A Fresh Perspective on the History of Hasidic Judaism

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Introduction

In this article, I shall examine the history of Hasidic Judaism, a mystical,[1] ultra-orthodox[2] branch of Judaism, which values joyfully worshipping God's presence in nature as highly as the strict observance of the laws of Torah[3] and Talmud.[4] In spite of being understudied, the history of Hasidic Judaism has divided historians until today. Indeed, Hasidic Jewish history is not one monolithic, clear-cut, straightforward chronicle. Rather, each scholar has created his own narrative and each one is as different as its author. While a brief introduction such as this cannot enter into all the myriad divergences and similarities between these stories, what I will attempt to do here is to incorporate and compare an array of different views in order to summarise the history of Hasidism and provide a more objective analysis, which has not yet been undertaken. Furthermore, my historical introduction in Hasidic Judaism will exemplify how mystical branches of mainstream religions might develop and shed light on an under-researched division of Judaism. The main focus of

1 Mystical movements strive for a personal experience of God or of his presence and values intuitive, spiritual insight or revelationary knowledge. The knowledge gained is generally 'esoteric' ('within' or hidden), leading to the term 'esotericism' as opposed to exoteric, based on the external reality which can be attested by anyone.

2 Ultra-orthodox Jews adhere most strictly to Jewish law as the holy word of God, delivered perfectly and completely to Moses on Mount Sinai.

3.The Torah comprises the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament to Christians) and contains fundamental Jewish law, it is also used to refer to the whole body of Jewish law.

4 The 'oral law' of Judaism interprets and discusses laws from Torah and the Tanach, the entire Hebrew Bible.

the introduction will be on eighteenth century Hasidic Judaism, which is when the Hasidic movement began to gain momentum.

Beginning: the Second till the Eighteenth century

> 'All beginnings are hard,' Chaim Potok, *In the Beginning* (1975, p.9)

This is certainly true for Hasidism. Contrary to popular belief, Hasidism did not come into being ex nihilo during the eighteenth century or as a result of its most renowned leader, the Ba'al Shem Tov.[5] The origin of the word hasid is chesed, one of the twelve sephirot,[6] and means 'loving-kindness'.[7] The first reference to Hasidic Jews comes from the Bible, where human beings who love God and are loved by Him are referred to as 'hasid' (Rosman 1996, p.27). This love is expressed through the fulfilment of mitzvoth (commandments). There are other references to Hasidim throughout Jewish history, beginning with the people who first organized the resistance against the Hellenization in the land of Israel in the second century B.C.E. (Rosman 1996, p.28). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we find the Hasidei Ashkenaz, a mystical, ascetic group situated in Germany, whose leader was Rabbi Judah Hasid (Rosman 1996, p.28). Then, in the late sixteenth century, there were groups in Israel who were profoundly inspired by Kabbalistic thinkers such as Isaac Luria (1534-1572) and Moses Cordovero (1562-1625) who

5 A title Israel ben Eliezer received when he became a spiritual leader; it is also shortened to Baalshem or Besht. I shall explain more about him and his role below.

6 A Kabbalist concept which comprises twelve, originally ten, vessels or emanations of God, together forming the 'Tree of Life'. The first mention is in the *Sepher Yetzirah* or the Book of Creation (3rd-6th century) which is one of the earliest texts in Kabbalah and in the Renaissance this mystical concept has been developed by Isaac Luria (1534-1572). Kabbalah is essential to Hasidic Judaism, I will expound on this below.

7 Interestingly enough, the word 'metta', an essential concept in Buddhism has exactly the same meaning, 'loving-kindness'.

formed 'holy associations', adhering to strict ascetic and mystical practices (Rosman 1996, p. 28-29). Furthermore, there was a renaissance of the ideals and practices of the Hasidei Ashkenaz in seventeenth century Germany and Poland (Rosman 1996, p.29).

