

# The Evolution of the Literary Neo-Hasid

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2011

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## ABSTRACT

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Depictions of Hasidim changed drastically around the turn of the century in Yiddish literature. This thesis tracks this change from the early Haskalah until the Holocaust. In general, depictions of the Hasid in the nineteenth century tended to be quite negative; however, the first chapter will establish a counter-narrative of maskilim who defended Hasidism, or even discerned in it positive qualities. These maskilim set the stage for the blossoming of neo-Hasidism in Yiddish literature. The second chapter is devoted to I. L. Peretz, who appropriated the Hasidic genre and transformed it into a neo-Romantic vehicle for preserving and building national identity. Peretz inspired several generations of Yiddish writers with his tales, including Aaron Zeitlin, whose Hasidic-themed poetry was a synthesis of modernism and mysticism and is the subject of the third chapter. Finally, the fourth chapter examines how Fishl Shneyerson used Hasidic concepts to create a new theory of psychology and a universal springboard for transcendence.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Dauber for all time he spent reading my drafts and all of his advice at every stage of writing. I would also like to thank my parents for their love and encouragement throughout this whole process. Finally, I would like to thank my husband for being a constant source of emotional support...and for not making good on his threat to burn all of my *treyfene bikher*.

## Preface

Joseph Dan terms neo-Hasidism “the Hasidism that never was.”<sup>1</sup> Professor Dan is not denying that neo-Hasidism was a dominant trend in Jewish literature at the end of the nineteenth century, but rather asserting that for a large sector of the Jewish population it effaced the reality of the historical Hasidic movement. Hasidism came to represent a supreme humanism, a pursuit of social justice, a regard for the poor and unlettered, and simple ecstatic joy of worship – a Hasidism that in fact, “never was,” and really falls under the appellation “neo-Hasidism.”

This study examines the origins of neo-Hasidism by analyzing the Haskalah’s changing perspective vis-à-vis Hasidism, the blossoming of neo-Hasidism as a literary movement in Yiddish, and some of its different paths and permutations after its initial phase. The Neo-Hasidic authors in this study, I. L. Peretz, Aaron Zeitlin, and Fishl Shneyerson, each engaged with Hasidism in a different way. Their relationships to Hasidism and the way they forged Hasidic material to fit their own visions reveal a lot about the essence of each author, from the inner struggles that fueled Peretz’s drive for national cultural rejuvenation, to Zeitlin’s mystical search for meaning, to Shneyerson’s desire to help his fellow humans heal their souls. By tracing the evolution of the literary neo-Hasid, one can also see the changing preoccupations of Eastern European Jewry from the Haskalah through the Holocaust. In this study, the term “Hasidism” will denote the religious movement based on the teachings of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov in the mid-eighteenth century, which was

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Dan, “Hasidism: Teachings and Literature,” The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe Online. <<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hasidism>>

spread by his disciples through much of eastern Europe and is still being practiced by Ultra-Orthodox Jews around the world.<sup>2</sup> David Jacobson defines “neo-Hasidism” as “retold versions of Hasidic tales, anthologies, and historical studies in which writers turned to Hasidism as a source of values which might serve as the basis for meeting the cultural needs of the present.”<sup>3</sup> I would expand “Neo-Hasidic” to include any Hasidic-themed material created by authors who either were never affiliated with Hasidism, or had distanced themselves from their Hasidic roots in order to pursue secular learning and were no longer in sync with the traditionalist camp. In the coming chapters I will refine and develop this definition by analyzing neo-Hasidic texts; however, it is unlikely that any of the authors presented here would have identified themselves or their work as neo-Hasidic. Indeed, other than a re-appropriation of Hasidic material, there is no single unifying thread in all of their works, albeit there are similarities which we will consider. Rather each author interacted in his own way with Hasidism, and the neo-Hasidic artistic by-product is quite different in each case. Additionally, these were the very authors whose works established neo-Hasidism as a literary movement, and at the time they were writing the term “neo-Hasidism” would have been filled with ambiguity and questionable allegiance with actual Hasidism.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the history of Hasidism see Gershon David Hundert, ed. Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to the Present, (New York: New York University Press, 1991), Ada Rapoport-Albert, ed. Hasidism Reappraised, (Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), Moshe Rosman, Founder of Hasidism : A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov, (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1996), Immanuel Etkes, The Besht : Magician, Mystic, and Leader, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> David Jacobson, Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers, (Albany, State University Press: 1987), 19.

In the first chapter, I contextualize the birth of neo-Hasidism by giving a history of the treatment of Hasidism by the proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment, the maskilim. Then I establish a counter-narrative of maskilim who, instead of attacking Hasidism, validated it, and even found positive aspects in it. I highlight specific biases that these maskilic authors maintained which were perpetuated in neo-Hasidic literature later on. I discuss various writers who laid the groundwork for neo-Hasidism, both by writing histories and re-appraisals of Hasidism, such as Dubnow and Berdyczewski, and by popularizing the Hasidic tale, such as Frumkin and Buber. Finally, I re-examine the antagonism between maskilim and Hasidism as a means of establishing identity and complicate the notion that these two “opposing” movements were as mutually inassimilable as often asserted.

In the second chapter, I focus on the Hasidic-themed writing of I. L. Peretz, who was perhaps the most well-known and influential Yiddish writer of his day. I examine his early work in order to elucidate both the transformation of his relationship with Hasidism, as well as to discover the seeds of later tropes and concerns. Peretz considered it important that literature be engagé and consistently sought to expose and fight against social injustice in his writing. His passionate humanism first brought him into an unofficial partnership with the young Socialist movement, but it later led him to Jewish folk traditions. Amidst these folk traditions Peretz found himself drawn to the Hasidic tale. Peretz was among the first writers to see past the old maskilic suspicion of Hasidism and empathize with the common Hasid’s poverty and suffering. Although his earlier writing is still characterized by a disregard for Hasidic rebbes, his representation of individual Hasidim is different



from those of his maskilic predecessors in that they are both more humanely and sympathetically rendered. Peretz eventually found in Hasidism a model for national rejuvenation and a moral basis for the newly evolving Yiddishism. In the figure of the rebbe, Peretz also found a literary stand-in for the artist. A close reading of Peretz's Hasidic-themed tales reveals, however, that Peretz was in a perpetual state of conflict. He was always torn between opposing poles, which never allowed him to fully embrace any particular stance. In fact, his "neo-Hasidic" tales could also be termed "neo-maskilic," as they are truly a hybrid of both traditions, as we shall see. Nonetheless, his tales were often misread as pious exemplars of secular humanism. Peretz was crowned the rebbe of Yiddish literature and in many ways he was, influencing generations of later writers, including the next writer in our study, Aaron Zeitlin.

The third chapter discusses Aaron Zeitlin's Hasidic-themed poetry, which represents a new shift in the definition of neo-Hasidism. Aaron Zeitlin was the son of Hillel Zeitlin, a compelling neo-Hasidic figure in his own right, who was both a practicing Hasid and an influential journalist and public figure. Growing up in Hillel Zeitlin's *literarische shtetl* (literary home), Aaron Zeitlin absorbed an eclectic mix of Kabbalah, Hasidism, and intellectualism, which would later define him as a writer. Zeitlin was very much a modernist poet; however, rather than relating to non-Jewish forms of expressionism and futurism, he found a Jewish source of ideoplasticity and dynamism in the Kabbalah and Hasidic-mystical figures. Zeitlin was himself a mystic, with a strong faith in God and an established, although inscrutable divine order. Zeitlin challenged the foundations of so-called "reality." He perceived

mystical forces as being constantly at play under the surface of reality. These forces were really part of an eternal cosmic flux -- at once filled with paradox, yet at the same time an expression of the oneness of God. Zeitlin explored this idea, as well as many others from Hasidic theology, throughout his poetry, while simultaneously using them to fulfill his artistic credo of a modernism grounded in Jewish sources. Zeitlin was a religious existentialist who embraced the struggle to find faith in God, and his various poems about Hasidic rebbes reveal that Zeitlin identified with the similar struggles that these leaders experienced.

The fourth chapter concerns the intriguing figure of Dr. Fishl Shneyerson, who both maintained strong ties to the Chabad Hasidic world of his youth, and was a prominent psychologist in his day. Shneyerson integrated Hasidic concepts into his psychological theory of “mentsh visenshaft,” or “man-science.” By rendering Hasidism scientifically, Shneyerson’s Hasidism underwent a universalizing transformation. His psychology of repairing and nurturing of one’s soul-life became a new kind of *tikkun* for humankind. His novels serve as case studies for his psychological theories; *Chaim Gravitser* is particularly relevant for our study because it takes place in a Hasidic milieu. We will examine the various Hasidic concepts in his novel and how Shneyerson uses them to promote his psychology. Shneyerson viewed dance as one of the premier methods of soul-reparation, and we will examine how the Hasidic dance in the novel charts the transformation of the main characters’ spiritual and psychological state. Shneyerson also makes several innovations to the neo-Hasidic genre, including the use of naturalism, a focus on the individual Hasid, and a

subversion of *lehavdil-loshn*. We will then see how Shneyerson creates a Hasidic rebel and institutes his own sort of reverse “creative betrayal.”<sup>4</sup>

In the course of this study, I will create a more complete picture of the transformation of the Hasid in Yiddish literature from an object of satire to a valuable native resource for authors to reshape into their individual visions. The resulting neo-Hasidic creations are both distinctive of their author’s artistic credo, as well as significant contributions to the emerging neo-Hasidic genre. The distinguishing nuances of each author’s rendering of Hasidism reflect the history and preoccupations of Eastern European Jewry on a larger scale. In tracing the evolution of the literary neo-Hasid, one can gain a better appreciation of Eastern European Jewry at a crucial time of change and transformation, from the pre-modern shtetl dweller to the urbanized, assimilated, and politically-engaged modern Jew of just a few decades later. Finally, it is a case of modern Jewish intertextuality in which a new genre, neo-Hasidism, supplanted the genre it was expanding upon, Hasidic literature. During this process the essence of the original genre became almost completely obscured for a large group of readers and created a nostalgia for something that never was. Now let us examine the nascence of the neo-Hasid in the next chapter, which also serves as a substantive introduction to our topic.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on the concept of “creative betrayal,” see David Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 4-5.

## Chapter One – The Prehistory of the Neo-Hasidic Tale

The Hasidim!...Indeed, in this word lie the trembling closed petals of a mystical rose; the word, like some echo from distant epochs, casts before our eyes some pensive ascetics with burning eyes and drawn faces! The Hasidim are a land of rapture and fanaticism, intellectual backwardness and boundless devotion to one person, illustrating the idea of constant communion with the deity; a land of terrible prejudices and beautiful tales, it is a complete, original view of the world, with its historical basis, which advocates boundless optimism in its followers. The Hasidim – they are a limitless ocean that has yet to be explored thoroughly, whose waves even now are in constant motion and from which it is not known what will emerge: maybe a new Atlantis, a land of wonders, dreams, and happiness, or perhaps a polyp with a hundred heads that will enfold all of Jewry with its thousands of arms...<sup>1</sup>

- Alfred Lor in 1900

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, pseudo-Hasidic tales were the most popular item on the Hebrew book market.<sup>2</sup> Writers were captivated by the treasure trove of literary material that Hasidism had produced and mined it to create a panoply of stories, poems, novels, and plays using Hasidic characters and themes. I.L. Peretz is perhaps the most famous of these writers to write his own “Hasidic Tales”; however, numerous writers such as Micah Berdyczewski, Martin Buber, S. Anski, Scholem Asch, Judah Steinberg, Yaakov Fridman, and the two other authors

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Lor cited in Marcin Wodziński, Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict, trans. Sarah Cozens (Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2005) 329.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Dan, “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism,” Modern Judaism 11,2 (1991) : 185. Joseph Dan, email correspondence with the author, 18 April 2010. “Pseudo-Hasidic” tales are tales written by non-Hasidic authors masquerading as authentic Hasidic tales. They are a subset of the broader term “neo-Hasidic, which refers to any Hasidic-themed work created by non-Hasidim, a term which we will soon define in greater depth.

from our study – Aaron Zeitlin and Fishl Shneyerson – helped themselves to this cache, thus creating a veritable Hasidic renaissance in the Jewish world of letters. These “neo-Hasidic” writings had their roots in the religious movement of Hasidism, but existed as a separate entity to contemporary Hasidim, and their authors often had little or no real familiarity with Hasidim. Since these “neo-Hasidic” writings constituted a new kind of Hasidism, it is imperative to distinguish between the original and the “neo.” Joseph Dan, in his article “A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism,” provides clarification on these two coexistent yet quite different definitions of Hasidism. The first he describes as historic and objective, encompassing the movement that started with Israel Baal Shem Tov and continuing until the Ultra-Orthodox Hasidim of today. This original movement I will refer to as “Hasidism.” The second, newer movement is a set of values which

represents the highest and purest aspect of Judaism, and includes religious devotion (but not fanaticism), ethical perfection, deep faith in God and the traditional Jewish values, love for God and for the Jewish people as a whole and for every individual Jew; a way of life which is characterized by worship of God through dancing and singing, enthusiasm, optimism and happiness, all within a framework of keen awareness of the needs of others and adherence to social justice.<sup>3</sup>

The newer movement I will refer to as “Neo-Hasidism.” A large subset of neo-Hasidism could also be termed literary/artistic Hasidism – and this is primarily the subject of this study; however, it must be noted that there also exists a progressive branch of Judaism known as “neo-Hasidism,” and which ascribes to the same set of values as literary/artistic Hasidism. Both historical Hasidism and neo-Hasidism share the same progenitor, Isarel Baal Shem Tov; however, they become more and more

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<sup>3</sup> Dan, 176.

divergent with time. The birth of neo-Hasidism is particularly fascinating to contemplate in light of the fact that just a few decades earlier, Hasidim had been portrayed by the Jewish literati as grotesque caricatures that were among the primary roadblocks to Jewish modernization. What exactly had happened in between that allowed for such a dramatic change in representation of Hasidim?

It is generally taken for granted that in eighteenth century Hebrew literature the Hasid is almost uniformly depicted unflatteringly by maskilim or modern-oriented Jews. Historians and literary scholars often refer to the “age-old enmity between maskilim and Hasidim” and it generally goes without question that the maskilim unilaterally vilified the Hasidim. Indeed, some of the most negative descriptions of Hasidim of the time did not come from anti-Semitic non-Jewish sources, but rather from these modernizing Jews. They saw Hasidism, which represented the most conservative element in Jewish society at the time, as the antithesis to their progressive, integrationist agenda. Among the common litany of accusations against the Hasidim was that they were superstitious, backwards, ignorant, economically non-productive, isolationist, and overly fond of alcohol. Their leaders were described as fraudulent and exploitative. Although a large number of maskilim, perhaps even the majority, represented Hasidim in such a light, there exists a lesser known corpus of writers who took a more objective stance towards Hasidism, and even found inspiration from the movement. Scant scholarly attention has been paid to these voices that present an interesting counter-narrative to the generally accepted understanding of the relationship between the Haskalah and Hasidism. In order to

better understand these contrasting figures, let us first review the standard canon of anti-Hasidic writers.

The first enlightenment figure to discuss Hasidim was Israel Zamość – a teacher of Moses Mendelsohn – who criticized a number of Hasidic customs, such as eating leftovers from the plate of the zaddik, overuse of alcohol, and excessive merrymaking. Zamość posed these criticisms in *Nezed hadema*, published in 1773:

Woe to the people with the noise of wings, the proud crown of the drunkards in Ephraim, who in their arrogance ride in the heavens...and they speak new things about the God of the gods and know the knowledge of Most High...They know and understand how to gather the sparks of holiness...And these have been mistaken through wine and become confused through drinking beer – the priest, the prophet, and the “masters of the name.”...Everyday is a holiday for them, they eat and drink and carouse...and I have seen fine people seizing the cupboard and the rebbe’s food-remnants and overturning the platter, and to fill his throat such a one takes a keg of whiskey, and when he is filled to the brim he expounds the lore of the Chariot-Throne...<sup>4</sup>

Zamość’s criticisms were not unlike earlier misnagdic ones, in fact the maskilim based many of their criticisms on earlier misnagdic views<sup>5</sup>; however, he focused more on moral issues rather than social or doctrinal ones<sup>6</sup>. Although this passage demonstrates his bias, particularly in his emphasis on alcohol, Zamość does refer to the Hasidim speaking “new things” about God, which implies a change to the

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<sup>4</sup> Israel Zamość, cited in Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, Trans. Bernard Martin, (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972-78) vol. 9, 234.

<sup>5</sup> The Misnagdim’s criticisms of Hasidism were generally focused around the Hasidim’s relationship with talmudic study and prayer, and sometimes even went so far as to accuse them of sectarianism and anti-nomianism. For more information see Mordecai Wilensky, “Hasidic Polemics in the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe: The Hostile Phase,” *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to the Present*, Ed. Gershon D. Hundert, (New York: New York University Press, 1991) 244-71.

<sup>6</sup> Wodziński, 17.

religion. For Zamość, Hasidism was mostly a side issue, since he viewed it as a marginal phenomenon.

It was almost twenty years later before the subject was first really explored by Solomon Maimon, with his publication of his two-volume *Geschichte des eigenen Lebens* in 1792 and 1793. Maimon was a Polish Lithuanian Jew who had made the intellectual journey from traditional Orthodoxy to secular Enlightenment and the physical journey from the eastern European shtetl to Berlin, the capital of the Jewish Enlightenment in the West. Maimon drew his criticisms both from the works of the Misnagdim and from his own personal experience of traveling to the court of the *Magid*, Dov Ber of Międzyrzecz. When he first arrived at the court of the Magid, he was impressed by the rebbe's seemingly divine knowledge of his pilgrims' personal lives yet soon became suspicious that the rebbe's "miraculous" knowledge really came from the use of spies, correspondence, skillful questioning, and a deep human understanding.<sup>7</sup> He described the Hasidim as being superstitious, backward, and following an ignorant and often fraudulent leadership. Maimon accused Hasidism of being a secret society which was given to physical excesses. Maimon attributes the spread of Hasidism to:

The natural inclination to idleness and a life of speculation on the part of the majority, who from birth are destined to study, the dryness and unfruitfulness of rabbinical studies, and the great burden of the ceremonial law, which the new doctrine promised to lighten, finally the tendency to fanaticism and the love of the marvelous which are nourished by this doctrine...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Solomon Maimon, *Geschichte des eigenen Lebens*, (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1935) 109.

<sup>8</sup> Solomon Maimon, *An Autobiography*, trans. J. Clark Murray (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001)163. (p. 104 in the German)



While Maimon sees some redemptive aspects of Hasidism, at least in theory, he believes that the average person will not have enough knowledge to ascend to such mystical heights, and will rather use the movement as an excuse to indulge in excesses. As we see from the above passage, Maimon is particularly concerned that it will fuel fanaticism and love of the marvelous, meaning superstition, both of which were antithetical to the Haskalah. In his autobiography, Maimon also criticized aspects from his own traditional upbringing, which were prevalent both among Hasidim and Misnagdim, such as the pre-eminence of talmudic study and the neglect of the Hebrew language, the custom of matchmaking, and devoting oneself to religious studies after marriage instead of engaging in productive labor. Even though in reality, Maimon had had little contact with Hasidim beyond his pilgrimage to the court of the Magid, and many of his criticisms were aimed at traditional Jews in general, Maimon's critique became the foundation for later maskilic censure of Hasidism.<sup>9</sup>

Maimon's choice of the Hasidism's supposed superstitiousness as a point of attack is noteworthy. The scholar Immanuel Etkes in his article "Magic and Miracle-Workers in the Literature of the Haskalah" describes how the Haskalah "declared an all-out war on 'superstition.'"<sup>10</sup> This was a good point of attack for a competing movement that defined itself by its belief in rationalism. It should be emphasized that the maskilim during this period were not against Judaism, but wanted to "purify" it of

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<sup>9</sup> Wodziński, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Etkes, "Magic and Miracle-Workers in the Literature of the Haskalah." New Perspectives on the Haskalah, eds. Shmuel Feiner and David Sorkin, (Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001) 113.

its irrational components which they viewed as later add-ons. Maimon was perhaps the first writer to use superstition as ammunition against Hasidism. Maimon describes the founder of Hasidism as a base witch-doctor;

A certain Cabbalist, Rabbi Joel Baalshem by name, became very celebrated at this time on account of some lucky cures which he effected by means of his medical acquirements and his conjuring tricks, as he gave out that all this was done, not by natural means, but solely with the help of *Cabbalah Maasith* (the practical Cabbalah), and the use of sacred names. In this way he played a very successful game in Poland.<sup>11</sup>

Maimon attributes the spread of Hasidism to the appeal of the Besht's ostensibly magical cures and use of practical Kabbalah. The association of superstition with Hasidism would ultimately become a central motif in works of the Haskalah that dealt with the subject of Hasidism.<sup>12</sup>

Another important early adversary of Hasidism, who also critical of the Hasidism's purported superstitious beliefs, was Menachem Mendel Lefin (1749-1826). Lefin was raised in traditional orthodoxy, journeyed to Berlin where he met with important enlightenment figures, including Mendelsohn, and then returned to Eastern Europe to spread enlightenment ideals there. Lefin was a moderate maskil who believed that rabbinic Judaism could be made compatible with enlightenment ideals. As part of Lefin's enlightened philosophy, he believed it was possible to separate ethics from metaphysics. Reforming one's soul was an intellectual project outside the realm of religion. Lefin used Benjamin Franklin's system of "habitude" – repeating good behaviors until they became part of one's morality – in order to create

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<sup>11</sup> Solomon Maimon, *An Autobiography*, 158. (p.100 in the German)

<sup>12</sup> See Etkes, "Magic and Miracle-Workers," for a detailed study of this subject.

his own system of training the soul to act morally, based on a rationalistic reckoning, rather than traditional *musar*. Lefin specifically designed this system as a means to combat Hasidism: “Lefin’s *Sefer heshbon hanefesh* is both a work of enlightened *musar* and an anti-hasidic polemic disguised as a traditional ethical text.”<sup>13</sup> Lefin viewed the Hasidim as representing a new, irrational Kabbalistic strain of Judaism, which scorned religious studies and rabbis, preferring to place their trust in superstitious miracle-working charlatans. Lefin censured the Hasidic rebbes for rejecting the rationalistic elements of Judaism and instead embracing the metaphysical ones, both by usurping traditional texts and encouraging their adherents to place their faith in the powers of the zaddik:

A distorted and crooked generation has arisen. Their leaders, in particular, ingratiate themselves to the people through all kinds of cajolery. They ask how they are doing and inquire after their well-being, all in order to turn them into faithful lovers, to obligate them to recognize their goodness, and to make them their future disciples, with all their hearts and money. [This leadership] also pecks out their eyes from understanding a book or any explicit reason in Scripture and they slander the pleasant *musar* of the Sages, may their memories be blessed, and they turn their words into wormwood. Instead, they fill their prayer books with the names of [Hasidic] men and women and of their mothers...They assure an individual or even entire communities that they see an edict about to befall them, and that they [the zaddikim] have already begun to pray for them with all of their might, which permits them to accept their financial tribute (*pidyoneihem*).<sup>14</sup>

In addition to sowing the seeds of doubt in the powers of divine intercession, Lefin is also criticizing the rebbes for the financial relationship that they have with their

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy Sinkoff, *Out of the Shtetl : Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands*. Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004, 135. Apparently Lefin was successful in passing off his book as a traditional ethical text because Feldheim Publishers reprinted *Sefer Chesbon ha-nefesh* in 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Menachem Mendel Lefin, cited in Nancy Sinkoff, *Out of the Shtetl : Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands*, (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004) 147.

followers. He viewed this relationship as exploitative, which is another one of his main criticisms of Hasidism. Ingeniously, by creating his new system, Lefin circumnavigated the need to have a rebbe as a spiritual guide: “Lefin’s appropriation of Franklin’s method obviated the requirement for a spiritual and ethical mediator in the life of an average rabbinic Jew.”<sup>15</sup> Lefin also inspired many of his readers to pursue secular education:

He also accomplished something important in that he found a way to reach the students in the prayer houses; to inspire them to self-education, he wrote in the popular Talmudic style *Iggerot ha-Hokhma* (“Letters on Wisdom”) and *Heshbon ha-Nefesh* (“Moral stocktaking”), which influenced many young people in the small towns to form ethical societies.<sup>16</sup>

As Gottlober noted, Lefin wrote in a popular style of Hebrew in order to make his work as accessible as possible; however, he realized that he needed to write in Yiddish in order to reach the broadest strata of Jewry. At this point Yiddish was much derided by maskilim who favored writing in “pure” languages, such as German, Russian, Polish or Hebrew. Therefore, when Lefin’s Yiddish translation of the Book of Proverbs appeared in 1814 in Tarnopol, it provoked much controversy. Tobias Feder was so enraged that he composed a bitter tract attacking Lefin. Due to the scandal, Levin was never able to publish a full translation of the Bible. Nonetheless, the door had been opened for a “new, modern, secular style.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sinkoff, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Abraham Ber Gottlober, “I served the Haskalah in Russia,” *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe*, ed. Lucy Dawidowicz (New York: Schocken Books, 1967) 115.

<sup>17</sup> Zinberg, Vol. 9, 216; Gottlober claims to have been inspired to write in Yiddish after reading Lefin’s Yiddish translation, see Gottlober, 115.

Lefin's perspective on Hasidism had a significant impact on the Galician circle of maskilim, in particular on Joseph Perl. Joseph Perl (1773-1839) is a noteworthy character in the battle of the maskilim against the Hasidim and was the author of one of the most important anti-Hasidic satires of the period, *Megale Temirin*. Perl was born to a wealthy Tarnopol merchant family, and his father was a Misnaged. Perl was married by the age of fourteen and became attracted to Hasidism in his youth. His father sent him frequently on business trips to Brody, where he became acquainted with the circle of maskilim who lived there, and by 1803 Perl was himself a maskil. Perl founded the *Deutsche-Israelitische Hauptschule* and was made its director for life. He also founded a reformed<sup>18</sup> synagogue nearby. Perl was one of the most active of the maskilim in agitating against the Hasidim by attempting to engage the government in his fight. When Perl died, Hasidim purportedly danced on his fresh grave.<sup>19</sup>

In 1816 Perl submitted *Über das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim* to the government for approval for publication. This manuscript was written in German and was primarily aimed at exposing the Hasidim through their own texts to the non-Jewish authorities. The government rejected Perl's work, and he set about crafting his next, and much more successful text, *Megale Temirin*, which was published in 1819. *Megale Temirin* is an epistolary novel, written in the Hebrew style employed

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<sup>18</sup> "Reformed" in that the sermons were in German and maintaining a higher level of decorum; however, the synagogue was still more conservative than the reform synagogues in Germany of the time, Dov Taylor, introduction, *Joseph Perl's Revealer of Secrets: The First Hebrew Novel*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997) xxv.

<sup>19</sup> Raphael Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Trans. Eugene Orenstein, Aaron Klein, Jenny Machlowitz Klein, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985) 148.

by Hasidic texts in order to appear as a Hasidic text, but is really a vicious satire. The novel was aimed at two audiences: “one a simple Jew, unsophisticated, oblivious to satire and *double-entendre* -- the other a maskil, who would understand Perl’s hidden meanings and be entertained by his literary subterfuge.”<sup>20</sup> The plot centers around the attempt to capture and destroy a certain heretical “book” that was written to incite the government against Hasidism. The book is, in fact, Perl’s own *Über das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim*, which in reality had never been printed, but in his novel achieves its desired outcome. Perl brings to light many of what he sees are the worst offenses in Hasidism, as we shall see. However, unlike earlier critics, Perl intended not only to write an anti-Hasidic work, but also an anti-hagiography which would call into question the historicity of the *Shivkhei HaBesht*.<sup>21</sup> For example in one letter a judge asks:

Who guarantees that all the things found in *Shivkey ha-Besht* are true? Does *he* know the ritual slaughterer of Linits, or is it signed by witnesses and a court? And why didn’t they publish the book *Shivkhey ha-Besht* while the Besht and his generation were still alive? Why did they wait until the whole generation who knew and saw his deeds and acts had died? Indeed, our rabbi, our Light, the *Rov*, The Great Light, Our Teacher Rabbi Elijah, told me and my companions that he had known the Besht well. He told us that in his generation he was like the rest of the wonder-workers and he wasn’t even learned but was even more of an insolent man and a swindler than the other wonder-workers of his generation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, xxxvii.

<sup>21</sup> Jeremy Dauber, *Antonio’s Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 264-265.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Perl, *Revealer of Secrets*, Letter 77, trans. Taylor, 140.

In addition to disparaging the founder of Hasidism, Perl makes the claim that Hasidism is a sect outside of normative Judaism. He accuses Hasidim of twisting the meaning of the Torah. Perl's attack on Hasidism is more textually based than those of other maskilim, and he accuses the Hasidim of creating a new canon that supplants the traditional Jewish canon by elevating the status of Hasidic writing to a level even higher than that of the Torah: "more beloved to them are the words of their *zaddikim* than the Torah of Moshe."<sup>23</sup> At the same time, he reveals both the Rebbes and their followers to be ignorant: "Perl manages simultaneously to present the Hasidim as waging a canonical war and as textually ignorant – a neat bit of polemic twisting on his part."<sup>24</sup> Perl pokes fun at many aspects of the relationship between the Hasid and his rebbe, for example attributing deeper meaning to every movement of the rebbe,<sup>25</sup> the rebbe's fondness for smoking his pipe, and the Hasidim attaching mystical properties to it,<sup>26</sup> and the homo-erotic overtones of the relationship between the Hasidim and their rebbe.<sup>27</sup> Among Perl's many criticisms are the Hasidim's love of alcohol,<sup>28</sup> disregard for *halacha*,<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Perl, Letter 76, 135-6.

<sup>24</sup> Dauber, 277.

<sup>25</sup> Perl, letter 17, 53

<sup>26</sup> Perl, letter 18, 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> Perl, letter 4, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Perl, letter 34, 75.

<sup>29</sup> Perl, letter 20, 57.

worshipping artifacts from rebbes in the same way as Christians revere relics,<sup>30</sup> using funds collected for sending to Eretz Yisroel and Rabbi Meir Bal HaNes for personal purposes,<sup>31</sup> lying, stealing, spreading false rumors,<sup>32</sup> swearing false oaths,<sup>33</sup> and even attempting to poison people.<sup>34</sup>

Perl later translated *Megale Temirin* into Yiddish in order to reach a broader readership, but it was not published until 1837. In 1825 Perl wrote a sequel to *Megale Temirin*, entitled *Bohen Tsadik*, although it was not published until 1838. Although the maskil Mordchai Gold is clearly the ideal in *Megale Temirin*, by the time Perl wrote *Bohen Tsadik*, the maskil also became an object of Perl's criticism, a symptom of the later maskilim's ambivalence with their agenda, which we will soon discuss.

The famous Russian maskil Isaac Ber Levinsohn (1788- 1860) was a friend and protégé of Lefin and Perl, and shared similar anti-Hasidic sentiments. Levinsohn was born into a wealthy family in Kremenets, Volhynia.<sup>35</sup> His father was a businessman as well as a grammarian and linguist. Levinsohn received a traditional

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<sup>30</sup> Perl, letter 64, 117.

<sup>31</sup> Perl, letter 70, 128.

<sup>32</sup> Perl, letter 21, 60.

<sup>33</sup> Perl, letter 22, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Perl, letter 39, 80.

<sup>35</sup> For more biographical information on Levinsohn see Zinberg, v. 11, and Mordechai Zalkin, "Levinzon, Yitshak Ber," The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe on-line, <[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Levinzon\\_Yitshak\\_Ber](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Levinzon_Yitshak_Ber)>



religious education and performed brilliantly in his studies.<sup>36</sup> He also grew up in a family atmosphere of Russian patriotism, which he maintained his whole life. He was married at eighteen, but divorced his wife after their only child died. He moved first to Radzhivilov, where he remarried, and then eventually moved to Brody in 1813, where he joined the circle of maskilim including Mendel Lefin, Nachman Krochmal, Joseph Perl, Samuel Jacob Bik, and Issac Erter. At first Levinsohn earned his living as a tutor and was soon employed as a Hebrew teacher in the newly formed Realschule in Brody. Later on he moved to Tarnopol, where he received a teacher's certificate from the school that Perl founded.

Levinsohn published two anti-Hasidic works. The first, *Divrei Tzaddikim*, was an epilogue to Perl's *Megale Temirin*. *Divrei Tzaddikim* was published in 1830 along with another satire, *Emek Refa'im*. Levinsohn later translated this work into Yiddish to reach the broader masses. His attack is vicious and quite comprehensive in the litany of evils he attributes towards Hasidism. Consider the following description of Hasidim from "Di hefker velt";

These boozers, the Hasidim, drink liquor and dance by their rebbe. And in the places where there is no rebbe, they dance in the Hasidic prayer-house, or synagogue. The rabble chatter amongst themselves. Then, amidst the gabbing, every kind of affliction, all the evil, and all the bad things come into being! Perhaps the old-fashioned Jews or a few simple folk, lay at home in their beds with their noses in the air; They (the Hasidim) eat chickpeas, peel vegetables, read the *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*, perhaps say a few psalms, yawn, and maybe sing a few high holiday tunes.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Zinberg, vol. 11, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Isaac Baer Levinsohn, "Di hefker velt," Nusekh Haskole, Musterverk, Vol. 36, (Buenos-Aires: Ateneo Literario en el Instituto Cientifico Judio, 1968) 63.

This description of Hasidim follows a litany of accusations against the Hasidim, including false oaths, smuggling, general disregard for laws in the name of making money, corruption and kickbacks in order to rule Kahal elections, revenge on people who don't blindly follow dictates, unfairly drawing draftees to czarist army from poor families, kidnapping only-children as draftees, in order to extract bribe money from desperate mothers, establishing all sorts of ridiculous taxes, which end up being leveled on the poor as opposed to the wealthy, not earning money, and wasting money on wedding gifts and expensive Hasidic garb. In this paragraph, Levinsohn juxtaposes any seemingly authentic spiritual practices, such as saying psalms, with peeling vegetables, in order to diminish the spiritual import of prayer altogether.

Indeed, there were many maskilim who wrote negatively about Hasidim, and it has been their voice that has been remembered as representative of the Haskalah: “denunciation of the *Hasidim* as superstitious obscurantists and of the rebbes as charlatans and scoundrels was certainly the norm in maskilic circles.”<sup>38</sup> According to Zalman Reyzen, one of the major prewar scholars of Eastern European Jewish literary history, it was not just the norm, but a major tenet of the Haskalah: “In the Torah of the Haskalah, one of the fundamental principals was a bitter, unmerciful fight against the anti-rationalist Hasidim.”<sup>39</sup> Recently, the scholar Martin Wodzinski has challenged this notion and has illustrated how “the attitudes of the Polish maskilim of

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Seltzer, “The Secular Appropriation of Hasidism by an East European Jewish Intellectual: Dubnow, Renan, and the Besht.” *Polin* 1 (1986) : 151.

<sup>39</sup> Zalman Rayzen, “An interesante perzenlekhkayt fun der haskole-tsayt,” *Literarishe bleter* 42 (1931) : 794.

the time varied widely”<sup>40</sup> vis-à-vis Hasidim. Certainly, as we have seen, there were many maskilim who were extremely critical of Hasidism; however, there were a range of maskilim who were more neutral or even discerned positive aspects of Hasidism. These maskilim were influential in their own right. Therefore, by examining their works and their influence, we can establish a counter-narrative of maskilim who do not fit the stereotype of the negative relationship between maskilim and Hasidim. By examining these maskilim’s contribution to a more objective and even positive view of Hasidism, one can see how neo-Hasidism can trace elements of its ideology back to these maskilim, and how such a genre could have been born in the wake of the Haskalah.

One of the most interesting figures in this counter-narrative was a maskil who went so far as publicly rejecting the Haskalah in favor of Hasidism – scandalizing the maskilim of his day with his “apostasy.” The enigmatic figure at the center of this controversy was Samuel Jacob Bik. In his time Bik was a well-known and influential maskil: “Bik was one of the most active among [the maskilim] and he had a tremendous influence thanks to his intellect, his personal positive traits, and his great education. According to the researcher of the Jewish Haskalah in Galicia, Israel Veynlez, [Bik] was even the *rosh ha-kahal* of the then famous and rich Jewish community of Brod.”<sup>41</sup> Tragically, Bik died during a cholera epidemic in 1831. He had intended that his works be published posthumously, but they were destroyed by a great fire in Brod soon after he died. All that remains from his literary output are

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<sup>40</sup> Marcin Wodziński, Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict, trans. Sara Cozens, (Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2005), 152.

<sup>41</sup> Zalman Reyzen, “An interesante perzenlekhkayt fun der haskole-tsayt,” 793.

some of his letters, Hebrew translations of European poetry, a few of his own verses, and a few manuscripts.<sup>42</sup> From this scant material, scholars like Zalman Reyzen and Shmuel Werses have tried to reconstruct the life, outlook and literary accomplishments of Bik.

Jacob Bik was born around 1770 in Brod to a wealthy and influential family with an illustrious pedigree. He had a thorough traditional education, was well-versed both in Talmud and Old Hebrew Literature, and was preparing for a rabbinical career.<sup>43</sup> He also acquired a broad secular knowledge on his own and mastered French, English and German. During this period Brod was one of the centers of the Galician Haskalah, and Bik became a close associate of its cluster of maskilim, as well as those of Tarnopol, Zsholkve and Lemberg, including Dov Ber Ginsburg, Joseph Perl, Nachman Krochmal, Yisroel Bodek, Isaac Erter and Shimshon Bloch. Bik was especially close with Mendel Lefin, who was both his mentor and friend. When Lefin published his Yiddish translation of the *Book of Proverbs* in 1814, and Tobias Feder composed his bitter tract attacking Lefin, Bik wrote a long letter defending Lefin on the grounds that all languages started out as “jargons” and that Yiddish translations are a way of paying back the poor and uneducated for their labor with spiritual nourishment.<sup>44</sup> Bik beseeched Feder not to publish his tract. Feder

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<sup>42</sup> These manuscripts are available at the Yosef Perl archive.

<sup>43</sup> Reyzen, “An interesante perzenlekhkayt fun der haskole-tsayt,” 793.

<sup>44</sup> Reyzen calls Bik’s letter a “Yidishist” manifesto” and credits it with being a cornerstone for the later movement of Yidishism. ““An interesante perzenlekhkayt fun der haskole-tsayt – sof,” Literarishe bleter 43 (1931) : 811.

agreed if he would be reimbursed for his publishing expenses and the maskilim of Brody sent him a hundred rubles.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps Bik's defense of Yiddish, the language associated with Hasidim, had something to do with the change in his attitude towards them. In his early career Bik displayed a typical maskilic attitude towards Hasidim. He even wrote an anti-hasidic satire, "Hezyone hitul" in the early 1820s. According to Werses, 1825-1826 was a transitional period for Bik. In 1826 Lefin died. While his friend was alive, Bik was no doubt influenced by his strong anti-hasidic bias. However, at this point Bik began to cultivate a distaste for the way in which maskilim would use any means to fight Hasidim, to the point where they arranged for soldiers to drive away a Hasidic minyan in the middle of praying.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the fight between the maskilim and the Hasidim was the fiercest between 1815 and 1848. In their zeal to modernize traditional Jewry, maskilim were sometimes instrumental in effecting such ultimately oppressive measures as the candle tax and restrictions on traditional clothing.<sup>47</sup>

Although Bik was at this time most likely in keeping with the maskilim's anti-Hasidic stance, he was "by nature a lover-of-peace."<sup>48</sup> Bik is characterized by Bloch as "the man with the feeling heart and eye that is aware of the every suffering person."<sup>49</sup> Bik was becoming more critical of the Haskalah's own program. Werses

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<sup>45</sup> Zinberg, vol. 9, 223.

<sup>46</sup> Shmuel Werses, "Yakov Bik, der blondzshendiker maskil," *Yivo bleter* 13 (1938) : 518.

<sup>47</sup> Raphael Mahler, "Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment," *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to the Present*, ed. Gershon D. Hundert, (New York: New York University Press, 1991) 401- 415.

<sup>48</sup> Werses, 515.

<sup>49</sup> Werses, 513.

credits Bik with being the first maskil to take a critical stance vis-à-vis the Haskalah.<sup>50</sup> The Haskalah embraced rationalism to the point where Bik felt it to be cold and indifferent to the suffering of the Jewish people. The Haskalah was also a movement for the privileged few, and “Bik longed for the folk-masses and found them in the Hasidic movement.”<sup>51</sup> Bik also accused the maskilim of preaching tolerance, but not extending that tolerance to Hasidim, who were an integral part of the Jewish people.<sup>52</sup> According to Ephraim Kupfer, Bik also feared that the more radical maskilim were leading the youth away from Judaism and straight towards assimilation.<sup>53</sup> In a letter to Krochmal, Bik states that it is “our duty to strengthen learning of Torah and the performance of mitzvas among the people of Israel because this is the soul of the nation.”<sup>54</sup>

Around this time, Bik wrote a poem mourning the death of the Hasidic leader R' Isaac of Komarna.<sup>55</sup> According to Werses, the maskilim never forgave him for this poem. One by one his friends started to reject him and viewed this poem as a betrayal of the ideals of the Haskalah.<sup>56</sup> Letters from Mieses, Bloch, and Rappaport

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<sup>50</sup> Werses, 505.

<sup>51</sup> Werses, 535.

<sup>52</sup> Haim Cohen, “Bick, Ya’akov Shmu’el,” The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe on-line.

<sup>53</sup> Ephraim Kupfer, “Yakov Shmuel Bik le-or te-odot khadashot” Gal-Ed: On the History of the Jews in Poland, IV-V (1978) : 539

<sup>54</sup> Jacob Bik, letter to Solomon Rapaport,” 29 March 1827, in Ephraim Kupfer, “Yakov Shmuel Bik,” 546.

<sup>55</sup> This poem does not appear to be extant.

<sup>56</sup> Werses, 520.

express surprise and disappointment at this change and try to persuade Bik to come back to the path of truth. Werses speculates that this debate was not really objective, but rather reveals the “biting enmity between the Haskalah and Hasidism.”<sup>57</sup> Bik wrote a critical evaluation of the fight between the Haskalah and Hasidism. Bik circulated this work among his friends in manuscript form, which ultimately only further antagonized them. Isolated from the literary community, Bik spent the last few years of his life devoted to philanthropic activities.

Although Bik’s former friends treated him like he had actually become a Hasid,<sup>58</sup> Bik appears mainly to have sympathized with and drawn inspiration from Hasidism. According to Werses, he might have been influenced to some degree by the Rebbe Moshe Leyb Sassever, whose court was near Brod. The Sassever Rebbe’s teachings of *Ahavas yisroel* complemented Bik’s personal philosophy. Werses may reveal his own maskilic-inherited bias when he credits the Sassever rebbe as having “strived to render Hasidus in its pure non-falsified form,”<sup>59</sup> inferring that the Hasidism of his day had become falsified. He also cites Dubnow’s description of the Sassever as being “more a teacher of Hasidus, than a miracle-worker” who “in his own moral Torah, his deeds were at one with his word.”<sup>60</sup> Werses emphasis on the Sassever’s practice of “pure Hasidus” and “moral” as opposed to “miracle-working” activity, may reveal a long-lasting discomfort with Hasidism inherited from the

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<sup>57</sup> Werses, 523.

<sup>58</sup> Werses, 523.

<sup>59</sup> Werses, 534.

<sup>60</sup> Werses, 534.

maskilim. However, this emphasis also reveals the themes that neo-Hasidic writers would ultimately be drawn to, primarily morality over miracle-working. Werses' final estimation of Bik is rather pejorative: "He sought new ideological forms, in order that he would be able to live as a Jew and as a human being. But, ultimately he became ensnared in the limits of nationalism and fear of heaven."<sup>61</sup> Perhaps Bik did not have much time to concretize his ideology, because his transition occurred in 1826 and, he died in 1831; however, since his major work on the matter was lost, it is really impossible to pass critical judgment on it. One can only speculate that if Bik had lived longer, and if his works had been published, perhaps he would be remembered differently.

Jakub Tugendhold (1794-1871), who had the fortune to live much longer than Bik, was also among the first maskilim to consider Hasidism in a positive light. Unlike Bik, he did manage to change the broader attitude toward Hasidim in the whole progressive camp.<sup>62</sup> Tugendhold worked most of his life as a censor for Warsaw's municipal government and maintained a high profile in the Warsaw Jewish community. He began his career as a tutor, and in 1819 founded the first elementary school for Jewish children in Warsaw. He was soon commissioned to establish three more schools by the government as reformed, government-controlled alternatives to the traditional cheder. In 1823 the government appointed him to be a censor for Hebrew books. From 1853-1863 he also served as the director of the Warsaw Rabbinical School. Tugendhold was well-known for his work on behalf of charitable

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<sup>61</sup> Werses, 536.

<sup>62</sup> Marcin Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism," *Gal-Ed*, 18 (2002): 13-41.



organizations and was twice decorated by the tsarist government for his government service and charitable work.<sup>63</sup> During his long and influential career, Tugendhold corresponded with representatives from many different walks of Jewish life, from Isaac Baer Levinsohn, to Moses Montefiore, to the Gerer rebbe, Isaac Meir Alter. As a government official, Tugendhold worked to defend all Jews from government measures that would have been oppressive, and many of his efforts were spent on behalf of Hasidim.

Tugendhold was a moderate, even conservative, maskil, who believed that the radical Haskalah and religious indifference were far greater threats to Judaism than Hasidism.<sup>64</sup> By the 1830s Hasidism was already a mass movement, with a large merchant-middle class base, which provided Hasidic rebbes with more wealth, power, and respectability.<sup>65</sup> Like other maskilim, Tugendhold did not see Judaism as incompatible with rational enlightened thought. However, whereas other maskilim had previously sought to separate Hasidism from their ideal of Judaism by portraying Hasidim as an errant sect that distorted the original beauty of Judaism, one of Tugendhold's first major innovations was to refute the claim that Hasidism was a sect, because they never made changes to ritual law:

The *hasidim* who exist today cannot be regarded as a sect if one considers the true meaning of that term in relation to the essence of religion. For these *hasidim* do not deviate in any way for the essential laws and regulations of the Old Testament, the Talmud, or other subsequent works that are esteemed by the nation of Israel for their

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<sup>63</sup> Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism,"20.

<sup>64</sup> Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism,"25.

<sup>65</sup> Mahler, "Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment," 426.

religious value. Indeed it is the duty of every *hasid* to obey such laws and regulations much more scrupulously than the law requires.<sup>66</sup>

Tugendhold put forth this opinion in 1831 in his introduction to the Polish translation of Menasseh Ben Israel's *In Defense of the Israelites*. This was a controversial claim, during a period when "unequivocal enmity toward Hasidism was the dominant attitude of the Polish progressives until the late 1850s and 1860s."<sup>67</sup> Tugendhold made the "truly revolutionary statement" that not only was Hasidism not a sect, but that it was just as legitimate a form of Judaism as those practiced by the Misnagdim and maskilim.<sup>68</sup> Since Tugendhold drew his sustenance from the government, he could openly clash with other maskilim on controversial issues and maintain an independent position. During his long career as a civil servant, Tugendhold consistently defended Hasidim and tried to protect them from decrees that would have affected them adversely. For example, in 1824 the government was planning on closing down Hasidic prayer houses. Tugendhold wrote a lengthy report defending Hasidim "who are distinguished by a praiseworthy unity and mutual brotherly bonds," from the "zealous Talmudists."<sup>69</sup> Tugendhold effectively prevented the prayer houses from being closed. In 1841 Tugendhold signed an appeal together with the Hasidic Rebbes, Isaac Meir Alter from Ger and Isaac from Warka, for the Jewish

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<sup>66</sup> Jakub Tugendhold, *Obrona Izraelitów*, pp XXIII-XXIV, cited in Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism,"30.

<sup>67</sup> Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism,"14.

<sup>68</sup> Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism,"31.

<sup>69</sup> Tugendhold's original has been lost; however, this excerpt can be found in Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych, Warsaw 1871, fol. 162-164 cited in Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism,"35-36.

people to begin farm work. In 1853 he wrote a report to the government to refute the accusation that the Hasidim used a prayer book that contained a prayer cursing the czar and the government. In 1859, when the government was planning on reforming the Jewish community in a way that would support liberal factions, Tugendhold convinced the Minister of Education to let him substitute his own plan, which favored the traditional Jews. At this point Tugendhold was likely more sympathetic with traditional Jews than maskilim of the radical stripe, who he felt were a threat to the Jewish community's cohesion: "Thus in his later years Tugendhold was a conservative maskil who defended traditional Jewish society from what he perceived to be excessively radical changes in socio-religious life, which could potentially lead to a weakening of the Jewish community and its religion."<sup>70</sup>

Although Tugendhold remained a maskil his whole life – he ultimately hoped that Hasidim would embrace secular education and cast off their mantle of ignorance – he was one of the first maskilim to discern positive aspects of Hasidism, such as unity and real adherence to religious law. Tugendhold is not very well-known among scholars, but he left an impression on his students and had a broad influence far beyond the borders of Poland in his day.<sup>71</sup>

In the 1850s and 1860s members of the Polish-Jewish intelligentsia, such as Marcus Jastrow, Samuel Henryk Peltyn, and Daniel Neufeld<sup>72</sup>, began making positive references to Hasidism. According to Wodzinski,

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<sup>70</sup> Marcin Wodziński, Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland: A History of Conflict, 151.

<sup>71</sup> Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism," 14.

<sup>72</sup> Marcus Jastrow was a preacher at a "German" synagogue, Samuel Henryk Peltyn was the editor of the assimilationist weekly Izraelita, and Daniel Neufeld was the publisher of the assimilationist

there is no doubt that Tugendhold's ideas were decisive for the ultimate shape of that segment of their ideology. On the other hand, the fact that Tugendhold's last efforts in the late 1860s and the most important publications in that field by Neufeld or Jastrow came during the same time period, as well as the fact that a considerable number of young members of the progressive movement were students at the Rabbinical School under Tugendhold's direction, point to the fact that these influences were quite direct.<sup>73</sup>

Wodziński speculates that Tugendhold is less well known than other defenders of Hasidism, both because he maintained an independent position as a government-employee, which made him unpopular with the Polish progressives, and also because he consistently defended all Jews from the government, rather than specifically just the Hasidim.<sup>74</sup>

Eliezer Zweifel (1815-1888) was better-known than Tugendhold in his efforts to "rehabilitate" the Hasid, even though he is positioned chronologically later in counter-narrative timeline. Whereas Tugendhold defended all Jews, Zweifel singled out Hasidim for praise in a way that had not been done previously. Zweifel was an instructor of Talmud at the progressive Zhitomir Rabbinical School and was known for his positive outlook on Hasidism. In his controversial work, *Shalom 'Al Yisrael* (Zhitomir; 1868-1874), he tried to make peace between the Makilim and the Hasidim.

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periodical Jutrzenka. For examples of their writings which contain positive references to Hasidim see: M. Jastrow, 'Lejbe I Siora, czyli listy dwóch kochanków Romans przez J. U. N[ciemcewicza]', Jutrzenka 1/3 (1861):28. S. H. Peltyn, 'Chasydyzm, jego istota i stosunek do rabanizmu', Izraelita 3/27 (1868):218. D. Neufeld, 'Urządzenie Konsystorza Żydowskiego w Polsce. VII. Gmina', Jutrzenka 2/40 (1862):326-30, cited in Wodziński, 40.

<sup>73</sup> Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism," 41.

<sup>74</sup> Wodziński, "Jakub Tugendhold and the First Maskilic Defense of Hasidism," 15-16.

Zweifel, like Tugendhold before him, proved that Hasidism was not a sect, and that it drew all of its content from the Talmud and Kabbalah:

The subject of this book, in the estimation of the author, is not inferior in any way to the subjects of other books, as we have found that Hasidism had a tremendous impact on our fellow Jews...Its effect is not less forceful than that of the Talmud or the Kabbalah. The author unequivocally declares that, in his view, Hasidism is comparable to the Kabbalah and is especially similar to the Talmud. They [*Hitnagduth*, Hasidism and Haskalah] are all equally important movements and equally holy. Their leaders were all equally distinguished.<sup>75</sup>

The fact that Zweifel declared Hasidism as holy as Misnagedism and the Haskalah was revolutionary in his day. Zweifel specifically defended many aspects of Hasidism, which had been previously isolated as alien to Judaism and ridiculed by the maskilim, such as Zadikism, wonder tales, consumption of alcohol, and ritual immersion. Zweifel concludes *Shalom 'Al Yisrael* by drawing parallels between the lives of the Ari<sup>76</sup> and the Besht and declares that “the Ari and the Besht in their content were the same.”<sup>77</sup> It is interesting to note that Zweifel denied that the Besht was a miracle-worker, following the maskilic tradition of abjuring magical practice. Therefore in re-evaluating the Besht, Zweifel strips him of any magical associations.

The real innovation of Hasidism, according to Zweifel, was that the Besht revealed the hidden secrets of the Kabbalah, “and so the Kabbalah became

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<sup>75</sup> Eliezer Zweifel, *Shalom 'Al Yisrael*, 2 vol. (Zhitomir, 1868; repr. Jerusalem: Makor, 1970) I am using Wiederkehr-Pollack's translation in Wiederkehr-Pollack Pollack, Gloria, “Eliezer Zvi Hachohen Zweifel: Forgotten Father of Modern Scholarship on Hasidism,” *American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. 49 (1982) 88.

<sup>76</sup> Rabbi Isaac Luria, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystic and seminal kabbalist.

