

# INTRODUCTION

## Hasidism as a Modern Movement



IT WAS THE CENTURY OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT and of the American and French Revolutions: the dawn of the modern world. But it was also the century of the Great Religious Awakening in North America, of Pietism in Germany, and of the split in the Russian Orthodox Church between Reformers and Old Believers. We are accustomed to think of the Enlightenment and its critique of religion as representing modernity, while seeing movements of religious revival as reactionary, throwbacks to an earlier age. Yet the story of modernity is more complex. As we now know, the trajectory of history did not lead in a straight line from religion to secularism, “darkness” to “light”: religion is as much a part of the modern world as it was of the medieval. As much as religion typically claims to stand for tradition, even the most seemingly “orthodox” or “fundamentalist” forms of religion in the modern world are themselves products of their age. Just as secularism was incubated in the womb of religion, so religion since the eighteenth century is a product of its interaction with secularism.

The southeastern corner of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was certainly an improbable place for a “modern” religious movement to be born. Yet it was there, starting sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century, that small circles of Jewish pietists coalesced around rabbis who would come to be called, in Hebrew, *tsaddikim* (“righteous men”) or, in Yiddish, *rebbe*s. From these modest beginnings emerged a movement that eventually named itself *Hasidism* (“piety”). The name referred not only to the traditional virtues of piety that the movement espoused but also to a new ethos of ecstatic joy and a new social structure, the court of the rebbe and his followers, his *Hasidim*, a word formerly meaning “pious men” but now also “disciples.” Drawing upon earlier texts of Kabbalah—or Jewish mysticism—as well as popular magical traditions, the *tsaddikim* (singular: *tsaddik*) served as intercessors between their *Hasidim* and God, providing the channels through which their followers could commune with the divine. They signified this relationship to God with such terms as *devekut* (“ecstatic union”), *ha’alat nitzotzot* (“raising of sparks”), and *avodah be-gashmiyut* (“worship through the material”). Focusing primarily on prayer rather than study, they developed new techniques for mastering *mahshavot zarot* (“alien thoughts,” or distractions, typically of a sexual nature). Rather than ascetic withdrawal, they emphasized *simha* (“joy”), seizing such thoughts and elevating them to pure spirituality.

Above all, Hasidic theology emphasized divine immanence—that is, that God is present throughout the material world.

From its beginnings, Hasidism was far more than an intellectual movement. It was also a set of bodily practices, including praying, storytelling, singing, dancing, and eating, all performed within the frame of the reciprocal relationship between rebbe and Hasid. The very *physicality* of Hasidism played an enormous role in transforming it from an elite to a popular movement. Despite all of the traditional elements one finds in Hasidism, this concatenation of ideas and practices was something entirely new in Jewish history, a movement of mass religiosity that would take its place side by side with more secular movements as part of the complex phenomenon of Jewish modernity.

This book presents a new history of Hasidism from its origins to the present. We intend to focus not only on the charismatic rebbes who have served as the movement's leaders but also on its followers. What did it mean in different periods to live as a Hasid, whether in close proximity to the rebbe's court or at a distance? Was Hasidism in a given time and place a majority phenomenon or a minority? What were the relations on the ground between Hasidim and non-Hasidim? What were the relations between Hasidim and non-Jews, both governments and ordinary people? We propose, therefore, to offer a cultural history of Hasidism, combining its social structures with its religious ideas.

Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century attempts to write histories of Hasidism were often products of the polemics for and against the movement among East European rabbis and intellectuals. These polemics also reverberated among the German Jewish historians, the school called the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* ("science of Judaism"). The most important of these historians, Heinrich Graetz, was scathing about Hasidism in his highly influential *History of the Jews*, where he contrasted Moses Mendelssohn, whom he termed the founder of the German Jewish Enlightenment, with the benighted "founder" of Hasidism, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov of Mezhibizh (Międzyboż). For Graetz, Hasidism was *unjüdisch* (un-Jewish), a pack of ignorant superstitions, and thus not a fitting subject for a history of the Jews.

