

Abstract

We begin our work with the following question: "Was there indeed a 'mystical decline' in late Hassidism in general and in the 20th century in particular"? The dominant academic opinion holds that Hassidism lost touch with its mystical roots from the second half of the 19th century onward.¹ We show that this picture is incomplete and that it is difficult to characterize Hassidic mysticism in such an ideal and sweeping fashion. We demonstrate the lack of available research on later Hassidism in general and of its experiential element in particular. Among other things, we show that certain parameters which were chosen to characterize Hassidic mysticism – parameters which eventually produced the conclusion that Hassidism had lost its spiritual roots – are not the only parameters to be considered for such an evaluation.

After presenting a number of characteristics for mysticism via comparison to trends in the field of global studies of mysticism, and defining mysticism as an "empowerment" of the experience of the presence of God - we set out to examine whether such mystical phenomena existed in Hassidism in the 20th century.

¹ Mendel Piekarz titled the first part of his book, *Ideological Trends of Hassidism in Poland During the Interwar Period and the Holocaust* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1990, with these words: 'From Religious Radicalism to Conservatism and Adaptation'; idem, 'Religious Spiritualism Against Zionism and Determinist Elitism: The Lessons of the Sermons of the Parczew Rebbe' (Hebrew), in: I. Bartal, R. Elior & C. Shmeruk (eds.), *Hassidism In Poland* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 1994, pp. 279-292; J. Dan, 'Hassidism in the Twentieth Century' (Hebrew), *Jewish Studies: Forum of the Union of Jewish Studies*, 31 (1991), pp. 133-139; D. Assaf, 'Historical and Sociological Aspects of Hassidism' (Hebrew), in: idem (ed.), *Zaddik and Devotees: Historical and Sociological Aspects of Hassidism*, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 19-21.

In our work, we choose a number of criteria to characterize the mystical phenomenon, such as: "empowerment" according to the studies of Jess Hollenback and Moshe Idel,² the aspiration for ecstatic-mystical prophecy and the drive to see God in relation to the prohibition to do so, mainly based on the studies of Haviva Pedayah and Elliot Wolfson.³

We have found that alongside a certain degree of mystical decline in the Hassidism of the 19th and 20th centuries, there existed trends of mystical "empowerment" and ecstatic prophecy, with "Imagery Techniques" being the most commonly used for realizing these mystical roots.

We prove that although one can find use of "Imagery Techniques" throughout the entire period that Hassidism existed, in the 20th century these techniques took on a different form in both quantity and quality from previous periods. Indeed, the "Imagery Techniques" of the 20th century have different attributes than those

² J. B. Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*, Pennsylvania State University Press 2000; M. Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism*, Los Angeles 2005; idem, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Albany 1988; idem, *Hassidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, Albany 1995; idem, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, New Haven - London 1988.

³ H. Pedaya, 'Vision, Falling, Song: Cravings Visions of God in Early Jewish Mysticism' (Hebrew), *Asufot: Annual for Jewish Studies*, 9 (1995), pp. 237-277; idem, *Vision and speech: Models of Revelatory Experience in Jewish Mysticism* (Hebrew), Los Angeles 2002; E. R. Wolfson. 'Iconic visualization and the imaginal body of God: The role of intention in the Rabbinic conception of prayer', *Modern Theology*, 12, 2 (1996), pp. 137-162; idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines: vision and imagination in medieval Jewish mysticism*, Princeton, N. J. 1994.

previously used which permit the reaching of even greater heights. Until the close of the 19th century, the use of this technique was similar to Kabbalistic-linguistic practices. In other words, the most common usage of Imaging was for the individual to imagine the letters of the name of God and to combine these letters in his imagination, using different kabbalistic combinations. However, in Hassidism of the late 19th century and especially the 20th century, the "imagery" exercises were not simply linguistic but they have the characteristics of a full screenplay: a long and at times complicated plot woven together from many scenes, a kind of a "waking dream" or a feature film. This imagery technique, in that it served "empowerment" and is the foundation of prophecy, is a mystical technique *par excellence*.

This raises questions regarding the one-sided assertion which a number of researchers have made regarding the weakening of the spiritual trend in general and mysticism in particular in Hassidic thought and practice.