Kabbalah[8] appears to be a common denominator in all of these cases (apart from the first group in the second century B.C.E. when even *avant-la-lettre* Kabbalah did not exist yet). It is an important aspect of post-Ba'al Shem Tov Hasidism as well. Kabbalah is the main form of Jewish mysticism and comprises a range of texts, from the first centuries to the present day, continually developing and expanding ideas on the origin and the nature of the God and the world. Asceticism is another binding factor and appeared to play a significant role in all of the groups mentioned above. We should also not forget the influence of Mussar[9] literature, which is arguably as significant to the movement as Kabbalah. Attempting to combine ethics and mysticism is essential to Hasidism and forms its most original element. Considering this brief historical overview and the shared characteristics of the various groups, one can see why scholars such as Moshe Rosman argue that Hasidism:

> was an outgrowth of an already existing religious orientation and not, as many have suggested, a radically new phenomenon that came as history's response to a crisis of Judaism or of Jewish society. (Rosman 1996, p.39)

However, the historical and political situation of the Jews in eighteenth century Eastern Europe is vital when reflecting on the rise of Hasidism as a popular and widespread movement. M. Gaster

8 The word means 'received' or 'receiving', as in received knowledge. Kabbalah is the main esoteric (mystical) movement in Judaism.

9 Literature concerned with Jewish ethics written by various rabbis, philosophers and Kabbalist thinkers beginning from the 16th century.

writes rather lyrically about the difficult circumstances of Eastern European Jews, they lived

> entirely cut off from the rest of the world, the landlords were feudal lords, there was no middle class worthy of the name and the peasants were almost ground to dust by the exactions of their feudal masters […] They were driven in upon themselves. (1928, p.x)

The isolation, suppression and poverty of most Jews living in small *shtetls* in the countryside were fertile grounds for people longing for change. Furthermore, Jewish communal self-government in Poland declined, because in 1746 the government buckled under the pressure of a large part of Polish society who wished to cease the recognition of the authority of autonomous Jewish institutions such as the *Kahal*.[10] To many, this had been a sign of the weakness of Poland's central government, which allowed for alternative authority figures to gain influence. Another context is the rise and subsequent failure of the Sabbatian movement. A Messianic[11] movement that had arisen earlier on in the seventeenth century, the Sabbatian movement had left many Jews disillusioned, yet ready for innovation.[12] These three circumstantial aspects of Eastern European Jewry in the eighteenth century are considered

10 A kahal served as a Jewish community council, it was an executive board that was elected to run an autonomous European Jewish community administering religious, legal, and communal affairs.

11 Jews, as the Christians did before Christ, await the coming of the Messiah, the saviour of the world who will restore primordial harmony and expel those who have sinned. Sabbatai Zevi had presented himself as a likely candidate and his conversion to Islam and subsequent failure of the Sabbatian Messianic movement, which had carried so much hope for the future of Judaism, was a great blow dealt to the Eastern European Jews who had believed in him.

12 The Sabbatian movement had diverted from and challenged Orthodox Judaism and had thus prepared the Jews for a change in their views and ways of worship.

'crises' by scholars such as Ettinger[13] and Dinur[14] and one can understand why. Hence, although the religious motives of Hasidism *sensu lato* had existed all through Jewish history, a sense of urgency seems to have accompanied its rising into a fully-fledged and established movement in the eighteenth century.

These circumstances can to some extent explain the large following of the eighteenth century Hasidic movement. Yet above all, the popularity of the movement has traditionally been ascribed to its most prominent leader, the Ba'al Shem Tov. However, several scholars have questioned whether the Baalshem really did play such a crucial role in the birth of eighteenth century Hasidism, perhaps he has merely been remembered thus. Weiss observes that:

> Against the conventional picture of the single-handed foundations of the movement by Israel Baalshem, the historian would be inclined to venture that Hasidism did not originate with any one charismatic leader as its sole founder, but that it grew out of a number of marginal groups each harbouring some charismatics, and that the group connected with the name of Israel Baalshem proved the most successful one generation later. (1997, p.4)

Before the rise of the Hasidic movement, smaller groups of pneumatics lived on the periphery of Jewish society and for a while, these groups existed simultaneously until the breakthrough of Hasidism. A pneumatic, a term borrowed from Gnosticism, is a person who longs to escape the material world and become (re)united with God in the highest pleroma (the highest layer of the

