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Towards a New Definition of Hasidism[*]

Abstract: The author of the article poses the question what Hasidism really is, and whether the belief, still widely-held today, that it was a sect, or a movement similar to a sect, is accurate. Although there are dozens of definitions of Hasidism, all of them are built on doctrinal categories. As the author argues, these kinds of ideological definitions are inadequate, given that they turn Hasidism into an abstract doctrine, disconnected from its believers and their daily practices. Instead, he offers a behavioral, or performative, definition of Hasidism as it was practiced in everyday life. This definition, based on low-profile, often folk testimonies, shows what rank-and-file followers understood by being a Hasid and how they defined their own distinctive features.

Keywords: Hasidism, Eastern Europe, behavioral definition, sect, confraternity.

According to Hasidic tradition, tsadik R. Menaḥem Mendel of Kock once explained to his pupils the difference between the Hasidim and their opponents. In his words a Hasid "is someone who fears and is afraid of God, while a *mitnaged* [opponent of Hasidism] is someone who is afraid of *Shulḥan Arukh*"—the code of Jewish law.[1] In other words, a Hasid is a person filled with a real disinterested love of God and not with fear of punishment for his sins. His love and fear of God are pure.

Hasidism's adversaries saw things differently. According to one of them, his own son "does not want to study and so wants to become a Hasid,"[2]

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[*] This article is an abridged version of chapter 1 in my forthcoming book *Hasidism: Key Questions* (New York and Oxford, forthcoming in 2018).

[1] Yoets Kim Kadish, *Siaḥ sarfei kodesh* (Łódź, 1931), 5:44.

[2] Moshe Menaḥem Walden, *Ohel ha-rabi* (Piotrków, 1913), 3:16.

and as a folk song put it, a Hasid is someone who instead of studying the Torah "knocks back the vodka in the tavern thus his wife and children are drifters."[3]

There are hundreds of similar attempts at defining Hasidism. The fact that there are so many of them results from the conviction that an accurate definition can capture the essence of a phenomenon, thus revealing its true nature.[4] This is surely a naïve hope, akin to the archaic belief in the magical power of a name which, if harnessed, could be exerted over the name's holder. But even if we do not believe in the ability of a definition to grasp the essence of a phenomenon (or we do not believe that this "essence" in fact exists), definitions can be useful in at least two situations. In the first one, a definition outlines the limits of a phenomenon (for instance, who is and who is not a Hasid), and in the second, it helps to define general cognitive categories within which the phenomenon is perceived (whom the Hasid resembles and from whom he differs). In other words, definitions do not have to be important in terms of essentializing convictions as to their ability to capture the nature of the defined phenomenon, but in terms of their consequences for perceiving and understanding this phenomenon, as well as social reactions to it. In this sense definitions are important and are even the object of a furious battle which we witness on a daily basis. Is the suicide bomber who inflicts collateral human damage a terrorist or a freedom fighter? Are left-wing critics of Israeli policies antisemites or defenders of human rights? And what about those boycotting Israeli academic institutions? Following the oft-repeated formula—ascribed to just about every twentieth-century tyrant—he who controls the discourse controls the world.

Perhaps this formulation is banal, the actual phenomenon, however, is not. The dispute over definitions is universal. No less intensively than in politics, attempts at appropriating language are being made in religious, cultural and academic spheres, including of course the historiography of the Jews. As Elliot Cohen points out in his study on the *Jews for Jesus* religious movement, defining it as deviant first of all serves a delegitimizing,

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[3] Noakh Prilutski, *Yidishe folkslider* (Warsaw, 1914), 1:98.

[4] The more general background is a debate over a definition of religion itself, fundamental to a study of religion, obsessively sought by successive generations of historians of religion. For an excessive definition and overtheorizing of religious studies and their influence on studies of Judaism, see Michael L. Satlow, "Defining Judaism: Accounting for »Religions« in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006), 4:837–860.

not descriptive or analytical function, thus excluding it from the bosom of legitimate religious alternatives. As such not only does this explain nothing, but in fact it prevents a proper understanding of the movement.[5] Studying the dispute over the supposedly sectarian character of the Qaraites, Marina Rustow emphasizes in almost identical terms that this discourse has had from its medieval beginnings an essential polemical function and, paradoxically, developed in places where the Qaraite religion was the least known, and not where there was real contact between rabbinical and Qaraite Jews.[6] This case is particularly instructive, since it deals with the delegitimizing term "sect," to which we shall return later. Furthermore, Rustow's splendid analysis of the polemic surrounding the Qaraites' supposed "sectarianism" shows how past religious disputes have framed, and are still framing the academic discourse, terminology and cognitive tools used in relation to the Qaraites by contemporary historians and scholars of religion.

I shall attempt to prove that a very similar process is at work in modern studies of Hasidism. The historically established terms in which Hasidism was and continues to be described represent a basic cognitive obstacle to a proper understanding of its religious message, social and cultural function and social interactions. This article seeks to explain the categories within which Hasidism has been defined, the effects of these general definitional categories, and finally possible alternative definitions.

The History of a Definition

When the tsadik of Kock wanted to recruit another follower, he would tempt him with the words: "Come, let me tell you what is a Hasid."[7] What was tempting about this promise? The definition was meant to be a magnet, for in the tsadik's opinion it reflected the hidden nature of Hasidism, its essence and thus led to an understanding of what was most important in Hasidism. In this sense just about all the definitions that we find in the Hasidic literature have an essentializing character and refer to what Hasidism "really" is. Thus they are prescriptive and not descriptive,

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[5] Elliot Cohen, "Jews for Jesus: Occupying Jewish Time and Space," in Sacha Stern (ed.), *Sects and Sectarianism in Jewish History* (Leiden, 2011), 206–232.

[6] Marina Rustow, "The Qaraites as Sect: The Tyranny of a Construct," in Stern (ed.), *Sects and Sectarianism*, 149–186.

[7] Kadish, *Siaḥ sarfei kodesh*, 1:101.

they speak of what a real Hasid should be and not of what he really is.[8] Hasidic texts sometimes express simple doubt as to the real nature of the Hasidim, for example in terms of their moral behavior, or their longing for a small select handful of "real Hasidim" instead of clusters of "five thousand Hasidim just as they are."[9] In these definitions specific moral qualifications are most frequently the distinctive feature of a Hasid.[10] The somewhat more practical definitions focus on one of the Hasidim's ritual differences, for instance the late hour of their prayers, or their pilgrimages to their tsadikim, which give them an absolute differentiating character, underscoring their special theological or moral significance.[11]

R. Menaḥem Mendel of Kock and other Hasidim were certainly not alone in attempting to define Hasidism, so did their opponents and subsequent neo-Hasidic continuators, ethnographic observers, and at the present time specialists in numerous academic disciplines—from history and theology to religious studies and sociology. Rather surprisingly, many of these definitions have a great deal in common, despite differing radically in terms of methodology, assessment and overview of the same phenomenon. They seek the essentializing, universal and timeless "nature" of Hasidism, perceiving it either in theological concepts, or a psychological approach, or else a mystical experience, usually intellectual, always elitist.[12]

The definitions of Hasidism currently dominant in textbook-style and encyclopedic publications, especially the surveys not specializing in Judaism or the history and culture of the Jews, can be instructive. As Jonathan Klawans has indicated in his interesting analysis, the bulk of attention in such definitions is focused on the putative founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer, or the Besht. Typically, these definitions provide

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[8] On the tsadik of Piaseczno and his diagnosis of the crisis in interwar Hasidism caused by an inappropriate understanding of the nature of Hasidism, see Zvi Leshem, *Hassidism Confronts Modernity: The Spiritual Societies of the Rebbe of Piaseczneh* (Efrat, 2003), 5–6; for similar statements by tsadik Yitzḥak Naḥum Twersky, see David Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism,* trans. Dena Ordan (Hanover, 2010), 223.

