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Written Torah and Oral Torah in the Study of Hasidism

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Abstract

The traditional academic approach to the study of the Hasidic movement in Judaism has tended to be based primarily on texts. Although book learning is important to Hasidim, the heart of the movement is living experience, in particular oral teaching of the Hasidic understanding and application of Torah by the Rebbe, most often in the Yiddish vernacular. Failure adequately to take account of this “oral Torah” (borrowing the term commonly applied to the Talmud) has led to inadequate, even erroneous conclusions about Hasidism and its tenets and history.

Keywords

Hasidism – oral tradition – Yiddish – Ba’al Shem Tov – Abraham Joshua Herschel – Moshe Idel – *tsaddik*, *kometz aleph* – *shemen zakh* – Pshiskha – Ger

תָּתֵן אֱמֶת לַיַעֲקֹב

“Thou wilt show truth to Ya’akov” (Micah 7, 20)

“And the *Toroth*” (Leviticus 26:46)—

This teaches us that two Torahs were given to Israel, one written, and one oral (*Sifra Behukotai*, chapter 8, section 10).

Gershom Scholem divided the rich literature of Hasidism into two main categories: Theological-conceptual literature and legendary literature. Sermons, biblical commentary, and tracts (*Kuntresim*) on religious matters constitute theological literature. On the other hand, legendary literature consists of praises, hagiography, collections of sayings, proverbs and refinements—of the *tsaddikim* (“righteous men”, i.e., the Hasidic leaders). Theological literature represents the views of the *tsaddik*, even though it is often not he who wrote his books but his students, whereas the legendary literature represents the stories told by the Hasidim about the *tsaddikim*, the records of the Hasidim who followed the good attributes and characteristics of their spiritual leader, and so on (Assaf/Liebes 2009: 325–369).

At the beginning of academic research of Hasidism, from the 1920s into the 1960s, there was a deep methodological disagreement between Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber regarding what were the main sources with which to study and analyse Hasidism. Scholem preferred to rely mainly on theological literature, which, in his opinion, could reveal “basic motifs” in Hasidic thought. Martin Buber, on the other hand, relied mainly on the second category, legendary literature (*ibid.*). Either way both of these research methods are based on written texts. Scholem’s approach examined theological texts; Buber’s, folkloristic texts. Indeed, the common origin of these texts from the two different genres, is oral speech, though eventually put into writing.

Nonetheless, there is a third genre that is not sufficiently used in Hasidic research. This is an oral tradition that is passed down from generation to generation and in a Hasidic way of life. Hasidism often cannot be understood without this oral layer. There are also texts that were partially understood, or misunderstood, due to a lack of familiarity with Hasidic lifestyle and oral traditions.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish philosophers of the 20th century, challenged the kind of academic scholarship regarding Hasidism that was based exclusively on texts. Heschel, who was raised in a Hasidic home in Warsaw, was familiar with the Hasidic way of life and environment. In his Yiddish book *Kotzk: In Gerangel far Emesdikayt* (“Kotzk: In the Struggle for Sincerity”), Heschel made two claims. The first is that without tradition, without oral Torah, you have no real path to understanding written Torah. His second argument, which we cannot address in this article, is that the stratum that was passed down orally from generation to generation in Hasidism was in Yiddish, while what was written was in Hebrew (Reiser 2016; Mayse/Reiser 2018), and that this discrepancy intensifies the misunderstanding of Hasidism:

Anyone who researches Hasidism only on the basis of literary sources and does not draw from its Oral Torah is relying on artificial material and over-

looks genuine, living springs. Hasidism cannot be researched without oral Torah and an actual acquaintance with the behaviour and qualities of its leaders. ... In order to understand Hasidism, one must learn how to listen and to stand among people who are *living* Hasidism (Heschel 1973: 8–9).

In Heschel's unpublished manuscript, housed in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, he adds a sentence which appears to be written in a more critical manner, and which seems to me directed against academic research, and is perhaps even a direct criticism of Scholem's research: "whoever wants to adopt a stringent critical-historical method can hardly study Hasidism" (*Oyb men vil onvendn a shtrengn kritish-historishn metod, Dan kon men koym porshn Hasides*).¹

From early Hasidism, the emphasis was on oral tradition and its transmission from generation to generation through spoken words rather than written texts. It is not at all clear that Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism (d. 1760; henceforth, the BeSHT), was interested in putting his words in writing, and perhaps even objected to it, as appears in the following story:

