

Gershom Scholem's First Lectures on Hasidism

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Abstract

Compared to his other fields of research, Gershom Scholem's studies of Hasidism were quite limited. In the major research plans which he developed in the 1920s and '30s – for example in his detailed letter to H.N. Bialik or his early plans for the Institute for Kabbalah at the Schocken Library – he makes no mention of this field of research. Still, he continually and systematically published on Hasidism over the years. Scholem's scattered articles on Hasidism were collected in recent years by David Assaf and Esther Liebes in the anthology "The Latest Phase," with updates and additions; this collection gives us a full picture of Scholem's contribution to the field. Much scholarship has also been dedicated to the controversy between Scholem and Martin Buber over Hasidism, or to be more precise, to the complex relationship between the two over the years. Some have come to read Scholem's studies of Hasidism from this vantage point alone. However, Scholem's deep interest in Hasidism was expressed in other ways: in his large collection of books which includes many Hasidic works with his handwritten marginal notes; in his drafts and notes for articles which were never completed; and in lectures on the subject which he gave over the years. This material remains hidden in the Gershom Scholem Archive and has never been collected. Of exceptional importance is a manuscript of a complete book on Hasidism in English, composed towards the end of 1948, which provided the basis of the lectures that Scholem gave in the United States in March 1949. This book, written in the context of his complicated relationship with Salman Z. Schocken, was also the basis of many studies which Scholem published years later, and he continually updated it over many years. Our interest here is in another hidden text: a series of early lectures on Hasidism which Scholem gave in Hebrew in 1945. This series – printed here for the first time – raises several fundamental questions about Scholem's studies of Hasidism and their relationship to Buber's projects, and shows with great clarity the manner in which Scholem wanted to portray Hasidism.

Compared to his other fields of research, Gershom Scholem's studies of Hasidism were quite limited. In the major research plans that he developed in the 1920s and 1930s — for example, in his detailed letter to Hayyin Nahman Bialik or in his early plans for the Institute for Kabbalah at the Schocken Library — he makes no mention of this field of research. Still, he continually and systematically published on Hasidism over the years. Scholem's scattered articles on Hasidism were collected in recent years by David Assaf and Esther Liebes in the anthology *The Latest Phase* [*Ha-Shelav ha-Aḥaron*], which includes additions and updates; this collection gives us a full picture of Scholem's contribution to the field.¹ In addition, much scholarship has been dedicated to the controversy between Scholem and Martin Buber over Hasidism — or to be more precise, to the complex relationship between the two over the years. Some have come to read Scholem's studies of Hasidism from this vantage point alone.²

¹ Gershom Scholem, *The Latest Phase* [Heb.], eds. David Assaf and Esther Liebes, (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009). For a summary of Scholem's contribution to the study of Hasidism, see, among others, Rivka Schatz, "Gershom Scholem's Interpretation of Hasidism as an Expression of His Idealism," in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 87–103; Louis Jacobs, "Aspects of Scholem's Study of Hasidism," *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985): 95–104; Joseph Dan, *Gershom Scholem and the Mystical Dimension of Jewish History* (New York: New York University Press, 1987) 313–28; Morris. M. Faierstein, "Gershom Scholem and Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (1987): 221–33; Zeev Gries, "Hasidism: the Present State of Research and Some Desirable Priorities," *Numen* 34 (1987): 97–108–179–213; Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 1–30; Rachel Elior, "Hasidism – Historical Continuity and Spiritual Change," in *Gershom Scholem's "Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism": 50 Years After*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993), 303–23; See also note 3, below.

² See, among others, Klaus Samuel Davidowicz, *Gershom Scholem und Martin Buber: Die Geschichte eines Missverständnisses* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), 104–43; Gries, "Hasidism," 189–191, 209–210; Moshe Idel, "Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem on Hasidism: A Critical Appraisal," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 389–402; Rachel White, "Recovering the Past, Renewing the Present: The Buber-Scholem Controversy over Hasidism Reinterpreted," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007): 364–92; Ron Margolin, *Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* [Heb.] (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2005), 1–54; Shalom Ratzvi, "From Criticism to Denial: Gershom Scholem on Buber's Hasidism" [Heb.], in *The Latest Phase*, 358–

