A Spiritual Awakening

The Hasidic movement, which originated during the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, in Podolia, Volhynia, and Eastern Galicia, is viewed as a decisive turning point in the history of Jewish society. It brought about substantial changes in Jewry's traditional structures, its religious world-view, and its organizational unity. From a small circle during the 1740s and 1750s Hasidism developed into a true force among the Jews of Eastern Europe, making a deep impression on their spiritual and social life during the last decades of the eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century Hasidism became a popular movement that encompassed a significant portion of the Jewish community in the Ukraine, Galicia, Poland, and Russia.

This unprecedented expansion has led historians to seek an explanation in the historical circumstances and social structure of the period, and indeed detailed accounts have been offered, linking the rise of Hasidism to the economic and social conditions of the times and to a historical crisis. Among the various explanations for the expansion of Hasidism proposed, those of Simeon Dubnow and Benzion Dinur are prominent.[1] Both of these scholars argued that the causes for the growth of Hasidism must be sought in the social life of the Jewish community of Poland during the first half of the eighteenth century. Dubnow and Dinur view this period as one of grave crisis and regard the growth of Hasidism as a reaction to this crisis. However they differ in their interpretation of the significance of this crisis.

Dubnow held that the economic and social distress of the Jews of Poland and the collapse of communal organization in the wake of the persecutions of 1648–1649 provided the background for the growth of Hasidism. This interpretation maintains that the poor performance of

the religious leadership, the gap between the learned class and the masses, and the general spiritual decline created a vacuum that was filled by Hasidism.

Dinur, however, believed that Hasidism arose and spread following a leadership crisis in communal organization and social discontent directed against leaders who had failed to fulfill their duties. He saw in it an "oppositional" movement with clear social tendencies. At the same time, Dinur stated that the organizational ideology of the Hasidic movement was not social but rather messianic in character, and it partook of a reaction to the spiritual crisis following disappointment with the Sabbatean movement and its promise for forthcoming redemption.

However, these explanations do not withstand the test of criticism, as has been shown by Jacob Katz, Israel Halperin, and Shmuel Ettinger: although Hasidism was a unique phenomenon, unprecedented in its scope, there was nothing distinctive about the economic and social conditions attending the origins of Hasidism in comparison to similar circumstances elsewhere.[2]

Indeed, the Hasidic movement came of age after two critical crises had left their mark upon Eastern European Jewish society, and it arose and developed within the framework of the religious and social changes and processes that preceded it; however, it does not seem that one ought to identify its essence with these crises.

The grave after-effect of the Sabbatean movement and its offshoots, on the one hand, and the decline in the power of the institutions of communal leadership and the collapse of Jewish autonomy, on the other, did provide the background for the rise of Hasidism. However, these circumstances do not provide a sufficient explanation for the extent of its influence, nor do they constitute a necessary foundation that would have allowed its growth. Whereas the collapse of the spiritual and social authority of the communities indeed did facilitate the rise of new forces and the vitiation of the traditional frameworks certainly created conditions for the formation of new social and ideological relations, these processes were insufficient either to determine the essence of the new phenomenon that arose in their wake or to delineate its unique character.

The birth of Hasidism was marked with religious awakening and took place within the spiritual realm of pietist circles which were widespread in Eastern Europe during the mid-eighteenth century.[3] This awakening, which took shape both among ascetic Kabbalists, who lived in isolation as recluses and in sacred societies, was marked by an outburst of charismatic religiosity, the power and authority of

which derived from consciousness of close contact with the divine.[4] This outburst of spirituality brought about a movement of religious rebirth that subjected the basic values of the traditional world to reappraisal. It brought forth charismatic figures whose authority was nourished from new sources, authority by which they instituted far-reaching changes in their religious world-view and in spiritual and social relations and bonds.[5] The connection between charisma, which draws upon contact with higher worlds, and mystical theology, in which the world is permeated with God, typifies the first stirrings of Hasidism and explains the transition from the individual, spiritual experience of esoterics to a transmittable mystical theory, which comes to be significant in the structure of the religious experience of ever expanding groups.[6] Undoubtedly, the origins of Hasidism were stamped with the imprint of the charismatic personality, whereas the later development and dissemination were marked by a combination between a personality graced with the holy spirit and a mystical renewal that created a new world of thought and consolidated a doctrine significant to a wide audience.

The creators of Hasidism combined mystical experience and a new perception of reality acquired from ecstatic exaltation and spiritual inspiration (in the spirit of "The whole earth is full of His glory, and no place is devoid of Him"). Significantly, they turned to the community and individuals (in the spirit of "In all your ways shall you know him")[7] They offered a daring formulation of theosophical expression for their esoteric experience, constructing a mystical theory in word and deed. Their religious inspiration, came from close contact with exalted realms, but was expressed in a language that enabled it to transcend the bounds of the chosen few. This was combined with a spiritual openness attributing significance to the religiosity of every individual. To these was added an undeniable social sensitivity and awareness—thus making this religious awakening a social phenomenon.

The development of Hasidism was anchored in an immanent religious process, within the Kabbalistic tradition, the details of which and the stages of whose evolution were bound up with charismatic authority and religious inspiration. The founders of the Hasidic groups claimed the right to develop original conceptions of God, divine service, and patterns of leadership. This right was based essentially on their immediate sense of connection with the experience of God, and on the critical influence of this connection on vital areas of human existence.[8] The transition from religious renewal under the aegis of the charismatic inspiration of individuals, into a social reli-

gious organization based on mystical elements, one that offers the experience of belonging on a spiritual and social basis to broad circles, is what characterized Hasidism and determined its tone.

The sense of the nearness of God and the inspiration of the holy spirit, which typified the founders of Hasidism, was translated by the disseminators of the movement through many levels: to the language of the tradition, to the formulation of a mystical theology, and to renewed religious consciousness; to new social conventions, to contemplation of God, to charismatic patterns of authority, and to a public responsibility; to detailed guidance in the worship of God and to a spiritual awakening connected with the formation of new social bonds; and, finally, to a feeling of guardianship for the individual and the whole Jewish people—all of which brought about the formation of new social affinities.

The social significance inherent in this spiritual-religious phenomenon was gradually revealed with the expansion of the movement and became decisive in its formation. We know of the movement's social uniqueness and the separatist barriers it erected. These were manifest in forming distinct prayer quorums, in establishing the relationship between the zaddik and the congregation of his Hasidim, in inspirational assemblies at meals, in the delivery of sermons and the holding of prayers in unique fashion, in journeys to zaddikim, in the giving of *pydyon-nefesh* (redemption fees), in the establishment of special little synagogues (*shtiblakh*), in separate ritual slaughter, in original song and dance, and in other religious social activities that created undeniable social and spiritual patterns of adhesion.[9] However, we must emphasize that the rise of Hasidism and its development and expansion did not derive from a given historical event, nor were they conditioned by exceptional social circumstances. They were rather the result of an immanent religious process that took place within traditional Jewish society and was decisively influenced by mystical inspiration and by a very powerful religious enthusiasm, marked by new and effective forms of communication.