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THE ORIGINS OF HASIDISM

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Abstract: The present article reviews the historical background that had generated the devastation of the Jewish community in the Ukraine in the second half of the 17th century and the rising of Sabbatianism in this period that was followed by the emergence of Hasidism in the second third of the 18th century. The literary evidence, dating from 1650 onward until the end of the 18th century, reveals that the Jewish writers were concerned with the documentation of the tragic devastation that followed the Chmielnizki revolt as well as expressing profound hopes for divine vengeance and a profound hope for messianic redemption.

The discussion is focused on two spiritual responses to the tragic circumstances: Sabbatianism and Hasidism, describing the uniqueness of each one of the two major mystical-messianic-charismatic movements in the Jewish community of the modern era. The discussion includes an analysis of the inner social reality of the Jewish community, where leaders were often chosen among the members of the wealthiest families. The economical-intellectual alliance created a situation where an alternative charismatic leadership was chosen by many members of the Jewish community, who were disappointed with the rabbinic leadership and its social responsibility.

The article presents also the 12 principles of the Hasidic thought and describes the unique circumstances that affected the activity of the Baal Shem Tov in relation to the thirty five blood libels that were recorded in his life time in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth.

Hasidism originated as a new spiritual and social entity in the second third of the 18th century in Podolia [Podole], Volhynia [Wołyń], and eastern Galicia, the historical south-eastern regions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which are the western-central and north-western portions of present-day Ukraine. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (1698–1760), the movement's founder, known in acronym as the Besh't, formulated his mystical worldview while reading Kabbalistic books and manuscripts in the middle of the 1730s. This worldview, which assumed that the concealed higher divine entity and the revealed lower world are interconnected and reflected in thought and language, had significant social consequences throughout all Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. The Besh't began teaching his new ideas in Medziboz [Międzybóž] in Podolia, where in the 1740s and '50s he was invited to reside by the Jewish community as a "Doctor Kabbalista," that is to say, as a herbal healer of body and soul and teacher of Kabbalistic texts associated with the 16th century mystical tradition that claimed "Whoever wishes to learn the True Wisdom [*hokhmat ha'emet* = kabbalah] must conduct himself in the way of the pious [*derekh hasidut*]."¹

¹ See Rabbi Jacob Tsemah, *Shulhan arukh shel ha'ari*, Safed 1587 [repr. Jerusalem 1961], Introduction. On Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, see Scholem 1976: 287–324; Rosman 1996; Etkes 2005; Elior 2006.

There were three overwhelming factors which can be said to have characterized and influenced this period of Jewish history, when the study of “the true wisdom” accompanied by living according to “the way of the pious” had spread: the confounding instability of Jewish life in those years, as experienced by the Jewish communities in Podolia and south-eastern Poland who would commemorate the horrific events of the second half of the 17th century, events which included (a) the massacre of entire Jewish communities perpetrated by the enslaved Ukrainian peasants rebelling against their Polish masters during an uprising in 1648–1668 headed by Bohdan Khmelnytsky (Chmielnicki) (1595–1675) – the illiterate Greek-Orthodox Ukrainian serfs perceived the uprising as part of the national revolt against the oppression of the Catholic Polish nobility and their literate Jewish agents; (b) the Russo-Swedish war which was fought for control of the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom – this conflict took place in 1654–1656 in Poland and Lithuania and resulted in the mass murder of thousands of Jews who were charged as traitors by the Poles; (c) the continuing Muslim Tatar incursions into the Ukraine to capture white slaves for the markets in the Muslim world (1660–1699); (d) the Turkish invasion of Podolia (1672–1699); (e) “The Great Northern War” (1700–1721), fought between Russia and Sweden on Polish soil in relation to the coronation of August II from Saxony as the King of Poland, supported by the Russian Tsar and rejected by the Swedish king. This war was followed by an internal Polish war, the war of Polish Succession 1733–1738, between August III (supported by the Russians) and Stanisław Leszczyński (supported by the Swedes). The internal Polish war was fought in order to establish the dominance within the kingdom between two rival candidates who were supported by the Protestant Swedish king and the Catholic king of France (whose sister was married to Leszczyński) supporting one faction, and by the Russian tsar, the Austrian Habsburgs, and Prussian rulers supporting the other. This unstable situation generated by the endless wars and invasions resulted in catastrophic economic collapse and social disorder that engendered widespread vandalism and theft by groups of Ukrainian peasants known as “Hydamakim,” or Gydamaks, who attacked Jewish neighborhoods and settlements (1734–1744; 1750–1768) and murdered thousands of their inhabitants. The loss of life within the Jewish community in the Ukraine and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the years 1648–1768 was overwhelming in the sheer numbers involved in the course of the Ukrainian revolt (over one hundred thousand Jews perished at the hands of the Cossacks according to Polish historians. Mass pogroms of Jews also broke out in those areas from which Polish forces had withdrawn) and the various wars and invasions that followed. The illiterate and enslaved Greek-Orthodox Ukrainian serfs revolted against and murdered not only the enslaving Polish Catholic nobility who owned all the land – ruled according to feudal order, taking most of its produce – but against the Jewish agents, factors and administrators of this nobility as well. The rebelling peasants also attacked and completely destroyed Jewish synagogues, Jewish schools and study houses, adding further to the economic devastation that were the consequences of this horrendous course of events. The Jewish survivors commemorated these tragic events in prayers and ritual and by means of historical chronicles, homiletic exegesis and mystical literature. Literary evidence dating from 1650 onward until the end of the 18th century reveals that the Jewish writers were concerned with the documentation of this inconceivable and tragic devastation as well as expressing profound hopes for divine vengeance professing a profound hope for messianic redemption.

The second phenomenon that marked this period in Jewish history was the rise of Sabbatianism, a prophetic messianic movement founded by Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) in the last third of the 17th century. Sabbatai Zevi was actively supported by the “prophet” Nathan of Gaza (1643–1680) who maintained that the gift of prophecy had been restored and that he had been divinely informed that Sabbatai Zevi was the messiah. Sabbatianism, or the belief in the inception of a new prophetic messianic era, was consolidated in the wake of the 1648–1649 Jewish massacres of the Khmelnitsky uprising in the Ukraine.² Sabbatianism, which was formed by two young people – Nathan of Gaza, 22 years old in 1665, and Sabbatai Zevi, who was shocked by the massacre of 1648–1649 that took place when he was 22 years old and the large number that had followed the new messianic message and its proponents – had become a dominant factor affecting the entire Jewish community in the course of the 18th century.³ Sabbatian teachings entailed messianic hopes of meta-historical vengeance against those who had murdered thousands of helpless Jews,⁴ as well as messianic hopes for redemption of those who survived. Sabbatianism was marked by a twofold perception of life in which its followers practiced a traditional observant Jewish life to all outward appearances while maintaining a Messianic Jewish upheaval from within. Sabbatianism focused upon manifold inquiries into the nature of the messianic era – thoughts concerning the return to a primordial lawless golden era or the building of a new world founded in grace. The principles included life before primordial sin and divine punishment, the expected return to paradise, where there would be no evil, no death, and no prohibition or limitations, all occurring after the rectification of the primordial sin perpetrated by Adam and Eve through the ministrations of Sabbatai Zevi. They were also engaged in other theoretical mystical, anarchic and antinomian speculations and in their future implications. The new intellectual inquiries were much affected by the Kabbalistic literature describing the ideal messianic “Torah of the Tree of Life,” a law which included no prohibitions since it was granted before the first sin and which pertained to the messianic future. Likewise, attention was given to the traditional “Torah of the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil,” that which relates to the law of exile. The first conception was adopted by the Sabbatians, while accepted custom, the traditional Torah of the Jewish community, was rejected inwardly and observed outwardly. This twofold anarchic-messianic-antinomian movement was especially active in Smyrna and Thessaloniki in the Ottoman empire, and its disciples taught its innovations in Podolia, conquered by the Ottomans between 1672–1699, in the Ukrainian settlements of Lvov (Lwów) and Brody, in Prague, Altoona in Denmark (today within the city of Hamburg), and many other Jewish communities. The Jewish community in the 18th century was divided between those circles that adhered to the messianic-Sabbatical hopes all over Europe, while living outwardly according to the traditional way, and those rabbinical circles that fought against dissemination of Kabbalah and Messianic teachings to the broad public and persecuted the believers of Sabbatai Zevi and his followers who adhered to the Kabbalistic-messianic literature. It should be noted that **Hasidism** had started its “formal” public life in 1772, when harsh excommu-

² Leib b. Ozer, *Story of Sabbatai Zevi* (in Hebrew), transl. from original Yiddish manuscript with introduction and notes by Z. Shazar, Jerusalem 1978: 81.

³ Scholem 1973.

⁴ Scholem 1967: 522.

nications against its followers, who were perceived as **Sabbatian** heretics, were enacted in Poland, Lithuania, Galicia and the Ukraine by imminent rabbis who were involved with persecution of the Sabbateans in the previous decades.

