Rationalism, Romanticism, Rabbis and Rebbes

Inaugural Lecture of
DR. ALLAN NADLER
Director of Research,
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Introduction by
LEON WIESELTIER

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I will begin with a poem, then proceed to a few cultural and historical propositions broached by the poem, and then proceed to the praise of our lecturer.

The Poem is by Itzik Fefer:

John Hollander has ably translated Fefer's Poem in this way:

I've Never Been Lost

In all my short, happy life, I've never
Been lost, not forgotten the way I came.
I laugh to myself when I remember
That I carry some famous rabbi's name.

The name that my grandfather wanted for me
Was the Holy Reb Hiskd of Skver's,
That I might lay tefilin and wear a tallit,
And do my singing of prayers and Zmiros.
That I might be the richest man in town,
And my wife's housekeeping be the best,
So days and nights gave way to each other.
And each year came to follow the rest.

The sun has blessedly bronzed my body.
My life is all battles and songs of fame.
It really breaks me up to remember
That I carry some famous rabbi's name.

I have brought this particular text to Allan Nadler's lecture for two reasons. The first is anecdotal. It is that the great figure in whose shadow the poet laughs, or rather groans and laughs, the rabbi whose teachings fill him with a robust feeling of irony, the "Holy Reb Itsik!" who has imprinted himself on the very unrabbinic consciousness of the poet, was a rabbi from Chernobyl by the name of Yitzhak Twersky. Many years later, in another center of Jewish learning, another Yitzhak Twersky also cast a shadow upon men who remain amused by the magnitude and the oddity of their debt to him. One of those men is our lecturer, and another of them is the man who has the great privilege of introducing our lecturer to you. The scars of "Reb Itsik" continue to bear unexpected and delicious fruit.

My second reason for adding Fefer's poem is more substantial. The poem seems to me remarkable in its glad and gracious overcoming of the internecine bitterness that characterized the Russian Jewish community of its time, in its natural feeling of warmth toward a legacy by which the poet no longer lives, in the depth of its affection for what it has rejected. Fefer, remember, was one of the great antagonists of the religious tradition in Modern Yiddish literature. He was a devout communist, a leading representative of "Soviet Culture" in Yiddish – none of which, incidentally, saved him from the Soviet executioner in August, 1932.

One of the most striking characteristics of Jewish culture of Eastern Europe in the last years that concluded with the twin khurbns of Nazism and Communism was, I think, the magnitude of its aggression against itself. All of the great ideologies, all of the great attempts at the transformation of Jewish fate – socialism, Zionism, religious reform, assimilation, even immigration – were partly or wholly self-immolations, long and painful and sometimes cruel exercises in an erasure of the tradition, particularly the religious tradition, by the sons and daughters of the tradition themselves. There were, of course, powerful reasons for the unleashing of these energies within. Still, it is important to realize that these revolutions had a heartbreaking quality of self-impoverishment and self-depletion.

Now we are at the end of this century of feuds; or at least we should declare ourselves to be at the end. This is not the least because history has been extremely unkind to the communities who fought these feuds. While the Jews were busy eliminating parts of their patrimony, their enemies were busy eliminating the Jews themselves. And they, I mean our enemies, did their work very well. The great Jewry that escaped the physical consequences of the destruction – American Jewry, certainly did not escape its cultural consequences. We are more than late to date to continue the work of rejection and repudiation. Owing to our own efforts, and owing to the efforts of our enemies, we have been left bereft of too many of the resources of our spiritual and cultural development.

The impulse in Fefer's poem that I find so honorable is the impulse of reconciliation. The sympathy that is large enough to contain the contradictions, and some of the most painful contradictions, of Jewish identity. And it is exactly this impulse that I recognize in YIVO's enlistment of Allan Nadler as Research Director, and in the theme of Allan Nadler's lecture tonight.

Allan Nadler is one of the lucky but strenuous ones of his and my generation, the generation that has fallen heir to the loss, who have shown by example how to receive the tradition without receiving its feuds. His knowledge of Rabbinic Judaism, of Eastern Europe's normative community, of what Fefer might have called "actually existing Judaism", was the envy of all of us who studied with him more than a decade ago at Harvard under "Reb Itsik" Twersky. I have counted myself for many years not only as his friend, but also as his student.
Still, his extraordinary learning is not precisely Allan Nadler’s distinction. For what happened in his case is that the trove of the tradition fell into an untraditional mind; into a mordant, skeptical, ribald mind – in a word, into an essentially Yiddish mind. Nadler is the unusual representative of a very rich collision; that is to say, he is a representative of a kind of reconciliation.

But not of an empty reconciliation. I do not mean to say that all the questions are gone and all the answers have been given, that everything Jewish is as valuable as every other Jewish thing, that we should all become consumers of our past or pasticheurs of our own identity. Obviously philosophical and political differences will remain, and the same standard of intellectual and political rigor should be applied to the all. But tension is a fine, nutritious thing. It is the condition of real creation. Anyway, it was our ideological forefathers, not we, who found tension impossible to bear. We must not. It therefore gives me uncommon satisfaction to introduce what will certainly be a truly inaugural discussion of the tensions in East European Jewish letters provoked by Hasidism, by a scholar who has managed to transform tension into an instrument of knowledge – Dr. Allan Nadler.