However, Scholem's deep interest in Hasidism was expressed in other ways: in his large collection of books which includes many Hasidic works with his handwritten marginal notes; in his drafts and notes for articles that were never completed; and in lectures on the subject which he gave over the years. This material remains hidden in the Gershom Scholem Archive and has never been collected. Of exceptional importance is a manuscript of a complete book on Hasidism in English, composed towards the end of 1948, which provided the basis for a series of lectures that Scholem gave in the United States in March 1949. This book, written in the context of his complicated relationship with Salman Z. Schocken, was also the basis of many studies that Scholem published years later, and he continually updated it over many years. (The complete manuscript will be published soon in a new edition by Jonatan Meir and Daniel Abrams, with an extensive introduction about Scholem's studies of Hasidism and the history of the manuscript, and with appendices including texts by Scholem on Hasidism which have not previously been published).³ Yet further insight into Scholem's engagement with Hasidism comes from another shelved text: a typescript of an earlier lecture series that Scholem delivered in Hebrew in 1945. These first lectures on Hasidism raise several fundamental questions regarding Scholem's scholarship on the topic and its connection to Buber's

69; David Biale, "Experience vs. Tradition: Reflections on the Origins of the Buber-Scholem Controversy," *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 15 (2016): 33–47; idem, *Gershom Scholem: Master of the Kabbalah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 13–14, 16, 29–30, 186–91; Hannan Hever, "Buber versus Scholem and the Figure of the Hasidic Jew: A Literary Debate between Two Political Theologies," in *Jews and the Ends of Theory*, eds. Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 225–62.

³ For a preliminary discussion of this manuscript, see Noam Zadoff (ed.), *Gershom Scholem and Joseph Weiss: Correspondence, 1948–1964* [Heb.] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2012), 42–43; Jonatan Meir, "Scholem's 'Archives'" [Heb.], *Tarbiz* 78 (2009): 255–70. The latter discusses additional shelved material in the Scholem Archive. For brief remarks by Shaul Magid, who saw only the original text of the lectures (a second, complete text, as well as additions, updates, and supplements, are preserved in various folders at the Scholem Archive), see Shaul Magid, "For the Sake of a Jewish Revival: Gershom Scholem on Hasidism and Its Relationship to Martin Buber," in *Scholar and Kabbalist: The Life and Work of Gershom Scholem*, eds. Mirjam Zadoff and Noam Zadoff (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 40–75. The monograph is also discussed in general terms in Yaacob Dweck, "Gershom Scholem and America," *New German Critique* 132 (2017): 68–69.

projects while demonstrating with great clarity the manner in which Scholem sought to portray the Hasidic movement.⁴

[2]

Scholem's lectures on Hasidism were delivered under the auspices of a seminar for Youth Aliyah counselors in 1945. This was not the first time that Scholem lectured in this framework. He had presented, several years prior, a talk on "The Idea of Redemption in Kabbalah," a lecture that was subsequently published in a thin pamphlet in 1942.⁵ This was the first pamphlet in the *Arakhim* series, which over the years came to include dozens of titles. It appears that Scholem lectured in this framework on Sabbatianism as well (as much is implied from a text cited below), yet these lectures have not been preserved. In any case, it seems that the typescript of the Hasidism lectures was also intended to be published in a similar booklet. This last fact is of considerable interest given that Buber lectured in this very framework on "The Idea of Redemption in Hasidism." Buber's lecture was published in 1942 under that title as the second volume of the *Arakhim* series (it was subsequently incorporated into Buber's *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut*, published in 1945).⁶ Scholem's lecture on Hasidism,

⁴ Gershom Scholem, "Ha-Hasidut" (MS), Archive of Gershom Scholem, National Library of Jerusalem, 40*1599, Folder 197a. These lectures have recently been published in Jonatan Meir, "Hasidism: Unknown Lectures by Gershom Scholem from 1945" [Heb.], *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 43 (2019): 93–120. For similar popular lectures delivered by Scholem in 1947, see idem, "Hartsa'ot al ha-Meshihiyut me-Ginzei Gershom Scholem," *Dehak: Ketav Et le-Sifrut Tovah* 10 (2018): 354–418. Here Scholem unsuccessfully seeks to describe a connection between Sabbatianism and Hasidism.

⁵ Gershom Scholem, "Ra'ayon ha-Geulah ba-Kabbalah," *Arakhim: Sifriyat ha-Makhon le-Madrikhim* 1 (1942) (26 pages). An updated edition was published in Jerusalem in 1946 and again in idem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), 191–216. A poster announcing the lecture is preserved in the Scholem Archive, Folder 28a.

