

THE MESSIANIC SECRET OF HASIDISM

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העורך: משה פריד
העיצוב: משה פריד
הדפוס: משה פריד
המחיר: 150 ₪

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INTRODUCTION

THE MESSIANIC ELEMENT IN HASIDISM

As we look around today and see giant billboards proclaiming the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the late grand rabbi of *Habad*, R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson to be the King Messiah, we may find it surprising that, only a few decades ago, the Hasidic movement could be characterized, in Gershom Scholem's phrase, as a "Neutralization of the messianic Element."¹ Like Simeon Dubnow and Martin Buber before him, Scholem, the founder of modern research into Kabbalah, denied that Hasidism could be defined as a messianic movement, and he saw its growth during the eighteenth century as a reaction to the Sabbatean apostasy. True to his dialectical approach to history, Scholem defined Hasidism as a religious movement that adopted the essence of Kabbalah but removed its messianic sting by forgoing its eschatological side and focusing instead on the redemption of the individual, which can be realized independently of national redemption. In Scholem's view, the individual's drive to "commune" with God took center stage within Hasidism and marginalized the anticipation of the Messiah and of the return from exile that had characterized messianic movements from sixteenth-century Safed Kabbalah through seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sabbateanism.

Scholem's conclusion is at odds with those reached by the historian Ben-Zion Dinur² and by Scholem's own student in kabbalistic research, Isaiah Tishby,³ both of whom identified an explicit or implicit messianic theme in Hasidism. In their view, a messianic movement does not necessarily slip into apostasy and leave the Jewish fold, as happened in the case of Shabbetai Zevi, who declared himself the messiah but converted to Islam, along with many of his followers, in 5426 (1666). They saw Hasidism as an exemplar of a messianic movement that stopped short of throwing off all restraints, remaining

¹ See Scholem 1971, pp. 176-202. The article's title "The Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism" clearly reflects Scholem's view on Hasidism.

² See Dinur 1955, pp. 83-227.

³ See Tishby 1967.

within the Jewish fold. Studies by contemporary scholars have provided added depth for the conclusions reached by Dinur and Tishby. Still, the messianic kernel of Hasidism remains hidden and ill defined. Its disclosure is intimately connected with the image of the “*zaddik* (righteous one),” the Hasidic community’s leader, whose followers attribute to him higher powers, even to the point of believing in his standing as the Messiah. It follows that any effort to reveal the messianic theology of Hasidism will be inseparably intertwined with reconstruction of Hasidism’s history as a movement, and both will require solving a basic mystery: who was the first Hasidic *zaddik* and under what circumstances did his followers come to see him as the Messiah?

The tradition of the *zaddik* as Messiah did not begin with Hasidism’s legendary founder, R. Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (the Besht). Gershom Scholem observed that neither during his life nor posthumously was the Besht designated “*zaddik*.”⁴ Likewise, the frequent portrayal in Hasidic hagiography of R. Dov Ber, the “*Maggid* (Preacher)” of Mezhirichi, as the Besht’s successor as *zaddik* and leader of the Hasidic movement is mere anachronism. It is a concept that hangs by a thread, reflecting late traditions based on events of doubtful authenticity. The historian Ada Rapoport-Albert has noted the gaps in reliable historical information about the early days of Hasidism, observing that “the need for farfetched conjectures in interpreting seemingly surprising events in the period following the Besht’s death grows out of the anachronistic expectation that the mantle of leadership would pass immediately and directly from the Besht to the *Maggid* [Dov Ber of Mezhirichi], in the way that leadership was passed (and sometimes fought over) in later Hasidic dynasties.”⁵ The desire to find a link grows out of the gap between the Besht’s death in 5520 (1760) and the beginning of historical Hasidism in 5532 (1772), when the first documents excommunicating the *Hasidim* were published. But there are no reliable data to support the proposition that the *Maggid* R. Dov Ber of Mezhirichi served as the Besht’s successor during that twelve-year period, and the identity of the *Hasidim* who were the objects of those excommunications remains unknown. There likewise is reason to doubt the widespread view that R. Dov Ber began to serve as leader of the *Hasidim* in 5532 (1772), only a few months

⁴ See Scholem 1976/2, p. 241.

⁵ Rapoport-Albert 1990, p. 199.

before his death. No historical facts support it, and it fails to explain what led R. Dov Ber, a sickly man toward the end of his life, to forsake old ways and embark on a new path that would ultimately establish far-flung groups within the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

And so the questions recur: Who was the first Hasidic *zaddik*? When was the first Hasidic court established? Who were the members of that court and what aspects of their beliefs and activities generated opposition forceful enough to crystallize the *Mitnaggedim* (opponents of *Hasidim*) as an enduring stream within Jewish society since the end of the eighteenth century?