It became possible to write a more balanced or objective account only at the turn of the twentieth century, once these battles had died down. The first to do so was Solomon Schechter (1847–1915), who published a small booklet on the subject in English in 1896 and in German in 1904. Schechter, who came from a Chabad Hasidic family, made his name as a scholar of the Cairo Geniza and did not pursue Hasidism as his main subject. More influential was Shmuel Abba Horodezky (1871–1957), whose four-volume history appeared in 1922. However, Horodezky tended to romanticize Hasidism, from whose bosom he also sprang, even though he had embraced the worldview of the Jewish Enlightenment.

Most important for subsequent scholarship was Simon Dubnow (1860–1941), the doyen of Eastern European Jewish historians. Already in the late 1880s, Dubnow undertook to collect sources for such a history, publishing a series of articles in Russian between 1888 and 1893. It was a period in Russian Jewish letters when intellectuals began to intuit the disintegration of the traditional Jewish world and sought to pre-

serve its memory by ethnographic and archival research. Although the world of the *shtetl* (plural: *shtetlekh*; the market towns in which many Jews lived) would persist for a number of decades, urbanization and emigration were already taking their toll. Dubnow, in exile from this world in Berlin, published the first scholarly study of the movement in 1931. At the request of Ahad Ha'am, the founder of cultural Zionism who had died four years earlier, Dubnow wrote his influential book *Toldot ha-Hasidut* (The History of Hasidism) in Hebrew. (It was also published simultaneously in German. Only a small portion is available in English.) In luminescent and riveting prose, Dubnow's book sketched the history of Hasidism from the time of its putative founder, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, to 1815. Since Dubnow's views were so dominant, it is worth spelling them out in some detail.

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Dubnow asserted that Hasidism emerged in the context of a political, economic, social, and spiritual crisis that overwhelmed the Jews of Ukraine, and eventually the whole of Polish Jewry. This crisis began with the 1648 uprising of Cossacks and Ukrainian (Ruthenian) peasants led by the man Ukrainians revere as their George Washington and whom Jews vilify as among their worst persecutors: Bogdan Khmelnytsky. A key component of this revolt against Polish rule in the Ukrainian territories of Poland was persecutions and massacres, especially of Jews, earning these events the Jewish sobriquet *Gezeirot Tah-ve-Tat* (the persecutions of 1648–1649). In Dubnow's telling, these persecutions set off a chain of anti-Jewish harassment, repression, and depredations lasting well into the eighteenth century, and climaxing in what he termed a "frenzy of blood libels." External persecution therefore provided the crisis to which Hasidism was an answer. Other early scholars of Hasidism emphasized different crises: Ben-Zion Dinur (1884–1973) focused on the corruption and political disintegration of the Polish Jewish communities, while Raphael Mahler (1899–1977) drew attention to economic factors.

All early historians of Hasidism also agreed with Dubnow about the centrality of the man generally considered to be the founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eli'ezer, Ba'al Shem Tov—often known by the acronymic form of this Hebrew title, Israel Besht (or just "the Besht"). The Ba'al Shem Tov (ca. 1700–1760) was a *ba'al shem* (plural: *ba'alei shem*)—that is, "master of the [divine] name," a kind of shaman who could use magic to invoke divine forces. According to Dubnow, who drew on Hasidic stories as well as archival material, the Besht was at once a socially marginal magician *and* a sophisticated religious innovator who proposed a new form of Judaism. He, like his audience, was relatively uneducated, and he promulgated his teachings through stories and pithy folk sayings.

According to this view, the rabbis of the Polish Jewish communities, oblivious to the real problems people were facing, imposed upon them an onerous *halakhic* (legal) regime. Communal lay leaders knew only how to demand obedience and raise taxes. By contrast, the Besht's doctrines, leadership style, and righteous acts offered psychological-spiritual healing (*tikkun*) to the Jewish soul and relief from communal oppression. By the time of his death on the holiday of Shavuot in 1760, he had galvanized an original—

yet authentically Jewish—revivalist movement. In Dubnow's account—which in many ways mirrored that of the Hasidim themselves—this movement had a coherent set of doctrines and institutions that attracted the semilearned majority, but not the learned elite.

