



Rachel Elior. *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006. xii + 258 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874774-84-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-904113-04-1.

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A Theory of Hasidism

Hasidism, in contrast to other movements that arose in Jewish Eastern Europe around the turn of the nineteenth century, has received enormous scholarly attention. Philosophers and writers have lauded Hasidism for safeguarding the East European Jewish folk genius. Social historians have marveled at its ability to flourish despite urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. Intellectual historians have deemed it Jewish mysticism's crowning phase. Rachel Elior's *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism*, a succinct and lucid explanation of Hasidic theology, may be seen as a continuation of this last approach. Elior is particularly interested in Hasidism's originator, R. Israel ben Eliezer (the Ba'al Shem Tov, c. 1700-60). Unlike other scholars of the Ba'al Shem Tov, however, who focus on his career as a mystical practitioner (*ba'al shem*) or his position in the Jewish community, Elior grapples with his innovative theology. She then expands her study to subsequent generations of Hasidic leaders.

According to Elior, central to early Hasidic theology is the attempt to access the divine presence in this world, which depends in great part on human perception and consciousness. While the kabbalistic tradition had boldly advocated a conception of man as a mirror and, indeed, redeemer of the divine, the Ba'al Shem Tov introduced the possibility of erasing the border between the human and divine realms altogether during one's day-to-day existence. In Elior's words, "The revolution that the Ba'al

Shem Tov engendered is anchored in the blurring of distinctions: between the "infinite light in the letters" and human language; between the heavenly abundance and the terrestrial delimitation; between the endowing divine and the receiving human; between sacred and profane; between the higher world and this world; between the heavenly "world of speech" and the human being in whom that world speaks; between the individual human being's soul and that of his neighbour; between life and death" (p. 67). Since every manifestation of physical reality, including human beings, contains its divine essence or "holy spark," physical reality can be both transcended and revitalized anytime and everywhere.

The first step is to realize that the physical world is merely clothing for the divine essence. Elior claims that the physical, for the Hasid, is mere illusion; that divine imminence is the "sole essential reality" (p. 83). But the major achievement of her book is its description of how Hasidim responded to the paradoxical quality of physical reality: by constantly seeking out "the divine vitality, the infinite energy of the 'nothingness' that energizes all being" (p. 110), a Hasid obtained a "divine perspective on reality," which enabled an elevated state of coalescence with God known as *devekut* (p. 113). He could thereby become both an "emissary from the terrestrial world to the higher world" and a conduit for the earthly community to receive "celestial abundance" (p. 125). One who mastered this art of moving between spheres of being and

nothingness became a *tzaddik*, the Hebrew term for a Hasidic leader.

Elior recovers one important feature of the movement's early historical context: the pervasiveness of Sabbateanism—a mystically informed, antinomian messianic movement—in eighteenth-century Eastern European society. The contemporaneous movement led by Jacob Frank was only the latest and most visible manifestation of Sabbateanism to inflame rabbinic sensitivities to any manifestation of popular mysticism. While Hasidism was not Sabbateanism, and while its ritual innovations had been practiced by non-Hasidic pious ascetics since the sixteenth century, those who condemned Hasidism were concerned that access to the kabbalistic tradition should remain the exclusive right of the elite possessing the approbation of the community lest another Sabbatean storm be unleashed (p. 99).

The book elides important scholarly debates about the historical reliability of sources. Expositions of teachings can be repetitive, comparisons (e.g., between the Besht and Jacob Frank) can be heavy-handed. Possible non-Jewish influences on early Hasidism are not fathomed. Most seriously, Hasidic leaders are not treated as real personalities inhabiting diverse places in Eastern and East-Central Europe. We miss the Ba'al Shem Tov's self-transformation: his origins as a secluded ascetic, his development into an itinerant ba'al shem, his arrival as a ba'al shem-in-residence and leader of a mystical cir-

cle in the town of Międzybóże, a prosperous trade hub and administrative center of the Czartoryski estates. The Ba'al Shem Tov's disciples, who forged Hasidism into a movement, seem to inhabit a historical vacuum. Beginning in 1772, the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth was dismembered and Jews became subjects of various absolutist empires, with the exception of those residing in the semi-autonomous, constitutional, urbanized, and industrialized Duchy of Warsaw (soon, the Congress Kingdom of Poland). Hasidism underwent a process of regionalization. Tzaddikim in areas under direct absolutist rule instituted dynastic succession and other royalist markers during this period. In contrast, Polish tzaddikim like Jacob Isaac of Przysucha and, later, Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica broke away from their masters and, with the backing of some of the region's prominent bankers, entrepreneurs, and industrialists, formed competing Hasidic schools. The immensity of plutocratic influence, the weakness of dynastic succession, and other unique features of the central Polish context belie Elior's attempt to reduce those disciple rebellions to simple theoretical disagreements (chapter 11). But as a fresh explanation of Hasidic theory that captures the early movement's appeal in an accessible manner, *The Mystical Origins of Hasidism* stands as a singular contribution. We begin to grasp how Hasidism's novel perception of the world offered adherents a sense of limitless possibility. As some recent treatments have tended to avoid Hasidic texts altogether, Elior's reminder of the potency of those texts is quite welcome.

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