Revealer Revealed

BY DAVID ASSAF AND DAVID BIALE

Megaleh Temirin
by Joseph Perl, edited by Jonatan Meir
Hasidut Meduma
by Jonatan Meir
Mossad Bialik, three-volume set, $88.71

Earlier this year, an email announcement of a publication made its rounds among scholars of Jewish studies. Written in the newly Hebrew of the Eastern European Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah), the advertisement proclaimed that the work would "reveal all secrets." The parody of genuine announcements of this type from the 19th century was dead-on, but the joke went beyond the mannered maskilic prose style: The work that would "reveal all secrets" was a three-volume magnum opus containing a scholarly edition of a book itself entitled Revealer of Secrets (Megaleh Temirin), plus copious notes, background sources, and a whole volume of commentaries. And since Megaleh Temirin is a parody of Hasidic literature, the email was thus a parody of a parody.

The author of the email was Jonatan Meir, a scholar of 19th-century Hebrew literature from Ben-Gurion University who has devoted much of his scholarly career to "revealing the secrets" of Joseph Perl (1773-1839), a maskil (enlightener) from Tarnopol in Eastern Galicia (Ternopil in modern-day Ukraine). Perl was best known during his lifetime for establishing a modern synagogue and a modern school that educated both boys and girls in secular as well as religious subjects, a model for the implementation of Haskalah ideology. He was a moderate maskil who favored incremental reforms and, unlike other maskilim of his day, remained a traditional Jew in terms of his personal practice. But Perl was also a crusader—one might even call him an obsessed crusader—against Hasidism, which he regarded nothing short of demonic. The remnants of his personal archive, not examined critically until the 1930s, are a treasure trove of information on early 19th-century Hasidism, since Perl compulsively collected every scrap of information on the movement whose existence he regarded as a threat to the modernization of the Jews.

Why Perl was so obsessed with Hasidism remains an unanswered question. His family was not Hasidic, but some later Haskalah writers claimed that he was a Hasid himself in his youth, who only came to embrace the Enlightenment in his late twenties under the influence of Mendel Levin (1749-1826), one of the earliest Galician maskilim. It is unclear whether there is any truth to this story, and many of the legends about Perl seem more motivated by ideology than history. If true, though, it would suggest that Perl wanted to atone for the sins of his youth. What we can say with certainty is that Perl only took up his pen against Hasidism following the publication of Shivhei ha-Besht (the hagiographical collection of stories about Israel Baal Shem Tov, the putative founder of Hasidism, who died in 1760) and Sippurim Malaye (The Tales of Rabbi Nachman), the remarkable allegorical stories told by Nachman of Bratslav, the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson.

By the time these two classics of Hasidic literature were published in 1814-1815, Hasidism had been on the scene for more than a half a century. Although Hasidic tradition—accepted and unwrittantly promoted by Perl—claimed that the Baal Shem Tov (or Besht) had founded the movement, historians including Moshe Rosman and Immanuel Eikes have argued convincingly that the Besht never set out to create Hasidism. He was a baal shem, a kind of shaman employed by his community of Medzhibozd to write kabbalistic amulets. A loose community of associates and admirers, notably Yaakov Yosef of Polonev and Dow Ber of Mezeritch, collected and reinterpreted his sayings. Dow Ber was the first to create a kind of court, which lasted until he died in 1772. Although, as Ada Rapoport-Albert has proven, Dow Ber also did not consciously organize his disciples into a movement, after his death, figures such as Elimelech of Lizhensk and Schneur Zalman of Liadi joined other associates of the Besht to spread the new doctrine—and their own interpretations of it—to new regions. As a result of their efforts, a religious and social phenomenon that had been limited to Podolia and Volhynia, provinces of southeastern Poland, now found adherents in Galicia (where Perl lived), central Poland, and White Russia.

When Perl took up his cudgel against Hasidism around 1816, the two or three generations of "founders" had passed from the scene, and Hasidism had developed a fairly well-defined identity as a movement of rebbev or tzaddikim (charismatic leaders) and Hasidim (the term means "pious" but now came to mean the follower of a tzaddik). As the founders of Hasidic branches such as Chabad, Chernobyl, and others died, succession passed to their sons (or, in some cases, favorite students). The dynastic principle came to characterize Hasidism in the 19th century and beyond.

