

SHAUL MAGID. *Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism*. Modern Jewish Philosophy and Religion. Translations and Critical Studies. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. Pp xxvii + 400.

The most theologically radical sect ever to emerge from the traditional hasidic milieu was that of Izbica/Radzin. Founded by Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Lainer (1800–54), a disciple of the Polish hasidic masters R. Simha Bunim of Przysucha and R. Menahem Mendel Morgenstern, the renowned Kotsker Rebbe, in 1839 Lainer had a dramatic falling out with the Kotsker. On the day after Simhat Torah of that year, he left Kotsk to form his own small hasidic circle in Izbica, a shtetl in the Radom province of Poland. The exact circumstances surrounding this break with his friend and teacher remain unclear, but the result was an irreparable rupture between Izbicer Hasidism and most of the major hasidic sects of nineteenth-century Poland. The Izbicer Hasidim's marginality was largely a result of R. Mordecai Joseph and especially his heirs' radically deterministic theology and the unconventional nature of their writings and interests.

R. Mordecai Joseph took the original hasidic doctrine of divine immanence to its logical panentheistic limits on several fronts. If, as the early masters of Hasidism claimed, God's presence permeates all earthly things, the Izbicer insisted that this must extend to the hearts and deeds of all Jews. Thus, all that a Jew does, his most heinous transgressions included, is somehow mysteriously a manifestation of God's irresistible and all-controlling will (*retson ha-Boreh*). In his most widely quoted epigram, the Izbicer subverted the essence of the most famous rabbinic epigram about the limits of Divine Providence ("All is in the hands of Heaven *except* the fear of Heaven") by changing just one word. The potentially antinomian expression "all is in the hands of heaven, *including* the fear of heaven" became the stunning leitmotif of his theology. This not only insinuated that human sin too must be understood, at its deepest level, as a manifestation of the Divine will; it also opened an avenue for individualist behavior that threatened the conformity demanded by Jewish law.

Mordecai Joseph's most famous work is his collected homilies to the weekly Torah portions, *Me ha-shiloah*, edited and published posthumously in 1858—despite the fierce resistance of other Polish Hasidim—by his prolific and even quirkier grandson, Gershon Henokh of Radzyn, the

central subject of Shaul Magid's new book. *Me ha-shiloah* is brimming with radically panentheistic and determinist biblical interpretations. Perhaps the most infamous and oft-quoted of them was R. Mordecai Joseph's defense of Zimri, the Israelite who was impaled along with his Midianite lover by the moral hero and high priest Phinehas, grandson of Aaron. (Nm 25.6–9). Mordecai Joseph takes Phinehas to task for his anger and hasty vengeance, while insisting that Zimri's act of fornication with the idolatrous woman represented a mysterious, but sanctified, acting out of Divine providence.

The publication of *Me ha-shiloah* created much controversy within Polish Hasidism, which had, by the mid-nineteenth century, become ultra-conservative, both theologically and halakhically. No Jewish publisher in Poland was willing to print it, and it became the only hasidic book in Europe ever to be issued by a non-Jew, the Viennese publisher Anton della Torre. R. Gershon Henokh was unable to obtain a single rabbinical *haskamah* (approbation) for the volume, and rival Hasidim actually consigned numerous copies of the work to the flames, the only time a hasidic book had been burned by other Jews other than when the Mitnagdim burned the very first hasidic work, *Toledot Yaakov Yosef*, in 1780. Moreover, the leading disciples of R. Mordecai Joseph himself—namely, R. Yehuda-Leib (aka *Reb Leibele*) Eiger and R. Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin—not only rejected R. Gershon Henokh's personal authority as a Rebbe; they specifically denounced his version of their master's teachings as redacted in *Me ha-shiloah*. R. Gershon Henokh, and Radzin Hasidism, stood indeed “on the margin” of the hasidic world.