Rationalism, Romanticism, Rabbis and Rebbes

Inaugural Lecture of Dr. Allan L. Nadler
Director of Research, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

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This evening we shall explore a major controversy which took place among the leading Jewish literary and intellectual figures of Eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. The question which ignited this controversy was, put most simply, what is modern, enlightened Jewry to make of Hasidism? What is its authentic message, historical significance and current relevance? What, if any, are the merits of Hasidism when contrasted to the Rabbinic Judaism which it came to challenge, and to the enlightenment which it so forcefully resisted? And, most pertinently, was Hasidism a progressive force which helped pave the way for the liberation of the Jewish nation from the ghetto? Did Hasidism contribute theologically to the modernization of Judaism, or socially to the emancipation of the Jewish people? Or was it, quite the contrary, a regressive, superstitious, anti-rational, and thoroughly anti-modern movement which served only to reinforce the ghetto walls and to keep the Jews all the more isolated from the wider European society?
These questions fomented a protracted debate among many of the leading Hebrew and Yiddish intellectuals and literary figures of Eastern Europe at the very beginning of this century. That debate was continued well past the middle of the century in the form of the famous exchanges on Hasidism between Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem.1

To this very day, the confusion over the true nature and historical impact of Hasidism has still not been definitively resolved. It is true that almost no serious contemporary historian gives credence to Buber’s interpretation of Hasidism. A good illustration of this is the fact that in the article by Yosef Dan on Hasidism which appeared in the Encyclopedia of Religion (New York, 1987), the only reference to Buber’s prolific work on the subject is limited to a section entitled “misconceptions about Hasidism”. Nevertheless there are still scholars, such as Steven Kepnes2 and Laurence Silberstein3 who today rise to defend the legitimate place of what they now call Buber’s “hermeneutical” exposition of Hasidism.

The continuing dispute over the historical significance and correct interpretation of Hasidism notwithstanding, there are certain basics upon which almost all Jewish scholars today agree. Whether viewed as progressive or regressive, the emergence of the hasidic movement was one of the great spiritual revolutions in the history of Judaism. Hasidism suddenly and radically shifted the emphasis of Jewish religious life from sober scholarship to an impassioned spirituality. At the pinnacle of the hierarchy of Judaism’s religious values Hasidism replaced the detached and unemotional study of Torah with joyful prayer and enthusiastic mystical communion with the Divine, through its popularized techniques for devekuth, or unio mystica. Hasidism supplanted the pessimistic and ascetic dualism of medieval Judaism with a mystical monism which instructed that God can be found in, and served through, the material universe. The hasidic masters insisted that God can also be discovered outside of the Bres Midrash, or Rabbinic study-hall, and that holiness need not be attained only through the masjid’s, the diligent Rabbinical student’s, quarantined life of study, contemplation and self denial. God’s immanence must be discovered in the fullness of human experience.

Hasidism rejected the morose medieval conception of man as a hopelessly divided and spiritually alienated being by insisting on the harmony of body and soul, and by joyously affirming the intimacy with holiness which is available to every man. Hasidism taught that the corruptible material universe was merely an apparition, a veil deliberately masking the divine, and challenging man to penetrate it. It instructed that all physical reality was but an illusion of the senses, merely eclipsing the omnipresence of God from our perception.

It was especially in these features of early hasidic thought that Buber and the neo-hasidic romanticists who preceded him perceived an enlightened, aesthetic and universal spirit in Hasidism. The movement’s immanence, and particularly its panentheistic identification of God with creation was misinterpreted and misappropriated by them to signify a worldliness and an incipient modernity in Hasidism which were simply not there. For, as Scholem has correctly noted, these mystical doctrines actually connote the very opposite — namely a mystical denial of the significance for the spiritual man of the temporal, physical world.

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1 Buber’s most important statement on the significance of Hasidism is, Hasidism and Modern Man (New York, 1958), and Scholem’s definitive critique of Buber’s interpretation of Hasidism is his essay, “Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism”, Commentary, 32 (1961), re-printed in Scholem’s book, The Masoretic Idea in Judaism (New York, 1971), pp. 227-250.


The emergence of this revolutionary spiritual movement, and particularly its separation from the established Jewish community and the inherent challenge to its religious authorities, gave rise, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, to one of the most painful and divisive conflicts in all of Jewish history. The Rabbinic war on Hasidism waged by the misnagdim reached its peak with the famous herem, or letter of excommunication, of R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna of 1796, in which he condemned Hasidism as a pantheistic heresy. The hasidim were henceforth officially banned, their shabbateykh, or small prayer houses, deemed temples of idolatry, their shebivech, or ritual animal slaughter, proclaimed unkosher, and their daughters forbidden.