<sup>77</sup> Eliezer Zweifel, *Shalom 'Al Yisrael*, vol. 1, 125. (Translation mine).

democratized.”<sup>78</sup> According to Zweifel’s analysis, Hasidism placed the emphasis on the individual, which ultimately revived, and perhaps even saved Judaism. Thus for Zweifel, Hasidism was not a change in Judaism, but rather a regeneration: “Without an iota being altered in the law, in the ritual, in the traditional life-norms, the long-accustomed arose in a fresh light and meaning. Still bound to the medieval in its outward appearance, Hasidic Judaism is already open to regeneration in its inner truth.”<sup>79</sup>

In addition to defending the legitimacy of Hasidism, Zweifel goes as far as to praise it in juxtaposition with the Haskalah. In Zweifel’s estimation, if rabbinic Judaism was too ascetic and too removed from the worldly realm, the Haskalah was too utilitarian, and thus also missed out on the pleasures of the physical world. The Besht, on the other hand, promoted the idea of *ein od milvado*, there is nothing besides the Almighty. Therefore, even mundane activities contain aspects of the divine. Performing physical acts, such as eating and drinking, can be elevated to holy acts if one does them with *dvekuth*, a Hasidic term describing the spiritual mindset of concentrating on one’s connection to the eternal, omnipresent God. Therefore, Hasidism achieves a good balance between asceticism and Epicureanism. Zweifel contrasts Hasidism with Misnagdism in that whereas Misnagdism was overly ascetic,

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<sup>78</sup> Wiederkehr-Pollack, “Eliezer Zvi Hachohen Zweifel: Forgotten Father of Modern Scholarship on Hasidism,” 24.

<sup>79</sup> Gloria Wiederkehr-Pollack, Eliezer Zweifel and the Intellectual Defense of Hasidism, (Hoboken, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1995) 202.

Hasidism brought back an appreciation for nature and the physical world, as long as one acknowledged worldly things as coming from a divine source.<sup>80</sup>

Although Zweifel talks about individual redemption through *dvekuth*, Zweifel did not mention the ultimately messianic dimension of Hasidism,<sup>81</sup> in that individual redemption was really a step towards the ultimate redemption. Perhaps Zweifel overlooked this major aspect of Hasidism because as a maskil at heart, he was more concerned with emancipation than redemption. As to whether or not he ignored the messianism in Hasidism on purpose or inadvertently, is not clear; however, this trend of presenting Hasidism without its messianic component will carry over into neo-Hasidic literature, as we shall see. Zweifel also made an important distinction between Hasidism in the days of the Baal Shem Tov, which he praises, and Hasidism in his day which he saw as having skewed the Besht's teaching that there is holiness in everything to the point of overindulgence in physical pleasures.<sup>82</sup> This distinction was crucial, because it allowed him to create a middle ground between maskilim and contemporary Hasidism. This polemical middle ground paved the way for a literary space in which Hasidism could be viewed more positively because its redeeming qualities were part of the past and therefore less threatening. This was a new possibility for maskilim as more time elapsed between the birth of Hasidism and its contemporary reality. Hasidim's noble past but dissolute present became an accepted cliché by the twentieth century.

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<sup>80</sup> Zweifel, Shalom 'Al Yisrael, v. 2, part 3, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Wiederkehr-Pollack, Eleizer Zweifel and the Intellectual Defense of Hasidism, 209.

<sup>82</sup> Wiederkehr-Pollack, Eleizer Zweifel and the Intellectual Defense of Hasidism, 195.

This particular reassessment of Hasidism was also expressed by Isaac Joel Linetsky (1839-1915), one of Zweifel's students and protégés. Linetsky was born in Vinnitsa, Podolia to a Hasidic family.<sup>83</sup> Linetsky's was a child prodigy; however, he became interested in the Haskalah and his father married him off at the age of 14 in order to deter this interest. When Linetsky cultivated an interest in the Haskalah in his wife, his father forced them to divorce, and married Linetsky off this time to a deaf, mentally handicapped girl. Finally at the age of 19, Linetsky moved to Odessa, where he taught Hebrew for a living. After divorcing his second wife, he moved to Zhitomir, where he attended the rabbinical seminary. He soon moved to Kiev, where he started writing in Yiddish and Hebrew. His first Hebrew article was published in 1865 in *Ha-Melits*. His first Yiddish publication appeared in 1867 in *Kol mevasser*, where he also began serializing his most well-known work, *Dos poylishe yingl*, later that year, which would ultimately be republished thirty times.

Although *Dos poylishe yingl* is one of the most biting satires of Hasidic life, the reader can clearly discern Zweifel's influence in Linetsky's characterization of Hasidism as having some positive attributes. This work is a noteworthy departure from such satires as Aksenfeld's *The Headband*, and Perl's *Megale Temirin* in which Hasidism is only subject to ridicule and censure, and the maskilim represent an unquestionable ideal.

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<sup>83</sup> For more biographical information see Jeremy Dauber "Linetski, Yitskhok Yoyel," The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe on-line, <[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Linetski\\_Yitskhok\\_Yoyel](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Linetski_Yitskhok_Yoyel)>.



*Dos poylishe yingl* parodied practically every aspect of Hasidic life, from community institutions such as the bathhouse and the cheder, to purported Hasidic social mores and customs, to the venerable rebbes themselves. Among Linetsky's many jibes, some of his main criticisms are: the Hasidic man's failure to provide for and total lack of concern for family, the extreme superstition of Hasidim, and the rebbe's greed and corruption. Consider the following depiction; "I think that these rebbes are sick and tired of living such a life. I mean, what refined person would stand to spend his time with such a world of sinners, with all kinds of hypocrites, slobs, chicken-dealers, bloodsuckers, and horse thieves?"<sup>84</sup> Linetsky asks rhetorically. He answers;

But what of it? Every rebbe is, poor thing, owned by his *gabe*... And a canaanite slave to his rebbitzin... You, husband, fool the world, scam in good consciousness, do business with the blind, slatterns, slobs, informers, bastards and thieves – as long as I should be able to wear a lot of jewelry, clothes, gold-stitched shoes, diamond garters, a down coat, etc. – and meanwhile, one burns, poor thing, the world. Young people ruin their small dowries. Craftsman give up their whole good-luck, the faithful take from widows and orphans, and use it up on *pidyones* and presents... The rebbe stares, and knits his brow, and signs for so long – until the sick person gives up his kosher soul... In short, one does every unlawful thing – as long as the rebbe should get money and more money! And God the master knows, from where the whole of Jewish blood drains out?...<sup>85</sup>

And yet, as effectively as Linetsky pokes fun at every aspect of Hasidic life, he differs from his predecessors in that he does not provide a clear alternative. Rather, he harbors his own doubts about the viability of the Haskalah. Firstly,

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<sup>84</sup>Linetsky, Isaac Joel, *Dos poylishe yingl*, *Musterverk: Nusekh haskole*, ed. Shmuel Rozshanski, (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Instituto Cientifico Judio) vol 36, 103-104. Does not include entire text. Translation mine.

<sup>85</sup> *Musterverk*, 104-105.

maskilim are capable of being just as irrational and intolerant as Hasidim, as the narrator, Itzik, compares his superstitious mother-in-law's attempt to force him to drink an aphrodisiac potion to "the eager young heretics who on encountering a pious, provincial Jewish lad enlighten him by shoving a hunk of gentile pork down his throat."<sup>86</sup> Although Linetsky's sympathies are definitely with the maskilim, he openly declares that the ways of the Haskalah are not the ultimate solution. When Itzik is in jail, he debates with his jailmates the merits of Hasidism's competing systems, Misnagdism and the Haskalah;

Both schools of thought, however, appealed only to *cold-blooded* persons, namely those who follow the beaten path and give attention only to the outward aspect of things, without heed to the *internal* aspect...A person endowed with enthusiasm and rapture, however, - one with heightened spirituality - could not conform to these schools of thought since such a person could not submit to specific rules and regulations and was averse to discipline.<sup>87</sup>

Linetsky contrasts these movements with Hasidism which "was essentially a living spark," which gave

complete freedom in Judaism, which was why its devotees were always exhilarated - a mood that brought accord and rapport among its followers. This accounted for the self-sacrificing mutual aid among Hasidim...Neither a misnaged nor a maskil would offer you a meal, let alone put you up for the night, or grant you a loan without interest, or join in your festivities, or come to your aid when you were most in need. The Hasidim, on the other hand, would put themselves out for one another; when one of them was in trouble the whole sect would stand by him to a man.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Isaac Joel Linetski, The Polish Lad, trans. Moshe Spiegel, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975) 161.

<sup>87</sup> Linetski, The Polish Lad, 283-284.

<sup>88</sup> Linetski, The Polish Lad, 284-285.

The narrator's first dream sums up the author's position when the angels chant that on the one hand "*The Lord of the Universe has condemned/ The arrogance of Hasidism,/ The curse which haunts our land/ With its shams and despotism*" yet at the same time reminds the reader "*And let us not disdain the good in Hasidism – / Its creed should not be wholly despised./ It could still be a source of idealism/ Through with the ancient Jewish hopes are realized.*"<sup>89</sup> In this way Linetsky is paving the way for a re-appropriation of Hasidism for inspirational purposes only.

In Linetsky's re-appropriation, he employs a similar position to Zweifel, in that he rehabilitates the early phase of Hasidism and its founder the Baal Shem Tov, while reserving his criticism for contemporary Hasidism:

"The Baal Shem Tov was not, God forbid, a swindler, as some people maintain. His Hasidism was an indispensable and salutary reform in the religious life of his epoch – as compared to the cold austerity of Orthodox Rabbinism, which reduced the divine service with all of the commandments of the Torah to the status of rules mechanically obeyed, so that the Jewish worshiper no longer felt any ardor or ecstasy in prayer, but performed the ritual like an automaton, as an order carried out by a soldier. With his Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov naturally achieved his final objective: the fulfillment of a task spontaneously, by one's own volition, experiencing the glorious meaning of a commandment together with its true benefit – that is, of being a voluntary soldier in the service of divinity."<sup>90</sup>

Linetsky laments that Mendelsohn, the Vilna Gaon and the Besht, pursued different paths without any sort of reciprocal relationship, which he feels would have benefited the Jewish people: "Had the three founders united in their efforts to reform the religious and spiritual life of the Jews, each according to his point of view and his

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<sup>89</sup> Linetski, The Polish Lad, 290.

<sup>90</sup> Linetsky, The Polish Lad, 293-294.

principles, they would no doubt have established a complete and undivided doctrine for generations to come, and there would have been no need for sects in Jewish life....”<sup>91</sup> Linetsky sees these three founding fathers as having been pure-hearted visionaries who changed the course of Judaism in their time and contexts for the better; however, he holds the second generation of leaders responsible for corrupting the true-path of their predecessors:

Unfortunately those who came after the three founders gradually fell away from the original concepts – some of them out of ignorance, and others for their own aggrandizement and profit...In the course of time, the three doctrines so diverged from their original outlook that hardly any resemblance to their original form remains. If the three founders were to see their corrupt and distorted doctrines now, they would find them unrecognizable.

Linetsky goes even further than Zweifel, who categorically distances himself from contemporary Hasidism. Linetsky is not, in fact, attacking Hasidic doctrine or even contemporary practice, but rather as David Goldberg points out, excesses and corruption:

by establishing the Baal Shem Tov as a norm Linetski strikes out at what he sees as Hasidic excesses; he also, however again gives evidence that his argument is not with Hassidism per se. The Baal Shem Tov, we are told, didn’t drink, didn’t claim to raise the dead, didn’t take rewards for his insights and services, didn’t kill, and supported his family by the labor of his hands. It is those who come after the Baal Shem, drinking, profiteering, idling and claiming supernatural powers, with whom Linetski takes issue.<sup>92</sup>

Linetsky feels that even contemporary Hasidism could be a valid lifestyle, as evidenced by the narrator giving an example of a Hasid, who both supports his

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<sup>91</sup> Linetsky, The Polish Lad, 294.

<sup>92</sup> David Chaym Goldberg, “Yiddish Satire and the Haskalah: The Case of Dos poylishe yingl,” diss., Columbia University, 1985, 33.

family and is an accepted member of Hasidic society.<sup>93</sup> In this way he takes a step even further than Zweifel. In light of this reading, it is perhaps less surprising that the same time as *Dos poylishe yingl* was being serialized in *Kol Mevasser*, Linetsky also published an article praising the Baal Shem Tov and comparing him to Mendelsohn.

In 1867 Linetsky published (under a pseudonym) an article entitled “Oysgebitn a shmata af a shmata,” (“Exchanged a Rag for a Rag”) in *Kol Mevasser*. Linetsky’s article is interesting both because it contrasts with the handling of Hasidism of the time, as well as the profile of an author who wrote such a powerful Hasidic satire as *Dos poylishe yingl* (which is perhaps why he published it under a pseudonym). Linetsky begins by complaining how much paper and ink has been used, and yet the so-called enlightened camp has yet to change one aspect of the Hasidim for the better. He pinpoints the unfair emphasis of the enlightened writers on the baser element among Hasidim: “We don’t mention the true Hasidim who live according to the law and who are earnest, honorable people, but rather from those who gild themselves from above with outer saintliness, meaning those who call themselves *gute yidn* (good Jews, i.e. Hasidic rebbes), who tell whatever miracles come to their heads, etc.”<sup>94</sup> He goes on to ask “how will a taunting insult (*shtekhvertl*) help” when it comes to enlightening the Hasidim?<sup>95</sup> Linetsky then breaks again, as he does in his novel, with (most) of maskilic tradition in formulating

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<sup>93</sup> Linetski, *The Polish Lad*, 268.

<sup>94</sup> Isaac Joel Linetsky [עלי קצין הצחקי], “Oysgebitn a shmata af a shmata,” *Kol mevasser* 19 (1867): 147.

<sup>95</sup> Linetsky, “Oysgebitn a shmata af a shmata,” 148.

a positive evaluation of the Besht: “The Baal Shem was a great man, a patriot, a famous orator.” According to Linetsky, the Besht founded the movement with one main goal: “Divine service (*avoyde*).”<sup>96</sup> Linetsky reminds the reader that thousands of educated Christians would offer their lives for divine service. Linetsky’s choice of this proof indicates that his audience would be likely to scorn divine service in the Jewish context, yet will be more likely to understand it in the sphere that they admire – the non-Jewish realm. Linetsky portrays the Besht as someone who “never demanded *pidyonot*, did not ride in fancy carriages, and did not drink any sprits, did not raise the dead, and did not drive any living people to their death!”<sup>97</sup> Thus Linetsky takes some of the most common accusations against Hasidic rebbes, such as taking money for their blessings, riding in fancy carriages at the expense of their congregants, drinking too much alcohol, and performing false miracles, and attempts to exonerate the Besht from these typical maskilic indictments. Rather, Linetsky depicts the Besht and his first followers as the ultimate Jews, only lacking in worldly education: “One existed for Torah and divine service, and many had their craft which sustained their wife and children as it should be.”<sup>98</sup> Linetsky is also defending the early Hasidim from the claim that Hasidim do not engage in productive labor and fail to support their families. Linetsky cites the many positive reforms that Hasidism brought; “self-flagellation lost its strength, melancholy (*atsves*) stopped, rather one

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<sup>96</sup> Linetsky, “Oysgebitn a shmte af a shmte,” 148.

<sup>97</sup> Linetsky, “Oysgebitn a shmte af a shmte,” 148.

<sup>98</sup> Linetsky, “Oysgebitn a shmte af a shmte,” 148.

should be lively and merry, if only through a little alcohol.”<sup>99</sup> Linetsky then compares the Besht to Mendelsohn in that both leaders created movements to counteract the negative impact of the Misnagdim on Judaism. The problem is that “with the passage of time, both parties got off track from their goal through their students, who do not go accurately on their paths. The education of today’s youth lacks fear of God and Hasidism lacks a bit of worldliness (respect).”<sup>100</sup>

Linetsky is one of several second-generation maskilim to harbor doubts about the Haskalah. The cause of this apprehension might have come in part from the fact that, since one of the methods used to combat Hasidism was to write works either openly parodying the Hasidic writing, theology and lifestyle, or even attempting to pass itself off as authentic, maskilim had to cope with a certain unease that came with walking around in their arch enemies’ literary space. Jeremy Dauber, in his article “Looking Again: Representation in Nineteenth-Century Yiddish Literature,” specifically addresses the ideological disquiet that the maskilic parody of Hasidim engendered, and how it transferred into an overall ambivalence about the whole corpus of maskilic literature: “As the nineteenth century continues and proponents of the Haskalah begin to generate different sorts of ambivalence, this anxiety over representation grows into a symbol of the doubtful efficacy of their literature as stand-in for their maskilic agenda-to achieve any sort of programmatic goal at all.”<sup>101</sup>

Dauber demonstrates how Perl’s use of falsified Hasidic letters with the goal of

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<sup>99</sup> Linetsky, “Oysgebitn a shmote af a shmote,” 148.

<sup>100</sup> Linetsky, “Oysgebitn a shmote af a shmote,” 148.

<sup>101</sup> Jeremy Dauber, “Looking Again: Representation in Nineteenth-Century Yiddish Literature,” *Prooftexts* 25:3 (2005) : 278.

undermining Hasidism in his novel *Megale Temirin*, ultimately casts doubt on the validity of his own maskilic book. Aksenfeld's *Shterntikhl* reverberates with the same doubt: "Here too, we see the fact of perceptual corruption alluded to within the text itself by its very nature – by engagement in the strategy of the subversive use of traditional strategies – is also corrupted."<sup>102</sup> The series of unmaskings at the end of the story serves to bring into question the whole Haskalah: "if things and people aren't what they seem, what are the implications for a movement based on rationalist, neoclassical aesthetic principles of imitation, which says that the literary depiction of something is, in essence, what it is?"<sup>103</sup> Once the maskilim began to doubt their own project, writers began casting around for new answers. Works like Perl's *Megale Temirin* and Aksenfeld's *Shterntikhl* are obviously not about re-evaluating Hasidism as something positive, but these authors effectively, albeit unwittingly, set the groundwork for questioning the Haskalah's negative view of Hasidism. The time had therefore come for a reconsideration of Hasidism.

In the later phases of the Haskalah, as we have seen, there is a definite lessening of enthusiasm, and rising ambivalence. One cause might be that many maskilim rode on the wave of Positivism, and for a time truly felt that they were being admitted into non-Jewish society as equals, only to be cut down by the rising tide of nationalism, which brought with it a new form of anti-Semitism. Rather than just being a product of the old claims of deicide, this new anti-Semitism pinpointed Jews as a foreign body in the nation state and sought to exclude them. Baal-

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<sup>102</sup> Dauber, 298.

<sup>103</sup> Dauber, 301.



Makhshoves describes how this new “social-political anti-Semitism” led to a massive wave of pogroms that awakened a new consciousness in Jews. Roskies describes how the maskilim who had made the most strides towards acculturation felt the blow of rising anti-Semitism the most keenly: “These guinea pigs of modernity, the maskilim and the small group of Russian Jews who won acceptance by society in the 1860’s, were also the first to feel its rod of chastisement.”<sup>104</sup> Instead of romanticizing non-Jewish society, Jews now looked back into their own past as a “happy, golden time” and in this way one can explain “the interest in the old Hasidism” as well as to the “folk song and folk music.”<sup>105</sup>

In re-examining their past from their new vantage point, later maskilim were more likely to discern something positive in Hasidism, especially in its earlier phases. According to Joseph Dan, the maskilim’s “previous hatred was replaced by a nostalgic, benevolent attitude” towards Hasidism. Let us recall Dan’s two definitions of Hasidism from the beginning of our discussion, for it is at this point that the split occurred. The first definition was of a historical-objective Hasidism, and the second was an idealized ethical and humanist version. Both definitions of Hasidism share the same progenitor, Isarel Baal Shem Tov; however, they become more and more divergent with time. According to Dan, this split occurred in 1863 with the publication of *Kehal Hasidim* by Michael ha-Levi Frumkin.

Frumkin (1845-1904) was born in Dubrovna, White Russia. He had an illustrious pedigree from both parents and was raised as a Lubovitcher Hasid.

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<sup>104</sup> David Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984) 62.

<sup>105</sup> Baal-Makhshoves, Geklibene verk, (New York: Cyco-Bikher Farlag, 1953) 52.

Frumkin stopped being religious in his teens and became an ardent maskil. He changed his name to Rodkinson, in honor of his mother who had died when he was young, and published many of his works under this name. In the mid 1860's, Frumkin began publishing Hasidic tales, including stories about the Besht and R. Schneur Zalman of Liady, as well as older rabbinic titles. Frumkin edited several journals, including *ha-kol*, *kol-ha-Am*, *Asefat Hakhamim*, and *ha-Me'assef*. Frumkin was something of a rogue, having been arrested 17 times, on counts of fraud, selling forged documents and bigamy.<sup>106</sup> Frumkin was most likely eager to cash in on the popularity of Hasidic tales, whose demand exceeded supply. He crafted his Hasidic tales using both historical facts and his own fancy,<sup>107</sup> and was ultimately extremely popular and his books were reprinted many times.

According to Dan, Frumkin is the founder of the second definition of Hasidism, which he coins "Frumkinian Hasidism." This romanticized Hasidism is characterized by universal values and euphoric worship, which I term "neo-Hasidism." In fact, many of Frumkin's "Hasidic" stories are simply Hebrew stories with "external connections to Hasidism."<sup>108</sup> Frumkin might have been primarily motivated by financial incentive; however, he unintentionally founded a new kind of Hasidic literature, simply by using Hasidism to give a story status:

The notion that the addition of the title "Hasidic" makes something more dignified and meaningful than if it were just "Jewish" began with this practice of Frumkin's. This phenomenon became more and more

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<sup>106</sup> Marvin Heller, "He Should Be Called Sama'el: Michael Levi Rodkinson – The Life and Literary Career of a Jewish Scoundrel Revisited," *Jewish Culture and History* 7:3 (2004) : 84.

<sup>107</sup> Dan, 181.

<sup>108</sup> Dan, 185.

common to the treatment of Hasidism in modern Hebrew literature; common Jewish elements were celebrated as “Hasidic,” as if this added to their importance and humanistic meaning. Meanwhile, the authentic, historical character of the Hasidic movement was almost completely submerged in this new mixture.<sup>109</sup>

Thus Frumkin’s opportunistic appropriation of “Hasidic” tales, gave birth to a new meaning of Hasidism, “Frumkinian” Hasidism, or “Neo-Hasidism,” as I refer to it.

This new form of Hasidism influenced Peretz and other writers, who in turn created neo-Hasidic works even further removed from historical Hasidism:

“They expressed in their stories the nostalgia towards a decaying traditional world, which in retrospect seemed to be an expression of a way of life which was based on universal values of charity, care for the weak and the unlearned, a sense of responsibility towards the social group and the people as a whole, unassuming leadership based on ethical qualities, and a pure religiosity uncomplicated by theological speculation. This process, which developed in both Hebrew and Yiddish literature, became one of the most dominant phenomena in Jewish letters before the First World War.”<sup>110</sup>

Frumkin helped lay the cornerstone for the neo-romantic interest in Hasidism that swept through the Jewish world in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Not only did Frumkin influence future generations of writers’ perception of Hasidism, but his portrayal of Hasidism as a sort of universalist “super-Judaism” also colored the historical surveys of Hasidism written by Dubnow and Horodetzki, who like Frumkin minimalized the importance of the Zaddik, and even in the romanticism of Hillel Zeitlin.<sup>111</sup> What is even more fascinating is that Hasidim also read Frumkin’s

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<sup>109</sup> Dan, 185.

<sup>110</sup> Dan, 186.

<sup>111</sup> Dan, 187.

original tales,<sup>112</sup> and that they in turn influenced later generations of “authentic” Hasidic tales; “Those tales, reprinted without reference to Rodkinson (Frumkin), have become an integral part of Hasidic literature.”<sup>113</sup> For example, some scholars believe that the tales of the Besht’s attempt and failure to journey to Eretz Yisrael were really Frumkin’s invention.<sup>114</sup> Since later Hasidic writings, such as those of Reb Nachman, reference this failed journey, if it was really a product of Frumkin’s imagination, he is responsible not just for the creation of neo-Hasidism, but for a significant part of Hasidic lore.

In addition to rising anti-Semitism, another one of the factors that led to a reconsideration of Hasidism was that the maskilim found themselves faced with a new threat. Previously, Hasidim posed a threat to the maskilic campaign of modernization, but now they perceived that an unanticipated bi-product of modernization was threatening Jewish national unity altogether – the “false enlightenment.” The “false enlightenment” was actually a term borrowed from the general enlightenment, whose members wished to distinguish themselves from the chaotic elements of modernization, which sought to break down traditional social structures of family, religion and government. It was in part a reaction to the French revolution. The Western European maskilim used this term to describe a similar phenomenon: the rampant acculturation of the Jews had led to a high rate of divorce,

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<sup>112</sup> Dan, 185.

<sup>113</sup> Heller, 89.

<sup>114</sup> Gedaliah Nigal, “The Hasidic Tale and its Sources,” Hasidism Reappraised, (Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997) 348.

extra-marital births, religious apathy, atheism, and conversion to Christianity.<sup>115</sup>

Since these changes were not accompanied by serious thought, but were purely driven by pleasure and convenience, the maskilim termed them the “false enlightenment” or the “pseudo-enlightenment.”

Just as the Haskalah took hold later in Eastern Europe, it was not until the 1860s and 1870s that maskilim in Eastern Europe found themselves faced with a false enlightenment.<sup>116</sup> As they witnessed the rampant spread of acculturation, and the ensuing promulgation of libertinism and secularism, they began to perceive that something had gone amuck with their original campaign of modernization. Like their Western counterparts, they wished to distinguish themselves, from those who displayed the outer trappings of modernization, but had not undergone a real intellectual transformation. The Eastern European maskilim tended to brand anyone who deviated from their ideology - from the socialist to the socialite – a part of the false enlightenment. According to Shmuel Feiner, the term “Pseudo-Haskalah” denotes a historical reality, but only from the standpoint of the maskilim themselves.”<sup>117</sup> This appellation had a two-fold purpose – both to establish a maskilic identity and to declare the Haskalah as the only legitimate course of Jewish modernization. Not unlike their once-scorned Orthodox brethren, the maskilim were facing their own crisis with modernity. The term “false enlightenment” therefore was also used by the relatively conservative maskilim to distinguish themselves from the

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<sup>115</sup> Shmuel Feiner, “The Pseudo-Enlightenment and the Question of Jewish Modernization,” Jewish Social Studies, Indiana University Press: N.S. 3:1 (Autumn 1996), 67.

<sup>116</sup> Feiner, 73.

<sup>117</sup> Feiner, 76.

more extreme secularists in the eyes of the Orthodox. The maskilim understood that the loss of religious belief associated with the false enlightenment had the potential to destroy Jewish national identity, and this term can therefore be thought of as the “first definition of what is characterized today as the secularization of Jewish life.”<sup>118</sup>

After the tremendous success of the Haskalah in Western Europe, Jews found themselves in a new dilemma. If religion was no longer a differentiating factor between them and other peoples, what was the role of the Jewish religion in the post-enlightenment age? As more and more Jews cast off religious observance or converted to Christianity, a group of historians founded the Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft der Juden in 1819. They decided that critical scholarship on Judaism was necessary in order to understand the significance of the Jewish literary and historical past and its relevance to the present. This rigorous study of Judaism in order to answer these existential questions became known as Wissenschaft des Judentums.<sup>119</sup> Eventually, Eastern European historians, such as Dubnow and Horodezky, would join the ranks of the Wissenschaft writers in order to answer similar questions for an Eastern European audience.

The Wissenschaft writers were the first non-Hasidic group to take a scholarly interest in Hasidism as something potentially edifying. The first generation of these writers share the negative attitude of the maskilim vis-à-vis Hasidism: “Since Wissenschaft des Judentums and modern Jewish historiography have always been

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<sup>118</sup> Feiner, 83.

<sup>119</sup> For more information on the history of the Wissenschaft des Judentums see David Nathan Myers, “The Ideology of Wissenschaft des Judentums,” *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, (London: Routledge, 1997) 706-720.

associated with Haskalah thinking, they have adopted much of the maskilic posture towards Hasidism.”<sup>120</sup> This “posture” was, of course, highly critical. A prime example of a Wissenschaft writer, who tried to be objective, yet could not escape the biases of the Haskalah was Heinrich Graetz.

Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891) was born in Posen, Germany and received his doctorate from the University of Jena. Graetz was a strong opponent of the Reform movement and a follower and close associate with Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. From 1853-1870 Graetz published his eleven volume *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart* (History of the Jews from Earliest Times until the Present Day.) Graetz’s *History of the Jews* was extremely popular and was translated into several languages. It was one of the first comprehensive histories of the Jewish people and influenced generations of writers following him. Graetz’s tone is far from objective and his bias against Hasidism is clear throughout the chapter on the rise of Hasidism. With the publication of the eleventh volume in 1870, appearing only two years after Zweifel’s *Sholem al yisroel*, Graetz still earmarks Hasidism as a sect outside and opposed to normative Judaism, comparable with the Essenes, and characterized by belief in the “grossest superstition.”<sup>121</sup> This work directly led to an eruption of criticism of Hasidism in Poland, and every article about Hasidism for the next twenty years referenced Graetz’s view of Hasidism.<sup>122</sup> Graetz’s description of

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<sup>120</sup> Israel Bartal, “The Imprint of Haskalah Literature on the Historiography of Hasidism,” Hasidism Reappraised, (Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997) 370.

<sup>121</sup> Heinrich Graetz, The History of the Jews, Vol. 5, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956) 375.

<sup>122</sup> Wodziński, Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland, 219.

this “sect” is laced with orientalist intrigue and rationalist distrust: “The new sect, a daughter of darkness, was born in gloom, and even today proceeds stealthily on its mysterious way.”<sup>123</sup> Graetz’s description of Hasidism not only emphasizes superstition in a similar way to earlier maskilic descriptions of Hasidism, but also consciously juxtaposes it with the Haskalah;

It seems remarkable that, at the time when Mendelssohn declared rational thought to be the essence of Judaism, and founded, as it were, a widely extended order of enlightened men, another banner was unfurled, whose adherents announced the grossest superstition to be the fundamental principle of Judaism, and formed an order of wonder-seeking confederates.<sup>124</sup>

Graetz’s “thesis that the essence of Hasidism was belief in the *zaddik*’s magical powers,”<sup>125</sup> shows the influence of the Haskalah on his work. Graetz is particularly indebted to Maimon, whose autobiography he used as a primary source.<sup>126</sup>

Although the maskil in Graetz describes the founder of Hasidism as being; “As ugly as the name, Besht, was the form of the founder and the order that he called into existence.”<sup>127</sup> At other times, he sets the Besht apart from the later forms of Hasidism, which Graetz sees as a gross corruption of the original Beshtian form. Graetz describes the Besht’s youth in the Carpathian Mountains in romantic terms:

The spurs of the Carpathian hills were his teachers. Here he learnt what he would not have acquired in the dark, narrow, dirty hovels called schools in Poland – namely, to understand the tongue which

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<sup>123</sup> Graetz, 375.

<sup>124</sup> Graetz, 374-375.

<sup>125</sup> Etkes, “Magic and Miracle Workers,” 120.

<sup>126</sup> Israel Bartal, “The Imprint of Haskalah Literature on the Historiography of Hasidism,” 368.

<sup>127</sup> Graetz, 375-6.



nature speaks. The spirits of the mountains whispered secrets to him. Here he also learned, probably from the peasant women who gathered herbs on the mountain-tops and on the edges of rivers, the use of plants as remedies.<sup>128</sup>

Once the Besht became well known, Graetz does give him credit for not taking financial gain from his wonder-working: “It must be acknowledged to his credit that he never misused these talents. He did not make a trade of them, nor seek to earn his livelihood with them.”<sup>129</sup> Earlier maskilic descriptions of the Besht had accused him of using his miracle working for monetary gain. Graetz therefore did try to maintain some objectivity, and thus purges some maskilic biases from his history of the Besht.<sup>130</sup> This more positive description of the Besht is significant because future critics of Hasidism maintained the more romanticized image of the Besht and his refusal to take money for his miracle-working. Although Graetz’s re-evaluation of early Hasidism presents it in a more positive light than previous accounts, the Besht’s successor, Dov Ber, receives unrestrained censure from Graetz. Dov Ber is depicted as an inauthentic mimic of the Besht, who lacking his predecessor’s talents, had to resort to alcohol in order to inspire and spies in order to soothsay. Graetz’s treatment of Hasidism, in a similar way to Zweifel’s, created a space within Hasidism for later writers to seek inspiration, while remaining critical of contemporary Hasidism. It is out of this literary space that neo-Hasidism was able to take root.

Graetz likens Hasidism to the messianic fervor of other revivalist movements of the day, such as a Christian sect in Wales known as the “Jumpers,” and the Shakers

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<sup>128</sup> Graetz, 376.

<sup>129</sup> Graetz, 377.

<sup>130</sup> Etkes, “Magic and Miracle Workers,” 121.

in America. Graetz characterized the Besht's followers as "men who desired to lead a free and merry life, at the same time hoping to reach a lofty aim, and life assured of the nearness of God in serenity and calmness, and to advance the Messianic future. They did not need to pore over Talmudical folios in order to attain to higher piety."<sup>131</sup> Here Graetz sets the seeds for later democratic/populist renditions of Hasidism. Graetz is highly skeptical as to whether or not the Besht really ascended into a higher spiritual world, and the messianism of the Hasidim only becomes relevant when he transforms it into a universal striving for emancipation and political stability.<sup>132</sup> In his essay "Stages in the Development of Belief in the Messiah," (1865) Graetz equates messianic striving with peace and equality for all human beings:

The history of the world, if we examine it critically, manifests clear signs of a messianic kingdom of tranquility, of fraternity among human beings, and of pure knowledge of God... We Jews may rightly be proud of the fact that it was Judaism that introduced the messianic aspiration of "they shall beat their swords into plowshares" to the world, one that we share with the noblest spirits among the gentiles in our own day.<sup>133</sup>

Whereas Zweifel had ignored the messianic component of Hasidism, Graetz adapts it to contemporary concerns, perhaps not unlike how later neo-Hasidic writers re-interpreted messianism to fit in with their own schemas, as we shall later see.

Although Graetz's depiction of Hasidism is replete with maskilic biases against Hasidism, one must also bear in mind that the Wissenschaft's notion that

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<sup>131</sup> Graetz, 379.

<sup>132</sup> Israel Bartal, "Messianism and Nationalism: Liberal Optimism vs. Orthodox Anxiety," Jewish History 20 (2006) : 10.

<sup>133</sup> Heinrich Graetz, "Stages in the Development of Belief in the Messiah," Essays, Memoirs, Letters, ed. Shmuel Ettinger, (Jerusalem: 1969) 68-69. Cited in Bartal, 10.

Hasidism was a part of Jewish History and therefore worthy of being a subject of critical study is also part of its maskilic inheritance: “Admittedly, Haskalah literature was extremely hostile to the Hasidic movement; but this should not obscure the fact that it was at the same time the first systematic expression of a modern European critical interest in the new phenomenon of Hasidism.”<sup>134</sup> This new critical interest ultimately led to full-fledged studies and monographs by writers such as Shimon Dubnow and Shmuel Abba Horodezky, which provided prime source material for neo-Hasidism.

Dubnow (1860-1941) was one of the first great Jewish historians to examine Jewish history not only as a religious movement, but as a social development.<sup>135</sup> He believed that by studying Jewish History, one could discover solutions to contemporary problems and build a future Jewish identity, based on cultural and linguistic, rather than religious ties. Dubnow published historical articles on Hasidism as early as the 1880’s, although with a typically maskilic bent.<sup>136</sup> Under the influence of the French philosopher and writer Ernest Renan, Dubnow began to understand religion as something “not to be viewed as true or false in [itself] but as [a way] of providing truthful insight into men’s needs and feelings.”<sup>137</sup> Therefore, even

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<sup>134</sup> Bartal, “The Imprint of Haskalah Literature on the Historiography of Hasidism,” 368.

<sup>135</sup> Nigier, Shmuel and Shatsky, Yakov, Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, Vol. 2, (New York: Alveltekhon yidishn kultur-kongres, 1956-1981) 471.

<sup>136</sup> Seltzer, “The Secular Appropriation of Hasidism by an East European Jewish Intellectual: Dubnow, Renan, and the Beshit” Polin 1 (1986) : 153-154.

<sup>137</sup> Seltzer, 154.

if Dubnow did not believe in organized religion, it could be valuable from a historical perspective as an ethical barometer. As he states in his memoirs:

I am an agnostic in religion and in philosophy with regard to their attempts, each in its own way, to discover the meaning of the enigmas of the world, but I can find out how mankind lived in the course of millennia and in what ways mankind sought truth and justice.<sup>138</sup>

From this standpoint, Dubnow was free to admire aspects for Hasidism without feeling threatened. Dubnow was able to view the Besht as a simple and humble man, who reached out to the masses: “Besht became the favorite of the masses. Warm-hearted and simple in disposition, he managed to get close to the people and find out their spiritual wants.”<sup>139</sup> This image no doubt appealed to the future founder of the Folkist party; “early Hasidism was an intriguing example of a successful anti-establishment movement of Jewish renewal that provided a new leadership for the Jewish folk.”<sup>140</sup> Israel Bartal points out that Dubnow’s populist rendition of early Hasidism is an inversion of the maskilic claim that Hasidism appealed to the lowest element of society, and that “later nationalist and populist historiography celebrated it as signaling by this very trait the rejuvenation of a decaying people that constituted the basis for the emergence of a new society in a reformed world.”<sup>141</sup> This inverted bias may very well have influenced later writers such as Berdyczewski and Peretz. It also reflects on the part of Dubnow’s critical research a secondary motive of a “search

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<sup>138</sup> Shimon Dubnow, “Under the Sign of Historicism,” The Golden Tradition, 233.

<sup>139</sup> Shimon Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland from the Earliest Times Until the Present Day, trans. I. Friedlander, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Publication Society, 1916) 224.

<sup>140</sup> Seltzer, 157.

<sup>141</sup> Bartal, “The Imprint of Haskalah Literature on the Historiography of Hasidism,” 371.

for a usable past.”<sup>142</sup> Dubnow published a series of articles on Hasidism in *Voskhod* between 1888 and 1893, and he reworked the material throughout his lifetime.<sup>143</sup> While Dubnow continues the tradition of idealizing the initial stage of Hasidism under the Baal Shem Tov and criticizing the “gross materialistic forms” of later Tsaddikism, he does allow that there were “true Tzaddiks who were “idealists, lovers of mankind, and saintly men,” and he cites Rabbi Levi Yitzkhak of Berditchev as an example.<sup>144</sup>

Shmuel Abba Horodezky (1871-1957) deserves mention as one of the last historians of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who in particular wrote prolifically about Hasidism.<sup>145</sup> He was descended from several great Hasidic dynasties. At the age of 20, he became interested in the Haskalah and founded the academic journal *Ha-Goren* in 1897. He published a multitude of works on Hasidism both in *Ha-Goren* and in practically all the Hebrew journals and newspapers of his day. Horodezky helped codify the literary mythology of Hasidism and its founders for non-Hasidim. I use the word mythology because Horodezky emphasized certain aspects of the Besht’s personality and worldview, such as the Besht’s communing with God in nature rather than in a synagogue, his humility, his lack of advanced Talmudic knowledge, his doctrine of cleaving to God being more important than

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<sup>142</sup> For more information on this term see David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>143</sup> Seltzer, 153.

<sup>144</sup> Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, 233.

<sup>145</sup> There are not very many secondary sources available on Horodezky. For basic biographical information see entry under “Horodezky, Shmuel Aba” in *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, and “Samuel Abba Horodezky,” and *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

being learned, and his being a populist leader. This depiction of the Besht was perpetuated in the vast majority of later representations of the Besht and early Hasidism and directly helped create the neo-Hasidic mythological image of the Besht. Horodezky also brought many other Hasidic figures to the imagination of the Jewish literati for the first time, including the Maiden of Ludmir.<sup>146</sup> Horodtzky was significant in this changing intellectual climate because “his quiet, informative, non-argumentative manner of speech helped break the boycott of the maskilim against Hasidism.”<sup>147</sup> Indeed, his tone is very different from that of Dubnow’s. His description of the Besht and other Hasidic leaders is warm and positive, whereas, Dubnow adopts a more rationalistic-critical tone. Let us compare Dubnow’s and Horodezky’s description of the Besht’s revelation in order to clearly see this contrast.

Dubnow describes how:

At last, after reaching the age of thirty-six, Besht decided – by inspiration from above, as the Hasidim believe, – that the time had come “to reveal himself to the world.” He began to practice as a *Baal-Shem, i. e.* as a magician and a Cabalist and to cure diseases by means of secret incantations, amulets (*kameoth*), and medicinal herbs. The figure of a wandering Baal-Shem was not unusual among the Polish Jews of the time, and Besht chose this career, for it subsequently proved a convenient medium for his religious propaganda.<sup>148</sup>

Dubnow makes sure to qualify any mystical claims about the Besht by such statements “as the Hasidim believe.” In this passage he also emphasizes the Besht’s

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<sup>146</sup> Ada Rapaport-Albert disproves many of Horodezky’s claims about the Maiden of Ludmir and Hasidic women in general in her article “On Women in Hasidism, S. A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition,” in *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*. (London: Peter Halban, 1988.) 495-525.

<sup>147</sup> “Samuel Abba Horodezky,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

<sup>148</sup> Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, 224.

role as a “magician” and a miracle-worker relying on “incantations, amulets and herbs.” Compare Dubow’s description with Horodezky’s. After a brief period spent communing with nature the Besht discovered himself and went out among the people:

“Woe unto us! He cried. The world is full of radiant, wonderful and elevating secrets, and it is only the small hand held up before our eyes, which prevents us from seeing the light.”

And he began to teach God. Many people left the benches in the schools, closed the Talmud, ceased to rack their brains with Pilpul and its hair-splitting disputes, and streamed out to listen to the Torah from the mouth of the Baal-Shem.

This Torah was not new in its substance. It was an old doctrine, which he had renewed – the doctrine of the prophets and Kabbala, the doctrine of simple and plain faith, without rabbinical or philosophical reasoning about the God head, the doctrine of devotion to God even to the suppression of the ego, the doctrine of the heart feeling and mysticism.

He led the people in love and pity and preached morality to them: “If you seek to lead your neighbor into the right path, you must do so out of love.”<sup>149</sup>

Whereas Dubnow tries to stick to the facts, such as the Besht’s exact age at revelation, and the historical context of *balei-shem*, Horodezky allows the Besht’s mystical aspect to shine through his description, and gives voice to the Besht’s inner life. Dubnow concentrates on the populist appeal of the Besht’s teachings: “This simplified formula of Judaism appealed to the Jewish masses and to those democratically inclined scholars who were satisfied neither with rabbinic scholasticism nor with the ascetic Cabala of the school of Ari.”<sup>150</sup> Horodezky, on the other hand, highlights the Besht’s revolution against the “Pilpul and hair-splitting disputes” of rabbinical Jews, who would come to be known as *Misnagdim* or

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<sup>149</sup> Shmuel Aba Horodezky, *Leaders of Hasidism*, trans. Maria Horodezky-Maasanik, (London: “Hasefer” Agency for Literature, 1928) 6-7.

<sup>150</sup> Dubnow, *History of the Jews*, 225.

“opponents” due to their opposition to Hasidism. Horodezky draws attention to the juxtaposition between rabbinical Judaism and Hasidism, and dramatizes the Besht’s revolt much more so than Graetz or Dubnow. It seems that Horodezky is one of the first historians to present the Besht not merely as someone who depreciated the value of the Talmud in order to give more status to simple and pure devotion, but rather as someone who breathed new life into Judaism. Horodezky depicts the Besht as clearing away the debris that had been causing Judaism to stagnate and bringing the more dynamic mystical aspect of Judaism to the fore, but on a level that everyone could understand. As we shall see, the idea of Hasidism “rejuvenating” Judaism will be a major theme among later neo-Hasidic writers. Furthermore, Horodezky asserts that the Besht’s “Torah was not new in its substance,” thus refuting once and for all the claim that Hasidism is a sect, but rather presents the Besht’s movement as a populist renewal.

According to Dubnow’s description, the Besht revealed himself as a magician and a kabbalist. Horodezky simply states: “he began to teach God,” and in this way de-emphasizes the Besht’s role as a miracle-worker. Horodezky presents the Besht as a teacher of “morality,” thus setting the stage for the neo-Hasidic humanist interpretation of Hasidism. Although he does chronicle some of the miracles that were attributed to the Besht later on in his description, Horodezky emphasizes that “all this he did through faith and prayer,”<sup>151</sup> as opposed to Dubnow’s description of the Besht’s performing miracles “by means of secret incantations, amulets (*kameoth*), and medicinal herbs.”

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<sup>151</sup> Shmuel Aba Horodezky, Leaders of Hasidism, 8.



In Horodezky's description of Hasidic leaders, he often includes stories that they told that illuminate an aspect of that particular leader's personage. In this way Horodezky also introduced his reader not just to Hasidic hagiography, but also to the Hasidic story. Although Frumkin's Hasidic stories had already been in circulation for a quarter of a century, Horodezky presented them in a more intellectual and historical framework, since they were often embedded in his histories. Horodezky served for many years as Martin Buber's research assistant and played an important role in the publication of Buber's Hasidic works.<sup>152</sup>

There are two more seminal characters in the development of literary neo-Hasidism that need to be mentioned, who were neither maskilim nor historians, Berdyczewski and Buber. Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (1865-1921) was one of the most important theoreticians of neo-Hasidism. He represents the next step in the development of neo-Hasidism, from a maskilic appreciation for Hasidism, to an actual embracing of Hasidism as a model for providing answers to contemporary problems. Berdyczewski was born in Medzibezh, Podolia (also home of the Besht) and was descended from a line of Hasidic rabbis. He was married in 1883, but his interest in modern Hebrew books angered his father-in-law, who forced him to divorce his wife in 1885. Berdyczewski moved to Odessa and soon began to publish articles and stories. Berdyczewski spent time in Breslau, Berne, where he received his doctorate, and Berlin. Berdyczewski was a prolific and profound writer, and

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<sup>152</sup> Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as a Kulturkritic*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 67.

although he is not as well-known than his contemporary Buber, he had a broad influence on the writers of his day.

Berdyczewski was part of the turn-of-the-century great debate about the future of the Jewish nation's soul, which raged among Jewish intellectuals of the time. Initially, Berdyczewski had been attracted to the ideals of the Haskalah; however, like many later maskilim, he became disenchanted with it. Berdyczewski believed that the Haskalah would ultimately lead to wide scale assimilation and loss of Jewish identity.<sup>153</sup> Many maskilim were turning to Ahad Ha-am's cultural Zionism for direction and inspiration. Berdyczewski forged his own answer by combining his vast knowledge of traditional Jewish literature with his newer, but also quite impressive familiarity with Western literature, especially the writings of Nietzsche and Rousseau.<sup>154</sup> In 1900 Berdyczewski put forth his own answer in *Sefer Hasidim*, a collection of articles and stories. This volume included an essay entitled, "Nishmat Hasidim," which was "a paean, with unmistakably autobiographical overtones, to Hasidism."<sup>155</sup> In this essay, Berdyczewski promoted Hasidism as an alternative to other forms of Judaism, which was both spiritual and in which individuals related to life and the physical realm in a natural manner: "give me the living body, the body of original Israel, its ancient character and natural life...give us back our youthful

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<sup>153</sup> David Jacobson, "The Recovery of Myth: M.Y. Berdyczewski and Hasidism" Hebrew Annual Review 2 (1978) : 123.

<sup>154</sup> Marcus Moseley, Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 198.

<sup>155</sup> Moseley, 241.

days.”<sup>156</sup> Berdyczewski believed that under rabbinic Judaism the Jewish people had become entirely spiritual and had lost touch with the natural world. The assimilationists, on the other hand, were in danger of losing their Jewish identity altogether. The maskilim were torn between the two extremes and therefore ineffectual:<sup>157</sup> “those who steer the middle course, are two faced: semi-occidental in their life and thought, and Jews in their synagogues. The vital forces are dissipated, and the nation is falling into ruins.”<sup>158</sup> Berdyczewski prescribed a cultural renaissance, and he found his model for this rejuvenation of Judaism in the very Hasidism that he had rejected as a young man: “Therefore, I look longingly to the beautiful period of the days of Hasidism, for in that exalted period I find life lived from the depths of the heart, poetic and lofty life. I see in it for the first time a life of Life.”<sup>159</sup> However, Berdyczewski specifically looked back to the early days of the Hasidic movement for inspiration, thus perpetuating the distinction between the idyllic early phase and corrupt later phase, and providing for himself an egress for dealing with contemporary Hasidism. Interestingly, Berdyczewski used Zweifel’s *Shalom ‘Al Yisrael* as source material for this work and cited whole passages from

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<sup>156</sup> Micah Yosef Berdyczewski, “Nishmat Hasidim,” trans. Simon Halkin, Modern Hebrew Literature, (New York: Schocken books, 1970) 94.

<sup>157</sup> David Jacobson, Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers, (Albany, State University Press: 1987) 21,27.

<sup>158</sup> Micah Yosef Berdyczewski, “Nishmat Hasidim,” 93-94.

<sup>159</sup> Micah Yosef Berdyczewski, “Nishmat Hasidim,” 93-94.

it.<sup>160</sup> It is therefore noteworthy that he perpetuated Zweifel's idealization of the early period of Hasidism, rather than later periods.

Berdyczewski's "return" was different from earlier maskilim's authentication of the viability of Hasidism. Rather, for Berdyczewski authenticity was not a virtue per se. Authenticity implies a set code and he believed that "The certain is in my eyes the end of every thought, the end of all knowledge, desire. And such a certainty, and such a knowing, which cannot go further, I view as powerlessness of thought, whereas the *perhaps* is the lifeblood of the soul."<sup>161</sup> According to Niger, "thinking was his religion." Therefore, his return to Hasidism was "a need to free himself from the constraint and scalding of the old Jewish culture, in order to be able to turn back to it afterwards, *willingly* with the right to think and think over."<sup>162</sup> Berdyczewski is therefore using Hasidism, in a new way, for his own purposes. Jacobson defines neo-Hasidism as "retold versions of Hasidic tales, anthologies, and historical studies in which writers turned to Hasidism as a source of values which might serve as the basis for meeting the cultural needs of the present."<sup>163</sup> Based on this definition, Berdyczewski is perhaps the first neo-Hasidic writer, since maskilim such as Zweifel were mainly interested in validating Hasidism, and Frumkin, it seems, was largely interested in making a living.

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<sup>160</sup> Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Kultur Kritik*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 48.

<sup>161</sup> Shmuel Niger, "Micah Yosef Berdyczewski," *Tsukunft*, Jan. 1922, 62.

<sup>162</sup> Niger, 62.

<sup>163</sup> Jacobson, *Modern Midrash*, 19.

In his collection *Sefer hasidim*, Berdyczewski provides a founding myth for his cultural renaissance in the form of his story *Shney olamot*. This story is a retelling of the first story from *Shivkhey habesht*, in which the Besht's father, Eliezer, is kidnapped, rises to power as an advisor to the king, returns home and fathers a child in his old-age – the Besht. According to David Jacobson, “a careful reading of Berdyczewski's version reveals that in portraying these three situations, Berdyczewski alludes to three alternative types of Jewish identity which form the basis of his myth.”<sup>164</sup> The naïve and ascetic Eliezer at the beginning of the story represents the traditional Jew. The high minister, who on the outside carries all the trappings of the nobility, but underneath his clothes wears a sackcloth, is the maskil. The child that is born to Eliezer – the future founder of Hasidism – is able to transcend these flawed models and be at peace and at one with the universe in a way that these predecessors could not. As Jacobson notes: “The narrator's description of Israel's way of relating to the world closely resembles Berdyczewski's description in “Nišmat Hasidim” of the Hasid standing alone in nature sensing his oneness with the world and with God...”<sup>165</sup> In this way the story from *Shivkhey habesht* has been reworked by Berdyczewski into “a myth of modern Jewish History,” which represents

the transition of the modern Jew from the perverted values of traditional Judaism to the inadequate compromise solution of the Haskalah. It is the transition which has led to the cultural crisis in which Jews find themselves at the turn of the century. The desired outcome of this crisis would be the birth of a Neo-Hasidic generation

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<sup>164</sup> David Jacobson, “The Recovery of Myth: M.Y. Berdyczewski and Hasidism” Hebrew Annual Review 2 (1978) : 126.

<sup>165</sup> Jacobson, 128.

which would transcend the dichotomies of traditional Judaism and the Haskalah and achieve a sense of oneness with the world.<sup>166</sup>

Obviously Berdyczewski's Hasidim were not real, historical Hasidim, and Berdyczewski did not actually propose that one should become Hasidic, but rather that Hasidism provided a useful model for Jewish cultural renewal.

In Berdyczewskian Hasidism spirituality existed hand in hand with the natural world. Furthermore, ritual law was de-emphasized. Berdyczewski's story *Dos fifele* or "The fife/whistle" is a very good example of how Berdyczewski not only de-emphasized, but actually went against Jewish ritual law. In this story Shimon, an innkeeper, and his wife have a ten-year-old son who is completely lacking in any kind of traditional Jewish education, as they live far from any large Jewish community. Shimon wants to take his son to town to pray with him on Yom Kippur, yet he and his wife are mortified that their son is so ignorant:

But that which was in past times, also exists today. They were ashamed – ashamed before others... When the Days of Awe came around and they traveled to town, they were ashamed to bring the child – one shouldn't sin from speech. A Jewish child and it appears to have descended from goyim. And the child also speaks half goyish – a coarse *shaygets*...<sup>167</sup>

Berdyczewski's ideas for creating a new Hebrew man who lives life in a natural state has often been associated with Nietzschean philosophy.<sup>168</sup> According to Nizer, Berdyczewski was for a time very much so under the influence of Nietzsche;

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<sup>166</sup> Jacobson, 128.

