

Introduction

In a remote corner of southeast Poland in the mid-eighteenth century, a loose-knit cluster of disciples formed around a charismatic mystic named Yisra'el ben Eliezer (1700–1760). This figure, known as the *Ba'al Shem Tov* (“master of the divine name”) or simply the BeSHT, is remembered as having celebrated joy as the highest spiritual value, in contrast to the then-rampant asceticism that was considered essential to religious flourishing. He suggested that every individual is capable of divine connection, and saw every seemingly mundane moment and inner stirring as a potential pathway to the Holy. A movement began to emerge as small groups of individuals who had known the BeSHT, including some of his key students, preached an approach to spiritual life that captured the hearts of many Eastern European Jews. The spread of these teachings was driven forward by charismatic leaders called *tsaddikim* (lit. “righteous ones,” sing. *tsaddik*) or *rebbe*s (affectionate Yiddish pronunciation of “rabbi,” sing. *rebbe*), each of whom shaped the contours of Hasidic thought and theology. To be a Hasid (lit. “pious one,” pl. Hasidim), a disciple of such leaders, was to infuse traditional practices, texts, and ideas with new spiritual meaning and devotional power.

As this largely youth-driven spiritual movement gained steam, it sparked severe opposition. Much of this came from the scholarly elites of Lithuania. In their eyes, the Hasidim were drunk and shameless, desecrating the decorum of prayer with their unseemly singing, somersaulting, and dancing. They changed the liturgy, disrespected scholars, smacked of Sabbatian antinomianism, and vulgarized Kabbalah. They were breaking up families, as self-absorbed men went on pilgrimage to their *tsaddikim* for Sabbaths and festivals, leaving behind their wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters during the holiest times of the year. And yet, Hasidism grew, adapted, and morphed in a rapidly changing world, spawning distinctive forms throughout regions of Galicia-Hungary, White Russia, and Poland. Today, the image of the long-bearded, black-hatted Hasid swaying in prayer is at once a symbol of Jewish authenticity and Jewish extremism, continuing to arouse fascination and scorn from Brooklyn to Jerusalem.

The formative stage (1736–1815) began with the circles of the BeSHT and his student Dov Ber, “the Maggid” (preacher) of Mezritsh, and concluded with the

deaths of the Maggid's direct disciples and spiritual comrades, who had founded their own "courts" and launched Hasidism as an identifiable movement. We have little historical data about the BeSHT himself beyond hagiographic legends and teachings printed decades later, and there is no evidence to suggest that he set out to found a new religious movement.¹ But it is clear that he critiqued the austere asceticism, intellectualism, and esotericism that dominated Ashkenazi Jewish piety at that time. Together with the disastrous debacle of Sabbatian heresy, Kabbalah had, for some, collapsed under the weight of its own complexity by the eighteenth century, and the BeSHT's devotionally oriented religious path spread like wildfire. He clearly had a profound impact on those around him, including future leaders such as Pinhas of Korets, Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye, and the Maggid of Mezritsh, not to mention his grandsons Moshe Hayim Efrayim of Sudilkov and Barukh of Mezhibzh.

While continuing to live within the domain of traditional Jewish law (*halakha*), the BeSHT sensed that excessive punctiliousness and studiousness could weigh down the soul. He emphasized that ritual conduct was never to be seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means toward *devekut*—an immediate "connection" with God that transformed all of life, even the most mundane daily activities. After the BeSHT's death in 1760, the Maggid attracted a particularly vibrant circle, many of whom were scholars from illustrious families in Eastern Europe. Although a sharper theoretician than the BeSHT, the Maggid's teachings continued to articulate an ecstatic way of life that was at once rooted in traditional practice and reaching beyond it. The chorus of voices around the Maggid's table was polychromatic indeed, yet they were united by a shared cluster of theological beliefs regarding the devotional life. When the Maggid died in 1772, an identifiable movement of Hasidism was taking shape. These figures were at its helm.²

In that very same year, however, rabbinic establishments throughout the region waged aggressive campaigns against Hasidism. As Hasidic communities grew and established their own religious infrastructures, a number of prominent rabbis, including the legendary Gaon of Vilna, sought to squelch the movement by means of polemics and excommunications. They accused Hasidim of all sorts of rebellious behavior that undermined Jewish law and decorum. These attacks obviously bruised the incipient movement, and yet so much "bad press" also served to disseminate the reputation of Hasidism throughout the Ashkenazi Jewish world. Tensions became so heated that the traditional Jewish critics of Hasidism became known as just that: *Mitnagedim*, literally "opponents."