The third phenomenon that affected Jewish life in the period of the formation of Hasidism was “the Catholic reaction” within Poland occurring in the last third of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century. The Catholic Church in Poland was threatened by the dissemination of the ideals of the Protestant Reformation in neighboring countries (Germany, Prussia, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark) and initiated a number of steps to strengthen its exclusive sacred position in the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom. These steps included reinstating medieval anti-Semitic constraints including the coerced conversion of Jews to Catholicism, the abduction of Jewish children in order to baptize them and raise them as Christians, false accusations against Jews in all economic, social and religious dimensions, the publication and dissemination of anti-Semitic literature, and the frequent orchestration of murderous blood libels.⁵

Within the lifetime of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov, approximately from 1698 until 1760, as well as within that of his parents in the last third of the 17th century, a greater number of blood libels were recorded than during any other historical period. According to two contemporary Polish historians, Zenon Guldon and Jacek Wijaczka (1977), there were 66 recorded blood libels in the 17th and 18th centuries in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁶ According to Wijaczka’s recent article, “Based on recent research we can conclude that during the Early Modern Era, 89 ritual murder accusations and trials took place in Poland (within the borders after the Union of Lublin). This includes 17 in the 16th century, 37 in the 17th century and 35 in the 18th century [...]. In total, at least 11 accusations and ritual murder trials took place in Lithuania, which brings the total to 100 trials within the Polish territories”.⁷ There were many more similar incidents that did not receive mention in Polish judicial documents but were well attested in contemporary Jewish literature.⁸ The first mystical testimony on the public activity of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov has to do with the blood libels in the 1740s and ‘50s.

In order to better understand the emergence and propagation of two significant mystical movements that defined reality in various ways – Sabbatianism and Hassidism – one needs to remember that the helpless Jewish community in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth suffered from the accumulative tragedies of (a) the Ukrainian revolt that devastated the Jewish community in the second half of the 17th century, (b) the Turkish victory over Poland which incorporated Podolia as part of the Muslim Ottoman Empire in the last third of the 17th century, (c) the Swedish conquest of the Polish kingdom that cost thousands of Jewish lives since the Catholic Poles accused the Jews of supporting the Protestant Swedish army and killed them as traitors, (d) the Polish internal coronation war in the first few decades of the 18th century that caused economic calamity and social upheaval and generated vandalism and robbery, and (e) the Catholic reaction initiated against Protestant heresy and Jewish intransigence.

⁵ See Dubnow 1930/1960: 8–18; Rosman 1996; Goldberg 1999.

⁶ Guldon/Wijaczka 1977: 99–140.

⁷ Wijaczka 2003: 208–209.

⁸ See R. Elior, *Israel Baal Shem Tov and his Contemporaries* (in Hebrew) (in press).

The Jewish community responded to these harsh situations in three manners: (a) by means of the messianic-prophetic radical Sabbatian heresy that was inspired by the Kabbalistic literature of the Zohar; (b) with the foundation of the Hasidic mystical movement that was inspired by the 16th-century Kabbalistic literature of Safed; (c) and the orthodox rabbinic conservative establishment which vigorously opposed both Sabbatianism and Hasidism and imposed severe prohibitions on the dissemination of Kabbalah and the permitted age of study of mystical literature. These responses occurred in a period in which the Jewish community found itself suffering with the rest of the Polish Lithuanian and Ukrainian population from severe socio-economic conditions following the foreign invasions and internal wars. However, due to the internal mystical developments that generated Sabbatianism and Hasidism, the persecuted Jewish community unexpectedly found itself divided internally for the first time in the modern period. This was a period in which the established traditional rabbinical leadership [known as *mitnagedim* = opponents] persecuted those who would not accept the normative authority that represented acceptance of life in exile. Those persecuted were the Sabbatian believers, who chose to follow the new Messianic beliefs expressed in Kabbalah and which were reflected in charismatic leadership that offered a new messianic world, as well as the followers of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, who chose the new mystical ways and spiritual leadership that offered a new world view that negated common distinctions. Both groups were formed in an informal way by members who freely joined and who created small alternative communities that relied on these new sources of inspiration for mystical authority and new forms of charismatic leadership. The new groups, headed by mystics, people who see the inner life as primary and who come to "know God" through inner experience, did not ask permission or seek recognition from the elected traditional rabbinical leadership of their communities. The historian Israel Halperin, editor of *The Records of the Council of the Four Lands* [*Pinkas va'ad arba aratsot*] [*Acta congressus generalis Judaeorum regni Poloniae 1580–1764*], Jerusalem 1945, which delineates marvelously the intricacy of Jewish life in the time of the dissemination of Sabbatianism and the growth of Hasidism, as well as the author of *Jews and Judaism in Eastern Europe* Jerusalem 1969, has noted that less than 1% of all the members of the Jewish community were eligible to participate in the elections to the council of the community which was responsible for the appointment of its religious and lay leaders. These leaders were the members of the wealthiest families and the educated elite that married each other, that were able to pay the highest rates of taxes that preconditioned the participation in the election.⁹ As soon as the traditional elected leadership realized that new circles were seeking alternative forms of organization related to mystical teachings and as soon as they understood that a parallel charismatic leadership nourished by messianic hopes was being formed in these circles, they themselves started to fight aggressively against them.

[A] Many Jews who were to become known as followers of Sabbatai Zevi or Sabbatians believed that the only response to the tragic situation in the harsh period between 1648–1768 was to view the traumatic events as a period of messianic birth pangs which brought forth Sabbatai Zevi as the messiah who revealed both a new messianic Torah, but also one who granted new messianic hope for the helpless survivors. After the death

⁹ See Halperin 1969: 55–60.

of Sabbatai Zevi, the belief in the new messianic era as well as the new laws which such an event entailed were disseminated by his brother-in-law, Jacob Kerido (last 25 years of the 17th century), the younger brother of Zevi's last wife Yocheved Philosoph, by his son Bruchia (last few years of the 17th century, first two-three decades of the 18th century) and by a number of Zevi's students who disseminated his writings (last three decades of the 17th century, first two thirds of the 18th century). Most of the believers who disseminated Sabbatianism were rabbis and kabbalists. They included Nathan of Gaza, R. Shlomo Florentin and R. Joseph Philosop of Saloniki, R. Hayim Malakh of Kalish (Kalisz), R. Yehuda Hasid of Shedlitz (Siedlce), R. Nehemia Hayon of Sarajevo, R. Shlomo Ayilion of Amsterdam and R. Shmuel Primo of Adrianople. Some of their students formed small Sabbatian circles within the Ukrainian Jewish community in the first half of the 18th century under the leadership of R. Haym Malakh of Kalish or Moshe Meir of Kaminka, Yacob Vilna, Elisha Shor of Rohatyn, R. Zeev Wolf of Nadvorna [Nadwórna], R. Eliezer of Aziran [Jezierzany], R. Fischel of Zlotchov [Złoczów], R. Shlomo Krakower, R. Moshe David of Podhajce, R. Jacob of Galina, R. Nahman of Busk and Jacob Frank.¹⁰ Some of the above mentioned Sabbatian teachers in Podolia were former students of distinguished Sabbatian teachers in the Moravian Jewish communities. The notable Sabbatian teachers in Moravia, in Prosnitz [Prościejów] and Prague, were R. Nehemia Hyon, R. Yehudah Leib Prosnitz and R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz.

[B] The rabbinic response from within traditional society was immediate and severe, as they proceeded to confront and oppress the messianic believers everywhere by means of proscription and outright excommunication from the second decade of the 18th century onward. The excommunications brought against the believers of Sabbatai Zevi started in 1713, continued with the struggle against R. Jonathan Eibeschuetz (1690–1764), a major Talmudic scholar who was born in Poland, raised in Prosnitz in Moravia and taught in the Central Yeshiva in Prague. Eibeschuetz was a distinguished Talmudic scholar and a notable rabbinic leader, he served as the rabbi of Metz in 1740–1750 and the rabbi of the three united German communities Hamburg, Altoona and Wandzibeck between 1750–1764, and was perceived as a major Sabbatian teacher by his fellows and students in the Great Yeshiva in Prague. Eibeschuetz was persecuted by the rabbinic leadership of the generation from 1726–1764 since the rabbis realized that many of his students in Prague returned to Podolia and Galicia, where they taught oral and written Sabbatian teachings that were ascribed to him. Those books which were ascribed to Eibeschuetz were banned in Prague in 1726 and in Brody in Galicia on the Podolian border in 1751, and their author was excommunicated in the last decade of the life of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, who was active in the same geographical region during the same period.¹¹ Further persecutions were instigated against R. Moshe Hayim Luzatto in Italy and Germany in the 1730s and '40s, again with the resumption of persecutions against Eibeschuetz in the '40s and '50s. The persecutions of the Sabbatian believers in Podolia and Galicia had reached an unprecedented peak when the rabbinic leaders of "the council of the four lands," the highest authority of the Jewish community in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, decided on recruiting the assistance of the Catholic Church and the Polish

¹⁰ Scholem 1974: 68–140.

