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THE ROLE OF MESSIANISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF HASIDISM*

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After the conversion of the false messiah Shabbetai Tzvi in 1666, world Jewry fell into a deep depression. Many had felt that the long-awaited Redemption had been imminent, but now they were condemned to live in an unredeemed world which continued to despise them.¹ Israel Baal Shem Tov (the Besht), and the followers of Hasidism, stepped into this vacuum of hope. Founded in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, Hasidism arose from the ashes of Shabbetai Tzvi and his messianic message. The question that has puzzled scholars for years, however, is this: What role did messianism play in the development of Hasidism? This paper will examine the arguments of various scholars of Hasidism, and draw conclusions about this revolutionary movement.

The single most famous Hasidic document related to messianism is a letter sent by the Besht to his brother-in-law, R. Gershon of Kutov, around 1752. In it, the Besht describes a journey of his soul to Heaven, where he meets the Messiah and asks when the Redemption will occur:

I went up stage after stage until I entered the palace of the Messiah where the Messiah studies Torah with all the *Tanna'im* and *Tzadikim* . . . and I asked the Messiah: when will he come, and he answered: until your teaching will spread throughout the world.²

According to Gershom Scholem, the version published by the Besht's close pupil, R. Yaakov Yosef, has a more authentic ring to it, especially the expanded answer of the Messiah:

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¹ Bernard Martin, *A History of Judaism*, vol. 2. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974), 166-167.

² Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 182.

By this you shall know it: when your doctrine will be widely known and revealed throughout the world and what I taught you will be divulged outward from your own resources. . . . And then all the husks [the powers of evil] will perish and the time of salvation will have come. And I—continues the Baal Shem—was bewildered because of this answer and I was greatly aggrieved by the enormous length of time until this would be possible.³

Some scholars maintain that this letter proclaims the movement's Messianic character. Some also assume that the letter might not refer at all to the specific teachings of the Besht, but rather to his esoteric practices, such as fasting from Sabbath to Sabbath. Such claims seem strangely out of focus, says Scholem, for no one knew of the letter's existence during the Besht's lifetime.⁴ Furthermore, continues Scholem, the letter explicitly mentions the Besht's teachings and doctrines, and not any of his esoteric practices. Such practices were not instrumental in spreading Hasidism's fame, and were certainly not a vital aspect of the movement after the Baal Shem's death. Thus the letter, far from proving that messianism held a prominent position in Hasidism, shows how it became marginalized. For Hasidism, messianism could not be seen as an immediate hope. To be sure, the answer of the Messiah did not encourage the Besht. Rather, it saddened him, as he felt that the time of his teachings being known far and wide (and, thus, the time of the Messiah's advent) was a long while off.⁵

According to Scholem, Hasidism did not place messianism at the center of its belief system. Rather, Hasidism used messianism for a different purpose. In the years prior to the emergence of Hasidism, the study of Kabbalah was popular. One of its main aspects was messianism. Hasidism took on those aspects of Kabbalah which were capable of evoking a popular response, but stripped them of their messianic nature. Since the mystical and apocalyptic elements in Kabbalah were dangerous for a generation following Shabbetai Tzvi, Hasidism de-emphasized many of them. Scholem writes that instead of assuming that Hasidism eliminated any and all aspects of Kabbalah related to messianism, it is more correct to say that Hasidism "neutralized" messianism. Hasidism knew that to promote a movement revolving around messianism was akin to philosophical suicide. No one, save for the continued believers in Shabbetai Tzvi, would be interested in supporting such a risky movement. It was one thing to allot a niche to the idea of redemption, but quite another to place this concept, with all it implied, at the center of religious life and thought.⁶

³ *ibid.*, 183.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), 329-330.

There were many who feared that Hasidism would be a new form of Sabateanism. The Hasidim introduced certain rituals and practices into their lives, such as ecstatic swaying during prayer, performing *shehita* with more finely honed knives than previously used, and frequenting their *rebbe*s for guidance, even for intervention with God.⁷ At the time, such rites were considered bizarre. The Mitnagdim feared these deviations, and forcefully denounced Hasidism. Some historians claim that partly as a response to this opposition, Hasidism put its primary emphasis on personal religious growth, rather than on national salvation.⁸ The idea of redemption, according to the Besht, was different from the traditional school of Lurianic Kabbalah. Redemption was no longer seen as a method of *tikkun olam*. It was now seen as a method to bring man and God together. *Deveikut*, or communion with God, was advocated as the goal of all people. Hasidism did not seek to destroy the exile from without; that is, bring on the ultimate Redemption. Rather, it sought to destroy the exile from within, by exhorting Jews to achieve closeness to God through heartfelt prayer and devotion.⁹ In this way, Hasidism responded to its critics' fears that it advocated national salvation (that is, a new form of messianism). It continued, however, to promote a closer relationship with God, whereby believers could achieve their own personal salvation.

