THE MODERN JEWISH EXPERIENCE
A Reader’s Guide

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NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London

We gratefully acknowledge the continued support of
THE JOSEPH AND CELIL MAZER FOUNDATION OF NEW YORK
William Mazer, President
and
Daniel G. Ross, Vice President
19. Religious Movements in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe
Allan L. Nadler

The critical study of the traditional religious movements of East European Jewry during the Modern period remains—with the notable exception of the remarkable recent efflorescence of scholarship on Hasidism—an exceedingly neglected field. This is particularly true of the English-language scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orthodox Judaism, which is so scarce that it is difficult even to consider it as constituting an established realm of academic research. The paucity of works in this area, particularly when contrasted with the highly developed and impressive recent scholarship on Hasidism, is, however, at least somewhat understandable. Unlike Hasidism, which represents a strikingly original school of the Jewish mystical tradition and a very well defined social movement in modern Jewish history, the perceived hallmark of most other branches of traditional East European Rabbinic Judaism of the past two centuries, or Orthodoxy, has been that of a reactionary resistance to original theology and to religious or social change of any kind. Even those movements within East European Orthodoxy which possessed some degree of originality were largely reactions to the disintegration, in the last two centuries, of the traditional social order of Russian and Polish Jewry and the subsequent rise of major Jewish heterodoxies, such as Hasidism, the Haskalah, and Zionism. The dominant impulse of Orthodoxy—some might even say its very essence—is caution, conservatism, and resistance to change. All this renders the subject less than perfectly fascinating to doctoral candidates and scholars seeking out new and original areas of research.

Mitnaggedism and the Lithuanian Yeshiva

The Rabbinic opponents of Hasidism—the Mitnaggedim—have not managed to attract the attention of many critical Western scholars. While there is a considerable Hebrew literature on the father of this movement of Lithuanian Orthodox Judaism, the Gaon of Vilna, R. Elijah b. Solomon, there exists only a single, long- outdated English biographical essay by Louis Ginzberg in his collection Students, Scholars, and Saints.1

The Gaon’s most famous and important disciple, R. Hayyim of Volozhin, who founded the first great Lithuanian yeshiva, has fared only slightly better. Aside from a few brief biographical sketches on R. Hayyim, the best of which is the article by Walter Wurzberger in Guardians of Our Heritage,2 there is a valuable study of his most important religious doctrine by Norman Lamm, Torah Lishmah: Torah For Torah’s Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries.3 This fine volume is especially important in that it examines the central doctrine of Mitnaggedic Judaism which underlies the ideology of the yeshiva movement which became the institutional framework for its furtherance—that is, the belief that the study of Torah is

Judaism’s supreme spiritual value and the Jews’ most important religious vocation. Also worthy of note is Lamm’s article on the second generation of Mitnaggedim, “The Phase of Dialogue and Reconciliation.” The thought of another famous disciple of the Gaon of Vilna, the populist preacher Jacob Kranz of Dubno (popularly known as the Dubner Maggid), is treated in Herman A. Glatt, He Spoke in Parables: The Life and Works of the Dubno Maggid. The theology of mitnaggedic Judaism is an almost entirely neglected field. With the exception of Allan L. Nadler, A Religion of Limits: The Theology of Mitnaggedism, which examines the major beliefs of the Mitnaggedim in contrast to Hasidic theology, the positive religious thought of the early Rabbinic opponents of Hasidism has been completely ignored by scholars. A case study of the religious thought of the Mitnaggedim as reflected in the writings of a direct descendant of the Vilna Gaon is Nadler’s essay, “Meir ben Elijah’s Milhamoth Adonai: A Late Anti-Hasidic Polemic.”

Mordechai Wilensky, the editor of the most important collection of primary texts of the rabbinic opposition to Hasidism, Hasidim u-mitnaggedim, wrote an article abstracting the basic substance of the massive early Mitnaggedic polemical literature, “Hasidic–Mitnaggedic Polemics in the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe: The Hostile Phase.” Samuel Dresner, “Hasidism and its Opponents,” displays a decidedly pro-Hasidic bias in his presentation of some of the theological issues which originally divided Mitnaggedim from Hasidim.

