

THE GAON OF VILNA AND THE RABBINIC DOCTRINE
OF HISTORICAL DECLINE

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The Mitnaggedim and the Doctrine of Decline

The extravagant claims which Hasidism makes with regard to the supremacy of its leaders loom large among the many grievances of the Mitnaggedim. The unprecedented wisdom, supernatural powers and meta-rabbinic functions attributed to all the hasidic masters, beginning with Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, far exceeded any claims made for Jewish religious leaders since the dawn of the rabbinic era in the first century. The leaders of Hasidism regularly claimed prophetic and priestly powers, both of which had long been assumed to have ended with the canonization of Scripture and the destruction of the second Temple. In making these claims, they seemed also to be in clear violation of the rabbinic doctrine of the "decline of the generations" (*yeridat ha-dorot*).¹ In an article devoted to this very issue, the late Louis Jacobs accurately observed that, "Repeatedly one finds in the Mitnaggedic polemics the taunt that the Hasidim make claims for their zaddikim quite impossible in 'our orphaned generation.'"²

A heightened awareness that they were living through impoverished times does indeed permeate the writings of several generations of Mitnaggedim. The students of the Gaon of Vilna repeatedly bemoaned the depth to which their own generation had sunk, and as I have argued elsewhere, a strong

- 1 The various sources for the rabbinic idea of generational decline are cited and analyzed in Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on the "Decline of the Generations" and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority* (Albany, 1996), 7–26.
- 2 Louis Jacobs, "Hasidism and the Dogma of the Decline of the Generations," in Ada Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised* (London, 1997), 210.

sense of despondency about the consequences of this decline underscored their pessimistic world-view, particularly their stark theology of human limitation.³ To illustrate this sense of historical decline, we call attention to just three prominent examples, hitherto unexamined by critical scholarship, from among many others found throughout the writings of the descendants and disciples of the Gaon of Vilna.

(i) In the introduction to his Vilna, 1802 edition of *Sefer Aggadat Bereshit* – a complex collage of early, mostly obscure rabbinical texts including some long-forgotten and largely unpublished materials, the Gaon's son, R. Abraham b. Elijah, bemoans at length the decline of rabbinical knowledge that has resulted in the loss of ancient texts over the course of many centuries. At the same time, he boldly proclaims that his textual reclamation and reconstruction of such texts is intended to counteract the process of degeneration.⁴

(ii) While the idea of generational decline is most commonly associated with the degradation of human wisdom, especially the falling standards of Torah scholarship, one occasionally finds in the writings of the Mitnaggedim a far more pervasive understanding of this process, whereby it alters the nature of the relationship between God and His universe. Thus, Samuel b. Abraham Maltsan of Slutsk, a devotee of the Gaon of Vilna, in his treatise *Sefer ha-Emunah ve-ha-Hashgahah* – a work based largely on the writings of the Gaon,⁵ argues that the relentless decline of humanity has

3 Mitnaggedic pessimism about the spiritual limitations of contemporary man is the central theme of my *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore, 1997).

4 The history of *Aggadat Bereshit* is discussed at length by Salomon Buber in the introduction to his critical edition of the work (Kraków, 1903). Buber's footnotes to R. Abraham b. Elijah's introduction also provide a fascinating history of the "censorship" of this document in several of its reprints in Galicia (Zolkiew, 1804 and Warsaw, 1877) by hasidic editors who deliberately concealed the identity of its author.

5 Samuel b. Abraham Maltsan, *Sefer ha-Emunah ve-ha-Hashgahah* (Koenigsburg, 1864). In the title page, the author declares that the ideas developed in his work have been "planted alongside the fountain that emerges from the Holy of Holies [namely], the teachings of our great rabbi – our brilliant source of strength and spirit of our nostrils, the light of Israel and its sanctity, master and teacher to the whole household of Israel, our master Elijah, Hasid of Vilna."

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the effect of limiting Divine Providence.⁶ In a striking example of what might today be characterized as an inverted “process theology” (downward-turning and rather gloomy), Maltsan argues that the decline of the generations has forced God to refrain from performing overt miracles, this being just one of the many ways in which divine interaction with the world has been curtailed as a response to human degeneration.⁷

(iii) This dim view of the leaders of the present generation in contrast with the rabbinic giants of the past, which was used by the Mitnaggedim to discredit the hasidic masters, survived well into the nineteenth century in the writings of many of the Musar movement’s rabbis, where it served the additional purpose of discrediting the optimism associated with the concept of historical progress, adopted by the proponents of Haskalah.⁸ A striking example of the endurance and centrality of the doctrine of generational decline is to be found in the influential work, *Sefer Me’oz ha-Dat*, by the Musar master, Rabbi Joshua Heller. It includes a highly polemical chapter devoted to the irreversibility of generational decline.⁹ Heller – a staunch Mitnagged, and among the leading disciples of Israel Salanter – seems to be responding to the optimism inherent in both the hasidic view of the supremacy of the tsaddikim and the maskilic embrace of the European Enlightenment’s doctrine of historical progress.

While the attribution of supernatural powers to the hasidic leaders, which

6 This is the central argument of the first half of this work. See in particular the long section lamenting the extent of generational decline, *ibid.*, 10a–12b.

7 *Ibid.*, 24a–25b.

8 On the idea of historical progress generally, see Robert A. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York, 1980). The closest that the classical rabbinic tradition ever came to incorporating the idea of progress was the adoption of the medieval epigram comparing latter generations to “dwarfs,” who are able to see farther than their predecessors – the “giants” on whose shoulders they stand. See on this, Sid Leiman, “Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants,” *Tradition* 27/3 (1993): 90–9. For an exhaustive if unconventionally conceived history of this epigram, including numerous citations from the medieval Hebrew sources, see Robert Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (New York, 1965). See also, Abraham Melamed, *On the Shoulders of Giants: The Debate between Moderns and Ancients in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan, 2003).