¹¹ On the persecutions of Eibeschuetz, see Leiman 1989: 179–194; 2001: 251–263; 2008: 435–456; Leiman/Schwarzfuchs 2006: 229–249.

government against the Ukrainian-Podolian Sabbatian believers headed by Jacob Frank (1726–1791), since 1755, seeking to kill or to convert the followers, as detailed in *The Records of the Council of the Four Lands* mentioned above. The rabbinic leadership that initiated these persecutions and hostilities against the followers of the Sabbatian ideology in the second decade of the 18th century included R. Moshe Hagiz of Altoona; R. Zvi Ashkenazi (*Hakham Zevi*) of Altoona; R. Avraham Broda of Prague; in the third decade it included R. David Oppenheim of Prague, R. Jacob Joshua Falk of Lvov and Frankfurt and R. Arie Leib of Amsterdam (previously from Rzeszów), R. Jacob Popers of Frankfurt; in the fourth decade the persecutions were headed by R. Hayim Rapoport of Lvov; in the fifth decade by R. Yehezkel Landau of Prague and R. Shmuel Hillman Heilpern of Metz (born in Poland), R. Yaacov Horowitz of Brody, R. Nathan Neta b. Arie of Brody; in the sixth decade R. Yaacov Emden of Altoona, the son of *Hacham zevi*) and his two brothers-in-law: R. Arie Leib of Amsterdam and R. Yitzhak ben Meir of Biali [Biała], who was a stepbrother of Eibeschuetz; as well as Emden's three sons-in-law: R. Avraham Yoskes of Lisa [Leszno], R. Avraham haCohen of Zamotz [Zamość] and R. Baruch ben David of Bialy [Biała]. Significantly, all four relatives of R. Jacob Emden, who was R. Eibeschuetz's worthy opponent, were positioned as the four leaders of "the council of the four lands," in the middle of the 18th century, in the same period as when the Sabbatians who were Eibeschuetz's students and their followers were excommunicated in the 1750s, when Hasidism had gained a public position under the influence of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. The only Jewish leader in the mid-18th century who expressed strong resentment towards the rabbinical persecutions of the Sabbatians in 1756–1759 was Israel Ba'al Shem Tov.

[C] The third way was the Hasidic movement, which was founded in the midst of the persecutions against the Sabbatians. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov was born to elderly parents who had been harmed by the tragic circumstances of the second half of the 17th century, was orphaned in an early stage of his life, and grew to maturity in the beginning of the 18th century. He grew up outside of the normative circles of the local Jewish community and maintained that he had never studied in any school and had no formal teacher. We know from documents relating to the first two decades of the 18th century that the accumulative catastrophes of the previous century had caused the devastation of schools all over the Ukraine, and many children who were born at the turn of the century did not learn in any normal traditional order. The Ba'al Shem Tov was unique in that he claimed that all he knew had been taught to him by a heavenly mentor, the biblical prophet Ahiya HaShiloni (I Kings 11, 29–30), who was described in the Talmud (BT. Bava Batra 121a), in the Zohar (*Zohar Hadash*, Gen. 29b), and in the introduction to Mishne Torah of Maimonides, as a person who transcended normal borders of life and death while being part of the chain of the transmission of the Torah. The first students of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov as a matter of fact reported this extraordinary circumstance of his mystical tuition in their later writings concerning their teacher. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov did not write any books, and left only a few letters attesting to his capacity to transcend borders of time and place. He taught a new mystical world view which was based, in part, on previous autobiographical Jewish mystical literature that had been written in the 16th century following the expulsion from Spain but further was founded on his own original radical perceptions inspired by dreams and mystical experiences. Distinguished and learned

rabbinical authorities such as R. Yaacov Yoseph of Polonnoye [Połonne] (1704–1782), who had officiated as a rabbi in the major communities of Podolia, R. Meir Margaliot (1713–1793), the highest rabbinical authority in Volhynia, and R. Dov Baer of Mezhiroch [Międzyrzec], a notable preacher in Volhynia, had known Israel Ba'al Shem Tov closely at the end of the 1720s or early '30s,¹² '40s and '50s,¹³ accepted him as their inspiring mentor and spiritual teacher and recorded his mystical teachings in their books, despite the fact that he lacked any formal education and possessed no recognized authority.

Israel Ba'al Shem Tov formulated a series of mystical teachings and paradoxical arguments describing the relations between the visible reality and invisible world or between the revealed shared experience and the concealed inner experience. Mystical thought assumes that the higher and lower worlds are interconnected and that there exists a hidden significance to all dimensions of revealed reality. He taught that the invisible divine presence concealed behind the revealed world as a soul in a body is constantly creating the world and preconditions the very existence of every moment of reality. He further argued that the visible existence is nothing but an illusion when perceived without acknowledging the divine living source that creates it and constantly sustains it. He contended that the whole world is a medium of the divine presence, while accentuating the presence of God in every letter of the holy written text and in every sound and word in the holy spoken language, since according to Jewish mystical doctrine, the source of language is divine. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov stated that the whole earth is universally filled with infinite divine glory, that all places are equally filled with divine sparks, that every letter is full of infinite divine content or illuminating divine light and infinite meaning, and that every Jew who concentrates on these assumptions can find God everywhere at every time in every place, within every word and every sentence, through every thought and every deed without any preconditions or limitations. These teachings were heard in the second part of the 18th century by his students and followers and were explained in detail in manuscripts, letters and printed books from the third part of the 18th century. Such books of the direct students of Israel ba'al Shem Tov included Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Toledot Ya'akov yosef* (Korets [Korzec] 1780); Dov Baer of Mezhiroch, *Magid devarav leya'akov* (Koretz 1781); Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Ben porat yosef* (Korets 1781); Aaron ben Tsevi Hirsch Kohen of Opatow [Opatów], *Keter shem tov* (Zolkiev [Żółkiew] 1784); [Anonymous], *Tsava'at harivash vehanhagot yesharot* (Zolkiev 1793) and other writings of the students of his students. In the minds of his Hasidic followers in the 18th and 19th centuries, the reputation of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov soared beyond the bounds of historical reality and acquired mythological status unconstrained by time, place, written record, or biographical evidence. Within a short time of his death, the known historical facts of his life – based in part on direct testimonies and in part on written sources – found their way into oral traditions that circulated in the 1760s and '70s and merged with Hasidic mystical traditions in the homiletic literature that began to appear from 1780 on. They continued to

¹² R. Meir Margalyot, known as the author of *Meir Netivim*, who was born in Jazlowiec in Podolia around 1713, met Israel Baa'l Shem Tov in his youth in the late 1720s or early '30s, as did his older brother R. Isaac Dov Ber Margalyot. Both brothers attested to the uniqueness of the teacher they had met in their youth and on his sanctity. See M. Margalyot, *Sod Yakhin uvo'az*, Ostrog 1794 [repr. Jerusalem 1990], 6a-b; J. Margalyot, *Kvutzat Ya'acov*, Prezmizel 1897, 51b.

¹³ His other students, Yaacov Yoseph of Polonnoye, R. Dov Baer of Mezhiroch, R. Michal of Zlotchov, R. Pinhas of Koretz and others that are mentioned in *Shivchei haBesht*, Kopyst 1814.

be written down in the decades that followed, and were published in the hagiographical literature in praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov that began to appear after 1814.

As Hasidism spread, the mythical dimensions of the Ba'al Shem Tov expanded as traditions recorded by the early generations of his disciples relating to his teachings and outlook, his charismatic personality, his mystical practices, his ability to illuminate the hidden world, and his prowess as a “master of the Name” with the power to heal by virtue of his contact with the sacred found their way into oral narratives. Written sources attested to “the new way in which he initiated in the worship of God,” his direct and indirect legacy as a religious innovator, and his skill in using parables to communicate religious messages. The various traditions concerning him rapidly fed into one another in an ever-growing torrent that obscured the line between fantasy and reality.

The founder of Hasidism was moved to annihilate the existential experience of his contemporaries and to liberate them from the harsh constraints of reality. As against their helpless situation in his time and place he maintained that “everyone should perceive himself as a member of the higher world” and as an associate of the angelic community described in the mystical literature, adopting the divine perspective and imitating angelic behavior. He argued that “Man is a ladder planted on earth whose head reaches heaven and the angels of God ascend and descend in him.”¹⁴ He further claimed that all things exist within a unity of opposites: every material manifestation is animated by an invisible divine source and possesses a tangible manifestation which may reveal the divine root and thus the divinity is transformed into a perceivable entity, and further all manifestation is illusory if not illuminated by the only true entity of the divine presence. The infinite divine presence animating reality is called **infinity** אין סוף [*ein sof*; endlessness] or in short אין [*ayin*], and the tangible corporeal reality which conceals its divine root is called **being** or יש [*yesh*]. However, the Hasidic claim is a dialectical one: the only true being is the invisible divine being, while the physical world perceived exclusively by the senses is nothingness. Being and nothingness in Hasidism are dialectical and transformative concepts; from the divine point of view there is only the infinite divine being (אין *Ayin*) devoid of any independent tangible presence, while from the limited human point of view (“the eyes of flesh”) there is only corporeal material being (*yesh* יש) devoid of any divine presence. Corresponding to this unity of opposites of being and nothingness the human effort according to Hasidic teaching is twofold: “ha’alah” העלאה [elevation] and “hamshacha” המשכה [drawing down] i.e. **elevation of being into infinite nothingness** through the “eyes of the intellect” engaged in contemplation and unification with God; and **drawing down the infinite nothingness into being** through the commandments assisted by the “eyes of the flesh.” Every follower of Hasidism was expected to try to overcome the “eyes of the flesh” in order to transform the corporeal being into nothingness through the “eyes of the intellect”, thus perceiving the divine presence; and to transform the infinite divine being known as nothingness (אין-סוף) [*Ayin* or *Ein Sof*] into tangible being (יש) [*yesh*] through his work in *Torah and Mitzvot* that elevates the perception of the “eyes of the flesh.” The first stage, transforming tangible being into nothingness through spiritual effort, is called “annihilation of being” and “divestment of corporeality” (*bittul hayesh hafshata migashmiut* – מגשמיית ויש והפשטה). Following

¹⁴ Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Toledot ya'akov yosef*, Korets 1780 [repr. Jerusalem 1973]: 50.

this ideal led man to “see himself as if he were not [...] to think that he is not part of this world,”¹⁵ or, as one unambiguous formulation has it, “Man must see himself as nothing and forget himself altogether.”¹⁶ The second stage, transforming the divine infinity into a physical presence through corporeal human worship, is called divine worship through the commandments or drawing down the divine abundance [המשכת השפע] *hamshachat hashefa*, or in short *hamshacha*.

Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, who was described by his students as a person “who is above this world and beyond the order of time,” was a mystic who was interested in blurring or obscuring the borders between the spiritual and the material dimensions of existence as well as in transcending the borders between the divine presence and human consciousness. He attempted to liberate his followers from the bondage of reality by placing them in a new vantage point where the divine constantly illuminates the profane and the mundane is constantly yearning for the divine. In the Hasidic consciousness the divine presence exists in every place, every time, every word and every thought, and vice versa: every concrete manifestation is perceived as a concealment of the divine being that sustains it. In order to consolidate this new consciousness the Besh't stated time and again that “The whole earth is full of his glory and there is no place void of him [...] divinity is in every place.”¹⁷ This radical statement of divine omnipresence brought with it the obligation of an attachment to God at all times and in all ways as well as a total demand of divestment of corporality and detachment from the existential vantage point: “The God-fearing, wholesome man [...] remembers at every moment before Whom he stands and divests himself of corporeality as if he is above this world and beyond the order of time.”¹⁸ In abandoning the distinction between superior and inferior levels of reality, the assumption of divine omnipresence closed the gap between God and man. Man is connected to the divine reality – variously conceived as sparks, letters, *Shekhinah* (divine presence), *Sefirot* (divine spheres) and lights – in a number of ways, thereby obscuring the distinction between the human and the divine. The idea that all physical existence requires the constant divine presence – that God is the essence that animates physical form – demands recognition of the infinite abundance of the divine vitality flowing through all dimensions of the physical world. God is present in everything, in every act, in every utterance or thought. Taken to the extreme, this position makes the concept of reality as separate from God devoid of meaning: all is divinity. “Thus the worlds do not maintain in God any substance at all from the aspect of his truth, in so far as there is nothing besides him.”¹⁹ In order to clarify these ideas concerning the totality of the divine immanence and consequential a-cosmism, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov introduced twelve related and overlapping concepts which aimed to create total change in human consciousness. Some of these concepts, formed in order to instruct his followers in the new contemplative way and spiritual worship, were known from previous mystical writings that were kept only to the select few; others were his own original inspiration. However,

¹⁵ *Tsava'at harivash*, Zolkiew 1793 [ed. Khat: Otzar Hasidim, Brooklyn 1975]: 17.

¹⁶ Dov Baer of Mezherech, *Magid devarav leya'akov*, Korets 1781 [ed. Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, Jerusalem 1976]: 186.

¹⁷ *Magid devarav leya'akov* (n. 16 above): 240.

¹⁸ Ze'ez Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or hame'ir*, Korets 1798 [repr. Jerusalem 1968]: 39b.

¹⁹ Aaron Halevi of Staroselye, *Sha'arei ha'avodah*, Shklov [Szklów]1821 [repr. Jerusalem 1970], vol. ii, gate 3, chap. 22: 42b.

the Hasidic innovation was the introduction of a new meaning for the existing mystical vocabulary, intended for the first time to be utilized and practiced by every male member of the Jewish community without any precondition or restriction. The common denominator of these new teachings, as first introduced during the period 1735–1780, those with which the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezhibezh and R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye led, taught and wrote, but did not publish, as well as the varied traditions emanating from the works published in the following 35 years (1780–1814) by the teachers of Hasidism, was a sense of mystical inspiration and spiritual awakening that generated crucial expansion of the concept of religious worship and social responsibility.

The Hasidic ideas were influenced by previous mystical literature, as will be noted below; however, whereas kabbalah relegated mystical practices to an elite few who separated themselves from the community and followed a pious way of life in order to devote themselves to sacred matters, the Ba'al Shem Tov saw every Jew as having the mystical potential to recognize the animating divine essence that suffuses everything. His students stated time and again that just as God is present equally everywhere, so all may equally approach God through their thoughts and achieve unity with him: "Every Jew contemplating [...] how God literally fills the higher and lower [levels] and heaven and earth literally, the whole universe is literally full of his glory."²⁰ "Everyone must worship God in all His dimensions, for everything is for the sake of the Highest, because God wants to be served in all modes [...] God can be served in everything."²¹ This conception, which saw in each person "a divine portion from above,"²² which asserted that "everyone was created on earth below to do great and wondrous things [...] to hint at the higher world,"²³ and which did not hesitate to say that "everyone can reach the level of our teacher Moses of blessed memory,"²⁴ reflected a new perception of man and a new perception of equality and freedom as part of an outlook that overturned conventional hierarchies which discriminate among different people, different access to study of Kabbalah and different modes of worship.²⁵

Israel Ba'al Shem Tov coined the following twelve mystical concepts, which were intended to be understood, practiced and shared equally by all male members of the community and through all modes of worship by virtue of the radical claim that God, who fills the universe with His glory, is present in human thought and human speech, thus "God wants to be served in all modes [...] God can be served in everything."

Devekut (unity with the Holy One, lit. attachment or adhesion to God) is an instruction demanding total devotion to God to the extent of renouncing the realities of the material world and transcending one's own self in order to enter the domain of nothingness and achieve true unification with the divine through higher levels of spiritual apprehension. The following definition of divine worship as given by the Maggid of Mezhibezh, the leading student of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, succeeds in conveying the desired reorientation in the realm of religious consciousness: "One must withdraw from all corporeality

²⁰ Shneur Zalman of Lyady [Lady], *Tanya: Likutei amarim*, Slavuta 1797 [repr. Kefar Habad 1980]: 120.

²¹ *Tsava'at harivash, I a* (n. 15 above).

²² *Magid devarav leya'akov* (n. 16 above): 62.

²³ Nathan Neta Hacohen of Kalbiel, *Meirat einayim*, in: *Ba'al Shem Tov al hatorah*, ed. Simon Menahem Mendel Wodnik, Lodz 1938 [repr. Jerusalem 1975]: 24.

²⁴ *Likuteim Yekarim*, Anthology, Lemberg 1792 [rep. Jerusalem 1974]: 1c.

²⁵ On the relation between the mystical tradition and the changing concept of freedom, see Elior 2007a.

so much that one ascends through all the worlds and achieves unity with the Holy One Blessed Be He, until one's being is transcended and then one is called a man."²⁶ The author explained the possibility of human attachment to the divine on account of the total divine presence in every place, every utterance and every thought: "In truth, where one's thought ranges, that is where one is. In truth, His glory fills *all* the earth and there is no place vacant of Him. In all places in which a man is, that is where he will find attachment [*devekut*] to the creator in the place where he is, for there is no place void of Him [...] in all places is divinity."²⁷ Israel Ba'al Shem Tov and his students made mystical unity a daily orientation for their followers when they proclaimed: "One should always be attached to God with a wondrous *devekut* [...] And one should know that one's worship and attachment to the Creator blessed be His name can elevate all the worlds."²⁸

Thought. By virtue of its divine source, human thought is able to overcome the limits of physical perception and recognize the essential infinite nothingness in being. "By thought man can attain great limitless conceptions, for thought too is infinite."²⁹ The Ba'al Shem Tov maintained that "when one thinks about the superior world, one is in the superior world, for where a person's thoughts are, there the person is."³⁰ According to this view, the ability to attain the divine perspective on the universe is solely dependent on the human mind. As a divine power, thought is able to penetrate to the truth beneath and beyond appearances: "Man must believe that God's glory fills the earth and all human thoughts contain His being and each thought presents a divine entity."³¹ Creative human thought, expressed linguistically, integrating abstraction, sensual and imaginary faculties, is infinite, and by virtue of its infinity is identical to the infinite creativity of the divine.

