HASKALAH AND HASSIDISM IN POLAND

Jacques Gutwirth

(Review Article)


T HIS learned volume, competently translated here, was first published in Polish in 2003. The subject had been researched by Raphael Mahler, who published his pioneering study first in Hebrew in 1961; in 1985 the book appeared in English in a slightly modified version as Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century. A comparison of the two volumes would not be easy because the authors approached the conflict (or confrontation) between the Haskalah (the specifically Jewish movement of the eighteenth-century ‘Enlightenment’) and hassidism from different perspectives. Mahler saw it from a Marxist socio-economic standpoint and interpreted the historical data accordingly. He considered the peculiarities of hassidic behaviour and beliefs — such as the cult of the rebe or charismatic leader; the position of the tsadik; and the various aspects of hassidic practices. Wodzinski, however, is mainly concerned with the various opponents of hassidism and reports (with many valuable details) on the history of that opposition, on the principal personalities involved, the publications, and the methods of dealing with the Polish authorities. Thus, the reader will gain an understanding of the reality of Polish hassidism through the prism of the various (and often prejudiced) standpoints of the opponents of the movement.

Wodzinski stresses that his study is concerned mainly with central Poland: the Duchy of Warsaw, which became ‘the Kingdom of Poland’ and is more usually known as ‘Congress Poland’; he describes
it as a semi-autonomous entity while others have considered it to have been a puppet state. It was established in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna (after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo) and would remain as Congress Poland until 1915.

In his Introduction, the author states (p. 5) that the nature of the Haskalah in Central Poland and its evolution differed from the path of the Haskalah in Galicia and Russia. He stresses (p. 10) that the status of the Jews became

...one of the most important topics of public debate... both for ideological (though not necessarily antisemitic) and for more general demographic, economic, and social reasons. The major concern lay in the fact that the ideologues of the Polish Enlightenment opposed organization of the state along religious lines, while the Jews were the only estate, or quasi estate, distinguished solely by religion.

It was a major concern because the Jewish population had increased to a total of about 750,000 by 1764, which was the year of the first census. Wodzinski adds that the demographic expansion was especially visible in the towns of the south-eastern territories. The year 1764 also saw the end of the Council of Four Lands (the parliament of Polish Jewry) and with it the end of the system of officially-recognized Jewish communities (kahalim). That situation stimulated the growth of the hassidic movement, amid the breakdown of traditional Jewish institutions.

However, hassidism was opposed from the outset. The mitnagedim — the ‘classically’ Orthodox Jews — condemned the hassidim for many of their practices, including their neglect of the study of talmudic texts, their establishment of prayer halls (shtiblekh), their different method of ritual slaughter of animals for food (shehita), and their fraudulent miracles.

The author devotes some pages to Salomon Maimon (1754–1800) the philosopher who was one of the initiators of the Haskalah but who was not familiar with specific aspects of Polish hassidism. He then considers Mendel Lefin (1749–1826) who was a protégé of Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski. That prince probably encouraged Lefin to propose a project of reform for the bulk of the Jewish population when the Jewish Question was debated in 1791 by the legislative Polish Assembly which was active from 1788 to 1792. In his report (written in French) Lefin said that he wished to clarify matters for the politicians who ‘... for all the unquestionable nobility of their purpose and goodwill, were nevertheless incompetent when it came to matters concerning Jewish society’ (p. 23). Lefin condemned kabbalistic visionaries and new zealots and according to Wodzinski, ‘there is no doubt that Lefin had the hasidim in mind’ when he referred to these zealots) and asserted that their aim was to drive reason out completely (p. 24). However, Lefin’s memorandum seems to have had little effect during the Assembly’s debates.

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Another Jewish reformer (who also wrote in the French language) was Jacques Calmanson (1722–1911). His treatise, *Essai sur l'état actuel des Juifs de Pologne*, was published in 1796 and dealt with the project to reform Polish Jews. It was addressed to the Prussian minister who governed the new territories annexed from Poland. Calmanson’s recommendations are reputed to have influenced the promulgation of the *Judenreglement*, the 1797 Prussian statute concerning the Jews. Calmanson was a strong defender of the Haskalah and believed hassidim to be dangerous fanatics; but for him (as for Lefin) the arch-enemy was the *kahal*.

