

Head to Head: Power Struggles in the Creation and Formation of the Habad Movement

HASIDISM IS THE PIETISTIC MOVEMENT that emerged in Eastern Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century.¹ Israel ben Eliezer (1700-1760), commonly known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (or 'Besht'), was a charismatic leader who is considered the innovator of this spiritual movement. Hasidism started as a small circle surrounding the Besht and only emerged as a widespread movement due to the dissemination of his ideas by his students. The only document written by the Besht was a letter he wrote to his brother-in-law, Gershon of Kutov, who resided in the Holy Land. In this letter, known as the "Besht's Epistle", he described in detail his travels through the upper worlds in 1747.² Thus, his teachings were preserved primarily by his disciples R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonne (1710-1784)³ and R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch. R. Yaakov Yosef published the first Hasidic book, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, in 1780. He meticulously recorded the teachings of his mentor while elucidating and developing the ideas through his own thinking.⁴ Often he explicitly records in his books⁵ lessons that he received directly from the Besht.⁶

It was the other great disciple of the Besht, R. Dov Ber (d.1772), commonly referred to as the Maggid, who devoted his life to molding Hasidism into bodies of institutions which consequently formed a larger movement. As a writer, he developed the conceptual ideas of Hasidism, and as a leader, he expanded its social significance.⁷ R. Dov Ber consciously dispersed his disciples across Galicia, Poland, White Russia, Moravia and Hungary. His goal was to disseminate the ideas of Hasidism throughout Eastern Europe. Unlike his predecessors, R. Dov Ber, preferred to stay in one location and

not travel to different destinations. With his students in far flung places, R. Dov Ber created a powerful structure of religious leadership that extended for thousands of miles beyond Mezeritch.⁸ His students became leaders in towns throughout Eastern Europe. The youngest of his disciples was R. Shneur Zalman Borukhovitch (1745-1812), a talented torah scholar in his own right. R. Shneur Zalman eventually formed the Habad school which thrived in White Russia until the Holocaust. This paper will analyze R. Shneur Zalman's rise to leadership as well as discuss the power struggles and dilemmas that he faced during his transition to leadership as well as the opposition he faced while shaping the Habad movement.

R. Shneur Zalman⁹ had a strong education in the fields of Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud with standard commentaries and codes. He mastered the entire Talmud and Jewish codes by the age of eighteen. At the age of twenty-five, he exhibited great scholarly adroitness by re-editing major sections of the *Shulhan Arukh*, thus publishing a new version of this great body of Jewish law.¹⁰ It is noted that he also studied philosophy, grammar, mathematics, geometry and astronomy.¹¹ In the summer of 1764, R. Shneur Zalman left Vitebsk where he resided since his marriage in 1760, and headed to Mezeritch in order to study with the Maggid, R. Dov Ber. He returned to his home in the spring of 1765, although he continued to visit R. Dov Ber occasionally, until the latter's death in 1772.¹²

After R. Dov Ber's demise, R. Shneur Zalman, due to his youth, did not assume the mantle of leadership immediately, as was the case with other disciples. Rather, he became a pupil of R. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730 - 1788),¹³ who obtained leadership of White Russia which was comprised of the Vitebsk and Moghilev regions.¹⁴ In 1777, R. Menachem Mendel decided to emigrate to the Holy Land along with R. Abraham of Kalisk and R. Yisrael of Polotsk. It is maintained that their decision to emigrate was a result of the oppression they experienced by their opponents known as the Mitnagdim, which began in 1772. The Gaon of Vilna, who was the leading Talmudic scholar in Lithuania, maintained that Hasidism was a variation of Frankism.¹⁵ He therefore supported organized efforts to eradicate Hasidism.¹⁶ Thus, R. Menachem Mendel hoped that he and his associates would be able to maintain Hasidic authority and sanctity by establishing a Hasidic center in the Holy Land.¹⁷