Letters. The Ba'al Shem Tov maintained that the infinity of language in general and every letter of the holy tongue in particular are the most obvious location of the divine presence. He wrote in his famous letter to his brother-in-law, known as "The Holy Epistle," that "each letter contains worlds and souls and divinity."³² He further claimed that every word is a unity of opposites containing a revealed sign [*tevah* = letter/word and ark] and a mysterious meaning [window]. His students explained: "I heard in the name of the Ba'al Shem Tov that making a window in [Noah's] ark [*tevah*] means making a window out of the word [*tevah*] of Torah and prayer, to gaze through it from the beginning of the world to its end."³³ Every word can be a "window" allowing the light of the life-giving divine infinity to shine through and reveal that things perceived by the senses as discrete are in reality part of the divine totality. The infinite light of the divine vitality in the universe, its sparks embodied in the letters of the holy tongue, is apprehended by man through language. Language in Hasidic thought is the unification of the abstract and the concrete, the infinite meaning and the finite sign of the letter as unity of opposites:

²⁶ *Magid devarav leya'akov* (n. 16 above): 38.

²⁷ *Magid devarav leya'akov*: 240.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 6.

²⁹ Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, *Noam Elimelekh*, Lemberg 1788 [repr. Jerusalem 1952], ed. G. Nigal, Jerusalem 1978: 25a.

³⁰ *Tsava'at harivash* (n. 15 above): 224.

³¹ Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Ben Porat Yosef*, Korets 1781 [repr. Jerusalem 1971]: 50a.

³² *Ben Porat Yosef* (n. 31 above): 128a.

³³ Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or hame'ir*, Korets 1798 [Jerusalem 1968]: 57.

“We hold this principle: that there is no place void of Him and His glory fills the whole earth, and all utterances that are spoken or actions done, by necessity contain *the letters of the Torah and holy sparks that animate them*.”³⁴ R. Ya’acov Yosef, the major exponent and writer of the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov, explained the connection between the divine power to create and the human power to abstract which are linked through the letters of the divine language that unite the hidden with the revealed: “For just as there are twenty-two letters of speech and Torah and prayer, so in all material and physical affairs in the world there are twenty-two letters through which the world and all that is in it was created. *Within these letters dwells the divine spirit*, for His glory fills all the earth and all that it contains, and there is no place void of Him, only there is concealment, but when those who know are aware of this concealment it is not concealment any more.”³⁵

Hasidic tradition often cites the Ba’al Shem Tov’s words concerning the creative language common to God and man, the divine source of the letters and their eternal vivifying power: “It is from the holy letters that the root and animation of man derive.” For whatever is in reality gets its being and existence only from the letters, out of which heaven and earth and all they contain were created. As is well known, the Ba’al Shem Tov explained the verse “Forever, O God, Your word stands in heaven” (Ps. 119) to mean that even now the entire life of creation and all existence springs from the holy letters that are God’s word standing always in heaven to give them life. For otherwise, all would return to chaos, as it would have no sustenance.”³⁶

The power to create reality by the flow of letters from the infinite to the finite, from nothingness to being, from the spiritual to the physical, from the inconceivable to that which can be apprehended, is not the exclusive dominion of the deity. God created and continues to create the world through the utterance and permutation of letters, by inscribing, carving, and combining them as recorded in *Sefer Yetsirah*; but man also combines letters to create words through language, generating in his mind new meanings and permutations that expand the bounds of comprehension and the depths of the spirit. The letters from which language is comprised may be regarded as a coincidence of opposites; spiritual and physical, abstract and concrete, concealed and visible, they are overflowing with meaning and yet essentially limited in their power to express the boundlessness of infinity without the concrete communicative sign.

Bitul hayesh (lit. “negating being” or “nullification of being”) is the effort to transcend physical reality in order to uncover the divine element that animates it. Israel Ba’al Shem Tov formulated this approach in his famous “parable of barriers:” “There was a wise and great king who did everything through illusions, walls and towers and gates [...] when his loving son made a great effort to reach his father the king, and then he saw that *there was no barrier dividing him from his father, for it was all illusion*. For when one knows that God’s glory fills all the earth, and that every motion and thought is from Him, then with this knowledge all evil agencies collapse, since *there is no barrier or curtain separating man from Him [...] for all concealment is but an illusion*. In truth everything is of His substance.”³⁷ The individual must strive to understand that the

³⁴ *Or hame’ir*: 126b.

³⁵ Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Toledot ya’akov yosef* (n. 14 above): 22b.

³⁶ *Ba’al Shem Tov al hatorah*, i. (n. 23 above): 16.

³⁷ *Ben Porat Yosef* (n. 31 above): 70c; cf. 111a.

corporeality that seems to separate him from God is irrelevant. The manifest physical element is illusory; only the hidden infinite divine being is genuine; God is the essence of being, the sole autonomous existence. Hence the Hasidic call to “distance [oneself] from physicality and imagine that one is only divine animation [...] and perceive the superior source of all things.”³⁸ R. Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, one of the leading students of the Maggid of Mezeritch, explained this clearly: “The principal element of worship is to be uprooted from one’s place, one’s human sensuous apprehension, solely in order to grasp the truth un-garbed [...] that is, to become accustomed to contemplating the vivifying spirituality [...] The main apprehension [...] *that all reality and its apprehension are nothingness, and that is the origin of all worship.*”³⁹ His foremost student, R. Aharon Halevi of Staroselye, further explained this mystical position: “The main point of achieving self-annihilation is that a person should truly become as naught, that is, that he should not know or feel any essence within himself [...] For his essence is of no significance to him at all, and he actually becomes a vessel prepared for the acceptance of actual revelation of His blessed substance.”⁴⁰

Nefesh elohit (lit. “divine soul”) or “eye of the intellect.” The divine soul that every Jew has in potential strives to elevate everything to the spiritual level, to strip away materiality to reveal the divine element underlying the concrete manifestation. Every individual has a *nefesh behemit* (lit. “bestial soul”) as well. The bestial soul, also known as “eye of the flesh,” seeks descent into the material world, to convert the spiritual into the physical in an attempt to distance itself from its source. “For it is known that there are two souls in every man, a divine soul and a bestial soul [...] The essence of the soul is intellect. For the essence of the divine soul is intellectual, and it is constantly contemplating and perceiving the light of the blessed Infinite; it has no other perception. The attributes of love and fear are born of the intellect and of that perception, and they are called the good impulse. Similarly, the essence of the bestial soul is that it applies its intellect to the perception of the corporeality of this world and its matter. This is the opposite of the divine soul, for the soul which is garbed in corporal concern is truly the opposite of the intellect of the divine soul, which is the equivalent of the higher wisdom...”⁴¹

Hafshatat hagashmiyut (lit. “divestment of materiality,” “stripping away of corporeality”). A process that expresses the desire of the divine soul to transcend corporeality by means of prayer and contemplation and uncover the divine element that animates it. “The God-fearing, wholesome man [...] remembers at every moment before Whom he stands and divests himself of corporeality as if he is above this world and beyond the order of time.”⁴² The word *olam* (world; corporeality; materiality) is derived homiletically from *he’elem* (concealment); on this view, the world is but a concealment of the divine light that makes its manifestation possible. It is the concealed divine element that animates the revealed reality; the physical element is merely a material manifestation that allows the hidden divine reality to be perceived. This consciousness affected the

³⁸ *Magid Devarav leya’akov*, preface: 6.

³⁹ *Igerot Kodesh*; Kuntres Miluim, ed. Dov Ber Levin, Brooklyn 1982; includes letters from Shneur Zalman of Lyady and Aaron Halevi of Staroselye, published as an addendum to *Igerot Kodesh*, ed. Dov Ber Levin, Brooklyn 1980, appended section, p. 10.

⁴⁰ Aharon Halevi of Staroselye, *Avodat ha-Levi*, Lemberg 1842 [Jerusalem 1972], I, Mi-Kets, 58b.

⁴¹ Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Torah Or*, Kopyst 1836 [Brooklyn 1978]: 75.

⁴² Zeev Wolf of Zhitomir, *Or hame’ir* (n. 33 above): 39b.

common Hasidic instruction: “This is the path that a man ought to choose for himself: in any place where he looks or listens, let him see and hear nothing but divinity clothed within there.”⁴³

Hishtav’ut (lit. equanimity or indifference). Equanimity is an ascetic state in which all values and concepts relating to concrete existence are to be regarded as meaningless. The Hasidic demand is that every follower will treat all dimensions of material life with complete equanimity: “Equanimity is a great principle, meaning that it should be the same to him if he is regarded as ignorant or as versed in the entire Torah. What causes this is regular *devekut* in the Creator, may His name be blessed, so that because of his preoccupation with *devekut* one has no time to think about these matters, in so far as one is always preoccupied with attaching himself on high, to Him.”⁴⁴ Israel Ba’al Shem Tov instructed his followers to connect this constant practice to a well-known verse which includes the word always: “It says, ‘I have set [*shiviti*] God before me always’ [Ps. 26: 8]. *Shiviti* implies equanimity [*hishtav’ut*]. Whatever occurs should be equal to him, whether people praise him or despise him, and so too with all other matters [...] let his thought cling to the higher [world] [...] and let one not consider at all the affairs of this world, and let him not think about them at all, in order to separate himself from corporeality [...] Let one think that one is a son of the superior world, and let not all those human beings who dwell in this world have importance in his eyes, for all this world is no more than a mustard seed compared to the higher world. Thus it should be equal in his eyes if he is loved or hated, for their love and hatred is nothing.”⁴⁵

Hitbonenut (lit. contemplation). Meditation on the divine presence that underlies physical manifestations in order to see in everything “its supreme root and source.” In order to meditate, one needs to remember that no aspect of reality can be taken at face value for every manifestation of reality conceals its divine essence. Physical existence is but a cover for the infinite light, a receptacle containing the divine light. R. Zeev Wolf of Zhitomir, one of the most distinguished students of the Maggid, formulated the Hasidic expectation as it was put by the Besh’*t*: “Do not see anything in the world as it appears, but raise your eyes to the heights, meaning the aspect of your contemplation and study, to see only the divinity clothed in all things of the world. For there is nothing besides Him, and there must be hidden holy sparks at all levels of being, granting them vitality.”⁴⁶ He further explained: “The principle is that of the wise man whose eyes are in his head [Eccles. 2: 14], who strengthens the eye of his intellect to divest himself of corporeality [...] until he acquires within himself a clarity and purity of vision, so that wherever he looks and listens he sees only the spirituality garbed in corporeality.”⁴⁷

Avodah begashmiyut (lit. “Worship through corporeality”). This concept refers to the name for the quest for the divine essence in the multi-faceted nature of material reality or the expansion of religious worship to all areas of human life by according religious significance to all profane activities, by virtue of the thought that illuminates them and

⁴³ Or *hame’ir*: 7b.

