to a Beshtian *communion* between man and God. The sexual undertones that the Maggid lent to *devekus* were the first of its kind in early Hasidism,⁶⁰ proving to play a substantial role in

⁵⁸ The Besht also prescribed an aspect of *bittul*, though for the Maggid, this practice held much more meaning, making it paramount in his theology. See Naftali Loewenthal, "Self-sacrifice of the Zaddik – Mitteler Rebbe," in *Jewish History: Essays Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein (London: Peter Halban, 1988), 458.

⁵⁹ Uffenheimer 54.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that the concept of *devekus* did not originate in Hasidism. Moshe Idel traces *devekus* back to the Kabbalistic doctrine of Abulafia, though does not underestimate the Hasidic modification in the practice. See, Moshe Idel, "Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, 394.

the development of later Hasidic thought. Gershom Scholem paints an important picture of the Maggid's departure from the Besht on this point.

The difference between the sermons of the two (Besht and Maggid), which have come down to us, is tremendous. I have mentioned the streak of soberness that characterizes the Ba'al Shem. In Rabbi Ber, this trait has disappeared. He is no longer the friend of God and the simple folk, who roams through the markets. He is the ascetic whose gaze is fixed on, or, I might rather say, lost in God. He is a mystic of unbridled radicalism and singularity of purpose... It is, therefore, not astonishing that he should use the terminology of mystical union in describing some stages of *devekut*.⁶¹

Scholem's use of the term "ascetic," with regard to the Maggid, is meant to project the Maggid's lifestyle as well as his desired path toward *devekus*.

Distancing himself from the Besht's doctrine of ascetically elevating the mundane, the Maggid believed that one had to strip away material and earthly elements in order to ascend to the state of *devekus*.⁶²

Going a step further, Scholem explains the biblical relevance for the Maggid's understanding of *devekus*. The Maggid understood Numbers 10:2 to be the primary metaphorical basis for *devekus*. The verse reads, "Make for yourself two silver trumpets – make them hammered out, and they shall be yours for the summoning of the assembly and to cause the camps to journey." The Maggid takes the word for trumpet (*khatzotzros*) and splits it down the middle, forming the words *Khetzi* (half) and *tzorah* (form). The Maggid takes this analysis and applies it to the relation between man and God as a motive for *devekus*. Man in Hebrew is *adam*, though without God, the Maggid understands man to be only *dam* (blood), missing the Hebrew letter *aleph* in front of the word. If man is *dam*,

⁶¹ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 226.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 226.

then God represents the missing *aleph*, meaning *alufo shel olam* (Master of the world). When the *aleph* joins together with the *dam*, then, man and God are joined together in a union, allowing man to be called by his primordial name “*Adam*.”

This example distinguishes the Maggid’s notion of *devekus* as a union from the Beshtian notion of communion. The semantic differentiation between “union” and “communion” is seen in parts of Hasidic scholarship. Union is meant to signify “joining” or “merging” God and man, in some cases emulating a conjugal union (which will be discussed later), while communion connotes more of a “meeting” or “coming together,” rather than “blending together.”

In the Maggid’s doctrine, man and God are both spiritually and physically joined together, returning man to his antediluvian state. The longing for the Garden of Eden and the antediluvian period is an important motif in ascetic Hasidism to be explored further in the analysis of R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk.

David Biale concurs with Scholem’s assertion that the Maggid concerned himself with *bittul hayesh* in preference to *avodah begashmiut*.⁶³ Additionally, Biale brings up the Maggid’s specific sexual doctrine, which is undoubtedly world-denying in nature: “According to the Maggid, ‘during the act of intercourse a man must become nothing,’ meaning that one should transcend one’s materiality and unite with the divine realm of nothingness.”⁶⁴ The Maggid thus removed himself from the Beshtian notions of sexuality that came before him. Taking joy in the material, both sexual and otherwise, was no longer the seminal approach

⁶³ Biale 134.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 50.

among certain Hasidim. The Maggid applied the Talmudic axiom, “a man has a small organ: if he leaves it hungry, it is satisfied, and if he satisfies it, it remains hungry,” to his sexual doctrine.⁶⁵ While he was not advocating for celibacy, he was promoting the idea of annihilating the physical aspects of sexual acts. “Becoming nothing during intercourse” meant to avoid any sort of pleasure and worldly desire. This facet of the Maggid’s teachings had a significant effect on the later Hasidim who sought to replace the female human with the divine.⁶⁶

The Maggid’s idea of merging in union directly with the Godhead through *bittul hayesh* is central in distinguishing Beshtian practices of *avodah begashmiut* as a means of *devekus*. Through the Maggid’s understated changes in sexuality, trends of celibacy and sexual replacement began to emerge among later Hasidim, taking *bittul hayesh* to an increasingly intense level. The Maggid’s employment of fasting also differentiated him greatly from the doctrine of the Besht, and from R. Pinchas of Koretz, a leading Hasid who adhered to the doctrine of the Besht. Rachel Sabath describes the fasting of R. Pinchas, distinguishing his practices from those of the Maggid.

In contrast to the Maggid who instructed another sage that one must “eat only sparingly,” R. Pinchas declared: “Here below they know more than on high, for one should eat and, through eating, serve the Lord.” R. Pinchas asserted that he learned how to “eat before the Lord” from the Besht. Following the teachings of the Besht, R. Pinchas opposed the fasting encouraged by the Maggid and his followers, yet also cautioned against eating too much.⁶⁷

By associating the practices of R. Pinchas with the Besht, Sabath demarcates the fasting of the Maggid in opposition to the Besht. A shift in ascetic

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See below, “R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk,” 40. “R. Nahum of Chernobyl,” 50-52. Both regarding conjugal associations with God.

⁶⁷ Sabath 90.

training had emerged. The Besht's training of "how to eat before the Lord" was now being challenged by the Maggid's training to "eat sparingly." This delineation signified a break from the world-affirming asceticism taught by the Besht. While attitudes toward food, sex, and the body were shifting, there were still those who wished to stand by the doctrine of the Besht and avoid changes to his practices at all costs.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the Maggid gained a great following, and his doctrine was adopted by a number of his disciples, many of whom went on to become the leaders of their own Hasidic dynasties.

The Maggid straddled ascetic doctrines. He was influenced by the Besht's material doctrine, though also advocated for world-denying asceticism, a type of asceticism that had a profound influence upon later Hasidic ascetics. The Maggid was the bridge between the asceticism of the Besht and that of the later Hasidim. Now, a closer look will be taken at the disciples of the Maggid and beyond. These Hasidim produced some of the most radically ascetic doctrines in Hasidism's history, yet despite such radicalism, many trace their Hasidic influences back to the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezeritch, citing both leaders as inspiration for their radical works.

⁶⁸ Such rabbis warrant a thesis in their own right; for the purpose of succinctness, counter-denial movements within Hasidism will not be addressed in detail.

R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk

Due to the declining health of the Maggid, the tree of Hasidic leadership began to branch at a high rate. As Green notes, “each of the disciples of Dov Baer was free to teach and practice Hasidism as he saw fit, thus giving rise to the varied and often contradictory styles of Hasidic life.”⁶⁹ A product of this dispersal was R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk. R. Elimelech was born in 1717 to a wealthy landowner in Galicia. At a young age, he and his brother Zusya studied with R. Shmelke Horowitz in Titkin, a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch. R. Elimelech’s early scholastic life was one marked by voluntary hardship: “They practiced asceticism and went into exile. Wandering incognito from town to town for three years, they suffered the rigors of the road, often weary and hungry.”⁷⁰ His travels took him through most of Hasidic Poland, where he was able to understand the plight and burden of the masses in post-Sabbatean society.

R. Elimelech’s most noted addition to Hasidism was his doctrine of the *tzaddik*, which contained a number of important ascetic elements which displayed R. Elimelech’s theological leanings. As explained by Louis Jacobs in his work, *The Doctrine of the Zaddik in the Thought of Elimelech of Lizensk*, R. Elimelech did not pioneer the idea of the *tzaddik*, though he did specify the *tzaddik*’s function within Hasidic society. The Lurianic practices of “uplifting the sparks” in order to bring about a messianic age stood as a foundation for R. Elimelech’s teachings concerning role of the *tzaddik*. According to R. Elimelech, most men do not possess the necessary spiritual and mystical aptitude to mend the sin

⁶⁹ Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 1992), 24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

committed in the Garden of Eden and bring God and the Jewish people out of their respective exiles.⁷¹ Thus, the role of the *tzaddik* and the role of the common man become clear. The *tzaddikim* must be the ones to channel the redemptive facets of man up to God, while bringing the divine presence down to man. The *tzaddik's* primary function, then, is to be an intermediary between man and God, serving to hasten the messianic age.⁷² At the same time, the common man must cling to the *tzaddik*, so as to be closer to his creator.

Because of his emphasis on the *tzaddik*, the ascetic practices found within the writings of R. Elimelech were intended for a very small percentage of Hasidim, namely those who possessed the spiritual capabilities of *tzaddikim*. Nevertheless, his prescriptions for *tzaddikim* were meant to shape Hasidism as a whole and are therefore pertinent to the greater study of Hasidic asceticism. The teachings of R. Elimelech are important to highlight because they attest to the general trend occurring within Hasidism: As time went on, asceticism became more radical in self-denial, incorporating greater degrees of bodily renunciation. Yet despite this trend of self-denial, some practices of the Besht were still functional within this increasingly ascetic society.

The incorporations of Beshtian asceticism along with newly formed notions of Hasidic self-denial are evident in R. Elimelech's teachings. Jacobs outlines part of R. Elimelech's hybrid bodily doctrine:

⁷¹ See below, "R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk," 40. Discussion of Adam's specific sexual sin within the Garden of Eden.

⁷² For this and many other Hasidic functions of the *tzaddik*, see Immanuel Etkes, "The Zaddik: The Interrelationship between Religious Doctrine and Social Organization," in *Hasidism Reappraised*.

At first, a strong dose of rigorous asceticism is useful to the zaddik's spiritual development. He should mortify his flesh and deny himself all but life's bare necessities. After he has engaged for a time in ascetic exercises he may eventually attain the more advanced stage in which he can enjoy the world in a spirit of utter consecration so that he is able to reclaim the "holy sparks" inhering in food, drink, and other worldly delights.⁷³

These views are interesting in that self-denial and Beshtian asceticism are both present, though the practices of the Besht are restricted for only highly trained *tzaddikim*. The fear of vulgarization was very real among Hasidim familiar with Beshtian asceticism, and by extension, this fear discredits the myths that Beshtian practices were considered by some to be hedonistic.⁷⁴ Hasidism argues that in order to delight in the material elements of the world, one must delight in a manner that is pleasing to God; therefore, the need for ascetic training is ever-present in both Beshtian and later Hasidic circles.⁷⁵

In the doctrine of R. Elimelech, it is the conquering of desire that can facilitate the righteous acts of a *tzaddik*. Delighting in the material is only possible when the *tzaddik* is "so lost in heavenly thoughts that God has to put into his heart a desire for worldly pleasures; otherwise, he would be incapable of reclaiming the sparks..."⁷⁶ One element of the "material" in R. Elimelech's doctrine was the

⁷³ Louis Jacobs, *The Doctrine of the Zaddik in the Thought of Elimelech of Lyzhansk* (Cincinnati: Judaic Studies Program, University of Cincinnati, 1978), 5.

