

The Politics of Exclusion in Judaism

Hassidim vs. Mitnagdim

I. (Extremely) Brief Historical Overview (via Wikipedia)

1. Sabbatai Zevi, (Hebrew: שַׁבְּתַי זְבִי, Shabbetai Tzvi, other spellings include Sabbatai Żevi, Shabbetai Żevi, Sabbatai Sevi, and Sabetay Sevi in Turkish), (August 1, 1626 – c. September 17, 1676 in Dulcigno (present day Ulcinj), Montenegro) was a Sephardic Rabbi and kabbalist who claimed to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. He was the founder of the Jewish Sabbatean movement. At the age of forty, he was forced by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed IV to convert to Islam. Some of his followers also converted to Islam, about 300 families who were known as the Dönme (aka Dönme) (converts).

2. Frankism was an 18th-century to 19th-century Jewish religious movement centered around the leadership of the Jewish Messiah claimant Jacob Frank, who lived from 1726 to 1791. At its height, it claimed perhaps 50,000 followers, primarily Jews living in Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe. Unlike traditional Judaism, which provides a set of detailed guidelines called halakha that are scrupulously followed by observant Jews and regulate many aspects of life, Frank claimed that "all laws and teachings will fall" and asserted that one's most important personal obligation was the transgression of every boundary.

3. Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer (רבי ישראל בן אליעזר) August 27, 1698 (18 Elul) – May 22, 1760), often called Baal Shem Tov or Besht considered to be founder of "Hassidic" Judaism

4. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (Hebrew: שְׁנֵיאוֹר זַלְמָן מְלִיאָדִי), also known as the Baal HaTanya,[1] (September 4, 1745 – December 15, 1812 O.S.), was an Orthodox Rabbi, and the founder and first Rebbe of Chabad, a branch of Hasidic Judaism, then based in Liadi, Imperial Russia. He was the author of many works, and is best known for Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Tanya and his Siddur Torah Or compiled according to the Nusach Ari. He is also known as Shneur Zalman Baruchovitch, RaZaSh, Baal HaTanya vahaShulchan Aruch, the Alter Rebbe ("Old Rebbe" in Yiddish), Admor HaZaken ("Old Rebbe" in Hebrew), Rabbeinu HaZokein, Rabbeinu HaGodol, the GRaZ, and Rav.

5. Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, (Hebrew: ר' אליהו בן שלמה זלמן) known as the Vilna Gaon or Elijah of Vilna and simply by his Hebrew acronym Gra ("Gaon Rabbenu Eliyahu"), (b. Vilnius April 23, 1720, d. Vilnius October 9, 1797) was a Talmudist, halachist, kabbalist, and the foremost leader of non-hasidic Jewry of the past few centuries. He is commonly referred to in Hebrew as ha'Gaon ha'Chasid mi'Vilna, "the saintly genius from Vilnius."

6. Chaim Volozhin (also known as Chaim ben Yitzchok of Volozhin or Chaim Ickovits; born January 21, 1749 — died June 14, 1821) was an Orthodox rabbi, Talmudist, and ethicist. Popularly known as "Reb Chaim Volozhiner" or simply as "Reb Chaim", he was born in Volozhin (aka Valożyn or Valozhyn) when it was a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He died there while it was under the control of the Russian Empire. It is part of present-day Belarus.

II. Vilna Gaon vs. Hassidism

For further reading, see

Nadler, Allen. *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 1997.

Etkes, Immanuel. *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*. Brandeis 2004

Etkes, Immanuel. *The Gaon of Vilna, The Man and his Image/* University of California Press Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, 2002.

7. The descriptions of the beginning of the struggle against Hasidism generally focus on events that took place in Vilna in the spring of 5532. However, existing documents contain echoes of two earlier events with which we must begin this discussion. The first was the effort made by Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady to gain an audience with the Vilna Gaon in the winter of 5532. The second event is the “debate” that took place in Shklov during that winter. Here is the description of these two events as presented by article six:

And when our rabbi and teacher Mendel of Minsk was here last winter with the true Gaon, the man of God, our master and rabbi, Rabbi Eliyahu the Hasid, may his candle be bright, he did not see the face of the Gaon all that winter long. 18 He [the Gaon] said that he had a commentary on a passage in the Zohar composed by their sect, in which there was heresy. . . . And when the writings arrived from Shklov here in the holy congregation of Vilna, then the Gaon said: The holy congregation of Shklov is right, and as for the aforementioned sect, they are heretics and must be brought low. Additional information that supplements and clarifies the picture is found in a passage from the letter of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady: We went to the Gaon he-Hasid, may his candle burn brightly, to his house to debate with him and to remove his complaints from us, while I was there with the Hasid rabbi our late teacher Rabbi Mendel Horosener of blessed memory, and the Gaon closed his door before us twice. And when the great people of the city spoke to him, [saying]: Rabbi, the famous rabbi of theirs has come to debate with his venerable, holy Torah, and when he is defeated, certainly thereafter there will be peace upon Israel, he put them off with delays. And when they began to implore him greatly, he left and went away and traveled from the city, remaining there until our departure from the city. Afterward in our country we traveled to the holy congregation of Shklov also to debate, and we did not succeed. And they did something to us that was not right, they broke their word and the promise they had given us at first not to do anything to us. Only when they saw that they had nothing to respond to our words did they come with a strong arm and suspend themselves from a high tree, ha-Gaon he-Hasid.

