Introduction

What Is Jewish Literary Modernity?

This is a book about Jews "fitting in," about the modern challenge of figuring out what it means to "fit in." Most important, it is a book in which I discuss a few stories about this challenge. Giving this challenge a narrative form has long been a concern for modern Jewish literature. But this story doesn't begin with "modern Jewish literature." In this book, I will go back to the earliest moments of Jewish modernization in Eastern Europe—the hostilities between Hasidim and their orthodox opponents (the Mitnagdim), the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the appearance of Jewish Enlightenment scholars (Maskilim) in Eastern Europe. In the age of empires and revolutions, we will find, the stakes of fitting in were being defined epistemologically and aesthetically before they were ever defined politically. "Fitting in" was the stuff of literature.

Every student of modern Jewish literature is familiar with the period between 1881 and 1905 in Eastern Europe. This was a period of great instability in the Russian empire. It stretches from the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 to the 1905 revolution, from the pogroms that accompanied Alexander III's accession in 1882 to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. Two of the most recognizable texts of the time were responses to these pogroms. Leon Pinsker's 1882 pamphlet on "auto-emancipation" and Haim Nachman Bialik's 1903 long poem "The City of Slaughter." This period was characterized by a series of violent assaults on the Jewish inhabitants of the Pale of Settlement.[1] At the same time, these were the years in which the voice of a new Hebrew and Yiddish literature emerged

in the works of writers such as Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, and Bialik. During this period, tensions embedded in the foundation of the Pale of Settlement, tensions that had defined the contours of its social and political fabric for nearly a century, began to form tears in this fabric, foreshadowing the disintegration of the Pale. One certain result was a great instability in the lives of the Jews of the Pale, which changed the way this generation represented itself and its environment in writing. The concomitant shifts in the literary expression of this generation have been discussed extensively in the field of Eastern European Jewish literature. In fact, the conventional historiography of the field sees precisely *these* shifts as *constitutive* of the object of study called "modern Jewish literature." Yet this conventional historiography is incomplete. While it considers the disintegration of the Pale of Settlement to be a catalyst (if not generator) of a new mode of Jewish literary expression, it does not pause to ask: What social structure was disintegrating?[2] And, more importantly for a *literary* historiography: What literary mode of representation was being undercut in order to generate an aesthetic that can be recognized as "modern" in Jewish letters?

Discussions of modernity often circle back to the discursive construction of a break from tradition that typifies and even constitutes the text as modern.[3] Such discourse was central to the emerging Eastern European categories of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures as well.[4] In the 1906 preface to his German translation of *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, Martin Buber introduces the teller of the tales thus: "Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, who was born in 1772 and died in 1810, is perhaps the last Jewish mystic. He stands at the end of an unbroken tradition, whose beginning we do not know."[5]

Tradition as an unbroken chain that is now broken is the problematic through which Buber will express his ideas about Jewish modernity and renewal. This tradition has an end, at which point its final figure stands *as* the end. Buber's depiction suggests that R. Nachman[6] stands at the end of a transmission, at the edge of a break from which no return is possible for Buber and his readers.[7]

For Buber, the importance of positioning R. Nachman as "the last," who stands at "the end," stems from his efforts to present the storyteller as a point from which a cultural renewal of Judaism can begin. As Martina Urban explains, Buber's focus

on R. Nachman dovetails with his wider effort "to foster a model for the new or rather renewed Jewish consciousness envisioned by cultural Zionism [. . .] and, concomitantly, [. . .] the creation of a distinctive Jewish modernism,"[8] a renewal that has its pre-condition in a backward glance. For Buber, recognizing the gap between himself and R. Nachman is the constitutive moment of a Jewish modernity. Buber, of course, stands on the other side of the break, identifying R. Nachman as a point of departure for a new Jewish consciousness—namely, the consciousness of having broken from tradition.

This seminal idea of a break with the past—a break that constitutes modern literature—has been critiqued as the construction of a past from which, and in opposition to which, modernity can be seen to emerge. But outside this more or less constructed juxtaposition with the present, neither the historiography nor its critique ever pauses to ask about the possibility of a future-oriented gaze *of* this past toward "our side" of such a break. And this lack of interest is rather odd given that what one imagines is being departed *from* is as definitive of the departure as the imagined destination. If we are indeed on a distant shore of history, looking back at the far shore from which we have departed, and to which we can no longer return, my initial question would be: What is, or rather, what was the view from that far shore?