⁷⁴ For accusations from *mitnagdim* directed toward the Hasidim, see Mordecai L. Wilensky, "Hasidic-Mitnaggedic Polemics in the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, ed. Gershon David Hundert (New York: New York University Press, 1991).

⁷⁵ Still, one cannot deny the notable divergences between world-denying asceticism and Beshtian asceticism. R. Elimelech worked to reconcile his ascetic ways with the initial way taught by the Ba'al Shem Tov. The same goes for his incorporation of Lurianic Kabbalah into a Hasidic doctrine. See Simon Dubnow, *Toldot Hahasidut* (Tel Aviv: 1930-1932), 179.

⁷⁶ Jacobs 5.

appetite. He wished to divorce desire from food, seeing sustenance as a channel to serve God only when desire is overcome. “According to your will you shall bring the offering’ – in other words, bring ‘your will’ as an offering. Offer up your will, your desires, on the Altar to Hashem. No longer shall your desires rule over your appetite for food, but rather you will eat to be healthy and strong in order to serve Him.”⁷⁷ Seen below, R. Elimelech applies the same concept of “divorcing desire” when discussing the parameters of marital sexuality.

Aside from a brief mention in discussing the practices of the Maggid, the importance of sexual asceticism within the teachings of post-Beshtian Hasidim has not been broached. The later Hasidic masters, starting with R. Elimelech, all developed individual attitudes toward sexuality and in what manner it was to be controlled. In the eyes of many Hasidim, earthly sexuality was not a sin of the body, but a sin of the conscience. The key to avoiding these sins was by overcoming desire and earthly knowledge of sexuality. R. Elimelech taught, “He should never gaze at women, and if his own wife is beautiful, he should not be aware.”⁷⁸ R. Elimelech’s teachings on sexuality and marital relations stress the importance of overcoming desire to the point where one must fully master one’s subconscious in order to take on the duties of a true *tzaddik*.

As an example, the *tzaddik* was to avoid nocturnal emissions, even if involuntary; not doing so showed “evidence of the *zaddik*’s lack of success in

⁷⁷ *Mipeninei Noam Elimelech*, trans. Tal Moshe Zwecker (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, 2008), 192. R. Elimelech takes this teaching from his interpretation of *Vayikra* 19:5 “When you slaughter a peace offering for Hashem; according to your will you shall slaughter it.” He says to “slaughter your *ratzon* (desires) and choose life”

⁷⁸ Jacobs 5. Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, (Hoboken: Yeshiva University Press, 1999), 261.

attaining the stage of complete attachment to the holy.”⁷⁹ R. Elimelech believed that a true *tzaddik* should be constantly in a state of *devekus*, and in order to be in such a state, marital sexuality and desire had to shift from woman to God.

R. Elimelech’s interpretation of Genesis showcases his ideal practices of sexual asceticism for *tzaddikim*. Genesis 4:1 reads, “Now the man had known (*yadah*) his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have acquired a man with God.’”⁸⁰ If seen in the greater context of the Genesis narrative, this verse places Cain’s birth directly after Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden. For R. Elimelech, Cain’s birth resulted in the creation of the “nest of evil,” a disastrous tragedy for the human race. The reason for the birth of the “nest of evil,” says R. Elimelech, is because Adam *knew* he was with his wife while they were procreating. In this way, R. Elimelech is taking a literal reading of *yadah*. For R. Elimelech, procreating was not a sin, in fact, it was a required action as a commandment from God;⁸¹ Adam’s sin, then, was knowing that he was in the act of sex, not the act itself.

David Biale quotes *Zohar* 3:60a as the impetus for this thought, saying “While the appropriate method for engaging in sex is for a man to think only of the upper world and ‘not to know that he is even with his wife,’ Adam *knew* that he was with Eve...”⁸² Adam’s fleshly focus was too great, and too material. The employment of the *Zohar* here is also something to note; the influence of

⁷⁹ Jacobs 5. See Deuteronomy 23:11

⁸⁰ In the *Tanakh*, *yadah* can mean both “to know” and “to have intercourse,” depending on the context.

⁸¹ Genesis 1:28.

⁸² Biale 134.

Kabbalism was still very pronounced in the early generations of Hasidism, and at times could not be separated from Hasidic thought.

R. Elimelech takes a similar approach in looking at Genesis 12:11, which tells of Abraham and Sarah's experience in Egypt. "And it occurred, as he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'See now, I have known that you are a woman of beautiful appearance.'" In this passage, Abraham is brought down from his state of complete attachment to God because of his proximity to the lewd Egyptians. Thus, Abraham recognizes the beauty of his wife, a sin in the eyes of R. Elimelech. R. Elimelech's interpretation of Genesis 12:11 illustrates that earthly knowledge of sexuality did not have to do with physicality. Thoughts, desires, and awareness were primary concerns.

While R. Elimelech was successful in establishing a Hasidic doctrine of asceticism based on marital celibacy and spiritual intimacy, his work can be critiqued from an exegetical perspective. In using both Genesis 4:1 and 12:11, R. Elimelech brings together two distinctively separate passages. Within the context of 4:1, *yadah* means to "have had sex," though in 12:11, *yadati* should be defined in its more literal context meaning "knew" or "had knowledge that." R. Elimelech imposes this literal reading of Genesis 12:11 upon 4:1, which significantly changes the context and meaning of 4:1. In both of these examples, R. Elimelech attributes negative corporal sexuality to sexual knowledge. R. Elimelech births evil from sexual desire while presenting Abraham's stumble as a result of sexual knowledge. This mystical reading of scripture was perfectly tolerable in R. Elimelech's time, but from a modern perspective, problems arise in R.

Elimelech's use of *yadah* in Genesis when compared to the majority of the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible). His reading of Genesis 4:1 is incongruent with the rest of the Genesis narrative and the narrative for the entire *Tanakh*.⁸³

R. Elimelech views knowledge of sex negatively.⁸⁴ Knowledge of a sexual encounter is bad, even if that encounter is exclusively conjugal. If R. Elimelech continued to impose the literal "know" upon the sexual, he would have a difficult time dealing with the birth of Samuel, which reads, "They arose early in the morning and prostrated themselves before God; then they returned and came to their home, to Ramah. Elkanah *knew* Hannah his wife and God remembered her."⁸⁵ In this biblical juncture, Samuel is born through knowledge, the same knowledge, according to R. Elimelech, that produced Cain. His theory does not hold water. Samuel was one of the early leaders of the ancient Israelites and an exalted prophet. His worth is far greater than Cain's, a detail that R. Elimelech omits.⁸⁶

One might ask why R. Elimelech went to all the trouble of formulating a doctrine that was prescribing spiritual celibacy while maintaining physical relations. No Hasidic ascetic could easily advocate for celibacy within marriage without receiving severe criticism from both Hasidic and non-Hasidic authorities.

⁸³ This was not at all an issue at the time, as many Hasidim located singular verses in order to verify a specific teaching. The amalgamation of these verses and teachings often times functioned as one's "doctrine."

⁸⁴ See Judges 2:10, Deuteronomy 34:10, and Amos 3:2 in order to view *yadah* understood as an exclusive act between God and man, having nothing to do with corporality. R. Elimelech would deem this knowledge acceptable because of *yadah's* sexual context between the two.

⁸⁵ I Samuel 1:19

⁸⁶ For other uses of "know" within a biblically sexual context, both positive and negative, see: Genesis 19:5, Genesis 37:26, and Judges 19:22.

Genesis 1:28 reads, “God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” Virtually all Hasidim, then, were required to at least procreate in their life in order to fulfill this commandment and not be seen as antinomian by the *mitnagdim*, among other Jewish groups.

After procreation, however, many Hasidim led lives of seclusion, isolating themselves from their wives and disciples, only to counsel with their closest followers. Seclusion was practiced by a number of later ascetic Hasidim in order to escape the perils of the material world. Because R. Elimelech’s doctrine of the tzaddik postulates that Beshtian asceticism was not only necessary but promoted (to a certain, proper extent), severe seclusion was unlikely to be supported within his doctrine. Nevertheless, as Hasidism progressed through the years, the role of Beshtian asceticism diminished, producing a greater number of Hasidic self-deniers. As such, seclusion from the world became more acceptable, enticing a number of later Hasidic leaders to practice greater seclusion and greater self-denial.⁸⁷ R. Elimelech’s teachings on the tzaddik and sexual asceticism exemplify the theological departures that were taking place in post-Beshtian Hasidic society.

⁸⁷ See below, “R. Nahman of Breslov,” 57. “R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk,” 65.

R. Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl

Tradition states that R. Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl was born in 1730 in the historically Hasidic province of Volhynia, the region which gave birth to the Maggid and witnessed the travels of the Besht. R. Nahum came from decent means, but was orphaned of a father as a young child. Nevertheless, he received a strong rabbinic education from a Lithuanian yeshiva. R. Nahum was able to visit the Besht prior to his death at least one time, and after the Besht's death in 1760, R. Nahum joined the discipleship of the Maggid of Mezeritch, choosing the Maggid's more independent path as opposed to that of R. Pinchas of Koretz.

