INTRODUCTION

I like maps, because they lie.
Because they give no access to the vicious truth.
Because great-heartedly, good-naturedly
they spread before me a world
not of this world.

—Wisława Szymborska, Map. Translated from the Polish
by Clare Cavanagh

The emergence of a religious ecstatic-pietistic movement called Hasidism (from the Hebrew ḥasid—pious) was undoubtedly one of the most significant events in the history of European Jewry in the eighteenth century. Although, as one of its critics wrote, its “insipid buds” hardly foretold such wonderful growth, in the nineteenth century Hasidism became one of the most important and largest movements within Judaism, and one of the most significant religious movements throughout the whole of Eastern Europe, Jewish or non-Jewish. Its extensive influence remains evident in a great many areas of Jewish settlement up to the present day.1

Furthermore, Hasidism has become with time not just a religious movement, its scope limited to a narrow circle of (exclusively male) mystical followers, but also a socio-cultural force of exceptionally wide influence, shaping a value system, imaginations, beliefs, social practices, and interpersonal relationships extending far beyond the confines of the Hasidic brotherhood itself. Over the course of the nineteenth century, enormous masses of Eastern European Jews residing in an area extending from Central Poland in the west, as far as Eastern Belarus and so-called New Russia in the east, and from Latvia and Lithuania in the north, to Galicia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania in the south, found themselves within the sphere of Hasidism’s influence as a cultural force. Although not all Jews living in these areas were followers of Hasidism, the development of the Hasidic movement influenced the lifestyle of not just Hasidim and their families, but of nearly all the Jews living in this area. Hence Hasidism is often perceived as the quintessence of Eastern-European Jewishness, and the Hasidic culture as the one unblemished version of traditional Jewish culture. Although this is an incorrect assumption (the world of traditional, then-Orthodox Judaism was far richer, and Hasidism is not necessarily the tradition’s embodiment), Hasidism’s great role in the collective imagination is a good illustration of the significance of Hasidism for the social and cultural life of the Jews and the enormous influence it had far beyond the boundaries of the actual Hasidic movement. Put simply, Hasidism has become in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries an icon of Jewishness.

1 For the best introduction to the history and culture of Hasidism see Dubnow, Toledot ha-
hasidut; Biale et al., Hasidism: A New His-
tory; Wodziński, Hasidism: Key Questions.

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It is, therefore, understandable that Hasidism is one of the most intensively studied aspects of the history and culture of Jewish Eastern Europe, and now also the United States and Israel. Indeed, today academic monographs published in English, Hebrew, and other languages on virtually all aspects of Hasidism are legion.2

This has not prevented the field, however, from neglecting some important aspects and focusing uncritically on others. Most generally, the main conceptual and methodological limitations of the research on Hasidism can be summarized in five categories: 1) focus on the intellectual history of Hasidism to the detriment of social, cultural, economic, or political histories and their methodologies; 2) inadequate use of sources of non-Hasidic origin, especially if they are not in Hebrew or Yiddish; 3) chronological focus on the earliest stage of Hasidism to the detriment of later developments; 4) elitist perspective focusing on the great and mighty to the detriment of the rank-and-file; and 5) essentialism and ahistorical approaches to the issue of what is and what is not Hasidism.3

All those limitations have had a direct effect on the study of the geography of Hasidism. A focus on intellectual history and theological thought to the detriment of other perspectives allowed for the downplaying of local context, spatial characteristics, or topography informing the social and cultural landscape of Hasidism. Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, of Hasidic origin himself, maintained that “unlike the space-minded man,” Jews, and Hasidim in particular, had lived in time, but not in space. According to his well-known dictum: “Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.”4 Needless to say, Heschel was not alone. Widespread assumptions that Hasidism was not only transterritorial, but indeed aterritorial, informed much of both scholarship and popular thinking on Hasidism. This was easily maintained in a post-Holocaust context when most of the scholarship stemmed from North America and Israel, far from and without physical contacts with the traditional spaces of the movement—when traditional places of Hasidism did not exist on contemporary maps. For many it was impossible to recognize that the famous Ger (Yiddish name of Góra Kalwaria) is identical to the Polish hamlet of Góra Kalwaria. For some it was indeed immaterial whether R. Nahman lived in Ukrainian Braslaw or Prussian Breslau and what the place looked like. Hasidism was to be the fruit of borderless Eastern Europe, eastern Ashkenaz, or even more amorphous Yiddishland. Thus, despite the fact that many geographical concerns, such as the spatial dimension of Hasidic expansion and the regional characteristics of various Hasidic groups, have long belonged to the most contentious issues in the historiography of Hasidism, the geography of Hasidism as a field has never been thoroughly and systematically addressed.5

This enduring neglect of geographical reflection on historical Hasidism is all the more surprising considering that the humanities—Jewish history and religious studies included—have been experiencing a significant renaissance of interest in the spatial aspects of reality.6 Further,
geographical studies inform much of the burgeoning research on contemporary Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy (usually called haredim), of which the Hasidim constitute a very significant section. Despite this and despite some very interesting publications on the geographical dimension of Hasidism, it seems that the spatial turn has not yet fully entered studies of the movement.