Wodzinski shows that the leading *maskilim* were civil servants in various Polish government institutions, especially in the departments dealing with Jewish matters — such as elementary schools, the censorship of Jewish publications, the Warsaw rabbinical school, etc. He states (p.70):

> The Polish government pushed for the popularization of a national language and the maskilim willingly succumbed to these pressures, because their aim was fundamentally in agreement with the Haskalah idea of rapprochment with the Christians…. The intense interest in the ‘Jewish question’ from the Polish public…. influenced the popularity of the Polish language. At the same time, however, the Polish maskilim nurtured the Hebrew language and emphasized its importance to Jewish identity, and the number of Hebrew publications that appeared at the time is proof that the maskilim’s stance on the Polish language was neither straightforward nor unconditional.

In 1818, the State Council of the Kingdom of Poland allowed the establishment of a modern rabbinic school and Abraham Jakub Stern (1762–1842) was requested to submit a project for that institution. He was a mathematician and an esteemed inventor of various machines. In that year, the local police of the town of Plock had closed down a prayer hall on Stern’s recommendation. He was consulted again in 1824 and again gave the same advice — which was implemented at first. Eventually, however, the hassidic prayer halls (shtiblekh) were tolerated. Other members of the Jewish Polish Enlightenment were not as radical as Stern in their opposition: they considered hassidism to be a marginal movement. Moreover, the *tsadikim*, the major hassidic leaders in Poland — especially those of Plock and of Ger (the Polish Gora Kalwaria) — were deemed to be more rational and more acceptable than the ‘charlatans’ of Galicia. The hassidim, according to various local studies reported by Wodzinski, constituted only a small minority in Congress Poland, varying from three to 10 per cent of the Jewish population. (However, in some cities the proportion was greater.) The author comments (p. 98):

> One of the most interesting sources with reference to the religious tendencies of the Jews in the Congress Kingdom, including the development of
hasidism, are the reports of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews. The British missionaries . . . left a relatively large number of reports on the subject.

Those reports reveal that the number of hassidim in Congress Poland was more limited than was the case in, for example, the Russian Pale of Settlement.

The position changed after the collapse of the November uprising of 1830–1831 against Russia’s rule in Poland. The numbers of hassidim had greatly increased and the conflict between them and the members of the Enlightenment intensified. Wodzinski states (p. 132):

The followers of hasidism, even if they did not constitute a majority in a given community, managed to dominate the community with their exceptional involvement and better social organization, and also because of the aggressiveness and ruthlessness of their enterprises. It partly explains why, in the 1830s and 1840s, when they still could not claim a real majority, they started to play a dominant rôle in the community life of Polish Jews.

Local conflicts were exacerbated. In Lodz in 1848, the Enlightened Jewish men who shaved their faces or enrolled their children in Russian schools complained that they were mocked, insulted, and attacked by the hassidim. On the other hand, more than two decades earlier, in 1824, Jakub Tugendhold (1794–1871), an influential member of the Jewish community of Warsaw and a vigorous defender of the Haskalah, had been consulted by the Government Commission for Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment and he had defended the hassidim. That was a courageous stand and Tugendhold was severely criticized. Wodzinski comments (p. 146):

Tugendhold contrasted the hasidim, who were pious, noble and obedient to the government, with the intolerant, insolent, and arrogant ‘zealous talmudists’, i.e. the mitnagedim . . . Furthermore, according to Tugendhold, the real threat to the reform of the Jews in Poland was not the hasidim but the mitnagedim . . .

In the long term, that led to a change of attitude by the modernizing Polish Jews: they could now consider the hassidim to be strategic allies against traditional Jewish orthodoxy.

In the fifth chapter of the volume, the author considers the modernizing camp during the 1850s and 1860s. Three main groups were distinguishable (p. 155):

... a relatively weak group comprising both the traditional maskilim, who wrote only in Hebrew, and some members . . . from the wealthy middle classes and the Warsaw bourgeoisie with their pragmatic pro-German sympathies; a group of radical assimilationists often accused, justifiably, of religious indifference and of renouncing Judaism; and a moderate group, aiming at hegemony, who promoted pro-Polish acculturation while wishing to preserve the status of Judaism and religious traditions.
The assimilationists wished to ignore hassidism, but they were embarrassed by the persistence of what they considered to be 'medieval fanaticism'. The maskilim were ambivalent: they were critical of the hassidim’s limited observance of Jewish traditional practices — for example, their abbreviated laying on of phylacteries — and their belief that the use of the ritual bath was generally sufficient evidence of Jewish identity. On the other hand, according to Hatsefirah (the Haskalah’s weekly publication), the hassidim were more meritorious than the Orthodox Jews because they were more united and more generous.