R. Shneur Zalman planned to accompany R. Menachem Mendel and the others on their journey to the Holy Land, however he only made it as far as Moghilev. There, the decision was made that he would remain in White Russia.¹⁸ It was only after insistent pleading that he acquiesced to

their pronouncement and returned to his home town of Liozna. From there, he served the dual function of supervisor of the Hasidic constituents in the region as well as a fundraiser for the Hasidim that emigrated to the Land of Israel. R. Shneur Zalman operated as a representative of R. Menachem Mendel who wished to maintain his authority of the region from a distance.¹⁹

At this time, R. Shneur Zalman was not the only representative of R. Menachem Mendel. The latter occasionally addressed the Hasidic fraternity of White Russia via letters. He did this for the purpose continuing his dominion of the area. However, at the same time, he recognized the need for local leadership. In a letter written in 1782, R. Menachem Mendel advised the local constituents to take counsel with three local figures. The names appeared in the following order: first, R. Yisrael of Polutsk, the elderly rabbi who had accompanied R. Menachem Mendel to the Holy Land but returned in order to gather funds; second, R. Issaschar Ber Segal, a former disciple of the Besht and past teacher of R. Shneur Zalman; and third, R. Shneur Zalman who was approximately in his thirties.²⁰ We see that R. Shneur Zalman is only third on the list. This does not mean that he is third in quality, but rather he was still young and not the primary leader of the area.

R. Menachem Mendel was trying to maintain authority from a distant territory. Surely, this was a great task as the general recipe for a healthy leader/follower relationship is contact and guidance. Hasidic constituents of White Russia naturally felt somewhat lost and in need of headship. It is for this reason that many Hasidim started to travel to Polish Hasidic leaders. R. Menachem Mendel was frustrated with this outcome and appointed specific local representatives who would be available to guide the local constituents.²¹

R. Yisrael of Polutsk passed away in 1784 and, eventually, the aging R. Issaskhar Ber receded to a secondary position, leaving R. Shneur Zalman as the chief local representative. In a letter written in 1784, R. Menachem Mendel instructs the Hasidic community to not take on a new Rebbe. Wilensky assumes that the content of this letter is referring to R. Shneur Zalman. In other words, R. Menachem Mendel is trying to hold on to his torch and instructs the community to not view R. Shneur Zalman as their leader.²²

In 1786, R. Menachem Mendel praises R. Shneur Zalman in a letter written to the Hasidic community by stating “who like he, teaches in all of the State.”²³ This statement is ambiguous. It could either mean that R.

Menachem Mendel is singing R. Shneur Zalman's praises and believes that he should be viewed as the leader. Or it could be viewed that R. Menachem Mendel is offering kind words to his local representative so that his constituents will feel comfortable approaching R. Shneur Zalman with their spiritual needs. Wilensky maintains that the correspondence from 1787 expresses R. Menachem Mendel's continued efforts to imprint in the minds of his constituents that from Tiberias, the town where resided at the time, he was still able to lead. Thus, at this point in time, R' Shneur Zalman is still merely a representative of the Hasidic establishment based in Tiberias.

It was only with the death of R. Menachem Mendel in 1788 that R. Shneur Zalman assumed full authority of the region. While on his death bed, R. Menachem Mendel wrote his final letter to the Hasidic community of White Russia. Only then did R. Menachem Mendel address R. Shneur Zalman with unrestrained and prolific praise: "honorable and rabbi, our dear and true friend . . . who we anoint to be a righteous leader in your region, so that there should not be a congregation of God that is like a flock without a herdsman."²⁴ It is only at this point, that R. Menachem Mendel officially appoints R. Shneur Zalman as leader of the White Russian Hasidic community.²⁵

Haim Meir Heilman, the Habad chronicler, asserts that R. Shneur Zalman remained a mere representative until R. Menachem Mendel's death, due to his refusal to take over officially as chairman of the region as well as opposition that came from large proportions of R. Menachem Mendel's followers. These supporters preferred to travel to leaders in Poland in order to seek spiritual counsel. However, Heilman claims that the pressure of R. Menachem Mendel upon the Hasidic constituents to recognize R. Shneur Zalman, along with the demand upon R. Shneur Zalman himself to assume responsibility, eventually led to R. Shneur Zalman taking the reins of the region.²⁶

