

David Biale, David Assaf, Benjamin Brown, Uriel Gellman, Samuel C. Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, Marcin Wodziński, *Hasidism. A New History*, with an afterword by Arthur Green, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. x+875.

by Ira Robinson

By any standard, *Hasidism. A New History* is a huge undertaking. Physically, it contains nearly 900 pages and weighs over two kilograms, making it somewhat awkward to handle. Chronologically, it covers a daunting 250 years of Hasidic religion, sociology, and history on a world scale, requiring expertise in multiple languages and academic disciplines. Organizationally, it is the product of a complex editorial process involving some nine collaborators and years of preparation. The result is a landmark scholarly perspective on the Hasidic phenomenon from its earliest appearance to the present. The book represents both a state of the art report on past and current research on Hasidism as well as a standard for future exploration in this field.

Hasidism has been an important factor in Judaism and Jewish history for approximately 250 years, and a quarter of a millennium is certainly enough chronology to begin to relate to the movement in its “longue durée.” In *Hasidism. A New History* the Hasidic movement, essentially for the first time, receives a scholarly perspective depicting that “longue durée.” We find in it important perspectives on significant continuities as well as change. Hasidic communities today are the product of a history of often strained relationships with non-Hasidic Jewish communities as well as governments and their agencies. Hasidism was controversial in its eighteenth century origins, and it remains the subject of controversy today for many of the same reasons. These controversies can be attributed in large part to the special communal structure of the Hasidim, which differed in important ways from that of non-Hasidic Jewish communities. As well, Hasidism simply did not and does not “fit in” well with the normative expectations of its multiple surrounding societies, Jewish and non-Jewish. This volume certainly deals with tensions between Hasidic and non-Hasidic Jews, which in the 18th and 19th centuries resulted in overt clashes, whereas in other eras such conflict evolved into symbiotic relationships and often mutual understanding. The book also analyzes how Hasidic communities have been targeted by governmental bodies in the past 250 years as an integral part of these governments’ attempts to modernize their societies educationally and economically. Hasidism’s longevity and continuing influence despite all the

controversies surrounding it, and despite both Jewish and governmental opposition to its leadership, its social organization, its educational policies, and, indeed, nearly every aspect of its distinctive way of life, make it worthy of note. Hasidism's vigorous and visible presence in the contemporary Jewish world despite its nearly complete destruction in its native Eastern European setting during the twentieth century certainly merits the serious scholarly consideration it receives in this volume.

Hasidism. A New History is a tour de force in the style of twenty-first century scholarship, in which narrow scholarly specialization is more and more the norm. In the previous century, such an all-encompassing work might have been conceived and written by individual scholars like Simon Dubnow or Salo Wittmayer Baron, both of whom, working essentially singlehanded, created histories of the Jews in multiple volumes. However contemporary scholarship tends to prefer presenting large and complex subjects like Hasidism by bringing to bear the collective expertise of a team of scholars. Thus *Hasidism. A New History* is the result of a collaboration of prominent scholars from North America, Israel, and Europe, all of whom have written extensively on various aspects of Hasidism with the exception of David Biale, whose distinguished publication history includes a leading role in a similar major collaborative scholarly effort, *Cultures of the Jews. A New History* (2002), that created a similarly massive volume attempting to depict Jewish cultures through the ages.

The attentive reader of this volume will receive important perspectives on the history, sociology, and theologies of Jews who defined themselves and were defined by others as Hasidic, representing the latest scholarly perspectives in these areas. The reader will also find important material on how outsiders to Hasidism, particularly but not exclusively Jews, have reacted to Hasidism, both negatively and positively. In particular, the volume deals with non-Hasidim who have from time to time appropriated elements of the Hasidic ethos in their own constructions of meaning. Finally, the careful reader will learn a lot about the history of scholarship on the Hasidic phenomenon: which scholars paid attention to Hasidism, what did they consider to be of significance in Hasidism, what factors did they ignore in their studies, and why. This issue is most important for us to consider because it is evident that the volume's narrative closely follows the scholarship in the various areas studied, and patently scholarship on Hasidism has been very uneven. Broadly speaking, the period of Hasidism's origins (up to circa 1815) has had a great deal of scholarly attention paid to it, whereas the post-1815 era, a period that Dubnow referred to as one of "decline," has been the subject of

considerably less scholarly attention. We thus find in the preface to the book an admission by the authors that there is much that we don't know, and that, particularly, Hasidism in the late nineteenth century is "poorly understood" (p. ix).

One of the areas that calls for a deeper analysis than the one given in this volume is the relationship of Hasidism to women. It is certainly true that, historically speaking, Hasidic rebbes publicly interacted primarily with males, and often barred females from their immediate presence. Insofar as the experience of the Hasidic court was designed specifically for males, it is certainly true that women were not considered to be Hasidim in the same way as men (p. 743). On the other hand, women were never completely absent from the Hasidic court and some women, particularly the rebbe's wife [*rebbitsin*], her daughters, and female servants, were permanent fixtures of the Hasidic courts. Indeed at times *rebbitsins* exercised considerable power, particularly in times of interregnum or dynastic conflict, as this volume amply testifies. More recently, the founding of Hasidic schools for girls has meant that women have become identified as "Hasidic" institutionally and not simply through their families. They thus have to be included, however reluctantly, on the part of the male Hasidic leadership, as part of their domain.

The economics of Hasidism is another area that needs deeper analysis than that given in this volume. One of the great continuities of Hasidic history has been complaints from outside the community of economic exploitation on the part of Hasidic spiritual leaders of their followers, and neglect of their work on the part of ordinary Hasidim. While the volume pays some concentrated attention to the economics of contemporary Hasidic communities (p. 762), more needs to be done with respect to the economic symbiosis between Hasidim and their surrounding Jewish communities. For example, Hasidic-owned stores selling kosher food or Judaica, would often not be economically viable without the patronage of members of the larger Jewish community interested in the products offered in such stores.

The most important element in the creation of this first major attempt at a comprehensive history of the Hasidic movement from its origins to the present is that it will serve as a challenge to researchers. Collectively the authors of this volume have given us their best understanding of the Hasidic movement. It is now up to the community of scholars dealing with Hasidism in its multiple

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manifestations to refute, refine, and improve on the many valuable perspectives presented in this volume if they can.

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