For Dubnow, Hasidism from the outset was a dynastic movement, where a leader passed his authority to a son or favorite student, so the mantle of the Besht's leadership was inherited by one of his main disciples, Dov Ber, the Maggid (preacher) of Mezritsh (Miedzyrzecz) (d. 1772). The Maggid (as he is usually called) further articulated Hasidism's doctrines, established its headquarters in his court north of Mezhibizh in the more centrally located Mezritsh, and dispatched emissaries to attract new followers for the movement. After the Maggid's death, a group of his disciples brought the movement to organizational and doctrinal maturity, founding their own autonomous courts in far-flung areas of Poland and the Russian Jewish Pale of Settlement (areas of western Russia where the Jews were permitted to live). This third generation was composed of men such as Elimelekh of Lizhensk (Lezajsk), Levi Yitshak of Barditshev (Berdichev), Avraham of Kalisk, Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, and Shneur Zalman of Liady. Each cultivated a signature organizational style and set of doctrinal nuances while maintaining authentic spiritual connections and loyalty to the Maggid's legacy. This decentralized structure and flexible faith enhanced Hasidism's physical and doctrinal accessibility to a broad public, boosting the movement's popularity and enabling it to dominate the Jewish street, at least in the southerly reaches of the Russian Pale of Settlement.

These first three generations of the movement's leadership—the Besht, the Maggid, Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye (a disciple of the Besht who did not found a court or dynasty), and the Maggid's disciples—constituted for Dubnow the creative and pristine period of Hasidism. Lasting from the Besht's "revelation" circa 1736 (preceding his move to Mezhibizh) and extending until 1815 (by which time all of the Maggid's students had passed from the scene), this period came to be known as "early" Hasidism. For Dubnow, the history of this period of Hasidism was essentially the history of these leaders.

Ending his history in 1815, Dubnow believed that this date marked a turning point from the "classical" or "creative" age of the movement to its later degeneration into "late" Hasidism when the movement splintered into myriad dynasties and subdynasties with little ideological originality or coherence. He thought nineteenth-century Hasidism was perverted by "tsaddikism" (excessive veneration of its leaders, whom he described as corrupt or as charlatans) and wastefully preoccupied with its struggle with Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment). This degeneration culminated after 1870 in what Dubnow dubbed "the period of absolute decline."

While Dubnow, Dinur, and others created the framework for Hasidic history, Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) sought to elucidate its spiritual and intellectual content. Buber famously termed Hasidism "Kabbalah become ethos," by which he meant that Hasidism concretized mystical insights into pious behavior and transformed the leaders' charisma into the basis for a just society. He made

central one phrase in Hasidic texts, *avodah be-gashmiyut* (“worshipping God through the material world”), which he understood in line with his own religious existentialism. Instead of an escape into otherworldly mysticism, Buber saw Hasidism as consciously grounded in this world. Buber’s primary source for learning the nature of Hasidism was Hasidic stories, typically recounting exploits of the tsaddikim. Not merely tales conveying folk wisdom and laudable charitable acts, these stories for Buber held the key to Hasidism’s revolutionary spirituality. In order to penetrate the deep spiritual-ethical message of each story, he rewrote them, which for Buber was a method of revealing their true meaning. Buber’s earliest work on Hasidism, from the first decade of the twentieth century, was part of the rediscovery of Hasidism—often called “neo-Hasidism”—by a cohort of modern, often nationalist, thinkers who found in it a model of romantic religiosity with which to counter assimilationist rationalism and rabbinism.

Gershom Scholem, although part of this movement of romantic recovery, insisted on rigorous standards of historical scholarship. Scholem reconstructed the history of Kabbalah—Jewish mysticism—from its origins in antiquity through Hasidism. He agreed with Dubnow and other earlier historians that Hasidism was a response to a crisis, but he located the crisis elsewhere. For Scholem, Hasidism was “the latest phase” of Jewish mysticism arising out of the failure of Shabbetai Tsvi and his seventeenth-century messianic movement. He argued that Israel Ba’al Shem Tov possessed certain Sabbatian manuscripts and that his movement needed to be understood as a response to Sabbatianism. Like the Sabbatians, Hasidism gave priority to charismatic spiritualists over Talmudic scholars. But where Sabbatianism veered into violation of the law as a result of its acute messianism, Hasidism “neutralized” messianism, fully embraced Jewish law, and redirected Sabbatianism’s mystical energies from the national plane to the individual.

