Hasidism and Its Response to Change

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Abstract The article has two distinct parts. The first reviews the current state of scholarship on Hasidism and its history, especially the changes that have taken place over the course of the past two decades. The second is a discussion of theological reflections on change and creativity found in the early sources of Hasidism. The movement’s creators were willing to make far-reaching assertions about the legitimacy of generational change, even considering it an obligatory undertaking. This call is a familiar part of youth culture in many diverse settings. The author suggests that early Hasidism was indeed largely led by young men shaping a revivalist religious movement that called for throwing off the shackles of mere traditionalist behavior. At the same time, it is notable that this potentially powerful radically revisionist claim was in fact used to make only minor changes in the actual patterns of religious behavior, setting the stage for the ultra-conservative wave that was to overtake Hasidism after 1800 and the beginning of its battle with modernity.

Keywords Hasidism · Eastern Europe · Eighteenth century · Religious radicalism · Youth culture

This essay consists of two separate sections, united by their dealing with changes in viewpoint. I open with some reflections on the state of hasidic historiography, highlighting recent changes in scholarly approaches to the subject. I then turn to consideration of an internal question in hasidic thought, the legitimacy of generational change.

I

In 1988 a conference in memory of Joseph Weiss convened in London. Devoted to a reconsideration of the phenomenon of Hasidism, the deliberations there eventually took the form of a memorable volume called Hasidism Reappraised, which was published in 1996.† Much has been written about Hasidism since then, and broader cultural, intellectual, and historiographical trends have come to the fore. The time has come to reappraise the reappraisal and to assess what we think, write, and teach about the history of Hasidism today.

The most immediately noteworthy feature of the 1988 conference was that it represented a generational shift. Gershom Scholem, Isaiah Tishby, and Raphael Mahler were all discussed as figures of the past, even by those who had been their students. This was a gathering of a mostly younger generation of scholars, people then in early or early mid-career, including Immanuel Etkes, Ada Rapoport-Albert, Gershon Hundert, Moshe Rosman, Moshe Idel, Rachel Elior, Zeev Gries, and others. While the volume eventually included essays by distinguished representatives of the previous generation, theirs were not the main voices at that conference.

Several other items are worthy of note as we look back at that event and volume. As perhaps befitted a gathering in Weiss’s memory, Hasidism was discussed chiefly as a religious and intellectual movement, and the sources under consideration were almost entirely internal, indeed almost all of them were published Jewish texts that had been available to prior generations of scholars as well. Rosman’s and Hundert’s contributions were among the early efforts of a new generation of Jewish scholars who were training themselves to read Polish and to gain access to other bodies of literary and archival source material, but this was certainly secondary in the minds of most, including those writing in the area of social history. Although the published volume included essays by a few senior scholars who had been born in pre-war eastern Europe, such as Chone Shmeruk, Mendel Piekarz, and Shmuel Ettinger (whose passing shortly after the conference is noted in the preface), it is fair to say that the bulk of the volume represented a generation of scholars of Hasidism who had little real contact with the lands, and hence with the non-Jewish cultural settings, within which Hasidism dwelt before the great destruction of the Holocaust era. We knew Ukrainian, Galician, Polish, or Hungarian Hasidism from a distance—mostly from documents, but also from contact with surviving communities now violently exiled far from their original homes and the towns that still bore their dynastic names. The conference took place, we should recall, before the fall of the Berlin wall and the opening of Eastern Europe that followed in its wake. Also noteworthy is the presence in the volume of essays by two scholars, Yehoshua Mondshine and Naftali Loewenthal, who are members of hasidic communities as well as scholars of hasidic history. This happily represents a crossing of bounds that probably could not have taken place in the previous generation.

Now, a generation later, the study of Hasidism is developing in a different atmosphere. Let me present, in outline form, a few of the factors that may account for the major differences as I see them.

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2This same approach may be seen in Weiss’s posthumous collected essays, appearing at nearly the same time (although most had been published within the author’s lifetime). See Joseph Weiss, Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism (London, 1997).