

# THE RUSSIAN DISSENTING SECTS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON ISRAEL BAAL SHEM TOV, FOUNDER OF HASSIDISM\*

By YAFFA ELIACH

Judaism was never a self-contained religion; throughout the centuries it maintained a constant exchange of ideas with the various cultures with which it came into contact. Judaism always absorbed foreign ideas, tales, customs and laws, shaping them in accordance with its specific needs, theories, and world-view.

The influence of foreign cultures is evident in the first pages of the Bible and throughout Judaic literature. The ancient myths, epics and tales of Sumer and Akkad found their way into the pages of the Bible, but their pagan origin became only a faint echo.<sup>1</sup>

Later, when Judea came into contact with non-Semitic cultures, it continued its conscious borrowing and adaptation of foreign ideas.<sup>2</sup> During the period of the Mishnah and Talmud, it was Hellenism and Roman Law that left its mark on Jewish literature and jurisprudence. "Greek Wisdom" was well known to the outstanding rabbis and this knowledge was applied to the exegesis of the Biblical narrative.<sup>3</sup> The brilliance of Hellenism attracted large segments of the Jewish urban and rural populations of Palestine; it resulted in the abandonment of

\*I would like to thank Mr. Joel B. Wolowelsky for his help in preparing this paper for publication and Professor Abraham Ascher of Brooklyn College for his guidance.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, U. Cassuto, *MeAdam Va'ad Noach (From Adam to Noah)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: University Press, 1944), pp. 1-37.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, Judaism made very significant contributions to both Eastern and Western cultures; it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss these contributions.

<sup>3</sup> Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1965), pp. 37-43.

Jewish law and constituted a threat to the very existence and survival of Judaism. The rabbis could not countermand the strong hold that these foreign customs had on the Jewish masses and therefore took the only alternative open to them: the "Judaization" of the foreign elements. "The Rabbis were compelled to tolerate the practice, but they succeeded in endowing it with Jewish character. They had to adapt a Gentile custom adopted by the ignorant masses so as to suit Jewish requirements."<sup>4</sup>

The tendency to incorporate foreign elements into a Judaic framework was not limited to a few localities. The dispersed Jews throughout the world were continually exposed to a wide range of Western and Eastern cultures. For example, in medieval Moorish Spain, Maimonides (1135–1204) wrote his major philosophical work, *The Guide of the Perplexed* — a Jewish philosophical treatise written for Jews by one of the leading Jewish authorities of the period. The specific Jewish nature of the *Guide* is obvious, yet Maimonides systematically borrowed foreign — chiefly Aristotelian — philosophical sources.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, it is now quite evident that, contrary to current theories, the founder of the Hassidic movement of Judaism — the Baal Shem Tov (1700?–1760) — was inspired by non-Jewish sources.

Until now, it has been generally accepted that in founding the Hassidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov drew exclusively from ancient Jewish sources: the mystic writings of the Kabbala, the Bible and its various commentaries, later Rabbinical writings and — to a lesser extent — the Talmud. However, the Rabbinical authorities at the time of the beginning of the Hassidic movement certainly did not see Hassidism as part of normative Judaism, for they fought violently against it. Today, a close examination of Hassidic sources, its customs, dances, songs, and dress shows that Hassidism indeed drew heavily on sources foreign to Judaism: the Russian Schismatics and Dissenters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> For the philosophical sources of the *Guide*, see Leo Straus' introductory essay, M. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), Shlomo Pines, trans., second edition, pp. lvii–cxxxiv.

In 1652, about half a century before the birth of the Besht,<sup>6</sup> Nikon became Patriarch of Russia; at that time a group of church leaders known as the "Zealots of Piety" (Bogoliubtsy) were working for a "revival" of Russian Orthodoxy. While Nikon had been one of the active members of the "Zealots," he turned against them after becoming Patriarch, as he feared that their activities would be a threat to the authority of the Church hierarchy in general and to his own power in particular. Officially, the conflict that was to lead to the great schism of 1667 arose over re-editing the missal and changing the ritual. Nikon worked to bring the texts and customs of the Russian church into conformity with those of the contemporary Greeks. As Nikon himself declared at the Council of 1656: "Although I am a Russian, and the son of a Russian, my faith and convictions are Greek."<sup>7</sup> The Zealots, led by Archpriest Avvakum, advocated retaining the Russian form of the ancient texts and rites; while originally introduced into Russia from Greece, these had acquired a specific national character after seven centuries of "Russification." Although the conflict outwardly involved religious issues, it was actually a struggle for authority. Nikon sought the unquestioning submission of the Church to the authority of the Patriarch. In this he received the full support of Tzar Alexis (1645–1676), who desired stronger control of the Church by the central ecclesiastic offices which in turn would be subservient to the state. The Tzar and Patriarch met strong opposition: Archpriest Avvakum and his followers — the Old Believers — represented the lower clergy and their parishioners who felt that the parish priests and local laity should have a greater influence in church affairs.

Shcapov and other historians suggest that the schism was basically the result of social conflict and was only superficially a religious split.

The *Raskol*, as they saw it, was only superficially a religious split. Religious issues provided the opportunity for the expression of social and political protest: social, against

<sup>6</sup> "Besht" is an acronym for "Baal Shem Tov" (Master of the Good Name).

<sup>7</sup> P. Miliukov, *Religion and the Church* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1960), p. 35.

the ever-increasing importations from the West — clothes, customs, institutions; political, against the central fact of seventeenth-century Russian history — the legalization in 1649 of the complete enserfment of the peasants. These historians observed that, after the first few years, the schismatics were exclusively of lower-class origin — peasants and some of the poorer townspeople — but that, rather than being the ignorant and dark element of Russia, they contained and continued to contain a much higher percentage of literate people than the Orthodox population. Hence, the Old Believers represented general popular opinion and its desire to preserve, if nothing more, popular customs and institutions against the encroachment of the centralizing and bureaucratizing state.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the cause of the split, the “Old Believers” were eventually forced to leave the established Church.<sup>9</sup> The outlawed group was joined by other non-conforming and dissenting groups — including remnants of the Judaizers, Molokanye, Dukhabors and the Khlysty.<sup>10</sup>

The Raskolniks gained membership and momentum and soon constituted a significant segment of the Russian population: fifteen million in 1880 and twenty-five million in 1907.<sup>11</sup> Their sects, numbering about one hundred and fifty, can be divided into three major groups: the Old Believers, the Rationalists and the Mystics.<sup>12</sup> In order to escape persecution by the Russian authorities, these groups moved close to the borderlands: to the White Sea, Siberia, the Urals, Crimea, Ukraine, and to the Western borders. Sometimes they crossed the borders to neighboring countries, such as Poland. For example, a sizeable Raskol community was established in Vetka, Poland.<sup>13</sup> These Raskolnik

<sup>8</sup> M. Cherniavsky, “Old Believers and the New Religion,” *Slavic Review*, vol. xxv, no. 1, March, 1966, pp. 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> At the Council of 1667, Nikon and the other Eastern Patriarchs declared an anathema on Avvakum and his followers.