The yeshiva founded by R. Hayyim in the Belorussian town of Volozhin eventually gave rise to a significant network of talmudic academies which served as the most important bulwark against the dramatic inroads which Hasidism had been making across Eastern Europe during the course of the nineteenth century. A definitive history of the yeshivas has, unfortunately, yet to be written. Several articles are, however, worthy of note. The best for undergraduate reading are Abraham Menes’ two overviews, “Yeshivas in Rus-

and Israel Meir Kagan of Radin (popularly known as the Hafetz Hayyim). While the biographies are rather worshipful and completely uncritical, they do provide some basic biographical and bibliographical information and contain some accurate and helpful references to the relevant primary texts. Due to their deeply religious adoration for their subjects, however, these works should be consulted, if at all, with critical caution.

Two important and original contemporary scions of the Lithuanian yeshiva world who spent most of their lives in America, Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik and Rabbi Isaac Hutner—and who are somewhat representative of two of the most important schools of the Lithuanian Yeshiva and Musar movements, Brisk and Kelm respectively—have received much critical attention recently.

While the extensive scholarship on R. Soloveitchik's original existentialist/Orthodox religious philosophy properly belongs to the field of modern Jewish thought, his philosophy of Halakhah has been examined by Lawrence Kaplan, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Philosophy of Halakhah.”19 David Singer and Moshe Sokol, “Joseph Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith,”20 have argued the degree to which Soloveitchik’s philosophy is in fact rooted in traditional Mitnaggedic Judaism. Soloveitchik’s most influential and important work on the significance of Halakhic study and observance, Ish ha-halakhah, which has been characterized by Eugene Borowitz as “a Mitnaggedic phenomenology of awesome proportions,” has been translated by Lawrence Kaplan.21 Two fine general introductions to Soloveitchik’s thinking are Lawrence Kaplan, “The Religious Philosophy of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik,”22 and Aaron Lichtenstein, “R. Joseph Baer Soloveitchik.”23

R. Isaac Hutner, a considerably more conservative Mitnaggedic contemporary of Soloveitchik, has been treated recently in a number of essays, most of which have appeared in the Modern Orthodox journal Tradition. Most notable among these are the following essays: Hillel Goldberg, “R. Isaac Hutner: A Synoptic Interpretive Biography”;24 Lawrence Kaplan, “R. Isaac Hutner’s Daat Torah Perspective on the Holocaust: A Critical Analysis”;25 and the translations by Steven Schwarzschild, “Two Lectures of Rabbi Isaac Hutner.”26

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The ideology of Mitnaggedism, which centered around the spiritual dominance in Jewish life of talmud torah, or rabbinic scholarship, gave rise to a traditional society in which the very act of learning became the most hallowed religious experience, and among whose adherents scholarship was the sole criterion for spiritual prestige. A fascinating sociological study of the central role of lernen, or yeshiva-style learning, in contemporary American Orthodox society is Samuel C. Heilman, The People of the Book.27

The Musar Movement

The most distinctive school to emerge out of the world of the Lithuanian yeshivas was the Musar movement. Founded by Rabbi Israel Salanter, the intensely introspective Musar ideology, advocating the struggle for personal moral excellence, has been perceived by many scholars as a response to the emphasis on the ethical improvement and the aesthetic correction of East European Jewry in the ideology of the early Russian Hasidah.

Salamter’s life and thought have been the subject of several book-length studies, of which the pioneering monograph by Menahem G. Glenn, Israel Salanter: Religious Ethical Thinker,28 though somewhat lacking in critical depth, remains the most informative and accessible. Glenn’s book also contains an English translation of the most important early manifesto of Musar ideology, Salanter’s Iggeret ha-musar (Epistle on Ethics), which is an ideal primary text for class study. Hillel Goldberg’s intellectual biography of Salanter, Rabbi Israel Salanter: Text, Structure, and Idea,29 is a very detailed study of the chronological and intellectual development of R. Israel Salanter’s religious thinking which might prove a bit too ponderous and esoteric for the average undergraduate. It is, however, supplemented by a most valuable “Essay on Bibliography” which provides a mine of references for further reading and research. A very early, but nonetheless helpful, portrait of Salanter is the biographical sketch by Ginzberg (n. 1), pp. 145–94. By far the best essay-length introduction to Salanter’s ethics and the ideology of the early Musar movement is the English abstract of Immanuel Etkes’s Hebrew book on Salanter, “Rabbi Israel Salanter and His Psychology of Musar.”30