9 Joshua Heller, *Sefer Me’oz ha-Dat* (Warsaw, 1882), chapter 4, 44–50.

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elicited angry mitnaggedic responses, was certainly unprecedented, it was paralleled by the equally extravagant claims of unique scholarly stature and intellectual prowess, made in the hagiographical literature devoted to the Gaon of Vilna – leader of the organized rabbinic opposition to Hasidism. The present paper highlights these mitnaggedic claims, and proceeds to show how they mirror and yet remain significantly distinct from the hasidic claims about the Besht and his disciples. Both sets of claims are examined in reference to the rabbinic doctrine of decline.

The Gaon of Vilna: Transcending the Generations

The hagiographical writings about the Gaon of Vilna portray him not as a man of his time but rather as a reincarnated soul from a much earlier era, who was responsible – in an “orphaned generation” – for replenishing Israel’s depleted spiritual resources. Not only do the Gaon’s disciples and admirers repeatedly compare him to the *rishonim*, but some of them go so far as to suggest that there had not been a rabbi of his stature since the generation of the *Savora'im* – the sixth century sages credited with the final redaction of the Talmud. Thus, R. Aryeh Leib Zunz of Polotsk writes:

There had not arisen anyone like him since the days of the ancient rabbis, the *Savora'im*, may they rest in Eden, such that the entire Torah, both exoteric and esoteric, is spread like a set table before him.¹⁰

As Immanuel Etkes astutely observes, the Gaon’s wisdom and scholarship were often described by his disciples and descendants in supernatural, quasi-messianic terms:

From the estimation that a Sage on the level of the Vilna Gaon had not appeared in our world for generations, it is but a small step to state that his appearance in that generation was a matter of divine grace ... [Even] Rabbi Menashe [of Ilia], a rationalist scholar influenced by the Haskalah, describes the Gaon as someone who paved the way for the advent of the Messiah...¹¹

10 *She'elot u-Teshuvot Meshivat Nefesh* (Warsaw, 1849), part one, §16.

11 Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and his Image* (Berkeley, 2002), 32–3.

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Such claims are found repeatedly in the panegyrics dedicated to the Gaon by his devotees, where the assertion is often made that his knowledge far exceeded that of earlier authorities stretching back more than a millennium. On the most pragmatic level, this claim could be used to account for the remarkable independence of mind reflected in the Gaon's frequent rejection or emendation of long-established ritual and liturgical traditions.¹²

Not only was the Gaon's mastery and understanding of the entire rabbinic corpus unprecedented, but his ability to correct long-neglected and corrupted texts enabled Jews to understand such ancient sources as could not be explained by any of the medieval authorities. Clarification of difficult classical rabbinic sources, most notably the Talmud and the *Shulhan Arukh*, by means of textual emendations based on critical analysis and deduction, and without resort to manuscript variants, was something that no rabbinical authority had dared to do for many centuries. When practiced by modern scholars today, such textual criticism is often condemned by the Gaon's spiritual heirs in the Lithuanian yeshivot as little short of heresy. Nevertheless, the Gaon's stature invested him with the power to emend hundreds of classical texts, replacing long-established Talmudic passages with his own alternative readings, and this actually earned him the effusive praise of his followers. Typical of such praise is the following tribute by Menahem Mendel of Shklov, referring to the Gaon's commentaries on minor Tannaitic tractates such as *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, whose study had been neglected for many centuries since they contained many corrupt and consequently incomprehensible passages:

I have decided to accommodate the wishes of many good and religious people, who have implored me to publish these small tractates which have been closed up, sealed and inaccessible since the days of the redaction of

12 Most of the Gaon's idiosyncratic and highly autonomous customs, often defying long-established common practice, were compiled by Isaachar Baer b. Tanhum of Vilna in his code-like anthology, *Sefer Ma'aseh Rav ha-Shalem: Minhegey ha-GRA* (Jerusalem, 1987 [reprint]). The author's introduction to this work is of particular interest. Betraying his judicious conservatism, it does not recommend widespread implementation of the Gaon's personal customs.

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the Talmud. No one can even begin to study them, as they have become corrupted, filled with thorns and covered with thistles, so that we are unable to approach them or to ... illuminate their holy words ... Even the greatest of the [medieval] commentators were forced to abandon their explication, until there came along our great Rabbi, namely the one true Gaon, who had completely and perfectly memorized all of the sixty Mishnaic tractates ... Only he was able to correct these [small tractates] and to remove from them the shadows cast by numerous errors; indeed, he brought all of them from darkness to light.¹³

While this bold claim by Menahem Mendel of Shklov may appear to be confined to the clarification of minor, relatively obscure Tannaitic treatises, one repeatedly finds in the mitnaggedic sources the same claim – without reference to particular texts – about the extent to which the Gaon’s textual authority transcended more than a millennium of rabbinical scholarship, and was unmatched by any of the sages since the era of the Geonim.

Etkes notes that in daring to engage in textual criticism rooted in conjectural emendations of classical works, including both Talmud and Zohar, the Gaon broke with the text-critical reticence and conservatism that marked the work of the *aharonim* – the post-sixteenth-century rabbinic scholars who followed the codification of the *Shulhan Arukh*:

However, unlike his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, the Vilna Gaon did refer to the problem of textual criticism. In this sense he acted as though he were one of the *rishonim*.¹⁴

This perception of the Gaon as a man whose unique stature enabled him to defy the principle of generational decline endured well beyond his lifetime. Tsvi Hirsh Farber, a traditional, mid-twentieth-century rabbinical scholar and student of the Gaon’s work, in an article devoted to the Gaon’s literary

13 Introduction by Menahem-Mendel of Shklov to *Sefer Mirkevet Eliyahu* (New Jersey, 1987 [re-issue of the Shklov 1804 edition of *Be’ur ha-GRA al Massekhet Avot, Avot de-Rabbi Natan, u-Massakhtot Ketanot*]), III–IV.