Scholem originally echoed Buber’s idea that the charismatic Hasidic tsaddik translated Kabbalah into ethical values applied through Jewish law (*halakhah*) to the common people’s everyday life. But later, as part of a withering attack on Buber, Scholem insisted that Hasidism’s real contribution was the appropriation and new articulation of earlier Kabbalistic notions, especially ecstatic union with God (*devekut*) and “annihilation of reality” (*bittul ha-yesh*). This theology was the opposite of this-worldly: it sought to transcend the material world. Yet Scholem agreed with Buber that Hasidism was not theosophically innovative, but instead focused on the inner life of the tsaddik and his Hasid. At the very onset of the movement, in Scholem’s view, personality took the place of doctrine.

Like all previous scholars of Hasidism, Scholem considered the movement’s first half-century to be a heroic period, a rebellion of religious energy against petrified religious values. Even though it brought forth no original ideas, its dynamic social structure revolutionized Eastern European Jewish life. But by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hasidism had lost its original élan. Scholem quoted a famous story by the nineteenth-century rebbe Israel Friedman of Ruzhin (1776–1850), who claimed that he no longer possessed any of the actual magical powers of his eighteenth-century predecessors—all he had left were the stories of their deeds. Storytelling, to be sure,

took on its own magical power in later Hasidism, but the intellectual creativity of the early movement had atrophied. For Scholem, the long history of Jewish mysticism came to an end with eighteenth-century Hasidism.

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The powerful narrative represented by these scholars, who were born in the latter part of the nineteenth century and flourished mainly in the first half of the twentieth, provides the crucial backdrop for this book, crucial because the counter-narrative that we will present challenges many of its assumptions and conclusions. As we shall see and as the latest research demonstrates, a “hasidism before Hasidism” arose before the eighteenth century, largely independent of Sabbatianism. Hasidism’s sources lay not only in Lurianic Kabbalah, as Scholem thought, but in a diverse library of Kabbalistic texts going back to the thirteenth-century Zohar and other late medieval and early modern mystical-moralistic tracts. Ascetic in nature, this mystical movement differed from later Hasidism, but it still furnished the later movement with texts, ideas, and potential followers.

As a movement that borrowed eclectically from many sources, Hasidism cannot be reduced to one, homogeneous doctrine. It incorporated both ascetic negation of the material world and antiascetic affirmation of the material, as well as messianic and antimessianic tendencies. For some Hasidic teachers, *devekut* meant the union of the worshipper with God, while for others, it meant less self-effacing communion. Some Hasidic teachings are almost explicitly pantheistic, while others emphasize God’s transcendence. Some rank prayer higher than study, while others see them as equally holy. Some doctrines are imbued with *halakhah*, while a few flirt with antinomianism. Each *tsaddik* offered his own interpretation of the “philosophy” of Hasidism. Not one, but the full range of these ideas must count as constituting Hasidism.

There have been repeated attempts, most recently by Moshe Idel, to find sources of influence for Hasidic ideas in non-Jewish sources, such as in ecstatic religion in the Carpathian Mountains. It is possible that the emphasis on certain kinds of prayer, cults of holy saints, and pilgrimages to their graves all have their parallels, if not roots, in similar phenomena in the protean world from which Hasidism sprang. Although the proof remains elusive, we wholly endorse the idea that Hasidism must be understood not as hermetically sealed but as a part of its environment. Certainly, the attraction of Eastern European noblemen and peasants alike to the *tsaddikim* and their courts that we find in the nineteenth century testifies to how embedded Hasidism was in its world. So, too, does the way Hasidic tales reflect motifs from folklore generally and Eastern European folklore in specific. That some Christians regarded tombs of *tsaddikim* as sites of veneration and that there were Jews who assigned theurgic power to some contemporary Christian figures speaks volumes about the complex relations between the two religions. Although the Hasidic masters at times disparaged the Christian world in terms of Kabbalistic dualism, the day-to-day interactions between Hasidim—as well as other Jews of the time and place—and Christians were marked not only by antagonism but also by symbiosis.