13 See Shmuel Ettinger. 1996. "Hasidism and the *Kahal* in Eastern Europe" in *Hasidism Reappraised*. (Ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert. London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization) and Ettinger 1991. "The Hasidic Movement – Reality and Ideals." in *Essential Papers on Hasidism* (Ed. David Hundert. New York, NYUP).
14 See Benzion Dinur. 1991. "Origins of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Foundations" in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*. (Ed. David Hundert. New York: NYUP).

divine sphere). Here it can be translated as mystic. According to Weiss, some two generations after the Baalshem, independent circles gradually disappeared or merged into the rapidly spreading Hasidic movement, with 'the name of the Baalshem surviving in the historical consciousness of Hasidism as that of a founder and central leader' (1997, p4-5). Weiss even argues that the Baalshem was a low-status idler attempting to gain acceptance in the 'Kutov' group,[15] whose leader was the gifted pneumatic R. Gershon of Kutov, through marrying his daughter. Gershon was a respected scholar, whereas the Baalshem was untutored, not well-versed in Talmud and belonging to the lower classes; by marrying Gerhson's daughter, he had a chance of gaining influence and recognition,[16] Only much later did Gershon's son, the brother of the bride, acknowledge the Besht as an authentic pneumatic. Another scholar, Jacob Katz, has similar ideas about the initial emergence of smaller Hasidic groups and the role played by the Besht. In *Tradition and Crisis* he states that

> In the new Hasidic groups, a few personalities stood out whose historical features have been more or less preserved by tradition… In social status, these personalities were members of the sub-intelligentsia of Jewish society – preachers, exhorters, miracle workers… Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov emerged as the leading figure among them, and it was due to his intensely sensitive personality that the movement was channelled into a clearly-defined course. (1961, p.232-233)

Again, the Besht here appears to be only one of the initiators of the movement, although Katz gives him slightly more credit by asserting that the Baalshem guided the movement, yet at the same time his opinion of the Besht is quite low (Katz sees him as a member of the

15 One of the smaller Hasidic groups, the Baalshem married the leader's daughter.
16 One can imagine that this is rather a different take than that of Hassidic Jews on how the Besht married Kutov's daughter.

'sub-intelligentsia', on par with exhorters). This could come as a surprise, but in fact, every scholar seems to have his or her own view on the Baalshem and those early years of the movement and as mentioned, opinions diverge quite dramatically. Simon Dubnow aptly remarks that

> The historical image of the progenitor of Hasidism is clouded by a fog of miracle stories with which the folk adorned its beloved hero. The veil woven by the imagination of his contemporaries and of later generations obscures the reality of the Besht's actual character to such an extent that it sometimes seems as if he was not a real person at all, but a myth, an imaginary name attached to the force that created a religious movement that shook the Jewish world. (1991 p.25)

It is impossible to ascertain the complete truth about the Besht and the very beginning of Hasidism with the material we have at our disposal today. Yet, the traditional biography of the Besht, however mythologised, is crucial to understanding the Hasidic movement and its religious thought. Moreover, since the model of learning privileged within Hasidism is not based on texts but on the direct master-disciple relationship, the life of the Baal Shem Tov forms an exemplary guide to the life of every modern Hasid. For these reasons, the Baalshem's biography should be taken into consideration in any work regarding the development of the history of Hasidic Judaism.

Israel ben Eliezer's beginning was in a small village in Podolia, Poland, around the year 1700, though due to his parents' advanced age, Israel was orphaned when he was a child. His father's famed last words were, 'My beloved son, remember this as long as you live – God is with you. You need not be afraid of anything' (Quoted in Dubnow 1991, p.27). For the boy, these words would

become a motto and a prophecy, 'a confirmation of his own teaching that man is in a constant, solitary encounter with his Creator' (Dubnow 1991, p.27). Fortunately, Israel was well taken care of by his community and they saw to it that he received an orthodox Jewish education in a *heder*[17] or *talmud torah*.[18] The boy was certainly intelligent and showed an aptitude for learning, but in the end he could not bear the restrictions of the school routine: 'he would study for a few days, and then he would stay away from class' (Dubnow 1991, p 27). Instead, he would sit in the forest by himself in the manner of the young Buddha. In his novel *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok invokes this image of Israel,

> …he would walk under the trees, look at the flowers, sit by a brook, listen to the songs of the birds and to the noise of the wind in the leaves. As often as his teachers brought him back, so often did he run away to these woods, and after a while they gave up and left him alone. (1966, p.108)

This remained the most important object in his life: quiet contemplation of God in nature. Yet before long when Israel became a beadle at the *beit midrash*,[19] he also began to study esoteric texts,[20] Lurianic Kabbalah, Chaim Vital and anything else Jewish mysticism had to offer, quite in line with the founders and members of earlier Hasidic groups.