In approaching this question an initial historical observation is in order. The consolidation of the Pale of Settlement occurred in the years between the first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1772 and Napoleon's final defeat in 1815. This period begins the year R. Nachman was born and extends a mere five years after his death. This too was a tumultuous time in the lives of Eastern European Jews. No less so than the last decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the constitution of the Pale of Settlement was already replete with those very fault-lines along which the social, political and—crucially for our purposes—the aesthetic order would be ripped up at the close of the nineteenth century.

This historical observation leads into the historiographical argument about "modern literature" within which the present book is framed. As an introduction to reading R. Nachman, I will offer a series of interventions into the conventional historiography and its assumptions, beginning with the following argument. It is

evident that Tsar Alexander III's "Temporary Regulations Regarding the Jews" (also known as the "May Laws") of 1882 heralded the disintegration of the *sociopolitical* order outlined by Tsar Alexander I in his 1804 "Statute Concerning the Organization of the Jews." Equally, the shifts in literary representation occurring at the time of Alexander III herald the disintegration of the *aesthetic* order established during the early years of the Pale of Settlement by the literary voices of that earlier generation. In other words, the object of study called "Modern Jewish Literature" is far better defined by an aesthetic turn away from the "local" modes of literary representation that characterized the formation of the Pale of Settlement at the turn of the eighteenth century, than it is by a break in the chain of hitherto unbroken tradition extending from this earlier period back into some imagined origin.

From the perspective of Hebrew and Yiddish literary studies, what I am suggesting is not new. Several scholars have already undermined the narrative of an "emergence" of modern Jewish literature around 1882, in part by introducing its relation to Hasidic writing in the mid-nineteenth century.[9] Building on such studies, I would like to push the discussion back to the literary production of the very first decade of the nineteenth century. More precisely, I would like to frame the discussion between two historical moments. On one end is the accession of Alexander I, amidst the formation of the Pale of Settlement. On the other end is the moment Napoleon lost the war and the European borders and power structures of the nineteenth century solidified. Furthermore, I would like to add to the discussions of early nineteenth-century Jewish literature by relating developments in the realm of literary production more directly to the broader historical context of the turn of the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe.

From the perspective of the history of ideas, my emphasis on the turn of the eighteenth century is not new either. Nor is my assertion that social and political challenges importantly informed, and even shaped, the development of the Hasidic movement. This argument has already been made by scholars such as Ben-Zion Dinur and Immanuel Etkes.[10] More broadly, the fact that the turn was a formative moment for European Jewry—on a socio-political and also on a theological level—is by no means a new observation. There is plenty of work on the many dimensions of this

moment—from studies by scholars such as Israel Bartal and Ada Rapoport-Albert to more recent works by Gershon Hundert and Glen Dynner.[11] Nor is it a new observation that the management and resolution of this crisis, of this largescale encounter with Enlightenment ideologies and modernization policies, would shape the next century of European Jewish life, intellectually, politically, theologically, and beyond. In literary terms as well, Marc Caplan has argued that, in both historical periods at hand,

> storytelling is a response to the recurring crisis in Jewish autonomy that these historical circumstances engender, both personally and in the larger culture of the nineteenth century; such crises can be understood politically as the relationship of Jewish power structures with the empires in which they were embedded, or in social and religious terms as the relationship between specifically Jewish sectarian and ideological movements. These crises were as much a problem of narration, representation and idiom as of politics or culture.[12]

However, I feel a certain discomfort with uncritically referring to the social and aesthetic shifts in either of these historical periods (1772–1815 and 1881–1905) in terms of a crisis. A "crisis" certainly implies a social and historical moment. But it is not only that. We must employ a critical conceptualization of the moment at hand. And that is the next point of my intervention: A social crisis is not fully a "crisis" unless it is also, at one and the same instance, a crisis of representation, an undercutting of the ability to signify. A critical conceptualization of crisis would recognize that such a moment is not only a catastrophe in the sense of a "bad" occurrence. More profoundly, it is a moment that undoes the presumed, natural social structure and *simultaneously* undermines the ability to represent this undoing *as* an undoing. Such a conceptualization would make the designation of a crisis both impossible and yet wholly historical at the same time and in the same language.