<sup>167</sup> Berdyczewski, "Dos fayfele" Musterverk v. 87, 113.

<sup>168</sup> Jacobson, Modern Midrash, 21.

however, was not a “Nietzschianer.”<sup>169</sup> In this description of Shimon and his wife, we see how Berdyczewski takes elements from Nietzsche in his criticism of traditional Jews for their useless inhibitions and their fear of all things too earthly, in this case non-Jewish peasants. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Berdyczewski is not doing away with spirituality; but rather, his notion of spirituality is entirely in harmony with nature. As in the first story, Berdyczewski again presents different models for Jewish existence. Shimon and his wife are the traditional Jews who are so preoccupied with what other people might think of them, that they almost left the boy – the ultimate hero of the story – at home. The boy at the beginning of the story is not a viable model for a Jewish national identity because he is entirely in the physical realm. When the boy prays on Yom Kippur with the Besht, Berdyczewski’s ideal model for a new Jewish consciousness, the boy becomes transformed. He suddenly becomes aware of the spiritual realm, but worships in an entirely natural and ultimately unhalachic manner. When he blows his fife and transgresses the prohibition of playing musical instruments on a holiday, he manages to open the gates of heaven in a way that even the Besht could not:

But that boy, who had never even been in a *beys-medresh* and who had never understood a word of prayer – and look – there stirs something in him and he wants to do something, but he cannot. So he blows on his whistle and in that hour that was his way *avoyde*<sup>170</sup> (divine service). And that *avoyde* from such a simple soul caused the heavens to experience a feeling of divine good-will. And all the towers opened up and allowed in the prayers before the throne of glory, and

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<sup>169</sup> Sh. Niger, *Tsukunft*, Jan, 1922, 62.

<sup>170</sup> The term *avoyde* (lit. work) in the context of Yom Kippur describes the re-enactment of the sacrificial service performed by the high priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur, which is a part of the Yom Kippur liturgy today. It is used in Hasidic terminology to mean “divine service.” In this context, everyone has their own *avoyde* or way of serving God.

everything was forgiven and another good and rich year was given with salvations and comforts in all places where Jews lived.<sup>171</sup>

*Dos fayfele* involves an interesting twist in the evolution of the literary neo-Hasid because it turns the maskilic inheritance on its head. Indeed, maskilim who were more positive about Hasidism always emphasized its strict adherence to ritual law to counter the claims of antinomianism. The disorderly style of prayer and the very concept that a *zaddik* could intervene in heaven on someone's behalf were among the greatest irritants to the maskilim. In this story Berdyczewski is actually taking an act that goes against ritual law and glorifying it, while at the same time painting the Besht's highly emotional way of praying in a positive light. In fact, the Besht's style of prayer is couched in this story as a more natural kind of prayer than the embarrassed restrained prayer of Shimon's father. For example, when the Besht saw that there was an accusation against the Jews in heaven, the Besht "shouted with the voice of a lion."<sup>172</sup> This impulsive style of prayer, reminiscent of an animal, is more viable in Berdyczewski's story, because it is more natural, while at the same time being a Jewish spiritual expression. In the same way, the unlettered boy's style of prayer is also a means of expressing his spiritual urge naturally. Berdyczewski's glorification of a Hasidism which is both at one with nature and emotionally passionate thus provided a neo-Hasidic foundation for a new modern Jewish canon.

Although it was Berdyczewski who first proposed Hasidism as a model for cultural regeneration, it was Buber's Hasidim that captured the public imagination

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<sup>171</sup> Berdyczewski, 116.

<sup>172</sup> Berdyczewski, 114.



due to his widespread fame and enduring legacy. Although Berdyczewski was himself a profound and original thinker, he has generally been side-lined by Buber's tremendous popularity. Berdyczewski and Buber actually partnered together on several research projects, with Buber drawing on Berdyczewski's tremendous knowledge of Jewish sources, and Berdyczewski relying on Buber for his contacts and even financial support. The two writers had a tumultuous relationship<sup>173</sup> and Berdyczewski was highly critical of Buber's work for not rendering Hasidic material faithfully, but rather adding his own inventions, an accusation which was well founded.

Martin Buber (1878-1965) was one of the most well-known personalities of the vanguard of intellectuals to take an interest in Hasidism and was according to Dubnow, the "creator of neo-hasidism."<sup>174</sup> He found the idea in Hasidic philosophy that God is present in everything both spiritual and worldly as a source of inspiration for his own philosophy, and it was in the introduction to his *Die Legende des Baal Schem* (Legends of the Baal Shem) that Buber began to develop his philosophy of I and Thou.<sup>175</sup> Buber was a cultural Zionist and viewed Hasidism as a valuable source for cultural regeneration. Like Berdyczewski, Buber was interested in using neo-Hasidism as a tool to prevent assimilation, while allowing for acculturation, as well as

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<sup>173</sup> For more information on the relationship between Berdyczewski and Buber see: William Cutter, Relations Between the Greats of Modern Jewish Literature: M.Y. Berdyczewski's Complicated Friendship with Martin Buber, Occasional papers in Jewish history and thought (Hunter College. Jewish Social Studies Program), No.10 (New York : Hunter College of The City University of New York, 2000.)

<sup>174</sup> Shimon Dubnow, Geshikhte fun khsidism, vol. 3, (Buenos Aires: Alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1958) 114.

<sup>175</sup> Maurice Friedman, Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Early Years 1878-1923, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981) 111.

providing a new modern Jewish identity, which was both uniquely Jewish, and which contained universal value.<sup>176</sup> Since Buber's interest was mainly in renewing Jewish culture's vitality, he had a tendency to sacrifice historicity.<sup>177</sup> In 1906 he wrote to Horodetzky: "My aim is not to accumulate new facts, but simply to give a new interpretation of the interconnections, a new synthetic presentation of Jewish mysticism and its creations and to make these creations known to the European public in as artistically pure a form as possible."<sup>178</sup> That same year Buber published *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, in which he both translated the tales, and added his own romanticized interpretation, expurgating negative references to Hasidism and highlighting aspects that appealed to his neo-Hasidic vision. In particular, Buber stressed the Hasid's constant connection with God both in mundane and holy activities. In 1908 he published *Die Legende des Baal Schem*. His work was widely read both by Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. Although Buber was a German Jew and wrote his tales in German, for many young intellectuals in Eastern Europe Buber's Hasidim were more real than contemporary Hasidim.<sup>179</sup> Thus at least for neo-Hasidic authors who did not come from Hasidic homes, Buber's Hasidim shaped their image of Hasidim more than any real-life encounters.

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<sup>176</sup> Urban, 10.

<sup>177</sup> This led to the "Scholem-Buber controversy" in the 1960s, in which the scholar Gershom Scholem criticized Buber for using Hasidic tales as primary source material, and emphasized rather the importance of Hasidic homiletic material. See Urban's introduction, 1-2.

<sup>178</sup> Friedman, 101.

<sup>179</sup> Wodziński, 247.

Let us consider one biographical tidbit from Buber's life. Buber was first exposed to Hasidim as a boy, when his grandfather took him to court of Sadagora. Buber's grandfather was in fact a maskil<sup>180</sup>, yet he preferred to pray in a Hasidic prayer house.<sup>181</sup> This biographical information serves to further illustrate how the supposed battle lines between the maskilim and the Hasidim were blurrier than history suggests.

When Buber wrote his Hasidic stories, he took the basic plots from the original stories and then changed and added details. He also added a layer of interpretation, in order to suit his own ends. In this way, Buber took the hagiographic tale and transformed it into an art form palatable to his audience. The resulting tales were very different from the originals both in form and content. For example, Buber's tale "The Werewolf," is much longer than the Hasidic original. In the original story Satan transforms himself into a werewolf that frightens the children that the young Besht is escorting to school. The Besht does not fear the werewolf but continues escorting the children, the next time prepared with a club, and when the werewolf attacks, he hits it on the head and kills it. In Buber's retelling, he adds context, psychology and plot details. In the original tale, the Besht's father gives him advice before he dies: "'My beloved son, remember this all your days: God is with you. Do not fear anything.'" <sup>182</sup> Buber greatly expands this episode:

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<sup>180</sup> Buber's grandfather, Solomon Buber, was an important maskil of his day, best known for his scholarship on midrash. Buber lived with his grandparents from the age of three.

<sup>181</sup> Friedman, 95.

<sup>182</sup> Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome Mintz, trans. eds. In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, (New York: Schocken Books, 1984) 11.

“My child, the Adversary will confront you in the beginning, at the turning, and at the fulfillment; in the shadow of a dream and in the living flesh. He is the abyss over which you must fly. There will be times when you will descend into his last concealment like a flash of lightening, and he will disperse before your power like thin cloud; and there will be times when he will surround you with vapours of thick darkness, and you will have to stand your ground alone. But those and these times will disappear, and you will be victor in your soul. For know that your soul is an ore that no one can crush and only God can melt. Therefore, fear not the Adversary.”<sup>183</sup>

In the Hasidic tale, the father simply gives advice. In Buber’s tale, the father gives a warning of what is to occur, and fills it with mystical imagery. Buber also changes important plot details. For example in the Hasidic tale, Satan transforms himself into a gentile sorcerer. In Buber’s tale, the Satan invades the body of a charcoal burner, and at no point does Buber indicate if he is a Jew or non-Jew. Buber intended that his stories would be read by both a Jewish and a non-Jewish audience and most likely sought to purge them of anything that might be offensive to non-Jews. It is interesting to note that in Buber’s tale Satan ascends to heaven to plead his case, an element not in the original. We will later see how Peretz, in several of his tales, also personifies Satan and portrays him as often involved in various “court cases” in heaven.

After the Besht kills the werewolf, both the Hasidic tale and the Buber tale include a coda, which is worthy of comparison. The Hasidic coda focuses on the development of the Besht:

After that the Besht became the watchman of the beth-hamidrash. This was his way: while all the people of the house of study were awake, he slept; and while they slept, he was awake doing his pure

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<sup>183</sup> Martin Buber, The Legend of the Baal-Shem trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955) 51-52.

works of study and prayer until the time came when people would awaken. Then he would go back to sleep. They thought that he slept from the beginning until the end of the night.<sup>184</sup>

This ending is purely hagiographical, depicting how the Besht stayed awake all night learning, and yet remained “hidden” in his piousness for the time being. Buber’s coda, on the other hand, focuses on the boys who witnessed the Besht’s killing of the werewolf:

From that day on the boys forgot their singing and began to resemble their fathers and their fathers’ fathers. Growing up, they passed over the land with their heads bowed between their shoulders as their fathers had done.<sup>185</sup>

Buber chooses to emphasize continuity in his tale, since the boys now resemble their fathers and grandfathers. The rite of passage is no longer centered on the Besht, but rather the boys who are forced prematurely to grow up. The image of their “heads bowed between their shoulders” is that of subservience and abnegation – the mental state of exile. On the one hand, Buber wished to portray Jewish culture as an unbroken chain, with some occidental appeal for his Western audience, and he does this by emphasizing continuity and the starkly traditional nature of the characters. This shared heritage can also inspire national unity. However, these prematurely-aged boys with bowed heads are in need of redemption. Buber is therefore setting the stage for the spiritual redemption that the Besht will bring, which he hopes will ultimately inspire a cultural redemption among contemporary Jews.

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<sup>184</sup> Amos and Mintz, 13.

<sup>185</sup> Buber, 55.

In conclusion, although a large majority of maskilim viewed Hasidism as a contradiction to everything that they stood for and a deviant and wholly negative aspect of Judaism, there were maskilim who reconsidered Hasidism as both viable and having positive aspects. I would like to take this reevaluation to another level, and propose that maskilim are actually more linked to Hasidism than they ever recognized. Since much of the literature of the Haskalah is based on attacking Hasidism and everything that it stands for, maskilic literature, would therefore not exist without Hasidism:

Such an approach flows not only from metaphorical confluence but historical reality: works of nineteenth-century Eastern European maskilic literature-both directly and explicitly, as in works by Joseph Perl, and indirectly and implicitly, as in works by Israel Aksenfeld and S. Y. Abramovitsh-are developed in a polemic framework in which Hasidism plays a major role as the historical subject of maskilic ire and as the creator of literature that both infuriates and inspires.<sup>186</sup>

And why did Hasidism spark so much “ire” on behalf of the maskilim? As we have examined, Hasidism represented everything that the maskilim despised about traditional Judaism. Since they wanted to maintain legitimacy, rather than attack rabbinical Judaism, they lumped all of their criticisms together and branded them “Hasidism” without necessarily taking into account historical accuracy. Since they were ostensibly a rationalistic movement, they seized upon the “superstitious” nature of Hasidism as one of the central targets of their war. Yet this “enemy” was essential for the maskilim in formulating their own ideology and representation;

Indeed, Hasidism inadvertently contributed to the strengthening and coalescence of Haskalah literature....The slogans and self-awareness of the Haskalah were consolidated and more clearly formulated

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<sup>186</sup> Dauber, 277.

through its polemical portrayal of Hasidism; moreover, the existence and success of the Hasidic movement sometimes lent motivation and meaning to the objective of the Haskalah.<sup>187</sup>

Hasidism became a sort of evil twin, which came from the same source as the Haskalah, but gave the maskilim meaning and self-definition through their battle for legitimacy. By ridiculing the superstitions of the Hasidim, the Haskalah movement was “better able to express its own inner truth – its image of itself as having transcended the superstition of the magical arts.”<sup>188</sup> Since the maskilim usually came from a traditional Jewish background, ridiculing the superstitious aspect of Hasidism provided them with a yardstick with which to demonstrate how far they had come in their efforts to modernize and harmonize with European culture and society.

It is this pre-existing linkage that helped pave the way for neo-Hasidism as much as any maskilic revisionism. If one examines the Haskalah as the antithesis of Hasidism, perhaps neo-Hasidic writers are their synthesis. Even more radical, perhaps this linkage actually went in both directions. Perhaps Hasidic literature was influenced by the Haskalah more than any Hasidim will care to admit. In order to substantiate and elucidate this claim, let us recall that during the period that marked the demise of Haskalah literature and the rise of “Modern” Yiddish literature, the most popular genre in Hebrew literature were pseudo-Hasidic tales.<sup>189</sup> According to Dan and Heller, Frumkin’s tales were read by Hasidim under the mistaken assumption that they were written by Hasidim. Indeed, it is highly likely that over

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<sup>187</sup> Werses, “Hasidism in the Eyes of Haskalah Literature” cited by Etkes in “Magic and Miracle Workers,” 127.

<sup>188</sup> Immanuel Etkes, “Magic and Miracle-Workers in the Literature of the Haskalah,” 127

<sup>189</sup> Dan, 185.

time Frumkin's and other neo-Hasidic tales might have then been re-appropriated by Hasidim, especially if there were no overtly maskilic elements, or if they were printed under a pseudonym. It is also feasible that later Hasidic writers might have used works like Horodetzky's for source material. Inevitably, despite the attempts of both camps to distinguish themselves and extinguish the other side, both sides are therefore inextricably bound to one another, and neo-Hasidism is but one manifestation of this bond.

Neo-Hasidic writers then went forward from where the more pro-Hasidic maskilim left off, using their own interpretations of Hasidism as fodder for new movements to replace the Haskalah, which was fading into obsolescence. For many authors neo-Hasidism could be used as a valuable source of cultural regeneration, and the neo-Hasidic tale would become part of these new models' central mythology. Northrop Frye makes a distinction between mythic and fabulous literature.<sup>190</sup> Mythic literature is comprised of society's important stories that make up its religion, laws, social structure, history, etc. Fabulous literature is just meant to amuse. Over time the fabulous may evolve into myth. Neo-Hasidic tales started out as fabulous, but they became a founding myth for modern secular Jewish identity. I would like to explore in depth the creation of this founding myth,<sup>191</sup> taking off from where Berdyczewski and Buber left off. I will start with the work of I. L. Peretz.

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<sup>190</sup> Northrop Frye, Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1976) 6-7.

<sup>191</sup> Jacobson makes the connection between Berdyczewski's story, Shney Olamot, and Frye's definition of a founding myth.





## Chapter Two – The The Maskilic Rebbe: Between Reason and Passion

No Hasidim, No Westernizers –  
The Torah has a stronghold,  
Rabbis grow,  
They raise prodigies...<sup>1</sup> - From “Monish” 1888 version

Without trade or gimmicks,  
The Torah has a stronghold,  
They raise scholars,  
They grow prodigies...<sup>2</sup>  
- From “Monish” 1908 version

Since I. L. Peretz was himself something of a paradox, let us begin our study with something of a conundrum. In 1888 Peretz made his debut in the world of Yiddish letters with his poem “Monish,” published in *Di yidishe folks-bibliotek*.<sup>3</sup> “Monish” allegorizes the already classic transformation from aspiring talmudic scholar to newly minted maskil still struggling to free himself from shtetl baggage. Peretz himself had made a similar journey – from childhood prodigy to successful lawyer and Hebrew poet of some renown. It would be another twenty years before he published this second version of “Monish,” and in the interim he would become the

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<sup>1</sup> I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk, (New York: CYCO, 1947) Vol. 1, 11.

<sup>2</sup> I. L. Peretz, Ale verk fun Y. L. Peretz, v. 13 (New York: Morgn Freiheit, no year on imprint) 41.

<sup>3</sup> For biographical information on Peretz see: Shmuel Niger and Yaakov Shatski, eds. Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, vol. 7 (New York: Altveltlekhn yidishn kultur kongres, 1956-1981), Zalman Reyzen, ed. Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese, un filologye, vol. 2, (Vilna 1926-1929) 974-1043. Also see Nachman Meisel, Y. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn, (New York: IKUF, 1945), and A. A. Roback, I. L. Peretz: Psychologist of Literature (Cambridge, Mass: Sci-Art Publishers, 1935). For literary criticism see: Ruth Wisse, I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991) and David Roskies, Bridge of Longing, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

most influential Yiddish writer of his day, finally breaking free of the restraints of the Haskalah and its literature to create a modern Yiddish literature. Along the way he would flirt with socialism, but would later turn towards neo-romanticism and rehabilitating the Hasidic genre as an artistic medium with the potential for national rejuvenation. However, in 1888, one would hardly hazard a guess that this young author would one day turn back to the shtetl, and specifically to the element that maskilim identified as the most backward – Hasidim – for inspiration, ultimately becoming one of the founding fathers of neo-Hasidism. Given this context, the above change in the two versions of “Monish” becomes more intriguing. In the first version, Hasidim and Westernizers (i.e. modernizing Jews) are potential elements of strife that are decidedly lacking in this sleepy shtetl. In the second version, both of these parties have been expurgated, and replaced by business as a potential for conflict. Examining Peretz’s transformation from youth to *klasiker*<sup>4</sup> reveals a possible answer to this puzzle. However, this statement must be qualified by the fact that in Peretz’s writings, there is rarely a clear answer, as we shall see.

The lack of clear answers in Peretz partly stems from the fact that he was often torn between conflicting poles in his personality, the tension between reason and passion being primary among them. This tension runs through both Peretz’s works and his biography. In fact he starts out his *Memoirs* by defining his very essence by this tension: “I was as they said, a prodigy. I had a sharp, logical mind and – much emotion. What ties these two things together? They aren’t tied together. They

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<sup>4</sup> Sholem Abramovitsh (pen name, Mendele Moykher Sforim), Peretz and Sholem Rabinovitsh (pen name, Sholem Aleichem) are known as the three *klasikers*, or classic writers of Yiddish literature.

don't flow together. A trial between two sides – in one ‘whether you want to or not, you live.’”<sup>5</sup> “Monish” is in many ways about this struggle between reason, represented by talmudic study, and passion, embodied by the comely wench Maria. According to Peretz in his *Memoirs* (1913-1915), he actually had two Marias. The first was a more superficial Maria – a girl who is a neighbor who corners him on the steps and demands that he “love her.” However, he identifies the real Maria as secular knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In this way, both passion and reason are fused in the symbol of Maria, which perhaps makes her indeed a very apt object of infatuation for Peretz. This clash eventually reaches epic proportions in his *Khsidish* tales when Hasidim, representing feeling, and Misnagdim, representing reason, confront one another, and – as in the Peretzian schema – there is generally no clear winner.

When Peretz began publishing his Hasidic tales a decade later, fiction began to intrude on reality, eventually “crowning” Peretz as rebbe and progenitor of modern Yiddish literature and elevating him to the level of legend: “Peretz was the great strength, the *legendary* [emphasis mine] figure, who ascended higher and higher in [the youth’s] fantasy.”<sup>7</sup> As is evident from this quote, Peretz loomed extremely large in the minds of subsequent generations, to the point where their descriptions of him tend to idealize him. This study will attempt to penetrate the legend of Peretz through the years of his development as a writer, down to the essential dialectic struggles of

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<sup>5</sup> I. L. Peretz, *Ale verk* (New York: CYCO, 1948) Vol. 11, 7. This quote comes from *Ethics of the Fathers* 4:29: *ve-al kerechah atah chai*. Peretz writes the first word with a bes, perhaps this is a typo, perhaps a play on words meaning “a person wanting to live.” Note: All translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>6</sup> I. L. Peretz, *I. L. Peretz: Ale verk* (New York: CYCO, 1948) Vol. 11, 110.

<sup>7</sup> Shimshon Apter, “Perets un di yidish-poylishe yugnt,” *Yidishe kultur* 3-4 (1945) : 94-96.

the author's own psyche, which are reflected in his writing from the beginning until the end. This task will not be without peril since most people writing about Peretz were themselves infected by the cult of Peretz.<sup>8</sup>

Peretz was born in 1852 in Zamość, Poland to a Misnagid family of distinguished pedigree. Peretz's great-grandfather wrote the famous sefer *Pney Yehoyshue*. Both sides of his family were merchants, which brought a degree of worldliness into the otherwise very religious family. Peretz received a traditional Jewish education and was also instructed in Hebrew, German and Russian. From early on Peretz was considered a prodigy and, until his thirteenth birthday, adhered to Judaism both in practice and in thought. However, at this time he began to read certain *sforim* which were considered taboo for a youth to be reading, such as Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and kabbalistic works. Peretz also gained access to a private library which contained masterpieces of Western literature, scientific works, and history books, all in Polish translation. Peretz's search and subsequent self-education in worldly matters follows a similar pattern to the biography of a maskil. Interestingly, in Zamość the rift between the maskilim and the traditional Jews was not as pronounced as in other Polish cities.<sup>9</sup> In many ways, the Haskalah came earlier to Zamość than other places in Poland, due to the fact that it was a merchant city, and several prominent early maskilim spent time there, such as Alexander Zederbaum, Jacob Eichenbaum, and Dr. Shloyme Ettinger. As a young adult, Peretz spent time with Yaakov Reifman, the local "heretic," who used to meet

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<sup>8</sup> I am certainly not the first to refer to a "cult of Peretz." See Ruven Braynen, "Iz Perets take geven a groyse perzenlekhkayt?", *Der Tog* April (1942).

<sup>9</sup> Meisel, *Y. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn*, 16.

with youths from Zamość in an abandoned fort and talk for hours about Torah and the Haskalah.<sup>10</sup> Reifman was held in great esteem by the local maskilim in Zamość and was very active in the field of Jewish education.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Peretz maintained a close relationship with his more progressive uncle, Moyshe Altberg. One of his best friends was Isaac Gelibter, whose father, Fayvel Gelibter, was a well-known maskil in the area. In his memoirs, Peretz describes a sort of reformed *minyán* that met in the house of his wealthy, assimilated relative Yehoshua Margolies, as well as a town Rabbi who read secular books, and various “enlightened” characters in Zamość, and summarizes that by the time the Haskalah was making its rounds in Poland “not a stitch of work [was]left” for it in Zamość. Thus, it was in this already fairly enlightened environment that Peretz writes, “I fell under the influence of the Haskalah.”<sup>12</sup>

During this period of searching, Peretz considered going to the progressive Rabbinical seminary in Zhitomir, but his strong attachment to his mother prevented him from making such a decisive break. Instead, when Peretz was eighteen years old<sup>13</sup>, his father arranged a match with the daughter of Gavriel Lichtenfeld, a maskil

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<sup>10</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Reifman had founded two modern Jewish elementary schools, one in Lublin and one in Chelm, although they were eventually closed down due to strong protest from Hasidim, who at one point even wanted to excommunicate him. He also founded a modern Yeshiva, but it was only open one year. Reifman believed that it was just as important to learn Torah as secular subjects and criticized the Warsaw Rabiner-shul for its negative relationship to Jewish history. Reifman often gave lectures to the youth in Zamość about science. Some of his students included Dovid Shifman, who was Peretz’s secretary for a time, A. Korngold, and Leybush Levisohn. Yakov Shatsky, “Haskole in Zamotsh,” Yivo bleter v. XXXVI, 1952, 42-44.

<sup>12</sup> I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz : Ale Verk, v. 11, 75, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Peretz was married in 1870 according to the YIVO encyclopedia; however, Roback notes that Meisel states in one chapter of *Leben un shafn* that Peretz was married at 18 and another chapter that

who was a mathematician and philosopher. Peretz was initially amenable to the match because he hoped that he would find in his father-in-law a confidant.<sup>14</sup> The two of them eventually co-published a book of Hebrew poetry, *Sipurim be-shir ve-shirim shonim*, in 1877<sup>15</sup>. However, Peretz never developed the closeness with his father-in-law that he sought and Peretz's marriage lasted only five years, ending in divorce. Soon after, Peretz moved to Warsaw, where he lived from 1876-1877. While in Warsaw, Peretz supported himself as a Hebrew teacher and continued to write poems in Hebrew.

When Peretz came of age as a writer the Haskalah still dominated the literary world, although it was in its final stages, having evolved from an early, small, and idealistic movement in the early 1800s, committed to spreading secular learning and promoting integration into secular society under the aegis of the government, to a more radical phase in the 1860s and 1870s in which more and more maskilim cast off religious observance and focused on improving the material conditions for Eastern European Jewry. In the later stages of the Haskalah many of its authors were already critical of the movement due to its failure to provide real solutions for improvement for the broad masses of Eastern European Jews; however, an appropriate replacement

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he was married at 20. A. A. Roback, *I. L. Peretz: Psychologist of Literature* (Cambridge, Mass: Sci-Art Publishers, 1935) 103.

<sup>14</sup> I. L. Peretz, *Y. L. Peretz : Ale Verk*, v. 11, 118.

<sup>15</sup> Several of the poems were written by Lichtenfeld, at least one was co-written by Lichtenfeld and Peretz, and a few were written by Peretz himself, including "Beys shomem," a poem about social injustice, and "Chana," a sentimental melodrama in the style of Heine.

had not yet been found.<sup>16</sup> Although Peretz might have started out on the path of a maskil, according to Baal Makhshoves, it is a mistake to compare Peretz with the typical Lithuanian maskil.<sup>17</sup> Peretz cannot be termed a real maskil, because although he was definitely shaped and influenced by its ideology, he was one of the most important and influential writers to break with many of its traditions and forge a new kind of literary ideology. The literature of the Haskalah was constrained by its concrete ideology. A text could be didactic or satirical, but it was hard to move beyond these two genres, which thus inhibited creativity. Peretz took the lessons he learned from the Haskalah and its discontents, and cleared the way for a new literature: “He broke all fences” and “he worked as if with an ax in a thick forest,” clearing a path in all directions – “he did not fear getting lost.”<sup>18</sup>

Peretz’s temperament was too passionate for the rigid confines of Haskalah literature. In a similar way to earlier maskilim, such as Bik and Linetsky, Peretz found a certain lack of warmth in the cold rationalism and elitism of the Haskalah. Intellectually, he shared many similarities with the maskilim; however, his emotions pulled him in other directions: “Peretz the maskil *maskil-ed* more with his head than with the rich instincts of his heart.”<sup>19</sup> In order to fully embrace the Haskalah, Peretz

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on the Haskalah see Shmuel Feiner, Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Consciousness, Trans. Chaya Naor and Sondra Silverton (Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004); Shmuel Feiner, The Jewish Enlightenment, Trans. Chaya Naor, (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2002); Raphael Mahler, Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century. Trans. Eugene Orenstein, Aaron Klein, Jenny Machlowitz Klein, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> Baal Makhshoves, Geklibene Verk (New York: CYCO-Bikher Farlag, 1953) 199.

<sup>18</sup> Shloyme Belis, Portretn un problemen (Warsaw, 1964) 8, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Baal Makhshoves, 203.



would have had to repress one side of his personality, since even “as a youth he struggled between thinking and feeling and in his searching he was attempting to find a harmony between them.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, Peretz sought to reconcile both these inclinations via literature.

The different and sometimes opposite poles to which Peretz was attracted at various points in his career as a writer are reflected by Zalmen Reyzen’s attempt to categorize Peretz’s work according to five different phases. During the first phase Peretz was under the influence of contemporary Russian and Polish literature. In the second phase Peretz developed an aversion to reality and discovered one of the main motifs in his life – his longing for a harmonious personality. The third phase was his neo-Hasidic phase. The fourth phase was modernism. During the fifth phase, under the influence of Maxim Gorky, Peretz returned to a healthy optimism; however, even though Reyzen sees it as useful to divide Peretz’s work into periods, he admits that such a periodization is “to a large measure artificial and not consistent.”<sup>21</sup> Ayzik Rosenzweig, on the other hand, separates Peretz’s oeuvre into a radical phase and a neo-Hasidic phase.<sup>22</sup> While such systematizations are not entirely faulty, to understand Peretz it is crucial to see him as a crucible of influences, into which new ones were constantly being added, but with the old ones still remaining present in the mixture. Essentially as an artist “Peretz was a searcher for new forms, new ideas and

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<sup>20</sup> Shmuel Niger and Yaakov Shatski, eds. Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, vol. 7 (New York: Altvelttelekhn yidishn kultur kongres, 1956-1981) 233.

<sup>21</sup> Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese, un filologye, vol. 2, 1018.

<sup>22</sup> See Ayzik Rosenzweig, Der radikaler periyod fun Peretzes shafn, (Kharkov: Melukhe-farlag far di natsionale minderhaytn, 1934).

new expressions.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, it is hard to actually classify Peretz, who was “*der probenmeister*” (or the “tryout master”) because “he tried out for us, if not all, many literary forms...”<sup>24</sup> *Peretz’s* long-time devotee, H. D. Nomberg, describes Peretz as the “middle point of his age, a center of influences. Everything was reflected in him and refracted, just like a prism.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed this is an accurate estimation, since throughout Peretz’s career one can see traces of the maskilic satirist, the lyricist, the social realist, the symbolist and the neo-romantic, etc. And yet his work was always distinctively his: “In all genres he was Peretz – flashy and quick witted, throwing glimpses of light and plumbing depths with shadows, and in one place he was crystal clear and in another – giving hollow hints.”<sup>26</sup> Peretz’s fervent searching and multifarious expression may have been a product of his own lack of certainty and set beliefs.<sup>27</sup> As Wisse summarizes, “The critics, through a scheme of periodization, tried to distinguish the engaged social activist of the 1890s from the neo-romantic of the 1900s, the Hebraist from the Yiddishist, the reliable secularist from the recidivist orthodox Jew, ignoring the modern temper that remained in perpetual quarrel with itself.”<sup>28</sup> This constant quarrel held Peretz back from ever committing to a single ideology, social or literary.

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<sup>23</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, vol. 7, 247.

<sup>24</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, vol.7, 254.

<sup>25</sup> H. D. Nomberg, Y. L. Peretz (Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1946) 52.

<sup>26</sup> Belis, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, vol.7, 254.

<sup>28</sup> Wisse, 91.

Peretz's inner state of perpetual conflict fueled a revolutionary spirit. Y. Kornhendler, in his book, *Vuhin fort undz Y. L. Peretz*, claims that Peretz's most important inspiration, and the driving force behind all of his work, was the fact that "Peretz was first and foremost a revolutionary" and that "all of his works, with small exceptions, were revolutionary acts."<sup>29</sup> Chaim Zhitlovsky also isolates this aspect of Peretz's character as a defining factor in his work in his article "Peretz, the Prophet of Struggle":

"Peretz was the first Yiddish artist to throw himself into the spiritual fight from his side: the social, the free-thinking, the philosophical, the religious, as also in the spiritual fight around the deepest problems of the meaning of life."<sup>30</sup>

Both these writers capture Peretz's fighting spirit. He criticized everything and everybody that he felt was in need of reform, without fear of retribution. In this way, Zhitlovsky's comparison of Peretz to a prophet is apt. Peretz enjoyed challenging people's peaceful apathy with current conditions: "I am afraid of peace! I am deathly afraid of quiet!"<sup>31</sup> This revolutionary streak also explains how Peretz was ultimately able to make a complete break with the Haskalah and forge a new modern Yiddish literature. This ability to break boundaries makes it more understandable how someone coming out of a maskilic heritage could one day write Hasidic tales.

In addition to the Haskalah, one of the substantive influences on Peretz's early literary and legal career was Polish Positivism. The liberal outlook of Polish

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<sup>29</sup> Y. Kornhendler, *Vuhin Firt Undz Y. L. Peretz?* (Paris: Farlag Oyfgang, 1930) 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Chaim Zhitlovsky, "Peretz, der novi fun kampf" *Yitzhak Leybish Peretz* (New York: Ikuf Farlag, 1951) 38.

<sup>31</sup> I. L. Peretz, *Y.L. Peretz :Ale verk*, vol. 8, 76.

Positivism, which had promoted secular education and assimilation for Jews, with the goal of full equality, had allowed young modernizing Jews like Peretz to feel like they had a stake in the future of the nation.<sup>32</sup> In many ways Peretz had been the picture of the assimilated Jew in Poland. He courted his second wife in Polish, and Polish was the language of their home. He even wrote his first poem in Polish. He dressed like a Pole, complete with his famous drooping mustache. He had a successful law practice and had Polish clients. However, his disbarment and failure to obtain justice, as well as rising the rising anti-Semitism in Poland, led to disillusionment with the program of Positivism, which in a similar way to the Haskalah failed to provide real solutions, or even a political party. Furthermore, as Peretz's literary career progressed, he grew to be an outspoken critic of assimilation.

Peretz's first attempts at writing were in Polish, which was the lingua franca of the half-assimilated Jewish intellectuals in Zamość.<sup>33</sup> In the early 1870s Peretz wrote several poems in Polish, which bore the influence of Goethe and Heine, as well as the distinctive stamp of Polish Positivism in their democratic and revolutionary character. They also have elements of the social awareness that Peretz would later exhibit, which was also part of the program of Polish Positivism. Peretz's lack of complete fluency in Polish – it was only recently that he had left the world of the *beys-medresh* – was evident in his poetry. Language was an issue that Peretz would wrestle with his whole literary career.<sup>34</sup> After writing in Polish, Peretz switched to

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<sup>32</sup> For more information on Polish Positivism and the Jews see Stanislaus Blejwas, "Polish Positivism and the Jews," Jewish Social Studies Vol. 46, No. 1 (Winter, 1984) 21-36.

<sup>33</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 48-49.

Hebrew – a language which no one spoke at that time – and then finally to Yiddish, although continuing all the while to write in Hebrew as well.

Peretz's early Polish poetry was rooted in Positivism, and his early Hebrew poetry was still bound to the Haskalah, the two ideologies being fairly compatible with one another. Peretz's early Hebrew poetry still made use of *melitza* – the then reigning style in the world of Hebrew maskilic poetry – however, it differed in spirit and temperament,<sup>35</sup> often grappling with real social issues, rather than reveling in the use of language itself. In 1875 Peretz's first poem was published in the magazine *Hashakhar*. It was a satirical fable in the maskilic vein. In this poem, entitled "Hashutfes," a flock of sheep is afflicted by a plague. Their owner goes to a holy man who promises to stop the plague in return for half of the surviving sheep. All the sheep but one die, and the owner returns to the holy man to plead for the remaining sheep, and the holy man demands half of the pelts from the dead sheep. In this poem we see both the social activism of Peretz, who attempts with literature to "expose" the exploitation of the poorer classes, as well as his maskilic criticism of supposed holy men who take financial advantage of their flocks. In 1876 Peretz published "Nogniel," a poem that established his poetical credo at the age of 24. In this poem, a group of poets go to the angel of song and poetry and beg for inspiration. The angel rejects the poets one by one, including a poor poet who writes to support his family, a well-off poet who writes elegies and birthday poems, a poet who writes for the sake of the language itself and a lyrical poet. The angel tells the lyrical poet, "Now is not

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<sup>35</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 51.

the time for Jews to be singing about love.”<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Peretz felt at this time that poetry needed to serve a higher purpose. This purpose is defined by the one poet whom the angel agrees to help. This poet looks at

all the wrongdoings in Jewish life. He sees the rabbis whose “palms are greased,” the “holy men” who lead astray the folk, the “heads of the community” who rob the common people, the darkness which rules over Jewish life, etc.<sup>37</sup>

This poem is clearly influenced by the maskilic tradition in its criticism of rabbis and its characterization of Jewish life as being ruled by “darkness.” In both “Hashutfes” and “Nogniel” Peretz uses poetry as a vehicle to raise awareness about social problems and therefore foreshadows his later role as a “poet-fighter against social injustice”<sup>38</sup> and his involvement in the socialist movement in the 1890’s.

In the years 1878-1888 Peretz seemingly disappeared from the world of letters. During this time, Peretz moved back to Zamość after a two-year stint in Warsaw, and re-married, this time to Helena Ringelheim. He studied for the law exams, and then, after having passed, practiced law for about ten years. During this time Peretz also organized free evening classes for workers. According to Reyzen, the popularity of the classes may have led the government to suspect him of socialist tendencies, which might have led to his disbarment in 1888.<sup>39</sup> According to acquaintances, Peretz did in fact write both Hebrew and Yiddish poetry during this period. Some of these Hebrew poems he published in 1887 in *Haasif*. According to

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 54.

<sup>37</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 55.

<sup>38</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, vol. 2, 237.

Meisel, these poems stood out in their “beautiful form and artistic fullness.”<sup>40</sup> Peretz also drew further away from the *melitza* style. There are two interesting trends to note in this early phase of Peretz’s writing. In his poem “Manginat ha-zeman (1887), Peretz describes his relationship to Yiddish:

My brothers, writers, don’t be angry with me if I fancy the language of Berl and Shmerl, and I don’t call their language a “stammer-language.” From their mouth I hear the language of my people... The language of roamers, the exiled, the language that will always bear witness to the spilled blood, to the violence, theft and destruction that traveled with us from land to land. In this language lies the tears of our parents, the tormented cries from many generations, the poison and the bitterness of history. These are precious diamonds – Jewish tears, which, in not becoming dry, crystallized.<sup>41</sup>

Even this early on in his literary career, Peretz expressed an interest in Yiddish, which was unusual among the Jewish writers of his time, the majority of whom still expressed a maskilic disdain for Yiddish. Maskilim had favored “pure languages” such as German, Hebrew, Russian or Polish, and viewed Yiddish as a degrading jargon that reflected the downtrodden state of Jewry. In this poem, Peretz reveals his appreciation for Yiddish as a folk language which, beyond merely being a device for communication, serves as a receptacle for the shared trials and tribulations of his people. The second trend, which is noteworthy, and which is connected to Peretz’s interest in Yiddish as a folk language, is Peretz’s change in his perception of traditional Jews and his newfound sympathy with them: “The Jew with peyes and with a long caftan is not a stranger to the nation, he suffers along with his nation. And

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<sup>40</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 63.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Meisel, Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn, 65.

that is why he is so dejected.”<sup>42</sup> By identifying with the traditional (and most likely Hasidic) Jew, Peretz makes a break with the maskilic tradition, and a turn towards new, previously unlikely sources of inspiration.

Peretz’s Yiddish debut was actually considerably earlier than “Monish.” In the 1870s and 1880s Peretz wrote many poems in Yiddish, which were quite popular in Zamość and used to be sung by its residents.<sup>43</sup> The poems were heavily influenced by the style of the *badkhen*, or wedding singer, but they also contained the seeds of Peretz’s later social and national critiques and concerns. Let us consider one poem from this period<sup>44</sup>, “Zamotsher Pozhodnik,” that reveals both the influence of the Haskalah on Peretz at this point, as well as his perception of Hasidim. The title of this poem means “Zamość’s Order,” which is an ironic title, because the poem is about Zamość’s complete lack of order or perverted order. The first few stanzas describe the filth and poverty in Zamość, the synagogue which is falling into ruin, is used for cards in summer and baking potatoes in the winter, and doubles as a tavern, and the poorhouse which is basically a way station to the graveyard. In the fourth stanza Peretz criticizes that it took them seven years to build a mikva, because so much of the funds are pocketed by the people in charge and states, “Is it not the same, I ask you/ A bathtub in winter and in the summer a river, rather than putting up with all this

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<sup>42</sup> Meisel, *Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn*, 66.

<sup>43</sup> Meisel, *Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn*, 38. Meisel does not relate if they were published, only that Peretz’s friends from Zamość sent them to him after Peretz’s death.

<sup>44</sup> This poem is re-printed in Meisel’s book; however, he does not give it a specific date, other than placing it in this early period of Peretz’s Yiddish poetry.



nonsense?” This statement is very maskilic, and in fact, blatantly anti-religious. The last stanza is reserved for Peretz’s criticism of Hasidim:

Of the Hasidim there is no possibility  
 They worry only about the divine presence.  
 We take our little green table to the side  
 We play cards, buy clothes, whatever pleases us  
 We are rich and have money  
 For apartments, festivals, satin, and silk.  
 For something just, if it is the case,  
 For the city, for the greater good:  
 The hands: Iron, the heart becomes a stone,  
 One can’t give, there isn’t even three dollars  
 One can’t do anything, time is valuable,  
 Moreover everything has to go into the ground...<sup>45</sup>

Peretz is accusing the Hasidim of using their money only for their own pleasure without contributing anything to the greater community. He also portrays them as hypocritically hiding behind a higher spiritual purpose, when their main interest is worldly things like cards and nice clothes. At this point, Peretz’s description of Hasidim is still quite maskilic.

Perhaps Peretz would have remained a lawyer in Zamość, penning the occasional Hebrew and Yiddish verse, had he not been disbarred in 1888. Peretz was disbarred after being denounced to the czarist authorities, and was never able to reverse this decision or even to discover who his accuser was. Overnight Peretz went from running a busy law office and earning a sizable salary to having no source of income whatsoever. In actuality Peretz’s disbarment may very well have been part of a larger trend of growing anti-Semitism due to the rising nationalism of the era. The atmosphere of mutual respect, at least among intellectuals, had already begun to erode

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<sup>45</sup> Peretz, in Meisel, *Y. L. Perets: Zayn lebn un shafn*, 42.

as early as 1881 with the pogroms following the assassination of Alexander II.<sup>46</sup> Ruth Wisse attributes to his disbarment his disillusionment with the assimilatory ideals of the Haskalah and Polish Positivism, as well as his subsequent switch to writing in Yiddish.<sup>47</sup> Peretz may have also considered writing in Yiddish simply because of the obvious fact that he was now without a livelihood, and it was just around this time that Sholem Rabinovitch, better known by his pen name Sholem Aleichem, offered Yiddish writers substantial recompense for publishing their work in *Di yidishe folksbibliotek*, which he was editing. In 1888, Peretz submitted the poem “Monish.” The poem is about a talmudic prodigy named Monish, who has so much spiritual potential that Satan fears he will bring the messiah. Lillith comes into his town, disguised as a young maiden, “Maria,” and Monish eventually succumbs to temptation. The poem ends with the eponymous child prodigy having his ear nailed to a wall after being exposed to Lillith’s song, which is often interpreted as Western culture. The ending seems hardly coincidental at a time when Peretz also found himself having lost the career which he spent years building, and which was premised on the false assumption that a Jew could successfully integrate into Polish society.

Nonetheless, Peretz’s championing of Yiddish as a viable language for artistic production did not happen overnight. Although Monish was his debut as a published Yiddish author, one of the stanzas of this very poem derides Yiddish for lacking the appropriate vocabulary to describe romantic feeling:

My poem would sound different,

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<sup>46</sup> Blejwas, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Wisse, 10.

If I were singing for non-Jews  
 Not for Jews, not “jargon”! –  
 No correct sound, no correct tone!  
 For love, for feeling  
 No matching word, no style...<sup>48</sup>

Even after his first publication in Yiddish met with some critical acclaim, Peretz still described Yiddish derisively as “jargon” in his correspondence with Rabinovitch.<sup>49</sup>

In 1889 Peretz was asked to join a statistical expedition sponsored by Jan Bloch to prove the productivity of the Jews of Poland. These forays into the dense undergrowth of the Jewish shtetl provided Peretz with a treasure trove for future writing. The czarist authorities ultimately put an end to the expedition and the data was never published; however, Peretz’s book *Bilder fun a provints-rayze*, published in 1891, was based on his experiences during the expedition. The experiences from this expedition also provided material for many of his later *Khsidish* and *Folkshtimlikhe mayses*. During Peretz’s travels in the Tomaszów region he came in close contact with Hasidim. Peretz had had little contact with Hasidim during his adolescence. In his *Memoirs*, he describes how in Zamość “Hasidim [were] small in number and [had] no influence whatsoever.”<sup>50</sup> As a young adult he viewed contemporary Hasidic rebbes with contempt, and in his *Bilder fun a provints-rayze* he still generally maintains this tone. Peretz depicts the Vorka rebbe in “Fartseylte mayses” as haughty, impatient and quick to anger. In other places he characterizes

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<sup>48</sup> Y. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk, Vol. 1, 20-21.

<sup>49</sup> See I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 11 “Briv un redes.”

<sup>50</sup> I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 11, 76.

rebbees as being greedy for money<sup>51</sup> and being con artists.<sup>52</sup> Now, however, for the first time, he got to know the small-town everyday Hasid and developed a certain sympathy for their poverty and suffering. From Yerucham, in “Numer 42,” a Radziner Hasid who scrimps and pinches to build a house, only to have it torn down because he does not have the money to build a fire wall, to Reb Elye in “Fartseylte mayses,” a Vorka Hasid who is a widower struggling to support his family and who lost his daughter in childbirth, Peretz portrays these characters from his *Bilder fun a provints-rayze* as perhaps flawed, but ultimately very human and engaged in a noble, yet failing struggle to take care of their family’s basic needs. The empathy with which Peretz depicts these Hasidic characters perhaps foreshadows his future neo-Hasidic representation of Hasidim. Peretz moves away from the satiric tradition of the Haskalah and gives a naturalistic rendering of the shtetl Jews full of pathos; “If Mendele saw the objectionable side of the Jewish town, and Sholem Aleichem its humorous side, Peretz grasped at its pathetic and sublime aspect.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to rendering Hasidim more sympathetically and naturalistically, Peretz allows the shtetl dwellers to express their own voices, without interference from the narrator. In the first sketch, the narrator hears some women in the marketplace discussing his arrival in town. Although the first woman is thankful that the government is considering their plight, the subsequent voices that the narrator overhears are much more skeptical. In the classic works of the Haskalah, the maskilic

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<sup>51</sup> See “Der Lamed Vovnik,” *Bilder fun a provints-rayze*, in *Y. L Peretz: Ale Verk*, Vol.2, 186.

<sup>52</sup> See “R’ Berl,” *Bilder fun a provints-rayze*, in *Y. L Peretz: Ale Verk*, Vol.2, 207.

<sup>53</sup> Roback, 135.

stranger's sudden appearance in the traditional shtetl is often marked by suspicion and distrust; however, in this case the women's voices are given a more objective rendering, in that they speak for themselves, without any authorial commentary. By putting the argument for distrusting the government-sponsored modern Jewish statistician in the mouths of the market women, Peretz provides a "powerful defense and counterattack" on the part of the traditional Jews; "The women have every reason to distrust this modern shepherd; their skepticism is not merely the result of intellectual confinement but also of bitter practical experience – experience at least partly shared by the author."<sup>54</sup>

According to the scholar Marc Caplan, *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze* marks an important stylistic and ideological change within Peretz's corpus. In *Bilder* the narrator is the representative of modernity, and is ostensibly introducing its amenities to the backwards culture of the shtetl. As Caplan points out, in each subsequent meeting with the characters the narrator encounters, the more disillusioned and anxious he becomes over modernization, and the more the characters affect change on him: "Rather than changing the shtetl, the shtetl changes him – infecting him with the same anxieties over change and doubt about the desirability of the modern condition that the shtetl Jews already live with."<sup>55</sup> These are the very anxieties that Peretz himself must have been grappling with as the promised equality of the Haskalah and Polish Positivism proved to be a mirage.

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<sup>54</sup> Wisse, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Marc Caplan, "The Fragmentation of Narrative Perspective in Y. L. Peretz's *Bilder fun a Provints-Rayze*," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 14, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 76.

Caplan draws attention to a notable stylistic change in the *Bilder*. Peretz switches back and forth between first and third person narrative, in such a way that he breaks down the narrative voice and causes a general feeling of dislocation. This “strategy of dissolving the first- and third-person perspectives is indicative in both Peretz’s writing as well as Abramovitch’s of the modernizing maskil’s self-reflexive interrogation and dismantling of his own motivating ideology.”<sup>56</sup> It is very interesting to note that the only maskil that the narrator encounters in the stories is reduced by the narrator to being as old-fashioned and ignorant as the shtetl inhabitants, only much more grotesque. The narrator makes several jibes at the maskil’s expense, and the more he gets to know him, “the more the maskil is becoming every minute repulsive to [him].”<sup>57</sup> According to David Roskies, this character represents one of the “three ruined pillars of Polish Jewry: the rabbi, the maskil, and the Hasid.”<sup>58</sup> Even in 1891, Peretz clearly recognized that the Haskalah was in a similar state of decline as the rest of the shtetl. Therefore both stylistically and in terms of content, it seems that just as the narrator of the *Bilder* is forced to reconsider his preconceived notions about shtetl life and the supposed superiority of modernity, Peretz is also in the process of shedding his maskilic identity and taking tentative steps in a new direction.

As we have seen from the *Bilder*, one of the characteristics that distinguish Peretz from the stereotypical maskil, even early on in his career, is his respect and empathy for the poor, traditional Jew. According to Peretz’s friend Shmuel

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<sup>56</sup> Caplan, 77.

<sup>57</sup> “Fartseylte maysey,” *Bilder fun a provints-rayze*, in *Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk*, Vol.2, 144.

<sup>58</sup> David Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 101-102.

Ashkenazi: “[Peretz] truly loved his people, especially the poorer and lower class stratas of his people.”<sup>59</sup> Whether or not this estimation is true, it is clear that Peretz drew inspiration from them. In Peretz’s poem “My Muse” (1891), Peretz identifies his muse not as a flower, butterfly, or nightingale, but rather as “an old Jewish woman/ shrunken and ugly;/ an abandoned wife with orphans/ overextended;/ a great pauper,/ and she screams, and she curses...”<sup>60</sup> Thus it is from the most helpless and troubled of people that Peretz seeks his inspiration. Perhaps at times he will gently mock her idiosyncrasies, but he will not attack her with the vitriol of his maskilic predecessors.

After his work on the statistical expedition, Peretz’s friends helped find him a job with the Warsaw Jewish Community Council, where he eventually headed the cemetery department. Although Peretz took a significant pay cut from his salary as a lawyer, and frequently complained about the monotony of his post to his friends, he remained at this bureaucratic 9-3 job for the next 25 years until his death. As part of this position, Peretz came into contact with all different kinds of Jews, which also provided fodder for his literary imagination.<sup>61</sup>

During these first few years (1891-1894) while working at the Council, Peretz edited, contributed to, and even help set to print a three-volume collection of Yiddish poems, stories and articles, entitled *Yidishe bibliotek* (Yiddish library).<sup>62</sup> Several

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<sup>59</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, vol. 7, 237.

<sup>60</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 1, 28.

<sup>61</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn, 119-124.

<sup>62</sup> After the third volume of the Yidishe bibliotek, it was printed as a monthly journal, also edited by Peretz; however, the journal ceased to exist after the sixth volume.

Yiddish writers who would go on to become well-known made their debut in the *bibliotek*, including Yehoash, Avrum Reyzen and B. Goren. In 1885 Peretz edited *Literatur un Leben*, and in 1884 he also began publishing his famous *Yom tov bletlekh*. These collections were so entitled because by naming them after the Jewish holidays, Peretz could get around the censor's withholding of permission for a regular monthly periodical. In the period 1894-1896 Peretz published 17 editions of the *Yom tov bletlekh*. In these stories and articles Peretz boldly criticized the Zionist movement to settle Palestine as exemplified by Chibbat Zion and the cultural Zionism of the Ahad Ha-am movement, both of which he felt hampered universalist ideals and led Jews to petty chauvinism: "We don't want to relinquish the general-human flag from our hands, we don't want to sow any chauvinistic wild cabbage..."<sup>63</sup> Rather, Peretz supported *doikayt*, the movement to establish cultural centers in the diaspora, using Yiddish as a national language.

Peretz's *Yom tov bletlekh* are often associated with the Jewish socialist movement. Although back in 1888, when Peretz wrote to Sholem Rabinovitch, he claimed to write "for myself, for my enjoyment,"<sup>64</sup> this statement reveals yet another contradictory aspect of Peretz's literary persona, because, as much as he played the role of the aesthete, Peretz also – perhaps even more so – viewed literature as a vehicle for social reform and considered it irresponsible of a writer not to try to better the lot of his people. As we have seen, Peretz expressed this idea as early as 1876, in his poem "Nogniel." Literature had a quasi-messianic potential for Peretz; "Perhaps

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<sup>63</sup> I. L. Peretz, "Vos viln mir?" 1894 in Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk, vol. 8, 92.

