

I'm not sure what the moral of this is. I do know that, like Peter Levi, I have enjoyed Horace's *Odes* since adolescence, for their wry wisdom, their exquisite sense of impermanence, their cynicism, stoicism, and epicureanism (Horace was a philosophical magpie), their quiet courage in dangerous times, above all for the scintillating and unique skill with words that stamps them all into one's memory. I have seen many worse translations than David Ferry's, and occasionally he scores, as with the beginning of 4.1. ("Venus, it seems that now / Your wars are starting again. / Spare me, spare me, I pray. / I am not what I was / When tender Cynara ruled me.") Too often, though, he is prolix, chatty, and cute.

The best thing by far about Ferry's *The Odes of Horace* is that it is bilingual. Again and again the eye is drawn to the left-hand page to see the exquisite origi-

nal bricks from which Ferry is extrapolating his straw. The well-meshed words seduce. They and their syncopated, unfamiliar rhythms are incantatory. I suspect that a surprising number of people, after tempting exposure of this sort, will quietly go away and start learning Latin; and if enough of them do that, we won't need translations anymore, except to let the *litterateurs* show off, which is anyway their most popular current use. Master the original languages, and you can then enjoy true variation-spinners such as Christopher Logue, or, for Horace, Donald Hall with his delightfully apt Horse-collar Odes (Carne-Ross misses these, too), however whimsically they may stray from their theme. Until then, most readers will have to rely, like Ptolemaic administrators in Egypt, on interpreters; and what that means, alas, a perusal of *Horace in English* will tell them with quite uncommon clarity. •

In this learned and valuable book, Nadler seeks to deepen our picture of that spiritual landscape by recapturing the vivid religiosity of Hasidism's principled opponents, who themselves cast a long shadow to the present. Amid today's popular and academic concern with "spirituality"—reflecting a disenchantment with intellect and structure, and a near-obsession with personal fulfillment—a second look at the Mithnagdim and the spiritual ideals that they developed is particularly welcome.

The extraordinary philological and historical researches of Gershom Scholem and his successors laid to rest the rationalistic depiction of Judaism offered by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* of the nineteenth century, by demonstrating the continuity and the vigor of mysticism throughout Jewish history. So good a job did Scholem do that the mystical tradition, and Hasidism in particular, have crowded out other streams of Jewish spirituality, and certainly its anti-Hasidic currents. Indeed, one of the last popular clichés of Jewish history is the depiction of Hasidism's opponents as arid legalists, and even proto-Enlightenment rationalists; yet it too must now be put aside for a fuller appreciation of the variety of Jewish spiritual life.

A Severe Ecstasy

BY YEHUDAH MIRSKY

The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture by Allan Nadler

(Johns Hopkins University Press, 254 pp., \$35)

When I was growing up in New York, my family would sometimes pray at a local *shtiebel*, Yiddish for "little room," the designation for smallish, usually ramshackle, Hasidic synagogues. Late in the day on Saturday, the rabbi and his congregants would gather around a table for the third Sabbath meal, which, in the Kabbalistic tradition, marks the passing of the day, and of the union of higher and lower worlds brought about by the Sabbath. The men would sing the hymns written by the great sixteenth-century divine Isaac Luria, evoking the spiritual twilight. My father, himself a rabbi, did not join in the singing. He would remain in the sanctuary with a volume of Talmud, and mark the Sabbath dusk by laboring through the intricacies of the text. My father was a *mithnaged*: literally, "an opponent," that is, an opponent of Hasidism. Or one who preferred study to rapture.

The Mithnagdim represent a Jewish spirituality in which study figures as the supreme religious act. Little-known today outside of Orthodox circles, this

tradition, which Allan Nadler makes accessible in his important book, helpfully complicates our understanding, not only of Judaism, but of the varieties of religious meaning. Mithnagdism broaches the difficult question of the relationship of the spiritual and the intellectual.

