

The Jews of Poland

By DEVORAH KIRSCH

Part II: The Rise of Chassidus

By the 18th century, the Jews of Poland were in a sorry state. Their communities repeatedly ravaged by Cossacks, their spiritual hopes deluded by Shabbetai Zvi, they huddled miserably in the towns and cities.

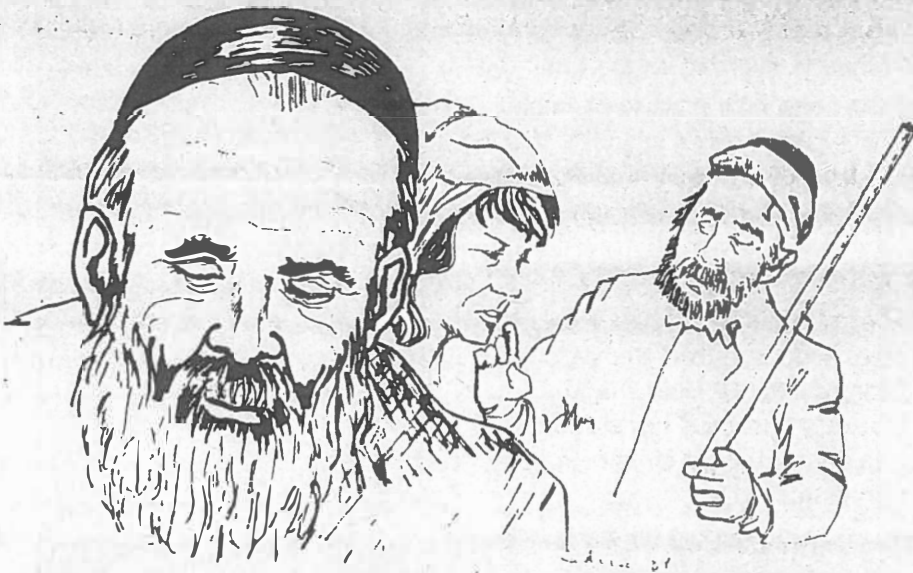
All of Poland suffered. In the wake of a series of wars the kingdom had woefully disintegrated, and during the years 1772-1815 it was partitioned three times among its neighbors — Russia in the east, Prussia in the west, and Austria-Hungary in the south.

The Poles themselves had degenerated to a backward mass of brutal and illiterate peasants. The aristocracy, completely decadent, cared only for its own privileges. The royal enactments protecting the Jews disappeared, and in many cities the right to keep Jews out was zealously maintained. The nobility treated them like slaves. In the Diet of 1740 the Jews were made "hereditary subjects" of estate owners, who did with them what they pleased.

In the Diet of 1764, taxes were quadrupled, and a sum of two guilden was imposed on every single Jew. Centralized Jewish self-government was dissolved, and in its place rose smaller communities, run by a *kahal* (community council). Economic as well as administrative activity was left in the hands of the rabbinate.

The Church had planted well its seeds of hate, which grew and intensified among the populace. In no time Poland became a hotbed of anti-Semitism. The synods (clerical gatherings) were reminiscent of the Middle Ages, as Jews were once again made outcasts and scapegoats.

While elsewhere in Europe the Jews were emancipated, in Poland they were once again accused of ritual murder and



Jerusalem of the North

Not everyone welcomed chassidus. Many deplored the lack of intellectuality, the vulgarity of a few of its followers, and the adulation of the *tzaddikim* (which the opponents considered idol worship). These people came to be called *mitnagdim*, or opponents, and the name has remained, although it has lost much of its original meaning.

In Lithuania, chassidus was fought tooth and nail. Called the "Jerusalem of the

North," Vilna was the capital of Lithuania and the citadel of Talmudic learning. It was there that an active campaign began against these "upstarts." One man, in particular, was their dedicated enemy.

Rabbi Elyahu ben Shlomo Zalman (1720-97), known to us as the Vilna Gaon, was one of the most brilliant scholars of his generation. He did not dislike Kabbalah or mysticism; rather, he felt that the study of *halacha* was more important. Moreover, he maintained that scholarship, not prayer, defined a Jew. He despised the ignorance of many chassidim. In 1772, he placed a *cherem* (ban) on

desecration of church objects. Pogroms and riots broke out, communities were ransacked, and Jewish leaders were thrown into prison. During the Sandomir Trial of 1698-1710, they were tried and executed, while the rest were expelled and their synagogue was converted into a Catholic chapel.