However, alongside his investigations into the nature of God, Israel also wanted to help people and at the age of thirty-five, after he had married Gershon's daughter and subsequently spent seven

17 Private elementary school.
18 Charity school.
19 Study hall in a synagogue or yeshiva.
20 As previously mentioned (see footnote 1), esoteric knowledge is based on personal divine insight, a moment of divine enlightenment which is taken as the starting point of a concept or theory about the nature of God, the world and humanity and their relationship.

years in solitude in the Carpathian mountains,[21] he revealed himself to be a holy man, a kabbalist, a miracle worker, in short, a *baal shem* (master of the name). Thus he remained for ten years - travelling, performing miracles, exorcising demons, writing amulets, healing people and teaching them (Horodezky 1928, p.5) like other *baalei shem* of his time. Yet, soon it became evident that the Besht was not an ordinary *baal shem* and he received the name *Ba'al Shem Tov* (master of the good name), which became his special title.

After ten years, another transformation took place as the Besht became a spiritual teacher; he ceased his travels, settled down in Miedzyboz, Podolia and concerned himself with the community he established. Interestingly, he also began experiencing altered states of consciousness[22] which guided him in his teaching. Despite of his humble beginnings, the Baalshem had become a true leader at last and, even though he was a representative of a different type of Judaism, there was perhaps less antagonism between the Hasidim and the Orthodox Jews than one would expect. Rosman and Ettinger argue that rather than opposing the *kehalim,*[23] the Baalshem engaged and even cooperated with them, even though in later years conflict certainly would arise (see Rosman 1996 and Ettinger 1996 please correct page references (no exact page reference, they both write about this extensively, I added 'see').

The Besht is said to have died on the first day of Shavuot, 1760. He had appointed one of his greatest disciples, Dov Ber of Miedzyrzecz, as his successor, (Horodezky 1928, p.17) but he did

21 His wife lived below in the village and she would sell the clay he hacked from the mountain.

22 These can be seen as the aforementioned moments of divine insight (see footnote 20)

23 Members of the *Kahal* see footnote *Kahal* page 2.

not leave behind any textual doctrinal work. The 'gospel' of the Baalshem, the *Shivhei Habesht*, was first published in 1814 in Kapost and contains about 250 tales about the Besht and his circle. Its author is the aforementioned Dov Ber, who heard the stories from various people and collected them, placing them in the order he saw fit (Rosman 1996, p.203).[24] It is in part from these stories that we have to extract the truth, although it is in question whether that truth is all-important. Arnold Mandel illustrates this when he writes that 'l'un des propos prêtés au Baal-Chem-Tov est le suivant: 'aucune de ces histoires n'est de moi' et cette remarque même procède encore de la légende'[25] (Mandel 1974, p.11). Besides, as Immanuel Etkes remarks:

> the mythological figure of the Besht is not only the product of the imaginations of fervid Hasidim… but was first of all an effect of the deep impression the Besht had made on his contemporaries. (Etkes 2005, 211)[26]

Whether through his stories or his person, the Baalshem definitely made an impression; by the early 19th century, Hasidism had become a major movement in the greater part of the East European communities in the Ukraine and Eastern Galicia, Poland, White Russia, Rumania and Hungary, and formed a small minority in Lithuania (Dinur 1991, p.86). [27]

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24 Most scholars agree upon it not being a very reliable, historical account but belonging to hagiography. For more on the *Shivhei Habesht* see Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht*. (Trans. Saadya Sternberg. Waltham (MA): Brandeis UP, 2005)

25 Trans. 'One of the statements attributed to the Baal Shem Tov is: "none of these stories are mine" and even this remark still carries the legend' (own translation).