⁴⁴ *Tsava’at harivash* (n. 15 above), 3, section 10.

⁴⁵ *Tsava’at harivash*, 2, sections 5–6.

⁴⁶ Or *hame’ir* (n. 33 above), Pekudei: 85.

⁴⁷ Or *hame’ir*, Pekudei: 84a.

the intention that accompanies them. The revelation of the divine substance in being requires the recognition of its essential nothingness.

Olam hadibur medaber badam (lit. “The world of speech [= *Shekhinah* = divine presence, representing the eternal community of Israel, and the oral law] is speaking through the mouth of a human being”). The founder of Hasidism stated in an unprecedented way that every human being can become a vessel for the divine voice. In the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov, the words spoken in the holy tongue of prayer and the Torah intersect with the divine plane of “the world of speech” (*olam hadibur*) connected to the *Shekhinah*; when man’s voice is charged with the holy tongue, the *Shekhinah* speaks within him. Divine speech and human speech are interwoven, for the “world of speech” is a kind of resonating box through which that world communicates from within. In other words, the manifest human speech reciting Holy Scriptures or sacred texts is the concrete disclosure of the hidden divine voice; the inwardness of the infinite light within the letters is revealed in human speech. From another perspective: when a person annuls his independent conception and turns himself (*yesh or ani*) into nothing (*ayin*), then his consciousness is filled by the spirit of God speaking in him: “It is not in heaven” (Deut. 30: 12): This is his mighty *Shekhinah* that the Holy One imparted his *Shekhinah* among us, in the mouths of his people the house of Israel as the holy Zohar states that the *Shekhinah* dwells in the mouth of man.”⁴⁸

Kavanot (expressions of mystical intent) ***Yihudim*** (lit. “unifications”) are mystical meditations aimed at restoring the ultimate unity of the divine realm that was shattered in the process of creation in a cosmic catastrophe known as the “Breaking of the vessels” or *Shevirat ha’kelim*. This mystical concept that transcends logical borders of time and place relates to the cosmic projection of the historical exile in which the community of Israel is banished from its place in heaven and on earth alike. The divine world is depicted in the image of separated male and female, *The holy one blessed be he* and his *Shekhinah* – the divine presence. The aim of the unifications is to redeem the captive and exiled *Shekhinah* – the heavenly community of Israel, with *the Holy One blessed be He*. *Yihudim* are permutations of letters without meaning in themselves – names or mnemonics, devoid of semantic value, functioning in ritual language or in amulets, which were recruited for this purpose of the redemption of the *Shekhinah*. Hasidic teaching, which demanded from all its followers that they contemplate on the captive divine presence constantly, in order to redeem it through their contemplation and devotion, attempts to integrate the esoteric practice with the mundane: “There is no thing great or small that is separate from Him, for He is present throughout reality. Therefore the perfect person can achieve supreme *Yihudim* (unifications) even in his physical actions, such as eating and drinking and business intercourse.”⁴⁹

Gadlut (lit. greatness of spirit) – a sense of broadmindedness and expansive vistas generated by distancing oneself from worldly concerns and coming closer to God and to the sense of redemption; ***Katnut*** (lit. pettiness), or small-mindedness generated by submission to the constraints of reality which is perceived as exile. The founder of Hasidism argued that living without this mystical awareness of ever-present divine presence that

⁴⁸ Abraham ben Dov Ber of Mezhirech, *Hesed le'avraham*, Czernowitz 1851 [repr. Jerusalem 1973], *likutim*: 52b.

⁴⁹ *Toledot Yaakov yosef*, (n. 14 above): 474.

calls upon the believer to live according to the twofold human response described above as *Devekut* (total devotion to God and the *Shekhinah* to the extent of renouncing the realities of the material world) with the divine presence on one side, and complete indifference to the corporeal world *Hishtavut* and *bittul hayesh* (equanimity and annihilation of being) on the other, leaves one in the obscurity of a dark reality of exile governed by devilish powers imposing inferior lenses of perception called *katnut*. The first desired state of *Devekut*, that which the Besh't called greatness [*gadlut*], attested by a state of happiness and exaltation or freedom from the limits of existence, is contradicted with its opposite, pettiness [*katnut*] imposed on the beholder that is imprisoned within the constraints of reality, reflected by sadness and misery related to the bondage of existence. The Ba'al Shem Tov instructed his followers to distance themselves from the usual borders of perception governed by the senses and to turn away from the norms of this world, to relate to perceived reality with complete indifference [*hishtavut*-] and to concentrate on the illuminating divine presence, [*gadlut*], hidden within and beyond the constraints of reality [*katnut*]. The new conceptual world that he had consolidated as a result of his mystical perception instructed his followers to adhere to the divine being and to contemplate on the *Shekhinah*, to annihilate being and transform reality into divinity, to disregard completely the material reality and normative concerns of living in exile and to dismiss the criteria of the tangible world, while trying to maintain an exalted state of happiness known as *hitlahavut* and *hitkashrut* or enthusiasm and attachment as expression of their disregard to human bondage and the vain constraints of reality.

Israel Ba'al Shem Tov was admired by his students as a singular human being who could transcend borders of time and place, ascend to heavenly spheres, talk with the Messiah and hear the voice of the *Shekhinah*; he was further described as expecting his followers to be in a state of exalted happiness expressing their liberation from earthly concerns. However, it is not always remembered that these mystical ideas directed towards happiness of liberation from the chains of daily hardship were taught during one of the darkest periods in Jewish history. Blood libels were initiated against the Jewish populations in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth in unprecedented numbers: In the years when the Besh't's parents were alive six blood libels were recorded: in 1675, 1680, 1683, 1689, 1694, and 1697. In the years when Israel Ba'al Shem Tov was alive (1698–1760), these were described by the historian Raphael Mahler in an incisive sentence: “The political element of the Catholic reaction brought on the Jews immense suffering and misery. Oppressing enslavement, blood libels, persecutions and humiliations were the daily lot and common experience of the Jews in Poland”⁵⁰ – 35 blood libels were recorded, among them: Sandomierz 1698; 1710; Podhajce 1699; Opatów 1706, 1713; Lvov 1710; Drohobycz 1718; Lublin 1722; Przemyśl 1722–1723; Lvov 1728; Posen 1736–1740; Gniezno 1738; Zasław 1747; 1750; Świdówka 1748; Donji Grad [Dunajgród] 1748; Żytomierz 1751; Sandz [Nowy Sącz] 1751; Markowa Wolica-Żytomierz 1753; Jampol 1756–1763; Żytomierz 1757–1760; (Stupnica)-Przemyśl 1759; Grodno 1760; Więclawice 1761; Lutsk [Łuck] 1764.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Mahler 1946: 329.

