ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

History 610

Senior Project

The Hasidim: Spiritual Jews of Eighteenth Century Poland

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4/3/19



Department of History

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Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without the assistance and support of several amazing individuals. I would like to sincerely thank my advisors, Professor Miller and Dr. Krone, for their advice and ideas throughout the whole process of writing this project, keeping me grounded and preventing me from straying too far from my thesis during my research. I could not have done it without them. I would also like to thank the Research Librarians, Jane Westenfeld and Helen McCullough, for meeting with me and helping me not only find sources for this project but allowing me to hold a seventeenth century edition of the *Shulhan Arukh*, which, although it was completely in Hebrew, helped keep me motivated when I was looking for primary sources.

To my friends and family, who have shown nothing but support throughout the whole process, I owe a great deal of thanks. Their constant enthusiasm towards my passions and project made it very difficult to remain stressed throughout this experience. I did not really think anyone would want, or allow, me to talk about my project with them for hours, but you all replied to my enthusiasm in kind. Thank you all so much. This project is dedicated to all of you!

Abstract

Within eighteenth century Poland, a new religious movement was formed amongst Polish Jewry. This movement, called Hasidism, embraced pantheism and an ecstatic view on life and prayer, quickly spreading to the regions of Poland that had been massacred the century prior. Polish Jewry had previously enjoyed a Golden Age, prospering under the protection of the Polish King, developing their religious talents, but things began to rapidly decline as pogroms quickly became the norm while the rabbis became more distant. Israel ben Eleazar, the Baal Shem Tov, lived a life that appealed to the uneducated spiritual masses, and rejected the academic focus of the rabbinate. The rabbinate did not appreciate Hasidism however, and through excommunications and public denouncements, they attempted to crush Hasidism once it began to spread after the Baal Shem Tov died, yet by becoming decentralized and following a group of leaders known as the tzaddikim, Hasidism would continue to live on, eventually becoming an accepted part of Judaism.

Introduction

"Hasidism is the Kabbalah become ethos. But the life that it teaches is not asceticism but joy in God. The word Hasid means 'pious man,' but it is a world piety that is meant here. Hasidism is no pietism. It dispenses with all sentimentality and emotional display."[1]

From Kingdom to exile, and from Temple to synagogue, the Jewish way of life has evolved throughout the ages, branching out to the many corners of the world. In one such corner, in eighteenth century Poland, the right conditions were met to allow a new form of Judaism to develop and be expressed like never before. This expression, viewed as radical by its contemporaries, was the foundation of Hasidism, a movement born from the actions and teachings of Israel ben Eleazar, the Baal Shem Tov, who advocated an emotional and personal relationship with God in opposition to the rigidness to which Polish Jewry had become accustomed.[2] While previously a sanctuary for the spiritually dependent Polish Jewry, the declining Kingdom of Poland had become a place of growing anti-Semitism by the eighteenth century. This growing outside threat, combined with an ever increasing divide between leading rabbis and the spiritual starved Jewish masses, would eventually lead to the creation of Hasidism, which, under the influence of their leader, the Baal Shem Tov, championed personal piety and closeness to God instead of the traditional study of Talmud, allowing it to continue to survive long after the Baal Shem Tov's death in 1760.

To fully understand Polish Jewish life in eighteenth century Poland, it is essential to understand the previous few centuries and how the Jews had previously fit into Polish society.

[1] Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, Translated by Maurice S. Friedman, (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), 10.
[2] See Glossary.

The rabbinic Council of Four Lands, also known as the *Vaad*, in all intents and purposes, was the governing body of the Jewish People within the Kingdom of Poland, as well as having the power to influence the Polish King by overseeing Jewish tax collection. The Jews not only had the power to govern themselves on a large scale, but to influence the King that ruled them in a fashion that most other Jewry were unaccustomed. The power of the *Vaad*, however, declined alongside the Kingdom of Poland throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and with each moment of decline, the Jews suddenly became subject to more pogroms and gained the suspicion of their previously friendly Christian neighbors. The Golden Age of Polish Jewry had come to an abrupt close, ending centuries of prosperity. Events, such as the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648, resulting in the death of up to 100,000 Jews in the region that makes up modern day Ukraine, and the execution of the Riezes brothers, two Rabbis convicted of converting a Christian, in 1728 were still fresh in the minds of Jews across Poland, who were noticing the rapid change. Desperately, they would seek to restore themselves to the normalcy that they had known in the centuries prior, yet with each attempt came further decline. Polish Jewry needed answers for these catastrophes as the very world around them seemed to crumble, just as it had in many other Jewish communities.

The spiritual relationship that Polish Jewry had at this time was strained as well, with the previously spiritual powerhouse that was the Polish Rabbinate now distant and unproviding to the masses. Halakha, Jewish law, had long been a part of the average Jew's daily life, being defined centuries ago by Joseph Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*, and its Eastern European edition, the *Mappah*. Even an uneducated Polish Jew was not ignorant of the importance of following the laws and traditions of Judaism, as they learned from the rabbis. The mystical Kabbalah of Isaac Luria was also well known in the region, with many rabbis eagerly reading from Luria's

teachings, but they rarely shared this knowledge with their congregations. Instead, they focused inwards on themselves, the rabbis concerned themselves more with achieving wealth and rank by engaging in rigid and sometimes hairsplitting discussions when interpreting Talmud, which hardly ever pleased the growingly distant masses. It was impossible for the rabbis to satisfy the people any more. The Jews of Poland were alienated from their rabbis, who had previously served as spiritual and religious guides for centuries, and they were beginning to seek another source of spiritual guidance. Sabbateanism, a messianic movement based around the teachings and charisma of Shabbatai Tzvi, did little to reconcile Polish Jewry to the rabbis and further drove them away from their traditional teachers, without providing a new source of stability after Sabbateanism failed..[3] Mystic Men, including the Baal Shem Tov, soon thereafter roamed the countryside with their followers and quickly became the norm as Hasidism began to rise and spread. Hasidism, in itself, came as a direct result of a spiritual disconnection with Jewish leaders and a newfound fanaticism towards mysticism and the Kabbalah, pulling practices and ideas from non-Jewish sources; the Hasidim were not going to forsake the God of their forefathers, but they were no longer going to place blind faith in distant and poorly educated rabbis, instead they were going to make practices of their own.

Since Hasidism still exists today and has a notable presence within the global Jewish community, this period in history, and the text surrounding it, is heavily influenced by religious fiction and the Jewish folklore that spawned following the foundation of Hasidism and this divisive period of history for Polish Jewry. Depending on the author, the Hasidim are either following the correct path of Judaism, and should be praised for their piety, or are a people

[3] *Shabbatai Tzvi* (1626-1676) - A seventeenth century Jew from the Ottoman Empire who was claimed to be the Messiah by his associate, Nathan of Gaza. He gained a large following but converted to Islam in 1666 after being captured by Ottoman Authorities in Constantinople.

locked in time, still attempting to live within the shtetl of their absurd and outdated interpretations. The very inception of Hasidism led to a mighty divide between rabbinic scholars and those who aligned with the Hasidim. Even today, there is a debate between their interpretations and practices within Judaism, especially with their now fundamentalist, if not nostalgic, mindset. The majority of the sources on this chapter of Eastern European Jewish history have ties to either one faction or the other. One source, being a collection of documents from the era, is entirely edited and written by representatives from Hebrew Union College, which many Hasidim would not even consider to be properly Jewish.[4] Other scholars, such as Samuel Dresner, are sympathetic towards Hasidism, idolizing the individuals based around early Hasidism, calling them great masters and divinely inspired. It also does not help that the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, did not write much during his lifetime, and most works about him are either written by his most fervent supporters or are heavily influenced by modern conceptions of his life, and, as a result are heavily biased. I am not a member of the Hasidic Movement, nor do I agree with its modern perceptions and practices, but I am interested in how the movement itself formed, not so that I could denounce it or promote it, but to further understand what exactly about Jewish life at the time led to its creation, and how it would continue to exist afterwards.

The first chapter will provide a brief analysis of the history of Polish Jewry within the Kingdom of Poland, starting with their establishment, leading up to the eighteenth century. Using sources from Eastern European historians such as Heiko Haumann's *History of East European Jews,* and Simon Dubnow's *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, from the Earliest Times*

[4] Hebrew Union College is the Rabbinical School for Reform Judaism within the United States, it is fairly prominent within Reform Judaism, and practically has a monopoly on Reform rabbis across the country.

until the Present Day, the origins of Polish Jewry and their Golden Age will be explored and analyzed, providing insight on what Polish Jewry had lost during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Aspects of this Golden Age, such as the increased autonomy, economic, and spiritual strength of that time will be examined as well, drawing from *The World of Hasidism*, written by Harry Rabinowicz, a 20th century Hasidic rabbi. Following this background, the relationship between the Kingdom of Poland and Polish Jewry will be examined through the use of studying primary sources provided by *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*. The Council of Four Lands, or the *Vaad*, will be studied as a political entity for the Polish Crown and as a branch of Jewish autonomy. Their edicts and tax collection will also come into play as the Kingdom of Poland began to decline. The first example of a decline will be during the Chmielnicki Massacres in 1648, which led to the mass slaughter of Jews in modern day Ukraine. Most scholars agree that this was the effective end of the Golden Age for Jews in Poland as it saw the introduction of pogroms and other forms of distrust from their Christian neighbors. Tales of Blood Libels, the belief that Jews murdered Christian children to use their blood to bake matzah, quickly began to spread, and not even assistance from the Pope could dissuade the furious Polish masses. The seventeenth century also saw an increased attempt to convert the Jews, with Catholic Priests attempting to reinstate many anti-Jew laws, which would have effectively driven Judaism into hiding or exile. Polish landholders that had in-debt Jewish tenants would also instruct them to perform unclean actions, which included the slaughtering of pigs, and seize and baptize their children if they couldn't pay, as mentioned within Samuel Dresner's *The Zaddik*. The increased hostility towards Jews, especially for rabbis and other scholars, will be expanded on by the execution of the Riezes Brothers, as mentioned in *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791,* where their public executions were mourned by the greater

community and considered an act of martyrdom. The ever-changing atmosphere for the Jews during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw an increase of fear and chaos as leaders attempted to return to the Golden Age, each time continuing to fail and making Polish Jewry more desperate.

Outside influences were not enough to call for the creation of Hasidism, so within the second chapter, the religious history and rapid decay of Polish Jewry will also be analyzed, concluding with the birth of the Baal Shem Tov. The spiritual state of Polish Jewry was in steady decline at the start of the eighteenth century, with rabbis focusing less on the spiritual health of their community and instead focusing on their status and rank within the *Vaad*. Outside Jewish influences on the region, which had provided enlightenment and stability to others Jewish communities had grown stale. Kabbalah, which had undergone its own revival in the centuries prior, was popular, yet the inner workings of it were jealously guarded secrets of the rabbinic oligarchy. Jewish law and authority was heavily influenced by Joseph Karo's *Shulhan Arukh* and its East European edition, the *Mappah*, yet these laws were mostly dictated to the masses, of which few were properly educated. The growing divide between the educated rabbis and the uneducated laymen was not sudden, and instead developed over time, with the century leading up to the creation of Hasidism seeing the creation of one of the largest Messianic movement to grip the hearts of Jews. This movement, coming from the popular false-Messiah, Shabbatai Tzvi, found there a large following amongst Polish Jewry in the seventeenth century, with many using the chance to denounce the rabbinic oligarchy. Many early Hasidim were previously Sabbatians, as even that movement quickly began to degrade during the eighteenth century. Using Dresner's theory, presented within *The Zaddik*, that the crisis that gripped the Jewish people in eighteenth century Poland was one that came from a lack of moral leadership, it is easy to place the blame

on the rabbis themselves, yet that is only a simplification. The rabbis, while being educated in a plethora of Jewish scripture, began to degrade in quality as the schools that taught them stagnated, becoming prisons to their students as pointed out by Lithuanian Jewish philosopher Solomon Maimon. Without the proper spiritual leadership that Polish Jewry were used to, they began to turn to other possible answers, which included false messiahs and when they failed, traveling mystic men.

Israel ben Eleazer, the Baal Shem Tov, was the greatest of these mystic men, attracting others to his teachings and through his practices and lifestyle, he inspired the creation of Hasidism, yet he was a man of great mystery. The third chapter will delve into the Baal Shem Tov's life and the myth based around him. As the founder of Hasidism, his actual identity has been merged with a hagiographical interpretation of him, making the man both myth and reality. He was born and raised in the small town of Okopy, fathered by a pious man named Eleazar, but orphaned from an early age, being taught at the local school for much of his childhood. Most of the information on the life of the Baal Shem Tov comes from *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, a hagiographical collection of the stories surrounding the Baal Shem Tov, as written down by the son-in-law of his secretary, and then printed by an eager Hasid in 1814. These tales, themselves coming from a multitude of Hasidim, make up the best account of the Baal Shem Tov's life, as well as showing how his followers viewed, and continue to view him. His theology, and interpretations of Judaism, are surrounded with speculation as they, with their radical changes, may have come from sources outside of Judaism, as many critics would suggest. In retrospect to the time, this may have been the only way his teachings would have been attractive to the spiritually exhausted masses, who, just like the early Protestants in Christian Europe, felt that religion was separated from them by the educated elite. The Baal Shem Tov solved this dilemma

by combining Kabbalah with reality and encouraging a positive and cheerful outlook on life, as pantheism became a dominant aspect of Hasidism. All of the teachings from the Baal Shem Tov, however, would threaten and enrage the rabbinic leadership, who viewed his populist teachings, and foreign practices, with distain.

The fourth, and final, chapter will begin in the aftermath of the death of the Baal Shem Tov in 1760 and how the Hasidim came to a philosophical crossroads without him while comparing it to a failed movement that existed at the same time, the Frankists. The Frankists, who were a successor movement to the messianic Sabbatians, grew to prominence in the final years of the Baal Shem Tov's life, and unlike the Hasidim, they failed to preserve themselves without their leader Jacob Frank. The legacy of the Frankists would remain in the back of many Jews minds during the latter half of the eighteenth century as reforms became essential to Hasidism. The successor of the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid, Rabbi Dov Baer, would essentially rework the movement after the Baal Shem Tov's death alongside the other members of his inner circle, eventually leading to the multiple Hasidic Dynasties that currently exist within Hasidism.[5] These dynasties would come from the idea of the tzaddik, righteous men with a divine connection to God, and through said connection had the authority of the Torah. From an outside perspective, these communities of Hasidim, each venerating a separate tzaddik were messianic cults, separate from orthodox Judaism, instead of another form of Jewish expression. Contemporary responses to this movement, especially the condemnations led by the opponents to Hasidism, known as the *mitnagdim*, became commonplace with rabbinic leaders calling for excommunications, the burning of Hasidic books, and the forced dissolvement of Hasidic

[5] Many of the Hasidic Dynasties would come from the lineages of the members of the Baal Shem Tov inner circle, which included Shneur Zalman, Nachman of Bratslav, and Yitzchak Meir Alter.

groups. Within each of these condemnations the differences between early Hasidism and Polish orthodox Judaism will develop as the two groups would come into frequent scholarly conflicts. The conflict between these two groups, threatening to result in a schism in the already declining Polish Jewry, would continue to develop as Hasidism spread, with these two groups only coming to terms with each other when outside threats, which included the Jewish Enlightenment and the collapse of the Kingdom of Poland in 1793, forced them to work together. In this time of turmoil, Hasidism continued to grow and develop eventually allowing it to cement itself into the communities with the start of the nineteenth century.