[9] Kadish, *Siaḥ sarfei kodesh*, 1:18.

[10] See, e.g., Moshe Ḥayim Efraim, *Degel maḥane Efraim* (Piotrków, 1912), 253; Avraham ha-levi Ḥazan, *Kokhvei or* (Jerusalem, 1972), 334; Mordekhai ha-kohen Blum, *Otsar Yisra'el ha-shalem* (Jerusalem, 2006), 206; Ya'akov Yosef Viner, *Sarfei kodesh* (Bnei Brak, 2008), 393–394.

[11] See, e.g., Walden, *Ohel ha-rabi*, 2:8, 3:22; Avraham Ḥayim Mikhelzon, *Ohel Naftali* (Lwów, 1911), 28; id., *Ateret Menaḥem* (Biłgoraj, 1910), 24; Kadish, *Siaḥ sarfei kodesh*, 3:74.

[12] On attempts at a psychological definition of Hasidism, see, e.g., Daniel Reiser, "Mesmerism, Hypnosis and Jewish Mystics in Vienna in the Early Twentieth Century," *Working Paper* 139 (2015), 3–4.

information about "the Baal Shem Tov, Eastern European origins, Hasidic piety, strict observance, distinctive modes of dress."[13] These definitions referring to the central figure of the Besht are to some extent accurate, since they point precisely to a key element of the self-image of the Hasidim deriving from the ideas of the Besht. At the same time, however, this is not an effective approach, for instead of providing relevant empirical criteria it refers back to legendary founding tales.

In fact, the dominant definitions of Hasidism both in textbook-style and encyclopedic publications, as well as in strictly academic studies nearly always restrict themselves to three categories: history (or the supposed convictions about Hasidism descending from the Besht and its East-European pedigree), ideological categories and the Hasidic "religious experience" defined in line with the classic understanding of this term as an ecstatic or mystical experience, usually associated with contact with a tsadik. For instance, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* defines Hasidism as a popular religious movement characterized by mass enthusiastic ecstatic behavior and charismatic leadership.[14] These are just a few examples from an endless series of similar definitions. Even if they are not representative for the most recent trends in the study of Hasidism (on this anon), they properly reflect the dominant perspective in conceptualizing the described phenomenon.

Fortunately, this way of defining Hasidism through Hasidic doctrine or mystical experience seems to the increasing number of contemporary scholars to be inadequate. It turns Hasidism into an abstract doctrine, attractive perhaps to scholars of religious ideas, but not connected to the historical reality of the Hasidic world. Again this is an essentializing approach, continuing the tradition of writing about what Hasidism "really" is. It is also an elitist approach, which does not take into account the fact that Hasidism became a mass movement in the nineteenth century with all that that entailed. It is hard to assume that essentially elitist mystical experiences and an understanding of complex intellectual constructions became in the nineteenth century the preserve of broad and usually poorly educated Jewish masses in Eastern Europe. After all we have a great amount of evidence which unambiguously confirms that for the average

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[13] Jonathan Klawans, "The Essene Hypothesis: Insights from Religion 101," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 23 (2016), 64–65.

[14] "Ḥasidism," in Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum (eds.), *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, 2007), 8:393.

Hasid the elevated ideas of Hasidic doctrine were incomprehensible, and their identity was built on completely different bases.

Dozen of writers, from the early *maskil* Jacques Calmanson to the twentieth-century Jewish ethnographers, wrote about many Hasidim's low intellectual capabilities.[15] But not only people critically disposed towards Hasidism wrote that "in wide Hasidic circles kabbalistic slogans and concepts are not well known."[16] Interesting in this regard is an account by Ben-Zion Gold of Radom from the 1930s in which he tells about the somewhat untalented Rachmiel, who was studying the mystical and difficult text of *The Zohar* written in Aramaic, although he understood nothing of it. Asked why he was doing this, he explained that "[i]t inspires piety."[17] Undoubtedly, if we look at Rachmiel's experience from the perspective of an intellectual historian seeking in a Hasidic reading of *The Zohar* the main ideas of Hasidism, then such a reading would be absurd, because intellectually barren, and the whole event grotesque. We can, however, look at this in another way, as an example of a religious attitude in which the very act of studying is at least as valuable as its intellectual effect. Understood thus, Rachmiel's experience provides us important information about Hasidism's religious practices, and most assuredly for the actual practitioner defines "real" Hasidism better than the ideas he could read in *The Zohar*.[18] In any event this is confirmed by Hasidic texts contrasting the intellectual character of the *mitnagedim*'s religiousness with their own emotional, anti-rational spirituality, for "the Hasidim . . . had the reputation of being ignorant."[19] For example, in a late story about R. Hillel of Porycz we read:

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[15] Jacques Calmanson, *Uwagi nad niniejszym stanem Żydów polskich y ich wydosko-naleniem* (Warsaw, 1797), 19; Yekhezkel Kotik, *Na ve-nad: zikhronotav shel Yeḥezkel Kotik, ḥelek sheni,* trans. David Assaf (Tel Aviv, 2005), 181; G[ershon] B[ader], "Mikhtavim me-Galitsiyah," *Ha-melits* (1894), 243 (9/21 Dec.), 2–3; Menachem Mendel Frieden, *A Jewish Life on Three Continents*, trans. Lee Sh. Weissbach (Stanford, 2013), 30.

[16] Beniamin Wolf Segel, "O chasydach i chasydyźmie," *Wisła* 8 (1893), 306.

[17] Ben-Zion Gold, *The Life of Jews in Poland before the Holocaust* (Lincoln–London, 2007), 127.

[18] In an interesting source from the nineteenth century one can read that "the local population, although it does not understand kabbalistic books, respects them to such a degree that on Days of Repentance they read these books like they read prayer books and the reader expects to earn redemption just by the process of reading." See Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in East Europe* (Princeton, 2014), 331.

[19] Mendel Tsitron, *Shivḥei tsadikim*, ed. Gedalyah Nigal (Jerusalem, 1996), 32.

> When he would come to the villages, all the farmers would come out to greet him together with their wives and children and he would lecture on Hasidism before them. Once he came to a particular village and a large assemblage came to hear him. Since there was no study hall there, he spoke in the street. He observed many of the listeners crying. He asked them: "Why are you crying?" They said to him: "We are crying because we are boorish and ignorant and we do not understand anything from your words of Hasidism. We are silent so as to understand, but our intellect doesn't grasp it." R. Hillel consoled them and said: "A Torah scroll is written on *kosher* parchment. The letters must be surrounded by parchment and written only with ink. The quill is not a letter and a letter doesn't become a letter except by being surrounded by empty parchment. And if so, you can imagine, fellow Jews, what joy is created in the heavens, when down below simple Jews are standing around and providing parchment for the letters of the Torah which they are writing into their souls."[20]

This, I hope, is an adequate indicator not to seek a definition of Hasidism in its ideas and theological concepts, and that they do not describe the experience of being a Hasid for thousands of followers of this movement in its long history in Eastern Europe. In folk tradition, surviving in numerous Hasidic folk songs, a Hasid's identity is expressed not in ideas, but despite the hardships of life and its setbacks, in the interaction, imbued with religious significance, between a tsadik and other Hasidim.[21]

The problem is more general, appropriate for the whole of contemporary religious studies, anthropology and the sociology of religion, and well recognized. With highly-developed methodological and theoretical reflection on studies of religion, with the continuing dispute on the supposed superiority of substantive or functional definitions of religion, these disciplines appear still to be helpless in the face of the question about the usefulness of the definitions formulated by them.[22] Hence Emile Durkheim's intuitions appear accurate: rejecting essentializing definitions, he characterized religion as intrinsically co-formed by beliefs and rites: "The first are states of opinion, and consist in representations; the second

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[20] Eliezer Steinman, *Be'er ha-ḥasidut* (Tel Aviv, 1962), 361; as cited in *Bobruisk: sefer-zikaron li-kehila Bobruisk u-venoteha = Izker-bukh far bobruisker kehile un umgegnt*, ed. Yehuda Slutsky (Tel Aviv, 1967), 272, followed by an English translation: http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/bobruisk/byb269.html [retrieved: 1 Feb. 2018].