<sup>10</sup> These groups will be discussed in greater detail below.

<sup>11</sup> Miliakov, *op. cit.*, pp. 114–121.

<sup>12</sup> F. C. Conybeare, *Russian Dissenters*, Harvard Theological Studies, x (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921), pp. 1–9.

<sup>13</sup> In 1733, the Russians attacked Vetka and captured its population of 40,000. Later, the Raskolniks returned and rebuilt the city. See S. Bolshakoff, *Russian Nonconformity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951), p. 59.

communities naturally came into contact with their new non-Russian neighbors, and thus it is very likely that they met the Jews of the Polish Ukraine, including those of the communities of Volhynia and Podolia, where Hassidism was born.

It was about six decades after the schism in the Russian Church that the Hassidic Movement was born. Most historians attribute the rise of Hassidism to the religious and socio-economic conditions of the Jewish community in Poland at that time: religious — the aftermath of Shabtaism;<sup>14</sup> socio-economic — the aftermath of the economic depression of the seventeenth century and the changes in the structure of the Jewish community of Poland that accompanied it.

The history of Polish Jewry during the first half of the 18th century was a series of economic struggles. The economic depression affected the life of the community and its institutions: a growing majority of the population lacked means of support, the institutions were unable to meet their financial obligation. . . . These trends weakened the regional community institutions and subjugated the local community institutions to the local influential individuals. . . . This crisis also affected the educational and rabbinical bodies. The disintegration of the above-mentioned centers of power resulted in the enserfment of the local community to the localities' elite.<sup>15</sup>

Hassidism and Enlightenment reintegrated the crumpling society and introduced new concepts alongside the existing Jewish Tradition [*Masoret*]. But while the drastic socio-economic changes affected all of Poland, Hassidism originated and became established only along the borderlands of the Polish Ukraine, in Podolia and Volhynia. Professor Katz notes this discrepancy and is forced to modify his stress on social and economic factors:

<sup>14</sup> There is no need to cite here the details of Gershom Sholem's theory that Hassidism was a later trend in Jewish mysticism following Shabtaism. See G. Sholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), third edition, pp. 325–350.

<sup>15</sup> Jacob Katz, *Masoret U'mashber (Tradition and Crisis)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1958), pp. 266–267. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Hebrew sources are by Joel B. Wolowelsky and translations from other foreign sources are my own.

We are therefore forced to summarize saying: the rise of this new movement [Hassidism] was made possible by specific social situations, and it developed as an extension of the religious changes that preceded it. In its content, values, structure and historic development, the movement represents an innovation; all that preceded it served only as a stimulus. It is actually a new "creature of history," its features and outlook recognizable only after its appearance.<sup>16</sup>

However, a close examination of the historical data and geography related to the birth of Hassidism suggests that Professor Katz' thesis must be modified even more radically than he admits. For while he feels that "any explanation of that phenomenon [of the rise of Hassidism] must focus [exclusively] on changes within the Jewish community,"<sup>17</sup> it seems clear that Hassidism resulted from the direct personal contact of the Besht with Raskolniks. The religious and socio-economic situation existing in Podolia and Volhynia was by no means unique. However Hassidism did not develop in other localities in Poland. What distinguished Podolia and Volhynia from the rest of Poland was their proximity to the Raskol community which gave the Besht an opportunity to observe the Raskol groups. The sociological situation existing in these localities may have created the proper atmosphere for the Jews' acceptance of the Besht's teachings, but this was not the sole factor.

Israel Baal Shem-Tov — founder of one of the largest movements of Judaism — was born in the small town of Okopy (?) in Podolia. The exact place and date of his birth remain obscure,<sup>18</sup> as does the history of his adolescent years.

"The historical image of the creator of Hassidism comes to us through the fog of the legends bestowed on him by his followers. These stories, woven from the imagination of his contemporaries and later followers, obscure the true picture of the Besht."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>18</sup> According to Graetz, the Besht was born in 1698. See: S. Dubnow, *Toldot HaHasidut (The History of Hassidism)* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir Co., 5720 [1959/60]), p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

It is amazing that there is a lack of comprehensive information regarding the Besht's life, as the biographies of all great Jewish personalities are usually recorded in great detail.<sup>20</sup> The Besht's biography, *Shivchei HaBesht*<sup>21</sup> [*Praises of the Besht*], written fifty-five years after his death, is a collection of Hassidic tales and legends. However, a close examination of a number of the tales reveals a remarkable similarity to actual historical events. This suggests that some of the legendary narratives of *Shivchei HaBesht* are woven into a web of actual events. Therefore, in the absence of historical material regarding the Besht from this period, we must "extract" the early history of the Besht by way of analysis of this work.

Rabbi M. Eliezer, the Besht's father, lived in the province of Wallachia near the border. He and his wife were old. Once pillagers came to the town and captured him. His wife fled to another town; as a result of her poverty she [was forced] to become a midwife and this was her means of livelihood. They took him to a far-away province, a place where there were no Jews, and sold him there. He served his master faithfully, was well-liked by him and was appointed supervisor of the household. He asked his master for permission to rest on the Sabbath and the request was granted. After many years he wanted to flee in order to save himself. It was revealed to him in a dream that he should not be impatient, as he had yet to stay in this province. And it came to pass that his master had dealings with

<sup>20</sup> This is not only true of the Besht's generation, where biographical material on his contemporaries — *e. g.*, The Vilna Gaon — is abundant. It is also true of earlier historical periods.

<sup>21</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht* was written by Dov Baer ben Shmuel haShochet, who was the son-in-law of the Besht's scribe, Alexander Shochet. There are two main editions of this work, which is the earliest biographical book about the Besht: The Kapust edition of 1814 and the Berdichev edition, which appeared six months later. Unless otherwise indicated, references to *Shivchei HaBesht* in this paper are to Berdichev edition, republished by Talpiot in Israel (1961). The passages cited are substantially the same as the corresponding passages in the Kapust edition. The Hebrew, while mixed with foreign words and phrases, is clear. The original edition had no punctuation, and that of the edition used is unreliable. The punctuation was therefore not followed in translating. The major historians of Hassidism rely on *Shivchei HaBesht* as source material for the early period of the Besht's Hassidism.

the king's minister and advisor and he gave him R. Eliezer as a gift.<sup>22</sup>

While no date is given, a correlation between events mentioned in the story and known historical data shows that the incident must have occurred in the last three decades of the seventeenth century in Russia.