Returning to the movement's origins, we claim, against the prevailing arguments of the earlier scholarship, that it was not crisis that gave birth to Hasidism but instead developments within the religious and social life of Polish Jews. By the early eighteenth century, the Jewish communities of Eastern Poland (present-day Ukraine) were deeply engaged in the process of reconstruction following the pogroms of 1648–1649. The communal structure was still quite strong; the crisis of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth lay in the future. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov was not an unschooled radical who sought to overturn either the values or social structure of his time. A functionary of his community, he did indeed gather a small circle around him, but this circle was drawn from the learned elite. And the sources do not demonstrate that he intended to found a movement: the “founder” of Hasidism acquired that role only retrospectively two or three generations later. Rather, it is apparent that he and his followers saw themselves as operating within the bounds of conventional mystical pietism.

It was Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritsh, a member of this group, often portrayed as the Besht's anointed successor, who formed the first court—that is, a place where Hasidim and other admirers of a rebbe made pilgrimage to receive his blessing and imbibe his teachings (others of the Besht's circle also established something like courts around the same time). When Dov Ber died in 1772, his disciples created a multiplicity of courts in multiple locations.

The year 1772 is also crucial because it marks the first *herem*, or ban, against the Hasidim. Hasidism's opponents (*Mitnaggdim*) mocked its claim to be a form of pietism by calling the followers of what they took to be a movement as *mit'hasdim*—those who *pretend* to be pious. In this way, the opponents tried to distinguish the new “Hasidim” from the older “hasidim”, even if the former at least initially saw themselves as only a variant of the latter. It is therefore possible that these opponents, led by Eliyahu, the Gaon of Vilna, played a key, if unwitting, role in forcing the Hasidim to see themselves as a movement. Just as Hasidism provoked a movement of opposition, so the opposition helped to catalyze Hasidism into a movement. Hasidism as a movement was therefore the product of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Yet its followers remained few in number. The courts of the tsaddikim probably numbered dozens or, at most, hundreds of Hasidim each. And not every Hasidic leader necessarily formed a court. But something new was unquestionably happening. The tsaddikim constituted new types of leaders. While some also served as communal rabbis, they generally extended their geographical influence beyond specific towns. A new pattern of religious life developed where Hasidim who lived at a distance from their rebbes made pilgrimage to the Hasidic courts one or more times a year. This geographic development would have a profound effect on how Hasidic Jews saw their relationship to place. It also created a social and leadership structure that would serve the traditional community well in the face of the dislocations of modernity.

By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Hasidic leadership developed increasingly in the direction of dynasties and institutionalized courts—something, we argue, that was not true of the Besht and his followers. As we noted earlier, Dubnow

saw in nineteenth-century Hasidism a movement in decline, but, even so, he clearly believed that more needed to be said about the later movement. (In the preface to his canonical history, he laid out the parameters and sources for a second volume, while he admitted that old age prevented him from undertaking the task.) We have heeded Dubnow's call for work on the later movement even as we depart from his narrative of decline. We argue instead that Hasidism of this later period was entering its first golden age (the second began in the last decades of the twentieth century). Spreading rapidly into Congress Poland, Galicia, Hungary, and Romania, as well as in its eighteenth-century strongholds in Ukraine and Belarus (White Russia), the movement became increasingly numerous and influential. If it did not win over a majority of East European Jews, Hasidism nevertheless claimed a mass following. It fought for and often gained control over local communities. One of the key stories that we will tell involves the life of the Hasidim in the *shtetl*—that is, far from the courts of the *tsaddikim*.

It was in the early nineteenth century that many important Hasidic texts from the eighteenth century were edited and published, a process that actually started in the 1780s. The editors of these texts thus put their stamp on their progenitors in the eighteenth century, turning the Ba'al Shem Tov retrospectively into the "founder of Hasidism" and projecting their conception of a dynastic movement backward by a half-century and more. Because of the paucity of historical sources about the Ba'al Shem Tov, the relationship of later Hasidism to its putative founder resembles that of the early Christian Church to Jesus, whose teachings also remain shrouded in mystery. The way in which later generations of Hasidim shaped the image of the Besht is therefore of critical importance in understanding their own definitions of the movement.