By the early nineteenth century, however, the heated enmity began to fade, as both sides beheld a far more threatening enemy rising on the western horizon. Some Hasidic thinkers were aware of the western European *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) in the early 1770s;³ over the next four decades those modernist ideals grew from sporadic trickles to steady streams running into the folds of Eastern European Jewish life. Values of secularism, rationalism, and liberalism—paradigms of individual freedom that went far beyond the individualist elements of Hasidic spirituality—started to take shape as viable alternatives to rabbinic Judaism. We shall see that the privatization of religion and transformation of Judaism into a voluntary affair proved fruitful for the rise of Hasidism, but it could easily spin out of control from a traditionalist perspective.

In the face of this new challenge, both Mitnagedic and Hasidic leaders began to reconsider their mutual enmity. The Hasidim, having gained great influence throughout western Russia, Ukraine, and southeastern Poland, were extending their reach into Galicia and central, or Congress, Poland. Despite some odd customs, they essentially lived within the legal confines of halakhah, promulgated a recognizable religious teaching, and encouraged piety among the young. Indeed their enthusiasm for the religious life was perhaps to be seen as admirable, considering the lurking alternative. The new generation of Hasidic leadership (most of the movement's founders had died by 1815), perhaps proving itself to onetime critics, became the spearhead of anti-*Haskalah* activism.

This new self-definition of Hasidism gained momentum across the panorama of the nineteenth century, the period of Hasidism's greatest influence. The more radical theological views of some early Hasidic texts were set aside or reserved for elites. Hasidic rabbinic authorities often chose to follow the most stringent of legal opinions, building on an ancient definition of *hasid* as one who goes beyond the letter of the law. Regarding education and reform, where the fiercest battles with *Haskalah* were fought, they brooked no compromise. Even in matters of dress and language, where the law offered fewer guidelines, the Hasidic choice was ultra-conservative. Hasidism came to embody faithfulness to “the ways of our ancestors”—and yet this very posture was part and parcel of the movement's attempt to navigate and to shape Jewish modernity.

Hasidism: A Modern Religious Movement?

The goal of this volume in the Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought is to offer an entrée into the religious thought of Hasidism. But we must ask: What does it mean to study Hasidism as modern Jewish thought? After all,

Hasidim were firmly committed to Jewish law and, ultimately, to the most ultra-traditionalist expressions of Jewish identity in contemporary times. One need only tune in to daily talk shows and news hours today to hear critiques of such fundamentalist movements—be they Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or Hindu—as “stuck in the Middle Ages.” What is it that makes Hasidism modern? Answering this question invites us to think critically about the very idea of “modernity,” and guides us in turn to identify some key aspects of Hasidism itself.

If “modern” implies that a cultural phenomenon harmonizes with a particular ideology, such as secularism, humanism, or liberalism, then one would be hard pressed to characterize Hasidism as such. Indeed, many prominent Jewish historians have excluded Hasidism from the domain of Jewish modernity.⁴ However, scholars in recent generations have called for less parochial, western-Eurocentric definitions of modernity, which might better encompass and account for the diversity of cultural phenomena over the past 250 years or so. Broader discussions of “multiple modernities”⁵ or, following Nietzsche and Foucault, “genealogies” of modernity,⁶ help us to conceptualize modernity not as a particular ideology or worldview but as a constellation of conditions. To understand Hasidism as a modern movement, we must appreciate the ways in which it was shaped by, and in response to, these conditions.

It has long been noted that Hasidic communities came to shun much of the world around them, including even fellow Jews of different persuasions, despite their calls to know God “in all your ways” and to uplift sparks of divine presence in all places. Despite the movement’s manifestly populist leanings, women were excluded from synagogues and study houses, as well as rebbes’ courts where Hasidim would gather to sing, eat, and, most importantly, hear tsaddikim “speak Torah.” Women continued to be barred from the most foundational performances of Hasidic identity even amidst various trends toward women’s liberation in the very same region (however gradually and imperfectly), among Jews and non-Jews alike. But the fact that Hasidim tended to respond defensively to various conditions and contexts of modernity does not suggest that they were somehow medieval or outside of history, but precisely the opposite. Those very tensions and battlefronts underscore the modernity of the movement. In line with those who regard religious “fundamentalism” as a definitively modern phenomenon,⁷ one recent group of scholars suggests that “Hasidism’s form of modernity was defensive or reactionary.”⁸

