לְמַעַן אַחַי וְרֵעָי אֲדַבְּרָה־נָּא שָׁלוֹם בָּךְ׃
(תהילים קכ"ב: ח)

Dedicated to the global circle of friends and study partners whose selfless devotion, passion, and support for Tiberian Hasidism have made this volume possible:

Martin S. Cohen David Greenstein
Avraham Avish Shor and the Karlin-Stolin community of Modi'in Ili'it
Haviva Pedaya Gershon Hundert Zeev Gries
Ariel Evan Mayse David Maayan Miles Krassen
Ron Margolin Jonathan Garb James Jacobson-Maisels
Zvi Leshem Shlomo Dov Rosen
Shaul Magid Art Green Daniel C. Matt

This volume is dedicated in loving memory of our friend and teacher:

Tsippi Kaufman, *z"l*
(1970–2019)
ובהתחדש הישן—חדש תוציא

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Acknowledgements

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In memoriam
of Dr. Tsippi Kauffman (1970–2019) Senior Lecturer in Jewish Thought at Bar Ilan University

Dedicatory Preface

Our hearts were torn upon hearing that Tsippi Kauffman has passed away. Tsippi was a wonderful colleague. We both had the honor of participating with her at several international conferences on aspects of Hasidism. Her presentations and comments brought clarity to complex topics and sometimes fractious discussions. She was an attentive and respectful listener, and her observations were always penetrating, furthering joint efforts at arriving at new syntheses. We are especially honored that Tsippi contributed to our international seminar on Tiberian Hasidism (AJS, San Diego, 2016).

Tsippi focused our attention on neglected Hasidic tales, personalities, and practices, uncovering their scholarly implications and wider significance. She combined imaginative reach and astute readings with control of sources and methodological rigor. Her writing is characterized by expository clarity and stylistic grace. Dr. Kauffman wrote her doctorate with Moshe Idel of the Hebrew University, which appeared in Hebrew under the title *Be-Khol Derakhekha Da'ehu: Tefisat ha-Elohut veha-'Avodah be-Gashmiyut be-Rei'shit ha-Chasidut* (In all your ways know Him: The concept of God and corporeal devotion in the early stages of Hasidism [Bar Ilan Press]). Her subsequent work, in journals such as *Tarbitz, Da'at*, *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature*, *Harvard Theological Review*, and *Journal of Religion* ranged widely through Hasidism and beyond, including work on gender.[1]

1 For a list of her publications see https://scholar.google.co.jp/citations?user=MCR5_A4AAAAJ&hl=ja.

One feature of her work that deserves special emphasis is the quality of equilibrium. Endowed with powerful intellectual gifts, Tsippi always deployed those gifts in a balanced and judicious manner. She avoided being overly swayed by fashionable theories, and arrived time and time again at a scholarly position of thoughtful balance and equipoise. In our view, this quality—a certain kind of critical sobriety and judicious temperament—is what makes for enduring scholarship in the long run and gives us absolute confidence that her legacy of deep and thoughtful writing will continue to influence the field for many years to come.

These qualities were particularly present in Tsippi's writing on gender issues in Hasidism. She surveyed earlier work respectfully but critically, and showed how we must move beyond binary characterizations and simplistic formulations, whether motivated by pietistic defensiveness on the one hand, or scholarly skepticism on the other. Drawing upon her own work on the Ba'al Shem Tov, she challenged us to soften rigid boundaries and engage "a more fluid and flexible space for identity definition" that would "blur binary boundaries of sacred and profane, central and marginal, spirituality and materiality, . . . to make a place for all those seeking closeness to God." We would do well to pursue her lead of embracing the "Ba'al Shem Tov's vision and the religious longing for a place where boundaries (including those of gender) fall away."

Tsippi exemplified how academic scholarship can be a calling, a path of moral integrity and spiritual nobility, as well as a courageous quest for truth. In her personal interactions, Tsippi was a model of kindness, generosity, and genuine humility—all while expressing her views with clarity and conviction. We have lost a great friend of Tiberian Hasidism and a noble spirit—*chaval al de-avdin*!