26 The *Shivhei Habesht* could therefore remind one of the gospels of Jesus Christ. Horodezky makes this point, although the Besht is also compared to a Shaman by Rosman and Hasidic Jews to Mongolian Buddhists by Gaster.

27 Although, according to Joseph Weiss, it was Dov Ber who managed to transform the scattered groups of Hasidim ('pneumatics') into a popular movement. See: *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism&Hasidism*. Ed. David Goldstein. London: the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997, 10.

Changes: the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century

From the beginning of its renewal ignited by the Baal Shem Tov, Hasidism underwent many changes. Inevitably, mystic and esoteric elements disappeared as Hasidism institutionalised and the study of Talmud once more took precedence over the study of Kabbalah, a process that was reinforced by the conflicts with the Mitnaggedim[28] over the neglect of Torah study (Wilensky 1991, p.266). A large, popular movement hardly ever retains the esoteric knowledge it began with, because its size and organisation requires the knowledge taught to be accessible, conventional and exoteric. Soon after the Baalshem's death, different leaders arose, each forming their own school of thought, the principal three being Bratslav,[29] Chabad Lubavitch[30] and much later Satmar.[31] Gradually, the position of Zadikk[32] became hereditary in most Hasidic schools and over the course of the nineteenth century, leadership crystallised into a network of dynasties, transmitting authority from one generation to the next and thus preserving each dynasty's distinct character and identity (Rapoport-Albert 1996, p.103). The Lublin denomination, named after the famed 'Seer of Lublin',[33] conceived the role of the Zaddik[34] in a new light, as above all he became a guide who leads his Hasidim to Torah and to God (Mahler 1991, 453). This means that although in the early days of Hasidism, each and every Hasid

28 Ultra-orthodox Jews, or 'opponents' of Hasidism.
29 Non-dynastic, founded by the great Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810).
30 Founded by Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the great-grandson of Judah Loew (the Maharal of Prague), who was the youngest and one of the most prominent members of Dov Ber.
31 Founded by Joel Teitelbaum (1887-1979) a Hungarian rabbi who managed to escape Nazi occupied Hungary on the Kastner train.
32 Head of a Hasidic dynasty.
33 Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz.
34 Leader of a Hasidic group.

had to strive for communion with God (*devekuth*) and consequently live the life of a strict ascetic, after the Seer of Lublin, Hasidim would adhere to their Zaddik who would adhere to God (Ettinger 1991, p.232). Modernism influenced Hasidism as well, insofar as certain denominations (such as the Przysucha-Kock school especially successful among the middle-class) placed the emphasis on the individual as opposed to the communal and the intellectual as opposed to joyous devotion. This individualised and intellectualised form of Hasidism echoed the assumed notion of superiority its members felt over the lower classes that were uncritically caught up in their traditional religious practices and the routine of daily life (Mahler 1991, p.454).

One should also to keep in mind the social and cultural developments in Western Europe at the time. The Age of Enlightenment had begun in the eighteenth century and the *Haskalah*, Jewish Enlightenment, was a direct result thereof. Jews in Western Europe had begun to assimilate, since ostensibly they were able to change their position in society and correspondingly began to grow weary of the insularity of Jewish community. Hence, the *Maskilim*, a group of Jews inspired by the *Haskalah,* sensed Judaism was ready for change, but following a different track, they believed Judaism needed modernization according to their new found enlightened values. Initially, Eastern European countries, most notably Poland, lacked the comfortable middle class to carry this movement, thus the *Haskalah* never gained a foothold in Poland and was far weaker in neighbouring countries, which allowed more space for Hasidism to expand.

Yet, soon there were other threats to Hasidism. During the second half of the nineteenth century, rural poverty drove many

Jews to the cities where they usually became workers or artisans (Gutwirth 2005, p.11). Here, they became exposed to secular socialist movements and Zionism, which offered alternative approaches to redeeming their suffering (Sharot 1982, p.189). Furthermore, the acculturation of the bourgeois led to assimilation and to make matters worse, as Joseph Dan describes:

> This was followed by the pogroms of the 1905 revolution which further undermined the existence of Hasidic communities in Russia; new ideologies [arose] and many youngsters responded by deserting their Hasidic families. This erosion culminated with the upheavals of the First World War, the Russian Revolution and civil war, and the annihilation of Jewish culture in the Soviet Union under Stalin. The traditional basis of the Hasidic movement was completely wiped out, and the Jewish *shtetl* of the nineteenth century vanished without a trace. From every point of view, it seemed that Hasidism could not survive as a spiritual force in post-1917 Europe. (1996, 418)