But might we put our finger on a more nuanced approach to Hasidism and modernity? First, let us consider ways in which certain technological advances

impacted the directions of Hasidic spirituality. The centuries following the rise of the printing press witnessed not only a more widespread dissemination of ideas, but also new elements of democratization. By the mid-eighteenth century, the power of knowledge became less concentrated and controlled in the hands of elite classes, thereby nourishing rising tides of individualism and populism. Hasidism's populist aspirations to attract all strata of Jewish (male) society were arguably reflective of this age of printing. And we might note that by the 1780s, as Hasidism became more geographically diverse and as leaders became unable to tend to the spiritual needs of each disciple, Hasidic circles harnessed printing technologies to disseminate their sermons and stories far and wide, feeding the expansion of a mass movement.⁹

Yet mass printing also presented significant cultural-spiritual challenges, and it is precisely in Hasidism's adaptive defiance that we find the deepest imprints of that technology. The orality of Hasidic culture was, in part, a response to several major concerns regarding print culture. First, there was widespread fear that books would become so widely accessible that they would weaken the social bonds of earlier epochs. In the words of Moses Mendelssohn, a contemporary of the BeSHT and a foundational figure of the Haskalah and German Enlightenment: "The spirit of living conversation has vanished," and "intercourse with the wise man is not sought, for we find his wisdom in writings."¹⁰ According to Mendelssohn's lament, the intimate connection between student and teacher had been supplanted by the written word. The personal relationship of master-disciple, an axiom of Hasidic devotion, should be seen against this backdrop.

The proliferation of books also brought about a concerning disenchantment with ideas. This loss of luster was especially apparent in Jewish mysticism, which had thrived on the thrills of whispered secrets and rare manuscripts transmitted among confidants and from masters to disciples. As Moshe Idel has noted, "In the second half of the eighteenth century, when so many Kabbalistic books had been printed (and reprinted) and made almost as available as any other type of Jewish literature, the esoteric aura of Kabbalah faded, and with it the importance of secrecy."¹¹ Hasidic orality should be understood, in part, as an adaptive response to concerns about the erosion of social bonds and the dimming of esoteric auras in the age of print. This movement was driven largely by charismatic leaders whose oral teachings were hailed as divine revelations.¹² Even while resisting against print culture in various ways, Hasidim rendered Jewish mysticism more radically accessible than ever, precisely by stressing the irreducibility and irreproducibility of its expressions. And later technologies, from trains and

telephones to airplanes and the Internet, have dramatically expanded the magnetic fields of the masters.

Another condition of modernity that may have shaped the course of Hasidism was the privatization and personalization of religion. When liberal states started to emerge in central and western Europe in the eighteenth century and experiment with new models of citizenship based on, among other things, separations of church and state, this forced religions to evacuate public spheres and to become primarily private, personal matters. While such a transition was relatively smooth for Protestant Christians (hardly a coincidence!), the new political conditions challenged Jews to define Judaism as a “religion” in the Protestant sense: an eminently private and personal affair, a “faith” that does not conflict with state law, public institutions, and civic responsibility.¹³ In Eastern Europe, the birthplace of Hasidism, the situation was quite different. Most Jews were not emancipated there until the twentieth century—but we should not overlook some crucial parallels.

For centuries, Eastern European Jews had enjoyed relative political autonomy under the auspices of empires, with their own internal structures of power. These were Catholic and Orthodox societies, from which Jews were largely excluded. Therefore, their Jewish life remained corporate, governed by the Jewish authorities by dint of imperial rule. Generally speaking, kings and emperors had charged rabbinic leaders with the authority to keep their Jews in check. With this configuration of rabbinic leadership, known as the *kahal*, rabbis had the power to enforce halakhah, excommunicate dissidents, and so on. However, those structures of Jewish power began to weaken in the mid-eighteenth century—just as Hasidism was beginning to take shape. In 1764, apparently inspired by enlightenment ideals gleaned during his student years in England, the Polish king Stanislaw-August Poniatowski abolished the Council of the Four Lands, the Jewish organization that had effectively governed much of Eastern European Jewry.¹⁴ And amidst Russian reforms of 1804, Alexander I’s regime declared explicitly that Jews were now free to split into any number of “sects” with their own synagogues and rabbinic dynasties, regardless of protests to the contrary by many rabbinic leaders. Meanwhile, in the Polish Kingdom, Jewish autonomy declined quite steadily at the hands of local authorities, culminating in the formal abolition of their independence, and hence of the *kahal*, in 1822. In short, Eastern European states began to centralize their own powers in the eighteenth century, leading to decreases of Jewish political autonomy and increases of Jewish religious freedom. Religious practices, ideologies, and identi-

