Abraham J. Heschel

The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov

Studies in Hasidism

Edited by Samuel H. Dresner

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ABRAHAM J. HESCHEL (1909–72), born in Poland to a long line of Hasidic rabbis, was one of the most prominent and beloved scholars of Judaism in the twentieth century.

SAMUEL H. DRESNER, a rabbi and scholar of Jewish thought, earned his doctorate in Hasidism under Abraham Heschel.

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THE LOSS OCCASIONED BY THE DEATH OF RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA Heschel in 1972 has been felt with increasing poignancy. Time has not served its customary conciliatory function. The passing years have only emphasized the immensity of the void and the unique stature of the man.

For the Christian world, what Reinhold Niebuhr once described as a "commanding and authoritative voice . . . in the religious life of America" has been silenced. Both Catholics and Protestants sought out Heschel's opinions on theological and social issues, because they believed these opinions represented an authentic Jewish perception expressed by one whose wisdom, piety, and integrity they esteemed. This fraternity with the Christian community manifested itself, for example, in Heschel's persuasive presence at the Second Vatican Council and in his close bonds with leading figures of the Protestant church. It had its basis in the prophetic call for a just society and in what Heschel described as "Depth Theology"—those underpinnings of religion, such as humility, compassion, faith, and awe, which characterize the community of all true men of spirit.

For the Jewish world, the death of Abraham Heschel has, of course, been an incomparably greater blow. Jewry has lost a scholar, a thinker, a poet, and a social reformer of the first rank. One of Heschel's unusual qualities was the universality of his concern. His interests were not limited to any single epoch or subject but embraced the totality of Jewish experience. Vertically, there was hardly a major topic in the history of Jewish thought which he did not plumb. In a time of growing specialization, most scholars prefer to restrict themselves to a single aspect of Judaism. Not so Heschel. He contributed major works in a number of fields: Bible (*The Prophets*), Rabbinics (*Torah min Hashamayim*), Hasidism (*Kotzk*), Theology (*Man Is Not Alone*, *God in Search of Man*, and *Who Is Man?*), and Ethics (*The Insecurity of Freedom*), among others. It was this mastery of virtually the entire Jewish creative experience which contributed to the richness of Heschel's own thinking. If his scholarship moved readily across the vertical dimension from the Bible to

contemporary thought, his Jewish concern was just as remarkably horizontal. By this I mean his understanding of, sympathy for, and acceptance by almost the entire spectrum of Jewish life—from the Zionists and the Hebraists to the Yiddishists, and from the Reform and Conservative to the Orthodox and the Hasidim. Though himself eschewing labels, identifying wholly with none of these schools, and all the while holding his own views, Heschel established good relations with each of the factions, since he believed each represented, in greater or lesser measure, an affirmation of Jewish life. Heschel's breadth expressed the quality of his *'ahavat yisra'el* (love of Israel).[1]

Heschel was intimately familiar with the Jewries with whom he resided. The liquidation of East European Jewry had left him as one of the few authentic interpreters of that great period of Jewish life and thought. He knew not only the Jews of Germany and America as well, but also was thoroughly conversant with the contemporary general culture of those countries. I recall the observation of Eugen Taeubler, Mommsen's successor as professor of classics at Heidelberg, that Heschel had a better grasp of German culture than the German-born faculty of the American academic institution in which Taeubler found himself in the forties. The same could have been said for Heschel's understanding of the pragmatic, open, and socially oriented American society which he came to appreciate soon after his arrival here in 1940, and for which, in time, he served as a leading spokesman.

Gifted with a moving literary style in four languages (Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and English), Heschel has left us a precious written legacy. Much of his work was produced at a prodigious rate in the language he mastered last, English, and comprises one of the most impressive bodies of writing by a single modern Jewish thinker. No one has yet picked up the pen he has set down, nor plumbed the depths of the Jewish mind so tellingly, nor so moved the heart. If it is true that the Jewish community's recognition of Heschel was belated, following rather than preceding that accorded him by Christians, then there is all the more reason for pain that

1. "My father" [he wrote] "used to tell me a story about our grandfather." [Abraham Joshua Heschel, rabbi in Opatów (Apt) and later in Miedzybórz (Mezbizh), after whom Heschel was named, was popularly known as the Lover of Israel (*'Ohev Yisra'el*), the inscription on his grave and the title of his book.] He was asked by many other rebbes, "How come your prayers are always accepted and our prayers are not?" He gave the following answer: "You see, whenever some Jew comes to me and pours out his heart and tells me of his misery and suffering, I have such compassion that a little hole is created in my heart. Since I have heard and listened to a great many Jews with their problems and anguish, there are a great many holes in my heart. I'm an old Jew, and when I start to pray I take my heart and place it before God. He sees this broken heart, so many holes, so many splits, that He has compassion for my heart, and that's why He listens to me. He listens to my prayers." ("Hasidism," *Jewish Heritage* 14, no. 3 [1972]:21)

we can no longer expect from Heschel yet another startling book, another bold act of prophetic leadership, or another moving reaction to a challenging issue.

The publication of this volume is evidence of the implication of Heschel's death for Hasidic scholarship. In no other field of study is his loss felt more keenly, for only now have a growing number of students begun to take seriously Martin Buber's long-denied claim, that Hasidism was the most significant phenomenon in the history of religion during the past two centuries. The new academic and popular interest in Hasidism is apparent from the surprising quantity of original works and reprints on the subject being published in Hebrew (see any recent issue of *Kiryat Sefer*), the growing number of English publications, and the spate of courses being introduced in colleges. While the "decline" of the Hasidic movement has received generous attention from scholars, the evidence of its communal and intellectual vitality is only now beginning to receive a hearing. If not on the same exalted level as in its first three generations, the movement has nevertheless continued with unabated vigor, regularly producing a formidable series of leaders and a constantly growing, if uneven, literature. Despite early separatist tendencies, Hasidism returned to (and was admitted by) the official Jewish community, while in the second half of this century—even after the Holocaust—it has shown itself capable of taking root in the democratic societies of the West. Consider, for example, the fact that a disproportionate number of Jews who have made signal contributions to contemporary culture—Agnon in literature, Chagall in art, and Buber and Heschel in philosophy—emerged from a Hasidic milieu. All this, if touched on by publicists, has by and large been ignored by scholars. Heschel, whose studies on Maimonides and Abrabanel demonstrated his understanding of the Spanish epoch, argued that the "golden period" of Jewish history was not in Spain but in Eastern Europe. For him the acme of Eastern European Jewry had been Hasidism, the high point of post-talmudic Jewish history.

While Heschel's specifically Hasidic studies are confined to the essays in this volume on the circle of the Besht (Baal Shem Tov = the master of the good name), the founder of Hasidism, and to the monumental work on Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, his other writings often reflect Hasidic sources and insights. Indeed, the more familiar one becomes with Hasidic literature, the more one understands how Heschel drew upon these sources. The influence of Hasidism is reflected in Heschel's contributions to the understanding of the phenomenology of prophecy and of *ruaḥ hakodesh* (the holy spirit). There are, for example, clear echoes of Hasidic concepts and concerns in Heschel's excursions upon the Sabbath as a bride, upon "divine pathos," the "ineffable," "radical amazement," the illusion of God's absence, the "holy dimension" of all reality, the

"primacy of inwardness," the criticism of "panhalachism," the centrality of prayer, the "dignity of words," and the "endless yearning." Some of the section headings in *Man Is Not Alone* might, in fact, be transposed to a book on Hasidic philosophy. In the final chapter of Heschel's work on Maimonides, where he described the great philosopher's last years when he abandoned his scholarly undertakings for a life of *imitatio Dei*, one catches a reflection of the tzaddik for whom "living" Torah is more important than "writing" Torah.[2]

The State of Hasidic Research

To understand Heschel better as a scholar of Hasidism, it would be helpful to review the general state of Hasidic research. One might describe it as both promising and problematic.

It is promising because of the growing number of scholars, both in Israel and the Diaspora, who have directed their efforts to the subject of Hasidism. There are several reasons which might be suggested for this increased interest. One reason is spiritual. It has to do with what Daniel Bell has called the "exhaustion of modernity," that is, the failure first of technology and then of "culture" (literature—art—music) as substitutes for religion. After several centuries in which "natural" man has explored the secular kingdom in search of redemption, there has again emerged a receptivity to the sacred dimension of reality. This accounts, in good measure, for the attentiveness to the Hasidic movement, the last great flowering of the Jewish spirit. A second reason for the growing interest in Hasidism is historical. The catastrophic end of a thousand years of Eastern European Jewish communal life has stimulated considerable effort to document and understand what was previously taken for granted and, consequently, in good measure, overlooked. Studies on Hasidism, formerly so scant, are today considered of sufficient interest to warrant their publication in major scholarly journals. Formerly, no courses in Hasidism had been offered at institutions of higher learning, even Jewish institutions; today, the number rises each year, as does the number of

2. More explicit cases of how Hasidic sources are used in Heschel's writings are abundant. For example, the startling title Heschel chose for his youthful volume of Yiddish poems, *Der Shemhameforash Mentsh*, "Man, the Ineffable Name of God," can be traced to Hasidic-kabbalistic origins. According to a form of gematria introduced by the kabbalists that permitted "filling," *milui ʾalafim*, where each letter of a Hebrew word receives the numerical value not of the letter itself but of the name of the letter "filled" with alefs, the value of the ineffable Name, YHVH (*Yod Heʾ Vaʾv Heʾ*), becomes 45 (= 20 + 6 + 13 + 6), which is equivalent to the simple gematria of the Hebrew for "man," *ʾadm* = 1 + 4 + 40 = 45! Thus, through the process of gematria, "man is the ineffable Name of God" (*Keter Shem Tov* [Brooklyn: Kehot, 1972], p. 74, § 292).

One further study in Hasidism was Heschel's "Unknown Documents in the History of Hasidism" (Yiddish), *YIVO Bleter* 36 (1952):113–35.

doctoral dissertations on or related to Hasidism. One product of the new research is the publication of the first critical edition of a classic Hasidic book with full commentary, which provides a key that will unlock many difficulties for the student and sets an example which others will no doubt follow.[3]

Hasidic research, however, is also problematic. So little has been done in the past that is of lasting value and upon which one can build. Anti-Hasidic prejudice in the West kept many students from contributing to this field and rendered the work of others ineffective. With the absence, until very recently, of university-level courses in Hasidism and professorships, fellowships, or research grants, few were encouraged to enter a field with so bleak a future. Of the studies which have appeared, most are characterized either by overenthusiasm or lack of sensitivity. Hasidism has been either romanticized or maligned. Indeed, the absence of a balanced approach to the subject has been a major obstacle. New movements are bound to engender advocates and critics. Hasidism, because of its nature and its claims, aroused a storm of controversy that has persisted down to our very day. Fervor characterized both its proponents and its enemies. Attack was followed by counterattack, forgery by counterforgery; the burning of books, excommunications, and courting the interference of government authorities were the order of the day. In time, matters quieted down, partly because the Hasidic movement had grown so powerful that it had to be received back into the community. Much of the more modern literature, however, has remained impassioned, extreme, and bitter. As a result, the contemporary scholar has at his disposal few evenhanded and well-informed studies congruent with Hasidism's depth and breadth. The sad fact is that we possess hardly a handful of significant works. Heschel himself observed in 1952 that "in the field of Jewish scholarship there are few subjects about which so much has been written in so dilettantish a manner as the history of Hasidism. Few researchers have followed the fine example set by Eliezer Tzvi Hakohen Zweifel with his work, *Shalom ʿal Yisraʾel* (Zhitomir, 1868—69) . . . Samuel Abba Horodezky's important monographs did not concern themselves sufficiently with details. Dubnow, in his noteworthy *History of Hasidism*, paid more attention to the opponents of Hasidism, the Mitnagdim, than to Hasidism itself . . ."[4]

The lack of surviving documents is a second obstacle to a proper understanding of the movement. Referring to the post-Holocaust situation, Heschel noted in the same article that " . . . we remain unsure of thousands of simple facts: biographical dates, bibliographic details, iden-

3. Dov Ber, Maggid of Miedzyrzecz (Mezeritch), *Maggid Devarav Leyaʿakov*, ed. and commentary by R. Schatz-Uffenheimer (Jerusalem: Hebrew Univ. Press, 1976).