Mithnagdism, or *Hitnagdut*, crystallized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in opposition to the spread of Hasidism. Then as now, Hasidism captured many imaginations with its mix of the exalted and the mundane, its popular dissemination of hitherto esoteric Kabbalistic doctrines, and its projection of exquisite metaphysical motions onto the inner lives of individuals. Its broad appeal, down to the present day, is not at all surprising. It is picturesque and soulful. Its mystic enthusiasm, and its storytelling and song, present a perfect spiritual alternative to the intellectually demanding and legally oriented discipline of classical rabbinic Judaism.

Hasidism's appeal is so great that it has become virtually synonymous with the Jewish religion of Eastern Europe.

Throughout Jewish history, mystical activity flourished alongside the study of Talmud, midrash, and other forms of exegesis, and philosophical speculation, with varying emphasis and intensity over time and place. All these forms of creativity could regularly be found within the same rabbis. Hasidism and Mithnagdism emerged out of this fertile terrain. Where Hasidism differed was in its commitment to the popularization and the internalization of mystical ideas, which in turn changed the shape and meaning of those ideas themselves. Thus Hasidism depicted the dynamic interaction of divine energies explored by the Kabbalists as being played out in the inner lives of individuals, whose own rises and falls mirrored the travails of the supernal worlds; and the Kabbalah's appreciation of divine immanence, which simultaneously reinforced the significance of the terrestrial concerns of *halakha*, Talmudic law, and offered a counterpoint to the fixities of that same law, was taken to far-reaching conclusions, with a near-sanctification of bodily function and communal life.

The well-known opposition to Hasidism by many leading rabbis of the day has long been seen as variously arising from a rejection of Kabbalistic doctrine, differing understandings of divine im-

manence, or class bias. Nadler joins a growing body of opinion arguing instead that the opposition to Hasidism was based not on the rejection of mysticism, but on the rejection of its popularization. And this, as Nadler shows in his most innovative chapters, was rooted in a deeply pessimistic view of the possibilities of widespread human perfection.

Any examination of *Hitnagdut* must begin with the career and ideas of Hasidism's first and most influential critic, Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna (or Vilnius), known as the Gaon, or Great One, of Vilna. He was the towering rabbinic figure of the eighteenth century, and one of the greatest masters of rabbinical learning in any century. The Gaon, who held no official position and confined his teaching to a small group of disciples, attained magisterial authority by his staggering erudition, his intellectual acuity and originality, and his ascetic piety. His Talmudic method eschewed the labyrinthine dialectics popular in many circles and emphasized instead the plain meaning of the text, and a broad knowledge of the entirety of rabbinic literature. His painstaking efforts to establish accurate versions of texts made him a forerunner of modern critical scholarship; and more importantly, he taught by example that textual study could be an act of supreme religious devotion. *Talmud Torah*, or the ideal of study as itself a high form of worship, had been a major theme of rabbinic culture since antiquity, but in the Gaon's example that ideal took on an intensity that burned itself into the minds of his followers.

The Gaon was no stranger to the Kabbalah. He composed commentaries on the Zohar (the central text of the Kabbalah, composed in the thirteenth century but traditionally ascribed to rabbis of the early Talmudic period) and other mystical texts, and a number of his closest disciples were accomplished students of mysticism. But they regarded that study as appropriate only to those who had first steeped themselves in the vast literature of the Halakha, the extensive body of Jewish law, and conducted themselves with unimpeachable piety. It is worth noting that the Gaon's disciples referred to him, without irony, as "the Hasid." The term itself, which originates in the Bible, has a long history, connoting deep benevolence and transformative piety. The Mithnagdic quarrel was not with that ideal as such, but with Hasidism's contention that it could be realized by the masses.