<sup>64</sup> I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk Vol. 11, 229.



Peretz [was] such a devoted man of letters that he [believed] that literature really [possessed] the power to bring the Messiah.”<sup>65</sup> At the very least, Peretz believed writing had the power to change the status quo, not unlike the early maskilim. In his *bletlekh*, Peretz also continued his fight against social injustice. Although they differ in genre and content, the seventeen volumes of the *Yom tov bletlekh* are united by Peretz’s zeal to “break boundaries, disturb the quiet, to lead the Jewish person out of his state of petrification.”<sup>66</sup> The revolutionary fervor with which Peretz attacked social problems in his *bletlekh* attracted the attention of the leaders of the growing Jewish socialist movement.

In the mid to late 1890’s Peretz started attending socialist gatherings, many of which were secret and illegal, and reading his works aloud. Socialists were able to read into Peretz’s work support for their movement, and at the same time Peretz was arguably publishing work that seemed to support their cause, as many of his works from this period “portrayed the need, exploitation, injustice and dispirited state” of the Jewish worker.<sup>67</sup> It is well known that his *Yontef-Bletlekh* influenced many of the socialists of his day and were often found by police on raids amongst contraband socialist material.<sup>68</sup> One of his most prized possessions was a torn and greasy copy of his *Yidishe bibliotek* which had been passed around in the Warsaw jail among revolutionaries imprisoned there, and which was presented to him by a member of the

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<sup>65</sup> Z. Kalmanovitch “Y. L. Peretses kuk af der yidisher literatur,” *Di goldene keyt* (Tel Aviv, 1949): 118.

<sup>66</sup> Meisel, *Y. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn*, 169.

<sup>67</sup> Meisel, *Y. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn*, 165.

<sup>68</sup> Roback, 165.

Bund.<sup>69</sup> However, Peretz was at no point a Bundist himself. Peretz feared solidified political parties and ideologies. Peretz did refer to himself as a socialist, but only in general terms, and he never officially joined any specific party.<sup>70</sup>

According to Ruth Wisse, “Peretz’s cultural affinity with the radicals never amounted to political affiliation. His approach to reform was idealistic rather than ideological, based on a vision of better human beings rather than on a scheme for their improvement.”<sup>71</sup> Peretz did openly advocate wide scale social change, which was probably partly responsible for his jail sentence in 1899;<sup>72</sup> however, he consistently resisted actual political affiliation. According to A. Litvak, in an article he wrote entitled “Y. L. Peretz un di yidishe arbeter-masn,” Peretz was most attracted to socialism “in the first years, when the worker’s movement was small and holy, weak and secret...”<sup>73</sup> Once it became a more codified ideology, Peretz began to distance himself from it.

Peretz had much more faith in ideas than in ideologies, or “isms.” Peretz was suspicious of “isms” for stagnating people’s thought process. In his essay “Visn, ideen, un ‘izmen”” (1902), he likens “isms” to beautiful gems. However, these gems

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<sup>69</sup> Roback, 172.

<sup>70</sup> Roback proposes that Peretz was a Fabian Socialist who was committed to a peaceful and gradual transformation to a socialist democratic state. Indeed, this helps shed light on Peretz’s affiliation with socialism despite his rejection of Bundist ideology. He wanted a socialist state, but he did not believe that it had to be ruled only by the workers, but rather that it should be a democracy.

<sup>71</sup> Wisse, 53.

<sup>72</sup> In August 1899, Peretz was jailed for three months in the Warsaw Citadel after attending an illegal socialist gathering.

<sup>73</sup> A. Litvak, “Peretz un di Yidishe Arbeter” Literarische Bleter 4 (1924), 4.

swallow without giving back, and by the light of the “finest diamond, one cannot read a book, nor write a letter, nor correct a work – therefore one needs the day with its simple light.”<sup>74</sup> By “the day with its simple light,” Peretz means reality. People’s vision becomes obscured by ideologies and they can no longer think clearly and see reality. Furthermore, he feared the leveling effect that socialism would have on creativity and the individual. In his later essay “Hofnung un shrek” (1906), Peretz correctly foresaw that in the zeal to make everyone equal, the brilliant would be cut down to measure with the mediocre: “Will you not chop down the cedars, in order that they not grow taller than the grass?”<sup>75</sup> Any plants that strayed from the manicured garden would be tossed out as weeds, which Peretz astutely perceived was a danger to art, as well as society as a whole.

Peretz’s involvement in the growing socialist movement and later disillusionment is very much interrelated with the development of his Hasidic tales. Socialism appealed to his humanism, but he feared its leveling effect, both creatively and in terms of Jewish identity. However, for someone coming out of the maskilic tradition, a turn to Hasidism for inspiration was not the obvious choice. In the mid to late 1890s, when Peretz’s attraction to socialism peaked, he remained vehemently anti-clerical, yet at the same time full of feeling and compassion for suffering underclass, which included Hasidim. Thus, in some way socialism’s sympathy for the underclass perhaps opened him up to sympathizing more with the common Hasid. During this period, his Hasidic-themed tales therefore mock the leadership while

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<sup>74</sup> I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk Vol. 8, 431.

<sup>75</sup> I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk, vol. 9, 101.

judging the poor, average Hasid more favorably. These tales can be seen as forebearers to his later *Khsidish* tales, as we shall soon explore.

In 1893 Peretz published the short story “Shmaye Giber” in the Hebrew language *Hatzfira*. This story so angered its Hasidic readership that the editor, Smolenski, refused to publish any more of Peretz’s work.<sup>76</sup> In this story, a group of Chabad Hasidim become enraged that a rabbi has given a halachic ruling using the *chayei-odem* – an accepted *posek* – over the *shulkhan-orekh-rav*, the halachic rulings of the founder of Chabad Hasidism. One Hasid, Shmaye, becomes so incensed that he tears the rabbi’s fur hat to shreds. The story is written in a satirical style, aimed at making the Hasidim look ridiculous for their unfounded and exaggerated anger over a ruling that has not transgressed Jewish law in the slightest. When Shmaye comes home after accomplishing his “mission,” he tells his children:

“Today I did a very, very great mitzvah, a great mitzvah, sanctified God’s name, I destroyed the Rov’s fur hat. You understand? He ruled from the *chayei-odem*! Of the *shulkhan-orekh-rav* he said nothing! May his mouth be gagged, you hear! I have surely merited the world to come!”<sup>77</sup>

In this story, all of the Hasidim come off looking ridiculous, and Shmaye is the epitome of the pathetic, emasculated Jewish male, quite the opposite of a “giber,” or “strongman,” that is the title of the story. In general this story does not show a marked difference with previous maskilic satires about Hasidim, except perhaps for the fact that Shmaye, rather than being merely ridiculous, is also portrayed as pitiable.

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<sup>76</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn, 155-6.

<sup>77</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk, v. 4, 177.

After Peretz served his three month jail sentence in 1899, Peretz began to distance himself from the socialists. According to his fellow jailmate Mordecai Spector, Peretz began writing his *Khsidish* stories during his time in jail. Wisse hypothesizes that “perhaps he reached for the spiritual reassurance of a neo-romantic literature in reaction to the limitations that prison routine forced on his freedom and comfort; or else this period of incarceration, in the last year of the nineteenth century, quickened a process that was already underway.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed Meisel believes that it is faulty to separate Peretz’s so-called radical phase from his supposed later interest in Hasidic tales, because his interest in folk material – which included Hasidic tales – was rather simultaneous with his involvement in the Jewish worker’s movement.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, from about 1880 to 1910 neo-romanticism was sweeping Europe. Peretz was always aware of the latest trends in Western literature, and just as the neo-romantics turned away from the ugliness of urbanization and looked for inspiration in ruins, exalted love, idealized history and haunted landscapes, he may indeed have turned towards the world of Jewish fantasy and legend after his surfeit of gritty realism in a Warsaw jail cell. By returning to his own traditions and history – from a modern, intellectual perspective – Peretz found a source for humanism much more appealing than the socialist banner, and ultimately much closer to his own heart; “Searching for the today in the yesterday, Peretz found himself.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Wisse, 55.

<sup>79</sup> Meisel, *Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn*, 172. Meisel gives the date from the censor (1896) for Peretz’s folk-song manuscript as proof of this.

<sup>80</sup> Shmuel Roshansky, Introduction. *Y. L. Perets in 19tn yorhundert*, by Y. L. Peretz, Musterverk ser. 11, ed. Shmuel Roshansky, (Buenos Aires: YIVO, 1973) 36.

Peretz had already been urging his fellow writers to use more Jewish sources in their writing, since he returned from the statistical expedition.<sup>81</sup> He found something lacking in the writing of assimilated Jewish writers, and urged his fellow writers to bring back the Jewish content to Jewish writing. These ideas were later crystallized in his 1910 essay “Vos felt undzer literature?” He was perhaps initially spurred on by the concept of folkism, which the Jewish intelligentsia had been exposed to in the 1870s by the Russian *narodniks* and their interest in peasant customs. Meanwhile, the Polish neo-romantic movement began to harness folk material as a means of building national identity. Peretz had acquired a wealth of folk material during his statistical expedition in 1890. According to Meisel, his interest in folk material went as far back as his childhood, when he was fascinated by folk stories, Hasidic tales, stories of miracles and folk heroes, and even in his first attempts at writing one finds “the spores of folk-creation, the elements and features of folklore.”<sup>82</sup> In 1901, Marek and Ginzburg published their famous collection, “Yidishe folks-lider,” in St. Petersburg. Peretz had, in fact, started collecting folk songs even earlier – and went as far as paying money for them.<sup>83</sup> Peretz had put together a manuscript of the songs, although it was never printed, most likely due to lack of funds.<sup>84</sup> These folk songs were a source of inspiration for Peretz for his own work: “These songs affected Peretz and his circle like a prophesy, like a revelation.

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<sup>81</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, 241-2.

<sup>82</sup> N. Meisel, Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn, 170.

<sup>83</sup> Mark W. Kiel, “Vox Populi, Vox Dei: The Centrality of Peretz in Jewish Folkloristics,” Polin 7 (1992) : 89.

<sup>84</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn, 171.

We all had the impression that a fresh spring, one which was living and sprouting, had opened.”<sup>85</sup> For Peretz, the Hasidic tale was part of a uniquely Jewish folk tradition, and the Hasidic rebbes who told the tales became the first folk poets of Yiddish literature. At the Language Conference in Czernowitz in 1908, Peretz cast the Hasidic tale as the bible upon which Yiddish literature was built; “The Hasidic tale is the *Genesis*. *Tales of the Baal Shem* and other wonder stories are folk-poetry, the first folk poet is Reb Nachman of Breslav with his *Seven Beggars*.”<sup>86</sup>

Peretz began experimenting with creating his own folk stories as a medium for reviving Jewish national identity. Anski, who also collected and researched Jewish folklore, describes how Peretz would request that he tell him folk stories and would listen for hours on end. Peretz would then proceed to retell the story to Anski in such a way that Peretz had “already processed it, assimilated, thrown out the non-artistic features from it, [and] given new, related details from another story” to the point where it was “far from its original source, like a polished diamond from a newly dug-up diamond in the rough.”<sup>87</sup> Peretz’s folk tales differ from the native material from which many elements are drawn in that the reader perceives “Peretz’s spirit, Peretz’s soul, Peretz’s point of view everywhere.”<sup>88</sup>

When Peretz began writing his own Hasidic tales, he imbued them not only with his own artistic tastes, but also with his atheistic, modern world view:

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<sup>85</sup> Meisel, citing Nomberg, Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn, 173.

<sup>86</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk Vol. 11, 293.

<sup>87</sup> Meisel, citing Anski, Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn, 176.

<sup>88</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn, 175.

As much as the earlier outer garments remained, the story received a new face, a new modern content. Peretz is not a mystic, nor a religious-believer, he did not relinquish his radical, freethinking world and seclude himself in the religious folk-story. He came to the religious thematic through his consciousness, approached it as a modern artistic master.<sup>89</sup>

Through textual analysis, we will soon determine exactly what elements Peretz added to his Hasidic stories, and how they reflect his outlook.

It is important to bear in mind that, as elevated as his portrayal of literary Hasidim was, Peretz excoriated the rebbes of his day. In *Shtet un shtetlekh* (1902), he criticizes the Bialer rebbe, the very rebbe, or at least dynasty, that is the subject of one of his most beloved “neo-Hasidic” works, “Tvishn tvey berg; “The Bialer rebbe, for example! He is not any sort of rabbinic authority, nor is he, heaven preserve us, a learned man; he’s not even a school teacher; a soft man, who can’t hold a whip in his hand...”<sup>90</sup> Peretz was a confirmed atheist and had inherited an aversion to Hasidism from the Haskalah; “He is a maskil and relates to Hasidism as a type of religiosity like someone of his generation.”<sup>91</sup> Of course, as we have seen, Peretz was not a true maskil, but Nomberg sees the influence of the Haskalah as a defining aspect of Peretz’s relationship to religion. Therefore, Peretz uses the idea of a democratic Hasidic movement at its inception – a maskilic distinction in and of itself – in order to “unmask real, practical Hasidism, which he already since his early years sarcastically belittled.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Meisel, Y. L. Perets: zayn lebn un shafn, 177.

<sup>90</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk vol. 8, 198.

<sup>91</sup> Nomberg, 94.

<sup>92</sup> Belis, 11.



Given this context, it is understandable why his contemporaries found it remarkable that Peretz turned to the Hasidic genre for inspiration;

And the surprising thing (for that time!) was that the warmth and inner feeling flow there from a source, which everyone (Peretz included) turned away from as if from something poisonous, dirty, which had absolutely no value and which had never had any value – from the Jewish religion.<sup>93</sup>

Yet, as we have seen even in his early writing, Peretz portrayed the common Hasid as a victim of circumstance with whom he could empathize. Given his interest in folk material, it is therefore perhaps less surprising that Peretz decided to harness the Hasidic tale as artistic material. Seeing it as something purely artistic, Peretz did not feel the need to expurgate the religious content from Jewish writing, but to incorporate it as artistic raw material as well; “He approached the religious thematic consciously, going as a modern artist-master.”<sup>94</sup> When Peretz wrote *Khsidish* he was not concerned with Hasidic reality, but with what he perceived as its inner essence. As an artist who had had limited contact with Hasidim, Peretz had “freer reign than Dubnow, who had to mediate historical documents, and Berdyczewski, who had to reconcile his personal experience. Peretz’s Hasidim were free to dance and sing to their hearts’ content.”<sup>95</sup> Yosef Volf compares Peretz’s appropriation of the Hasidic genre with what Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Goethe did with pre-existing Hamlet,

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<sup>93</sup> Nomberg, 95.

<sup>94</sup> Meisel, 177.

<sup>95</sup> Roskies, Bridge of Longing, 115.

Don Quixote, and Faust legends.<sup>96</sup> In other words, Hasidic sources were artistic fair game, as much as any other pre-existing legends.

With legendary raw material, Peretz was free to re-create Jewish heroes that embodied his core values. Many of his later rebbes represented “the most beautiful and most glorious stuff of humanity.”<sup>97</sup> They are symbols for moral perfection rather than religious figures: “Judaism and humanity are one and the same for him.”<sup>98</sup> In Peretz’s *Khsidish* stories the majority of rebbes have been stripped of their religiosity and have become paragons of humanistic virtue, who achieve this status more by helping their fellow man than by prayer or other rituals. As such, Peretz’s *Khsidish* is a *muser* book for his disenfranchised generation of Jews; “Like his stories in the folk manner, so too these stories in the Hasidic manner shaped an imaginary past that could provide an enriched moral basis for the Jewish present.”<sup>99</sup>

The metamorphosis from maskilic satire to Peretz’s later *Khsidish* tales seems to begin with “Dos shtrayml,” which was also published in 1893.<sup>100</sup> This story appears to be a satire in the maskilic vein, which aims to expose how Hasidim blindly follow anyone who wears a shtreimel no matter how morally repugnant that person might be. The story is narrated by a shtreimel maker in the form of a monologue, a

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<sup>96</sup> Y. Volf, Leyenendik Peretsn (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband Fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentina , 1948) 69.

<sup>97</sup> Nomberg, 94..

<sup>98</sup> Roshansky, 38.

<sup>99</sup> Wisse, 56-57.

<sup>100</sup> “Dos shtrayml” was originally published in an American newspaper (Di arbeter tsaytung or Di tsukunft) before being reprinted in Literatur un lebn, ed. I. L. Peretz (Warsaw: Isaac Funk, 1984) 110-34.

form which Peretz uses in many of his later Hasidic stories as well. The narrator uninhibitedly reveals the worst offences of the Hasidic leadership, including ignorance, corruption, and sexual immorality.

The narrator savors his work as a shtreimel maker because he feels connected to the absolute power the shtreimel wearer wields. He refers to the person who wears the shtreimel as “The Shtreimel,” implying that the power does not come from the character of the person himself, but merely from his fur hat. According to the narrator, whatever the Shtreimel orders, the people obediently follow. For example, if he deems something unkosher,

Millions of keys get thrown<sup>101</sup>, millions of wives don't make kugl, millions of pots are shattered on the stones of the street, and with the challah that is taken I could employ a whole nation of paupers<sup>102</sup>. And who does all that? All with my own hands! All with my shtreimel!<sup>103</sup>

The narrator reveals that such orders may be arbitrary or based on personal financial gain. Sometimes they may even endanger people, such as when the sheep had a disease and the Shtreimel pronounced them kosher. The people worship the Shtreimel to the point where the narrator compares it to idol worship: “There is one thing that keeps me going in life: I know that once in a blue moon I unleash a little idol in the community, and the whole crowd bows down to it, to my “handiwork”!<sup>104</sup> Peretz

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<sup>101</sup> The narrator is referring to how, if the Shtreimel deems a women unclean due to her menstruation, she will throw something to her husband, rather than hand it to him, in accordance with Jewish ritual law.

<sup>102</sup> According to Jewish law, when someone bakes something with more than a certain amount of flour, that person must take some of the dough and burn it. This is therefore not really a criticism of Hasidim, but of Jewish law.

<sup>103</sup> I. L. Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 2, 256-257.

<sup>104</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 2, 256.

even hints that the Shtreimel may take sexual advantage of his followers; “Every groom must first show me (the Shtreimel) his bride and every bride, her groom! With me – everything, even under duress, without me, not a lick.”<sup>105</sup> In this description of the Shtreimel’s quasi-prima-nocta, Peretz rehashes the old maskilic accusation of homosexuality among Hasidim. Furthermore, the narrator accuses a “Shtreimel” of having an ongoing affair with one of the daughters of the innkeeper. By consistently referring to the individuals he implicates as “The Shtreimel,” or a “Shtreimel,” Peretz effectively reduces the shtreimel to symbol of unrestrained power, greed, corruption and sexual depravity. Since the Shtreimel’s unrestrained power and sexual immorality are the focal points of the story, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch of the imagination to say that this furry hat is something of a phallic symbol.

Any “Shtreimel” is clearly venal in this work; however, the narrator is harder to classify. He professes to relish his work as a shtreimel maker because he feels connected to the tremendous power of the Shtreimel. Yet, in his description of the Shtreimel’s power, he reveals the Shtreimel’s base nature, much in the way of an eiron in ancient Greek theater, and the reader begins to wonder how much the narrator respects the shtreimel wearer after all. According to Ken Frieden, “The narrative by this worker is less a psychological portrait than a critique of the world he cheerfully pretends to accept.”<sup>106</sup> The narrator also reveals that he is lax in his religious observance and given over to more physical desires. This confession can either be read as a parody of the ignorant Hasid who indulges in worldly desires, or a

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<sup>105</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 2, 257.

<sup>106</sup> Ken Frieden, Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsch, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 268.

disillusioned Hasid cum proto-maskil. The narrator mocks himself for having too contemplative a nature for a hat maker: “I have developed a bad habit: I like to think about everything I see: From where does it come? Why is it so? Couldn’t it be different?...”<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, when the narrator begins to describe the innkeeper’s daughters in more poetic terms than perhaps your average hat maker, he specifically draws attention to the inappropriateness of his language: “Et, I have been endowed with some other sort of idiom, it does not befit a hat maker!”<sup>108</sup> Peretz makes the most distinctive break with the maskilic tradition in his rendering of the narrator’s deep sympathy for the innkeeper’s daughter, who comes to a bad end after having had a child out of wedlock with a non-Shtreimel. The tear that the narrator sheds for the second daughter at least partially redeems him, and at the very least humanizes him. Even if the narrator is an eiron/proto-maskil, he still appears to be affiliated with the Hasidim. Peretz’s acknowledgement of the human side of the common Hasid marks a step away from the standard maskilic satire and a continuation of the sympathy for them which he expressed in his early poetry and *Bilder fun a provintz-rayze*.

Another one of Peretz’s early “Hasidic” works, “Hakhnoses kale,” (1894) is also a satire, in which Peretz makes fun of both the rich Hasid who hopes future generations will copy the style of his special hat, and the poor Hasid, “Mendel Poverty,” who comes collecting money for his daughter’s wedding and is described in the most revolting terms possible: “Stooped, with a white, wind-swept beard, tangled

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<sup>107</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 2, 251.

<sup>108</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 2, 259.

in the string from his old, torn caftan, a pale face under a greasy hat.”<sup>109</sup> He is apparently so dirty that every male member of the household places his hand in a napkin before shaking Mendel’s hand. Neither of the two main characters has any particular depth; however, one might argue that this work is a gentle satire nonetheless, in that Peretz does not openly mock either of the characters, but limits himself to a few understated jibes, such as: “Time does not have any pity, she wipes away the old, the moldy, and the holy.”<sup>110</sup> Otherwise, he allows them to speak without much in the way of narratorial commentary, much in the way of the *Bilder*. By describing something as old, moldy, and holy, Peretz equates holiness with moldiness. However, as repugnant as Mendel Poverty is, we find out that he has sold his house to raise money for his daughter’s dowry. All at once, the reader is reminded of the human being who suffers homelessness in order to marry off his daughter. Likewise, the rich Hasid does agree to raise money for the poor Hasid, even if a lot of it has to come from his own pocket. Perhaps Peretz does admire to some degree the brotherhood of these Hasidim who ultimately do stick out their necks for one another.

The clearest break with the maskilic rendition of the Hasid occurs with the publication of “Mekubolim” (1904) and “Mishnas khasidim” (1902 in Hebrew, 1904 in Yiddish), both of which appeared in *Yom tov bletlekh*. According to H. D. Nomberg, “In *Yom tov bletlekh* the old maskilic tone totally disappeared. This was not an external change, an adaptation to circumstances. Peretz broke inwardly with

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<sup>109</sup> I. L. Peretz, *In 19tn yorhundert: Musterverk* vol. 11 (Buenos Aires: IWO, 1973) 203.

<sup>110</sup> Peretz, *In 19tn yorhundert: Musterverk* vol. 11, 203.

the ideas of the Warsaw maskilim.”<sup>111</sup> Meisel similarly notes that by 1904 the Odessa maskilim were already becoming suspicious that Peretz “had not remained true to the old family traditions... One looked with suspicion at his every movement. One pricked up ones ears whenever his said a word to see if he might G-d forbid say something truly alien and heretical.”<sup>112</sup> First of all, neither of these stories is a true satire, the primary genre of the Haskalah and the genre of the two previous stories “Dos shtreimel” and “Hakhnoses kale” – although there might still be a satirical vein. In fact it is possible to read both of the following stories and conclude that Peretz had only positive associations with Hasidim, as many readers later did.

At the most simplistic level, “Mekubolim,” or “Kabbalists,” is about the head of a once great Yeshiva that has all but ceased to exist, and his last remaining student, Lemekh, a starving but noble character, who fasts in order to achieve moral perfection until he is called to join the heavenly chorus and therefore dies. While indeed the overall impression one garners from the story is an admiration for the spiritual heights that Lemekh achieves through his fasting, if one examines the text on a closer level, there are many hints as to Peretz’s true intentions.

Although on the surface the Rosh Yeshiva seems to be the noble mystic, who rejects material comforts to remain in his Yeshiva until his dying day, a more nuanced reading reveals how Peretz repeatedly undercuts the Rosh Yeshiva’s supposed pure intentions and unblemished holiness throughout the text. The first example of this undercutting is when the Rosh Yeshiva expounds on the different

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<sup>111</sup> Nomberg, 59.

<sup>112</sup> Nachman Meisel, (Citing Sh. Shneyfal) Yitskhak Leybish Perets un zayn dor shrayber, (New York: IKUF, 1951) 331.

levels of song in Kabbalah. His talk is interrupted by the porter, who brings him his long overdue breakfast, and he stops in the middle of his discourse to go wash. Peretz draws attention to the Rosh Yeshiva's physical weakness; "the coarse voice of the porter pulled the Rosh Yeshiva out of the divine harmony. He got up heavily and went to the water basin to wash, his heavy boots dragging."<sup>113</sup> Emphasizing the physical weakness of the Rosh Yeshiva serves to cut him down to size, lest the reader assign him too high a spiritual ranking. By interrupting him in the middle of his speech, Peretz also minimizes its value. Peretz further weakens the lofty first impression of the Rosh Yeshiva by having him continue his talk on the way to the wash basin "with less enthusiasm."<sup>114</sup> Lemekh's enthusiasm, on the other hand, only increases with the suspense of having to wait for his teacher to wash.

When the Rosh Yeshiva begins to eat his breakfast before Lemekh receives his, Lemekh has a fleeting covetous thought and therefore resolves to take on a penitential fast, his fourth fast in a row. When he explains that he is about to undertake another fast, the Rosh Yeshiva is obviously disheartened that his student is fasting without him; "Without me? – he said with an air of pretension."<sup>115</sup> Peretz's description of the Rosh Yeshiva's tone is hardly reverential, but rather dwells on his pettiness.

Both the townspeople and the Rosh Yeshiva seem to believe that Lemekh died because he was called to join the heavenly choir. Yet the last line of the story explains

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<sup>113</sup> Peretz, "Mekubolim," Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk Vol. 4, 22.

<sup>114</sup> Peretz, "Mekubolim," Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk Vol. 4, 22.

<sup>115</sup> Peretz, "Mekubolim," Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk Vol. 4, 23.



that the Rosh Yeshiva is still dissatisfied with Lemekh's death; "A few more fasts – he groaned – and he would have died with a divine kiss."<sup>116</sup> If the reader is really to believe that Lemekh was "taken" to join a heavenly choir, than the decision was God's; who is the Rosh Yeshiva to question it? On the other hand, if he died of hunger, how can the Rosh Yeshiva possibly have expected him to take on yet more fasts? Either way the Rosh Yeshiva comes across as begrudging his student recognition because he is jealous that Lemekh has accomplished what he was unable to do.<sup>117</sup>

In the final lines of the story, Peretz both chastises the town and cuts down the Rosh Yeshiva. The story ends by saying that all of the town would have wished such a lofty death as Lemekh's for themselves. In reality, they are all partially responsible for murdering him by starving him to death. Although Lemekh took the last fast upon himself, Peretz makes it clear that there are many other days when the fast is enforced, simply because the town doesn't bring enough food. Therefore, the townspeople are also responsible for Lemekh's covetous thought which made him take on this fourth and final fast because they didn't bring enough food earlier on. A deeper reading of the text reveals Peretz's true intention: to point a finger at the town for allowing Lemekh and the Rosh Yeshiva to go hungry for so long, and at the Rosh Yeshiva himself for his petty jealousy of his student.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Peretz, "Mekubolim," Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk Vol. 4, 25.

<sup>117</sup> According to Ruth Wisse the final line of the story is very similar to the famous punchline of the joke about training a horse to go without food, which makes the Rosh Yeshiva all the more ridiculous. Wisse, 32-33.

<sup>118</sup> Wisse, 32.

Indeed, underneath the overt tone of mystical admiration, “Mekubolim” is laced with an irony, which, although different from the biting satirical tone of a maskilic satire, nonetheless defies any sort of mystical interpretation of the text, and directs the reader rather to question the social conditions that have led to the dire poverty of the main characters, as well as the entire town of Lashchev.<sup>119</sup> Roskies describes the last line of the story as a “satiric punchline, which owed more to De Maupassant than to the Ba’al Shem Tov.”<sup>120</sup> Yet, despite Peretz’s implied criticism of the town, and his slightly more obvious mocking of the Rosh Yeshiva, Lemekh does escape Peretz’s critical eye fairly unscathed, and emerges as a solidly sympathetic character, which might have understandably confused Peretz’s maskilic readers. However, Lemekh escapes Peretz’s critical eye because he functions both as part of Peretz’s social critique, as well as a stand-in for the artist. Thus it is from the figure of Lemekh and his dual function that Peretz’s neo-Hasidism will grow.

As the same time that Peretz develops his neo-Hasidism, he cultivates an antidote to any sort of mystical reading of his stories. Peretz developed throughout his oeuvre a specific technique of raising someone up only to cut them down, thus creating a sort of mystical strawman, who is oftentimes only revealed to be made of straw in the last sentence of his stories. As much as Peretz uses mystical concepts, it is important to remember that “Peretz is not a mystic, nor a religious believer...” and that he approaches everything from the consciousness of “a modern artistic

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<sup>119</sup> Lashchev is one of the towns that Peretz visits in his *Bilder fun a provints-rayze* and is indeed poverty stricken.

<sup>120</sup> Roskies, Bridge of Longing, 108.

master.”<sup>121</sup> When Peretz utilizes his mystical strawman in his *Khsidish* stories, it is actually a key to unlocking their true meanings, which are actually antithetical to any sort of mystical interpretations.

In addition to creating a mystical strawman, Peretz uses three more techniques to subvert any sort of pious or mystical readings of his stories. The first is to make the rebbe seem ridiculous, or at least undermine him, so that the reader will not take him too seriously, even though on the surface Peretz’s flowery descriptions of the rebbe’s mystical prowess may at first lead the reader to believe otherwise. Peretz does this in “Dem rebens tsibek,” “Er zekhroyne levrokhe,” “Nisim unefloes,” “Kores,” and “Simkhe shebesimkhe.” Another method of Peretz’s is to completely strip the rebbe of his religious content and endow him with a superior humanism, such as in “Oyb nokh nisht hekher” and “Berl der shnayder.” Peretz’s third *modus operandi*, which is especially consistent with Haskalah literature and his own early works such as “Dos Shtrayml,” is to allow the reader to hear criticism of Hasidim and their rebbes from the horse’s mouth – to allow a Hasid free range in his thoughts in a monologue form, such as in “Az me zagt meshuge,” “Er zekhroyne levrokhe,” and actually most stories that he provides with an “authentic,” Hasidic narrator.

“Mishnas Khasidim” (1902, 1894 in Hebrew) is a superb example of all of these techniques at play. This story appears on the surface to be one long paean to the mystical power of song and dance. In this story the rebbe of Nemirov is able to communicate with animals and inanimate objects through song. He is able to unite the whole world in song and break through to the highest levels of heaven. According to

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<sup>121</sup> Meisel, *I. L. Peretz: Zayn lebn un shafn*, 177.

the rebbe, “The whole world is nothing more than a song and a dance for the Holy One, blessed be He. Everyone is a choirboy and everyone sings His praise...”<sup>122</sup> The zenith of the story – and the only real plot element – is when the rebbe of Nemirov dances at his only daughter’s wedding, and reaches the height of mystical perfection – truly becoming a divine melody – and elevating everyone else around him as well, only for the narrator to notice that the new son-in-law neither sings nor dances. The rebbe reassures the narrator that the son-in-law’s discourse on Torah will be the equivalent of the rebbe’s singing and dancing, and indeed it is so. The reader is swept away by the music that Peretz evokes, until the very end of the story, when the rebbe takes the narrator aside and explains that; “I danced in the same way; only one melody didn’t penetrate. It stands at the door: The Vilna Gaon’s student...eh!”<sup>123</sup> The rebbe then tells the narrator to go give the gentile wagon drivers something to drink. The reader is catapulted down from the loftiest of heights by the rebbe himself, whose groan of disappointment cuts the narrator “in the heart like a knife.”<sup>124</sup>

In the last line of the story, the narrator says that he never understood what the rebbe meant when he told him to give a drink to the gentiles. Since in the Hasidic genre, a rebbe’s words always carry weight, making the rebbe’s last lines so mundane diminishes the significance of all that came before, or at least is as jarring to the reader as it is to the narrator. Such a prosaic statement coming from a rebbe belongs more to Perl’s *Megale Temirin* than to the seemingly Hasidic tale that Peretz has just

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<sup>122</sup> Peretz, “Mishnas, khsidim,” Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 4 179.

<sup>123</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 4, 186.

<sup>124</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 4, “186.

spun. Furthermore, there is an ambiguousness to the rebbe's statement that "only one melody didn't penetrate."<sup>125</sup> The reader assumes that it is the son-in-law's melody that is blocked, but it is not entirely clear from the rebbe's words that it is not his own melody. The whole ending leaves both the narrator and the reader somewhat confused and subtracts from the rebbe's initial mystical aura, revealing the mystical strawman underneath and the irony that is hidden in the text. According to Ken Frieden, "Peretz's ironies unsettle his narrators' overt expressions, and several of the major Chassidic tales revolve around narrators whose own implicit ambivalences are essential to their meaning."<sup>126</sup>

Indeed a closer reading of the irony in the text reveals much more about the neo-Hasidic crux of the story. Firstly, there is a linguistic connection between the Hasidim and the idol worship from the biblical episode of the golden calf.<sup>127</sup> When the rebbe dances the Hasidim dance around him "iggul betokh iggul,"<sup>128</sup> or "in a circle inside of a circle." The word *iggul* is very close to the word *egel* or "calf." Since this comparison comes unwittingly from the Hasidic narrator, it adds an element of irony to the story. Peretz also uses exaggeration to create irony in this story. When the narrator begins describing the unparalleled joy experienced at the rebbe's daughter's wedding, he testifies that "the oldest (wedding guest) of them all, Reb Tsats, told me – and Reb Tsats is not one to speak just for the sake of speaking –

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<sup>125</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 4, 186.

<sup>126</sup> Frieden, 282.

<sup>127</sup> Ken Frieden makes this connection with idol worship, and shows more evidence from the Hebrew version of the story as well. Frieden, 300-301.

<sup>128</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 4, 184.

that that was the first *simcha* since creation.”<sup>129</sup> By defending Reb Tsats as someone who does not speak for the sake of speaking, the narrator is actually bringing into question Reb Tsats’s credibility, especially when he has a name like “Tsats,” which evokes the Yiddish word “tsastke,” or “ornament.” In fact, this statement wakes the reader up to the fact that the whole story is one big ornamentation. Everything the narrator says is an exaggeration, such as when he describes the rebbe’s dancing as “a third or even a whole half [of paradise.]”<sup>130</sup> The numerous exaggerations piled atop one another ultimately contribute to an ironic reading of the story and a lack of faith in the narrator. If the rebbe of Nemirov can really move the heavens with his song and dance, why was his melody ultimately blocked, as is suggested by the rebbe’s ambiguous closing statements? Was it because of some mystical conflict with his Lithuanian son-in-law, as a more neo-romantic reading would suggest? Or is Peretz once again simply up to his old tricks of cutting down his characters with a mystical strawman? The answer is perhaps both. As we have seen, the conflict between reason and passion is a major theme both in Peretz’s work from the beginning as well as his own biography. Both poles attracted him, therefore keeping him in a state of perpetual conflict and inner contradiction. This state of contradiction is pivotal in understanding Peretz: “One has to understand the whole Peretz, because it is specifically in the contradiction that the real Peretz lies, his unity and his wholeness is embodied in the real and alleged contradictions, in them lies hidden his philosophy

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<sup>129</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 4, 182.

<sup>130</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk v. 4, 182.

his artistic-social credo.”<sup>131</sup> These conflicting interests may explain why Peretz had a deep love of both satire and folklore, and how they come to co-exist in so many of his stories. Although Peretz does partially undermine a completely positive reading of the stories, it is significant that his criticism is both subtle and not entirely overpowering, such that many people often miss it. For example, it is possible to interpret the ending as an expression of the rebbe’s humanist concern even for the gentile wagon drivers. Furthermore, there is a part of Peretz that is also inspired by the sincerity of Lemekh and the spiritual energy that the Nemirover Rebbe’s song generates for his Hasidim – whether or not it has any real mystical value. Indeed, Peretz can be both ironic and yet still inspiring, and his modern readers – those who perceived both strands – loved him for it.

Although “Dos Shtrayml” and “Hakhnoses Kale” are about Hasidim they are not really part of Peretz’s *Khsidish* stories<sup>132</sup>, and there is some debate as to whether “Mekubolim” belongs either. As Niger illustrates, “Mekubolim” marks a change in Peretz’s tone; however, it is not entirely clear that the two main characters are even Hasidic. It is hard to draw a neat line between Peretz’s merely Hasidic-themed stories and actual *Khsidish* stories, as “Mishnas Khsidim” was published as early as 1894 in Hebrew, the same year as “Hakhnoses kale” and “Mekubolim.” Perhaps it would be more useful to look at all of Peretz’s Hasidic tales as a whole, in order to best appreciate his development as a writer. However, his later tales are clearly different,

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<sup>131</sup> Belis, 11.

<sup>132</sup> The term *khsidish* was first used in the first edition of Peretz’s collected works in 1901. It originally only included six stories: “Mekubolim,” “Oyb nisht nokh hekher,” “A shmues,” “Shehasimkhe bemoano,” “Tsvishn tsvey berg,” and “A gilgul fun a nigun,” as well as the first three “Yoykhanan melamed” stories.

yet they preserve certain Peretzian continuities, as we shall see in “Oyb nisht nokh hekher,” written in 1900, thus perhaps deserving the title “high-*Khsidish*.”

“Oyb nisht nokh hekher” begins with the Nemirover Hasidim speculating where their rebbe disappears to at *slichos* time every year. They believe that he must ascend to heaven at this time. A skeptical Litvak decides to follow the rebbe and discovers that he dresses up as a peasant, chops wood in the forest and brings it to a poor, sick woman. The story is devoid of miracles or any mystical aspect whatsoever. The Litvak becomes a follower of the rebbe based on his humanistic achievements. This story is perhaps the most positive story in Peretz’s *Khsidish* cycle. The rebbe has been so stripped of any religious or metaphysical aspects that he becomes a safe hero for Peretz. Yet even in this seemingly favorable Hasidic tale, Peretz the maskil still peeks out.

First of all, since all the Hasidim believe their rebbe ascends to heaven, they come off looking somewhat foolish, especially when the reader discovers that he actually disappears into the woods. Secondly, just the fact that there is no real miracle fits in with the maskilic schema of supposed miracles really having rational explanations. Thirdly, Peretz interjects certain ironic comments about the Litvak, which serve to ground the reader, lest one become too mystically inspired by the story. Additionally, the rebbe is also described in very human terms. The reader first sees him groaning for a full hour before he gets out of bed, and then urinating – hardly a majestic introduction. Finally, when the Hasidim at the end claim that their rebbe goes to heaven, the Litvak says “Oyb nisht nokh hekher,” creating a secular



humanist moral, which effectively means that helping your fellow human beings is on a higher level than appearing before God.

There is an interesting detail in the story that is worth highlighting that illustrates Peretz's qualified use of religious material. The rebbe says his *slichos*, or penitential prayers, while kindling wood for the poor, sick woman: "And, while placing the wood in the oven, the rebbe said the first part of *slichos* with a groan... And he lit the fire, and the wood burned cheerfully, and he said with a lighter spirit the second part of *slichos*. The third part of *slichos* he said when the wood caught fire, and he covered the stove."<sup>133</sup> Jews say *slichos* during the period before Yom Kippur in order to move themselves to repent for their transgressions. In saying his *slichos* while lighting the fire for the sick woman, Peretz is equating penitence with taking real action to help one's fellow human being. Thus even this ritualistic element becomes secularized and de-sanctified under Peretz's pen. What is really "holy," according to Peretz, is real social action.

This story also provides a nice dénouement to Peretz's running leitmotif of reason versus passion. When the Litvak becomes a Nemirover Hasid at the end of the story, there is a marriage of reason and passion. The Litvak, representing reason, dedicates himself to a leader, who is passionate in his service to his fellow man. The final product: a Misnagdic-Hasid, who pronounces the secular humanist moral of the story: "if not even higher."

"Oyb nisht nokh hekher" may be largely responsible for the misconceptions about Peretz and neo-Hasidism. It is one of his most popular *Khsidish* stories. Since

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<sup>133</sup> Peretz, "Oyb nokh nisht hekher," Y. L. Peretz: Ale Verk, v. 4, 102.

there are no overtly negative references to Hasidim, the secular reader is free to bask in the moral superiority of the rebbe, without realizing that it is just this emphasis on his moral rather than mystical actions that makes him so appealing and ultimately maskilic. However, since his outer garb is Hasidic, a reader who is not familiar with Peretz and his works' literary and historical context automatically assumes that Peretz is glorifying Hasidim and that the work is neo-Hasidic in an entirely different sense than Peretz originally intended.<sup>134</sup>

This misreading of Peretz's *Khsidish* stories only became more entrenched with the passage of time, hence the tricky appellation of "neo-Hasidic." The problem with using this term is that it is based on misconceptions about the true meaning of Peretz's stories. If we recall Dan's definition from the first chapter, we see how it was precisely a misreading of Peretz's stories that led to the evolution of this term to describe "the highest and purest aspect of Judaism" within a framework of keen awareness of the needs of others and adherence to social justice.<sup>135</sup> The term "neo-Hasidic" also incorporates the ideology of later writers and critics who were actually impressed and inspired by real aspects of Hasidism. For example, Shloyme Bikl in his article "Perets – neo-maskil oder neo-khosid?" uses "Oyb nisht nokh hekher" to prove that the story is not just an artistically-rendered "*khsidish*" story, but rather actually essentially Hasidic, since the idea that

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<sup>134</sup> My Hasidic mother-in-law read Peretz's tales in Beth Yakov as a girl, since she was in a Yiddish program and at the time there were not Yiddish stories written by religious authors. Her description of them leads me to believe that these young readers were not aware of the irony or secular-humanist morals. I also know a convert to Judaism whose interest in Judaism was first piqued by reading "Bontshe shvayg" in a college course in Jewish literature.

<sup>135</sup> Joseph Dan, "A Bow to Frumkinian Hasidism." Modern Judaism 11,2 (1991) :175-193.

kindling the oven of a sick, old widow is “if not even higher” than a penitential poem and in general a flight in heaven on the wings of a burning prayer. This “If not higher” is not as S. Niger believes merely “*Khsidish*,” but actually a cornerstone of Hasidism.<sup>136</sup>

Bikl is incorrect both in deeming this the cornerstone of Hasidism and by assuming that Peretz had any intention of making it essentially Hasidic. Perhaps by the time he was writing, neo-Hasidism had so supplanted historical Hasidism that Bikl actually mistook Peretz’s Hasidism for the real thing. Bikl’s later misreading only serves better to illustrate how Peretz, in writing “Oyb nisht nokh hekher,” “created not only art, but also, in a certain sense, a neo-Hasidic religion”,<sup>137</sup> although this was actually unintentional on Peretz’s part. This transposition of secular humanist values onto Hasidism began after the publication of Peretz’s *Khsidish* stories, when the Jewish intelligentsia became Hasidic-crazed to the point where

the politically unaffiliated intelligentsia grabbed onto “Hasidism” like a dogma of belief. The cloudy faith in “Hasidism” sufficed for them not to have to break their heads over all of the hard problems of life. There even was a short period of about five years when critical thought was banned altogether. Not only the formal, dry thought dismissed as “Misnagedism,” but also thinking in general became something superfluous.<sup>138</sup>

These intellectuals did not become Hasidic, but Peretz’s Hasidic tales provided them with a spiritual outlet, after the dry rationalism of the Haskalah and the wide-spread abandonment of religious belief that had followed. Perhaps the Jewish intelligentsia became burnt out after their encounter with modernity. Nomberg describes their

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<sup>136</sup> Shloyme Bikel, *Shrayber fun mayn dor* (New York: Farlag Matones, 1958-1970) 251.

<sup>137</sup> Bikel, 253.

<sup>138</sup> Nomberg, 96-97.

attraction to Hasidism as a “rescue from despair”;<sup>139</sup> Niger explains it as an “expression of freed energies” in the wake of the socialist movement.<sup>140</sup> Whatever the case may be, they may have in fact willfully misinterpreted Peretz’s *Khsidish* stories to suit their own desire to let go of logic for a while and indulge in pseudo-religious oblivion. This pseudo-religion is likely the forerunner to the progressive form of Judaism which today goes by the name neo-Hasidism, which owes a large debt to people reading, or rather misreading, Peretz and later-generation Hasidic-themed tales and assuming that they encapsulate essential Hasidic values.

Of course, Peretz himself was never a Hasid of any color; “Peretz was never a Hasid, nor a ‘Hasidist,’ nor a neo-Hasid.”<sup>141</sup> Nor did Peretz intend to impart any sort of religious message in his stories, and had little regard for a religious neo-Hasidic movement, whether it claimed him as progenitor or not;

[The neo-Hasidic path] doesn’t have any ground underneath its feet, an artificial “path,” because today’s youth don’t have any faith in the rebbe or in miracles. The whole division between “Hasidim” and “Misnagdim,” when it has to do with today’s intellectuals has no sense whatsoever and is nothing more than a poetic expression.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Nomberg, 96.

<sup>140</sup> Shmuel Niger, “Y. L. Peretz’s leben nokhn toyt,” *Di goldene kayt* 10 (1951) 47.

<sup>141</sup> Shmuel Niger, *Y. L. Perets : zayn lebn, zayn firndike perzenlekhkayt, zayne Hebreishe un Yidishe shriftn, zayn virkung* (Buenos Aires: Argentinener optayl fun Altveltlekhn Yidishn kultur-kongres, 1952) 275.

<sup>142</sup> Peretz in an interview. M. Olgin, “A tog mit Y. L. Perets,” *Forverts* 7 April 1912.

Nonetheless, Peretz played along with this trend socially, at least allowing himself to be made into a sort of rebbe,<sup>143</sup> to the point where some other contemporary writers found his posing as rebbe particularly grating.<sup>144</sup>

Yet if the Jewish intelligentsia were obsessed with Hasidim, they needed their own secular humanistic rebbe, and who could better fill this role than Peretz? He already had his “disciples,” since aspiring writers flocked to his apartment seeking his criticism, his “*haskome*,” and hopefully his help in getting themselves published; “He brought up and took care of whole generations of writers. Almost everyone that has a name now in Yiddish literature went through his *cheder* and owes him thanks for his literary education.”<sup>145</sup> One cannot over-emphasize his role as mentor and “father of a literary generation,” not to mention modern Yiddish literature. Peretz’s influence was so strong that some young writers even found it stifling.<sup>146</sup> In his book *Yitskhak Leybush Perets un zayn dor shrayber*, Nachman Meisel devotes a whole chapter, entitled “Perets – der lerer un vegvayzer,” to the subject of Peretz’s influence on Yiddish literature. He cites contemporary after contemporary of Peretz’s who claims that Peretz was the most influential Yiddish writer ever. In addition to his being a mentor, Peretz’s apartment was a place for writers and intellectuals to meet, exchange ideas, read each other their latest works and socialize, with Peretz presiding over and

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<sup>143</sup> “For the last fifteen years of his life Peretz played the role a literary rebbe, both consciously and unconsciously.” Braynen, “Iz Perets take geven a groyse perzenlekhkayt?” See also Tsevi Hirshkan, *Unter eyn dakh* (Warsaw: H. Bzshoza, 1931.) 173.

<sup>144</sup> See Meisels chapter, “Forvorfn un taynes tsu Y. L. Perets,” in *Y. L. Perets un zayn dor shrayber*.

<sup>145</sup> Nachman Meisel (citing Sh. Ansky), *Y. L. Peretz un zayn dor shrayber*, 159.

<sup>146</sup> See for example, Meisel’s conversation with Asch in Nachman Meisel, *Doyres un tkufes*, (New York: Folksbibliotek, 1942) 26-27.

leading all these activities. It seems almost natural that these formerly religious young men's relationship with Peretz would have "carried over in a new form the relationship and spirit that was still so fresh and alive in Hasidic Poland,"<sup>147</sup> i.e. that of a Hasid to his rebbe. Peretz was every bit as big a personality as a writer, and in fact some would argue more so; "Peretz led *tishn* because he was fundamentally more of a rebbe than a writer."<sup>148</sup> According to Sholem Asch, young writers used to gather at Peretz's house on Saturdays and sing Hasidic melodies, like "Oy, oy, rebenu."<sup>149</sup> The idea of Peretz as a rebbe figure to his literary disciples was so strong that it is one of the first things that Niger disputes in his book devoted to Peretz.<sup>150</sup> Niger makes such an effort because so many of his contemporaries indeed saw Peretz as a rebbe. When Baal-Makhshoves describes how several of the participants in Peretz's Jubilee in 1901 sang the Hasidic song "Undzer rebenyu," he says, "Already there existed the half-conscious acknowledgement that Peretz was something of a moral guide, a leader, a promise of something more, a *rebenyu*."<sup>151</sup> Peretz as rebbe remains a lasting image; "Peretz was the rebbe of the young Yiddish literature."<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Shloyme Mendelson, Shloyme Mendelson: Zayn lebn un shafn (New York: Unzer tsayt, 1949) 156.

<sup>148</sup> Yitzhak Dov Berkowitz, Dos Sholem Aleykhem bukh (New York : Sholem-Aleykhem Bukh Komitet, 1926) 158. Berkovitch is paraphrasing Sholem Aleichem.

<sup>149</sup> Sholem Asch, "My first meeting with Peretz," In This World and Next., Trans. Moshe Spiegel., 350.

<sup>150</sup> Nomberg, 25.

<sup>151</sup> Baal-Makhshoves, 207.

<sup>152</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, 245.

Yet no matter how much Peretz may have enjoyed playing the role of rebbe, the maskil in him makes his voice known in all of his *Khsidish* stories. According to Niger, these hybrid stories, which are neither completely maskilic nor completely Hasidic would perhaps be better labeled neo-maskilic; “Neo-maskilic would perhaps be better suited to describe many of Peretz’s *Khsidish* stories than neo-Hasidic.”<sup>153</sup> Of course, the term “neo-maskilic” is just as complex a term as “neo-Hasidic,” and the relationship between the terms “maskilic” - “neo-maskilic” and “Hasidic” - “neo-Hasidic” is analogous. Despite the fact that on the surface Peretz may seem to be glorifying Hasidim and/or their rebbes in these stories, we have seen how he always administers a sometimes last minute, and usually very subtle, sleight of hand, which ultimately casts the story in a completely different light, one not inconsistent with his maskilic heritage.

In the battle between Misnagdim and Hasidim, the maskilim tended to align themselves with the Misnagdim. Peretz, the “neo-maskil,” uses this battle to express his own inner conflicts. “Tvishn tsvey berg” (1900) (Between Two Mountains) is about the opposition between the Brisker Rov, who is a Misnagid, and the Bialer Rebbe, a Hasid. The Bialer Rebbe in this story was once a student of the Brisker Rov; however, he found the Brisker Rov’s practice of Judaism both elitist and lacking in warmth, and thus defected to the Hasidic camp, eventually becoming a rebbe himself. These two “mountains” eventually meet when the Brisker Rov travels to the town where the Bialer Rebbe is stationed, because his daughter, who is in labor, lives there. In theory, the Bialer Rebbe has the advantage, since the narrator is one of his

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<sup>153</sup> Niger, Y. L. Peretz, 289.

Hasidim. When the two “mountains” finally meet towards the end of the story, the reader expects some sort of conversion on the part of the Brisker Rov, who witnesses the ecstatic dance of the Bialer Rebbe’s Hasidim, in which “everything sings – the sky sings, the firmaments sing, and the earth beneath sings, and the soul of the world sings --- everything sings!”<sup>154</sup> The Brisker Rov’s response to this vision is to remind the Bialer Rebbe that it is time for afternoon prayers, and as soon as he speaks, everything is reduced again to the mundane. While it is possible to read the story as the failure of the Misnagid to kindle any passion in his own heart and as a glorification of the joy with which the Hasid worships, Peretz sows contradictory seeds for a different kind of reading.

The Brisker Rov is described as being physically powerful; “Now that was a man – a pillar of iron, I’m telling you! A tall, tall Jew, really taller than average... people trembled before him, like before a king!”<sup>155</sup> Conversely, the Bialer Rebbe is “a thin, small man, with a little black beard, curly black *peyes*, a thoughtful, quiet voice.”<sup>156</sup> Even his name is diminutive: Reb Noyakhke. Furthermore, when the Brisker Rov comes into town, the storm immediately subsides and his daughter, who has been struggling for days in labor, finally gives birth. The most compelling evidence that the Bialer Rebbe is not the clear hero of the story is that the Brisker Rov is able to shatter the vision that the Bialer Rebbe has created, and quite simply that it is the Brisker Rov who gets the last word.

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<sup>154</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, vol. 2, 129.

<sup>155</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, vol. 2, 123.

<sup>156</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, vol. 2, 125.