The Kingdom of Poland was no longer a paradise for Jews; their prosperity bound to a failing monarchy and an ever-distant rabbinate. Hasidism was a culmination of the frustration and uncertainty felt by Polish Jewry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who, with little faith in their leadership, almost seemed to be waiting for a mystic man to uplift them. The Baal Shem Tov, himself an embodiment of these frustrations, proved to be the answer that many Polish Jewry had been waiting for, and through his cheery and joyful outlook on life and the constant worldly presence of God, he would answer the prayers of many Jews during his lifetime, and beyond.

Chapter 1
The End of a Golden Age

"For the first time in history, Polish Jewish refugees, later to become a familiar sight, began to make their way to different countries; to Holland, England, Italy, Turkey, and even Egypt."[1]

For centuries, life had been ideal for Jews within the Kingdom of Poland. Supported by the Polish King, the Jews were allowed a noticeable degree of autonomy, allowing them special privileges and rights where there had previously been none. Under the King's watchful eye, the Jews were also allowed to form their own system of self-governance, providing a sense of stability amongst Polish Jewry. This stability, combined with their granted autonomy, would encourage the spiritual growth of the community as well, propelling Polish Jewry into their Golden Age. For over a century Polish Jewry thrived, yet their prosperity would abruptly end with the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648. Pogroms, previously unheard of within Poland, became frequent and, with the support and protection of the Polish King waning, harder to prevent. Any attempt to return to pre-1648 normalcy by Polish Jewry would prove futile as more members of Polish society, including the Church and nobility, began to target Jewish leaders, causing them to flee en masse, and igniting more hatred. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Polish Jewry were in rapid decline, desperately hoping for change and a return to the paradise that they had previously known.

Poland's relationship with the Jewish People began in the thirteenth century when Prince Boleslaw the Pious, of Great Poland, issued the Statute of Kalisz in 1264, which declared the Jews to be the "chamber servants" of the Prince, and to whom they had to pay tribute in

[1] Harry Mordka Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism*, (London, 1970), 16.

exchange for promises of protection and freedom in economic activities. This bore a heavy resemblance to Emperor Frederick II's Privilege of 1236, which had placed a similar title on the Jews of the Holy Roman Empire, but unlike the Privilege, Prince Boleslaw granted the Jews within the realm of Great Poland the right of self-governance and would diligently protect them from any attack that would harm the Jews. Boleslaw's successors would repeatedly reaffirm this Statute, with his grandson, King Casimir III extending its influence on the entirety of the Kingdom of Poland. Under Casimir III, Polish Jewry had gained more rights than they had been allowed within the Christian medieval world, which included the ownership of land, both in the city and the countryside, and the ability to purchase and sell goods of all kind, including beverages. Economically speaking, Polish Jewry had the same rights as their non-Jewish counterparts.[2] There were few, if any, other places within Europe that had allowed Jews to experience such rights by this period.

In Hebrew, Poland's very name, *Poilin,* or *Polaniah,* meant something very specific for the Jews that lived within it. *Poilin* was roughly translated into "Here shall ye dwell," and *Polaniah*, "Here dwelleth the Lord," and such comparisons were not completely exaggerated. The majority of the Jews who came to Poland, starting in the thirteenth century, were refugees and survivors from Western Europe, where they were slaughtered at the hands of Crusaders or expelled from their homes in France and Germany. During this period of uncertainty, the Polish Crown had welcomed the Jews with open arms, and, within Poland, they found sanctuary. One sixteenth century Rabbi, Moses Isserles (1525-72) remarked, "Had not the Lord appointed this land as a refuge, the fate of Israel would indeed have been unbearable. By the grace of God, both the King and the nobles are favorably disposed towards us."[3] This favorable disposition allowed

[2] Heiko Haumann, *A History of East European Jews,* (Budapest, NY: Central European University Press, 2002), 4-5.
[3] Rabinowicz, 11-12.

Polish Jewry to develop their own system of self-governance. Every Jewish community had its own Town Council, known as a *Kahal,* which regulated daily life for the members of its community. Above the *Kahal* were councils responsible for entire districts, known as the *Gelliot*, who in turn answered to the provincial councils, *Medinot*, who answered to the highest Jewish authority in the Kingdom of Poland, the *Vaad Arba Aratzot*, or as it roughly translates, "The Council of the Four Lands."[4] These four lands were Great Poland, Little Poland, Red Russia (East Galicia and Podolia), and Volhynia. The land of Lithuania was briefly under the jurisdiction of the *Vaad*, but its own, Lithuanian-based, council would form in the early seventeenth century, working in conjunction with the *Vaad*.[5] The *Vaad*, consisting of multiple rabbis and learned laymen, viewed itself as the Sanhedrin reborn, and when discussing justice for the Jewish community, it decreed, "The leaders of the Four Lands were just like the Sanhedrin [of old which met] in the Chamber of Hewn Stone [of the Temple], for they had the power to judge every Jew in the Kingdom of Poland… The lawsuit of a Jew would never come before gentile judges, nor before the court of any magnate, nor before the king himself—may his glory be exalted."[6] The authority that the *Vaad* bestowed itself was not entirely exaggerated. Its primary responsibility, as dictated by the Polish King, was the collection of taxes from Jews, yet it also oversaw the majority of Jewish life, be it economic, administrative, religious, cultural, or social.[7] Whenever a Jew had a quarrel with another Jew, he had the privilege of appearing before a Jewish court instead of a Polish one. Essentially the autonomy of the Jews was only restricted by taxation, as when it came to everyday life, the *Vaad* reigned supreme. Author Harry

[4] Rabinowicz, 13.
[5] Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader, *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*, (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 330.
[6] "Philanthropy and Justice Among the Polish Jews, ca. 1648" in Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader, *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*, (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 331-332.
[7] Saperstein, 330.

Rabinowicz would refer to this form of governance as a "State within a State," which as a result of the increased autonomy allowed intense Torah study and education, resulting in Poland becoming a proud center of Jewish learning as Polish Jewry entered their Golden Age. Rabinowicz, when writing on this time, would state, "the sixteenth century was the golden age of Polish Jewry, no less splendid than the golden age (900-1200) of Spanish Jewry, or the Talmudic period in Babylon."[8] Within these three centers, the earliest of which being in Babylon, the Diasporic communities of Jews found an increased level of prosperity and knowledge, allowing them to develop some of the foundational texts within modern Judaism. In Babylon, the Babylonian Talmud was written, and from Spain came Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, which still heavily influences Judaism today.[9] Every Golden Age both provided and resulted in the scholarly prosperity of the Jews and an overall advancement of the Jewish People. By the sixteenth century, Polish Jewry had surely reached their zenith, with German Jewry eagerly moving towards Poland. Rabinowicz's claim is not unfounded, as in what will later be discussed, many of the religious movements that would spark amongst Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would take place, or attempt to gain popularity, within the Kingdom of Poland. For the first time in history, European Jewry looked towards Poland for its rabbinic leaders.[10]

By the mid-seventeenth century, the Jewish population had rapidly increased from 24,000 to 500,000; five percent of the Kingdom's entire population, of which the largest communities

[8] Rabinowicz, 14.
[9] Moses ben Maimon (1135-1204), commonly known as Maimonides or Rambam, was born in Cordoba and was considered the greatest Jewish scholar of his time. Outside of the Jewish world, he was known for his skills as an astronomer and physician, being appointed as the leader of the Egyptian Jewish Community and whose medical writings would influence physicians for generations. His writings on Jewish Law, and his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, were read as far away as Iraq and Yemen, with his explanations of Torah still being viewed as canon by rabbis today.
[10] Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy*, (Abelard-Schuman, 1960), 23.

were found in the region of Red Ruthenia, yet this would all change in 1648.[11] Near Red Ruthenia, in modern-day Ukraine, Polish authorities would wrong a peasant named Bogdan Zinov Chmielnicki and spark a bloody rebellion. The Ukrainian peasantry, primarily Greek Orthodox, had long been oppressed by the Catholic Polish nobility and were only waiting for an excuse to rebel.[12] Under Chmielnicki, the Ukrainian Peasants found common cause with the Cossacks and the Crimean Tatars and rose up in arms together against the Polish Monarchy and its allies, which, by association, included the Jews. The Jews were the Polish King's direct subjects and enjoyed many privileges and luxuries that the Ukrainian peasants had not. The royal protection that had allowed Polish Jewry to prosper for centuries had made the Jewish people Chmielnicki's primary target. The Polish Army, led by King Wladyslaw, attempted to defeat the rebels, but were annihilated in May, allowing Chmielnicki and his allies to pillage Poland.A Russian Historian, quoted by Rabinowicz, would write:

> "The most terrible cruelty was shown towards the Jews. They were destined to utter annihilation, and the slightest pity shown to them was looked upon as treason. Scrolls of the Law (Torah) were taken out of the synagogues by the Cossacks, who danced on them in drunken frenzy. Then the Jews were placed upon the Scrolls and butchered without mercy. Thousands of Jewish infants were thrown into wells, or buried alive."[13]

The Catastrophe of 1648, as it would later be known, would claim countless lives, with the death toll varying from the tens of thousands to far above 100,000.[14] One survivor, Manasseh ben Israel, claimed that 180,000 Jews had been killed while petitioning Oliver Cromwell to readmit the Jews to England in 1655. Jews were beginning to flee Poland en masse, preferring other havens over the now bloody Poland. Rabinowicz ranks this time, referred to as the Chmielnicki Massacres, to be one of the largest disasters in Jewish history, to only be surpassed by the "Hitler

[11] Haumann, 30.
[12] S. M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Translated by Israel Friedlaender. Vol. 1. 3 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1916), 144-145.
[13] Rabinowicz, 15-16.
[14] Haumann, 36.

Holocaust of World War II."[15] Sadly these massacres quickly turned into the norm in the decades following Chmielnicki's rebellion as both Cossacks and native Poles would begin to target the Jewish community with violent fervor, tearing down whatever sense of normalcy that had existed. Long accumulated tensions were finally being released, and since the Jews enjoyed special privileges under the Polish King, through which many of them have obtained wealth, their deaths, and the looting of their property, promised a hefty reward, to which few people, especially those who had been wronged by the monarchy, could pass.[16] Even Polish soldiers joined in on the massacres, with King John Casimir II remarking, "Many of the Jews were robbed or killed by our soldiers, and others were despoiled or massacred by foreign troops."[17] Even with John Casimir II's lamentation, he did little to ease the situation, especially when he declared the Virgin Mary to be the Queen of Poland in 1656, which only spurred on zealous Catholics to attack the Jews with newfound confidence.[18]

The King's declaration reinforced the Christian nature of the Kingdom, which, for his zealous subjects, the very presence of Jews seemed to threaten. Blood Libels quickly became the norm, with the massacres of the communities of Sandomierz, Poznan, and Zaslav coming from accusations of Jews killing Christians.[19] A popular saying, justifying these Blood Libels, is, "Just as Poland cannot do without the Liberum Veto, so the Jews cannot have matzot without Christian

[15] Rabinowicz, 16.
[16] Haumann, 37.
[17] Rabinowicz, 16-17.
[18] Haumann, 38.
[19] Blood Libels, along with well poisoning and host desecration, were one of the primary causes of persecution for Jews within Europe. Stemming from the belief that Jews needed blood to bake matzo for Passover, Blood Libels were universally false as not only is blood not needed for matzo, but they were also fabricated as reasons to attack Jews. A Blood Libel tended to accompany a missing child, with famous examples being William of Norwich in England and St. Gabrial of Bialystok in the Kingdom of Poland, whose 'sacrifice by the Jews' would require retribution by the Christian community. Many Blood Libel 'victims' would be canonized by the Church, providing validity to the claims, and further inspiring more anti-Semitic sentiment.

Blood."[20] These claims are, of course, completely unfounded, and were used only as an excuse for violence against the Jews by those who were completely ignorant of Jewish tradition; which not only doesn't support the consumption of blood, but would consider human sacrifice abhorrent. Ignorance would prove triumphant in most cases, so whenever a corpse was found in Poland, the neighboring Jews would become the primary suspects, and soon thereafter a mob would form from the frightened and angry peasantry. The massacre would begin immediately thereafter. Catholic Priests usually led these mobs, and while seeking to stifle the "infidels" they pushed for the reinstatement of many anti-Jewish laws, which included outlawing the construction of new synagogues, prohibiting Jews from having Christian servants, forcing the burial of the dead to only happen at night, and the confinement of Jews to their homes during Christian festivals. These blatant attempts to practically make the Jews invisible in society would also inspire other priests to close synagogues and hold them for ransom, while actively denouncing the Jews and inspiring some of the previously mentioned Blood Libels. The role of Priests in the persecution of Jews became so prevalent that the *Vaad* sent a delegation to Rome to beg for aid from the Pope. However, even though the Pope declared the charges false, Polish Priests ignored his declaration and continued to make accusations against the Jewish community.[21] Nothing could dissuade the attacks on Polish Jewry, who were becoming increasing vulnerable to those that sought their destruction.

Prior to this time, the Polish King would be able to intervene and stop these rumors from spreading or, at the very least, come to the Jews' aid, but the monarchy was greatly weakened by the events in the seventeenth century, which made the previously upheld Statute of Kalisz moot. The Statute of Kalisz decreed that the Jews would be direct servants to the Polish King in

[20] Rabinowicz, 17.
[21] Dresner, 26.

exchange for protection, yet with the King's power in decline, he lacked the power to protect the Jews. The King was practically subservient to the whims of the nobles, who played their part in the ever-collapsing structure of the Kingdom by weakening their King.[22] The Kingdom was failing, with its territory shrinking through relentless wars with Russia and Sweden in the late 1650s, the former of which maintained a strict hatred for Jews, violently expelling them from any town that they occupied.[23] The chaos only opened the Jews up to more persecution by both callous invaders and greedy liberators, both of which believing that there was some reason to not trust the Jews. Overall the Kingdom was rapidly declining from the war and with its decline, so too did the prosperity of the Jews. Many schools and Jewish institutions had been destroyed in this time, and while one part of Poland had attempted to defend the Jews, another had eagerly deserted them, and in some cases, took part in the slaughter. Entire communities were lost and the *Kahal*, now lacking many members, had to be reorganized. Many *Kehillot* became bankrupt, eventually resorting to moneylending and turning into "banks" for many nobles and even the priests that would frequently denounce Jews. With the *Kehillot* becoming more focused with keeping themselves financed, they began to pay less taxes to the *Gelliot*, and in turn the *Vaad's* influence began to wane with its dwindling wealth. The *Vaad* was established to oversee the Jews and provide a steady source of income for the King, yet with it unable to collect Jewish taxes, the *Vaad* fell into debt, and became less important to the Polish government, which paid less attention to it until it was eventually dissolved in 1764.[24] The King of Poland could no longer defend the Jews, nor could the *Vaad* perform its duty in collecting Jewish taxes, making the status of the Jews increasingly precarious as the Polish Kings became increasingly annoyed.