⁶ Martin Buber, "Ra'ayon ha-Geulah ba-Hasidut," *Arakhim: Sifriyat ha-Makhon le-Madrikhim* 2, (1942) (12 pages); reprinted in idem, *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut: Iyyunim be-Mahshavto u-be-Havayato* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1945), 123–32; translated into English in idem, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon Press, 1960), 202–18. Most of the book's contents were published beforehand and were certainly known to Scholem. In the beginning of the book (ibid., 5) Buber writes, "Forty years have passed since I began to champion Hasidism." Joseph Weiss later recounted the following anecdote: "I heard from Natan Rotenstreich — when Buber's book was

then, can be seen as a response to Buber — or an attempt to address the same question from a completely different angle — in much the same way that Buber no doubt utilized the title of Scholem's first lecture ("The Idea of Redemption in Kabbalah") in formulating his presentation.

Buber presented exile and redemption as the past and future consciousness of the Jewish people; he sought to demonstrate that it was only with the advent of Hasidism that common people achieved redemptive consciousness, realizing their active role in the redemption of the world. He enumerated four categories of redemption that Hasidism consolidated and rendered into a single entity, while foregrounding the "national element" within Hasidic doctrine. He concluded: "Moses Hess said that we cannot foresee the consequences of Hasidism if it will be taken up by the national movement. This is also my opinion. Because here, in Hasidism, we have something close to us in time, and its off-shoots reach into our very age. Hasidism is a great revelation of spirit and life in which the nation appears to be connected by an inner tie with the world, with the soul, and with God. Only through such a contact will it be possible to guard Zionism against following the way of the nationalism of the age, which, by demolishing the bridges which connect it with the world, is destroying its own value and its right to exist."⁷ Scholem's lectures, whether in "The Idea of Redemption in Kabbalah" or in his unpublished 1945 lectures on Hasidism, were quite different. In contradistinction to Buber, Scholem devoted his attention to analyzing the connections between Sabbatianism and Hasidism. In other words, he sought to present the origins of Hasidism within the context of the history of Kabbalah, rather than in relation to contemporary concerns. Scholem opened his lectures on Hasidism from the very place where Buber left off, remarking that "Many mistakes or misunderstandings crept into the study of Sabbatianism; such is the case with Hasidism, as well. The study of Sabbatianism was dominated in many circles by viewpoints that were either decidedly

published — *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut* — Scholem took the thin book and said, 'This is the essence of forty years?' (alluding to the preface...)." Jonatan Meir and Noam Zadoff, "'Divrei Shalom' or 'Hayei Moharash': Satiric Manuscripts from the Joseph Weiss Archives" [Heb.], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 20 (2017): 378.

⁷ Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, 218. The Hebrew original appears in idem, "Ra'ayon ha-Ge'ulah be-Hasidut," 12; idem, *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut*, 132.

conservative or rational expressions of the Haskalah. On the other hand, with respect to Hasidism, a romantic orientation increased from the time it began to be studied. One of the pitfalls with which we struggle today is the attempt to interpret every historical phenomenon in connection with the new national movement. The endeavor to turn eighteenth-century Hasidim into Zionist pioneers is entirely without basis. Hasidism is at a distance from the very matters with which Zionism is concerned. Hasidism by its very essence is placed at a remove from our affairs.”⁸ Scholem’s opening comments are not directed only at Buber’s concluding remarks, but also to a lengthy article by Ben-Zion Dinur — published not long before Scholem’s lectures — that Scholem alluded to numerous times in his Hasidism lectures and sharply criticized at various other times.⁹ As we see in the passage cited above, the lectures also represent his first attempt to clearly present Hasidism in connection to Sabbatianism.

Scholem’s lectures continue the rigorous historical and theological analysis that he employed in his *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism* (1941), a direction that was broadened in his shelved English monograph (1948), later fine-tuned in his dispute with Isaiah Tishby at the World Congress of Jewish Studies (1965), and which materialized in later articles, most notably his lengthy essay “The Neutralisation of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism” (1969).

⁸ Scholem, “Ha-Hasidut,” 1; Meir, “Hasidism,” 104. Scholem made similar comments in his 1941 “Study Month” lectures, which were principally concerned with Sabbatianism. See Gershom Scholem, *History of the Sabbatian Movement* [Heb.], eds. Jonatan Meir and Yamamoto Shinichi (Jerusalem: JTS-Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 2018), 347–51. It is interesting, in this context, to revisit an early unknown publication by Scholem, his first on Hasidism, which consists of a translation of a letter written by R. Abraham of Kalisk with an introductory footnote connecting its contents to the Zionist enterprise. Geschem [=Gerhard/Gershom Scholem], “R. Mendel von Witebsk: Hachschara,” *Der Jude* 8 (1924): 147–48; reprinted with a corrected title and without the brief introduction (it seems that he had since changed his mind) as “Rabbi Abraham Kalisker: Hachschara,” *Almanach des Schocken Verlags* (1933–1934): 97–98. In some copies of the last publication, Scholem’s name is also omitted.