Polish merchants and craftsmen allied themselves with the clergy in order to undermine their Jewish competitors. As a result, many Jews, in search of opportunity, migrated to the rural areas, but there was little relief to be found.

The wealthy were a minority. By 1788 most Jews were petty traders, traders, storekeepers, shoemakers, tailors, furriers,

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carpenters, or stonecutters. One out of twelve was a *luftmensch* ("idler," one who is out of a job); one out of sixty was a beggar.

A few could still make fortunes leasing land from the nobles, or by becoming estate overseers. This class of newly-rich Jews created resentment among the other Jews. They crowded out many of the fine established families, who had valued scholarship as well as community involvement. The newly wealthy, self-centered and irreligious, preferred to cooperate with the aristocracy, often against the interests of their fellow Jews. Many were granted positions of leadership within the *kahal*, whether or not they were qualified.

The third class of Jews were the ones who suffered the worst. Many of them were manual laborers and thus considered crude and vulgar by the sophisticated. Living among the peasantry, wallowed in

them. After his demise, his followers had the chassidic leader Rabbi Schneur Zalman imprisoned.

The chassidim defended themselves against the attacks. They had already begun putting out their own works. In 1780, Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak, a follower of the Besht, had printed the first chassidic work, *Toldos Yosef Yitzhak*. The chassidim even invited the Vilna Gaon for a debate. However, the Vilna Gaon rejected them all his life, and a rift remained between the two camps.

As time passed, the hostility toward the chassidim diminished. The Lithuanian Jews had other problems to worry about — official anti-Semitism, as well as assimilation. Besides, chassidim itself evolved, attracting a more refined and intellectualized membership as scholarship regained its importance.

Nevertheless, some differences remained, and survive to this day. The chassid and the non-chassid represent two distinct types of Orthodox Jews. Nevertheless, just as the chassidic movement was modified to a certain degree, so too did Lithuanian-style Judaism undergo a transformation, which left its mark.

The very resistance to chassidus helped to strengthen the identity and spirit of the non-chassidic community. It plunged deeper into Talmudic study. The rise of the chassidic movement in Poland paralleled an explosion of Lithuanian intellectual and creative energy.

While chassidic life centered around the *rebbe*

superstition, they were too ignorant to study Talmud. Although a Jew, if he were learned, might escape poverty by marrying into a wealthy family, scholarship was restricted to those with money and *yichus* (lineage).

The intellectualism of Torah study had alienated the poor and uneducated. During holidays, whenever they went to town they left feeling unwelcome in the synagogues, where the rabbis delivered sermons for the more scholarly.

The rabbinate itself suffered widespread corruption. Often a post was handed down

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to a rabbi's son or son-in-law, through bribes to the local nobleman. These bribes were frequently secured through embezzlement. In the sermons of the day, the *maggid* — itinerant (traveling) preacher — would condemn the rabbis and merchants for their complicity with Polish overlords.

Slowly the masses began to lose respect for Jewish authority. They were truly in a bind: on the one hand, they were alienated by the snobbery of the upper-class Jews; on the other, they retained strong religious feelings, and yearned for an outlet.

The Kabbalists

A number of Jews had already turned to Kabbalists and miracle workers for comfort. Both offered what scholarship could not: reliance on simple faith and prayer, and attachment to G-d through worship and good deeds. The miracle

worker, called a *ba'al shem*, was known to heal the sick, exorcise demons, and counsel the distressed.

The most famous of these was *Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov*. Through him Polish Judaism became transformed. As a child, the Ba'al Shem Tov (*Besht* for short) disliked the gloomy atmosphere of the *cheder*. He often escaped to the woods, where he would linger for hours. When he was older, he became an apprenticed assistant to a schoolmaster. He loved children; he taught them hymns, told wonderful stories, and took them to the woods.