[22] Rabinowicz, 17.
[23] Dubnow, 153-157.
[24] Haumann, 37-40.

Conditions in Poland continued to decline in the early eighteenth century, with constant attempts to return to pre-1648 normalcy usually resulting in an increased reliance upon the Polish nobility. An example of this is within the town of Szybuscz, whose synagogue was burnt down and whose population was extinguished in 1648. The Jewish population, which had become exponentially more rural after the massacres, began to resettle there through the urging of Prince Potozky, who freed them from taxes, duties, and other obligations for twelve years in exchange for the maintenance of the local lord's household.[25] Some lords would use this power for more nefarious reasons. One example, provided by Samuel Dresner, from the memoirs of a Polish lord, tells of a Jewish tenant named Hershke, who had fallen into a "ninety-one taler" debt, and as a result was bound in chains and forced to sleep within a pigsty while his youngest son Eliezer, referred to as Layzya, was brought into the house. The lord had every intention to force the child to convert to Christianity, admitting his desire to have the boy baptized by a local bishop and having Layzya taught the principles, prayers, and values of Catholicism. By the time Jews from Berditchev came to pay Hershke's debt and reclaim Layzya, who had already been forced to eat pork and was apparently close to accepting a baptism. The lord, while displeased by this turn of events, consoled himself by writing, "Nevertheless, I am confident that the Jew will not be able to pay the next time his obligation is due, and in the end, Layzya will become a Christian."[26] There is little information on what happened to Layzya and the Polish after this, but it can only be assumed that Layzya was eventually converted to Christianity after Hershke failed to pay his tenant's debt yet again. This story reflects the overall relationship between Polish lord and subservient Jew at in the latter half of the seventeenth century. They were little more than the average serf, yet as non-Christians, they were viewed with distain. The lord clearly despised

[25] Haumann, 41.
[26] Dresner 25-26.

Hershke, and desperately wanted to convert his son into a proper Polish Christian. The fact that the nearby Jewish community so readily, and desperately, came to pay Hershke's debt and rescue Layzya, shows that this was not an abnormal occurrence. The Jews had to give in to the demands of the Polish nobility as the Polish King no longer had the power to help them. Not every lord would have been as relentless as the lord described here, but the chance to build a life in the countryside, away from the major Jewish communities, which were easily targetable, was too good to pass up. The economic success that was initially given amongst Polish Jewry was becoming less and less common, and combined with the increased persecution by both the peasantry and nobility, Jews began to leave Poland en masse, electing to try their luck within other nations, such as England, the Ottoman Empire, Holland, and Germany.[27] There were still many Jews coming into Poland, unaware of the bloodbath that awaited them, still hoping that it was the bastion of Judaism that it was in the centuries prior, but just as many Jews moved into Poland, just as many survivors of the pogroms and massacres would in turn flee to the West, which had just a few centuries prior shut them out.[28]

The new mass emigration of Polish Jewry did not only consist of common individuals, but of religious scholars and rabbis as well since, for the increasingly hostile Poles, the only thing worse than a Jew, was a learned Jew. In the city of Lemberg, now known as Lviv, a Jewish convert to Christianity, named Jan Filipowicz, reverted to Judaism in 1718. Such an act was an atrocity for the Polish Priesthood, who, along with the local authorities began an investigation to find the Jew who did it, because under no circumstances would Jan have returned to Judaism by himself. Immediately, upon hearing of the arrests that would eventually take place, many prominent rabbis and laymen fled the city, some even going so far as to flee the Kingdom. Those

[27] Rabinowicz, 16.
[28] Haumann, 40.

who did not flee, however, were arrested, just as Hayyim and Joshua Reizes were when they failed to escape. Hayyim and Joshua, two brothers, were both prominent rabbis within Lemberg and prime suspects in the Filipowicz investigation. They were accused of "tampering" with the faith of a Christian convert, "of taking a cross from him and trampling it underfoot, and of attempting to wipe away the chrism, the holy oil with which he had once been anointed." The Reizes were found guilty of this crime after Jan confessed under torture and were sentenced to death immediately thereafter.[29] The Reizes were to have "their tongues torn out of their throats, and while still living they are to be quartered and then burnt."[30] To escape the torturous death, Joshua committed suicide in his cell, with his corpse being dragged through the city and burned; Hayyim experienced the entirety of his sentence as promised on May 13, 1728. The Burial Society of Lemberg, consisting of Jews that had known the Reizes, recorded these events with great mourning. Hayyim was the president of the rabbinical academy in Lemberg and a great philanthropist for the community, and Joshua a pious scholar. On Jan, they wrote, "a certain Jew, who was not of our city and whose birthplace was not in our country—for he came from afar—had changed his religion, came here, repented of his sin, and returned to his faith."[31] From Jan, it can be concluded that many Jews, outside of Poland, still viewed it as a possible refuge for religious freedom, but as Jan painfully learned, that was no longer the case.[32] Reverting to Judaism was a crime punishable by death, and only served to make the lives of Polish Jewry far more difficult as it attracted the ire of Polish Priests, who blamed any 'reversions' on the Jewish

[29] The legitimacy of Jan's confession is rather dubious since, according to the Burial Society of Lemberg, Jan had not referred to either of the Reizes by name and only pointed them out after Hayyim spoke of his own innocence when the Lemberg Jews were lined in front of the local Archbishop.
[30] Saperstein, 254.
[31] "From the Minute-books of the Burial Society of Lemberg" in Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader, *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*, (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 255.
[32] Jews were frequently coerced, or forced, to convert to Christianity in Europe, the belief that they would willingly return to their original religion, as Jan did, was practically unthinkable. Judaism was viewed strictly as a religion, with the conversion of a Jew resulting in him being accepted into the Christian community.

leadership. It was no longer safe to be a Jew in Poland, especially the Jews who held religious or political authority such as the rabbis, who as prominent individuals had to answer for any alleged crime committed by their communities.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Kingdom of Poland was no longer the sanctuary that it had been for Polish Jewry in the medieval era. Instead it had become another prime example of anti-Semitism in Europe, with Catholic priests calling for justice against fictional Blood Libels, a multitude of pogroms, and increasing tensions with an increasingly impatient nobility. The Polish King, who was their only hope, could no longer help the Jews that he had previously sworn to protect. No matter what happened to the Jews, be it nobles trying to convert their children or roving bands of brigands that sought their demise, they no longer had any source of protection. The panic and sense of despair amongst Jews within the Kingdom of Poland was only natural as they began to seek out answers at this time. The source of these answers, no longer being the rabbis, would come from a mixture of false messiahs, mystic men, and eventually the teachings of wandering man known as the Baal Shem Tov.

Chapter 2
Kabbalah, the Messiah, and the Urge for Redemption

"If a man wants to become a Jew they say to him: 'What has prompted you to come to convert? Don't you know that Jews are now oppressed, prostrate, mistreated, suffering?' If he answers: 'I know, and I am not worthy to join you,' then they accept him without further delay."[1]

Throughout the millennia since Judaism's conception, it has continued to evolve and adapt to the need of its people and their surroundings. Especially since the start of the Jewish Diaspora, every place of dwelling, or land of refuge, has become a focal point of change and study for the Jews that dwell there.[2] The lands within the Kingdom of Poland were by no means an exception to this rule, and during the Golden Age for its Jewry, it became a center for Torah study whose students and practitioners eagerly followed Kabbalistic practice and *halakha* in their daily lives. The political strength and stability that Polish Jewry enjoyed was reflected in their religious strength, as great rabbis and scholars flourished within the Kingdom of Poland. As time went on, and the Golden Age of Polish Jewry diminished, the conditions began to rapidly deteriorate within seventeenth, and eighteenth, century Poland, causing the Jews to embrace new and sometimes radical ideas, each building off one another creating new forms of expression. The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were a time of complete religious chaos, seeing the previously powerful Polish rabbinate decay in quality, leading to the development of

[1] "Selections: Orah Hayyim, Yoreh De'ah, Even Ha-Ezer, Hoshen Ha-Mishpat," in Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791*, (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 327.

[2] The Jewish Diaspora, being the dispersion of the Jews from their homeland in Israel, began with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, resulting in the population being scattered across the Mediterranean and beyond, resulting in a greatly decentralized people with an inherent hope of one day returning to their homeland. Each community would adopt its own distinct culture and interpretations of Jewish text with the two largest communities coming from Central Europe and the Iberian Peninsula, the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi. This Diaspora technically still exists, and will end with the coming of the Messiah, who will return the Jews to their homeland and build the Third Temple, heralding a new era for the people.

popularized messianic movements and once those failed, opening the door for the creation and widespread popularity of Hasidism.

The first new idea to be embraced by Polish Jewry was a form of mysticism known as Kabbalah. According to Kabbalists, Kabbalah has, in some form or another, existed since the end of the Second Temple Period (roughly 70CE); evolving and spreading on its own throughout the Jewish world over the course of history. It's initial spread to Poland came with its first Jews, as Kabbalists were found in the majority of Jewish communities, but it wouldn't be until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that a new form of Kabbalah would begin to have a major influence over the daily lives of Polish Jewry.[3] This form of Kabbalah was imported to Poland from the city of Tzfat (Safed) in the Ottoman Empire where famed Kabbalist, Isaac Luria began to teach and reform it in the sixteenth century.[4] Lurianic Kabbalah, as it is now known, was initially centered around the Sephardic communities in the Levant, who in the century following their Expulsion from Spain, were seeking answers of their own. Luria, himself born in Jerusalem after the Expulsion, developed his own form of Kabbalah which included the "elimination of the negative factors that disturb the right order," of which, he claimed, the Torah aimed to do.[5] These negative factors, or evils, exist by the grace of the divine sparks that Luria believed to be captured within them. The performance of good deeds can help provide restitution for these sparks, allowing them to shed their outer layers and eventually reunite with the Divine presence. However, the performance of mitzvot, the commandments dictated by the Torah,[6] will directly

[3] Moshe Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 2.
[4] Hallamish, 28.
[5] Gershom G. Scholem. *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism.* Translated by Ralph Manheim. (USA: Schocken Books, 1965), 129.
[6] Within Judaism, there are 613 commandments that are dictated by the Torah. These commandments, or mitzvot, include actions that both should or should not be done. There are 248 positive commandments, with an example being the recital of the *Shema* prayer twice of day, and there are 365 negative commandments, with the most well-known examples being the infamous Ten Commandments.

redeem the spark and allow it to reunite with the Divine presence, eventually culminating in the multiplication of goodness and the cessation of evil that is the prophesized Messianic Redemption.[7] Essentially, evil can be defeated through the spreading of good.[8] This solution through mitzvot did not only provide an answer to evil, but it also remained within the "orthodoxy" of sixteenth century Judaism as it affirmed the strength and importance of following *halakha*, Jewish Law dictated by the Talmud.[9] Luria's ideas were both traditional and revolutionary, yet, since he hardly ever wrote them down, it fell to his students and disciples to spread it. From master to student, and from student to peer it spread, until it had reached the Jews within Poland, who just like their distant peers eagerly embraced Luria's teachings, implementing it into their way of thinking and addressing issues of morality and daily life. Lurianic Kabbalah was the foundation for the majority of the religious and spiritual movements that would spark amongst Polish Jewry during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, inspiring radical new ideas on the defeat of evil, providing hope in times of trouble, and most importantly, supplied the building blocks for multiple messianic movements and what would eventually become Hasidism**.**

As Lurianic Kabbalah spread across the Jewish world in the sixteenth century, Tzfat transformed into a center of Jewish learning and housed many great scholars who worked alongside one another, developing their own ideas; one such scholar, named Joseph Karo, would use this environment to create his masterpiece which helped shape and unite the Jewish world. His masterpiece, being a codification of Rabbinical ritual with reference to Kabbalistic ideas, is

[7] Classical Jewish texts prophesize that a Messiah will come to redeem the Jewish People, gather the exiled to the land of Israel, and rule over a prosperous nation. This idea later evolved into the Messiah's arrival heralding the beginning to the Messianic Age, which would come after an era of darkness, in which the coming of the Messiah would redeem the Jewish People.
[8] Hallamish, 181-182.
[9] Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 188.

known as the *Shulhan Arukh,* and it would influence Polish Jewry long after Karo's death.[10] The *Shulhan Arukh,* directly translating to "Set Table," consisted of four sections, each addressing a certain aspect of Jewish Life. The first section was "Way of Life," and served as a guideline for religious worship for Jews at home and at synagogue. The second section, called "Teacher of Knowledge," addressed ritual slaughter, dietary laws, and forbidden practices within Judaism. These two sections combined practically dictated the ideal lifestyle of every Jew. The third and fourth sections, "Stone of Help" and "Breastplate of Judgment," together codified certain laws, them being marriage and divorce, and civil law and court procedure.[11] Each Jewish community, should they follow these guidelines, would be structured and function in the exact same way. Karo hoped that the *Shulhan Arukh* would help centralize and unify the many Jewish communities of the world and avoid a possible schism between them,[12] but while it did gain some traction within the Sephardic communities, the Ashkenazi communities within Eastern Europe were far less receptive to it. The Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities had been generally separated from each other for centuries and as a result they developed their own customs and traditions within Judaism. The very names associated with these communities denotes the distance and background of these groups. The Sephardim, coming from Spain, or Sepharad, have interacted with both the Muslim and Christian world, while the Ashkenazim, coming from Germany, or Ashkenaz, primarily interacted with the Christian heartland that was the Holy Roman Empire. Their perspectives on the world and their Jewish identity have been shaped by their neighbors, with great Sephardic scholars, such as Maimonides, being advisors of

[10] Scholem, 134.
[11] Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791,* (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 324-325.
[12] Although he lived in modern-day Israel at the time, Joseph Karo was alive during the Protestant Reformation, and was likely aware of the effects that it had on the Christian World, and more specifically, the Holy Roman Empire, where the Reformation eventually turned into bloodshed. Karo likely feared that a similar, bloody, schism would form if he did not unite the Jewish communities.

