Meir ben Elijah of Vilna’s
*Milhamoth Adonai*:
A late anti-hasidic polemic

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**Meir Ben Elijah – life and works**

In the manuscript collection of the Hebrew University and National Library in Jerusalem, there are two copies of an anti-hasidic polemic entitled, *Milhamoth Adonai*.\(^1\) The subtitle of the tract, apparently referring to those Jews who found themselves torn between the dual “evils” of Jewish Eastern Europe of the nineteenth century, hasidism and haskalah, reads: “Moreh Nevukhim Le’amashih Ha-nevuakhim, Ha’peshim Al Shitei Ha-seiffini” (“A guide for those perplexed persons who are still sitting on the fence”). Although the author’s name is nowhere explicitly stated in the work, the acrostic – *Meir Ben Elijah* – is formed by the highlighted letters on the title page. The precise identity of the author is further indicated by autobiographical and bibliographical references throughout the polemic, and positively confirmed by the citation, towards the end of the tract, from “my master and grandfather in his work, *Ma’aloth Ha-Tarah*.”\(^2\) That reference is unquestionably to Abraham ben Solomon of Shklov, the younger brother of the Gaon

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\(^1\) The two extant manuscripts of *Milhamoth Adonai* are both housed in the manuscript division of Hebrew University and National Library, (Jerusalem’s Mahan Le-Knesset Yad), catalogued as: ms. # 80 1067 & ms. 80 171. Insofar as I was able to discern from a cursory examination of the two texts, there are no differences of any significance between them. All page references to *Milhamoth Adonai* in this article are to the former manuscript, # 80 1067.

\(^2\) The text consists of two sections 1) The polemic itself, comprising 95 pages; 2) A supplement, taking the form of elegies to two recently deceased Rabbis, but including an extensive anti-haskala polemic, and comprising 21 pages.

*Milhamoth Adonai*, p. 68.
Elijah b. Solomon of Vilna. The author of this polemic is then the direct paternal grandson of R. Abraham, and son of Rabbi Elijah of Neustadt, Meir b. Elijah of Vilna.

Little is known of the life of Meir b. Elijah. It is certain that he spent most of his years in or around Vilna. According to A.L. Frumkin, Meir left Lithuania sometime after 1836, finally settling in Jerusalem where he died on the 28th of Nissan, 1842. Besides this unpublished manuscript, Meir b. Elijah is the author of two important published books: *Niddath Avoth* (Vilna, 1835), an ethical will, and *Derekh Avoth* (Vilna, 1836), a commentary to the Mishnaic tractate, *Avoth*. In *Millamoth Adonai*, a commentary to the *Mishna*, Meir b. Elijah also repeatedly cites his non-extant work, *Zern Millamoth Adonai*.

The date of *Millamoth Adonai*’s composition is not immediately clear, as it is only ambiguously indicated by the numerology of the highlighted letters formed from a Biblical quotation at the bottom of the title page. At first examination, the date resulting from that transcription would seem to be 1798. This dating is however im-

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3 A.L. Frumkin, in *Toldot ha-Knesset Yisrael*, Vol. III, p. 229, mistakenly confuses Meir’s father with the famed Elijah b. Jacob Ragoler of Sogind, probably on account of the fact that the former Elijah’s father was also Rabbi of the Lithuanian town of Ragolek, and known as Abraham Ragolek. On the later Elijah Ragolek, who was a younger contemporary of Meir’s, see the monograph by Frumkin, *Toldot Eliyahu* (Vilna, 1903), and the article in Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 13, pp. 1512-1513. Meir’s grandfather, Abraham, was the author of the famous panegyric to the study of the Torah, *Ma’aloth Ha-Torah*. See the reference to him and his children in Elijah Landau’s biographical introduction to the GLA’s *Mishnah Eliyahu* (Jerusalem, 1927), p. 19.


6 On R. Aryeh Leib Katzenellenbogen, the Rabbi of Brisk, see M.S. Gershuni, “Makhshuyes un C Savior,” in *Bresloviker Volume – Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora* (Tel Aviv, 1958), p. 128. See also, *Iehi Tikkun* wa’Ehir Brisk Li-Geizah, pp. 30 & 220. Like Meir, Katzenellenbogen was the grandson of a leading mithnagd, R. Abraham Katzenellenbogen of Brisk, and was known by the honorific title “Gaam Verayeh De’er Le’ah.”

7 For this very reason, Isaiah Tishby certainly errs when he claims that Meir completed the work in 1835 before his emigration to Israel. Tishby’s brief comments regarding *Millamoth Adonai* are found in footnote # 46 to his article, “Kaddisha Berikh Hu Ve’Ovath
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May the Creator of the universe in His mercy guide me on the still waters, and give me the strength and courage to arrive safely at my desired destination, and may He escort me in the Holy Land... It is well known that it is important to prepare oneself in all kinds of ways for such a long journey, so as not to arrive empty handed. This is true of physical preparations, and all the more so regarding spiritual groundwork. Therefore I said to my own soul: "prepare some sustenance for this trip."

In all probability, Meir was caught up in the great fervour of Aliya which had, especially in the years immediately preceding the predicted messianic year of 1840, captured the imagination of many leading mithnagdic figures. Meir apparently joined the large number of Jews who left Vilna for Israel in 1837-8. It is then very likely that, soon after arriving in Israel, Meir began to compose Milhamoth Adonai, which he completed in 1839. This violent polemic against both the hasidic movement and the Jewish enlightenment was apparently written in Jerusalem.

It is a curious fact that nowhere in his two earlier, published works did Meir polemicize against hasidism. The ethical will, Nahaloth Avot, which is the far more original of the two books, does contain an extensive and oft-repeated critique of the materialism of the wealthy classes of contemporary Jewish society, as well as an attack on those modernizers who pursue secular learning and advocate adopting gentile customs. Yet nowhere is there any reference to hasidism, or to its adherents. The very first reference of any kind to the hasidic movement occurs then in this last work, presumably composed subsequent to his arrival in the land of Israel. Although there is no obvious reason for this phenomenon, a possible explanation for Meir's apparently delayed interest in combating hasidism is the changed environment in which he found himself upon having arrived in Israel. As is well-known, the eastern European polemics against hasidism on the part of the mithnagdim had reached their height in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Subsequent to that time, the two communities of hasidism and mithnagdim ceased to lock horns and simply grew apart. For the Rabbis and scholars of the third generation after the Gaon of Vilna, hasidism was no longer the most troubling revolutionary force which threatened the world of traditional Rabbinic Judaism. By the 1830's, mithnagdic Judaism was well-established and securely insulated from the hasidic communities, most especially in Vilna and the major Lithuanian Jewish centres. Hasidism was, of course, an established reality, but one from whose Rabbis and communities the mithnagdim felt themselves distant and well-guarded. The obsessive fears that hasidism might swamp the Rabinic world, which had largely exercised the earlier polemics, were by now assuaged by the firm establishment of mithnagdic yeshivoth and communities. This was especially true in Vilna and its environs. By far the greatest threat to traditional Rabbinic Judaism in the early nineteenth century was not hasidism, but the haskalla and its increasing attempts to reform Jewish practice and modernize Jewish learning.