In the generations following Salanter’s death, the Musar movement flourished and was divided into several distinct ethical and pietistic schools. However, in contrast to the abundance of good scholarly material on its founder,
significant less has been written in English about the subsequent masters of the Musar movement and the various heads of the Musar yeshivas. There is a long, uncritical, but helpful article by Rabbi J. J. Weinberg, “Lithuanian Musar.”31 Jung (n. 2) also includes a study by Eliezer Ebner of a major disciple of Salanter, R. Simcha Zissel Broide.32

Two books by Lester Samuel Eckman provide the essential information on the subsequent history of the movement and the key doctrines of its most important rabbis: The History of the Musar Movement33 is a simple, uncritical chronological survey of the development of the movement and its important masters and academies; The Teachings of the Fathers of the Musar Movement34 is an almost entirely nonanalytical, somewhat paraphrastic introduction to the basic doctrines of the major figures of the Musar movement after Salanter, from his students, R. Simha Zissel Broide and R. Isaac Blaser, through to the famous mid-twentieth century Sage, Israel Meir Kagan of Radin (the Hafetz Hayyim). Despite the superficiality and absence of critical scholarly analysis in Eckman’s books, they remain somewhat objective and are the only studies available in English which contain essential biographical and intellectual information on the later Musar movement. Although, with the exception of Salanter’s Igeret ha-Musar, none of the early texts of the movement are available to English readers, the first part of one of the most important twentieth-century Musar works, ideal for class analysis, Mikhtav me-Eliyahu by R. Elijah Dessler, has been translated.35

Religious Zionism and Ultra-Orthodox Anti-Zionism

The emergence of modern Jewish nationalism in Russia proved to be the greatest and most divisive challenge to traditional Judaism in Eastern Europe, which had long maintained a passive Messianic posture regarding the vulnerable predicament of the Jews in exile. The rejection of the traditionally acquiescent rabbinic political posture of submission to the Galut implicit in early Zionism, and more particularly the explicit renunciation of religious faith and Halakhic practice by early twentieth-century Zionist theoreticians such as A.D. Gordon and Micha Joseph Berdichevsky, provoked the anger of the vast majority of the rabbis of Eastern Europe. By the first decades of this century, anti-Zionism had already become a standard aspect of Orthodox ideology in most parts of Eastern and Central Europe. Nevertheless, a small but distinguished group of rabbis was taken with the Zionist idea and gave rise to an important Orthodox wing within the Zionist movement, which ultimately became the Mizrahi Zionist Organization.

The best general introduction to the rather complicated history of the confrontation between traditional Judaism and modern Jewish nationalism in Russia during the formative years of the Zionist movement is the excellent study by Ehud Luz, Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement.36 Luz deals extensively with the wide variety of religious responses to Zionism from the perspectives of both the social and intellectual historian. There are important separate chapters on the development of ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist theology and the emergence of religious Zionism and the Mizrahi movement. Luz, “Spiritual and Anti-Spiritual Trends in Zionism,”37 provides a thematic exploration of some of the major issues resulting from the confrontation between Jewish nationalism and tradition.

The most famous rabbinic precursors of Modern Jewish nationalism were Zevi Hirsch Kalischer and Samuel Mohilever. Important selections from their writings, with brief introductions, are included in the first section of Arthur Hertzberg, The Zionist Idea.38 Sam N. Lehmen-Wilzig’s article on Zevi Hirsch Kalischer, “Proto-Zionism and Its Proto-Herzl,”39 provides a valuable introduction to his thought. There are also good articles on R. Kalischer by Jacob Katz40 and on R. Mohilever by Eliyahu Moshe Gencehovsky.41

The two most important pioneers of religious Zionism were R. Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Jewish Palestine, and R. Isaac Jacob Reines, the founding father of the Mizrahi movement. Rabbi Kook’s remarkably original mystical/messianic appreciation of the significance of modern Jewish nationalism has been studied by dozens of Israeli scholars, most of whose work is available only in Hebrew. There are, however, a number of decent English biographies as well as some fine translations from Rabbi Kook’s vast literary corpus.