Muslim monarchs and masters of mathematics and sciences. Sephardim explored the scholarly world outside of Judaism. Azshkenazi scholars on the other hand focused inwards, developing their own understandings of Torah and Talmud, and as a result rarely learned about the advances in science like their Sephardic brethren. Karo, being Sephardic, wrote the *Shulhan Arukh* according to Sephardic tradition**,** with certain laws being adapted from the local traditions of Sephardic communities, making the Ashkenazim and their customs in Poland irrelevant. It would need to be modified to be applicable to Polish Jewry and the other Ashkenazim, so Moses Isserles, a famed rabbi from Krakow, added his own notes and interpretations to the text, essentially creating his own work, calling it the *Mappah*. The *Mappah*, or "Table Cloth," properly implemented Ashkenazi customs and traditions in the form of slight edits, and, as a result, it became very popular within Poland, first appearing in the Krakow 1571 edition of the *Shulhan Arukh*. An example of Isserles modifications can be found in law 695 within "Way of Life" which discusses the laws of the Purim banquet. Within Karo's original work, he wrote, "On Purim a person should drink until he doesn't know the difference between, 'Cursed be Haman,' and 'Blessed be Mordecai,'" but Isserles added a note of his own immediately afterwards, stating, "Some authorities say that it is not necessary to get as drunk as all that, but merely to drink more than one's normal allowance, so that he may fall asleep, and because he is asleep he will not know the difference between 'Cursed be Haman' and 'Blessed be Mordechai' …as long as his thoughts are directed to God."[13] The edits made by Isserles, being inspired by Ashkenazi tradition, had a slightly higher authority amongst the Ashkenazim in Poland, who were highly receptive to their peer in Krakow, and quickly began to follow its guidelines as a result.

[13] "Selections: Orah Hayyim, Yoreh De'ah, Even Ha-Ezer, Hoshen Ha-Mishpat," 325.

The *Shulhan Arukh*, with its codification of laws and traditions, created a sense of unity amongst the many Jewish communities, successfully connecting the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities into one, relatively unified, Jewish network. This network, while formed by Karo's work, was not reliant upon it, allowing ambitious individuals, such as Shabbatai Tzvi, to utilize it to spread their own ideas and teachings across the Jewish world, from Sephardic Morocco to Ashkenazi Poland.[14] Born in 1626, Shabbatai Tzvi, a Greek Jew from Smyrna, declared himself the Messiah with the assistance of Nathan of Gaza, calling himself King of the Jews, and not long thereafter Tzvi gained a large following by 1666, the Sabbatian Movement.[15] Just like Lurianic Kabbalah, this movement was spreading from the Levant to nearby Egypt, Yemen, Western North Africa, Italy, Germany, and far away Poland with excited fervor. Never before had a Messianic movement spread so far and rapidly within Judaism and soon letters of support, heralding the coming of "the king," began to arrive from every corner of the Jewish network. One such letter, quoted by contemporary rabbinical scholar, Emmanuel Frances, declared:

> "Know ye, our brethren, the House of Jacob, that God has visited his people and has sent us a redeemer and savior, our king Sabbatai Sevi, who has been anointed by the prophet Nathan according to the word of the Lord. And now, by decree of our king [and?] prophet, call a fast and a solemn assembly, turn from your evil ways, gather yourselves together and come to worship before your king."[16]

Support for Tzvi was widespread, but he was especially popular amongst Polish Jewry, who, less than twenty years after the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648, felt that his doctrine was tailor-made for their situation.[17] Tzvi however did not witness these massacres firsthand, nor was he from the

[14] The spelling of Shabbatai Tzvi's name (שַׁבְּתַי צְבִי) varies based on the source. Another common spelling is Sabbatai Sevi.
[15] Claims to Messiahship were not entirely uncommon throughout Jewish history. Frequently influential sages and scholars would be believed to be destined for such a role. In the eyes of one of his students, Hayyim Vital, Isaac Luria was destined for messiahship, yet neither made any actual claim. Shabbatai Tzvi, however, had followers across the map, being popular amongst both Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the first false-messiah to do so.
[16] Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676*, (Bollingen Series XCIII. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 328.
[17] Heiko Haumann, *A History of East European Jews.* (Budapest, NY: Central European University Press, 2002) 47.

region, but he did spend two years in Poland, endearing himself with the local Jewry through his personal charisma and his actions. While in Poland, he married a Jewish girl by the name of Sarah, whose parents had been killed during the Chmielnicki Massacres, showing sympathy to her loss and further endearing Polish Jewry to him. The Chmielnicki Massacres, and the chaos that followed them, quickly morphed into a war heralding the arrival of Tzvi as more Polish Jewry joined the Sabbatians.[18] He allegedly told survivors of the massacres, "Soon will I avenge you and comfort you even as a mother comforteth her son. And I will recompense you a hundred-fold for the sufferings you have endured. The day of revenge is at hand and the year of redemption hath arrived."[19] His personal charisma and understanding of their plight quickly legitimized Tzvi in the eyes of Polish Jewry, and the Sabbatians in Poland would frequently express, if not brag, to their Christian neighbors that the time of redemption, and vengeance, had come, carrying pictures of Tzvi and Nathan, and igniting anti-Jewish riots in the process.[20] This, however, did not dissuade the Sabbatians, with each act of violence against them only heralding the time of vengeance and redemption that Tzvi had promised them. Essentially, to many Polish Jews, he was a foreign godsend, sent to an endangered people crying out for help, and promised them redemption, and vengeance.

While providing many new ideas of his own, Shabbatai Tzvi was influenced by Jewish texts and mysticism, having studied both Kabbalah and Talmud as a child. He was also a teacher of Lurianic Kabbalah while he stayed in Izmir, and as a result many of his doctrines were heavily influenced by Luria.[21] The most prominent of Luria's teachings to be borrowed by Tzvi

[18] Shabbatai Tzvi himself declared the massacres to be the start of the era of redemption, citing an unknown Jewish matyr named Abraham Zalman as the "Messiah of the Tribe of Joseph," whose death, like legend states, would signify the start of the era of redemption.
[19] Harry Mordka Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism*, (London, 1970), 26.
[20] Scholem, 596-597.
[21] Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 150.

concerned the nature of creation and the fate of evil; especially with relationship to the Messiah. Primarily written by Nathan of Gaza, another Lurianic Kabbalist, the tenets of the Sabbatians dictate that the role of the Messiah is to restore the earth to its original harmony through eternal sufferings, surrendering to evil to overcome it, and to make himself impure so that he may purify. In other words, for Tzvi to purify the world, which according to Lurianic Kabbalah was already in process, he had to immerse himself within evil to properly combat and later defeat it, thereby allowing Tzvi to embrace sin. According to the Sabbatians, the laws of the Torah did not apply to their Messiah, nor did it entirely apply to themselves, and they quickly began to practice a "sinful way of life," just as their master had done to combat evil.[22] They followed their own commandments and had their own prayers. The Commandments of Shabbatai Tzvi, numbering eighteen, dictate a multitude of rules that Sabbatians must follow, with the most important being devotion to the Messiah (Tzvi) and to God. These Commandments, with a prophesying and anti-Turkish nature, seemed to focus on establishing a brand-new Jewish community.[23] These commandments dictated a holy day for Sabbatians to gather (the 16th of Kislev), and the importance that all Sabbatians gather on that day, the prohibition of killing another and false witness, and the continued importance of circumcising male children.[24] The primary source of authority did not lie within the scholarly elite, or in the Torah, but in the word of Shabbatai Tzvi, their messiah, whose truth was unquestioning. Yet while some rabbis, believing the signs of Tzvi's messiahship, would themselves become Sabbatians, rabbis as a whole were widely untrusted by the movement. The reasoning for this, especially for the eager Polish Jewry, came

[22] Haumann, 48.
[23] The seventeenth commandment dictates that a Sabbatian should never, under any circumstance, make an alliance with a Muslim or sleep with Muslim women, who thereafter are compared to reptiles. Being a subject of the Ottoman Sultan ingrained a deep hatred for Islam in Tzvi and his followers.
[24] David Meltzer, *The Secret Garden: An Anthology in the Kabbalah*. (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Arts/Barrytown, 1998), 220-221.

from the fact that many rabbis in 1666, and continuing into the eighteenth century, were failing to properly address the needs of their congregants and would instead focus on the scholarly oligarchy that they had established. While Tzvi led the Sabbatians, they were centralized and under control, but everything changed when Tzvi was forced to convert to Islam.[25] Many Sabbatians would follow their leader, believing that converting to Islam was their destiny. The majority of the Sabbatians, however, did not convert to Islam, and after Tzvi's death, they adopted radical interpretations of his teachings. The idea that Tzvi had to immerse himself in sin to destroy it, quickly turned into the Sabbatians immersing themselves in sin and embracing it.[26] To the outside eye, sin became sacred to the Sabbatians, and by the 1750s, it was no longer the promised redemption that Polish Jewry desired, but a perverse set of practices, viewed unfavorably by the masses and eventually dying out completely with the success of Hasidism.

In the wake of the Sabbatians came spiritual exhaustion and the level of Torah study rapidly decreased as a result. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, one of the earliest disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, recalled how daily religious life and Jewish rituals were almost forgotten in the early eighteenth century, explaining how even the rabbis had forgotten the most important aspects of Judaism. He complained that many people were:

> "satisfied with a minimum of worship, going to the synagogue only in the morning, and even these prayers are recited by rote, and in a hurried fashion… They are humble regarding spiritual matters, being satisfied with a minimum, but this is not the case with material matters, the pleasures of this world, for they feel that no one is entitled to wealth and honor except themselves."[27]

These claims, while coming from one of the earliest Hasidim, show that in the aftermath of the Sabbatian Movement, Judaism had lost its luster and that Polish Jewry only practiced out of

[25] While in Constantinople, claiming to await the end of days, Shabbatai Tzvi was arrested by Ottoman authorities, who gave him a choice, convert to Islam, or die. He chose the former, converting in 1666 after some time in prison.
[26] Haumann, 48.
[27] Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy*. (Abelard-Schuman, 1960), 33-34.

mechanical obligation instead of any actual endearment or passion. The lack of passion, in the eyes of Samuel Dresner, left Judaism "hard and unbending, easily giving rise to anger and strife, engendering hatred and rivalry, opening the door to the chief of all transgressions—pride."[28] The Golden Age of Polish Jewry was gone, not only from a physical level, but a spiritual one, which the Sabbatians attempted to solve on their own, but only led to further degradation. Polish Jewry were in a perpetual state of spiritual decay. Although written long after Hasidism took root, and reflective of how modern Hasidim perceive this time, these conditions, as dictated by Dresner, made it clear that the only redeeming movement for Polish Jewry would have been one filled with humility and passion, because without either of those traits, they could not regain their spiritual strength. The spiritual presence of Polish Jewry rapidly declined in the early eighteenth century, and, in the minds of the early Hasidim, the worst offenders of this decline did not come from the exhausted laymen, but from the rabbis themselves.

During the rise of the Sabbatians, and continuing into the eighteenth century, the rabbinic leaders amongst Polish Jewry were a class of their own, holding themselves high above the common folk who would come to them for aid. Being members of the *Kahal* or the *Vaad,* they quickly turned into wealthy oligarchs, living in luxury and splendor while their own congregants barely scraped by. They were instruments of taxation who did little to endear themselves to their neighbors and peers. Rabbis had become salaried officials, answering questions on ritual, but doing little else for their congregants. The majority of their time would be spent engaging in *pilpul*, dialectical discourse on some complicated Talmudic passage, which rarely applied to the uneducated masses who would come to them for help. The average Jew within Poland at this time lived in the countryside and did not have the ability, or privilege, to attend *yeshiva*, nor did

[28] Dresner, 34.

they have proper teachers to teach them Torah, leaving the majority of them dependent on the rabbis. The schools that did exist in the countryside were of such poor quality that the best description of them, provided by Lithuanian Jewish Philosopher, Solomon Maimon, is that of a "small and smoky hut" which shared more similarities with a dreary prison for children than a house of Talmudic learning; where teachers beat their students, who were under their heel from sunrise to sunset.[29] The teachers, according to Yaakov Yosef, found it "more profitable to flatter and amuse the parents than to teach the children."[30] As a result, these children were completely ignorant of Torah, and, in comparison to the scholars from the seventeenth century, were completely unworthy of the scholarly legacy that they had to maintain. A popular parable from Yaakov Yosef states:

> "I heard a tale of an apprentice who learned his trade from a smith. After he had mastered it, he made a list, point after point, of how he must go about his craft. He did not mark down, however, that he should first ignite a spark for the fire, because this was obvious and hardly needed to be mentioned. Now he went to work at the king's palace, but alas, found to his dismay that he was unable to perform his duties. He was soon dismissed. Finally he returned to his master, who reminded him of the first principle, which he had forgotten."[31]

This parable, in reference to the rabbis and scholars of Yosef's time, explains that they knew Torah, read Mishnah, and discussed Talmud, but while these were all commendable traits for the rabbinic leadership, they lacked the first, and perhaps most important, aspect of their study, which, according to Yaakov, was the desire to be closer to God. The rabbis didn't speak with passion towards their congregants, nor did they pray with passion; they just wrote down their opinions and engaged in *pilpul. Pilpul* meant nothing to the uneducated Jew, nor did it mean anything to the Jew in distress, it was only worthwhile to the rabbis that engaged in the

[29] Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*. Translated by Yitzhak Y. Melamed, Abraham P. Socher, and Paul Reitter, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 19-20.
[30] Rabinowicz, 29.
[31] Dresner, 34-35.

discussion and sought to raise their prestige. The Sabbatians, with all their flaws, were also unsatisfied with the rabbis, and eagerly turned against them during the seventeenth century, with endless *pilpul* being cited as a primary reason for this divide. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, rabbis were still engaging in their tireless, if not meaningless, *pilpul*, and yet again it was alienating Polish Jewry, who, with little faith in their leadership, would eagerly attach themselves to any leader that wouldn't engage in *pilpul* and address the needs of the people.[32]

The religious and spiritual traditions found amongst Polish Jewry continued to develop alongside one another until they began to manifest themselves in popularist messianic movements. The authority of the rabbis where questionable at best, and many learned men would sooner teach themselves, then have faith in the teachers found in the countryside who helped raise a generation of ignorant scholars. All of this developed in the aftermath of over a century of rabbinic prosperity in Poland. A century where Poland was the center of the Ashkenazim, where the *Mappah* was developed to properly bring the laws and traditions of the *Shulhan Arukh* to the masses in 1571, and where Lurianic Kabbalah became the foundation for mystic thought. The Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648 changed everything. Polish Jewry fled to the countryside where the useless discourse between rabbis became less and less significant. Essentially leaderless, Polish Jewry cried out for answers. The Sabbatian Movement was the first answer, providing hope and reaffirming dreams of vengeance, yet it failed once Shabbatai Tzvi converted to Islam and later died; leaving a hole in the spiritual hearts of the masses, which the rabbis were still unable to fill. The time had come for a new movement, popular like the Sabbatians, yet distinctly passionate and spiritual, to rise. The table was set, and the tablecloth adorned, the Hasidim were on their way.

[32] Haumann, 48.