Yet the fine work that has been done to date on the formation of the Pale of Settlement does not question the *representation* of this moment as a crisis by those who experienced and reported on it. This book offers the missing account of an aesthetic formation, a

mode of representation that would be formative of a "crisis." In this introduction, I want to underline that representations of crisis are accompanied by crises of representation. We need to interrogate the possibilities and implications of representing the turn of the eighteenth century as a crisis. This is where R. Nachman of Braslav comes in. He was one of the most prominent thinkers and writers of his time who addressed himself to the consolidation of the Pale of Settlement, both in the context of the socio-political crisis it produced for the Jewish community and in terms of a concomitant aesthetic crisis of representation. Consequently, I will dedicate the bulk of the discussion that follows to reading several accounts by R. Nachman of the particular challenges that emerge in the *aesthetic* construction of this so called "crisis of modernity."

Late nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish literature inaugurated Hebrew and Yiddish modernism, as well as other forms of representation a student of literature would identify as "modern." However, the preoccupation with a distinctively Jewish literary modernity, characteristic of the field of Jewish literary studies, does not emerge in this context of early national movements, and does not appear as the voice of a political minority. This preoccupation is equally operative, and with as much force, in the earlier context of empire, on the stage of late eighteenth-century imperial expansions. It is expressed in the voice of an emerging form of social and political subjectivity. The context is that of a radical reshaping of the public sphere—indeed, according to some, the very invention of the public sphere.[13]

The partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century, and the subsequent constitution of the Pale of Settlement, had a seminal impact on the place of Judaism in broader society, and on the representation of Judaism in letters. This moment marks a greater tectonic shift in representational strategies than even the 1882–1905 pogroms. And yet the effects of the 1882 May Laws, the Dreyfus Affair, and the early twentieth-century pogroms (which Bialik's formative aforementioned poem responded to) are by now self-evident to researchers of Hebrew and Yiddish letters as constitutive of a literary "modernity." These events certainly mark the collapse of an order. But it is the incubation and formation of that order—geographically, socially, aesthetically—against which those later shifts in literary

representation developed, and yet has remained outside the scope of literary historiography.

What would be gained by bringing the writing of the early years of the Pale of Settlement into the discussion of modern Jewish literature? Would this offer a "correction" to the historiography at hand? In other words, am I merely relocating the constitutive break that inaugurates modern Jewish literature into the early nineteenth century? To be clear, the answer to the latter is: No. My intention is not to offer a correction to the historiography of Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, locating their constitutive break at an earlier moment. Rather, by problematizing the very notions of "break" and "tradition," my aim is to call into question one of the underlying assumptions of literary scholarship, namely the role and dynamic of rupture and continuity, of tradition and its breaks, at least with respect to the study of Hebrew and Yiddish letters. The conventional historiography (of which Buber is only one proponent) offers an a-historical and essentialist notion of tradition, against which it sets up the modernity of "our" writing as a break. In this conceptualization, "modern writing" becomes a vantage-point from which to generate questions about tradition that can only be glimpsed from "our side" of the break. It is precisely this frame and the questions it generates that obfuscate R. Nachman's oeuvre, rendering it inaccessible (or even irrelevant) to a "modern" reader on the near shore.

The modern break with tradition itself draws on a rich tradition of breaks—even as it privileges "its" break as constitutive, over and against other previous breaks that are subsumed by its a-historical and essentializing tendencies toward the concept of tradition. The condition of diaspora (much like that of "writing"), with its ongoing adjustment to different political circumstances, neighboring communities, and social and religious standards, has importantly assumed tradition to be a local and historical question: What is it to be Jewish here and now? This last observation leads to my subsequent point of intervention. If the turn of the nineteenth century constitutes itself as "modern" through a discursively constructed break from the "far shore" of tradition—by which is meant, as I have just argued, the social and representational structures of the turn of the eighteenth century—what is, or, rather, what was the view from that far shore? To pose this question is to take a local and historical view of

R. Nachman's place along that long series of breaks and starts that is constitutive and incessantly reconstitutive of the Jewish textual "tradition" (or any textual "tradition" for that matter).