We are told that "no Jew was permitted to live in that state [to which Eliezer was taken]. If a Jew were found there, the sentence was death."<sup>23</sup> The Muscovite Duchy had for a long time closed its territory to professing Jews — including Jews on business trips — under the penalty of death.<sup>24</sup> As such a policy was not in effect in any other country in that area, it seems possible that Eliezer was brought to Russia.

*Shivchei HaBesht* also describes Eliezer's participation in a sea battle: "The King went with his soldiers in boats to fight over the possession of a region."<sup>25</sup> During the Azov Campaign (1695–1696) — Russia's first famous sea venture — Tzar Peter the Great (1689–1725) attacked Azov with his soldiers by sailing down the Don.

It was after his first attack on Azov failed that Peter had determined to build a fleet capable of preventing the Turks from relieving it by sea. And on his main expedition against the enemy, eighty-six ships of war — two-decker ships, galliots, brigantines — and five hundred barges, had sailed down the Don.<sup>26</sup>

In describing the sea battle in which Eliezer participated, the *Shivchei HaBesht* mentions the king's difficulties in conquering the city. It is Eliezer's advice which brings about the victory. Having received a revelation which describes how to attack the city, Eliezer is brought before the king: ". . . they shaved him, changed his clothes and brought him before the king in a small

<sup>22</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> S. W. Baron, *The Russian Jew* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), pp. 7–14.

<sup>25</sup> *Shivchei Ha-Besht*, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> Mairin Mitchell, *The Maritime History of Russia 848–1948* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Limited, 1949), p. 65.



boat.”<sup>27</sup> This is a further indication that *Shivchei HaBesht* describes Peter’s battle. Peter had a great dislike for beards and old style Russian clothes; his many “Westernizing” reforms included ordering people to shave their beards and change their old style of dress.

On the very day after his return to Moscow [two years after the Azov campaign] took place the well-known scene when with his own hands he shaved off the beards of his principal nobles. Shortly after he proceeded to cut off the long sleeves of their surcoats, and Hungarian or German dress was prescribed for the court and officials.<sup>28</sup>

For his advice, R. Eliezer was rewarded with a wife — the King’s minister’s daughter; however Eliezer would not have relations with her. In time, he revealed to her his true identity as a Jew, whereupon she sent him back to his homeland, where he met his first wife. A son — Israel — was born to them when they were both close to a hundred years old.<sup>29</sup>

This is the oldest account of the Besht’s origins. However, after Hassidism became more firmly established, another version was offered. This version does not mention that the Besht’s father ever lived in a foreign country, that he was confronted with another culture, or that he had another wife. It seems reasonable to accept the version of the *Shivchei HaBesht*, since the man who recorded it heard it from a person who had known the Besht personally.<sup>30</sup> The second version was written over a hundred years after the Besht’s death, at a time when Hassidism would have wanted to present the image of its founder in light of its image as a group firmly rooted in Judaism.

For example, according to this second source, R. Eliezer, the Besht’s father, was a most hospitable person. Once, it was decided in heaven to test him. The prophet Elijah went to carry out this mission, appearing to him one Sabbath afternoon in the

<sup>27</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> B. H. Sumner, *Peter the Great* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p. 44. While Peter’s orders did not become law until two years after the Azov campaign, those close to him had adopted these western customs.

<sup>29</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, pp. 42–43.

<sup>30</sup> See footnote 21.

guise of an old man who was not a Sabbath observer. Rather than embarrass the man by admonishing him, R. Eliezer, being most patient, invited him in, served him a Sabbath meal, and on Sunday gave him a contribution. Upon seeing his true personality, Elijah revealed himself to R. Eliezer, informed him of his mission, and as a reward for his good deeds, promised him a son “who will enlighten all of Israel” — this is the Besht.<sup>31</sup>

Further indication that the earlier version more closely correlates with actual events is the fact that the later one does not mention that Eliezer came in contact with Russian culture, while tales like the following indicate that in his childhood the Besht indeed had such contact:

Once the Besht was sick and lost the ability to speak. His followers and friends stood about him and he hinted to them that they should dress him in his tfilin; they did so. He lay for a long time wearing his tfilin and afterwards began to talk. They asked him: “What happened?” and he answered: “It was found that there is a sin of [my] childhood being held against [me] for which [I] was [now] being prosecuted. [My] rabbi told [me] to quickly put on the tfilin. Then the prosecutor came to [me] in the form of a gentile with a brass bar in his hand and wanted to bash in [my] head but could not come close because [I] was wearing the tfilin. He yelled at [me] *in Russian*: ‘Take off that leather,’ but I did not pay attention and he yelled until [the charge] was dismissed.<sup>32</sup>

Such sources also point to the possibility that the Besht was born in Russia and/or spent his early childhood there.

The Besht’s life was greatly influenced by manuscripts received through a certain Reb Adam.

There was once a man named R. Adam from whom the Besht received his writings. [R. Adam] once came to a cave and found there manuscripts dealing with the secrets of the Torah. . . . He asked that he be answered in a dream as to whom he should give the manuscripts. And he was an-

<sup>31</sup> *Rachamai HaAv (The Father’s Mercy)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: HaMamin, 5718 [1958]), pp. 47–48. *Rachamai HaAv* was first published in Chernovits in 1865.

<sup>32</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 127. Italics added.

swered that he should give them to R. Yisrael b. Eliezer from the city of Akop. Before his death he instructed his only son: "I have in my possession manuscripts containing secrets of the Torah but I am not worthy of them. Search out one city — its name is Akop — and find there a man called Yisrael b. Eliezer, who is about 14 years old. Give him the manuscripts, for they belong to the essence of his soul — and if you will be worthy of studying with him that too would be good." After the death of our teacher R. Adam, his only son, an outstanding scholar of the highest character, took a cart and horses and went from town to town until he came to Akop and he stayed with one of the good people of the town, who asked him whence he came and to where he was going, for it seemed that he was not there to collect money. He answered: "My late father was a well-known saintly man. Before his death he commanded me to take a wife from Akop and I must fulfill his command." Immediately the city was in an uproar, arranging several matches. He married into the family of a well-to-do man, for he was well-liked by all who saw him. After the wedding, he began to seek the object of his search but was able to find only Yisrael, the caretaker of the Beit HaMidrash. His keen insight revealed to him that this appearance may be deceiving and it is possible that this is the man whom he was seeking.<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted, as was pointed out by Dubnow, that Adam was "a strange name; it was never used by Jews."<sup>34</sup> Professor Scholem is also puzzled by the name Adam and he suggests that it was a fictitious name.