Etkes, I. *Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image*.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002. p 80-81.

From these two accounts, we may infer the following probable sequence of events: during the winter of 5532 rumors reached the Gaon regarding the new type of Hasidim and their strange customs. The source of the rumors was apparently in the community of Shklov, in White Russia, where several rabbinical scholars lived who were closely associated with the Gaon. When the Hasidic leaders in White Russia learned that the Gaon was hostile to Hasidism because of what he had heard about it, they decided to set out for Vilna to mollify him and prove to him that the

accusations against them were groundless. The initiative of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady was probably based on a sober estimate of the enormous authority of the Gaon and of the potential danger to Hasidism, should he decide to act against them.

8. For the moment let us consider a third accusation, to which Rabbi Shneur Zalman explicitly referred in his letter: a Hasidic interpretation of a certain passage of the Zohar, which the Gaon viewed as a sign of heresy. We do not know what passage of the Zohar Rabbi Shneur Zalman refers to, nor how the Hasidim interpreted it. In any event, it is worthwhile to take note of further information that Rabbi Shneur Zalman included in his letter in which he sought to vindicate the Gaon and the way he acted toward the delegates of Hasidism: And in truth we exonerated him, since the matter had already been decided by him absolutely without any doubt in the world, and the trial was over for him based on the gathering of testimony from many people who appeared trustworthy. Accordingly, when he heard about some Torah matter from a well-known intermediary, . . . he did not look favorably and change it to positive, [thinking] that perhaps the intermediary had changed the words slightly, for it is known that with a slight change of the words the [meaning of] a matter can truly change completely from one extreme to the other, and certainly it did not cross his mind that perhaps [the Hasidim] have the words of the Lord according to gilui eliyahu, separating and stripping off the corporeality that is in the Holy Zohar in a manner hidden and beyond him, only that it requires reception from mouth to mouth and not through the aforementioned intermediary, because great and mighty sanctity is necessary for such a high level, and truly the opposite of what was confirmed to him according to witnesses reliable in his honor's eyes; . . . and for this reason he did not want to receive any claim or answer or excuse in the world about a Torah matter that he had heard, nor anything in the world from us.

Etkes, I. Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002. p 82.

9. The answer emerges in the continuation of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's letter: I went with him to the room of our great rabbi, whose soul is in heaven, and my eyes saw and my ears heard that he spoke severely to him about the evil of his leadership of our fellow believers in the state of Russia, . . . whose conversation all day long was debauchery and levity, and also to mock all the scholars and to have contempt for them with all sorts of derision and throwing off of the yoke and great frivolity. And they also constantly turned themselves over with their head down and their feet up (which is called kuleyen zikh) in the markets and the streets, and the name of Heaven is profaned in the eyes of the uncircumcised, and also of other kinds of mirth and joking in the streets of Kalisk. And in the winter of 5532, after the debate that was held in Shklov, he could make no answer to that accusation or the likes of it. And the sages of the holy community of Shklov wrote to report to the late Gaon of Vilna, until they made it enter his heart to judge them as detractors, perish the thought, like a judgment against an apikoros who scorns Torah scholars, and about the turning of the feet upward he said that it is from Pe'or etc.; and so they wrote from Vilna to Brod and there they printed the tract Zemir 'Aritsim in the aforementioned summer. This caused great grief to all the Hasidic leaders of Volhyn, and they could not sit in their houses, and they gathered all of them together in the holy community of Rovna at that time with our great rabbi, whose soul is in heaven, to take counsel.

Etkes, I. Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002. p 84.

10. And the leaders and the court sent people out to search for their books and writings, and they found strange writings there, that it is impossible to write openly and the space is too small. And a ban was proclaimed after testimony was given about their actions. And a legal hearing was held

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about their unseemly actions, also their foolishness of the upper parts below and the lower parts above. And one of them was polluted with lying with a man, and he confessed to this before the court . . . and also other ignoble things, and they interrupted their prayers with words in Yiddish. And the leaders visited the Gaon he-Hasid to ask his opinion, and he said that it was a duty to repel them and pursue them and reduce them and drive them from the land.³⁴

Etkes, I. Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002. p 88.