[21] Aharon Vinkovetzky, Abba Kovner, Sinai Leichter, *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, 4 vols. (Jerusalem, 1983–1987), 3:92–93.

[22] See Peter Berger, "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13 (1974), 125–133. Essential literature on definitions of religions in James M. Donovan, "Defining Religion," in Stephen D. Glazier, Charles A. Flowerday (eds.), *Selected Readings in the Anthropology of Religion: Theoretical and Methodological Essays* (Westport–London, 2003).

are determined modes of action."[23] Following this path, anthropologists when defining religion propose a performative (or behavioral) and not substantive approach, thus one seeking constituent features of religion in social events and not declarations or ideas.[24] This is what I propose to do in the study of Hasidism, too.

To be sure, an attempt at a performative definition of Hasidism is by no means new. In fact, from innovative insights of Moshe Idel some twenty years ago, much of the contemporary scholarship on Hasidism has been informed by the school of performative studies and—more generally—performative focus of cultural anthropology.[25] Gadi Sagiv, for example, analyses one of the Hasidic rituals "as cultural performance that sheds light on nineteenth-century Hasidism in general," while Tsippi Kauffman investigates early Hasidic leader R. Zusha of Annopol as "a real performer" whom she reads "through the lens of performance theory."[26] Many of these excellent studies constitute a direct inspiration for what I propose here. If there is anything new in what I propose, this is in a consistent—I daresay radical—application of an egalitarian perspective, attempting to free the study of Hasidic performance from preoccupation with elitist mystical experience and a limiting focus on ritual as the only expression of religious praxis.[27] For the historian, including the historian of religion, such a focus may ultimately be too narrow. Seeing the practice of religion simply as ritual either forces one to expand the concept of ritual beyond the term's natural meaning, or is reductive since it does not take into account the social and institutional aspects of the functioning of religion, for instance through religiously-motivated membership of political organizations, participation in religion classes, or selection of

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[23] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London, 1976), 51.

[24] For a classic approach by this school, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1984), 65.

[25] For his studies underlying performative aspect of Hasidism, see, e.g., Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles, 2005), 31–33; id., "Modes of Cleaving to the Letters in the Teachings of Israel Baal Shem Tov: A Sample Analysis," *Jewish History* 27 (2013), 299–317.

[26] Gadi Sagiv, "Hasidism and Cemetery Inauguration Ceremonies: Authority, Magic, and Performance of Charismatic Leadership," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 103 (2013), 330; Tsippi Kauffman, "Hasidic Performance: Establishing a Religious (Non)Identity in the Tales about Rabbi Zusha of Annopol," *The Journal of Religion* 95 (2015), 70.

[27] Contemporary studies of ritual are a separate sub-discipline with its own journal—*The Journal of Ritual Studies*, textbooks (see Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*) and a series of publications (*Oxford Ritual Studies*). There is no need here to enter this extensive minefield.

a religious school with an appropriate curriculum. Although shorn of ritual features, these activities, and a great many others, can belong to religiously-motivated and defining practices. Thus I am proposing that a performative definition of Hasidism not be restricted to ritual and seek the broadest possible basis for religiously-motivated activities, and at the same time using historical sources to verify which of these activities were perceived by social actors as constitutive practices for Hasidism.

In line with the declaration of egalitarianism I also propose abandoning an elitist perspective and turning to the practices and declarations of rank-and-file followers of the movement, thus to the so-called vernacular level of religion.[28] Since we acknowledge the Hasidic movement as a mass movement, seeking a reply to the question of the historical definition of Hasidism we should take the movement's mass, thus popular, character into consideration. This makes us look at ordinary Hasidim, who said who they were, as well as ordinary non-Hasidim, who said who they were not. In other words, it seems essential to me to define Hasidism by the categories in which those involved saw themselves and practiced. These do not have to be self-aware and verbalized definitions. What I have in mind is definitions expressed by activities, which for instance include in or exclude individuals from the community of Hasidim. They should, however, have the least polemical character, whether apologetic (on the part of the Hasidim themselves and their sympathizers) or critical (on the part of *mitnagedim*, *maskilim* and others). Therefore, I shall attempt in my analysis to refer to another type of sources, above all nineteenth-century texts from folk literature, to various official and unofficial texts, as well as memoirs. In these sources I shall seek traces of performative definitions and not self-aware statements defining Hasidism. I hope that this will permit a presentation of a new and cognitively useful definition of Hasidism.

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[28] See Leonard N. Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54 (1995), 45–47. At the same time I must underscore that my emphasis on vernacular religion is an attempt to balance the disproportionately great interest in forms of official religion in prevailing work on Hasidism. The eventual goal is rather to remove this opposition and not to strengthen it. For the opposition of vernacular to official religion, as well as demands to abolish a binary view of religious life, see Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in David D. Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, 1997), 3–21.

A Sect

Before, however, we proceed to attempt a new definition of Hasidism we need to take a look at the hitherto-dominant definitions and their effects. As I have explained elsewhere, the term used most frequently to describe Hasidism was and has been to this day the word "sect."[29] The designations *kat ḥasidim* (sect of Hasidim) or *kat mitḥasdim* (sect of bigots) were the terms most frequently used by anti-Hasidic polemicists from the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

Why so? Classical definitions describe a sect as a small, voluntary and exclusive religious group of personally charismatic people, who are hostile towards, or at least mistrustful of society in general.[30] The popular discourse builds in part on these categories, but focuses above all on dependency, intolerance, exclusiveness and secretiveness, separateness from and rejection of society, tension with the surrounding culture and society, demand of total commitment at the cost of members' relative isolation from the surrounding environment. In everyday language it also implies narrow-mindedness, manipulative practices, irrational behavior, coerciveness. The popular image of a sect implies also strong and unconstrained leadership, hostility towards the outside world, and secret social goals at variance with outside norms.[31] In many languages the term "sect" has nothing but strongly pejorative connotations and is used as a term of opprobrium, not description.

The unconscious and hostile dimension to the definition of "sect" is relevant insofar as it forms a specific paradigm for thinking and writing about phenomena acknowledged to be sectarian or similar to sects, even

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[29] See Marcin Wodziński, "The Question of Hasidic Sectarianism," *Jewish Cultural Studies* 4 (2013), 125–148.

[30] For classic sociological definitions of sects, see especially William H. Swatos, *Into Denominationalism* (Storrs, 1979); id., "Church-Sect and Cult: Bringing Mysticism Back In," *Sociological Analysis* 42 (1981), 17–26; Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston, 1985); Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (London, 1950); Laurence R. Iannaccone, "A Formal Model of Church and Sect," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988), Supplement, 241–268; Ronald Lawson, "Broadening the Boundaries of Church-Sect Theory: Insights from the Evolution of the Nonschismatic Mission Churches of Seventh-Day Adventism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37 (1998), 4:652–672.