The Besht was self-taught. He spent his nights devouring Kabbalah, accompanied by a Divine voice that came and spoke to

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him. During much of his youth he kept a low profile. He married a rabbi's sister and lived in quiet poverty. He had no celebrated rabbi as a teacher, no erudite Talmud learning. Much of his ideas were based on preexisting philosophy, mainly mysticism.

But the Besht was able to simplify these ideas for the masses. He preached that Hashem was everywhere, and that understanding of Him could be grasped by faith as well as by study. Diverging from the Kabbalistic system of the Arizal, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, which stressed abstinence and isolation from physical pleasures, the Besht insisted that piety could be achieved through living normally in the everyday world. Moreover, he taught that serving the Creator should be done through joy, not sadness.

When he was thirty-six, the Besht made his public debut. Traveling

and his court, in Lithuania the yeshiva grew to occupy central importance. Originally, it was a place to train rabbis, and was distinct from the community. Now, it was supported by different communities; people came from far and wide to learn. They married and developed their own society of Torah students, known as the *kollel*.

The first of this new kind of yeshiva was started by Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (1749-1821). Others of a similar pattern sprang up elsewhere — in Mir, Telz, Slobodka, Novarhadok, Kelm, and Eisheshok. Headed by Talmudic scholars, each developed its own system of thought. The *yeshiva bochur*, or student, was evaluated by his diligence and grasp of knowledge. Ideally, he was someone whose behavior served as an example for the community.

Those who weren't privileged enough to remain in a *kollel* and who instead had to work nevertheless remained in touch with the yeshiva world. A new class emerged, the *ba'al batm*, who financially supported the *kollelim* and were themselves quite educated. Just as chassidus made worship available to every Jew, so too in Lithuania was Torah study widely disseminated. No longer was it confined to the yeshivos; now it was spread and pursued by entire communities.

These yeshivos produced a phenomenal number of scholars — rabbis like Yosef Slutzker, Yosef Baer

around towns and villages, he mingled with the people, preaching and spreading his message. He won people over with his charisma as well as his natural sympathy for their concerns. By stressing love for every Jew (*ahavas Yisrael*), regardless of wealth or learning, he endeared himself to many. Before he went to sleep, he would distribute all the charity he had received during the day to the poor and needy.

In no time he gathered followers, who called themselves *chassidim*. Chassidus stressed *kavanah*, concentration in prayer; *devekus*, attachment to G-d; and *hislahavus*, enthusiasm in prayer. Chassidim replaced the traditional Ashkenazic *siddur* with an edition edited by *Rabbi Yitzchak Luria*. This *siddur* has

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come to be known as the *Nusach Ari Siddur*.

Most importantly, chassidus emphasizes the role of the *tzaddik*, the holy man. Though *tzaddikim* had always existed, they now became of central importance. The *tzaddik* was the embodiment of G-d's Torah, a perfect saint who was capable of receiving and bringing G-d's message to the people. In time this person would be called a *rebbe*, the chassidic leader who dominates the life and community of his followers.

During the Besht's lifetime chassidus remained more of a philosophy than a concrete practice. It still lacked cohesiveness, or any kind of systematic method of study. The Besht himself did not author any literary works; it was left to his disciples to record his sayings and anecdotes. Over the next century they would shape and refine his teachings.

While the Besht appointed his son to be his successor, the latter yielded the mantle of leadership to Rabbi Dov Baer, from the town of Mezherich. The Maggid of Mezherich was the one most responsible for spreading chassidus. A brilliant Talmudist, he was recognized by the Besht as someone who could reach out to the educated. Until his time, chassidim had been mainly recruited from the lower classes. The Maggid, no less than the Besht, understood that in order for chassidus to become valid it had to win support from the learned.

Organized and pragmatic, the Maggid had the necessary qualities for leadership.

By the time of the Maggid's death, the chassidim had made great strides all over Eastern Europe.

Unlike the Besht, who spent much time in public, the Maggid remained indoors, instilling his followers with chassidus and sending them to towns all over Eastern Europe. Among these emissaries was the renowned and beloved Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, who went to Berdichev, in the Ukraine. Many of them became *rebbe*s and formed their own brands of chassidus, named after the towns where they lived.