The present study attempts to return to the starting point and resolve some of these mysteries. It examines the years 5500 (1740) to 5541 (1781), Hasidism's Era of Redemption. That period, spanning two generations, produced two messianic characters from whom the movement developed: the Besht, as herald of redemption, and the redeemer himself—R. Yehiel Mikhel, the *Maggid* of Zolochov, who was Hasidism's first *zaddik*.

"The Era of Redemption" is a phrase borrowed from the terminology of those who "reckon the End"—groups of Jews who, since the destruction of the Temple, have sought to calculate when the Messiah will come and how the process of redemption will play out. For example, following the death of Shabbetai Zevi in 5436 (1676), some of his followers continued to believe that their Messiah did not die in the manner of all flesh but was "hidden away" in the higher realms. They accordingly sought to calculate when the period of his concealment would end, at which time he would reappear and redeem Israel.⁶ But the effort to reckon the End was not confined to Sabbatean circles; even those who rejected the Sabbatean calculations on the premise that "the deer [*ha-zevi*] has fled, having produced nothing good," spun their own alternative calculations. Among them was R. Isaac Hayyim Kohen min ha-Hazzanim, who calculated that the Messiah would be born in 5470 (1710) and that the redemption would take place in 5500 (1740), when he was thirty years of age.⁷

Among the well-known eighteenth-century reckoners of the End was the Italian scholar of Kabbalah Immanuel Hai Ricchi (5448–5503;

⁶ See Scholem 1937, pp. 377–378; Benayahu 1959–1960; Goldish 2004, pp. 162–170.

⁷ See Shazar 1970, p. 25.

1688–1743).⁸ His *Uprightness of the Heart (Yosher Levav)*, composed in Aleppo, Syria, in 5497 (1737), includes detailed calculations of the End, written in the vague language typical of kabbalistic Sages. They led him to conclude that the time of redemption would be in the eighth month, Iyyar, in the year 5541 (April–May 1781).⁹ To reinforce his finding, he anchored it in the numerical value of the verse “Though it tarry, await it; because it will surely come, it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3), interpreted to refer to the coming of the Messiah. Ricchi added one important detail to all this: the signs of the redemption will begin to appear forty years before the event, that is, in 5500 (1740). This added feature is significant, for it anticipates an extended period of redemption, forty years or more, and it suggests an effort on Ricchi’s part to conform his results to those of earlier End-reckoners, who had determined that year to be the time for redemption. Similarly, R. Samuel b. Eliezer of Klovrio adopted Ricchi’s calculations and, in his work *Ways of Pleasantness (Darkhei*

⁸ Immanuel Hai Ricchi, a commentator of Lurianic Kabbalah with a possible Sabbatean undertone in his writings, had settled in Safed in 5478 (1718) and returned to Italy after the death of his daughter in a plague. In 5497 (1737) he settled in Jerusalem but a financial crisis forced him again to leave the Land of Israel and to return to Italy where he was murdered. For a detailed biography of Hai Ricchi, see Benayahu 1949; Wilensky 1949; Barnai 1992, “Hai Ricchi” index; Morgenstern 1999, pp. 19–28.

⁹ See *Uprightness of the Heart* 47a: “If so, six and one-half hours of the divine ‘day’ are equivalent, in human terms, to 541 years and eight months. Thus, according to R. Simeon b. Yohai’s views, the mountain of the Lord’s house will have been established [cf. Isa. 2:2] by A.M. 5541. At that point, Israel will have respite from the wars and tribulations that must accompany the coming of the Messiah, which will wane during 5500 and the first two-thirds of 5541, up to the point at which we will be happy and joyful. Your evidence for this is the phrase ‘even if he tarry, await him’; for the numerical value of ‘if he tarry’ (אִם יִתְאַוֶּה) is 541 [the Hebrew year designation, omitting the thousands figure], and the first letter of ‘await’ (אָוֵן), וי has a value of eight, corresponding to the eight months, during which we await him, for he will come.” Ricchi’s calculations are based on the talmud’s statement (*Sanhedrin* 97a) that a day in God’s life corresponds to one thousand human years, based on a midrashic understanding of Ps. 90:4—“For a thousand years in Your eyes are as yesterday when it is past.” The talmud determines as well that the redemption will take place on God’s Sabbath—“a day that is all *Shabbat*”—that is, the seventh millennium of creation. On the basis of that and other traditions, Immanuel Hai Ricchi advanced the estimated onset of the redemption to the dawn of the sixth millennium. Relying on the calculation that 1,000 years=one day=12 hours, he determined that the dawn of the sixth millennium begins six and one-half hours after “midday” of the fifth millennium, that is, 5,000 years + 541 years and eight months after creation. The year 5541 corresponds to 1781. For additional detail see Tishby 1967, p. 17; Morgenstern 1999, pp. 19–36.