Sensing both this marginality and the inherent dangers of much of Izbicer theology, Gershon Henokh was acutely aware of the possibly explosive consequences of publishing his grandfather's teachings. So, in the (unpaginated) preface to the first edition of *Me ha-shiloah* (Vienna, 1860), Henokh explicitly limited its intended audience:

Despite the fact that I know that there are numerous places where the teachings will be hard on the ears of those who have not been trained in such doctrines. So that I have gathered them together only for the members of our own sect who can appreciate their great value . . .

R. Gershon Henokh was a remarkable rabbinical scholar, but his beliefs and particular interests were always unconventional. Aside from editing his grandfather's and father's biblical commentaries, his original compositions consisted in a pseudo-Gemara to those tractates of the Mishnah not included in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sidre tehorot*, Josefow,

1873), and several monographs regarding his claim to have rediscovered the *hilazon*, a mollusk required to produce *tekhelet*—the bluish hue mandated by Scripture for one fringe of the *tsitsit*. (Gershon Henokh traveled widely in search of *tekhelet* and claimed to have been led to the elusive *hilazon* by researchers in a Viennese aquarium.) Both of these works, by their very nature, reflect an urgent sense of imminent messianic redemption. He also published several of his own biblical commentaries, in three volumes under the title *Sod yesharim*.

Izbica/Radzin remained among the smallest and least influential of Polish hasidic dynasties. However, the radical writings of its masters have recently been rediscovered by the devotees of the contemporary Jewish Renewal Movement. The followers of the late Shlomo Carlebach were introduced to the Izbicer's radical teachings some decades ago, and blue-threaded *tsitsit*—once an extremely rare sight—have become an almost standard sartorial accessory among those newly born into Renewal Judaism. Despite R. Gershon Henokh's explicitly stated desire strictly to limit the reach of his potentially dangerous teachings, *Me ha-shiloah* has become popular in neo-hasidic circles, and an English translation of the first part of the book was recently published.

The scholarly study of Izbica/Radzin Hasidism also began only quite recently, and it has remained very sparse. The first scholar to take note of this school was Joseph Weiss, who in 1961 published a groundbreaking article about the religious freedom and potential antinomianism inherent in R. Mordecai Joseph's radical mysticism. This was followed, two years later, by a brief and incisive article by Rivka Shatz. More than another quarter century passed before Morris Faierstein published the first monograph-length study outlining Mordecai Joseph's biography and the key features of his mystical theology (*All Is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica* [Hoboken, N. J., 1989]).

Shaul Magid's detailed investigation of the writings of R. Gershon Henokh of Radzin, *Hasidism on the Margin*, therefore represents the most serious scholarly attempt to make sense of this hasidic school to date. Magid delves deeply and analytically into R. Gershon Henokh's writings in an effort to establish the importance of his radical reconstructions of the teachings of the traditional Jewish canon, from the Bible through to the writings of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov.

*Hasidism on the Margin* consists of three major sections. In the first section, "The Piety of Secrecy" (chapters 1–3, pp. 1–108), basing himself largely on R. Gershon Henokh's programmatic introduction (*Ha-bakdama ve'ha-petihā*) to his father's, R. Jacob Lainer, commentary to Genesis—*Sefer bet Ya'akov* (Warsaw, 1890)—Magid presents his understanding of

Izbica/Radzin's doctrine of esotericism and its internal understanding of the history of Kabbalah and Hasidism. It is an interesting and detailed presentation, but Magid's use of his sources is problematic.

Magid makes too much, for example, of the rather short discussion of Maimonides found in R. Gershon Henokh's *Hakdama*, arguing that it represents a systematic mystical rereading of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, intended to incorporate it into the kabbalistic tradition. Magid's bloated claims about R. Gershon Henokh's achievement include the statement that R. Gershon Henokh engaged in "a detailed comparative analysis of the Guide and the Zohar in an attempt to expose their similar positions and shared influences" (p. 73). This is depicted as an ambitious project that he allegedly "begins by collecting all the contradictory statements made by the Maimonides on any given issue . . . then finds a passage in the Zohar that deals with the same issue" (p. 48). It all sounds quite fascinating, but there is simply no textual evidence anywhere in R. Gershon Henokh's writings that he achieved any of this.