There was a man who wrote down the Torah [i.e. the homilies] that he heard from the BeSHT. Once the BeSHT saw a demon walking and holding a book in his hand. He said to him: "What is the book that you hold in your hand?" He answered him: "This is the book that you have written". The BeSHT then understood that there was a person who was writing down his Torah. He gathered all his followers and asked them: "Who among you is writing down my Torah?" The man admitted it and he brought the manuscript to the BeSHT. The BeSHT examined it and said: "There is not even a single word here that I have said".²

This tale depicts the BeSHT declaiming against a disciple who produced a textual artifact by transposing his oral sermon into written words. Rather than impugning the felicity or fidelity of these transcriptions, the BeSHT seems to fundamentally reject the idea that his living words may be cloaked in the man-

1 Abraham Joshua Heschel Papers, Duke University, Box 60a, folder 1. I thank Dr. Dror Bondy, who brought this document to my attention. For correspondence between Scholem and Heschel see Fiano/Kessler 2023.

2 The translation is based on that of Ben-Amos/Mintz 1993: 179, with several key changes. It is worth noting, perhaps with a touch of irony, that this story was likely an oral tradition committed to writing in 1815.

tle of writing. Moreover, the very act of shifting between these two modes of communication is connected to the figure of a demon, suggesting that the process of transforming an oral teaching into a written text is itself a diabolical moment.

The BeSHT and his disciple Rabbi Dov Ber, the *Maggid* (or “preacher”) of Mezritsh, chose not to publish their teachings in written form. Only twenty years after the death of the BeSHT (1760) and eight years after the death of the *Maggid* of Mezritsh (1772) was the first Hasidic book, *Toldot Ya’akov Yosef*, published (Korets 1780), and this, it should be emphasized, at a time when Hasidism was in conflict with the *mithnagdim* (objectors to Hasidism), and in a difficult struggle for survival (on the *mithnagdim*, see Nadler 1997; Etkes 2002). Why, then, did not they print their words? The answer is simple—because Hasidism was born of an oral culture that emphasized spoken words and the immediate, intimate encounter between a master and disciple (on Hasidism as an oral movement, see Idel 2002: 470–481; Dynner 2006: 199–211; Lewis 2009: 93–95). Characteristics, such as these, diminished the need for a written literature and intensified the living connection between the Hasid and the *tsaddik*. Spoken words were one of the central tools in effecting this bond between master and disciple—and between fellow members of the devotional community (on the power of spoken words, see Mayse 2020).

We should also note that the oral delivery of the Hasidic sermon, given by the *tsaddik* in spoken Yiddish, was itself a dramatic religious event. In many cases this oration was a dramatic gathering, the contours and significance of which cannot be fully understood in textual witnesses (Green 1983). The transcribed sermon is a distant reverberation of the living event, described by Ze’ev Gries as “a faint echo of the living experience” (Gries 1994: 153). Contemporary scholars cannot hope to restore this dramatic event, but our treatment of the resultant texts must take into account that the Hasidic sermon was often accompanied by theatrical (such as body movements) and musical elements (songs and wordless melodies [*niggunim*], as well as the intonation and resonance of spoken language), as well as displays of mystical rapture (Sagiv 2014: 181–200).³

3 See also the letter from a certain Rabbi Ya’akov Yitshak Zelig [1905] 2005. In this invaluable epistle, the author describes hearing sermons delivered by many of the great leaders of the Peshiskhe dynasties (including Kotsk, Ger, and Aleksander), referring to mystical and ecstatic states experienced by speaker and listener alike. It is noteworthy, however, that some written testimonies do include references to the dramatic actions accompanying the homily, see Mayse 2017: 83.

The transformation from a culture that is primarily oral to one that is more textual took place, significantly, after the last decades of the eighteenth century for many, if not most, Hasidic communities. It only became commonplace for leaders of the Pshiskha dynasty to write down their teachings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon invokes the following tale in the name of Rabbi Ḥanokh Borenstein (1897–1965), the leader of the Sokhachov Hasidic court:

A rabbi came to his grandfather [Rabbi Abraham Borenstein], the great genius [and author of] *Iglei Tal*, the son-in-law of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotsk, and told him that he was writing a book about Kotsk. The man requested that he [Rabbi Abraham] tell him a few things about Kotsk. This genius reprimanded him, saying: “In Kotsk only living books have been left behind!” (Agnon 1978: 434; see also Cohen 2006; Dynner 2006: 211–217).