Recent scholarship has shown that

the early Hasidim were not, as commonly supposed, of the common folk, but members themselves of the rabbinic fraternity. Some, such as Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745-1812), the founder of today's Lubavitch movement, were acknowledged masters of the law. The appellation *Ba'al Shem Tov*, or Master of the Good Name, given the founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eliezer of Medzhibozh, was a common designation for the seers and the shamans who served as community functionaries—alongside rabbis, scribes, butchers, and others—in the communities of Eastern Europe; and he himself was well-integrated into the structure of his community. Nor are the roots of Mithnagdic opposition to Hasidism entirely to be found, as some have thought, in differing understandings of the notion of divine immanence in the material world. Early Hasidic and Mithnagdic thinkers alike believed that ultimately the divine presence permeates both the seen and the unseen worlds. Yet the Mithnagdim, as Nadler observes, "were intent on preserving the distinction between the human and divine perspectives on the nature of the cosmos, in sharp contrast to their Hasidic contemporaries, whose goal was the obliteration of that distinction."

What the Mithnagdim feared above all was the antinomian potential of mystical enthusiasm—the effacing of boundaries, metaphysical and mundane, in the popular embrace of an immanent divinity, unmoored in the rigors of study and obedience to the law. This, Nadler maintains, derived in turn from a deep pessimism about the human condition and the attainment of spiritual perfection in the prisonhouse of this world. Nadler's greatest contribution is the light that he casts on Mithnagdic pessimism. He demonstrates at length that they held very little hope for this life, and so they refused to accept Hasidic claims as to the possibility of spiritual transformation.

Consider their attitude toward death. A rich tradition of Kabbalistic thought saw the transfiguration of death, and the enactment of mystical death, as an avenue of profound spiritual experience. Through deep meditations, ritual simulations of death, and the characterization of martyrdom as the ultimate devotion, generations of mystics (as Michael Fishbane has written) "cultivated dimensions of death for the sake of higher levels of spiritual awareness." These practices took a more popular turn in the seventeenth century, which saw a proliferation of funerary rituals and meditative tracts centering on death

as part of a broader effervescence of new rituals; and this resulted, in large part, from the spread of Kabbalistic ideas among broader sectors of Jewish society, and with it a more pervasive awareness of the metaphysical reach of human action beyond this corporeal life.

Not for the Mithnagdim. For them, in Nadler's telling, real death was the only release from this world's relentless imperfection. "For most of the classical Hasidic thinkers," he writes, death was "an ascent, most often the final elevation, of the human soul . . . the culmination of the religious works already partially attained in this world, and . . . life's final, crowning spiritual achievement." For the Hasidim, the erasure of the self in death climaxed the *bittul ha'yesh*, the dissolution of the self and the material world through meditative practices. But the Gaon of Vilna, Nadler says, "assumed a diametrically opposed position . . . namely, that the descent of the soul into the body is its worst torment and that, far from allowing for even greater perception of the godly realms, corporeal existence hopelessly obscures the divine domain from the human senses."

In an astounding exegesis of Adam's sin, the Gaon wrote that the introduction of death into human experience was actually a blessing in disguise, "for there is nothing better for man than the decomposition of his physical matter." And his disciples furthered this view, with statements such as Eliezer Segal of Pinsk's admonition that death "is an act of compassion and mercy. For now that Adam has eaten of the tree, man must die in order to attain his true purpose. Thus did God explain to Moses that 'no man can behold Me and live.'" In 1825, Zevi Hirsch Katzenellenbogen, a later disciple, went so far as to say that an early death is to be welcomed: "Why bother with a needless delay here? Its only result will be the deviation from the right path and descent into the ways of sin." For Mithnagdic thinkers, the soul's habitation in the body was a torment, an ordeal to be met and mastered, and not an opportunity, as the Hasidim taught, for the redemption of the material world. The human body was a jail, not a vessel of transcendent experience or an arena for spiritual perfection.