Nehemia Polen and Aubrey L. Glazer
23 Elul 5779/September 23, 2019

A. Introduction

A Spiritual Portrait of R. Abraham Alexander ha-Kohen of Kalisk

Gershon Hundert
(McGill University)[1]

Abraham ben Alexander of Kalisk was a significant figure in the history of the Hasidic movement. Through his teachings and his actions, he represented some of the more radical aspects of the movement. Since Hasidism was a uniquely Eastern European phenomenon, it is important to begin by outlining the conditions of that area prior to the birth of Hasidism and to discuss some of the reasons for its rapid growth as well.

Eastern Europe was generally on the periphery of the major economic, political, and intellectual developments that contributed to the creation of modern society. The appearance of rationalist philosophy, modern capitalism, and modern state forms in Western Europe generally preceded their eventual eastward movement. Because of this, similar

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to the generosity of Gershon David Hundert in granting permission to republish his pioneering scholarship on the Kalisker for this series on Tiberian Hasidism. While selected studies have emerged since the time of this thesis, Hundert's impeccable scholarship stands the test of time and offers a remarkable portrait of the Kalisker from which all future studies must begin again.

1 Gershon David Hundert, *Toward a Biography of R. Abraham Kalisker* (MA thesis, Ohio State University, 1971).

economic and political trends in both areas often led to dissimilar developments.

In Poland, feudal political institutions remained until the end of the eighteenth century. Then, in a flurry of activity, marked especially by the Four-Year Diet of 1788–1792, an abortive attempt was made to prevent the complete disintegration of the state. Prior to that time, there had been no progress in the constitutional development of Poland since the sixteenth century.

Since that time, the monarchy had no longer been hereditary; the succession was controlled by the nobility. This factor, combined with the principle of unanimity, the famous *liberum veto* that prevailed at the assemblies of the nobility, prevented change in the political and economic *status quo*. Poland remained primarily agrarian, and the virtual powerlessness of the burghers contributed to a marked decline in commerce and in urban life in general. In addition, a series of wars and rebellions in the seventeenth century, the worst being the Cossack insurrection that began in 1648, contributed to the general instability. Thus weakened, Poland was increasingly subject to interference in its affairs, on various pretexts, by Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Finally, Poland was divided among those countries by a series of partitions in 1772, 1793, and 1795.[2]

The Jews of Poland were particularly affected by the decline in urban life. More than two thirds of them lived in the towns, where they often numbered between a third and a half of the general population. The general economic decline was aggravated by a large and rapid increase in the Jewish population; while the Cossack uprisings had cut their number almost in half by 1658, they numbered approximately 900,000 by 1790. To the visiting traveler, they seemed to "swarm about the villages and towns."[3] As a visitor remarked, "In the kingdom of Poland they are to be seen swarming in every direction . . . you cannot enter a town or village, how small so ever its size, where you are not met by them."[4]

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2 The best treatments in English of this period in Polish history will be found in S. Kieniewicz et al., *History of Poland* (Warsaw: Polish Scientific Publishers, 1968), and W. F. Reddaway et al., *The Cambridge History of Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941).

3 John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel to Greece, Turkey, Russia, and Poland* (New York: 1838), vol. 2, 189.

4 Ebenezer Henderson, *Biblical Researches and Travels in Russia* etc. (London: John Nisbet, 1826), 221.

Indeed,

> If you ask for an interpreter they bring you a Jew; if you come to an inn, the landlord is a Jew; if you want post horses, a Jew procures them, and a Jew drives them; if you wish to purchase, a Jew is your agent; and this is perhaps the only country in Europe where Jews cultivate the ground. . . .[5]

Jews were to be found ". . . exercising almost all professions, and engaged in every branch of trade; millers, whitesmiths, saddlers, drivers, ostlers, innkeepers, and sometimes even as farmers."[6] Visitors to Poland were unanimous in the opinion that, "nearly the whole retail trade . . . is in the hands of the Jews."[7] "The whole business of the country is in the hands of the Jews."[8] "They have in a manner engrossed all the commerce of the country."[9]

The Jews comprised a sizeable proportion of the urban population of Poland. As the Jewish population expanded, however, they moved in increasing numbers to small villages, particularly in the southeastern Ukrainian regions. They were businessmen, petty craftsmen, and artisans. In general, they seemed to dominate the commerce of the country.