Fascinatingly (though perhaps predictably), the view that R. Nachman sees from his "shore" is quite similar to the "modern" view from our shore. He too sees himself looking forward and back from a "far shore," glimpsing a departure that will be constitutive of a future he will not have access to. A century later, we will understand the departure from this future as constituting our own present modernity. R. Nachman is a particularly revealing case study of a previous moment of "rupture" since he is, to some extent, stranded on the far shore, unable to return and yet unable to depart. He clearly recognized "tradition" as synthesizing the fits and starts of a dynamic of rupture and continuity, for example, in such statements as: "I will take you by a new way—a way that has never before existed. It is indeed an ancient way. And yet it is completely new" (such statements will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4).[14] Another example is his exploration of the Spanish Expulsion as a defining moment in the constitution of a tradition from which he sees himself departing (we will discuss this in greater detail in chapter 2 when we read his story "The Tale of a King Who Decreed Conversion"). And yet he also recognizes his own intransitive position on the shore from which one must depart. It is a position he stylizes through what I will call (in the final chapter of this study) a "poetics of intransitivity."

R. Nachman's view is from beyond the pale of Jewish literary historiography, from within the emergent Pale of Settlement, and from the far shore of modernity's constitutively imagined break. It is the view of a beginning that takes place in part by excluding those whose writing is generating it. This beginning from which one cannot "return" and yet cannot proceed is a "permanent beginning,"[15] which is the origin of the title of the present study, *A Permanent Beginning: R. Nachman of Braslav and Jewish Literary Modernity.*

Why R. Nachman?

Why is R. Nachman of particular interest for a *literary* consideration of the turn of the eighteenth century? In the first years of

the nineteenth century, Tsar Alexander I, who had recently acceded to the throne, passed legislation designed to resolve much of the social tumult that had divided the region over the preceding three decades. His 1804 "Statute Concerning the Organization of the Jews" attempted to reorganize the Jewish community of what in the previous decade had been termed the "Pale of Settlement." (Details of this legislation will be discussed extensively in chapter 1.) What is particularly pertinent for us is that R. Nachman's emergence as a Hasidic leader corresponds to Alexander I's emergence as an "enlightened despot." Significantly, R. Nachman devotes much thought and writing to the tsar's new laws, which include, among many other regulations and policies, a mandatory modern dress code for Jewish public officials, curricular mandates for Jewish schools, and—perhaps his most notable decree—an aggressive modernization plan for the Jewish labor force. This latter plan would result in the forced urbanization of about half a million Jews. While it is not likely that R. Nachman read the text of the tsar's statute, neither was he unique in responding to it. The majority of Eastern European Jewry was anxious about the changes it entailed (this will be covered at length in chapter 1). What is unique in R. Nachman's response is his appreciation of the aesthetic dimension this new legislation encompasses and its challenges to the representation of Jewish difference. It is amidst this broad reshuffling of social structures that R. Nachman begins teaching and telling his tales.

What sets R. Nachman apart from his contemporaries is both circumstantial and of the essence. As Yakov Travis states clearly, "more is known about the life of R. Nachman than any other [Hasidic leader] in the first generations of Eastern European Hasidism."[16] The vast efforts of Braslav Hasidim to preserve the most (seemingly) mundane details of their leader's life allow us to paint a full and fascinating portrait of a Hasidic thinker and creative genius at the very moment his world was changing unrecognizably. Most relevant to our present topic is the fact that R. Nachman chooses to engage with these changes through narrative fictions. Several of the more than 160 stories he told were written down by his disciple and scribe Nathan Sternhartz (1780–1844).[17] R. Nathan tells of his practice of reviewing drafts of the tales with R. Nachman. Together, they selected the thirteen that would be

published.[18] R. Nachman died in 1810 before reaching his fortieth year of life, but R. Nathan finished the work, and the tales were published posthumously in 1815—in a bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish edition, as R. Nachman had requested.[19]

