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# Hasidic Performance as a Reconstruction of Biblical Life

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THE SHIFT in focus in the study of kabbalah and hasidism from the search for systematic thought and theology to an enquiry into kabbalistic techniques, practices, and rituals was a breakthrough introduced by Moshe Idel just over two decades ago. This does not merely constitute a change in methodology but rather signals a veritable paradigm shift in kabbalistic scholarship.<sup>1</sup> It has had an impact on every other field in the study of Judaism, which is, after all, a distinctly performative religion.<sup>2</sup> Religious experience cannot be understood in isolation from the way of life in which it occurs.<sup>3</sup> It is the performative dimension of experience, not the ideology or theology in which it may find literary expression, that is responsible foremost for shaping the Jewish way of life and should therefore be the backdrop of any study of the textual sources for Jewish theology or intellectual history. However, Idel in his studies of hasidism was primarily interested in performance by the ‘elite’, the *tsadikim*, excluding from consideration a whole range of more popular ritual practices. It should also be noted that the performative dimension of hasidism had been investigated, prior to Idel’s studies, by a number of other scholars, whether in the context of halakhah, folklore, or mystical praxis as such,<sup>4</sup>

This chapter is based on my article ‘Haḥasidut keshihzur havai ḥaim mikra’ai: nekudot rishoniot’, in *Mehkarei yerusalaim bemaḥshevet yisra’el* (forthcoming), and was supported by Herzog College and the International Research Project on Galician and Bukovinian Jewry, Haifa University.

<sup>1</sup> See M. Idel, ‘On Judaism, Jewish Mysticism and Magic’, in P. Schäfer and H. G. Kippenberg (eds.), *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Leiden, 1997), 195–214; id., *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn., 1988); id., *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY, 1995); id., *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles, 2005); see also D. Reiser, *Imagery Techniques in Modern Jewish Mysticism* (Berlin, 2018), 1–13; J. Garb, ‘Moshe Idel: An Intellectual Portrait’, in H. Tirosh-Samuels and A. Hughes (eds.), *Moshe Idel: Representing God* (Leiden, 2014), 20–3.

<sup>2</sup> It has even influenced the global study of religion (see e.g. M. Idel, ‘Yahadut, mistikah yehudit umagyah’, *Mada’ei hayahadut*, 36 (1996), 25).

<sup>3</sup> See A. Afterman, ‘Paradigmah ḥadashah bemeḥkar hakabalah’, in M. Idel, *Shalshalot kesumot: tekhnikot veritualim bamistikah hayehudit*, trans. M. Scharf (Jerusalem, 2015), 221–32.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. A. Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, trans. S. Himelstein (Hoboken, NJ, 1992);

Hasidic texts containing instructions for achieving prophecy in the present day are found in the writings of the students of the Magid of Mezeritsh, and are transmitted in his name.<sup>53</sup> However, the definition of hasidism as a prophetic movement reconstructing the phenomenon of biblical prophecy only appears within hasidic sources at a later stage, as the movement was confronted by the need to define itself.

Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, in *Mevo hashe'arim*, repeatedly claims that the establishment of a fellowship striving towards receiving the *ruah hakodesh* (holy spirit) and actualizing prophecy is, in effect, 'returning to former glory', a restoration and reconstruction of a biblical way of life which has been lost and is no more: 'When I look for an example of our fellowship in the Torah, I find one in the Disciples of the Prophets.'<sup>54</sup> This conception is not limited to the form of the hasidic fellowship; it also includes the other performative dimension which develops throughout hasidism.<sup>55</sup> According to Shapira hasidism is a reconstruction of the biblical way of life, with an emphasis on prophetic experience: 'hasidism proceeds in the way of the prophets'.<sup>56</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The points raised in this chapter are preliminary, indicating the pressing need for performance-oriented scholarship, without which we can achieve only a limited understanding of hasidic life. The various practices performed by the hasidim—journeying to the *tsadik*, assembling for the *farbrengen*, bestowing *pidyonot*, singing, dancing, drinking liquor, and more—suggest a particular (although by no means exclusive) attempt to live and revivify the religious experience of biblical times. The Jerusalem Temple, the high priest, biblical royalty,<sup>57</sup> and even biblical prophecy had a tangible presence for them, regardless of the fact that they never actually experienced them.

Franz Rosenzweig, a German Jewish theologian and philosopher, arrived in

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No'am elimelekh*, 109–10. <sup>54</sup> Shapira, *Mevo hashe'arim*, 43b.

<sup>55</sup> See Z. Leshem, 'Bein meshihyut linvuah: ha'hasidut al pi ha'admor mipiasetsna', Ph.D. thesis (Bar-Ilan University, 2007). <sup>56</sup> K. K. Shapira, *Hakhsharat ha'avrekhim* (Jerusalem, 1962), 7b.

<sup>57</sup> Comparable attempts to reconstruct biblical kingship lie beyond the scope of the present chapter, but notably, it was said of Rabbi Israel Friedman of Ruzhin that he 'conducted himself with greatness and lordship like a king of Israel'. This included such royal accoutrements as court musicians and minstrels and riding in a majestic carriage drawn by many horses—all justified by the argument that he was descended from King David (see Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 212–43). A similarly royal lifestyle also characterized the Tshernobil hasidic dynasty (Sagiv, *Hashoshelet*, 51–4, 72–6). David Assaf notes that the tension between Israel Friedman and Rabbi Mordekhai of Tshernobil was interpreted as the tension between King David and King Saul, indicating that Israel Friedman was not exceptional in claiming descent from King David, as many other *tsadikim* claimed royal affiliation. While such claims of illustrious descent may be seen as a response to criticism and an attempt to anchor the authority of the *tsadik* in legendary figures of the past, it is nevertheless impossible to dismiss the possibility that a number of *tsadikim* perceived themselves as royalty and acted accordingly.

Warsaw as a German soldier during the First World War. It was there that this great man, who was well acquainted with the principles of hasidic theology, encountered flesh-and-blood hasidim for the first time. On 28 May 1918 he wrote to his mother as follows:

I visited Warsaw Saturday evening shortly before seven. . . . I spent most of my time in the Jewish quarter. . . . I chanced into a hasidic *steeble* [*sic*] . . . the meal came between *mincha* and *maariv*, at dusk, so called *shaleshudes*—the third meal. . . . It was only a token meal, whether because of the war or by custom, I don't know; the singing was the main thing. I have never heard anything like it. These people don't need an organ. . . . Nor have I ever heard such praying. I don't believe all that talk about 'deterioration' [of hasidism]; those who now find this deterioration would have seen nothing but deterioration even a hundred and fifty years ago.<sup>58</sup>

Rosenzweig was highly impressed by the melodies he heard at *shaleshudes* and the ecstatic prayers he witnessed. It was precisely the performative nature of the event that changed his view of hasidism.

Study of the performative dimension of hasidism, whether from the disciplinary perspective of intellectual or social history, anthropology, cultural or gender studies, or any other disciplinary approach, will greatly enrich our understanding of how hasidism was actually experienced by both its leaders and their rank-and-file followers, while also throwing new light on the dynamics of the relationship between them.

<sup>58</sup> F. Rosenzweig, letter to his mother, Adele Rosenzweig, 28 May 1918, in *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, ed. N. N. Glatzer (New York, 1988), 74–5.