As for the integrationists, they viewed the hassidim as a major threat to the modernization of the Jewish people, as their chief ideological rivals. Apart from these three groups, the majority of the Jews followed a non-hassidic traditionally Orthodox Jewish lifestyle — but nevertheless, according to various sources, they were attracted to hassidism, especially to the miracle-worker rôle of their rebbes. The attitude of the integrationists towards hassidism is seen in the periodical Jutrzenka (published from 1861 to 1863) where the words hassidim or hassidism do not even appear. Instead, there are references to ‘the exultant’, the ‘Kabbalah Party’ or the zealots. The hassidim were openly criticized (among other things) for their abuse of alcohol and tobacco; for their intolerance; their superstitions; and their ‘outlandish dress’. However, the publication believed that an alliance with them was possible, since they were idealists and their chief leader (the Gerer rebbe) was worthy of deference. For moderate integrationists, hassidism was an infinitely better alternative to total religious indifference. That attitude was more prevalent among Warsaw’s Jews than among the ‘enlightened’ provincials: the latter encountered much more hostility, daily, in their dealings with the local hassidim and they saw the conflict as a fight for survival.

Jutrzenka was closed down in 1863 by the tsarist authorities because it supported the Polish revolutionary movement. In 1866 the integrationists published the Izraelita, which remained in existence until 1915. The editors persevered in their preoccupation with the hassidim whom they accused of being obscurantist, lacking in basic hygiene, given to ‘sick fantasy’ and to the ‘blinding of reason’. It was hoped to diminish the movement’s influence by enrolling hassidic children compulsorily in schools which taught secular subjects. One of the most remarkable contributors to the periodical was Izrael Leon (Leib) Grosglik (1851–1904); he was a former hassid who by his own efforts had succeeded in learning the Polish language. He could describe with authority the isolation of young hassidim as a result of their inadequate education and of their limited social interactions. He advised that young members of the Enlightenment should try to befriend young hassidim — interestingly enough, advocating the strategy which Habad
hassidim employ in their missionary activities among secular Jews nowadays. But by the 1870s, the sponsors of the periodical had to admit that it was useless to try to ‘enlighten’ the hassidim. The new editorial policy was to publish mainly articles emphasizing the negative aspects of hassidism — publicizing scandals and findings of guilt in court cases involving hassidim. Eventually, however, that campaign diminished in intensity as ‘modern antisemitism’ in the 1870s showed its ugly face in writings and in social interactions in the Kingdom of Poland.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the integrationist and modernizing movement was active from two different standpoints. On the one hand, there was the approach manifested by the journalist Nahum Sokolow (1859–1936) who drew attention to the political influence of hassidim and stressed that it was necessary to fight that influence. On the other hand, there were several modern intellectuals who became seriously interested in Hassidism — notably Heinrich Graetz (whose monumental \textit{Geschichte der Juden} was published in 11 volumes from 1853 to 1876) and later Simon Dubnow whose classical study \textit{Toledot HaHassidut} was published in 1931–32 (and translated into English in 1950).

There were also the folklorists, such as Benjamin Wolf Segel and Henryk Lew who looked upon the hassidic movement as a form of folk custom and a treasury of folklore. Both Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals stressed the importance of carrying out studies of the Jewish people. That was also the case in the Ukraine, particularly owing to the influence of the ethnographer Shlomo Anski. Finally, hassidism was popularized in the theatre and in literary publications, largely owing to Sholem Ash (1880–1957) whose Yiddish texts were translated into Polish (and published by Izraelita from 1907 onwards) and partly owing to the \textit{Hasidic Tales} of Leib Peretz.

Raphael Mahler had viewed with disfavour Congress Poland’s treatment of the Jews. However, Wodzinski believes that Polish Jews had been treated with understanding by the Congress authorities; and he has made a learned contribution to our knowledge of the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe. It is regrettable that the volume’s subject index (pp. 331–335) is inadequate and it must be hoped that if the volume is reprinted, that index will be expanded for the benefit of specialist readers.

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