[31] For the rift between the sociological and popular definitions of sect, see Inger Furseth, Pål Repstad, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Aldershot, 2006), 133–139; Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (London–New York, 2001), 260–262.

if in the writer's conscious intentions there is no such assumption. In the case of Hasidism this is the widely-held conviction of its exclusivity, of the Hasidim's blind obedience to their charismatic leader, and, in general, of the absolute bipolar division of Eastern Europe's Jewish population into Hasidim and their opponents. This ignores the basic fact that throughout the whole of Hasidism's golden age—that is, from the development of the Hasidic movement towards the end of the eighteenth century up to the interwar years—the overwhelming majority of Jewish society were neither supporters nor opponents of Hasidism, but were ambivalent or, more often, indifferent towards it. This ignores too the possibility of the existence of historically-authenticated hybrid identities fitting in on neither side of the alleged social barrier dividing the Hasidic sect from the rest of society. An eloquent example of the influence of the sectarian paradigm for perceiving Hasidism is generally viewing the adoption of Hasidism as an act of conversion, thus a constitutive act for many sects, and at the same time a very visible sign of breaking with one's former community and identity.[32] Focusing on the dramatic textual accounts of "conversions" to Hasidism, we forget that the overwhelming majority of them were in no way dramatic and in reality led to no rupture, that the adoption of Hasidism was linked to no ritual, was devoid of rites of passage—a key for conversion. We shall return to these issues.

All these above-mentioned features of Hasidism—exclusivity, blind obedience to their charismatic leader, the absolute bipolar division of the world—as well as a great many others, are more assumed than actual. The conviction that this is what Hasidism is emanates above all from unconscious transference, in part also from projecting features of modern Hasidism onto the pre-modern realities of Eastern Europe. The ostensible obviousness of these supposed characteristic features means that they are not subjected to critical analysis. Thus the paradigm of Hasidism as a sect, developed by anti-Hasidic polemics, complicates and often prevents outright an effective understanding of the movement's true features and its relationship with the surrounding society. In an analysis of Hasidism we need, therefore, to go back to the basic question of whether defining it as a sect is in any way justified, and whether it helps to understand and explain its attributes.

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[32] See Merrill Singer, "The Use of Folklore in Religious Conversion: The Chassidic Case," *Review of Religious Research* 22 (1980), 170–185; Immanuel Etkes, "R. Meshullam Feibush Heller and His Conversion to Hasidism," *Studia Judaica* 3 (1994), 78–90.

So, was Hasidism really a sect? First of all, contrary to what they were accused of by the *mitnagedim* and *maskilim*, the Hasidim consistently denied the existence of any doctrinal distinctions, and they were able to derive the liturgical differences from traditions that were present within normative Judaism.[33] The most distinctive liturgical feature of Hasidism, the Lurianic-Sephardi (instead of Ashkenazi) prayer tradition, also characterized earlier Jewish pietistic groups in Eastern Europe, who were not criticized by the mainstream Jewish community.[34] Similarly misplaced was the accusation of antinomian and heretical practices during ritual slaughter. In reality, these charges were grounded in the suspicions of a rival group rather than in any halakhic arguments.[35] The same can be said about virtually all the Hasidic innovations. The custom of making a financial donation known as *pidion ha-nefesh*, submitting requests to a tsadik (*kvitl*), double *tefilin*, and other Hasidic "innovations" had, in fact, a long tradition in Judaism. Some contemporary historians even claim that there is no content in the teachings of Hasidism that is not known in the legacy of Judaism.[36] What was new was a shift of emphasis and some modified interpretations of religious practices. To be sure, these shifts were as much of socio-political as of religious concern to both the Hasidim and their opponents, as well as to the largest group of those indifferent to Hasidism. But they did not warrant the accusation of sectarianism.

Equally disputable are other criteria based on which both anti-Hasidic polemicists and later historians tried to classify Hasidism as a sect. While being evidently separate organizationally, Hasidism in its classic period was never exclusive and separatist. Hasidim would pray in non-Hasidic synagogues without any reservations, and they likewise allowed non-Hasidim to study and pray in their Hasidic *batei midrash* (study and prayer halls). The overlap between *batei midrash* and other prayer quorums is well illustrated by countless conflicts in which Hasidim and non-Hasidic

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[33] Aaron Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, trans. Shmuel Himelstein (Hoboken, 1992), 128–214; Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (London, 1972), 36–45.

[34] Elchanan Reiner, "Hon, ma'amad ḥevrati ve-talmud torah," *Zion* 58 (1993), 287–328.

[35] Controversies regarding Hasidic *sheḥitah* (ritual slaughter) generated great interest among scholars. The best work on the topic, convincingly explaining the nature of the conflict, is Shaul Stampfer, "The Controversy over *Sheḥitah* and the Struggle between Hasidim and Mitnagedim," in id., *Families, Rabbis and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2010), 342–355.

[36] Mendel Piekarz, *Bi-yemei tsemiḥat ha-ḥasidut: megamot re'ayoniyot be-sifrei derush u-musar* (Jerusalem, 1978).

Jews fought for influence in local *batei midrash* or synagogues.[37] Although such incidents underscore the antagonisms between Hasidim and non-Hasidim, they also indicate a fundamental fact, namely, that these two groups often spent time together, studied, and prayed at the same *batei midrash*. Moreover, more often than not praying and studying together did not arouse any controversy. The leaders of both factions emphasized praying together and indicated in unison that this was proof of the essential religious unity of Hasidim and their adversaries.

Summing up, from among the previously-mentioned features of a sect, there is very little that indeed applied to Hasidism. Possibly the only feature resembling the popular image of a sect was a flat social hierarchy based on the charisma of the tsadik, with a communitarian social structure.[38] One should add here, however, that, unlike in a sect, religious power in Hasidism was never centralized and held by a single charismatic leader. On the contrary, power was shared among numerous tsadikim, who created loosely-linked, competing groups. Thus even this characteristic of Hasidism might be considered sectarian only in the most general sense. The sole content of the classic definition of a sect that really applied to Hasidism was, thus, the pejorative value judgment attributed to the term and to the group labelled with it. Instead of being descriptive, the appellation had only a polemical and delegitimizing function.

Grassroots Definitions

Hence Hasidism was not a sect, and using the term "sect" and associated projections onto Hasidism of the features of a sect are not only inaccurate, but cognitively harmful. Like many other religious phenomena, Hasidism simply does not fit into the sect-church typology. The simple consequence of this is the need to seek a new term and concept defining Hasidism's organizational structure, which—by analogy with other

[37] Menaḥem Baynvol, "Basey-medresh, khsidim shtiblekh un politishe organizatsye," in *Kehilat Sherpts: Sefer zikaron*, ed. Ephraim Talmi (Wloka) (Tel Aviv, 1959), 168.

[38] The literature on the structure of Hasidic communities is surprisingly modest, devoting somewhat more attention only to the position and function of the leader. For the most important works regarding the role of the tsadik, see Arthur Green, "The Zaddiq as *Axis Mundi* in Later Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (1977), 328–347; Ada Rapoport-Albert, "God and the Zaddik as the Two Focal Points of Hassidic Worship," in Gershon D. Hundert (ed.), *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York, 1991), 299–329.

similar structures—would allow us better than the prevailing definitions to understand the mechanisms of its operations, organization or social interactions.