In contrast to Scholem, Raphael Mahler asserts that for many Hasidic *rebbe*s, messianism was a major part of their daily lives. According to Mahler, the Hasidim believed that the purpose of the exile was for Jews to gather together the "holy sparks" that had been scattered throughout the world since the days of Creation. As long as the sparks were still scattered, the exile would continue. R' Mendel of Rymanow (d. 1815), a Hasidic writer, felt that the laws passed by non-Jews permitting Jews to purchase homes were merely ruses meant to bind Jews closer to the exile, thereby preventing them from gathering the sparks. Mendel contrasted the European Jews with the tent-dwelling Egyptian Jews, whom he said did not wish to become permanent residents of the Diaspora.¹⁰

R. Mendel was not the only Hasidic leader to promote national redemption. Mahler cites several later Hasidic *rebbe*s, including R. Mendel of Kosow (1768-1826), R' Hersh of Zydaczow, and R. Naftali of Ropczyce (d. 1831), who actively spoke of the Messianic Age and imminent Redemption. According to Mahler, the faith of the ordinary Hasidism in the Redemption was as firm as their *rebbe*s'. One of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith, "Though he (the Messiah) may tarry, I await his coming every day," was a cardinal teaching

⁷ Mordecai L. Wilensky, "Hasidic-Mitnaggedic Polemics in the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe: The Hostile Phase." In Gershon David Hundert, ed. *Essential Papers on Hasidism, Origins to Present*. (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 253.

⁸ Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*. (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1991), 217.

⁹ Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 186.

¹⁰ Mendel of Rymanow, *Menahem Siyyon*, 56-57. Cited in Raphael Mahler, "Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment." In Hundert, 416-417.

of the Hasidim. One rebbe took this saying quite literally. Mahler quotes a story told of R. Sholem Rokeach of Belz who, when greeted with the traditional “Next year in Jerusalem!” when drawing water for his Passover matzot, responded, “Why should it be next year? We hope and pray that the water we have just drawn will be used tomorrow to bake matzoh in Jerusalem.”¹¹

Unlike Scholem, who maintains that Hasidism promoted more of a personal redemptive quality, Mahler writes that the expositors of Hasidic doctrine taught the concept of a total redemption—both national and spiritual. Moses of Sambor, brother of Hersh of Zydaczow, stressed a three-fold goal: “We seek the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of David, and the rebuilding of the Temple.”¹²

Drawing on both Scholem and Mahler, Joseph Weiss maintains that one must make a distinction between two different schools of Hasidic thought. According to Weiss, the school of the Great Maggid, R. Dov Baer of Mezritch (1710-1772), and R. Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810), while espousing many similar views, differed in their understanding of the Messianic era. He writes that the Maggid’s theology was not centered around the three moments of Creation, Revelation at Sinai, and Redemption by the Messiah. His experience of God, however, was based on the perception of the divine essence which is present in all things.¹³ Since the Maggid emphasized a personal, contemplative method towards drawing near to God, he minimized the intense interest in the Messiah and the collective redemption. Thus, no Messianic yearning exists in the mystical tenets of the Maggid. Since the mystical experience is not based on the historical event of the Revelation at Sinai, it is also not related to the post-historical event of the Redemption. According to Weiss, the lack of all Messianic tension is a characteristic feature of the Maggid’s “contemplative piety.”¹⁴

Unlike the Maggid’s school, the Bratslav school’s main emphasis was on the paradoxical ways of redemption. R. Nachman himself thought that his own soul was the soul of the Messiah, and at one time hoped that the final Redemption would occur during his lifetime. This is the climactic point of the two categories of Bratslavic belief: where “faith” born from despair converges at the eschatological point with “hope” born from despair. Both categories tended towards Messianic redemption, teaching that no one should lose hope that he would not see the final redemption, even if the existing situation implied otherwise.¹⁵

In relation to the state of affairs after the Messiah arrives, Weiss asserts that the Maggid and R. Nachman were consistent with their pre-Messianic beliefs.

¹¹ Isaac Ber Levinsohn, *Dover Shalom* (Przemysl, 1910), 41. Cited in Mahler, 417.

¹² Moses of Sambor, *Tefilah leMoshe*, Torah portion *Va’etchanan*. Cited in Mahler, 417.

¹³ Joseph G. Weiss, “Contemplative Mysticism and ‘Faith’ in Hasidic Piety.” *Journal of Jewish Studies* IV, (1953), 21.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 28.

The Maggid was extremely frugal in describing the changes that will take place in the days of the Messiah. In his teachings, there is no trace of a revolutionary conception of a Messianic future. As with the Revelation at Sinai, the Maggid's school did not deny that the Messianic redemption would take place. On the other hand, it never described the era of Redemption as something fundamentally different from the present state of the world.¹⁶

By contrast, the school of R. Nachman hoped for radical changes to take place when the Messiah arrived. In the present world, faith is opposed to reason. In the future world, the Bratslavers believed, faith would *become* reason. While in this world, believers believe due to faith. When the Messiah arrived, however, rational evidence would support the believer, thus vindicating him.¹⁷ Since the Bratslaver school placed so much emphasis on the Messianic age, it only made sense that when this age would occur, they would expect that the rewards for believers would exceed their greatest expectations.