Yet, despite its intensity in the last years of the eighteenth century, the rabbinic rage against Hasidism was rather quickly spent; within a generation, the bans were almost universally ignored. For a new and far more menacing spectre was now haunting the traditional world of East European Rabbinic Judaism — the haskole, or Jewish enlightenment. The spread of

the haskole to Eastern Europe in the early decades of the nineteenth century was deemed so dangerous and considered so subversive a threat to Rabbinic Judaism that it managed rather quickly to transform hasidim and misnagdim from mortal enemies to tactical allies, in a new, jointly waged battle between the forces of tradition and modernity.

But while the Rabbinic war on Hasidism was, in the course of the nineteenth century, rapidly eclipsed by this unified religious resistance to the haskole, a major confrontation about Hasidism emerged within enlightened Jewish circles almost a full century later. Rather than a war between the parties themselves, this was a struggle among the liberal Jewish historians, essayists and intellectuals of late imperial Russia over the true meaning and legacy of Hasidism.

This twentieth century reincarnation of the hasidic-mishnagdic controversy was then a feud among historians and intellectuals, not Rabbis. They argued over whether it was the hasidim or the mishnagdim who were the spiritual forbears of the Jewish passage from the restrictive life of the ghetto towards greater spiritual freedom and national autonomy? Is today's modern Jew, they wondered, the spiritual child of the Baal Shem Tov or of the Vilner Gaon? The conflicting answers to this basic question gave rise to scores of romantic essays, polemical articles, neo-basidic short stories and poems which filled the pages of the enlightened Eastern European Jewish press in the early years of this century. In fact, during the first decade of the twentieth century, hardly a single issue of such enlightenment and Zionist publications as Ha-Olam, Ha-Shilash, and He-Atid did not contain several articles each devoted to the "Hasidic Problem", mostly written by national-


2 The text of this Herem has been introduced, reprinted and annotated by Mordechaj Wilensky, Hasidim u-Mishnagdim, Vol. I, pp. 187-190.


ists whose true ultimate worry was, of course, Russia's "Jewish Problem". The most celebrated Hebrew writers and essayists of the day, such as Reuven Brainin, Shmuel Abba Horodetsky, Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Sbai Ish Hurwitz, and Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, argued passionately on the pages of these haskolle journals about the relative merits of Hasidism and Misnagdism.

Let us remember that for most of the preceding century the maskilim had been unanimous in their uncompromising hostility to Hasidism. Virtually without exception, they perceived the hasidim to be the mortal enemies of enlightenment, as caricatures of all that was most offensive and unenlightened in the medieval Jewish civilization to which they sought, in the rather infamous words of Moritz Steinschneider, to give a decent burial.

The non-rational nature of Hasidic mysticism, its denial of reality to the world, the superstitious behaviour and bizarre rituals of the hasidim, and especially their slavish devotion to the Rebbe - all of these were viewed by the maskilim as the very antithesis of reason, and as a perilous obstacle to the social and intellectual progress, as well as the aesthetic refinement of the Jews, to which the haskolle was so singularly dedicated.

Just as the Rabbinic polemics and the writs of excommunication of the Vilna Gaon and his followers were dissipating, they were being replaced by the biting anti-hasidic satires of enlightenment writers such as Joseph Perl, Isaac Erter, Abraham Dov Gottlober, Isaac Baer Levinsohn and Shlomo Yehuda Rappaport (Shir). 8

For most of the nineteenth century, there were precious few who dissented from the haskolle's utter disdain for Hasidism. And those who dared to express any appreciation for its spiritual message, such as the Galician maskil, Yaakov Shmuel Bik (1772-1831) were roundly condemned and disassociated by their contemporaries.

The first haskolle writer to challenge seriously this uncompromising hostility towards Hasidism was the enlightened Talmudic scholar, Eliezer Zweifel.9 In his rambling, four-volume defense of Hasidism, Shalom Al Yusaf (1868-1873), Zweifel endeavoured to demonstrate that there was merit, spiritual depth and even beauty to be found in many of Hasidism's doctrines, and that there was consequently no sense in waging an all-out war on the hasidim. Shalom Al Yusaf is particularly significant in that it was really the first work in modern Jewish literature to make the argument for a pluralistic perspective on Jewish life. Zweifel insisted that the teachings of the Gaon of Vilna, the Baal Shem Tov and Moses Mendelssohn, if appreciated in the proper historical and social context, all had merit. Rather than viewing the movements which they generated as mutually exclusive, Zweifel implored his readers to appreciate that Hasidism and the Haskolle could each thrive side by side, and contribute, in complementary fashion, to the spiritual and social progress of the Jewish people.