Another charming story is told by Agnon, who wants to emphasise that the Hasidic relationship cannot be fully translated and delineated in textual writing. It evokes a plectrum strumming the strings of the soul, which is not perceived in a system of written words:

Once, the *tsaddik* R. Moshe of Kobryn came to the city of Trisk. He went to greet the Maggid of Trisk, Rabbi Avraham. The Maggid asked him if there were any books left from his *tsaddikim*. R. Moshe replied: “Of course!” Then the Maggid asked: “In handwritten or printed form?”. R. Moshe replied: “On the hearts of Israel”, as it is said: “Write them upon the tablet of your heart” [Proverbs 7:3] (*ibid.*: 436).

It is important to note that even after Hasidic textual literature developed, it never fully replaced the living and immediate connection between master and disciple forged through spoken words and living role models. Both of these vital layers of communication, the written and the oral, have remained in all periods of Hasidism into the present day. The twentieth-century Hasidic leader Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of Piaseczno (1889–1943) and a relative of James Russell, continuously reminded his disciples that his own writings—like all Hasidic literature—must not be misinterpreted as a replacement for the rich world of Hasidic life and experience: “As a rule, the essence of Hasidism is not inscribed in a book, but rather in the Hasidim themselves, in the sense of ‘This is the book of man’s lineage’ (Genesis 5:1). The person(s)—the Hasidim—are the book(s) of Hasidism” (Shapira 1966: 43a; *idem* 2019: 444).

Reading and analysing Hasidism solely on texts adopting “a stringent critical-historical method” without deep and intimate acquaintance with Hasidic tradition and style of life—can—and will surely—lead to errors. The oral dimensions of Hasidism are critical to understanding the Hasidic texts. Let me give three brief examples that illustrate my claim:

1 *Kometz Aleph*

A famous saying in the name of Rabbi Menaḥem Mendel of Rimanov (1745–1815), was quoted in many different variations, from his disciple Rabbi Naftali Tzvi of Rupshitz to currently tsaddikim: “The holy Rabbi Menaḥem Mendel of Rimanov said that at Mount Sinai Israel did not hear but *Kometz Aleph*,⁴ and many of his holy disciples debated these words” (Horvitz 1965: 151). A number of scholars and philosophers, such as Gershom Scholem, Jean-François Lyotard, Benjamin Sommer and others, saw in these words a bold and radical view, according to which Rabbi Menaḥem Mendel would have believed that there *was* no content in the revelation at Mount Sinai and that Israel heard nothing; they only experienced a revelation in silence and a direct presence of the Divine.⁵

Moshe Idel, on the other hand, presented a totally opposite approach. The phrase *Kometz Aleph* is known to every child who has studied in the *heder*,⁶ and means learning aloud, even shouting, in the process of vocal collective memorizing of the Torah together with the *melamed* (teacher). According to Idel, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Rimanov did not want to claim that the revelation of Mount Sinai was a silent event, but rather an event saturated with voices. The *melamed* who recites the sound *Kometz Aleph O* and the students who repeat it, all together, aloud—are an image analogous to the event of the revelation at Mount Sinai. God is likened to a *melamed*, and the Israelites are His young pupils, who constitute together a community full of voices. The first letter—consonant and vowel—which is taught in the *heder* is *Kometz Aleph* and is the initial encounter between the teacher and the students. Learning *Kometz Aleph*

4 The first commandment in Moses’ tablets starts with the Hebrew word *Anokhi*. The vowel under the first consonant *Aleph* is *Kometz* (אָ). This is usually pronounced as the vowel O without any pronunciation of the consonant.

5 See a broad overview and review of interpretations of Rabbi Menaḥem Mendel’s saying, ranging from Hasidic commentary to contemporary philosophy in Harvey 2016. About the representations of *Aleph* see Russell 2023.

6 *Heder* (literally, “room”) is the traditional primary school in Jewish orthodoxy, teaching the basics of Judaism and the Hebrew language. On the *heder*, see Assaf et al. 2010.

for the students is a beginning full of excitement which also heralds a continuation. Similarly, the initial encounter between God and Israel was imbued with supreme excitement and became a harbinger of continuation. Indeed, the connection between vocal learning in the Eastern European *heder* and the revelation at Mount Sinai appears in many Hasidic texts and justifies Idel's insight. For instance:

It is God who is teaching you Torah; and the voice of God is encased in the voice and words of your Rabbi when he speaks to you about matters of Torah, divine service and even about proper behaviour according to the Torah. And the fear and joy, the fright and terror that the people of Israel experienced at the time they were at Mount Sinai and heard the voice of God in flames of fire—some of that is also with you now when you are in the *yeshiva*: When you remind yourselves that the room in which you are in now is full of angels and *seraphim* and that God's voice comes out from among them—encased in the voice of your rabbi entering your ears and your heart—fright and joy, fear and love shake your body and roil your heart, and you humble yourselves to the Torah of our God heard in the words of your rabbi (Shapira 1932: 31).