Researchers agree that the tales are as much an impressive catalogue of folkloric elements that R. Nachman had collected as they are of Kabbalistic symbols and myths. This observation is often made hand in hand with a mention of the Grimm brothers.[20] Those who look to the Kabbalistic symbols in the tales take the Lurianic mythical universe as their major point of reference.[21] However, as will be argued in chapter 6, Kabbalistic readings of the tales pay insufficient attention to the manner in which, as Zvi Mark puts it, R. Nachman "uses the kabbalistic language as a tool to analyze current European issue[s], which the tales deal with."[22] As Mark goes on to explain:

> R. Nachman's literary works were created in the context of a familiarity with world literature, within the limits of its extant translation into Hebrew and Yiddish. And no less important, they must be read as literature that was created with constant attention to "news of the world" and out of a critical necessity to know what was occurring in the wider world at every moment.[23]

This is no less true with regard to the folkloric elements. In *Prokim fun der yidisher literatur-geshikhte*, Chone Shmeruk addresses the association of R. Nachman's tales with the Grimm brothers' folkloristic project.[24] The appearance of Yiddish-language writing in the Hasidic context was nearly simultaneous with the first moments of the Grimms' publishing career in 1812. In particular, the publication of the book *Shivchei HaBesht* in 1815, which clearly drew on folkloristic elements and genres in constructing a hagiography of Yisra'el Baal Shem Tov as the "founder" of Hasidism, has drawn the attention of folklorists.[25] However, Shmeruk continues, this synchronicity has created the impression that all early Yiddish-language Hasidic publications were of a similar "folk" genre when, in fact, the tales of R. Nachman are clearly not.[26] Instead, attention should be given to the manner in which folkloric elements serve to develop in narrative form a set of speculative questions about

the organization and reorganization of society. In this regard—and growing out of the tradition of Hasidic storytelling that dates back at least to the *baal shem tov* (if not the nomadic preachers before him)—R. Nachman's tales might be mentioned more suitably alongside such works as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) than those of the Grimm brothers.[27]

As mentioned, R. Nachman was an avid consumer of what he called "news of the world." In fact, many of his teachings, tales, and exchanges with students are framed by the news of the day. R. Nachman's interests spanned politics, medicine, technology, literature, and more. In one moment, he expounds on the term *poesia*,[28] while, in another, he describes a flying machine capable of reaching Jerusalem in a matter of minutes. It is pertinent that, beyond living through some of the major European revolutions, R. Nachman lived through some important technological advances. The last two decades of the nineteenth century were socially and politically tumultuous, and they also saw great leaps in science and technology. For example, in the span of just two or three years, beginning in 1783, great advances in aviation were accomplished. These years saw the first manned flight of a hot air balloon (in the presence of Louis XVI and Benjamin Franklin) and the successful crossing of the English Channel in a balloon. By the mid-1790s, balloons were being deployed in military campaigns as well, and the first years of the nineteenth century also saw the successful testing of the parachute.[29] These feats of human flight captured the imagination of many, and R. Nachman was no exception.

R. Nachman's great-grandson Shimshon Barsky (1874–1935) reports R. Nachman sharing his vision for the days of the Messiah: "There will be many machines, and there will be such a machine that flies in the air, and a Jew who is perturbed before [morning] prayers, will sit in the machine and fly to Jerusalem before prayers, to ask the messiah for advice how to pray properly, and will make it back [in time] to pray in his own home."[30] R. Barsky further relates the response of R. Naftali (R. Nachman's close friend and disciple), who responded that "if he ever heard of such a machine he would go dancing through the marketplace" for the joy of knowing he was witnessing the days of the Messiah."[31]

Such fantastical technological developments are more in line with the speculative and fanciful episodes of *Gulliver's Travels* than

with any folkloric narrative tradition "recovered" by the Grimm brothers. R. Nachman was certainly not unique in imagining the possibilities of such technological developments. Human flight had fascinated many over the course of millennia. But the link he creates in his imagination between this historical circumstance and his set of expectations regarding the days of the Messiah is his own. This speaks to the relation between his imaginative expression and the historical moment in which he wrote. Beyond his interest in "news of the world," it is R. Nachman's penchant for molding this news and his commentary on it into fictional narrative form that make him a storyteller of particular interest for the student of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. In this book, I offer a thick description of the relation between text and context (for lack of a better dichotomy) in R. Nachman's writing and thought—in historical and intellectual-historical terms, in theological and ideological terms, in literary and aesthetic terms. The fuller and thicker our appreciation of this relation, the more we will see the literary-aesthetic questions come to the foreground of R. Nachman's concerns.