Zweifel did not however limit himself to pleading for tolerance of the hasidim and for pluralism in Jewish life. He was also the first to suggest that there was actually to be found in Hasidism's mystical doctrines the kernels of the Jewish enlightenment. Zweifel argued that Hasidism's radical affirmation of the immanence of God in the material universe helped pave the way for the secular immanentism of the

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8. For an excellent overview of the writings of these Hebrew literary figures and their anti-hasidic writings, see Israel Zieberg, A History of Jewish Literature, translated by Bernard Martin. (Cincinnati, 1972-18), Vols. 9-10. The English version of Zieberg's work is supplemented with a very helpful bibliography by translator B. Martin.

Enlightenment. Zweiffel placed Hasidism within the tradition of Spinoza's pantheism and he maintained that, like Spinoza, Hasidism had helped to break down the Rabbinic wall which hitherto had kept the Jews isolated from the natural world and from modernity. Though Zweiffel then earnestly tried to remain true to the title of his work, Shalom Af Yisrael, by finding merit in all of the factions of Judaism of his day, it is clear that he viewed Hasidism as an improvement over the arid and elitist Rabbinism which it had come to challenge. So, for example, after describing Hasidism's radically mystical affirmation of divine immanence, Zweiffel comments:

Hasidism, as it is today, has a clearer understanding of real life than the Talmudic missagdim of the Torah faithful masses who reject all of the joys and pleasures of this world - even those which are permissible. And it is in this sense that Hasidism's worldview is in alignment with that of the maskilim.

This theme was, two decades later, to be taken up by the hasidic romanticists, such as M.Y. Berdichevsky, S.A. Horodetsky and Y.L. Peretz. But in his own day, Zweiffel remained virtually isolated among the maskilim in his preferences for the Beshet and the hasidim over the Gaon of Vilna and the missagdim. For though themselves alienated from the legalistic rigidity of Rabbinic Judaism, almost all of the Eastern European maskilim were more comfortable with the scholarly and intellectual legacy of the Gaon of Vilna than they were with hasidism's mystical piety.

Indeed, many of the early pioneers of the Jewish enlightenment in the East were fond of viewing the Gaon and the missagdim as genuine precursors of the haskolle. Beginning with Isaac Ber Levinsohn's attribution of enlightenment tendencies to "kol habrurah kadisha talmidei ha-GRA" (the entire holy assembly of disciples of the Vilner Gaon), as he put it in Teudah be-Yisrael, the Gaon was deliberately cast, by the early

maskilim, as well as their sympathetic chroniclers of the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement, as, to quote Max Raisin, "the originator of the movement" of Jewish enlightenment in the East. 11

In his remarkable anti-hasidic essay, "Ha-Hasiduth ve-ha-Haskala," 12 Shai Ish Hurwitz 13 offered the following, rather typical, maskilic appreciation of the Gaon of Vilna as a precursor of the enlightenment:

It was the GRA who first created the opening, like the eye of a needle, for the critical textual study of the Talmud, which eventually resulted in today's critical, literary scholarship. It was the GRA, long before Zimm and Graetz came along, who allowed himself to amend Rabbinic texts critically. And certainly the GRA's critical textual insights were far more authoritative than those of the founders of Wissenschaft des Judentums.

The GRA was a trailblazer in the field of Jewish education: he eliminated the Rabbinic casuistics (pulpai), and was the first to establish a logical pedagogical order of study whereby Jewish children would begin with Bible and Hebrew grammar, followed by Mishnah, and only then begin the study of Talmud - a program which was later championed by all of the maskilim, in particular by Isaac Baez Levinsohn.

Who knows of all of the latter's (i.e. maskilim) efforts for the improvement of Jewish education would have thought that in the pioneering work of the GRA?

11 See J.S. Raisin, The Haskalah Movement in Russia, (Philadelphia, 1913), Chapter 2. See also, for further examples of this appraisal of the GRA's relationship to the haskolle, L.H. Weiss, "Reyshatam Zemah ha-haskala be-Russia", in Mi-Merorim 2:1, Israel, 1986, pp. 27-57.

12 Shai Ish Hurwitz.

13 See the review and critical evaluation of this literature by Immanuel Eitels in his essay, "Ha-GRA Ve-ha-Haskala: Talmud u-Mezuzah", in Parshim be-Toledote ha-Ha-rishon ha-Yehudit Beyond Hebrewskin: Esh-Eh--Zeh Ta'amim be-Mekhudei Yisrael, (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 192-217.

14 See also, on the beginnings of haskolah among the Rabbinical elite of Eastern Europe, inter alia, Israel Klaunzer, Vilna Bizniesh ha-Gaon, passim; B.Z. Katz, Rabbinicmissagdim, (Tel Aviv, 1956-58), Vol. 3, pp. 140-148; Vol II, pp. 122-139.