⁵¹ See Mahler 1946: 335–345; Balaban 1930 (Chap. 12); Guldon/Wijaczka 1997: 99–140; Tazbir 1998: 233–245. Weinryb (1973: 152–153) counted as many as 53 pogroms of Jews and 86 trials for ritual murder and profanation of the Host in 16th–18th century Poland. In a recent article (2003), Wijaczka counts

Janusz Tazbir, a Polish historian who is a foremost specialist in Old Polish history, summed up the tragic situation in the wake of the frequent blood libels in his essay “Anti-Jewish Trials in Old Poland”: “It would seem that in old Polish society the Jew was what Leszek Kołakowski was later to call ‘a man with no alternative’. He could be summarily brought to court as the alleged perpetrator of ritual murder; in daily life he was a clown whom everybody, from the street urchin upwards, could insult and spatter with mud. The Jesuit Walenty Peski, responding to the assertion that the Commonwealth of the Gentry was a paradise for Jews, wrote: ‘I would run away from such a paradise if I had to wear such rugs, pay fees for any shoveling, and suffer persecutions even from small children, as is their lot in Poland’. In Peski’s opinion, rather than with paradise, the Jews were entitled to compare Poland with Biblical Egypt.”⁵²

Tazbir said clearly: “In the 18th century, Poland led the statistics of ritual murder trials” (p. 240); “In the view of both Polish society and the Christian population at large, Jews belonged to a group to which norms of human compassion did not apply” (p. 244). He went on to remark on the religious background to the frightening situation and the frequent blood libels against the helpless Jews, who were labeled as “the cruel Jews” in the period of the “Catholic reaction:” “The indignation at the ‘nation of God-killers’ was inflamed by the belief that the Jews remained blind to the splendor of the true faith instead of doing penance for their crime. They had committed the sin of ingratitude and, for this; God, for whom ‘nothing is uglier than ingratitude’, had turned away from them and transferred His grace to, among other people, the Poles.”⁵³

Israel Ba’al Shem Tov was active publically, as a healer of body and soul and as a Kabbalistic teacher and inspiring mystic in the 1740s and ‘50s, in a period that was defined by Polish historians as “the summit of political corruption and anarchy,” when the royal house of Vetten, the house of the Saxonian kings of Poland, who spent most of their time in Dresden, was declining in strength, the nobility gained unprecedented rights and did whatever they pleased, and the Catholic Church acquired unprecedented power, when severe anti-Jewish measures had been taken by the Bishops of the Catholic Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The mystical vocabulary of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov that was discussed above was much affected by the publication of the mystical autobiography of R. Joseph Karo (1488–1575), the famous law scholar and mystic from Safed, the author of *Shulhan Aruch – The Code of Jewish Law*. Karo kept a private diary between the years 1533–1575, one that he never intended to be published. The diary records the words of a divine voice that had been speaking in Karo’s consciousness, introducing itself as the *Shekhinah/Mishnah/neshama*, uniting the mystical name of the divine presence, the oral law and Karo’s soul. The record of his inner voice had been published posthumously under the title *Maggid Meisharim*, Lublin 1646, alluding to the medieval word *Maggid*, an angelic mentor, and to the biblical verse relating to the divine voice which has the idiom *Magid Meisharim*, (Preacher of Righteousness) Isaiah 45:19.

100 blood libels/ritual murder trials in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth between the 16th and 18th centuries.

⁵² Tazbir 1998: 245.

⁵³ Tazbir 1998: 235.

The divine voice or the angelic mentor started to talk in Karo's consciousness on the eve of Shavuot of 1533, when the horrible news of the martyr's death of his friend Shlomo Molkho, burnt on the stake in Mantua in November 1532, reached him in Adrianople, Turkey.⁵⁴ The divine voice, which had introduced itself simultaneously as the voice of the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence of feminine nature in Kabbalistic literature, the eternal community of Israel, and the heavenly representation of the oral law, in the consciousness of the greatest student of the law in his generation, delineated in great detail a **twofold world** – on the one side there was an **evil regime representing exile**, evil, enforced silence and absurdist existence, **reigned over by the Devil = *Sitra Ahra*, *Samael***, the prince of death and darkness, embodying all the evil powers as expressed in the anti-Semitic persecutions of the European Jewish community, by the Christian Church, i.e. the frequent deportations, banishments and enslavement, enforced conversion and enforced silence, captivity, discrimination, abduction of children, the burning of books, and the daily humiliations of a persecuted religious minority. On the other side, the divine voice introduced **the divine regime which represented redemption of the eternal community of Israel, known as the *Shekhinah***, the divine presence, “**the world of speech**” and the **oral law**, and her consort, *the Holy One blessed be He*, the creator, God of history, representing the eternal **written law**. This dimension was associated with the Messiah, the prince of life, hope and freedom, representing equality, knowledge, human dignity, justice and truth, continuity of life, peace and tranquility. **The evil side** was the projection of the tragic historical experience of the Jews on the heavenly arena that was presented as a combat zone between evil powers and holy powers or between exile and redemption. The mystical war between *the evil side* and *the holy side* was described as the tragic Jewish experience throughout the course of the second millennium. This historical experience included the tragedies inflicted by the Crusades, the expulsion of the Jews of England in 1290 and France in 1306, the persecutions during the period of the Black Death in 1348, the enforced mass conversion in Spain in 1391, the expulsion of the Jews from Austria in 1420, the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the enforced mass conversion in Portugal in 1497 and the abduction of Jewish children who were educated as Christian priests in 1487, the persecutions of the Spanish Inquisition in the course of the 16th century, the Khmelnytsky uprising and the Ukrainian Revolution of 1648–1666 and resultant massacre of the Jews and large numbers of captives, the exile from land to land due to the expulsions and the horrible reoccurring blood libels; the innovation of Karo's divine voice, that introduced itself as the *Shekhinah*, who is imprisoned in the bondage of exile and persecuted by *Samael* or the evil side described above, lies in his repeated twofold claim that the only way to hasten redemption and overcome the powers of evil was (a) by constant devotion, *Devekut*, offered by the students of the law, who constantly adhere to the law giver and contemplate on “the oral law,” the *Shekhinah* – the Holy Side, while studying the legal and the mystical tradition and praying with intentions and unifications for her redemption; (b) by complete detachment from this evil world ruled by *Samael* = *the Other Side* = *side of impurity*, through equanimity, asceticism, divestment of corporeality and self-abnegation.

⁵⁴ Werblowsky 1965; Elior 2007b: 267–319.

The dualistic distinction between exile embodied by Samael (acronym of the side of evil, impurity, and defilement “*Sitra Mesavuta*”), and redemption embodied by the holy side, “*Sitra de Kedusha*,” and the Messiah, was further expressed by Karo’s divine voice that presented itself as the *Shekhinah*, by two feminine concepts taken from the Jewish mystical magnum opus composed at the end of the 13th century following the crusades: *Sefer HaZohar*, *The Book of Splendor*, ascribed by an anonymous author to the sage R. Simon bar Yohai. The two feminine mystical concepts were *Shekhinah* – “divine presence,” the eternal community of Israel, the “world of speech” represented in heaven identified with oral law and symbolized by the lowest of the Kabbalistic ten spheres “kingdom” on the one side; and *Kelipha* – “the husk,” the eternal power of evil, repression, persecution and enslavement, on the other side. The *Shekhinah* was perceived as being tormented, persecuted, and imprisoned six days of the week under the *Kelipha*. The *Shekhinah* is redeemed only on the Sabbath, while the *Kelipha* was described as reigning during the week and powerless on Sabbath. The Kabbalistic innovation centered on the contention that only human **contemplation**, human **devotion** and **unification**, human **attachment** and human **thought**, spiritual and tangible alike, accompanied by sacred deeds of charity and social communal responsibility can release and free the *Shekhinah* from the bondage of exile, and conversely, every excessive concern with corporeal matters beyond minimal needs strengthens the powers of exile and every sin contributes to the intensification of the powers of evil and harshness of exile. As seen above, all these concepts were introduced as the Hasidic vocabulary in relation to the divine presence.

The explicit divine instruction heard by R. Joseph Karo was to detach and distance himself as much as possible from corporeal reality (*Samael/kelipha/evil/death/realm of exile/realm of silence*) [marked in his lifetime by the harsh persecution of the Spanish Inquisition that followed the enforced converts and executed them as heretics] by treating it with complete **indifference**, **equanimity**, **self-abnegation** and **divestment of corporeality** and to adhere wholeheartedly and constantly to the divine (messiah/*Shekhinah*/letters/sparks/world of speech/powers of life/justice and redemption) by means of a divine worship expressed through **contemplation**, **attachment**, **unification**, **intentions**, **communion with God** and **adhesion to the Shekhinah** by constant study of the law as well as of the mystical tradition concentrating on the elevation of the *Shekhinah* from the bondage of exile. According to the divine voice recorded in Karo’s diary there is no longer any neutral ground or any free time: every contemplative effort and positive action, associated with the constant study of the oral law and the mystical tradition of the Zohar and the biblical commandments and the intentions and unifications at the time of prayer associated with them, contributes to the balance of the meta-historical scales leading towards redemption, while every negative action associated with biblical sins and the focusing on the constraints of mundane concerns contributes to tipping the scales towards the powers of exile and catastrophe.

Israel Ba’al Shem Tov adopted this dualistic conceptual world view of exile and redemption, evil and good, *Samael* and *Messaiah*, *Kelipha* and *Shekhinah*, as expressed in Karo’s mystical autobiography as well as its active vocabulary – the part that relates to the divine world: communion with God, contemplation, unification, attachment elevating the *Shekhinah*; and the part that relates to the proper relation to the mundane world: indifference, annihilation of self, equanimity, divestment of corporeality, asceticism – all

taken from Karo's mystical diary. However, while Karo's diary recording his inner voice was never intended to be published by its author, as noted above, since it was directed **only to himself** as the inspired listener to the instructions of the divine voice, embodying the oral law ever cultivated by the students of *Halakhah* (rabbinic law) and the heavenly community of Israel commemorated in the mystical literature known as *Kabbalah*, the voice of his soul and the representation of the Kabbalistic tradition of "the world of speech," Israel Ba'al Shem Tov transformed the personal dialogue of the multivalent divine voice into a common instruction, **directed to every Jew**, on a daily basis.