Chapter 3
Israel ben Eleazar, the Baal Shem Tov

"More legends have been woven around Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the 'Master of the Good Name', than around Moses, father of the Prophets. Just over two hundred years have elapsed since his death, yet he seems to belong to antiquity."[1]

In 1740, in the small Podolian town of Medzhibozh, a famed sage and miracle worker, after years of travel, chose to erect his permanent residence.[2] This man, who had previously traveled the Polish countryside, was not completely abnormal. Like many other miracle workers of the time he would travel from town to town, from house to house, to teach his teachings. With him came his followers, men and women who had become discontent with the spiritual decay of Polish Jewry and who would eagerly embrace the populist, and highly spiritual, form of Judaism that he advocated and for which they craved. He was the embodiment of the Hasid, the founder and first rebbe of Hasidism, the culmination of a century of unsurety.[3] This man, born at the start of the eighteenth century, was Israel ben Eleazar, but by the end of his life he was known as the Baal Shem Tov, the "Master of the Good Name." Combining Kabbalah with daily life, and joy with tradition, he turned from a miracle worker to a religious teacher, gaining both uneducated followers and turning multiple members of the rabbinic authority to his new sect. He taught with action, and wrote almost nothing down, instead allowing his students to record his words and write stories around him which subsequentially shrouded his life in mystery. As his life reflects, Hasidism came as a direct result of the habits and practices of the Baal Shem Tov, who, through

[1] Harry Mordka Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism*, (London, 1970), 31.
[2] S. M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Translated by Israel Friedlaender, Vol. 1. 3 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1916), 214.
[3] The term rebbe, being the Yiddish form of rabbi, denotes a master or teacher in modern Hasidism.

a lifetime of attempting to preserve his spirituality and restore his people to holiness, found himself with a following of likeminded individuals who in turn would shake the foundations of Polish Jewish society.

The life of Israel ben Eleazar (1700-1760), the Baal Shem Tov, begins with the accolades of his father, Eleazar, whose legacy, preserved within *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, is used to legitimize the future endeavors of his son by comparing him in life and stature to the biblical figure of Joseph.[4] Of the 251 tales found within *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, the first three focus entirely on Eleazar. In the first tale, at an undisclosed point in the seventeenth century, Eleazar, being bestowed the title of rabbi, had lived within Wallachia near the border with his wife. They were both old and not wealthy. One day, beginning the legend, he was captured by bandits and sold to a man within a "remote country where there were no Jews."[5] This country, while not explicitly named, is believed to be Russia by some scholars, who not only cite its closeness to Wallachia, but also its opinion of Jews.[6] Until the annexation of Poland by the Russian Empire in 1793, Russia had a very strict ban against Jews, who were not allowed to be within Russian territory under threat of death.[7] Legally speaking, Russia was a land without Jews. Further evidence supporting this claim is that Eleazar assisted the unnamed king with a foreign campaign by giving military advice during a sea battle.[8] This sea battle, and the method in which it was won, is similar to a battle during the Azov Campaign committed by Tzar Peter

[4] Eleazar is only referred to as Eleazar when mentioned within *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, no information on his family is given aside from his wife and future son.
[5] Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov: The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 7.
[6] Yaffa Eliach, "The Russian Dissenting Sects and Their Influence on Israel Baal Shem Tov, Founder of Hassidism," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. 36, (1968, pp. 57–83), 64.
[7] Salo Wittmayer Baron, and Elias Schulman, *The Russian Jew*, (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 7-10.
[8] Ben-Amos, 9.

the Great in 1695, who, if Russia was the foreign land, would have been the king described.[9] This campaign shared both thematic similarities with Eleazar's experience, but would also coincide with Eleazar's lifetime. Eleazar's contributions may be embellished by Hasidic scholars but by using this evidence it can clearly be discerned that Russia was the location in which he was a slave, which provides this tale with some validity. While a slave, Eleazar earned himself the affection of his master, the viceroy to the King, and, through faithfulness and loyalty, became overseer to his master's household. The significance of Eleazar becoming the overseer of his master's household "through faithful service" is that this is the first easily identifiable myth found within *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*. Eleazar's experience in the viceroy's household is reminiscent to that of Joseph within the Book of Exodus, where Joseph earned a similar title after serving his master, Potiphar, faithfully in Egypt.[10] The similarities to the Book of Genesis continue, with Eleazar continuing to serve as a commander and advisor for the king, and being granted a new wife for his loyalty, although the tale asserts that Eleazar never touched her to preserve his faith with his first wife.[11] A few years later, as fate would dictate, Eleazar would flee back to his native land, where he would meet with the Prophet Elijah, who said, "Because of the merit of your behavior a son will be born to you who will bring light to Israel, and in him this saying with be fulfilled: *Israel in whom I will be glorified*."[12] As the story would have it, Eleazar and his original wife, who had faithfully waited for him, would have a son when they were near the age of one hundred, further cementing the biblical parallels.[13] It is within these three tales

[9] Eliach, 64.
[10] Genesis 39.5.
[11] Ben-Amos, 10.
[12] The Prophet Elijah is one of the most prominent prophets within Judaism. According to Jewish Tradition, the return of the Prophet Elijah will herald the coming of the Messiah.
Ben-Amos, 11.
[13] In the Book of Genesis, the second Patriarch, Isaac, is born when his parents, Abraham and Sarah, are close to the age of one hundred as well.

that the events leading up to the birth of the Baal Shem Tov are explained, yet they are clearly hagiographical myth. The very life of the Baal Shem Tov is given legitimization by having his father, Eleazar, be an extraordinary and holy man on par with Joseph. The piety of his father and the presence of the Prophet Elijah during these tales provide a Messianic influence as well, with the exact details likely coming from eager followers of the Baal Shem Tov in the early nineteenth century that idolized his memory. As a result, the exact details leading up to his birth, as well as many of the other tales expressed within *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, are hagiographical, told and written long after the initial events could have happened, leaving certain details of the truth unknown, yet providing enough to provide some insight on who the Baal Shem Tov was.

Israel ben Eleazar was born in the town of Okopy in the Polish province of Podolia in either 1698 or 1700, where he, much like his father, would be described as a pious, yet strange, man, who was fond of the natural world and held a great sense of empathy, and would frequently butt heads with the orthodox members of his community. Ben Eleazar lived briefly with his father, Eleazar, but he would die while ben Eleazar was a child, and as a result, with no mention of his mother, he would grow up as an orphan.[14] The legacy of his father apparently greatly influenced the early life of ben Eleazar since it was because of Eleazar's memory that the Jews of Okopy treated him kindly and placed him under the care of a teacher, referred to as a *melamed*. Ben Eleazar began his studies in the early years of the eighteenth century, which was a time when the scattered *yeshivas* were abysmal. Eighteenth century Jewish philosopher, Solomon Maimon, would describe the conditions of the Jewish schools in Poland at the time in his autobiography, stating:

[14] Ben-Amos, 11.

> "Most often the school is a smoke shack with students scattered around, some perching on benches, others sitting on the dirt floor. The teacher, with a filthy shirt on his back, sits on his desk commanding his regiment, all the while holding between his legs a bowl of tobacco, which he works over into snuff with a pestle as massive as the club of Hercules. His assistants conduct drill sessions in their own corners of the room, each one ruling over his subjects just as the teacher himself does: as an absolute despot… Children are locked up ere from morning until evening. They have free time only on Fridays and on the afternoon of the first of the month."[15]

This was how Maimon described the school that he had personally attended, and the conditions within it made him, and his brother, both eagerly want to escape it. Unlike Maimon, however, ben Eleazar would frequently escape from his school in Okopy, running away into the forest to "be in solitude." Repeatedly ben Eleazar would do this, until eventually the townspeople gave up, no longer returning him to the *melamed*. His repeated escapes from the school are used within *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* as a means to explain how the Baal Shem Tov did not have a normal childhood, yet through Maimon's description of the conditions of schools in Poland, it can be concluded that Israel's desire to escape from his *melamed*, did not come from divine inspiration, but from an urge to escape the unpleasant conditions within the Okopy school. Unlike Maimon, ben Eleazar would return to the Okopy school on his own volition and became one of the *melamed's* assistants, taking the children to school and synagogue and teaching them how to sing and pray with passion.[16] The abnormal actions of the Baal Shem Tov are highlighted from an early age, from his constant flight from school to be in the forest, and his desire to teach passion to the schoolboys once he became the *melamed's* assistant, his early education planted within him the seeds of change. Be it from divine inspiration or from a desire to truly provide beneficial education to his fellow Jews, his childhood clearly shaped his early understandings of society.

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[15] Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*. Translated by Yitzhak Y. Melamed, Abraham P. Socher, and Paul Reitter, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 19-20.
[16] Ben-Amos, 12.

While he was a young man, ben Eleazar began to study Kabbalah in secret, reading the writings of Isaac Luria, Hayyim Vital, and a mysterious Kabbalist known only as Rabbi Adam. It is from Rabbi Adam that Israel indirectly received a set of manuscripts in which both Divine and Practical Kabbalah was recorded, along with the "secrets of the Torah" which ben Eleazar would use to shape many of his teachings, but just like the Baal Shem Tov himself, Rabbi Adam is shrouded in myth. The fifth tale within *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* is centered around this man, who the author had first heard of through the words of a contemporary named Rabbi Samson. The tale tells of how Rabbi Adam found his manuscripts within a cave and would later sup with "the Kaizer" at a banquet that Rabbi Adam had magically apprehended from a local king.[17] The actual identity of Rabbi Adam is unclear, as he never directly interacted with the Baal Shem Tov, and has only been talked of from second hand experience, all of which reinforcing the legend around him. Multiple Jewish historians, including Simon Dubnow and Gershom Scholem, found the name Rabbi Adam strange, as the name Adam was uncommon amongst Polish Jewry at the time. That name however did belong to a prominent Christian in the final decades of the seventeenth century, named Adam Zernikov. Adam, a Prussian, would become a military advisor in Russia after spending some time in a monastery in Chernigov, which was near the Russian borderlands with the Kingdom of Poland.[18] Regardless of his identity, Rabbi Adam, prior to his death, commanded his son to bring his manuscripts to a man in the city of Okopy named Israel ben Eleazar, who was fourteen years old at the time.[19] In the tale, it is asserted that Rabbi Adam learns this information within a dream when he wonders who he should pass his manuscripts to, but historian Yaffa Eliach believes that this information instead

[17] Ben-Amos, 13-15.
[18] Eliach, 67.
[19] Ben-Amos, 15.

came from early correspondences with Eleazar, who had spent some time in Russia.[20] Whoever this mysterious man was, Rabbi Adam and his manuscripts had a very prominent influence on ben Eleazar's view on religion and Kabbalah, yet the two never met. Rabbi Adam's son, who in the tale would become one of ben Eleazar's first students, would tell ben Eleazar of Rabbi Adam. The two would study the manuscripts and learn Kabbalah together in private, only stopping when Rabbi Adam's son mysteriously died.[21] It is from this point that ben Eleazar would strike out on his own, leaving his community in Okopy and traveling to the city of Brody, a regional capital for both the Kingdom of Poland and the Jews within it.

While in Brody, ben Eleazar was "loved" by everyone, yet since he hid his knowledge and showed the outward appearance of a loafer, he was eventually urged to leave the city by his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon. The exact process of ben Eleazar's marriage to his second wife is fairly secretive, with only him and his father-in-law, Abraham, being within the know, and his wife consenting after her father's death, even though the only evidence of their betrothal was a contract procured by her future husband. The only individual involved with the affair not content with the marriage was Rabbi Gershon, ben Eleazar's new brother-in-law. He had attempted to study with ben Eleazar, yet since ben Eleazar had "concealed his knowledge," Rabbi Gershon found ben Eleazar's presence unbearable. He eventually told his sister, "Really, I am disgraced by your husband, and if you want to divorce him, it is acceptable to me. If not, I will buy you a

[20] In Hebrew, the word 'ben' (בן) means 'son of,' so when Rabbi Adam asked for his manuscripts to be sent to Israel ben Eleazar, he could have also specifically been asking that they be sent to the son of Eleazar.
Eliach, 68.

[21] The end of the seventh tale in *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* has Rabbi Adam's son beg Israel to bring down the Prince of the Torah, an angel who could properly teach Torah, yet when they do, Israel laments that they were both condemned to death for their hubris. They remain awake the entire night in order to survive, but Rabbi Adam's son, moments before sunrise, faints and dies.
Ben-Amos, 16-18.

horse, and you may go and lodge with his wherever he will lodge. I cannot bear this shame."[22] This is effectively the beginning of the seven-year seclusion that Israel ben Eleazar took, becoming the Baal Shem Tov, yet while many of the tales prior to this point are dubious to scholars, the tales of his marriage and after his seclusion include historically verifiable information.[23] The lifestyle attributed to Israel as he was secluded within the mountains has no proper way to be verified, yet two hagiographical tales exist during his seclusion in which he serves as a judge for a group of robbers and when he redeems the soul of a frog which had once be a man.[24] While staying in a village near Brody, the Baal Shem Tov, constructed a house where he would pray in seclusion, this house also had a bathhouse and *mikveh*. Within his possession, he had white robes which he would wear during Shabbat,[25] an abnormal custom among Polish Jewry at the time.[26] He was also quite conservative with his use of tefillin, refusing to put it on during the days after Rosh Hashanah, as most other Polish Jews would, citing books from German Jews that were against the practice.[27] Each time the Baal Shem Tov would act strangely during religious practice, he would incite his brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon, even more, who viewed him as nothing more than a simpleton.[28] To the Hasidim, however, ben Eleazar was no simpleton, but instead a hidden genius that was waiting to be revealed. The

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[22] Ben-Amos, 22.
[23] "The Besht before He Began His Public Career," in Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791,* (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 483.
[24] According to the final paragraphs of the eighth tale, he and his wife lived separately, with them meeting every week or so, so that he may give her the clay which he had quarried for a living. He also allegedly made his own bread in a hole that he dug near his dwelling.
Ben-Amos, 22-26.
[25] Ibid. 27.
[26] His white robes would be one of the reasons that the Rabbis denounced him later in history, as it was not a custom amongst Polish Jewry, even the Kabbalists. The wearing of white robes, however, were a custom of the Khlysty sect of Christianity, which Eliach points out to be similar to Hasidism.
Eliach, 73.
[27] Ben-Amos, 27.
[28] Rabbi Gershom and the Baal Shem Tov were entering a house and the Baal Shem Tov only placed his hand on the mezuzah at the doorpost, instead of kissing it as Rabbi Gershom did, this was the third time the Baal Shem Tov's lack of observing traditional Jewish practices angered his brother-in-law.

process of ben Eleazar revealing himself as the Baal Shem Tov is described as him unmasking himself, with his face radiating light, reflecting his "true self." The Baal Shem Tov's glowing face, and how it is near blinding to some, is similar to how Moses' face glowed after witnessing God on Mount Sinai within the Book of Exodus.[29] Here however, instead of reflecting the power of God, it seems to denote the innate holiness within the Baal Shem Tov's soul, providing him with biblical validity and an otherworldly presence. The revelation of the Baal Shem Tov is chaotic, bright, and hard to communicate, but once he began to "expose himself" to certain individuals, he asked one, who was a guest in his house, to bring the rabbis within Brody to him, referred to as the 'Sect of Great Hasidim,' so that he may reveal himself to them as well. At this time, the Baal Shem Tov decided to seal away Rabbi Adam's manuscripts behind a stone in the mountains, effectively ending his time as a student of these manuscripts and becoming a leader himself.[30]

Prior to this point within the story of the Baal Shem Tov, he was only a student of Rabbi Adam's "divine" manuscript, likely taking many of his practices from said manuscript, adapting it to his needs and perhaps even Judaism. The early practices of the Hasidim were, for the most part, completely rejected by the dominant Rabbinic Judaism, and they were condemned multiple times by the rabbinic leadership. Within one such condemnation, taking place in the community of Shklov, White Russia, in 1786, decades after the Baal Shem Tov's death, declared:

> "Hasidim have deserted the Jewish group and have set up a so-called place of worship for themselves. And thus, as everyone knows, they worship in a most insane fashion following a different ritual which does not conform to the religion of our holy Torah, and they tread a path which our fathers have never trod."[31]

[29] Exodus 34.39
[30] Ben-Amos, 31-32.
[31] "The Besht before He Began His Public Career," 360.