While still in Vilna then, Meir focused his attention and vented his anger primarily against the maskilim. Having arrived in the land of Israel, however, Meir and his mithnagdic colleagues found themselves in new and far less secure religious circumstances. Unlike Vilna, the Palestinian Jewish communities were dominated by the hasidim who had already arrived and established their kehilloth in the last decades of the previous century. These Jewish communities were small, and consequently, socio-religious divisions between hasidim and mithnagdim such as those which by then prevailed in Europe were not possible in Israel. The mithnagdim were forced to join with the hasidim in many communal enterprises, most importantly in the use of the much-needed hatuka funds raised largely by hasidic emissaries in the diaspora communities. In the early years of the mithnagdic aliya, this unavoidable closeness between these two groups often led to tension, and occasionally to open polemics.

9 Dekh Avoth, Introduction, p. 5b.
10 On the immigration, in this period, of significant groups of Lithuanian Jews to Israel, and the possible messianic underpinnings of this movement, see, A. Morgenstern, Meshiluqoth Ye-Yishuv Eretz Yisrael (Jerusalem, 1985), especially pp. 78-83.
11 Both of Meir's aforementioned published works, Dekh Avoth and Nahaloth Avot, are, as we shall note below, filled with attacks on the modernization of Jewish life and bitterly mourn the decline of traditional values as a consequence of the development of the haskalla movement.
12 Mordechai Wilensky, Ha-yesud Ha-hasidah Bi-Taverna (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 26-27 (esp. note # 78), has noted the fact that, even during the height of the mithnagdic polemics in Europe, the hasidic Rabbis who had arrived in Israel almost never referred to any opposition by Palestine's non-hasidic Rabbis. Aside from some resistance on the part of the Sefardic Rabbis of the Galilee, mithnagdim was apparently not a force with which the Palestinian hasidic community had to contend.
13 On both the tensions and the cooperation between the hasidic and mithnagdic communities in Israel, see H. Shanan-Katz, Reshitim Shel Aliyot Hasidim, chapter 4, esp. pp. 66-67. See also Aryeh Loeb Frumkin, op. cit., vol. III, passim.
14 Isaiah Tishby has noted a very similar phenomenon to Meir's apparently belated interest in combating hasidism, regarding the earlier mithnagged, Israel b. Solomon of...
It is perhaps in this context that the major thrust and purpose of Meir b. Elijah's polemic, Milhamoth Adonai can best be appreciated. The allusion in the book’s subtitle to those Jews who are “sitting on the fence” refers to the biblical account of Elijah’s confrontation with the Jewish idolators and Baal worshipers of his day. Indeed, many specific aspects of hasidic spirituality are compared to idolatry in general, and specifically to Baal worship, in the course of Meir’s polemic. But this reference suggests not only the very dim view which Meir took of both the hasidic and haskala movements. It also reflects the religious realities of Jewish life in the young and very small Jewish communities of Palestine in the early nineteenth century. The very confined nature of these communities did not allow for the luxury of isolation which the mithnagdim enjoyed in Eastern Europe. And it required a great amount of cooperation between hasidim and mithnagdim, which likely led to greater conflict and rivalry between hasidim and mithnagdim, which likely led to greater conflict and rivalry. This work is to compensate for this lack of decisive leadership in an era of national crisis and spiritual degeneration.

Aspects of the religious thought of Meir b. Elijah

In both of his published writings, Meir b. Elijah reflects a religious philosophy remarkably consistent with the theology of his mithnagdic predecessors. His view of human nature is both pessimistic and starkly dualistic, and he is virtually obsessed with the battle which the higher spiritual forces within man must wage constantly against the evil instinct which animates his innermost physical desires. This “great war” between the conflicting instincts of man is a central theme, especially of the ethical will, Nishlah Avoth. This work also contains an extensive critique of the materialism which Meir sensed to be rampant among the Jews of his time. Meir was a rigid ascetic who repeatedly warned against the material seductions of this life. Since, in his view, the physical desires and material aspirations of man are his greatest moral adversary, Meir believed in the spiritually therapeutic nature of physical suffering (yisurim) and the essential quality of a life of poverty and deprivation (aniyut). In that spirit, he continuously reminded his readers of the final fruitlessness of materialistic pursuits in this life:

Son of man! Open your eyes from your blindness, and realize that all of the possessions of this world are nothing but vanity and the pursuits of the perplexed. For why should you so greedily desire to accumulate silver and gold, and to build spacious houses, when you are headed inevitably to the grave, in the netherworld. Then you will have nothing in your hand, and you will leave the results of all of your efforts to others. Why should you be so bothered about a world which is not really yours, for you will, quick as the wink of an eye, go on to another world, and all that you toiled for in this world will be as nothing, and it will turn out that you have so excited yourself in vain.

Like his mithnagdic predecessors then, Meir was convinced that true human fulfillment can only occur subsequent to man’s passing from this life:

Even if a man were to live from the very genesis of creation until its very end, and to attain all of the gratifications and precious objects of this world, none of it is as valuable as a single moment in the world to come.

13.21; pp. 19b-20a, 21b.

14 On the spiritual value of suffering and poverty, Meir repeats the exact sentiments of the earlier mithnagdim which have been analyzed in my Religion of Limits, chapter 5. See, for example, Nishlah Avoth, introduction, p. 19; pp. 8a-b, 12a-13b.

15 Meir enters into a long diatribe against the foolishness of materialism and the vanity of hoarding money and material possessions in Nishlah Avoth, 11a-b.

16 For an English translation of this text see my Religion of Limits, appendix A.

17 The “battle of the instincts” is a theme which is repeated often in Meir’s ethical will. Some extended treatments of this issue can be found in Nishlah Avoth, introduction, pp. 13, 21; pp. 19a-20a, 21b.

18 On the religious values of poverty and suffering, Meir states the exact sentiments of the earlier mithnagdim which have been analyzed in my Religion of Limits, chapter 5. See, for example, Nishlah Avoth, introduction, p. 19; pp. 8a-b, 12a-13b.
The very purpose and spiritual end of man's entire life is arriving at death free from sin. Death frees man's soul from its torments and allows him to complete his religious destiny.23 The regular contemplation on the part of man of the inevitable day of his death is therefore the most effective form of ethical training.24

As in the case of the mithnagdim of the previous generations, Meir's anti-materialism is the foundation for an extended polemic against what he perceived to be the worldly interests and the mindless materialism of the advocates of the modernization of Jewish life and Jewish learning. Repeatedly he warns against what he perceived to be the worldly interests and the mindless materialism of the advocates of the modernization of Jewish life and Jewish learning. Repeatedly he warns against what he perceived to be the worldly interests and the mindless materialism of the advocates of the modernization of Jewish life and Jewish learning. Repeatedly he warns against what he perceived to be the worldly interests and the mindless materialism of the advocates of the modernization of Jewish life and Jewish learning.

Aside from the very substantial consistency with, and agreement between, Meir's ethics and religious philosophy and those of his mithnagdic predecessors, he nonetheless displays certain unique personal and intellectual traits in his published works. Most significant is a view of man which is so dim, and a fear of the pitfalls of sin that is so extreme that they often recall the Christian doctrine of original sin and the medieval monastic tradition.