This study begins, accordingly, with a new look at the Besht's *Holy Epistle*, in all its versions. It shows that the Besht hoped to be the herald of the redemption, in the manner of Elijah proclaiming the Messiah's arrival, and that he devoted seven years of his life to that effort. Only on Rosh ha-Shanah of the year 5507 (September 1746), when his soul ascended to the Garden of Eden and encountered the Messiah, did the Besht come to realize that he would not merit greeting the redeemer during his lifetime. But even though his hopes were shattered thirteen years before his death, they left an indelible mark on his circle of students.

Most of the book is devoted to presenting the teachings and work of R. Yehiel Mikhel, the *Maggid* of Zolochew, a student of the Besht. R. Yehiel Mikhel embodies a different type of messianic character, the *zaddik*, whose soul is believed by his disciples to be the soul of the redeemer or who may himself believe that.

Born in 5486 (1726), the *Maggid* of Zolochew grew up in the intensely messianic environment, suffused with expectations and reckonings of the End, that surrounded the ascetic sects out of which Hasidism was to grow. In contrast to the Besht, who kept his mystical experiences to himself and to all appearances was undistinguished from the crowd, the *Maggid* of Zolochew chose to withdraw from the community and founded a prayer house (*beit minyan*) of his own. In that prayer house, which he established for his students in the town of Brody in eastern Galicia, the first Hasidic-messianic court was formed. Its members functioned as a kabbalistic fellowship, striving to fashion a living bridge between earth and heaven, between the human and the divine, and to bring about national redemption by means of prayer and mystical union. The principal messianic burden was cast on the leader, the *Maggid* of Zolochew. He was called "the soul of *Shaddai*," after "*El Shaddai*"—one of God's names—thereby showing the divine origin of his soul. His students understood that soul to be an embodiment of the *sefirah* (divine emanation) of foundation (*yesod*), the *sefirah* of the *zaddik*, from which the soul of the Messiah was hewn. This gave rise to the designation "*Zaddikim she-ba-dor* (the righteous ones of the generation)" by which the *Maggid* of Zolochew was known. This was the first time in the history of Hasidism that the term "*zaddik*" had been used as a noun rather than an adjective and applied to a man with a messianic mission. It served to convey the god-like stature enjoyed by the first Hasidic *zaddik* in the eyes of his disciples.

The book offers a comprehensive portrayal of the Era of Redemption of the *Maggid* of Zolochov and his students. It begins in 5532 (1772), with an incident at the slaughterhouse in the town of Korets, Ukraine, in which the *Maggid's* students rose up against the oppression of the poor by the town's wealthy class and its rabbinical allies. That episode gave rise to the separatist Hasidic slaughter of kosher meat, and the associated documents attest for the first time to the existence of a band of people calling themselves "*hasidim* (Pious Ones)," worshipping in their own prayer house and adopting kabbalistic practices.

The second stage of the Era of Redemption took place in 5537 (1777). In the month of Adar, a group of *Hasidim* led by R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and R. Abraham of Kolyshki set out for the Land of Israel—heaven's gate, through which prayers ascend to the upper worlds. On the festival of Shavuot that year, the members of the group who had remained behind conducted a *tiqqun leil shavu'ot*¹⁴ and attempted, during the course of the night, to spiritually unite in shared prayer the group's members in the Land of Israel with those in the Diaspora, a step that would open the gate of heaven and bring about the redemption. Soon after that festival, beginning in 5538 (1778), the group began to publish esoteric kabbalistic books, intending to disseminate the secrets of redemption and accelerate its advent. The expectations of the band's members in the Diaspora and in the Land of Israel were focused on the eighth month, Iyyar, of the year 5541 (April–May 1781), in which Israel was destined to be redeemed.¹⁵ At that point, they published the *Besht's Epistle*, in the hope that disseminating the mysteries of the Messiah, encompassed in that letter, would consummate the messianic effort that the Besht himself had undertaken. Aryeh Morgenstern, who uncovered the connection between the time of the publication and the expected messianic date,¹⁶ saw Ricchi's influence on the *Maggid* of Zolochov's circle as definitive; indeed, R. Meshullam Feibush Heller, an important student of the *Maggid*, cited Ricchi's *Uprightness of the Heart* as a work essential to understanding the mystery of the redemption. Heller's

¹⁴ *Tiqqun leil shavu'ot* refers to the practice of staying awake all night on the festival of Shavuot, engaged in study or prayer, in commemoration of the giving of the Torah—*translator's note*.