Idel as a child studied in a *heder* in Romania and has an intimate acquaintance with orthodox and Hasidic life. No wonder that he read this specific text so differently than others. As I have claimed, intimate acquaintance changes the way we read texts.

2 “Pure olive oil”—“*shemen zich [zakh]*”

In my youth, I heard an oral tradition from a Hasidic chief pedagogue (*mashpi'a*) about a twentieth-century *tsaddik* in Israel (whose name I cannot remember) who spoke on *Hanukkah*. This *tsaddik* criticised military parades of the Israel Defence Force on Israeli Independence Day, saying that when the Maccabees defeated the Greeks on *Hanukkah*, the Sages ruled that one must light candles with “pure oil” (*shemen zakh*) as a sign of victory, in contrast to a military parade that has a side of arrogance: “My strength and the power of my hands have acquired this victory for me” (Deuteronomy 8:17). The Sages were wise to fulfil the adjacent verse, “Remember that it is the Lord your God who has given you the power of victory” (Deuteronomy 8:18). Indeed, human beings—in this case the Jewish people—made an effort to wage war against all odds, however the success is attributed to God, and thus one is to show Him grat-

itude. It is a religious mentality that accompanies every human act: a man ploughs and sows, reaps and grinds, kneads and bakes and then thanks God, saying “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth”. Similarly, success in war is celebrated by thanking God through the act of lighting candles, which is a ritual that physically articulates a spiritual action. The essence of the *mashpi’a’s* message is that gratitude should be expressed by “pure oil”—by light, rather than by militant bragging.

But there is another aspect here. It is impossible to understand the deepest layer of this homily without close acquaintance with the Hasidic experience, in this case the language on the lips of the Hasidim, Yiddish. If one day this sermon will be written down, it will not be fully understood by a scholar who is not familiar with the Hasidic style of life and language. As mentioned above, Hasidic sermons were usually written in Hebrew, in the Jewish holy tongue, even though they were spoken in Yiddish (on the linguistic gap between the oral sermon and the written sermon in Hasidism, see Reiser/Mayse 2020: introduction). Those who receive them by oral tradition—in the language they were spoken—can understand the hidden strata that translation, which is always one step away, conceals.

This homily was delivered and passed down in Yiddish. The Hebrew words *shemen zakh* (“pure oil”), which the Sages used when they established the custom of lighting the Hanukkah Menorah, take on a completely different meaning in Yiddish. *Shemen zakh* in Yiddish (written *Shemen Zich* but pronounced in Poland and Galicia, which was the centre of Hasidism, as *Shemen Zach*) means idiomatically to be ashamed or, in this context, to act humbly. The Hasidic Rebbe actually “played” with the double meaning of this phrase and taught that candles should be lit “with pure oil”—that is, with humility. He called upon his followers to offer thanks for victory with a mental attitude of humility and submission rather than militant arrogance, which is considered a grave sin (see the language and context the above verses from Deuteronomy 8). Reading this sermon in a text without being acquainted with Hasidic life and language will miss the deeper point and reveal only the outer layers, as Heschel put it.

3 The Elitist School of Pshiskha

The oral Hasidic tradition states that the Pshiskha dynasty rebelled against mainstream Polish Hasidism. According to this tradition, the “holy Jew” Rabbi Ya’akov Yitzchak Rabinowitz (1766–1813), rebelled against his teacher Rabbi Ya’akov Yitzchak Horvitz, the “Seer of Lublin” (1745–1815). This rebellion is depicted in several areas such as the question of the *tsaddik’s* status and author-

ity in Hasidism—has he mystical and magical powers? Pshiskha denied such powers, against everything that was accepted at the time in Polish Hasidism. Scholarship or populism? Pshiskha created a scholarly Hasidic court that did not open its gates to all. Pshiskha is depicted as an elitist institution that despised the masses. Against the background of this tradition, Martin Buber (1999) wrote his book *Gog and Magog*. Recently, all these elements have been challenged in research on the grounds that these depictions are just social constructs lacking a sound scientific basis. There are no reliable texts that justify the view of the Pshiskha school as a distinct, unique, elitist-scholarly Hasidic branch, that disdained and even rejected magic and messianism (Gellman 2012; idem 2018: chapter 8). However, I would like to present a text that has gone unnoticed by scholarship, proving these oral traditions to be sound, at least with respect to the elitism of Pshiskha and their desire to close their Hasidic court to the masses.