4. See Heschel, "Unknown Documents in the History of Hasidism."

tification of names, etc. This sorry state of affairs is due in part to the fact that research on Hasidism suffers from a dearth of documents."[5] While Heschel was writing about the post-Holocaust condition, such a vacuum had, in fact, long prevailed in the great Jewish libraries of Western Europe and America, upon which most historical research on Judaism was dependent. The author of a work on Shabbetai Tzvi observed that it is easier to write a study on that subject than on some noted Hasidic figure, for while manuscripts about Sabbateanism were being avidly collected by the Jewish librarians of the West, Hasidic documents, even the most valuable, though readily accessible, were virtually ignored. The librarians followed the example of their doyen, Steinschneider, the master bibliographer who insatiably ransacked every nook and cranny in search of a Hebrew manuscript, but freely admitted that he knew next to nothing about Hasidic literature. Sabbateanism, though heretical, was after all a curiosity, while Hasidism was a contemporary calamity, a "malady of Judaism."[6]

A case in point is Elkan Adler, the noted English barrister, book collector, and son of the former chief rabbi. While his anti-Hasidism seems a somewhat gentler British version, it no doubt played a role in what he felt was of value to collect. The description he gives in his travel book of "Hasidic" joy on Simhat Torah around the turn of the century in Jerusalem includes seeing himself as "Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians, when the monkeys patronized him . . . If the tune of the Chassidim is funny, . . . a Chassidish howl, . . . [and] the harmonization rather like a Chassid's nightmare after a heavy supper of Beethoven! . . . the manner in which they make the Hakafoth, or circuits of the Synagogue, during the Rejoicing of the law, is funnier still. It was comical and shocking to see venerable gray beards pirouetting on their toes like some European fairy of the pantomime, but it was highly appreciated, and I had to simulate satisfaction for fear of being rebuked, as Michal was when she objected to King David's 'dancing with all his might.'"[7] An unusual combination of Jewish knowledge and aristocratic wealth, Adler literally scoured the earth in search of rare Hebrew books. He managed to collect manuscripts at the rate of about one hundred a year and to visit each of the continents, except Australia, half a dozen times or so in search of them.[8] Yet the catalog of his manuscripts reveals hardly a single Hasidic work.

5. Ibid.
6. See S. Baron, "Steinschneider's Contribution to Historiography," *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), English section, p. 95.
7. Adler, *Jews in Many Lands* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1905), pp. 50–55.
8. Ibid., pp. 12–13.

Another problem in Hasidic research is the separation, by predeliction or circumstance, between some Hasidic scholarship and familiarity with Hasidic life. In other disciplines, such disjuncture may not have serious consequences. The essence of Hasidism, however, was the living reality of which the written word, impressive and vast as it is, is only a reflection. Hasidism was more than the philosophy which could be distilled from its classics. It was a certain style of life. With the demise of Eastern European Jewry, the living tradition was severely attenuated. Heschel writes:

> [It] is a tragedy that this great movement is essentially an oral movement, one that cannot be preserved in written form. It is ultimately a living movement. It is not contained fully in any of its books . . . [In] other words, Hasidism has a very personal dimension . . . To be a Hasid is to be in love with God and with what God has created. Once you are in love you are a different human being . . . That is the history of Hasidism. Indeed, he who has never been in love will not understand and may consider it a madness. That is why there is so much opposition to Hasidism, more than we are willing to admit.[9]

Some modern scholars, not familiar or sympathetic with Hasidic life, may be limited almost exclusively to its literature and by necessity approach their subject like astronomers, biologists, . . . or tourists.

Hasidic literature itself, finally, is intrinsically difficult to penetrate. It is enigmatic, terse, usually the work of a disciple transcribing the words of his master, often written in a poor Hebrew which is nothing more than a translation of the original spoken Yiddish,[10] characterized by allusions to kabbalistic formulae, and presupposing a knowledge of the rabbinic texts. The writings of Hasidism, though filled with brilliant insights and profound exposition, present a formidable obstacle to the student. One need only observe that although Hasidic literature numbers about 3,000 items, we lack a bibliography, an adequate study of its nature and extent, a comprehensive anthology, and a critical edition of and commentary to even a handful of its classic texts.[11]

9. "Hasidism," *Jewish Heritage* 14, no. 3 (1972):14–16.
10. A reference to this problem is found in the introduction to *Teshu'ot Hen* by R. Gedaliah of Linitz, one of the earliest followers of the Besht. The editor of the book, a disciple of R. Gedaliah and a son of the author of *Shivhey Habesht*, explains that difficulties in comprehending the text may be due to the profundity of the ideas, the errors of the printer, and the limits of his own understanding in transcribing the text. "Or perhaps the meaning of the author was altered in [my] translating from one language [Yiddish] to another [Hebrew], and it was as a 'tongue of stammerers' to me. For it is known that the task of translating from one tongue to another is considerable, in that care must be taken neither to add nor detract from the intent of the author . . . " (*Teshu'ot Hen* [Berdichev, 1816; rpt. Jerusalem: S. Reifen, 1964], p. 15).
11. A century ago Solomon Schecter believed that Hasidic literature consisted of some "200 volumes." See his *The Chassidim* (London: Jewish Chronicle, 1887), p. 22. The Mosad

In a little-known article,[12] Heschel once suggested that the attitude toward Hasidism of the scholars of the West was yet another example of their wholesale rejection of the Ashkenazic tradition in favor of the supposedly more liberal, "cultured," and decorous Sephardic mode. To demonstrate his point, he included one of his rare references to contemporary writers:

> In the modern period, its [the Sephardic] influence permeated other Jewish groups, especially in Germany. It was the admiration of the 19th-century German Jewish scholars for the Sephardic Middle Ages that determined the mood of the modern "Science of Judaism" (*Wissenschaft des Jüdentums*).
>
> The scholars of emancipated German Jewry saw in the Spanish period the "Golden Age" of Jewish history, and celebrated it as a happy blend of progress and traditionalism upon which they desired to model their own course. In their research they went to the point of applying the cultural standards of the "Golden Age" to the literature of later centuries. For some Jewish scholars, any Jewish literature dating after 1492, the year in which Jewish life in Spain ceased, was not considered worthy of scholarly investigation. Their example was followed in forming the curricula of the higher schools of Jewish learning, which gave no place to works written after 1492 and before the beginning of modern Hebrew literature.
>
> This desire for inner identification with the Spanish Jewish period reflected itself in the synagogue architecture of the 19th century. Liberal Jewish synagogues in Central Europe were built in the Moorish style, as if the stucco arabesque, horseshoe arches, and dados of glazed and painted tiles were the most apt possible expressions of the liberal Jew's religious mood.
>
> Hand-in-hand with the romantic admiration of the Sephardim that became one of the motifs of Reform Judaism in Germany went social aspirations, too. The social standing of the few Sephardim in Germany was superior to that of the Ashkenazim, and the leaders of the new Reform movement, anxious to develop a new and more advanced way of Jewish life that would abandon the traditional forms still adhered to by the Jewish masses, often blatantly imitated the manners of the Sephardim. In the Portuguese synagogues they found that solemnity and decorum which they missed in the old *shul*. It was hardly for scientific reasons that the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew was introduced in the early "temples."

Harav Kook of Jerusalem, under the general editorship of Dr. Yitzhak Raphael and the authorship of Shalom H. Parush, is publishing a bibliography of Hasidic literature. See also the fine translation of R. Nahum of Chernobyl's *Light of the Eyes* by A. Green, published by Paulist Press in 1982.

12. "The Two Great Traditions," *Commentary* 5 (1948):420–21.

> . . . [T]he modern Ashkenazic Jew, particularly in Central Europe, often came to lose his appreciation of the value of his own original way of life. He developed an embarrassed aversion for the dramatic, for the moving and vivid style, whether in the synagogue or in human relations. For him dignity grew to mean something to be achieved by strict adherence to an established, well-balanced, mannerly form, undisturbed by an eruption of the sudden and spontaneous . . . Thus Hermann Cohen wrote in 1916 that the elimination of the dramatic manner from the worship of East European Jews would turn the synagogues into "seats of true culture."
>
> This lack of understanding for and alienation from the values of the Ashkenazic traditions became complete. Describing the way in which the Hasidim prayed, a prominent Jewish historian, in a work first published in 1913 and reprinted in 1931, could write:
>
> "The [Hasidic] movement did not signify a gain for religious life; the asset that lay in its striving for inwardness was more than cancelled out by the preposterousness of its superstitious notions and of its unruly behavior . . . According to its principles, Hasidism meant a total revolt against the divine service [*sic*!]; nothing could have made the untenability of the latter more striking than the fact that great numbers of people should turn away from it, not out of skepticism or doubt, but out of a most intense yearning for piety . . . Hasidism contributed to the deterioration rather than to the improvement of the divine service . . . its noise and wild, restless movements brought new factors of disturbance . . . It is no wonder that at such a time complaints were made about the lack of devoutness and attention, about the disorder and interruptions. The divine service stood in need of a thorough renovation and restoration if it was to survive. The modern age [read: the Reform movement—AJH.] supplied both."

The book referred to by Heschel is *Dèr jüdische Gottesdienst*, the standard work on Jewish liturgy, by Ismar Elbogen, one of the leading figures in *Die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the movement for the scientific study of Judaism).[13] Other expressions of this point of view have not been uncommon. For example, according to the system of organization of the standard library catalog for Judaica, "Hasidism" is listed under the rubric, "sects," along with the Essenes, the Karaites, and the Samaritans.[14] As early as 1887, perhaps the most distinguished figure associated with the development of American Jewish scholarship, Solo-

13. Ismar Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Leipzig: Fock, 1913), p. 392.

14. Freimann, A., *Katalog der Judaica* (Frankfurt: Lehrberger, 1922), p. ix. Also listed under this rubric are the Saducees and the Pharisees.

mon Schecter, had published a sympathetic article on Hasidism in English ("The Chassidim," first read before the Jews College Literary Society, 13 November 1887, later printed in the *Jewish Chronicle*, and reprinted in his *Studies in Judaism*). Virtually none on this continent were to emulate him. Among the more than seventy volumes of the *Jewish Quarterly Review*, the more than forty volumes of the *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, and the more than fifty volumes of the *Hebrew Union College Annual*, only a handful of articles relating to Hasidism have appeared—and these, more often, to anti-Hasidism![15] It would be fair to conclude that the approach to Hasidism of *Die Wissenschaft des Judentums* was perpetuated, until most recently, by its American advocates.

Among the few scholars of the West who repudiated the outlook of *jüdische Wissenschaft* and contributed to a reawakening of interest in Hasidism have been Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem. Their motives were only partly the same.