These differing practices disgusted those who were not affiliated with the movement, with each deviation being viewed as nothing short of heresy. Some early practices, such the previously mentioned white garments, included eating instead of fasting during the anniversary of someone's death, and changes to prayer which include the making of foreign sounds and jumping with ecstasy.[32] From these forms of worship the Hasidim embraced spiritual joy above rigid tradition, and through these traditions, inspired by the Baal Shem Tov, his followers opened themselves up to the intimate nature of Judaism. To the Baal Shem Tov, all were entitled to enter the "spiritual kingdom," and it was important that the entirety of the Jewish people not only had access to the knowledge of the Torah, but that they easily understood it as well.[33] Similar to the Protestant Reformation, which had reformists translating the Latin Christian Bible into their vernacular languages in order to allow the public to understand it, the Baal Shem Tov was "translating" the Torah to people by reintroducing it into daily life.[34] His translations, however, were not linguistic as the Protestant reformists were, but instead a clarification to provide understanding and separate the text from the rabbinic elite, giving power to the people. The Torah became publicized and Kabbalah was made into reality; the gap between secular and sacred was nonexistent. The *Shechinah* was everywhere, permeating from everything; the world was "a mirror in which is reflected the glory of God."[35] The Baal Shem Tov proposed a

[32] These practices greatly resemble the religious practices of two Christian sects that were near the region at the time, the Khlysty Sect and the Raskolnik's. Hasidism is by no means a Christian sect, yet the similarities between it and the already established Khlysty and Raskolnik sects is undeniable.
Eliach, 73-74.
[33] Rabinowicz, 34.
[34] The Baal Shem Tov did not actually translate the Torah into the vernacular as the majority of the Jewish population already knew Hebrew.
[35] The divine presence of God, or the feminine aspect of God within Kabbalah.
Rabinowicz, 35.

pantheistic view of the world, one which required rejoicing as every aspect of the world held a spark of God.

Combining Kabbalah with the Baal Shem Tov's own personal philosophies, Hasidism was born; but instead of promoting the fasts and ascetic lifestyles of Lurianic Kabbalah, the Baal Shem Tov promoted living life with a "cheerful disposition."[36] Self-harm did not please the Baal Shem Tov, nor would it please God, as it was damaging the human body, one of God's creations, and a vessel of holiness. One of the members of his inner circle, Yaakov Yosef, a famed rabbi and Kabbalist, would frequently fast in secret to atone for his sins, doing so over the course of six years, with his final fast being a full week long. According to Hasidic legend, when the Baal Shem Tov discovered that Yaakov Yosef was fasting for a week, he rode to him with such haste that his horse died, immediately declaring to his friend and student, "My horse worth ten red coins has died because of you. This will be your atonement."[37] Placing oneself in danger for the purpose of God was abhorrent, as the *Shechinah* did not exist in melancholy and sadness, but joy and mitzvot.[38] Fasting for excessive amounts of time, as Lurianic Kabbalah and the rabbinate supported, were frowned upon by Hasidism, and in its place came reasons for joy and self-perseverance. The Jewish people would no longer attempt to restore themselves through unnecessary suffering, as the Baal Shem Tov saw it, but through living life with a cheerful disposition.

The cheerful nature of the Baal Shem Tov was legendary amongst his followers, who idolized him beyond doubt, seeing not just a man, but an embodiment of what they all inspired to be. Through the Baal Shem Tov's methods and teachings, shaped by his life, he had "converted"

[36] Dubnow, 226.
[37] Ben-Amos, 64.
[38] Ibid. 65.

his followers to his way of thinking, embracing passion over repentance, and accepting the triumph of good without the destruction of evil. He was the first rebbe of Hasidism, gaining a large following and having many attendants within his inner circle, all of which would mourn his death greatly in 1760. The Baal Shem Tov died with little complaint, surrounded by his followers, content with his teachings and, according to those that knew him, continuing to provide advice with his final breath.[39] He was the center of Hasidism, and with his death a void was left in the hearts of his followers, especially those within his inner circle who relied upon him. The teachings of the Baal Shem Tov were still fresh like a small plant in a garden. Without proper cultivation it would wither and die; new gardeners were needed to tend to the seed planted by the Baal Shem Tov and now was the time for them to step forward.

[39] Ben-Amos, 250.

Chapter 4
The Tzaddikim and the Survival of Hasidism

Because of our many sins, worthless and wanton men who call themselves Hasidim have deserted the Jewish group and have set up so-called place of worship for themselves. And thus, as everyone knows, they worship in a most insane fashion following a different ritual which does not conform to the religion of our holy Torah, and they tread a path which our fathers have never trod."[1]

Much like the Sabbatians that had proceeded them, the Hasidim came to a dilemma when their leader, the Baal Shem Tov, passed. Under the leadership of the Baal Shem Tov's successor, the Hasidim had to decide if they were to take on the mantel of their teacher and continue his work as he would, as most Jews had traditionally done, or move forward with their own interpretations. The leaders of Hasidism chose the latter, opting to provide their own input to each issue, and using their warm charisma to spread Hasidism across Poland. Their fellow Jews, those who did not embrace Hasidism, quickly became threatened by this and began to attack it as a heresy with unrelenting fury, demanding the segregation, exile, and even destruction of Hasidism. Hasidism was surrounded by threats and was at risk of dissolving into obscurity like Sabbateanism. However, unlike Sabbateanism, which heavily relied upon a single central leader, Hasidism became decentralized and instead of relying on just the Baal Shem Tov, the Hasidim relied on a circle of learned scholars that had previously went to him for guidance. There were multiple rebbes who could offer their own perspectives and teachings, each with an innate holiness and understanding of the Torah, these were the tzaddikim. They, with their restructuring of Hasidic thought, and the distinctly positive nature of Hasidism during the late eighteenth

[1] "An Anti-Hasidic Circular" in Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791,* (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 360.

century, in spite of the attacks against it, allowed it to survive against their critics and survive in the new world that all Polish Jewry were thrown into when the Kingdom of Poland was forcibly annexed by Russia in 1793.

Concurrent to early Hasidism, a revivalist movement amongst the remaining Sabbatians, based around their new leader, Jacob Frank, arose, and through this movement's failure, Hasidism found itself in the position to gain new followers. This movement, the Frankists, believed that Jacob Frank was the reincarnation of Shabbatai Tzvi, the "messiah," and eagerly embraced his failed attempts of religious reform. His reforms, however, would prove to be the final death throes of Sabbateanism as instead of providing a spiritual form of expression, as Hasidism did, it embraced hedonistic practices which were universally denounced by the rest of Judaism, including the Hasidim. Like other would-be messiahs that would arise after the death of Shabbatai Tzvi, Jacob Frank, born in Podolia in 1726, had attempted to take command of the Polish Sabbatians in 1755.[2] He encouraged his followers to spurn guilt, and completely rejected the Talmud, if not traditional Judaism, citing it as the main reason for the Jewish People's suffering and inability to find peace.[3] The Frankists were so excessive in their abnormal practices that early Hasidim and the Polish Rabbis condemned them in a brief moment of unity. Word of sexual excesses and a lack of morality quickly spread amongst the scholarly elite, and in Brody, less than five years after Frank formed his movement, the Frankists were excommunicated.[4] They fully embraced Christianity not long after, abandoning their Jewish roots and ceasing their relationship with Judaism, much to the relief of the Jewish community.[5] The disaster that was the

[2] Harris Lenowitz, *The Jewish Messiahs: From the Galilee to Crown Heights*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 170-171.
[3] Harry Mordka Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism*, (London, 1970), 26.
[4] S. M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Translated by Israel Friedlaender, Vol. 1. 3 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1916), 214.
[5] Rabinowicz, 26.

Frankist Movement affirmed two ideas into the minds of Polish Jewry. The first, learned by the rabbis, was that the excommunication of a "heretical" sect was necessary for the continued survival of Judaism. The second, realized by the common people, was that a Sabbatian based messiah was no longer a viable option when attempting to fulfil their spiritual needs. Should they place their faith in any single man again, he would have to be different from Frank or Tzvi. A void had formed in the hearts of Polish Jewry, who, in the aftermath of the Frankists, had only become more confused and desperate for answers, which many would soon find within Hasidism.

Where messiahs failed, and rabbis proved callous and unrelatable, the Baal Shem Tov, and his successors, were warm and simple, appealing to the masses. In 1760, with the Baal Shem Tov now dead, Hasidism began to spread with evangelizing zeal. The Baal Shem Tov's successor, Rabbi Dov Baer, known as the Maggid, sent his disciples across the far reaches of Poland to bring more Jews into the Hasidic fold.[6] Southern Poland, the region that had been massacred by Chmielnicki a century prior was where Hasidism spread easiest, with other areas, such as Lithuania, being much harder to spread into.[7] Solomon Maimon, a Lithuanian Jew, when reflecting on Hasidism in his autobiography, states:

> The majority of Polish Jews are scholars, that is to say, devotees of idleness and contemplation. Because of this tradition, and because the new teachings made the path to blessedness easier—fasting, staying up all night, and constantly studying the Talmud were deemed not only impractical but also to harm the cheerful spirit needed for true piety—it was only natural that the new sect quickly attracted new members.[8]

Hasidism appealed on a personal level for Polish Jewry and was an easy alternative to the scholarly focus that traditional Judaism championed. Instead of fasting and living a life of

[6] Rabinowicz, 41.
[7] Dubnow, 231.
[8] Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*. Translated by Yitzhak Y. Melamed, Abraham P. Socher, and Paul Reitter, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 87.

asceticism, as Lurianic Kabbalah would encourage, Hasidism instead focused on enjoying life and embracing bodily pleasure. To them, God dwells in all things, and as a result all things were, in essence, joyous. No scholarly education was required to know this, and Hasidism, as a result, appealed greatly to the uneducated. The Polish Jewry in the south, who lacked proper education, were eager to accept Hasidism, and proved to be its heartland, but these new Hasidim required educated guidance. Luckily, Hasidism had also appealed to some members of the scholarly elite; famed Talmudists and scholars, such as Rabbi Yaakov Yosef, Rabbi Levi Isaac, and Rabbi Gershon became disciples of the Baal Shem Tov in the 1750s and would each work to develop Hasidism after their master's death.[9] Each of these men, under the instruction of the Maggid, and encouraged by their own passions, established Hasidic communities in towns and villages across southern Poland.[10] From their new seats of Hasidic power, these learned scholars, the inner circle of the Baal Shem Tov, made it their mission to spread their teachings to the far corners of Poland and Lithuania, causing small enclaves to sprout throughout the Kingdom.

The greatest threat to initially plague the early Hasidim existed in the form of their fellow Jews, whose scholarly elite would excommunicate the Hasidim, and their leaders, on multiple occasions throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century. Even in its weakened state, the Jewish orthodoxy within the Kingdom of Poland would not be easily defeated by the Hasidim, and from one of the most influential rabbinic leaders of the time, Elijah ben Solomon, the Gaon of Vilna, came the first of many excommunications of Hasidism. From his seat in Vilna, with the support of the anti-Hasidic rabbinical leaders, the *mitnagdim*, the Gaon issued the

[9] This is the same Rabbi Gershon from Brody, the Baal Shem Tov's brother-in-law.
Abraham J. Heschel, *The Circle of the Baal Shem Tov: Studies in Hasidism*, Edited by Samuel H. Dresner, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 47-50.
[10] Rabinowicz, 43.

excommunication in 1772.[11] "Our brethren, sons of Israel," they decreed, "new people have appeared, unimagined by our forefathers, who have formed a sect of *hashudim*."[12] From the very beginning, the critics of Hasidism expressed their disdain, referring to Hasidism by the term *hashudim,* which translates to, "suspicious ones," instead of "pious ones' as the word Hasidim translates. From this point, the *mitnagdim* continue, citing every grievance which would give them a reason to sever relations with the Hasidim. The first criticized the way in which Hasidim prayed, "they roar in abominable words in the vernacular and they behave in a crazed manner and say that their thoughts wander in all world."[13] The ecstatic nature of Hasidic prayer was so different from the orthodoxy that it was viewed as purely heretical. From the outside perspective, there was no normalcy within Hasidic prayer, shouting foreign shouts and jumping around had no known roots within Judaism.[14] These foreign sounds produced during prayer, much to the disgust of the rabbis, included Yiddish, the vernacular language of the Ashkenazim, which was not the language of prayer, or with Sephardic pronunciations, which were foreign to the Ashkenazi of Poland.[15] In the eyes of the rabbis, the early Hasidim had turned their backs on the traditional language of Hebrew, yet more reasons for excommunication continued to appear. During prayer, the Hasidim would sway vigorously, rolling their heads, and moving in weird motions, with some even somersaulting. These events were more festival than prayer, which

[11] Elijah ben Solomon (1720-1797), the Gaon of Vilna, was a rabbinic master of his time. Similar to the Baal Shem Tov, there are many legends surrounding the Gaon, who descended from prominent rabbis and apparently mastered both Torah and Talmud at a young age. While studying Torah and Talmud, he focused on the literal interpretations, *peshat*, instead of the *pilpul* practiced by other rabbis at the time. He is regarded as saying how the *Shulhan Arukh* was not binding if it conflicted with the Talmud, yet the revisionist nature of Hasidism greatly upset him, leading to his denouncement of them.

[12] "Excommunication of the Hasidim (April 1772)" in Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Second ed, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 390.

[13] "Excommunication of the Hasidim (April 1772)" 390.

[14] Yaffa Eliach, "The Russian Dissenting Sects and Their Influence on Israel Baal Shem Tov, Founder of Hassidism," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. 36, (1968, pp. 57–83), 74.

[15] Hilary L. Rubinstein, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Abraham J. Edelheit, and William D. Rubinstein, *The Jews in the Modern World: A History since 1750*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 59.

confused onlookers greatly.[16] Perhaps one of the most egregious transgressions committed by the Hasidim, in the Gaon's eyes, was how the Hasidim belittled the study of Torah, claiming that they shouldn't study it too much, reflective of their anti-academic philosophy. For a rabbi, this was unthinkable. The study of Torah, of the traditional laws and commandments to the Jewish people, was an essential part of life, and the Hasidim were willingly ignoring it. This was the final straw, and within their excommunication, the rabbinical leaders of Vilna, led by the Gaon, declared:

> "All leaders of our people must wear the mantel of zealotry, zealotry for the Lord of hosts, to destroy and expunge, and to sound to them the voice of excommunication and banishment… they must be divided and dispersed such that two heretics should not be found together, because two of the same breed are prohibited from everything… and it befits the world to separate them."[17]

The Hasidim were to be forcibly divided, preventing any sort of interaction between them and other Hasidim, encouraging the scattering of Hasidism. The *mitnagdim* declared it the role of all pious Jews to work towards the destruction of the Hasidic heresy. This was the first declaration against Hasidism as a movement, and not long afterwards came more denouncements, each calling for the excommunication of the Hasidim.