15 See A. E.J. Haskel, 1909, pp. 29-69.

16 A thorough study of Hurwitz's essays is Stanley Nash, In Search of Hasidism: Shai Hurwitz and his Followers in the Hebrew Press, (Leiden, 1980).
Moreover, the GRA was a scientific scholar the likes of which had not been seen in Israel since the days of the great Gaonim of Babylonia and North Africa. At his behest, Joshua Zeitlin established his center for Jewish scientific scholarship, and as his command did Baruch of Shklov decide to translate Euclid into Hebrew. And in all of this he was a shining example for his many disciples. The GRA's students came into close contact with the Biblical scholars and pioneers of the enlightenment: who were assembled in those days in Berlin under the direction of Moses Mendelssohn, in a joint effort to find ways in which to improve the spiritual condition and education of the Jewish people.  

This idyllic portrayal of the Gaon of Vilna was, I believe, a direct response to the very unflattering depiction of him by the neo-hasidic romanticist, Shmuel Abba Horodetsky, in an article which had appeared in the Hebrew journal, Ha-Shiloah less than two years earlier. But Hurwitz' highly exaggerated depiction of the Gaon as a veritable masik ha-hadashim, which is his main theme. Responding angrily to the sympathetic revisionist interpretations of Hasidism which were at the time being advanced by the Jewish neo-romanticists such as Horodetsky, Berdichevsky and Buber, Hurwitz' polemic is every bit as merciless in its critique of Hasidism as were the classical misnagdic polemics and haskole satires of the previous two centuries.

Hurwitz' "Ha-Hasiduth ve-ba-Haskalsa" was a reaction to a major trend in Jewish letters at the turn of this century; a sympathetic reappraisal of Hasidism inspired by the influence of European romanticism, in particular the writings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. For Eliezer Zweifel's perception of the seeds of enlightenment in hasidic theology, was now being extended by some of the greatest fin-de-siècle Hebrew and Yiddish romantic writers.

Disillusioned by the early haskole's almost exclusive emphasis on reason and understanding, and disenchanted with European idealism, the Jewish romanticists - many of them passionate Zionists - longed to recover the innate, primitive essence of ancient Israel and claimed to have found it in Hasidism. In contrast to the contrived genius of the Talmudists and the artificially imposed legislation of the Rabbis - viewed as the unnatural products of the Jewish exile - Hasidism represented, in the minds of these idealists, a re-birth of the natural, subconscious spirit of the Jews. The primal nature of Hasidism's religious enthusiasm, and its rejection of the sophisticated, scholarly religion of the Talmudists, heralded an almost miraculous reincarnation of the spirit of ancient Israel, a return from the shackles of exile symbolized by the restrictions of Halakha, to Jewish authenticity, and the beginning of the difficult trek back to Erez Israel.

By far the most enthusiastic champion of Hasidism among the ranks of these Russian Zionist historians and essayists was Shmuel Abba Horodetsky. A prolific, if not perfectly critical, historian of Jewish mysticism, Horodetsky viewed Hasidism in the larger context of his schematic and bifurcated view of the entire history of Jewish spirituality from Biblical times until his own day, which is most forcefully and systematically expressed in his collection of essays entitled Yahaduth ha-Sekhel ve-Yahaduth ha-Regesh. As this title suggests, Horodetsky simplistically attempted to characterize all of the various historical forms of the Jewish religious experience schematically under two sweeping broad rubrics - "sekhel" and "regesh" (reason and emotion). Rege is the authentic, primitive spirituality of the Jews; rege is the true religion of ancient Israel; it breathes the free spirit of the land of Israel, its probi...
erts and holy men. Sekhel, by contrast, exemplifies the exilic religion of reason and law; it is reflected in the artificially imposed regimen of the Talmud, a work which is, as Horodetsky reminds us "peri ha-galuh", the product of exilic banishment and Jewish self-alienation. Horodetsky maintains that the spirit of Yahaduth ha-regesh, subordinate though it was to Yahaduth ha-sekhel during the long years of Israel’s homelessness and Rabbinic domination, never vanished entirely. Even the Talmud – that detested "peri ha-galuh" reflects, in its very composite nature, the constant dialectical tension between sekhel and regezh, represented in its respective components of halakha and aggadah. And the spirit of regezh managed to survive the Jewish dark ages only among the small and elite circles of the kabbalists.

Horodetsky criticizes the obsession of the Eastern European Rabbis with Torah scholarship and intellectual attainment, characterizing it as a sad reflection of the domination of Judaism by sekhel. It was only the revolt against Rabbinism wrought by the Baal Shem Tov which initiated the difficult struggle of the Jews finally to liberate themselves from the domination of sekhel and to become emancipated from the shackles of galuh. The hasidic masters, about whom Horodetsky wrote so prolif-erically and reverently, were following in the great tradition of the prophets of ancient Israel, the ha-sidim ha-aggadah and the kabbalists. In this scheme, Hasidism was more than merely a precursor to the haskole; for in restoring the proper emphasis to Judaism to regezh, in turning the Jews back to the primal, natural faith of their ancient homeland, Hasidism also marked the true starting point of modern Jewish nationalism.