Heilman professes that the original intention for leaving R. Shneur behind from the journey to the Holy Land, was in order to fill the leadership void that R. Menachem Mendel left behind. He contends that this was the very wish of R. Menachem Mendel and the expectation of the Hasidic constituents residing in White Russia. In other words, R. Shneur Zalman did not want to stay behind. He, too, longed to create a Hasidic home in the land of Israel. But the decision was made, by the authorities above that he would stay for the sake of the people. Thus, the reason it took so long for R. Shneur Zalman to grasp and solidify his leadership was because of his personal humility—expressed through hesitation to become leader—and

the reservation of certain loyal followers of R. Menachem Mendel.²⁷

It was inevitable that R. Menachem Mendel would have to eventually pass the torch onto R. Shneur Zalman. However, it seems from his letters to the Hasidic community that his own demise was probably the only reason that he appointed R. Shneur Zalman as mentor and chief. This theory asserts that R. Menachem Mendel wanted to maintain his authority until his very last moments. Either way, we see that R. Shneur Zalman's rise to leadership was a gradual process that only culminated with the death of R. Menachem Mendel.

Once R. Shneur Zalman officially assumed leadership, his own, particular school of thought began to flourish. Early Habad philosophy is defined by the publication of R. Shneur Zalman's, most important and controversial work, *Likkutei Amarim*, popularly known as *Tanya*. *Tanya* was first published in 1796; however, his teachings circulated in manuscript form long before the book was printed. The work presents a complex and comprehensive system of spiritual and practical life according to a dialectical principle comprising concurrently of a relationship with God, the world and man.²⁸ The entire corpus of Habad literature is grounded upon *Tanya*. Thus, Elijah expresses that there are two dominant concerns within the Habad school of thought. First, Habad thought expresses a consolidated mystical theosophy that is based on Kabbalistic thought and its Hasidic interpretation, together with the definition of extensive mystical and dialectical principles that form a link between God and man. Second, Habad literature entails the idea of divine worship which relates to contemplative and mystical elevation as well as a reevaluation of the relationship between corporeality and religious worship as expressed in the Torah and its commandments.²⁹

Tanya stands out as being unique, in that its teachings are not disguised in the form of homilies based on the weekly Torah portions. It is a systematic work that clearly lays out its steep and demanding objective to the reader. *Tanya* attempts to communicate esoteric teachings to diverse ranks of the Hasidic community. It can be viewed as a spiritual manual for those seeking advice in manners of divine worship. R. Shneur Zalman's audience was a wide range of spiritual seekers that included scholars as well as men engaged in commerce.³⁰

R. Shneur Zalman's attempt to disseminate esoteric teachings to the masses invited sharp critique from other prominent Hasidic leaders. "They were sensitive to R. Shneur Zalman's aim to communicate a system based on esoteric sources which, step by step, would be meaningful and relevant to the reader, rather than radiate flashes of luminous inspiration."³¹ They

felt that certain teachings should be hidden from the general audience and only studied by the elite. His critics included Hasidic leaders such as R. Shlomo of Karlin, R. Asher of Stolin, Rabbi Baruch of Meziboz, R. Abraham of Kalisk and R. Zvi Hirsch of Zydaczow.³² In 1797, R. Abraham of Kalisk, from the Holy Land, wrote a poignant letter attacking the *Tanya*. His concern was the explicit nature in which R. Shneur Zalman endeavors to explicate the message of the Besht and Maggid via Lurianic concepts.³³ He wrote:

I have seen the *Book of the Intermediate Man*³⁴ which you have had printed. I do not consider it very useful for helping people. . . . For this kind of person, it is sufficient to have one spark which will have many meanings for him—this path of Torah. Too much oil in the lamp could, heaven forbid, cause the flame to be extinguished.³⁵