ties became increasingly matters of personal choice and inclination rather than the ambit of local rabbinic authorities. The kahal lost the ability to control and punish, since all Jews—pious or otherwise—were ultimately subjects of the empire. We can thus speak of a privatization and personalization of religion as a feature of Eastern European Jewish modernity, and this is crucial for understanding the rise of Hasidism.

One of the arenas where these conditions were especially manifest was in the failure of Mitnagedim to stamp out Hasidism. Those rabbis simply no longer wielded enough power. As the tsaddik Shneur Zalman of Liady argued to Russian authorities in response to Mitnagedic attacks, “When Poland was being divided [1772], the governing rabbinic councils were also disbanded and the nation became free. And each person is allowed to pray for as long as he pleases.”¹⁵ Even the Mitnagedim of Brody, eight years after their ineffective ban on Hasidism,¹⁶ were forced to acknowledge, “This generation has been stripped of such power.”¹⁷ Hasidism continued to grow and spread. Tsaddikim even took various actions to stack remaining Jewish councils with their own followers in order to facilitate their spiritual “conquest” of the land.¹⁸ And one could argue that the rebbes’ courts became the new sites of Jewish authority, but their power was certainly different from that of the kahal, which had been essentially a proxy for the sovereign government. As Eliyahu Stern has indicated, the institutional success of Hasidism “confirms José Casanova’s argument that privately controlled religious initiatives have fared better in the modern age than have those that rely on state or communal power structures.”¹⁹ Indeed, the economic, cultural, and spiritual power that tsaddikim amassed in their communities does not disprove the privatization of religion among Eastern European Jews; it was made possible by it.

The privatization of religion did more than foster the survival and spread of Hasidism; it penetrated to its very theological core. While Hasidic leaders remained firmly committed to traditional Jewish practice, they sought to inspire normative observance less through recourse to legal obligation than through appeals to the yearnings and inner lives of Jews. Gershon Hundert has pointed out that Hasidism emerged at the same time as other eighteenth-century pietistic movements, from Shakerism in England to the Great Awakening in North America, and beyond. While it is difficult to identify any direct lines of influence, Hundert indicates that all of these movements “were coextensive with the Enlightenment. What the spiritual movements and the Enlightenment shared was, most particularly, the emboldening of the individual to independence in

matters of thought and spirit.”²⁰ Resonances of such personal autonomy, combined with the attentiveness to individual interiority that is characteristic of modernity,²¹ echo in Hasidism’s distinctive turn from metaphysical speculations to the grounds of earthly life and personal processes.

Hasidic theology should thus be considered as a unique stream within the broader landscape of modern Jewish thought. To be sure, aside from polemical attacks, Hasidic works are rarely in direct dialogue with other forms of modern Jewish thought. However, shared historical circumstances and the conditions of modernity led Hasidim to ask many of the same questions. The present volume argues that they offer radically different answers to core issues of modern concern, ranging from theological fields such as creation and revelation to distinctly modern socio-religious issues of language, identity, community, and leadership.

The Study of Hasidism

At this point the reader should become briefly acquainted with the historiography of Hasidism, including past trends and future directions. The first wave of this scholarship coincided with the nineteenth-century rise of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the historical-critical “science of Judaism.” Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), a scholar of this school, dismissed Hasidism as darkly obscurantist, irrational, and superstitious—essentially an aberration in Jewish history that reflected the downtrodden conditions of Eastern European Jewry.²² The first major scholarly study of Hasidism was undertaken by Simon Dubnow (1860–1941), who regarded Hasidism in a relatively positive light, but was nonetheless influenced by the paradigms of his predecessors. To an even greater degree, Dubnow emphasized that Hasidism was borne out of crisis, highlighting the gruesome pogroms of 1648–49 in Ukraine.²³

Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), founder of the academic study of Jewish mysticism, initiated a scholarly turn toward the inner religious dynamics of Hasidism. He too cast the movement as a response to crisis. In his view, the main trigger was the explosion of Sabbatian messianism in the seventeenth century.²⁴ According to Scholem, Hasidism managed to capture the mystical imaginations of the masses in the wake of this tragedy, deepening their bonds with halakhah while simultaneously—and paradoxically—straining against the spiritual fetters of the law. Moreover, through psychologizing traditional categories of exile and redemption as inner processes, Scholem contended, the Hasidic masters managed to neutralize the messianic element.²⁵

Over the past decades many Israeli and American scholars—including Joseph Weiss, Moshe Idel, Rachel Elijor, Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, Arthur Green, Haviva Pedaya, Elliot Wolfson, Tsippi Kauffman, and Jonathan Garb—have continued to plumb the theological and phenomenological depths of Hasidic spirituality in rather innovative ways.²⁶ They have added texture to Scholem's early studies, often overturning his assumptions about certain dimensions of Hasidic piety. But many recent scholars have looked for greater social-historical analysis, addressing what Ada Rapoport-Albert has called "the history of Hasidism as a complex of historical and historiographical considerations."²⁷ Their research investigates Hasidism and its theology by carefully examining the dynamic imbrication of mystical, social, literary, and historical elements.

A major finding of this recent wave of Hasidism studies is that, contrary to Dubnow, Scholem, and others, Hasidism did not necessarily arise as a response to any crisis. The political and economic conditions of Eastern European Jewry were considerably more favorable in the mid-eighteenth century, when Hasidism emerged, than in previous generations, and the relative stability may actually help to explain the flourishing of the movement.²⁸ From this perspective, Hasidism was neither a symptom of persecution and powerlessness, nor an absolute rupture with the past. It was less reactionary, less anti-establishment, and ultimately more institutionally savvy than romantics and skeptics alike had wanted to believe.

A closely related contention is that the nineteenth century, when Hasidic institutions and dynasties spread most rapidly and powerfully across Eastern Europe, was the true "golden age" of Hasidism. This revision contradicts much of the self-representations of Hasidism in that movement's own literature. However, it also flies in the face of many previous academic scholars who celebrated the earliest circles of Hasidim and portrayed the later generations as losing sight of the movement's original revivalism and devolving into ultra-Orthodoxy. Earlier scholars tended to identify an "essence" of Hasidism embodied in the original masters, but the new school of Hasidic studies rejects such essentializing approaches and seeks to understand the movement's polyphonic development.

Without recourse to nostalgia, we believe that there is a difference between a golden age defined by theological innovation and boldness of vision, and the age of Hasidism's dominance of society. Each paradigm highlights a different aspect of the movement's development and legacy. More fundamentally, however, the attempt to identify a particular idyllic period does injustice to the complexity of Hasidism, a rich and ever-changing religious phenomenon whose social

and theological creativity stretches from the eighteenth century and into the present day.

The landmark *Hasidism: A New History* (2018), authored by a team of eight scholars led by the cultural historian David Biale, also employs an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand the complex fullness of Hasidism.²⁹ In what is the only complete account of the movement's history, the group argues that Hasidism did not necessarily arise as a response to any crisis, that it was precisely the nineteenth century that was its "golden age," and that one is hard pressed to identify any single spiritual essence or ideological cornerstone of the movement. *Hasidism: A New History* also lays an even stronger emphasis on the modernity of Hasidism. "Starting in the nineteenth century and continuing to today," the authors suggest, "Hasidism's very identity is wrapped up in its struggle against modern, secular culture and derives much of its identity from that struggle. It is this dialectical entanglement with its secular opponent that defines Hasidism as a modern movement. We might say that Hasidism throughout its two-and-a-half-century history represents a case of 'modernization without secularization.'"³⁰ Hasidism's modern elements are thus found primarily in its traditionalism and opposition to reform.