Weiss concludes his argument with the following claim regarding Hasidism. He writes that in Hasidism there is no conformity on any basic religious question. Different schools of Hasidism offered different views on many aspects of Judaism. He does, however, group Hasidic thought into two theoretical systems: one direction, that of the Maggid, is of the mystical, contemplative type, with an idealistic and semi-pantheistic outlook. The other direction is based on the piety of faith, where fervent belief and trust in the coming of the Messiah may be all that is needed to hasten his arrival.¹⁸

Far from asserting that Hasidism's emphasis on personal redemption was an innovation, as Scholem claims, Moshe Idel maintains that such an emphasis was not new to the world of Jewish mysticism. Idel says that such ideas existed in the works of Jewish thinkers as early as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Consequently, there is no need to assume that there was a "neutralization" (as Scholem calls it) of external redemption, as there were more than a few earlier models for Hasidism to follow. Instead of assuming that Hasidism created new views of redemption, Idel says that it would be more plausible to consider whether the appearance of a Hasidic spiritualistic interpretation of redemption is related to existent views. Idel maintains that the special emphasis put on the doctrine of individual redemption in Hasidic thought was a result of a peripheral trend which had been marginalized over a long period of time. The reaction to Sabbateanism pushed these principles to the forefront of Jewish thought.¹⁹

Idel expands his assertion, saying that the spiritual metamorphosis in Hasidism is not limited to the transition from communal to personal redemp-

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 28-29.

¹⁹ Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 236-237.

tion. Rather, Hasidism also espouses spiritualizations of various topics only indirectly related to messianism, such as the Land of Israel, the Temple, and others. The “neutralization” of messianism in Hasidism is but one manifestation of a deeper shift in values within the Hasidic world. This shift spawned a model of mystical thought related to a kind of Kabbalah. Kabbalah was, after all, one of the factors responsible for Hasidism’s emphasis on personal redemption. According to Idel, an honest examination of the influence of messianism on Hasidism is more complex than an isolated discussion of the notion of individual redemption itself.²⁰

Criticizing Scholem’s view of the role of messianism in Hasidism, Idel writes that during the time of Hasidism’s birth, there was awakening interest in and strengthening of a spiritualistic trend that had been relegated to the background of Jewish mysticism during the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries. Specifically, Idel faults Scholem for emphasizing those forms of mystical literature which differ dramatically from Hasidism, rather than those that are closer to it. The very recourse to the term *neutralization*, argues Idel, assumes that “authentic” messianism is limited to the national-political variety, so that the spiritual, or personal, conception of messianism can only be perceived as the revocation of this “ideal” messianic element. According to Idel, this assumption is based on the acceptance of the concept of individual messianism as a late and innovative development, emerging around 1750. His contention, however, is that from the thirteenth century onward, there were discussions of the Messiah as dwelling in an individual’s higher intellect, not necessarily as redeeming Israel, and that such ideas were not results of external influences, much less a reaction to Sabbateanism. Idel concludes, “Since it is a complete system of thought possessing its own internal logic, it deserves to be studied on its own terms and not considered as a mere reaction to specific socioeconomic factors.”²¹ As opposed to Scholem, Idel believes that it is too easy to claim that Hasidism reacted to its surroundings, developing its messianic ideas around them. Instead, *perhaps* due to Shabbetai Tzvi, or perhaps due to merely a renaissance of Jewish thought, Hasidism drew on ideas long entrenched in Jewish mysticism.

It is clear that while it may be logical to conclude that Hasidism may have minimized messianism because of the debacle of Shabbetai Tzvi, the truth is that many factors probably led to the position of messianism in Hasidic thought. There is no question that Shabbetai Tzvi laid the groundwork for the enthusiastic acceptance of Hasidism by many Jews, as they were thirsting for a way to raise their spirits, “from out of the straits,” as the Psalmist put it. It is also clear that there were a number of other factors that led to the development of the

²⁰ *ibid.*, 237.

²¹ *ibid.*, 237-238.

Hasidic movement, and specifically, of the messianic element contained within. In addition to Sabbateanism, Hasidism was influenced by older ideas in Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah. It is also more correct to say that different streams of Hasidism held different views on the importance of messianism. As noted, historians have a wide range of disagreement with relation to the catalysts of the movement's spread, as well as to the role messianism played in it. Regardless of whether Hasidism originated the idea of personal redemption, marginalized the idea of national redemption, or embraced a combination of the two, one thing is certain: Israel Ba'al Shem Tov's movement altered the course of Jewish history and provided Jewish thinkers with a plethora of concepts to debate for years to come.