In my preoccupation with bringing together questions about R. Nachman's historiographical "position" and an appreciation of his literary contribution to that historiography, I follow most closely the work of Yiddishists such as David Roskies and Marc Caplan. Roskies contends with Buber's identification of R. Nachman as "the last," arguing instead that he was "the first Jewish religious figure to place storytelling at the center of his creative life [. . .] Thus, [Roskies continues] modern Yiddish storytelling was born."[32] In R. Nachman's tales, Roskies claims, modern Yiddish storytelling emerged as "the blueprint for creative renewal. [R. Nachman] did not want to create a seamless narrative out of disparate traditions— he ripped out all the seams and started over."[33] In determining whether R. Nachman was the last or the first, however, one may lose sight of the historiographical dynamism of his "position." I will strive to keep this dynamism in full view throughout this book.

Caplan's reading of R. Nachman, in turn, is part of his effort to offer a "theory of peripheral literature as an integral component in global modernism."[34] Following Roskies's identification of the "birth of Yiddish storytelling," Caplan asserts that "the defining focus of Yiddish in this theory [of peripheral literature]

is the anticipatory role played by a *belated* modernity in creating an *anticipatory* modernism."[35] He thus argues that R. Nachman's tales "can be considered modernist, even if Reb Nakhman cannot be considered a Modernist. Modernism in this reformulation thus functions coincidentally with modernization."[36] Though R. Nachman is deeply interested in the particularities and uniqueness of his contemporary moment, I do not see R. Nachman's tales as modernist. His "coincidence" with modernization processes leads him in a different literary-aesthetic direction in my own argument. However, the challenge of "positioning" him within a literary-historiography of Yiddish and Hebrew letters is a shared and guiding concern for the beginnings of my own project. The interpretive difference I maintain from the fine scholarship just referenced lies in my understanding of the sense in which R. Nachman is a "beginning," "anticipatory," and so on. In the coming pages, I propose a different appreciation of the possibility or impossibility of a beginning-departure in literary-aesthetic terms.

Having stressed the ties between R. Nachman's writing and his historical moment, a cautionary remark is in order about the impression that "more is known about the life of R. Nachman than any other *tsaddik* in the first generations of Eastern European Hasidism."[37] Our extensive knowledge of R. Nachman's life is due in part to the fact that there have been more rejections of him and his writing than of any other Hasidic leader of the first generations of the movement. This rejection began during his lifetime with attacks by Arye Leib of Shpole;[38] it persisted after his death in attacks aimed at R. Nathan Sternhartz by Moshe of Savran;[39] and it continued into the twentieth century in the works of historians such as Simon Dubnow, who does not mince his words: "All the tales of R. Nachman are, in my opinion, words of hallucination out of the religious fever of a man sick in body and spirit, and for naught have the new researchers bothered to follow the path of Braslav Hasidim and seek an inkling of sense in this pile of nonsense."[40]

Given such caustic rejection, we must address the question of R. Nachman's place among the Hasidic textual and intellectual production of his day. How central or important was R. Nachman really? Was he a marginal radical or a central figure? Considering the above quotation by a respected historian of Eastern European

Jewry, this question relates to (even implicates) a set of ideological historical biases that we must avoid.

R. Nachman is very much a central character of his time, as also of the decades (if not centuries) that followed. Casting him as an outlier is inaccurate, and arguments made by Jewish Enlightenment scholars (Maskilim) that he was shunned by the Hasidic movement are to be taken with due skepticism. R. Nachman was very much a part of the movement and was connected to its intellectual and political elites. He was the great-grandson of the *baal shem tov*, the "founder" of Hasidism. His uncle and early supporter, Ephraim of Sudilkov, was the grandson of the *baal shem tov*. And Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, a pillar of late eighteenth-century Hasidism, was his supporter.