One element of Hasidic religion that Nadler treats only briefly, though it stimulated much Mithnagdic ire, was the veneration of the Tzaddik, literally the "righteous man." Like "Hasid," the term "Tzaddik" has a long and venerable history. In their

reinterpretation of Kabbalistic doctrines, Hasidim came to regard the Tzaddik, or the Rebbe, not only as the leader of the flock and the steward of its material needs, but also as the mediating vessel of transcendence. But this charismatic authority was seen by the Mithnagdim as a dangerous alternative to the authority of the law. (A contemporary illustration of the perils of the Tzaddik idea may be seen in the extreme veneration of the recently deceased Lubavitcher Rebbe as the Messiah by a significant number of his followers. Nadler discussed this phenomenon in his influential essay "Last Exit to Brooklyn," in *TNR*, May 4, 1992.)

These theological arguments had practical effects. The maintenance of halakhically fixed times for prayer was an early and telling bone of contention. Jewish law channels the obligation to pray through a series of prescriptions of place, manner, and time—morning prayers to be done by mid-morning, afternoon prayers before sunset, evening prayers thereafter, all according to detailed specifications. Over the centuries, modes of contemplative prayer, first suggested in the Talmud, were developed by the Kabbalists into elaborate practices aimed not only at the spiritual elevation of the individual beyond the mundane but, more dramatically, at the healing of God. Drawing on the metaphysical powers of the Hebrew language, Kabbalistic prayer sought nothing less than the repair of the Name of God, which had been shattered, according to the Lurianic cosmogony, in the creation of the world.

Hasidic prayer took even this radical understanding of prayer a step further and, in keeping with its focus on the inner life, sought the dissolution of the self into God in prayer, by means of deep meditation on the sounds and the words of the liturgy. Thus, Nadler writes, "in Hasidism, contemplative, mystical prayer became man's most important personal religious obligation, upon which no limitations, temporal or literal, might reasonably be set." Taken with Hasidism's commitment to the popular dissemination of these ideas, in part so as to afford a stirring religious vehicle to the masses who were not themselves Talmudic masters, prayer became a flash-point for confrontation over the nature and the structure of religious experience, the reach of legal obligation, and the nature of rabbinic authority. Prayer's displacement of Torah study as the supreme religious act engendered a willingness to play fast

and loose with the legally mandated forms of its expression, with the sanction of the Rebbe. Coming not long after the mystical antinomianism set loose by the Sabbatian movement of the late seventeenth century, this was seen by the Mithnagdim as a reckless attack on the very foundations of traditional Jewish practice.

A vigorous response was not long in coming. Nadler directs particular attention to the works of Phinehas ben Judah of Polotsk, a disciple of the Gaon of Vilna and one of the best-known Mithnagdic preachers of his day. Phinehas was not a major thinker, but he is a useful representative of the Mithnagdic temper. In book after book over several decades, Phinehas reminded the masses of their responsibilities and urged them to direct their religious energies through the study of Torah and faithful adherence to the Halakha. His *Kether Torah*, or *The Crown of Torah*, first published in 1788, offered a scathing criticism of conventional understandings of spirituality and, in keeping with the Mithnagdic understanding of death, provided harrowing meditations on the inevitable putrefaction of a life unmastered by Torah. In the book's early chapters, he systematically surveys the seemingly pious and high-minded forms of religious life—introspection, the desire for union with God, kabbalistic exercises, solitary study and devotion, self-abnegation before the unlettered—and dismisses them all as not only solipsistic, but, more interestingly, as seductive ploys by Satan to lure the unwary from the true locus of divine service, namely the house of study. Thus Phinehas warns that "Satan will whisper to the unsuspecting scholar, 'It would be good for you to cut back on study and pursue mitzvot [good deeds]....' Yet his entire aim is to lead you from the house of study, which is the altar on which [Satan] is slaughtered."

Like his master the Gaon of Vilna, Phinehas regards the study of Kabbalah as the pinnacle of scholarly and religious attainment—but a pinnacle attained only after long and arduous study of the Talmudic corpus (which study, in fellowship with other students of Torah, is the supreme act of religious devotion). Here we begin to see the Mithnagdim's deepest contribution to the religious life of humanity, the ideal of *Torah Li'Shma*, "Torah for its own sake," of ceaseless study as the truest union of divine immanence and transcendence in the life of the individual and the community.