⁹ B. Dinburg [Ben-Zion Dinur], “The Beginnings of Hassidism and its Social and Messianic Elements” [Heb.], *Zion* 8, no. 2 (Jan. 1943): 107–15; 8, no. 3 (Apr. 1943): 117–34; 8, no. 4 (Jul. 1943): 179–200; 9, no. 1 (1944): 39–45; 9, no. 2 (1944): 89–108; 9, no. 4 (1944): 186–97; 10, nos. 1–2 (1945): 67–77; 10, nos. 3–4 (1945): 149–96. Scholem appended ten critical handwritten notes to his copy of the essay offprint, which is preserved in his library.

[3]

Scholem certainly began to develop his method of studying Hasidism in response to the approach taken by Martin Buber. The criticism he leveled at the latter (at times accompanied with praise) is readily apparent in the diaries and letters he wrote over the years, and quickly became public.¹⁰ Buber was also present in the courses on Hasidism that Scholem delivered at the Hebrew University, in which he would speak of the former in highly critical terms.¹¹ Such was the case, for example, with his 1944 course on "Problems in Hasidic Doctrine." Joseph Weiss, who attended the course, summarized the main points. At the beginning of the first lesson, Scholem declared, "Hasidism has yet to be studied seriously. [The current scholarship] is mere prattle that does not rise to the level of criticism. For all intents and purposes, there are considerable questions in need of addressing, and it is amazing that hardly any of them have been investigated."

¹⁰ For an analysis of Scholem's comments on Hasidism in his youth, see Biale, *Gershom Scholem*. It should be noted that a considerable amount of material related to this affair that has not yet been considered can be found in Scholem's unpublished letters and diaries.

¹¹ Scholem delivered a number of courses on Hasidism at the Hebrew University: (1) "Hasidism: *Sefer Magid Devarav le-Ya'akov*, *Sefer ha-Tanya*," Seminar, 1938–1939, Scholem Archive, Folder 18 (In January 1939, Scholem wrote to Shalom Spiegel: "For my seminar this year, I am reading Hasidic commentaries, and especially the illustrious *Magid Devarav le-Ya'akov* of the Magid of Mezritch, and I have been greatly enlightened!); (2) "Problems in Hasidic Doctrine," Seminar, 1943–1944. Notes for this course were recorded by Joseph Weiss, see below note 13; (3–4) From notes from his courses at Hebrew University, it appears that he also delivered a course on "Key Problems in Hasidic Doctrine" in 1948–1949 and in 1951–1952. Fragments and outlines for one of these courses are preserved in the Scholem Archive, Folder 205; (5) "The Baal Shem Tov," Course, Summer 1951, Scholem Archive, Folder 209; (6) "Action and Contemplation in Hasidic Doctrine," Seminar, 1962–1963; (7) In the 1954–1955 academic year, he delivered a course on "Sabbatianism and Hasidism." This course was, for all intents and purposes, exclusively concerned with Sabbatianism. Notes were later printed by Rivka Schatz as *Parashat ha-Shabta 'ut* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1955). The last lecture [lecture 45], on Hasidism, is missing from the publication and can be found in the Gershom Scholem Library, Sch 176; (8) Many additional public lectures. It is also known that he delivered similar lectures in 1950 and 1952. Hence, any assumptions regarding the small space given to Hasidism in Scholem's teaching load should be disavowed. See Joseph Dan, "Gershom Scholem and the Study of Kabbalah at the Hebrew University" [Heb.], in *History of the Hebrew University Project*, ed. Lavsky, Hagit (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008), 208–09.