Of course, the Bialer Rebbe is not without charm, and in many ways is still the more appealing of the two characters. When the Brisker Rov comes to the house where his daughter is in labor, his eyes were like “ritual slaughtering knives, bright knives flashed in them! And he roared like a lion: Away women!”<sup>157</sup> The narrator juxtaposes the Brisker Rov’s eyes and voice with those of the Bialer Rebbe’s;

The Bialer Rebbe’s eyes shine with such goodness, with such softness that they bring pleasure into the heart; when his gaze falls on you, you feel like you are being showered with gold... And his voice, that sweet voice, that satin-sweet voice – Master of the Universe – it grabs you by the heart, it caresses the heart so soft, so sweet... No one fears him, God forbid; rather the soul melts in love, in the sweetness of love, it wants to leave the body and unite with his soul...<sup>158</sup>

The Brisker Rov and the Bialer Rebbe are both portrayed as being great scholars; however, the Brisker Rov is depicted as being elitist in his knowledge, whereas according to the Bialer Rebbe “the Torah must be for all Jews!”<sup>159</sup> At the end of the story, there is no clear victory. The Bialer Rebbe has failed to move the Brisker Rov with the vision of the Hasidim dancing, yet he has made a significant enough impression that the Brisker Rov ceases persecuting Hasidim. It is worth noting that the three things that impress the Brisker Rov the most about the Bialer Rebbe is that he is a great scholar, he does not work miracles and he does not usually accept *pidyonot*. Significantly, Peretz has created a Hasidic rebbe that stands against some of the most common maskilic criticisms of rebbes: their supposed ignorance, false miracles, greed, and corruption. Peretz therefore captures the Hasidic passion and

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<sup>157</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, vol. 2, 111.

<sup>158</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, vol. 2, 111.

<sup>159</sup> Peretz, Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, vol. 2, 115.

love of one's fellow man, and discards everything that is not useful to him. In this way, this story is actually an example of a neo-maskilic appropriation of Hasidism in order to create perfect, humanist heroes. This story also illustrates how Peretz used the Hasidic genre to play out his own inner struggles.

Peretz pits the Hasid against the Misnagid in several of his stories, and this story in which the reader comes "between the two mountains" of traditional rabbinical learning and Hasidic passion and joy is in many ways the culmination of this leitmotif in Peretz's oeuvre. Peretz employs this great battle as an allegorical representation of the battle between reason and passion, which we have seen played such an important role in his own artistic character. As usual, this story reveals that the author himself was torn in both directions. This conflict is especially apparent in his *Khsidish* tales. In these stories the maskil in him is forced into a head-on confrontation with the artistic feeling Hasidism engendered: "There Peretz stood in sharp contrast with himself, because he himself was a maskil. The artistic unconscious in him, fought hard with his consciousness and he didn't even notice."<sup>160</sup> It is doubtful that this struggle was as unconscious as Nomberg presented it, but it seems rather that Peretz purposefully channeled it into the literary battle between Hasid and Misnagid. According to Baal-Makhshoves this tension permeated Peretz's whole relationship with Jewish life; "Peretz had a double relationship with Jewish life – a realistic and a romantic one."<sup>161</sup> Neither of these opposing inclinations ever fully reconciled itself to the other, but remained in perpetual conflict. This perpetual

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<sup>160</sup> Nomberg, 95.

<sup>161</sup> Baal-Makhshoves, 126.

conflict is a key to understanding Peretz; “Peretz’s whole essence was based on the fact that both of these forces activated one another and called out to one another.”<sup>162</sup>

In his life, Peretz often found himself torn in his loyalties. He habitually tried out new ideas as if trying on new clothing:

Peretz was subject to every sort of influence during his life. He was not very attached to ideas – he was a true free bird, a Don Juan in the world of ideas: he lived with the latest and the prettiest idea that conquered his heart... He treated them like pretty women... they should be attractive, shining and amusing, and – they shouldn’t demand a wedding canopy and contract...in the domain of all political, moral, and aesthetic beliefs, he was the biggest practitioner of “free love.”<sup>163</sup>

Naturally, some of these ideas were in conflict with one another, but such a conflict reflects Peretz’s own nature, which had at its essence basic tension between reason and passion, but also between art for art’s sake and a responsibility to his people, atheism<sup>164</sup> and a strong belief in morality and the worth of inherently Jewish sources, maskil and rebbe.

Yet as much as Peretz might have tried on new literary outfits, there is an undeniable unity to his writing throughout his career. As we have seen, even in his earliest work, he displayed a feeling for the common person, and especially empathized with the downtrodden. He was always critical of social injustice, and

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<sup>162</sup> Oyslender, N. “Peretses ‘shtet un shtetlekh,’” Tsaytskrift 1(Minsk: Institut far vaysruslandisher kultur, 1926) 61.

<sup>163</sup> Nomberg, 56.

<sup>164</sup> According to Mukdoni, in his article “How I. L. Peretz Wrote His Folk Tales,” In This World and the Next trans. Moshe Spiegel (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1958). 356, Peretz once gave a speech to a group of workers that “revealed himself as an intensely faithful Jew.” Most likely he was not faithful to rabbinic Judaism, but apparently he was faithful in aspects of Judaism, which is yet another contradiction.

believed that one must fight with whatever powers one is endowed in order to combat it, which in his case was his literary prowess. Although he had little use for religion, he understood its power to give people's lives meaning and how it could bring out the noblest aspects of a Jew, and therefore set about his life's task of re-working Judaism into a usable humanist entity that could fuel a national rejuvenation.

Therefore, when Peretz appropriated the Hasidic genre he “farperetzt” – Peretzized – Hasidism, imbuing it with poetry and transforming it into an ethical code to the point that “he wrote his own Torah... He was himself a rebbe. He wasn't a *khoyzer*.”<sup>165</sup> In an article entitled “Y. L. Peretz's kuk af der yidisher literatur,” Kalmanovitch proposes that Peretz viewed a poet as a prophet as well as the founder of a religion.<sup>166</sup> Literature was holy for Peretz and a vehicle for redemption. As a secular rebbe from a maskilic background, his goal was to provide a moral basis to the newly evolving Yiddishism, which would be a substitute for traditional Judaism. Had Yiddishism persevered, Peretz would have been its Messiah.

Poised as Peretz was for redeeming his nation through literature, it perhaps becomes more understandable why Peretz took out the reference to Hasidim and maskilim as potential sources for conflict in his later version of “Monish,” with which we started our discussion. At this point in his career, Peretz fully bridged the gap between the Haskalah and modern Yiddish literature. Satire was only one of many literary tricks he had up his sleeves, and would use it when it suited his own ends, and with his own *trompe-l'oeil*, in which more often than not the supposed parody would

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<sup>165</sup> Niger, Y. L. Peretz, 22.

<sup>166</sup> Kalmanovitch, 115-116.

be turned on its head. In his Hasidic-themed tales, he had managed to create heroes like the Nemirover and Bialer Rebbes, who effectively combined the best of the maskilic and Hasidic traditions. It was no longer in the interest of national solidarity and rejuvenation to single out one side for unqualified mockery. Finally, at this point – whether or not Peretz had fully accepted this role – the Neo-maskilic/Neo-Hasidic rebbe of Yiddish literature had a reputation to live up to. His *toyres*, on the other hand, as soon as they were released into the literary wilds, become fair game for future writers to interpret and appropriate, or reject as they saw fit. In the next chapter we will see how the next generation of Yiddish authors navigated the post-Peretz literary world, and specifically concentrate on Aaron Zeitlin's neo-Hasidic poetry, as a direct continuation of the literary movement that Peretz started.

### **Chapter Three – Between a Broken Heart and Belief: Aaron Zeitlin’s Existential Hasidim**

Peretz’s literary salon had some competition in Warsaw – Hillel Zeitlin’s *literarische shtub* on Shliske 60. Although not as famous as Zeglina 1, Hillel Zeitlin’s home also drew crowds of Yiddish and Hebrew writers, as well as other members of the Jewish intelligentsia. The two authors’ homes had their own distinctions. In Peretz’s salon, Peretz authoritatively advised fledgling writers, whereas Hillel Zeitlin’s *literarische shtub* was more of a meeting place where ideas were exchanged. In the Zeitlin home the food was kosher, since Hillel Zeitlin was an observant Jew. Peretz, on the other hand, was an atheist. In Zeglina 17 Peretz played the *literary* rebbe, but in Shliske 60 actual Hasidim gathered and sometimes even learned Kabbalah with Hillel Zeitlin, who in addition to being a highly influential writer and public figure, gave free Kabbalah lessons. Therefore, “If one talks about holding a *tish* and being a rebbe, the true Hasidic-literary *tish* was perhaps really in Hillel Zeitlin’s and not Peretz’s home.”<sup>1</sup>

Hillel Zeitlin had three children, Aaron, the subject of this study, Elchonon, a journalist, poet, critic and social activist, who died of illness in the Warsaw Ghetto, and Rivka, who was killed by the Nazis. Elchonon chronicles his experiences growing up in this extraordinary family in his memoir, *In a literarisher shtub*. Both brothers imbibed Yiddish and Hebrew literature on a daily basis. From a young age

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<sup>1</sup> Shmuel Niger, foreword, *In a literarisher shtub*, by Elchonon Zeitlin (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1946) vi-viii.

they became acquainted with Yiddish and Hebrew writers of consequence in Warsaw, as well as with famous visiting writers. Aaron Zeitlin was accustomed to reading his youthful poetry to published authors, and both brothers participated in the literary debates that took place in their house.<sup>2</sup> They also accompanied their father to literary events.<sup>3</sup> The Zeitlin brothers grew up fully au courant of modern literary trends, while on Shabbat and holidays they prayed with their father in a Hasidic prayer house. Although the other members of his family were killed by the Nazis, including his wife and young son, Aaron Zeitlin survived to become one of Yiddish literature's greatest writers, who was a uniquely modernist metaphysical poet. Like Peretz, Zeitlin found inspiration and creative raw material in Hasidism; however, rather than mining the Jewish past for sources for national-secular cultural renewal, Zeitlin would expertly utilize both kabbalistic and Hasidic material in order to create poetry that was also a personal prayer, which was both a hymn of praise and, particularly after the Holocaust, a broken-hearted plea.

The single most important influence on Aaron Zeitlin was his father, Hillel Zeitlin (1871-1942), and therefore it is important to have some familiarity with the life, personality and literary accomplishments of Hillel Zeitlin, in order to better understand the development of Aaron Zeitlin as a writer. Hillel Zeitlin was one of the major Jewish thinkers in interwar Poland and, as we noted earlier, his home was a meeting place for intellectuals and Hasidim alike. Hillel Zeitlin was a unique Neo-Hasid in his own right. Whereas many other authors of his period wrote Hasidic

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<sup>2</sup> Elias Schulman, Portraits and Studies (New York: Knight Printing Corporation, 1979) 349.

<sup>3</sup> Elchonon Zeitlin, 61.

material and could be termed “neo-Hasidic writers,” Hillel Zeitlin actually lived a neo-Hasidic life. According to Dov Sadan:

In our literature there was a group of Romantics and neo-romantics – They were the poets and writers, which, through the medium of art and poetry, relived the second birth of Hasidism. But Zeitlin did not want to create a Romantic world, but also to realize it, to live it.<sup>4</sup>

Hillel Zeitlin was born in Korma, Belorussia to a family steeped in Chabad Hasidism. He made the transition to a free-thinking intellectual in a manner characteristic of his period by reading Haskalah literature and teaching himself secular subjects.<sup>5</sup> Hillel Zeitlin was exposed to a variety of literary and political movements during his career and underwent several transitions before becoming the neo-Hasid of his later years. From 1896-1905, he lived in Homel, associating with the circle of Hebrew writers there, including Yosef Brenner, Uri Nisan Gnessin, and Zalman Yitsak Anokhi. In Homel he became influenced by Positivist philosophy. He made his debut as a Hebrew writer in *Ha-Shalach* with an article entitled, “Ha-tov ve-ha-ra” (The Good and the Bad) about the problem of optimism and pessimism in philosophy, and he continued to publish articles – at this point exclusively in Hebrew. During this period Hillel Zeitlin was active in the Zionist movement and attended the Fifth Zionist Conference in 1901. After the Kishinev pogrom and the debate over Uganda as a possible Jewish homeland, he became a Territorialist, eschewing the idea of political or cultural normalization for the Jews. In 1905 he moved to Vilna, where

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<sup>4</sup> Dov Sadan, Toyern un tirn. (Tel-Aviv:Farlag Yisroel-Bukh, 1979) 24-25.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Hillel Zeitlin’s biography see Mikhail Krutikov, Shachar Pinsker, “The Zeitlin Family” The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe on-line, <[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zeitlin\\_Family](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zeitlin_Family)> and eds. Niger, Shmuel and Shatsky, Yakov, Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur (New York: Altveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres, 1956-1981). v. 8, 575-580.



he was on the editorial board of *Ha-Zeman*. He published prolifically in Yiddish in *Dos yidishe folk*, *Haynt* and *Der moment*. At first he published in Yiddish merely as a means to spread enlightenment to the broad masses, but with time he began to view Yiddish as a powerful force against the spread of assimilation.<sup>6</sup> In Vilna Zeitlin's home was already a meeting place for Jewish intellectuals. In 1906<sup>7</sup> he moved to Warsaw to edit *Dos yidishe vokhnblat*. Hillel Zeitlin settled at Shliske 60, which became the literary meeting place Elchonon so vividly describes in his memoir about growing up in the Zeitlin home, *In a literarisher shtub*. Among the writers and cultural figures that often congregated there were, Z. Shneur, Y. D. Berkovitch, Z. Anokhi, P. Hirshbein, A. N. Gnessin, Y. Katzenelson, Y. Mastboym, Y. Fichman, D. Frishman, and Y. M. Vaysenberg. During this period, Hillel Zeitlin published his famous "Ernste shmuesn" in *Dos yidishe vokhnblat*, which harshly criticized the Jewish socialist parties.

Although Hillel Zeitlin had initially set out on the typical maskilic path, in addition to turning more and more towards Yiddish as his literary medium, he also gradually began to move back to the traditional Judaism he had jettisoned as a young man, and in his last years he was outwardly indistinguishable from his Hasidic brethren. The religious historian Hillel Seidman writes of his encounter with Hillel Zeitlin a year before he was murdered by the Nazis:

...when I arrived at 4 P.M., I found about a *minyán* of religious Jews, including some famous *talmidei chachamin*. Zeitlin sat in his chair,

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<sup>6</sup> Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur, 576.

<sup>7</sup> YIVO Ency. says 1906, Reyzen Lexicon says 1907, and Shatzky/Niger Lexicon says 1908, which makes more sense if he had already established a literary salon in Vilna.

white with emotion, and his voice was fiery as he spoke of his mystic hopes for the coming year.<sup>8</sup>

At a time when the Jewish intelligentsia was, in general, far from the world of traditional Judaism, Hillel Zeitlin managed to seamlessly integrate his highly intellectual and politically up-to-date literary persona with his fervent religious belief. He sought to make his readers aware of the great thinkers of religious-Jewish philosophy and was especially interested in Kabbalah and Hasidism – interests which he would pass down to his son, Aaron. Hillel was, in fact, among the first modern scholars of the *Zohar*, which he viewed “as the highest expression of Jewish literature and spirituality.”<sup>9</sup> Hillel Zeitlin also wrote many articles and monographs about Hasidism and its leaders, such as “Der alter rebe,” which is about R’ Shneur Zalman of Liady (*Moment*; 1912, 1913), *Reb Nachman M’ Breslav* (Warsaw; 1910), *Reb Yisroel Baal Shem Tov* (Warsaw; 1911), and *Khsidus* (Warsaw; 1922). He was the first person outside of the Breslover Hasidic community to compose a major study of Reb Nachman.<sup>10</sup> In his later years he made a sort of rapprochement with the Zionist movement, and although he did not officially endorse it, he believed in actively rebuilding the land of Israel.

Hillel Zeitlin’s religiosity was unique in his day because it was a synthesis of both traditional Judaism and Western philosophy. Although he ultimately embraced Hasidism and followed ritual law, he was nonetheless “neo-hasidic,” since he did not

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<sup>8</sup> Hillel Seidman, *The Warsaw Ghetto Diaries*, (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, Inc., 1997) 123.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan Wolski, “The Secret of Yiddish: Zoharic Composition in the Poetry of Aaron Zeitlin,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts*, 20 (2009) 160.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979) 17.

seek to purge himself of his worldly knowledge but fully incorporated it into his system of belief. This synthesis was all the more pronounced in Aaron Zeitlin, whose lifestyle was outwardly that of an intellectual and who appeared both in dress and religious observance to be quite secular, yet still held tenaciously onto his father's religious inheritance and professed a deep and unwavering belief in God. Aaron Zeitlin's writing is peppered with Hasidic/kabbalistic terms and sees the world through the eyes of a kabbalist: "Zeitlin is not only knowledgeable about Kabbalah, but also someone who thinks with the concepts of Jewish mysticism and sees through its images."<sup>11</sup> In addition to Kabbalah, Zeitlin drew inspiration from Hasidism – in particular Chabad Hasidism, which was legacy from his father. Hillel also bequeathed to Aaron a fascination with Breslav Hasidism. Aaron Zeitlin composed a Yiddish abridged version of Hillel's *Oro shel mashiakh be-torat ha-breslavi* (Light of the Moshiach in the Torah of Breslav), in addition to writing his own poems and essays on Reb Nachman. According to Yitzchak Niborski, "Not only the figure, the life, and the work of Rabbi Nachman are found at the center of numerous texts of Zeitlin, but they seem to have determined entire parts of his personality as a writer."<sup>12</sup> If Peretz was the founder of literary neo-Hasidism, Zeitlin's neo-Hasidism became something larger, which colored both his writing and his religious-ideological conception of existence.

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<sup>11</sup> Shloyme Bickel, *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, (New York: Farlag Matones, 1958) 129.

<sup>12</sup> Yitzchak Niborski, "Mysticisme et Modernité Dans La Littérature Yiddish," *Yod: Revue des études hébraïques et juives modernes et contemporaines* 31-32 (1990) 160.

Aaron Zeitlin was the oldest of the three Zeitlin children and was born in 1899 in Avarovitch, White Russia.<sup>13</sup> He spent his early childhood in Homel, followed by Vilna and Warsaw. In Warsaw Zeitlin finished Gymnasium and attended some Hochschule. Aaron Zeitlin was an avid reader and was able to read in eight languages, including Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Russian, German, French, English and Spanish, several of which he taught himself.<sup>14</sup> He was familiar with the literature and philosophy in these languages of both well-known and lesser known authors.<sup>15</sup>

Aaron Zeitlin started publishing in Hebrew children's magazines by age eleven. He published his first poem in Yiddish in 1914 in Nizer's "Yiddisher Velt," entitled "Metatron," which was an apocalyptic epic poem that met with some renown.<sup>16</sup> In the 1920s he wrote poems, articles, essays and reviews both in Hebrew and Yiddish for such publications as *Undzer ekspres*, *Bikher velt*, *Literarische bleter*, *Teater tsaytung*, *Varshever almanakh*, *Varshever shriftn*, *Ha-shalach*, *Ha-tikufah* and American newspapers such as *Forverts* and *Tog-morgn zshurnal*. He also edited a Hebrew monthly journal for children, *Shibolim*. In 1922 Zeitlin published a book of lyrical poems, *Shotns afn shney*. By 1926 he was the editor for the literary

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<sup>13</sup> For bibliographical information on Aaron Zeitlin see Mikhail Krutikov, Shachar Pinsker, "The Zeitlin Family" The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe on-line, <[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zeitlin\\_Family](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Zeitlin_Family)>. Also see Zalmen Reyzn, "Tsaytlin, Arn," *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologie*, Vol. 3 (Vilna: Farlag B. Kletskin, 1929) 297-99, although it only covers until the 1920's. For information on his later years, see "Biografie" in Aaron Zeitlin, *Literarische un filosofische eseyen*, (New York: Altveltlekh yidishn kultur-kongres, 1980.) Zeitlin refused to be included in Nizer and Shatzky's *Leksikon* because it was financed by restitutional funds from Germany.

<sup>14</sup> Ezekiel Lifschutz, "Bamerkungen funem tsuzamenshteler," *Literarische un filosofische eseyen* (New York: Altveltlekh yidishn kultur-kongres, 1980) 389.

<sup>15</sup> Lifschutz, 389.

<sup>16</sup> *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologie*, Vol. 3, 297.

supplement to the newspaper *Undzer ekspres*. In 1929 he became well known as a dramatist, with his publication of *Yankev Frank* and then *Brenner* later that year. Also in 1929 the Vilna Troupe performed his *Yidn-shtot*. In 1930 he became head of the Yiddish Pen Club. During this time Zeitlin, together with Bashevis Singer, co-edited the prestigious literary Journal *Globus*. In 1937 he published his novel *Brenendike erd*. In the years up until WWII, Zeitlin continued to publish prolifically in multiple genres and in both Yiddish and Hebrew, which was rare for a writer of his day. In March 1939 he was invited to come to America by Maurice Schwartz, who was producing Zeitlin's play *Esterke*. When the Nazis invaded Poland, he was unable to return and thus his life was saved. However, his wife and son were killed in the Holocaust, along with the rest of his extended family. In the years following the Holocaust, he continued to write many poems, articles, essays, reviews, and translations in Yiddish, while at the same time continuing to write in Hebrew. In 1943 he published *In kampf far a yidisher melukhe*. From 1947-1957 he published three volumes of his collected poetry. In 1947 he published an anthology of interwar writing in Poland together with I. I. Trunk. In the 1950s and 1960s he also published several dramatic poems in Hebrew. He was a professor of Hebrew Literature in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He was awarded several literary prizes, including the H. Leyvik award from the Kultur-kongres.

Interwar Poland was a remarkably ripe time for Yiddish literature, especially in the period from 1918-1924. Jewish writers enjoyed independent Poland's democracy and free press and during this period. There were at least 50 different

journals in Yiddish on literature, literary criticism, art, and theater.<sup>17</sup> In 1916 the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw was founded as a union, advocacy group, and social meeting place for Jewish writers. In 1918 it found permanent headquarters at Tlomackie Street 13. Tlomackie 13 became the hub of Jewish literary life in Poland. It was a meeting place not only for writers, but also for actors, artists and others involved in the Yiddish cultural scene.<sup>18</sup> The term *Tlomackie drayen* or “Tlomackie idling” (lit. spinning) came into use to describe someone who spent time there and was influenced by the literary currents he or she picked up there. In 1927 the members of the writer’s club, which was at this time headed by Aaron Zeitlin, were successful in appealing to the international P.E.N. club to accept a Yiddish section of the club.

According to the literary critic Nachman Meisel, Aaron Zeitlin belongs to a fourth generation of Yiddish writers, who came of age as writers between 1914 and 1919, which he terms “Writers of War and Revolution.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, many of the

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<sup>17</sup> Nathan Cohen, “The Jewish Literary and Journalistic Center in Warsaw Between 1920-1942 As Reflected by the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists.” Diss. Hebrew University, 1995, 3.

<sup>18</sup> “Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw,” YIVO encyclopedia on-line. For more information also see N. Meisel, “Tlomatske 13,” *Geven a mol a leben* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farlag fun poylishe yidn in argentine, 1951) 261-278.

<sup>19</sup> According to Meisel it was an “accepted fact” that Yiddish writers could be categorized in generations. In this periodization the first generation (1860’s-1900) includes Mendele Moykher Sforim, Linetsky, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Ansky, Berdyczewski, etc., the second generation (1901-1905) includes A. Reyzen, Nomberg, Asch, P. Hirshbein, etc, the third generation (1906-1914) includes Lamed Shapiro, Bergelson, Der Nister, Shteynberg, Anochi, etc. and the group associated with “Di Yunge” in America, the fourth generation (1914-1929) includes, I. Singer, Kulbak, A. Zeitlin, Leyeles, Glatshteyn, Meylekh Ravitch, P. Markish, etc. The fifth generation (after 1930) includes Manger, Grade, R. Korn, Sutzkever, R. Zhikhlinisky, etc. Nachman Meisel, *Tsurikblikn un perspektivn*, (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz Publishing House, 1962) 22.

writers of this generation experienced the ravages of war firsthand and brought these experiences into their work. According to Roskies;

Those who came of age during World War I, who spent their adolescence and young adulthood under German occupation or under the shadow of Russian terror, were filled with an overwhelming sense of sacrilege. And not, in this case because of Russian barbarity and German cruelty, but because of what had been irrevocably lost in the war – that final claim to Jewish sanctity, intimacy, and security. When all bonds – between Jews and God, Jews and other Jews, Jews and Gentiles – seemed to have been severed, there was nothing left but to chronicle the loss.<sup>20</sup>

The experience of the destructiveness of war has often been linked with Yiddish literary modernism.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the large scale human loss of World War I, the Yiddish writers of this generation suffered the loss of the “first generation” of Yiddish writers, who died between 1915 and 1921. Left without their founding fathers and literary teachers, Zeitlin’s generation of writers had no choice but to forge their own path. These writers turned towards western Modernist literary trends such as expressionism and futurism for inspiration. In Warsaw Peretz Markish, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Y. Y. Singer and Melech Ravitch led a group of expressionist and futuristic writers that became known as *Di Khalyastre* (The Gang). As Peretz had done in the previous two decades, they tried to create a secular Jewish identity based in Yiddish; however, they did so in a way that was a complete reversal of Peretz’s approach:

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<sup>20</sup> David Roskies, Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999 ) 116.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen, 6. Dan Miron complicates this notion by demonstrating how the modernist Poet Uri Zvi Greenberg’s shift to modernism had more to do with intellectual poetic revelation than his unquestionably traumatic wartime experiences. See Dan Miron, “Uri Zvi Grinberg’s War Poetry,” The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars, ed. Gutman, Mendelsohn, Reinhartz and Shmeruk (Hannover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1989.)

Eschewing prewar Peretzian aesthetics, mysticism, and Jewish folk motifs, they Judaized the Christ theme: the bloodied Jew on the cross becomes the Jewish nation bleeding to death under the impact of pogroms.<sup>22</sup>

Their writing was characterized by revolution of the spirit and rebuilding from anew; however, they did not have a unified ideology.<sup>23</sup> Eventually, they were split by the opposing politics of Bolshevism, national cultural autonomy, and revisionist Zionism. Although Zeitlin had much in common with this group, he was not really a part of it. Firstly, although he had also suffered the loss of the founding fathers of Yiddish literature, he was blessed with a real father who was a major writer from another “generation,” from whom, it seems, he never felt the need to rebel. Furthermore, although some of his contemporaries felt the need to rebel against the influence of the first generation of Yiddish writers, in particular Peretz, Zeitlin was definitively influenced by Peretz.<sup>24</sup> Szeintuch elaborates on this connection:

Aaron Zeitlin’s requirement of Jewish literature between both world wars is truly a loyal continuation of I. L. Peretz’s path: To establish a Jewish culture which unites Jewish literary traditions of generations, and to rid itself from that which is absolutely alien, because it does not come from a Jewish source. He does not mean to isolate culture from the world, but rather the complete opposite. In a totally Jewish way, he sees the only perspective for Jewish literature and culture to become truly universal and to be recognized by the whole world.<sup>25</sup>

Like Peretz, one of the Jewish sources he uses to accomplish this goal is Hasidism, as we shall see. Yet he does share certain similarities with *Khalyastre* in his

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<sup>22</sup> YIVO Encyclopedia online, “Khalyastre.”

<sup>23</sup> Cohen, 6

<sup>24</sup> Shmuel Niger, “Y. L. Peretzes lebn nokhn toyt,” Di goldene keyt 10 (1951) : 46.

<sup>25</sup> Yechiel Szeintuch, “Arn Tsaytlins ani mamin,” Goldene keyt 112 (1983) : 152.



expressionistic language and imagery. In 1922 Peretz Markish, one of the leaders of *Khalyastre*, declared that “our measurement is not beauty, but horror.”<sup>26</sup> The beauty of Zeitlin’s poetry comes both from the horror, as well as from his ability to transcend it.

The period between the two world wars was perhaps the golden age of Yiddish literature, and Warsaw was its hub. If ever there was a time where a Yiddish writer should have found camaraderie and a group with a common purpose, it was then. Yet two loners stood apart from the crowd – Aaron Zeitlin and Isaac Bashevis Singer – who became close life-long friends. When Bashevis came onto the literary scene Zeitlin, who was five years his senior, was already an established writer.<sup>27</sup> Zeitlin and Bashevis shared similar backgrounds and interests: they both came from religious homes, had an interest in mysticism and Kabbalah, and exhibited a certain shyness that was often interpreted as standoffishness by contemporaries.<sup>28</sup> According to Roskies, Zeitlin was “the most formative influence on Singer after his own brother.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed Zeitlin is the only Yiddish author that Bashevis made reference to in his Nobel speech, other than his brother (and Reb Nachman). Although Bashevis was strictly a prose writer, Aaron Zeitlin viewed him as a fellow poet, whose writing

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<sup>26</sup> Peretz Markish, “The Aesthetics of Struggle in Modern Poetry,” *Ringin* 10 (1922) : 35-51.

<sup>27</sup> Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life*, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 61.

<sup>28</sup> Elchonon Zeitlin characterizes Aaron Zeitlin as being “quiet, shy, and off to the side,” E. Zeitlin, 110. Roskies describes both Aaron and Bashevis as being “shy and standoffish,” David Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) 275. Hadda describes Bashevis’ shyness and attraction to Zeitlin, Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Roskies, 275.

was pure music.<sup>30</sup> The two young men related on many levels and helped one another cope with the sense of alienation that each felt: “each found in each other a salve for his sense of solitude.”<sup>31</sup>

Zeitlin describes how he was a “loner. I didn’t grow with a learning partner, I never sang in a chorus.”<sup>32</sup> His writing reflects this sense of isolation, since, although he was influenced by different writers and movements, it is hard to assign him to any particular group: “But Aaron Zeitlin can in no way be classified, because one can’t find any partners to him, even according to external signs.”<sup>33</sup> There are undeniably veins of expressionism and futurism in Zeitlin’s poetry. Some of his earlier poems especially read like text-book examples of expressionism, with their subjective representation of reality and use of jarring, violent and fantastical imagery. Take for example “Staccato (1913)”:

אויפֿן דאָך קריכט אַ טויטער היינטיקע נאַכט.  
 די לבנה שרײַט רויטער היינטיקע נאַכט.  
 די לאַמטערן ווינקט געלער היינטיקע נאַכט.  
 אַלע מוירן וואַכן היינטיקע נאַכט.  
 סײַעלן פֿלעדערמיז לאַכן היינטיקע נאַכט.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, Foreward to Der sotn in goray, (New York: Farlag Matones, 1943) 7.

<sup>31</sup> Hadda, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Avram Tabatshnik, “Fun a shmues mit Arn Zeitlin,” Di goldene keyt 65 (1969): 32.

<sup>33</sup> Yitskhok Yanasovitch, “Arn Tsaytlin,” Pinkes far der forshung fun der yidisher literatur un prese (New York: Alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1965-1975), 120.

<sup>34</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, Gezamlte lider, vol. 1 (New York: Farlag Matones, 1947) 12. This poem was included in Zeitlin’s anthology *Shotns afn shney* (Shadows on the Snow) in 1923. Unfortunately, the majority of poems in Gezamelte lider (Collected Poems) are not dated and they are not necessarily chronologically ordered. Determining the date of much of Aaron Zeitlin’s work is very difficult because he constantly reworked his writings and earlier editions were often republished with several changes without mention of the original.

All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

On the roof, crawls a dead todayish night.  
 The moon screams red todayish night.  
 The lantern winks yellow todayish night.  
 The walls keep a vigil todayish night.  
 The bats will laugh todayish night.

Zeitlin incorporates modernist trends into his writing and was a contemporary of the

*Khalyastre* writers; however, he felt no kinship with them:

The interesting thing is that according to the construction of his song, his new word-expression and even the technique of his prose, Zeitlin was extremely *modern* and would have fit in well among the poets of the “*Khalyastre*,” who revolutionized Yiddish poetry in Poland. And yet, he was fundamentally different from them in the content from his poem, in the inner world that he discovered with his poem and with the vision that he evoked. They – expressionistic in their wild screaming, portrayal of pain and suffering, he – mystic-philosophic, although also suffering and aggressive in revealing what he saw from behind the curtain of our existence.”<sup>35</sup>

The radically modernist world-view of the *Khalyastre* poets was summarized in Uri Zvi Greenberg’s poem “Mefisto” (1921), a reworking of the Faust legend. In this poem God is absent and Satan rules the world, only for the narrator to discover that even Satan is his own projection. According to Nathan Cohen, Zeitlin’s metaphysical poem “Metatron” (1914, reworked 1922) was in many ways a direct answer to Greenberg’s “Mefisto.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps since Zeitlin felt isolated from his peers and was mystically inclined, he turned towards God for understanding, thus reinforcing his spirituality. His poem “hisboydedes” or “spiritual isolation” about the Kotsker Rebbe illustrates this principle:

ייד איז איינזאמקייט. זיין איינציקער ידיד איז

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<sup>35</sup> Yansovitch, 119.

<sup>36</sup> Cohen, 39.

דער וועלטנאיינזאמער, דער בורא. ווער  
קאָן באַנעמען זייער ביידינ'ס בדידות?<sup>37</sup>

Jew is isolation. His only friend is  
The World-isolated, the Creator. Who  
Can apprehend their mutual friendship?

In 1926 Zeitlin set out to define his artistic credo in “The Cult of Nothingness and Art as It Ought To Be,” which reveals his engagement with modernist trends, as well as his insistence on finding sources for them within a Jewish context. Zeitlin defined his ideal “cosmic art,” which according to Roskies “was another name for Italian futurism...what Marinetti and others of his school had tried to achieve through pseudomathematical equations, spiraling geometric forms, musical terminology, and above all the glossolalia of machines, Zeitlin proposed achieving through the mystical sources of Jewish culture.”<sup>38</sup> And thus, even in his most futuristic moments he runs in direct contradiction with the movement, which proposes violently to do away with tradition.

While Zeitlin does admire aspects of Futurism, he ultimately rejects it in the Jewish context in favor of mysticism, which he sees as accomplishing all that Futurism does but is more suited to the Jewish writer. He expounds on this idea in a letter to Shmuel Niger<sup>39</sup> in 1923:

I endeavor there (as already partially in “Metatron”) to exchange the dynamic-mechanic of Futurism for the dynamic-conscious (more correctly: the dynamic-godly) of that which I call “cosmic” poetry and which I would prefer to call – if I were not so afraid of an ism – neo-

<sup>37</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, Arn Tsaytin: Ale lider un poems: Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn, vol. 1 (New York: Bergen Belson Memorial Press, 1970) 319.

<sup>38</sup> David Roskies, Bridge of Longing, 275.

<sup>39</sup> Shmuel Niger (1883-1955) was an important literary critic with whom Aaron Zeitlin corresponded between 1914-1948. His letters are reprinted in Be-reshut ha-rabim u-ve-reshut ha-yachid, see below.

Kabbalism. (By the way: I don't know of any other true-Jewish, abstract-Jewish and truly equal to world-art other than art and the truth of the Kabbalah). The "true" Futurism, the great European one – not to compare with our collective childish quasi-Futurism! It has according to my opinion, that great advantage, that it opened everybody's eyes to the dynamic and accentuated it. Only it is too gentile and not humane, and instead of leading to the sunny paths of joy and revelation, it leads again to the dark caves of elegy – the same elegy and "weltschmerz," which the superhuman (divine) – the source of all true joys – is hidden from it.<sup>40</sup>

Zeitlin finds the imagery of the Kabbalah, in which the world is presented as being in a constant state of flux, much more suited to explore the dynamic state of the world than Futurism, at least for the Jewish writer. The Kabbalah is an endless wellspring for Jewish creativity: "throughout his life Zeitlin proclaimed the Kabbalah as the ground of Jewish artistic creativity and he saw in the Zohar in particular a blueprint for Jewish artistic renewal."<sup>41</sup> Zeitlin's work is so full of kabbalistic imagery, themes and concepts that critics often use kabbalistic terms to describe his work.<sup>42</sup> Zeitlin uses the Kabbalah in a similar way to how Peretz used his Hasidic tales for the purpose of national cultural renewal, a similarity of which Zeitlin was himself aware:

Ideoplastic is the main element of what I call Jewish art; I find it already in different parts of the *Tanakh*, later I find it – wherever one turns – in the most ideoplastic book in the world – in the *Zohar*, and afterwards in the kabbalistic works of Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, and in our generations – in some of the wonder-works from the great master Peretz.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Yechiel Szeintuch, Be-reshut ha-rabim u-ve-reshut ha-yachid, (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000) 105.

<sup>41</sup> Wolski, 148.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Shmuel Niger, "Untergang un oyfgang," Yidishe shrayber fun 20stn yorhundert (New York: Alvetlekh kultur-kongres, 1972) 370-371.

<sup>43</sup> Letter to Niger in 1929 reprinted in, Be-reshut ha-rabim, 130.

When Zeitlin describes the “ideoplasticity” of the *Zohar*, he means that rather than direct representation, the *Zohar*’s imagery expresses ideas, visions, and associations. He sees the similarity in Peretz’ stories in that they are essentially a literary space for Peretz’ vision. In general, the idea is paramount in Peretz’ work, and even in the most memorable of stories, there lurks social criticism, a program for cultural renewal, a commentary on aesthetics, a cautionary allegory – and like the *Zohar*, his tales can be interpreted on multiple levels. In the case of his Hasidic tales, Peretz’ secular-humanistic values walk around in the form of Rebbes.

Aaron Zeitlin’s favoring of ideoplasticity over direct representation and his belief in the dynamism of existence means that instead of his work being realistic, it tends to challenge the very foundations of reality. Things as they appear in the physical world are not concrete or fixed but are in a constant state of flux. At the same time they are all expressions of the oneness God, as Zeitlin expresses so eloquently in his poem “Echad”;

אַלץ איז יאָ און אַלץ איז ניין,  
פון צעברומטן ים־אוקינוס  
ביז צום שווייגנדיקן שטיין,  
און פון ווערעם ביז נשמות...

און נאָר איינער איז די לייטער:  
גרייכט צום הימל, גרייכט צום תהום.  
פון איין כלי צו דער צווייטער  
גיסט־זיך אַלץ דערזעלבער שטראַם -  
אַלץ איז קערפּער, אַלץ פּאַנטאָם.

וואָלט די וועלט זיין פּוסט און טויט  
און פון גאַרנישט נישט באַשטיין,  
חוץ פון עפעס דאָרט אַ שטיין  
ביי אַ וואַקלדיקן פּלויט, -  
וואָלט פון יענעם שטיין אַליין  
אַלץ אויפּסניי געקאַנט אַנטשטיין.  
ווייל אין אַלץ, וואָס האָט געשטאַלט,

שלאַפֿט אַ וועלט, ווי אין אַ וויג,  
 און עס ברומט אַ גאַנצער וואַלד  
 אין דעם זשומען פון אַ פליג.  
 מיט דעם שעפער'ס ערשטער פרייד  
 לעבט אַן־אויפהער די יצירה,  
 און אַ זאך איז גאָט'ס אַ קלייד,  
 איטלעך וועזן איז אַ ספירה.<sup>44</sup>

Everything is yes and everything is no,  
 From the roaring ocean  
 To the silent stone,  
 And from worms to souls...

And only one is the ladder:  
 Reaches to the heavens, reaches to the depths.  
 From one form to the next  
 The same stream all pours –  
 Everything is corporal, everything phantom.<sup>45</sup>

If the world were empty and dead  
 And nothing whatsoever remained,  
 Except for some stone  
 By a shaky fence –  
 From that single stone alone  
 Everything could come into existence once again.  
 Because in everything that has a form,  
 A world sleeps, as if in a cradle,  
 And there roars a whole forest  
 In the buzzing of a fly.  
 With the Creator's first joy  
 Creation lives without an end,  
 And a thing in God's clothing,  
 Several beings is an emanation from God.

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<sup>44</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, "Echad," published 1922 in Shotns afn shney, cited here from Gezamelte lider, v. 1, 48-49.

<sup>45</sup> This part of the poem is in some ways reminiscent of Samuel Coleridge's "Eolian Harp:"

... And what if all of animated nature/  
 Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,  
 That tremble into thought,  
 as o'er them sweeps/  
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
 At once the Soul of each, and  
 God of all?...

Even if the world seems entirely paradoxical to human understanding, it all stems from a single source – God. Therefore, there is a hidden divine logic, of which we may catch only the most fleeting of glances.<sup>46</sup>

Zeitlin's rejection of reason as a means of understanding and systematizing the world coupled with his belief in God has led to his being termed a religious existentialist,<sup>47</sup> and in many ways this classification suits him. Existentialism rejects the idea that the most certain and primary reality is rational consciousness.<sup>48</sup> One cannot rely on pure logic and there is no logical order to the universe. Existence precedes essence and therefore one can shape one's own essence. Humans are therefore constantly being forced to choose between good and evil, and this is the meaning of freedom.<sup>49</sup> Reality is fluid and subject to manipulation. Zeitlin often challenges the reader's conception of reality and believes that there are irrational forces everywhere at work in our perceived reality, only most people are not aware of them:

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<sup>46</sup> See for example, Zeitlin's poem, "Signaln" (circa 1933) Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn, v. 2, 207.

<sup>47</sup> According to Szeintuch, Zeitlin's earlier metaphysical consciousness developed into religious existentialism in the 1930's (although I would be inclined to say even earlier). See "Di tsvantsiker un draysiker yorn in Arn Zeitlin's shafn," Divrei ha-kongres ha-shmini l'madaye ha-yahadut khativah 3 (Jerusalem, 1981) 366.

<sup>48</sup> Expressionism's insistence on the subjective nature of reality parallels on an artistic level the philosophy of existentialism.

<sup>49</sup> Many religious existentialist thinkers were therefore preoccupied with the notion of freedom. Since freedom involves choosing between good and evil, religious existentialist philosophers were often critical of modern philosophy, which rejected God and attempted to derive ethics from rational thinking. See: Anxious Angels, 2, 13-15. Zeitlin is particularly skeptical that this is possible, especially in a post-Freudian world, in which human beings no longer chose between good and evil but are subject to unconscious forces and are effectively absolved of guilt. Zeitlin blames modern psychology for creating the psyche that allowed for the holocaust. See: Zeitlin, Literarishe un filosofishe eseyen, 253.



די וועלט פֿון נס, די וועלט פֿון ווונדער –  
 ווי לאַנג זי וואַרט אויף דיר אומזיסט!  
 נישט ווייט איז זי און נישט באַזונדער:  
 זי נסימ'ט דאָרטן ווי דו ביסט.<sup>50</sup>

The world of miracle, the world of fairy-tale –  
 How long she waits for you to no avail!  
 She is not separate and she is not far:  
 She miracles right where you are.

These irrational forces do have an explanation in a religious context. Zeitlin's existentialism is coupled with a strong belief in God, hence the term “religious existentialist.”<sup>51</sup> As a religious existentialist, he does believe that there is some order to the universe, even if it is beyond a human being's comprehension. Zeitlin had strong faith in the existence of God: “Aaron Zeitlin's great faith never wavered and never suffered any wounds even in our great Holocaust.”<sup>52</sup> Zeitlin believes very strongly that without God, nothing has any meaning. (As we shall later see, according to Zeitlin, it is necessary to believe in God to create meaningful literature).

נאָר קומט איר און נעמט איר מיין גאָט פֿון מיר אָפּ  
 וואָס בלייבט פֿון מיין גוטס און וואָס בלייבט פֿון מיין האָב?  
 דאָ אונטן די טרערן, דאָרט אויבן די שטערן –  
 וואָס קען פֿון זיי ווערן, וואָס וועט פֿון זיי ווערן?  
 די טרערן – נאָר וואָסער, וואָס קען מער נישט וואָשן  
 דעם שמוץ פֿון דער וועלט, און די שטערן – נאָר אַשן...<sup>53</sup>

But if you come and you take my God away  
 Will any of my goodness or belongings stay?

<sup>50</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, “Real,” *Lider fun khurbn un gloybn*, vol. 2 (New York: Bergen Belson Memorial Press, 1970) 286-287.

<sup>51</sup> For more general information on Existentialism see John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism*, (New York: Modern Library, 1974). For a survey of religious existentialist thinkers see George Pattison, *Anxious Angels*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Yanasovitsh, 129.

<sup>53</sup> Zeitlin, “On Got,” *Lider fun khurbn un gloybn*, v. 2, 192.

Stars there above, tears here below –  
 What can from them grow, what can from them grow?  
 The tears, only water, which can no longer wash  
 The dirt of the world, and the stars – only ash...

In Zeitlin's poem, "Got, du host oyfgehert gloybn in mir" (God, you have stopped believing in me), he voices his fear that he may have wandered away from God and not be able to find his way back, thus rendering his life meaningless.<sup>54</sup> The existentialist goal in life is to find meaning solely by embracing existence (and in Judaism one must fully believe in God, even if there is no tangible proof of God's existence). Zeitlin, who is always a lover of paradoxes, clearly expresses this existentialist goal in his poem, "Kosmisher neyn," in which the poet contemplates suicide, but an all encompassing "cosmic no" answers him.<sup>55</sup>

The religious existentialist recognizes that God is full of contradictions. Therefore, it is normal to have doubts. Bashevis describes Zeitlin as "someone torn by doubts and at the same time a believer."<sup>56</sup> The struggle to maintain faith, even when it makes no sense, is one of the defining features of a religious existentialist. Zeitlin knew that he could never understand God and that he would always have his doubts. Yanasovitsh sums up Aaron Zeitlin the religious existentialist: "Aaron Zeitlin remained even in his most burning doubts, the great Jewish believer. He often, even in those times, fought with God but never denied him, never blasphemed."<sup>57</sup> Zeitlin's belief in God was not static but active and he lived for the daily search for God more

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<sup>54</sup> Zeitlin, Lider fun khurbn, v. 2, 202.

<sup>55</sup> Zeitlin, Lider fun khurbn, v. 2, 287.

<sup>56</sup> Yitschok Bashevis Singer, "Arn Tsaytlin – Tsu zibetsik yor," Di goldene keyt 65 (1969) : 14.

<sup>57</sup> Yanasovitsh, 131.

than for the discovery. His emphasis on searching was perhaps an inheritance from his father: “Hillel and Aaron were in fact God-searchers, not God finders. Their God was a silent one, not a talker, a never solved riddle.”<sup>58</sup>

As unwavering as Zeitlin was in his belief in God, he did not adhere strictly to the letter of Jewish law. (According to Bashevis, Zeitlin believed in God, but had trouble accepting the concept of revelation in which is necessary to believe in order to be an Orthodox Jew – a problem his father also grappled with.)<sup>59</sup> Zeitlin explains his lack of ritual observance in a letter to Nizer in 1929:

Between myself and the kabbalist, it seems to me, is a very thin separation – perhaps no separation at all. The true difference between me and him is only the deep matter of religious forms, of that which one calls “physical commandments.” I, for example, do not pray. Yes, I do pray internally, but I do not put on *tefillin* anymore. I don’t say that it’s good this way. Perhaps I have not grown. And perhaps this is because I have my own religious symbolism: art as I understand it. Whatever the case may be, I admit that I envy my father, who is not only religious, but also observes the centuries-old, collective symbolism.<sup>60</sup>

Zeitlin’s art, in this way, replaces prayer and other rituals,<sup>61</sup> but we can see from this excerpt that he is not totally at peace with having given up the physical commandments.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, Aaron Zeitlin’s Judaism is more of a mystical-

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<sup>58</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, foreword, Literarishe un filosofishe esayen, by Aaron Zeitlin (New York: Alveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres, 1980) 5.

<sup>59</sup> Bashevis Singer, Forward to Literarishe un filosofishe esayen, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Yechiel Szeintuch, Be-reshut ha-rabim, 131-132.

<sup>61</sup> Zeitlin was quite possibly influenced by the Russian religious existentialist Nicholas Berdyaev (1874-1948) who stated that “creativity is itself religion.” The Meaning of the Creative Act, (London: V. Gollancz, 1955) 110.

<sup>62</sup> See his poem “Der yid in mir veynt,” Lider fun khurbn un gloybn, v. 1, 338.

philosophical belief system than a ritualized religion. Interestingly, when Zeitlin promotes belief in God in his essays, he often cites modern secular philosophers to prove his point.

One very important philosopher from whom Zeitlin derived much inspiration was Lev Shestov.<sup>63</sup> Lev Shestov (1866-1938) was a Russian-Jewish religious existentialist who took a distinctly anti-modern stance and rejected most of Western philosophy as trying to bring about a reconciliation between science and religion that is simply not possible. Reason and scientific knowledge cannot be used as a basis for man's spiritual path in life because they only hinder rather than foster belief. Rather,

Only a reappropriation of the faith of Scripture –which proclaims that man and the universe are the creation of an omnipotent, personal God and that this God made man in His own image, endowing him with freedom and creative power – could, Shestov came to believe, liberate contemporary humanity from the horrors of existence. But such faith, in the face of the mechanist and rationalist assumptions underlying modern scientific and philosophical thought and now entirely dominating the mentality of Western man, is attainable only through agonized personal struggle against what has come to be regarded as “self-evident” truth.<sup>64</sup>

Faith, freedom, and struggle for belief resonate through much of Zeitlin's corpus.

Like Zeitlin, Shestov was also enamored of contradictions. Interestingly, Hillel

Zeitlin paid several visits to Shestov, who thought very highly of him.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> George Pattison calls Shestov an “anti-philosopher” because of his attack on reason as a means to accomplish self-understanding. See: Pattison, 188. According to Szeintuch, Shestov and Hillel Zeitlin were the two most important influences on Aaron Zeitlin. Yechiel Szeintuch, “Di tsvantsiker un draysiker yorn in Arn Tsaytlin's shafn,” 367

<sup>64</sup> Bernard Martin, introduction, Athens and Jerusalem, by Lev Shestov (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1966) 13.

<sup>65</sup> Nachman Meisel, Forgeyer un mittsaytler, (New York: IKUF, 1946), 223.

In addition to being introverted by nature, Zeitlin's sense of alienation was exacerbated by the fact that he rejected most of contemporary Yiddish literature:

I don't believe in **contemporary** Yiddish literature with its boyish-youthful "worldliness," with its ridiculous "Peretz-Revisions" (Nomberg before his death, and Moshe Gross – in the *literarische bleter*),<sup>66</sup> with its portrayals of how ten Jews "perform the priestly blessing" over one gentile woman (Fuks – "Winter")<sup>67</sup> and how Elka the Maiden went to the Austrian soldier (Dort),<sup>68</sup> with its soviet *derzshimada*<sup>69</sup> – the symbol of tastelessness – Litvakovn, with its taking poison over a bad review,<sup>70</sup> with its Nadir-colored yawn,<sup>71</sup> with its graphomaniac *bikher-velt* where Kazdan,<sup>72</sup> the petty trader of "worldliness" weighs literature on the falsely weighted Bundist scale<sup>73</sup>, with its trembling before the three gimels, *got*, *gayst* and *gloybn* (God, spirit and belief), with its poor, crazed Weissenberg, with its sly provincial advertisements for every "worldly" Quasiproletarian Katszine (the pre-advertisements in *Bikher-velt* about his novel), with its tragic-comic helpless PEN club...<sup>74</sup>

<sup>66</sup> H. D. Nomberg, *A literarisher dor* (Warsaw: Farlag "gayst," no date). Moyshe Gross, "Peretz tsvishn di ideyen," *Literarische bleter*, 4.10, 1925, 49-50.

<sup>67</sup> Moyshe Fuks (1890-1974) published in 1923 a war story, entitled "Winter" in *Varshever almanakh*. This story's raw realism shocked the literary critics of his day. cf. 17, Szeintuch in "Aaron Zeitlin's Ani Mamin," 158.

<sup>68</sup> The literature of this period is replete with stories of shtetl-dwellers using their daughters to procure staples from the army, to the extent where there was oftentimes outright prostitution involved. See Roskies *Against the Apocalypse*, 116-117.

<sup>69</sup> Derzhimorda (literally "keep your mouth shut") was a character in Gogol's *Inspector General* who came to symbolize the brutality of the police. See Roy A. Medvedev, et al. *The Unknown Stalin*. (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003) 255.

<sup>70</sup> Moyshe Litvakov (1880-1939) Editor of *Emes*, publicist and proletariat literary critic.

<sup>71</sup> Moyshe Nadir's (1885-1943) mocking and irreverent tone were no doubt in opposition to Zeitlin's serious vision for Yiddish literature.

<sup>72</sup> Khayim Shloyme Kazdan (1883-1979) was part of the Kiev intelligentsia, who demoted the classics of Yiddish literature to folklore and elevated folklore to abstract modernism see Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, 201.

<sup>73</sup> Zeitlin took issue with the fact that the Bundist press gave preference for politically engaged literature, and one of the reasons he founded *Globus* was to break apart their hegemony in the Yiddish world of letters. See Szeintuch, *Be-reshut ha-rabim*, vi-vii.

<sup>74</sup> Zeitlin's letter to Nizer (Warsaw, 1929) printed in: Yechiel Szeintuch, "Aaron Zeitlin's Ani Mamin," 154.

Zeitlin belittles some of the most prominent writers, publications and organizations of his day, even making fun of the P.E.N. club, and although this particular statement was made privately in a letter to Niger, his outspoken criticism of various writers that he took issue with did not earn him many friends.<sup>75</sup> Even during his tenure as president of the Yiddish PEN club, he fought to change the direction of Yiddish literature, and was not even sure he believed in the literature he was promoting to the world at large.<sup>76</sup>

At the same time as Zeitlin was busy honing his own ideal of Yiddish literature, he lashed out against those authors who he felt were doing a disservice to it. In particular, Zeitlin waged his own personal war against what he called “Nombergism.” In general, H. D. Nomberg’s heroes tend to stagnate to the point where it is as if they are dead: “If they remain alive, it is only because every minute they are ready to die.”<sup>77</sup> In Nomberg’s most famous novella, *Fliglmán*, the eponymous main character lives a solitary life of intellectual speculation and self-satisfied egoism, until he becomes obsessed with getting married. When he is unsuccessful in this endeavor, he loses his sanity, absurdly pleading with a police officer at the end of the story “Bury me. I have a passport, see!”<sup>78</sup> Fliglmán came to

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<sup>75</sup> Szeintuch calls him a “writer-fighter” and cites 15 different authors that he took issue with, including Nomberg, Weissenberg, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Nadir, Opatashu, and Abe Cahan. See: Yechiel Szeintuch, Be-reshut ha-rabim, 32-34.