Another crucial development in this latest era of scholarship—and an area that demands much further research—has been attention to the place of women in Hasidism. This has sparked some methodological questions. For example, is there such a thing as a female Hasid? Although women have been marginally more involved in Hasidism than in earlier phases of Jewish mysticism (except Sabbatianism),³¹ it remains true that women were excluded from the most fundamental spaces and discourses of Hasidic life. This has been noted most prominently by Ada Rapoport-Albert and Marcin Wodzinski.³² While there are instances in Hasidic literature where women are called *Hasidot* (female Hasids) and even *tsaddikot*, the historical records confirm that women acquired those descriptors only through their relations with men and, moreover, any woman who did actually attract followers was ultimately regarded by Hasidic institutions with alarm as a sort of aberration, at best.³³ From this perspective, then, while a woman could attain the status of "wife of a Hasid" or "daughter of a Hasid," it was not until the twentieth century—and only then in select strands of Hasidism—that women could truly be *Hasidot*.³⁴

On the other hand, however, some scholars have contended that such perspectives presuppose an excessively "top-down" concept of Hasidism, which fails to appreciate the "bottom-up" realities of Hasidic life at the grassroots level.

In other words, why should rebbes, their courts, and the views of “elite Hasidic literature”³⁵ get to dictate the boundaries of Hasidic identity and culture? Without denying the marginalization or exclusion of women from core contexts of Hasidic performance, scholars such as Tsippi Kauffman have investigated representations of women in Hasidic tales, everyday practices of women in Hasidic environments, Hasidic writings in Yiddish that may have appealed (intentionally or unintentionally) to women, and even intimations of gender in the homiletic literature.³⁶

One last note regarding the interpretation of Hasidism requires comment. Around the dawn of the twentieth century, as a new generation became disillusioned with Enlightenment promises of progress and glorifications of reason, some relatively assimilated Jews gazed longingly and romantically at Hasidism. They did not want to become Hasidim in the strict sense—that was not what stirred them. Rather, they sensed that there were some ancient coals that still glowed in those communities, and they wanted to rekindle that core. These visionaries of Jewish renewal—religious thinkers such as Martin Buber and Hillel Zeitlin, along with literary figures such as Mikhah Yosef Berdichevsky, and Y. L. Peretz—refashioned Hasidic tales and teachings in new textures for more secular-minded seekers.³⁷ They spotlighted values of joy and spontaneity, everyday ecstasies, and radiant relations, while filtering out elements of misogyny, legalism, and isolationism. In extracting desired gems from the classic matrix of historical Hasidism, these writers constructed what came to be called Neo-Hasidism. This approach to religious thought and life continues to thrive today in a variety of forms.³⁸

The Present Anthology

The book in your hands aims to provide an introduction to Hasidic thought, the theological heart of this flourishing movement across the past two and a half centuries. Investigations of the social, political, economic, and intellectual dimensions of Hasidism, from the critical perspective of scholarly distance, have revolutionized our understanding of that movement. But as Glenn Dynner, in his study of the institutional and financial engines of Hasidism’s “conquest” of Polish Jewish society, aptly notes: “If we had the ability to travel back in time and ask a Polish Hasid what drew him to his master, we would probably hear about the zaddik’s commanding presence—his piercing yet transcendent gaze, his holy aura, and the inspirational effect of his sermons, blessings, and divine worship,” as well as “his simple yet profound teachings, which scholars

are able to access indirectly through Hasidism's impressive canon of homiletic literature."³⁹

The religious thought of Hasidism, in all its phenomenological textures, is in the very marrow of the movement. Without it one can hardly begin to grasp the rise and spread of Hasidism. In telling the story of Hasidic theology, this volume seeks to draw together the full range of Hasidic literature: homilies, letters, stories, polemics, personal diaries and memoirs, legal codes and rabbinic responsa, and historical documents. We hope to demonstrate that, far from receding into spiritual atrophy after 1815, Hasidism has continued to produce remarkable mystical thinkers across the past two and half centuries.

Our choice to focus on Hasidic thought poses inescapable challenges regarding the representation of women and the inclusion of female voices. Women have been largely excluded not only from the gatherings in which Hasidic homilies were delivered, but also from the textual traces of those events. These written sermons, a mainstay of Hasidic theology, were published almost exclusively in Hebrew and thus remained accessible only to men with the necessary education and erudition.⁴⁰ While we maintain that the homiletic literature is indispensable for understanding Hasidism, the volume does go against the grain of Hasidic religious thought to incorporate women's voices. In addition to a few rare examples of theological writings by Hasidot, the volume includes tales portraying women in positions of power in their community, prayers written and recited by women, a mystical letter attributed to the daughter of a Hasidic leader, a spiritually rich and stylistically stunning autobiography by the daughter of a Polish tsaddik, and the remarkable poetry of a twentieth-century mystic.