Rabbi Ya'akov Yitzchak Rabinowitz, founder of Pshiskha Hasidism (The “Holy Jew” 1766–1813), and Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshiskha (1765–1827), followed by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859), did not write down their words (Agnon 1978: 434; Cohen 2006; Dynner 2006: 211–217). The first of this school of thought to write his sermons was Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger, in his book *Sfat Emet*, published immediately after his death in 1905. In a particular discussion of the Midrash *Bereishit Rabbah*, which I cannot enter into here, he notes the following on behalf of his grandfather, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter (1799–1866), the founder of the Ger Hasidic dynasty:

It must be explained according to what my grandfather, my teacher and Rabbi, rest in peace, said, that the main character trait of Joseph was to be holy and distinct, focused only on God, as it is written about Joseph “distinct (*nazir*) of his brothers” (Gen. 49:26). On the other hand, the main character trait of Judah was to bring holiness also to the affairs of this world, as it is written, “And to his people shall you bring it” (Deuteronomy 33:7). And I heard from him that this was also disagreed with by his teachers, may they rest in heaven. For there were some of them who wanted Hasidism to be formed from a few Hasidim that are supreme saints. And there were those who wanted Hasidism to spread and expand among the majority of the people, even if they were simple people. These were his words. (*Sfat Emet*, PARASHAT VAYESHEV, II, December 17, 1870).⁷

7 I wish to thank Rabbi Stuart Fischman for bringing this text to my attention.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter distinguishes between two religious types—Joseph and Judah. Joseph has the character of an ascetic, who detaches himself from worldly and social affairs, and strives entirely for devotion to God. Judah, on the other hand, associates with the masses, and thinks that one should not break away from common simple people but rather bring them holiness. Against the background of the presentation of these two types, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Ger mentioned that his grandfather Rabbi Yitzchak Meir said that the rabbis of the generation before him were also divided on this topic. It should be mentioned that Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter was a disciple of the leaders of some of the main Hasidic leaders in Poland but in the end, he identified with and joined the Pshiskha school, under Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Pshiskha and later under the guidance of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. Therefore, when he mentions something on behalf of the generation of his Rabbis, there is no doubt that he is referring to them. Who then wanted only “a few Hasidim that are supreme saints”—if not the leaders of the Pshiskha Hasidic school? If I am not mistaken, then we have here an oral testimony of a grandfather to a grandson—written down later by the latter. Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger established one of the greatest dynasties in Hasidism (currently in the State of Israel, Ger is the largest Hasidic dynasty). His scholarly books, which delve into Talmudic issues and *halakhah* (Jewish law) are studied in every yeshiva, and if he did testify that Pshiskha was an elitist form of Hasidism that wanted only “a few Hasidim that are supreme saints” rather than a community composed of many simple Hasidim—then I do not see any reason to cast historical doubt on his testimony.

In this case there is a text but let me reflect on what would have happened if it did not exist. Would it then have been possible to reject such a strong tradition about Pshiskha, one that exists until today in all the branches of Hasidism? To remove misunderstanding, I am not arguing that researchers should accept every oral tradition with closed eyes indiscriminately, but rather that researchers should be careful not to reject oral traditions and deconstruct them too hastily. The scientific criteria in the study of Hasidism have not yet been established—for accepting or rejecting a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. Maybe it is time to develop such criteria.

4 Conclusion

Hasidism was—and still is—a vibrant movement, based heavily on oral Torah alongside written Torah that it created and continues to produce. Therefore, it

is difficult to study Hasidism using critical, philological, and historical tools—when they are based solely on written texts.

This great movement is essentially an oral movement, one that cannot be preserved in written form. It is ultimately a living movement. *It is not contained fully in any of its books. It is more than can enter books.* There are shades of meaning in uttering a Hasidic idea, a certain accent, a spirit, even a manner of speaking which is vital to the substance of speaking in Hasidic law (Heschel 1996: 34).

In order to reach the depths of Hasidism, researchers must be involved in Hasidic life, even if they do not identify themselves with Hasidim. I do not think that only a Hasid or a Jew can study Hasidism—not at all. But I do believe that it is worthwhile and appropriate for scholars to work together, side by side, with Hasidim, to absorb information “from within”, from a traditional perspective. “It is good that you should take hold of this; but do not withdraw your hand from that either: for he that fears God performs them all”. (Ecclesiastes 7:18)

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