Like those who came before him, R. Nahum was financially insolvent during his adult life. "He worked as a teacher and lived a life of poverty. Legend depicts him as having lived as a wandering preacher for some years. Even after the Jewish community of Chernobyl gave him the office of town preacher, his economic situation was destitute.⁸⁸ So great was his poverty that a number of prominent rabbis, including R. Shneur Zalman of Lydy, wrote to their disciples on behalf of R. Nahum, asking for financial help.⁸⁹

Though there is no way to gauge R. Nahum's descent into poverty, the biographical information available leads one to assume that his poverty was, to a certain extent, voluntary. For many post-Beshtian Hasidim, poverty was a clear way to deny the material world. By living without the world, one hoped to live beyond the world. Poverty brought forth the value of humbleness, which would draw one closer to God. It was a form of *bittul hayesh*, a way to depart from

⁸⁸ Green, *Upright Practices*, 22.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

oneself and from the stringent corporality of society. These teachings are found in R. Nahum's seminal work *Me'or Eynayim*, which notes the biblical foundations in the avoidance of wealth. R. Nahum writes:

Like that of Moses when he said: 'And we are what' (Exod 16:7). Even if one cannot be as humble as was Moses, the degree to which the *shekhinah* dwells in a person is all in accord with how much the person manages to humble himself. The closer you draw near to the bright light of God, the more humble you become; one who has seen his greatness is of course diminished in his own sight. That is why Moses, who saw so very much of God's greatness, was the most humble of all men.⁹⁰

In this teaching, we see the weight which humility carried through the life and teachings of R. Nahum. R. Nahum's use of Moses as the ultimate man of humility illuminates a fundamental aspect of his ascetic Hasidism. Humbleness can describe one's actions toward others as well as one's relation to the world. Poverty allowed one to be humbled materially, which subsequently allowed for greater contact with the divine presence of God.⁹¹

The phrase "for what are we" occurs in consecutive verses.⁹² R. Nahum cites the text to show how Moses creates a divine distinction between God and man. For R. Nahum, it was the humility of Moses that allowed him to ascend Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights to receive the Torah from God.⁹³ This was what R. Nahum is referring to when he calls Moses the "most humble of all men." Thus Moses' encounter with the Godhead is seen as an example of attainment for all men. R. Nahum argues that it is through this humbleness, awe,

⁹⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁹¹ The link between poverty and humility is evident in the ultimate goals of these Hasidim.

⁹² Exodus 16:7-8.

⁹³ Exodus 24:18.

and recognition of the unimportance of the material that one is able to move toward a closer encounter with God.

Though clearly breaking from the Besht in a number of his practices, it is important to note that R. Nahum was still of an era that was influenced by the doctrine of the Besht. However, to be sure, this does not diminish the shifting arc of ascetic practice within Hasidism. On the contrary, it shows that even with a number of Beshtian ideas still present, Hasidism consisted of diverse, often contradictory practices that managed to significantly alter the character of the movement. As an example, the amount of fasting prescribed by R. Nahum was fairly mild and was most likely influenced by Beshtian sources, though his reasons for fasting, namely repentance and atonement, were more independent of the Besht.⁹⁴ R. Nahum writes:

Fast one day in each week. Be alone with your maker on that day and confess explicitly all your sins against Him, even those of your youth. Be ashamed and ask forgiveness; cry, for all the gates are locked except that of tears. Then turn back to rejoicing over the fact that you have attained full repentance.⁹⁵

Aside from fasts, R. Nahum's main additions to the growing world-denying doctrine within Hasidism were his views on sexuality and the importance of a divine, as opposed to worldly, union. Like R. Elimelech, R. Nahum sought to control and overcome sexual desire. The same principle of not "knowing" your wife applies to the regulations laid out by R. Nahum:

He must use that arousal of love itself for the love of God. This may be done even if a person in fact has to fulfill his conjugal duty as stated in the Torah. Even then he may perform only for the sake of his Creator,

⁹⁴ See above and below, "Maggid of Mezeritch," 35. "R. Nahman of Breslov," 54. R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk," 63. Cf practices of fasting.

⁹⁵ Green, *Upright Practices*, 32.

fulfilling this commandment as he would those of tzitzit or tefillin, making no distinction at all between them, and not seeking to satisfy his lust. One who does this is elevated to a very high rung.⁹⁶

R. Nahum claims that “any sexual desire, including that toward one’s wife, exists only as an instrument for uniting with God. Even permitted sexual acts must be divorced from desire.”⁹⁷ In this instance, women are treated as nothing more than vessels for access to the divine; they are necessary, though are employed for strictly utilitarian purposes.⁹⁸ R. Nahum went even further with his decrees concerning sexuality. By incorporating a heavy amount of scripture in order to lend significance to his line of reasoning, R. Nahum maps out an extremely individual, world-denying method of attaining *devekus*.

In *Me’or Eynayim*, R. Nahum introduces a *mishnaic* teaching that is meant to explain the waxing and waning of the moon. The teaching refers to the “two great lights” – the sun and the moon – in Genesis 1:16, and gives the reason for why the moon is of lesser intensity. According to the *Mishnah*, God first created two equally great lights, but when the moon protested this shared dominion, God made the moon a lesser light; God felt as though he had transgressed by diminishing the moon and subsequently asked that Israel’s new-moon sacrifice contain an element that was to atone for His transgression.⁹⁹ The relationship between the moon and God, which by metaphorical extension relates to the relationship between God and Israel, shaped R. Nahum’s understanding of marriage.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 117. Also see Biale 133 for identical quote within the greater context of Hasidic sexual desire.

⁹⁷ Biale 133

⁹⁸ See below, “Maid of Ludmir,” 67-73.

⁹⁹ Green, *Upright Practices*, 56.

R. Nahum uses a Talmudic discussion of Genesis 1:16 to further his ideas about the moon and Israel. By God setting up the atonement-based new-moon sacrifice, he quotes R. Ishmael, who claimed that if Israel merited to greet the face of its father in Heaven but once a month, it would suffice.¹⁰⁰ The moon is described in the Talmud as a feminine entity, which sets in motion a comparison between the moon and the People Israel. R. Nahum believes that the diminishment of the moon aligns directly with the diminishment of Israel. Israel is linked to the moon through its use of the lunar calendar, and also in its exile. According to R. Nahum, Israel's state of mind has been diminished into an exilic form, and it is through the eventual messiah that Israel's exilic diminishment will cease. R. Nahum takes two passages from Isaiah in order to express how the diminishment of the moon (Israel by extension) will conclude during the messianic age. Isaiah 60:20 reads "Your moon will no longer set," which is taken to mean that Israel will rise from exile. R. Nahum uses 60:20 in conjunction with Isaiah 11:9 which says, "Earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord." In this way, R. Nahum sees the reduction ending, which would come to mean that worldly exile would cease. All of Israel will be permanently released from corporality and exist in an eternal, heavenly state.

Similar to R. Nahum's invocation of Moses as a symbol of humbleness, here he metaphorically understands Moses to be the sun, a source of light that shines the light of the Lord on Israel. R. Nahum sees Moses being in a constant union with God, a face-to-face union that allowed for the full expansion of the

¹⁰⁰ B. Sanhedrin 10a. *See*: Jacob Schacter, Isidore Epstein, H. Freedman. *Sanhedrin* (London: Soncino Press, 1969).

mind, out of the depths of corporality. The metaphor of Mount Sinai is used again, though here R. Nahum explains that all of Israel and Moses were in this face-to-face union with God during the divine revelation described in Exodus 19:18. R. Nahum aligns this face-to-face union (Deut 5:4) with a moon that is not diminished, the eventual goal for all of Israel. However, he explains that when Israel sinned by worshiping the Golden Calf, they fell back into the lower rung of diminution, with R. Nahum claiming “We shall not again attain this state in constancy until our righteous redeemer comes.”¹⁰¹

The sexual aspect of this extended metaphor is found in R. Nahum’s analysis of the face-to-face coupling between God and Israel. According to R. Nahum, as man received the Torah in Exodus 19:18, the described face-to-face union between Israel and God metaphorically represented the female (Israel) being subsumed into the male (God). He explains that when God said, “Go unto the people and sanctify them,”¹⁰² ‘sanctify’ (*qiddushin*) could have referred to the betrothal of a woman. This signifies some sort of conjugal union between God and Israel. R. Nahum further describes this union between God and man:

They become one with Him and are included within Him. The oneness is born of their intense longing for and attachment to God, but also because of the great longing that is aroused in Him, as it were, to *cleave* to the community of Israel, which has now reached so elevated a state. We Israel are like the female... Longing brings about the subsuming of the female within the male. It is through this that the birth process takes place and they form one flesh. This happens because they are joined together.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Green, *Upright Practices*, 59.

¹⁰² Exodus 19:10.

¹⁰³ Green, *Upright Practices*, 60.

Without ever explicitly mentioning a scriptural foundation for this passage, R. Nahum has undoubtedly made use of biblical passages on marriage. Genesis 2:24 reads, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh.”¹⁰⁴ The similarities between the Biblical references to marital unions between a man and his wife and R. Nahum’s description of man and God are worth noting.¹⁰⁵

R. Nahum uses the same verb “to cleave” (*davak*) as is used in Gen. 2:24. The word *davak* is used in a number of places throughout scripture, often relating to a marital unions. The practice of *devekus* is a cognate of the *davak* found in Gen 2:24. The *devekus* described here is “a perpetual being-with-God, an intimate union and conformity of the human and the divine will.”¹⁰⁶ R. Nahum’s *devekus* between God and man is similar to the Besht’s idea of *devekus*, though an important difference lies in the course of achieving this religious perfection.

The Besht saw everyday activities as holy; access to the divine was not limited to religious acts. For R. Nahum, *devekus* could only be achieved through the traditional “sacred” route, i.e. prayer and Torah study. The Besht’s doctrine of *avodah begashmiut* (worship through corporality) allowed for the mundane to hold meaning on the same level as the holy.¹⁰⁷ By contrast, R. Nahum adhered to the doctrine of *hitpashut hagashmiut* (stripping away the material). R. Nahum’s distinct methods of achieving *devekus* illustrate the changing nature of asceticism

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 2:24

¹⁰⁵ For prophetic metaphorical relationships between Israel (a wayward wife) and God, see Hosea and Ezekiel 16. For a uniquely modern Hasidic understanding of Hosea, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 39-60.

¹⁰⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 123.

¹⁰⁷ Elixir 310.

that immediately followed the Besht. Still, as stated earlier, R. Nahum never made a complete departure from the practices of the Besht. Concerning the body, R. Nahum wrote, “Even though a person remains in the world of actions and in the physical body, both of which might keep one back, he serves Him nonetheless.”¹⁰⁸

Returning to R. Nahum’s example of *devekus* in *Me’or Eynayim*, the ultimate goal was for Israel (the female) to be subsumed within God (the male), thereby forming one flesh. The female cleaves to the male, which is in line with the attitude of male dominance that pervades Hasidism. The “one flesh” R. Nahum is describing is a male flesh; after the act of subsuming, the female becomes not part of the male, but male in whole. “As they become part of that face-to-face coupling, becoming male along with Him, blessed be He, in true union.”¹⁰⁹

This extended metaphor given by R. Nahum shows that aside from necessary procreation, martial unions were dispensable and should ultimately be replaced with divine unions. The *tzaddik* should overcome and destroy sexuality and human desire. Only slightly removed from the generation of the Besht, ascetic doctrines concerning sexuality and bodily practices transformed greatly. The next focus of this paper will be on the Hasidic rabbis I call the “later Hasidim.” These masters were generations removed from the Besht, and though ties remained, their doctrines reflect a palpable break from early Hasidism.

