

SPEECH ON FOUNDING OF HASIDUT

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My talk today covers events that occurred in Jewish history in the 1700s in western Ukraine.

JACOB FRANK

You may remember that my last speech recounted the life story of Jacob Frank (1726-1791), a false messiah who lived in western Ukraine in the 1700s. He claimed to be the reincarnation of Shabtai Zvi, a false messiah who lived in the 1600s. Jacob Frank and 26,000 of his followers converted to Catholicism and practiced something called Frankism, that combined elements of Judaism and Christianity.

The episodes of the 2 false messiahs taught the rabbis to beware of 3 warning signs: (1) Beware of a movement that believes its leader has mystical powers. (2) Beware of a movement that accentuates kabbalah and Zohar at the expense of Talmud. (3) Beware of a movement that professes to be divinely inspired to change Jewish traditions.

All 3 warning signs were exhibited by the Hasidic movements.

YISRAEL - BAAL SHEM TOV

The founder of the Hasidic movement was Yisroel ben Eliezer (1698-1760, later called the Baal Shem Tov) (point to poster). He was born just before 1700 in western Ukraine. His parents were poor and pious. They died when Yisrael was a young boy, and he was cared for by the community. Yisrael dropped out of cheder at the age of 10. As a teenager, his first job was being a teacher's assistant. In later life he indicated that his most joyous experience was teaching young children to read and pray.

Yisrael married at the age 16. But his wife died soon afterward. And he remarried.

For the next 20 years, he lived in different villages, supporting his family by doing different jobs. For example, he was shamash of shul, a well digger, a shochet, and a tavern owner.

Through his travels, he met villagers who taught him secrets of using herbs to heal. So he became an herbalist.

In one village, he met a baal shem, which is someone who uses mysticism and amulets and invoking Gd's real name to cure people and exorcize spirits. The baal shem taught Yisrael to be a baal shem. Yisrael became known as Baal Shem Tov (BESHT).

At age 40, Yisrael moved to Mezhbezh in western Ukraine. He healed people through mysticism and herbs. While healing his patients, he would advise them on how to lead a good life.

These (see poster) are the tenets he taught them, which were the foundation of a philosophy that became known as Hasidut (Hasidism).

(going through the poster, item by item)

Intention

Yisrael taught *kol ma'asecha yihuyu lshem shamayim*: that each Jew should always have the **intention/attitude** that my entire life is service to Gd. Whatever I am currently doing, even a daily chore like plowing a field, should be with the **intention** I am doing this to serve Gd. So even a secular act, like plowing field, can become a religious good deed if done with the right **intention**.

Prayer

Prayer can be more important than Talmudic education.

Devekut

Through the right attitude and prayer, a person can reach the level of **devekut** (connection with God). The goal of every Jew is to achieve **devekut**. BESHT claimed to have, himself, reached the level of devekut, even to the point of having divine revelations.

Tzadik

Very few people actually reach devekut. Such a person is called a **tzadik**. Everyone else can connect with Gd by serving the zaddik. So the tzadik is our link to Gd.

Purity

Since we are striving to connect to Gd, we should always be in a state of **purity**, by going to the **mikvah** daily.

Personal Importance

Each Jew is individually **important** to Gd. Each Jew should have the attitude that *bishvili nivra ha'olam*, which means the entire universe was created for me.

Kabbalah

So it is important for me to discover what my place in the universe is, by learning **kabbalah**.

Letters

Hebrew **letters** were not invented by humans. They instead came from heaven. We should concentrate on the mystical characteristic of each letter. (Yitzchak Ginzburg recently published a book that compiles, from different

sources, what the characteristics of each letter are.)

Pantheism

BESHT taught **pantheism** (*tzimtzum shelo kipshuto*). Which is the concept that Gd not only **created** all things, but is **part** of all things. Since all things and all people are part of Gd, all things and all people must possess good. Even someone who appears to be a sinner is actually a good person who happens to make mistakes.

Optimism

Since Gd and goodness is in everything around you, you have reason to be **optimistic** (*bitachon*). Also, **optimism** can benefit you. Because if you are hoping for something, being optimistic that you will get it increases the chance it will occur.

Joy

You should be constantly **joyful**. And especially serve Gd with **joy** (*derived from tachat lo avadta...b'simcha uvtuv levav*).

Sfard

BESHT recommended switching from praying in **Ashkenaz** nusach to praying in **Sfard** nusach, because the Sfard nusach is more in line with kabbalah.

BESHT's teachings attracted a following. Many people, including scholarly rabbis, traveled to Mezhbezh to learn from him. But since BESHT did not write books or do outreach, the Hasidic movement did not expand beyond western Ukraine. So misnagdim (those who were opposed to Hasidut and considered it a threat to Judaism), which were centered in Lithuania, did not attack Hasidut.

DOV BAER - MAGGID OF MEZRICH

That changed when BESHT died 1760. The new leader of the movement was BESHT's disciple Dov Baer (1704-1772) (point to poster). Dov Baer moved from Mezhbezh Ukraine to Mezhrich (Mezrich) Poland, and became known as the Maggid of Mezhrich. Before Dov Baer's death in 1772, he did outreach, by sending his disciples as missionaries to locations throughout Europe to spread the Hasidic philosophy. The most famous of the disciples was Shneur Zalman (1745-1812), who later became the first Lubavicher rebbe. Shneur Zalman moved to Belarus, and spread Hasidut through Belarus and Lithuania. When Hasidut reached center of Jewish scholarship, Vilna Lithuania, the rabbis were alarmed. The

Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) spearheaded a cherem (excommunication) in 1772 against the Hasidim. But that did not stop Hasidut's growth.

IMPRISONMENT EVENTS

After the Vilna Gaon died, in 1797, some misnagdim issued another cherem against Hasidim. The Hasidim in Vilna retaliated filing a complaint with the Russian government, accusing the Jewish Council of Vilna of misappropriating funds collected from Jewish community to pay the Russian government. The members of the Jewish Council of Vilna were imprisoned and interrogated by the Russian government and released.

Then the misnagdim retaliated by filing a complaint with the Russian government, accusing Shneur Zalman of sending money to an unfriendly country (Palestine, then part of the Ottoman empire). Shneur Zalman was imprisoned and interrogated by the Russian government and released.

EPILOGUE

At the end of the 1700s, the misnagdim stopped attacking the Hasidim, for 4 reasons: (1) The misnagdim's most leader (Vilna Gaon) died. (2) The Hasidim became too numerous and established to excommunicate. (3) Hasidut ended up not being as damaging to Judaism as it initially appeared it would be (did not imitate the false-messiah movements. (4) The misnagdim saw the growth of a more incidious threat to Judaism – the Haskalah movement, the Jewish enlightenment.

POSTER

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DOV BAER - MAGGID OF MEZRICH
SHNEUR ZALMAN - LUBAVICH

INTENTION
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DEVEKUT
TZADIK
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JOY
SFARD