14 See Etkes, op. cit., 16.

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legacy, relates that during a youthful encounter with the renowned Kabbalist and nephew of Israel Salanter, R. Aryeh Leyb Lipkin, he queried what he had felt to be exaggerated claims about the Gaon's extraordinary learning. The rather tart response he received cast the Gaon as a virtual "Renaissance man" of unprecedented breadth and depth of knowledge:

... I was immature enough to dare ask him why our master, the GRA, was being praised to the extent even of claiming that he was greater than those who had lived many generations before him; that since the days of the Tanna'im, Amora'im, Savora'im and Geonim, no one like him had ever appeared; and that exalted secrets had been revealed to him, as to the heavenly angels. He answered with a jaundiced look: "Know, my son, that in every generation there are great scholars, each a master of his field of expertise but not of any other ... But to rise to the level of being the greatest of the generation in all disciplines, to be supreme in rabbinics, supreme in Kabbalah, supreme in piety, in holiness and purity, supreme in the most sublime ethical attributes, and supreme in each and every field of knowledge, including both the humanities and the sciences – astronomy, grammar, architecture and more and more; such remarkable excellence could not be achieved even by the greatest men of earlier generations. Only our great rabbi [the Gaon] has merited this."¹⁵

In his homiletic comment on the biblical epigram, "Do not say how the earlier days were better than these days, for you then speak unwisely" (Ecclesiastes 7:10), which runs counter to the doctrine of decline, another prominent mitnaggedic master, R. Menahem Tsvi Taksen, cites the example of the Gaon:

This is intended to inform us that even though the former generations were greater than the latter, nevertheless it can occur even in the latter generations

15 Zvi Hirsh Farber, "He'arot u-Millu'im le-Korot Sifrey Rabbenu ha-GRA, z"l," *Talpiyot* 5/1–2 (1961): 359. A central theme, and the apparent objective of this article, is to establish the supremacy of the Gaon over all the other rabbis of his generation. In addition, Farber cites, though often without proper references, a wide array of statements to the effect that the Gaon's wisdom and scholarship transcended those of previous generations as well.

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that, on occasion and as an emergency measure, God will set up a man as great as those of former generations, in fact far greater than those of many generations preceding his. Such is the case in our own generation, for when God observed the poverty of his nation and saw how weakened the Torah had become, He provided for us a holy angel from heaven – the GRA, of blessed memory, who through the light of his wisdom restored the crown of Torah to its ancient glory. Furthermore, he was just like one of the *rishonim*.¹⁶

The mitnaggedic Rabbi of Slonim, Joseph Reisin, perhaps best summarized this perception of the Gaon when he quipped about his authority that “We must always rely on the last of the *rishonim* and the first among the *aharonim*.”¹⁷

The notion that the Gaon was a man far “behind his time” (in the sense in which the moderns, committed to the idea of progress, would describe a remarkably original thinker as being “ahead of his time”), persists well into the twentieth century. The preeminent rabbinic authority of the postwar Lithuanian-mitnaggedic community in Israel, Abraham Isaiah Karelitz (the *Hazon Ish*), was particularly effusive in his praise of the Gaon as one who had miraculously transcended the decline of the generations:

We relate the Gaon to the following line: Moses, Ezra the Scribe, our holy Rabbi (Judah ha-Nasi), Rav Ashi, Maimonides and then the Gaon, through whom the Torah was revealed as through a Holy man designated for this purpose. He uncovered much that had been covered with darkness until he came along. He is thus considered to be one of the *rishonim* ... one informed directly by the Holy Spirit, whose profound knowledge of the entire Torah cannot be accounted for rationally.¹⁸

This statement, coming as it does from a rabbinical scholar widely viewed as the leading ideological forebear of the most extreme variety of ultra-

16 *Sefer Orah Yesharim* (Pietrekow, 1909), 174.

17 *She'elot u-Teshuvot She'erit Yosef* (Warsaw, 1913), 26.

18 Abraham Isaiah Karelitz, *Sefer Kovets Iggarot* (Bney Brak, 1989), part I, letter 32, 71.

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Orthodoxy in contemporary Israel, is all the more remarkable in that it violates the rabbinic principle whereby prophecy and all other forms of supernatural revelation carry no authority whatsoever in matters of Jewish law. This is captured in Talmudic epigrams such as “we pay no heed to heavenly voices,” “the Torah is not in heaven,” and “the sage is greater than the prophet.”¹⁹

The most extreme statements of the Gaon’s unique status as one who has transcended the decline of the generations are to be found in the writings of his most illustrious disciple, R. Hayyim of Volozhin. In his introduction to the Gaon’s commentary on assorted rabbinic homilies, R. Hayyim depicts the appearance of the Gaon at a particularly dark moment in history, following many generations of spiritual and scholarly decline, as nothing short of a miraculous divine intervention. Clear affirmations of generational decline are juxtaposed with effusive praise for the Gaon as one who has alone managed to defy it:

From the day that the Talmud was completed and sealed, all original insights – those that might have enabled us to see, to understand, and to teach – have ceased, and we have become like blind men groping in the dark for knowledge of the Talmud ... unable to chart a clear path to understanding the Mishnah, the Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud. Thus we must thank God’s glorious and blessed name, for having witnessed with our own eyes that His great mercies have not ceased, and that He has not revoked His eternal covenant with us. For even as we sit in the darkness of this last and most lowly of generations, God has enlightened us by sending us a holy angel from heaven, that rabbi who is the emissary of the Lord of Hosts, our great teacher, whose righteousness, knowledge of Torah and insight into it encompass the entire world, from one end to the other, and who is honored by his holiness and Torah knowledge – the Gaon, Rabbi Elijah Hasid of Vilna, may his resting place be in Eden. Who would have

19 Among the many discussions of the inadmissibility of prophetic revelation in the context of rabbinic scholarship and adjudication, the fullest and most systematic is to be found in Tsvi Hirsh Chajes’ booklet, *Darkhey ha-Hora’ah* (Lvov, 1845).