The name Rabbi Adam, which was exceedingly unusual among Jews of that period, seemed to prove that the so-called Rabbi was in reality a legendary figure and I am personally inclined to the view that the whole story of his literary heritage was a figment of the imagination.<sup>35</sup>

Professor Scholem associates the manuscripts with Rabbi Hershel Zoref of Vilna, who died in 1700.<sup>36</sup>

While Adam is not a Jewish name, it is the name of a prominent man of letters who lived in Russia during the last decades

<sup>33</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, pp. 44, 45.

<sup>34</sup> S. Dubnow, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> G. Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 331–332.

of the seventeenth century who wrote a number of books on religion.

Judging from his faith and knowledge, no one within the Provoslovik faith was more worthy of praise and honor than Adam Zernikov, who was almost un-noticed in his time. He was born abroad and educated within the Lutheran Church, also studying in various western universities. Adam became dissatisfied with the Lutheran Church, which was divided into many sects according to the private interpretation of each teacher.<sup>37</sup>

He therefore turned to the Greek Orthodox Church, left for Russia and settled in Chernigov.<sup>38</sup> However, before coming to Russia, he spent a number of years in the great centers of learning at Koenigsberg, Oxford, Paris, Milan, and Venice. After much traveling and studying, Adam arrived in Russia and settled at the Batyrincki monastery at Chernigov. He soon left there to become chief adviser on military and other affairs to the Hetman of Baturin.<sup>39</sup> It is quite possible that the "king's adviser" to whom Eliezer was given<sup>40</sup> was the adviser to the Hetman of Baturin and that Adam thus met Eliezer. Adam, himself a foreigner (a Prussian, born in Koenigsberg in 1652), might well have taken an interest in Eliezer, who spoke Yiddish, a dialect of German.

When R. Adam instructs his son to deliver the manuscripts to the Besht, he has very accurate information: the name of the Besht, his father, the specific town, and even the Besht's age.<sup>41</sup> This precise information is attributed to a supernatural act: it was revealed to R. Adam in a dream. It is more likely, however, that he got this information from Eliezer.

<sup>37</sup> Filaret, *Istoria Russkio Tserkvi (History of the Russian Churches)* [Russian] (Charkow, 1853), Vol. IV, p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Chernigov is in the Ukraine to the east of Podolia and Volhynia. Adam assumed the name of this city and is sometimes called Adam Chernigovski. See: *Brockhouse Encyclopaedia* [Russian] (St. Petersburg, 1890), Vol. I, p. 163.

<sup>39</sup> A. Zernikov, *De Processine Spiritus Sancti A Suo Patre*. Biography and Russian trans. by Mislavski (Kiev, 1774).

<sup>40</sup> See above, p. 64.

<sup>41</sup> See above, p. 67.

The precise nature of the manuscripts is not mentioned; we are only told that R. Adam found them in a cave and that they contained secrets of the Torah.

After R. Adam's son found the Besht,

he called him saying: "My late father left me manuscripts commanding me to give them to you; they are here before you. I would ask one favor: that you study with me." He answered: "Very well, provided that no-one besides you know and there be no visible change in your behavior — that you simply instruct me to serve you as before." It was thus agreed. Later, the rabbi's son said to his father-in-law: "I would like to live a more secluded life, if possible in an isolated house outside of the city where I may dwell upon the Torah and my work." They did this.<sup>42</sup>

The Besht and R. Adam's son lived in complete isolation from the Jewish community. Soon afterwards, R. Adam's son and the Besht's first wife died. The Besht then took his mysterious manuscripts and left Akop, wandering unnoticed from city to city.<sup>43</sup> The Besht never parted with his manuscripts. Wherever he lived, he built a seclusion hut — at times in a remote place in the forest<sup>44</sup> or in a rented house of a Gentile.<sup>45</sup> He studied his secret sources in seclusion, always at midnight. He was once discovered by a member of the community, R. David. The Besht dismissed R. David's questions regarding his activity by saying that he had been reciting Psalms. Another time, he was so angry at an intruder that he knocked him unconscious, later warning him, "You should not look at what is forbidden."<sup>46</sup>

It is only when he was about to reveal himself that the Besht parted with his writings.

The Besht hid those manuscripts under a stone in the mountain, for he had commanded the stone to open itself [to receive the documents]; he left the manuscripts there

<sup>42</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 46.

<sup>43</sup> During this period he married his second wife. He reveals his true identity only to his wife; her family felt that he was an uneducated peasant.

<sup>44</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 60.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 52.

and the stone reclosed itself. He left a watchman there. The rabbi of our [Shochet's] community said that he heard from the Mochiach of the community of Polani who said when he was old: "I have the power to take the manuscripts from there because I know the place [where they are hidden] but because the Besht hid them there I do not want to take them." And he said that the fifth revelation of these manuscripts was to the Besht, adding that these manuscripts were yet in the hands of Abraham, Joshua b. Nun, and the others I do not know.<sup>47</sup>

We are never told the exact nature of these writings, but it is doubtful that they were Kabbalists works, since such works would not demand this secrecy, for in that period, even after the period of Shabtai Tsvi, Kabbalistic study was popular.<sup>48</sup>

At that time, however, there existed Raskol literature which was to be kept in strict secrecy. The tenth of the Twelve Commandments of the Khlysty Sect — one of the Raskol groups — was:

Keep these rules secret, reveal them not even to father or mother, and even if men scourge thee with whip or burn thee with fire, bear it. So doing, the true shall after the pattern of the old martyrs win heaven, and on earth spiritual satisfaction.<sup>49</sup>

It is at least possible that the Besht kept his manuscripts secret because they were in fact not Jewish sources but rather Raskol literature.<sup>50</sup> If that is the case, the years of isolation

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> Dubnow, *op. cit.*, pp. 24–34.

<sup>49</sup> F. C. Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 358. These Twelve Commandments were revealed by Danila of Kostroma during the reign of Tsar Alexis (1645–1676). *Ibid.*, p. 357. The Raskolniks were also forced to keep their writings secret because they were outlawed by the Church. Only in 1906 did Russia lift the ban. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>50</sup> Note that the Mochiach of Polenoa received from the Besht those "religious teachings (Torah) which are part of his soul, in a setting of lightning and thunder, in a language containing all types of foreign thoughts (writings?); this is how the Besht received his Torah, in a manner resembling Israel's experience at Sinai as described in the Zohar." However, Shochet significantly adds that he knows of no reference in the Zohar to any foreign sources in connection with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 76.

could be viewed as a period during which the Besht formulated his views and worked the Raskolnik ideas and customs into a Judaic framework. Once he had formulated what he considered to be a Jewish system, the original sources could be discarded. However, it is not so much the secrecy linked with both the Besht's and Raskolnik's writings that lead us to suspect that the manuscripts were of a non-Jewish nature; it is rather the nature of the criticism heaped upon the Besht and his followers by the great Jewish scholars of that period.