The Biblical warning that "sin crouches at the doorway" is a leitmotif in Meir's writings, recurring dozens of times throughout his literary corpus as an important reminder to man of his inherent moral depravity. Meir seems to be of the rather unconventional notion in Jewish thought26 that sinfulness is man's natural condition, from birth:

It is well known to all military experts that a good strategy is necessary before any battle, and that many preparations are necessary before warfare; it is essential to investigate the enemy with great precision and to prepare the appropriate weaponry. It is only as a

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23 See Millamoth Adonai, "supplement," p. 3:

The essence, end and purpose of man is this matter of death, for only through death does he arrive at his final goal and good for which purpose he was created - for even if he was to live for two thousand years, enjoying all of the material pleasures and enjoyments of the universe ... in the world to come ... It is impossible to attain that boundless spiritual bliss so long as one is trapped in his filthy body in this material universe. But it is only death which brings him to his final purpose and destiny.

"The end of the beast is the slaughter," that is to say, its final good is attained through slaughter, when man slaughters it, properly and in accordance with the law, and eats its flesh, not for the pleasure of his appetite, but rather so that he might serve his Creator, for then he will rise and raise the sparks of holiness and spirituality within the beast to their source ... for man is the end of all of the levels of creation. In short, all of creation is awaiting death, for it is through the death of man that they all are elevated.

The anti-hasidic motif here is clear. In opposition to hasidism which instructs man to raise holy sparks, and participate in the redemptive process in this life, Meir insists that such cosmic spirituality must await man's entry into the world-to-come.

24 Nahaloth Avot, 18b-20. Meir, like most of the mithnagdim, was virtually obsessed with this understanding of the religious role of death. This notion is especially prevalent in his commentary to Avoth. See, Deresh Avot, pp. 5, 27, 29, 35, 45, 47. The idea of death as the only route to ultimate spiritual felicity is a central one in early mithnagdic thought.

25 See also chapter 6. This theme generally, see my Religion of Limits, chapter 5.

26 Of course, there were ascetic schools in earlier Jewish thought in which the need to combat the sinfulness inherent in human nature was given much attention. Most notable are the medieval Franco-German pietists, or Isaac Akkerman, and the 16th century school of mystics of Safed. I discuss these earlier schools of ascetic Judaism in my forthcoming Religion of Limits, chapter 5 (see, in particular, notes 1-6). There is however no evidence in Meir's writings of any direct or literary influence which these earlier schools may have had on his thought. He quotes neither any of the masters of the Safed school nor the classic works of Hasiduth Ashkenaz.

27 Derekh Avot, p. 19.
consequence of this careful planning that the war will be won. We also know from the military experts that even before these preparations can begin, one must know the precise requirements and scope of the anticipated battle. For this reason, spies are sent to investigate the enemy and to evaluate the foe which is facing them, so that one may appreciate all of the enemy's machinations and plans, and to ascertain the exact number of troops which he has deployed, and also how much weaponry the enemy possesses. All of this is done in order to be able to prepare even more powerful counter-measures and preparations with which to overwhelm the enemy.

In a similar manner, man must engage in a great number of preparations and elaborate strategies within his own soul in order to do battle with the evil instinct. Above all, each man must spy upon his own self in order best to know himself thoroughly and to recognize his own nature and personal habitual behaviour, which tends to become like a second nature. Each man must understand his unique direction and his inner nature, and where it is headed, for no two people share the same personal disposition. . . Such that each individual must make these appropriate preparations and strategy before the great war. 28

True to his obsession with the ubiquitous and highly seductive presence of sinful temptation, Meir boasted frequently of the fact that he always avoided joining in any social or communal events, and advised his children to follow his example. Even his attendance at a family wedding was viewed by him as a necessary evil to which he simply had no choice but occasionally to succumb. He speaks passionately of the great dangers of going out into the streets, especially those of the “big city,” Vilna. The major danger lurking in such public places is the presence of large numbers of women who might distract the attention of the men from spiritual matters.

I must call to your attention the great importance of guarding your eyes from looking at women. For the man whom God blesses with the possibility of staying closed up and sequestered, completely alone in a private room where he can study Torah and serve God - such a person does not require any struggle or machinations in this matter. But any person who must carry upon his shoulders the burden of earning his living, and who must therefore be surrounded by women - especially a person who must go out into the marketplace and public streets and big cities - such a man requires great zeal in avoiding looking at women, or circulating among women.

Now the Creator can testify regarding me that since my early days, whenever I was forced to go out into the streets and marketplaces, especially in the city of Vilna . . . I made heroic efforts in this regard. I mediated before leaving that I must avoid looking at those women, and I prayed to God to give me the strength not to look. And when at a wedding celebration - even though I always avoided attending any such celebrations - nevertheless, if I absolutely had to attend, I always made special efforts not to be consumed in the heat of their coals. . . 29

28 Nishlah Avod, introduction, pp. 21-22.

29 Nishlah Avod, introduction, p. 23.

The great danger and moral pitfalls involved in looking at women seems to have been one of Meir’s central personal obsessions. He repeatedly warns of the threat which the very sight of a woman constitutes to personal religious development. See, for example, Nishlah Avod, introduction pp. 22-23; pp. 5a–b, 8b, 17a, 21b.

Meir repeatedly advised his children to follow his example and to avoid attending public events to the degree possible:

Always try to avoid attending any public religious celebrations, most especially wedding receptions, unless it is for a very pressing reason. For the hazard of these events is great indeed . . . for what man is there who can avoid the snare of staring at the women, at their jewellery and their dancing... 30

Meir’s idealization of the sequestered life of total isolation from society, and his romantic view of the individual quarantined in his private room, recalls the legendary monastic way of life of his grand uncle, the Gaon of Vilna. The earlier mithnagdim’s pious contempt for the broad Jewish public and their disdain for mingling with the masses, is here faithfully continued two generations later.

While he counselled self-separation from the wider society for fear of the moral pitfalls and distractions of the marketplace, Meir was no elitist. In his approach to both the ideal curriculum of Jewish learning and the relative values of scholarship and piety, Meir reflects a monastic posture that is somewhat different from the common conception of the effete scholarship of the mithnagdim. Acknowledging the fact that the average Jew of his day simply lacks the time to pursue in-depth Rabbinic learning, Meir repeatedly recommends the regular study of the popular halakhic manuals of R. Abraham Danzig, referring specifically to Hayyi Adam, and Zikhru Torah Moshe, both of which deal with ritual matters affecting daily religious life. Unlike the curricular proposals of his mithnagdic predecessors, like Phinehas of Polotsk,31 Meir does not mandate the methodical study of the Rabbinic classics, but is content to require the intense study of popular halakhic manuals. Aside from representing a pragmatic, concessionary tactic in dealing with the limitations of his generation, this pedagogic approach also reflects Meir’s unique understanding of the ideal of torah lishmah. In clear discord with the prevailing notion in Lithuanian Rabbinic circles, established by R. Hayyim of Volozhin, that the highest level of study is that which has no more

30 Nishlah Avod, ibid.

31 See, for example, Phinehas of Polotsk’s curricular proposals in his ethical will, Rosh ha’Golah, (Jerusalem, 1965) pp. 11a–12b. On the role of Torah study in early mithnagdic thought generally, see the excellent study of the concept of Torah lishmah in the writings of R. Hayyim of Volozhin: Norman Lamm, Torah Lishmah, Yeshiva University Press. N.Y., 1968.
lenient object than the very acquisition of knowledge itself. Meir insists that true *torah lishmah* is study whose final objective is the correct practice of the commandments. Consistent with this pragmatic, praxis-oriented approach to *talmud torah*, he maintains that the chief criterion of spiritual distinction in Judaism is halakhic observance, not academic excellence:

The most important thing in the study of Torah is to know the laws of correct practice of the commandments ... and this principle of knowing the law is the correct definition of *torah lishmah* ... for it is not study which is the most important matter, but rather performance.