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believed ... in a generation as pitiable and as degenerate as ours ... that such a new and brightly shining light would be revealed?²⁰

But it was not merely in relation to the “revealed Torah” that the Gaon was celebrated as having defied the decline of the generations. In his lengthy hagiographical introduction to the Gaon’s commentary on the *Sifra di-Tseni’uta*, R. Hayyim elaborates on the Gaon’s unprecedented mastery of the whole of the “hidden Torah” – the esoteric mystical literature of Judaism, as well as his remarkable personal mystical experiences. In this text one finds by far the most extensive treatment of the Gaon’s relationship with the earlier masters of both Rabbinics and the Kabbalah. R. Hayyim offers an explanation of the significance of *Sifra di-Tseni’uta* – a notoriously obscure and long-neglected work of Kabbalah incorporated in the *Zohar*.²¹ He asserts that the Gaon had made this largely forgotten tract accessible again by clarifying a host of imprecise and, according to the Gaon, faulty passages, which marred this classic work, whose relationship to the *Zohar* and to later works of Jewish mysticism he analogizes to the relationship of the Mishnah to the Gemara and to later works of rabbinic law. *Sifra di-Tseni’uta* is, according to this schema, a highly condensed foundational work which lies at the core of the entire kabbalistic tradition. The Gaon’s enterprise of correcting what he viewed as flawed rabbinic texts, by offering his own original and often bold alternative readings, clearly extended – according to R. Hayyim – to the classical texts of the Kabbalah, where the Gaon’s mastery was as great as his unmatched erudition in Rabbinics.

Before beginning to extol the Gaon’s knowledge of Kabbalah and the degree to which he succeeded in restoring the correct text of the *Sifra di-Tseni’uta*, R. Hayyim typically laments the degeneracy and ignorance of

20 Hayyim of Volozhin, Introduction to *Perush ‘al Kammah Aggadot* (Vilna, 1800), 3–4 of un-paginated front material.

21 On the *Sifra di-Tseni’uta* generally, see Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany, 1993), 54–67; Pinhas Giller, *Reading the Zohar* (Oxford, 2001), esp. 95–9. On 159–69 Giller provides an English translation of key passages from the work.

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his own generation. His effusive and often repetitive praises for the Gaon's character and intellect, while often using stock rabbinic phraseology, become truly remarkable when he suggests that the Gaon's mastery of Kabbalah exceeded not only that of his immediate predecessors but also the insights of all the post-Talmudic masters including, in certain respects, even Isaac Luria – the “holy ARI”:

Behold the extent to which, in the present generation, suffering has become oppressive, sustenance has dwindled, and the people of God find themselves reduced to the lowest level ever, may the Merciful One have mercy ... Wisdom is not to be found anywhere, certainly not in us, who are drunk – and not from wine, confused and bewildered as we grope like blind men to grasp the holy words of the Sages, whose meaning totally eludes us ... But God in his mercy, and in keeping with His promise that the Torah will never be forgotten from amongst Israel, has sent us a holy angel, a man possessed of the spirit of God, our great rabbi and Gaon, the light of the world, whose holy Torah and righteousness have been proclaimed from one end of the earth to the other, our master and teacher, the saintly and holy man of Vilna, from whom no secrets ... have been withheld, who enlightened us with his holy writings on both the exoteric and the esoteric tradition. He exposed to the light of day the most deeply buried wisdom and its secrets. So, too, he has done with this awesome and holy book ... the *Sifra di-Tseni'uta*, of which only a few secrets had been singled out by the authors of the *Zohar*. For the light of this book was almost entirely concealed since the time when it was used by some of the greatest and most holy of the ancient rabbis ... This holy book has been like a hidden Torah, long concealed from Israel. Besides, who could understand it, as so many mistakes have occurred in the printed editions? The best we have are some interpretations scattered in the writings of the ARI. Therefore, how marvelous is this day, now that we have finally merited this buried treasure, thanks to this remarkable, wondrous and awesome commentary ... by that saint and holy man, our great rabbi Elijah, who has managed to explain it thoroughly, in great depth and breadth, and who has ordered the text in an excellent fashion, by correcting it and removing the shadow of its numerous corrupt and confused

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earlier versions ... And he [the Gaon] himself testified that the ARI had left him much room for improvements.²²

R. Hayyim continues with a somewhat rambling overview of the Kabbalah's transmission history. His central thesis is that the steady decline of wisdom over the course of many generations is interrupted by rare and miraculous appearances of great kabbalistic masters, such as Luria and the Gaon, who were sent by God, several centuries apart, to "save the generation" by restoring knowledge of Kabbalah. Accordingly, after Luria's death, none of his students save Hayyim Vital could understand his system properly. Kabbalistic knowledge went into an immediate and unremitting decline, until the appearance of the Gaon some two centuries later:

On account of our many transgressions, the keen eye required for any investigation of the writings of earlier authorities, including the ARI, of blessed memory, in order to trace them to their sources in the Zohar, the Idrot and the Tikkunim, has been dulled. For even Luria's own students could not make sense of his words ... except for Hayyim Vital, as Luria himself had testified. Consequently, no one dared enter deeply into the Holy of Holies ... For the times were impoverished and the crops of the field diminished, and no one among us knew anything, until God, may His name be blessed, manifested His compassion for the sake of His righteousness and in order to raise and glorify His word and to show us wonders by means of His Torah. Behold, from the clouds there descended a man, to whom great praise is due. This great man was unique, for there had not been anyone like him for many generations before him. Onto him did God bestow a heart that understands and eyes that see, and to him were the paths and thoroughfares of both the revealed and the hidden Torahs made clear, and an abundance of discernment was granted unto him; this was none other than our pious and hallowed, great and holy Gaon ... It is he who in his writings has tidied up, clarified and illuminated for us the holy path that had not been traversed by anyone for many generations ... And he sifted fine flour for us, that he cleansed from the chaff of earlier authorities, and he

22 Hayyim of Volozhin, Introduction to *Sifra di-Tseni'uta* (Vilna–Grodno, 1820), II.

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achieved many other great things, particularly in showing us His great fire through this commentary on the *Sifra di-Tseni'uta*. Now all this was brought about by God, who demonstrated to us that even when we are in enemy territory, as we are today, and even at the very last and lowest of all levels, Lord have mercy, God is still a light unto us, and He revives us with shining dew drops that he causes to fall from the secret wisdom, for God will not abandon his people, for His name's sake.²³