11. Then the leaders sat and also two groups of the judges, and the Rabbi was the chief justice. And there was a verdict to burn their writings at the kune [pillory] before the welcoming of the sabbath. And morenu Issar the head of the sect should go up to the topmost step on the sabbath before the prayer, “He dwells eternal,” and in all the synagogues and the houses of study there should be no minyan here, but only in the synagogue and the great house of study, and he should confess there in the formula that would issue from the court. And then the warden should excommunicate them and all those associated with them and should write letters of peace to all the major communities, to the holy community of Shklov and to the holy community of Minsk.

Etkes, I. Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002. p 89.

12. The means for suppressing Hasidism decided on by the Vilna leadership— public confession of the leader of the sect and proclamation of a ban against the Hasidim— were not sufficient for the Gaon, as we find in the continuation of the account by the author of article six: And when the verdict against morenu Issar was issued, the Hasid was not present here [in Vilna], but in Antikolya, and on Friday, before the holy sabbath, he assembled the leaders and was angry with them: Why have you been lenient in your judgment? If it depended on me, I would have done to them as Elijah the Prophet did to the Prophets of Ba'al. And the Hasid wished to place morenu Issar in the pillory, only the leaders did not desire that. And they struck him with a rubber whip in the kahal room before the welcoming of the sabbath. And then they burned their writings before the pillory. And before “He who dwells eternal,” he went up to the upper step, and the Hasidim, his comrades, stood at his right, . . . and afterward they banned him. And all that week he sat in prison in the jail of the citadel that they call “Schloss.” And on the sabbath night he was held in the kahal room. The main gap dividing the Gaon and the community leaders concerned their attitude toward Rabbi Issar, a leader of the Hasidim in Vilna. The Gaon’s demand to pillory him was probably intended to give public and extremely forthright expression to the condemnation of Hasidism.

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14. The Vilna Gaon’s determination that the Hasidim were heretics who should be persecuted motivated the beginning of the organized struggle against Hasidism, and it was fundamental to it. Not only did the Gaon’s associates act in his name and with his authority, but the community establishment also depended on his instructions, as he led the battle against Hasidism. As long as the Gaon was alive, it was impossible to effect a reconciliation between the Mitnagdim and the Hasidim.

Etkes, I. Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002. p 92.

15. In the month of Shevat 5538 (winter 1778), several months after reaching the land of Israel at the head of a “caravan” of Hasidim, and about six years after the outbreak of the struggle against Hasidism, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk sent an epistle from Safed to “the Ministers, Sages, and Judges of the States of Volhynia and Lithuania, and Russia.” This epistle, as far as we know, was the first public call by a Hasidic leader for reconciliation between the warring camps. These are its main points: 1. The Hasidim rejected all accusations leveled by the Mitnagdim against them and declared loyalty to the values of the tradition. They were willing to forgive the Mitnagdim for the wrongs they had done to the Hasidim during the persecutions, and they called for a new chapter in relations between the two camps. They recognized the authority of the community leaders to whom the letter was addressed, that is to say, the traditional establishment, and called for these leaders to recognize the righteousness of the Hasidim and to live in peace with them.

Etkes, I. Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image.

Ewing, NJ, USA: University of California Press, 2002. p 97.

Nadler. Faith of the Mithnagdim:

16. Letter of the GRA issued to rabbinic leadership of Belorussian and Podolian communities in fall of 1796:

Into your ears I cry: Woe unto he who says to his father, “what have you begotten?” and to his mother “what have you brought forth to birth?” a generation whose children curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; who have sinned greatly against them by turning their backs to them. Their stubborn hearts insist on rejecting good and choosing evil, transgressing the Torah and changing its laws...In the Torah of Moses they have established a new covenant, working out their evil schemes with the masses in the House of the Lord...interpreting the Torah falsely while claiming that their way is precious in the eyes of God...They call themselves Hasidim - that is an abomination! How they have deceived this generation, uttering these words on high: “These are they gods, O Israel: every stick and stone.” They interpret the Torah incorrectly regarding the verse “Blessed be the name of the

glory of God from his dwelling place” (Ez 3:12) and also regarding the verse: “...and You give life to everything” (Neh 9:6) - Nadler 11

17. R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, founder of Habad in Shaar Hayichut v'haemunah in Tanya:

With this in mind, the statement in the Zohar that the verse “Hear O Israel” (Deut 6:4) teaches the higher unity of God, while the verse “Blessed be the name” (ez 3:12) teaches the lower-level unity...namely, that His very essence and being, may He be blessed, which is called by the name Eyn Sof, completely fills the earth in both space and time; for in the heavens above and on earth below, and in all four directions, everything is filled with the light of the Eyn Sof, may He be blessed...and all...are completely nullified in the light of the Eyn Sof.