From Brody came the second excommunication of Hasidism, citing how they had introduced changes to the slaughter ritual, and as a result having non-kosher meat, similar claims would come from Shklov over a decade later in 1786, which by citing similar reasons, called for the severing of social relations with the Hasidim. The Shklov document, bearing the signatures of members of the community, states, "What their ritual slaughterers kill may not be eaten, the meat of such slaughtering is to be considered carrion, and the instruments used are to be

[16] Rubinstein, 58.
[17] "Excommunication of the Hasidim (April 1772)," 390.

considered polluted and forbidden."[18] Within Judaism, to produce kosher meat, animals need to be slaughtered in a specific fashion, as dictated by the Torah, which would efficiently remove blood using the techniques that are instructed.[19] The slaughterers amongst the Hasidim were considered completely unqualified and as a result, they could not produce kosher meat. The Jews within Shklov were unwilling to even touch the meat that may have come into contact with the Hasidim, continuing, "Meat brought into one city from another place is to be considered carrion unless it is accompanied by a certificate from a reliable person who is not a member of the Hasidic group."[20] Under no circumstances were rabbinic Jews to eat meat provided by the Hasidim, or slaughterers that may be associated with them. Further sanctions against the Hasidim, called by the community of Shklov, included the banning of Hasidic literature, having no one shelter a member of the Hasidic movement, and the refusal of allowing any Hasid appearing within a Jewish court.[21] Essentially, the Hasidim were to be completely severed from the rest of the Jewish community. The major centers of Polish Jewry had completely denounced Hasidism, and many of the small communities would eagerly follow suit, threatening a permanent schism between the two on par with the Frankists from the 1750s.

The early attacks against the Hasidim were zealous and relentless, yet Yaakov Yosef, being a primary target as a "converted Rabbi," paid them little thought, instead viewing each excommunication and each denouncement as little more than affirmation of the righteousness of Hasidism. The excommunication of 1772 was undeniably a threat, as were the many that followed, yet instead of despairing, Yaakov Yosef responded by publishing his own work, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, the first Hasidic book, in 1780, which brought Hasidic teaching to all who read

[18] "An Anti-Hasidic Circular," 361.
[19] Deuteronomy 12.21 and Deuteronomy 14.21
[20] "An Anti-Hasidic Circular," 361.
[21] Ibid. 360-361.

it.[22] Using this, and his other writings, the Hasidim cemented themselves against their rivals and maintained some form of normalcy. Yaakov Yosef would also spend his final years going on the offensive against the critics of Hasidism, directly censuring the rabbinic authority, calling them "little foxes who despoil the vineyard," echoing a century of criticism by lamenting on the current status of the rabbis, who, in his eyes, only embraced piety for personal honors and becoming haughty, refusing to associate with the masses who they owed their teaching.[23] In a passionate culmination of a lifetime of frustration, Yaakov Yosef denounced every tier within Jewish society. The teachers lacked dedication, the butchers relied too much on technical knowledge, and the scholars, the rabbis, they were the worst of all, each puffing their chest to declare, "I shall rule. I am the greater scholar."[24] In his eyes, there was no leadership for the Jewish people outside of Hasidism, with every conventional rabbi being corrupt in one way or another. The decay that had plagued the Jewish community in Poland came as a direct result of the inadequacy of the rabbinate. As a rabbi himself, and as someone who had interacted with each tier of rabbinic society, each criticism was given more and more legitimacy as he continued with unrelenting fury.[25] This offensive, accompanied by *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, is credited by some Hasidim as being the saving grace of Hasidism in the years following the death of the Baal Shem Tov, yet more importantly it helped spread a new philosophy that would fracture Hasidism into separate communities, each similar to one another, yet different.[26]

In light of the threats towards Hasidism, the Hasidim continued to adapt to new teachings, yet instead of stagnating and focusing excessively on the philosophy of the Baal Shem

[22] Dresner, 63-65.
[23] Rabinowicz, 45.
[24] Ibid. 46.
[25] Dresner, 83-84.
[26] Ibid. 73-74.

Tov, each new leader, based on Yaakov Yosef and the other members of the Maggid's inner circle's example, would carve their own paths and nearly start the movement anew. Where traditional rabbis, learned scholars who came to their position through years of Talmudic and rabbinic study, failed, Hasidism proposed a new kind of leadership, which conveniently worked in conjunction with the Maggid's inner circle, the idea of the tzaddik. The tzaddik, a righteous individual, was the key to unlocking the solution to help restore the Jewish community in Poland. To achieve this restoration, a new leader, the tzaddik, with the assistance of the lower religious functionaries, was needed to push the Jews forward.[27] Yaakov Yosef saw major flaws within his community, with each level of the religious hierarchy having some part of the blame. The roles of the lower religious functionaries effected the entire community; and while the rabbis held much of the blame in Yaakov Yosef's eyes, responsibility also fell upon the functionaries as any failure on their part would greatly harm the community. Judaism is communal, and when certain members fail to uphold a certain standard, the whole community suffers as a result; they need guidance and discipline. The solution for this, becoming one of Hasidism's greatest critiques, was the creation of separate houses of worship, the use of separate slaughterers, and the encouragement of the ignorant to become learned.[28] The Hasidim were regrouping themselves for redevelopment and change. Many Hasidic leaders were rabbis, yet it was the decaying piety of the rabbis that had alienated them, so the rabbis had to be replaced.[29] The idea that partially replaced them were the tzaddikim, a handful of men, righteous and humble, with a divine connection to the *Shechinah*, who, as a result, are able to live as "living Torahs."[30] Being

[27] Lower religious functionaries included, teachers, cantors/hazzans and butchers. The assistance that these functionaries could provide would be to continue their work, but not forsake certain principles for the purpose of salary, which was one of the primary criticisms that Yaakov Yosef had towards them.
[28] Dresner, 113-117.
[29] Rabinowicz, 46.
[30] The *Shechinah*, also known as the feminine attributes of God, is the presence of God within the world. This idea of God's presence comes from rabbinic literature.

connected to the *Shechinah*, a tzaddik had a mystical connection between the physical and the divine worlds and could serve as mediators between the Jews and God, and as "living Torahs" their wisdom was infallible. Central to each tzaddik was the belief that humanity had an innate holiness which gave them the capacity to understand creation and live as a vessel that outshone the mighty Temples of yore and the Torah. Humans, being the dominant factors as God's chosen creations, were capable of achieving far more and as a result not to be restricted by an unevolved Torah. In comparison to the tzaddikim, the Torah was just a collection of words and sentences, the beginning of a lesson, incomplete.[31] The tzaddikim, as "living Torahs" were the continuation of the lesson, using the material provided by the Torah to shape their own teachings. As a result, the tzaddikim had the freedom to teach as they so desired, serving as holy middlemen for the Hasidic communities, with the power to move it in any direction that they saw fit. It would come to no surprise that many members of the Maggid's circle would become the first tzaddikim of the Hasidim, attracting their own followers, and becoming centers of their own communities.[32]

With the idea of the tzaddikim spread across Hasidism, the Hasidim had found a new source of leadership to guide them other than the rabbis. While the Baal Shem Tov was never called a tzaddik himself, his role was very similar to them, and the tzaddikim that would succeed him would ironically take far more prominent roles in Hasidic thought as they developed their teachings and, in some cases, made claims for messiahship. By the late 1780s, the tzaddik wasn't just a righteous man anymore, but a king in his own right, each having his own court, with students standing by like courtiers, each waiting with bated breath for an utterance from the "living Torah." Gifts were frequently bestowed by pious Hasidim and eventually the tzaddikim

Dresner, 119-120.
[31] Dresner, 123.
[32] Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, Translated by Maurice S. Friedman, (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), 16-17.

had become an elite class of their own, being called rebbe by their communities and fathering hereditary dynasties. The holiness found in each tzaddik, their followers would speculate, could be inherited by their sons, creating actual dynasties in which the eldest son was treated like a prince, and succession bound itself with teaching.[33] The sons of a tzaddik had the advantage of learning from him throughout their whole life, and as a result would be worthy successors to their father's dynasties. Son-in-laws had a similar advantage but gone were the days in which a learned scholar could easily climb the social ladder. Hasidism, while attempting to move away from the hierarchal flaws that existed within the eighteenth-century Polish rabbinate, had merely redirected the focus unto themselves. Rebbes were rabbis, and while some of the first tzaddikim came from humble origins, just like many of the rabbinic masters of Polish Jewry, they soon became a caste of their own. A caste divided between dynasties which would feud, argue, and even marry into one another in some sort of spiritual-political alliance. Ironically within this new caste, Hasidism was plagued by problems that had existed in the old, with ambitious men, who were hailed as tzaddikim, using their position to their advantage, calling themselves the messiah in the footsteps of Shabbatai Tzvi and Jacob Frank. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,[34] the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, would attempt to fight this trend, citing the sudden abundance of tzaddikim as a sign of evil in the 1790s, gaining hatred from many of his peers.[35] Tzaddik would oppose tzaddik, and the united Hasidic group reverted to local communities, based around their tzaddik like their forefathers would a rabbi. With Hasidism decentralized, a single failed tzaddik could not destroy the whole movement nor could Hasidism be easily changed. Hasidism

[33] Rubinstein, 59.
[34] The teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav would form the Bratslaver Hasidic Dynasty, which still considers their dead founder as their tzaddik, giving them the nickname of "the Dead Hasidim" as they have not had a living rebbe for over 200 years.
[35] Buber, 19-21.

had unexpectedly achieved the goal desired by Polish Jewry for over a century, they had reorganized and re-stabilized their society in the new world, adopting new philosophies and embracing newer leaders, they were ready for the future.

The very concept of the tzaddikim would vary between each early tzaddik; Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Hasidism, believed that the tzaddik was not supposed to be a mediator nor a pillar of authority, but a supervisor to help teach morality to his students.[36] Instead of paying homage to the rebbe, Zalman and his successors only asked for respect to be paid, as the bond between them and the community should be based on mutual appreciation instead of a king and his courtiers.[37] From this belief, and the other teachings of Zalman, Chabad-Lubavitch, as well as the other dynasties that formed in the final decades of the eighteenth century, became its own distinct identity within Hasidism.[38] They had their own copy of the *Shulhan Arukh,* edited by Zalman to fit Hasidic needs, known as the *Shulhan Arukj of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi*, and much like the edits made in the *Mappah* in the sixteenth century, Zalman included his own in the margins.[39] Zalman, himself a passionate student of the written Torah, insisted that his followers do the same, claiming that it was through the study of Torah that man could reach their spiritual perfection; a good Hasid always made time for study.[40] Unlike the many criticisms towards Hasidim and how they rejected the study of Torah, Zalman and his followers embraced it.[41] He combined northern Rabbinic Judaism with

[36] The Chabad-Lubavitch form of Hasidism is perhaps one of the most widespread forms of Hasidism to still exist today. It became especially popular under the leadership of their seventh rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, during the twentieth century. Schneerson would be the last rebbe of the Lubavitcher Dynasty founded by Zalman, yet his movement continues to thrive as one of the most widespread forms of Hasidism.
[37] Rabinowicz, 74.
[38] Rubinstein, 61.
[39] Shneur Zalman, *Shulchan Aruch of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi*, Translated by Eliyahu Touger and Sholom Ber Wineberg, (Brooklyn, NY, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2016), 1.
[40] Rabinowicz, 75.
[41] "Excommunication of the Hasidim (April 1772)," 390.

southern Hasidism, providing one of many links that would help reunite the Hasidim with their rabbinic neighbors as they together faced both the Russian occupation and the threat that was found within the Jewish Enlightenment during the nineteenth century.[42]

Hasidism had successfully survived in the decades following the death of the Baal Shem Tov; neither outside criticism nor inner turmoil would destroy what they were continuing to develop as the eighteenth century came to a close. They had outlasted the Frankists, gained the admiration of sympathetic scholars, and stood strong against the *mitnagdim.* Yet the Hasidim did not remain idle. Hasidism was able to develop and decentralize during the final decade of the eighteenth century, focusing on multiple smaller communities instead of Hasidism as a whole. They reconstructed society, building their own houses of worship and instructing themselves on the proper way to live by the commandments of the Torah. However, as the Hasidim were miraculously rebuilding their society as Polish Jewry had dreamed since their great loss in the seventeenth century, the Kingdom of Poland was finally dying. After a series of failed wars and partitions between its neighbors, the Kingdom was finally dissolved in 1793, with the majority of the territory housing Jews being annexed by the Russian Empire. Hasidism, as well as the newly established Russian Jewry, had many new challenges ahead of them, yet under the leadership of the tzaddikim and through the passionate and communal teachings of Hasidism, the Hasidim would thrive for the next two centuries.

[42] The Jewish Enlightenment, known as the *Haskalah*, was an intellectual movement amongst European Jewry, starting in the 1770s and concluding in 1881. Based on the Enlightenment of Christian Europe, the Jewish Enlightenment primarily focused on preserving the Jewish people as they entered modernity, with Hebrew being revived as a language and assimilation being encouraged. The Jewish Enlightenment had a wide range of thinkers with many thoughts and movements coming from this period. Perhaps one of the most well-known movements that would arise from the Jewish Enlightenment would come at its end with the rise of Jewish nationalism, and later Zionism. The vast majority of Eastern European Jewry, including the Hasidim, greatly opposed these radical ideas of nationalism and assimilation, and would work together to prevent it from spreading in the east.

Conclusion

"The time for cultural rejuvenation had not yet arrived for the Jews of Poland and Lithuania. Least of all could such a rejuvenation have been stimulated by the change in their external, political situation: the transfer of the bulk of the Jewish population from the power of disintegrating Poland to that of Russia, a country even less civilized and built upon the foundations of autocracy and serfdom."[1]

The history of the Jewish people, for the past three millennia, has been rife with constant change and development. Starting from a small set of tribes within the lands of Canaan, the Jewish people has developed from a confederation to a Kingdom, then to exile, and after nearly two thousand years of exile a modern state was formed. Every corner of the map that is, or was, inhabited by Jews holds a particular, yet sometimes familiar, story. Be it the plains of Spain, the mountains of Ethiopia, or the forests of Russia, the Jewish narratives are constantly developing. Yet, for the Ashkenazim of Poland, the Jews of Eastern Europe, there were few places more significant to their development than the lands that once made up the Kingdom of Poland. Within that land, in the eighteenth century, on the verge of modernization, a unique form of Judaism was created. This form, a strange combination of new and old, promoted pantheism and a closeness to God for the first time in Ashkenazi history, and even centuries after the fact, these ideas still have an intoxicating pull for some Jews. This emotional expression, viewed as radical by its contemporaries, was the cornerstone of Hasidism; a movement so drenched with mythos that even though it was established nearly three centuries ago it has a sense of antiquity around it worthy of the events described within the Hebrew Bible.