These research weaknesses find especially strong expression when it comes to the maps of Hasidism—the most popular, but also the most conservative mode of presenting Hasidic geography. Most contemporary atlases of the Jews or Judaism do not contain any reference to Hasidism whatsoever. While several other publications and several top atlases do have such maps, few of them advance our knowledge of Hasidism. The vast majority of these reflect an impressionistic view of the territorial scope of Hasidism, marking only the places of residence of the most famous Hasidic leaders or the areas in which the major Hasidic dynasties were dominant.

The essential defects of such maps and their underlying concepts are twofold. First, they depict a static and synchronic picture, without any consideration for the chronological development of Hasidism, merging centers dating from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries into one map. This inevitably obscures the historical dimension of a movement by reducing it to a cluster of timeless personalities, all seemingly active simultaneously.

Second, the criteria for selecting the Hasidic “centers” included in such maps are purely impressionistic, and are usually based on subjective judgments as to the “importance” of this or that Hasidic leader. Even if one agrees with the particular selection made in any one of these maps, it is not clear to what extent it reflects Hasidic political and social realities. Does it, for example, correlate the places of residence of Hasidic leaders with centers of Hasidic demographic, political, or social dominance? Are the selected localities Hasidic pilgrimage sites or were they densely populated by Hasidic followers? None of the maps addresses these uncertainties, and it is not at all clear what they actually show.

These weaknesses have prompted us to look for an alternative conceptualization of Hasidic geography, with the aim of creating a more meaningful—dynamic-diachronic rather than static-synchronic—representation of the spatial aspects of Hasidism. We sought to approach the issue with the new sources, new perspectives, and new methodologies and to translate these new findings into the language of cartography.

First, this atlas very consciously broadens its sphere of interest beyond the Hasidic leaders and shows thousands of their followers living in hundreds of small towns far from Hasidic centers. Even if this was at times difficult to portray, it attempts to escape from the dominant paradigm of the history of Hasidism as a history of its leaders. Instead, much attention has been given to mapping the rank-and-file, their prayer sites, pilgrimage routes, economic life, or contemporary dispersion. In a sense, it attempts to challenge what Jonathan Z. Smith
called the “imperial map of the world” as seen by the priests from their perspective of the center and the temple, but not by the rank-and-file religionists in the provinces.10

Second, it carefully avoids the still-dominant focus on the earliest phase of Hasidism. Instead, the vast majority of the maps in the atlas cover later stages of the movement and attempt to present them evenly throughout its whole history, from its emergence in the late eighteenth century through today.

Third, it attempts to adopt a wide variety of geographical perspectives, from a broad macroscale view on the Eastern European Hasidic expansion, to a mesoscale analysis of internal hierarchies of Hasidic groups and dynasties, to microscale research of the religious landscape in individual localities, down to the floor plan of an individual prayer hall.

Fourth, it attempts to grasp the interconnectedness of the material, mental, and social aspects of the space. While naturally the social space of interactions between the Hasidim, their institutions, and their leaders lies at the heart of this atlas, it pays equal attention to the material dimension of the space—to physical territory and natural landscape, as well as to the mental space; imagined spaces, places, and boundaries; memory of the space and place; and, finally, their symbolic significance.11 In other words, the atlas presents social and demographic information, but also physical/material, political, economic, intellectual, and cultural aspects of Hasidism. By doing so, it aims to present a comprehensive, multifaceted picture of the movement.