Buber opposed *jüdische Wissenschaft*'s stress on rationalism, philology, and positivism; its pursuit of a historiography "which sees the past as a meaningless 'promiscuous agglomeration of happenings,'" thus fragmenting "Jewish history into many tiny problems."[16] Scholem understood *jüdische Wissenschaft* as the "academic mortician" of Judaism. Referring to the polemical purposes of the Western scholars, who, in the throw of emancipation, were embarrassed by and sought to dismiss the unpleasant evidence of mysticism in Judaism, he writes:

> Factors that have been emphasized and were considered positive from the world-view of assimilation and self-justification now require an entirely new analysis in order to determine what their actual role was in the development of the nation. Factors which were denigrated will appear in a different, more positive light from this point of view . . . It is possible that what was termed degeneracy will be thought of as a revelation and light and what seemed to [the nineteenth-century historians] will be revealed as a great living myth . . . not the washing and mummification of the dead, but the discovery of hidden life by removal of the obfuscating masks.[17]

15. E.g., M. Wilensky, "Some Notes on Rabbi Israel Loebel's Polemic Against Hasidism," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 30 (1962):141–51; Y. Eliach, "The Russian Dissenting Sects and Their Influence on Israel Baal Shem Tov, Founder of Hasidism," *PAAJR* 36 (1968):57–81; E. Etkes, "The System of R. Hayim of Volozhin as a Response of the Community of the Mitnagdim to Hasidism" (Hebrew), *PAAJR* 39 (1972):1–46 (Hebrew section); J. Weiss, "The Great Maggid's Theory of Contemplative Magic," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 31 (1960),137–48.

16. David Biale, *Gershom Scholem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), p. 46. See M. Buber, "Jüdische Wissenschaft," *Die Welt* 11–12 (October 1901); *Jüdische Bewegung* (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1920), 1:48–58.

17. Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, p. 11. Translation emended by editor—SHD.

Although both Buber and Scholem were agreed in their rejection of the apologetic-rationalist-philological approach of *Die Wissenschaft des Jüdentums*, the two were subsequently to follow different directions in their work. A reading of their controversy on the proper post-*Wissenschaft* approach to Hasidism is of considerable interest; for our purposes, moreover, the two approaches help to provide a context within which to view the contributions of Abraham Joshua Heschel.[18]

Toward the beginning of the century, Buber, through his lyric German rendition of the Hasidic tale, brought the startling message of Hasidism to the Western Jew, and to the Gentile. He was only the best-known figure of the neo-Hasidic revival which included such writers as Berdichevsky, Peretz, Horodezky, and Y. Steinberg, most of whom were nationalists or members of the intelligentsia, rebelling against the traditional pattern of Jewish study.

Gershom Scholem and his school repudiated not only *jüdische Wissenschaft* but neo-Hasidism as well, particularly Martin Buber's understanding of Hasidism. They pointed to Buber's preference for Hasidic legend over the discursive writings, as well as to his penchant for exposition which emphasized mysticism or existential "decision" at the expense of the real meaning of the text and the centrality of tradition. Though Scholem would not have gone as far as Hurwitz who attacked neo-Hasidism for "searching for pearls in piles of garbage," he did adopt almost all of Hurwitz's "critique of Hasidism as a quietistic movement" and of Sabbateanism as a model of historical vitality.[19] He acknowledged Buber's contribution as a groundbreaking effort, but argued that it glossed over the less attractive aspects of Hasidism, was self-serving, and was overly selective in its emphasis. As Buber's general thinking moved from mysticism to existentialism, so did his understanding of Hasidism. Thus during the first phase, before World War I, he dealt with the "ecstatic quality" of Hasidism. Later, he emphasized Hasidism's "hallowing of the everyday" and its concern for the "concrete here and now."

The approach of the dominant Scholem school is no less problematic. Scholem credited the period of Shabbetai Tzvi as the watershed of modern Jewish history. He viewed the false messiah as a liberator who broke the millennial rabbinic hegemony and thereby facilitated, in

18. See G. Scholem, "M. Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 227–51; idem, "M. Buber's Conception of Judaism," in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 126–72; R. Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Man's Relation to God and World in Buber's Rendering of the Hasidic Teaching," in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. Paul Schilpp and Maurice Friedman (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1967), pp. 403–35; Martin Buber, "Replies to My Critics: On Hasidism," idem, pp. 731–41; Biale, pp. 165–69; M. Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism," *Commentary* 36, no. 3 (1963):218–25.

19. Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, p. 48. Cf. Stanley Nash, "The Psychology of Dynamic Self-Negation in a Modern Hebrew Writer, Shai Hurwitz (1861–1922)," *PAAJR* 44 (1977):81–93. See now S. Nash, *In Search of Hebraism: Shai Hurwitz and His Polemics in the Hebrew Press* (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

greater or lesser measure, the emergence of such movements as Haskalah, Zionism, Reform, and Hasidism. For Scholem, "pluralism" replaced "normative" as the key word in the new Jewish historiography, providing, alongside of halakhah and philosophy, a place for mysticism, and even such undercurrents as antinomianism.[20]

While contributing significantly to the understanding of the Hasidic text, both as to its historical authenticity and its relation to the older Kabbalah, the Scholem school betrays at times its own selective weakness for the gnostic, the quietistic, and the supposedly Sabbatean elements in the literature of Hasidism. Critics have made their points. R.J.Z. Werblowsky sees Scholem's attempt to raise Sabbateanism to the level of rabbinic Judaism as a dangerous misreading of Jewish history; Kurzweil questions Scholem's historical objectivity in view of the latter's anarchical emphasis on the irrational in contrast to the halakhic and rational elements in Judaism; Jacob Katz is doubtful whether historical sources support a causal relationship between Sabbateanism and modern Jewish movements;[21] while M. Piekarz argues that numerous Hasidic statements, which Scholem traces to Sabbatean texts, merely share a common source in classical Musar works such as *Sheney Luḥot Habrit* and *Re'shit Ḥokhmah*.[22]

Die Wissenschaft des Judentums, because of its stress on polemics and rationalism, either ignored or demeaned Hasidism. Buber, the foremost representative of the neo-Hasidic revival, while cultivating the tale and showing the contemporary relevance of several of the central Hasidic themes, can be faulted for often interpreting Hasidism in terms of his personal philosophy, whether mystical or existential. Scholem, who opened modern Jewish historiography to the dimension of the mystical and the mythical, tended to overlook the moral and the enduring religious message of Hasidism, by virtue of his concentration on the kabbalistic and the Sabbatean, as well as his distance from Hasidic life itself.

20. For an example of the attractiveness of Sabbateanism to a contemporary novelist, see Isaac Bashevis Singer, *A Young Man in Search of Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), p. 7. Cf. Samuel Dresner, "Is Bashevis Singer a Jewish Writer?" *Midstream* 27, no. 3 (1980):42–47.

21. Cf. Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, pp. 155, 172–74, 192–93, and the bibliography cited there. For Buber's response to Scholem's strictures, see Martin Buber, "Replies to My Critics," pp. 731–41, and above, n. 18.

22. *Bimey Tzemihat Hahasidut* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1978). A more polemical approach is adopted by H. Lieberman, "How Jewish 'Researchers' Explore Hasidism" (Hebrew), *'Ohel Rahel* (Brooklyn: Empire Press, 1980), 1:1–49. Cf. Scholem, *Devarim Bago* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1975), p. 300, n. 20.

Several significant studies have appeared since Scholem's death: Schweid, "Mysticism and Judaism according to Gershom Scholem" (Hebrew), *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, Supplement 2 (1983); R. Shatz, "Gershom Scholem's Interpretation of Hasidism as an Expression of His Philosophy of Idealism" (Hebrew), in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Israel National Academy for Science, Magnes Press-Mosad Bialik), pp. 48–63.

Both Buber and Scholem rejected Jewish tradition as a pattern for their personal lives, and both pursued theories which support their own positions. Buber's central emphasis on Hasidism was upon the existential decision. (A favorite tale of his is about the Master who asked his disciples, "What is the most important thing in the world?" One answers, "the Sabbath"; another "prayer"; a third, "Yom Kippur." "No," the master explains, "the most important thing is whatever you are doing at the moment!")

> Buber as a religious anarchist rejected the notion of an authoritative revelation and historical tradition. Out of hostility toward both orthodox halakhic Judaism and rational Jewish philosophy, Buber rejected the burden of tradition and created his counterhistory by a subjective, mythopoeic "act of decision."[23] Scholem also labels himself a religious anarchist, but . . . he means something quite different from Buber. Scholem . . . argued that Judaism actually consists of an anarchistic plurality of sources . . . When Scholem calls himself a religious anarchist, he means that the historical tradition, which is the only source of knowledge we have of revelation, contains no one authoritative voice. All that can be learned from the study of history is the *struggle* for absolute values among conflicting voices of authority. Scholem is an anarchist because he believes "the binding character of the Revelation for a collective has disappeared. The word of God no longer serves as a source for the definition of possible contents of a religious tradition and thus of a possible theology."[24]

Buber's stress upon mysticism and/or existential decision in Hasidism and Scholem's search for Sabbatean influences both reflect antinomian sympathies.

23. "Buber is dissatisfied with Hasidism because it does not expand the realm of revelation," argues Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer, "and in this he sees its failure . . . [But], if Hasidism had been more universal and had dared to broaden the 'horizon of revelation,' instead of confining itself from the start to the revelation in the Torah, it would have achieved this greatness at the price of antinomianism, . . . and is it not thus that we must understand Buber's position?" ("Man's Relation to God and World," p. 419).

In a letter to Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber writes that he discontinued religious observances after he became bar mitzvah, at the age of thirteen, and Gershom Scholem testified that "the early Buber developed a deep aversion to the Law, to *halakhah* in all its forms." . . . Buber was a "man who with complete radicalism stood aloof from the institutions of Judaism as a cult, and whom nobody ever saw in a synagogue during the almost thirty years he lived in Israel." (M. Buber, *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, ed. Grete Schaeder [Heidelberg: 1975], 3:141; Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Conception of Judaism," in *Jews and Judaism in Crisis* [New York: Schocken, 1976], p. 129; see also pp. 133–34. Cf. Franz Rosenzweig, "The Builders: Concerning the Law," in *On Jewish Learning*, ed. N. N. Glatzer [New York: Schocken, 1955], pp. 72–92; Ernst A. Simon, "Martin Buber and the Faith of Israel" [Hebrew], *Divrey Iyyun* [Jerusalem: 1958], pp. 13–56; Arthur Cohen, "Martin Buber and Judaism," in *Leo Baeck Yearbook* 25 [London: Secker and Warburg, 1980], pp. 287–300; Nahum N. Glatzer, "Reflection on Buber's Impact on German Jewry," in *Leo Baeck Yearbook* 25, pp. 301–9).

24. Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, pp. 80, 98.

For Heschel, Hasidism was neither romanticism, rebellion, nor an affirmation of orthodoxy. He could not be labeled a neo-Hasid, though he forsook the Hasidic enclave for the broader Western society; nor did he find Hasidism shot through with Sabbatean elements, though he was well aware of the origins and history of the movement. Indeed, in his understanding of Hasidism, Heschel had no peer. His grasp of the entire range of Jewish literature—biblical, rabbinic, philosophic, and mystical—enabled him to discern in what sense Hasidic writings were a continuation of or a departure from the past, where they were original, what elements of earlier Jewish thought they accepted or rejected, and what problems they attempted to address. Philosophically, he was able to place Hasidism within a wider intellectual context; historically, he sought to gather those bits of evidence which, properly evaluated and pieced together, might reveal a hitherto unknown aspect of a personality or an event. Heschel's mastery of Hasidic texts themselves was such that when works were cited during discussions, he usually had no need to see the printed volume to quote from it extensively. Heschel's control of the material was joined by highly disciplined study habits. During his relatively short life, characterized by some wandering and dislocation, Heschel was the author of more than a dozen major works in several different languages.