Among the ordinances issued by the Confraternity for the Study of Mishnah in Radoszkowicze, there was a prohibition on admitting to its ranks candidates who belong to the "sect of the Hasidim, i.e. those who attend their prayer house for three days, even if they are not consecutive, or every day for at least one service, or who travel to any rebbe of their sect."[39] The ordinance clearly identifies two defining Hasidic behaviors: regular attendance at a Hasidic prayer house and pilgrimage to a tsadik's court. This performative definition is all the more useful for us, as it does not attempt to capture the abstract nature of Hasidism, but rather to find a socially-verifiable means of assessment as to who is and who is not a Hasid. One can imagine that the board members of the confraternity in Radoszkowicze had to take personal decisions on individuals whom they knew, sometimes liked and respected, so they needed an effectively verifiable criterion that would allow them to decide fairly who was and who was not a Hasid. Even if such formulations are by nature reductive, they provide an excellent illustration of how historical agents used those performative definitions in their daily life.

In Radoszkowicze they decided that a Hasid was everyone who prayed in a *shtibl* and traveled to the *rebbe*. This definition was consistent with many accounts of characteristic Hasidic behavior that appear in nineteenth-century writings originating from both Hasidic and non-Hasidic circles, which show the only vital difference between the Hasidim and non-Hasidim to be a deeper commitment of the former to prayer and the development of some distinctive forms of worship, for example the intensity of prayers, which were much longer in a *shtibl* than in non-Hasidic prayer sites.[40]

The Hasidim themselves, when pressed to provide a simple, reductive definition, also pointed to the pilgrimages to the tsadikim and the differences of prayer.[41] Great numbers of nineteenth-century testimonies specify the *differentia specifica* of these ritual differences of Hasidism.

[39] Mordekhai Wilensky, *Ḥasidim u-mitnagedim: le-toledot ha-pulmus she-beineihem 1772–1815*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1990), 1:320.

[40] See, e.g., "Khsidim-shtiblekh," in *Seyfer Radom*, ed. Yitzḥak Perlow, Alfred Lipson (Tel Aviv, 1961–1963), 44.

[41] See, e.g., Elimelekh Shapira, *Divrei Elimelekh* (Warsaw, 1890), 487; Moshe Menaḥem Walden, *Sefer nifle'ot ha-rabi* (Bnei Brak, 2005), no. 32.

For example, in 1818, in Olkusz a certain Jakub Brill in his anti-Hasidic denunciation provided the following description of the Hasidim: "The difference between our old religion and the contemporary Hasidim is that they say their prayers from *tefilat Sefarad* [the Sephardic prayer book], and we follow an old tradition and custom of *tefilat Ashkenaz* [the Ashkenazi prayer book]."[42] As an early twentieth-century observer from Wyszków noted, the population in his home town was divided between *mitnagedim* and Hasidim, but eventually the only difference between the two factions was that the former prayed in the Ashkenazi and the latter in the Sephardi style.[43]

These are distinctive, but relatively low-profile features. Certainly, it is difficult to claim that forms of worship are socially of no importance. Still, as demonstrated above, Hasidic differences in forms of prayer may not be taken as an issue serious enough to constitute the core of religious schism in Judaism. The most distinguishing liturgical feature of Hasidism, which is the Sephardic prayer book (instead of the Ashkenazi), was used also by earlier Jewish pietistic groups in Eastern Europe, and these incidents were not criticized by the mainstream Jewish community. Significant differences in both the prayer book and rituals of prayer were common among Ashkenazi Jews and never raised any serious doubts as to the orthodoxy of a differing party.

It is worth noting that the behavioral definitions quoted here—based on experience and not doctrine—which we can see unambiguously pointing to the central meaning of the form and place of prayer for the development of Hasidic identity, turn out to be strikingly close to the substantive definitions. As Shaul Magid has convincingly shown, it was precisely the experience of prayer that was central to the doctrinal definition of Hasidism, or rather of being a Hasid.[44] There is nothing startling in this: even if egalitarian performative definitions are not directly linked to religious doctrine, it is hard to imagine that they would be free of such links, or—heavens forefend—at odds with doctrine.

The no less numerous accounts in memoirs emphasize the simplicity of the elements defining what being a Hasid meant. They rather consistently

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[42] Archiwum Państwowe w Kielcach, collection: Rząd Gubernialny Radomski, no. 4399, pp. 16–20.

[43] Maks Tshekhanov, "Dos shtetl in di yorn 1891–1913," in *Sefer Vishkov*, ed. David Shtokfish (Tel Aviv, 1964), 22.

[44] Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison, 2003), 72–108.

enumerate participation in worship and other gatherings in a Hasidic *shtibl*, as well as periodic pilgrimages to the tsadik's court as determinants of belonging to the Hasidic world.[45] We also, however, know that non-Hasidim frequently prayed in *shtiblekh*, and that there were quite a number of Hasidim who did not go on pilgrimages to the tsadik's court.[46] And these rather loose distinctive categories turn out to be even fuzzier. The same accounts underscore too the ease of entry into the world of Hasidism and the lack of any special rites of passage that would have made a "conversion to Hasidism" a spectacular religious event, or that would have at least required dramatic public acts of joining the Hasidic "sect." Quite the contrary. For instance, Yeḥi'el Kamiel of Kałuszyn recalled that apart from the pilgrimage to the tsadik's court that made him a Hasid, he also received a *shtreimel*, a round fur-brimmed hat, and "thus I became a Hasid of Otwock."[47] This spectacular feature of dress, which in the twentieth century came to be associated with Hasidism, is a clear symbolic element, but not a rite of passage.

What does this mean for us? The low status of distinctive features allows us to assume low social barriers between the Hasidim and the surrounding Jewish world. Unlike during a relatively short period of Hasidic-mitnagedic conflict in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, in the nineteenth century crossing boundaries became increasingly easy. For a proper grasp of what Hasidism really was, one needs thus to move out of the traditional bipolar stereotypes of Hasidic sectarianism.

Confraternity

Historically, in addition to the delegitimizing word "sect" the most commonly-used neutral term to describe the Hasidic community was the word *ḥevrah*, or confraternity. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Hasidism was already being described as a confraternity both within circles of Hasidism and among *mitnagedim*, *maskilim*, as well as among the most numerous of all—those who belonged to none of the

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[45] Maks Gudman, "Fun khsidim shtibl tsu revolutsionerer tetikayt," in A. Volf Yasni (ed.), *Sefer Yadov = Yadov bukh* (Jerusalem, 1966), 131–144; Herman Leder, *Raysher Yidn: Zikhroynes fun Rayshe biz Nyu York* (Washington, 1953), 112.

[46] See, e.g., *Sefer ha-zikaron: Sokolov-Podliask*, ed. M[ordechaj] Gelbart (Tel Aviv, 1962), 266.