The first excommunication of the Besht and his followers was pronounced in the city of Ostraha during the Besht's life time:

To the nobles of Israel . . . to the princes of the community leaders . . . We have heard the disturbing voices of the joyful city . . . There were once here many Torah authorities . . . the late leader of the exile, the Maharsha . . . and now newcomers who believe everything have arrived. . . . As we have seen with our own eyes, as did all of Israel, this evil, vile, instigating, dishonest man, a stranger, arrogant and light-headed . . . He persuaded many with his slick language, so that those foolish people who believe everything run after him, cherishing his every word, which is nothing but wind. And this man — may his memory be blotted out — who defiles Israel once said that he is from Shklov, and then said that he is from Shvatsh; he came to our community, twice preaching here. He damaged himself within his own words of inanities, until we were afraid for his sins, lest he have been exposed to a heretic. We searched him out and found . . . that he is evil, and boasts in his stupidity that he is a drunken prophet, acting crazy . . . And he here revealed his shame that he ate and drank and got drunk on the Yartzeit — all his words are worthless . . . He is dressed in white . . . He shall be called impure until God takes his revenge. *Thus, we, learned in the Torah, in all strictness excommunicate this evil, vile above-mentioned man, Israel — may his name be blotted out.* And to all places where these words are received, all God-fearing men should heed these words . . . encircle, pursue and excommunicate him; separate him from the community of the Exile; search his hidden [thoughts] and [you will] find in them deceit and heretical ideas.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Shever Poshim*, Manuscript 23; *Zimrat Am HaAaretz*, manuscript, 31. Quoted in S. A. Horodetsky, *HaChasidut ViHaChasidim (Hassidism and*

The authorities chose two specific items to mention in addition to stating their general feeling that the Besht was a heretic: he feasted on the Yartzeit and he dressed in white.

A second more famous excommunication was pronounced by the Gaon of Vilna in 1772, after the Besht's death. This excommunication emphasized the strange behavior of the Hassidim during prayer and the changes introduced by them:

Our brethren Israel . . . do you not know that newcomers, unknown to our ancestors, have arrived, organizing a suspicious [*HaShudim*, a pun on *Hassidim*] sect . . . forming private cliques. Their ways are different from Jewry with respect to the liturgy . . . they yell improper foreign sounds during the Amidah, behaving in a mad fashion, saying that their thoughts are wandering in many worlds. . . . They do away with the study of Torah; they always maintain that one may limit his studies and not be too upset regarding his sins . . . All their days are holidays . . . As they say their forged prayers they display different voices, and the entire city is in an uproar . . . They behaved like wheels, topsy turvy . . . This is only one of thousands of their ugly ways . . . The above-mentioned suspect confessed before us . . . and thank God that their sins were revealed to us in our camp, they confessed after a very thorough investigation . . . [The ban is then pronounced.]<sup>52</sup>

The Brodi excommunication followed soon after, adding that the Hassidim had introduced changes in the slaughter ritual.<sup>53</sup>

The changes itemized were far from insignificant. The particulars mentioned were characteristic of the Russian Dissenting

---

*Hassidim*) [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 5711 [1951]), p. 60. A number of people — including Dubnow — doubt the authenticity of this ban, claiming that at best it was written by extremist scholars in the community and not by the community leaders. It should be noted, however, that the doubt is raised by R. Mindel Biber (*ibid.*, note 4) who says that the traditions of the Ostraha community do not include such an account. However, Ostraha was a Hassidic stronghold (see, e. g., J. Eisenstein, ed., *Ozar Yisrael* [Hebrew] (New York: Pardes, 1951), vol. 1, p. 199, and such an account would, in time, be suppressed.

<sup>52</sup> *Zmir Aritzim VeCharvot Tzurim*, pp. 22–25. Quoted in Dubnow, *op. cit.*, p. 116. Actually, the Gaon was one of a number of scholars who signed the ban.

<sup>53</sup> See Dubnow, *op. cit.*, p. 120.



sects. Jewish scholars, familiar with Jewish law, detected the non-Jewish characteristic of these actions.

For example, the Besht is accused of wearing white.<sup>54</sup> When the Khlysty sect — that Dissenting sect which most closely resembles Hassidism — met for its secret services they

assembled in a brilliantly lighted meeting hall, dressed in long white shirts and having lighted candles in their hands. After the usual reading and singing, the sectarians began ritual dances, which included jumping, running, and whirling after the fashion of Moslem dervishes or “holy rollers.”<sup>55</sup>

The Dukhobors, established in 1665 during the reign of Tzar Alexis, and the Khlysty<sup>56</sup> wore these long white garments on holidays and other important occasions. The Brodi excommunication includes among the innovations of the Hassidim the fact that all wore white on the Sabbath and holidays.<sup>57</sup> By including this in the excommunication, the rabbis testified to their feeling that it was of a non-Jewish nature.

The idea of eating rather than fasting on the anniversary of death [Yartseit] resembles the Molokanye innovation of eating

<sup>54</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 50, also mentions that the Besht wore white on the Sabbath. It should be noted that at that time in Vilna there was a Jewish Kabbalistic group that wore white. In spite of this, the Besht's wearing of white was condemned.

<sup>55</sup> S. Bolshakoff, *Russian Nonconformists* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), p. 90. Cf. the similar description in K. K. Grass, *Die Russischen Sekten* [German] (Leipzig, 1905), p. 384. Note there footnote 2: “It is told in Melnikov's book (*Die Weissen Tauben* [*The White Doves*], p. 300, 2 Anm.) that the Christs, Prophets and Mother-gods would put on a golden Gürtel [a type of belt], in some of the ships [communities] all of the members wear red (see Vergel, p. 371), in others, they wear a black Gürtel.”

<sup>56</sup> The exact time of origin of the sect is not known, but it seems to be as old as the prevailing orthodoxy (Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 356). The members gained a substantial following during the life of their most famous Christ [leader], Danila, who died in 1700 at the age of 100. (*Ibid.*, p. 359). These and other Raskol sects were somewhat influenced by the Judaizer sects, which were semi-Christian groups, the first one having been formed under the influence of Zechariah, a Lithuanian Jew, who came to Novgorod, Russia in 1470. (Bolshakoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 31 ff.). These groups observe Jewish ritual and law in various degrees. For more details, see G. Vernadsky, “The Heresy of the Judaizers and Ivan III,” *Speculum*, Vol. VIII, 1933.

