

Hasidism

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Heschel and Hasidic Judaism Glenn Dynner Abraham Joshua Heschel glorifies Eastern European rabbinic culture as an advanced, pious sect of Judaism, offering equality to men and women, an easily comprehensible and fair hierarchy of religious power, purity of mind and spirit, and a straightforward and simple path to heaven. Heschel; American rabbi, and leading Jewish theologian and philosopher, describes Hasidic Judaism as a near perfect religious society.

Heschel references many Jewish ideologies that assist in proving the superiority of Hasidic Judaism to various other religions; including dissimilar sects of Judaism. Though Heschel's argument is strong and he makes many valid points supporting the superiority of the Hasidim, such as the increased vivacity of Jewish life, there exists numerous instances in which he glosses over an ugly, hidden reality of Hasidic life in order to produce a more pristine picture of Hasidic existence.

What Heschel fails to mention in his essay, are the numerous power struggles endured by Hasidic leaders, false claims of messianic power, clear evidence of sexism, and an institution that includes an obscure hierarchy that imparts confusion and uncertainty to both leaders of Hasidism and followers alike. Scholars; Jacob Frank, Baal Shem Tov and Solomon Maimon offer new insight, and dissimilar views on the merits of Hasidism in Eastern European culture.

Like the distinguished Christian reformists known as the Puritans; the Jewish sect of Hasidism transpired from the dissatisfaction of a small minority who sought to improve the individual's religious experience by assuming more stringent methods of observations and religious rituals and practices.

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Eighteenth century Poland served as the venue for this particular religious revitalization. The Hasid recognized strict, relatively inflexible practices that focused even the most mundane, routine chore around the worship of the Jewish God. Hasidism; the plural of Hasid derives from the verb "Hasid" meaning pious or devotee. Unlike previous sect of Judaism whose followers worshipped God only in the vicinity of a temple on Friday nights, the Hasid show devotion to God through everyday actions and practices. In his essay; *East European Jews In Two Worlds: Studies From the Yivo Annual*, Heschel depicts how the Hasid revitalize Judaism through the democratization of Jewish study and worship, a renewed sense of proximity to deity, the introduction of God into everyday activity, a consciousness of the significance of personal actions, and a new sense of self importance and personal responsibility to God.

Hasidic Judaism appeals mainly to Jews who feel the conventional form of religious worship and study has become stale and unsentimental. Many of the Hasid grew to resent the tired hierarchal religious structure found in Jewish communities. Hasidism was able to provide the discontent with a renewed feeling of individual significance and proximity to God. The Hasid succeeded in democratizing the study and worship of God, expelling the tired patriarchal rule of worship, and re-instating an egalitarianism society in which each individual experienced a personal relationship with God.

In his eulogy on Jewish life in Eastern Europe, Abraham Joshua Heschel discusses the numerous developments made by Rashi, and the Hasid whose ambition it was to revitalize Jewish religious, and everyday life. By combining both everyday chores, and religious worship, the Hasid were able to

establish a way of life that was constantly illuminated by God's love and glory. Heschel comments on the infusion of religious piety into everyday life. He explains how worship and religious studies evolved from mundane weekly choirs, to an outlet in which life maintained vigor and meaning. The pattern of life was not limited to religious activities. Not only what is to be done on the Sabbath, but also what is to be done in the course of the week, has a definite form. The pattern prescribes the kinds of food to be eaten on certain days, the manner of putting on and off the shoes, the deportment in the street. " (Heschel, 6). This renewed sense of proximity to deity made Jewish worship much more than a weekly, mechanized due to be paid to God. Heschel explains how Hasidic Judaism re-energized Jewish spirituality and conviction. Hassidim", he explains, " brought down heaven upon the earth. They (The Hasid) banished melancholy from the soul and uncovered the great fortune of being a Jew. Jewishness meant rebirth. " (Heschel, 13). Worship was no longer realized through a step-by-step, formal document; worship was realized with each beat of the believer's heart. The Sabbath, like worship, was no longer confined by days of the week, nor by the walls of the synagogue. Hasidism introduced a new phase of modernity and democratization into the Jewish religion.

Knowledge became a right of the male masses; wealth no longer determined who had the privilege to study the Torah. Heschel describes this transformation in his eulogy on Jewish life in Eastern Europe; " Scholarship", he says, " ceased to be the monopoly of the few, and became widely disseminated. " (Heschel, 7). Hasidic Judaism breathed into the religion a

new consciousness of the significance that individual deeds and actions had not only on the self, but also the general well being of the Jewish population.

The common folk developed a more refined awareness of the actions and beliefs necessary to adapt in order to restore Judaism to its former glory. For the Hasidim the Kabbalah reinforced a new awareness of their individual deeds, it could even make " every Jew believe himself somewhat of a Messiah". (Heschel, 13). Every Jew had the opportunity to find happiness and fulfillment through faith and study. This mentality produced a new sense of self-importance and responsibility to God. Man was born with one mission; to perfect the world by resembling the scattered Sparks of Holiness in the world.