Far from lacking in intellectual creativity, nineteenth-century Hasidism spawned a variety of schools and new ideas that unfortunately have attracted less scholarly attention than their eighteenth-century predecessors. The theological creativity of eighteenth-century Hasidism underwent important changes as the movement became both more popular and more institutionalized. While some *tsaddikim*, such as those of Zhidachov and Komarno (Komárno) emphasized Kabbalah, other nineteenth-century Hasidic leaders, notably Israel of Ruzhin, explicitly scorned the Kabbalistic theology of the early movement in favor of a more practical, nonintellectual form of Hasidism. A new kind of leadership emerged, especially in Galicia and Hungary, of *rebbe*s who functioned simultaneously as *tsaddikim* and as traditional rabbinical legal authorities. Other creative innovations were not lacking, from the antinomian speculations of Izhbits Hasidism to the extreme and idiosyncratic asceticism of Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. At the same time, archival evidence suggests that nineteenth-century Hasidism may not have been primarily a movement of the poor and unlettered any more than it was in the eighteenth century. It also attracted merchants who found the widespread social networks of Hasidic groups useful for commercial as well as religious purposes.

As Hasidism won an ever-wider circle of adherents, its earlier Orthodox opponents gradually came to accept the movement as a legitimate part of the traditional world, especially when that world came under assault by Jewish Enlightenment activists known as *Maskilim* (singular: *Maskil*). These intellectuals, who were at first a tiny minority in the Jewish world, established alliances with the Russian and Habsburg states



as well as with other forces of modernization. In their satirical writings, the Maskilim found a ready target in the tsaddikim as corrupt charlatans and their Hasidim as gullible obscurantists. In the pages that follow, we will focus more than previous historians on the ways in which Hasidism itself evolved precisely as the result of its conflict with the forces of Enlightenment. The Hasidim embraced modern strategies of political organizing and lobbying, often winning important concessions by the Russian, Polish, and Habsburg authorities against attacks by their Jewish and non-Jewish enemies. Like other modern religious movements of tradition, Hasidism drew much of its sustenance from the struggle with the Enlighteners. Just as it is impossible to think about the Jewish Enlightenment without its attacks against Hasidism, we argue that it is impossible to think of Hasidism without its use of new weapons against secular modernity.

The mass emigration of Jews from the Russian Empire that began in 1881 and lasted until the 1920s siphoned off millions of potential adherents, many of whom abandoned religion when they left the Old Country. Urbanization shifted the centers of population from the small market towns in which Jews were often the majority, to cities, especially Warsaw. Although Hasidism remained rooted in small towns, with the onset of World War I, a number of important courts migrated to the cities. At the same time, the railroad made it easier for Hasidim to travel to the court of the rebbe. Always a geographically dispersed movement, with its groups drawing their adherents from beyond the local community of the rebbe, Hasidism was ideally positioned to benefit from new forms of transportation. In the late twentieth century, the Hasidim made similar use of the airplane—and in the twenty-first century, we see a parallel process, among some Hasidic groups, with the use of the Internet.

In the early twentieth century, Hasidism faced a new and less hospitable landscape. World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution shattered Jewish society and radically destabilized the movement's social infrastructure. So, too, did the rapid secularization and acculturation of the Polish Jews between the World Wars. Ideologies like Zionism and Communism competed for the loyalty of young Jews. On the eve of the Holocaust, Hasidism was very much besieged. And what these other forces had started, the Nazis finished by murdering an incalculable number of Hasidic leaders and their followers. By the end of the war, the idea that the movement was finished was not unreasonable. Hasidism was but a pale ghost of its former self—many rebbes and their Hasidim dead or scattered to the winds.

When Simon Dubnow wrote his history in 1931, he reported having just heard that the Soviet authorities had destroyed the tombs of the Ba'al Shem Tov and Nahman of Bratslav, two of the main sites of Hasidic pilgrimage. Himself in exile from Russia, Dubnow clearly despaired about the future of the Jews in that part of the world that was their historic heartland. From his vantage point, the history of Hasidism appeared to be coming to an end. Yet after the devastation of the Holocaust, which claimed Dubnow as one of its early victims, the phoenix has risen from the ashes in ways and in places that would have astonished its first historian.