<sup>76</sup> Szeintuch, Be-reshut ha-rabim, 32-38.

<sup>77</sup> Shmuel Niger, “Af der grenits fun toyt un leb’n,” in H. D. Nomberg: Oysgeklibene shriftn: Musterverk v. 3, (Buenos Aires: Kultur-kongres, 1958) 220.

<sup>78</sup> H. D. Nomberg, “Fliglmán,” H. D. Nomberg: Oysgeklibene shriftn: Musterverk v. 3, (Buenos Aires: Kultur-kongres, 1958) 93.

symbolize the disappointment and powerlessness of a whole generation of intellectuals between the two world wars.<sup>79</sup> Zeitlin spoke out publicly against Nomberg in an article in the *Literarische bleter*, as well as in a letter to Shmuel Niger in which he accuses Nomberg of poisoning a whole generation of writers with his “spiritless spirit.” The deeply spiritual Zeitlin was aesthetically as well as personally repelled by Nomeberg’s atheistic, anti-spiritual nihilism and refers to Nomberg as “The lord of emptiness.”<sup>80</sup>

Zeitlin had very definite ideas about what constitutes good literature (as well as bad). His ideas crystallized in such essays as “Vos iz literature,” “Misye fun yidishn shrayber in hayntikn dor,” “Di mashin vos makht geter,”<sup>81</sup> and many others. First and foremost, he insisted that Jewish literature had to have Jewish content, much in the same way as Peretz. As thoroughly acquainted as Zeitlin was with Western ideas of high culture, his own writing was still steeped in traditional Judaism. He starts out his essay, “Misye fun yidishn shrayber in hayntikn dor” by citing Peretz’s famous essay, “Vos felt undzer literatur?” and is in agreement with Peretz that “Yiddish (artistic) creation must be the way to self-actualization in a Jewish way,”<sup>82</sup> which is a paraphrase of Peretz’s 1910 diagnosis for Yiddish literature. Like Peretz, he feels that Yiddish literature lacking in tradition is soulless. However for Peretz, tradition alone was enough to anchor modern Yiddish literature, irrespective of the

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<sup>79</sup> Yechiel Szeintuch, “Aaron Zeitlin’s Ani Mamin,” 157.

<sup>80</sup> Zeitlin’s letter to Niger (Warsaw, 1929), 153.

<sup>81</sup> All three essays are in Aaron Zeitlin, Literarische un filosofische eseyen.

<sup>82</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, Literarische un filosofische esayen, 143. It is hard to give an exact translation, the actual quote reads: “Yidish shafn muz zayn der gang tsum mentsh afn yidishn veg.”

author's personal views on religion. Hillel Zeitlin once said of Peretz that he has "a heaven, but no God in it."<sup>83</sup> Zeitlin argues that not only Jewish tradition, but also a belief in God is necessary to create quality literature. In Zeitlin's essay "Di mashin vos makht geter," he argues that the only cure for Western literature at large is to "make way for oneness and for the one God."<sup>84</sup>

Zeitlin argues that without God there are no standards for morality, and therefore no boundaries. Similarly, literature without boundaries becomes endlessly subjective and prey to endless meaningless questions: "It is something that has no boundaries. It is the false ad-infinitum of the devil."<sup>85</sup> Zeitlin does not mean that a writer should not pose questions for the reader, which he does frequently by highlighting the many paradoxes in life. Indeed, as we have established, Zeitlin was more of a God-searcher than a God-finder, and as a result he asks many questions in his writing and is less forthcoming with answers. Zeitlin brings the reader "more questions than answers."<sup>86</sup> Zeitlin has no pat answers for why humans are condemned to suffer,<sup>87</sup> yet "Every true writer is in his own way an asker of questions and in his own way an answerer of questions. If he is a greater asker, the answer lies

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<sup>83</sup> Elchonon Zeitlin, 60.

<sup>84</sup> Zeitlin, "Di mashin vos makht geter," Literarische un filosofie eseyen, 166.

<sup>85</sup> Zeitlin, "Di mashin vos makht geter," Literarische un filosofie eseyen, 161.

<sup>86</sup> Yeshie Shpigl, Geshtaltn un profiln, vol. 2 (Tel-Aviv: Farlag Yisroel-Bukh, 1980) 40.

<sup>87</sup> Despite Zeitlin's full belief in the oneness of God, which is a meta answer to all questions, he still cannot fathom why such evil exists in the world as was unleashed during the holocaust. See his poem "Di letste vaytkeyt" Ale lider fun khurbn v. 1, 31-33.



in his questioning itself.”<sup>88</sup> Zeitlin believes that literature that asks questions for the sake of asking questions, without achieving at least some kind of answer through the asking – even if it is inconclusive – is pointless. Following this train of logic, he negates art for art’s sake: “Art for the sake of art in actuality never existed.”<sup>89</sup> There are always ideas behind art, and therefore the reader is not only interested in the “art” of the story, but even more so in “the *intention* of the story, its meaning, the idea, said another way – the spirit.”<sup>90</sup> By spirit, Zeitlin is referring to his concept of “ideoplasticity” being “the main element of what [he calls] Jewish art.”<sup>91</sup> The image must be beautiful, but its beauty comes from the idea that it expresses – and hopefully the questions that it answers.

Zeitlin is a brilliant wordmaster; however, it is the combination of his exquisite use of language, with his profound ideas that makes his poetry truly sublime. As we have seen, Zeitlin’s poetry is replete with kabbalistic imagery and ideas. There are also several major concepts that Zeitlin expresses in his writing, which are main ideas in Hasidic thought. Three of these ideas play a preeminent role in Zeitlin’s work and distinguish him as a neo-Hasidic writer who uses Hasidic concepts in a way that reinforces and gives added dimension to his own philosophical outlook: 1. contradictions that are really expressions of the oneness of the universe, 2. *tsebrokhnkayt* (broken heartedness) and 3. *tikkun* (redemption). Contradictions

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<sup>88</sup> Zeitlin, “Vos iz literatur,” Literarische un filosofie eseyen, 141.

<sup>89</sup> Zeitlin, “Vos iz literatur,” Literarische un filosofie eseyen, 141.

<sup>90</sup> Zeitlin, 142.

<sup>91</sup> Letter to Niger in 1929 reprinted in, Be-reshut ha-rabim, 130.

permeate Zeitlin's writing at the most basic level, the word. If reality is illusory, the word is all the more so to Zeitlin: "Like every great artist, Aaron Zeitlin knew about the duality of a word. On the one hand, a word is the great creative actualizer (*yesh*) and, on the other hand, it is inept and can only give the shadow of our experience."<sup>92</sup> Sutzkever compares Zeitlin's relationship with words, to an animal who attacks his master. His war with words continued through his whole literary career: "It is already a half a century that he has been at loggerheads with the word, which he both loves and can't live without – let alone create, and at the same time he hates it and drives it away from himself with an unnatural cruelty."<sup>93</sup>

This contradiction of words being one's lifeblood and one's enemy is perhaps a microcosm of the cosmic contradiction that is at the heart of Zeitlin's belief system – that the world, and therefore the God that created it, is one big paradox. Zeitlin expresses this idea in his poem "Nishto keyn sof" (1918):

יעדע רגע וואָס זי בלייט  
קירצט די בלייִצייט פֿון דער בלייט,  
און די מאַיאונג טויט דעם מאַי,  
און דאָס זינגען טויט דאָס ליד.

לעבן פרעגט דאָס לעבן אָפּ,  
טאַנצט ביז ס'עקן זיך די טעניץ,  
און דער טויט פרעגט אָפּ דעם טויט -  
און ווערט ווידער עקזיסטענץ.

לעש און פלאַם און ווידער לעש,  
שטאַף ווערט גייסט און גייסט ווערט שטאַף.  
סיווערט דער אַין אייביק ישׁ,  
ישׁ ווערט אַין - און דער סוף?

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<sup>92</sup> Yanasovitsh, 133.

<sup>93</sup> A. Sutzkever, "Aaron Zeitlin," *Di goldene keyt* 46 (1963): 72.

Every minute that she blooms  
 The blooming-time is shortened from the bloom,  
 And the May-ing kills the May,  
 And the singing kills the song.

Life negates life,  
 Dances until the dances end themselves,  
 And death negates death –  
 And becomes again existence.

Extinguish and flame and again extinguish,  
 Matter becomes spirit and spirit becomes matter.  
 The *eyn* always becomes *yesh*,  
*Yesh* becomes *eyn* – and the end?

There is no end.

Life waxes and wanes and waxes once again and there is no end because these  
 seeming paradoxes are all part of God's eternal plan.

If God is full of contradictions, then man who is in his image is surely full of contradictions, and art which reflects the artist's inner being, is naturally contradictory. Zeitlin therefore sees contradictions as a basic truth. Furthermore, if two things that seem completely different are shown to be one and the same, their hidden sameness reflects the inherent unity of the world. Therefore, contradictions in Zeitlin's work give a clearer picture of the poet's cosmic vision of oneness: "all contradictions by the true poet, are a prayer to wholeness."<sup>95</sup> Zeitlin sees this concept of discrete things all being a manifestation of the oneness of God as a defining aspect of Hasidism, and in particular, the Chabad branch of Hasidism. In his essay entitled

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<sup>94</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, "Nishto keyn sof," Gezamelte lider v. 1, 38-39.

<sup>95</sup> Zeitlin in a speech cited by Sutzkever, "Arn Zeitlin," 72.

“Chabad,” he explains how: “The Creator is the first and last reality.”<sup>96</sup> The fundamental practices in Chabad, such as prayer, learning and singing a *nigun* or melody, are really also just expressions of the oneness of God:

Both the *nigun*, both the prayer, both the learning – everything must serve one goal: the flowing together with the oneness, the abolition of separations, the realization that multiformity is a means of getting lost, that in truth everything is one, because outside of the Creator, not a single thing is “clearly there.”<sup>97</sup>

It should be noted that one of the main ideas of Futurism is that objects in reality are not separate from each other or distinct from their surroundings, as they appear to be. This parallel illustrates how Zeitlin was able to so seamlessly synchronize modernist literary trends with Hasidism. Yet despite the overwhelming atheism in these modernist movements, he was able to emerge with his belief in God and the wholeness of the universe intact – even after the Holocaust.

The Ropshitzer rebbe once said “There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.” *Tsebrokhnkayt* (brokenness) was another major element in Zeitlin’s poetry even as early as the thirties.<sup>98</sup> Zeitlin’s *tsebrokhnkayt* is even more prevalent in his post-Holocaust poetry, where only by writing with a truly broken heart can the poet’s prayers be answered:

Specifically because the deeply Jewish poet Aaron Zeitlin is brokenhearted, reduced to ashes with the destruction of Poland, wounded with the names of Jewish children – specifically because his poem is full with dramatic contradictions – it is whole, because its brokenhearted prayer is heard.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Zeitlin, “Chabad,” Literarische and Philosophische eseyen, 227.

<sup>97</sup> Zeitlin, “Chabad,” 231.

<sup>98</sup> Szeintuch, “Di tsvantsiker un draysiker yorn in Arn Tsaytlin’s shafn,” 367.

<sup>99</sup> Sutzkever, 72.

Zeitlin's narratorial voice in the poems written directly after the Holocaust is completely shattered. If at any point hints of despair creep into his writing, it is in this poetry from the early forties.<sup>100</sup> However, Zeitlin still asserts the omnipresence of God – even in the crematoria of Maidanek and takes some sort of comfort in the fact that there is an order to the world – evil and mad as it seems. In his poem “Af di khurves,” Zeitlin starts by invoking the image of the matriarch Rachel, who is usually depicted as the one who can elicit compassion from God for her children, the Jews, even in times of his greatest wrath. In Zeitlin's poem she has stopped pleading on behalf of the Jews because everyone is dead anyhow:

ביסט דו דאָס, מוטער רחל, מוטער אָן קינדער?  
 אויף שוואַרצע שטיינער זיצטו אַ פאַרלאָשענע.  
 פאַרשטערטע, צוזאַמענגעשלאָסענע  
 ליגן די הענט אויף דייע קאַלטע קני.  
 הויבסט זיי צום געבעט נישט מער -  
 טויט איז אַלץ סיי ווי.<sup>101</sup>

Are you, Mother Rachel, a mother without children?  
 On black stones, you sit, extinguished.  
 Stiff, closed-up.  
 Your hands lay on your cold knees.  
 You don't lift them up in prayer anymore –  
 Everything is dead anyhow.

Even though the matriarch Rachel has ceased praying to God, she still knows that he is exists and has witnessed everything: “Everything he saw/He was himself in Maidanek,/ Saw them escorted to the ovens.../Heard their last cry”.<sup>102</sup> The last verse

<sup>100</sup> Zeitlin ends two poems from this period by effectively telling God he no longer even cares about redemption. See “Hoykh iber di shlakhten,” and “Tfile l'arn” (1944) *Lider fun khurbn*, v. 1, 30, 36-38.

<sup>101</sup> Zeitlin, *Lider fun khurbn*, v. 1, 33.

<sup>102</sup> Zeitlin, *Lider fun khurbn*, v. 1, 34.

of the poem is filled with broken-hearted paradox, that ultimately asserts an order to the world, however mad it might be:

און קינדער לאַכן נאָך. ער דאַרף נאָך קינדער  
 אויך איצטער, אויך אַצינדער!  
 ער דאַרף מגוגס און גוגין -  
 און ס'וואַרטן בראַכן, ווייבער קינדלען,  
 מערדער מאַרדן און עס שווינדלען  
 דעמאָגאָגן -  
 ס'ענדערט זיך די וועלט זיינע אַ האַר נישט.  
 גאַרנישט,  
 זעקס מיליאָן מאָל גאַרנישט!<sup>103</sup>

And children still laugh. He still needs children  
 Also now, also at this time!  
 He needs *Magogs* and *gogs*<sup>104</sup> –  
 There awaits deliveries, women to give birth,  
 Murders to murder and to swindle,  
 Demagogues –  
 The world does not change even a hairsbreadth.  
 Nothing,  
 Six million times nothing!

Although Zeitlin ends the poem on such a tragic, broken-hearted note, he still acknowledges a divine order to the world and offers a prayer, even if there is some irony in it. He says that one day a “bespectacled and hairy” historian will come and read his lines about the Holocaust, duel with Satan, and win. The memories of those murdered by the Nazis will be remembered, both by the historian, and by their cosmic imprint. The poet must suffer the anguish of the victims he portrays, but he will ultimately be victorious: “The Satan shoots me, his (the historian’s) second./ I fall – /In a triumph-fall/ A *haleluka* rises up.”<sup>105</sup> In using the word “*haleluka*” (praise God),

<sup>103</sup> Zeitlin, *Lider fun khurbn*, v. 1, 35.

<sup>104</sup> Zeitlin is referring to the war between God and Magog, which is supposed to be an antecedent to the coming of the Messiah.

<sup>105</sup> Zeitlin, *Lider fun khurbn*, v. 1, 35.

which is used throughout the book of *Psalms*, Zeitlin offers a hymn of praise to God even in the most despairing of moments. He thus affirms his belief in God and the divine order of the universe. It is significant that he must suffer the wounds of Satan in order to offer up this broken-hearted prayer, because his character of Reb Nachman makes similar self-sacrifices in order to be able to extend the most powerful of prayers, as we shall soon see.

Poetry is a prayer and poetry is also a form of *tikkun* for Zeitlin, as well as his reader. *Tikkun* is particularly emphasized in Hasidic thought and was often a preoccupation of Hasidic rebbes. *Tikkun* literally means “rectification,” but it also describes the larger concept that the goal of every being on earth is to serve God in their own way, thus perfecting the world and ultimately playing their own role in hastening the coming of the Messiah. In Lurianic Kabbalah *tikkun* involves repairing the vessels that shattered when God contracted himself during *tsimtsum*. Performing mitzvas can accomplish *tikkun*. According to Shpigl the *tikkun* aspect of Zeitlin’s poetry is all the more present after the Holocaust: “But the deeper the wounds – all the more mildly the sweet dew of healing will fall on us later on...“The demon of words” will become reincarnated as the Angel Rafael. Not only for Aaron ben Hillel does every poem become a *tikkun*, but also for us, imprisoned in his black-burning, hot poetic spheres.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, Zeitlin’s poems are both a prayer and a source of healing for himself and his readers. He wrote several poems that deal with *tikkun* and

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<sup>106</sup> Shpigl, 36.

it is a prevalent theme in his works.<sup>107</sup> Naturally, *tikkun* is also a major theme in Zeitlin's Hasidic poems, especially those dealing with Reb Nachman.

Just as *tikkun* is a lifelong goal, writing a poem is also an ongoing process for Zeitlin. A poem does not really have an ending: "A poem I continue to write. But it is never finished. A poem one must write one's whole life."<sup>108</sup> Indeed, Zeitlin admitted in an interview that he reworked his poems his whole life,<sup>109</sup> which sometimes makes it hard to date his poems. Not only is writing poetry a holy act akin to *tikkun*, but the act of writing poetry parallels divine creation itself. When Zeitlin discusses the act of picking which word to use in a poem, he describes the process of selection as "*yetsire*" (divine creation).<sup>110</sup> When Zeitlin wrote a poem, he put his whole self into the poem: "The poem is the person. The whole person."<sup>111</sup> Every time he picked up his pen it was a form of poetic *tsimtsum* – similar to the kabbalistic belief that God created the world by contracting himself, and within this vacated space he created the material world.

Just as Zeitlin's interest in Kabbalah is an inheritance from his father, so too is his interest in Hasidism, the most mystical branch of Judaism. Hasidism gives Zeitlin free reign to explore the mystical concepts to which his religious existentialism is so

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<sup>107</sup> Zeitlin wrote several poems specifically about *tikkun* (see for example "Tikkun" *Gezamlere lider*, v. 1, 33, "Dos tikun lid" *Lider fun khurbn* v. 1, 331), and the concept of *tikkun* plays a role in an even larger body of his work.

<sup>108</sup> Aaron Zeitlin in a conversation with Sutzkever. Sutzkever, "Arn Zeitlin," 71.

<sup>109</sup> Tabatshnik, 30.

<sup>110</sup> Tabatshnik, 31.

<sup>111</sup> Tabatshnik, 31.



inextricably tied. Zeitlin is particularly drawn to Chabad Hasidism, which was also an inheritance from his father both intellectually and by pedigree. “Der tsar un der “Tanya””<sup>112</sup> is a poem that juxtaposes Shneur Zalman of Liady and Czar Paul I of Russia. Shneur Zalman of Liady was the first Lubavitcher rebbe and is also referred to as the Baal Ha-Tanya, after one of his major works, the *Tanya*. Shneur Zalman was one of the Maggid of Mezhirech’s students and he brought Hasidism into the bastion of traditional Judaism or Misnagedism, in White Russia. As a result he suffered much more persecution than the rest of the first generation of Hasidic rebbes. In 1798 in an effort to counter the spread of Hasidism, a Misnagid informed on Shneur Zalman to the Czarist government, accusing him of treason, and he was arrested. He was acquitted later that year but was again arrested in 1801 on the same trumped up charges and then again acquitted.

Shneur Zalman created the Chabad philosophy, which charted a deeply intellectual approach to Hasidism.<sup>113</sup> One of the fundamentals of his philosophy was *hisbonenuth* or “contemplative prayer,” which he defined in *The Gates of Prayer* (1796) and the second part of the *Tanya*. When one engages in *hisbonenuth*, one concentrates on the concept of unity in the world. Everything stems from God, who is the *ein sof* or infinite one, and everything is an expression of the *ein sof*. Therefore

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<sup>112</sup> First published under the title “Pavl un Shneur Zalmen,” *Tsukunft*, July 1934, 228-239.

<sup>113</sup> For more information on the development of Chabad philosophy see Naftali Lowenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)

God is the only true reality,<sup>114</sup> an idea which we have seen expressed by Zeitlin in his poem “Realizm fun a yid.”

Paul I, who was Czar of Russia during Shneur Zalman’s incarceration, was the son of Catherine II and Peter III, although his paternity has always been dubious. Paul’s short and ill-fated reign lasted from 1754 to 1801. Throughout his reign he harbored fears of assassination, and in 1801 he was struck with a sword, strangled, and than trampled to death in his bedchamber.<sup>115</sup> He has generally been portrayed as having noble ideas for reform but often being capricious and cruel, if not mentally, or at least morally abnormal.<sup>116</sup>

“Der tsar un der “Tanya”” takes place in the dark, dank cell of the Peter-Pavel jail cell, where Shneur Zalman is incarcerated. The first stanza highlights the ugliness of the surroundings, where Shneur Zalman is forced to sit on the bare ground.

אין פעטער-פאָוועל-פעסטונג, אין דער תפיסה פון די צאָרן,  
רויכערט זיך אַ פינסטער לעמפל אויף אַ נאַסער וואַנט.  
שאַטנס קוקן קרום מיט שפיצל-אויגן פון זשאַנדאַרן.  
אויף דער הוילער ערד - אַ ייד אַן אַרעסטאַנט.<sup>117</sup>

In Peter-Pavel Fort, in the jail of the czars,  
A dark lamp smokes on a damp wall.  
Shadows look askance with pointed eyes of policemen.  
On the bare ground – a Jew, a prisoner.

<sup>114</sup> See Naftali Loewenthal, “Habad Approaches to Contemplative Prayer,” *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert, (Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997) 289-290.

<sup>115</sup> For more information on Paul I see: *Paul I: A Reassessment of His Life and Reign*, ed. Hugh Ragsdale, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1979).

<sup>116</sup> Ragsdale complicates this portrait by noting that his biography has been preserved by his assassins, in whose best interest it was to prove him unsuitable for leadership. Ragsdale, xiii.

<sup>117</sup> Zeitlin, “Der tsar un der “Tanya”,” *Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn*, vol. 1, 252.

The miserable conditions in which Shneur Zalman is forced to live are starkly contrasted with Zeitlin's characterization of Shneur Zalman. Zeitlin portrays him as maintaining complete calm and serenity in the face of the physical and emotional hardship of languishing in the Czar's prison: "But nothing disturbs his God fearing peace of mind."<sup>118</sup> The Chabad mystical system was complemented by a strict adherence to discipline and control of the mind.<sup>119</sup> Throughout the poem Zeitlin builds on a cerebral characterization of Shneur Zalman. Even the land he comes from is personified as being deep in thought: "The fields from the white, quiet-cloudy, strict-deep-in-thought Belorussia."<sup>120</sup> The verses that describe Shneur Zalman are comprised by long and complicated sentences, hinting at his intellectual depth. The section introducing Shneur Zalman (א) ends with a stanza defining the essence of Shneur Zalman as his intellectual Chabad philosophy:

ווייל דעם וואָס לעבט אין חכמה־דעת־בינה!  
 דער עיקר איז מחשבה ווייסע, דינע,  
 דער עיקער איז חב"ד.<sup>121</sup>

Praiseworthy is the person who lives in intelligence-knowledge-wisdom!  
 The essence is thought white, thin,  
 The essence is Chabad.

*Khokhme-das-bine* or "intelligence-knowledge-wisdom" are the words, whose acronym is חב"ד, or ChB"D (pronounced Chabad.) The Czar calls Shneur Zalman by his Frenchified name, Zel-man, which can be translated in Yiddish as soul-man.

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<sup>118</sup> Zeitlin, "Der tsar un der „Tanya”,” 252.

<sup>119</sup> Loewenthal, "Habad Approaches to Contemplative Prayer,” 291.

<sup>120</sup> Zeitlin, 252.

<sup>121</sup> Zeitlin, 252.

Shneur Zalman operates purely on the spiritual plane, whereas the Czar, as we shall see, is restricted solely to the physical world.

Shneur Zalman's elevated spirit despite his wretched surroundings contrasts with Paul I, who despite his high position and place on the throne, is portrayed as having a debased character, the subject of the second section of the poem (ב). This section first introduces the Czar Paul I as a comic character. Zeitlin undercuts Paul by his use of repetition: "He talks to himself, talks to himself, Pavel the Czar."<sup>122</sup> This repetition creates a comic effect and makes Paul seem ridiculous. Furthermore, he is introduced in the middle of conversing with himself and is referred to in the diminutive, Pavel, despite his being Czar of Russia. Indeed as we shall see, he is completely dwarfed by greatness of Shneur Zalman.

Another way in which Pavel is contrasted with Shneur Zalman is that Zeitlin associates Pavel with the powers of darkness: "And a demon dances in his dark eye."<sup>123</sup> Whereas, Zeitlin emphasizes the color white in his description of Shneur Zalman: "**white**, quiet-cloudy, strict-deep-in-thought Belorussia," and "The essence is thought **white**, thin..." The verses describing Pavel are much shorter and have more one syllable rhymes. The way in which Pavel refers to his mother as a "bitch" and "whore" hardly builds a glorious portrait of the Czar. The Czar's own language reveals him for the fool that he is (Czar conveniently rhymes with the Yiddish word for fool, "nar" – a rhyme that Zeitlin exploits). The Czar has a verbal tic that he

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<sup>122</sup> Zeitlin, 252.

<sup>123</sup> Zeitlin, 252.

repeats over and over – “Chort” (devil) – which makes him yet more ridiculous, as well as deepens his connection with evil.

Pavel’s monologue is permeated with dread. In one stanza he uses some form of the word fear five times, and he himself realizes the irony that he is at once a ruler and yet is ruled by fear:

איך האָב מיך געשראָקן און ס'ווייל דער קאָשמאַר –  
די שרעק – נישט אַוועק. כ'בין געוואָרן דער צאַר,  
נאָר איבער דער שרעק בין איך אַלץ נישט קיין האָר.<sup>124</sup>

I became afraid and it does not want, the *cauchemar*<sup>125</sup> –  
The fear – to go away. I became Czar  
But over the fear, I am still not master.

When Pavel threatens to send the spooky night to Siberia (“He would catch such a doggish night, hit it, beat it, and sent it, the crook, to Siberia –”),<sup>126</sup> he in actuality reveals his own powerlessness and is again rendered ridiculous. The Czar turns to drunkenness for comfort and finally falls asleep, rising the next day at two in the afternoon.

Pavel is overcome with a strange desire to see the imprisoned rebbe and he blames the rebbe’s “magic” for this impulse. Since he is forced by “magic” to go see Shneur Zalman, he is cast as a slave to powers beyond his control. Although he threatens Shneur Zalman, his threats are revealed as empty. Shneur Zalman has already predicted the end of his incarceration, and as we know from history this prediction turns out to be true. Once Shneur Zalman reveals that Pavel’s reign will

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<sup>124</sup> Zeitlin, 252.

<sup>125</sup> Yiddish and French for “nightmare.”

<sup>126</sup> Zeitlin, 253.

soon come to an end, the Czar of Russia is completely humbled before the imprisoned rebbe. At this point in the poem, Pavel's worst fears have been confirmed. He talks in a "submissive" tone of voice and

דער קאָפּ פֿון צאַר,  
ווי צוגעקוועטשט מיט בלייערנע געוויכטער,  
לאַזט זיך אַראָפּ: פֿאַר שרעק פֿאַרקריכט ער  
צווישן די אַקסלען.<sup>127</sup>

The head of the Czar,  
As though pressed with lead weights, falls:  
From fear it crawls  
Between his shoulders.

Pavel is a slave to fate whereas Shneur Zalman willingly accepts God's will, which mirrors Zeitlin's acceptance of divine order. Shneur Zalman is more like a partner to God's plan than a slave:

אין רשות פֿון גורל איז דער צאַר.  
ער דער רב, וויל לכתחילה דאָס אַליין,  
וואָס דער בורא וויל – איז ער אַ שותף צו גאָט'ס מיין  
און צו זײַן פּלאַן: ער איז ביים גורל נישט קיין שקלאַף.<sup>128</sup>

The Czar is in the custody of fate.  
He, the Rabbi, wants that from the outset,  
Which the Creator wants – He is a partner to God's intent  
And to his plan: He is not a slave to fate.

Zeitlin's Shneur Zalman can be seen as an existentialist. Even under the most miserable of circumstances, he persists in his unwavering belief in God. Unlike the Czar who is helplessly caught in the net of fate, Shneur Zalman chooses to be a partner in his fate by striving with his complete being to become one with God: "He immerses himself in God."<sup>129</sup> Zeitlin identifies with Shneur Zalman because his life-

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<sup>127</sup> Zeitlin, 255.

<sup>128</sup> Zeitlin, 255

<sup>129</sup> Zeitlin, 252.

goal is also to serve God through all of life's tests – and tested he was with the murder of his wife, child, and extended family. However, since he completely accepts God's will and is also a part of God, death is, although perhaps painful, ultimately inconsequential for him, in the same way as the poem's hero, Shneur Zalman. According to Eli Wiesel, not only was Zeitlin unfazed by death, he simply did not believe in it. He believed strongly in the after life, and that people who have passed away may even try to communicate with us but that we are not equipped to perceive them.<sup>130</sup>

Perhaps it is for this reason that Zeitlin creates a literary character who can perceive the wishes of the deceased in the form of Reb Nachman. Zeitlin wrote several poems about Reb Nachman and seems to have inherited a fascination with Reb Nachman and Breslav Hasidism from his father. Nachman was different from other Rebbes because he asserted that he did not have unique inborn powers, but rather that his spiritual accomplishments were the result of great struggle. Therefore, when he helped his followers, it was not because he was above sin, but because he had waged similar battles himself:

In direct contrast to this earlier model (of a rebbe), Nahman functions so well as a *zaddiq* not because he has always remained above the reaches of sin, but rather precisely because he himself has undergone all the conflicts and torments that even the most beleaguered of his followers could ever imagine – and he has emerged triumphant. A basic reversal has here taken place in the rationale of the *rebbe*: Nahman is capable of lifting you out of despair and transforming your spiritual life not because of his great compassion from above, but

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<sup>130</sup> Eli Wiesel, "Arn Tsaytln Z"L," Literarische un filosofische eseyen, 379.

rather because he has been through all of your torments, and worse, in his own life.<sup>131</sup>

Zeitlin must have related to Reb Nachman's constant struggles, since he himself was engaged in a constant struggle to have faith. Indeed, unwavering faith, even in the most wretched of circumstances – even when nothing seems to make sense – is one of Zeitlin's trademarks. In the poem "Reb Nachman's kholem," Reb Nachman is in the middle of learning when all of a sudden he is surrounded by outraged people, but he has no idea what he has done to upset them. He tries to hide in the forest, but the wild animals similarly treat him as if he has committed the worst of sins. He runs into a study house, but he finds he forgets the letters of the alphabet because they refuse to serve someone as evil as him. Finally, he breaks down and wants to cry, but even his tears reject him. When he realizes that he is condemned to be rejected by all of creation without even knowing why, he finally comes to the realization that the only thing left for him to do is to come to the level of fatalistic acceptance:

די סיבה ווייס איך נישט, נאָר גאַרנישט:  
 מסתמא דאַרף מען עס, מסתמא טויג עס.  
 און אַז מען זאָל מיד לייגן איצט, ווי יצחקן, אויפ'ן מזבח -  
 נו, איז וואָס? עס וואָלט געפאַסט ווי אַלץ פאַרשטיי איך,  
 בלויז דאָס פאַרשטיי איך נישט...  
 פון ווען איז עס אַ וואָרעם אַזאַ חכם,  
 ער זאָל זיין אַ מבין אויף דעם הימלס דרכים?  
 אַבי דער בורא מיינער ווייס -  
 בין איך שוין געטרייסט:  
 מען דאַרף נאָר וויסן, אַז ס'איז דאָ אַ ווייסער.<sup>132</sup>

I don't know the reason, but it is of no consequence:  
 It must be that it is needed, it must be that it is worth something.  
 And if they want to put me now, like Yitzchak on the sacrificial alter –

<sup>131</sup> Green, 26.

<sup>132</sup> Zeitlin, "Reb Nachman's kholem," *Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn*, vol. 1, 285.



Nu, so what? It would be fitting for all I know,  
 Only that I don't understand...  
 Since when is a worm such a wise person,  
 That he should be a connoisseur of heaven's ways?  
 As long as my creator knows –  
 I am already comforted:  
 One only has to know, that there is a knower.

If he is being rejected, it must be for a reason. Even if he does not understand the reason, he is comforted that God knows the reason. As soon as Reb Nachman comes to this realization, he is filled with happiness. This poem affirms Zeitlin's belief that life is more about the search than the answers, which he now poignantly re-asserts in the wake of the Holocaust, as this poem was written in 1948. There are no good explanations for the Holocaust that we know of; however, Zeitlin takes comfort in the fact that God, at least, knows the meaning for it.

In Zeitlin's poem "Der Rebbe Reb Nachman" (1933), Reb Nachman has recently come to settle in Uman and has chosen to live opposite a cemetery. It is not surprising that Zeitlin would imagine Reb Nachman to be preoccupied with death, because the real life Reb Nachman had a fascination with and almost attraction to death all his life.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, he moved to Uman a year before his death, after he had already been diagnosed with tuberculosis. Reb Nachman died young at the age of 38. Zeitlin evokes the Rabbi's youth, which contrasts with the surrounding cemetery:

אין אומאן, פֿאַרן פֿענסטער פֿון זיין שטוב,  
 וואָס גייט אַרויס צום בית־הקברות,  
 שטייט אַ יונגער הויכער ייד...<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Green, 32.

<sup>134</sup> Zeitlin, "Der Rebbe Reb Nachman," Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn, vol. 1, 270.

In Uman, by the window in his room,  
Which looks out onto the cemetery,  
Stands a young, tall Jew.

Nachman's relative youth belies the great Tsadik that he is, which can be glimpsed at through his eyes in Zeitlin's ethereal description of Nachman: און הויך־געוועלבתן,  
<sup>135</sup> „שטערן / אַ הימל/ מיט צוויי צאָנקענדיקע שטערן. (A high-vaulted forehead/ A heaven/  
With two sunken stars.) In Zeitlin's poem Reb Nachman has settled across from the cemetery in order to give *tikkun* to the souls of all the people buried there.

The first thing that Reb Nachman says in the poem is : „לא אמות פי אחיה – לא אחיה פי,  
<sup>136</sup> „אמות. (I will not die, but I will live – I will not live, but I will die.) The first part of this statement comes from *Psalms* and is a statement that, even though God makes one pass through many tests, one will persevere and live to praise God. Both the character of Reb Nachman, and Zeitlin himself would relate to this statement, since it affirms faith even in the face of misfortune. However, it is particularly interesting how Zeitlin's Reb Nachman then inverts this statement, thus equating life and death. The real Reb Nachman had a penchant for paradox, perhaps because of his own inner paradoxes: “Nothing was more real to him...than the inner flux with which he lived so constantly.”<sup>137</sup> In this case the reader realizes that Reb Nachman also means this equation quite literally, since what then follows is a sequence of dead people going about their daily lives without the realization that they are dead. Thus Zeitlin blurs

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<sup>135</sup> Zeitlin, 270.

<sup>136</sup> Zeitlin, 270. “Lo amut ki akhye” is from psalm 118, and is also said during *Hallel*.

<sup>137</sup> Green, 107.

the boundaries between life and death in the poem, infusing it with his characteristic dynamism and setting it in his mystically-enhanced reality.

All these souls beg Nachman for *tikkun*. Reb Nachman comforts all the souls. Then his great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, comes to tell him that his works have tremendous power and have had an impact on all the heavenly spheres. However, despite his great success in redeeming the dead people, he sinks into a deep melancholy. He falls on the floor in a fit of tears. In the morning he gets up, calls Nosn his scribe, and tells him of his epiphany: through great *Simcha* one can drive away the evil inclination and redeem one's soul. He tells Nosn to call in his Hasidim and he will tell them a story that begins in Uman but ends with the redemption in Yerushalayim. Nosn trembles, most likely because he realizes his rebbe is about to die.

In Peretz's *Khsidish* stories most of the rebbes are flat characters, who are walking representations of secular humanist values, such as the Rebbe in "Oyb nisht nokh hekher." His characters are more allegorical than having real psychological depth. "Der Rebbe Reb Nachman" is a detailed psychological portrait of Reb Nachman. Zeitlin takes the facts that are known about Reb Nachman's personality,<sup>138</sup> as well as his familiarity with Breslover doctrine and uses this knowledge to create a psychological study of Reb Nachman's inner life – his paradoxes, his struggles, and his reaction to the controversy surrounding him.

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<sup>138</sup> Hillel Zeitlin had already published two major works on Reb Nachman at this point: *Reb Nachman mi Braslav* (1910) and *Oro shel Moshiakh be torat ha-Breslavi* (1935).

Zeitlin relates to the controversial figure of Reb Nachman. Reb Nachman felt that he was unjustly persecuted, and that he was condemned to be persecuted his whole life.<sup>139</sup> In 1802 the Shpoler Zeide, another leader of Ukrainian Hasidism, tried to get other rebbes to join him in denouncing Reb Nachman. Although he was unsuccessful, a year later Reb Nachman became estranged from his uncle Barukh of Medzhibozh, who was the other main Hasidic leader in the area. Zeitlin portrays Reb Nachman as feeling indignant that he is persecuted by people who do not even really know who he is:

אויף וועמען קריגסטו שפאלער זיידע?  
 אויף וועמען קריגסטו אלע?  
 אויף א מענטש, וואס איז נאָשט איך!  
 ווער איז אייך מיך מגלה?  
 איר קענט מיך נישט, איר ווייסט נישט –  
 סתם זיך אויסגעטראַכט אַ מענטש,  
 און מיט דעם אויסגעטראַכטן מענטש  
 פֿירט איר מחלוקת,  
 דערגייט אים די יאַרן.  
 וואָס ווייסט איר פֿון די לוחות,  
 וואָס ליגן אין מיין אַרון?<sup>140</sup>

Against whom do you fight Shpoler Zayde?  
 Against whom do you all fight?  
 Against a person who is not I.  
 Who revealed me to you?  
 You are not acquainted with me, you do not know –  
 You just invented a man,  
 And then with that man,  
 Waged wars,  
 Tormented him.  
 What do you know of the tablets,  
 That lie in my ark?

<sup>139</sup> For a detailed account of Reb Nachman's conflicts with other Hasidic leaders see the chapter entitled "Conflict and Growth" in Green, Tormented Master.

<sup>140</sup> Zeitlin, 276.

In his essay “Reb Nachman Braslaver,” Zeitlin attributes the controversy surrounding Reb Nachman to his being “so new, so different, so otherworldly in his speech, in his conduct, in his *toyres*, that it simply was not relevant to draw near to him without suspicion outside of his circle.”<sup>141</sup>

As much as Reb Nachman was surrounded by outer controversy, he was even more filled with inner strife. Reb Nachman was plagued by doubts about his own suitability to be a leader: “Nachman himself was plagued by a terrible sense of persecution. The Zeide’s denunciations, whatever their specific content may have been, played into Nachman’s own sense of guilt and inadequacy to his role.”<sup>142</sup> Zeitlin hones in on the import of this inner conflict: “More bitter than the external battles/ Are the ones in him himself.”<sup>143</sup> Zeitlin most likely identifies with Reb Nachman on both counts. First of all, Zeitlin was also surrounded by controversy, both because of his criticism of contemporary Yiddish literature, and because his own writing was so different and so full of kabbalistic imagery that some found it impenetrable.<sup>144</sup> Just like Reb Nachman, he was also torn by inner conflicts, which is reflected in his frequent use of paradoxes and contradictions. When he says of Reb Nachman: “contradictions burn in him,”<sup>145</sup> he could just as well be talking about himself – the modernist mystic par excellence. Zeitlin’s ability to fuse modernism

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<sup>141</sup> Zeitlin, Literarische un filosofische eseyen, 247.

<sup>142</sup> Green, 106.

<sup>143</sup> Zeitlin, “Der Rebbe Reb Nachman,” 276.

<sup>144</sup> Yanasovitsh, 117-118; Yitschok Bashevis Singer, “Arn Tsaytlin – Tsu zibetsik yor,” 15.

<sup>145</sup> Zeitlin, 276.

and mysticism in the figure of Reb Nachman and transform him into an existential hero are trademarks of Zeitlin's neo-Hasidism.

This blending of modernism and mysticism exists not just in the characterization of Reb Nachman, but also in the language that Zeitlin employs. Just as we have seen in Zeitlin's early poetry, this Hasidic-themed poem has many moments of expressionism:

שאַט!  
 ס'רירן מיט פֿאַרבלוטטיקטע גלידער  
 קדושים,  
 גיבן זיך אַ שליידער ביז עק פֿעלד  
 צעשניטענער הייט,  
 אַלטע, יונגע, קינד און קייט –  
 מצבות וואַרפֿן זיך פֿון זייט אויף זייט –  
 די זון – אַ לאַגל מיט בלוט,  
 דער ווינט שרייט.<sup>146</sup>

Shsh!  
 Martyrs,  
 Move with bloody limbs,  
 Flung until the end of the field  
 In pieces,  
 Old, young, kith and kin –  
 Tombstones are thrown from side to side.  
 The sun – a skin with blood,  
 The wind screams.

The loud exclamation, the vivid imagery, the wind screaming and the literally chopped bodies all lend an expressionistic feel to this moment in the poem, which is well suited to Zeitlin's depiction of a field of slaughter. Furthermore, the way he describes the dead people running around: "...בוגרותן אין איין העמד/ לויפֿן מיט נאַקעטע הענט..." (Marriagable girls in one shirt/ run with naked hands) and „בעטלער לויפֿן באַרוועס/ מיט

<sup>146</sup> Zeitlin, 272.

<sup>147</sup>"...טאַרבעס פֿאַרלאַטעטע געלע גרויסע (Beggars run barefoot/ with big, yellow, patched-up sacks), gives the feeling of one big modernist dance. Zeitlin rapidly switches from moments of humor to horror, in a way that is often quite jarring.

This dramatic change in mode parallels Reb Nachman's own dramatic mood swings:

This life (i.e. Nachman's spiritual life) was one of constant struggle, or constant rise and fall in relationship to God, a life alternating between periods of bleak depression leading him to the brink of utter despair, and redoubled efforts to try once more to come close to God. The sense of alienation from God that he had felt as a child was undoubtedly exacerbated by the guilt and conflicts normal to adolescence; there seemed to be hardly a day in his life when he did not touch the borders of both heaven and hell.<sup>148</sup>

Reb Nachman's dramatic mood swings are reflected in his philosophy of spiritual descent being necessary for spiritual ascent:

When a man has to rise from one level to the next, prior to his ascent he must first undergo a descent. The paradox is that the very purpose of the descent is the ascent. From this you can see how much strength is required in the service of God. Even when you fall or descend in any way, you must never allow yourself to be thrown off balance to the extent that you come to look down upon yourself or to hold yourself in contempt.<sup>149</sup>

It is not hard to see how this aspect of Reb Nachman's philosophy resonated with Zeitlin's own appreciation of paradox and the struggle to maintain faith.

There is an absurd strain in this poem, which serves as a sort of corollary to Zeitlin's existentialism. In the face of pain, struggle and death, one coping mechanism is to laugh. In "Der Rebbe Reb Nachman," the reader encounters at many

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<sup>147</sup> Zeitlin 270-271.

<sup>148</sup> Green, 40.

<sup>149</sup> Rabbi Nachman, trans. Avraham Greenbaum, Likutey Moharan I:13 in Restore My Soul, (Monsey & Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1980) 16-17.

points a kind of tragic-comic deathly carnivalesque as various corpses parade by going about their daily business, but do not realize that they are dead. Therefore, they encounter various problems, such as a cantor who cannot find his synagogue because it no longer exists, or a community leader who cannot find the town hall for the same reason. There is real humor in Zeitlin's description of these characters such as the Maggid:

א מגיד קומט אָן,  
 שטעלט אַוועק אַ קערה.  
 אָט שטייט ער אויף אַ שאַטנדדיקער בימה,  
 שטעלט אָן די אויגן די שטאַרע,  
 עפעס איז אים קשה –  
 האָט פֿאַרגעסן די דרשה.<sup>150</sup>

A preacher arrives,  
 Puts out his collections-plate,  
 He stands on his shadowy stage,  
 Fixes his rigid eyes,  
 Something is hard for him –  
 He forgot his sermon.

This scene is reminiscent of Peretz's *Bay nakht afn altn mark*, in which dead people who come out of their graves encounter similar problems.<sup>151</sup> There is something absurd in the descriptions of the dead people trying to go about business as usual. Reb Nachman, both historically and in Zeitlin's poem, was a bit of an absurdist. He believed that the best way to fight the evil inclination of depression was to express joy (*simcha*): "Use every ploy you can think of to bring yourself to joy. Depression does tremendous damage. Make every effort to rid yourself of it completely...for

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<sup>150</sup> Zeitlin, 271-272

<sup>151</sup> Zeitlin even wrote a poem referencing *Bay nakht afn altn mark*, entitled "Nokhklang tsu "Bay nakht afn altn mark." In this poem the poet goes back to the shtetl after the holocaust and tries to revive the dead once more as in Peretz's play; however, the only being that answers him is the angel of death, whose wings have been burnt and has been reduced to the "last oy from a Jew burned in Treblinka." *Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn*, v. 1, 42.



many people, the best way to come to joy is through jokes and laughter.”<sup>152</sup> In Zeitlin’s poem Reb Nachman also promotes doing whatever it takes to laugh, even if it involves making yourself somewhat ridiculous:

„נישט געבאלעמוטשעט, נתן! מאַכן זיך צום נאַר!  
יאָגעלעך... באַהעלטערלעך...  
זיפּנבלאַזן. זיפּנבלאַזן לאָזן...<sup>153</sup>

Don’t dilly-dally Nosn! Make yourself a fool!  
A game of tag...hide and seek...  
Blowing bubbles, bubble away your troubles...

Reb Nachman then goes on to describe how when he was in Turkey he played with children and dressed in “children’s pants, a jacket with epaulets, a cap with tassels,”<sup>154</sup> and they played make-believe French people, thereby destroying the devil. Here Zeitlin is referring to the stop that Reb Nachman made in Istanbul on his way to the Holy Land in 1798. When Reb Nachman was in Istanbul, he supposedly adopted strange, childish behaviors, which were apparently an intentional descent into the greatest depths, in order to allow for his later spiritual ascent when he would reach the Land of Israel, as well as to overcome the evil forces that would keep him from reaching his goal,<sup>155</sup> hence the “devil” to which Zeitlin’s poem refers.

A reader who is familiar with the representation of Hasidim in the Haskalah and the neo-Hasidism of Peretz may wonder if Zeitlin is really mocking Reb Nachman by portraying him as acting foolish in order to thwart the devil. Here we

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<sup>152</sup> Rabbi Nachman, trans. Avraham Greenbaum, Likutey Moharan II: 48 in Restore My Soul, (Monsey & Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1980) 29.

<sup>153</sup> Zeitlin, 280.

<sup>154</sup> Zeitlin, 280.

<sup>155</sup> Green, 68-69.

see, however, how different Zeitlin's neo-Hasidism is from Peretz's. In Zeitlin's poetry a rebbe's metaphysical powers are not questioned, and indeed the devil could actually be part of reality, as is evidenced from his poem "Realizm fun a yid:"

אויך איך האָב פֿיינט די בונטע מליצות,  
איך בין, ווי דו, אַ רעאַליסט,  
נאָר מיינע ווירקלעכקייטן זיינען  
נישט אויסגעוואַקסן אויף מיסט.

כיפֿאַראַכט פֿאַעטאַכץ, נאָר וואָסדען זשע?  
פֿאַר מיר איז גאַט רעאַליסט,  
נשמה איז פֿאַר מיר ממשות,  
קאַנקרעט דער טייוול און דער חטא.<sup>156</sup>

Also I despise gaudy *melitzas*,  
I am, like you, a realist,  
Only my realities are  
Not grown out of garbage.

I scorn fancy-shmancy poetry, so what then?  
For me, God is a realist,  
Soul is for me finite,  
Concrete is the devil and sin.

In this poem Zeitlin claims to be a realist but reveals that his version of realism is different from the standard definition. In some way, this poem is reminiscent of Peretz's "Nogniel," in which the angel rejects poetry for the sake of poetry, just as Zeitlin starts off by disavowing "gaudy *melitzas*." When Zeitlin says that his realities did not grow "out of garbage," he is most likely referring to the expressionist poets who used their experiences from the ravages of war as inspiration for their poetry. He may also be referring to the atheistic world-view of many of his contemporary poets. God and therefore religious precepts, such as the devil and sin, are concrete reality for Zeitlin. In this way, Zeitlin is in not poking fun at Reb Nachman, but rather asserting

<sup>156</sup> Zeitlin, "Realizm fun a yid," *Lider fun khurbn un gloybn*, vol. 1, 330.

that by achieving a comic posture, Reb Nachman was able, on some level, to chase away the devil.

Therefore, this poem could be characterized as transrealistic – a term that could be applied to much of Zeitlin’s oeuvre. Transrealism is a literary mode that blends fantastic elements with realism. It is a reaction to the tiredness and boundaries of realism “tries to treat not only immediate reality, but also the higher reality in which life is embedded.”<sup>157</sup> Indeed, “Der Rebe Reb Nachman” is highly fantastic. Corpses come back to life and literary boundaries are broken down as characters from Reb Nachman’s own stories, such as six of the seven beggars from “The Seven Beggars” and the simple man and wise man from “The Wise man and the Simple Man,” come to him and ask for *tikkun*. Yet at the same time, Zeitlin attempts to give a real character sketch of historical figures such as Reb Nachman and Noshon the Scribe, with actual psychological depth. Transrealism is highly suited to a religious existentialist because he can question reality and propose new models for reality, while at the same time having free reign to explore divine realms of existence. Returning to Zeitlin’s poem “Realizm fun a yid,” we see that Zeitlin does invoke a new reality at the end of the poem:

עס האָט מיין וואָר אַן אַנדער פנים -  
 עס האָבן דורות זי געשמידט,  
 און אַנדערש איז מיין רעאַליזם:  
 ס'איז רעאַליזם פֿון אַ ייד.<sup>158</sup>

My reality has another face –

<sup>157</sup> Rudy Rucker, “A Transrealist Manifesto,” The Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America 82 (1983). In truth, the term “magic realism” could also probably be applied to Zeitlin; however, magic realism often seems to have an undercurrent of the grotesque which is not present in Zeitlin’s work.

<sup>158</sup> Zeitlin, 331.

Generations have forged it,  
 And different is my realism:  
 It is the reality of a Jew.

Zeitlin has defined this reality in the preceding two stanzas as “a great grandfather’s prayers” and the “struggle between De’la Reina and Lillith.” In other words, both his direct ancestors, and the Jewish nation’s collective struggles of earlier generations are present in Zeitlin and therefore part of his reality. This collective past, both historical and mystical, is in fact, the reality of a Jew. Reality is therefore shaped by both personal and collective experiences in Zeitlin’s schema. As we have seen earlier from the poem “real,” God and by extension the world of miracles is also part and parcel of reality. Peretz strips his Hasidic characters of any mysticism in order that they should serve his neo-Hasidic worldview, which was more preoccupied with issues such as social injustice, the threat of political dogma, and creating a moral base for secular Jews than anything miraculous. Zeitlin, on the other hand, is specifically drawn to Hasidism because its realism also incorporates collective Jewish history and mysticism.

As we have discussed, one of the concepts that Zeitlin appropriates from Hasidism and mysticism is an appreciation for contradictions that really express the oneness of the universe. Zeitlin views Reb Nachman as someone whose “contradictions” were the “inner dialectic for the great personality”<sup>159</sup> and in this poem his Reb Nachman makes a number of paradoxical statements. In addition to his equating life and death, he states that “The simple person is a wise person, the wise

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<sup>159</sup> Zeitlin, *Literarische un filosofische eseyen*, 247.

person a simple person.”<sup>160</sup> This statement is a reference to Reb Nachman’s story about the *Khokhem* or “wise person” and the *Tam* or “simple person.”<sup>161</sup> Because the *Kokhem* has too much wisdom, he loses his faith in the King and ends up being tortured by the devil in a bog. The *Tam*, on the other hand, becomes elevated to a position of minister. This story is an allegory for divine service, in which one must have a simple faith in God and avoid pursuing false knowledge that can lead one away from one’s faith. Zeitlin brings out an interesting paradox in the poem. The *Tam* must take on aspects of the *Khokhem* in order to be a prime minister and in the allegorical sense to serve God, but then he also has to deal with the *Khokhem*’s inclination to question God: און ס’הערט דער חכם זיך נישט אויף צו מישן/ אין דעם תמ’ס ,,<sup>162</sup> עסקים. (And the wise person doesn’t stop mixing/ In the simple person’s business.) The closer one gets to holiness, the harder the evil inclination works to stymie that person. Therefore, there is also the paradox that the evil inclination is actually beneficial for humans:

Having the evil inclination is actually something of great benefit to us. It is with this that we can truly serve God. When we are subjected to the fierce heat of the evil inclination, we have the capacity to steel ourselves to get the better of it. Then we can channel this passion into an act of genuine service.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Zeitlin, “Der Rebbe Reb Nachman,” 273.

<sup>161</sup> This story can be found under the title “The Sophisticate and the Simpleton” in Rabbi Nachman’s Stories, trans. Aryeh Kaplan, (Monsey and Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1983) 160-196.