Scholem then proceeded to present a rather critical in-depth analysis of the state of the field. He discussed the writings of Simon Dubnow, Samuel Abba Horodetzky, Hillel Zeitlin, Mordechai Ben-Yehzekel, Aaron Ze'ev Aescoly, Ahron Marcus, and others. When he came to Buber (according to Weiss's summary), Scholem remarked:

Buber's books are of considerable value, for he had the ability to present key characteristics of various figures. For example, his book on the Maggid [*Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge*, 1922] is a good portrayal with a serious introduction.¹² There is no reason to make light of Buber (as is customary among professors!) Buber could have written a book on Hasidism that would have surpassed all those that have been written to date. The historic question did not concern him. It is worth reading *Deutung des Chassidismus* [1935] as well. For him, the problematic of Hasidism is formed from its legend and not its doctrinal works. He argues that the legend is the primary source as opposed to the theoretical literature (these two categories are highly prominent in Hasidism). It is possible to learn the psychological reality, if not the historical truth. Scholem disagrees with Buber's method. According to Scholem, Buber exaggerates the preeminence of the legend. Regarding the legends themselves, there are tales found within the books themselves, yet the corpus of Hasidic tales (a rich literature) is replete with religious creativity, with an elementary force largely unparalleled even in the non-Jewish world! For Buber, there are 350 books of legendary literature. However, they were certainly all [published] much later. *Shivhei ha-Besht* — the first in this category — is from 1814. Afterwards, only in the '50s and '60s [of the nineteenth century]. There is much doubt with respect to the authenticity of this literature. The theoretical literature was consistently published not long after the death of their authors. The same cannot be said of the legendary literature (aside from *Shivhei ha-Besht* and the biography of R. Nahman of Bratslav), all of which were published in Lvov. They were all written by one author (Michael Fromkin Rodkinson), or maybe two, and it's highly likely that he made them all up. So far, no one has checked if there are any such manuscripts prior to the aforementioned

¹² See Scholem's letter to Buber in Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel: 1918-1938* (Heidelberg: L. Schneider, 1973), 86-89.

Michael (a *maskil*). Michael Fromkin — a famous adventurer, the nephew of R. Aaron of Staroselye (the primary disciple of R. Shneur Zalman)—the question is whether what he put on paper was actually relayed to him or whether he merely wrote belles-lettres. Others claim that Menahem Mendel Bodek of Lvov assisted him. So far there has not yet been any critical examination at all. Buber simply relied on these books [...]. Regarding Buber, he comprehended more than all of the rest combined. Do not read his *Die Legende des Baalschem* [1908] (in exceptionally grandiose German). Scholem greatly values Buber's book on the Maggid *Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge* [1922] and *Das verborgene Licht* [1924] (the best book Buber wrote on Hasidism), and the thin book *Deutung des Chassidismus* [1935].¹³

Similar expressions of admiration, which, in fact, include biting criticism, reappear in Scholem's 1948 essay on Buber (the essay was published in honor of Buber's birthday and was thus quite moderate),¹⁴ and, far more outwardly, in his unpublished English monograph written later that year. Seeing as this work is not widely known, we will cite a lengthy quote that summarizes the main points Scholem directed at Buber:

Whereas Horodezky's Hasidic ardour is essentially naïve, his very simple and unaffected writing sometimes lovely and sometimes boring, the same cannot be said of Buber. His is a deep and penetrating mind which not only admires intuition in others but has it at its own command. Overwhelmed by the Hasidic message, when it first presented itself to him in his quest for living Judaism, he has that rare combination of a searching mind and literary refinement that makes for a great writer. His Hasidic "oeuvre" is highly sophisticated and polished, and the manner in which a writer of such merit and power of mind most earnestly

¹³ "Hartsa'ot Gershom Scholem al Shabta'ut ve-Hasidut" (MS, Transcription by Joseph Weiss), Joseph Weiss Archive, National Library of Jerusalem, 4*1479, Folder 21. On the hagiographic literature of the 1860s, which was penned by many writers, see Jonatan Meir, *Literary Hasidism: The Life and Works of Michael Levi Rodkinson*, trans. Jeffrey G. Amshalem (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Reprinted (without the original title) in Scholem, *The Latest Phase*. 325–29. On the essay's title, see Meir and Zadoff, "'Divrei Shalom'," 379.

propounded what to him seemed the very soul of Hasidism, could not but produce a deep impression on our generation. As a matter of fact, many of us have come to think of Hasidism primarily in terms of Buber's philosophical reinterpretation which has been proffered in perfect choice of words and such a wealth of seemingly irresistible evidence in the shape of Hasidic legends and sayings as to baffle the would-be critic.