[47] See Kamari, "Mayn ershte nesiye tsum rebn," in *Seyfer Kaluszin; gehaylikt der khorev gevorener kehile*, ed. Aryeh Shamri, Sholem Soroka et al. (Tel Aviv, 1961), 287.

ideological camps of nineteenth-century Judaism. These statements were so numerous that it is hard to understand why the analogy between Hasidism and a confraternity has not hitherto been the subject of academic study. We can read about "the confraternity of Hasidim" both in the oldest collection of hagiographical Hasidic tales, the *Shivḥei ha-Besht* of 1814, as well as in the mitnagedic tract *Zemir Artisim*, or in the writings of the obsessively anti-Hasidic *maskil* Josef Perl.[48] The word *ḥevrah* was often used, especially in Hasidic literature, to indicate various types of gathering, for instance of all the Hasidim finding themselves quite by chance in the same place at the same time, or all the Hasidim traveling together to the tsadik, or reveling at a given moment at the tsadik's table. In this meaning of the word it denoted just a group of people gathered in one place and had no definitional function. However, the word "confraternity" was often explicitly juxtaposed with the word "sect," and thus played the role of the consciously selected definitional term in opposition to the rejected idea of a sect.[49] Abraham Stern wrote that: "Members of this sect, or rather society, do not differ in their principles from other followers of Judaism in any way."[50] In Hasidic literature this term was quite often clarified as a "holy confraternity" and thus a gathering of a religious character.[51] Sometimes too "the Hasidic confraternity" was named simply as one of the confraternities, as in the 1822 report from Żarki, which writes about a "funeral confraternity called holy, about a sect called Hasidim and all the other similar confraternities and sects."[52] At the same time when in Congress Poland, following the new law, all Jewish religious confraternities were being disbanded, in many local communities Hasidic groups were also listed among the disbanded associations, and in others there arose a controversy as to whether Hasidism should be included in the confraternities to be

[48] *Shivḥei ha-Besht*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem, 1991), 264, 82 (here: *siye'ata*); Wilensky, *Ḥasidim u-mitnagedim*, 1:62; Josef Perl, *Uiber das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim*, ed. Avraham Rubinstein (Jerusalem, 1977), 86.

[49] Interestingly enough, the distinction between a sect and a confraternity, and the use of these terms when discussing Jewish religious movements was the object of dispute among Christian scholars of Judaism as early as the sixteenth century—see Francis Schmidt, "The Hasidaeans and the Ancient Jewish 'Sects': A Seventeenth-Century Controversy," in Stern (ed.), *Sects and Sectarianism*, 189.

[50] Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, collection: Centralne Władze Wyznaniowe, no. 1871, pp. 41–42, 47.

[51] Gedalyah Nigal, *Sipurim ḥasydiyim mi-Lemberg-Lwów: sipurei Frumkin-Rodkinson ve-Bodek* (Jerusalem, 2006), 27; *Seyfer nifloes ha-Khoyzeh* (Piotrków, 1911), 56.

[52] Marcin Wodziński, *Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland, 1815–1867: Historical Sources in the Polish State Archives* (Kraków–Budapest, 2011), 81–82.

disbanded.[53] Quite similarly, in the maskilic journal *Ha-tsefirah* provincial correspondents wrote that in their towns "in addition to the Hasidim there are seven other confraternities" or "four other confraternities."[54] This clearly shows that Hasidic groups—even if called a sect—were perceived as religious organizations analogous to confraternities, or exactly the same as confraternities. The same understanding of Hasidism as a confraternity shines through in memorial books in which descriptions of local Hasidic groups were included in the chapters on confraternities.[55]

What is important is that in the vast majority of texts the term "confraternity" does not refer to abstract "Hasidism," or to all the Hasidim in the world, but rather to a local group of followers of a given tsadik in a given locality, for instance the "merry confraternity" of Radzyń Hasidim in Radom.[56] Thus the term describes a local group with a permanent, though informal structure, fixed hierarchies and norms, established customs—a group based on strong personal ties and common goals. Sometimes, in another context a *ḥevrah* means also all the followers of a given tsadik, or all the Hasidim at his court.[57] In that case we have a clearly-defined group of people physically meeting face-to-face, with a developed structure and narrowly-defined territorial limits. In both cases then we are dealing with institutions structurally close to medieval or early-modern Jewish confraternities. As I assert, it was precisely the confraternity, the *ḥevrah*, that was the form of social organization structurally closest to Hasidic groups. Putting it simply, historically Hasidism's social structure was not the structure of a sect, but of a religious confraternity, and it as a confraternity that it should be examined.

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[53] Ibid., 82–87.

[54] *Ha-tsefirah* (5 Sept. 1887); *Ha-tsefirah* (27 Oct. 1887).

[55] *Vishniva: ke-fi she-hayta ve-eynena od…; sefer zikaron = Sefer zikaron li-kehilat Vishniva*, ed. Ḥayim Avramson (Tel Aviv, 1972), 33–35.

[56] "Khsidim-shtiblekh," 47. See also Rafael Halevi Tsimetbaum, *Sefer kol ha-katuv le-ḥayim; bo nikhlal sefer Darkhei ḥayim . . . maran rabenu Ḥayim Halberstam…* (Jerusalem, 1962), 52; Avraham Ḥayim Mikhelzon, *Dubar Shalom* (Przemyśl, 1910), 156; Yitzḥok Even, *Funem rebens hoyf* (New York, 1922), 71–72, 262; I. B. Alterman, "Eyniklekh," in *Megiles Gritse*, ed. I. B. Alterman (Tel Aviv, 1955), 159–164.

[57] See, e.g., *Seyfer nifloes ha-Khoyzeh*, 56; Mikhelzon, *Ohel Naftali*, 46; Even, *Funem rebens hoyf*, 22, 24, 47, 54, 64, 73, 90, 144, 171; Avraham Paperna, "Zikhronot ve-shemuot: anashim u-ma'asim, epizodim historiyim ve-'anekdotot me-ḥayei bene Yisra'el be-Rusyah bi-tekufat ha-haskalah," *Reshumot* 1 (1919), 162–163; Yisrael Klapholts, "Dmuyot shel ḥasidei Belz be-Rava," in *Sefer zikaron li-kehilat Rava-Ruska ve-ha-sevivah = Izker-bukh Rava Ruska un umgebung*, ed. Avraham M. Ringel, Yosef Ts. Rubin (Tel Aviv, 1973), 94.

The now extensive literature on the subject of confraternities in medieval and modern Europe, including Jewish confraternities, provides a great many interesting analogies allowing us to examine the development and operations of Hasidism in a new light and in a new context.[58] Above all, the actual definition of confraternities, especially devotional ones, appears strikingly similar to what we know about Hasidism. Michela Andreatta has written about Jewish confraternities in modern Italy as if she was describing a Hasidic group:

> Association with one of these groups provided members with an alternative and more exclusive context in which to express religious piety, at the same time ensuring them important spiritual benefits, such as mutual prayer . . . as well as fraternal participation in joyous occasions. Another source of sociability inside the confraternity was through special events organized alongside the specific rite observed, the most common being the procession, or the banquet held on the occasion of the . . . anniversary.[59]

This short description contains just about all the key elements defining Hasidism: a religious organization based on strong group identity and the solidarity of its members; a sense of difference created by, *inter alia*, rituals uniting the group, including celebratory elements; the intense camaraderie of shared experiences; a feeling of religious difference—often superiority—emanating from the group adopting some specific form of piety, inaccessible to others; or simply a more rigorous form of piety. We even have here what appear to be specific to Hasidism—*yortsayt* celebrations, a feast on the anniversary of the death of significant tsadikim.

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[58] A review of the literature in Christopher F. Black, "The Development of Confraternity Studies over the Past Thirty Years," in Nicholas Terpstra (ed.), *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 2000), 9–29. In terms of Jewish confraternities, Italian confraternities have hitherto been the most intensively studied, see Elliott Horowitz, *Jewish Confraternities in Seventeenth-Century Verona: A Study in the Social History of Piety* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1982); id., "Jewish Confraternal Piety in Sixteenth-Century Ferrara: Continuity and Change," in Terpstra (ed.), *The Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 150–171; id., "Processions, Piety, and Jewish Confraternities," in Robert C. Davis, Benjamin C. I. Ravid (eds.), *The Jews of Early Modern Venice* (Baltimore, 2001), 231–248; Bracha Rivlin, *Arevim zeh la-ze ba-geto ha-Italki: ḥevrot gemilut ḥasadim, 1516–1789* (Jerusalem, 1991). For Jewish confraternities in Eastern Europe see Maurycy Horn, *Żydowskie bractwa rzemieślnicze na ziemiach polskich, litewskich, białoruskich i ukraińskich w latach 1613–1850* (Warsaw, 1998); Anna Michałowska-Mycielska, *The Jewish Community: Authority and Social Control in Poznań and Swarzędz, 1650–1793*, trans. Alicja Adamowicz (Wrocław, 2008), 137–156.