¹⁰⁸ Green, *Upright Practices*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

R. Nahman of Breslov

The discussion of the later Hasidim will begin with perhaps the most intriguing, perplexing, and individually distinct Hasidic figure, R. Nahman of Breslov. R. Nahman was born in 1772, the year of the Maggid's death, in Medzhibozh, the former town of the Ba'al Shem Tov. His mother was the granddaughter of the Besht, making R. Nahman the Besht's great-grandson, and his father was descended from R. Nahman of Horodenka, an original member of the Besht's circle. R. Nahman's progenitors becomes important in relaying his messianic strivings. R. Nahman led a life of inner turmoil and strife, giving rise to his unparalleled ascetic doctrine and practices; his teachings embrace physical suffering and urge an utter disdain and contempt for both the body and material society.

Historical knowledge of the early life of R. Nahman paints a portrait of inner torment and deep anguish. "The childhood depicted here is that of a pained young ascetic, one who at an early age knew the difficulties of the religious life and struggled with all his strength to overcome them."¹¹⁰ R. Nahman's early life was shrouded in periods of intense longing for God. Independent of others, he composed his own prayers in Yiddish, incorporating a number of exilic themes found within the Psalms.¹¹¹ R. Nahman prayed in order to draw near to God, though prayer alone would not suffice to bring about a spiritual liberation.

As a boy, R. Nahman complemented his sessions of deep prayer with a number of ascetic acts. "When he was six years old, Nahman would go out in the

¹¹⁰ Green, *Tormented Master*, 27.

¹¹¹ Cf Psalm 63 and 137.

midst of cold winter nights to visit the grave of the Ba'al Shem Tov 'to ask of him that he might help him draw near to God.' He would then go and immerse himself in the outdoor *miqweh* in order to chastise himself."¹¹² The irony here is tangible. Surely the Besht would have rebuked R. Nahman himself for taking part in such acts under his name! Even among more conservative scholars, it is generally agreed that the Besht advocated for moderation, something that was completely foreign to R. Nahman. Also in his youth, R. Nahman wished to overcome the joy he took in eating. Instead of fasting altogether, which he realized would be impossible, he began to swallow his food whole, so as to not benefit from the taste.¹¹³

The motif of turning away from worldly desires did not end after R. Nahman's early life; in fact, "the ascetic tendencies that had been present in earlier years now grew in intensity and demand."¹¹⁴ He began fasting from Sabbath to Sabbath, reinvigorating his goal of overcoming satisfaction through eating. His practices of bodily mortification also increased greatly. In the winter, R. Nahman would mortify his body by rolling around in the snow, and in the summer, he allowed insects to bite his flesh untouched. The reasoning behind such harmful acts was due to R. Nahman's individual ideas concerning how to bring oneself to God. Even on his wedding day at age 14, R. Nahman's mind was said to have remained focused on "turning aside from worldly desires and serving

¹¹² Green, *Tormented Master*, 28, n. 21.

¹¹³ R. Nahman did such fasting until his throat almost became swollen shut and his mother found out.

¹¹⁴ Green, *Tormented Master*, 35.

God.”¹¹⁵ In his personal understanding and interpretation of Hasidism, fasting and bodily mortification were two vehicles which allowed one to provide genuine service to God. At this point, three generations removed from the founding of Hasidism, R. Nahman managed to ostensibly create a doctrine that was found in direct contrast to Beshtian norms. One legend goes that the Besht visited R. Nahman in a dream and told him to increase his number of fasts. Such a statement is only possible when one is generations removed from the Besht! By looking back at Beshtian teachings concerning fasting, the changing face of Hasidic asceticism becomes increasingly clear.

When he [Besht] heard that one of his disciples was following ascetic practices, the Ba'al Shem wrote to him: “By the counsel of God, I order you to abandon such dangerous practices, which are but the outcome of a sicorded mind. It is written, ‘Hide not yourself from your own flesh’ (Isaiah 58:7). Fast, then, no more than is prescribed; follow my command and God will be with you.”¹¹⁶

While clearly not advocating for gluttonous behavior, it is inconceivable to believe that the Besht would have condoned such daily austere practices. This story of the Besht illustrates his own rejection of fasting.

In addition to fasting, R. Nahman developed a radical doctrine emphasizing the importance of overcoming sexual desire.¹¹⁷ R. Nahman’s teachings were highly individualized, as many were rooted in the sexual trials he himself experienced as a child.

He said that he had undergone countless trials...great and awesome trials with regard to this desire which cannot be discussed in detail. When he was still very young, at the time when a person’s blood boils, he suffered countless trials in this regard. It was within his power to satisfy his lusts,

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 35, n. 42.

¹¹⁶ Fox 30.

¹¹⁷ Green claims that it was “an emphasis far beyond that of other Hasidic writings.” Green, *Tormented Master*, 37.

and he was thus in very grave danger. Being a powerful warrior, however, he succeeded in overcoming his passions. This happened to him a great many times. Nevertheless, he would not seek to avoid being tested further in this matter. On the contrary, he longed to be tested, and would pray to God that He try him once again. He did this out of a confidence that he would not rebel against God.¹¹⁸

R. Nahman's personal experience with sexual desire shaped his doctrine of the *tzaddik*, in which he states that a *tzaddik* can only be one who completely overcomes sexual desire. R. Nahman believed that all evil stemmed from a lack of sexual control. As such, one was not simply to avoid sexual desire, but to annihilate it all together.

He [R. Nahman] was once speaking with someone about a certain well-known *zaddiq*. The other praised this *zaddiq* by saying that he had completely broken in himself the passions for food and drink. Our master asked him: 'But how does he do with regard to *this* [sexual] desire?' 'Who knows that?' was the reply. Said our master: 'But the root is really this alone. All other passions are really easily subdued. The level of a *zaddiq* is most basically determined by his degree of holiness in this area: whether he has been able to subdue it completely.'¹¹⁹

As a young man, R. Nahman claimed to have conquered the sin of sexual desire, and in doing so, "reached the point where the presence or thoughts of women caused no greater sexual arousal in him than did men."¹²⁰ Despite his total, self-described lack of desire, he still fathered seven children, though in his recounting of his own sexual acts, it becomes clear that he took part in such acts only to fulfill certain *mitzvot*, so as to not be antinomian.

¹¹⁸ Green, *Tormented Master*, 37, n. 48.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 167, n. 58.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38. R. Nahman is quoted as saying, "To me there is no difference between male and female." This was in regard to his overcoming of sexual desire, not to be confused with outside connotations.

Copulation is difficult for the true *zaddiq*. Not only does he have no desire for it at all, but he experiences real suffering in the act, suffering which is like that which the infant undergoes when he is circumcised. The very same suffering, to an even greater degree, is felt by the *zaddiq* during intercourse. The infant has no awareness; thus his suffering is not so great. But the *zaddiq*, because he is aware of the pain, suffers more greatly than does the infant.¹²¹

In conjunction with the notion of overcoming sexual desire, R. Nahman pioneered the doctrine of the “suffering *tzaddik*.” His personal struggles were validated in the belief that the *tzaddikim* had to endure great labor in becoming holy. “Nahman began to develop the notion that his very pain was the mark of greatness and the proof that he was to be a true *zaddiq* after all... the pain felt by Nahman the individual was transformed into that of the suffering servant, the *zaddiq* chosen by God for some great purpose.”¹²² Because of his frequent fasting, sexual abstention, hatred of regal Hasidic festivities, and his overall practices of denial, the path of R. Nahman was not popular among common Hasidim, leaving the spiritual elite as his primary followers. Despite this limited membership, R. Nahman’s redefined Hasidism sought to make every disciple into a *tzaddik*; his doctrine was for all who would follow, though its esoteric nature restricted the numbers.

By placing himself within the role of a *tzaddik*, R. Nahman undoubtedly brought forth a messianic element. While surely present in other schools of Hasidism, R. Nahman is unique in that he saw himself as the progenitor of the messiah. The messianic sense in the works of R. Nahman is seen in his rejection of the idea of *devekus*. The Besht’s idea of *devekus* was predicated on finding

¹²¹ Ibid., 39, n. 55.

¹²² Ibid., 41.

God within all. R. Nahman denied this assertion, arguing that as long as sin was omnipresent in the world, *devekus* would not be realistically attainable. Instead, R. Nahman stressed the doctrine of *tikkun* (redemption), which would bring about salvation and the arrival of the messiah. In this way, R. Nahman shifted Hasidism to become more directly involved with messianic rather than personal redemption. R. Nahman's works suggest that he proclaimed himself to be the Messiah ben Joseph, the precursor to the final redemptive Messiah ben David. His personal association with Joseph is no coincidence, as Joseph is often viewed as the biblical archetype of sexual purity.¹²³ R. Nahman's personal employment of *tikkun* and his belief in his messianic identity gave rise to an increasingly potent messianic environment. Green writes:

We will recall that Nahman, in addition to claiming possession of the messianic soul, was in fact the product of a union between two families that claimed descent from the House of David. Given this confluence of messianic symbols, it is no wonder that he first expressed a hope, later to turn to certainty, that the redeemer would emerge from among his own offspring.¹²⁴

R. Nahman's refutation of *devekus* should not be seen as a rejection of divine interaction. As seen in his childhood, R. Nahman was greatly concerned with individual supplication to God. As he grew older, these ideas formed one of the central tenets of Breslov Hasidism: the practice of *hitbodedut*. With *hitbodedut*, "The Hasid was to set aside a certain period of time each day, preferably out of doors, if possible, and always alone, when he was to pour out before God his most intimate longings, needs, desires, and frustrations. Nahman

¹²³ See Genesis 39 for narrative of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Joseph withstands the advances of Potiphar's wife, thereby maintaining his sexual purity in the eyes of God.

¹²⁴ Green, *Tormented Master*, 189.

emphasized the need to do all this aloud, to bring those usually unspoken inner drives to the point of verbalization.”¹²⁵ The type of seclusion seen here is not for an extended period of time at the end or beginning of one’s life;¹²⁶ instead, it emphasizes the importance of a daily break from society, in addition to the *halachically* prescribed daily routine of morning, afternoon, and evening prayers.

This seclusion was a necessary complement to R. Nahman’s employment of ascetic, self and world-denying acts. In order to bring the world out of suffering, R. Nahman believed that he had to experience the world’s deepest suffering and train himself to accept the yoke of that suffering. God was not to be found in the material, but in the tormented soul.