¹⁵ That is, according to the reckonings of Immanuel Hai Ricchi in *Uprightness of the Heart*.

¹⁶ See Morgenstern 1999, p. 198.

own letters were published under the title *Honest Words of Truth and Faith (Yosher Dibrei Emet)*, alluding to the title of Ricchi's book. It appears that the lengthy period of redemption sketched by Ricchi enabled the members of the *Maggid's* circle to merge their messianic aspirations into a continuum that started with the Besht and to see themselves as carrying out the divine redemptive program that had begun in 5500 (1740) and that was to reach its climax in Iyyar of 5541 (April–May 1781).

The higher the hope, the deeper the despair. The publication of *Besht's Epistle*, with date and publishers prominently displayed, disclosed the messianic program of the *Maggid* of Zolochov and his disciples and made them the target of forceful attacks by rabbis and lay communal leaders. Unnerved by the very existence of a messianic band, these leaders feared the renewal of a Sabbatean sect that would undermine existing institutions and threaten traditional ways. They may also have feared the reaction of the Christian authorities and local populace, who might well take the appearance of a Jewish messiah as disparaging the Christian belief in Jesus as messiah. The mounting opposition to the *Maggid* of Zolochov and his circle generated a spate of excommunications and ostracisms, decreed in many communities during the months of Av and Elul 5541 (July–September 1781). These attacks appear to have brought about the death of R. Yehiel Mikhel in Elul 5541 (August–September 1781), four months after the anticipated redemption that had still not come. He died brokenhearted, ostracized, and excommunicated.

Paradoxically enough, the tragic death of the first Hasidic *zaddik* paved the way for the emergence of Hasidism as a mass movement. The *Maggid's* disciples, in contrast to those of Jesus and of Shabbetai Zevi and to the "dead *Hasidim*" of R. Nahman of Bratslav, did not believe that their master would return from the dead. Beyond that, the *Maggid's* students vowed never to choose a new leader, and the absence of an accepted heir led to the group's gradual disintegration. Some of its members claimed the title "*zaddik*," gathered disciples, and established courts patterned after the esoteric court in Brody: the *zaddik* at its heart, and his believers sheltering him like the organs of the body, which both envelop the heart and draw vitality from it. The break-up into numerous courts, which transformed Hasidism from an underground movement into one with a mass following, also precluded the sprouting of its messianic seed, for when all is said and done, the nearly simultaneous appearance

of two or more messiahs makes a mockery of the notion of a single, chosen, Messiah. Hasidism's messianic impulse was thus tempered, sublimated into an internal aspiration. To this day, however, from the Satmar court in the United States to the Belz, Gur, and Vishnitz courts in Israel, tens of thousands of *Hasidim* cherish the belief that the Messiah will come forth from their own dynasties of *zaddikim* and will someday be revealed to all. That notwithstanding, open expressions of messianism associated with particular *zaddikim* have been infrequent and unusual. One such messianic outbreak took place in the nineteenth century, involving R. Nahman of Bratslav; another is the contemporary outbreak surrounding the Lubavitcher Rebbe. But though these later phenomena draw on deep-seated trends in the Hasidic doctrine of the "zaddik," they are merely a pale reflection of events in the early days of the movement. In the twentieth century, religious messianism, emphasizing the role and personality of the redeemer, has been displaced from the stage of Jewish history. It has made way for ideological and political movements, ranging from socialism to Zionism, though some of those movements retain messianic aspirations cloaked in modern dress: messianism without a Messiah.

The history of Hasidism as here presented differs from the picture of the movement's beginnings generally painted in Hasidic literature. But the book's account offers an alternative not only to Hasidic historiography but also to the conventional academic view, particularly with respect to early Hasidism's messianic dimension. That factor, which lies at the heart of the matter, has until now been examined only superficially.