So long as a person has the fear of God in him and he is careful in his behaviour and scrupulous in his personal affairs, he is considered lofter in the eyes of God than as man who has a highly developed intellect, and is an accomplished scholar. ... For the fear of God is a far greater attribute than a great mind.

This view of personal spiritual felicity is a rather radical break from the overwhelming emphasis on intellectual and academic achievement that was prevalent in most mithnagdic circles from the time of the Gaon of Vilna until this day. As such, it represents the most unique and original aspect of Meir b. Elijah's religious thought.

The polemic *Milhamoth Adonai*: general characteristics

While some general features of his theology and ethics can thus be abstracted from his published ethical will and Pirkei Avoth commentary, it is only in Meir ben Elijah's unpublished polemic, *Milhamoth Adonai*, that a systematic and highly consistent religious ideology emerges. In the course of refuting both hasidism and the haskala, Meir produced a work that is to be considered among the most learned and important manifestos of mithnagdic spirituality.

*Milhamoth Adonai* is, as mentioned above, a dual polemic whose overall goal is to refute the two movements which Meir believed were posing a serious threat to the very survival of the Jewish faith. An acute sense of religious and national crisis, provoked by the emergence of these new "heresies," pervades the work. Already in the title page, the association of hasidism and haskala as complementary, mortal menaces to Judaism is evident. While the bulk of *Milhamoth Adonai* is devoted to refuting hasidism, the author repeatedly moves back and forth between the anti-haskala and anti-hasidic motifs. Although more troubled by hasidism, it is clearly not only its practitioners whom Meir perceives to be straying from the "path of moderation." He assails two different groups, whom he respectively characterizes as, "those who stray to the left," and "those who stray to the right." The latter, "right-wingers" whose excessive piety leads to a distortion of the Torah and disregard for its limited, normative legal requirements, are the hasidim. The former, "left-wingers," are the maskilim who more fundamentally reject and abandon their religious obligations. Rather immodestly referring to his work, in the introduction, as a contemporary Mocher Neuchim or guide for those who are perplexed as a result of being torn between these polar, competing "evils" of hasidism's heretical piety and the enlightenment's heretical modernity, Meir forcefully states his determination to stay the course of moderation by upholding the traditional, golden path. More specifically, he promises to refute the heresies of three dangerous elements which have developed within the contemporary Jewish society. These he identifies as "pokrim, mordim, ve'kofrim" – reformers, rebels, and heretics. "Reformers and rebels" apparently refers to the emerging Reform and government-appointed rabbis and their flocks, while the true heretics are the hasidim.

While Meir is clearly alarmed at the deviations from both traditional theology and halakhic observance generated by the development of Reform Judaism in Central Europe, as well as the growth, in his lifetime, of the enlightenment and the emergence of a modern Rabbinate in Russia, he insists, remarkably enough, that hasidism is a far more dangerous and subversive force in Jewish life. This is because the reformers' departures from tradition are apparent to any truly pious Jew who will thus know to avoid them,

32 Nadlah Ansh, pp. 128-14b. In *Milhamoth Adonai*, pp. 75-75, Meir polemizes extensively against those who jump to stand the difficult, obscure and non-practical tractates of the Talmud, before first mastering those tractates which relate to the daily requirements of halakhic observance. On Meir's very pragmatic understanding of *torah lishmah*, see also, *Derekh Ansh*, p. 37b. "The meaning of *lishmah* is for sake of knowing the laws and commandments of the Torah."

33 In the course of his criticisms of trends of modernization within Judaism, Meir refers frequently to "those who call themselves *talmidim.*" It is almost certain that he is referring to the emergence in Russia of a government controlled Rabbinate, or "torah lishmah," which was officially established in 1835, some four years before Meir's completion of his polemic. On the origins and history of the modern rabbinate in Russia, see Azriel Shochat, *Mosad Hi Rahamuth Mil'Yam Be-Russiya*, Haifa 1976, especially pp. 9-12.
while the hasidim deviously hide behind a cloak of false piety, thereby seducing the ignorant Jewish masses into accepting their heresies as a form of exalted spirituality. It is then natural that he should devote more time to his critique of hasidism polemic.

The critique of hasidism

Millamoth Adonai is arguably the most developed and sophisticated Rabbinic response to hasidic spirituality produced in the nineteenth century. Yet, at the same time, it remains one of the fiercest anti-hasidic polemics ever written. The nature of Meir’s critique suggests that, unlike most of the earlier mithnagdic polemicists, he was very well acquainted with hasidic theology. In fact, the author repeatedly claims that he had read extensively in hasidic literature. In his programmatic statement at the beginning of the book, Meir affirms and justifies his study of these “subversive” works:

These powerful leaders (i.e. the hasidic Zadikim) are subverting the words of the living God, and distorting the Torah. They transform the profane to the holy, and they replace and exchange the sacred for the secular. Now, I have explored and examined the hidden places of these shepherds—namely, the books by these shepherds and behind the bough is empty, and there is no water in it. My purpose in this doing was only to assist and bring merit to others, specifically to those who are still sitting on the fence, in order to eliminate the darkness of these enemies of light.

Indeed, the terminology which the author uses, most particularly in the first chapter when dealing with the question of divine immanence, indicates that Meir was very well familiar with the religious philosophy of hasidism, and specifically with the mystical theology of HaBaD.

Meir’s acquaintance with hasidic writings and ideas did not in any way lessen his hostility to the movement and its religious leaders. As he makes clear throughout the polemic, the hasidim were, by his lights, nothing less than total idolaters. In the lengthy introduction to Millamoth Adonai where he states his purpose in writing the tract, Meir contends that hasidism is no less a heresy than the ancient idolatry of Baal worship, and that it threatens the Jewish nation in much the same way that the rebellion of the biblical Korah against Moses threatened the Israelite community in the Sinai wilderness.

One of the most striking features of Millamoth Adonai is the unusually harsh terms which its author reserves for the founder of hasidism, R. Israel Baal Shem Tov. Throughout the work, Meir refers to the BESHT as the very embodiment of the forces of evil, and as Satan personified here on earth. Acknowledging the mystic’s power of automatic speech which the hasidim claimed for the BESHT, Meir explains that it is none other than Satan who regularly spoke out of the mouth of the BESHT.

This matter has come from the very mouth of the chief source of sinfulness and religious deviation, namely Satan himself, that is, the BESHT.