In the towns, the Jewish community was organized as a separate corporation. Taxes for the government and for communal use were collected by community, or *qahal*, officials appointed by the oligarchic communal leadership structure. Judges appointed or elected by communal leaders tried civil cases involving Jews. There were also numerous communal institutions, cemeteries, schools, bathhouses, almshouses, synagogues, and so on. Many religious fraternities existed to provide mutual insurance (sickness, burial expenses, dowry), philanthropic activity, or study, and there were Jewish artisan guilds as well.

The devastation and destruction suffered by the Jewish community of Poland during the Cossack uprisings placed a very heavy financial burden on the *qehillot* (plural of *qahal*) of Poland at the time when they were the least able to cope with it. At the same time, the tax burden was

5 William Coxe, *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Denmark* etc. (London: n.p., 1784), vol. 1, 163.

6 John Thomas James, *Journal of a Tour in Germany. Switzerland, Russia, Poland* etc. (London: John Murray, 1819), vol. 2, 367.

7 George Burnett, *View of the Present State of Poland* (London: n.p., 1807), 137.

8 Stephens, *Incidents of Travel*, vol. 2, 214.

9 Coxe, *Travels into Poland*, vol. 1, 193.

increased by the government; as the communities borrowed, interest rates rose, and debts spiraled.

Although the *qahal* had never been democratic and it exercised wide-ranging controls over the activities of the individual Jew, it retained his respect because of the important functions it performed. By representing the Jews to the government, the *qahal* sought to exert its influence in averting anti-Jewish legislation and in preventing the persecution of its members. In addition to providing numerous social and religious services, the communal leadership also appointed learned rabbis, thereby associating its authority with that of the tradition itself.

During the eighteenth century, however, the communal leadership ceased to perform its functions. That is, in addition to increased taxation and the increase in population, which weakened the previously close ties between the individual members, power in the *qehillot* was seized by prominent wealthy men associated with the courts of the local nobles. The *qahal* leadership became a simple vehicle for the exploitation of the Jews by the nobility, and the *qahal* ceased to represent the interests of the Jews themselves. This was particularly true in the southern provinces of Podolia and Volhynia.[10]

In addition to the corruption of communal leadership, a widespread decline in learning accompanied this situation of social instability. "In Lithuania in 1720, 12 years of study after marriage was required for a man to serve as a rabbi; in 1761, all that was demanded was that the rabbi not be under twenty years of age."[11] The rabbis "follow the counsels of the mighty in their town. They are led by the *qahal* to defend the inciter and to encourage the oppressor. The elders use the rabbi merely as a peg on which to hang their dubious acts."[12]

The corruption of both the lay and the religious leadership led to a defective social order; people could no longer admit to the justice of existing hierarchical distinctions. As the traditional order decayed, the need for new social forms intensified. The Jews sought membership in

10 B. Z. Dinaburg, "The Beginnings of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Elements" [Heb.], *Zion* 8, no. 3 (1943): 121–125.

11 Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 228.

12 I. L. Margolis, *Beit Middot* (Frompol, 1780), 41, as quoted in Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia 1772–1844* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 161.

groups whose social function and authority were more legitimate and acceptable.

The active opposition to the *qahal* consisted mainly of the Jewish artisan guilds.[13] There was a struggle by these associations to retain a degree of independence from the *qahal*. Led by itinerant preachers and what Dinaburg (also known as Dinur) has termed the "intellectual proletariat" (ritual slaughterers, elementary teachers, and so forth), the guilds did not fully succeed in escaping the control of the *qahal*; they remained scattered and fragmented centers of opposition.