Horodetsky’s enthusiasm for Hasidism as the miraculous re-flowering of the native and authentic Jewish spiritual genius, exercised him to produce many impressive studies of Hasidism, most significantly his extensive biographical series on the great hasidic masters.17

But it was his series of provocative essays in which he not only championed Hasidism as the harbinger of a great renaissance of the Jewish national spirit, but mercilessly criticized the misnagdim and especially their leader, the Vilna Gaon, as blind and archaic reactionaries, which most outraged his critics, such as Shai Hurwitz.

In the most inflammatory of Horodetsky’s essays, the aforesaid “Ho-Gra ve-ha-Besht”, he contrasted these two great men in bold and sharp terms, characterizing the Gaon of Vilna as a selfish, egotistical scholar who remained hermetically sealed in his study and cared nothing for his people, and gave nothing of himself to them. His sole concern was the advancement of his own scholarship. The Besht by contrast, though not a great scholar, was a truly great populist leader, who gave his life to the betterment of his people, and dedicated his wisdom and spiritual insight to them. At the conclusion of his respective portraits of the Gaon and the Besht he evaluated their true legacy thus:

Hurwitz responded with outrage. How dare anyone mini-

mize the centrality of scholarship to the spirit and genius of the Jewish people. The Jews are, and always have been, the "am ha-sefer", the people of the book. A legacy of study is not to be sneered at; for scholarship is the defining characteristic of the Jewish nation, and has, since ancient times, been its true vocation. A life dedicated to the advancement of Jewish learn-

17 Ha-Hasidus voh-ha-Hashevet, 4 Vols. (Bertin, 1923).
** "Ha-Gra ve-ha-Besht", op. cit., pp. 333 & 356, respectively.
return to genuine haskole, to a life guided by reason and scholarship, rather than the primitive and superstitious mysticism which had so enticed the romantics.

Horodetsky responded vigorously to Hurwitz' polemic in an article published that same year, which he begins by accusing Hurwitz of rekindling the flames of hatred which had once raged between the hasidim and mithnagdim in the days of the Gaon:

It is important to note that in the course of supporting his argument that Hasidism was a regression from modernity, rather than a turning towards it, Hurwitz focused especially on the hasidic tales, particularly the Shuvhei ha-Besht. Using the fantastic hasidic legends of the Besht's miraculous powers to demonstrate the fundamental irrationality of Hasidism and in order to hold its naive true believers up to ridicule. Hurwitz completely rejected the suggestion that Hasidism is anything less than a total regression to the darkest moments of the middle ages. Horodetsky, on the other hand, like Zweiffel before him, depended primarily on the panentheistic doctrines found in the theoretical writings of early Hasidism, such as Toldoth Yizkor Yosef, Zofnath Pneach, Maggid Derav le-Yaakov and

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Zvavey Ha-Ranash, in order to support his appreciation of Hasidism. Of course, in the case of the later dispute over Hasidism between Scholten and Buber, we witness the very opposite phenomenon: a dramatic illustration. I believe, of just how very subjective the reading of mystical literature has been in Jewish historiography. Let me also add at this point that the echoes of this century-old dispute about the correct understanding of Hasidism can be today heard in the revisionary work of scholars like Moshe Idel. And the connection, drawn one hundred years ago by romanticists like Horodetsky and Berdichevsky, between ecstatic mysticism and the quest for the natural, primal religion of ancient Israel are sometimes today repeated in the most unexpected contexts—for example, Harold Bloom’s bizarre dedication of The Book of J to the Israeli scholar of Kabbalah, Moshe Idel.

One particular legend which Hurwitz used to illustrate Hasidism’s backwardness and to demonstrate that Hasidism was the furthest thing from a progressive, universal movement was the remarkable story of the Baal Shem Tov and the old celibate priest. Due to its importance in the present context, I shall read the entire text of the tale:

Once, on the eve of Yom Kippur, before Kol Nidre, the congregation gathered in the beyn-midrash. The Bashi stood up, but he did not begin to pray. It was evident that he was greatly perplexed. There was a long delay, and the entire congregation began to cry. Because they realized that this was not an empty matter. Then the rabbi looked through the window and saw an old priest walking before the beyn-midrash, and he went out to see him. The rabbi began to talk with him. He asked him how he was, and they became so engrossed in conversation that he accompanied him home. The rabbi discussed with him why he did not take a wife... The priest answered him that he was not permitted to marry. The rabbi argued with him a great deal about it and urged him to resign his priesthood and perform the mitzvah of propagation at least in his old age. The priest said that according to his rank he could not marry a woman of the lower class and a woman of a worthy family would not agree to marry him. The rabbi said that a certain governor had a beautiful daughter and he would certainly be willing to give her to him as a wife. He kept talking to him until he agreed. The thought of her beauty so excited him that he had an accidental seminal emission from the heat of his desire for her. The rabbi immediately went to the beyn-midrash and began to pray Kol Nidre.

After the prayers his followers came to him and he told them the story. A great accusation in heaven had blocked all the prayers from ascending because this priest had never had an accidental emission.

They said: "How do you know that he had an accidental emission?"