Furthermore, documentation of ideological resistance to R. Nachman (as opposed to the internal Hasidic turf wars, which is what we seem to witness in the case of Arye Leib of Shpole) that did actually derive from various traditionalist Hasidic leaders, including his own uncle Baruch of Medzhybizh, must also be taken with a critical pinch of salt. These Hasidic voices of resistance were subsequently amplified by Maskilim and later scholars, who towed the line of representing the Hasidic movement as a fundamentally traditionalist movement. If R. Nachman is not a traditionalist, the logic goes, he cannot have been a central figure in the movement. But this argument betrays more about the biases of early documenters of Hasidism than about R. Nachman's position in the Hasidic world.[41] To this confusion must be added the difficulty that exists in making sense of R. Nachman's own relations with the Maskilim of his day (a question that will be addressed in chapter 5).[42]

Finally, the very fact that R. Nachman's work was picked up by his contemporaries as well as subsequent polemicists testifies to an identification of him as one against whom to polemicize, and as representative, to some extent, of the Hasidic movement. Why polemicize against an outlier? What sense would it make for opponents of the movement to convince non-Hasidim that R. Nachman and his nontraditionalist ideas are representative of the movement and worth polemicizing against, while at the same time representing him as an outlier? Hasidism was a highly political and politicized movement. Today, it is primarily through literature that this politics is in any way still legible to us.[43] The present study thus offers an

intervention into two fields of inquiry that come together in research on R. Nachman's writings: Eastern European Jewish literature and literary historiography, on the one hand, and the literary and intellectual history of Hasidism, on the other.

Some Structural Notes

I have divided the lines of inquiry of this book into three parts: (1) political-aesthetic questions, (2) questions of social and intellectual history, and (3) literary questions. These are of course artificial divisions as these lines constantly interrupt and refer back to each other throughout the book. At the same time, the arc of the argument I present in this book leads from a primarily history-oriented first chapter to a primarily literary-theoretical final chapter. This is in order to build upon the existing research on R. Nachman, which is primarily historical and literary-historical. More importantly, however, this arc is essential for my intervention into the field—presenting the difference between an intellectual-historical reading of R. Nachman's texts and a "properly literary" reading of them by walking the reader through from the former to the latter. While doing so, I demonstrate the necessary but insufficient nature of historicizing R. Nachman's texts in parts 1 and 2, and I then draw literary-theoretical conclusions from this observation in part 3. For the broader argument about R. Nachman's place in the emergence of a "Jewish literary modernity," it is important to move through the more historical aspects of the reading as a lead-up to the literary interpretation of R. Nachman's texts.

In part 1, my discussion moves between context and text, since it is precisely the context of R. Nachman's writing that is so often overlooked in favor of some "deeper" internal meaning. The first chapter, "Positioning R. Nachman," begins by discussing R. Nachman's "position" in spatial and temporal terms, that is, historically and geographically. The chapter focuses on the 1804 "Statute Concerning the Organization of the Jews." As will soon become clear, any effort to "position" R. Nachman must take into account the sociopolitical shifts of his day and the restructuring of the Jewish community that accompanied them. The second chapter, "Representing Difference," details the sociopolitical shifts as they

relate to the representation of the Jewish community. It identifies in these shifts a particularly aesthetic problem that is present in this early nineteenth-century reorganization of society. Beginning with Teaching II:28 of the second volume of R. Nachman's collected teachings *Likkutei Moharan*,[44] this second chapter introduces a term that will be central to my argument throughout the rest of the book: *the invisibility of confessional differences*. This key concept refers to the removal of a certain category of markers of difference from the public sphere, as part of the process of creating a modern public sphere. Chapter 2 also introduces us to "The Tale of a King Who Decreed Conversion," which we will read as a commentary on the invisibility of confessional differences. In the third chapter, "The Secret of Our Wisdom," we will continue reading "The Tale of a King Who Decreed Conversion" as well as Teaching I:61 of the first volume of *Likkutei Moharan*. We will see R. Nachman engage the question of communal leadership in light of the social shifts he is witnessing and offer a political-aesthetic strategy for coping with them.