<sup>57</sup> Dubnow, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

on the anniversary of the Last Supper in memory of Jesus,<sup>58</sup> rather than fasting, as is the custom in the Russian Church.

The other accusations in the Vilna excommunication include mention of changes in the prayer ritual. These changes — shouting foreign sounds during the service and jumping around — cannot be accounted for by the Hassidic introduction of Rabbi Yitschak Luria's ritual<sup>59</sup> and are identical with the prayer mannerisms of the Khylsty sect:

[During the Khylsty service, some would] begin to stamp, kick, hop, leap, shriek; . . . all are ejaculating such phrases as: Oi Duyh, Oi Dukh, Suvatio Duch, Okh, ðkh, ðkh! [Ho Spirit, Spirit, Holy Spirit, Ho, Ho, Ho] . . .

But some under the intoxication of the [Holy] Spirit begin to speak with tongues, which it is the task of others to interpret . . . :

Nasontos, Lesontos, phurtlis, natruphuntru, natrisinphur . . .<sup>60</sup>

When the Khylsty fell into a religious trance they became unaware of the actual world around them, at times even not noticing the entrance of the hated police.

They are no more themselves, the normal man or woman is dead in them, their hearts flutter, their tongues are stirred by the new soul within them, they are raised into the seventh heaven, are in paradise, they even see God and the angels face to face.<sup>61</sup>

The Vilna rabbis were quick to notice the non-Jewish nature of the mannerisms.

Another mannerism of the Hassidim — their dances — is also traceable to the Khylsty. One of the most exalted religious experiences of the Khylsty is singing and dancing the "Radenie," an old dance which the sect members performed in many forms and variations. During the dance, both men and women are

<sup>58</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

<sup>59</sup> Luria (1534-1572) — also known as the Ari — was the originator of the Lurian trend in Jewish mysticism.

<sup>60</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 350.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351. Cf. the Vilna excommunication which accuses the Hassidim of being in "another world" during prayer.

dressed in white flowing apparel, each one carrying a white handkerchief to wave simulating the fluttering of angel's or dove's wings. The Radenie has many forms. In one form, the people lined up facing the Christ. They then ran after one another, keeping time with an accelerating rhythm and then suddenly turning in the opposite direction. At times they beat themselves.<sup>62</sup> The circle form of the Radenie is better known.

The homily [to the presiding Christ or Mother of God] finished, the dance begins, at first an orderly circular dance in which men and women join hands; all are singing the Prayer of Jesus given above in alternations with other hymns. Faster and faster<sup>63</sup> revolves the human circle, more animated becomes the vocal strains, and presently they burst into a chorus . . .

O I burn, O I burn  
 The Spirit burns, God burns!  
 Light is in me, Light is in me,  
 The Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost!  
 O I burn, burn,  
 Ghost, Oi Yega (Four times)  
 Yevoye! Host Yevot (Thrice)

Soon isolated figures detach themselves from the throng and spin round, like Dervishes, with incredible rapidity.<sup>64</sup>

The importance of dancing and signing in Hassidism is well known.<sup>65</sup> Many of the Hassidic dance forms resemble the descriptions of the Radenie. The music of the Hassidim "had the characteristics of improvisation, a result of the 'soul's rising;'"<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> For the various Radenie forms see Grass, *op. cit.*, pp. 384-389.

<sup>63</sup> The Besht felt that during prayer one should start at a slow pace and during the prayer accelerate gaining momentum. *Tsava'at HaRIBaSh (The Will of Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem)* (first edition, Zalkva) (reprinted in Israel: Talpiot, 1961), p. 218. *Tsava'at HaRIBaSh* is bound in one volume with *Shivchei HaBesht*.

<sup>64</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 349-350.

<sup>65</sup> See, e. g., *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 75, and *Likutai Keter Shem Tov*, compiled by Zvi HaCohen from Y. Yoseph of Polonia, *Keter Shem Tov*, 1784 (reprinted in Israel: Talpiot, 1961), p. 199. *Likutai Keter Shem Tov* is bound in one volume with *Shivchei HaBesht*.

<sup>66</sup> M. Sh. G'shuri, "Litorat HaNigun B'Chasidut" ("Hassidic Music"), *Sefer HaBesht*, Y. L. HaCohen Maimon, ed. [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1960), p. 71.

during the Radenie, the participants improvised, “stirred by the new soul within them.” These new music and fast dance forms were introduced by the Besht,<sup>67</sup> most probably under the influence of the Khlysty sect.

Perhaps the most striking and convincing similarity between Hassidism and the Dissenting sects is the similarity of the Hassidic *tsadik* and the sects’ Christs. While Judaism always had *tsadikim* (righteous people), Hassidism elevated the *tsadik* to a new position that he had never had before.<sup>68</sup>

The concept of Christ among the Khlysty is part of a

widespread form of Christianity generally called Adoptionism [in which] the Holy Spirit descends from heaven, disguised in the similitude of a dove, to take possession of the ‘man form of men,’ Jesus of Nazareth, who was singled out for such honor because of his having kept all the Law and the Prophets. . . .<sup>69</sup> The Khlysty believed that Christ’s body lay in grave after his death, like any other man’s body. The Resurrection really means that the Divine Spirit which had constituted him a Christ was bequeathed by him to successors worthy thereof.<sup>70</sup>

The Christs had a number of specific powers. They could see the future, predicting what the weather would be, whether the crops would fail or whether there would be a bumper harvest, what the take of fish in the rivers would be, and when there would be persecutions by the government. Members of the sect confessed their sins to them and they could detect sinners — for example, they would swing a lamp: if it remained lit, all present were blameless; if it went out, someone had sinned.<sup>71</sup>

The Besht also had similar powers: he could see the “whole world” — a power that had been given to the righteous<sup>72</sup> — and

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 73.

<sup>68</sup> Judaism always had *tsadikim* (. . . “the righteous are foundations of the world,” Proverbs x:25) and people who had some of the characteristics of the Hassidic *tsadik* (*rebbe*); however, the position that the *tsadik* had in Hassidism is a unique one in Judaism.

<sup>69</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 339–340.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 355–356.

<sup>72</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 61.

could predict the destruction of cities.<sup>73</sup> He could pick out sinners by observing their faces;<sup>74</sup> once he decided that a sinner was nearby by the position of a lamp.<sup>75</sup> He also predicted rain<sup>76</sup> and singled out localities favorable for fishing.