Forty years of (if I may use a familiar term) neo-Hasidic teaching have provoked strong response in the Jewish world and, as far as I am aware, have found the competent scholars (if there were any) rather unwilling to ask the fundamental question whether everything in this inspired and beautifully worded interpretation may stand the critical test of sober analysis. Dubnov has, in a very general way, expressed some doubt as to the "modern" turn of Buber's Hasidism but he did not substantiate them, and the emotional (to say nothing of the artistic) appeal of Buber's writings is, of course, so infinitely greater than that of Dubnov's rather arid discussion of Hasidic thought, that there could be but little doubt with whom success would lie. Buber, on the other hand, was not interested particularly in the historical problems connected with Hasidism, and one might say that both authors complement each other and, taken together, present a fair picture of where Hasidic research stands today.

But just as there is a lot to be added to Dubnov from a purely historical point of view, both as far as historical perspective and detail are concerned, there is much in Buber that demands a critical discussion. His continuous emphasis on the eminence of legendary tradition over the theoretical literature reveals a methodological principle of approach which I consider very questionable. For aesthetical purposes of presentation, the legend has doubtless a greater advantage and appeal, and much of this material lends itself to a subjectivist interpretation more easily than the theoretical writings on which, in my humble opinion, a discussion of the meaning of Hasidic doctrine must be based. It is very interesting to note that in the course of the years, as Buber's existentialist and subjectivist philosophy became more and more developed and elaborate, his references to the theoretical literature of Hasidism became ever weaker. Almost

never did Buber quote the writings of the first theoreticians of Hasidism who, in the first few years after the founder's death, advanced their ideas in a more or less homiletic but theoretically consistent way. I do not consider this to be merely accidental. Those books were written, and published in part, many years before the Hasidic legend took shape, and to say that the originality of the movement revealed itself more genuinely in the legend, the bulk of which is at least fifty years younger than the aforementioned books, is a contention that cannot stand. Buber apparently regarded these sources as too much dependent upon earlier kabbalistical literature, and his special interest in the points of departure of Hasidism from Kabbalism made him consider them more clearly recognizable in the legends than in the theoretical teaching. But it is precisely this problem which, in my opinion, cannot be solved by building on popular legend. The question of where exactly Hasidism departs from older Jewish tradition, particularly the esoteric one, has, to my knowledge, never been answered in a satisfactory way and by a sober analysis of the primary sources, the reason being a very simple one, namely, that none of these writers, whatever their other respective merits, had any considerably knowledge of kabbalistical literature. They were, therefore, unable to state with sufficient authority exactly what was new and original in Hasidism and what represented only the continued repetition of older formulas; these writers therefore had to content themselves with generalities and more or less vague statements.¹⁵

But let us, again, return to Buber. Leaving aside his methodological principles, we should not forget that he has not only collected the tales of the Hasidim in his *magnum opus*, but has also repeatedly stated his views about their essential meaning in terms of a modern anthropological and existentialist approach. His Hasidic studies, which have been very thorough, and his personal philosophy are closely interrelated. It would not be easy to say how much of his philosophy has developed out of his Hasidic studies and, conversely, how much his interpretation of Hasidism has been colored by his philosophy. But it will be necessary to consider, in these lectures, at least some of the

¹⁵ Scholem, "Hartsa'ot al ha-Hasidut," (MS), Scholem Archive, Folder 299b, 7-9.

fundamental points of Buber's suggestive interpretation which seem to me open to serious objections.¹⁶

These are just select passages on Buber from the shelved monograph, and Scholem's work is filled with similar gems directed toward others who wrote on Hasidism. In any case, it is clear that Scholem began to write in opposition to Buber's perception of Hasidism long before the 1960s, and openly criticized him in his public lectures, even if his remarks were always mixed together with words of praise.¹⁷ Scholem's public turn from Buber in the 1940s must be understood as stemming from two developments: the beginning of the former's systematic study of Hasidism, and the latter's attempt during those very years to spread his "Gospel of Hasidism" in Hebrew (such works as *Gog u-Magog* [1944]; *Be-Pardes ha-Hasidut* [1945]; *Or Ha-Ganuz* [1947]) and in English (*For the Sake of Heaven* [1945]; *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings* [1947]; *Tales of the Hasidim*, vols. 1-2 [1947-1948]; *Hasidism* [1948]; *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism* [1950]).