Despite the fact that Hasidic literature is characterized by considerable shortcomings, which we have already alluded to, the effect of the publication and dissemination of the early Hasidic writings was as a series of thunderbolts that shattered as well as enlightened. Of those who read these treatises, few remained unmoved, some becoming angry critics of the new movement, others fervent followers. So avidly did the devotees pore over these books in the years that followed that they virtually devoured them, and soon a first edition in good condition could hardly be found. Hasidic literature was, and was meant to be, evocative as well as cognitive, addressing the soul and the mind at once. The "word," so central to the entire Hasidic enterprise, was, in its written form, says Heschel, "a voice, not a mere idea." To him, whose approach to Hasidism was never that of pure research, the task of the present student of this literature becomes, therefore, "how to hear the voice through the words." Heschel's trenchant observations are contained in his preface to a study of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, author of the first and, in some ways, still the most significant Hasidic book:

> The Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem was a place which only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Now even the Holy of Holies was occasionally in need of repair. To provide for such an occasion, there were openings in the Upper Chamber leading [down] through the ceiling of the Holy of Holies and close to its walls. Through these openings they used to lower the workmen in boxes (*Tevot*), which were open only to the walls, "so that they should not feast their eyes on the Holy of Holies.". . . It is said that the Upper Chamber of the Holy of Holies was even less accessible than the Holy of Holies, for the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies once a year, whereas the Upper Chamber was entered only once in fifty years to see whether any repairs were required.
>
> The great Hasidim were the repair men of the Holy of Holies. In Hebrew *tevot* means both boxes and *words*. It was through the word that they entered the Holy of Holies. In the Hasidic movement the spirit was alive in the word. It was a voice, not a mere idea. It emanated in words that had the power to repair, to revive, to create.
>
> Judaism today is in need of repair. The spirit is stifled, the word is emaciated; we do not know how to find access to the "Upper Chamber."
>
> Hasidism withers when placed on exhibition. Its substance is not perceptible to the eye. It is not enough to read its written word; one must hear it, one must learn to be perceptive to the voice. Fortunately there are words in many of its records which still ring with the passion and enthusiasm of those who spoke them. The problem is how to hear the voice through the words.
>
> Neither the Baal Shem nor most of his disciples have written down their utterances. One of the very few who did write was Rabbi Yaakov Yosef. The surprise, the joy, the refreshment which the publication of his books brought to the Jewish world are quite understandable to those who are acquainted with the spiritual atmosphere of the eighteenth century. It was like questioning the Ptolemaic theory in the time of Copernicus. These books offered a transvaluation of accepted values, a fresh vision of what is at stake in Jewish faith and existence, and a singular sensitivity for the divine. These are words that originated in Paradise, said one of the contemporaries. In other books one must read many pages until the presence of God is sensed; in the writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, God's presence is felt on each page.[25]

Heschel's Hasidic understanding went beyond books. He was intimately familiar with Hasidism as a living phenomenon, was privy to the legacy of tradition handed down from several Hasidic dynasties because of his early upbringing and continued association, and had remarkable

25. Preface to S. Dresner, *The Zaddik* (New York and London: Abelard-Schuman, 1960; rpt. New York: Schocken, 1974), pp. 7–8.

sensitivity to the core of Hasidic authenticity as it was transmitted from generation to generation. Without acquaintance with the oral tradition of the movement, and with Hasidism as a living phenomenon, Hasidic scholarship, in Heschel's opinion, faces a major obstacle, which the demise of East European Jewry serves to emphasize. His published views on this central issue revolve around the preparation of his last major work, the powerful two-volume Yiddish study on Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk.

Why, in his waning years, Heschel determined to write his one major Hasidic work on the later master of Kotzk rather than the movement's founder, the Baal Shem Tov, whose life and thought had occupied him for decades, Heschel did not tell us. Perhaps the formidable problems which the paucity of historical sources presented for a comprehensive work on the Baal Shem—the need to collect, collate, and interpret scattered hints and pieces of information to establish dates, names, and places, comparing different versions of manuscripts and/or early prints, as well as contending with numerous other conflicting theories which would have to be presented and refuted—comprised too wearying a project for the final years of his life. A book on Kotzk, on the other hand, might almost write itself. Whether or not this explanation as to the subject of the study satisfies our curiosity, there is a second problem about the language of the study which Heschel himself answers: namely, why he wrote his book on Kotzk in Yiddish. Surely, he knew that to do so was to limit severely the work's future readership and that either English or Hebrew would have been preferable from the point of view of the future use of the book. In explaining that he resolved to use Yiddish as the language of the work in order to preserve the authentic legacy of Kotzk, Heschel's understanding of the relationship between the oral tradition and Hasidic scholarship comes to the fore:

> The words of the Kotzker Rebbe have simmered within me all my life. Even when not in agreement, I felt their powerful thrust. Though my way has not been without hardship, when thinking of the Kotzker Rebbe everything difficult became easier. Rabbi Mendel occupied himself with problems which, though we may not always be aware of them, disturb us to this very day. The answers he proposed may be hard for modern man to accept, but his perception was revolutionary, his impact shattering. Whoever is for but an hour in the presence of the Kotzker will never again give way to smugness.
>
> One of the qualities of the Kotzker Rebbe was a marvelous gift in formulating his thoughts in a tense, sharp and brilliant manner. Reading those of his aphorisms which have been preserved in the distinctive manner in which they were uttered, that is, in Yiddish, reveals an extraordinary style and power. Unfortunately, those who published Rabbi Mendel's words translated them into Hebrew, for seldom in Jewish history has the talent for conversion into felicitous Hebrew been so lacking as among those learned Jewish circles in Poland of the last century. Consequently, a number of his sayings . . . are garbled. That I understand them despite their ambiguous Hebrew formulation is due to the fact that in my youth I heard many of these aphorisms in their original Yiddish. It was my good fortune to have known Rabbi Ben Tzion and Rabbi Moses Judah, who had visited Rabbi Mendel, as well as a large number of Hasidim who were thoroughly imbued with the way of the Kotzk. From them I learned many of the aphorisms which I cite in this book.
>
> . . . Some oral statements have survived which are more correct than their literary form. While the oral tradition preserved what was spoken by the rabbis, the literary text conveys them only as they were translated into Hebrew. One who has been close to Hasidic life knows with what reverence the words of the masters were transmitted after they were "heard." One literally lived with them, was nourished by them: every effort was taken to transmit such words accurately.
>
> *Whoever attempts to describe Hasidism on the basis of literary sources alone without drawing upon the oral tradition, ignores the authentic living source and is dependent upon material artificial in character. In the absence of the oral tradition and a proximity to Hasidic personages, one can scarcely describe Hasidism. Its essence was rarely expressed in writing, and that which was written down was translated into Hebrew in a style which seldom captured the living tongue of the masters. Hasidic literature is a literature of translation, and not always successful translation. In order to understand Hasidism one must learn how to listen and how to stand close to those who lived it* [Emphasis S.H.D.].
>
> Surrounded by so many great scholars, why did none of them write down R. Mendel's words, as students of other Tzaddikim had? The Kotzker himself asked his disciple, R. Yehiel Meir, to record his teachings, but he did not. In my opinion it was because of an unwillingness to do so in Yiddish. The words R. Mendel spoke in Yiddish were not easily rendered into Hebrew. To translate them exactly was not possible, while to record them in Yiddish was not acceptable. Thus Kotzk remained an oral tradition.
>
> . . . What I have written in this book about the Kotzker, whether his personality or his way, reflects the tradition of Kotzker Hasidim . . .[26]

It has been suggested that the low estimate in which Hasidism was formerly held in scholarly circles may have encouraged Heschel in his

26. *Kotzk: In Gerangel far Emesdikeit* (Kotzk: The struggle for integrity), 2 vols., (Tel Aviv: Hamenora, 1973), pp. 7–10.

earlier writings to omit all but the most necessary references to Hasidic material in support of his theories. The tragic end of Eastern European Jewry, however, brought new respect for what it had produced. This, together with the growing acceptance of Heschel's own works, permitted him to make more open use of Hasidic literature. It is of interest that Heschel's first book, *Der Shem Hameforash Mentsh* (1933), a youthful volume of Yiddish poetry, was not listed in the initial bibliography of his works which appeared in 1959, but is present in the updated 1965 version.[27]

Heschel observed privately more than once that "after the Holocaust, Jewish scholarship should be devoted to that which advances Yiddishkeit." He was warning that in the terribly weakened position in which Jews now found themselves, with their very survival at stake, and with the demise of the great centers of Jewish authority and guidance, they dared not expend their limited resources on hairsplitting studies or on the exposure of the unseemly side of Jewish life. Heschel was speaking to a situation in which some Jewish scholars were content to edit texts, collect footnotes, and frown upon ideas, questioning, for instance, whether there was such a thing as Jewish theology, while others explored the Jewish "underworld," dwelling upon forgeries and heresies.[28] Heschel preferred to devote himself, in a series of seminal works, to delineating wide areas of Jewish creativity—biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and Hasidic. Even his popular survey of Eastern European Jewry, which reflects the enduring values of a thousand years of Ashkenazic Jewry, stands in marked contrast to the explorations of the occasionally insipid, bizarre, and ribald. If Heschel may be faulted, it is in his tendency toward Hasidic apologetics and his preference to stay clear of the ignoble and dark features which are inevitable in a world which included millions. To limit Jewish research in any way, however praiseworthy the motive, may result in an incomplete view of the subject. The reader and the student must submit the final verdict as to the relative reliability of those who sought, for whatever reasons, to portray a different and often more negative picture than did Heschel.

Heschel as a Scholar of Hasidism

Perhaps the single most important project which Heschel left unfinished at his untimely death, a project to which he was uniquely suited and the completion of which students and scholars of Judaism had

27. *Between God and Man: From the Writings of Abraham J. Heschel*, (ed. F. A. Rothschild (1959; rev. rpt. New York: Free Press, 1965).

28. An examination of the topics selected for doctoral dissertations in Jewish studies during the past thirty years unfortunately confirms Heschel's concern.

long awaited, was his work on the life and thought of the Baal Shem Tov, the renowned eighteenth-century founder of the Hasidic movement.[29] We do not know when Heschel first made plans to write this comprehensive work, but while in Cincinnati (1940–45) he was already methodically gathering material. Perhaps the destruction of Hasidic life in Eastern Europe made him turn from those areas of Jewish thought in which he had been engaged, primarily Bible and medieval philosophy, to a study of the movement he considered to be, in some ways, the final flowering of post-biblical Jewish history. Heschel's agony over the Holocaust during the years in Cincinnati, while failing to influence public policy directly, led to his memorable portrait of Ashkenazic Jewry, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, in which he sketched its lasting qualities.[30]

Whatever the reasons, Heschel's book on the Besht was never written. Other works and projects, coming in quick succession, always postponed the book that must have been dearest to his heart. The closest he came was his investigation of R. Menahem Mendel of Kotzk,[31] which was finished at the very end of his life, as if at least one major statement on Hasidism had to be made before death snatched him away. In that book, a part of which he adapted into English as *A Passion for Truth*,[32] he dealt,

29. Heschel's plan is indicated in the introductory note to his first published essay on the history of Hasidism, the Yiddish study, "Reb Pinkhes Koretzer" (*Yivo Bleter* 33 [1949]:9), which he described as "a chapter from the author's work on *the Besht and his circle*" (emphasis SHD). By July 1947 Heschel had completed his essays on R. Pinhas of Korzec and R. Gershon of Kutov (ibid., p. 48).

30. In an interview with Heschel in 1963, the Yiddish journalist, Gershon Jacobson, recorded Heschel's recollections as a newcomer to America.

"I was an immigrant, a refugee. No one listened to me. Let me mention three examples: In 1941 I met with a prominent Jewish communal leader, a devoted Zionist. I told him that the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto endure in the belief that American Jewry is working ceaselessly on their behalf. Were they to know of our indifference, the Jews in Warsaw would perish from shock. My words fell on deaf ears. In 1942 or 1941, I was at a convention of Reform rabbis. A representative of the Quakers appeared, demanding that the rabbis adopt a resolution to have food parcels sent to the Jews in the ghettoes and concentration camps. The appeal was turned down. The rabbis explained that they could not do it officially, because it might aid the Germans by sending food into their territory. In 1943 I attended the "American Jewish Conference" of all Jewish organizations, to appeal that they act to extinguish the flames which had engulfed Eastern European Jewry. The "Conference" had a long agenda—Eretz-Yisrael, fascism, finances, etc.—the last item of which was Jews under the Germans. By the time they reached this issue, almost all the representatives had left. I went away brokenhearted."

