

unworthy of their attention just years before. As with the subway system, the crime rate all across the city began to drop precipitously.

As *Turnaround* makes a point of emphasizing, Bratton's achievements were not an unmixed blessing for the man who had hired him. The mayor, obsessed with garnering all the positive press coverage for himself, soon turned on the popular new commissioner, going so far as to circulate rumors that challenged his personal integrity. After 27 consecutive months of falling crime rates, Bratton was pushed out, a victim, by his own account, of political pettiness and egomania.

Bratton's settling of scores must be taken with a grain of salt—he himself has made known his interest in running for mayor. But what cannot be disputed is the breakthrough that he helped to achieve in law enforcement. Until quite recently, the conventional wisdom among New York's politicians, judges, civil libertarians, criminologists, and editorial writers was that high crime rates were inevitable so long as urban neighborhoods were scarred by poverty and racism. At best, the police could only hope to contain a threat that was socially induced and all but immutable. In liberal policy circles, no one believed that crime could actually be rolled back.

What Bratton, Giuliani, and their imitators in other big cities have demonstrated in recent years is that policing is not just an empty exercise. To the contrary, it can make the difference between chaos and livable streets, even in the poorest of neighborhoods. As a practical matter, they have proved that to fight crime you do not send out social workers, you send out the police and energize them to enforce *all* the laws.

First Principles

The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture

by Allan Nadler

Johns Hopkins. 254 pp. \$35.00

Reviewed by
Jay M. Harris

AMONG THE more curious developments in American Jewish life over the past several decades has been a growing fascination, especially among secularized Jews, with Hasidism. Indeed, the black-hatted Hasidim, once considered little more than backward if picturesque remnants of the East European world destroyed by the Holocaust, and virtually indistinguishable from their non-Hasidic but no less ultra-Orthodox coreligionists, are now widely seen as heirs to a priceless—and progressive—tradition of Jewish spirituality. The elements of that spirituality include an attachment to Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism, another phenomenon that today enjoys a remarkable vogue.

No less appealing to present-day sensibilities has been the standard account of Hasidism's emergence in the 18th century. The movement, it is often suggested, really represented a proto-democratic revolution against the highly repressive and rigidly hierarchical Jewish religious society of the time. Sparked by the ecstatic, homely religiosity of the revered teacher known as the Baal Shem Tov (1700-60), Hasidism, it is said, gave voice to the long-suppressed needs of the Jewish masses. No wonder, then, that this new liberating trend aroused fierce resistance among the defenders of the religious status quo, who came to be known simply as Mithnagdim, or opponents.

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As for the Mithnagdim themselves, they have not fared nearly so well either in popular conceptions or at the hands of historians. Invariably cast as reactionary and often moneyed oligarchs, they are allowed their turn on stage just long enough to establish them as petty, narrow-minded, and vindictive advocates of their own political interests and of a soulless legalism.

In this important new book, Allan Nadler finally lets the much-maligned Mithnagdim tell their side of the story.

IN RECONSTRUCTING the "faith of the Mithnagdim," Nadler, the director of research at the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research in New York, introduces us to a remarkable universe of individuals and ideas. He pays due attention not only to the famed Gaon of Vilna (1720-97), the scholarly genius who sat atop the more traditional communities of East European Jewry, but also to a host of lesser figures central to the dissemination of the mithnagdic view. Delving into their many writings, Nadler presents a richly detailed picture of their battle with Hasidism.

To the Mithnagdim, the most troubling innovation of the new movement was its approach to worship. Not only did the Hasidim show a casual attitude toward the prescribed times and forms of devotion, they also elevated prayer over the study of law and Torah, thus inverting the traditional hierarchy of Jewish religious values. Disturbing too was the movement's unabashed celebration of the worldly pleasures of food and drink, which for the Mithnagdim bespoke a dangerous materialism.

More surprising, perhaps, are certain affinities Nadler finds between the two camps. Both, in his reading, were foes of the early Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, a contemporary effort to modernize selected aspects of the Jewish tradition. (On this point, unfortu-

nately, Nadler fails to make a compelling case when it comes to the Mithnagdim, at least at that time.) Moreover, the Mithnagdim, far from being cold, legalistic opponents of mysticism, were themselves often sophisticated practitioners of Kabbalah, objecting primarily to what they viewed as the crude popularization of sacred esoterica practiced by Hasidim.

STILL, THE differences between the two movements ran deep—deeper, Nadler shows, than disputes over particular practices or attitudes, and deeper than is suggested by the usual interpretations of those disputes as being essentially social or political in nature. Indeed, the wider purpose of Nadler's careful exposition is to demonstrate that, at its core, the divide between Hasidim and Mithnagdim really did come down to first principles, to two different ways of conceiving of God's creation and man's place in it.

Nadler describes the Hasidim as "monistic materialists"—believers in the essential unity of body and soul, of this world and the next. From this there followed a profoundly-held optimism: human beings could hope to sanctify their daily existence, to discover the inherent godliness of the material universe, and even to overcome the capacity for evil.