<sup>162</sup> Zeitlin, 277. This paradoxical concept is also found in Breslov theology: “At the very moment when a person is rising to a level of greater holiness – for example when he drawing closer to a true *Tsadik* – it can happen that all of a sudden he experiences something that is the very opposite of pure. Don’t lose heart because of this. It is a sign that you are coming closer to holiness.” Reb Nachman, Likutey Moharan II:49, 30.

Zeitlin presents this notion with an interesting twist. The Tam must actually try to take on aspects of the Khokhem, his complete opposite, in order to serve God better, while not for a minute losing himself in the Khokhem's evil ways. Thus, the Tam must struggle every minute to be the master of his own faith. Yet, in the same way as in Reb Nachman's vision, this battle with the evil inclination will only make him a better minister in the service of God.

The idea that the struggle with the evil inclination is constant is related to another paradox that Reb Nachman expresses. Since he has been able to achieve pure *simcha*, he must then do battle with the sadness that could at any minute disturb his *simcha*:

מחמת ער האָט זוכה געווען צו שמחה,  
 אַ שמחה, וואָס רירט אַזש אָן די ספֿירות,  
 מוז ער דורך די נעכט און דורך די טעג  
 מיט די קליפות פֿון עצבות  
 פֿירן אַ געשלעג.<sup>164</sup>

Because he merited *simcha*,  
 A *simcha*, that moves even the heavenly spheres,  
 He must through the day and the night  
 With the husks of sadness  
 Lead a fight.

Earlier we have seen how Reb Nachman recommends using *simcha* to fight the evil inclination, but once one achieves pure *simcha*, the evil inclination is always ready to attack in the form of depression. Once again this relates to Reb Nachman's fairly drastic mood swings. These mood swings thus became an essential component of Reb Nachman's philosophy, in the form of the constant struggle not to yield to the evil inclination of depression. In Zeitlin's world-view one must struggle to find God,

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<sup>164</sup> Zeitlin, 276.

and even if one manages to find God, one must then struggle to maintain his connection to God. Nachman's *simcha* is the springboard which brings him into contact with God. In Zeitlin's case it is perhaps his poetry.

As we have seen, poetry functions much like prayer for Zeitlin. His Hasidic poems both resonate with and affirm his mystical world-view. Writing was also a sort of sacred act for Peretz but one that replaced religion and placed universal ethics at its midpoint, rather than God. Section '7' of "Der Rebe Reb Nakhman" helps elucidate the difference between Zeitlin's Hasidic-themed work and Peretz's. The zaddik in Zeitlin's poem is able to storm heavens, redeem souls, heal people and perform many other wonders, but according to his Reb Nachman this comes at a great cost to the zaddik himself:

די מעשות זינע -  
 פליגלען האָבן זיי באַקומען!  
 נאָר די פליגלען קאָסטן אים  
 טויזנט באַהאַלטענע מומען.  
 יאָ, ער איז דער טייך,  
 וואָס שווענקט אַרונטער אַלע פּגמען,  
 נאָר פּדי דער טייך צו זיין, וואָס פּלייצט  
 אַלעמענס פּלעקען עוועק  
 מוז ער אויף זיין דעק  
 טראָגן יעדן פּגם און יעדן פּלעק.<sup>165</sup>

His stories –  
 Received wings!  
 But the wings cost him  
 A thousand hidden stings.  
 Yes, he is the river,  
 That rinses away all stains,  
 But in order to be the river that carries  
 Away everyone's pains  
 He must on his deck  
 Carry every blight and every fleck.

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<sup>165</sup> Zeitlin, 276-277.

This segment is reminiscent of Peretz's story "Revelation; or, The Story of the Billy Goat."<sup>166</sup> This story also features Reb Nachman, who has just been revealed as a zaddik and people have started streaming in to him in order that he help them with one of his miracles. After Reb Nachman has made *havdalah*, he is overcome with sadness and leaves for a while. When he comes back, he tells a story about a billy goat who had miraculous horns that could reach into heaven and allow him to ask for the Messiah to come. Even if he could not get the Messiah to come, in hard times he could knock down a precious stone from heaven, from which the people could derive income. However, one day someone asks to make a snuff box from the goat's horns, and then word gets out and everybody wants a snuff box from the goat's horns. Soon the billy goat can no longer reach heaven with his horns.

In Peretz's story the billy goat is clearly a metaphor for Reb Nachman himself, who feels he is being drained of his spiritual powers for petty miracles. Just as Zeitlin's Reb Nachman laments that he must sully himself in order to help other people, Peretz's Reb Nachman launches a similar complaint. However, the similarity in theme helps bring out the huge contrast between Peretz's representation of Reb Nachman and Zeitlin's. Peretz's Reb Nachman consciously compares himself to a billy goat giving people horn for snuff boxes. Even though Peretz makes sure to say that it is a very holy billy goat, it is still a billy goat. Peretz also transforms Reb Nachman into a romantic hero, pale and trembling with great emotion:

Here Reb Nachman's voice cut off... He hid his face in his hands, and one could clearly see how his head and hands trembled, and the moon high above, which stood over his head like a crown, seemed also to

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<sup>166</sup> For a critical discussion of this story see Roskies, Bridge of Longing, 124.



tremble. And finally, after a while, he raised his head and revealed a pale face, and with a wonderful, trembling voice he went on to narrate:<sup>167</sup>

Peretz is always up to his undercutting tricks and cannot help but inject some parody into the seemingly holy aura of Reb Nachman. When Reb Nachman leaves after making *havdalah*, his Hasidim speculate as to how it is possible for him to be sad. One Hasid starts to say that he does not know how a rebbe who has already made so much money on miracles could be sad, but he is immediately cut off by the looks from the other Hasidim. However, just mentioning Reb Nachman in this light, even though the Hasid is shamed into silence, serves to undercut Reb Nachman.

Peretz's Reb Nachman feels like more of a purely artistic creation than Zeitlin's. Perhaps this feeling of artifice is due to the fact that Peretz includes many more characters as well as a multitude of details, from how the town will prosper with a zaddik located there, to what foods will be served to his supplicants. Zeitlin represents Reb Nachman entirely differently. His portrait is much more naturalistic, due to his deep psychological study of Reb Nachman.<sup>168</sup> Any details are to enhance Reb Nachman's inner life. Of course, the main difference is the authors' intentions. In general, Peretz mined the Hasidic world for material that suited his agenda for promoting secular humanistic values in a pleasingly artistic, yet Jewish form. In Peretz's story the author is also making a statement about artistic self-sacrifice.

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<sup>167</sup> I. L. Peretz, "Reb Nakhmenke's mayses," *Y. L. Perets: Ale Verk*, vol. 4 (New York: CYCO Biker Farlag, 1947) 206.

<sup>168</sup> Zeitlin wrote at least nine poems about Reb Nachman, each of which create a detailed psychological sketch of Reb Nachman. He also wrote one essay on Reb Nachman as a personality and one essay on his stories. In his essay "Reb Nachman Braslaver," Zeitlin credits Reb Nachman with being a very good psychologist himself and calls him a "psychologist of *kedusha* (holiness.)" See: Literarische un filosofische eseyen, 251.

Zeitlin, on the other hand, believed in God and valued rebbes for themselves, in addition to their being sources for literary inspiration. Zeitlin never cuts down Shneur Zalman or Reb Nachman. Zeitlin's Reb Nachman genuinely wants to help souls who are desperate for *tikkun*. Although in Peretz's story the narrator mentions that Reb Nachman has been performing miracles, the only miracle that we hear of is much more mundane than in Zeitlin's cosmic drama. An elderly lady who has trouble milking her goat, comes to Nachman who replies that everything will work out and indeed the goat allows herself to be milked from then on. Zeitlin's Reb Nachman actually reaches the heavens and manages to redeem all the dead people's souls. In this way, Zeitlin does not shy away from the aspect of *zaddikism* in the way that most previous writers and historians did: "[Zeitlin] wrote about Hasidism like a member and a close associate. He is, you should understand, inspired by Reb Nachman's personality and not only for his stories, but also defends his 'zaddikism.'"<sup>169</sup>

Both Peretz's and Zeitlin's Reb Nachmans have redemptive powers, and in fact, both Reb Nachmans are stand-ins for the author. As we have seen Peretz did feel that literature has redemptive powers, but his Reb Nachman is tempered by his own conflicting belief that human beings are essentially too flawed to ever really get things right. People will always put their personal day-to-day needs ahead of collective improvement. His Reb Nachman is therefore too overwhelmed by people's petty requests to bring about the redemption. As the most famous Yiddish writer of his day, Peretz had writers flocking to him for advice, which no doubt cut into his time for creative production. In this way asks Roskies, isn't the billy goat's sacrifice

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<sup>169</sup> Ezekiel Lifschutz, "Bamerkungen funem tsuzamenshteler," *Literarische un filosofische*, 390.

“analogous to Reb Nakhmenke himself, who for the sake of an old lady whose nanny goat stopped giving milk, squandered his spiritual energy on the day-to-day needs of his people? And isn’t this analogous to the writer I. L. Peretz, who knows that his reputation as a cultural figure and a secular rebbe has grown at the expense of his artistic aspirations?”<sup>170</sup> Although Zeitlin was never the literary rebbe figure that Peretz was, his Reb Nachman also shares a number of similarities with him as we have seen, paramount among them being Reb Nachman’s penchant for paradox, constant struggle for faith, and controversial status. Unlike Peretz, he did believe that the final redemption would come and this is reflected in the ending of his poem. Rather than permanently sacrificing his redemptive powers like Peretz’s billy goat, Reb Nachman’s stories – both historically and in Zeitlin’s poems – have true messianic potential and are emblematic of Zeitlin’s much more mystical neo-Hasidism.

The end of the poem contains a reference to Reb Nachman’s story, “The Seven Beggars.”<sup>171</sup> In this story the reader never encounters the seventh beggar, because the seventh beggar will not be revealed until the Messiah comes. Therefore, for Reb Nachman this story was an expression of a future reality, and the boundaries between literature and reality are themselves only allegorical. Zeitlin portrays Nosn the Scribe as longing for these boundaries to finally dissolve and for the final redemption to come:

קען זיין, דער דור וועט זוכה זיין

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<sup>170</sup> Roskies, Bridge of Longing, 124.

<sup>171</sup> Reb Nachman, “The Seven Beggars,” trans. Aryeh Kaplan, Rabbi Nachman’s Stories, (Monsey and Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1983) 354-437.

צו אַ תיקון גאַר אַ הויכן  
 און דער רבי וועט זיך אויפֿהויבן  
 מיט אַזאַ מין גדלות־דמוחין,  
 אַז ממש אַלע קליפות  
 וועלן ווערן דעריבן,  
 און אין אונדזערע יאָרן - בימינו  
 מיט די אייגענע אויערן - באַזנינו,  
 הערן מיר דעם סוף פֿון דער מעשה מיט די זיבן,  
 וואָס איך האָב זי עד־גמירא נישט פֿאַרשריבן.  
 דענסטמאַל וועל אויך איך,  
 הקטן נתן מנעמיראַוו,  
 אפשר משיג זיין אויף אַן אמת -  
 און נישט בדרך רמז -<sup>172</sup>

Could it be that this generation will merit  
 Such a high purification  
 And the Rebbe will get up  
 With such a state of mind,  
 That even all the evil spirits  
 Will be torn asunder,  
 And in our lifetime – In our days,  
 With our own ears – With our own ears,  
 We will hear the end of the story with The Seven,  
 Which I have not yet completed writing down.  
 At that time I will also,  
 The Small One Nosn from Nemirov,  
 Perhaps understand a truth –  
 And not one merely hinted at –

Once the end of the story is revealed, the final “wedding” will take place and the seventh beggar, the allegorical representation of the Messiah, will come and “Perhaps we, ourselves, will even merit becoming the moral of the story.”<sup>173</sup> Nosn makes an interesting inversion: instead of the story intruding into reality, he longs for reality to become the end of the story, which will be the messianic age. This moment reveals Zeitlin’s transrealism at its most effective. The fantastic and the real are united, as

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<sup>172</sup> Zeitlin, 278.

<sup>173</sup> Zeitlin, 279.

are literature and nature, and one's spiritual strivings, with the object of the strivings – and there is real potential for redemption on all levels.

Of course this redemption cannot be achieved without personal sacrifice, as Reb Nachman must absorb the sins of all he extirpates. In another poem by Zeitlin, “Der vikuakh afn boydem-shtibl,” redemption once again demands its price. In this poem two young rebbes, Leyb Sore's and Avrum der Malokh, have secluded themselves in an attic room. There is but one window, which is completely covered with ice. The purpose of their seclusion is to be able to completely concentrate on a spiritual ascension into heaven. Leyb Sore's does manage to breach heaven, but he hears the cries of his people who are still on earth and is sent back to help them. Avrum der Malokh had almost reached heaven when Lilith tempts him and he falls into a swoon. Upon recovering, Leyb Sore's tries to persuade him to leave the attic room with him and go help the rest of the Jewish nation:

איצט פֿאַרשטיי איך:  
 אש תמיד תוקד על המזבח -  
 די ערד איז דער מזבח.  
 קדושה גייט נישט אַליין -  
 אַפֿילו נישט אין צווייען, ווי איך מיט דיר.  
 אָן פֿלֿישֶׁרֶאל גייט זי נישט, ניין!<sup>174</sup>

Now I understand:  
 An eternal flame should burn on the altar –  
 The earth is the altar.  
 Holiness alone does not go –  
 Even in pairs, like you and me.  
 It doesn't go without all of Israel, no!

Avrum der Malokh thinks he will get dragged down by the common people, and since he is able to reach a higher level than them, he should concentrate on trying to ascend

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<sup>174</sup> Zeitlin, “Der vikuakh afn boydem-shtibl,” 262.

to heaven. Leyb Sore's gives up transcendence and leaves the attic room to go to "Jewish suffering,"<sup>175</sup> and Avrum der Malokh remains behind.

This poem has echoes of several Peretz stories, including "The Tale of the Billy Goat," the dream sequence from "Mishnas khsidim," but especially "Oyb nisht nokh hekher," in which rather than actual ascend into heaven, the Nemirover Rebbe helps his fellow human beings – in this case a poor, sick woman. Yet once again the superficial similarities are minor compared to the glaring contrasts. First of all, Peretz's rebbe never really ascends into heaven as his Hasidism believe. Rather, he physically helps a sick woman chop firewood. The story's title "Oyb nisht nokh hekher," both negates miracles and promotes Peretz's humanistic ideals. In Zeitlin's poem Leyb Sore's really does reach heaven, and this fact is never called into question. He sacrifices his own spiritual soaring to help the Jewish nation. As we examined in the last chapter, Peretz subtly undercuts the Nermirover Rebbe in "Oyb nisht nokh hekher." Zeitlin at no point compromises the holiness of either rebbe. Both rebbes are alternative religious ideals, one is the ascetic, the other is the spiritual guide of the collective.

The poet does seem to sympathize more with Leyb Sore's vision, which is perhaps more similar to the poet's own perception of his divine mission. According to Leyb Sore's vision, holiness is on earth in helping one's fellow Jew, which fits in to Zeitlin's scheme in which holiness is in everything, especially in the struggle on the physical plane. Once again we encounter a contradiction: "the order of our Godly

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<sup>175</sup> Zeitlin, 264.

work/ Must be reversed.”<sup>176</sup> Only by going voluntarily back down to earth and back to one’s fellow man, can one rise in holiness.

The Nemirover Rebbe in “Oyb nisht nokh hekher” is a real Peretzian hero – as much as there is room for a true hero in Peretz’s world. Reb Nachman is then the quintessential Zeitlinian hero. In addition to the similarities between Reb Nachman and Zeitlin, Reb Nachman is also a meeting point between his modernism and mysticism. Reb Nachman’s vision is truly ideoplastic. Zeitlin describes Reb Nachman’s stories as:

...binding poetic flight to the heights with mystic descent into the depths, stories, where the form becomes idea-ized, and the idea becomes form-ed,<sup>177</sup> where the forms are – kabbalistically speaking – vessels for legends, utensils for inner illuminations.<sup>178</sup>

In Reb Nachman’s stories the form and the ideas are in perfect confluence. Zeitlin therefore is able to locate the ideoplasticity and dynamism that he admires from futurism, in the figure of Reb Nachman: “Reb Nachman was, in his own way, a type of Futurist of Hasidism.”<sup>179</sup>

Zeitlin died in 1973 at the age of 75, having published prolifically throughout his whole life. His poems about various rebbes represent only a small part of his work. Nor did he write them in a single period of his literary career. Whereas for Peretz, Hasidic inspired stories represented a major change and a revelation of sorts, Hasidic philosophy in general had a large-scale, ongoing impact on Zeitlin’s work,

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<sup>176</sup> Zeitlin, 259.

<sup>177</sup> "די געשטעלט ווערט פֿאַרמחשבהט און די מחשבה ווערט געשטאַלטיקט"

<sup>178</sup> Zeitlin, Literarische un filosofische eseyen, 249.

<sup>179</sup> Zeitlin, Literarische un filosofische eseyen, 248.

whether it was actually Hasidic themed or not. There are several reasons for this Hasidic influence. First of all – upbringing – Zeitlin was, after all, Hillel Zeitlin’s son, and he inherited his father’s interest and enthusiasm for Hasidism. His father was a living example of someone who was able to live the life of a modern intellectual and maintain his Hasidic belief and identity. Secondly, Aaron Zeitlin’s artistic credo prioritized Jewish content. Like Peretz, he found these homegrown wonder-tales an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Most of all, Hasidism synchronizes well with Zeitlinism. A Hasid is, in a fashion, a religious existentialist ideal, since he struggles to serve God twenty-four hours a day. Furthermore, Zeitlin was able to locate in the figure of Reb Nachman a Jewish-modernist prototype. Zeitlin did not; however, choose to embrace the Hasidic lifestyle to the letter of the law, but rather used Hasidism to create a unique philosophical-theological system, which allowed him to navigate through some of recent history’s most traumatic periods, brokenhearted, yet spiritually intact.

Zeitlin’s neo-Hasidism, though it shares some continuities with Peretz’s, represents a new direction in which Hasidic material is appropriated for a specifically mystical mission, that helps the author define and illustrate his own religious-philosophical world-view. It is actually ideoplastic in an entirely different way than Peretz’s neo-Hasidism. Peretz’s Hasidim represent ideas, but more in the way of metonymy – the Rebbe is a certain set of values. Zeitlin, on the other hand, uses Hasidic thought in a way that is more in line with historical Hasidism; however, as a non-observant Jew, his Hasidic-inspired poetry actually replaces the role of ritual for him. In our next chapter, we will see how Fishl Shneyerson also renders a more



historically accurate representation of Hasidism, while appropriating Hasidic ideas in a novel way – as a new theory of psychology.

## **Chapter Four – The Soul Doctor: Dr. Fishl Shneyerson’s Neo-Hasidic Psychology**

In quiet ecstasy the melody and the dance become one, capturing the inner source as if in prayer, rising and branching out selflessly farther. Hands entwined, tight-closed groups dancing – all souls are one soul, and the whole body quivers as if in prayer, every limb trembles in ecstatic joy and pleads for mercy:

-- Master of the Universe, let me disappear into you, actually really disappear!..<sup>1</sup>

Hasidim are dancing. Hand in hand, heads uplifted towards heaven, they form a circle with their bodies and a single entity with their souls. All have one desire, to unite with the Almighty. Their dancing becomes a living expression of *bitul*, or self-abnegation to the point where there is no distinction between oneself and God.<sup>2</sup>

Dancing is elevated to divine service. From wedding cards to literary representations, one of the most popular artistic renderings of Hasidim is of them dancing. When Hasidim dance, they become a metaphor for divine inspiration, which is perfect for artistic manipulation. Dancing translates religious ecstasy into an artistic expression, so that the artist has merely to shape this ready-made material into his own vision. Peretz was among many authors who profited from this artistic raw material.

However, there are few belletristic impressions of Hasidim dancing that seek to reveal to the reader the inner spirit of the Hasid during the dance. Fishl Shneyerson, the Chabad Hasid cum psychologist and writer, who is the subject of this chapter, provides a glimpse into the soul of the Hasid during his dance: the Hasid longs to join so completely with God that the distinctness of his own soul will disappear into the

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<sup>1</sup> Fishl Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, (Berlin: Jüdischer Literarischer Verlag, 1922) 63.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on *bitul* see: Naftali Loewenthal, Communicating the Infinite, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 2-3.

eternal. Shneyerson then uses this idea as a metaphor for his own psychological theories about healthy soul-life. Fishl Shneyerson was a neo-Hasid for whom the Hasidic dance became a cure for the soul, and a path to transcendence.

Shneyerson is different from Peretz and Zeitlin in that he considered himself first and foremost a scientist. He was internationally well known in his day in the field of psychology, and much of his research and writing was dedicated to the scientific exploration of the soul.<sup>3</sup> He also wrote four novels and some short stories, which work in tandem with his psychological works. His fictional characters serve as case studies for his psychological theories. What is fascinating is that many of the basic ideas of his “Mentsh vissenshaft,” or “Science of Man” can be traced back to ideas in Hasidic thought, and provide evidence of the impact of neo-Hasidism even beyond the literary world. If one thinks of the history of the literary Hasid in terms of a tree, the roots would be the maskilic satires of Hasidim, the trunk would be Peretz’s *Khsidish*, and one branch would be the lyricism of Zeitlin. Shneyerson’s psychologized Hasidim and Hasidic psychology would comprise an altogether separate branch that perhaps itself branched in two, between his psychological and belletristic works – both of which draw heavily on Hasidism.

Fishl Shneyerson was literally born to be a rebbe, since he was a direct descendent of Shneur Zalman of Liady, and his father was a Hasidic rebbe. Born around 1887 in Kamenits-podolsk, Shneyerson received rabbinical ordination by the

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<sup>3</sup> Shneyerson’s most famous psychological work, Der veg tsum mentsh (Vilna: Farlag B. Kletskin, 1927), was translated into English two years later and includes forwards by John Dewey and Adolf Meyer, one of the most influential people in the world of psychiatry of his time. See: F. Schneersohn, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, (New York: The Science of Man Press, 1929).

age of sixteen.<sup>4</sup> He had a reputation for being a child prodigy and must have seemed well on his way to following in his illustrious ancestors' footsteps; however, he also learned secular subjects and audited classes in a Gymnasium as an extern.<sup>5</sup> An extern was allowed to sit in on classes and take exams in order to receive a degree, although he or she was often subjected to unfairly high standards by the examiners, which Shneyerson writes about in his later novel *Yidishe nekome*. By eighteen, he had succeeded in passing the exams. In 1908 he traveled to Berlin where he studied medicine until 1914. In 1915 he passed the state medical examinations in Russia. Shneyerson preferred research to the practice of medicine; rather than open a private practice, he worked in a laboratory in St. Petersburg. In 1918 he was chosen to be dean of the University of Kiev's Pedagogical-Therapeutic Department, which he had helped to found. He was also instrumental in establishing a Hebrew-language journal called *Kadimah*, which dealt with religious-philosophic problems. During this time, Shneyerson tried to establish a branch of science dedicated to the study of religion, which he called "religiologie." According to A. Golom, Shneyerson remained an observant Jew his entire life.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For biographical information on Fishl Shneyerson see: eds. Niger, Shmuel and Shatsky, Yakov, Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur (New York: Altveltlekhn yidishn kultur-kongres, 1956-1981), v. 8, 755-757 and Zalman Reyzen, Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologie, (Vilna: Farlag B. Kletskin, 1929) 822-831.

<sup>5</sup> It is not clear what made Shneyerson leave the traditional world of study; however, Reyzen mentions that his father was both a rabbi and learned in secular subjects, which perhaps made the family more open to their son's broader education. Shneyerson must have also remained close with his family, since he moved back in with them for a while after earning his doctorate, Leksikon, 823-824. He also dedicated his novel, Grenadir Shtrase, to his father.

<sup>6</sup> A. Golomb, "Yidn un felker-psikhologie," Yivo-bleter, v.10 3/5 (1936) 340-351.

In 1921 he left Kiev due to the Russian Civil War and went to Warsaw, where he taught classes in pedagogy and ran a clinic for children. In 1923 he settled in Berlin, where he supervised a clinic for traumatized children. In 1927 he traveled first in Eastern Europe and then in America, giving lectures on his theories of “Man-science,” which we shall soon examine in depth. From 1933 until 1937 he worked in Warsaw. Finally, in 1937 he moved to Tel-Aviv, where he headed a psychology laboratory, remaining in Israel for the rest of his life. Shneyerson published prolifically in the field of psychology, and his work was translated into many languages. Some of his most important works in the area of psychology are *Di katastrofale tsaytn un di vaksndike doyres* (Catastrophic Times and the Growing Generations; 1923), *Der veg tsum mentsh* (The Way to Man; 1927), *Mentsh gezelshaft* (Man Society; 1927), *Cholem un shpil* (Dream and Play; 1933), *Yidn un felker-psikhologie* (Jews and Folk-psychology; 1936). He also published four novels: *Khayim Gravitser* (2 vol., 1922-6), *Karahod* (1928), *Yidishe nekome* (Jewish Revenge)<sup>7</sup>, *Grenadir Shtrase* (Grenadir Street; 1935).

Shneyerson’s psychological works are extremely literary, and his belletristic works are sustained psychological studies. Ravitch describes his style of writing as “belletristic science.”<sup>8</sup> When he is writing about psychology, he cites works from Sholem Aleichem to Dostoevsky to serve as case studies to prove his points. He then uses his novels to prove his psychological theories. Shneyerson postulates that art, rather than science, has been far more effective in reaching the inner psyche of man:

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<sup>7</sup> I have not yet been able to find a date for *Yidishe nekome*, but it was published after *Karahod* and before *Grenadir Shtrase*.

<sup>8</sup> Ravitch, Melekh, *Mayn leksikon*, (Montreal: A Komitet, 1945) 267.

But the ordinary and complex reactions of a man in the day-to-day life, the infinitely multiform reality of concrete experience, the large inward world of fateful passions, and of the intimate depths of personality, have until now remained the domain of the artistic rather than of the scientific intuition.<sup>9</sup>

Art is created in and simultaneously explores the spiritual realm that Shneyerson is determined to reach via science, but he does not hesitate to avail himself of art in order to reach this goal scientifically. Shneyerson's work, even his specifically "scientific" work, often transcends genre: "We encounter a new theory from a Yiddish thinker. It a psychological theory, or perhaps a psychiatric one, or perhaps actually a popular-philosophical system, such as Prentice Mulford's. Or perhaps it is just a composition on the border between poetry and philosophy."<sup>10</sup>

Shneyerson no doubt saw himself as both a doctor and a philosopher. There is more than one of stand-in for the author throughout his literary work. One of the most revealing of Shneyerson's stand-ins is the younger Doctor Gruber in his novel *Grenadir Shtrase*:

I must tell you that my colleagues, the doctors, are less satisfied with me. They call me mockingly "The Philosophical Dreamer" (For a man of medicine that is the worst nickname). You should know that I completed two programs of study, I am not only a medical doctor, but also a Doctor of Philosophy. Indeed I have a philosophical approach to most old and petrified concepts about mental-illness.<sup>11</sup>

The actual Professor Dr. Shneyerson – he was often referred to with the double title – was critical of the psychological currents of his day. The field of psychology was

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<sup>9</sup> Fishl Shneyerson, *Studies in Psycho-Expedition* trans. Herman Frank (New York: The Science of Man Press, 1929), 8. For citations from "Der veg tsum mentsh," I will be using Frank's translation, unless otherwise indicated. All other translations are mine.

<sup>10</sup> Auerbach, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Fishl Shneyerson, *Grenadir Shtrase*, (Warsaw: Literarishe bleter, 1935) 217.

fairly new, when he graduated medical school in 1914. The study of psychology as a discipline outside of philosophy or physiology is credited to Wilhelm Wundt, who established the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879.<sup>12</sup> Shneyerson was no doubt influenced by Wundt's "experimental self-observation" as a means of gathering data, since as we shall see Shneyerson's methods are quite similar.

However, Shneyerson believed that experimental psychology focused too intently on minute details, thereby failing to grasp the full scope of a person's soul:

"Experimental psychology does not yet "see" man in his integrity, man in the wholeness of all his own concrete-infinite multiformty."<sup>13</sup> Shneyerson was most likely influenced by Gestalt psychology with its emphasis on focusing on the psychological whole. Although even Gestalt psychology does not take the entire whole into account according to Shneyerson, because it focuses on the whole of only one situation, but is not dynamic.<sup>14</sup> Freud's theories were also widely circulated in Shneyerson's day; however, Shneyerson disagreed with the importance that Freud placed on sexual urges as once again blocking a perception of the person's psyche as a whole: "The first few discovered facts of the soul-life, such as the sexual phenomena of the psychical life and the inferiority feeling, at once gave rise to new tissues of abstractions, to myopic theories and doctrinaire factions."<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>12</sup> For more information on Wundt and psychological currents of Shneyerson's time see: Ludy T. Benjamin, A Brief History of Modern Psychology, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007)

<sup>13</sup> Fishl Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 181. ("Multiformty" appears to be a typo, and the author means "multiformity.")

<sup>14</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 36-38.

<sup>15</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 16-17.

he was indebted to Freud for the role, which the unconscious as well as dreams, plays in his own theories. Most likely Jung's theory of "stability of personality," achieved by integrating the conscious with the unconscious, played a role in shaping Shneyerson's theories, as well as his belief that spirituality was necessary for a healthy human psyche. Finally, he was in direct opposition to Cesare Lombroso's conclusion that genius is an abnormal psychological state, but rather believed that such an inspired perspective was the ultimate goal of a healthy psyche.

Shneyerson's solution to the problems he found in contemporary psychological thought was to create his own school of what he called "Mentshvisenshaft" or "Science of Man."<sup>16</sup> The goal of the "Science of Man" was to "grasp and explore man as a totality and in all his multiform concreteness,"<sup>17</sup> rather than just focusing on a specific neurosis. Shneyerson outlines his "Science of Man" in *Der veg tsum mentsh* (1927). *Der veg tsum mentsh* does not just focus on mental illness, but rather it attempts to look at the whole person, and can therefore be used by anybody to maximize his or her potential.<sup>18</sup> In the opening chapter Shneyerson draws an analogy between physical exercise in which one exercises one's body and soul exercises in which one learns how to be more in contact with one's own deeper needs and sensitivities. He terms this probing into the soul an "expedition," which he likens to an actual expedition:

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<sup>16</sup> Ravitch, 267.

<sup>17</sup> Fishl Shneyerson, *Studies in Psycho-Expedition*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ab. Goldberg, "Vegn profesor Shneyerson's mensh-visnshaft un mensh gezelshaft," *Tog morgn zshurnal*, 29 Jan. and Feb. 5: 1928.



The Science of Man does not engage in idle interpretations and generalizations, but undertakes a direct expedition into the life of the soul in order to make an organized study and report what it has discovered in the near and remote provinces of the psychical life. The word “expedition,” in its application to this Science, does not by any means carry a metaphorical meaning. It is a concrete verbal expression indicative of the method and means by which we are able to penetrate to the core of the integral psychical reality.<sup>19</sup>

According to Shneyerson, everybody is capable of participating in this expedition, one need only learn how. Shneyerson recommends setting aside a certain time, dimming the lighting, re-arranging the furniture, and assuming a comfortable position, since “when a man assumes a quiet and calm pose, he is likely to arouse in himself the following clear and simple notion: I am a man, unlimited in his possibilities for rise and in his opportunities for sinking.”<sup>20</sup>

If these last words seem reminiscent of the Hasidic concept of *aliya* and *yeride*, which we discussed in the previous chapter, it is because they are indeed taken from Hasidic thought.<sup>21</sup> Fishl Shneyerson’s “Science of Man” actually draws heavily on Hasidic thought for inspiration. In fact, more than one critic has described his psychology as Hasidism couched in scientific terms. According to the critic A. Goldberg, Shneyerson is clearly “a mystic, albeit in his writing he tries to erase that word.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Shneyerson tries to allay the fears of his reader that his soul

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<sup>19</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 168.

<sup>21</sup> The Hasidic concept of *alilya/yeride* had already been around in Yiddish literature since at least 1914, in Anski’s *Dybuk*. The play opens with the words “Why, oh why/ Is the soul/ From such heights/ Cast down into the deep void?/ The falling carries/ The rising in it...” S. Anski, “Dibek,” Sh. Anski: Oysgeklibne verk, Musterverk, v. 21 (Buenos Aires: IWO, 1964) 125.

<sup>22</sup> Ab. Goldberg, “Vegn profesor Shneyerson’s mentsh-visnshaft un mentsh gezelshaft,” Der morgn zshurnal 5 Feb. 1928.

expeditions are not “one of those semi-mystical and nebulous speculations which have shot up, like weeds, on the soil of contemporary psychology.”<sup>23</sup> Shneyerson feels the need to defend his scientific methods because his theories are based on mystical thought. Aaron Zeitlin describes how in *Der veg tsum mentsh*; “The old Chabad Hasidic world-feeling blends with personal experimental-psychological experiences...”<sup>24</sup> B. Rivkin, like Goldberg, believes that Shneyerson is purposefully disguising the Hasidic basis for his psychology and terms it “scientific contraband,” and “smuggle-work,” which he then serves up to academia: “He teaches his grandfather’s Hasidus in the University – Hasidus stripped of its religiosity, and served with a scientific fork and knife.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, we see how neo-Hasidism was not only influential in the world of Yiddish belle-lettres, but that even penetrated the field of psychology.

With this background in mind, it becomes clear how thoroughly Hasidic thought permeates Shneyerson’s work. During the soul-expedition, one should concentrate inwardly and recall various “intimate experiences,” until

Ideas, images, emotions, and longings, gradually divest themselves from their supposed fragmentariness, and become inwardly intertwined into a concentrically radiating consciousness, much as a composer blends the various tones into a symphony, that of a sudden has aroused in his soul. Thus, one is enabled to approach more and ever more closely the cosmic-intimate primal sources of the soul-life; each impression from the outside world, and each inward emotion, springs from and leads to, this cosmic-intimate sources.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Shneyerson, *Studies in Psycho-Expedition*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, “Profesor d”r F. Shneyerson: Der veg tsum mentsh. Mentsh gezelshaft.,” *Yidishe velt* 1 (1928) 151.

<sup>25</sup> B. Rivkin, “Visnshaftlekhe kontrobande, *Tsukunft* 8 (1928) 485.

<sup>26</sup> Shneyerson, *Studies in Psycho-Expedition*, 169.

The “cosmic-intimate primal sources of the soul-life” refers, of course, to God; however, Shneyerson usually holds himself back from stating this too explicitly, because his work needs to sound scientific. Shneyerson is actually giving basic lessons here in *bitul*, which is particularly emphasized in Chabad philosophy.<sup>27</sup> When he says “ideas, images, emotions, and longings, gradually divest themselves from their supposed fragmentariness,” it is striking how closely this description of the ideal psychic state during a soul expedition resembles Aaron Zeitlin’s description of the focusing in on the oneness of God in his essay on Chabad:

Both the *nigun*, both the prayer, both the learning – everything must serve one goal: the flowing together with the oneness, the abolition of separations, the realization that multiformity is a means of getting lost, that in truth everything is one, because outside of the Creator, not a single thing is “clearly there.”<sup>28</sup>

Zeitlin and Shneyerson were in fact friends and found common ground in their shared Chabad heritage.<sup>29</sup>

Although consciousness is in a state of constant flux, Shneyerson divides it into three main modes for the sake of study. In order to describe the lowest level of consciousness, Shneyerson coins the term, “spherico-primitive” level, which is the realm of dreams, insanity, hypnotic states, states of intoxication and narcosis, and crude, primitive instincts. The middle level is “normal consciousness,” which is the concrete logical level of day-to-day consciousness. Finally, the highest level is the

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<sup>27</sup> See previous chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Zeitlin, “Chabad,” 231.

<sup>29</sup> See Aaron Zeitlin’s forward to Shneyerson’s Hebrew novel, *Kochah Shel Sanigoryah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Press, 1966)

“spherico-intimate” mode. In a successful expedition, one is able to reach the “spherico-intimate” level of consciousness. The spherico-intimate mode is a state of heightened perception in which one can tap into the “primal sources of the soul-life.” A person becomes aware of his soul and its source in something eternal. Shneyerson refers explicitly to Jewish *aggada* to illustrate this point: “In the Hebrew religious *aggadic* consciousness it has been an established maxim that not only man, but nature, too, offers praise-songs to God; “unto the smallest blade of grass, each living creature offers God a praise-hymn of its own...”<sup>30</sup> In the spherico-intimate mode one can “perceive the ‘praise songs’ of all the worlds within himself...” and thereby “more and more grasp and enjoy his own nature, and, in a deliberate-productive way, will find and cultivate the creative-ecstatic origin of the life of the soul.”<sup>31</sup> There are a variety of ways to enter the spherico-intimate realm, including artistic inspiration, religious inspiration, ecstatic and tragic experiences, and spherico-intimate emotions, such as love.<sup>32</sup>

Shneyerson’s division of consciousness into the primitive, the normal, and the spherico-intimate, reflects the Chabad Hasidic concept of the *rasha* or “evil person”, the *benoni* or “average person,” and the *tsaddik* “or holy person,”<sup>33</sup> or in Shneyerson’s own words; “Midway between the saint and the sinner stands the average human being, much as in the case of any person the ordinary course of life

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<sup>30</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 181.

<sup>31</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 191.

<sup>32</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 101.

<sup>33</sup> For more information on the *rasha*, *benoni* and *tsaddik*, see Nissan Mindel, The Philosophy of Chabad, v. 2 (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1973) 44-57.

moves midway between the rarely occurring ecstatic flights and the infrequent plunges into the lower depths.”<sup>34</sup>

Unfortunately most people are “shackled to the habitually predominating normal consciousness.”<sup>35</sup> If the spherico-intimate drive is repressed, it often leads to an outburst of mental illness. Shneyerson terms this neurosis “psychological scurvy,” because just like the body needs certain vitamins or it will become stricken with scurvy, so too does the soul need vitamins in the form of spherico-intimate experiences. If a person is lacking in these essential soul-vitamins, that person’s stifled spherical urge will cause a fall into the spherico-primitive consciousness: “When the spherical quotient does not harmonize with the actually feasible mode of living, Psychical Scurvy is bound to arise, -- i.e., the morbidly primitive emergency action, prompted by the unsatisfied intimate urge.”<sup>36</sup> For some people, this state will lead to a life of crime or depravity, and for other more sensitive people, neurosis. In order to cure psychological scurvy, Shneyerson advises travel, a change in environment and above all, dancing, which “[brings] fresh ‘sparks’ into [one’s soul]” and “[produces] marvelous curative effects.”<sup>37</sup> Shneyerson promotes dancing as one of the best ways to reach the spherico-intimate level of consciousness, and we will see the importance he ascribes to dancing once again in his novels.

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<sup>34</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 109.

<sup>35</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 167.

<sup>36</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 111.

<sup>37</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 63.

Shneyerson creates an ideal in which one would always be in touch with this highest level of consciousness. In a review of *Der veg tsum mentsh*, Ab. Goldberg describes an ideal Shneyersonian man as being in a permanently ecstatic state, such that he becomes intoxicated with the divine. People that have integrated the spherico-intimate mode into their normal consciousness “always see, always live in ecstasy. It is a glowing fire that does not become extinguished. The heavens stand open for them. They have drunk from that natural drink which they can never sober. They are God-drunk.”<sup>38</sup> According to Aaron Zeitlin, Shneyerson wanted to build a new “Ekstaz-kultur” (ecstasy- culture) in which he would revive “the Ur-primitive creative dance-joy, which is the only way to redemption of the creative powers of humankind.”<sup>39</sup>

If one translates always being in touch with this “higher level of consciousness,” being “God-drunk,” or living permanently in a state of “ecstasy” back into the Hasidic terminology that is the source for these ideas, Shneyerson is actually describing *devekut*, or “cleaving,” and *hitlahavut*, or “burning enthusiasm.” The early Hasidic master R. Meshullam Phoebus of Zbaraz describes the precondition to truly loving and fearing God (a more traditional way of formulating a “higher level of consciousness”): “And the prior essential condition is prayer with attachment [*devekut*], with burning enthusiasm [*hitlahavut*] of the heart, with a coercion of all man’s psychological faculties in the direction of clear and pure thoughts on God

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<sup>38</sup> Ab. Goldberg, “Vegn profesor Shneyerson’s mensh-visnshaft un mensh gezelshaft,” Der morgn zshurnal 5 Feb. 1928.

<sup>39</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, “Profesor d”r F. Shneyerson: Der veg tsum mentsh. Mentsh gezelshaft,” Yidishe velt 1 (1928): 151.

constantly...”<sup>40</sup> R. Meshullam also stipulates that all the religious laws must be scrupulously followed, which Shneyerson at no point mentions. Although Shneyerson himself followed ritual law, he does not attempt to compel others to follow it in his texts, either scientific or literary, but rather draws on Hasidic thought for inspirational purposes only. This lack of insistence on ritual observance is characteristic of neo-Hasidism.

Shneyerson’s last chapter is entitled “The Last Can Become the First.” It is his conclusion that every person is capable of leading his or her own psycho-expedition and unlocking the treasure troves of the spherico-intimate consciousness. If one is prevented from participating in the journey, one may fall into the abyss of the primitive consciousness, but if one is successful, one has unbounded potential: “Each man is unlimited in his sinking, and illimitable in his rising. The last can become the first.”<sup>41</sup> Shneyerson is trying to bring about a revolution in the already-dogmatized world of psychology. Rather than being controlled by unconscious urges, Shneyerson is proposing that one can redirect one’s “nervous” energy, not only into something positive, but something that can be a springboard for endless potential. He is not trying to diagnose only those who are sick, but to prescribe a path to psychological transcendence for everybody. Auerbach makes a similar sort of comparison; “The Hasid-Psychologist gives here the Misnagdim of Science a new fiery Torah: The last can be the first.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Louis Jacobs, “Hasidic Prayer,” Essential Papers on Hasidism, ed. Gershon Hundert, (New York: New York University Press, 1991) 333.

<sup>41</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 188.

<sup>42</sup> Rokhl Auerbach, 11.

Auerbach is not just speaking metaphorically, for Shneyerson's psychological theories resonate with the Hasidism with which he was raised. More than once Shneyerson refers directly to Hasidism in *Der veg tsum mentsh*. As we have said, Shneyerson is much opposed to Lombroso's idea that genius is really an expression of neurosis. Shneyerson discusses how creative impulses often stem from the balance of the soul being upset, but he believes that people can learn to channel this upset of balance into something positive and healthy, and it is from this channeling that artistic genius has often been born.<sup>43</sup> Shneyerson likens the inspiration that is often found in an individual who has an upset in the balance of his or her soul to the concept of *tsebrokhenkayt* or "brokenness" in Hasidism: "Religion, in its own way, has at all times assigned a high worth to the inner anguish and fears of the 'broken and shattered heart,' as can be evidenced, for instance, in the Chasidic notion of 'brokenness.'"<sup>44</sup>

However, Shneyerson does not believe that only certain gifted persons have this ability to achieve artistic inspiration, although he does acknowledge that some people are more naturally "spherical."<sup>45</sup> One of the most basic premises of Shneyerson's psychology is the presence of "ur-koykhes" in every person. Ur-koykhes are no less than a person's ability to feel an awareness of God and to become connected to God. Here Shneyerson's mystically inflected psychology becomes

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<sup>43</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 6-7.

<sup>44</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 7. In the Yiddish Shneyerson uses both the *loshn-koydesh* and Yiddish terms: "„Lev nishbar u-nedakah", di khsidishe „tsebrokhnkayt”" Der veg tsum mentsh, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 67.



overtly manifest: “At all times, men, in such (spherico-intimate) states, have immediately, in themselves and from themselves, visualized the Absolute, have merged with God, without losing sight of His impenetrability.”<sup>46</sup> Shneyerson’s emphasis on the ability of every person to practice the “Science of Man” resonates with the Hasidic notion that everyone can intimately connect with God, without having to belong to a mystically elite society. This idea that every person has the ability to tap into and connect with the divine is akin to the Hasidic idea of *hisoyreres* or “spiritual awakening.” The integration of the spherico-intimate consciousness into one’s daily life is then *dveykut* or “cleaving” to God at all times, even during the mundane. Shneyerson himself alludes to this parallel:

At all times, mystics and artists, persons who are seeking for and evoking such spherical-intimate experiences, have been able each in his own way, to turn these exceptional experiences to account for the creative process of the religious or artistic kind. In the Jewish life, for instance, during the modern times, the Chassidic ecstasy (*Dvekuth*), an intimate ecstatic concentration, has become a most prolific source of an immense healing soul-force, both from the point of view of individual and social psychology.<sup>47</sup>

Shneyerson’s method for reaching the spherico-intimate consciousness finds its Hasidic parallel in *hitbodedut*<sup>48</sup> or seclusion and meditation. The resulting “Ekstaz-kultur” is really *hitlahavut* or burning enthusiasm.

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<sup>46</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 170. Original reads: “צו אַלע צייטן האָבן מענטשן אין אַזוינע „Der veg tsum mentsh, 151.

<sup>47</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 170.

<sup>48</sup> For a study of *hitbodedut* see M. Idel, Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) 103-69.

In summary, Shneyerson postulates a method in which one would be able to explore one's soul, root out the seeds of psychological imbalance, and channel them into the highest sort of connection with God. This restoration of the soul-life is reminiscent of the process of *tikkun*.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, as Rivkin says of Shneyerson's work, "Truly, his whole psychology is a psychology of *Tikkun*."<sup>50</sup> Thus, we have seen how Shneyerson's psychology resonates with Hasidism, both because of his upbringing, but also because as a grown man, his entire worldview – even as a man of science and culture – was infused with Hasidism: "a flaming Hasidic endlessly rising exaltedness and belief in the good inclination, in the good foundation that lies in every person shined out from his books..."<sup>51</sup> As a well-known psychologist in his day, he was able to bring Hasidic concepts into an entirely different discipline than literature, creating a uniquely neo-Hasidic psychology.

Although Shneyerson devoted most of his literary activity to his works on psychology, he also wrote four Yiddish novels, each of which contains Hasidic-themed material. Even though Shneyerson was raised Hasidic, his novels are distinctly neo-Hasidic. Firstly, he explores subjects that are taboo in devotional literature, such as crisis of faith. Furthermore, his entire perspective has been shaped by his exposure to secular studies, from his universalizing of the mystical experience, to his very literariness and insistence on a naturalistic portrayal of Hasidism. His novels also function as case studies for his psychological theories. It is fascinating to

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<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of *tikkun*, see previous chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Rivkin, 487.

<sup>51</sup> M. Dvorzhetski, "Der neshome-forsher," *Goldene kayt* 31 (1958): 96.

see how his Hasidic-inspired psychology plays out in a Hasidic milieu in his novel, *Chaim Gravitser*, which takes place in the world of Chabad. *Chaim Gravitser* is Shneyerson's most critically acclaimed novel,<sup>52</sup> and I believe his most important work of fiction. A detailed analysis of the novel is key to understanding his brand of neo-Hasidism.

*Chaim Gravitser* is clearly a fictional case study for Shneyerson's theories put forth in *Der veg tsum mentsh*. This is true even though *Chaim Gravitser* was completed a year before the publication of *Der veg tsum mentsh*. Perhaps the novel itself helped Shneyerson's psychological work coalesce: "Two paths lead genetically to *Der veg tsum mentsh*: the new streams in contemporary psychology...and the author's two volume novel *Chaim Gravitser* and who knows if the second was not the more correct one?!"<sup>53</sup> What is certain is that Chaim Gravitser, the main character of the eponymous novel, is an example of someone who has completely attained a spherico-intimate consciousness: "*Chaim Gravitser* the deep book that portrays the life-play of the creative ecstatic Jewish person, who lives out his spherical striving, as Shneyerson would have called it today, in religion, under the banner of the Chabad Hasidic movement."<sup>54</sup> Taken as a whole, *Chaim Gravitser* is an illustration of Shneyerson's principle of unlimited rising and unlimited falling, which is neatly divided between the two volumes – the first documenting his rise and the second his fall.

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<sup>52</sup> In truth there is a dearth of secondary material on Shneyerson; however, when critics discuss his work they above all reference *Chaim Gravitser*.

<sup>53</sup> Auerbach, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Auerbach, 11.

According to Shneyerson, there are people who are naturally more in touch with their soul-life. Such a person he terms a “spherical person;”

Certain individuals, by their natures and sometimes by their nurtures, happen to possess a life-thirst raised to such a power, that is to say, such a highly intensified need for stimulative experiences, that this thirst cannot be at all quenched by an everyday style of life...They are, as the saying goes, the impassionate heroes, tempestuous natures, and so on and so forth.<sup>55</sup>

Compare the definition of a spherical person with this description of Chaim Gravitser:

Chaim Gravitser, who as a child was already known as a Talmudic genius, was by eighteen years almost one of the most well known figures in the Chabad world – he always stubbornly refused a rabbinical post, which was offered to him more than once. He was from his youth on a teacher for older children and teenagers...The manner of his teaching, as with his whole nature, was a thirsty-striving one, with that rare Chabad fire that does not get dimmed, but rather the opposite, makes the brain yet stronger and clearer. His students loved him tremulously.<sup>56</sup>

Chaim Gravitser, although not a rebbe, fits in with the hagiographic tradition of the zaddik as having a higher sort of soul.<sup>57</sup> The other Hasidim call him “Chaim the furnace”<sup>58</sup> because of his fiery tempestuous nature. His physique, in addition to his psyche, inspires awe in others:

Everyone who knew him – and who didn’t know him – wasn’t exactly frightened of him, but rather became negligible next to him. There

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<sup>55</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Fishl Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser 23. All translations of Shneyerson’s novels are mine.

<sup>57</sup> See Norman Lamm, “The Zaddik,” The Religious Thought in Hasidism: Text and Commentary, (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1999) 251-322.

<sup>58</sup> Fishl Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser 28.

was something unusual about him. He was tall, almost a giant, with great powerful shoulders, with a high, wide, iron forehead, under which deep black eyes looked out, and with a long thick black beard.<sup>59</sup>

At the beginning of the novel, despite his awe-inspiring potential, Chaim has been content to remain a small-town teacher, occasionally making pilgrimages to his rebbe. However, on once such trip to his rebbe, he has an epiphany that changes the course of his life. Chaim takes the concept of *ein od milvado*<sup>60</sup> – there is nothing other than God – and manages to internalize this idea to the point that:

The perpetual mantle of deadened separateness had fallen off the world. Words, letters, forms, affects, and events – everything became unbearably transparent. Wherever he turned his gaze, the life-mist from the whole world began to dissolve as if in smoke, revealing that everything is truly just the life force of God.<sup>61</sup>

The whole world had become transparent, and Chaim could see the divine in everything with perfect clarity, without any *mekhitses*<sup>62</sup> or “partitions.” Shneyerson cites religious fervor as one of the ways of breaking into the spherico-intimate realm, and indeed Chaim Gravitser’s spherical striving accomplishes the ultimate goal of completely dissolving his soul into God, so much so that nothing else exists outside of God, thus reaching the level of *ein od milvado*.

Chaim is able to break all *mekhitses*, because Chaim is a revolutionary character. According to Roskies, Shneyerson’s “‘true’ hard-drinking Hasid was a

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<sup>59</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 26.

<sup>60</sup> In 1796 Shneur Zalman of Liady published Gate of Unity and Faith, which explained that everything in existence is really an expression of the infinite (*eyn sof*), i.e. God, and therefore God is the only true reality. See: Naftali Loewenthal, “Habad Approaches to Contemplative Prayer, 1790-1920,” Hasidism Reappraised, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 289.

<sup>61</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 86.

<sup>62</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 99.

rebel by any other name.”<sup>63</sup> Early on the reader learns that he was banned from Lubovitch for a year because of something impertinent he said privately to the rebbe. This impertinence, or *chutzpah*, characterizes Chaim throughout the novel. Chaim has a problem with authority figures, from his own rebbe, to the Chernobyler rebbe, to God himself: “He does not want to take off his hat even for God.”<sup>64</sup> Even when he achieves his highest spiritual heights and starts his movement of *ein od milvado*, he never consults with his rebbe, and this indeed worries some of the older Hasidim. Chaim’s *aliya*, in this way, is also a revolution. It is only a small step away from his revolt against Hasidism to a revolt against God. Chaim Gravitser fits in with the paradigm of the Hasidic leader who leads people in a religious reawakening, much like the Besht and Reb Nachman; however, it is a fine line between revamping religion and heresy. Although Chaim ostensibly remains an observant Jew, he does actually break ritual law on a few occasions. First of all, he refuses to sit *shiva*. Secondly, he misses reciting Kaddish for his son. Finally, he dances with a non-Jewish woman in the tavern.

Since Chaim happens to be an extremely intelligent, charismatic and articulate person, he is able to bring hundreds of other Hasidim to the same state of internalizing *ein od milvado*. In Shneyersonian terms, everyone has reached the spherico-intimate realm – and thus become “God drunk” – and hundreds of Hasidim are in a state of constant religious ecstasy: “At that point everyone did not just

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<sup>63</sup> David Roskies, The Jewish Search for a Usable Past, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 76.