At the epicenter of these events are R. Yehiel Mikhel, the *Maggid* of Zolochov, and the members of his band. Clarifying the link between their messianic belief and their interpretation of the *Besht's Epistle* discloses the continuity between the *Besht's* mission as herald of the redemption and the succeeding generation's efforts to actuate the redemption.

Beyond that, the activities of the *Maggid* of Zolochov and his students follow a pattern that shows the formation of a sect whose religious life was dominated by the messianic idea. The *Besht's* own mystical efforts to bring about the redemption had represented, for the most part, only the spiritual strivings of an individual. In contrast, the actions of the *Maggid* and his students attest to the flowering of a messianic movement, in the manner of earlier such

movements in Jewish history. A messianic movement of this sort draws no distinction between the redemption of the individual and the redemption of the Jewish people, through which the individual will also be redeemed; the leader of the movement is seen as the redeemer of the nation as well; the yearning for redemption is transformed in the believer's consciousness from a utopian vision to a driving force, active in history; and the believer's expectations are focused on the Land of Israel, the return to which is understood as carrying out the redemptive process in a concrete way.

These four defining features certainly characterize the activities of the *Maggid* of Zolochov and his disciples. They sought to disseminate their messianic tidings throughout Jewish society, and they directed their messianic hopes to their leader, believing that his soul was a reincarnation of the redeemer's soul and that it enjoyed a special affinity with the soul of Moses. Some members of the group went up to the Land of Israel as a vanguard, showing that they sought not redemption *in* the Diaspora but, rather, redemption *from* it.

Why, then, did the figure of the *Maggid* of Zolochov disappear from the history of Hasidism and why have most of his sayings and deeds been attributed to another *Maggid*, R. Dov Ber of Mezhirichi? The answers lie concealed within the esoteric codes adopted by the disciples and behind the image projected by nineteenth-century Hasidic writers—the image of a literary Hasidism, which uses hagiography to backfill the gaps in the historical account, even where its connection to actual events is highly tenuous.

It is no simple matter to discern what lies behind the superficially complete picture painted by Hasidic hagiography. And it is still more difficult to piece together the data in order to uncover the inner account of a closed community that conceals its secrets from outsiders. To do so requires a fresh reading of Hasidic sources and a reassessment of conclusions reached during the fifties and sixties by historians and students of Kabbalah. The leading candidate for reevaluation is Gershom Scholem's definition of Hasidism as a neutralization of the messianic impulse—a definition given a decidedly ironic cast by the recent turn of events in the *Habad* court. Scholem vigorously denied any messianic element in Hasidism and dogmatically criticized the contrary view of Ben-Zion Dinur and Isaiah Tishby. But it appears, with the benefit of hindsight, that Dinur and Tishby studied Hasidism from an objective point of view, setting aside emotion and prejudice. Scholem, in contrast, was implicitly concerned

with the question of what Hasidism *ought to be*, rather than what it actually *was*. This failing on the part of the outstanding researcher of Kabbalah may have been mere happenstance, attesting to the elusive nature of messianic belief and to its tendency to conceal more than it reveals. But it may also be that Scholem was ensnared by his own refusal in principle to even consider the possibility of a messianic side to Hasidism. He may have been deterred from entertaining that possibility by his concern that acknowledging the messianic character of Hasidism might cast it in the same light as Sabbateanism, thereby obscuring the boundary between a movement that remained within the Jewish fold and one whose leader had converted to Islam and removed himself from the Jewish world. It is possible as well that Scholem's view of the matter tacitly expressed his unwillingness to regard Zionism as a messianic movement that carried on the messianic feature of Hasidism¹⁷—a position clashing with that of his contemporaries who often depicted the fierce commitment of the Zionist pioneers as a modern embodiment of the intense faith that characterized a congregation of *Hasidim*. Indeed, to understand the Hasidic immigration to the Land of Israel in 5537 (1777) as messianically impelled is to emphasize the continuity between the messianic immigrations and the early Zionist immigrations.

“Great are the searchings of the heart.” And even now, as the messianic mystery of Hasidism's beginnings is on its way to being solved, the picture remains far from complete. I've tried to present my findings as layers of a palimpsest being progressively uncovered, but many questions are yet to be answered. In addition, I've attempted in this work to tell a story that begins with great hope but ends with bitter disappointment and to depict for the reader both the heavy toll taken by the agonies of redemption and the sweet fruit that they bear in the ascent to the Land of Israel. May I thereby recall and give voice to the ideas that are explicit and implicit in the written record.

¹⁷ Scholem often expressed his skittishness about defining Zionism as a messianic movement. See, for example, Scholem 1990, pp. 85–90.