The Mithnagdim, by contrast, began with a very different premise: a "dualistic" vision of man that sharply differentiated between the physical and the spiritual realms. On this deeply pessimistic view, human beings were not only forever tempted to corruption by worldly pleasures, but were also hopelessly distant from any meaningful communion with the divine. The practical result was a restrained, even self-denying, notion of how life was to be lived and God served.

In tracing the roots of Mithnagdism, Nadler makes especially good use of the polemical writings of Phinehas of Polotsk. A close disciple of the Gaon of Vilna, Phine-

has was unusual among the Mithnagdim for making a concerted effort to speak in terms understandable to a popular audience. Through his analysis of Phinehas and a plethora of other unstudied authors, Nadler succeeds in acquainting us with a whole range of mithnagdic thought on religious issues that often had little to do directly with the battle against Hasidism, from attitudes toward asceticism and death to

conceptions of God and His interaction with the world.

IN SHOWING that the mithnagdic perspective is coherent, consistent, and firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, Nadler has performed a real service. Valuable as his work is, however, it is not without problems. Essentially, these come down to a failure at times to heed his own call to appreciate Mithnagdism on its own terms.

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Thus, though he has indeed emancipated himself from the politically-charged morality play of earlier writings on the subject, Nadler has not entirely relinquished the tendency to see Mithnagdism as basically reactive in nature, a congeries of responses to hasidic "provocations." He asserts, for example, that the mithnagdic stress on Torah study should be seen as an "antidote" to the religious optimism of the Hasidim. Yet as he himself makes plain in this book, things were really the other way around.

Intellectual effort was integral to the mithnagdic world view long before the encounter with Hasidism. Only through such concentration, Mithnagdim believed, could an individual emerge unscathed from the day-to-day battle with the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination. This orientation, well established at the time throughout the Jewish world, was something Hasidism rebelled *against*, sparking in turn a fierce reaction on the part of the Mithnagdim.

More is at stake here than a quarrel over a particular point. It is a commonplace among many contemporary historians that the values expressed by conservative movements in any age should be seen primarily as a response to external challenges. On this view, conservatives are in general negaters rather than affirmers, guided more by fear of others than by any well-developed principles of their own.

Untrue in general, this facile proposition assuredly does not apply to the Mithnagdim. Like cultural conservatives in other times and places, they did not develop their core values in order to meet a threat. Rather, these values had long been so ingrained as to be taken for granted; the confrontation with a threat was what forced the Mithnagdim to articulate them.

This is a process that can indeed lead to new emphases and even to new ideologies. But the basic dynamic, it must be emphasized, is a dialectical one, not the linear and

fundamentally ahistorical model projected by historians who reflexively deny conservatism a cultural identity of its own.

Still, this interpretive lapse aside, Nadler's book is a genuine achievement. His pioneering reconstruction of mithnagdic thought marks a turning point in our understanding of a crucial moment in Jewish history. From now on, anyone interested in the development of modern Judaism will have to take into account what he has done.

Mickey & Co.

The Magic Kingdom:
Walt Disney and the
American Way of Life
by Steven Watts

Houghton Mifflin. 526 pp. \$30.00

Reviewed by
Daniel J. Silver

WALT DISNEY may have been immodest, but he was not exaggerating when in the early 1960's he offered an assessment of his place in American culture. "I'm not Disney anymore," he told a young employee.

I used to be Disney, but now Disney is something we've built up in the public mind. . . . It stands for something, and you don't have to explain what it is.

What Disney and his enterprise stood for was, in a much-mocked phrase, "wholesome family entertainment." The man behind that phrase is the subject of this well-researched and thoughtful biography by the historian Steven Watts, which also provides a starting point for thinking about the Disney legacy today.

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WALT DISNEY was born in Chicago in 1901. His father was an itinerant building contractor who incessantly moved his family around the country in a search for work. Adept since childhood at drawing, Disney left home permanently in 1919 to pursue a career as a newspaper cartoonist, and got his first experience with the simple cutout type of animation used for advertising when he joined a commercial art studio in Kansas City. Together with some fellow graphic designers, he then started a small cartoon studio. When the money ran out he left for Los Angeles, where he went into business with his brother Roy. The new Disney Brothers Studio opened in 1923.

After a series of false starts—a lovably antic character named Oswald the Lucky Rabbit caught the attention of a distributor, but then Disney lost the legal rights and key animators defected—the new team struck paydirt when, from a few linked circles on a sheet of paper, Mickey Mouse was born. Introduced at the end of the 20's, Mickey did not take long to achieve enormous popularity with movie audiences. By the late 30's, he had become an international icon.

Mickey Mouse exemplified the Disney secret for success: cartoon features based on identifiable personalities rather than, as was the standard of the day, mere collections of gags. Exhibitors clamored for more, and were soon rewarded in the form of Donald Duck and Goofy the feckless hound. But the restlessly ambitious Disney, dissatisfied with churning out short features, soon turned toward the risky business of full-length animated films. In the end, and despite the cautionary protests of his business-manager brother, his decision proved correct. Walt Disney's lasting reputation was built not by Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck but by such movies as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940),