Even though after the First World War the political representatives of the newly formed state Poland had signed minority clauses giving Jews equal rights during the Versailles Peace Conference, these signatures turned out to be worthless. Hasidic Jews in Poland, by then the largest concentration of Hasidim found anywhere with over three and a half million Jews by 1939, continued to endure severe discrimination and political anti-Semitism. A result of this was mass emigration from Russia to the United States – which had already begun in the 1880's – despite of the fact that Hasidic leaders dissuaded their followers from moving, apprehensive of the relatively open and secular societies in the West (Sharot 1982, p.189). Yet Hasidism managed to survive outside of Russia in neighbouring countries, especially in Hungary and Romania, where it swelled and thrived. Hasidic courts that had been

banished from Belorussia and Ukraine established new homes in Warsaw and other Polish cities, the Zaddikim, the God-invested leaders of the Hasidim, set up new synagogues and schools for their followers, disregarding the presence of Jewish secularism all around them (Dan 1996, 418).

Challenges: 1939 till the Present

In 1939, by far the greatest disaster struck Hasidism and other Jewish denominations with the outbreak of the Second World War and the onset of the *Shoah*. The *Shoah* imperilled the physical existence of Hasidic Jews, but it also tested their devotion and fidelity to the Hasidic way of life, as the Zaddik and his adherents all went through the hardest trial of their faith. Pesach Schindler, who has done extensive research on Hasidic Judaism and the Holocaust, asserts that:

> The period of World War II witnessed the annihilation of the great majority of the Hasidic leaders and their adherents… The Zaddik in the main, and consistent with Hasidic tradition, would refuse to be separated from his flock. He served as a source of strength, comfort, and faith during a crisis which shook the foundations of the Hasid's physical and spiritual existence. (1990, p.17)

The rigid religious beliefs of the Hasidic Jews turned out to be essential to retaining self-respect and maintaining the integrity of one's personality in the face of the perpetrator's best efforts to destroy it. As Schindler states:

> The general frame of faith, the specific concepts, and the social units may have served as the type of shock absorbers and defences reported by Bruno Bettelheim in his psychoanalytic studies of concentration camp inmates. He noted that the more substantial and sustained the realm of 'private behaviour', the more bearable and, possibly, meaningful was the trauma of Holocaust events. (1990, p.120)

In addition, the original element of Hasidic Judaism, the centrality of mysticism, may have helped Hasidic Jews live with or endure the trauma of the *Shoah*. Schindler quotes two scholars on this point: first of all Baruch Kurzweil, who states that:

> the tragic personality is an entity sealed up within itself, whereas emphasis of the self within an entity higher than itself characterizes the mystic personality. (1990, p.121)

Since, the whole life of a Hasid revolves around adhering to God, *devekuth*, or adhering to God through his Zaddik, Kurzweil makes a valid point. Steinman has a similar theory, arguing that replacing the narrow-minded focus on one's own life with the permanent view on God, allows:

> a sense of trust emanating from a soul which originates in the Holy Source […] and arouse [the] courage inspired by a Holy Spark (*azut dekedushah*). (1990, p.221)

There were, however, Hasidic Jews who survived World War II outside of the concentration camps. While in Poland, very few had lived through the Nazi massacres and the time spent in the death camps, some Hasidim were able to survive by having been forgotten. Jacques Gutwirth has shared an astounding story. Hasidic Jews who had fled to the area of Poland occupied by the Soviet Union shortly after the German invasion in 1939 were forced either to return to the Nazi-occupied zone or to become Soviet citizens and live more than 100 kilometres away from the border. Some Hasidim actually chose to return to the places under German occupation from which they had come, which paradoxically saved their lives because the Soviet authorities deported everyone who made this choice to Siberia. This group thereby escaped the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and despite many hardships the majority of them managed to survive in Siberia. (2005, p.13)

More Hasidim survived in Hungary, since it was not occupied until 1944 because of its allegiance with Germany, which meant that systematic deportations to concentration camps did not begin until March 1944. Since these deportations commenced so late in the war, one third of the Hungarian Jews survived.[35] In Romania, Jews suffered from persecutions by their own government, as they had done in Hungary, but they were not subjected to Nazi tyranny. The surrender of Romania to the USSR in 1944 prevented the deportation plans prepared by the Nazis.[36] Furthermore, there were small Hasidic communities in Palestine, England and the United States who were fortunate enough to remain outside of the grasp of the Nazis (Gutwirth 2005, p.13).