"What then, in fact, did you do?"

"I went to Rabbi Eliezer Silver's synagogue in Cincinnati [where Heschel resided. R. Silver was actively involved in saving Jews during the Holocaust.], recited Psalms, fasted, and cried myself out. I was a stranger in this country. My word had no power. When I did speak, they shouted me down. They called me a mystic, unrealistic. I had no influence on leaders of American Jewry." (*Day-Morning Journal*, 13 June 1963)

I thank Dr. Zanvel Klein for calling this interview to my attention.

31. *Kotzk*.

32. *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973; repr. ed., New York: Noonday, 1974).

as well, with the Besht. True, his purpose was to contrast the way of the Besht with that of Kotzk, the main subject of the work, but in his remarks on the Besht he condensed a number of valuable insights into the founder of Hasidism, as well as allowing himself a personal statement:

> I was born in Warsaw, Poland, but my cradle stood in Mezbizh (a small town in the province of Podolia, Ukraine), where the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, lived during the last twenty years of his life. That is where my father came from, and he continued to regard it as his home . . . The earliest fascination I can recall is associated with the Baal Shem, whose parables disclosed some of the first insights I gained as a child. He remained a model too sublime to follow yet too overwhelming to ignore . . .
>
> Years later I realized that, in being guided by both the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker, I had allowed two forces to carry on a struggle within me. One was occasionally mightier than the other. But who was to prevail, which was to be my guide? Both spoke convincingly, and each proved right on one level yet questionable on another.
>
> In a very strange way, I found my soul at home with the Baal Shem Tov and the Kotzker. Was it good to live with one's heart torn between the joy of Mezbizh and the anxiety of Kotzk? . . . I had no choice: my heart was in Mezbizh, my mind in Kotzk.
>
> I was taught about inexhaustible mines of meaning by the Baal Shem; from the Kotzker I learned to detect immense mountains of absurdity standing in the way. The one taught me song, the other—silence. The one reminded me that there could be a Heaven on earth, the other shocked me into discovering Hell in the alleged Heavenly places in our world.
>
> The Baal shem made dark hours luminous; the Kotzker eased wretchedness and desolation by forewarnings, by premonitions. The Kotzker restricted me, debunked cherished attitudes. From the Baal Shem I received the gifts of elasticity in adapting to contradictory conditions.
>
> The Baal Shem dwelled in my life like a lamp, while the Kotzker struck like lightning. To be sure, lightning is more authentic. Yet one can trust a lamp, put confidence in it; one can live in peace with a lamp.
>
> The Baal Shem gave me wings; the Kotzker encircled me with chains and entered into joys with my shortcomings in mind. I owe intoxication to the Baal Shem, to the Kotzker the blessings of humiliation.
>
> The Kotzker's presence recalls the nightmare of mendacity. The presence of the Baal Shem is an assurance that falsehood dissolves into compassion through the power of love. The Baal Shem suspends sadness, the Kotzker enhances it. The Baal Shem helped me to refine my sense of mystery; the Kotzker warned me of the constant peril of forfeiting authenticity.
>
> . . . My origin was in Mezbizh [the town of the Besht]. It gave me nourishment. Following the advice of the old Chortkover Rebbe, R. David Moses, the uncle and second husband of my father's mother, my father settled in Warsaw. There I spent my younger years among Kotzker Hasidim. I am the last of the generation, perhaps the last Jew from Warsaw, whose soul lived in Mezbizh but whose mind was in Kotzk.[33]

From Heschel's childhood on, there were Hasidic leaders who looked to him as one with unique promise for renewing Hasidic life. That was not to be, at least not in the way that they had hoped. Descended from Hasidic nobility on both his father's and his mother's side, young Heschel's talents were early recognized, and though he was only a child of ten at the time of his father's death, the Hasidim began to bring him *kevitlekh* (petitions) and wished him to become their rebbe. "We thought," said the rebbe of Kopyczynce (Kopitchinitz), a cousin and brother-in-law, "that he would be the Levi Yitzhak of our generation." A byword after his departure was that "had Heschel become a rebbe, all the other rebbes would have lost their Hasidim."[34] While his education had always been directed with special care in the selection of his teachers, even more attention was now paid in view of his promise, and it was during this period of his life that the influence of the remarkable Kotzker Hasid, Reb Bezalel, his teacher from the age of nine to twelve and a half (described by Heschel's childhood friend, the writer, Yehiel Hofer), was most keenly felt. But awareness of the worlds "outside" was stirring, and the young Heschel did not accede to the wishes of the Hasidim. Heschel's curiosity was too consuming to ignore what lay beyond the narrow borders of the Jewish society of piety and learning of his ancestors in which he had been raised. Hofer related how, at the age of seven or eight, Heschel once surprised him by compiling a detailed catalog of the bolts of cloth which were piled in high columns in Hofer's father's millinery store, giving such information as color, material, quantity, price, etc., as an example of how Heschel insisted on mastering whatever new phenomenon drew his attention. Heschel's interest in secular studies began at about age fifteen or sixteen. His decision to leave Warsaw for Vilna and later Berlin to gain a secular education was received with concern. His mother, an unusual woman, clever and strong, who maintained their *shtibl* (the Hasidic house of prayer) after her husband's death and appreciated her son's gifts, noticed that she no longer heard him chanting

33. Ibid., pp. xiii–xv; *Kotzk*, p. 10.

34. Quotations for which no sources are given come from this writer's conversations with Heschel, or from family members.

the Talmud from his room, for he was now engaged in learning Polish, and she inquired why. He told her of his plan and she communicated her concerns to the family in Vienna and Warsaw. A meeting of the family in Vienna was called by the Tchortkover Rebbe[35] which Heschel may have attended. His mother's brother, the Novominsker Rebbe of Warsaw, at whose table Heschel grew up and one of the most powerful influences upon his life, tried to dissuade him, and agreed only when he saw that it was to no avail. "You can go," he told Heschel, "but *only* you." It was on a Saturday night after the close of the Sabbath that Heschel left Warsaw, changing his Shabbos hat for an ordinary weekday cap, and accompanied by his cousin, a son of the Novominsker Rabbi.

Just before the young Heschel was to depart his ancestral home in Poland for the secular society of the West, an old Hasid came to bid him farewell. Following the admonition that one should take leave with a word of Torah, the Hasid quoted the Mishnah (Avot 5:8) which cites, as "one of the ten miracles of the Temple in Jerusalem," that, no matter what the provocation, "the holy flesh [of the sacrifice] did not ever become polluted." Then he told how R. Barukh of Miedzybórz (Mezbizh) explained the passage: "One of the most wondrous miracles was, indeed, *lo' hisriaḥ besar kodesh mey'olam*, which is to say, 'the holy flesh'—that is, the people Israel—'did not become polluted, *mey'-olam, from the world.*'"

"Avraham," the old Hasid concluded, taking him by the shoulders, "remember the word of R. Barukh. *Lo' hisriaḥ besar kodesh mey'olam*. You, Avraham, you holy flesh, do not become polluted from the world!"

The Novominsker Rebbe, mentioned above, is important for another reason. One of Heschel's major contributions as a religious thinker was his analysis of Jewish piety. He was a phenomenologist. He held that discursive reason, while essential, was, alone, inadequate in penetrating the inner recesses of religion. This could better be achieved through a description of the religious phenomena itself, which, much as the artist's

35. I.e., R. Israel. He was the son of R. David Moses, the first Tchortkover Rebbe, who was married later in life to his niece, Heschel's father's mother, Rachel Leah, both having been widowed from their first spouses. R. David Moses was a son of the famed R. Israel of Ruzhin, while Rachel Leah was both his daughter-in-law and his granddaughter. Indeed, the Ruzhiner died in her arms. After the death of her first husband, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Miedzybórz, Heschel's grandfather, she brought her son, Heschel's father, to the court of Czortków (Tchortkov) where he was raised. Since R. Israel of Ruzhin knew intimately those who knew the maggid of Miedzyrzecz, whose great-grandson he was, and since the oral record was handed down with such care, this is an instance, which Heschel once cited in conversation, of how reliable traditions going back to the earliest generations of Hasidism were available to him. (Cf. A. Twerski, *The Genealogy of Tchernobil and Ruzhyn* [Lublin, 1938], p. 120 [Hebrew].)

In addition to being descended on his father's side from R. Israel of Ruzhin, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Opatów, and R. Dov Ber of Miedzyrzecz, Heschel counted on his mother's side R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev and R. Pinhas of Korzec.

canvas, would have the power to evoke another level of comprehension. In composing his now classic picture of Jewish piety, Heschel drew from the lives and writings of holy men of the past, as well as from his own personal experience, but equally important were the living models he had known in his youth. One whom he identified was the rabbi of Minsk Mazowiesk (Novominsk).

Rabbi Alter (a name added for long life) Israel Simon (after his grandfather) Perlow (1874–1933) was Heschel's mother's twin. The Novominsker's grandfather was a son-in-law of Rabbi Solomon Hayim of Kedainai (Kaidenov) in White Russia, situated between Minsk and Vilna. It is there that the family lived. The father of the Novominsker, Jacob (1847–1902), was advised to "bring his type of Hasidism to Poland," and settled in Minsk Mazowiesk (Novominsk), just outside of Warsaw, established a yeshivah and a large synagogue with an impressive *hof* (court). The privations of World War I drove the Novominsker himself, who succeeded his father in 1902 (though he had been at the head of the yeshivah since its founding in 1896), to remove to Warsaw, where he remained. His principal published work was *Tif'eret 'Ish*. The Novominsker was an unusual tzaddik. Famed for his talmudic learning and as a kabbalist, his piety, Torah, and love of Israel were well-known. He presided at the third Sabbath meal, the *Shalosh Seudos*, in a mood of ecstasy: his songs and words of Torah were wonderful, while his gestures and his face were marvelous to behold. He helped to bring Heschel's father to Warsaw, found a suitable place for him, and after the latter's early death, acted as mentor to the family. His uncle liked to have the young Avraham sit at his right hand when he spoke before the Hasidim at the Sabbath table.[36]

> His life [Heschel observed], was consistent with his thought . . . He was a complete person. Not one minute of the day was allowed to pass without attempting to serve God with all of his strength. He gave himself over to a tremendous task: the service of the Almighty at every moment with every act. An ordinary *Minḥah* prayer was like Yom Kippur elsewhere, and on the Sabbath, as he put each morsel of food into his mouth, he would say, *Lekoved Shabbos Kodesh* "for the honor of the holy Sabbath." This latter custom was not practiced even by my father, while the Gerer Hasidim who were the majority in Poland and followed the austere teachings of Kotzk, opposed it as excessive expression of one's feelings.[37]

36. Cf. H. Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism* (London: Valentine, 1970), pp. 164–66; A. Bromberg, *Hasidic Leaders* (Jerusalem: Hamakhon Lehasidut, 1963), 20:124–68 (Hebrew).