Of the two biographies of Rabbi Kook written by Jacob Bernard Agus, the better one is High Priest of Re-Birth: The Life, Times, and Thought of Abraham Isaac Kook.42 Aside from the biography of this religious maverick, Agus includes a rudimentary introduction to aspects of R. Kook’s religious philo-

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Two other works on Rabbi Kook, neither of which is as good as Agus’s, are the intellectual portrait by Leonard Gewirtz, *Jewish Spirituality: Hope and Redemption*, and the brief, uncritical biography by Dov Peretz Elkins, *Shepherd of Jerusalem*.44

Rabbi Kook’s writings have been edited and carefully translated into English, with helpful introductory essays, in two volumes by Ben Zion Bokser: *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook* and *The Lights of Penitence*.46 Another translation of Kook’s *Orot ha-teshuvah* (Lights of Penitence) is Alter Ben Zion Metzger, *Rabbi Kook’s Philosophy of Repentance*.47 An interesting sampling of R. Kook’s correspondence which provides much insight into the sociopolitical and religious background of his activities as modern Palestine’s first Chief Rabbi is the annotated translation by Tzvi Feldman, *Rav A. Y. Kook: Selected Letters*.48

The only good English biography of Rabbi Reines, which surveys both his career and his religious doctrines, is Joseph Wanefsky, *Rabbi Issac Jacob Reines: His Life and Thought*.49 Two partisan histories of the political movement which Reines founded, both entitled *History of the Mizrahi Movement*, were written by J. L. Maimon and S. Rosenblatt.50

Far less material is available on the history and theology of Orthodox anti-Zionism. The history and ideology of the non-Zionist Agudath Israel party, founded in Poland largely in opposition to the rise of religious Zionism, is the subject of an excellent dissertation by Gershon Bacon, “Agudath Israel in Poland 1916–1939: An Orthodox Jewish Response to the Challenge of Modernity.”52 A far less critical history of the Agudah, with a strong emphasis on the biographies of its leading rabbincic figures, is Joseph Friedenson, “A Concise History of Agudath Israel.”53 A good analysis of some of the political operations of the Agudath Israel is Ezra Mendelsohn, “The Politics of Agudat Yisrael in Inter-War Poland.”54

*Heaven at Bay: The Jewish Kulturkampf in the Holy Land*, by Emil Mar-

academic study of East European Orthodox Judaism is still in its infancy. The real proof of the degree to which this remains an underexplored area of research is the fact that virtually none of the existing scholarship has been subjected to any critical revision. Nonetheless, as the above hopefully makes clear, there is more than sufficient material available in English to satisfy the needs of an undergraduate-level syllabus.

20. Modern Jewish Religious Movements
Alan Mittelman

The literature on modern Jewish religious movements, which—for the purposes of this essay—refers to Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist Judaism, is vast. Considerable historical, sociological, and philosophical/theological scholarship on the movements exists, as does an ongoing production of primary source materials found in such institutional self-expressions as sermon collections, rabbinic professional journals, institutional documents, and so on. I am (thankfully) spared the daunting task of bringing conceptual and bibliographic order to such a field, as my focus is modest and practical. My concern is pedagogic. I concentrate on how the field of modern Jewish religious movements can best be integrated into a curriculum on the Modern Jewish Experience. To do this, I explore some of the issues raised in the relevant scholarship and consider the best texts and approaches for the classroom.

There are, roughly, three scholarly approaches to these movements. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists, and philosophers are all working in the area. The following survey is intended to note some of the main titles which could be chosen depending upon which approach to the modern Jewish experience the professor wishes to take in the course. Some of the books are intended for the instructor’s own preparation, others may be given to the student. The selection of materials presented here is representative, not exhaustive. My suggestions are just that. One must work with the materials on one’s own to find out what best suits one’s purposes and one’s students.