After the war, the remaining Hasidic communities were transplanted to the United States and Israel (Schindler 1990, p.17). Most Hasidim who entered the United States after WWII settled in New York, in three Brooklyn boroughs: Williamsburg, Borough Park and Crown Heights. Nowadays, most Satmar (one of the most insular communities with about 30,000 adherents) live in Williamsburg and the Lubavich (the largest and most open community with 250,000 members) have their centre in Crown Heights. New York also has several minor Hasidic groups, such as Bratslav, Stolin, Vishnitz, and Bobov, most with fewer than one hundred families (Sharot 1982, p.505). After the Shoah, the Hungarian, Rumanian and Slovakian Hasidim became as numerous as the Hasidic Jews from Poland, for the reasons explained above.

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35 This is a very short summary, for more information see for instance Randolph L Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000.

36 As above, see for instance Matatias Carp and Andrew L. Simon. *Holocaust in Romania*. Safety Harbor: Simon Publications, 2001.

Discrepancies in misfortune have to some extent altered the native composition of the Hasidism that re-emerged after World War II (Gutwirth 2005, p.135).

It is unsurprising that after the Second World War, when Hasidic communities were already drastically reduced, Hasidism did not continue to grow as exponentially as it had before. The relatively open societies of the United States and Israel, which had no legal or political discrimination and were far less anti-Semitic, offered the chance of assimilation and many other opportunities Eastern European Jews never had. This also forced the remaining members of Hasidism to become more consciously introversionist, since the majority of the Hasidim now live in large cities which include substantial social and cultural diversity (Sharot 1982, p.512).

Turning inwards and firmly regulating any contact with the outside world has its downsides. Some members feel they have no choice but to live according to the Hasidic lifestyle, even if they wish to do differently. Although the core of the religion can be described as joyful devotion to God, the actual day to day practice means the strict obedience of severe rules, which can be especially oppressive to women and arguably to all members, yet most Hasidim stay. Sharot explains that:

> the Hasidim have no formalized procedures for the acceptance and expulsion of members, but they have achieved great success in maintaining their distinctive way of life […] This success may be [due to] three sets of mechanisms: insulation, commitment and social control. (1982, p.504)

The combination of these three factors may keep members in their respective congregations, but it certainly comes at a steep price, as does the choice to leave, which evidently means ending nearly every

friendship and breaking all family ties – the complete and utter abandonment of the community (see Winston 2005 and Feldman 2012).

As to the spiritual core of the present movement, the question is whether there continue to be new mystical or intellectual leaders like the Baal Shem Tov, Dov Bear, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and others who guided the first expansion of Hasidism. According to Joseph Dan and Marc-Alain Ouaknin the answer is negative. Dan remarks that:

> the search for the spiritual or ideological foundations of the present revival of the Hasidic movement has yielded virtually nothing. Not only are new ideas apparently absent, but the old spiritual teachings are giving way to a new emphasis on the external features of Jewish life. (1996, 421-422)

While Marc-Alain Ouaknin comments :

> de l'extérieur, ce hassidisme est encore vivant, il compte de nombreux adeptes, mais il manque ce qui fit la révolution hassidique : la force de se renouveler et de s'inventer. [37] (1990, p.92)

Dan and Ouaknin make valid points; Hasidism is becoming as traditional as Orthodox Judaism was at the time of the Baalshem.[38] Perhaps the lingering threat of the *Shoah* caused people to be more cautious and conservative, preserve the little they managed to save instead of adding and reinventing – and perhaps in time this will change. Moreover, it appears that adherence to the hereditary Zaddikim was the key factor, if not the only one, which secured the