This ideal found its supreme ex-

pression in a treatise called *Nefesh Ha'Hayyim*, or *The Soul of Life*, the masterpiece of Hayyim of Volozhin, the Gaon's preeminent disciple and the founder, in 1803, of the Volozhin yeshiva, the largest and most influential of modern rabbinic academies. Hayyim of Volozhin enjoyed cordial relations with his Hasidic contemporaries, and the anti-Hasidic polemics in his book are contained in an appendix of uncertain provenance. His educational program was aimed less at combatting Hasidism as such than at embodying the ideal of Torah study in an institution, the first of its kind, that would train, in a university-type setting, an elite corps of Talmudists drawn from a broad geographic area and taught by rabbis unencumbered by communal responsibilities.

Hayyim of Volozhin's achievement was to endow Torah study with fantastic metaphysical properties. In his hands, study became the only true form of transcendence available in this corrupt and fallen world. Drawing on passages in the Zohar, which attribute to the Torah a pre-existence to the creation of the universe, and characterize it as the blueprint of all of creation (in an intriguing echo of Islamic discussions of the uncreatedness of the Qu'ran), Hayyim of Volozhin argued that Torah study offers the sole avenue of escape from the metaphysical and earthly complexities of the world, and the possibility of communion with God:

And the reason for this is that the hidden supernal source of the holy Torah is high above all the universes ... all of whose existences are entirely dependent on our preoccupation and study of her ... unlike all the other commandments, including prayer, which, if God forbid we fail to perform, the universe would not revert to the chaos of creation ... while engagement with the holy Torah touches upon the very life and sustenance of the universes ...

In Hayyim of Volozhin's view, study can break the stranglehold of temporality and create an entrepôt for eternity into this world. The prosaic character of much of the Talmudic legal corpus itself makes this transfiguration readily available to one and all. Any Jew who applies himself to the study of the law can sustain all the seen and unseen worlds and find redemption as his eyes meet the page.

Nadler's book ends in the early nineteenth century. As the decades went on, the Hasidim and the Mithnagdim buried many of their differences to join forces against the common enemy of

modernity, which was encroaching on Eastern Europe in its various forms of secularism, socialism, and nationalism. Hasidism became steadily institutionalized and routinized. While it continued to produce some audacious and profound thinkers until the middle of this century, it lost its creativity as a mass movement. For their part, the Mithnagdim steadily excised Kabbalah and most other non-Talmudic studies from the curricula of their expanding network of academies. Aside from the small but influential Mussar movement, which encouraged yeshiva students to engage in radical introspection and strenuous moral reckoning, it showed less and less interest in any religious expression outside the orbit of Talmudic study. Today, the assertive ultra-Orthodox communities of Israel and America are organized around their academies, theologically quiescent and entirely self-contained.

Allan Nadler has performed a great service by bringing the Mithnagdim more to light. The spiritual universe that he has unearthed with erudition, imagination, and care is now more accessible to students of Jewish history and of religion in general. But what are we today to make of this Mithnagdic sensibility, so at odds with all we think of as "religious" or even "spiritual"? What variety of religious experience is this? Indeed, the historical experience of Mithnagdim highlights the inability of current categories of "religion" to capture spiritual traditions that express themselves in terms of study and law.

In looking at Mithnagdic religion, one is struck above all by its austerity. This is a religious life in which ecstasy and enchantment are secondary and suspect, and displaced by a humbled devotion to the work of the mind and the study of the text. There is a powerfully self-denying quality to Mithnagdic religion, in its willful renunciation of the search for transcendence. This sacrificing of one's longings on the altar of sacred study is its own severe faith. It is a religion of lowliness, of submission; a permanent prostration before a divine authority, perfect, infinite, and whole, existing outside of us, which can secure us against our own fallibility and our drift in the world.