By the time of the Maggid's death, the chassidim had made great strides all over Eastern Europe. They had their own synagogues and *shochtim* (ritual slaughterers), and had impromptu celebrations. For holidays they traveled to the town of their *rebbe* to receive a blessing and hear the *rebbe*'s stories or words of Torah. At the Shabbos *tisch* (table), they clamored for scraps of food left by the *rebbe* (called *shirayim*). They would send him requests for blessings or advice on a piece of paper (called a *kvitlach*).

Soloveichik, Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, and Yitzchak Echanan Spektor. They and their descendants have made *kollelim* very much a part of the Orthodox world.

Chassidus itself made inroads, affecting all but the diehard *misnagdim*. To the younger generation it had an emotional appeal, which cold academia lacked. The man who filled the void was Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-83). His movement, devoted to the study of *mussar*, ethics, helped to bolster the morale of yeshiva students. Torah study was designed to shape the individual's complete character, and not just his mind.

Mussar involved self-examination of one's deeds in order to correct his behavior. Unlike chassidus, which stressed joy, *mussar* tended to be more serious. Like chassidus, however, *mussar* aimed for the mass audience. Women as well as men attended *shlurim* (lectures) and read literature devoted to its study.

Mussar was systematized and integrated into the Lithuanian yeshivos, becoming very much part of the curriculum. The *mussar schmuessen*, ethical talks, were delivered regularly by the *mashglach*, supervisor. This person occupied a prominent position, second only to the *rosh yeshiva*.

After initial hostility, the chassidic and non-chassidic Jews ended up supporting rather than fighting, each other. United, they provided a shield against assimilation and *Haskalah*, and helped fortify Jewish identity.

Prayers were long, protracted, and fervent, often accompanied by singing and dancing. The most popular form of musical celebration was a tune (called a *niggun*). Some chassidim, like the Modzhitzer, became famous for their melodies. In addition, they wore a long black coat (called *beckesher* or *kapote*), and a round, furry hat (called *shtreimel* or *spodek*). Early chassidus became a powerful emotional force which made the spirit of Judaism accessible to every Jew.

After the movement spread, however, the intensity began to wane. Not all the *rebbe*s were learned or pious; many simply inherited their position. Quarrels

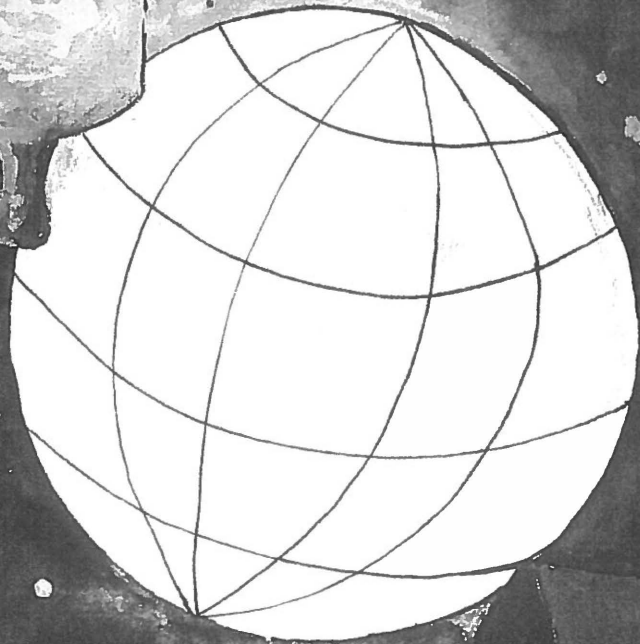
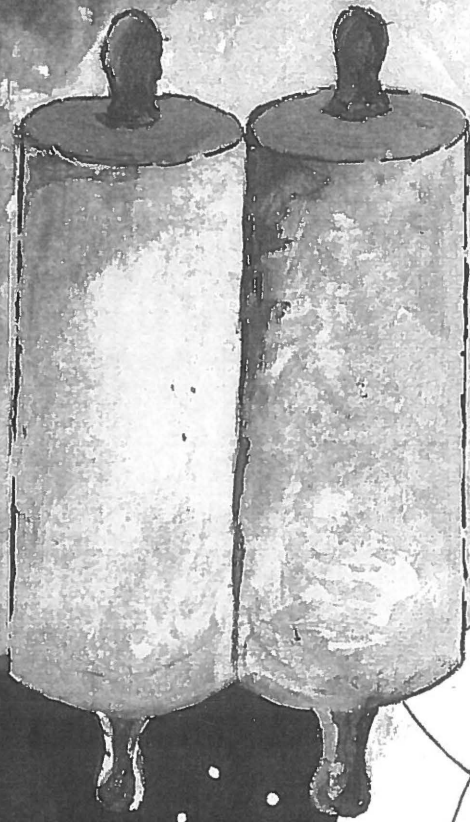
These men desired a *rebbe* who could be a scholarly guide as well as a spiritual leader.