In addition to the instability of the Jewish communal structure, the precarious nature of the economic situation, and the instability of Polish society in general, the Jews of eighteenth century Poland were still reeling from the shock of the failure of the messianic movement centered on Sabbetai Tzevi (d. 1676). Numerous secret followers remained, however, and Jacob Frank (1726–1791) revived the movement during the eighteenth century.

These messianic movements, in their various anti-nomian and nihilistic guises, presented a fundamental challenge to traditional Jewish values. They claimed an end to the exile, that the messianic age had commenced, and that the ties of law and of the tradition itself could now be thrown off. It was a world turned on its head—what had been holy was now sinful, and what had been sin took on the aura of holiness.[14]

Although certain adherents of these movements followed their leaders into conversion—Sabbetians to Islam and Frankists to Christianity—some did remain Jewish, while at the same time maintaining secret allegiance to one or both of these messiahs. Most Jews turned in tragic disappointment from Shabbetai Tzevi when they learned of his conversion, and a strong campaign was waged by the rabbinic leadership to eradicate all memory of Sabbetianism. Frankism was never as widespread, though mention is made of Frankists throughout the eighteenth century. Both of these movements were particularly strong in Podolia and Volhynia, while in Lithuania and White Russia their impact was considerably weaker.

13 Cf. B. Z. Dinaburg, "The Beginnings of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Elements" [Heb.], *Zion* 8, no. 4 (1943) and 9, no. 1 (1944).

14 See Gershom Scholem, "The Holiness of Sin," *Commentary* 41, no. 1 (January 1971): 41–70.

During this period, small groups and isolated individuals who were ascetic, spiritually inclined, and learned lived in the Jewish communities of the towns and villages of Poland. They wore white robes on the Sabbath and the holidays, and they tended to keep to themselves. These men were called *chasidim* ("pious ones") by the people. They studied the esoteric, mystical lore of the Kabbalah and, in some cases, formed centers for secret Sabbetian activity. Theirs was a spiritual life, full of fasting and study, repentance and prayer—the very antithesis of a popular movement. Yet, a popular revivalist movement did arise during the mid-eighteenth century, and it borrowed the name of these very groups—Hasidism.

The founder of this new movement was Yisra'el ben Eli'ezer of Miedzyborz in Podolia (c. 1700–1760). Popularly, he was referred to as the Ba'al Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name") or by the acronym, BeSh"T. This charismatic preacher quickly gathered a large following in Podolia and Volhynia, after he revealed himself c. 1740. While the BeSh"T himself left no written works, his words are recorded in a number of works written by his followers.[15] After the death of its founder, the movement spread north to White Russia and even as far as Lithuania, under the leadership of the students of the principal ideologue of the movement, Dov Ber of Mezrich, Volhynia (1710–1772), and others. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Hasidism had engulfed most of the Jews of Eastern Europe. What factors contributed to the rapid, success of this movement?

At this time, the Jews of Eastern Europe were in the midst of a profound spiritual crisis. The decline in learning, the failure of the messianic movements, the increasingly grave economic situation, the prevalence of strict ascetic teachings as the model of religious life—all these factors were intertwined in varying degrees with the continuous persecution by different elements of the non-Jewish population. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that a popular revivalist movement arose.

Hasidism provided a life-affirming doctrine, which sought religious meaning in everyday reality. If Kabbalah lifted the earth to the heavens, then Hasidism sought to bring the heavens down to earth.[16] Scholem

15 See especially Ya'aqov Yosef of Pollonye, *Toldot Ya'aqov Yosef* (Jerusalem, 1972–1973 [5733], original edition, Koretz, 1780 [5540]) and Elimelekh of Lizensk, *No'am Ellimelekh* (Lviv, 1788).