R. Shneur Zalman wrote *Tanya* as a systematic guide. His intention was to uplift the masses and allow them to genuinely connect to the higher chain of mystical literature. However, R. Abraham felt that the great majority of Hasidic constituents had no place on that path. Rather, they were only meant to absorb the simple teachings that were placed before them. He did not trust the Hasidim; he did not think that they had the proper tools to understand the true teachings of the Besht and the Maggid. He exclaimed:

Whereas I myself found no contentment in that your honor has garbed the words of the Holy Rabbi of Mezhirech, which are the words of the Holy Rabbi, the Besht in the words of the holy ARI³⁶ of blessed memory. Although everything leads to a single place, “the language of the Torah is one thing and the words of the Sages is something else and must be separate,” especially because of the danger that, for our many sins, corporeality is descending and penetrating and the generation is not worthy.³⁷

We see that R. Abraham was reluctant to share the depths of the mystical, sublime teachings.³⁸

R. Abraham of Kalisk’s point of contention, the manner in which R. Shneur Zalman explained the Hasidic doctrine, is exactly what made *Tanya* provocative and unique. R. Shneur created an organized and intellectual manual for his disciples. His goal was to use kabbalistic language in order to rationally elucidate the teachings of the Besht and Maggid. The *Tanya* employs an intellectual perspective to Hasidism; for this is precisely the meaning of Habad—*Hokhmah* (wisdom), *Binah* (understanding) and *Da’at* (knowledge). R. Abraham felt that empowering the Hasid himself to understand, rationally, the depths of the teachings takes away from the central-

ty of the Hasidic leader. The leader of a Hasidic group, referred to as the *Zaddik*,³⁹ is not a mere communal head, rather he expresses cosmological and spiritual powers. This is perhaps the greatest innovation of Hasidism. R. Shneur Zalman changed this socio-religious dependence that the Hasid maintained towards the *Zaddik*, since he no longer had to rely on his faith of the *Zaddik*. Now, the Hasid had direct access to the esoteric teachings.

R. Shneur Zalman changed the leader/disciple relationship by establishing local guides, students of high intellectual pedigree, who assisted others to understand the meaning of *Tanya*. This was a further critique of R. Abraham of Kalisk, since Hasidic teachings in his mind were not intellectual teachings that could merely be explained. Rather, the illumination of esoteric Hasidic teachings required charisma.⁴⁰ He maintained that they were meant to only be given over by a highly elevated and spiritual person—the *Zaddik* himself.

R. Abraham of Kalisk's criticism of R. Shneur Zalman must be understood in its social context. R. Abraham, writing from Tiberias, viewed himself as having inherited from R. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk the leadership of White Russia. Even though R. Shneur Zalman was officially placed as head of the region, R. Abraham viewed him as being obliged in some way to his authority. On the contrary, R. Shneur did not perceive their relationship in this way. He thought of R. Abraham as the leader of the community in the Holy Land and had devoted much effort to help financially sustain him and his constituency. R. Shneur Zalman viewed himself as continuing the Path of the Maggid, R. Dov Ber. Thus, he ignored R. Abraham of Kalisk, who maintained that R. Shneur Zalman had diverged from the direction of the Maggid, and never sought his approval for his own work. Eventually, R. Abraham severed ties with R. Shneur Zalman and found new means of support for his community. The outcome of this break within the White Russian community helped shape Habad into a distinct and unique Hasidic group within the larger movement.⁴¹

R. Shneur Zalman created a unique school of Hasidic thought; a doctrine that was highly critiqued by his contemporaries. Through his cerebral and rational teachings he took his Hasidic school in a new direction. When R. Shneur Zalman passed away, his son R. Dov Ber became the leader. At this point in the history of Hasidism, there was no precedent for a son taking over the leadership. The ideas of Hasidism were transmitted from teacher to disciple. The decision to appoint R. Dov Ber as successor solidified Habad as a dynasty that would continue to grow for years to follow.

