

Heinrich Graetz on 'The New Chassidism' in History of the Jews, vol. 5:396 418.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEW CHASSIDISM.

The Alliance of Reason with Mysticism—Israel Baalshem, his Career and Reputation—Movement against Rabbinism—The "Zaddik"—Beer Mizricz, his Arrogance and Deceptions—The Devotional Methods of the Chassidim—Their Liturgy—Dissolution of the Synods "of the Four Countries"—Cossack Massacres in Poland—Elijah Wilna, his Character and Method of Research—The Mizricz and Karlin Chassidim—Circumstances prove Favorable to the Spread of the New Sect—Vigorous Proceedings against them in Wilna—Death of Beer Mizricz—Progress of Chassidism despite the Persecution of its Opponents.

1750—1786 C. E.

As soon as an historical work has performed its service, and is to undergo a change, new phenomena arise from various sides, and assume a hostile attitude, either to alter or destroy it. It might have been foreseen that the rejuvenescence of the Jewish race, for which Mendelssohn had leveled the way, would produce a transformation and decomposition of religious habits among Jews. The innovators desired this, and hoped, and strove for it; the old orthodox party suspected and dreaded it. The process of dissolution was brought about also in another way, upon another scene, under entirely different conditions, and by other means, and this could not have been foreseen. There arose in Poland a new Essenism, with forms similar to those of the ancient cult, with ablutions and baths, white garments, miraculous cures, and prophetic visions. Like the old movement, it originated in ultra-piety, but soon turned against its own parent, and perhaps hides within itself germs of a peculiar kind, which, being in course of development, cannot be defined. It seems remarkable that, at the time when Men-

delsohn declared rational thought to be the essence of Judaism, and founded, as it were, a widely-extended order of enlightened men, another banner was unfurled, the adherents of which announced the grossest superstition to be the fundamental principle of Judaism, and formed an order of wonder-seeking confederates. Both these new bodies took up a hostile position to traditional Judaism, and created a rupture. History in its generative power is as manifold and puzzling as nature. It produces in close proximity healing herbs and poisonous plants, lovely flowers and hideous parasites. Reason and unreason seemed to have entered into a covenant to shatter the gigantic structure of Talmudic Judaism. The attempt once before made by history, to subvert Judaism by the contemporaneous existence of Spinoza and Sabbatai Zevi, was now repeated by the simultaneous attacks of representatives of reason and unreason. Enlightenment and Kabbalistic mysticism joined hands to commence the work of destruction. Mendelssohn and Israel Baalshem, what contrasts! Yet both unconsciously undermined the basis of Talmudic Judaism. The origin of the new Chassidim, who had already become numerous, and who sprang up very rapidly, is not so clear as the movement started by Mendelssohn. The new sect, a daughter of darkness, was born in gloom, and even to-day proceeds stealthily on its mysterious way. Only a few circumstances which contributed to its rise and propagation are known.

The founders of the new Chassidism were Israel of Miedziboz (born about 1698; died 1759) and Beer of Mizricz (born about 1700; died 1772). The former received, alike from his admirers and his antagonists, the surname of "The Wonderworker by means of Invocations in the Name of God," Baalshem, or Baal-Shemtob, in the customary abbreviated form. Besht. As ugly as the name, Besht, was the

the humble occupation of a wagoner, afterwards he dealt in horses, and when his means permitted it he kept a tavern.

Occasionally, when specially requested, he employed his miraculous remedies, and thereby gained so great a reputation that he was consulted even by Polish nobles. He became conspicuous by his noisy, delirious praying, which must have so transfigured him that men did not recognize the wagoner or horse-dealer whom they knew. He was admired for his revelation of secrets. In Poland not only the unlearned and the Jews considered such gifts and miracles possible; the Jesuits and the Kabbalists had stultified the Christians and the Jews of their country, and plunged them into a state of primitive barbarism.

It would have been a remarkable thing if such a wonder-doctor, who appeared to have intercourse with the spirit world, had not found adherents, but he can hardly have designed the formation of a new sect. He was joined by persons of a similar disposition to his own, who felt a religious impulse, which could not be satisfied, they thought, by a rigorous, penitential life, or by mechanical repetition of prescribed prayers. They joined Israel, in Miedziboz, to pray with devotion, *i. e.*, in a sing-song tune, clapping their hands, bowing, jumping, gesticulating, and uttering cries. At almost the same time there arose, in Wales, a Christian sect called "the Jumpers," who resorted to similar movements during prayer, and induced trances and mesmeric dreams. At the same time there was established, in North America, the sect of the Shakers, by an Irish girl, Johanna Lee, who likewise in the delirium of prayer pursued mystic Messianic phantoms. Israel need not have been a trickster to obtain followers. Mysticism and madness are contagious. He particularly attracted men who desired to lead a free and merry life, at the same time hoping to reach a lofty aim,

and to live assured of the nearness of God in serenity and calmness, and to advance the Messianic future. They did not need to pore over Talmudical folios in order to attain to higher piety.