This criticism was brought into the open in the 1960s when Scholem delivered several comprehensive lectures on the Baal Shem Tov (Besht) and began to publish essays adapted from his monograph. A detailed analysis of these publications clearly shows that Scholem was merely returning to what was already written in the monograph, even if many of his arguments were reworked. A key turning point among these polemical activities was a 1961 lecture that he delivered in London titled "Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism" (an invitation to the lecture is preserved in Scholem's archive). This lecture received extensive press coverage, with one review beginning "Martin Buber, who preached the gospel of Hasidism to the West, did not give over a complete picture of the movement, argued Gershom Scholem in a lecture at the Institute of Jewish Studies in London. Buber treated Hasidism as a spiritual phenomenon, emphasizing its religious-

¹⁶ Ibid., 10. Following the first lecture, which dealt with, among other topics, Buber's activities, the editors of the journal *Jewish Social Studies* turned to Scholem with a request to publish his critical essay on Buber's writings on Hasidism. Scholem turned down the request and only years later years did he publish his scathing critique of Buber [Scholem Archive, Correspondence, *Jewish Social Studies*]. Scholem most likely declined the request due to an existing contractual obligation to publish the lectures elsewhere.

¹⁷ The presumption that Scholem only began to publicly criticize Buber in the 1960s is present in Biale, "Experience vs. Tradition," 47; Ratzvi, "From Criticism to Denial," 358-69.

existential aspect and gave literary form to the legends and aphorisms of the *tsaddikim*. But according to Scholem, Buber is unconcerned with Hasidism as a historical phenomenon.”¹⁸ This lecture served as the basis for Scholem's famous essay, “Martin Buber's Hasidism: A Critique,” which caused a firestorm and brought the controversy out into the public arena. The essay concludes: “Too much is left out in his [Buber's] presentation of Hasidism, while what has been included is overloaded with highly personal speculations. These may be of a sublime character and they may appeal deeply to the modern mind, but if we are searching for an understanding of the actual phenomenon of Hasidism, both in its grandeur and its decay (which in many ways are bound together), we shall, I am afraid, have to start all over again.”¹⁹

The timing of the publication was auspicious: celebrations of the two-hundredth anniversary of the death of the Besht (1960)—an occasion that was marked with many publications on the Besht, in both Hebrew and English; the publication of Maurice Freidman's English translations Buber's books on Hasidism, (*The Legend of the Baal-Shem* [1955]; *Hasidism and Modern Man* [1958]; *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* [1960]); as well as the reprinting of Buber's earlier works previously published in Hebrew and English. In 1961, Buber was awarded the Bialik prize for, among other accomplishments, his anthology *Or ha-Ganuz*, which had been reissued in an expanded edition in 1957. In an eloquent speech delivered upon accepting the prize, Buber spoke, *inter alia*, on the significance of the “renewed

¹⁸ Robert Weltsch, “Professor Scholem on Martin Buber and Hasidism,” *Haaretz* (Jun. 22, 1961). A précis of the lecture appears later on in the article. See, also, “Buber and Chassidism,” *Jewish Chronicle* (Jun. 23, 1961) This article opens with a quotation from the lecture: “The merits of Martin Buber's presentation of Chassidism are very great indeed, and to a great extent it will stand the test of time. But his interpretation is not rooted in the texts of Chassidic ideology, but in his personal philosophy.”

¹⁹ Gershom Scholem, “Martin Buber's Hasidism: A Critique,” *Commentary* 32 (1961): 305–16; idem, “Buber and Hasidism,” *Commentary* 33 (1962): 162–63; idem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 227–50. Scholem's essays on Buber in Hebrew were compiled in *The Latest Phase*, 325–57. Buber responded to the criticism (as well as to an essay by Rivka Schatz) on several opportunities. Important material on the controversy—which extended far beyond disagreements over the interpretation of Hasidism—is preserved in the Scholem Archive, Series 8, Folder 279.

Hasidism” for political and spiritual life in the State of Israel.²⁰ It is in this context that Scholem issued his fierce criticism of Buber. Buber, however, was not the only figure whom Scholem publicly criticized in those years: he also quarreled Tishby, Dinur, and others regarding the messianic question in early Hasidism (manifest in a symposium held at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 1965).²¹

Scholem was galvanized during these years to return to his shelved monograph on Hasidism, and it seems that he tried, up until the 1970s, to complete it. He extracted entire chapters, which he updated and turned into essays (among them *Demuto ha-Historit shel Ha-Besht* [1960] and “The Neutralisation of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism” 1969), and delivered lectures in various framework that were closely related in content (for instance, three lectures on the Besht and his teachings delivered at Uppsala University in October 1959 and a lecture on “The Idea of Messianism in Hasidism” delivered at Princeton University in October 1970). All of this was, to some extent, preparation toward the completion of the monograph, a task that has heretofore never been accomplished.²²

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Scholem’s interest in Hasidism was not limited to his complex relationship with Buber and was certainly not connected to any

²⁰ See Martin Buber Archive, National Library of Jerusalem, Ms. Var. 350, Series 1, Folder 20; Mordechai Martin Buber, “Mah Natna li ha-Ḥasidut ha-Mehudeshet,” *Davar* (Dec. 22, 1961). Writing on Buber and Hasidism increased in the wake of the prize. An exceptionally critical essay in this context is Baruch Kurzweil, “M. Buber — Ḥatan Peras Bialik,” *Haaretz* (Dec. 22, 1961). He ridiculed the “aesthetic Hasidism” bereft of any meaning for contemporary man and far removed from historic Hasidism (see, also, Buber Archive, Series 8, Folder 384).