R. Nachman's efforts to make sense of the broad social changes going on around him, and of his own position as a communal leader in such a turbulent moment, involved a reimagining of some of the most traditional cosmogony of the Jewish textual traditions. In part 2 of the book, we turn to questions of social and intellectual history. The chapters in this part explore R. Nachman's *self*-positioning as it ranges from his sense of history and the historicity of his moment, to the challenge of faith that emerged vis-à-vis the rise of Jewish Enlightenment, and to questions of his power to influence these events. This part's two chapters will continue our exploration of the context within which we have resolved to read R. Nachman's work. However, in turning our attention to R. Nachman's *self*-positioning, we will inquire into his agency—discursive, theological, and social—in the processes already described. Chapter 4 reads Teaching 21 of the first volume of *Likkutei Moharan* and discusses R. Nachman's ability and desire to innovate, with a particular focus on the precarious nature of his moment in terms of the traditional Jewish historical narrative. Subsequently, chapter 5 reads Teaching 64 of the first volume of *Likkutei Moharan* and addresses R. Nachman's relation to new possibilities of Jewish existence outside the fold of tradition and communal structures.

In part 3, we turn our attention to the literary reception of R. Nachman's tales. Chapter 6 reframes our discussion in terms of R. Nachman's academic and disciplinary receptions. First, it highlights the scope of extant interpretive frames, and then it discusses more broadly the disciplinary assumptions underlying scholarship on his writing. This chapter is divided between two discussions. The first regards prevalent concerns with R. Nachman's messianic role and its relation to modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. The second is a discussion of questions regarding the Kabbalistic nature of the tales. Chapter 7 then attempts to move beyond this messianic-Kabbalistic reception by posing explicitly literary-critical questions of R. Nachman's writings. In the first half of chapter 7, we will discuss the various introductions to the 1815 edition of the *Tales*, as well as the first tale, "The Tale of the Lost Princess." In the second half of the chapter, we will read "The Parable of the Wheat" and "The Parable of the Turkey" and relate R. Nachman's tales to the broader political-aesthetic context we have been discussing.

Since historical and sociopolitical contexts play a large role in my reading of R. Nachman, I have made reference to the first (1815) edition of the *Tales* throughout the book. While the Hebrew wording is not different from current editions, I sometimes refer to the Yiddish parallel of the narrative in the 1815 bilingual edition. Highlighting variation and discrepancies between the two versions often demonstrates a point or draws attention to the possibility of a thicker contextual reading. Therefore, I cite the tales in their first edition by indicating the page number followed by the page side with a letter (a or b). While the original 1808 and 1811 volumes of R. Nachman's collected teachings are equally available, the variation with later editions is minor, and there is no running commentary or translation with which to compare the text of the teachings. Therefore, I have not found occasion to make reference to distinct elements of the original editions of the teachings. I reference teachings by volume (I or II), teaching number, and paragraph number so as to make accessible the citation in any edition of the book.

Finally, all translations of primary and secondary sources are my own unless otherwise noted. In my translations of R. Nachman's tales and teachings, I have tried to reflect the idiosyncratic nature of his language as much as possible. Thus, there are instances of

inconsistent tenses within sentences and sentences that seem to run on for entire paragraphs. This is in part an effort to convey not only the content but also the form of his teachings and tales—presented orally to his disciples, noted by R. Nathan and then edited for print by the two of them. This is also essential for conveying the content of the texts at hand, since the associative nature of R. Nachman's style relies in part on the strings of filiations he discursively develops. An example of this translation challenge in R. Nachman's teachings is the recurrent word *bechina*. As stated, the associative element is very powerful in these texts, and the marker of free-association is *bechina* (literally "aspect," "facet," "dimension").[45] The semantic meaning is not as important as the formal use of the word as a metastructural indicator of those points in which R. Nachman's exegesis turns into imaginative free association. Therefore, I have chosen to leave the word untranslated so as to highlight its formal function in the narrative flow of R. Nachman's teachings.

Last, by bringing together a diverse set of primary and secondary materials—narrative fictions, teachings, legal history, intellectual history, literary theory, and more—in this book, I aim to enrich the context within which we resolve to read R. Nachman and, indeed, modern literature.