The Khlysty men — and their Christs — lived apart from their wives. “They teach that if God desires a virgin to conceive, he will impregnate her with his Holy Spirit as he did Mary the Mother of Christ.”<sup>77</sup> While the idea of virgins giving birth would seem to be a conception foreign to the eighteenth century Jew, we read that

When the Besht’s wife died his followers and friends told him to marry another. The Besht answered in surprise: “I need a wife?! For fourteen years I remained apart [from my wife] while in bed and my son Hershele was born ‘by the word’ (i. e., by a miracle).”<sup>78</sup>

The powers of the *tsadik* could be transmitted at the time of his death to his son (or other relative), who assumed his duties. Thus, Hassidic dynasties such as Lubavitch, Karlin, Balz, etc., became established. This concept of a dynasty of *tsadikim* (as opposed to a dynasty of scholars, priests, or kings), is a new one for Judaism. However, it closely resembles the dynasties of Christs which existed among the Raskol groups.

The most famous of the Khlysty Christs was Danila of Kostroma (1600?–1700). Danila’s spiritual son, Ivan Timofejevich Suslow, was born when Ivan’s mother was 100 years old; Ivan was her first born. Danila revealed himself first in a village and then moved with his followers to the city. He elevated one of

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>77</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>78</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, original Kapust edition, p. 36b. “By the word” might also be interpreted to mean “upon command [of God],” as the story following this quote might suggest. However, this translation makes the claim “I remained apart [from my wife] while in bed” very difficult. In addition, it is most significant that this paragraph is subtly deleted from the Berdichev edition, as R. Meier ben R. Sh. Zalman Militah would not give his approval to the printing of the Berdichev edition unless various passages would be changed or removed. See the introduction to the Berdichev edition in the Talpiot edition, p. 17.

the sect's holy books, the *Dove Book* [*Ḳnīga Galubina*], above all the others, throwing the rest into the Volga. When he became God, it was in a situation of fire and angels. He died on St. Basil's day, and he ascended bodily to heaven.<sup>79</sup>

The Besht — an only child — was born when his mother was about one hundred years old. He first revealed himself in a small village, then moved to the city.<sup>80</sup> The Besht revealed himself at the age of 36;<sup>81</sup> the Christs revealed themselves after the age of thirty.<sup>82</sup> The Brody excommunication accused the Besht of disregarding all Jewish studies in favor of the Kabbalah.<sup>83</sup> The Besht — who also died on a holiday (Shavuot)<sup>84</sup> — hoped that on his death he would rise up to heaven in the midst of a storm — as did Elijah — but was prevented from doing so because of the death of his wife.<sup>85</sup> He appointed as his successor a person suffering from podagra — a disease that affects the foot and sometimes the hand.<sup>86</sup> One characteristic of a Christ is his suffering, and Danila — as all the Christs — had visible markings on his hands and feet as a result of his crucifixion.<sup>87</sup> Danila, as were all the Christs, was a reincarnation of Jesus; the Besht — himself a reincarnation of Moses,<sup>88</sup> King David,<sup>89</sup> and Rabbi Saadia Gaon<sup>90</sup> — was to be the Messiah.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, pp. 357–359. (A rival legend says that he was buried in the village.)

<sup>80</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 52.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>82</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 341. The Besht, however, may have picked the age of thirty-six because that coincides with the age when the Ari revealed himself.

<sup>83</sup> Dubnow, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 160.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>87</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>88</sup> *Meirat Eynayim (The Lights of the Eyes)*, compiled by N. M. HaCohen, (reprinted in Israel: Talpiot, 1961), p. 244. *Meirat Eynayim* is bound in one volume with *Shivchei HaBesht*.

<sup>89</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 157.

<sup>90</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 87.

<sup>91</sup> *Meirat Eynayim, op. cit.*, p. 245. It has been noted that the Besht resembles Jesus in a number of aspects. (See, e. g., Dubnow, *op. cit.*, p. 41). This is explainable by the close similarity between the Besht and the sect's local Christs, who resembled Jesus.

Just as the Besht's ritualistic innovations may be traced to the Raskol sects, so too may his socio-economic outlook. He opposed any class distinctions — whether based on scholarly or material superiority — and opposed the accumulation of wealth.<sup>92</sup>

The Rav [The Besht] never had money in his possession. When he would return home he would pay his debts and on the same day would distribute what was left to charity.<sup>93</sup>

The Dukhobortsy sect aimed at the abolition of social distinctions based upon rank or economic prosperity. They had no priests and believed that every Dukhobor is the Trinity incarnated.<sup>94</sup>

Their cardinal tenet was mutual love. They had no private property, and the goods of each were those of all. In their settlement at Milky Waters they practised real communism, had a common treasury, common flocks and herds, and in each of their villages common granaries, from which each was supplied according to his needs.<sup>95</sup>

While the Besht had discarded his mysterious manuscripts when he revealed himself, it seems that he maintained a constant personal contact with the Russian Dissenting sects throughout his life. We can account for his frequent mysterious travels and his close relation with Gentiles.<sup>96</sup> On one such mysterious journey, the Besht, accompanied by his Gentile driver Alexis<sup>97</sup> and a young man then living at Brodi, set out for the long ride to the city of Pozna. On the way, they stopped at a humble house near the edge of an unknown village. The Besht and his Jewish companion went inside, while Alexis, on the Besht's orders, remained sound asleep in the carriage — as was his custom on these mysterious travels.

<sup>92</sup> His successors did not share his view and many of the later Hassidic *rebbe*s lived in a princely manner.

<sup>93</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 123.

<sup>94</sup> Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>96</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, pp. 109, 153, 157.

<sup>97</sup> The Besht's horses and his driver Alexis are most prominent figures in the Hassidic folklore.

Inside sat an old man, his complete body covered with wounds and scales. . . . When the old man saw the Besht, he was most joyful, immediately ran to him offering his hand and saying: "Welcome, my teacher." . . . They then went into another room, staying there a half hour. They then came out, and took leave of one another.<sup>98</sup>

Upon arriving at Pozna, they did not enter the Jewish sector, where the young man's parents lived, but rather stayed in the house of a Jewish tailor in the Gentile sector. While there, the Besht participated in an enthusiastic and loud prayer service. The tailor's house was soon surrounded by an armed, angry gentile crowd. However, when the Besht appeared at the door they began trembling, full of fear. They fell to the floor and stayed there until the Besht returned indoors.<sup>99</sup> If, as was his custom, the Besht was wearing white clothes, we could well understand what made these gentiles of Pozna fear him.

Later, the Besht met with a non-Jewish professor who knew Hebrew and Talmud and taught at the famous academy of Pozna.