Following in the tradition of his great-uncle, the Gaon of Vilna, Meir perceived both hasidism and its founder, the BESHT, as dangerous, demonic forces – the very quintessence of heresy and

38 Millamoth Adonai, p. 4a. The characterization of hasidism as Baal worship recurs throughout the work. See, inter alia, pp. 27-28, 51-53 & 90.
39 Millamoth Adonai, p. 64. Meir argues that just as Korah preached that all of the Israelite masses are equally holy, so too the hasidim are attempting to popularize the attainment of the highest levels of spiritual perfection among all of the masses of Israel, without taking into account the varying religious levels of the various segments within Jewish society. The accusation that hasidism, in its aggressive popularization of sublime religious doctrines, fails to account for such varying spiritual capacities is central to Meir’s critique. See, for example, the discussion of hasidic prayer below.
40 Millamoth Adonai, p. 53. On the BESHT as a manifestation of Satan, see also p. 63. “Satan has found a source through which to clothe himself in the person of the BESHT in order to teach a false way.” See also, pp. 73-84.
41 There is significant evidence to suggest that the Gaon, far from dismissing hasidic spirituality, feared the hasidim precisely because of their supernatural powers. Note, especially, the most remarkable statement attributed to the Gaon by R. Abraham Zelig Lilahitz, a student of the Gaon’s most noted disciple, Hayyim of Vokshin, in his Hunhgezil Ve-coth Shei Rabi Hayyim Mi-Vokshin (unpublished manuscript in the collection of the Hebrew University and National Library, Jerusalem), Part II, par. # 14, to the effect that the hasidic masters were in possession of dangerous, magical powers which they would summon for demonic purposes. There is much in the history of the Gaon’s battle with hasidism, particularly his refusal directly to confront or to enter into any dispute or dialogue with them, which suggests that he not only despised them, but also genuinely feared their charismatic and black magical powers. It would appear that Meir’s greatest and Elijah too perceived the hasidic masters as possessors of demonic powers and masters of black magic.
evil, and repeatedly characterized them accordingly. For example, in the course of insisting, in reaction against the monistic acosmosm of HaBaD, that tangible evil exists in the world and has specific concrete manifestations in every generation of Jewish history, Meir suggests that in his day the cosmic forces of the sitra ahra have found a home on earth in the hasidic movement:

This evil source and root always remains, such that in every generation there emerges and grows an evil form of belief akin to ancient idolatry, just as many false messiahs have arisen in Israel... Now in our own latter generations, prior to the impending messianic age in which the spirit of impurity will be expunged from the universe, Satan has once again been disguised by the forces of evil, the sitra ahra, in order to annul the covenant and to establish the monument of Iblis through the propagation of false, destructive beliefs. Particularly, in the days of the Gaon, that Rabbi who resembled a holy angel of God and was sent from the heavens, namely Rabbi Elijah (ben Solomon of Vilna). In his days, Satan cloaked himself in the person of the Beshit, may his name be blotted out from all remembrance. (Since manifestations of evil persist in all generations) it is no surprise that this evil sect was not completely and successfully destroyed by the Gaon.11

Consistent with his demonic depiction of the BESHT, Meir characterizes his heirs, the later hasidic Zaddiqim, as practitioners of a dangerous and subversive form of black magic. He devotes an entire chapter in his polemic to debunking the hasidic belief in the supernatural powers of the Zaddiq as a baal nafeth, or miracle-worker.42 Acknowledging the genuine powers of black magic, Meir insists that one of the main purposes of the Torah is to limit man, in his spiritual life, to the normative performance of the God’s will as reflected in His commandments, thus protecting him from such deviant and potently dangerous magical practices.

Meir extends his criticism of the hasidic Zaddiq to satirizing certain specific, “magical,” customs which he had apparently witnessed in their courts.43 He refers contemptuously to the custom of hasidim to gather en masse around the Rebbe’s table, during the Sabbath and festivals, in order to eat his leftovers, or shiruyim, as an idolatrous form of personality worship.44 He also mocks the hasidim’s belief in the universal power of their Rebbes’ prayer,45 and their ability to effect miracles in response to the hasidim’s petitionary notes, or kvittelach, to them.46

In a most remarkable use of the very scriptural verse which was the proof-text most commonly cited by the early hasidim to support their panentheistic cosmology, Meir denies the magical role adopted by the hasidic Zaddiqim, insisting that the Torah emphatically rejects any religious reliance on human intermediaries:

The intention of the verse, “Know this day and set it in your heart that the Lord, He is God, in heaven above and on the earth beneath, there is none else but Him” (Deuteronomy, 4:39), is that you should understand with true knowledge (yediah mamash), that is, through cognition and deep investigation (be’afel u’behilchonenuoth) and you should retreat from the wayward thought with which the evil impulse dupes you in order to have you cling and depend upon a foolish man and his vain thoughts... Rather you must know that “The Lord is God,” that is, He Himself is the one who supervises and directs the world, and it is only to Him that you should turn with all of your problems, and only Him that you should petition for all your needs, and to Him alone that you should repent for your sins. You should not cling to any mortal man such as yourself, who was created by God from crude matter, in the vain hope that he will atone for your sins, correct your flaws, or raise your prayers to the highest heavens.47

Given the preeminent use of that same verse in all of the major hasidic writings in order to verify hasidism’s belief in Divine immanence, it is almost certain that Meir’s citation of Deuteronomy 4:39 to deflate the claims of the hasidic Zaddiquim is highly calculated. Especially striking in this paragraph is Meir’s use of expressions, such as “yediah mamash” and “hilchonenuoth,” which were important technical terms in the vocabulary of the popular HaBaD mystical writings.

Historians have noted the increasing moderation of the hasidic battle with hasidism during the course of the early decades of the 19th century.48 It has been suggested that the emergence of the haskala and reform movements equally alarmed both hasidim and mithnagdim, thus creating, however inadvertently, a common

41 Millamoth Adonai, pp. 27-8.  
42 Millamoth Adonai, chapter 7.  
44 Millamoth Adonai, p. 52.  
45 Millamoth Adonai, p. 63.  
46 Millamoth Adonai, p. 45.  
47 Millamoth Adonai, pp. 88-89.  
48 Two, among almost innumerable, examples of the use of Deuteronomy 4:35 & 4:39 in hasidic writings to support the belief in Divine immanence, taken from the first two generations of the hasidic movement, are Keter Shem Tan 184, and Shneur Zalman of Liydah, Likutei Torah, Deuteronomy, pp. 7-14 (Brooklyn, 1965).

49 The extent of this moderation is the subject of some scholarly dispute, particularly with regard to the most prominent disciple of the Gaon of Vilna, R. Hayyim of Volozhin. Norman Lamm, in his Torah Lishmah, has claimed that the conciliatory tone of Nezach Ha-Hayyim is a reflection of this softening. Isaiah Tishby, in his articles “Kasha Berikh Hu...” in Kitzur Sefer, vol. 50, and “Kituugo shel R. Yisrael Mi-Shklov...” in Kitzur Sefer, vol. 51, disagrees.
enemy and something of an automatic bond among all Orthodox factions. In the face of this softening of mithnagdic hostility to the hasidim on the part of many leaders of Rabbinic Judaism of the period, Meir ben Eliyahu remained intractable and absolutely uncompromising in his war on hasidism. In fact, he complained about the waning spirit of classical mithnagdim, and cited it in justifying the pressing need for his own polemic:

I am most surprised at the Sages of our generation, those who are called "mithnagdim," for having failed to take a stand on this matter. (On the contrary) they have adopted some of their (i.e. the hasidim's) customs as if they were good, thus giving succor to the evildoers. The opposite response is in order, namely, to eliminate and terminate even the most superficial and primitive of the customs of these sinners who call themselves hasidim, in order to protect (the Torah) from further violation. 50

Like the earlier mithnagdim, the central feature of hasidic religious behaviour that most disturbed R. Meir was its exaggerated, undisciplined nature. A central motif of Milhamoth Adonai is the total absence of a properly-defined, disciplined, hierarchical process of religious growth in hasidism. Rather than ascending the ladder of piety gradually, Meir accuses the hasidim of jumping to its highest rungs in an overly anxious thirst to attain the highest spiritual levels without proper preparation, or hadarag. 51 This criticism of the precipitoussness of hasidic religiosity underlies Meir's specific rejection of the hasidic approach to both prayer and study.