While earlier Hasidism was almost exclusively an Eastern European phenomenon, the postwar movement had to reroot itself in new and radically changed circumstances

in relatively small areas of settlement, primarily in North America and in what would become the modern State of Israel. A new concept of Hasidic place took hold. Hasidism came to see itself in exile from its original home in Eastern Europe, preserving the place names where it originated as the names of its rebbes' courts. Eastern Europe became an imagined space, the site of hallowed memory. With the fall of Communism and the end of travel restrictions in the former East Bloc, holy sites, especially the graves of rebbes, have resurfaced and today have become destinations of Hasidic pilgrimage.

Place is but one dimension of Hasidic identity as it emerged in the postwar era. Hasidim turned Yiddish into a holy language, a way of preserving the vanished world of Eastern Europe. Clothing and a variety of other customs specific to each Hasidic group also assumed sacred meaning. Because they signified the Old Home, they could not be changed. In this fashion, a movement of tradition became *traditionalist*—that is, a movement whose *raison d'être* was to conserve the past. Yet, of course, traditionalism of this sort is itself modern—an artifact of the postwar world.

With the creation of the State of Israel and growth of large Hasidic communities in the United States in the last half-century, important distinctions have developed between those living in a sovereign Jewish state and those in Diaspora. In Israel, Hasidic groups, most of which were virulently opposed to Zionism, had to negotiate their relationships with a secular Jewish state. They needed to interact with other religious communities, such as the pious Jewries of Middle Eastern and North African origins. In the United States, where other remnants of East European Hasidism found refuge, they needed to learn for the first time how to thrive in a pluralistic democracy. In both postwar America and Israel, Hasidic groups that had developed at a distance from each other in Eastern Europe now found themselves living cheek-by-jowl with one another in neighborhoods like Borough Park and Me'ah She'arim. Competition for followers, always a part of the Hasidic story, became much more intense in Hasidism's new homes.

While most Hasidim of the postwar period ignore the less religious and secular Jews among whom they live, two groups, Chabad-Lubavitch and Bratslav have developed missionizing ideologies directed to the wider Jewish world. The seventh Lubavitch Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, is of particular importance, since many of his followers regard him as a messianic figure. Even after his death in 1994, some believe that he continues to play an eschatological role in this world. The career of Schneerson and the ongoing vitality of his movement as well as the other surviving groups of Hasidim demonstrate that this religious phenomenon is not a mere relic of an earlier world, but continues its creative career today.

The story of Hasidism at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not, as the Hasidim themselves often insist, a story only of uncompromising conservatism, the preservation of age-old traditions in the face of punishing assaults by the secular world. In reestablishing themselves in Israel, North America, and elsewhere, the Hasidim created—wittingly or not—new forms of religious and social life. Their very conservatism, while unquestionably grounded in the nineteenth-century “invention” of ultra-Orthodoxy, took on new colorations, the inevitable result of the new settings in which

they found themselves. Far from a mere fossil of the eighteenth century marooned on the streets of Jerusalem and Brooklyn, they are a dynamic part of the modern world. Indeed, starting in the nineteenth century and continuing to today, Hasidism's very identity is wrapped up in its struggle against modern, secular culture and derives much of its identity from that struggle. It is this dialectical entanglement with its secular opponent that defines Hasidism as a modern movement. We might say that Hasidism throughout its two-and-a-half-century history represents a case of "modernization without secularization." It is the goal of this book to tell that story as part of the process by which the Jews became modern, a process in which the Jewish religion itself has changed profoundly but scarcely disappeared.

In the foreword to his history of Hasidism, Simon Dubnow spoke of the challenge of distilling the "essence" of Hasidism from the *tohu-va-vohu* ("chaos") of its teachings and from the "obscurantism" of its preachers. For our part, the challenge is not to distill an essence of what is, by its nature, a diverse and, at times, contradictory movement. But we share Dubnow's desire to rescue for the modern reader a sense of the vitality and endless originality of a religious phenomenon that continues to enthrall those who engage with it, even if they do not count themselves among its adherents.