<sup>64</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 47.

understand, but actually felt how the partition that seemingly separated God from the world disappeared as if it were imaginary straw...”<sup>65</sup>

However Shneyerson associates a danger with coming in close contact with the soul. When a person objectively sees the “intimate soul-nature,” he must wrestle with this spherical element in himself in order to organize it and shape it. This can be “perilous” because:

given a weak inner organization, also the artist is bound to succumb in this struggle with the spherical element. In the course of history it has not been an infrequent happening that a mystic and artistic ecstasy and inspiration have actually resulted in chaotic confusion.<sup>66</sup>

In the case of Chaim Gravitser, the spherical consciousness completely overpowers the normal consciousness, to the point that when Chaim is informed that his only child, Yosele, has died from tuberculosis, he sings and dances. Since everyone is part of the divine, there is no such thing as death, just *ein od milvado*: “What is death? Death and life both become negated and dissolved in God.”<sup>67</sup> However, when Chaim is confronted with the sight of Yosele’s open grave being filled with dirt, he is forced to confront reality and is forcibly dragged down into normal consciousness:

– Buried, buried...

Suddenly Chaim’s face darkened. A strange fire lit in his eyes. For a moment he pressed together his lips. Suddenly he came to and spoke to himself:

– From where in me, and without my permission or knowledge, did an abyss of tears lift up?<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 99.

<sup>66</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 203.

<sup>67</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v.1, 101.

<sup>68</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v.1, 110.

Chaim had achieved a complete *aliyah*, or ascent into the spherico-intimate consciousness. Once his spherico-intimate drive is frustrated, psychological scurvy will deflect this impulse into the primitive consciousness, which Chaim describes as his *ba'al-guf* or person driven by physical desires;

And I, a simple person from flesh and blood, dared to redeem all worlds right away. Around and around the eternal light from *ein od milvado* started to shine. Then I received a blow specifically from the world of truth, which suddenly and intentionally opened the fresh grave of a deceased only child and which summoned out from me the *ba'al-guf*.<sup>69</sup>

Shneyerson would translate the *ba'al-guf* that Chaim says has been unleashed in him as neurotic symptoms. These neurotic symptoms include running away in the middle of his son's funeral, without even saying *Kaddish* and then various hallucinations he experiences in the forest. His refusal to sit *shiva* and his whole quarrel with God is perhaps an outbreak of neurosis. Now that he has been thrust into his primitive consciousness, Chaim has strange dreams, gets drunk on the second day he should be sitting *shiva*, and dances with a non-Jewish peasant girl in a tavern.

Part of Chaim's psychological scurvy is his fight with God, which is totally illogical as the deceased Yosele points out in one of Chaim's dreams. Chaim recognizes that God is impenetrable, and then proceeds to try to understand God. Chaim comes to see the world as one big wheel in which people are turned from one extreme to the other extreme without their will:

All worlds turn as if they are in a wheel. Wherever one runs, one comes to the same place. In the greatest spiritual ecstasy, the body drags back to the earth. And in the wildest abandon, the soul point

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<sup>69</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, 267.



pulls back into (spiritual) heights. I am flung about as if in limbo...I have lost my strength in this wheel.<sup>70</sup>

Chaim's wheel resembles the wheel of fortune or *rota fortunae* of ancient philosophy, representing the capricious nature of fate. This idea has been carried over into Judaism, and there is a Yiddish saying "di gantse velt iz a redl" (the whole world is a wheel). If we interpret this wheel metaphor in Shneyersonian terms, Chaim is alluding to the cycle of *aliya* and *yerida*. Chaim has not developed the coping mechanisms to deal with his descent. He stubbornly decides that he is not going to give up his fight until he finds out why God has condemned people to suffer the ups and downs of this wheel. It is possible that Chaim has stumbled across the cure to his sickness – although he does not realize it yet – for he will now set out on a quest to discover the meaning of this "wheel." Although at the end of the novel, he has not reached a new state of enlightenment, it does end on a positive note. Perhaps this *yerida*, is necessary for his next *aliyah*.

Meanwhile, Chaim accepts his somewhat self-imposed status as a *gefallenem* or fallen one. He separates himself from other Jews by praying off to the side and remaining in the sidelines during the festival in honor of having finished writing the Torah scroll. He resolves to sit and learn *Mishnayes* all day long, as well as to fast for two consecutive days. As his perception of his role as a *gefallenem* evolves, Chaim decides to leave the path of Hasidism, and to spend time learning from the Misnagdim, the proponents of Rabbinical Judaism. He compares Rabbinical Judaism to a well-trodden, reliable main road. The Baal Shem took his followers off this highway to breathe in fields and forests and to put some more soul back into their

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<sup>70</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, vol. 2, 97.

practice of Judaism. However, once the Besht left this world, it became too easy for a regular person to get lost in the woods. Chaim's decision to return to the world of Misnagdism is an interesting sort of reverse creative betrayal on the part of Shneyerson.<sup>71</sup> As a later-generation neo-Hasidic writer, Shneyerson turns the whole trend of turning to Hasidism for inspiration that Peretz had started on its head, and he sends his fictional character to the Misnagdim to look for clarity.

The full psychological impact of Chaim's *yeride* after his unbounded *aliya* is the essence of the novel. Although Shneyerson is an accomplished writer, "Fishl Shneyerson certainly did not intend to write a purely belletristic work. It was much more interesting to place his awareness and weight on the ethical-philosophical moments in Chaim Gravitser..."<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the plot of the novel is fairly limited, and the novel really progresses based on the evolution of Chaim's thoughts. The moments that Meisel describes are the moments of introspection when Chaim ponders his role as a *gefallenem*. It is in these moments that the neo-Hasidism of the psychologist-belletrist comes into bold relief: his new interpretation of Hasidic concepts, his reverse creative betrayal, his confrontation with religious questioning, and his universalistic mystical outlook on the soul.

In addition to the ethical-philosophical moments, there are several dance sequences in the novel, which are worth examining because each one reveals the changes in Chaim's psychological state and their impact on his soul. Dance is a regular part of Hasidic life, particularly among men. Besides dancing at weddings,

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<sup>71</sup> For more information on "creative betrayal" see Roskies, Bridge of Longing, 4-5.

<sup>72</sup> Nachman Meisel, "Fishl Shneerson – Khayim Gravitser," Bikher velt (1923) : 63.

Hasidim dance at practically any festive gathering, such as a *bris*, a *bar-mitzva*, a *sium*, a *farbrengen* or *tish*. Shneyerson believes that dance is one of the foremost ways of getting in touch with one's soul-life, which is another one of the reasons why Hasidim make such a perfect case study for Shneyerson's theories of consciousness. The first dance sequence (cited at the beginning of the chapter) takes place after the conclusion of Shabbos in Lubovitch, right before Chaim experiences his *aliyah*.

During this dance "all souls become one soul" and beg God:

-- Master of the Universe, let me disappear into you, actually really disappear!..<sup>73</sup>

Chaim does at this point manage to achieve *bitul elokim*,<sup>74</sup> or becoming so fused with God that his own soul becomes negligible in the surrounding infinity of the divine.

However, this is not the highest level, as Chaim himself points out:

To become *bitul* in God is not yet the highest level. The greatest *bitul* still carries in the last remains of separateness. Because becoming *bitul* to God, still means that besides God, there is something which becomes *bitul* in him. But in truth, there is ABSOLUTELY nothing besides him and without him.<sup>75</sup>

In Shneyersonian psychology, Chaim has entered the spherico-intimate realm, but he has not fully integrated it to the point where he is constantly in an ecstatic state.

Chaim comes to realize that the highest level is that of *ein od milvado*. Rather than becoming lost in God, the ultimate state of awareness is that one is already part of

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<sup>73</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 63.

<sup>74</sup> Dov Ber of Mezeritch, the Besht's successor, describes *bitul* or "self-abnegation" as the purpose of existence. Shneur Zalman proposed not only self-abnegation of the self, but also *ein od milvado*, the abnegation of all of existence, except for God. See: Naftali Loewenthal, Communicating the Infinite, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 2-3. Also see Chapter 3, 26-27.

<sup>75</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 56.

God, since there is nothing besides him. Once he truly rises to the level of *ein od milvado*, he is truly able to see how God is really the essence of everything;

The perpetual mantle of deadened separateness had fallen off the world. Words, letters, forms, effects and events – everything became unbearably see-through. Wherever he turned his gaze – the smoke evaporated that surrounded the life-fog of the whole world’s-breadth, which was really actually only the divine life force.<sup>76</sup>

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Aaron Zeitlin makes similar use of the concept of *bitul* in order to explain life’s seeming contradictions. Since the concept of *bitul* negates death, it was a source of comfort for Zeitlin after the Holocaust. Similarly, even after he has fallen to the lowest point, Shneyerson’s character Chaim still clings to *ein od milvado* as one would cling to a far-off shimmer of light in the overwhelming darkness of his despair.

In the first volume, Chaim so completely becomes a walking manifestation of *ein od milvado* that Chaim’s presence “evoked the bright, glowing content of the true soul-life in every person. Really everyone felt fearfully clear the eternal, burning soul-light from *ein od milvado*.”<sup>77</sup> Once Chaim transmits the *ein od milvado* to everyone else around him, they they travel from town to town, singing and dancing, until Chaim receives news that his only son is on his deathbed. Everyone returns to Chaim’s shtetl, but not before Yosele passes away. The entire crowd enters the deceased’s house in song, and Chaim proceeds to dance next to his son’s corpse. The description of Chaim’s dance is short; “Chaim illuminated the song with his glowing

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<sup>76</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 86.

<sup>77</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 95.

face and actually, not far from the corpse, started – glowing – to dance.”<sup>78</sup> Basically, nothing on earth can cause Chaim grief, because everything is just part of God. He is only conscious of the divine now and literally glows with divine light. He is seemingly rooted in a state of perpetual spiritual ecstasy.

Chaim is at this point at the zenith of his *aliya* and will soon start to feel grief. This grief will drag him back down to normal consciousness, thus beginning his tremendous *yeride*/psychological scurvy. Chaim’s next dance reflects the complete reversal of his soul-life. His spherico-intimate consciousness has been frustrated, and he has burst into his primitive consciousness. The next dance is the dance of Chaim’s *ba’al-guf* being unleashed.<sup>79</sup> Chaim’s *ba’al-guf* does not instantly take over. Rather, after Chaim has learned Mishnayes out loud for the minyan at Leyzer Bunin’s house, he begins to feel guilty that he is acting the role of a devout Jew, when he missed one Kaddish and is not even sitting shiva. He decides “true chaos is better than false piety.”<sup>80</sup> Chaim then takes the coin that Bunin has given him, and that he previously rejected, heads to the local tavern, and proceeds to break his two-days-fast with some food and a lot of alcohol. After he has become quite intoxicated, the *porits* who is in the tavern sets his dog on Chaim. Chaim fends off the dog, walks over to the non-Jews and, on what should be his second day of sitting shiva, Chaim begins to dance to

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<sup>78</sup> Shneyerson, *Chaim Gravitser* vol. 1, 106.

<sup>79</sup> The Ba’al-guf was a popular trope in Yiddish literature after the turn of the century. The Ba’al-guf appeared as a literary character with Bialik’s *Arye Ba’al-guf* (1899) and came to be defined as “an inarticulate boor who lived by his passions and responded not to the dictates of Law but to the varied calls of nature.” Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984) 141.

<sup>80</sup> Shneyerson, *Chaim Gravitser*, vol. 2, 80.

the accompaniment of a non-Jewish peasant's harmonica. The chaos and hurricane of disturbing thoughts and emotions in Chaim's soul is made manifest in this dance:

This was a terrible chaos-dance. Great mountains tear themselves from their places and with stormy momentum throw themselves and fall into the eternal abyss. Here Chaim releases himself into a burning whirlwind, and then in the next moment he stops and breaks the whirlwind into a thousand pieces. The abyss itself begins to shake in a world-of-chaos noise.<sup>81</sup>

The great mountains are the ethics, morality and sense of propriety that have been installed in Chaim's consciousness. The abyss is his primitive consciousness, into which he is being dragged body and soul. This dance is a complete reversal from the idealized Hasidic dances of Peretz's Hasidim, as well as Chaim's earlier dances. Rather than being a unification of God and man, this dance is a dance of destruction. Fishl Shneyerson's neo-Hasidic psychology brings him into a new kind of Hasidic dance – a dance of a tormented soul who is wracked with a crisis of faith. And yet, Chaim cannot completely lose himself in his primitive consciousness. Some vestige of his spherico-intimate consciousness maintains its hold on him:

But in just that stormy destruction lay hidden in the depths an eternal burning silence, in the world-of-chaos fog, one could clearly see illuminated, uniquely secure point in his soul. Chaim threw down his gartl and caftan – and struggles with all his powers to drag that point down into the abyss with him. But however much he struggles with that point, all the less can he reach it.<sup>82</sup>

This "point" is Chaim's "pintele yid" or the part of a Jew's soul that no one can obliterate. This is the part of Chaim's soul that still recognizes the *ein od milvado*. If Chaim would have been able to cast that point down into the abyss, perhaps he would

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<sup>81</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, vol. 2, 91.

<sup>82</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, vol. 2, 91-92.

have been able to live the rest of his life out as a *ba'al-guf*; however, he cannot completely throw off Jewish law and live only according to his urges. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot erase this point and, after the non-Jewish peasant girl Aniute kisses him, he grabs his tallis and tefilin and runs out of the tavern.

Chaim realizes that he cannot be the ardent Hasid that he once was, nor can he surrender himself completely to his *ba'al-guf*. It is at this point that Chaim begins to see the whole world as one big wheel of fortune, and therefore he cannot have complete faith in anything. He becomes broken-hearted. In Shneyersonian terms, this struggle pertains to the struggle between Chaim's spherico-intimate consciousness, in which he has perceived the truth of *ein od milvado*, and his normal consciousness, in which he has had to confront the cruel reality of death.

Chaim knows both intellectually and feels spiritually the truth of *ein od milvado*; however, his own personal grief has launched him into a quarrel with God. Even though Chaim knows everything is really part of God, even death, he can't help but feel angry that human beings are condemned to rot in the grave.<sup>83</sup> His next dance at the *sium ha-torah* reflects the state of desperate longing of his soul. Isaac the Shoykhet, who is famous in that town for his "kozak," is in the middle of dancing when Chaim bursts in suddenly "like a whirlwind" and begins "a strange dance":

What is going on here? The crowd retreated backwards in fear. Isaac stood confused and unmoving. The musicians stopped playing. Chaim's face became pale yellow, his cheeks shrunk – with his last strength he danced as if in cramps, a strange and difficult dying of longing.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Chaim's quarrel with God is very similar to the main character in another of Shneyerson's novel's Karahod.

<sup>84</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser v. 2, 183.

Chaim's psychological scurvy has progressed to the point where it appears to be affecting his physical health; the description here resembles a corpse. This dance is reminiscent of Anski's *Dybbuk*, and is completely different from the harmonious dance that both Peretz portrays and Shneyerson depicts at the beginning of the novel. Indeed Chaim is haunted; though by his spiritual dilemma, rather than a wandering soul.

The more Chaim questions God's way of running the world, the more he takes issue with organized religion as he knows it in the form of Hasidism. And yet, Chaim cannot help but become drunk with *ein od milvado*. Not long after Chaim decides to go back to the path of traditional Judaism, he meets Panie Brayner, the local Jewish magnate, who offers Chaim a bed for the night. That evening Chaim becomes acquainted with Panie Brayner's maskilic, rabidly anti-Hasidic son-in-law, Bendet. Although Chaim has now chosen the path of Misnagdism, he defends Hasidism and explains to the Brayner family his role as a *gefalenem*, which he contrasts with that of a heretic (the son-in-law);

A heretic is a deathly-ill person, who is beyond feeling pain and dies without even knowing. A fallen one, rather, convulses with pain and seeks with all his powers a cure, and as soon as one suffers and one seeks, there is a chance that one might find. And that is the matter that our sages were referring to when they said: *Apikorsim moridin veloh ma'alim* – One cannot raise up a heretic, which one casts down to the level of a fallen one, and as soon as he becomes a fallen one and has pains, he will naturally seek and find his *tikkun*...<sup>85</sup>

On some level, therefore, Chaim knows that his fall at least has the potential to lead to another rise, and that this will be his *tikkun*. From this excerpt, one can better

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<sup>85</sup> Shneyerson, *Chaim Gravitser*, v. 2, 254.



understand why Shneyerson's psychology has been termed a psychology of *tikkun*. *Tikkun* in this sense translates into a restoration of a healthy soul-life. Of course, this is not the meaning of *tikkun* in its original Hasidic context, and this new interpretation of *tikkun* is part of what defines Shneyerson as a neo-Hasidic thinker.

By defending Hasidism to Bendet, Chaim unwittingly begins to rediscover his purpose in life and his own personal *tikkun*. He is able to understand that even though he is a *gefalener*, he does have a purpose in life, and that is to raise himself up again – his great *yeride* will ultimately lead to an *aliyah*. Chaim once again breaks into dance as he realizes that he can still perceive the *ein od milvado* because that is the ultimate truth. In fact, he can even transmit the awareness of *ein od milvado* in his fallen state to non-believers, because of his immense charisma and real connection to God: “Just as before Yosele's funeral, that same quiet glowing started to awaken in him and with awesome lightness flooded and captured everything and everyone.”<sup>86</sup> When Chaim enters a state of awareness of *ein od milvado*, or his consciousness again touches the level of the spherico-intimate, he literally starts to glow:

Chaim stood himself in the middle of the room and throwing back his head, he began, while singing, to dance. Just as on the day of Yosele's funeral, the “great conflagration” started in him. While dancing, his eyes opened wider and he became illuminated and quietly glowed. That same smile as if he were about to faint played on his lips, which one saw on him before Yosele's funeral and which pulled hearts and souls like a magnet.<sup>87</sup>

Perhaps this dance most vividly portrays the struggle between Chaim's spherico-intimate and his normal consciousness. During this dance Chaim has restored his

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<sup>86</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser vol. 2, 259.

<sup>87</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser vol. 2, 261.

vision of *ein od milvado*. Suddenly in the middle of the dance, Chaim's body – exhausted from several days without sleep – literally pulls him down from the heavens to the physical plane. On the verge of physical collapse, Chaim races off to the guest room and shouts that he is a “fallen one” and a “ba'al-guf.”

That night a vengeful Yosele comes again to Chaim in his sleep. In this dream sequence, Yosele leaves him in the world of demons. Chaim calls out to the Besht to save him and he is transported to the Besht. The Besht tells him that his suffering is not in vain and that he should proceed with his quest to go amongst the Misnagdim. Even though he may get lost, God will not abandon him. The Besht tells Chaim that he loves him, because despite everything, he never forgets *ein od milvado*, and that Chaim is really a spark from the Besht's soul that has been let down to earth “to carry thirst and yearning in all corners.”<sup>88</sup> The next morning Chaim rises filled with new energy and sets off on his journey with the Besht's words still in his ears:

The sweetness of the Baal-Shem's words still fluttered in his soul. He went ahead and did not even once look around or stop. But in his ears there still resounded:

- You hear Chaim Serdtse, there is truly *ein od milvado*...
- *Ein od milvado*.<sup>89</sup>

Chaim is finally able to reconcile his fallen state with his lingering perception of *ein od milvado*. He assumes the role of a seeker, walks off into the sunrise, and the novel comes to an end. Interestingly, Shneur Zalman believed that the Besht's mystical teachings, specifically those pertaining to raising up the divine sparks, were not for

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<sup>88</sup> Shnayerson, Chaim Gravitser, 285.

<sup>89</sup> Shnayerson, Chaim Gravitser, 287.

the common Hasid, but only for the zaddik.<sup>90</sup> In this way, Shneyerson is going against the grain of Lubovitch theology by creating a Chabad rebel who goes back to the origins of Hasidism for his own self-discovery.

The essence of *Chaim Gravitser* is the spiritual and moral journey of the main character. The setting is secondary and in fact interchangeable, since Shneyerson's novel *Karahod* is about a similar kind of spiritual crisis but takes place among non-Hasidim, and the main character is a simple hat-maker. However, since so much of Shneyerson's psychological thought is inspired by Hasidism, *Chaim Gravitser* achieves a double resonance. Shneyerson's psychology is filled with ideas from Hasidism, and his Hasidim then are in perfect resonance with his psychology, creating a uniquely harmonious work.<sup>91</sup> Shneyerson's neo-Hasidism represents an important branch in the evolution of literary neo-Hasidism. His representation of Hasidim is more naturalistic than his predecessors. Peretz's Hasidim are more idealized concepts,<sup>92</sup> and Zeitlin is more interested in the spiritual struggles of his Hasidism. Shneyerson's, of course, also highlights the spiritual struggle, but his naturalism emphasizes the humanity of Hasidim. In addition to portraying Hasidim in states such as singing, dancing, and reciting Torah, he also shows them drinking to

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<sup>90</sup> Naftali Loewenthal, "Habad Approaches to Contemplative Prayer, 1790-1920," 290.

<sup>91</sup> In *Grenadir Shtrase* Shneyerson portrays the thoroughly assimilated German Jew in spiritual crisis, and his status as an alien element to German culture creates an element of discord, rather than harmony. In *Yidische nekome*, the main character is a still-traditionally-observant Jew, maneuvering the world of externs, and he is therefore an alien within an alien group. Finally, when the protagonist of *Karahod* converts to Christianity, just to spite God, rather than from any true conviction, he becomes the ultimate alien. This theme of being an alien element in Shneyerson's work is in itself very interesting and worth further investigation.

<sup>92</sup> In "Oyb nisht nokh hekher," Peretz does show the Nemirover rebbe groaning in the morning and relieving himself; however, this is Peretz's way of subverting the rebbe's mystical prowess, rather than an attempt to humanize him.

excess, vomiting, and sweating. However, he does not do this as a caricature, but rather to give them breadth as full human beings, which reinforces his secular psychological theories. Thus, the spiritual struggle of the Hasidim is metaphoric for the spiritual struggle that everyone must undergo in order to reach the spherico-intimate realm and realize one's full potential. Shneyerson also focuses on the individual Hasid rather than on the Rebbe, versus Peretz and Zeitlin, who tended more to feature the rebbe as the focal point. Shneyerson represents Hasidim as multifaceted and distinct individuals. Rather than just one big generic mass, his Hasidim are made up of different types, such as the fiery-tempered, the *shlepers*, the rich and the poor, the childish, the joker, and the learned, once again emphasizing their humanity.

Shneyerson is one of the first writers to represent Lubovitch or Chabad Hasidim, the branch of Hasidism founded by Shneur Zalman of Liady, which was the dominant Hasidic group in Lithuania and Belarus.<sup>93</sup> Like Hillel Zeitlin, who also wrote about Chabad Hasidim, Shneyerson was raised in Chabad, and unlike Hillel Zeitlin, Shneyerson never severed his ties. He is one of the few neo-Hasidic writers, who can write about Hasidim from the unique perspective of being an insider, while also having a secular-worldly intellectual outlook. This dual perspective is reflected in the rebbe's *maymarim* in the first volume, which both sound convincingly like real *maymarim*, while at the same time they resonate with Shneyerson's own philosophy. For example the rebbe describes how in exile, one has the capacity to rebuild the Temple in one's soul:

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<sup>93</sup> Meisel, 62. However, both Hillel and Aaron Zeitlin did write about Chabad Hasidism.

„... The truth is that since the nation of Israel is in exile – every Jew – You hear – Every! – is given the power to rebuild the Temple in one’s own soul. Everybody set up a holy alter in oneself, upon which there rises up the incense-cloud of Torah and prayer... Every one, if he only so desires, can enter the Holy of Holies of his own soul, and like the high priest on Yom-Kippur, see God face to face.”<sup>94</sup>

The rebbe’s description of entering the “Holy of Holies” of one’s own soul is very much like Shneyerson’s description of a soul-expedition. Just as Shneyerson emphasizes that everyone is capable of doing this, so too does the rebbe place it within everyone’s capacity. Although in the rebbe’s case, he is addressing a Jewish-only audience, whereas Shneyerson, the neo-Hasid expands this ability to a universal human potential.

Although Shneyerson is more concerned with the psychological study of the individual, in this case Chaim Gravitser, as one of the neo-Hasidic writers in our study, it is worthwhile to examine his general representations of Hasidim. Chabad Hasidism is characterized by a more intellectual approach, both because Shneur Zalman emphasized prayer and Torah study over more emotional expressions of worship as well as the movement’s being situated in the bastion of Misnagedic intellectualism.<sup>95</sup> As Shneyerson’s Chernobyler Hasid, Panie Grabover puts it: “Chabadniks are just Hasidically-misguided Misnagdim.”<sup>96</sup> Like all Hasidim, Chabad Hasidim are portrayed as enjoying a good drink and dance; however, only after they review the Rebbe’s latest *maymar* (discourse). The Rebbe’s *maamarim* are indeed very cerebral, centering around kabbalistic concepts, such that the average

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<sup>94</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 1, 13.

<sup>95</sup> Naftali Loewenthal, Communicating the Infinite, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 43.

<sup>96</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 2, 65.

Hasid does not necessarily understand them. Chaim is described as having an “iron brain,” and when he ventures out among Polish Hasidim, they recognize that he is a Chabad Hasid just from the way he learns *Mishnayos*: “In one minute the whole crowd realized that this passerby was a Chabadnik, which was clear from his sharp mind.”<sup>97</sup> Like other sects of Hasidim, Chabad Hasidim are described as being very loyal to their rebbe and consult him with questions and immediately seek his advice in times of crisis. When the Rebbe delivers a *maymer*, the Hasidim all push to get as close as possible to hear the Rebbe. The Hasidim seem to derive spiritual strength from the Rebbe, which again is typical of all Hasidic groups. Chaim, who throughout the book is described as having an extra dose of *chutzpa*, actually bangs on the Rebbe’s door in the middle of the night demanding that the Rebbe address the crowd because he claims that the “Hasidim are dying of thirst” to hear words of Torah.<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, Shneyerson portrays Chabad Hasidim as having a certain sort of arrogance in their worship:

One recites the evening prayers with Chabad-impertinent *devekut*. The pent-up ecstasies flutter impatiently. She should only come, the weekday night – one will glow right through her, gather her up, and twirl her about in a Chabad-*chutzpadik* whirlwind.<sup>99</sup>

Shneyerson does not explain why he characterizes Chabadniks as being arrogant, but it may have something to do with their constant striving to understand what is deeper and hidden. When Chaim gets into a fight with some Polish Hasidim because he mocked their faith in miracles, they yell at him: ““Dried-out Chabadniks! You just

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<sup>97</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 2, 65.

<sup>98</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser v. 1, 81.

<sup>99</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser v. 1, 51.

love to speculate, you even want to understand God with your head and touch him with your hands, dried-out Chabadniks”...<sup>100</sup> Perhaps Chaim takes this arrogance to an extreme, as he is such a spherical personality.

When Chaim runs away from his shtetl to another shtetl dominated by Chernobylers Hasidim, the narrator contrasts Polish Hasidim with Chabad Hasidim, :

Chaim had always felt strange among “Polish” Hasidim and couldn’t endure their flaming enthusiasm with their stories of wonders and miracles. These Polish Hasidim (Chaim used to refer not only to Polish, but also to Voliner, Galitsianer, and all other non-Chabad Hasidim under this name) singled themselves out, not only in their “path,” but also in their language and appearance. The Chabadnik is deeper, exaltedly reserved and sunk in thought. He is always in the middle of climbing and ascending all of the higher mountains. The more burning the enthusiasm, the more powerful the striving to delve deeper into and even hear the inner powers of the worlds...The “Polish” Hasid is rather soft, vague, full of simple, flowing belief and pure-child-like joy. Without speculation or questions, with heartfelt devotion, he ignites in rapturous enthusiasm.<sup>101</sup>

The characterization of Chabad Hasidim as “always in the middle of climbing and ascending all of the higher mountains” is perhaps what distinguishes them as having a certain arrogance in the eyes of Shneyerson. Chaim’s unbounded *aliya* is just an extreme manifestation of this Chabad tendency, and his great *yeride* is due both to circumstance – his son’s death – and a lack of inner psychical organization due to his tempestuous nature. In this description, Shneyerson’s juxtaposition of the two kinds of Hasidim follows conventional distinctions in which Polish Hasidim are regarded as being more emotional and Chabad Hasidim as being more intellectual. Their relationship to their rebbe is also different. The Chabadnik wants to hear from his

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<sup>100</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser vol. 2, 62.

<sup>101</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser vol. 2, 60.

rebbe “deep *toyres*, true revelations, which open the eyes and lead all the closer to the path of light. Miracles should be recited by women.”<sup>102</sup> Whereas the Polish Hasid is more interested in:

a holy gesture from the rebbe, a wonder-tale, a Hasidic take on a scriptural verse – that alone already lights the whole Hasidic joy. It’s truly enough for a Polish Hasid to see the rebbe, to eat leftovers from his holy mouth and to absorb in himself the rebbe’s holy-enthusiastic tremble. What to rebbe’s Torah is for the Chabadnik, is for the Polish Hasid the rebbes “*tish*,” where Hasidim merit to eat a festive meal together with the rebbe, take in every holy gesture, make a toast, sing, and make merry.<sup>103</sup>

It is important to remember, that although Shneyerson does have inside information when it comes to Chabad Hasidism, his biography does not indicate that he had any real exposure to other Hasidic groups. Therefore, his rendition of Polish Hasidim is most likely colored by how Chabad Hasidim viewed Polish Hasidim, as well as literary representations of them. In many ways, his description of “Polish Hasidim,” does not differ from that of Peretz. Rather, the difference is in the intent. Peretz’s Hasidim are folk characters that are useful so long as they fit in with his agenda. For Shneyerson, the Polish Hasidim serve as a foil to Chaim, who represents the extreme of Chabad Hasidism.

While Shneyerson comes far closer than his predecessors in a historically accurate rendering of Hasidim, one cannot call his writing Hasidic primary source material for several reasons. Although he may have remained ritually observant, by virtue of attending university and entering the world of Jewish intellectuals, Shneyerson did make some sort of break with the highly insular Hasidic world, even

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<sup>102</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser vol. 2, 60.

<sup>103</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser vol. 2, 60-61.



if he might not have completely severed all ties or rejected all of its ideals. On a textual level, there are many indications that the author is not an actual Hasid. For example, the naturalism is oftentimes very earthy, describing Hasidim drinking, vomiting and sweating. This contrasts with hagiographic material, which aims at obliterating the overly physical aspects, in order to emphasize saintliness. Another striking element is that on more than one occasion Shneyerson uses Jewish-coded-language – words that have an aspect of holiness and are only used to describe Jews – in order to describe gentiles. This is a subversion that breaks with the *lehavdil-loshn* or separate language used for Jews and Christians in order to maintain a distinction, even at the level of speech, which is characteristic of Yiddish.<sup>104</sup> When Chaim is dancing in the tavern, and Aniute begins to dance opposite him, the narrator describes how: “Her black eyes were full of peasant *temimes*, and her big heavy figure was soaked with the *tsniusdik* quiet and sleepy powers of the wide fields around the village.”<sup>105</sup> The words, *temimes* or “appealingly guileless” and *tsniusdik* or “modest in attire and conduct,” particularly stand out because they would never traditionally be used to describe a non-Jew. Shneyerson is similar to Sholem Asch in that he acknowledges that holiness can also be found among non-Jews. When Chaim calls the Breyner family to dance, he includes the two goyim present, with the realization that, since *ein od milvado* means there is nothing besides God, even goyim are part of God, and therefore holy:

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<sup>104</sup> See Max Weinreich, History of the Yiddish Language, trans. Shlomo Noble (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 193-195.

<sup>105</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, vol. 2, 93.

Men and women, big and small, - you all therefore see that there is nothing besides Him. In every breath, in every speck – everywhere the eternal light of *ein od milvado* burns. From the *porits* to the beggar, from the palace to the *shtibl*, from the Torah's ark to the tavern, from the first to the last, from the oak to the blade of grass...from the melody of *Kol-Nidre* of holy service – till the most debauched goyish tune...<sup>106</sup>

Even though the logical conclusion of *ein od milvado* is that everything is an emanation of God, traditional Judaism still makes a strong distinction between the holy and the profane, with anything non-Jewish falling into the category of profane. Even the *klasikers* would often use *lehavdil loshn* even if it was in a tongue-and-cheek manner. However, Shneyerson is a scientist and his man-science allows for anyone to get in touch with his or her “inner-gaon.” Therefore, he does not exclude non-Jews from potential for holiness, either in his psychology or in his literature, which once again elucidates his thoroughly neo-Hasidic worldview.

Shneyerson commits another major taboo that completely differentiates him from Hasidic authors. He acknowledges that a Jew may at some point have doubts regarding his faith, and allows Chaim free-reign in his thoughts on this issue. Very early on in the first volume, before Chaim even has his *aliya*, let alone his *yeride*, the narrator describes the emotional state of a Jew at the end of Shabbos. When the soul has been elevated so high, and one is thrown back into the mundane week, one might be tempted to question the meaning of Shabbos, since after it is over, one ends up exactly where one started:

Before *mayriv* lights up in the sky, everyone, in general, gathers in the small hall. Everyone has Shabbos-strained faces. The already weakened Shabbos-sun bows to the earth. The angels, who in the morning had given zest and refreshed, stand now under one's heart.

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<sup>106</sup> Shneyerson, *Chaim Gravitser*, v. 2, 259-260.

One's mouth is dry and sour. Secretly the soul quivers and asks silently: What is the point of Shabbos, when afterwards comes the same week that came before. What did the Shabbos actually accomplish? Oh, no! Such questions never arise in the sharp Chabad mind, and if they did one would tear them to dust without any excuses. But the weakened soul quivers from that side of the mind and does not stop asking, in its way, just this terrible-simple question.<sup>107</sup>

The way in which the narrator asks “What did the Shabbos actually accomplish?” and then immediately states that a Chabad Hasid would never ask such questions, is reminiscent of Abramovitch's use of the phrase “Ober dos bin ikh nisht oysn” (But that is besides the point), which in fact is meant to draw ones attention to the point being made. In this passage only the smallest of doubts is broached; however it foreshadows the questions that Chaim will come to ask that lead to his great fall. The Chaim of the second volume is racked with doubts. He questions why God creates people only for them to die. He becomes obsessed with the image of the world being one big wheel of fortune. He also questions why there is so much fighting between Hasidic groups:

We are truly, Reb Nachum once again in that same wheel. You understand, fights, honor and money become uplifted as being from God's path, and in this way they crawl around into holiness. And from great holiness, one falls into fighting and one gets honor from the angels. A wheel! By each quarrel the devil dances. And no matter what the fights might be about, the devil has already grabbed a dance. Rich people carry their money to rebbes and become elevated and the rebbe himself becomes a rich person and then starts sliding down the slippery slope. Sinners are as full of good deeds as a pomegranate, and saints, the bigger they are, all the bigger is their evil inclination.<sup>108</sup>

Interestingly, Chaim is affronted by the very kinds of paradoxes that Aaron Zeitlin highlights in his writing. Whereas for Zeitlin these paradoxes affirm that everything

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<sup>107</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser v. 1, 41.

<sup>108</sup> Shneyerson, Chaim Gravitser, v. 2, 99.

comes from God, Chaim simply cannot understand why evil also comes from God. Shneyerson would diagnose Chaim's obsession with life being one big wheel as a neurotic expression of psychological scurvy. When Chaim reached the level of *ein od melvado*, he too understood that everything comes from God, and was therefore able to embrace even the worst tragedy. It is only when he is sunk in the spherico-primitive that this contradiction becomes a neurosis for him.

The war that is being waged in Chaim's soul only comes to a cease-fire at the end of the novel when he receives in his dream the blessing of the Besht to go out in the world and seek the truth. Chaim is absolved from his doubts because he is at least engaged in searching for the truth. The search alone is therefore elevated to an ideal. In this way, Shneyerson's novels, which all embrace a philosophy of seeking, resonate with Aaron Zeitlin's poetry of God-seeking. As we have seen in Zeitlin, the search for answers was even more important than the answers themselves. Searching is more dynamic than finding and fits in with Zeitlin's futuristic-kabbalistic world-view of constant flux. A constant search might also be the solution to Chaim's problems. Now that he is not held in the constant ecstasy of *ein od melvado*, he can find a spherico-intimate replacement in traveling around looking for answers, as traveling is one of the best ways to combat psychological scurvy.<sup>109</sup> Zeitlin's sense of divine order, even in a state of cosmic flux, is similar to Shneyerson's ideal state of the soul, in which a person would be well-enough anchored in normal consciousness to withstand ongoing ascents into the spherico-intimate realm and descents into the primitive realm.

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<sup>109</sup> Shneyerson, Studies in Psycho-Expedition, 61.

Chaim Gravitser has not yet achieved such order in his psyche, and this novel is a case study of a morbidly affected individual, as is also the case with Shneyerson's novels *Karahod* and *Grenadir shtrase*. It is worth taking a few moments to examine the protagonist of Shneyerson's novel *Yidishe nekome*, Lubinsky, who appears as the main character in *Yidishe nekome* (Between 1926-1928), and makes a brief cameo appearance in *Grenadir shtrase* (1935). The character of Lubinsky is interesting because he is someone who has achieved an ordered psyche and is a stand-in for the author. Therefore, Lubinsky's character sheds light both on Shneyerson's psychological ideal, as well as his self-perception as a neo-Hasid. Lubinsky is in many ways the ideal Shneyersonian man. Lubinsky is a Jewish extern who has passed his exams once, but was refused entrance to university because of the quota system and is now taking another year to study for the exams in the hope that he will get better grades on his exams and thus facilitate his entrance into University. He is one of the three "frumaks" (overly devout in the eyes of secular contemporaries) among the 200 or so Jewish externs, and has in no way cast aside his observance, despite his secular education:

... Lubinsky, who is a one-time Yeshiva student around Volozshin and was known there as a precocious genius. He is barely twenty three and he is a hot-blooded youth with deep black eyes and a sprouting black beard...and although he started his secular studies years ago, he is still *hislavesdik* (enthusiastically) observant, and from every gesture peeks out the hot-blooded Yeshiva student.<sup>110</sup>

Like Shneyerson he is from a Hasidic background, but has not completely assimilated:

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<sup>110</sup> Shneyerson, *Yidishe nekome*, (Vilna: Farlag B. Kletskein, no date) 8-9.

Lubinsky, the one-time-Volozshin genius with the great sharp head, was however descended from his mother's side from Hasidic rebbes and from them it seems he inherited a deeply religious burning-soul. Everywhere he searched for and felt that inner, always eternal power, which was illuminated deep from within his soul. Many years ago, when he and his friend Yisroel Rabinovitch left the Volozshiner Yeshiva and went out into the new world, they absolutely did not tear themselves away from the deeply-rooted faithful Jewishness. In the same long black coats, with the same burning belief, they, as it seemed to them, in their youthful dreamy way, brought that inner burning into the new world, where they already felt, albeit unclearly, something new, and yet the same eternal inner power.<sup>111</sup>

This last sentence reveals the neo-Hasid, both in Shneyerson's stand-in Lubinsky, and in the author himself. This kind of neo-Hasid remains an observant Jew, while imbibing the best that the secular world has to offer, because he recognizes that even the profane stems from the eternal God.

Shneyerson, in universalizing his Hasidic-inspired psychology, credits non-Jews with the same spiritual capacity as Jews. Anyone can get in touch with his or her "inner gaon!" and "the first can become the last," regardless of creed. Religion is just one form of spherico-intimate expression, and Lubinsky, despite his religiously observant stance, asserts this very point:

- Don't ask so much. You will be as ill equipped to understand my religious devotion, as my father, an old Rabbi can understand love. Both these things, love and religious observance, are not meant to understand, but to experience. Understand, that from that side of the brain, from that side of habitude, there is in a person a fluttering world, of which religious devotion is one of her fiery outpourings. Here in the salon I feel now the hidden breath of that fluttering world...<sup>112</sup>

The "fluttering world" is the spherico-intimate consciousness, and Lubinsky admits that there are other ways of stimulating the soul that are present even in the ballroom

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<sup>111</sup> Shneyerson, Yidishe nekome, 29.

<sup>112</sup> Shneyerson, Yidishe nekome, 112.

of the rich, assimilated Jew. Shneyerson advocates dance as one of these “fiery outpourings.” Not surprisingly, Lubinsky – like almost all of Shneyerson’s main characters – dances as an expression of his soul-life. Lubinsky dances a “Kozak” for the other students and it is described in the same way as Chaim Gravitser’s dance after his *aliya*, as a “gli-tants” or glowing-dance:

The blood from his Hasidic grandfathers lit up in him with his own brand-new fire. “What was yesterday is today” – In the great glowing fire, all sides are equally illuminated. His dance becomes even fierier. Here he propels himself high up into the air like a glowing-storm and then in the same moment he touches the floor and beats out the same and yet a brand-new fire. The young people watched him and gaped. They were barely able to stand up on the floor.<sup>113</sup>

This dance reflects the ordered nature of Lubinsky’s psyche in which “all sides are equally illuminated,” meaning all the levels of his consciousness, as well as all the aspects of his word-view, both traditional and modern, are in sync. In this way, this dance is a celebration of neo-Hasidism, in which both the old and new fires burn with equal intensity.

In the middle of Lubinsky’s dance, he catches sight of the blue blouse of the wealthy, assimilated Roza Levinshtayn, which pulls him back into normal consciousness.

But in the middle of his glowing-dance, a light blue blouse shimmered. A sweet sense of losing himself rose in him, which ate at his heart and pulled him to the ground. Is there really such a big abyss between old times and today?<sup>114</sup>

Lubinsky, like Chaim Gravitser, completely inhabits his spherico-intimate consciousness during the dance, until he notices Roza. Unlike Chaim, Lubinsky can

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<sup>113</sup> Shneyerson, *Yidishe nekome*, 114.

<sup>114</sup> Shneyerson, *Yidishe nekome*, 114.

handle this transition. He is both anchored in normal consciousness, while still fulfilling his spherico-intimate urge. He is also like Shneyerson, since he balances his religious observance with his participation in the secular world. He ponders whether or not there is really such a difference between “old times” and the modern ones in which secular education and female acquaintances play a role. He does not pursue Roza, but nor does he leave the party before the dancing begins, like the other religious character, Rabbi Shapiro. Lubinsky, the neo-Hasid feels at home in the *beys-medresh* and in the ballroom.

When Lubinsky fails his exams due to the sadism of one particular professor, his grandfather, the Hasidic rebbe, comes to visit him and consoles him:

Don't cry my child, and don't lose heart. I know that you are carrying our holy light into the new world. I tell you, for one drop of light that you bring, it is worth all of your suffering. His Holy Name also descends into the world, and the soul lowers itself into a body in order to make holy and elevate foreign worlds. As long as you have God in your heart, you can go calmly on your dark path.<sup>115</sup>

Shneyerson creates a neo-Hasidic rebbe to give Lubinsky his blessing on his integration into the modern world. In Lubinsky's brief appearance in *Grenadir Shtrase*, he is studying medicine in Berlin, like the real-life Shneyerson did, and he still wears the same black beard and long coat. Lubinsky is the neo-Hasid that the author modeled on himself.

Fishl Shneyerson presents an interesting case in the development of neo-Hasidism in Yiddish literature. He is different from the other authors in our study because he was at heart a Hasid, despite outward appearances, as Aaron Zeitlin, his colleague and friend avows: “The late Professor Fishl Shneyerson was a Chabad

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<sup>115</sup> Shneyerson, *Yidishe nekome*, 150.



Hasid in all the folds of his soul, a grandson of Chabad leaders and an inheritor in spirit.”<sup>116</sup> Yet, just by virtue of his having left his community, having studied medicine abroad, and identifying with the intelligentsia of his time, his perspective changed drastically. This changed perspective sets him apart from other Hasidic authors and places him within the ranks of neo-Hasidic. Shneyerson makes certain innovations in his writing that also serve to distinguish him as a neo-Hasidic author. Firstly, by bringing Hasidic concepts into the field of psychology, he is therefore forced at the same time to look at Hasidism more scientifically and regard various Hasidic concepts, such as *devekut*, *hitlahavut*, *bitul*, *tikkun*, etc., from a psychological perspective. By virtue of creating a scientific theory using Hasidic concepts, he is automatically universalizing Hasidism. His subversive use of *lehavdil-loshn*, semantically echoes his belief that everyone is part of God and can tap into divine powers. Perhaps since his psychology is about tapping into the endless potential of every human being, his writing tends to be more naturalistic than his neo-Hasidic predecessors, emphasizing the humanity of his characters. Shneyerson does not have any qualms about tackling the issue of a crisis of faith – his goal is to teach the reader how to mend one’s soul. Therefore, a broken, rebellious soul is the perfect topic for a case study. The end of *Chaim Gravitser* suggests that the answer lies in the search – much as is the case in the work of Aaron Zeitlin. That the search leads Chaim away from Hasidism towards Misnagdism, is a reverse creative betrayal which goes against the direction of neo-Hasidism since its inception. Chaim Gravitser is an individual who has not yet at the stage of synthesis, and is now chasing after the antithesis of

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<sup>116</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, Foreward, Kochah Shel Sanigoryah, by Fishl Shneyerson (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Press, 1966) n.p.

Hasidism. Shneyerson, on the other hand, sees religion in all its “multiformity,” as one of many paths to restoring a healthy soul-life and achieving a psychological *tikkun*.

## Conclusion and Further Directions for Study

I heard this upon the arrival of the Rabbi of the community of Nemirov. Once on Simhath Torah the followers of the Besht were happy, dancing and drinking a lot of wine from the Besht's cellar.

The Besht's pious wife said: "They will not leave any wine for the blessing of kiddush and Havdalah," and she entered the Besht's room and said to him: "Tell them to stop drinking and dancing since you will not have any wine left over for the kiddush and Havdalah."

The Besht said to her jokingly: "Well said. Go and tell them to stop and go home."

When she opened the door and saw that they were dancing in a circle and that flames of fire were burning around them like a canopy, she herself took the pots, went to the cellar, and brought them as much wine as they wanted.

After a while the Besht asked her: "Did you tell them to go?"

She said to him: "You should have told them yourself."<sup>1</sup>

From *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*

In this story about the Besht, the Besht's wife, who it seems represents the voice of rationalism (i.e. If your Hasidim drink all the wine there won't be any left for Kiddush and Havdalah), sees something in the potent image of the Hasidim dancing that makes her completely reverse her position. A large portion of hagiographic tales function in this way: a skeptic sees something that the zaddik does, and it convinces the skeptic of the true power of the zaddik. This paradigm can also be applied to the emergence of neo-Hasidism as a literary genre. After the cold rationalism of the Haskalah, various disillusioned maskilim perceived the living passion of Hasidism and embraced it on a literary level. Of course, this is an oversimplification; however, in the neo-Hasidic tales of later authors, there is an awareness that it was not just the Lithuanian skeptic that the zaddik had enchanted, but also the maskil.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome Mintz, trans. eds., *In Praise of the Baal Shem Toy*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1984.) 80-1.

At the end of this tale, the Besht asks his wife if she indeed told the Hasidim to go and she answers, “You should have told them yourself.” A traditional reading of this tale would no doubt interpret her rejoinder as a humorous admission that she was wrong to try to restrict the Hasidim’s consumption of wine. But on another level, this statement alludes to the fact that the Besht has opened a “whole new can of worms” by relinquishing some amount of control. His wife now has agency of her own and the Besht has no way of knowing what she will do. Obviously the Besht’s “pious wife” would not really deviate from her husband’s path; however, the writers who appropriated the Hasidic genre were not bound by the same loyalties. Each one breathed his own worldview into his Hasidic creations, therefore each author, although broadly categorized as “neo-Hasidic,” came up with a unique synthesis of Hasidism and his own essence.

In our study we have analyzed I. L. Peretz’s *Khsidish* tales, which have been completely stripped of any mystical overtones and refashioned into secular-humanist parables that serve both as a source for national rejuvenation and an ethical basis for Yiddishism. We have also seen how Aaron Zeitlin found a Jewish source of both mysticism and modernism in Hasidism, and how his rebbes come to symbolize his own existential struggle to find God and meaning in a chaotic, cruel world. Finally, we have traced how Fishl Shneyerson de-sanctified Hasidic concepts and used them to build a new psychological theory of soul-repair destined for a universal audience. We have also considered Shneyerson’s novels as case studies for his Hasidic-inspired psychology and noted his reverse-creative betrayal at the end of *Chaim Gravitser*.

If we view these authors as evolutionary steps in literary neo-Hasidism, Peretz made the important step of claiming Hasidic material as a native source for national renewal. Zeitlin furthers this claim; however, he suggests that it can also be used by the artist as a personal prayer and as a means of achieving individual *tikkun*. Shneyerson then universalizes the potential of Hasidic theology, transforming it into a path for transcendence for everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. Although both Zeitlin and Shneyerson believed in God, they continued Peretz's trend of de-ritualizing and universalizing Hasidism, thus finishing the process that Frumkin began and creating a neo-Hasidism that was essentially different from the historical Hasidism from which it originally stemmed. The neo-Hasidic progressive branch of Judaism both traces its origin back to, and in many ways is fundamentally closer to, literary neo-Hasidism than historical Hasidism.<sup>2</sup>

Peretz, Zeitlin, and Shneyerson are three major neo-Hasidic writers but this study is by no means all-inclusive. There are many other authors whose neo-Hasidic work has yet to be studied, and such studies would create a much more complete picture of the evolution of literary neo-Hasidism in all its forms. Although I include Berdyczewski in my introductory chapter as someone who set the stage for neo-Hasidism, he was an important neo-Hasidic author in his own right, and further analysis of his Hasidic-themed work would be fruitful. There are several other neo-Hasidic authors that would be worthy of research. Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport (1863-1920), better known under his pen name S. Anski, was a Russian and Yiddish writer and ethnographer who became interested in the Hasidic tale as a subset the folk tale.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on neo-Hasidism as a progressive branch of Judaism see Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and tales of the Hasidic Masters, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, 2003).

Anski viewed Hasidism, in particular the Hasidic tale, as a treasured native folk vein, which could be used like other folk material to arouse national consciousness and pride. By re-sanctifying such figures as the Baal Shem Tov and the Apter Rebe, he was able to create Jewish heroes that were authentic enough to stir a readership disillusioned with the false promises of the Haskalah and yet stylized enough not to be confused with the real thing. Anski is best remembered for his play *The Dybbuk*, which he wrote between 1914 and 1917, in which he used Hasidic characters and a stylized folk setting to inspire the audience to try and make a bridge between their Jewish roots and their worldly outlook. Judah Shteinberg (1863-1908) grew up Hasidic and eventually became one of the most prolific contributors to Hebrew and Yiddish literary journals of his day. Shteinberg wrote much Hasidic-themed material, including versions of romanticized Hasidic tales, which focus on the common Hasid, rather than the rebbe. Sholem Asch (1880-1957) came from a Hasidic background and ultimately wrote some of the most controversial works of Yiddish fiction; however, his Hasidic prose poem “A shtetl” (1905) and his novel *Der Tilim-yid* (The Sayer of Psalms; 1934) were both written to provide comfort for Jews during turbulent times. Asch’s unique brand of neo-Hasidism is seemingly idyllic in its glorification of simple piety, while it more subtly pushes boundaries that previous neo-Hasidic writers had never crossed, such as the introduction of Christological themes. The Nobel laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888-1970) grew up in a Hasidic family and wrote several Hasidic-themed works such as his novellas *Ve-Hayah he-‘akov le-mishor* (*And the Crooked Shall Become Straight*; 1912) and *Ha-Nidah* (*The Banished One*; 1919), and his novel *Hakhnasat kalah* (*The Bridal Canopy*; 1931). He

also collaborated with Buber on an anthology of Hasidic literature, which was cut short by a fire, though much of the material appeared with the posthumous publication of *Sipure ha-Besht (Tales of the Baal Shem Tov; 1987)*. Yankev Fridman (1910-1972) was a descendent of the Rizhener Hasidic dynasty, and wrote Hasidic-themed stories and poems. H. D. Nomberg also had an interesting and complicated relationship with Hasidism and wrote some Hasidic-themed works. As a contemporary and close associate of Peretz, it would be productive to compare his relationship to neo-Hasidism with that of Peretz.

In terms of further studies, more work could be done on several of the authors from the first chapter that have not been studied at length, such as Frumkin and Horodezky, on whom there is almost no available information. It would be fascinating to explore how tales written by Frumkin, Horodetzky, and other non-Hasidic authors may have been re-appropriated back into the Hasidic cannon unwittingly, when readers assumed that they were authentic source material. In general, I have discovered that there was much more cross-pollination between the maskilim and the Hasidim than ever seemed possible from their supposed bitter enmity. It would be worthwhile to explore this subject in more depth and find examples of individuals who both identified with the Haskalah and with Hasidism. Another worthwhile project would be to try to track down folk material that Peretz gathered, in order to discover some of the original sources for his *folkshtimlikhe* and *khsidische* tales.<sup>3</sup> In general, a comparison of neo-Hasidic texts with the originals upon which they are based might be very illuminating. By tracking the changes that

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the folk material that Peretz collected see the articles by Y. L. Cohen and Sh. Z. Pife in *Yivo-bleter* 12 (1937) 280-291.

the neo-Hasidic authors made to the tales, one could examine what elements from Hasidic stories appealed to the authors, which elements they discarded, and what embellishments they added. After relating these changes to an author's ideology and historical context, one could infer his reasons, draw a clearer picture of the development of neo-Hasidism, and refine its definition.

As we have seen, the image of the Hasid dancing has tremendous power. Just as it persuaded the Besht's wife not to send away the Hasidim, and convinced Peretz's Brisker Rov to stop persecuting Hasidim,<sup>4</sup> it convinced multiple generations of Jews to re-evaluate a part of Jewish tradition that might otherwise seem outmoded, and discover in it powerful living sparks and an unlimited source of creativity.

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<sup>4</sup> See Peretz's tale "Tsvishn tsvey berg," Y. L. Peretz: Ale verk, Vol. 4, (New York: CYCO bikher-farlag, 1947) 103-117.



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