

Elimelekh of Lizhensk

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Suggested Reading

Author

(1717–1786/87), Hasidic leader; founder of [Hasidism](#) in [Galicia](#) and [Poland](#). The son of a wealthy village Jew in the district of [Tykocin](#), Elimelekh was first drawn to Hasidism by his brother Meshulam Zusya (d. 1800), later of Hanipoli. The two were among the best known disciples of Dov Ber, the [Magid](#) of Mezritsh. During their early years they were said to wander together in self-imposed poverty, in order to partake in the exile of the *shekhinah*. Elimelekh was known for other extremes of ascetic practice as well, in contrast to some others of the Magid's followers.

After the Magid's death in 1772, Elimelekh took a leading role within the leadership of Hasidism (he and his brother were the eldest of the circle). While [Menaḥem Mendel of Vitebsk](#) instituted the dissemination of Hasidic teaching in Lithuanian and Belorussian communities, Elimelekh led those disciples who stayed to the south and moved westward. Settling in Lizhensk (Pol., [Leżajsk](#)), he gathered a group of disciples around himself to replicate his master's circle; this group later spread Hasidism throughout [Galicia](#) and Poland. Members included [Ya'akov Yitshak Horowitz](#) of Lantset (later, the "Seer of [Lublin](#)"), [Yisra'el the Magid of Kozhenits](#), [Menaḥem Mendel of Rimanov](#), Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of [Apt](#), and Naftali Horowitz of [Ropshits](#).

Elimelekh's book *No'am Elimelekh*, published in 1788 shortly after his death, is a classic of Hasidic literature and has been reprinted in more than 50 editions. To a greater extent than any other Hasidic work, it focuses around the figure of the *tsadik*, detailing his spiritual life, powers, relationship to the upper and lower worlds, and the importance of faith in him for those surrounding him. Elimelekh follows the teachings of his master Dov Ber in this regard, but with respect to others in the Mezritsh circle he may be seen as the one who most fully elaborates the ideal of the *tsadik* and develops the theoretical basis for this institution within the Hasidic community. He believes that the *tsadik* should commit himself to praying for (and thus "decreeing") the material as well as the spiritual welfare of his followers, and that the *tsadik's* disciples need to bind themselves to the holy man's powers by means of redemptive gifts (*pidyonot*), through which he was to be supported. Elimelekh is also the author of various short treatises and letters that have appeared in print, the best-known of which is the "Tsetl katan," recited daily by many Hasidim and thus found in various Hasidic prayer books.

The dedication that Elimelekh received from ever-widening circles of supporters reflected the fact that his promulgation of the figure of the *tsadik* was offered without any hint of quest for political power or personal gain. Elimelekh did not establish a lavish "court" in Lizhensk, as some had begun to do elsewhere in the Hasidic world by the 1780s. His personal commitment to the ascetic life was well known, but it was combined with an acceptance of the path of service through joy and a belief in the transformation ("uplifting") of material blessings into channels for worship—an article of faith that made Hasidism especially attractive. The willingness of the *tsadik*, as Elimelekh described him, to abandon his natural desire to cleave only to the upper worlds and to labor on behalf of the Jewish people and their needs, including material wants, was lovingly accepted, both by his circle of disciples and, through them, by masses of Jews.

At some point in his later years, Elimelekh seems to have gone through a period of emotional inability to maintain this balance, as the increasing demands of the public and their need for worldly blessings became more than he could bear. As he retreated from offering access to himself as a channel for such blessings, his disciple [Ya'akov Yitshak Horowitz](#) took on much of the public role, although without his master's formal authorization to do so. This led to some conflict between master and disciple, complicating the emerging circles of influence in the spread of Hasidism—which constituted Elimelekh's main contribution to the history of the movement. Elimelekh's memory and place in the chain of Hasidic tradition are venerated both by the Galician schools, through such disciples as [Menaḥem Mendel of Rimanov](#) (1745–1815) and Tsevi Hirsh of [Zhidachov](#) (1763–1831), and the very different Polish school that was to emerge in [Pshiskhe](#) and [Kotsk](#).

Elimelekh's sons and grandsons carried on a dynasty of *tsadikim* for two generations, but the vast majority of his Hasidim followed one or more of his disciples rather than his own family. His burial place in Lizhensk was a major Hasidic [pilgrimage](#) site until the Holocaust, and has been renewed as such since the restoration of his grave in 1960.

Suggested Reading

Simon Dubnow, "Rabi Elimelekh mi-Liz'ensk ve-torat ha-tsadikiyot ma'asiyit," in *Toldot ha-ḥasidut*, vol. 2 (3 vols. in 1), *Tekufat ha-gidol veba-hitpashtut*, pp. 178–188 (Tel Aviv, 1930); Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, *No'am Elimelekh*, ed. Gedalyah Nigal, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1978); Bezalel Landau, *Ha-Rabi R. Elimelekh mi-Liz'ensk* (Jerusalem, 1962/63); Mendel Piekarz, "Ha-Mahalakh he-ḥadash bi-megamoteha ha-ra'ayoniyot-ha-ḥevratyot shel ha-ḥasidut be-Polin umi-ḥutsah lah: R. Elimelekh mi-Liz'ensk u-mamshikhav," *Gal-Ed* 15–16 (1998): 43–80; Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Le-Mahuto shel ha-tsadik ba-ḥasidut: 'Iyunim be-torato shel R. Elimelekh mi-Liz'ensk," *Molad* 18.144–145 (1960): 365–378.

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