R. Hayyim goes on to discuss the nature of the relationship between the writings and mystical practices of earlier Kabbalists, especially Isaac Luria, and the commentaries of the Gaon on such kabbalistic classics as the Zohar and the *Sifra di-Tseni'uta*. Etkes has dealt extensively with the polemical aspect of this discussion, insofar as it was intended at least in part to refute the Hasidim's accusation that the Gaon neither respected Luria's authority nor the sanctity of his writings.²⁴

Reconciling Claims about the Gaon with the Doctrine of Decline

The obvious question that presents itself is how to reconcile these tributes with the rabbinic doctrine of decline. How are we to understand the conjunction, in the same texts, of claims to the effect that the Gaon towered not only over the many generations that elapsed since the time of the *rishonim* but also over the thirteen centuries since the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, with dramatic condemnations of his own generation for its degeneracy? As it happens, this problem is addressed directly by Hayyim of Volozhin's nephew, R. Abraham Simcha of Amchislov. According to R. Abraham Simcha, there is, in fact, no contradiction between the belief in the steady decline of the generations and the appearance, even in the darkest

23 Ibid., III.

24 Etkes, op. cit., 23–33. See also Nadler, *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 36–9. For the text of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady's claim that the Gaon did not respect Luria's teachings, see Mordechai Wilensky, *Hasidim u-Mitnaggedim* (Jerusalem, 1970), vol. 2, 200–1.

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times and for the most degraded generation, of exceptional individuals whose stature eclipses the sages of previous eras. In the introduction to an edition of *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* that includes his commentary, culled from the writings of the Gaon, R. Abraham Simcha explains the appearance of the Gaon as following on centuries of unremitting intellectual and spiritual degradation. At the heart of this lies the casuistic method of Talmudic study known as *pilpul*, which R. Abraham Simcha deplures, regarding it as symptomatic of generational decline. He connects the advancements wrought by the Gaon – his unmatched erudition in Talmudic and kabbalistic literature, and his ability to correct a host of corrupt texts – to his rejection of *pilpul* in favor of the ratio-critical method that was to become the standard of Talmudic study in the Lithuanian yeshivot:

Of course, on account of our many transgressions, the generations generally degenerate and descend ... so that it is not possible for the more recent authorities to be like the earlier ones ... Now, this degeneration has reached the point of Satan arriving and confusing many students, so that since the time of that acute scholar, Rabbi Jacob Falk, who lived in the sixteenth century, and who was proficient in Torah and *pilpul*, the fundamental principles – the proper method and order of Torah study – have been forgotten ... Thus it was that for many days ... indeed, for more than two centuries, the world became entirely bereft of the proper and straightforward methods of Torah study, with the exception of a few exceptional scholars, of whom some had nevertheless become attached to this convoluted method [of *pilpul*] ... Until all of a sudden, God shined a new light upon us – that great and awesome Gaon and saint, the light of Israel and its holiness, whose scholarship and sanctity have been proclaimed from one end of the world to the other, our great master and teacher, Elijah of Vilna, may his soul rest in Eden.²⁵

R. Abraham Simcha clearly viewed the Gaon's appearance as a sudden and charitable act of divine Providence, whose purpose and effect were to reverse the lamentable decline of Torah learning over the course of two

25 *Sefer Midrash Ruth he-Hadash ha-Nikra Midrash Ne'elam* (Jerusalem, 1996), 8–9.

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centuries. He goes on to describe, with great awe and exuberance, the path-breaking method of rational-critical Torah study initiated by the Gaon and its revolutionary effects on the state of Torah scholarship. R. Abraham Simcha was very clearly aware of the apparent contradiction between his depiction of constant generational decline and the dramatic rise of rabbinic learning attributed to the Gaon and his method of Torah study:

Although I wrote above that the generations degenerate and descend, and that so, too, the hearts of men become smaller, as the Sages have written (Eruvin 53), nevertheless, it is not inconceivable that our great rabbi was a vast treasure of a type that has not been revealed since the generations of the Savora'im and the Geonim. He was a man who had everything. For we have already learned from our holy master, the ARI of blessed memory, that this [decline] refers only to the generations in general, so that it is still possible for a unique individual (*yahid ba-dor*), even in the very lowest generation, to be endowed with a soul that is greatly elevated, incomparably higher than any in previous generations. Such a person is sent to correct his own generation as well as the generations of the future. For God will not abandon His people while He witnesses their degeneration.²⁶

Thus R. Abraham Simcha establishes that the miraculous appearance of the extraordinary individual in no way mitigates the general principle of historical decline. Such an individual simply constitutes the exception that proves the rule.

Hasidic Parallels

The notion that a remarkable individual may appear miraculously in an otherwise “orphaned generation” has some echoes in hasidic literature, where it is focused on the personality of the Besht. However, in contrast to the mitnaggedic depiction of the GRA as having alone transcended the decline of the generations, the influence of the Besht is believed to have extended to subsequent generations of hasidic leaders and their followers.

²⁶ Ibid., 9–10.

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Consequently, from the time of the Besht on, all are believed to be in the process of continuous elevation, effectively reversing the course of generational decline. For example, the great anthologist of hasidic teachings and tales, Yisrael Berger of Bucharest,²⁷ explicitly addresses the doctrine of generational decline in terms that are reminiscent of R. Abraham Simcha's statement regarding the Gaon's superiority to earlier generations. Given the Talmudic dictum that "if the earlier scholars were like angels, we are like humans, and if they are like humans, we are like donkeys" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 112b), how is it possible, he asks, to make far more extravagant claims for the stature of recent hasidic masters than for that of all the rabbinical Sages of the past? To this rhetorical question Berger offers four answers: (1) The Talmudic adage does not represent a universally held view but rather it reflects the exceptional modesty of its authors, Abba bar Zamina and his sources, Ze'ira and Mani, who "said it only in reference to themselves, and perhaps it is only on account of their great modesty that they uttered such a thing, as is the way of all holy men."²⁸ (2) The principle of generational decline applies in general but does not preclude the appearance of exceptional individuals in each generation, who may surpass even the greatest achievements of earlier generations. (3) Citing a striking statement from the kabbalistic classic, *Berit Menuhah*, and alluding to a host of hasidic masters who relied on it, Berger rejects entirely the notion of constant generational decline, in favor of an almost Hegelian notion of dialectical progress, whereby each third generation represents a substantive step forward in relation to the previous two. (4) The tsaddikim whose wisdom and spiritual powers exceed those achieved by previous generations are, in fact, reincarnated souls of the greatest Sages of the past. Far from defying the principle of generational decline, they provide further proof of the superiority of the ancients, who are now miraculously brought back to life. It is noteworthy that only the second of these four answers is to be

27 Author of the four-volume anthology, *Zekhut Yisra'el*. On Berger and his books, see G. Nigal, *Ha-Sipporet ha-Hasidit* (Jerusalem, 1981), 47.