He answered: "Because it was immediately impossible to stand near him."

And so with the help of God all the accusers were silenced.

After paraphrasing this tale, Hurwitz mockingly wonders:

Hurwitz’ article had a tremendous impact. It engendered a similar attack on Horodetsky by the Zionist leader Moishe Leib Lilienblum, in a remarkable essay published a year later. And, more significantly, it very clearly generated a change of heart in a Hebrew literary giant who had hitherto been one of the great romanticists of Hasidism, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky. The man who had at one time re-written the classic hasidic legends in such a manner as to glorify Hasidism and to praise its masters, suddenly discovered in these very same legends the most ugly and offensive material. In a startling, revisionist article, Berdichevsky cited this very same hasidic tale of how it was only a priest’s orgasm which allowed the Jews’ prayers to soar to the heavens, as a specific source of his disillusionment with hasidism.

Why was Berdichevsky so disillusioned by this particular tale, to the point where he subtitled the first part of his

22 Shaveler Ha-Berak: tale #239. This citation is based on the translation found in the English version of Shaveler ha-Berak, entitled In Praise of the Baal Shem, ed. Jerome Mintz. P. 248.
25 Much has been written about Berdichevsky’s romantic hasidic tales. Perhaps the best single treatment of this theme is Samuel Z. “ha-Hasidut be-Olamah shel Berdichevsky”, Meda, Vol. 4 (1967), #214, pp. 425-427.
renunciation of Hasidism. "ha-Rav ve-ha-Kohen" (the Rabbi and the Priest)? I believe that the devastating impact of this tale is related to the fact that its context is so similar to another tale, from the same hasidic source, which Berdichevsky himself had made so famous. That tale, retold in Yiddish by Berdichevsky as "Das Faygel", in his collection, Yiddische Kamin fun a Veyten Korev, describes how, under almost identical circumstances—i.e. on Yom Kippur, in the shul of the Besht, with the prayers of the Jews not succeeding in breaking through to the heavens, and the master and his hasidim despairing— it was the whistling of a naive and ignorant young lad, an act halakhically forbidden on Yom Kippur, which succeeded in reaching God where the prayers of the most pious and learned Jews had failed.

Clearly Berdichevsky originally saw in this Hasidic tale all that he had wished Hasidism to be—a return to a primitive, natural relationship with God, in which neither learning nor piety nor halakhic obedience are of ultimate spiritual worth; a system of faith in which a primal shriek is more valued by God than the most sophisticated formulations of the established liturgy.

But then, Berdichevsky discovered, I believe thanks to Hurwitz' article, a very similar— but oh how different!—hasidic tale. For this time it is not the naive pious enthusiasm of an innocent boy but rather the violation of the dignity and the vows of a Catholic priest which succeeded in reconciling God with the children of Israel. All at once, the naive myths which Berdichevsky had read into Hasidism were shattered. Hasidism, he now discovered, was not the liberating and universal movement away from the ghetto which he had thought it to be; it does not represent a return to the nature and beauty of ancient Israel; quite the contrary, Hasidism is an even deeper, xenophobic retreat into the darkness of medieval Jewish alienation from the world. Where he once felt that Hasidism was an expansion of spirituality and an extension of it to the entire world, he now sensed that it is even more sectarian and more limiting than the Judaism of the Rabbis. Hasidism's superstitious mistrust of the goy and its contempt for his religion, as reflected in this story, enslaves Jews to a parochial, irrational life of fear and lethargy. With evident despair, Berdichevsky concludes his re-assessment of Hasidism with these words:

Historians have, naturally enough, completely discredited the romantic view of Hasidism. Examined critically and historically, Hasidism was not of course a movement for the lib-

37 "Le-Torash ha-Herhev ve-ha-Zimzum", op. cit., P. 165.
eration of the Jew from the shtetl, or from religious authority or from the exile. It did not proclaim an end to galut; quite the contrary, as the subsequent history of Hasidism amply demonstrates, it reinforced the galut. As for the rationalists’ appropriation of the Gaon of Vilna, he was in actual fact a mortal enemy both of rationalism and of any changes to traditional Jewish life. There is virtually no historical merit in the claim that his broad academic interests, which included the sciences, reflect any genuine affinity whatsoever to the haskole. His interest in the sciences was medieval in nature; he viewed them as purely ancillary to Torah, and as nothing more than the handmaids of faith.

For the historian, for the objective textual and philological scholar of the literary sources of Hasidism and Misnagdism, the entire disputation which we have been following this evening is then of no consequence. Both sides were equally naive, and equally wrong in their respective evaluations of the Besht and the Gaon. For hasidim and misnagdim were equally backward and medieval, and their doctrines equally offensive to the spirit of the Enlightenment.

But I would like to suggest that it is a mistake to limit the legacy of either the Gaon or the Besht to the constraining analysis of historical and textual scholars. The full implications of the teachings of these great men are far more complex than the sober historical/philological study of their writings might reveal.