²¹ Symposium participants included Gershom Scholem, Ben-Zion Dinur, Isaiah Tishby, Joseph Weiss, Joseph Dan, Abraham Rubinstein, and Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer. A précis of the lectures can be found in a review by Joseph Dan, “Vikuah al ha-Meshihuyut ba-Ḥasidut, *Ha-Universitah* 11 (5726): 64–69. Dan opens his remarks: “It is doubtful if all of these scholars had ever previously gathered together for a thorough discussion of the challenges of the Hasidic movement,” and that “from the beginning to the end, the symposium—which carried on for approximately seven hours over two days—was marked by fierce disagreement.” A complete protocol, which includes many notes that were left out of the participants’ later publications, can be found in the Scholem Archive, folder 197.

²² For further details, see Meir, “Scholem’s ‘Archive,’” 267–69.

possibility of Hasidic renewal through academic scholarship, as others have asserted.²³ For Scholem, the study of Hasidism was an intrinsic part of writing a new history of Jewish mysticism. For such a depiction, it was first necessary to provide an alternative to Buber's populist portrayal, an alternative to the very idea that Hasidism should only be spoken of within the context of its renewal and the existential possibilities it offered to modern man. He wanted, in short, to liberate Hasidism from the clutches of Buber's spiritualism. He also sought, in the same manner, to present an alternative to the nationalist history exemplified by Dinur, who sought in Hasidism a certain messianism, or by Yitzhak Raphael who, with his populist writings on Hasidism, wished to connect Hasidism with religious Zionism.²⁴ The removal of the neo-Hasidic facade, as well as that of narrow nationalism, gave rise to a new perspective on Hasidism concerned with historical questions and its novel theologies that, in a certain sense, sustains scholarship until the present day.

Much has changed in Hasidic scholarship from when Scholem's first lectures on Hasidism were written in 1945, such that in many respects they should be looked at only as prologues or first attempts. The lectures are not clearly worded, and there is no clear and systematic theory underlying them. However, precisely due to this, it is possible to extract many interesting anecdotes (for instance, on Jacob Frank's frightening face; on Bratslav Hasidism as a "sect that, in a Hasidic spiritual sense, has remained alive and vigilant"; on the legends surrounding the rabbi of Kotsk and the novelty of his approach; on Berdyczewski; on Buber's interpretation of the elevation of sparks; on Yitzhak Raphael's religious Zionist historiography; and more).²⁵ Many points mentioned here were sharpened by Scholem in

²³ See, for example, Magid, "For the Sake of a Jewish Revival." In this context, there is considerable interest surrounding Scholem's remarks at the Eranos Conference on the duty of the scholar and identification with one's scholarship: Gershom Scholem, "Identifizierung und Distanz: Ein Rueckblick," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 48 (1979): 463–67. On this, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "The Spiritual Quest of the Philologist," in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and his Work*, 22–23; Noam Zadoff, *Gershom Scholem: From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back*, trans. Jeffrey Green (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 172–73.

²⁴ For a related claim in the of Scholem's Sabbatian scholarship, see Jonatan Meir and Shinichi Yamamoto, *Gershom Scholem and the Research of Sabbatianism*, trans. Samuel Glauber-Zimra (Jerusalem: JTS-Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, 2021): 19–28, 84–89

²⁵ See Meir, "Hasidism: Unknown Lectures," 93–120.

later years, while others have been refuted by other scholars. Even the question of the relation between Sabbatianism and Hasidism — which was central until the 1960s — has been put aside in favor of other questions.²⁶ Therefore, the significance of these lectures is not necessarily found in their content (even if these early texts contain much hidden wisdom), but rather in the questions they raised in their specific moment in the history of scholarship.

²⁶ See the important discussion in Moshe Idel, “Messianic Scholars: On Early Israeli Scholarship, Politics and Messianism,” *Modern Judaism* 32 (2012): 22–53.