28 Yisrael Berger, "Petikhta Rabba" to *Sefer Zekhut Yisra'el ha-Nikra Eser Orot* (Jerusalem, 2001), vol. 2, 12.

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found in the mitnagedic discussions of the Gaon's unparalleled achievement.²⁹

A much closer parallel to Hayyim of Volozhin's depiction of the Gaon and the transmission of the Kabbalah in his introduction to the Gaon's commentary on the *Sifra di-Tseni'uta*, is to be found in the lengthy programmatic introduction by R. Gershon Henoch Leiner of Radzyn to his father's commentary on the Torah, *Sefer Beyt Ya'akov*.³⁰ Like R. Hayyim, R. Gershon Henokh begins by endorsing the traditional idea of generational decline, incorporating it in his history of the transmission of the Kabbalah. Again like R. Hayyim, he lists a handful of providential, near-messianic personalities, whose unprecedented clarity of insight into the esoteric doctrines of the Kabbalah had disrupted or even reversed the process of decline. Both R. Hayyim and R. Gershon Henokh refer to Simeon bar Yohai and Isaac Luria as instances of this reversal. Where they part company is in their inclusion of the Gaon and the Besht respectively among the individuals who defied history by healing their generation from the consequences of historical decline. Moreover, while according to Hayyim of Volozhin, the Gaon transmitted his astonishing knowledge of Kabbalah via textual emendations of esoteric texts and epigrammatic commentaries on them, which remained impenetrable to all but the most advanced scholars who could study his work in depth, for R. Gershon Henoch, the Besht's greatest achievement was to have clarified the secrets of Kabbalah – obscured since the days of Luria – in such a manner as to render them accessible even to the masses, including those who had no access to the relevant textual sources:

Behold how, thanks to the mercies of God, who has raised up, for each generation according to its needs, wise men and seekers of God, to whom

29 Ibid., 3–19. Cf. Louis Jacobs' summary of Berger's discussion, in his "Hasidism and the Dogma of the Decline of the Generations," 212–13.

30 *Sefer Beyt Ya'akov* (Warsaw, 1890), 1a–11b. This long two-part introduction, "*Ha-Hakdamah ve-ha-Petihah*," was subsequently published by the author's son, Yeruham Leiner, as a separate volume: *Sefer ha-Hakdamah ve-ha-Petihah* (New York, 1946). On R. Gershon Henoch and his doctrines generally, see Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism* (Madison, WI, 2003).

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He threw open the gates of Torah ... He has also sent us a redeemer, the pride of Israel and its holiness, namely, our master and teacher who is worthy of his name – Rabbi Israel, Master of the Good Name, of blessed memory, who opened the gates of wisdom, discernment and knowledge. He began to investigate the whole of God's Torah and prepared himself to fathom and explicate the most profound secrets of its wisdom in such a way as to enable the human intellect to grasp and understand it. In those days, he also explained to the people – so that they would understand and instruct accordingly – that all the words of the Torah had been given to the whole of Israel, with the intent of making each and every soul from among the people of Israel intimately acquainted with them, for the Torah was not given to the angelic hosts but rather to the seed of Jacob whom He chose. Not a single aspect of Torah should be beyond the understanding of every Israelite, each in accordance with his own intellectual ability and grasp, so that even in our lowly generation of intellectually limited souls, God has enlightened us with the words of an instructor [i.e. the Besht], who has taught us and enabled us to comprehend even the deepest secrets of the Torah at the highest level; for he opened for us the inner gateway to God, which had been closed long before his days; he opened it to the entire congregation of Jacob, for after all, the Torah, which is not in heaven, was given to all of them as their inheritance, so that every individual who searches God with a perfect heart can find in his words a clear path ... Since then, the gates to the Garden of God have remained open...³¹

Both R. Hayyim and R. Gershon Henokh view their respective masters as exceptional, miraculous, even quasi-messianic figures, who manage to reverse the long process of generational decline. However, whereas for R. Hayyim, the Gaon's scholarship benefited only a small elite of scholars equipped to penetrate his cryptic commentaries on both the rabbinical classics and the esoteric works of Kabbalah, for R. Gershon Henokh, the achievements of the Besht and, to an even greater extent, of his own grandfather – Mordecai Joseph of Izbica, had the very opposite purpose and

31 *Ibid.*, 8a–b.

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effect. Accordingly, a central theme that runs through his introduction to his father's work is his insistence upon a populist redefinition of *nistar* – that esoteric aspect of Torah, which he effectively eliminates by denying its esoteric nature.