37. Heschel's appreciation of his uncle is confirmed by other sources. So admiring was he of him that the Gerer Rebbe, the ranking Hasidic leader in Poland, used to send his Hasidim

Heschel left Warsaw for Vilna to study and graduate from the secular, Yiddish real-gymnasium there, joining, during his stay, the newly formed group of Yiddish poets, Yung Vilno, which later included writers such as Abraham Sutzkever and Hayim Grade, who recalled in what high regard the youthful Heschel had been held. Shlomo Beillis, a fellow poet, a Communist who still resides in Warsaw, described his impressions of Heschel. ". . . with the deep eyes of a *talmid ḥakham*, he came from a world far different from mine." When they took walks through the forest, Heschel "would surprise me by bringing along his dark hat and, upon entering the woods, would put it on. When I inquired for the reason, he replied in his soft voice: 'I don't know if you will understand. To me a forest is a holy place, and a Jew does not enter a holy place without covering his head!' "[38]

Heschel moved west, to the University of Berlin and the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, to the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus*, to England, and, finally, to America. He claimed he was no longer a Hasid. He had indeed abandoned the Hasidic style of dress and of restricted social contacts for the larger world, both Jewish and German. Heschel wrote:

> In my childhood and in my youth I was the recipient of many blessings. I lived in the presence of quite a number of extraordinary persons I could revere. And just as I lived as a child in their presence, their presence continues to live in me as an adult. And yet I am not just a dwelling place for other people, an echo of the past . . . I disagree with those who think of the present in the past tense . . . [T]he greatest danger is to become obsolete. I try not to be stale. I try to remain young. I have one talent and that is the capacity to be tremendously surprised, surprised at life, at ideas. This is to me the supreme Hasidic imperative.[39]

To the end Heschel remained an anomaly. Most of those who had left the narrow Hasidic milieu of Eastern Europe for the modern, open

to visit the Novominsker and would himself call upon him whenever the Gerer was in Warsaw. This writer has seen a *kevitl* from the Gerer Rebbe to the Novominsker. When the Gerer Rebbe sought someone to head the powerful Agudas Yisroel organization, he remarked that there was only one person in all of Poland whom he could recommend without qualification: the Novominsker Rebbe; and when his followers asked whom they should consult upon his departure for a visit to the Holy Land, the Gerer again responded: the Novominsker. Hillel Zeitlin observed: "Whenever I felt depressed and needed to repent, I visited the rabbi of Novominsk" (Rabinowicz, *The World of Hassidism*). The chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Yedidiah Frankel, said, "The picture I have in my mind of a perfect tzaddik is the rabbi of Novominsk. His profound wisdom, his constant learning, the depth of his Kabbalistic mastery, his majestic face, the smile which never left his face, his love of all Israel, his refusal to utter a critical word about another, were unforgettable."

38. Shlomo Beillis, "The Beginnings of Yung Vilno," in *Die Goldene Keit*, pp. 18–19; cf. E. Schulman, *Yung Vilno* (New York, 1946).

39. Heschel, "In Search of Exaltation," *Jewish Heritage* 13, no. 3 (1971):29.

society of the West—especially if they pursued studies in the humanities—exchanged the one world for the other, often repudiating their Hasidic origins. This was true even of those engaged in Jewish research. The art, philosophy, and literature of the West, as well as its power and apparent freedom, were more than attractive: they were overwhelming. The enthusiastic reviews of Heschel's early works, *Die Prophetie* and *Maimonides*, confirmed how highly he was considered according to the West's own scientific and literary standards. Nonetheless, while mastering European *Kultur* and *Wissenschaft* and recognizing their values, Heschel retained his own religious position and even his Hasidic bias.

In an address before the annual convention of American Reform rabbis in 1952, he gave a memorable description of the conflict he experienced between Berlin and Warsaw, between the intellectual claim of the university and the way of Torah:

> I came with great hunger to the University of Berlin to study philosophy. I looked for a system of thought, for the depth of the spirit, for the meaning of existence. Erudite and profound scholars gave courses in logic, epistemology, esthetics, ethics and metaphysics. They opened the gates of the history of philosophy. I was exposed to the austere discipline of unremitting inquiry and self criticism . . .
>
> Yet, in spite of the intellectual power and honesty which I was privileged to witness, I became increasingly aware of the gulf that separated my views from those held at the university. I had come with a sense of anxiety: how can I rationally find a way where ultimate meaning lies, a way of significance? Why am I here at all, and what is my purpose? I did not even know how to phrase my concern. But to my teachers that was a question unworthy of philosophical analysis.
>
> I realized my teachers were prisoners of a Greek-German way of thinking. They were fettered in categories which presupposed certain metaphysical assumptions which could never be proved. The questions I was moved by could not even be adequately phrased in categories of their thinking.
>
> My assumption was: man's dignity consists in his having been created in the likeness of God. My question was: how must man, a being who is in essence the image of God, think, feel and act? To them, religion was a feeling. To me, religion included the insights of the Torah which is a vision of man from the point of view of God. They spoke of God from the point of view of man. To them God was an idea, a postulate of reason. They granted Him the status of being a logical possibility. But to assume that He had existence would have been a crime against epistemology.
>
> The problem to my professors was how to be good. In my ears the question rang: how to be holy. At the time I realized: There

is much that philosophy could learn from Jewish life. To the philosophers: the idea of the good was the most exalted idea, the ultimate idea. To Judaism the idea of the good is penultimate. I cannot exist without the holy. The good is the base, the holy is the summit. Man cannot be good unless he strives to be holy . . .

I did not come to the university because I did not know the idea of the good, but to learn why the idea of the good is valid, why and whether values had meaning. Yet I discovered that values sweet to taste proved sour in analysis; the prototypes were firm, the models flabby. Must speculation and existence remain like two infinite parallel lines that never meet? . . .

In those months in Berlin I went through moments of profound bitterness. I felt very much alone with my own problems and anxieties. I walked alone in the evenings through the magnificent streets of Berlin. I admired the solidity of its architecture, the overwhelming drive and power of a dynamic civilization. There were concerts, theaters, and lectures by famous scholars about the latest theories and inventions, and I was pondering whether to go to the new Max Reinhardt play or to a lecture about the theory of relativity.

Suddenly I noticed the sun had gone down, evening had arrived. *From what time may one recite the Shema in the evening?*[40] I had forgotten God—I had forgotten Sinai—I had forgotten that sunset is my business—that my task is "to restore the world to the kingship of the Lord."

So I began to utter the words of the evening prayer.

> *Blessed art thou, Lord our God,*
> *King of the universe,*
> *who by His word brings on the evening twilight . . .*

On that evening in the streets of Berlin, I was not in a mood to pray. My heart was heavy, my soul was sad. It was difficult for the lofty words of prayer to break through the dark clouds of my inner life.

But how would I dare not to *davn*? How would I dare to miss evening prayer? "Out of *emah*, out of fear of God do we read the Shema."[41]

Contact with Western culture, particularly with German Jewry, its synagogues and academies of higher Jewish learning, made Heschel all the more certain that Hasidic thinking and living contained a treasure

40. The first words of the Mishnah dealing with the evening prayer.

41. A play on *Me'eymatai* (From what time), the first word of the Mishnah dealing with evening prayer, which is taken to mean "out of *'eymah*." It comes from the Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev. See Heschel's *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Scribner's, 1954), pp. 94–98, and "Toward an Understanding of Halakha," *Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* 63 (1953):386–91.

which should be made available to the emancipated Jew. His early studies on prophecy and Maimonides had stressed themes such as the divine pathos, the striving for prophecy, and *imitatio Dei*—concepts to which he had been sensitized by Hasidism. But what of Hasidism itself? What of that immense repository of surprising beauty and startling wisdom of which the West was not only ignorant but contemptuously ignorant? Where should one begin? Hasidism constituted a panorama of hundreds of remarkable spiritual figures, each with his own special way, and a literature whose books were precious, because, according to R. Pinhas of Korzec, unlike other works, one did not have to turn countless pages in them to find God. Before understanding the contributions of its notable leaders and the meaning of its most important books, one had to address the phenomenon of the Hasidic movement's creator, the Baal Shem Tov. This was the task to which Heschel began to direct himself.

Some idea of how Heschel intended to proceed in his work on the Baal Shem comes from an early outline of the book (or part of the book) which I found in his files:

1. The Love of God
2. Love for Israel—Love for Evil-Doers
3. Descending into Hell [to Redeem the Sinner]; Self-Sacrifice
4. [Faith?] in the Tzaddik
5. Humility
6. Evil
7. The Value of the Common Deed
8. The Relation to [?]
9. Messiah
10. Sadness
11. Strictness in Observing the Law
12. Truth
13. The Hasid
14. To Study Musar
15. The Besht on Himself
16. The Talmudic Sages
17. Bodily Movement [in Prayer]
18. "Serve Him in All Your Ways"
19. Limits of the Way of the Besht
20. Yearning
21. The Study of Torah
22. The Tzaddik

This outline is, of course, neither complete nor final. The topics, for example, seem not to be arranged in any particular order. No provision is made, moreover, for the historical studies of the circle of the Besht which, in revised form, were presumably to comprise the first part of the

work. But what is significant about the outline is that it enables one to contrast Heschel's view of what should comprise the main subjects of Hasidism with that of other scholars.

Heschel did not, as we have noted, complete the work on the Besht which he had planned. One would have wished to possess a comprehensive statement from him, even a single essay, on the meaning of Hasidism. Unfortunately, almost all of his published Hasidic research is of a technical nature. He rarely even lectured on the subject, nor, I believe, did he ever offer a formal course on Hasidism at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he taught for over twenty years, or elsewhere. His scanty lecture notes, however, do provide brilliant, if all too brief, insights. At one point he even hints at the reasons for his reticence. "Young boys are shy," his notes read. "Too shy to lecture on Hasidism. It is too personal. Too intimate. I remained a boy even after becoming a man!"

While it is to be regretted that the detailed monographs dealing with the circle of the Baal Shem failed to lead to a full-length evaluation of the doctrine of Hasidism and its significance—especially since Heschel's textual and historical studies were generally done not for their own sake but in order to distill the meaning of the material he researched—there are a number of scattered remarks in his notes, in his more popular writings, and in *A Passion for Truth*, which point to what he wished eventually to say. Obviously, they must not be taken as his measured and scholarly view either of the movement or of the man who was its founder:

> Hasidism [he writes] was neither a sect nor a doctrine. It was a dynamic approach to reality. That was its essence. It succeeded in liquifying a frozen system of values and ideas. Everything was neatly labelled—good and evil, clean and unclean, safe and dangerous, rich and poor, *rashaʿ* and *tzaddik*, *mitzvah* and *ʿaverah*, beautiful and ugly, truth and falsehood. But, such a division is artificial. Life cannot be enclosed in boxes. Values are often ambiguous. What, for example, is beauty? Something in itself, or an experience born when a person who loves the beautiful discovers it? In attaching oneself to the source of all unity, the Hasid learned to bend every action to the ultimate goal. Hasidism opposed the externalization of the maggid's preaching and the idolatry of the talmudist's learning. It attacked the inclemency of intellectuality, the rigidity of legalism, a system of life which had become chilly. The Hasid studied the Talmud also to experience its soul, to envision worlds. Hasidism brought warmth, light, enthusiasm; it set life aflame. It was one of the great conquests of Jewish history. The admonition not to fool others was given a new turn: don't fool yourself. Truthfulness, wholeheartedness was

central. The aphorism became a mode for Hasidic thinking. The parable took on new power. Doctrines affected life and were transformed into attitudes and facts. Hasidism learned how to fight with the enemies' weapons—the evil urge (*yetzer haraʿ*) and joy (*simḥah*). It taught that holiness was something concrete and positive. To redeem the sparks was earthly serving. There are two ways of instilling discipline: knowledge of the law and understanding its meaning: Halakhah and Kabbalah. At a time when the spectacular phenonenon of *lamdanut* (talmudic learning) was praised, Hasidism stressed *ʿanavah* (humility), the imponderable, the inaudible. It taught reverence, enthusiasm. It taught that scholarship for its own sake could be an idol, that God is greater than sin.[42]

It was a time when the Jewish imagination was nearly exhausted. The mind had reached an impasse, thinking about impossible possibilities in Talmudic law. The heart was troubled by oppressive social and economic conditions, as well as the teachings of ascetic preachers. Then a miracle occurred. It was as if Providence had proclaimed, "Let there be light!" And there was light—in the form of an individual: Reb Israel, son of Eliezer, Baal Shem Tov, "master of the Good Name" (ca. 1690–1760) . . .