David Biale argues that part of R. Nahman’s messianic fervor was due to his understanding of Sabbateanism. Biale claims that R. Nahman’s extreme asceticism was part of an attempt to invert and correct the sexual transgressions committed by the Sabbateans.¹²⁷ R. Nahman was born more than 100 years after the death of Sabbatai Zevi, yet ripples of Zevi’s antinomian practices were surely felt within R. Nahman’s era.

Yet, because so much of the information potentially linking R. Nahman to Sabbateanism is from unverifiable sources, it is better to look at R. Nahman in the context of his own time. R. Nahman was directly confronted by the *Haskalah*, the rational movement of Jewish enlightenment. The *Haskalah* was a movement that sought to emancipate the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe from the mystical

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹²⁶ *See* below, “R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk,” 65.

¹²⁷ Biale 136. These transgressions include orgies, homosexual practice, and an attitude of sexual liberalism.

strongholds of Kabbalism and Hasidism that by this time were omnipresent. As was his method, R. Nahman sought to confront the *Haskalah* directly, thereby challenging the challengers. Arthur Green explains that it was the concept of doubt that the *Haskalah* furthered, and it was this supposed doubt that R. Nahman wished to overturn.

He who seeks to appear as redeemer to such a generation must be redeemer not only from temptation and sin, but also from doubt and from the encroaching depression and insecurity caused by man's feeling of the absence of God. To affect such a redemption, both for himself and his people, Nahman would have to confront head-on doubts he himself know so well.¹²⁸

By confronting such doubt and hoping to bring it out of the *Haskalaic* rationality, R. Nahman essentially employed the Beshtian method of uplifting and elevating straying thoughts. Though the specific elements differ to a great degree, the functionality of both R. Nahman's and the Besht's "uplifting" is in fact extraordinarily congruent.¹²⁹

The life of R. Nahman came to an abrupt end after he contracted tuberculosis and died at the young age of 38. Despite his short life, R. Nahman's impact on Hasidism was great. His focused and intense asceticism marked perhaps the ultimate shift from Beshtian Hasidism, yet it is interesting how in many places, connections and associations with the Besht remain (beyond

¹²⁸ Green, *Tormented Master*, 309.

¹²⁹ See below, "Theoretical Implications of Hasidic Asceticism," 83-85 for a further focus on R. Nahman and the *Haskalah*.

lineage).¹³⁰ At least for a short while after his death, R. Nahman's form of ascetic Hasidism assured a spot for practices of self-denial within the movement.

¹³⁰ See above, "R. Nahman of Breslov," 54. Cf with the dreams of R. Nahman, which often invoked the Besht.

R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

The last Hasidic rabbi chronicled in this study is R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, known also as the Kotzker Rebbe. Born in 1788 in the district of Lublin, R. Mendel's parents were ardent *mitnagdim*, which makes his journey into Hasidism interesting to detail. While not much is known of his childhood, he has been described as a self-assured, lonely boy with mystical tendencies, similar to rabbis that came before him.¹³¹ Being brought up in the world of the *mitnagdim*, R. Mendel was initially taught to reject the mystical tendencies of the Hasidic world. His first encounter with Hasidism occurred when he met with R. Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz, the Seer of Lublin. R. Mendel was disenchanted with much of the Seer's teachings concerning "tzaddik-worship."¹³² R. Mendel preferred an independently based system of spiritual attainment. This preference led him to meet with R. Yaakov Yitzchak Rabinowicz of Peshischa, the Holy Jew. "The Jew" was a former disciple of the Seer of Lublin, though had broken off from the Seer for reasons similar to R Mendel. Under "The Jew," and later, R. Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, the successor of "the Jew," R. Mendel began to formulate his own variety of Hasidism.

World-denying acts of asceticism soon became more common for R. Mendel. After his marriage at the age of 14, R. Mendel began to hold worldly material in disregard. "He immediately clothed himself in tattered rags, in contrast

¹³¹ Fox 60.

¹³² See above, "R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk," 37. Cf *tzaddik-worship* above with R. Elimelech's proscription to "cling to the *tzaddik*." While R. Mendel and R. Elimelech were similar in a variety of ways, they also ostensibly differed on a number of levels.

to the spic-and-span Hasidim of R. Simcha Bunim.”¹³³ By all accounts, his outer appearance reflected an inner turmoil of sadness and suffering, similar to the early life of R. Nahman. One of the more extreme accounts of his sufferings, this time physical, goes as follows:

I spent half-a-year with Rabbi Leibush of Shidlovtza and nobody knew me there. I was penniless and miserable, constantly exposed to the pangs of hunger and agony of colds. During an entire winter I slept in an attic exposed to the wind and rain. When I forgot myself in prayer and put my bleeding hands on the walls, they froze and stuck to the bricks. I was constantly in want and there was darkness around me. I was on the brink of death.¹³⁴

While the validity of this account can be questioned, the fact that such radical stories were being circulated suggests the intensity of R. Mendel’s asceticism. Themes of physical and mental loneliness pervaded the life of R. Mendel from the time of his childhood until his dying days. Despite having hundreds of disciples, R. Mendel lacked companionship on a deeper level. This state of perpetual loneliness eventually took an enormous toll on R. Mendel, causing him to end his life in a wretched, desperate state of seclusion.

Like those discussed earlier, R. Mendel emphasized the importance of overcoming and defeating sexual desire: “Mendel understood the biblical prohibition on adultery to include relations with one’s own wife, if they involved sexual desire!”¹³⁵ We are reminded here of R. Elimelech’s interpretation of *yadah* as being an indicator of sexual deviancy. Like R. Elimelech, R. Mendel also viewed the Genesis narrative (1-4) as the general impetus for employing sexual

¹³³ Ibid., 67.

¹³⁴ Fox 69. See Eliezar Steinman, *Be'er HaChasidut* (Tel Aviv: Keneset, 1958-1959) 281.

¹³⁵ Biale 134.

asceticism within Hasidism. R. Mendel seemed to disavow the material as a whole, even when such material was elevated through the lens of the Besht. This is evident in his forbidding of bodily pleasures “that are permissible, but do not make for holiness.” If seen in a Beshtian light, (and in some cases with R. Elimelech), this statement would be void, for all permissible acts were said to make room for holiness. R. Mendel’s lack of acceptance of the material, while not surprising, shows the increasingly radical doctrines of the later ascetics.

R. Mendel and his disciples practiced a regimen of fasting. The Kotzker Hasidim were said to live on a diet consisting largely of whiskey and dry bread, which they attained by selling their wedding gifts.¹³⁶ Any pleasurable food was said to get in the way of their primary livelihood: study and prayer. R. Mendel believed that an ultimate marker of Hasidism was to put one’s trust in God. Fox writes:

The faithful Hasidim remained in Kotzk for months and even years, completely disinterested in things material. They did not know where their next meal would come from... [Their rabbi R. Mendel] taught them the rabbinic saying: “The Torah was given for interpretation to no one but those who ate manna.” This meant that only Jews who had not more than one day’s living and cared little about the next day were in a position to study and understand the Torah properly.¹³⁷

In his doctrine on prayer, R. Mendel advocated for the escape from corporality, a concept at the core of later Hasidic asceticism. “Real prayer meant a state of feeling in which the soul divested itself of its corporality and reached unison with its maker.”¹³⁸ This teaching importantly highlights R. Mendel’s

¹³⁶ Fox 92.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 114.

doctrine of individuality, as opposed to more *tzaddik*-oriented teachings. Here, *devekus* was an act that was possible for each individual, not exclusively for the “spiritual elite.”¹³⁹

The virtue of humility exhibited by R. Nahum seemed to carry over to the teachings of R. Mendel. Like other ascetic acts, humility required training of both the body and the mind. R. Mendel encouraged his followers to “be humble in your humbleness.” “Only when a man overcomes all traces of selfishness and pride and becomes humble can he achieve saintliness and communion with God.”¹⁴⁰ Humbleness, then, along with other acts, was a necessary precursor in attaining a state of *devekus*. Humbleness manifested itself in both prayer and everyday acts. It was said that the Kotzker Rebbe prayed with his body completely still, only moving his lips to whisper the words. Outside of prayer, the Kotzker Hasidim exhibited humility in their dress and outward appearance.

The Rabbi of Kotzk and his faithful walked around in slippers and tattered rags; many Hasidim covered their heads with cabbage leaves instead of a hat... Once, on the eve of Yom Kippur, a Kotzker Hasid saw a respectable Jew walking in his white overgarment (*kitel*) to the synagogue. The Hasid asked him to borrow the white overgarment and rolled himself in the slush. Then he took it off and returned it to the bewildered owner.¹⁴¹

Toward the end of his life, R. Mendel’s temper began to grow shorter, and his inner turmoil appeared to be advancing at a rapid rate. Scholars today can only speculate on what exactly R. Mendel appeared to be enduring, though, regardless,

¹³⁹ See above, “R. Nahman of Breslov,” 56. Note difference in *devekus*-related teachings.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 99. The language of *communion* as opposed to *union* used here suggests that R. Mendel’s approach to *devekus* could have been Beshtian in nature. Nevertheless, without seeing the primary source, the intentionality of using *communion* is unknown.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 100-101.

evidence suggests that R. Mendel secluded himself in his house for the last 20 years of his life.

And after his heart comprehended fully the ways of God, our holy rabbi chose to be separated from people, and lived in isolation. For about twenty years, his feet did not step outside the confines of his house. And he continued to grow in purity and sanctity and his Torah utterances won wide acclaim.¹⁴²

One tale relates that a seemingly innocuous comment made by one of his follows about Sabbath observance set him into a frenzied state of seclusion. One would be more apt to believe that his seclusion was brought on by an amalgamation of events that had occurred throughout his inwardly troubled life.

The padlocked doors to his room, only to be temporarily opened on the Sabbath and holidays, confirm the intense seclusion of R. Mendel. As time went on he saw fewer and fewer of his disciples, drifting deep into a confounding state of seclusion. While clearly showing ascetic tendencies throughout his life, it is fair for one to challenge the association of R. Mendel's seclusion with his ascetic nature. One could view his seclusion as a personal way of drawing nearer to God, a necessary step in attaining *communion* with his Creator.¹⁴³ In this way, dubbing his act "ascetic" would seem appropriate; R. Mendel was then denying the material world to the point where he dared not interact with other humans. At the same time, because of a general dearth of verifiable information regarding the end of his life, it would be remiss to unequivocally deem his seclusion "ascetic."¹⁴⁴ In this way, both conclusions regarding his seclusion are possible, and without more information, one can only speculate about his inexplicable acts.

¹⁴² Ibid., 124. See Aaron Walden, *Shem HaGedolim* (Warsaw: 1864).

¹⁴³ See n. 140 above.

¹⁴⁴ Doing so leaves out the possibility of mental illness.