All of the neo-hasidic romanticists were forced to confess that the pure Hasidism in which they saw the seeds of enlightenment, did not fulfill its own promise. As Horodetsky wrote in his defensive response to Hurwitz:

But Horodetsky oversimplified the subsequent history of Hasidism. And it is precisely in the fullness of the historical picture that we can, I believe, see elements of truth in the perception of both sides to this great dispute. The history of Hasidism after the Maggid of Mezeritch is not nearly as simple as Horodetsky, and the others, would have us believe; it was far more than an unremitting decline into the depravities of Zaddikism. Among the very many, diverse schools of hasidic mysticism, there were in fact some in which the romanticists’ utopian glimpses of freedom and individualism were nearly realized.

Some fifty years before Horodetsky and Hurwitz feuded over the competing roles of law and spirit in Judaism, there appeared a remarkable hasidic work, May ha-Shiloah, in which early hasidism’s radical emphasis on divine immanence was taken to its extreme logical conclusions. If, as the Besht taught, all of mundane existence is suffused with the divine, argued its author Mordechai Yosef of Izhbitz – a most unusual disciple of the Kotzker Rebbe – so too must the fullness of the human spirit be divine, even when it sins. Every action of man must therefore be perceived as a manifestation of rezon ha-Borah, including his moral and religious failings. In his most shocking expression of this religious determinism, the Izhbitzer Rebbe altered the familiar Ramban statement, "hakol biyidei Shomayim huz mi-yirath Shomayim" ("all is in the hands of heaven, except for the fear of heaven") to read "hakol biyidei Shomayim, afu yirath Shomayim" ("all is in the hands of heaven, including even the fear of heaven"). The actions of man – whether good or evil, permitted or forbidden – are all a natural, legitimate reflection of pervasiveness of the divine in the world, a manifestation of rezon ha-Borah, or God’s will.

While Hurwitz had denied Horodetsky’s claim that in Hasidism there can be found the seeds of the Jews’ liberation from the tyranny of the law, or yishuv ha-sekhel, the Izhbitzer
Rebbe struggled with the confining nature of the halakha when confronted with the natural urges of man, and suggested that its legal statutes are often less important than the innate needs of man. I, for one, cannot imagine a more romantic or utopian form of spiritual freedom than that expressed in May ha-Shiloah.22

As for the Gaon of Vilna, his legacy of scholarship was ultimately to transform Vilna into a truly distinctive city, among the great Jewish centers of pre-war Europe. Although not himself receptive to philosophical rationalism, and not a true forerunner of the haskole, the Gaon established Vilna as the greatest seat of Jewish scholarship in modern history. And, in time, it was precisely this overwhelming emphasis in Lithuanian Judaism on scholarship which gave rise to an openness and to an intellectual pluralism in the Orthodox community of Vilna that was unmatched anywhere in Eastern Europe.

And it is here, in this YIVO building, that the saved remnants of one of the most poignant symbols of that unique atmosphere of intellectual openness which is the distinctive legacy of the Vilner Gaon, have found their home. I am talking about the Strashun Library, which was both a symbol and a real citadel of religious and intellectual pluralism and tolerance in pre-war Eastern Europe. The fullness and complexity of Jewish life in Vilna were reflected both in the books and in the readers of the "Strashun Bibliotek". An examination of the very first catalogue of this library, Likutei Shoshanim, reveals the remarkably open eclecticism of its founder, Matityahu Shtrashun. Although himself a great traditional Talmudic scholar, in the school of the Vilner Gaon, he acquired books representing almost every discipline of the sciences and humanities. And the library was, over the subsequent years, used by every element of Vilna's Jewish community, from Bundists reading Marx and Engels in Yiddish translation to Rabbinic Sages consulting the responsa literature in order to resolve a vexing halakhic problem. Such an environment of intellectual openness and tolerance could only be maintained in a Jewish community whose legacy was that of the all-embracing scholarship of the Gaon of Vilna. The remarkable openness of this great Jewish institution is captured in an essay about the Strashun Library, by its last librarian, Reb Haikel Lunsky:

YIVO, was fortunate enough physically to have inherited a major part of the Strashun Library. But we have not yet become its full and authentic heir. For YIVO to flourish in the coming decades, it must capture the open and eclectic spirit of the Strashun library, whose books it now owns. YIVO must dedicate itself to the objective study, documentation and rehabilitation of the fullness of pre-war Jewish life and culture, without preference for any specific aspect or faction of that culture. YIVO must adopt that posture of Jewish pluralism and inclusion of which the Vilna Kekhile and the Strashun library were such a poignant symbol. We must renounce any attachment to a particular Jewish ideology and abandon any narrow, particularist doctrinal agenda. I view this as a major part of my task here, as director of research: to deepen YIVO's

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commitment to truly Jewish scholarship, and to broaden the range of students and scholars who will in the years to come flock to YIVO, so that it might one day recall the full magnificence of that reading room in Vilna.