16 See, for example, Simon Dubnow, *Toldot ha-Chasidut* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1943), 4–8, 60–63.

states that the central question in an examination of Hasidism is that of "the social function of mystical ideas."[17]

Hasidism taught the centrality of personal religious experience and its common availability. It represented "a new form of religious consciousness in which rabbinical learning, whatever its intrinsic significance, played no essential part."[18]

There is considerable scholarly debate surrounding the question of the role of messianism in the Hasidic movement. Dinaburg suggests that, to its founders, Hasidism "was a movement for preparation for redemption, and its teaching was entirely a Torah of redemption."[19] There is no obvious evidence in support of this statement, he claims, because of the time in which the movement arose. The elders of the community continued to be gravely suspicious of anything even vaguely reminiscent of Sabbetianism. Thus, the Hasidic leaders had to speak in veiled terms and only to hint at the real meaning and import of the words in their writings. It was the aim of the BeSh"T and his circle to raise the spiritual level of their generation to one worthy of redemption and to create a close interrelationship among the people. These were the two preconditions for the advent of the Messiah. Dinaburg concludes his study with a reconstruction of the nine steps, or levels, leading to the fulfillment of these two preconditions. The last of these steps is the *'aliyah* ("going up" to the Holy Land) of the *tzaddiqim* ("righteous men"—charismatic leaders of Hasidic groups), a subject which will be returned to in the body of this work.

Scholem contends that:

> Hasidism represents an attempt to preserve those elements of Kabbalism which were capable of evoking a popular response, but stripped of their messianic flavor. . . . That seems to me the main point. Hasidism tried to eliminate the element of Messianism. . . . Perhaps one should rather speak of a "neutralization" of the Messianic element.[20]

17 Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 327.

18 Ibid., 335.

19 B. Z. Dinaburg, "The Beginnings of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Elements" [Heb.], *Zion* 10, nos. 3–4 (1945): 149.

20 Scholem, *Major Trends*, 329.

Clearly, then, there is a great deal of question about the significance of the messianic element in the rise of Hasidism.

A number of scholars have attempted to show that Hasidism was also a movement of self-conscious social protest. Raphael Mahler, for example,[21] describes the rebellion of the Jewish masses, especially that of the artisans, who demanded democratization of the *qahal* during the last decades before the partitions of Poland. He states that Hasidism combined with this ferment, though not organizationally and without embracing all of its ideas. At times, Hasidic leaders themselves protested against the communal order. Often, those involved in the rebellion were drawn to Hasidism by its democratic oppositionist teachings.

Both Mahler and Dinaburg cite essentially the same evidence in support of this position. They state that the early Hasidic leaders came from precisely those social strata, the "intellectual proletariat," which provided the leadership for the oppositionist movements in the *qahal.* They also cite certain activities attributed to the BeSh"T, such as helping rural Jews to celebrate Passover, worrying about the non-Jews who cheated them, and being concerned that they might require non-Jewish employees to work on the Sabbath. He would also send his followers to replace certain religious functionaries whose performances he found wanting in religious fervor.

Mahler and Dinaburg both cite a story from Solomon Maimon's writings, which describes a young Hasid's arrival in a town. The first thing he did "was to ask about the community's practices and whatever he found unrighteous he cancelled and enacted new regulations which all followed in detail." And "the elders of the town . . . , who were much more learned than he, were frightened and trembled before him."[22]

Another example can be found in the remarks of R. Aharon Karlin, which he appended to certain decrees on communal taxation enacted in the district of Niesviezh in 1769. These laws were enacted by the "decree assembly" (an official body selected by the electors for that purpose) in order to "save the poor from exploitation." R. Aharon prefaces his own remarks by stating: "Since I have beheld the poverty of our people . . . I could not bear it. I have seen the evil with which the poor . . . are beset,

21 Raphael Mahler, *History of the Jewish People in Modern Times*, vol. 1, *1780–1815*, book 3, *Eastern Europe* [Hebrew] (Merhavya, Israel: Sifriat Po'alim, 1955), 181–307.

22 B. Z. Dinaburg, "The Beginnings of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Elements" [Heb.], *Zion* 10, no. 2 (1945): 149.