This section on R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk concludes a formal look into the specific lives of ascetically inclined Hasidic rabbis, though before moving any further, one last look will be given to a scarcely mentioned yet fascinating Hasidic figure: Hannah Rokhl, The Maid of Ludmir. Hannah Rokhl will demonstrate how Hasidic asceticism was interpreted and enacted by one woman within the movement.

Hannah Rokhl: The Maid of Ludmir

Due to the largely male-dominated culture within Hasidism, scholarly and primary sources regarding the role of women in Hasidic society are rare, with the presence of feminist critiques being virtually nonexistent. Only in the last 25 years have feminist perspectives on Hasidism emerged, making inroads into the academy. At the front of this emergence was Ada Rapoport-Albert. In the anthology *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, Albert wrote a principal chapter entitled, “On Women in Hasidism, S.A. Horodecky and The Maid of Ludmir Tradition.” Albert’s goal, it seems, was to debunk preposterous assumptions made by scholar S.A. Horodecky in 1923. Horodecky claimed that Hasidism strengthened Jewish family life by uniting husband and wife, opened up the gates of scholarship for women, and enabled some women to become *tzaddikim*.¹⁴⁵ In attacking the dated claims of Horodecky, Albert strengthens the validity of certain ascetic notions that have been brought up throughout this paper, i.e. the exclusion of women from desire, sexuality, and conjugal unions as a whole.

To start, Albert argues against Horodecky’s claim that women were given joint access to the *tzaddik*, thereby improving the position of women within Hasidic communities. She claims that it was in fact the opposite that occurred among Hasidim, taking evidence from the traditional opponents of Hasidim.

Mitnaggedim and *Maskilim* alike accused Hasidism, with considerable justification, of undermining the institution of Jewish marriage and aggravating the condition of women by drawing young married men – the main recruits to the movement in the formative years – away from their wives and children for

¹⁴⁵ Ada Rapoport-Albert “On Women in Hasidism, S.A. Horodecky and The Maid of Ludmir Tradition,” in *Jewish History*, 496-497.

periods ranging from several weeks to several months and more... Hasidism proved an effective alternative to traditional family life. It did not, of course, renounce marriage formally or on a permanent basis, but it allowed its followers some room for periodic liberation from material and family ties, for the sake of the higher pursuit of spiritual invigoration.¹⁴⁶

Here we see the direct consequences of Hasidic, mystical replacement of marital unions.¹⁴⁷ In addition to man's spiritual abandonment of his wife, Albert also notes the more concrete, tangible difficulties. As was the case in Kotzk, men left their wives and family for years at a time in order to be close to R. Mendel. While it was not necessarily common for Hasidim to leave their families for such an extended period of time, male absences were frequent, leaving women to be solely responsible for the household. While such difficulties certainly existed for women, they were never recorded, thus making it difficult to explore the significance of women's roles in Hasidic communities.

For the crux of her critique, Albert reappraises Horodecky's account of Hannah Rokhl, the Maid of Ludmir, calling into question the assumptions made by Horodecky about women *tzaddikim*. The Maid was born in 1815, and like the Hasidim outlined above, was said to have had a high aptitude for religious learning. She was a woman of extraordinary piety, who was soon engaged to her childhood love. Hasidic custom states that once an engagement is announced, the future bride and groom cannot come into contact with each other until the date of the actual wedding. This realization gave the Maid great distress, causing her to withdraw from society and isolate herself in her room. It was said that upon visiting her mother's grave, a frequent occurrence, the Maid was overtaken by a

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 497.

¹⁴⁷ Read under a feminist lens, the doctrine of R. Nahum most blatantly points to the disparity between men and women and a general lack of concern for married women. See above, "R. Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl, 47-51.

mysterious illness, and upon recovery, claimed that she would break off the engagement and would not marry because she had “transcended the world of the flesh.”¹⁴⁸

From that time on she adopted the full rigor of male ritual observance, and absorbed herself in study and prayer.... in Ludmir, where she lived in complete seclusion... Men and women from the neighboring localities, among them scholars and rabbis, began to flock to what became her ‘court.’ She would not allow anyone into her room, but would address her teachings and blessings from behind the closed door to many followers gathered in the adjacent room every Saturday, at the third Sabbath meal.¹⁴⁹

Though the Maid gained a following, many were unhappy with the idea of men regarding this *woman* as some sort of *tzaddik*. As such, R. Mordecai of Chernobyl, the son of R. Nahum, was brought in to intervene and place the Maid back into a proper feminine locality. The intervention was mildly successful for the concerned Hasidim. The Maid soon married, thereby abandoning her *tzaddik*-like practices, though the wedding was never consummated and ended in divorce. Once more she married and divorced before consummation, choosing to live the rest of her life as a “Maid” in the holy land where she would die in 1895.

The story of the Maid, despite its lack of documented truths, can be used to understand the constraints and limitations of a woman in Hasidic Jewry. Putting aside the distinction of a *tzaddik*, in order for the Maid to have achieved some sort of leadership status, she had to deny her feminine role in society and take up an exclusively male persona. By taking up the “full rigor of male ritual observance,” the Maid was renouncing her femininity for an increased spirituality. In this way, one could safely argue that Hasidism catered only directly to the

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 503.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 503.

spiritual development of men. The asceticism performed by the Maid made greater her male-like qualities. It was through an asceticism of self-denial culture that one could be deemed *more* male. At this time in Hasidism, world-denying asceticism was seen as honorable and justified. Because of a lack of directly feminine “holy” roles, it makes sense that the Maid chose to take such extreme measures in her aim to be religiously equal. Celibacy was the way for the Maid to maintain her fleshly transcendence; by being celibate, she did not allow herself to take on the predetermined, restrictive conjugal role. However, it was ultimately this exclusively “male” trait of celibacy that caused her to recede into a void of loneliness at the end of her life in Jerusalem.

It makes sense then, that marriage was used in order to reverse the role of the Maid. R. Mordecai’s intervention directly forced the Maid to marry and leave behind her life as a secluded ascetic. By placing the Maid back into her prescribed gender role, her life as a mystical leader became one of less authority. Marriage was seen as the foundation of a feminine life; therefore, one could not fluctuate between genders while under the constraints of a conjugal union. It also seems plausible that in actively choosing to exemplify a more male persona, the Maid had to take an extreme route in order to gain a certain amount of respect.

The Maid’s adoption of the ascetic, celibate life was a declaration of her spiritual-mystical and, probably, also her scholarly orientation, an orientation which had often been marked by the strict ascetic piety of the men who chose it... In the lack of any legitimacy for this type of piety in women, and since no model was available in Judaism for an asexual spirituality oblivious of sexual boundaries, the Maid was forced to renounce her identity as a women, only to embrace a false identity as a man, emulating the standard discipline of ritual observance, and so also the rigor of ascetic piety traditionally confined to males.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 507-508.

Albert ends her piece claiming that the Hasidic world viewed the Maid as an “embarrassment,” a stark contrast to the thoughts of Horodecky. It seems Horodecky failed to realize the lack of institutional structures of authority for women in Hasidic Judaism.

The celibate and gender denying aspects of the Maid are not exclusive to Hasidism. In many cases throughout early Christianity, women renounced their marriages, families, wealth, and femininity in order to gain authority from leading male figures. It is interesting to compare the life of the Maid with the life of Saint Pelagia in fourth century Antioch. Pelagia was a former dancer of great beauty whom the bishop Nonnus converted; she subsequently lived alone in Jerusalem. Pelagia practiced extreme forms of asceticism and, like the Maid, took on a male persona.¹⁵¹ Both the Maid and Pelagia drew upon similar goals in their adoption of male practices and personas. “Thus the wearing away of Pelagia’s feminine appearance is one element of her male disguise as well as the mark and symbol of her conversion and holiness.”¹⁵² This observation by Teresa Shaw holds true in the account of the Maid as well. Differences, however, lie in the communal reactions to the actions of these women. Hasidic leaders saw the Maid as an “embarrassment” because she left her prescribed place in society and tried to direct herself into a male role that was not meant for women. Pelagia followed a

¹⁵¹ In her case, she became a eunuch named Pelagios.

¹⁵² Teresa Shaw, *The Burden of Flesh*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 243.

similar path as the Maid, though her act was seen as acceptable among the religious leaders at the time.¹⁵³

While two distinct views from the male hierarchy exist among these women, a case can be made for the presence of misogyny in both. The inability of the Maid to live the life of an unbothered teacher and ascetic shows a specific male power structure that was meant to keep what was viewed as insolent behavior, like the Maid's, in check. In Pelagia's case, she was allowed and even encouraged to adopt a male persona in order to remove her as an object of lust among men. "The [life of Pelagia is] a strong example of the use of female beauty as a symbol of the temptation of males. The destruction of their beauty also removes the danger from their appearance. Emphasis on female responsibility for male lust runs throughout early Christian ascetic literature."¹⁵⁴ In both of these ascetic cases, male authorities carry out actions exclusively for the benefit of the male population. Even if women could successfully traverse the boundaries of gender, their place in religious society remained in a secondary position.

This discussion of the Maid and her asceticism concludes a chronological analysis of ascetic practices developed by a number of Hasidim. In presenting the Maid of Ludmir, the gender disparities in the Hasidic movement have been introduced, and to a point, unpacked. The seven Hasidim presented here have shown how asceticism changed over the years from the Besht to the Maid. This chronological arc of asceticism illustrates how world-affirming practices were

¹⁵³ While many religious leaders respected the practices of Pelagia, not all were robust in their support. Held in 340 C.E., the Synod of Gangra condemned a number of actions seen in the practices of Pelagia, including: women wearing men's clothing and women cutting off their hair.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 243.

refocused and reconstituted into a set of principles that lent a greater focus to aspects of worldly-denial. The Maid was one of the last temporally relevant figures of Hasidic asceticism in the 19th Century; by the time of her death in c.1895, the Hasidic movement was beginning to transition out of insularity and into modernity.

Theoretical Implications of Hasidic Asceticism

This concluding section will explore the theoretical implications and methodological significance of the ascetic arc found within Hasidism. Hasidic asceticism functioned both on an individual and communal level; as seen above, asceticism was prescribed for whole communities as well as singular members. With regard to these ascetic acts, certain questions arise: Why were these ascetic practices undertaken? How was meaning created through these practices? What role did they serve for both individual and communal identity formation? What types of societies grew out of these acts? Richard Valantasis's theory of asceticism will illuminate the societal function of asceticism within these Hasidic communities.