We deal with a number of Hassidic thinkers and leaders, primarily the pre-Holocaust mystical doctrine of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro, the Piaseczno Rebbe (known for his sermons in the Warsaw ghetto), and the mystical doctrine of Rabbi Menachem Eckstein, Dzików Hassid.⁴ We find that the purpose of "imaging" according to their

⁴ The former has been intensively studied, although mostly for his Holocaust-era thought and his educational-pedagogical thought. His mystical thought was neglected until recently; see the following pioneering studies on the subject: Zvi Leshem, *Between Messianism and Prophecy: Hassidism According to the Piaseczner Rebbe* (Hebrew), Doctoral Dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2007; Ron Wacks, *The Flame of the Holy Fire: Perspectives on the Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymous Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczna* (Hebrew), Alon Shvut 2010. The latter has not been researched until today, except

doctrine is to "empower" religious-ritualistic experiences into a mystical experience. In other words, its purpose is to bring one to an experiential encounter with God or come in contact with the divine. Another purpose of "imaging" is to strengthen the capability of imagination ("*Koach Hamedame*": the power of imagining) in order to attain prophecy, with a definite mystical nature. The Piaseczno Rebbe even sought to grant prophetic capabilities of imagination to all. He hoped to see everyone become prophets, thus creating a public Hassidic-prophetic culture.⁵

In order to focus on the perception of imagination as it appears in Hassidic thought, and to explain the amazing phenomenon of the appearance of mystical practices, based on the "Imagery (Feature film) technique", specifically in the 20th century, we show that these developments did not occur in a vacuum but in parallel to

for a single seminar paper of Netanel Yechieli which was submitted to Prof. Moshe Idel a number of years ago. In 1921, Eckstein published a mystical book in Vienna titled: 'The Conditions of the Soul for Achieving Hassidism'. We also found in an archival search, articles of his in Hebrew and Yiddish as well as unpublished manuscripts written by him, which received their first treatment in our work. However, the purpose of this work is not to be limited and focus only at these two figures, but rather to research in addition the mood, the atmosphere and a number of roots (Jewish and non Jewish), from which these figures were affected, grew and operated.

⁵ Gershom Scholem was willing to recognize the existence of mystics in the 20th century, however he argued that mysticism was for them a private affair and thus held no significance. Scholem identified the "last stage" of Jewish mysticism, a mysticism of public significance, whose purpose is to "influence the generation, to teach a path not for that individual whose eyes were opened...but to pass on this knowledge to his fellow man", with the Hassidic movement in its inception in the 18th century, and no later. See G. Scholem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv 1976, pp. 72-73. We argue that it is possible to find public mysticism even in 20th century Hassidism.

developments in Europe at the same time. We present different philosophical models of imagination which developed in Western philosophy and correspondingly in Eastern practice and we examine these models' capability to influence Hassidic thinkers living in Eastern Europe.

In place of the Greek (Plato, Aristotle) and the medieval (until Kant) concept of imagination which saw imagination as an imitation of an original external thing and not an original thing *per se*, came a modern philosophical approach which sees imagination as a "creative imagination". This conception argues that, in a manner similar to music, imagination is an original internal creation of man (Romanticism) or in more modern variations – a structure of thought (Sartre) that does not imitate something external. This new pattern of thought brought about the development of techniques of imagination in many fields in general (such as psychology, e.g. hypnosis, autogenic training, guided affective imagery etc.) and in the mystical field in particular. This pattern of thought also influenced the Hassidic movement which saw imagination as an original tool of creation, as opposed to the Maimonidean conception which argued that "imagination can not by any means disassociate itself in its perception from matter...therefore it should not be taken into consideration".⁶

Modern philosophical and psychological conceptions of imagination could penetrate Hassidism through writings on modern thought that were translated at the beginning of the 20th century, for example: Théodule Ribot's *Essai sur l'imagination créatrice* (1900), translated into Hebrew in 1921.⁷ In addition, we consider other potential

⁶ Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (Hebrew; Michael Schwartz Edition), Part I, Tel Aviv 2003, pp. 73.

⁷ תיאודיל ריבו, *הדמיון היוצר: מסה פסיכולוגית*, תרגם ד"ר ניסן טורוב, ניו יורק-ווארשה-מוסקבה תרפ"א.

influence, such as pre hypnotic practices - as in the method of Mesmerism (named after Franz Mesmer) which served as the foundation of the imagery exercises of modern hypnosis and was commonly known throughout Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Another channel of influence was the spread of alternative psychological practices and methods of therapy from the Far East in the wake of Western colonialism which not only brought the West to the East, but also brought the East to the West, bringing together different and distant cultures.

The purpose of this work is to illuminate some of this golden age of Eastern European Hassidism and to present 20th century Hassidism, in contrast to the accepted view of research which sees it as an outdated, atrophied movement, in a more complex manner and to show that alongside signs of atrophy, one can find fascinating and unique mystical phenomena.