[59] Michela Andreatta, "The Printing of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Italy: Prayer Books Printed for the Shomrim la-Boker Confraternities," in Joseph R. Hacker, Adam Shear (eds.), *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy* (Philadelphia, 2011), 157.

Elliott Horowitz points also to the important symbolic distinction between members of a confraternity and the "uninitiated," as well as the existence of rituals reserved only for members, whose aim was to create a sense of exclusivity.[60] So it was with Hasidism. Just as in every brotherhood, membership in a Hasidic community imposed on its members certain specific obligations and distinguished them from the remaining members of the local community, and often created also a sense of elitism and superiority towards the remaining *proste Yidn* (ordinary Jews).[61] As an outside observer wrote in 1824: "in their religion they are the most learned, the most pious, the most observant, on account of which they feel superior to other Jews and call all other Jews ordinary."[62] As stated above, this is also most characteristic of the pious confraternities. At the same time, however, the boundary between the members of the brotherhood and those who did not belong to them was quite porous, and the brotherhood's aims and ideals were open and stood in no essential contradiction to the rules and models of behavior accepted by the whole of society.

The analogy between Hasidism and the confraternities goes further. The historical source of the appearance of Jewish confraternities was, as Jacob Katz remarks, the social tension between the oligarchic kahal elite and the new aspirations of ever-broader social groups, who could not find in a traditional local community paths to achieving their political, social or religious ambitions. Confraternities allowed for a relatively safe way to channel these tensions, which certainly does not mean that they dispelled them completely. This potential for tension and elements of alternative social hierarchies to the kahal were always present in confraternities, which at times led to social crises and always to suspicions.[63] Hence—paradoxically—confraternities, especially the charitable ones, helped the kahal authorities and replaced them in achieving a great many goals, traditionally the responsibility of the local community, but continued also to be in a state of tension with them, creating alternative and thus competing centers of power and social hierarchies. Frequently the local communities and the rabbinical elites, although not formally warring with the confraternities,

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[60] Horowitz, "Jewish Confraternal Piety."

[61] For Hasidic expressions of a feeling of superiority and resultant social distinction, see, e.g., Kotik, *Na ve-nad*, 42; Wodziński, *Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland*, 274–275.

[62] Ibid., 91–92.

[63] See Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Bernard D. Cooperman (New York, 1993), 132–140. Note that describing confraternities, Katz recalls their structural similarity to Hasidism, but draws no conclusions when analyzing the latter.

saw them as a potential or actual threat and at times—just as in the case of Hasidism—even as incubators of heresy.[64]

At the same time the confraternities quite regularly went through a process of social accommodation. Initially egalitarian structures born out of criticism of the prevailing social order, the confraternities quickly became the source of a new social stratification, of the formation of new elites and new social divisions. In many early-modern Italian confraternities we see, for instance, a process of excluding women and other groups of lower social status, and a deepening rift between "those who pay and those who pray," that is, titular members of the confraternity and those who actually carry out its statutory aims.[65] From the point of view of a confraternity's original statutory aims this is spectacular goal displacement, yet looking at the deeper social basis of the formation of confraternities, it appears to be a natural process of promotion for the groups involved, and thus the realization of their most basic, though undeclared aim. This all appears to correspond perfectly to Hasidism's place and path in the Jewish community of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. Perhaps that is precisely why so many observers of Hasidism called it a confraternity.

Consequences

It is hard to overstate the possible consequences of the paradigm shift in describing Hasidism. The first, suggested to us by the canonical studies of Gabriel Le Bras on religious confraternities, is shifting historians' attention away from doctrinal or institutional issues to religion as a living experience in the close, intimate social interactions of, for instance, a confraternity or a Hasidic community.[66] In my opinion, this is today one of the principal challenges facing new research into Hasidism, and taking into account the analogy with a confraternity can provide helpful analytical tools permitting just such an approach.

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[64] See Elisheva Carlebach, *The Persuit of Heresy: Rabbi Moses Hagiz and the Sabbatian Controversies* (New York, 1990), 12–13.

[65] See Horowitz, "Jewish Confraternal Piety"; see also Ronald F. E. Weissman, "Cults and Contexts: In Search of the Renaissance Confraternity," in Konrad Eisenbichler (ed.), *Crossing the Boundaries: Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities* (Kalamazoo, 1991), 213–214.

[66] Nicholas Terpstra, "The Politics of Ritual Kinship," in Terpstra (ed.), *The Politics of Ritual Kinship*, 1–8.

No less significant a consequence is defining Hasidism's actual place in the religious structure of Judaism and, more specifically, the relationship between the Hasidim and all the rest of the Jewish world.

Being a confraternity does not remove the tensions between the Hasidim and the non-Hasidim, which have hitherto so hypnotically bewitched students of Hasidism. But extracting this tension from the context of the sectarian discourse takes it to a completely different place, and shows its completely different sources and social consequences. Belonging to a confraternity does not stigmatize and exclude in the eyes of those who do not belong to it. Quite the contrary. Many people share the goals that a confraternity sets itself, for instance care of the sick, or help for the poor, or the need for intensive group prayer following the Sephardic prayer book, but for a number of reasons do not achieve these goals in as intensive a form as do members of a confraternity and thus agree that other specialized people and groups do it better than them, or for them. For a group this can be the source of a sense of superiority, and for people outside the confraternity a source of jealousy or suspicion. But this is not a reason to exclude the members of the confraternity from the bosom of a religious community. And often it is not even a source of jealousy, but simply a recognition of the acceptable differences in the bosom of a single religious community. This simple notion removes the fundamental bipolar division of Eastern Europe's Jewish world into Hasidim and their opponents.[67] Such a division—like any bipolar division—is convenient, since it allows for an easy ordering of the world. But it is also equally unreal, for it warps and oversimplifies reality in which identity does not follow bipolar divisions, and social activities are not determined by these, or by any other dichotomies.

Fluid or situational identities—changing in relation to the context which confronts them—also affect Hasidim. Hasidism was not the only and not always a dominant element of one's identity and sometimes came into conflict with other identities or role performances. Historically—and I claim this is also an integral part of the history of Hasidism—a surprising number of individuals appeared to identify themselves, or were identified by others, as "half-Hasidim," or close to Hasidism, or as accepting Hasidic customs only selectively or sporadically, e.g. on the occasion of

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[67] See, e.g., in the otherwise splendid work by Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 2010–2012), the chapter on Jewish religious life (2:275–333) is divided into two parts, the first one on Hasidism and the second on "opponents of Hasidism."