R. Gershon Henokh's discussion of Maimonides in the *Hakdama* to *Sefer bet Ya'akov*, to which Magid devotes an entire chapter (chapter 2: "Recircumcising the Torah: The Synthesis of the Zohar and the Guide and the Hasidic Reconstruction of Esotericism," pp. 40–71), is essentially based on two folios (5a–7a, in the Warsaw 1890 edition) of this text. R. Gershon Henokh's discussion of the *Guide* is far from being the uniquely systematic hasidic "reconstruction" of Maimonidean philosophy claimed by Magid. This is particularly evident when it is compared to the detailed and systematic two-hundred-page commentary to the *Guide for the Perplexed*, written by the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, (*Derekh Emuna: Sefer ha-bakira*, Poltava, 1912), who had died twenty-four years before the publication of *Sefer bet Ya'akov*. Despite Schneerson's truly remarkable, syncretistic reading of the *Guide* through the prism of kabbalistic literature, Magid introduces R. Gershon Henokh as "the *only* Hasidic thinker to systematically read the Guide for the Perplexed through the lens of the Zohar and subsequently through Hasidic thought" (p. xxii).

The result of Magid's overly focusing on the alleged reconstruction of the *Guide* and his detailed, narrow reading of R. Gershon Henokh's *Hakdama* is that he seems to miss the text's real novelty: namely, the modernity of its historiography, specifically regarding the "chain of tradition" (*shalbelet ha-kabbalah*). While in the first part of his history of the Kabbalah, R. Gershon Henokh follows the traditional view of generational decline (*yeridat ha-dorot*), he adopts a striking theory of historical progress when describing the post-Lurianic period, culminating with the emer-

gence of the Besht and his own grandfather as pre-messianic figures. This, together with his advocacy of a near antinomian individualism rooted in the subconscious, though both are couched in messianic language, seems to me to betray the influences of modernity on R. Gershon Henokh's thinking. Unfortunately, beyond asserting very generally, in the introduction, that "by the latter third [*šic*] of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Congress Poland [why not Galitsia? AN] modernity was literally knocking at the door of every Hasidic home" (p. xviii) and implying that R. Gershon Henokh's attempts to "redeem" Maimonides ought to be appreciated in that context, Magid fails to explore this important issue.

The second major part of Magid's book, "Hasidism and the Hermeneutical Turn" (chapters 4–6, pp.109–203), consists in his attempt to explicate the hermeneutical methodology of R. Gershon Henokh's biblical commentaries. Magid argues that scholars of Hasidism have to date ignored the hermeneutics of hasidic bible commentaries, focusing instead on historical and theological issues, at the expense of a sensitive reading that uncovers interpretive principles at work. Magid delves deeply and at great length into R. Gershon Henokh's biblical commentaries in an attempt to achieve the latter. He is specifically interested in uncovering R. Gershon Henokh's idealized prototypes for the "messianic personality," who may act "outside the law," which he locates in his interpretation of the biblical Patriarchs. The reader who struggles to get through the ponderous discussions of these long chapters will not, unfortunately, discover any hermeneutic methodology at work. Rather, it seems to me that Magid is imposing his own systematization onto these decidedly unsystematic writings, in order to discover biblical prototypes with which to explain R. Gershon Henokh's radical theology and unusual historiography. His clarification of difficult and obscure Hasidic biblical exegesis is in itself a significant achievement, but, again, Magid seems often to over-read primary texts, and his eisegesis still falls short of his claims about the significance of his sources.