In order to facilitate an appreciation of these writings in their situational contexts, this volume is divided into four periods. While such periodization in history is never perfect or absolute, understanding these divisions should be helpful.

- 1 1736–1815: Emergence, Challenge, and Renewal. Hasidism begins to emerge as a counterforce to conventional piety in Jewish society. It calls for spiritual creativity, spontaneity in worship, and a celebration of divine presence in all of life. Borne aloft by a new class of charismatic leaders called tsaddikim, it sees its great battle in opposing “studied religious behavior.”
- 2 1815–1881: Ascendancy and Dominance. Achieving victory in most places over its original rabbinic opposition, Hasidism immediately faces a new enemy, Haskalah or Western enlightenment. As Hasidism becomes a dominant force

in Jewish religious life, it takes a stance of uncompromising defense of tradition in the face of this perceived threat from without, making common cause with the rabbinate that had once opposed it.

- 3 1881–1945: Decline, Renaissance, and Destruction. Forces of urbanization and emigration undermine the traditional small-town Jewish life that had been the setting of Hasidism. World War I accelerates this process, and Hasidism finds itself struggling for survival in new urban contexts. In doing so, it seeks to adopt some aspects of modernity. Outside forces, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust, destroy Hasidism in Europe.
- 4 1945–Present: Renewal and Reconstruction. Hasidism takes root in Israel and North America. Ultra-traditionalism, itself a product of the encounter with modernity, combines with nostalgic charm and remarkable spiritual vibrancy to make Hasidism intriguing to modern Jews, whose responses to it come in multiple versions.

The reader is also encouraged to read the introductions to each part and subsection, which provide further contextualization of the various figures in this volume. Readers should also remain mindful of the most immediate context: These materials were almost invariably based upon oral events. The medium is indeed the message, and we no longer have access to the embodied gestures and tonalities, pregnant pauses and climactic crescendos, or the interpersonal relations in the room that surely impacted the words uttered.

Our translations and introductions use YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe for places and names, with just a few minor adaptations. Our transliterations of Hebrew terms follow the Sephardic pronunciations of Modern Hebrew. We have generally dropped honorifics for the sake of brevity and crispness, except when we felt that they conveyed essential biographical or historical information. Hasidic texts are built upon many layers of textual hermeneutics. In the service of including more texts, we include references to earlier material only when being cited directly. Hasidic sources published before the twentieth century have very few—if any—footnotes. For this reason, we have elected to follow the inverse of common practice: in the present volume all such citations or notations were added by the editors or translators. The few footnotes imported from the original Hasidic texts have been supplied in square brackets. Finally, we have been intentionally light-handed in terms of biographical information for the figures included herein. The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, available online (<http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org>) is an excellent resource. For

those interested in deepening the quest, a reading list of foundational scholarship and primary sources has been posted on the Brandeis University Press website, where readers will also find a step-by-step guide to interpreting Hasidic texts.

But a brief word on how to read Hasidic literature is in order. The reader must bear in mind that this is a deeply hermeneutical discourse. These texts cannot simply be skimmed; they must be read slowly and studied mindfully. It will often prove helpful to look up references to biblical and rabbinic citations and read them in their original contexts. Hasidic theologians draw upon the language and imagery of past tradition, while also reinterpreting and thereby renewing and reimagining those elements. Be alert to the shared symbolic language of Kabbalah, but remember that each author in this volume uses mystical terminology and symbols in a unique way.

After you have read the text and are satisfied that you understand its meaning, think about its historical context. What events or social circumstances might give rise to such a teaching? And to whom might it be addressed? Then consider the deeper existential and religious questions with which the author is engaging. Hasidic exegesis is far from any scholastic attempt to discern authorial intent or contextual significance. It is a spiritual practice of the highest order, and the less familiar an ancient image becomes, the more awesome it is revealed to be. In Hasidism, the Torah is not a book. Scripture is an encoding of God's name in the sounds and shapes of enchanted ink. It is black fire on white fire. While the Torah's linguistic crust was revealed at Sinai, its magmatic core continues to churn. Hasidic sermons are an echo of that revelation, marbled with ethical and spiritual insights that address enduring questions. It is our hope that the reader will find them to be a source of both intellectual stimulation and personal inspiration.