37 Trans. 'From the outside Hasidism is still alive, it has many followers, but it lacks what created the Hasidic revolution: the strength to renew and to be inventive.' (own translation)

38 As mentioned above, the reverence for God's presence in nature, the joyful way of worship and the study of Kabbalah have been replaced with traditional Talmud study in many dynasties.

preservation and renewal of Hasidism after the mayhem of recent history (Dan 1996, p.423). The hereditary Zaddik proved to be the strongest link with the past communities and, presently, it is the 'cult' of the Zaddik and faith in his redemptive powers that form the main distinctive qualities separating Hasidism from Ultra-orthodox Judaism. The - according to Joseph Dan - inevitable question, 'is there a form of Jewish mysticism that is alive today?' (1996, p.426) can be answered thus: the belief in 'mystical leadership', an inherently modern Jewish phenomenon, which came to its fullest expression in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Since Hasidic Jews participate significantly in, mainly Israeli, politics (through Agudath and Degel Hatorah) extending to participating in the government, Hasidism cannot or can no longer, be described as a 'sect' despite its limited number of followers (350.000 - 400.00). Furthermore, as Gutwirth comments:

> Leaders of powerful institutions in the American Jewish establishment, such as the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, or, in France the leaders if the CRIF and the FSJU, have been more or less quick to grasp that in the context of demographic decline in the Jewish world, especially outside Israel, Hasidism, with its intense religious and community life, its assiduous practice of a Talmudic culture and its maximal endogamy represents a particularly strong model of Jewish identity, which is precisely what these institutions wish to foster. (2005, p.2)

Indeed, there is a hint of irony about the fact that Hasidic Jews, who in the eighteenth century were accused of deviance and heterodoxy, have become one of the chief carriers of a traditional form of Judaism, notwithstanding the aforementioned belief in mystical leadership.

Concluding Remarks

A clear perspective on the history of Hasidic Judaism remains rather elusive, as I have indicated at the beginning of this introduction. Shmuel Ettinger is correct when he states that 'to this day, few scholars have been able to address Hasidic history in a detached manner' (1996, p.64). When reviewing the few scholars who have examined the history of Hasidic Judaism, this becomes patently apparent. Much of Simon Dubnow's interpretation of the socio-economic context of Hasidism and his blatantly dismissive attitude to its spirituality are derived from his *Maskilic*[39] sources (Bartal 1996, p.371). Benzion Dinur saw Hasidism merely as a response to a crisis of communal organisation and weak, sometimes corrupt Jewish leadership. According to Etkes, Raphael Mahler was a Marxist and believed Hasidism to be a movement of the masses and the *petit bourgeoisie* (1996, p.449), however, Mahler believed it failed to deliver specific messages of social reform. Furthermore, as both Arthur Green and Immanuel Etkes point out, Dubnow, Dinur and Mahler '…failed to recognize the power of religious experience as a factor in the development of Hasidis' (1996, p.449). Green argues that 'Hasidism is an outbreak of radical immanentist mysticism in eighteenth-century Ukranian Judaism' (1996, p.442). Instead of regarding Hasidism merely in relation to Judaism and the circumstances of Jews at the time, Green urges to:

> take this outbreak as [an esoteric] phenomenon and try to understand what it is by considering its parallels in other contexts, places and cultures. (1996, p.443)

David Hundert renders a similar statement, the social historian 'cannot explain Hasidism, which belongs to the context of the

39 *Maskilic* refers to *Maskilim*, members of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment (see page 8-9).

development of the east European religious mentality in the eighteenth century' (1996, p.50) I think the esoteric-religious approach should not be exclusive, but it is in part how I have tried to understand Hasidism, comparing this mystical current with other currents and examining the possibilities of shared backgrounds, 'shared passions', texts and environments.[40] On the other hand, one should not stare oneself blind on the esotericism of the movement and ignore the law-based, rather constrictive reality of the Hasidim today. For Martin Buber and Elie Wiesel have both romanticised the movement, especially its origins and are reticent about negative aspects of Hasidism or the contemporary experience (Hundert 1996, 50). Hence, the esoteric-religious method should be combined with the social-historical approach in order to perceive the complete picture.

40 This broader comparison is too extensive for a 6000 word article, but it is part of my current research.

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