This cautious approach toward one's own religious desires, this skepticism about enthusiasm in the name of God, is a powerful and useful corrective to the self-centeredness of much of what we call "spirituality," and a powerful anchor for the ethical dimension of religious life. For the attractions of authority and self-abnegation are only partially

psychological. They are also existential and moral—which is why, in our own time, Emmanuel Levinas's effort to install ethics at the center of philosophy, and Joseph Soloveitchik's eschewal of romantic religion in favor of a moral and intellectual engagement with the world through the law, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz's devastating criticisms of nationalist idolatry, could all draw on Hayyim Volozhin and the traditions of Mithnagdic austerity.

A healthy suspicion of personal enthusiasm is surely a corrective to the cult of self-fulfillment. But can this really be the whole story? The longings for transcendence, for unity of thought and feeling, for connection to the world around us and to the masses of humanity who will never be scholars—surely these longings, too, are ineradicable, and God-given, and parts of our human constitution. A faith that makes no room for them will wither on the vine. For study and service to become worship, surely there must also be joy.

The Mithnagdim themselves were not entirely joyless. Here Nadler scants a crucial element of their life, and makes them seem a little more terrifying than they really were. They most certainly did imbue Torah study with joy, with passion. To set foot in a *beit midrash*, a house of study, with its long tables heaped with books and clusters of students analyzing texts aloud, is to be plunged into an exuberance of sight and sound, a living conversation of past and present. This is study as worship, a thoroughgoing consecration of the life of the mind. In an extraordinary passage, which Nadler mentions but does not quote, Phinehas ben Judah of Polotsk leaves his readers with an idyll of the house of study as the realization of perfect community:

And happy the eye that could see the community of scholars in its proper place, all studying in groups preoccupied with Torah and Talmud ... and among them the elders and wise, and the children of the wealthy who had rejected the vanities of this world and would study with the children of the poor, from whom (the Talmud says) the Torah will emerge. ... The house of study was full of Torah, full of piety, full of humility, with no wandering or sleep or frivolity or idle chatter. It was a sort of Eden, where the righteous would dwell in their glory and enjoy the splendor of the Torah ... and God would listen to them, to hear what they were saying, and He would love them.

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lent crime, deregulated vast industries, eliminated the federal budget deficit, reformed its welfare system, downsized its military, and tackled entitlement growth. Has it done so despite a political system characterized by weak parties and a fractionated government made up of a House, Senate, president, and multiple courts—not to mention 50 states and myriad localities—or because of it? Pundits and academics never tire of bemoaning the corruption, disorder, and argument endemic to our sprawling, contentious system. But, just as our free-wheeling economic system encourages creativity, the great strength of our democracy is the way it allows for, indeed encourages, the emergence of new ideas and new leaders. Would national welfare reform have succeeded without the experimentation carried out in states such as New Jersey and Wisconsin? Ross Perot is an obnoxious arriviste; such a flamboyant character could never rise through the ranks of Japan's disciplined political parties. But, without the scare he gave the Republicans and the Democrats, Washington might not have addressed his followers' biggest concern: the budget deficit.

To be sure, Japan did not create its political system by itself. Its constitution was devised—and its political class anointed—by the American occupiers after World War II. The U.S. was specifically intent on preventing the rise of powerful leaders who might lead Japan back down the dangerous road of nationalism. But, today, both American and Japanese interests would be served by the cultivation of dynamic new political practices, values, and personalities.

Of course, this could be even more difficult than reforming the Japanese economy. Not only does a more open style of democracy go against the grain of Japanese culture, but the Japanese still do not entirely trust themselves to handle a true free market in ideas. One reason is that it could indeed create new space for neo-nationalists, many of whom are dangerously anti-American, or harbor loopy notions about reconstructing a stronger and more aggressive Japanese military. While economic reform will benefit most Japanese, those groups who do suffer could easily fall under the sway of demagogues.

But this is a risk Japan must accept. The longer the government postpones change, the more painful that change will be when it inevitably comes. Japan cannot establish a truly modern economy without simultaneously building a truly modern democracy.

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