When returning from Pozna — never having visited the Jewish sector — the bewildered young man asked the Besht to explain the strange events of the journey and to reveal the identity of the old man in the village and the professors. The Besht explained that the old man was the Messiah — for each generation has the actual Messiah, to reveal himself if the generation is worthy;<sup>100</sup> he did not explain who the professor was but the young man found out that the professor later converted to Judaism.<sup>101</sup>

While many of the Besht's actions can be traced directly to the Dissenting sects, other actions and strange behavior must

<sup>98</sup> R. Yitzchak Kadaner, *Sipurim Noraim (Awesome Stories)* (Munketch, 5654 [1864]). Quoted in *Sefer Ma'asiyot (Book of Tales)* [Hebrew]; Mordecai b. Yechezkiel, compiler (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 5688 [1928]), Vol. 3, p. 68.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71. The idea of the Messiah being an old wounded man waiting to reveal himself appears in the Talmud. However, we should note that the idea of the Messiah appearing in every generation is very applicable to the Khlysty.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.



be attributed to his personality which in turn was strongly affected by his pipe (*lulke*). He saw his visions and underwent visible physical changes after smoking his pipe. Smoking tobacco was accepted by the Jewish and non-Jewish population of the Besht's community.<sup>102</sup> Yet there are indications that the Besht smoked something other than tobacco.<sup>103</sup> When smoking the pipe (*lulke*) the Besht experienced joy,<sup>104</sup> was stimulated to prayer<sup>105</sup> and above all saw visions.<sup>106</sup> His disciple, the Mochiach of Polenoa, asked that for his reward for a life time of Torah study he be granted that which the Besht once experienced while smoking the *lulke*.<sup>107</sup>

It seems that the Besht had developed an addiction to his pipe and on occasions when he could not smoke, as during the holidays,<sup>108</sup> he suffered visible physical changes: his eyes bulged and he maintained a fixed expression, his face was aflame, and his body shook violently.<sup>109</sup> At times he began to cry,<sup>110</sup> and he once doubled over.<sup>111</sup>

Others who came near the Besht while he was smoking had strange experiences. The Mochiach of Polenoa once came upon

<sup>102</sup> In Russia, smoking was considered a foreign custom and was introduced only during the reign of Tzar Alexis. See Sumner, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>103</sup> Only in one incident in *Shivchei HaBesht* (p. 155) is the substance that the Besht smoked identified as tobacco (*titun*); however, in that story his pipe is referred to as a *Ma'aleh-Ashan*, while in all the other stories the substance smoked is not identified and the pipe is referred to as a *lulke* (Persian for "pipe"), having a long *Zibuk* (Turkish for "shank") (pp. 142-143). While smoking the *lulke*, the Besht remained in a stationary position lying or sitting in his room or carriage, while when he smoked tobacco he was walking around. It should be noted that in this respect he differed from the Old Believers, who did not smoke.

<sup>104</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 97.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>107</sup> *Mierat Eynayim*, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>108</sup> Smoking is prohibited on the Sabbath and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement); some authorities prohibit smoking — and even the sniffing of tobacco — on all holidays.

<sup>109</sup> *Shivchei HaBesht*, p. 61.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

the Besht while the latter was smoking and the Mochiach began to cry uncontrollably.<sup>112</sup> The Besht was aware of the effect of his *lulke* on others:

Once the Rav was riding and smoking his pipe (*lulke*), the shank of the pipe was so long that the pipe extended outside of the carriage. As they were riding, an officer, accompanied by two horse soldiers, approached them; they took the pipe from him and continued on their way, as did the Rav. After an hour, the Rav stopped and told his servant: "Take a horse and ride to overtake the soldiers and take the pipe from them; so he did. When he found them they were sitting on their horses fast asleep. He took the pipe and went on his way."<sup>113</sup>

The smoking of a pipe later became something of a ritual among the early Hassidic *rebbe*s and was a constant target of ridicule by the opposers of Hassidism.

In conclusion, it has been shown that there are significant ritual and sociological similarities between the Hassidism of the Besht and the Dissenting sects of the Russian Church. The striking similarities plus the battles waged by the Jewish scholars of that period who felt that they were fighting something foreign to Judaism leave little doubt that the Besht's Hassidism was directly influenced by these Raskol groups.

Yet it must be noted that whatever resemblance contemporary Hassidism has to these or other<sup>114</sup> rituals, there is no doubt that Hassidism is now a completely Jewish movement. This is primarily due to the "Judaizing" efforts of the later founder of the Lubavitcher (Habad) branch of Hassidism, the author of the *Tanya*.<sup>115</sup>

It should be noted that Habad Hassidism recognized that the Gaon of Vilna was justified in his violent opposition to early Hassidism, and that in fact Hassidism owes a great debt to the

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142-3.

<sup>114</sup> For example, even today the Braslow Hassidim do not eat onions and garlic. This was the custom of the Molokanye and Khlysty sects (Conybeare, *op. cit.*, p. 352).

<sup>115</sup> Space does not permit a discussion of the Judaizing methodology and effects of the *Tanya*.

Gaon. The third Lubavitcher rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel, said:

If not for the fight [against early Hassidism], there would be a real basis for the fear that the new system [Hassidism] . . . would gradually lead us, step by step, beyond the boundaries set by Tradition and Torah law. . . .<sup>116</sup>

We can attribute the fact that the rift between Hassidism and Mitnagdism has almost vanished to the complete "Judaising" of Hassidism over the years.

It must be noted that the greatness of the Besht should not be confused with the sources of his movement. He gave to Judaism — at a time when it so desperately needed it — a method of revitalization. Regardless of his sources and origins, he made a significant and valuable contribution to Judaism.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Baruch HaLevi Epstein, *Mekor Baruch* (New York: 1954), vol. 3, p. 1237 (Hebrew, p. 619a). Note that R. Menachem Mendel made his feelings known to the first Lubavitcher rebbe (the author of the *Tanya*), who was directly involved in the fight with the Gaon. He accepted R. Menachem Mendel's remarks with approval. (*Ibid.*).

<sup>117</sup> It was impossible to include all the source material uncovered during the research done in preparation for this article. Such material will be included in a more extensive forthcoming work, which will elaborate on the points raised in this article and discuss other aspects that were not discussed because of limitation of space, such as the philosophy of Hassidism, a more thorough discussion of the Raskol sects, the early years and origin of the Besht, etc.

Following the presentation of this paper to the Academy for Jewish Research, Mr. Menashe Unger brought to my attention Torsten Ysander's book *Studien zum B'estschen Hasidismus* (German translation by Frau Ilse Meyer-Lune) (Uppsala, 1933). Mr. Ysander notes the similarities between Besht Hassidism and the Russian dissenting sects, but feels that he does not have enough source material to come to definite conclusions (pp. 372–415). I am grateful to Mr. Unger for this reference