The rebbe's court was an increasingly central institution, with tzaddikim often attracting followers from far and wide. Pilgrimage to the court was the high point in a Hasid's religious life. Some of these courts—most notably that of Israel of Ruzhin—styled themselves as royal, bowing the ostentatious trappings of the nobility: sumptuous houses, fine furnishings, and armies of retainers. These courts were the objects of much fascination, attracting not only Hasidim but also non-Hasidic Jews and Gentiles. "Tzaddikism," with all that it entailed as a social institution, became one of the predominant characteristics of Hasidism and one that attracted Perl's special ire.

As to its teachings, early Hasidism cannot be reduced to one doctrine. It appears that the Baal Shem Tov taught a religion of joy, as opposed to the asceticism of other pietists (often called "pre-Besht Hasidim") of his time. The early Hasidim, teachers emphasized the importance of devekut, ecstatic communion with God. But there were diverse ideas of what this communion meant theologically. Did one lose one's identity in God? Did one transcend the material world or rather render it holy? Different rebbev gave different answers.

Perl was not interested in Hasidic theology, since he believed that the movement was a deviant sect whose leaders were corrupt, money-grubbing charlatans who defrauded their benighted followers, justified all manner of immorality, and taught hatred of the Gentile authorities. The first work that he wrote anonymously, in German (he was fluent in German, as well as Yiddish and Hebrew), was entitled Uber das Wesen der Sekt Chassidism aus ihren eigenen Schriften gezogen (On the Essence of the Hasidic Sect, Drawn from Their Own Writings). The "essence" of Hasidism here has nothing to do with its theological doctrines but rather their assault on the Hasidic version of Judaism that Perl wanted to advance. Perl seems to have composed this work around 1816 and sent it to the Austrian censors (Tarnopol was now part of the Habsburg Empire) who apparently did not permit its publication. It was published for the first time in 1937, with Perl's authorship established a few years later on the basis of a document found in his archive. Uber das Wesen may be seen as the first in a
From its title page to its rabinnic approbation to its painstakingly accurate citation of actual Hasidic texts, the book looks on the face of it as if it might actually be Hasidic.

Formal charges were never filed. Labeling Hasidism a sect was a strategy of maskilim and other opponents of Hasidism, one that has even persisted to this day. But the Austrians, like their counterparts in Congress Poland and Russia, consistently rejected the claim that Hasidism was a sect and instead affirmed, on the basis of their own investigations, that it was simply a kind of "fraternity" within the Jewish community. Hasidic prayer quorums (minyanim) and their prayer houses (shitetbachim) were no more sectarian than those of various other groups in local communities.

Perl's attempt to enlist the authorities in his campaign was thus an abject failure, but one that won him notoriety as an "informor," the worst of povertaries in the traditional Jewish vocabulary. At the same time that his political efforts failed to ban Hasidism (in this regard, the Hasidah was utterly ineffective), he turned to a different field of combat: if the authorities wouldn't listen, he would turn to his fellow Jews. And so it was that three years after composing his German treatise, in 1819, he published—again anonymously—his great Hebrew epitaph novel, Megaleh Temirin.

Perl's book purports to relate the escapades of Hasidim who attempt to get a hold of and destroy a bukh with magical properties that has been written to defame them in the eyes of the Gentile authorities. In light of Perl's German text, it was not hard for scholars to establish that the bukh (the German/Yiddish designation is deliberate on Perl's part to distinguish it from a sefer, that is a holy book) was none other than Perl's own Über das Wesen (he refers to it by name in Letter #109 of Megaleh Temirin). In other words, it is Perl himself, in the guise of his German book, that sends the Hasidism of Megaleh Temirin into a panic. In the recent translation of Dov Taylor:
find out that the Kabbalah embraced by Hasidism regarded non-Jews as "husks" (empty shells of materiality), who might harbor stray sparks of divinity but could never possess holy souls. When Hasidism availed themselves of Gentile courts, they do so only to exorcise these sparks from what is otherwise a demonic realm. By performing such magical procedures, they intend to annihilate the Gentile husks. Here, too, Perl draws from actual Hasidic texts for the purpose of showing how dangerous Hasidism is to the relations between Jews and Gentiles. In this letter, the (presumably Jewish) reader of Perl's Hebrew text is meant to identify with the Gentiles and to laugh both at the antics and crude ideas of the Hasidim.