NOTES

1. There are various theories as to why Hasidism emerged. The first scholars of Hasidism such as Simon Dubnow and Ben Zion Dinur saw the sprouting of the new movement as a result of social and economic hardships. Dubnow posited that Hasidism arose as a result of the social and economic turmoil that was experienced after the Chmielnecki uprisings against the Poles and the subsequent pogroms that took place during 1648-49. The feeling of despair was compacted with the false messianic hope of the Sabbatian movement. These factors led to social struggle where the uneducated classes felt alienated from traditional values and expressed criticism towards the established leadership. Overall, the uneducated masses expressed a sense that religion had let them down. According to this approach, Hasidism responded by spiritually revitalizing society by creating a new religious order where individuals were able to experience the divine. See Simon Dubnow, *History of Hasidism* (Hebrew) (4th ed., Tel Aviv, 1975). Dinur also claims that Hasidism emerged as a result of Sabbatianism and communal disfavor of the religious leadership- the *Kahal*. For further elaboration see Ben Zion Dinur, "The Origins of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Foundations," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York, 1991), 86-208. Gershom Scholem espoused an approach that deals with Hasidism within the larger context of Jewish mysticism. He analyzed its continuity and the differences that it had from previous currents. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1995), 325-350.
2. For a critical evaluation of the epistle, see Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic and Leader* (Waltham, MA, 2004), 79-91 and Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (California, 1996), 97-113.
3. For a biography and analysis of his teachings, see Samuel Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy* (New York, 1974).
4. *Ibid.*, 64.
5. His other three books were smaller in size and not as significant. They often repeat ideas that were mentioned in *Toldot Yaakov Yosef. Ben Porat Yosef* (1781) is a two-volume work which contains a commentary to Genesis, legalistic material, sermons and responsa. *Zafnat Paneah* (1782) is a commentary to Exodus. *Ketonet Passim*, his last book, was published posthumously in 1866. See Dresner, *The Zaddik*, 245-252.
6. He writes "I heard from my master."
7. Rachel Elior, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism* (Oregon, 2006), 61.
8. Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago, 1990), 33.
9. He was born in Liozna, in the region of Moghilev. His paternal rabbinic lineage traces back to the erudite scholar R. Judah Loew of Prague (1520-1609), most commonly known as the Maharal. See Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 39, n. 35.
10. Roman Foxbrunner, *Habad: The Hasidism of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady* (Alabama, 1992), 45. On page 47, he notes that this project was initiated at the request of the Maggid.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 48.