[1]S. M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*. Translated by Israel Friedlaender, Vol. 1. 3 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1916), 241.

The fate of Polish Jewry was always bound with the Kingdom of Poland, from the Statute of Kalisz in 1264 they were attached to the Polish monarchy, allowing them to achieve a great deal of autonomy.[2] Using this granted autonomy, Polish Jewry developed their own society, entering a Golden Age and becoming a beacon of rabbinic learning and Talmudic study for the rest of the Jewish world.[3] Polish Jewry had their own forms of governance, known as the *Vaad*, and enjoyed special privileges, yet this paradise that they had crafted over the course of four centuries was torn to the ground when the Cossack Rebellion tore through southern Poland, resulting in the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648.[4] In the wake of such cruelty and destruction, many Jews were driven from their homes and a cry for answers was raised across the Kingdom. The desperate Polish Jewry, no longer able to trust their own rabbis, who frequently engaged in useless *pilpul* and would tend to lack the proper education to uphold their Golden Age standard, placed their faith in false messiahs and mystics, and with each failed attempt for redemption and a return to normalcy, Polish Jewry felt a continued feeling of spiritual exhaustion.[5] Judaism, was not providing the answers that Polish Jewry desired; neither Kabbalah, Talmud, and even Torah would help. The world around them was spinning in a downward spiral, yet where Polish Jewry felt they couldn't find answers, a traveling miracle worker started to offer his assistance and gave them exactly what they desired. This man, the Baal Shem Tov, told them something that they had never heard before, God was everywhere, even in the darkest of places, and as a result, life should be filled with ecstasy and rejoicing.[6] Never before has such a philosophy been proposed to Polish Jewry, and, in this time of pain and uncertainty, I argue that it was the answer that

[2] Harry Mordka Rabinowicz. *The World of Hasidism.* (London, 1970), 16.
[3] Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy*, (Abelard-Schuman, 1960), 23.
[4] Heiko Haumann, *A History of East European Jews*, (Budapest, NY: Central European University Press, 2002), 30.
[5] Dresner, 33-34.
[6] Rabinowicz, 35.

many Jews needed. They eagerly embraced the populist and pantheistic ideals of the Baal Shem Tov, both uneducated pauper and most learned rabbi would come to him for help and spiritual advice. He was the first of the tzaddikim, the first of the Hasidim, and from him a movement within Judaism was born. This movement, featuring drinking, merrymaking, and dance during times of prayer, was completely radical and unexpected.[7] Hasidic prayers were festivals, and soon they began to reorganize themselves by building their own houses of worship and embracing their own teachers instead of the traditional rabbis. The Baal Shem Tov, being the first of these teachers had the greatest individual impact on early Hasidism by influencing it with the rituals and actions within his daily life. To his followers, he could do no wrong.

His life, and those of his inner circle, were heavily fictionalized by the Hasidim, who spread legends such as the mighty deeds supposedly performed by the Baal Shem Tov and some of his students. Through these legends, the idea of the Baal Shem Tov as a holy miracle worker surviving today with tales of him performing exorcisms, summoning rain, and curing the sick still prevailing within modern literature.[8] Every aspect of his identity is either hagiographical legitimization to his leadership, or an underlying cause for the movement that sparked from him. Just like many students in schools desired at the time, the Baal Shem Tov, didn't stay in his school, going into the wilderness.[9] Studying Lurianic Kabbalah and the unknown manuscripts of Rabbi Adam he shaped his outlook on life and developed his peculiar practices. The Sabbatians, whose memory hung above the early Hasidim like a ghoulish shadow, only lasted within Judaism until the disaster that was the Frankist movement in the 1750s, of which the Baal Shem

[7] "Excommunication of the Hasidim (April 1772)" in Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, and Jehuda Reinharz, eds. *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, Second ed, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 390.
[8] Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov: The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Hasidism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 34-37.
[9] Solomon Maimon, *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*. Translated by Yitzhak Y. Melamed, Abraham P. Socher, and Paul Reitter, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 19-20.

Tov was one of its many critics, yet, instead of rejoicing in their destruction, he mourned their loss.[10] He was said to have lamented, "I heard the *Shechinah* grieving and mourning. [Yet] as long as the limb is attached to the body, there is still hope that it will be healed, but, after the limb is amputated, then everything is lost. Every member of the House of Israel is a limb of the *Shechinah.*"[11] This widespread love of the Jewish people, including those that were despised, such as the Frankists, would further legitimize the Baal Shem Tov in the eyes of his followers, who would continue to tell legends about him, making him the myth that he is known as today. With time, his words would turn into edicts and encourage further practices within Hasidism. They evolved, focusing on the smallest of details, such as rabbinic Talmudists that had proceeded them, and developed a distinct culture and form of expression for Judaism.

The creation of Hasidism, so radically different from the orthodoxy and threatening to the status quo, led to a divide between the those who accepted it and those who vehemently opposed it. A new schism, one which could never be repaired, was threatening to form between the two. Early attacks against the Hasidim, led by rabbinic leaders such as the Gaon of Vilna and the *Kahal* of Brody, were ruthless and called for the complete excommunication of the Hasidim.[12] Hasidic leaders would respond to these attacks as well, with Yaakov Yosef harshly criticizing the rabbis and religious functionaries, with none being spared from his wrath.[13] As Hasidim and *mitnagdim* denounced and attacked one another upon the scholarly and societal battlefield, the Kingdom of Poland crashed down around them.[14] When the dust finally settled, and when the

[10] During the early eighteenth century, comparing someone to the Sabbatians was one of the greatest insults within rabbinic circles, often putting a rabbi's career at risk if he couldn't defend himself from the claim.
[11] Rabinowicz, 37.
[12] "Excommunication of the Hasidim (April 1772)" 390.
[13] Dresner, 83.
[14] "An Anti-Hasidic Circular" in Marc Saperstein, and Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The Jews in Christian Europe: A Source Book, 315-1791,* (Pittsburgh PA: Hebrew Union College Press, 2015), 360.

Hasidim and *mitnagdim* finally began to settle their differences, the Kingdom of Poland was no more, partitioned and destroyed by its neighbors, leaving them under the sovereignty of the Russian Empire. After five centuries, Polish Jewry were no more, they were now the newly created Russian Jewry, and had to adapt to a brand-new world.[15] Within this previously hostile land, the Hasidim would continue to live on, and surprisingly flourish within the mighty ghetto that was the Russian Pale of Settlement.[16] For the next century they continued to develop their theology and hold on to their personal identity. New Hasidic dynasties based around new, Russian, tzaddikim would also form, spurred by their experiences in this new environment. Slowly, yet surely, the Hasidim began to cement themselves into Ashkenazi culture, securing themselves within society, only to be threatened once again by the events of the Holocaust in the twentieth century.

Hasidism came as a direct result of the century of degradation within the religious spirit of Polish Jewry, and through its creation, not only did many Hasidim find the answers that they had hoped for, but it also provided the catalyst for the other Jews, who opposed Hasidism, to find ways to reform themselves as well. Judaism would continue to survive, yet the form of its expression had become more varied than ever before. Hasidism, born from desires of reform and change in the rabbinic class system, built an insular society around itself, having its own dynastic castes and practices, practically rebuilding the society that was lost in 1648 with a new Hasidic image.[17] Its previously radical nature soon dulled into conformity, and eventually, when the new threats reached them, conservatism. Now, as a religious movement, modern Hasidism, in all its branches and forms, is associated with the Haredi, the Ultra-Orthodox of Judaism; still dressing

[15] Dubnow, 241.
[16] Hilary L. Rubinstein, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Abraham J. Edelheit, and William D. Rubinstein, *The Jews in the Modern World: A History since 1750*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65.
[17] Rubinstein, 59.

as they did when the Baal Shem Tov lived and holding on to the answers that had sustained their forefathers, unwilling to modernize. This is the modern perception of Hasidism, a movement unwilling to change and clinging to Jewish traditions that had been made irrelevant by modernity. However, this is not what Hasidism was when it first began in the eighteenth century, instead of being traditional and fundamentalist, it was new and unconventional.

From my experience, through interactions with my peers, this old Hasidism seems to be fairly forgotten, replaced by the conception that modern Hasidism is not only the same as it was in the eighteenth century, but was what traditional Judaism strived to be. To further understand the modern movement, old Hasidism, and the reasons for its foundation, must itself be studied to prevent ignorance and misconceptions. The founding of Hasidism, coming as a culmination of centuries of history provide insight into the centuries of struggle that the Jewish people had experienced; being but one of many possibilities that could have occurred. The Kingdom of Poland, as a political and religious hub for Judaism, was the perfect location for Hasidism to take root. It was a paradise, providing the environment for religious prosperity, but it was still a land of the diaspora, and once Polish Jewry were painfully reminded of that fact, they became a prime group for religious renewal. Hasidism was not their first attempt, but it was, by far, their most successful. It appealed to the common people on a base level, adhering to Kabbalistic traditions and harnessing new ideas on the presence of God. Today, within Judaism, these ideas are no longer exclusive to Hasidism, as not only have these ideas appealed to a wider audience, but because Hasidism and the Ashkenazi orthodoxy were able to eventually share their philosophies. The future for the now traditionalist Hasidim and Judaism is impossible to discern, yet by understanding the past, a greater future can hopefully be achieved.

Glossary

Ashkenazi – A term for the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. The name, deriving from the Hebrew word for medieval Germany, Ashkenaz.

Baal Shem Tov – Baal Shem Tov (בעל שם טוב), translating to "Master of the Good Name" is the pseudonym frequently used to refer to the founder of Hasidism, Israel ben Eleazar. The name is frequently shortened to Besh't (בשט), coming from the first letters of each word in the name.

Blood Libels – An accusation against Jews that claimed they used Christian Blood in religious rituals, especially in the baking of matzo for Passover.

Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648 – A term referring to the Cossack Rebellion against the Polish monarchy in 1648. The Massacres, claiming the lives of tens of thousands of Jews, were the result of repressed hatred towards Jews and the Polish Monarchy.

The Jewish Diaspora – The dispersion of the Jews outside of the land of Israel. The Jewish Diaspora began after the Jews were forcibly expelled from the land of Israel by the Romans in the second century.

Frankism – The eighteenth century religious movement based around the false-messiah Jacob Frank, who converted to Catholicism in 1759. Frankism encourages the rejecting of religious norms in Judaism and at its peak had 500,000 followers within Poland.

Gaon – An honorific title given to a few leading rabbis and scholars throughout history to denote their greatness in Torah study.

Gelliot – The district councils of the *Vaad.*

Halakha – Jewish law as dictated by the commandments within the Torah.

Hasidism - An influential Jewish movement founded in Poland in the eighteenth century. Members of this movement are known as Hasid (singular) or Hasidim (plural).

Hashudim – Meaning suspicious ones, the term *Hashudim* was used to define the Hasidim in a derogatory fashion in the eighteenth century.

Kabbalah – An ancient Jewish mystical tradition, based on interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, that developed rapidly during the Medieval era. Someone who practices Kabbalah is known as a Kabbalist.

Kahal/Kehillot – The town councils of the *Vaad.*

Mappah – Translating to "Tablecloth," the *Mappah* was an edit to the *Shulhan Arukh* by Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530-1572) to make the *Shulhan Arukh* relevant to Ashkenazim.

Matzo – The unleavened bread used for the holiday of Passover.

Medinot – The provincial councils of the *Vaad.*

Messiah – The prophesized "King of the Jews" that will return to the Jewish people, return them to Israel, construct the Third Temple, and rule over a prosperous nation. The Messiah's arrival is also believed to herald the beginning to the Messianic Age, coming after an era of darkness, in which the coming of the Messiah would redeem the Jewish People. Multiple individuals throughout history have either claimed or been given this title, included Simon Bar Kokhba, Shabbatai Tzvi, and Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Messianic – Relating to the Messiah. An example being a Messianic Movement.

Mikveh – A bath used for ritual immersion in Judaism to achieve ritual purity. *Mikveh* are to be used by Jewish women to "purify" themselves after menstruation and childbirth and Jewish men after ejaculation.

Mishnah – A collection of exegetical material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish Law, forming the first part of the Talmud.

Mishneh Torah – A code of Jewish Law written by Maimonides in the twelfth century. The *Mishneh Torah* is considered as his magnum opus.

Mitzvot – The 613 precepts and commandments commanded by God given in the Torah.

Mitnagdim – Translating to "opponents," this term was used by the Hasidim to refer to their theological opponents.

Pilpul – The Talmudic term used to describe a rhetorical process that the Sages used to formulate their legal decisions.

Rabbi – A Jewish scholar or teacher, especially one who studies or teaches Jewish Law. They serve as the religious leaders of Rabbinic Judaism.

Rambam – The acronym of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides. The term Rambam is frequently used when discussing Maimonides in a Jewish setting.

Rebbe – The Yiddish form of the word Rabbi. In modern Hasidism, the Rebbe is the leader of the movement.

Sabbateanism – The religious movement that believed their leader, Shabbatai Tzvi, was the Messiah. Followers of this movement are known as Sabbatians.

Sanhedrin – An assembly of either twenty-three or seventy-one rabbis that sat as a tribunual in every city in the ancient land of Israel.

Sephardi – Also known as Sephardic, the term Sephardi is used to refer to any Jew coming from the Iberian Peninsula or North Africa, deriving from the Hebrew word for medieval Spain, Sepharad.

Shechinah – The presence of God in the world as well as the feminine aspect of God.

Shulhan Arukh – Translating to "Set Table," the *Shulhan Arukh*, written by Joseph Karo (1488-1575) in the Levant, is a codification of laws in Judaism.

Talmud – The body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend and a central text to Rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud consists of two sections, the Mishnah and the Gemara. There are two versions of the Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, compiled in the fifth century, and the Jerusalem Talmud, which was compiled earlier.

Tefillin – A set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah. Tefillin is to be worn during weekday morning prayers in Rabbinic Judaism.

The Maggid – Rabbi Dov Baer, the successor of the Baal Shem Tov as the leader of Hasidism. The term *Maggid* translates to "preacher."

The Second Temple – Also known as Herod's Temple, the Second Temple was built to replace the destroyed First Temple, Solomon's Temple, in the sixth century BCE. While it stood, it was the holiest site within Judaism. The Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE after the Jews attempted to rebel.

Torah – The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, yet in this project the word Torah is used to refer to the Law revealed to Moses and Jewish Teaching.

Tzaddik/Tzaddikim – Translating to "righteous one" a Tzaddik is a title in Judaism given to people considered righteous. A Tzaddik within Hasidism is believed to be able to communicate with both the physical and divine worlds.

Vaad/ Vaad Arba Aratzot – The Council of Four Lands, which oversaw the administrative and religious life of Polish Jewry from the sixteenth century to 1764.

Yeshiva – A Jewish college or seminary.

Yiddish – A language used by the Ashkenazi, originally serving as a German dialect combined with Hebrew and, later, Slavic languages.

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