Perl composed these fake letters in a kind of caricature of Hasidic Hebrew, an often ungrammatical hodgepodge mixed with Yiddish syntax that poses an almost insurmountable problem of translation. (Hasidic sermons were typically delivered in Yiddish and translated later into Hebrew or, to be precise, išen kodesh, a mixture of rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic.) The only English version of Megaleh Temrin, which we have quoted here, demonstrates this challenge. Taylor decided to render Perl's letters into fractured English, which hardly sounds like even a caricature of Hasidic writing, but rather like the hilarious "Yinglish" of Leo Rosten's famous Education of Hyman Kaplan, which was apparently Taylor's model. The result was not entirely successful.

In the years following the publication of Megaleh Temrin, stories circulated that Hasidim read the book and believed it to be genuine, so cleverly had Perl succeeded in camouflaging his text. However, these stories appear to have been fabrications by maskilim, which were no more historical than the claims that the Hasidim burned the book when they discovered its true intent. Both of these legends served the propaganda of the Haskalah. In reality, the Hasidim probably had little knowledge of Perl's episodio attack. The true audience for the book consisted of recruits to the nascent Hasidah who seem to have immediately identified both the author and his purpose. In other words, the success of Perl's parody lay in readers quickly discerning that the letters were exaggerations of real Hasidic texts.

In fact, one might even say that Perl acted unawittingly as a shill for Hasidism, even as he sought to debunk it. Although Shvivei ha-Besht went through a number of editions after it was published in 1815, it seems unlikely that it was widely known when Perl published his book in 1819 and Sippurei Maisiyot (The Tales of Rabbi Nachman) was probably even less well known, since Bratslav Hasidism was a marginalized and persecuted group. By making these texts so central to his parody, Perl may have publicized them beyond the Hasidic circles for which they were intended. Indeed, Perl's Megaleh Temrin is a mirror image of Shvivei ha-Besht, which, he claims, has the same talismanic qualities.

The plot of Megaleh Temrin is convoluted and full of subplots and multiple characters (Meir helpfully provides a list in one of his appendices, since it's almost impossible to keep them straight in the text, given their invented names). In the guise of defending themselves, the Hasidim of most of the 151 letters reveal their violent, lascivious, con-
Haskalah—and by imagining it, he helped bring it about. Of course, as part of the world of traditional Judaism, Hasidism was destined to come into conflict with the forces of modernity. But (that it became increasingly the most “ultra-Orthodox” of the Orthodox, the most rigid defender of tradition, owes something to the particular animus between maskilim and Hasidism. Perl was not the first modernizer to mount an attack on Hasidism, but he was the first to do so relentlessly and with well-honed weapons of satire.

In historical perspective, the all-out warfare between the Hasidim and maskilim that began with Perl was a fight over who would lead the Jews into the terra incognita of the 19th century. Hasidism had developed in 18th-century Poland at a time when rabbinic and communal leadership was under siege; the crisis of leadership became much more acute in the 19th century after the partitions of Poland and the rule of the absolutist governments in Russia and Austria. Hasidism, with its supra-communal networks and courts of rabbis, provided new forms of community and authority for many Jews in these empires. (Hasidism probably never won over a majority of the Jews of Eastern Europe, but it did command the allegiance of a large minority.) The maskilim, for their part, envisioned a different kind of community based on new occupations, secular education, and political integration. Hasidism, perhaps even more than other traditionalist movements, saw the Haskalah alternative as a real threat to its own innovative vision.

When the Jews of Eastern Europe experienced pogroms, political persecution, emigration, and impoverishment in the last decades of the 19th century, the Haskalah became discredited. But the new movements of Zionism and social revolution that took its place also aspired to provide the Jews with alternative leaders, so Hasidism now turned its rhetorical guns against them. Indeed, some of the most vociferous opposition to Zionism to this day comes from Hasidic sources. Beyond the theological arguments of this anti-Zionism, there is still a battle over political power: Who will lead the Jews in the modern world?

The weapon of satire that Perl mobilized for the beginning of this two-century-long war seems today inadequate to its intended task. To be sure, there is much in Hasidism that lends itself to satire; thus, when extremist Hasidim protested use of the internet, they held a rally from which women were banned, but then streamed the proceedings to women . . . over the internet!

But Hasidism deserves a much more serious hearing from those who would not themselves join its ranks. As both a religious and social phenomenon, it is here to stay, a phoenix that rose miraculously from the ashes of the Shoah. And once one takes it seriously, the challenge is to imagine a world in which Hasidim and maskilim—or their descendents—can live together, if not in harmony, then at least in peace.

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