The critique of hasidic prayer

One of the major complaints of the earlier mithnagdim was hasidim's emphasis on mystical prayer as the highest priority of Jewish religious life. They accused the hasidim of reversing the traditional hierarchy of values by raising prayer over the supreme obligation of Torah study. The mithnagdim were also scandalized by hasidism's neglect of many of the normative laws governing prayer, most especially the proper times for the various services. Finally, they opposed the Hasidic masters' aggressive popularization of mystical prayer, which involved the widespread use of the Lurianic version of the liturgy hitherto limited to elite circles of genuine mystics, and the propagation of esoteric mystical exercises in prayer to the masses of Israel. 52

Each of these classical mithnagdic complaints regarding hasidic prayer re-emerges decades later in Milhamoth Adonai. In response to hasidism's inversion of the priority of study over prayer, Meir insists that Talmud Torah must retain its pre-eminence over all other religious activities. 53 He shares fully in his predecessors' concern for the integrity of the normative laws regulating the form, and especially the time, of prayer. In a stinging rebuke to the hasidic obsession with inwardness and kavana in prayer, Meir argues that the hasidic impulse to delay the service pending the attainment of proper intention is nothing less than Satanic in origin. He insists that the neglect of the liturgy's time regulations undermines the entire edifice of tefilla:

(The hasidim) cite the saying that prayer without kavanah is like a body without a soul. On the basis of this expression did Satan find the strength to clothe himself in the person of the BESEHT in order to instruct that the essence of prayer is mystical union with God . . . and without that mystical experience one had better not pray at all, and certainly should one delay the time of prayer.

This man has permitted the forbidden and invented a new, perverse religion. Behold how strongly the Satanic forces have emerged in order to propagate this stupidity . . . so that even the leaders of our people have come to believe in this new religion which he (the BESEHT) has simply invented . . .

Their basic argument is then that prayer without kavanah is akin to a body without a soul. But the truth is that prayer in the wrong time indeed has no body and no soul at all. Such prayer has virtually no existence at all. For the basis and foundation of our Torah is rooted in temporal restraints and limits. 54

Central to his opposition to hasidic prayer is Meir's insistence that all mystical activities require years of carefully controlled spiritual growth and preparation, a necessity which the hasidim flagrantly ignore. While in no way denying the theoretical power of genuinely mystical prayer, Meir insists that, but for a select few, such an experience is unavailable to the members of his own diminished generation:

50 Milhamoth Adonai, p. 49.
51 For a discussion of the ideal human type in hasidic thought, the beit hadarag, or the master of the highest levels of spirituality, see Louis Jacobs, Holy Living (N.Y. 1990), chapter 3, especially pp. 40-45.
53 Milhamoth Adonai, p. 74.
54 Milhamoth Adonai, pp. 73-74.
As for us, who are grounded and entrapped in the impurities of the earth and tempted by the riches of this world, always pursuing the attainment of money and material gain with all of our energies and powers ... would we only (limit ourselves) to intend the meaning of the words of our prayers, and intend, before praying, to fulfill our legal obligation of the mitzvah that our Creator has given us — namely, to worship Him. What business have we jumping the rungs of the ladder and rising to the heights without proper gradation ... ?

Meir refutes hasidism's use of the Mishnah's warning against the routinization of prayer, in order to encourage the immediate attainment of a mystical level of communion with God during worship. He insists that the hasidim err in applying the Mishnaic standard to the masses of Israel. Meir assures the average Jew, incapable of genuine mystical experience, that it is sufficient to pray with the simple intention of fulfilling one's legal obligations:

It turns out that when (the Mishnah) stated that one should not turn one's prayers into a routine (for) — namely, merely to fulfill the mitzvah — this is to advise the exceptionally pious, the true hasidim. As for simple people like ourselves, it is sufficient to intend, before one's recital of the "Hear O Israel," and one's prayers, simply to fulfill one's legal obligation. If only we would also have the proper intention to understand the meaning of the (words of the prayers), and not attempt to rise to the highest level without proper gradation. It is only the elite few, summoned by God Himself, that may enter the holy after having gone through the nine levels (of spirituality) which must precede the level of true hasidut.

The general conclusion of our words is that, when it comes to adding intensity and inwardness to the performance of the mitzvah, all men are not equal ... and this is obviously the case too when it comes to the study of the Torah — all men are not equally suited to the same level.

The basic error of the hasidim, in their propagation of mystical prayer to the masses of their followers, lies in their failure to draw appropriate distinctions between the varying spiritual capabilities of different individuals. Each generation, and every single individual within those respective generations, have different capacities for religious greatness, or mystical experiences. One must be careful not to prescribe powerful, kabbalistic prayer formulas to the simple Jews who will not be capable of attaining such exalted levels of religious experience. For this reason Meir emphatically rejects hasidism's justification of its mystical activities and doctrines by citing the precedents set by mystics of earlier generations, most notably R. Isaac Luria. While honouring the legacy of these earlier kabbalists, Meir insists that there can be no analogy drawn between their exalted spirits and the religious depravity of contemporary Jewry:

... but we today are lacking in wisdom and knowledge, we are intellectually diminished, spiritually incapacitated and impoverished in Torah learning — we appear before them (the mystics of earlier generations) truly, like a monkey before a man.

Of particular interest in Meir's polemic against hasidic prayer is his dispute with two specific hasidic sects — Habad and Kotsk.

In the course of his critique of the precipitous and undisciplined spirituality of the hasidim and their popularization of the notion that all Jews should be encouraged to reach the heights of mystical prayer, Meir alludes to the Habad school:

They have seized, as the source and the basis of their religiosity, that everything depends upon the extent of one's spiritual purity and that everyone must become exalted by rising to the highest heights and attaining the level of Habad ... But in tractate Sotah, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai proclaimed: "I have seen exalted men, but they are very few." Now if that was the case in those earlier generations, how much more are we of limited intellect, for we are virtually nullified in significance compared to them.

Meir was writing during the period the most active and aggressive propagation of mystical contemplation, or hithbonenueth, in the history of the Habad movement, on the part of its second master, R. Dov Baer of Lubavitch. As Naftali Loewenthal has recently demonstrated in his intellectual history of the Habad movement, the widest possible dissemination of mystical experiences in prayer and contemplation of the divine was the central goal and dominant impulse of Lubavitch, especially in this period. It is almost certain that, in insisting that his generation was both incapable and

55 Milhamot Adonai, p. 72.
56 Mishnah, Berakhot, 4:3. See the discussion of the need for inwardness in prayer in B.T., Berakhot, 29b.
57 Milhamot Adonai, p. 62. See also page 87, where Meir warns generally against precipitous, or exaggerated spirituality: "In all matters of added intensity and hasiduth, one must be exceedingly careful that these be engaged in only in accordance with the gradations of the Torah..."
unworthy of the attainment of such spiritual levels, R. Meir was responding to R. Dov Baer's unprecedented popularization of *hitbeneinu* to the Jewish masses.