The attempt to reconcile the doctrine of decline with the most outlandish claims of superiority to prior generations appears time and again in the writings of the Izbica/Radzyn tsaddikim, and in the works of a handful of their hasidic associates and followers. Zadok of Lublin, who presents a quasi-modern, radical theory of historical progress – dialectical albeit couched in mystical terminology – can serve as an example,³² as can a bizarre tale, which ends on an unwittingly satirical note, about R. Gershon Henokh's younger brother, Abraham Joshua Heschel of Chelmno:

Once the opponents of Hasidism asked him [R. Abraham Joshua Heschel] if he believed in the miracles of the Zaddikim as recounted in the tales of the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples, where it is told how they were able, by virtue of their holiness and prayers, to perform wonders beyond the laws of nature. He responded that he did indeed believe with perfect faith that their power was as great. Indeed, he claimed that in them [the Zaddikim] was fulfilled the verse: "Thou shall decree a thing and it shall be established for Thee" (Job 22:28). But the Mitnaggedim persisted: "Do we not find it written: (2 Kings 8): 'And the king spoke to Gehazi, the lad of the man of God, and said: tell me all the wonders that Elisha has performed, for it was he who revived the Shunamite woman.' The scriptures then go on to extol the greatness of Elisha. Now, do you actually mean to tell us that the Besht was able to perform miracles as did Elisha?" And he [R. Abraham Joshua] answered them in the following manner: "One thing is certain: that we Jews have always insisted, as did the Sages, that 'if the earlier ones are as angels,

32 On R. Zadok's theory of "progressive revelation" that seems to run counter to the doctrine of decline, see Alan Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok of Lublin* (New York, 2002), 334–61. See also, Yaakov Elman, "Reb Zadok Hakohen of Lublin on Prophecy in the Halakhic Process," in B.S. Jackson (ed.), *The Touro Conference Volume*, Jewish Law Association Studies, 1 (Atlanta, 1985), 1–161; idem, "R. Tzadok HaKohen on the History of Halakha," *Tradition*, 21/4 (1985): 1–26.

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we are merely the sons of man,'; this is a time-honored principle in Israel that applies right up until our own era, so that the Ge'onim are beneath the Amora'im, and the Amora'im are less than the Tanna'im, and the Tanna'im are inferior to the latter prophets, and they are beneath the early prophets. But do we not also find in the Talmud (Avodah Zarah, 9b) that Antoninus³³ said to Rabbi: 'I know that even the least among you is capable of reviving the dead'? Now, ask yourselves, consider and understand that this refers to the Amora'im. And how very many generations separate the Amora'im from the prophet Elisha! Is it plausible that the least of the Amora'im could perform miracles on the same level as Elisha?" They said to him, "Fine, let our rabbi explain this to us," but he demurred, saying: "Know that I do have a perfectly adequate answer to this question, one that I heard from my father and teacher [i.e. R. Jacob Leiner], but it would be totally futile for me to try to explain it to you, since the answer is rooted in the ways of Hasidism which you will not understand and which you will never accept in your hearts."³⁴

While much of R. Gershon Henokh's schematic history of the transmission of the Kabbalah mirrors that found in Hayyim of Volozhin's introduction to *Sifra di-Tseni'uta*, there is clearly a recurring motif here, one that is directly opposed to the esotericism and elitism of the Mitnaggedim. This is the insistence that the knowledge of Kabbalah is vital for the spiritual well-being of all Jews, even the most simple. The goal of the Besht and his disciples, one brought to perfection by Mordecai Joseph of Izbica, was to popularize kabbalistic teachings in such a way as to allow each individual to connect with those aspects of the mystical tradition that are relevant to, indeed essential for, his spiritual felicity. Accordingly, the crowning achievement of the Besht and his followers, culminating in the teachings of the Izbica/Radzyn tsaddikim, was to reverse entirely the decline of

33 On the exchanges between these two men, see S. Krauss, *Antoninus und Rabbi* (1910). Cf. David Zvi Hoffmann, "Die Aggadot von Antoninus in Midrash und Talmud," in: *MWJ*, 19 (Berlin, 1892), 33–55, 245–55.

34 Hayyim Simcha Leiner, *Sefer Dor Yesharim* (Lublin, 1925; reprint, Jerusalem, 1997), 105.

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knowledge of the esoteric aspects of Torah (*Torat ha-nistar*), most dramatically its formerly secret doctrines contained in the classical but inaccessible texts of the Kabbalah. Thus, unlike the Gaon, whose supreme knowledge, which defied the decline of the generations, never reached the masses of Israel, the Besht and his disciples had the effect of reversing that decline by making their knowledge accessible to each and every Jew.

In opposition to the hasidic notion that the downward direction of history was effectively reversed with the appearance of the Besht, mitnaggedic writings repeatedly insist that the Gaon's defiance of generational decline was unique to him and a tiny coterie of his disciples, but it never affected subsequent generations of the Jewish masses. Indeed, this emerges as the central theme of the Gaon's eulogy by one of his closest disciples, Phinehas b. Judah of Polotsk.³⁵ Alluding to the rise of the most recent enemies of traditional rabbinical Judaism, the Hasidim and the Maskilim, Phinehas presents the death of the Gaon as a tragedy that imperils the future of Torah. He argues that just as the Gaon was so unique as to have had no immediate predecessors, so, *a fortiori*, he could not possibly have any successors or heirs:

This day is as difficult as that day of darkness at noon, for there had not been anyone like him in the world since the days of the Tanna'im. Woe unto us, for we have remained in the darkness which covers the earth. Who is left to enlighten us, now that the great Cedar of Lebanon has been felled, and the whole world is in the dark? ... Who will save us from the wolves of the night surrounding us? For that great shepherd protected us, until he was outsmarted by the wolves, who knew that so long as he lived, they would not be able to devour us. Now woe unto the sheep left without a shepherd.³⁶

This pessimistic viewpoint is in stark contrast to the hasidic narrative whereby the Ba'al Shem Tov not only bequeathed the fullness of his enlightenment and superior wisdom to his worthy heirs, but – according to

35 On Phinehas b. Judah of Polotsk, see my *Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 7–10. On his published works, see *ibid.*, 177–84.

36 Phinehas of Polotsk, *Sefer Pe'ultai ha-Shemini* (New York, 2004), vol. 2, 487.

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later schools of Hasidism, notably that of Izbica/Radzyn – some of the later hasidic masters were able to advance and expand the knowledge of God beyond the point at which the Besht and his disciples had left off.