NOTES

1. For two perspectives on the BeSHT, see Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Baal Shem Tov*, second revised edition (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013); and Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

2. See Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London and Portland: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 76–140.

3. See the anti-Maskilic sermon in this volume, Section 7. Solomon Maimon's description of the Mezritsh circle also reflects the cultural proximity of Hasidism and Haskalah (see below, Section 3).

4. See Michael A. Meyer, "Where Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?" *Judaism* 24:3 (1975): 329–38; Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Bernard Dov Cooperman (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 202–13; and Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4–5. For a helpful summary and critique of this view, see Eliyahu Stern, *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), x–xx.

5. S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129:1 (2000): 1–29.

6. See, for example, Gershon Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

7. See the six-volume *The Fundamentalism Project*, edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994–2004).

8. David Biale, David Assaf, Benjamin Brown, Uriel Gellman, Samuel C. Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, and Marcin Wodzinski, *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 376.

9. See Zeev Gries, "The Hasidic Managing Editor as an Agent of Culture," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, 141–55.

10. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1983), 93.

11. Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 185; cf. Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania*, 119.

12. See Ariel Evan Mayse, and Daniel Reiser, "Territories and Textures: The Hasidic Sermon as the Crossroads of Language and Culture," *Jewish Social Studies* 24:1 (2018): 127–60.

13. See Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

14. See Richard Butterwick-Pawlikowski, *The Polish Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1788–1792* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); cf. Stern, *The Genius*, 135–37.

15. Quoted in Stern, *The Genius*, 106. On the erosion of halakhic authority and the emergence of the semi-neutral society in late eighteenth-century Jewish life, see Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 42–56.

16. See in this volume, Section 4.

17. Quoted in Stern, *The Genius*, 106.

18. See Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). See also Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, "Hasidism, Havurot, and the Jewish Street," *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 10:2 (2004): 20–54.

19. Stern, *The Genius*, 168.

20. Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania*, 176–77. See also Yaffa Eliach, "The Russian Dissenting Sects and Their Influence on Israel Baal Shem Tov, Founder of Hassidism," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 36 (1968): 57–83.

21. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

22. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1956), 5: 374–94.
23. See the excerpts from his *Toledot ha-Hasidut* (1931) reprinted in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, ed. Gershon D. Hundert (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 25–66.
24. See also the volume in this series on *Sabbatian Heresy*, edited by Paweł Maciejko.
25. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 325–50; idem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 176–202.
26. References to the many important works by such scholars appear in the “Further Reading” list available on the Brandeis University Press website.
27. See Ada Rapoport-Albert, “Introduction,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, xvii–xxiv, and the remarkable studies therein.
28. See also Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 13–15.
29. Biale, et al., *Hasidism: A New History*.
30. *Ibid.*, 11.
31. See Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, 1666–1816* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011).
32. See Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidic Studies: Essays in History and Gender* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2018); and Marcin Wodzinski, “Women and Hasidism: A ‘Non-Sectarian’ Perspective,” *Jewish History* 27:2–4 (2013): 399–434. Cf. Biale, et al., *Hasidism: A New History*, 447–51.
33. Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Maiden of Ludmir: A Jewish Holy Woman and Her World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
34. See Naftali Loewenthal, “‘Daughter/Wife of Hasid’—or: ‘Hasidic Woman?’” *Mada’ei ha-Yahadut* 40 (2000): 21–28.
35. Chava Weissler, “Woman as High Priest: A Kabbalistic Prayer in Yiddish For Lighting Sabbath Candles,” *Jewish History* 5:1 (1991), 22 n4.
36. See Tsippi Kauffman, “Hasidic Women: Beyond Egalitarianist Discourse,” *Be-Ron Yahad: Studies in Jewish Thought and Theology in Honor of Nehemia Polen*, ed. Ariel Evan Mayse and Arthur Green (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 223–57.
37. On literary Neo-Hasidism, see Nicham Ross, *Beloved-Despised Tradition: Modern Jewish Identity and Neo-Hasidic Writing at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Be’er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010) [in Hebrew].
38. For a glimpse into the origins and current-day legacy of devotional or philosophical Neo-Hasidism, see *A New Hasidism: Roots*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019) and *A New Hasidism: Branches*, ed. Arthur Green and Ariel Mayse (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2019).
39. Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 22.
40. See Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidic Studies*, 323–24.