Meir is most scandalized by the radicalism of the followers of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk with regard to prayer. He claims that they have taken the requirements for *kavana* prior to prayer to such an extreme that, in its absence, they have virtually eliminated the structures of prayer completely. In this earliest extant Rabbinic reference to the Kotzker sect, Meir complains:

"...now just as it is impossible to rise to the highest of these worlds suddenly and without first gradually rising through the other worlds in proper order, so it is too with regard to study – it is impossible to study kabbala and the secrets of the Torah without prior knowledge of the esoteric aspects of Torah."  

Meir repeatedly accuses the hasidim of recklessly prescribing the widespread study of kabbalah, largely to the detriment of classical Rabbinic learning and normative halakhic observance:

"...now, while there is no question that the secrets of the Torah and the study of kabbalah are the highest values of our faith, as the following sources attest... They thus have chosen to try and become elevated men, to ascend suddenly to the heavens without any moderation or gradations, and without the prior study of the simple Torah. Now, while there is no question that the secrets of the Torah and the study of kabbalah are the highest values of our faith, as the following sources attest. Nonetheless, all this only applies to one who has first filled his stomach with the simple study of the Torah, the gemara, and all of the earlier and later codifiers. But it is unheard of simply to replace all of this (rabbinic) study with the immediate consumption of these dangerously potent wines."

Meir is critical specifically of the hasidic attempt to popularize the belief in divine immanence. Again, he insists that the correct comprehension of this theosophic notion lies beyond the capacity of the vast majority of contemporary Jews.

All of this is the work of Satan who tempts them (i.e. the hasidin) to rise to the highest places in a precipitous, ungraduated manner. For who would dare to enter into the holy preparation – that is, without first having studied the esoteric Torah and attained the (reserve level) of fear of God? Indeed, you must rebuke such a person and tell him: "The secrets of God are only for those who fear Him," for "godlovers" and not heretics."

Meir thus accuses the hasidim not only of reversing the traditional hierarchy of scholarly priorities by replacing normative, mandatory Rabbinic scholarship with the study of highly esoteric kabbalistic doctrines, but also of trivializing and vulgarizing the sublime doctrines of Jewish mysticism themselves through their careless popularization.

This critique of hasidism's daring and aggressive propagation, to a wide audience, of such sublime endeavours as mystical prayer and kabbalistic study are rooted in classical mithnagdism's far
more pessimistic evaluation of the cognitive capacities and spiritual potentialities of the contemporary Jew. Following the traditional, pessimistic rabbinic view that, with the progression of history, there is a continuous regression of the religious stature of successive generations, Meir objects to hasidism’s daring optimism regarding the capabilities of all contemporary Jews to attain the most sublime religious experiences. In this sense, Meir faithfully follows in the footsteps of his mithnagdic predecessors whose dispute with hasidism was rooted not so much in objective theological differences as in a fundamental disagreement regarding man’s subjective spiritual potentialities.

The rejection of hasidic monism

In one important respect however, Meir’s critique of hasidic doctrine transcends that of the earlier mithnagdim. Not content to limit his dispute with hasidism to the epistemological question of man’s existential capacity for lofty spiritual attainment, Meir insists on a different perception of the essential relationship between ontological good and evil, both in the world and within man’s soul. In sharp opposition to hasidism’s celebration of the pervasive presence of God in all of creation, including the realm of apparent evil, Meir presents a thoroughly dualistic understanding of both the cosmos and the spirit of man.

The critique of hasidism found in Millamoth Adonai is, in that sense, rooted in an axiomatic disagreement regarding the very nature and purpose of creation. In contrast to hasidism’s monistic belief in the immanence of the divine in the created universe and the hasidic emphasis on man’s task of uncovering and revealing divinity in every corner of the world, Meir insists on a dualistic perspective. It refers not to the real existence of autonomous evil within God’s creation, but merely to the imperfect, limited human perception of the universe, which man is charged religiously to overcome and correct. The verse from Ecclesiastes is, moreover, a reminder that the source of this appearance to the human senses of evil in the cosmos is also divine in origin. In hasidic thought, man’s most important spiritual task is to transform this fragmented, perceived dualism of the created world and to arrive at an awareness of the pervasive presence of God, which unifies the entire cosmos. This monistic faith in the absolute immanence of God and the unreality of tangible evil in the world reached its peak in the acosmic doctrines of the Habad school. Its understanding of the relationship between God and the universe involved a total rejection of Lurianic dualism. As Rachel Elior has noted, in her study of the theosophy of R. Aaron Ha-Levi of Starosselje, the most noted disciple of Habad founder Shneur Zalman of Lyadi:

The traditional Lurianic conception of evil, characterized as it was by a pronounced dualism — gave way, in the thought of R. Aaron, to a philosophical simplification which completely neutralized the dualistic struggle, and which defined and restricted its interest in evil as merely a means towards the final discovery of the pervasive reality of

ontology in which good and evil, God and Satan, and body and soul stand in a permanent, incorrigible state of diametrical opposition to, and perpetual battle with, each other. Relying on the Biblical verse, “Behold how God created both good and evil, the one opposite the other,” he maintains in good Lurianic fashion, that this reflects the inescapable objective state of creation, in which good and evil stand apart from, and against each other.

In hasidic thought, by contrast, any dualism reflected in the scripture, “R’eh gam et zeh le-umath zeh asah ha-elkim” is no more than a depiction of the universe from the subjective human perspective. It refers not to the real existence of autonomous evil within God’s creation, but merely to the imperfect, limited human perception of the universe, which man is charged religiously to overcome and correct. The verse from Ecclesiastes is, moreover, a reminder that the source of this appearance to the human senses of evil in the cosmos is also divine in origin.

The rejection of hasidic monism continues with a discussion of the concept of evil and its relationship to God. The verse from Ecclesiastes, “R’eh gam et zeh le-umath zeh asah ha-elkim” is analyzed in the context of the traditional concept of evil, which is defined as a mingling of both good and evil, and is contrasted with the hasidic understanding of evil as merely a manifestation of evil within the material world.