The foregoing analysis of Hasidic figures illustrates much overlap in bodily practice and observance between a number of chronologically distinct Hasidim, starting from the rise of the Besht in the early 1700s to the Maid of Ludmir in the late 1800s. By analyzing the practices and teachings of a number of respected, authoritative Hasidim, I have concluded that the progression and development of the movement is marked by increasingly negative attitudes toward the body, seen in the Hasidic employment of self-denial and seclusion. In this way, ascetic trends of the movement were both independent of previous figures and dependent upon a shared history, allowing for a sense of shared identity to characterize a movement predicated upon the historical progression of practice and observance.

In his essay “A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism,” Richard Valantasis hypothesizes that new ascetic cultures are constructed through the performance of acts and the observance of rituals, thereby producing a separate culture which contrasts the former. The performances themselves, he claims, have no meaning apart from their social context. Valantasis writes, “These [ascetic] acts function as signifiers in a semiotic system, in that they carry meaning with the context of their performance: a particular performance such as fasting bears no inherent and self-evident meaning except that which is assigned it in that system.”¹⁵⁵

Valantasis’ theory of ascetic “performances” guides one to a conclusion about cultural construction, which is beneficial in understanding how ascetic Hasidism developed. Valantasis argues that ascetic performances lead toward two possible cultural constructions. “Negatively described, asceticism breaks down the dominant culture through performances that aim toward establishing a counter-cultural or alternative cultural milieu. Positively described, the ascetic, like an actor learning to be a character in a play, lives in a new culture created through the careful repatterning of basic behaviors and relations.”¹⁵⁶ These negative and positive conceptions of asceticism are not set up to be mutually exclusive; instead, both of these components are essential in creating sustainable, alternative cultures.

¹⁵⁵ Richard Valantasis, “A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush & Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 548.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 548.

Two forms of constructed Hasidic societies grew out of ascetic performances: world-affirming Beshtian Hasidism and the world-denying “later” Hasidism. Both of these Hasidic societies were created as reactions to the dominant cultures of the time. For Beshtian Hasidism, the dominant cultures were Polish society and pre-Hasidic Kabbalism;¹⁵⁷ for the later ascetics, the dominant culture they chose to deconstruct was Beshtian Hasidism itself.¹⁵⁸ In the coming pages, I present historical examples that show the ways in which these two forms of Hasidism used asceticism to break down the old and construct the new.

The Besht performed world-affirming ascetic acts in order to counter the society of which he was a product. His conception of Hasidic Judaism was spurred by a rejection of both Polish society and the Kabbalistic doctrines which came before him. By searching within the world to elevate and uplift divine sparks, the Besht trained his mind to welcome and respect worldly material. The Besht experienced worldly desire in order to experience God. Jacob Joseph of Poloyne, one of the Besht’s primary disciples, quotes the Besht’s world-affirming doctrine: “Every mitzvah or act of holiness starts with thoughts of physical pleasure,” and “it is proper for a man to have physical desires and out of them he will come to desire the Torah and the worship of God.”¹⁵⁹

Evidence of the Besht’s variance from his Kabbalistic predecessors is found in his understanding of nocturnal emissions. The *Zohar* viewed nocturnal

¹⁵⁷ The *mitnagdim* were also a dominant culture at this time, though a proper, all-inclusive examination into the relations between the *mitnagdim* and the Hasidim is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁵⁸ This holds true for the majority of later Hasidic ascetics, though some oppositional parties were time sensitive. In the case of R. Nahman, the *Haskalah* posed a great threat to his Hasidic ideology.

¹⁵⁹ Biale 131.

emissions as a sin comparable to murder.¹⁶⁰ The Besht, however, was less concerned with nocturnal emissions. He viewed these involuntary acts as the necessary expulsion of evil, concerning himself more with the thought than the deed. This was a stark contrast to those who came before him. The Besht set in motion a religious revolution that was bound to experience a certain amount of backlash from those who followed.

Aside from defying prior Kabbalistic practices, the Besht's practices also created a new Hasidic culture which diverged from the Polish society in which he lived. As laid out in the historical introduction, Hasidism emerged during a time of great turmoil among Jews living in Eastern European communities (modern day Poland and Ukraine). The Khmelnytsky uprising of 1648 set in motion a series of pogroms and governmental ordinances that afflicted Polish and Ukrainian Jewish communities for hundreds of years. These external factors led to internal strife among the Jewish population. The gap between the masses and the elite had widened as a result of outside economic pressure, and as a result, rabbinic corruption became more pronounced.¹⁶¹ Operating under these circumstances, the Besht's goal was to rectify and resolve this discord. His specific doctrine of *devekus* makes sense when placed within its proper historical context. By creating a system where access to God was neither limited to the rabbinic elite nor restricted to prayer and world-denying practices, the Besht fashioned a movement that was in direct opposition to the dominant Jewish

¹⁶⁰ *Zohar* 1:219b. See Sperling and Simon 312.

¹⁶¹ Sharot 135.

structures of the time. Hasidism began as a revivalist movement, and in this vein, the Besht's wished to revive Judaism to a state of collective joy.

Having explored Beshtian Hasidism's construction as a resistance to dominant societal structures, both Jewish and gentile, I will now take note of the later ascetics and their deliberate opposition to Beshtian Hasidism. The practices within the framework of "world-denial" are typically understood as "standard" practices of asceticism, namely: fasting, celibacy, and isolation. These ascetic performances were themselves assigned to a system that served to create new religious significance through an initially esoteric movement. This section explores the meaning of this new religious significance and how the practices of the later ascetics illustrate the ever-developing trends of world-denial within Hasidism.

Using the lens of Valantasis' theory, the doctrine of the Maggid of Mezeritch was one of the initial constructions of post-Beshtian Hasidim. The Maggid began the process of breaking down dominant Beshtian theology through his practices of *bittul hayesh* (annihilation of the self) and his repatterning of *avodah begashmiut* (worship through corporality). By refashioning Beshtian bodily emphasis to include more aspects of denial, specifically his privileging of the union between man and God over man and wife, the Maggid was escaping what had by then become the dominant form of Hasidism, creating a new society that would come to influence many later Hasidim.

The Maggid, however, was neither ready nor willing to disavow his Beshtian rearing. As such, by repatterning the doctrine of the Besht himself, the

Maggid was able to exist both within the society he chose to deconstruct and the society he himself was fashioning. As Valantasis notes, “It is not necessary that the alternative culture formed through asceticism oppose the dominant culture. The counter-cultural orientation need not indicate hostility or mutual exclusion. Cultures may coinhere, and an ascetic may participate in a number of different cultures simultaneously.”¹⁶² The blending of these two doctrines constructed a culture that straddled the fence between a world-affirming doctrine and a doctrine steeped in corporal rejection.

However, unlike the Maggid, many later ascetics were not able to reside concurrently in two diametrically opposed societies. Their differences were constructed at too great of height. Thus, solitude became a feature of an extreme ascetic lifestyle among later ascetics. Valantasis notes that once created, a counter-culture possesses a social structure dissimilar to the previous one. One major component of this structure for many later Hasidic ascetics was solitude. Typical interactions between rabbi and wife and rabbi and student were omitted and replaced by a lack of social interaction in general. This is evident in R. Elimelech’s teachings on marriage, which shift the object of sexual desire from wife to God, R. Mendel’s end-of-life isolation, where he cut off contact with the majority of his disciples, and the solitude of the Maid of Ludmir.¹⁶³ The leader remained in a leadership position, though social interaction was intentionally stifled.

¹⁶² Valantasis 549.

¹⁶³ See above, “R. Elimelech of Lyzhansk,” 39. “R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk,” 65. “Maid of Ludmir,” 68.

Concluding his section on the social components of asceticism, Valantasis outlines four main points to illustrate the social function of asceticism. I will present his four points and explain how these points relate to the structure of Hasidism.

First, asceticism enables the person to function within the re-envisioned or re-created world. Through ritual, new social relations, different articulations of self and body, and through a variety of psychological transformations, the ascetic learns to live within another world.¹⁶⁴

Valantasis views asceticism as a primary means of spiritual transportation and transformation. Asceticism, both world-affirming and world-denying, offers a direct route toward individual and communal transformation. The Maggid's use of *bittul hayesh* in establishing his own individual doctrine apart from the Besht ushered in an era where a number of ascetic forms of Hasidic Judaism grew and expanded. Ascetic practices were employed in order to create new societal structures in opposition to current structures of power. Many of these practices were often based on previous models, seen especially in the teachings of R. Nahman.

R. Nahman gave *devekus* a different function than did the Besht. R. Nahman stated that the practice of *devekus* was not possible so long as sin was present within the world. R. Nahman did not necessarily change the definition of sin from that of the Besht, but he redefined the potential of the sin. No longer could profane and sinful elements be uplifted to that of the holy. Instead, they had to be expelled in order for sustained spirituality to be available.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 550.

Valantasis's second function of asceticism deals with the use of asceticism to provide a concrete set of rituals for otherwise theological concepts.

Second, since so much of the ascetic culture relies upon narrative, biography, demonic and angelic psychology, as well as systems of theological anthropology and soteriology, asceticism provides the method for translating these theoretical and strategic concepts into patterns of behavior.¹⁶⁵

Hasidim used ascetic practices to refashion society so as to streamline its societal notions of mysticism and divine recognition. Within Hasidism, sacred texts were used as a primary foundation of ascetic practices.¹⁶⁶ Esoteric interpretations of these biblical and rabbinic narratives led to the translation of Bible into behavior. By applying scripture to further ascetic arguments, rabbis were able to impose added weight to their observances, thereby creating a communal consciousness that was essentially self-verifiable through scripture. The success of these teachings was predicated on the significance of scripture and overall communal value systems. Scripture not only served as an omnipotent archetype of righteous behavior, it allowed for the construction and advancement of fundamental religious societies.

The Hasidic interpreters of scripture both relied upon ancient narratives and participated within the narratives. It was R. Nahum who related proper *devekus* to Moses' face-to-face union with God, and R. Nahman who wished to emulate the sexual purity of Joseph.¹⁶⁷ R. Nahman viewed himself as the Joseph of his time, a *tzaddik* who, being pure in mind and body, was meant to bring about

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 550.

¹⁶⁶ These sacred texts include but are not limited to: *Tanakh, Talmud (Gemara, Mishna), Zohar, Midrash.*

¹⁶⁷ See above, "R. Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl," 50. "R. Nahman of Breslov," 53.

a messianic redemption.¹⁶⁸ In these cases, the actions of the Biblical patriarchs were exemplary, and their deeds were examined and applied in an ascetic framework.

In the function below, Valantasis argues that asceticism allows for the retraining of the senses. Through this retraining, the world can be re-envisioned, allowing the ascetic to experience their sensory system in a completely new manner.