developed between chassidic courts — the circle of close disciples which the *rebbe*s had — each claiming greater distinction than the others.

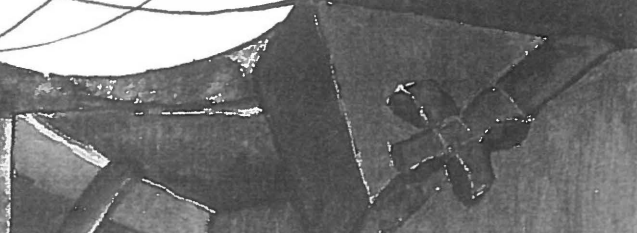
A number of chassidim themselves had grown critical of the naivete that was passing for fervor. In Poland, where Talmudic learning was traditionally valued, a group of brilliant and dynamic men were busy redefining the Besht's philosophy, and at the same time restoring the importance of study. These men desired a *rebbe* who could be a scholarly guide as well as a spiritual leader. A revitalized chassidus emerged, blending scholarship and mysticism.

CORRECTION

Due to a production error in the Adar II issue, the name of the Wurzbürger Rav was misspelled. It is Seligmann Baer Bamberger.



The
GIRL



TO OUR READERS

Over 3,300 years ago, the Jewish people received the Torah from G-d at Mount Sinai. That event has stood by us through the darkest years of exile. Even in those greatest moments of despair, we have declared: *Hashem echad u'shemo echad* — G-d is one and His name is one. The jealousy of the nations at our being the Chosen People has sparked many attempts to destroy us, but we continue to live.

The darkest moment of the *galus* was the Holocaust. During that time, there were many non-Jews who were repulsed by the actions of the Nazis and came to the defense of the Jews. The most famous of the Righteous Gentiles is Raoul Wallenberg, who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews, only to be thrown into a Soviet prison after the war. He has not been heard from since. "A Special Hero" details Wallenberg's superhuman efforts.

"Torah Highlights" discusses a number of items related to the giving of the Torah.

There is a custom among Jews to remain awake the entire first night of Shavuot studying Torah. In the merit of our Torah study, may we soon witness the final redemption of the Jewish people.

Have a happy Shavuot!

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MAIL ROOM

A Pair of Sixes

Dear Editor,

I love reading *The Jewish Reader* every Shabbos, but this week something strange happened. The Adar II magazine and the Nissan magazine were both Vol. 1 No. 6. I just don't understand. I think you made a printing mistake.

Naomi Fishman
Houston, TX

□ □ □

Dear Editor,

In the March-April issue it says Vol. 1 No. 6. But in the April-May issue it also says Vol. 1 No. 6.

I think your magazine is super. Keep up the good work.

Zevi Sandman
New Haven, CT

Hmmm. OK, we admit it. We goofed. Now, if that were our only mistake . . .

□ □ □

The Nissan Issue

Dear Editor,

Your Holocaust issue really hit home. We must remember this tragedy and prevent it from happening again.

Chana Rosenwasser
Brooklyn, NY

□ □ □

Dear Editor,

I thought the Holocaust (Nissan) issue was too, too depressing. One article was fine — but an *entire* issue? Hasn't this subject been exploited enough? I afraid young people will get the impression that to be a Jew means to be a victim.

Leah Weiss
Queens, NY

One can never speak enough about the worst tragedy in Jewish history.

□ □ □

(Continued on page 31)

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