Heschel describes the charge each individual Hasidim hopes to assist; " The end of man's life", he says, " lies in his perfecting the world. He has to distinguish, gather, and redeem the Sparks of Holiness scattered throughout the darkness of the world. " (Heschel, 13). Life for the Hasidim was a mission that God entrusted to each individual. Solomon Maimon; Jewish scholar of the Talmud, and tutor of the young, disputes that Hasidism democratized scholarship. Maimon goes so far as to call religious teachers " tyrants".

Maimon's description of these oppressive teachers discredits Heschel's claim that the Hasid provided religious tolerance and acceptance. Maimon continues to describe an environment that did not provide religious stimulation, but instead suppressed individual thought and progress. Along with the many changes of the fifteenth century, Gutenberg's printing press was instrumental in spreading Hasidism. This new technology allowed for the

spread the Hasid's literature, captivating new audiences, wherever they spread.

Hasidic Judaism has not gone without its fair share of dispute and controversy; often from leaders of exterior Judaic sects. Of these disputes, three men; Baal Shem Tov, Sabbatai Sevi, and Jacob Frank, have been most instrumental in challenging the legitimacy of Hasidism. Jacob Frank; a self-declared messiah and well-known religious authority, is often considered to be the founder of the "anti-Talmudists". He rejects the Talmud in recognition of the "Zohar", a doctrine that allowed Christianity and Judaism to coexist side-by-side.

Frank encouraged his followers to seek out "heretics" and expose them as enemies of the Zohar. Though Frank was able to fuse Christianity and Judaism by referring to himself as an embodiment of one of the three Christian divinities, his teachings and beliefs were far from perfect. Though traditional Jewry was far from perfect, it is unclear whether any of Frank's so-called "improvements", were beneficial to the Judaism. Jacob Frank spread his religion by taking advantage of the curiosity Jews had about the Christian sect.

Through his work, Frank was able to create a bridge connecting the old religion with the new. Though his followers were looking for a revived, democratic religion that valued truth, and certainty, what many Frankists found were a series of confusing, somewhat irrational claims against the Talmud and the Torah. Frankism was simply too radical, to be accepted by the masses without significant criticism. When many of these dishearten Jews

scrutinized Frankism, they found further confusion, bizarre insinuations, and ultimately a man whose main goal was self-proclaimed fame.

In hindsight, Frank appears to have little attachment to Judaism, many, myself included, believe that he used Judaism to promote his own reputation and wealth. At the peak of his popularity, Frank was imprisoned and chooses to convert to Christianity, rather than remain loyal to his own teachings. Frankism immediately lost the majority of its followers, many receding to their initial religion. Another Messianic movement, Sabbateanism, founded by Sabbatai Sevi, another self-proclaimed messiah, emerged in the year 1665. Sabbateanism, like Frankish called for a revitalization of Judaic-religio spirit.

Sabbateanist claimed that Messianic times had/ become and persuaded followers to disregard the commandments explained in the Torah; calling them unnecessary, and pre-messianic. Sabbateanist engaged in "sinful" behavior such as polygamy and breaking the Sabbath in order to prove that messianic times had come. These activities general leant to increases upheaval and unrest. Temptations such as these disprove that Heschel's belief that Hasidic Judaism is indeed a perfect institution. It is arguable that it was the discontentment of the Hasid that allowed these different sects of Judaism to arise.

Bal Shem Tov; the alleged founder of Hasidic Judaism, warns against the human tendency to doubt and question, The Baal Shem Tov cautioned the Hasidim: " Every time you experience a worry or doubt about how God is running the world- that's Amalek launching an attack against your soul. We must wipe Amalek out of our hearts whenever- and whenever- he attacks so

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that we cannot serve God with complete joy. " The Bal Shem Tov's warning suggests that the Hasidic Judaic community has within its people those whose belief is not entirely inflexible.

Religious phenomenons such as these disprove Heschel belief in this type of peaceful religious community. In his writings, Heschel's teachings lend to the impression that the Jewish Rabbinic hierarchy found in Jewish communities was dignified, distinguished and without flaw. This hierarchy; often referred to as the " Kahal", is far from perfect. A diagram showing the hierarchy of the Judaic powers demonstrates that a Rabbi's power was only authentic in his own jurisdiction (the Jewish community), and that local powers in the government could easily censure or nullify any of the Rabbi's decrees.

The Kahal demonstrates that while the Rabbi's possessed some power, most of it was symbolic, and susceptible to Gentile rule. Though Hasidism did enjoy mass popularization and followings, the religion itself is far from perfection. Like most religious facts, the Hasid experience significant doubt, internal struggle, religious hypocrisy, and many other imperfections that keep Hasidism from reaching any kind of perfection. Though these faults did exist, Hasidism is undoubtedly accredited with the revitalization of Judaism faith and spirituality.