Third, the re-envisioning of the world and of human life in it requires intensive perceptual transformation. In order to achieve a different state, as visualized or pictorialized by a religion, there must be at the most basic perceptual level of the sense, and of perceptions and experience, a form of retraining geared toward the re-envisioned world. Asceticism provides the means for this retraining.¹⁶⁹

There are some semantic difficulties when dealing with theoretical texts. In this case, the “sense” has to be defined before understanding Valantasis’ theory in light of Hasidism. Here, I define sense as the way the body experiences its surroundings through the five basic senses: touch, smell, taste, sight, and hearing. If one supposes that self-denial was a way to experience the most basic sensory levels, it becomes clear the ways in which asceticism retrained those who sought to re-envision society.

Aside from obvious changes to societal structures, Hasidim organized their new societies by augmenting the sensual experience of common acts. Eating was given a nuanced meaning through fasts, and sexuality was given a nuanced meaning through selective celibacy. The experiences that come from both food

¹⁶⁸ Green, *Tormented Master*, 182-220.

¹⁶⁹ Valantasis 550-551.

and sex transformed sensory experience in both the doctrine of the Besht and the doctrines of the later ascetics. The Besht wished to experience these acts by fully embracing their sensual aspects; the later ascetics wished to minimize Beshtian sensual experiences while emphasizing new experiences made possible by the denial of bodily desires. Among later ascetics, these acts were meant to elicit real bodily pain in order to reach the divine, evidenced by R. Nahman's pain during intercourse.¹⁷⁰ One was able to open the door to a spiritually ascetic counter-community by exchanging sexual desire for one's wife with a sexual desire for God. In both cases, certain sensory experiences were necessary in order to encounter the divine. Both types of these experiences employed ascetic practices in order to construct new ways to attain greater spirituality.

In his fourth and final point, Valantasis addresses asceticism's capacity to approach and interact with other dominant ideologies (scientific, rational, enlightenment).

Fourth, asceticism provides the means through which other domains of knowledge and understanding can be incorporated into the re-envisioned world. Scientific, historical, doctrinal, sectarian, and other kinds of issues are translated through asceticism into the other conception of the world.¹⁷¹

An example of this translation comes in R. Nahman's interactions with the *maskilim* (literally, "enlightened ones") of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries during the *Haskalah*. Many *maskilim* lived in close proximity to Hasidim, and as such, these competing societies interacted on a number of levels. While Hasidism did not re-envision enlightenment ideals for their own use, they did react to the movement as a whole.

¹⁷⁰ See above, "R. Nahman of Breslov," 55.

¹⁷¹ Valantasis 551.

For example, R. Nahman chose to spend the end of his life in Uman, Ukraine, attempting to redeem the *maskilim*.¹⁷² Uman was home to a small number of enlightened Jews, many of whom R. Nahman came to be acquainted with. The complexities of R. Nahman's relationship with the *maskilim* are far too great to be discussed here, though it is important to note that one of R. Nahman's final goals in life was to guide the souls of the *maskilim* to the divine. "He took great pride in every bit of contact that he had with the enlighteners, sure that even the slightest sign of respect they might show him was a foretaste of their impending repentance... Even though their souls were derived from the 'side of evil,' the true *tzaddik* was able to bring out some sparks of holiness within them."¹⁷³ R. Nahman, then, is one example of the Hasidic reaction to the *maskilim*. He promoted Hasidic ideology by appropriating the language and concepts of the *maskilim*. His critique of their lifestyle was not done within a Hasidic vacuum; many apocryphal tales portray R. Nahman speaking with the *maskilim* about a number of Hasidic phenomena, yet he is doing so in order for the *maskilim* to internalize his teachings.¹⁷⁴ R. Nahman's redemptive efforts with regard to the *maskilim* relied upon his ascetic pedagogy, specifically his understanding of desire.

¹⁷² Green, *Tormented Master*, 252. This was one of two reasons why R. Nahman came to Uman. In addition to redeeming the living *maskilim*, R. Nahman sought to "work with the poor souls" of the martyred Jews from the Gonta massacre of 1768.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁷⁴ For detailed accounts from primary sources of the interactions between R. Nahman and the *maskilim*, see Green, *Tormented Master*, 273, n. 58-79.

R. Nahman identified the rational, tempting, concepts promoted by the *maskilim* as heretical and profane.¹⁷⁵ There were even comparisons made between the *maskilim* and the primordial snake in Genesis, calling upon the persuasive tactics of the latter.¹⁷⁶ With a clear enemy in sight, R. Nahman chose to contest the ideas of the *Haskalah*: “His weapon in the battle with the naturalists is significantly that of desire. He must call forth the *longings* for God, the desire for a restored wholeness, in himself and in those around him, in order to reassert the will of God as the activating force in the universe.”¹⁷⁷ R. Nahman, then, focused his actions toward promoting his ascetic notions of desire, which he hoped would win over and subsequently redeem the *maskilim*.

¹⁷⁵ These “concepts” included secular studies, European philosophies, critical scholarship on ancient Jewish texts, and the revival of spoken and literary Hebrew.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

Conclusion

In narrating the development of Hasidic asceticism, I have shown the progression of a movement that displays multiple attitudes toward food, sexuality, and the body. The world-affirming asceticism of the Ba'al Shem Tov encouraged followers to delight in the material. By pursuing the holiness within all things mundane, common village Jews who followed the Besht were able to attain a heightened sense of spirituality, achieving *devekus* through everyday acts.

As Hasidism grew, however, world-affirming attitudes began to shift toward more ascetically inclined practices rooted in self-denial. Many of the leading post-Beshtian Hasidim developed doctrines that stressed the importance of sexual renunciation through the conquering of desire. These teachings created a uniquely Hasidic form of mysticism, relying heavily on a spiritualized sexual relationship between God and man. Along with attaching sexual metaphors to God, later Hasidim showed great contempt for the body and its faculties, causing many of them to prescribe intense regimens of self-denial, which included practices of fasting, seclusion, and in some cases, bodily mortification. The world-denying behavior of these later Hasidim, however, was not linear. Years removed from Hasidism's founding, Beshtian connections still existed, enduring generations of doctrinal transformation.

The ascetic arc hypothesized within this paper has not been explored by many scholars of Hasidism. This paper has raised questions about the development of Hasidism during the late eighteenth through the late nineteenth centuries, and in doing so, critiqued and questioned previous scholars, thereby

furthering the academic study of Hasidic Judaism. In the future I myself would like to explore the correspondence between the *mitnagdim* and the Hasidim, focusing on how the polemical nature of this relationship might have influenced Hasidic asceticism. It is possible that Hasidim were concerned with how the *mitnagdim* viewed their practices, causing a greater shift toward mainstream *halacha* within a number of Hasidic circles. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to look into the relationship between the later Hasidim and their Christian contemporaries, specifically studying how laws, restrictions, and economic constraints might have prompted Hasidim to adopt greater attitudes of restraint toward the body.

Lastly, this study could be expanded to include the ways in which Hasidim confronted modernity.¹⁷⁸ Jewish immigration in the early twentieth century, the Holocaust, and the founding of the state of Israel all significantly altered the history of Hasidism, and it would be interesting to explore the ways in which modern, geographically sensitive conceptions of the body shaped Hasidic ideology.

¹⁷⁸ Beyond that of the Haskalah.

Glossary

*All italicized terms are from Hebrew, unless otherwise noted.

adam: Man.

alufo shel olam: Master of the World

avodah begashmiut: Worship through corporality. A seminal practice of the Besht.

bittul hayesh: Annihilation of the self. A teaching of the Maggid of Mezeritch that initiated an ascetic change within Hasidism.

dam: Blood.

davak: “Cling” or “cleave.” The root form of *devekus*.

devekus: Literally “to cleave” or “attach.” A state of deep meditation where one spiritually “cleaves” to a divine aspect of God. The ways one went about achieving *devekus* differed from traditional methods of prayer and Torah study to unconventional methods of delighting in worldly pleasures.

ein sof: Literally “no end,” the *ein sof* is the Kabbalistic term for the divine origin of creation.

Godhead: The highest aspect of God found in the *Zohar* and Lurianic Kabbalah. Many Hasidim looked to come into union with the Godhead through the act of *devekus*.

halacha: The combined body of Jewish laws; composed of elements from the *Tanakh*, *Talmud*, and many other rabbinic sources.

Haskalah: The eastern European Jewish enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

hitbodedut: A Breslov practice of secluded prayer, pioneered by R. Nahman.

hitpashut hagashmiut: Stripping away the material.

khatzotzros: Trumpets.

khetzi: Half.

kheyder: Yiddish for a traditional orthodox elementary school.

Kiddush: the prayer over wine, recited on the eve of Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

kitel: A white robe worn by Jewish men as a burial garment. Also worn on *Yom Kippur* and often at weddings.

klippot: Literally “shells,” is a Kabbalistic term for the material surrounding fallen divine sparks from the process of creation.

maskilim: The enlightened ones that identified with the *Haskalah*.

melamed: Yiddish for tutor or teacher of young students.

Midrash: A compilation of rabbinical tales meant to explain elements within the Torah.

mitnagdim: The “opponents” of the Hasidim. Traditionally Lithuanian Jews who opposed the mystical elements of Hasidism.

mitzvah: Commandment. Referring to the 613 commandments given at Mount Sinai.

pilpul: An intense analytical method of studying the Talmud, centered around rabbinic discussion aimed at resolving textual inconsistencies.

qiddushin: Betrothal. Biblically referring to the dedication of a bride to her groom.

Shekhina: The earthly feminized presence of God.

shtetl(ekh): Yiddish for “little town.” Centers of lower class Jewish culture where Hasidism began to spread.

Shulchan Aruch: Literally “set table.” The *Shulchan Aruch* is the foundational and most widely accepted compilation of Jewish law.

szlachta: Polish for a class of Polish nobles.

Talmud: The written component of the oral Jewish law. The Talmud is composed of the *Mishna*, the first written redaction of Judaism’s oral law, and the *Gemara*, sections of rabbinical analysis and discussion.

Tanakh: The canon of the Hebrew Bible. Comprised of the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), Prophets (Joshua-Malachi), and Writings (Psalms-II Chronicles).

tikkun: Redemption. Found in the doctrine of R. Nahman.

tsimtsum: A term used in Lurianic Kabbalah to explain the creation of the world through the withdrawal of the *ein sof*.

tzaddik: Righteous one. A title lent to the leaders of the Hasidic movement.

tzorah: Form.

yadah: The biblical verb for “to know” and “to have intercourse.”

yeshiva: Traditional Jewish educational institution concentrating on the study of sacred text and ritual.

Zohar: The formative work of Kabbalah comprised mainly of mystical interpretations of the *Tanakh*.

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