Shneur Zalman’s use of this verse to support his belief in the total intermingling of divinity and corporeality in this world is clearly the very popular opposite of Meir’s more traditional, Lurianic understanding.
God. Far from being the opposite of good, evil is, rather, the vehicle for revelation of good.71

The highest goal of the divine worship, for the HaBaD masters, was the transformation, through heightened human awareness that God is the only ultimate reality, of the apparently physical, evil realm of the senses into pure divinity. Rachel Elior has detailed the HaBaD technique of divine service through this "transformation" of evil, or bittul ha-hippukh—the annulment of dualism.72 The HaBaD masters of Meir's time insisted that it is precisely in the human encounter with the realm of apparent evil, and the spiritual transformation of it into Divinity, that God's pervasive presence on earth becomes most manifest and magnified.73

Meir ben Elijah was the only mithnagdic polemicist to display an evident understanding of hasidism's radical monism, and to contend specifically with its technique of "transforming" evil into good. In fact, he identifies this spiritual approach as the very "source and root" of the falsity of hasidic beliefs.74 Using the precise term repeatedly applied in the HaBaD writings of his time to the paradoxical worship of God through the encounter with the realm of evil, i.e. hippukh, Meir repeatedly castigates the hasidim for their habit of blurring the realms of good and evil. Meir is particularly appalled by the related hasidic practice of avodah be-gashmiyut which he also characterizes as the "transformation of spirit to matter, and evil to good".75

They transform the words of the living God into words of heresy... when they transform the realm of good to evil, in a spirit of joyfulness... Anyone who examines their evil ways will find that almost all of their allegedly good activities are based on the transformation of the Torah... It is not enough that they have annulled much of the Torah and do not observe its (dictates), but they go so far as to transform the divine worship into sinfulness.76

Meir, in sharp contrast to the HaBaD school, adopts the classic Lurianic understanding of the source, nature and place of evil in the world. God chose to create an essentially composite universe in which objective good and evil exist in perpetual tension with each other.77 He maintains that the abyss which divides the material and spiritual realms of the universe must not be obscured, for that will simply lead to the triumph of evil. Matter and form are diametrical opposites, and the strengthening of the one is directly proportional to the weakening of the other:

The general principle is that the spiritual forces and the corporeal forces stand in opposition (Heb. mitnagdim) to each other, when the one rises the other must fall, and when the one is fortified, the other must be weakened.78

Man, being the culmination of the creative process, represents an accurate microcosm of this dualistic universe, and thus harbours within his own turbulent spirit, all of the warring cosmic forces of good and evil:

The Creator, Blessed be He, created man with remarkable wisdom, as the finale to the creative process. He thus included within man all of the forces of the entire cosmos—both material and spiritual—from the heights of the supernal worlds to the depths of the netherworlds.79

Thus did God form man in such a way that all of these different forces from the universe would be opposing (Heb. mitnagdim) within him and always struggling against him.79

It is man's challenge to cause good to triumph by actively suppressing the evil forces of his body to his essentially pure spirit until, in death, he can be liberated from the fragmented, dualistic, material universe and united with God in the world of the spirits.80

71 Rachel Elior, Torath Ha-Elokhah Be-Dor Ha-Sheni shel Hasiduth HaBaD, Jerusalem, 1982, p. 166.
72 See Rachel Elior, Torath Ha-Elokhah Be-Dor Ha-Sheni shel Hasiduth HaBaD, Jerusalem, 1982, particularly chapter 7.
73 See R. Elior, ibid., pp. 245-257.
74 The very first chapter of Millhamot Adonai includes Meir's dualistic depiction of the universe and his detailed refutation of hasidism's monistic conception which he already identifies as the "source and root" of its heresies in the title of the chapter, on page 20.
75 See Millhamot Adonai, "supplement," pp. 9-10, where Meir accuses the hasidim of effectively changing good into evil as a consequence of their ostensible desire to transform evil into good.
76 Millhamot Adonai, p. 44.
77 On the Lurianic understanding of the nature and place of evil in the universe, see Isaiah Tishby, Torat Ha Ra Velohakim be-kaaloth ha-Or, Jerusalem, 1965.
78 Millhamot Adonai, "supplement," p. 10.
80 Tishby summarizes the Lurianic view of the dualism of man's existential condition as follows:

It is evident, at any rate, that man himself is split into two camps. This dualism is most radical, since all matters pertaining to this world belong to the camp of evil... This dualism transforms man into a stage for the confrontation of two warring forces.

This confrontation reflects signs of the (larger) war between the two forces of (good and evil) in all of creation.

(Tishby, Torat Ha-ra Ve'Ikulim... pp. 108-109.)
The culture of Jewish enlightenment.

Jewish society in the day, the hashkafa movement.

Hashkafa is the concept of "philosophy and culture." It was a movement in late 19th and early 20th century Europe that sought to modernize Jewish life and culture, incorporating elements of European Enlightenment and secular thought. The goal was to integrate Jewish tradition with modernity, promoting a more progressive and intellectually engaged approach to Jewish life.

Hashkafa is often associated with the Jewish intellectual salon and the "Jewish renaissance" movement. It sought to challenge traditional Jewish thought and practices, condemned by many as outdated or irrelevant in the modern world. Hashkafa proponents advocated for a more open-minded and tolerant approach to Jewish life, emphasizing education, literacy, and secular knowledge.

In the context of Jewish enlightenment, hashkafa was a significant movement that aimed to bridge the gap between traditional Jewish culture and the broader European intellectual scene. It played a crucial role in shaping modern Jewish identity and society, leading to the establishment of modern Jewish institutions and organizations that continue to thrive today.
After the deceased, Mr. Smith, a beloved member of the community, passed away, his family and friends gathered to celebrate his life and honor his legacy. The service was filled with love and memories shared, as everyone remembered the kind soul and the impact he had on their lives.

Mr. Smith was known for his generosity and his love for the community. He volunteered at the local community center, helping the elderly and young alike. His dedication to community service was not just a part of his duty but a reflection of his character.

The service included readings from friends and family who shared stories about Mr. Smith. The choir sang beautiful hymns, and the organist played touching music that filled the room with emotion. The atmosphere was one of respect and gratitude, as everyone acknowledged the extraordinary life of Mr. Smith.

After the service, the family invited everyone to join them for a meal at the community center. The food was provided by the local restaurant, and the atmosphere was one of togetherness and support. The attendees shared stories and laughter, creating a warm and nurturing environment.

The service was a celebration of Mr. Smith's life, a reflection of his impact, and a time for friends and family to come together and remember the love and kindness he brought into the world.
Conclusion

The theoretical background and fundamental principles of the subject matter are presented in a clear and concise manner. The discussion covers various aspects of the topic, including the historical development and current trends. Key concepts and theories are elaborated upon, with examples and case studies to illustrate their application.

The objectives of the study are well-defined, and the research questions are clearly stated. The methodology employed is robust, with a focus on qualitative and quantitative research methods. The data collected is analyzed thoroughly, and the results are presented in a logical and coherent manner.

The implications of the findings are discussed, highlighting their significance for both theoretical and practical applications. Suggestions for future research are also provided, encouraging further exploration and development of the subject area.

Overall, the conclusion reinforces the importance of the study and its contributions to the field. It leaves the reader with a clear understanding of the topic and a sense of the potential impact of the research.
of its rapid disintegration in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In reaction to Hasidism’s religious enthusiasm, it reaffirmed the conservatism of the earlier Minhagim, and insisted that Jews not aspire to transcend the limited parameters of the normative Jewish legal tradition.

In rejecting the enlightenment’s reliance upon human reason, Meir ben Eliahu reflects the fear of transcending the limits of conventional religious faith, which also animated his battle with Hasidism. In the course of defending the tradition against the dual onslaught of both Hasidism and modernity, Meir retreated to an anthropology of religious pessimism and an obsession with the dangers of the evils which surrounded him. In his thinking, man is actively in history. Sin is not just a sin on every street corner of Vilna, the “shiva aliyah” operates as a frightening world to the religious, separating man from God, body from soul, faith from reason, man from woman, and Jew from gentile yet higher.