The Hasidic ideas concerning the encompassing presence of God that entailed a social revolution relating to the equal accessibility of all male members of the Jewish community to the mystical tradition gained a great number of followers in the last third of the 18th century, when the mystical awakening that altered conceptions of the relationship between man and God was spread by means of oral teaching and written manuscripts by the students of the Maggid of Mezeritch, the major student of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, who taught between 1760–1772. Gradually it became obvious that the mystical demands that were directed to the public by the teachers of Hasidism as part of the ongoing struggle between exile and redemption, which had become entirely dependent on unification with God, self-abnegation, divestment of corporeality and equanimity, and the other mystical concepts described above, were too demanding for most people. This gap between the mystical ideal and the daily practice was the background of the emergence of the persona of the *tsadik* (lit. "a righteous person"). The *tsadik* was a person who became a spiritual leader since he was best able to reflect the two dimensions as mentioned above – the complete denunciation of the material world, reflected in personal self-abnegation and indifference to the mundane, along with the complete devotion to the heavenly world or the ecstatic communion with God expressed in the constant concentration upon the divine presence in every aspect of reality. The Hassidic *tsadik* is a charismatic leader whose legitimacy had been conferred by higher worlds. He reflected in his mind and in his conduct the divine unity of opposites that connected between God and man: the transformation between being and nothingness, concealment and revelation, creation and annihilation, affluence and withdrawal. He took upon himself a dual responsibility for two communities: the material and spiritual well-being of his Hasidic community as well as the redemption of the heavenly community of Israel, the *Shekhinah*. The *tsadik* linked the terrestrial world of his followers with the supernal worlds, and channels the divine abundance from above to them. Since the last two decades of the 18th century, the most distinctive and probably most famous feature of Hasidic communities has been the leadership of a *tsadik*. *Tsadikim* (pl. of *tsadik*) such as Elimelekh of Lyzhansk (1717–1786), Jacob Isaac Horowitz the Seer of Lublin (1745–1815), and Nahman of Bratslav (1772–1810) established their community courts at that time in Galicia, Ukraine and Poland, as the Habad dynasty led by Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745–1813) did in Lithuania. This new unelected leadership posed an alternative to the traditional elected leadership and was the product of an eruption of charismatic piety that drew its legitimacy from a consciousness of contact with superior realms that had emerged from the abovementioned instructions of devotion and self-abnegation founded on the mystical literature. These groups ascribed great importance to mystical experiences attesting to communion with God and recognized the authority of visionaries who spoke within the Hassidic-Kabbalis-

tic vocabulary. They came into being as a result of the wide dissemination of Kabbalistic literature, with its paradoxical image of the Kabbalist as simultaneously the conserver of ancient sanctified tradition and an inspired innovator who receives divine revelation as the *Shekhinah* is speaking through his mouth. The doctrine of the *tsadik* was first articulated in the circle of the Maggid of Mezhirech in the 1760s and early 1770s when his students testified on such revelations. In the 1780s and 1790s it was developed by his disciples through writings and in practice, and further articulated in the works published by Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye starting from 1780 and later. The spiritual and social implications of these teachings were to have a profound effect in the various Hasidic circles. The *tsadik* embodied all the mystical ideals that were formulated by Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, as were described above, through his person. However, the *tsadikim* added to these general orientations two important elements: charismatic leadership or a sense of divinely inspired mission and a sense of immediate contact with higher worlds; a new form of comprehensive social responsibility: the relationship between the *tsadik* and his followers, the *Hasidim*, was based on an all-embracing nexus of spiritual brotherhood and social responsibility. The *tsadik* embodied the divine dialectics of being and nothingness that was mentioned above. Only now he was the one who became responsible for the two directions: turning **being into nothingness** for the sake of his followers by self-abnegation and divestment of corporeality, and transforming the **divine infinite nothingness into being** as into divine abundance for the benefit of his followers. R. Abraham, known as “the Angel,” the son of the Maggid of Mezhirech, summed up the twofold vocation of the *tsadik*: “It is known that God emanated worlds and created being out of nothingness, primarily in order that the *tsadik* should transform being into nothingness and elevate the qualities of the corporeal to their source.”⁵⁵ His colleague R. Elimelekh of Lyzahansk, who studied with the Maggid, presented succinctly the unprecedented twofold responsibility of the new leaders as those who are listening in their minds to the ever-renewed word of God: “The *tsadik* should draw God into this world, in order that He will dwell among us and will sustain us, and then he should raise up the *Shekhinah*.”⁵⁶ His student, Jacob Isaac Horowitz, “the Seer of Lublin,” wrote in the first person drawing from his own experience as a *tsadik* about the charismatic inspiration that was the basis of the Hasidic leadership: “His abode should be with us in a manner that will affect miracles and wonders for the benefit of Israel. That is a testimony that the *Shekhinah* dwells among us, namely He [God] responds when we call out.”⁵⁷ The *Hasidim* were expected to attach themselves to the *tsadik* while he was uniting with heavenly spheres, and they were expecting to be blessed by the divine abundance brought by the *tsadik* from heaven to earth. This conceptual world created a new social reality which attracted many followers, as we know from the harsh reaction of the opponents who were excommunicating the new Hasidic circles and their leaders between the years 1772–1815. The Hasidic movement grew rapidly every decade from the second half of the 18th century. From 1772 onwards the rabbinic elite, those members of the conservative leadership of the Jewish community in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth and the Ukraine, they who were previously engaged in the harsh persecutions of the Sabbatians – a course of

⁵⁵ *Hesed le'avraham*, (n. 49 above): 9.

⁵⁶ *Noam elimelekh* (n. 29 above): 8.

⁵⁷ Jacob Isaac Horowitz, *Zikhron zot*, Pekudei, Munkacs 1942 [repr. Ashdod 2003]: 73.

action that had culminated in mass conversion of the Sabbatians to Christianity in 1760 – now inaugurated an aggressive struggle against the Hasidic community. The opponents were afraid that the new Hasidic circles are secret followers of Sabbatai Zevi who would justify “violating the Torah for the sake of God” or who would adopt the idea of the “holiness of sin,” as it was written explicitly in the name of their leader, the Gaon Elijah of Vilna and his followers.⁵⁸ The rabbis were threatened by unfamiliar social expressions formed in the Hasidic communities, where tsadikim guided by divine inspiration took all social and spiritual responsibilities for their followers in an unprecedented way. The prevailing traditional leadership realized that the new charismatic leadership that propagated mystical ideas and taught kabbalah to the masses and assumed comprehensive social and spiritual responsibility for the followers might very well undermine the status of their existing authority and the justification of their power within the traditional Jewish community. This elite, the *Mitnaggedim* (= *opponents*), charged the *Hasidim* with major and minor changes in the accepted tradition, among them: rejection of prevailing Ashkenazi tradition in ritual; rejection of prevailing Ashkenazi tradition in religious norms; rejection of prevailing Ashkenazi spiritual priorities; contempt for the Torah and its scholars; and Sabbatian heresy.⁵⁹ The *Hasidim* answered to the first three charges that all their changes were carried out according to the sacred Kabbalistic tradition and they dismissed the two last charges completely. On these accusations R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, a disciple of the Maggid who was a rabbi in White Russia, a celebrated halakhic scholar and a Hassidic leader immersed in Kabbalah, wrote: “Whoever hears this cannot help but laugh.”⁶⁰

In spite of the great social tension between *Hasidim* and their opponents, at the end of the 18th century and throughout the first few decades of the 19th century the new practice of a Hassidic community led by a tsadik spread to other areas in which Hasidism had taken root: Karlin-Stolin, Chernobyl, Ruzhin-Sadgora [Rużyn-Sadagóra], Kotsk [Kock], Izbica, Zhidachov [Żydaczów] and Komarna [Komarno], Belz, Munkacs, Satmar [Satu Mare], and Ger [Góra Kalwaria]. In their heyday these Hasidic courts demonstrated the spiritual inspiration and social potential of the tsadik-led community; in their decline during the later parts of the 19th century when rival dynasties were fighting with each other they demonstrated its pitfalls. But the leadership of the tsadik has continued to be a key feature of Hasidism into the 21st century.

The tension between commitment to the world of tradition and the desire for freedom from the domination of accepted frameworks determined, and continues to determine, the character of the Hasidic world. Hasidism in the 18th century remained within the limits of the norm while yearning to transform its meaning, and recognized the potential of the individual to establish new bounds. All worlds were seen in the light of the vicissitudes of the divine, and all existence was understood in terms of processes of change and mutability. This is what explains the unique conceptual world of Hasidism, the mystical awareness on which it is founded and its encompassing social significance. Hasidism, in its ideal conception, offered a new mystical approach to the great conundrums in the relationship between God and man in the hardship of history, and offered new spiritual

⁵⁸ See Wilensky 1991: 244–271. For the original documents see Wilensky 1970 [1990].

⁵⁹ For details on the accusations see Elior 1997: 135–177.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

answers to the tensions between the religious plane and the social plane of existence. In its awareness of the constant divine presence and the ever-renewed word of God, the Hasidic leaders took upon their selves the task of reading anew Jewish history in relation to exile and redemption, reinterpreting the Jewish tradition according to the Kabbalistic literature that promised hope for redemption as well as redefining God, humanity, and the world in a profound spirit of freedom and social creativity.

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