The Reinstatement of the Doctrine of Decline in Later Hasidism

All of the above notwithstanding, and however much the doctrine of historical decline was re-interpreted or circumvented through the ingenious exegesis of both Hasidim and Mitnaggedim, it endured for both as a standard, canonical principle. As Hasidism continued its retreat from many aspects of the radical theology of its founders,³⁷ the traditional literal or “Orthodox” rendition of the idea of generational decline re-emerged in the writings of many hasidic rabbis and scholars. I conclude this study with one particularly striking example of this later hasidic re-endorsement of the idea of decline, employed in the service of a polemic against modern critical scholarship. In the lengthy introduction to his critical edition of Menahem Recanati’s classic work, *Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitsvot*, the late-twentieth-century hasidic scholar, R. Simcha Bunem Liberman, presents a strictly doctrinaire understanding of generational decline, in order to discredit contemporary scholarship in the field of Kabbalah.

Rabbi Simcha Bunem Liberman was a disciple of the Gerer Rebbe, Abraham Mordechai Alter, and a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and Nazi concentration camps. Liberman immigrated to England after the war, where he studied and was ordained at the Gateshead Yeshiva. In 1971 he was appointed Lecturer in Talmud and Rabbinics at Jews’ College, London.³⁸

37 On later Hasidism’s retreat from its original radical theology, see, Mendel Piekarcz, *Hasidut Polin: Megamot Ra’ayoniyot Beyn Shetey ha-Milhamot u-vi-Gezerot 700–705 (ha-Shoah)* (Jerusalem, 1990).

38 I was unable to find any published biographical material about Rabbi Liberman, but I studied Talmud and Codes under his tutelage as a rabbinical student at Jews’ College, London in 1973–1975, and was privileged during that period to benefit from a close student-mentor relationship with him. The brief biographical outline below is based largely on the information he shared with his small class of students,

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As his appointment at what was then England's Modern Orthodox rabbinical seminary suggests, Liberman was unusual among hasidic rabbis of his generation in his exposure to and, it must be said, vigorous rejection of many of the conclusions of critical Judaica scholarship. Still, while he rejected the key historical findings of scholars of the Kabbalah, particularly with regard to such issues as the antiquity and authorship of the Zohar and other canonical texts of the Kabbalah, Liberman employed many of the tools of critical scholarship in both his teaching and his first major publication – the “critical edition” of Recanati's *Ta'amey ha-Mitsvot*, which was based on three unpublished manuscripts from the collection of the British Library.

While establishing the text of Recanati's work by means of the modern scholarly tools of comparative manuscript analysis, Liberman devoted the better part of his lengthy introduction to a scathing fundamentalist assault on critical kabbalistic scholarship. This reflected his ultra-conservative view of the transmission history of the Kabbalah. It featured a thinly veiled attack on Gershom Scholem and his school, as well as on Martin Buber and on other modern anthologists of hasidic tales.

Liberman begins this introduction by citing four classical Talmudic sources for the doctrine of generational decline. With this he attacks the insolence of contemporary scholars who write critically and disrespectfully of the medieval Kabbalists as if they were their own contemporaries, colleagues and peers. He then advocates a strictly essentialist rather than functional or historical understanding of the principle of decline, insisting that it determines the essence of human nature as being subject to continuous degeneration. Thus, in expounding the Talmudic epigram, “If the *rishonim* are like humans, then we are like donkeys” with a play on the etymological connection between the Hebrew words for donkey (*hamor*) and matter (*homer*), Liberman argues that there is a difference in the very substance or – as we might say today – the DNA of the early Sages and our

and on many private conversations with him, both at Jews' College and as a guest in his home. My other sources are the autobiographical references in the introductions to his books: *Bi-Sheviley ha-Hoda'ah* (Jerusalem, 1998); *Bi-Sheviley Birkat ha-Gomel* (Jerusalem, 1998); and *Bi-Sheviley ha-Nissim* (Safed, 2003).

own. In the *rishonim* the spiritual element was dominant, while among contemporary scholars the material, or *homer*, prevails. This first section of Liberman's introduction, entitled *Le-Or ha-Kabbalah* (In the Light of Kabbalah), appropriately bears the telling subtitle, "*Ha-Rishonim ke-Mal'akhim*" (the early Sages are like angels).

Having established the essential superiority of earlier Sages, Liberman advances a deeply conservative, fundamentalist view of the history of the transmission of Kabbalah, equating it in all respects with the history of the Oral Torah. Just as the latter represents a tradition originating in the revelation at Sinai, so, too, the wisdom of Kabbalah originated in Moses' reception of the Torah. As for the long and numerous gaps in the recorded transmission of the esoteric tradition, Liberman explains them as the direct result of the deep reluctance on the part of the rabbis to teach and even more so to set down in writing the "secret Torah," that is the Kabbalah.³⁹ What is particularly interesting about Liberman's argument is his selective reliance on the views of Gershon Henokh of Radzyn in his introduction to *Sefer Beyt Ya'akov*. While fully endorsing the beginning of that text, which presents the traditional notion of generational decline, Liberman all but ignores the dramatic shift in Gershon Henokh's narrative, when he arrives at the emergence of the Besht and his disciples, which arrested and even reversed the process of decline. Liberman's conservative, pessimistic position, which denies even the Besht and his followers the power to overcome that process, is effectively indistinguishable from the position of the Mitnaggedim, despite the allowances they make for the unique stature of the Gaon. This represents an early-twentieth-century retreat from the boldness that once characterized the hasidic teaching on the reversal of decline with the arrival of the Besht. While the insistence on a strict, fundamentalist understanding of the nature of generational decline was once used by the Mitnaggedim and the Musar masters as a weapon against both Hasidism and Haskalah, in more recent times, as Liberman's polemic demonstrates, the Hasidim have

39 With this discussion, Liberman summarizes his long introduction, "Le-Or ha-Kabbalah," in Simcha-Bunem Liberman (ed.), *Sefer Ta'amey ha-Mitsvot ha-Shalem* (London, 1962), 20–36.

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adopted the same conservative stance in order to combat the latest threats of modernity, not least among them the threat of critical scholarship. Concerns about the presumption of academic Judaic Studies have led hasidic scholars such as Liberman to abandon the claim whereby generational decline had been reversed by the hasidic masters, and to re-embrace the conservative position of their former rabbinical critics. This represents closure of what had once been a key doctrinal dispute between Hasidim and Mitnaggedim.