13. Immanuel Etkes, "R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi's Rise to Leadership," (Hebrew) *Tarbiz* 54 (1985), 429. It is important to note that R. Shneur Zalman always maintained that his essential teacher was R. Dov Ber and not R. Menachem Mendel.
14. Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 39.
15. Ibid.
16. The first anti-Hasidic document, *Zamir Aritzim Veharevot Tzurim* was published in 1772. The allegations against the Hasidim can be summarized as follows: the establishment of their own prayer houses where they changed the liturgy and did not adhere to the set times of prayer according to Jewish Law. Also, they altered the methods of prayer. Allegations also included their method of ritual slaughter where they used double edged knives. Moreover, the Hasidim were accused of neglecting torah study, disrespecting Torah scholars as well as maintaining bizarre behavior. Lastly, they were suspected of being Sabbatians. Other waves of controversy arose in 1781 and 1796. See Mordecai Wilensky, "Hasidic-Mitnaggedic Polemics in the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe: the Hostile Phase," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, ed. Gershon Hundert (New York, 1991), 244-271. It is important to note that these allegations did not stem from any of the scholarly works of the Hasidic leaders, since the first Hasidic books were only published in 1780. Thus, these accusations stem completely from Mitnagdim's perception of the conduct of the Hasidim.
17. Mordecai Wilensky, *The Hasidic Community in Tiberias* (Hebrew) (Israel, 1988), 12.
18. See Haim Meir Heilman, *Beit Rebbe* ("My Masters House") (Berdichev, 1902) in Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 40. Heilman's *Beit Rebbe* is a chronicle of the first three generations of the Habad movement. Louis Jacobs maintains that Heilman is generally reliable in preserving the traditions of Habad leaders. He does however state that it should be used with caution since it does contain some hearsay legends. See Louis Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity: The Life And Works Of Aaron Of Starosselje* (London, 2006), 23-24.
19. Etkes, "R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi's Rise to Leadership," 430.
20. Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 42.
21. Wilensky, *The Hasidic Community in Tiberias*, 19.
22. Ibid.
23. D.Z. Hillman, *Letters of the Author of the Tanya* (Hebrew). Found in Wilensky, *The Hasidic Community in Tiberias*, 20.
24. Wilensky, *The Hasidic Community in Tiberias*, 20.
25. Since R. Menachem Mendel was not well, R. Abraham of Kalisk signed the letter. However, the content of the letter is the expressed the will of R. Menachem Mendel. See Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 42.
26. See Heilman, *Beit Rebbe*, 22-30.
27. Etkes, "R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi's Rise to Leadership," 430
28. Rachel Elijor, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidim* (New York, 1993), 19. For a concise and neatly packed explanation of Habad thought, see: Idem, "HaBad: The Contemplative Ascent to God" in *Jewish Spirituality from the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1989), 157-205.
29. Ibid, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, 20.
30. Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 47-48.
31. Ibid, 51.

32. Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, 20-21.
33. One of the premier innovations of the Besht was that he reinterpreted Lurianic concepts and gave them new meaning. He applied psychological meaning to the speculative Kabbalistic framework. For a brief presentation of the mysticism of Isaac Luria, see Louis Jacobs, "The Uplifting of the Sparks in Later Jewish Mysticism," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Sixteenth Century Revival to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1989), 99-126.
34. This is another name for *Tanya*. The intermediate man refers to the ordinary individual who is neither a *zaddik*—righteous or saintly, nor is he a *rasha*—wicked person. The intended audience of the *Tanya* is this middle grouping of people. Thus, it is meant to be an accessible work.
35. *Letters of the Author of the Tanya*, 105. Translation from Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 51.
36. Acronym for R. Isaac Luria- Divine, Rabbi, Isaac. The only Rabbi in history whose acronym included the name of God.
37. *Letters of the Author of the Tanya*, 105. Translation from Elijah, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, 21
38. It is interesting that R. Abraham's critique of R. Shneur Zalman, is very similar to the Mitnagdim's general critique of the Hasidim. The Mitnagdim, were not opposed to the study of the esoteric tradition, as the leaders—the Gaon of Vilna and R. Haim of Volozhin—were published scholars of mysticism; rather, they opposed the consumption of mystical texts by the general masses.
39. Hasidic thought explains that God's presence in the world is immanent. Man, potentially, has the ability to cleave to the Divine—this is the concept of *D'veikut*. However, one must be on a high spiritual level in order to achieve this sense of cleaving. Thus, the *Zaddik*—the Hasidic leader who is on a higher spiritual level—has the ability to cleave to God. He is a part of the upper and lower worlds simultaneously. He serves as an axis for his followers. In this way, he collapses the distinctions between the divine and corporeal world. Since the average person is not able to cleave to God, he cleaves to the *Zaddik*. It is through his unique relationship with the *Zaddik*, by way of cleaving to him, that the Hasid is able to cleave to God. See Arthur Green, "The Zaddik as Axis Mundi," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (1977): 327-47; Rachel Elijah, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism* (Oregon, 2006), 126-151. See also Ada Rapoport-Albert, "God and Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hasidic Worship," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, ed. Gershon Hundert (New York, 1991), 299-329.
40. Loewenthal, *Communicating*, 51.
41. *Ibid*, 77-86.