Most importantly, the atlas attempts to break radically with an inadequate use of available sources. Unlike the existing maps of Hasidism, it is based on the extensive and diverse collection of qualitative, but above all quantitative, data of diversified origin. Six of the nine chapters use extensive GIS-processed databases with hundreds of records. The largest database created for this atlas records more than 130,000 Hasidic households in 1,200 localities on six continents. Similarly, one microlevel map of pilgrims who traveled to an investigated Hasidic court is based on a collection of approximately 6,300 petitions delivered to a particular Hasidic leader in the 1870s. The atlas clearly demonstrates that rich and valuable historical resources still exist and, with the advent of digital humanities, might be easily available for research.12

To be fair, the problematic nature of primary sources for the historical geography of religion is a more general issue for the entire discipline, not limited to the historiography of Hasidism.13 The atlas thus provides an indication of possible new research into historical geographies of religions more generally. Scholars use historical materials allowing for analysis of the spatial aspects of religions, but despite the exponential growth of geotemporal databases, few of them find application in mesoscale research on the historical geography of religion. Instead, the vast majority of them present aggregated survey data on major world religions, by nature ahistorical, ethnocentric, and lacking any human-scale dimension.14 On the other hand, when more specific microscale materials are explored, these usually involve discussion of individual

11 It needs to be explained here that in defining Hasidic space and place I take an anti-Foucault and pro-Lefebvre position, namely I am not interested in space as a metaphor, or in the use of spatial categories in the analysis of nongeographical phenomena, Hasidic or otherwise. Rather, I attempt to investigate how material—both physical and imagined—space and place affected, intersected with, and translated into the social, cultural, or economic realms of Hasidism. In other words, I opt for rematerialization of social and cultural spaces. See Lefebvre, Production of Space; Knott, The Location of Religion, 14.
12 On the prospects of digital humanities in historical research see Gildi and Armitage, The History Manifesto, 88–116. For the major, and in my opinion much-deserved, criticism of the contemporary development of digital humanities see Grusin, “The Dark Side of Digital Humanities.”
13 For a general overview of recent developments and the state of the discipline, see the two most recent decennial reports by Kong, “Mapping ‘New’ Geographies of Religion”; Kong, “Global Shifts, Theoretical Shifts.”
14 For the criticism of the notion of world religions see Smith, Map Is Not Territory, 295; Smith, Relating Religion, 166–73.
cases of the process of diffusion, emergence of individual pilgrimage sites, or politics of religious places, which often escape broader application.15 Mesoscale studies, in both a social/institutional and spatial sense (i.e., studies combining in-depth analyses of religious structures far below the global level of world religions with large resources on translocal religious phenomena) are still a desideratum.16

We argue that sources for such analyses, even if hard to find, do exist, or rather they could and should be generated from a variety of indirect resources. While it might seem a Sisyphean task to comb through thousands of multilanguage volumes in search of dispersed, sporadic, and hard-to-process narrative data, we argue that these materials, once aggregated, are invaluable resources for a quantitative analysis of historical forms of religions. In other words, this atlas attempts to demonstrate the possibilities of in-depth quantitative GIS-based research of a mystical religious movement and a richly documented, deeply nuanced, and carefully contextualized historical research of a religious movement far smaller than world religions or major denominations. The atlas not only presents the spatial dimension of a mystical movement, but also it endeavors to demonstrate and interpret the meaningful interrelations between the movement’s geography and spirituality. This is possibly the boldest argument of this atlas: Hasidism has been conditioned by the spatial characteristics of the movement not only in its social organization, but also in its spiritual life, type of religious leadership, or cultural articulation. And it is possible to capture this dimension of Hasidism with maps.

As the opening stanza by Wisława Szymborska indicates, cartography is always a lie. The maps “give no access to the vicious truth,” as the world they spread before our eyes is only a cartographical projection. We have been continuously reminded that “the map is not the territory.” But it is precisely for the reason that it is only a kind of abstraction—an irony that seems to have escaped the author of this pun, Alfred Korzybski—that the map might communicate other, equally real, but more difficult-to-capture dimensions of space: mental and social. In the case of the atlas of a religious movement, maps have the potential to show phenomena one cannot see on the surface of reality, things “not of this world,” things otherworldly. We very much hope this atlas gives such an insight into the history, life, beliefs, and spirituality of the Hasidim, past and present.

16 See Stausberg, “Exploring the Meso-Levels of Religious Mappings,” 103–4. For the closest analogy to what has been suggested see Donkin, The Cistercians; of newer studies see Preston, “Shrines and Neighbourhood in Early Nineteenth-Century Pune, India.”
Fig. 1.1.1. There are no extant images of the historic Besht (1700–1760), the putative founder of Hasidism, nor do we know much about his life. One of the few certain facts about the earliest stage of emerging Hasidism is its geographic setting in Podolia and Volhynia, southeastern provinces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The interior of the Besht's bet midrash in his native Międzybudź, Podolia, was photographed by the Sh. Ansky's ethnographic expedition shortly before 1914.

From: Collection of the Russian Museum of Ethnography, St. Petersburg, Russia

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