It became the fashion in neo-Chassidean circles to scoff at the Talmudists. Because the latter mocked at the unlearned chief of the new order, who had a following without belonging to the guild of Talmudists, without having been initiated into the Talmud and its appendages, the Chassidim depreciated the study of the Talmud, avowing that it was not able to promote a truly godly life. Covert war existed between the neo-Chassidim and the Rabbanites; the latter could not, however, harm their opponents so long as Israel's adherents did not depart from existing Judaism. After the death of the founder, when barbarism and degeneracy increased, the feud grew into a complete rupture under Beer of Mizricz.

Dob Beer (or Berish) was no visionary like Israel, but possessed the faculty of clear insight into the condition of men's minds. He was thus able to render the mind and will of others subservient to him. Although he joined the new movement only a short time before Israel's death, yet, whether at his suggestion or not, Israel's son and sons-in-law were passed over, and Beer was made Israel's successor in the leadership of the neo-Chassidean community. Beer, who transferred the center to Mizricz—a village in Volhynia—was superior to his master in many points. He was well read in Talmudical and Kabbalistic writings, was a fluent preacher (Maggid), who, to further his purpose, could make the most far-fetched biblical verses, as also Agadic and Zoharic expressions, harmonize, and thus surprise his audience. He removed from the Chassidim the stigma of ignorance, especially disgraceful in Poland, and secured an accession of supporters. He had a commanding appearance, did not mingle with the people, but lived the whole

upper and lower worlds. The Deity reveals Himself especially in the acts of the Zaddik; even his most trifling deeds are to be considered important. The way he wears his clothes, ties his shoes, smokes his pipe, whether he delivers profound addresses, or indulges in silly jokes—everything bears a close relation to the Deity, and is of as much moment as the fulfillment of a religious duty. Even when drawing inspiration from the bottle, he is swaying the upper and nether worlds. All these absurd fancies owed their origin to the superstitious doctrines of the Kabbala, which, in spite of the unspeakable confusion they had wrought through Sabbatai Zevi and Frank, in spite of the opposition which their chief exponent, the Zohar, had encountered at about this time at the hands of Jacob Emden, still clouded the brains of the Polish Jews. According to this theory, the Zaddik, *i. e.*, Berish Mizricz, was the embodiment of power and splendor upon earth. In his "Stübel," or "Hermitage," *i. e.*, in his dirty little retired chamber, he considered himself as great as the papal vicar of God upon earth in his magnificent palace. The Zaddik was also to bear himself proudly towards men; all this was "for the glory of God." It was a sort of Catholicism within Judaism.

Beer's idea, however, was not meant to remain idle and unfruitful, but to bring him honor and revenue. While the Zaddik cared for the conduct of the world, for the obtaining of heavenly grace, and especially for Israel's preservation and glorification, his adherents had to cultivate three kinds of virtues. It was their duty to draw nigh to him, to enjoy the sight of him, and from time to time to make pilgrimages to him. Further, they were to confess their sins to him. By these means alone could they hope for pardon of their iniquities. Finally, they had to bring him presents, rich gifts, which he knew how to employ to the best advan-

tage. It was also incumbent upon them to attend to his personal wants. It seems like a return to the days of the priests of Baal, so vulgar and disgusting do these perversities appear. The saddest part of all is that this teaching, worthy of a fetish worshipping people, met with approbation in Poland, the country distinguished by cumbersome knowledge of Jewish literature. It was just this excess, this over-activity of the spiritual digestive apparatus, that produced such lamentable phenomena. The intellect of the Polish Jews had been so over-excited, that the coarsest things were more pleasing to them than what was refined.

Beer despatched abroad as his apostles bombastic preachers who reasoned his injurious teachings with distorted citations from the Scriptures. Simple-minded men, rogues, and idlers, of whom there were so many in Poland, attached themselves to the new Chassidim; the first from inclination to enthusiasm and belief in miracles; the cunning, in order to procure money in an easy way, and lead a pleasant existence; and the idlers, because in the court of the Zaddik they found occupation, and gratified their curiosity. If such idlers were asked what they were thinking of, as they strolled about pipe in mouth, they would reply with seriousness, "We are meditating upon God." The simple people, however, who hoped to win bliss through the Chassidean discipline, engaged continually in prayer, until through exhaustion they dropped unconscious.

Neo-Chassidism was favored by two circumstances, the fraternization of the members and the dryness and fossilized character of Talmudic study as carried on in Poland for more than a century. At the outset the Chassidim formed a kind of brotherhood, not indeed with a common purse, as among their prototypes, the Essenes and the Judæo-Christians, but having regard to the wants of needy members. Owing to the closeness of their union,