He was born in a small town in the province of Podolia, Okop, to poor and elderly parents. Orphaned as a child, he later eked out a living as an assistant teacher of little children (*belfer*). Tradition has it that at the age of twenty he went into seclusion in the Carpathian Mountains for spiritual training and preparation for his calling. There he lived for several years as a digger of clay, which his wife sold in the town where she kept house. When he was thirty-six, he revealed himself as a spiritual master. Later he settled in Mezbizh [i.e., Miedzybórz] . . . where he died in 1760.

The Baal Shem was the founder of the Hasidic movement, and Mezbizh was the cradle in which a new understanding of Judaism was nurtured. When millions of our people were still alive in Eastern Europe and their memory and faith vibrated with thought, image, and emotion, the mere mention of Reb Israel Baal Shem Tov cast a spell upon them. The moment one uttered his name, one felt as if his lips were blessed and his soul grew wings. . . . During his lifetime, Reb Israel inspired a large number of disciples to follow him. After his death his influence became even more widespread. Within a generation, the insights he had formulated at Mezbizh had captivated the Jewish masses with new spiritual ideas and values. And Mezbizh became the symbol of Hasidism. Rarely in Jewish history has one man succeeded in

42. This paragraph is drawn from Heschel's lecture notes.

uplifting so many individuals to a level of greatness . . . No one in the long chain of charismatic figures that followed him was equal to the Baal Shem.

Hasidism represents an enigma. It is first of all the enigma of the impact of one great man, the Besht . . . who in a very short time was able to capture the majority of the Jewish people and to keep them under his spell for generations. What was there about him that was not to be found in other great Jewish personalities like Maimonides or even Isaac Luria or Akiba? . . . The answers given are partly sociological, partly historical; I believe there is also a Hasidic answer to this Hasidic riddle . . . [in] the following story:

In Poland in the eighteenth century, a king was nominated, not as a matter of heritage but of election. Noblemen would get together from all over the country and . . . elect a king. The king could also be a citizen of a foreign country, so whenever a king died and there was a possibility of election, many princes and aristocrats from all over Europe would vie for that honor. And this is what happened. The king passed away and immediately various princes, eager to become king of Poland would send their representatives to Poland . . . each . . . sing[ing] the praises of his candidate. "He is the wisest of all men," one . . . said. "He is the wealthiest," said another. "The kindest," said a third. This went on for days, and no decision was reached. Finally one representative decided he would take his candidate, the prince himself, bring him to the people and say: "Here he is, look at him, see how grand he is!"

And that man was elected.

Many Jews talked about God, but it was the Besht who brought God to the people. This is perhaps the best answer to the question of how to explain the unbelievable impact in such a short time of this great man.

Reb Israel Baal Shem Tov revealed the Divine as present even in our shabby world, in every little thing, and especially in man. He made us realize that there was nothing in man—neither limb nor movement—that did not serve as vessel or vehicle for the Divine force. No place was devoid of the Divine. He taught that the Tzaddikim who grasped the bond between Creator and creature were blessed with so great a power that they were able to perform marvelous acts of mystical unification in the sphere of the Divine. Furthermore, every man in this world could work deeds that might affect the worlds above. Most important, attachment to God was possible, even while carrying out mundane tasks or making small talk. Thus, unlike the sages of the past, who delivered discourses about God, the Baal Shem, like the wise man in the parable, brought God to every man.

. . . The Baal Shem brought about a radical shift in the religious outlook of Jewry. In ancient times the sanctuary in Jerusalem had been the holy center from which expiation and blessing radiated out to the world. But the sanctuary was in ruins, the soul of Israel in mourning. Then the Baal Shem established a new center: the Tzaddik, the Rebbe—he was to be the sanctuary. For the Baal Shem believed that a man could be the true dwelling place of the Divine. He brought about the renewal of man in Judaism. The Jewish people is not the same since the days of the Besht. It is a new people. Other pesonalities contributed great works; they left behind impressive achievements; the Besht left behind a new people. To many Jews the mere fulfillment of regulations was the essence of Jewish living . . . The Besht taught that Jewish life is an occasion for exaltation. Observance of the Law is the basis, but exaltation through observance is the goal. . . . Other great teachers bore the message of God, sang His praises, lectured about His attributes and wondrous deeds. The Baal Shem brought not only the message; he brought God Himself to the people. His contribution, therefore, consisted of more than illumination, insights, and ideas; he helped mold into being new types of personality: the Hasid and the Tzaddik. . . . [T]he greatness of the Besht was that he was the beginning of a long series of . . . moments of inspiration. And he holds us in his spell to this very day. He who really wants to be uplifted by communing with a great person whom he can love without reservation, who can enrich his thought and imagination without end, that person can meditate about the life . . . of the Besht. There has been no one like him during the last thousand years.[43]

Descendant of a Hasidic dynasty and heir of the living tradition at its most vital source, master of the philosophical and historical-critical method of the West as well as possessing unusual creative gifts, Heschel was perhaps the one scholar who might have given us the definitive work on Hasidism.

Historical Studies

The essays before us constitute historical studies which Heschel published as preliminary to a proper understanding of the Besht and the foundations of Hasidism. If the intended work was planned in two volumes—one to deal with the history and the second, the teachings of the Besht—these four essays would have supplied much of the material for the first volume.

43. A composite from "Hasidism," *Jewish Heritage* 14, no. 3 (1972):14–16, and *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), pp. 3–7.

Besieged by controversy, Hasidism had emerged in the eighteenth century as a reform movement which engendered bitter opposition. Its early writings, such as the *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* (Korzec, 1780), were largely polemical, attacking not only the decline of Judaism into legalism and asceticism, but also the corruption of Jewish life itself. To correct the malaise, Hasidism boldly proposed a new type of leader, the tzaddik, a new kind of service to God which was not limited to Torah study and worship but embraced "all one's ways," and a new mood of joy and exaltation. Along with this program came the advocacy for the establishment of separate synagogues. A furious clash of forces followed, producing a polemical literature from the Mitnagdim, as the opponents of the Hasidim were called.

Though the Hasidim, at first separatists themselves and later excluded by the ruling group, finally rejoined the general community, the remnants of the early opposition never disappeared. The bitterness which provoked the excommunications of the first generations was still felt in the twentieth century. Its tone could be heard in the anti-Hasidic satire in the East and the aggressively critical reports by historians in the West. If Hasidim were drunkards, and tzaddikim little deities dabbling in witchcraft,[44] then it should come as no surprise that the Besht himself was the object of stinging jibes. "Ignoramus" and "sorcerer" were the two terms most commonly applied to him. In an atmosphere where Western scholars, such as Graetz, were so critical of Hasidism, it was natural that disturbing questions would continue to be raised: Did the Baal Shem, in fact, ever live? Do we possess any evidence about him from contemporary sources, apart from the hagiography which accumulated after his death? What do we know of his early followers? What was their relationship to the Frankists and the Sabbatean heresy?

Adored by some and reviled by others, the subject of miracle legends and scurrilous gossip, the inspiration for subsequent communities of the faithful as well as decrees of excommunication, the Baal Shem himself seemed shrouded in mystery. How to get behind the legend to the man? If a historian of Polish Jewry of the distinction of Mayer Balaban despaired in the 1920s and 1930s of finding any verifiable historical evidence about the founder of Hasidism,[45] consider the difficulties that confronted scholars, after the Holocaust had destroyed most of the primary sources, as well as the movement's living tradition.

44. Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1898), 5:375–81.

45. "According to Balaban, all that is left to us concerning the life of the founder of the Hasidic movement is pure legend. To him, therefore, no responsible historian should attempt to write an historical treatise on this topic. 'A legend is a piece of folk poetry and it should not be dissected. We must take the legend as it is, or not use it at all.' There are no historical facts whatsoever against which to test these legends about the Baal Shem Tov . . . Balaban is dubious as to whether any genuine evidence relating to the founder of the Hasidic movement will ever be found. 'Israel Baal Shem Tov was a simple man. He did not participate in the public life of the Jewish community, and did not come into contact with the leading personalities of his age. He did not compose books himself and did not write introductions to the books of others.' Neither did he engage in business activity nor have any communication with the Polish noblemen. There is therefore nowhere to look for traces of his activities. All we have is a multitude of legends—which often contradict each other." (I. Biderman, *Mayer Balaban: Historian of Polish Judaism* [New York: Biderman Book Committee, 1976], pp. 204–5; cf. M. Balaban, "*Hasidut*," *Hatekufah* 18 (1923):488.) Balaban's strict delimitation of the role of legend was made, in part, in reviewing the exaggerated claims of S. Setzer's biography of the Besht (in the periodical *Bicher Velt* 1, nos. 4–5 [1922]:406–7).

Balaban's general view of Hasidism was one of disapproval. He claimed that Hasidism had a negative influence upon family life and was one of the major causes of the decline of Polish Jewish culture. Summarizing Balaban's view, Biderman writes that "Polish Jewish culture . . . came to fruition during the Seventeenth Century, later to deteriorate under the twofold impact of the misfortunes which beset Polish Jewry from outside and the decay brought about by the mystical and hasidic movements from within the community" (p. 174). At least three factors must be considered in assessing Balaban's disapprobation: (1) The highly critical views of Heinrich Graetz; (2) the fact that Balaban's knowledge of Hebrew, according to one Jewish historian who was his student, did not allow him to master the sources sufficiently to gain a proper understanding of Hasidism; and (3) Balaban's descent from a family of Mitnagdim. One ancestor was a cosigner, with the rabbi of Lwów, of the 1792 excommunication of the Hasidim, while Balaban's grandfather "was known for his opposition to the Hasidim and was a principal supporter of Rabbi Ornstein, rabbi of Lemberg (i.e., Lwów) from 1804 to 1839," a leading opponent of the Hasidic movement. "Opposition to Hasidism was characteristic of the Balaban family," concludes Biderman, "and the young Mayer Balaban remained faithful to the family tradition."

One of the major objectives of Heschel's studies was to refute the point of view represented by Balaban, arguing, that, indeed, "there are . . . historical facts . . . against which to test these legends about the Baal Shem Tov," to the point of affirming that the Besht did, in fact, "come into contact with leading personalities of his age."

Heschel felt it vital that the historical basis for the rise of Hasidism be established to whatever extent it was still possible. To do so meant examining the entire eighteenth-century rabbinic literature for occasional references to and hints of the early Hasidic figures. The libraries of Hebrew Union College and, especially, of the Jewish Theological Seminary provided him with a unique opportunity for a systematic and thorough review. His work was severely hampered by the disastrous fire at the latter institution in 1966 which destroyed or made unavailable many of the rare volumes he needed. With the help of the book dealer, Jaker Biegeleisen, Heschel also began to rebuild his own Hasidic library, though he could not replace the valuable material, including rare manuscripts, he had lost in Europe. In 1949, aware of the presence in America of some of the central figures of the Hasidic remnant who had survived, he founded the YIVO Hasidic Archives, which functioned under his guidance and was directed by Moses Shulvass, to search out what could still be salvaged. Heschel believed that there was a reliable oral tradition going back to the early Hasidic period, if only one knew where to look

and how to listen. The YIVO Archives were, therefore, used as well for fieldwork and oral histories.[46]

In Heschel's relentless search, no document which might illuminate the origins of Hasidism was overlooked. Even rare and early Polish periodicals were scrutinized. Scholars who brought him their discoveries in this field almost always found that Heschel had been there before them. By exhaustively exploring the literature of the early eighteenth century for new information and by reexamining known material and allusive oral traditions, Heschel sought to move toward a historical understanding of the Besht. The major results of Heschel's early work are the essays in this book, originally published in Hebrew and Yiddish, in which he attempted, for the first time, to chart the lives and describe the teachings of the personalities of the intimate circle which the Besht had gathered about him as disciples, colleagues, or both. These monographs constitute an indispensible corpus of research preliminary to a proper understanding of the Besht, the founder of Hasidism.