major feast days, or the tsadik's visit to their town.[68] A similarly surprising phenomenon was the Hasidim not recognizing any tsadik's authority, and traveling to various *rebbes* or not traveling to the *rebbes* at all. In Gostynin, for example, they were recognized as a separate group of "cold Hasidim," i.e. those who travel to the tsadik only occasionally and do not participate in most of the local Hasidic celebrations, dances, parties, etc.[69] On the other hand, some elements of Hasidic traditions, e.g. trips to courts of tsadikim with petitions, or participation in particularly ceremonial Hasidic events, came to be widely popular beyond Hasidism, even among staunch opponents of Hasidism.[70] At the same time, for Hasidim themselves—the most obvious group to be included—defining the core of Hasidic identity was becoming ever more difficult. Faced with the increasing diversification of courts and forms of Hasidic life, a growing number of accusations was leveled against Hasidic groups by rival groups, of only pretending to be Hasidim, or indeed of being fake Hasidim.[71] This all created a gray zone of identities, from declared Hasidim regularly participating in all forms of Hasidic communal life, by way of a whole constellation of transitory forms and flexible semi-Hasidic and occasionally Hasidic identities, hybrid identities, right up to demonstratively non-Hasidic or even anti-Hasidic attitudes, despite everything accepting certain Hasidic rites and traditions. Testimonies from the period speak about "Hasidic *maskilim*" or "a Grodzisker Hasid, and in addition, a *maskil*, and an ardent Zionist," no matter how paradoxical these appellations sound.[72] The phenomenon reached its peak during the First World War, when the sudden rise of such hybrid identities led to the greatest crisis in the Hasidic world.[73]

This leads to a great many very practical revaluations in the understanding of relations in the Jewish world in modern Eastern Europe. For instance, was a local community that chose a Hasidic rabbi "Hasidic," and

[68] Aaron Diamant, "Kolbushov a mokm khsides," in *Pinkes Kolbuhov*, ed. M. I. Biderman (New York, 1971), 389; "Khsidim un misnagdim shtiblekh," in *Sefer Biala-Podlaska*, ed. M. Y. Feigenbaum (Tel Aviv, 1961), 260.

[69] Yitzḥok Zandman, "Gostininer Idn," in *Pinkes Gostynin: Yizker bukh*, ed. Y. M. Biderman (New York–Tel Aviv, 1960), 174; see also Shaul Miler, *Dobromil: zikhroynes fun a shtetl in Galitsye in di yohren 1890 biz 1907* (New York, 1980), 11.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Walden, *Sefer nifle'ot ha-rabi*, no. 369.

[72] Yankev Dov Berg, "Di Yidn fun mayn dor," in *Brzerzin; izker-bukh*, ed. A. Alperin, N. Summer (New York–Israel, 1961), 49.

[73] For more see Marcin Wodziński, "War and Religion; or, How the First World War Changed Hasidism," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 106 (2016), 3:283–312.

what was that supposed to mean? Numerous examples prove that Hasidim became rabbis not *because* they were Hasidim, but *despite* it, for example thanks to their learning, family connections or because no-one else was willing to work in such a miserable little place. In elections the divisions often ran not between Hasidim and their opponents, but along completely different lines. For instance, in Maków in 1851 many of the Jewish inhabitants were opposed to the Hasidic candidate for rabbi Eliezer Wolf Kohn not because they did not like Hasidim, but because he had earlier been the rabbi there and "getting involved alongside his pastoral duties in other inhabitants' inheritance and investment issues had created a great many disputes and quarrels."[74] In Ostrów, for a change, "even though most of the Ostrów Jews followed Hasidism, the community did not insist on choosing their rabbis from among the followers of the tsadikim. In most cases it was the candidates' greatness in scholarship that determined their appointment as communal rabbis."[75] All this—although intuitively obvious—becomes fully understandable only when we drop the sectarian paradigm for defining Hasidism and see it as an organization similar to other religious confraternities.

Furthermore, the analogy with a confraternity not only explains the real mechanisms for the election of Hasidic rabbis by non-Hasidic communities (and *vice versa*), but throws light on the more general over-representation of Hasidim among the rabbinate and local community officials. Seeing themselves as exceptionally pious and more so than the majority of other Jews involved in religious life, the Hasidim more often than others chose professions connected directly with religious observance. Directly in line with this analogy is, for example, the over-representation among the Catholic clergy of Pentecostalists and members of the Opus Dei confraternity.[76] Somewhat startlingly, Hasidism—even though so different—turns out to be the same as many other Jewish and non-Jewish religious movements.

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[74] Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, collection: Centralne Władze Wyznaniowe, no. 1661, pp. 287–293. For more examples and an analysis of the phenomenon see Marcin Wodziński, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict*, trans. Sarah Cozens (Oxford, 2005), 133–134; id., *Hasidism and Politics: The Kingdom of Poland, 1815–1864* (Oxford–Portland, 2013), 237–238.

[75] Moshe Meir Yashar, "Ha-rabanut ve-ha-rabanim be-Ostrov Mazovietsk," in *Sefer ha-zikaron li-kehilat Ostrov-Mazovietsk = Izker-bukh fun der yidisher kehile in Ostrov-Mazovietsk*, ed. Aba Gordin, M. Gelbart, Aryeh Margalit (Tel Aviv, 1960), 17.

[76] See Michael I. Harrison, "Sources of Recruitment to Catholic Pentecostalism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13 (1974), 1:54.

Conclusion

The dominant way of understanding Hasidism was, and to this day is, seeing it as a sect and thus ascribing to it features generally seen as sectarian: doctrinal, liturgical, and organizational distinctiveness, exclusiveness and separatism, a strongly-developed authoritarian power structure, a substantial discrepancy between declared and realized objectives, as well as concealing the true norms and rules regulating the life of its members and the community. Historically, strategies of equating Hasidism with a sect developed from the earliest anti-Hasidic polemics of the *mitnagedim* and *maskilim*. In the following decades this equation was quite unreflectively accepted by a large part of the public, in both the Jewish and the non-Jewish communities, and turned out to be persistent. Even if violent acts of social exclusion were not common, narratives about such responses circulated and reinforced the understanding of the relationship between Hasidim and non-Hasidim as one between a marginalized sect and the normative Jewish community.

However, Hasidism was not a sect. Its distinctive features were seen by the overwhelming majority of nineteenth-century Jews, Hasidim, non-Hasidim and anti-Hasidim alike, to be localized above all in the area of the distinctiveness of its prayer book and religious practices connected directly to the forms of its prayers. These features had low differentiation power, so the social barrier between the world of Hasidism and the world external to it was relatively low and easy to cross. This forces us to reject radically the view that Hasidism was a sect or a "sect-like" religious movement, and that the borders between these two worlds were primary compared to other social divisions. Likewise, sources from the time, as well as an analysis of the truly functioning distinctive features incline us rather to the conviction that Hasidism was, and was perceived by many of its contemporaries as being a religious confraternity, or to put it perhaps better, as being "like a religious confraternity." Just like other confraternities it had its own aims, its own forms of devotion and its own group ethos, but in no way did this set it apart from, or above the rest of Jewish society. But if so, it seems that all these issues, analysis of which has hitherto derived either from an explicit, or unarticulated, yet implicitly present assumption about the sectarian nature of Hasidism, will require re-thinking.

The terminological equation of Hasidism with a sect has indeed been the reason for many scholarly misunderstandings. For example, it has

induced researchers to interpret participation in Hasidism as the adoption of an all-encompassing, uniform identity. The construction of firm boundaries between the Hasidim and the Jewish community resulted in problematic interpretations and a false perception of relations between Hasidism and its surroundings. As a consequence, historians have assumed the false dichotomy of a Jewish world torn between the Hasidim and their adversaries. Even a casual glance at the complex social relations within the Jewish world shows that dividing lines did not necessarily run between Hasidim and non-Hasidim. Perhaps we must again ask the question about the nature of the Hasidic expansion and its social organization, Hasidic leadership and its competitiveness or complementarity with communal structures of the kahal, the place of women in the Hasidic movement, and thus really all the issues that more or less from the beginning have formed the essence of historical studies of Hasidism.

Translated from the Polish
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