The final, shortest, and strongest part of this book, "In and Around the Law" (chapter 7, pp. 205–48), deals with the issue that has been of central interest to scholars, namely, the problem of the antinomianism inherent in the most radical expressions of Izbicer Hasidism. Magid engages in an extensive and finely nuanced exploration of the problem of antinomianism, as it relates to mysticism in general and Hasidism in particular. There are some fascinating excursae along the way to his classification of Izbicer doctrine as "soft antinomianism" in contrast to "hard antinomianism," of which Sabbateanism and Frankism are the classic Jewish exam-

ples. But there are problems here too, particularly when Magid attempts to engage in comparative theology. His efforts to draw analogies between the issues raised by Izbicer Hasidism and Church controversies in the period following the Counter-Reformation (pp. 207–16) are particularly weak and reflect a superficial understanding of Calvinist theology. Magid's references to the followers of Arminius as "Armenians" (pp. 210–11 and 353) do not help reassure the reader that the complex doctrinal battles within Protestant Christendom are as potter's clay in his hands.

At the end of his long discussion of antinomianism, often fascinating but at times convoluted and confusing, Magid is still unable to point to a single example of actual antinomian behavior by a single Hasid since the inception of the Izbica dynasty in 1839. This hard historical fact raises a central question: if the very idea that makes Izbicer Hasidism so intriguing was never translated into practice, what exactly are its meaning and historical importance? That the potentially antinomian doctrines in Izbicer writings have been interpreted internally (i.e., by Radziner Hasidim) as applying only to postmessianic times, Magid seems to find quite irksome. He has his own agenda, which, by the book's conclusion, has become quite apparent.

Magid wants to make the argument that Izbica/Radzin Hasidism can serve as a case study through which to understand the imagined radicalism of nineteenth-century Polish Hasidism in general. He often refers to "Izbica and other Hasidic schools" in the same breath, arguing that the determinism and "soft antinomianism" of Izbica is far more representative of Hasidism than both traditional Hasidim and critical scholars of Hasidism have hitherto allowed.

While the title of Magid's book accurately suggests that Izbica/Radzin Hasidism is indeed, and always was, "on the margin," it oddly concludes with a lengthy complaint about the degree to which both scholars and modern-day traditional Hasidim have marginalized it. To counter this, Magid suggests that the writings of R. Gershon Henokh can serve as a useful "lens" on Polish Hasidism in general (p. 249). He alludes to "other Polish Hasidic masters" who allegedly shared the radicalism of Izbica/Radzin (pp. 252–53), but he cannot of course name a single example, since none exists.

Magid does not exactly conceal his own motivation for having written this kind of book, which ends on a contentious, polemical note. With his exposition of the radicalism and antinomianism of Izbica/Radzin Hasidism, he hopes to provide a "traditional" model and "authoritative" sources for the pious transgressions of New Age Hasidim. Thus he will have overcome the suppression of the true spirit of Polish Hasidism by both

the scholars and the major, conservative hasidic groups who have canonized hasidic literature in such a way as to exclude the important, allegedly representative doctrines of the Izbica/Radzin dynasty. In so doing, he opens the door for the use (or misuse) of the “heresies” of Izbica/Radzin, by today’s pious heretics:

What I mean to say is that . . . the masters of the Izbica and Radzin traditions *and other masters in mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century Polish Hasidism more generally*, are heretics . . . they created the religious critique inside tradition, sufficient for those who followed them to read (or misread) them and implement that critique in a more overt fashion. (p. 253, emphasis mine)

Magid therefore laments both the scholars’ and the later Hasidim’s exclusion of Izbica/Radzin from the “Hasidic canon,” which he views as the real source of its marginalization:

My claim is that the canonization of Hasidic literature is, in one sense, its failure as it suppresses the very heretical elements that made Hasidism so compelling and attractive to those interested in religious reform. (p. 254)

It is hard to believe that Magid actually believes that nineteenth-century Polish Hasidism was a heretical movement advocating religious reform, and that the writings of the masters of the Izbica/Radzin dynasty are a good and “not atypical” (p. 249) exemplar of such heresy and reform. But this is precisely the belief that appears to animate this book and the only possible explanation for its interpretive exaggerations.