Four (or five, if we include R. Moses of Kuty) of the leading figures in the group associated early with the Besht are discussed in the following essays. A number of almost equal importance are not. Heschel did not give us portraits of others from the Besht's circle, such as R. Nahman of Horodenka (grandfather of R. Nahman of Bratslav), whose early ascent to Palestine helped set a pattern among Hasidism for the love of the Land;[47] or R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, the chief literary disciple of the Besht, whose books are the main record of the Baal Shem's teachings; or of R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz who succeeded to the leadership of the movement after the death of the Besht; or of R. Judah Leib Pistener.[48] No doubt, Heschel intended eventually to deal with these and other figures. I have located some significant unpublished material in his files which has yet to be examined.

Strictly speaking, none of the figures whom Heschel has described in these essays can simply be called a "disciple" of the Besht. R. Nahman and R. Pinhas, critics at first, became disciples who were also colleagues, while R. Isaac of Drohobycz seemed to have remained somewhat distant until the end. (His son R. Yehiel Mikhel of Zloczew, on the other hand, became one of the most fervent fighters for the way of the Besht. It was before his house in Brod that the first Hasidic book, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, by R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, was publicly burned.) In any case, those who comprised the circle of the Besht did not submerge their

46. See the introductory remarks to A. Heschel, "Unknown Documents in the History of Hasidism."

47. See ibid., pp. 115–19.

48. R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye held him in such esteem that he published his eulogy of him (*Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* [Korzec: Katz, 1780], p. 92d).

individuality to the Besht: at times they were partners, at times opponents, at times followers. What each of them shared in common was the possession of immense personal talents and their role as the conscious object of the Besht's missionary efforts.

Previous to Heschel's studies, these figures had been vague and unclear. Some, like R. Gershon of Kuty, R. Nahman of Kosów, and R. Isaac of Drohobycz (Drobitch), were occasionally quoted or told about; only R. Pinhas of Korzec had left a body of teachings. In Heschel's adept hands, these men are revealed as formidable scholars and striking personalities who, no doubt, would have played a role in any period of Jewish history. In reading these essays, one beholds the image of historical figures and not simply legendary ghosts.

Heschel's thorough examination of eighteenth-century rabbinic literature enabled him to add important facts to what was already known. The close relationship between the earliest members of the "circle" of the Besht and such significant personalities of the time as R. Hayim Hakohen Rapoport of Lwów, R. Meir Margoliot of Lwów, R. Eleazer Rokeah of Amsterdam, and R. Ezekiel Landau of Prague is confirmed and explored in Heschel's studies. The brother-in-law of the Baal Shem, R. Gershon of Kuty, emerges as one of the central figures of his time, suggesting a reevaluation of our understanding of his role in eighteenth-century Jewish history, as well as the role of certain other Hasidic figures. R. Gershon was a halakhic authority respected by R. Ezekiel Landau of Prague, and by R. Jonathan Eybeschütz, as well as a communal figure who was accepted as a leading representative of Palestinian Jewry. Heschel presents a fascinating picture of R. Gershon in the notable Constantinople Jewish community where Ashkenazim and Sephardim esteemed and worked with one another. The position of R. Gershon can be better appreciated by our new knowledge that a person of such eminence as the wealthy printer and regular visitor to the sultan's court, Moses Soncino, who "administered the funds raised by R. Ezekiel Landau in Poland for the Ashkenazim in Jerusalem," was a close friend of R. Gershon's and, in fact, acted as intermediary in the correspondence between the Besht and R. Gershon. R. Gershon traveled to the Land of Israel from Constantinople accompanied by R. Abraham Rosanes and R. Isaac Rosanes, among the most noted rabbis of the community. Soon after his arrival, R. Gershon was offered the post of rabbi of the Ashkenazic community of Jerusalem. Heschel's long article, marked by new insights and suggestions, has encouraged considerable further research into R. Gershon Kutover's role in eighteenth-century Palestine. Persuasive evidence is now available that the early Hasidic leaders occupied a more important position than was formerly believed among the pilgrims of the period.

It is in the essay on R. Gershon that Heschel published an important

discovery: a reference to the Besht made during his lifetime by R. Meir Teomim, the head of the Yeshivah in Lubartów (Levertof) and father of the noted talmudist and author of *Peri Megadim*, who writes: "I have seen in a letter from the Holy Land what the Hasid, our master and teacher, R. Gershon, may his light continue to shine, wrote to his well-known [*mefursam*] brother-in-law, the Baal Shem Tov, may his light continue to shine." The source of this statement, a talmudist and father of a halakhic authority, the term used, "*mefursam*," and the fact that it is one of the very few contemporary references to the Besht, "refutes the claims of scholars that the Besht led a secluded existence and was unknown during his lifetime except to a small circle."[49]

Apart from Heschel's contribution to the history of Hasidism in these essays is his analysis of Hasidic thought. In his essay on R. Pinhas of Korzec, for example, he delineated the ideological conflict which occurred early in the history of the movement, in which each side claimed that it possessed the true meaning of the Besht's legacy. The maggid of Miedzyrzecz (Mezeritch) had stressed the centrality of Kabbalah and established *devekut* as the highest goal. For him, the awareness that all is God would lead man to understand that this world is but so many veils which must be cast aside to enter into the divine embrace. His language is strongly Lurianic, with spiritual ascent beyond time and place the all-consuming goal. For R. Pinhas, on the other hand, the stress is elsewhere. This world is no illusion. It is the place, and now is the time, where man must labor diligently and unremittingly to perfect himself. To escape the world is to violate the Psalmist's admonition that one must first "turn from evil" and only then "do good." R. Pinhas, who had favored R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye and not the maggid as successor to the Besht, emphasized moral virtue and simple faith.

The present essays are not all of a single type. The articles on R. Gershon of Kuty, R. Pinhas of Korzec, and R. Nahman of Kosów are finished works. The essay on R. Isaac of Drohobycz, not published in a scholarly journal, is much less elaborate. Published in Hebrew and Yiddish and in various stages of completeness, the essays which constitute the present volume should be understood as preliminary studies which would undoubtedly have been edited or recast to make up part of the work on the Besht which Heschel had planned.

Among the challenges to the editor and translators were the technical nature of some of the material, the frequent play upon Hebrew words, and the kabbalistic concepts which could be rendered only with difficulty into concise English. Our hope was to remain faithful to the author's words; our dilemma was to make these writings understandable to

49. See below, pp. 71–76, 98–99.

the reader of English beyond the narrow circle of Hasidic scholarship. Toward this end, a series of supplementary footnotes and explanations within the text itself has been provided, always in brackets [ ]. While nothing is omitted, highly technical material has at times been placed in footnotes or in an appendix, and on a few occasions, the material has been rearranged for ease of reading. For the benefit of those pursuing Hasidic scholarship, subsequent published research on the subjects dealt with by Heschel has been summarized in the notes, and the relationship of these studies to Heschel's positions has been pointed out. The important work of two Israeli scholars, Piekarz and Barnai, has been especially noted. The relevant research has thus, to a considerable extent, been brought up to date.

Though not uniform, the transliteration has been executed with an attempt at some consistency. For the ease of the reader, diacritical marks have been minimized, while established English spellings of Hebrew words have been maintained. The transcription follows the generally accepted norm in works of scholarship, with the following exceptions: we have used *sh* (instead of *š*) to transliterate the Hebrew letter *shin*, *tz* (instead of *ṣ*) to transliterate the Hebrew letter *tzadi*, and *ey* (instead of *ê*) to designate the hard *e*.

The titles of scholarly works have usually been translated, while the titles of rabbinic works have almost always been transliterated. Generally, the titles of rabbinic works bear no relationship to their contents and sometimes sound odd in translation.

For the most part, we have either eliminated or shortened the honorific titles that characterize references in rabbinic works to both the living and the dead.

Place names are given according to the spellings in Berl Kagan's *Hebrew Subscription Lists* (New York: Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and Ktav Publishing House, 1975). When an alternate spelling is given, that spelling reflects the Yiddish name of the town or city—e.g., Kozienice (Kozhnitz). For a list of the Eastern European towns and villages mentioned in this book, the reader may refer to the Gazetteer.

Dates, almost always given by the author according to the *anno mundi*, are presented as follows: In dates of publication, the year is simply given according to the common-era date in which most of the Jewish year fell—e.g., the publication date for the *Luḥot ʿEdut* is given as 1755, even though three or four months of A.M. 5515 actually fell in 1754. In other contexts, the Jewish year often is spread out over the two years of the common era in which it fell—e.g., 1743/4 (C.E.) for A.M. 5504. In cases in which a month is given, only the correct year is cited, e.g., 10 Tishri 1748 where the original has 10 Tishri 5509.

Some comments on the individual articles: For the chapter on R. Pinhas of Korzec, the translators have had the advantage of consulting both the Hebrew and Yiddish versions of this essay. The two differ slightly. Our translation is an amalgam. In several places, material from the chapter on R. Nahman of Kosów which would prove too specialized for the English reader has been placed in footnotes; another small section was made into an appendix. The Drohobycz piece, the most unfinished of the chapters, required some rearrangement of the text.

The essays in this volume originally appeared as follows:

"Rabbi Pinhas of Korzec" (Hebrew), *Alei ʿAyin: The Salman Schocken Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1948–52), pp. 213–44; "Reb Pinkhes Koritzer" (Yiddish) *Yivo Bleter* 33 (1949); 9–48.

"Rabbi Gershon Kutover: His Life and Immigration to the Land of Israel" (Hebrew), *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 23 (1950–51): part 2, pp. 17–71.

"Rabbi Nahman of Kosów, Companion of the Baal Shem" (Hebrew), *The Harry A. Wolfson Jubilee Volume*, ed. Saul Lieberman et al. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1965), Hebrew section, pp. 113–41.

"Rabbi Isaac of Drobitch" (Hebrew), *Hadoʾar Jubilee Volume* (New York: Hadoar, 1957), pp. 86–94.

Parts of this Introduction appeared earlier in a slightly different form in two articles published in *Judaism*: "The Contribution of Abraham Joshua Heschel" (vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 57–69) and "Hasidism through the Eyes of Three Masters" (vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 160–69).

The present work, begun more than ten years ago, was undertaken to honor the memory of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and to enrich our knowledge of the Hasidic movement. Because of the problems already delineated in making available such a book to the English reader and to the nonspecialist, as well as the desire to produce a work of reliable scholarship, a number of experts, both here and abroad, were consulted in various capacities at different stages of the work. While their contributions have added to the quality of the work, I do not absolve myself from responsibility for any mistakes. I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to the following: Dr. Zanvel Klein of the University of Chicago, who carefully reviewed most of the manuscript as the work proceeded, correcting numerous errors, making valuable suggestions, and contributing significantly to its final version; Dr. Ada Rappaport-Albert of the University of London, the principal translator of the chapter on R. Gershon of Kuty; Dr. Martin Samuel Cohen of the Jewish Theological Seminary Library, the principal translator of the notes to that chapter, who compiled the Gazeteer and the Bibliography; Rabbi Gedalia Rabinowitz of the Hebrew Theological College (the son of the Monastritche Rebbe from whom Heschel obtained two important manuscripts for the chapter, "R. Pinhas of Korzec"), who was constantly available to the editor; Dr. Moses Shulvas of Spertus College of Judaica, a companion of Heschel's during his student years in Berlin and the first director of the YIVO Hasidic Archives which Heschel had established, who generously provided information from his understanding of East European Jewish history; the late Rabbi Arye Kaplan and Dr. Mordecai Goldman of Spertus College of Judaica, who interpreted several kabbalistic and rabbinic passages; Rabbi Elliot Gertel and Dr. Karen Sager, who reviewed the manuscript for style and consistency; and Mrs. Norma Gavin who typed it.

SAMUEL H. DRESNER