THREE WARSAW MYSTICS

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Jewish religious thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is identified almost wholly with Jewish religious philosophy in the Western mode, written primarily in Germany and the United States. This is true of anthologies and studies of the subject as well as of course curricula in universities and seminaries. The background of these discussions is dominated by German Idealism, and particularly the thought of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Various Jewish thinkers are examined in large part for their readings of Judaism in response to, and sometimes in rebellion against, these leading shapers of the continental philosophical mind in modern times.

When Eastern Europeans are considered at all in discussion of Jewish intellectual modernity, it is generally secular national alternatives to religion that they are thought to offer. Pinsker, Ahad Ha-‘Am, Borochov and others are treated in this way. But the religious thought of Polish and Russian Jewry in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries has seldom been considered or thought to have broader significance. After all, we are taught, this Jewry divided itself sharply between Orthodoxy and irreligion. Orthodoxy was partly that of the yeshiva world, where almost by definition there is no significant attention given to religious thought, since the intellectual focus is entirely upon Talmudic study. For Lithuanian Jewry the exception is the Mussar movement, which has indeed been the subject of significant research. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe the key influence in the religious world was Hasidism, but this movement had been spiritually creative, it is still often assumed, only in its first half-century, a period ending with the deaths of its third generation of leaders around 1815. The early period of Hasidism of course has been very widely treated by scholars. After that time, Hasidism was supposedly so wholly engaged in its life-and-death struggle against haskalah and every incursion of modernity that its energies were dissipated and its creative powers diminished. If it innovated, it

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Three Warsaw Mystics did so in a retrogressive way, re-reading its own earlier tradition to eliminate or lessen the religious radicalism of the BeSHT and the early Hasidic masters so that Hasidism would be a fitting weapon with which to fight off all modern, non-Jewish, and ‘external’ influences.

But the picture in fact is much more complicated than that. There were important thinkers, both in the Hasidic and Mitnaggedic communities, a number of whose works are now being rediscovered and in some cases translated from the mostly Hebrew originals. Lines of influence can be traced among these works, and schools of thought begin to emerge. This paper seeks to trace one such school of thought, claiming a link between a leading figure of later Hasidism and two major figures in Jewish religious thought of the twentieth century. The three have in common an association with the city of Warsaw in the early decades of this century. The three figures who will be considered here are Judah Leib Alter of Gur (1847–1905), the second Gerer rebbe, best known by the title of his book Sefat Emet,1 Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942), author, journalist, sometime prophet, and martyr of the Warsaw ghetto,2 and Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), who emigrated to the United States in 1940 and is well-known as a leading

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1 The biography of Judah Leib Alter has been treated (unscientifically) in Y.L. Levin’s ADMORey Gur, Jerusalem 1977, and in the writings of A.Y. Bromberg, Sefat Emet and Ha-ADMOR mi-Gur, in his series Mi-Gedoley ha-Hasidut, Jerusalem 1949, now translated into English as Rebbes of Ger, New York (Artscroll) 1987. A more professional historical approach to Gur Hasidism is that of A.Z. Eshkoli’s chapter on Hasidut Polin, in I. Heilprin’s Bet Yisra’el be-Polin, Jerusalem 1953, but he is entirely dismissive with regard to the Sefat Emet (p. 129). The thought of the Sefat Emet has been the subject of critical study by Y. Jacobson, ‘Exile and Redemption in Gur Hasidism’, Da’at 2–3 (1978–9), pp. 175–216; idem, ‘Truth and Faith in Gur Hasidic Thought’, Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy, and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby; Jerusalem 1986, pp. 593–616; idem and M. Piekarz, “The Inner Point” of the Admorim Gur and Alexander as a Reflection of Their Ability to Adjust to Changing Times’, ibid., pp. 617–660. Y. Alfasi’s Gur: Toledot Hasidut Gur (2nd ed., Tel Aviv 1978) is a combination of history/biography and treatment in an anthological way of certain selected topics.

2 Zeitlin has not yet been the subject of the full study that his work certainly deserves. There is an unpublished doctoral dissertation on Zeitlin’s early years (M. Waldoks, ‘Hillel Zeitlin, The Early Years’, Brandeis University 1984), a slim volume by a disciple (S.B. Urbach, Toledot Neshamah Aḥat, Israel (Shem we-Yafet) 1953, and several articles, most of which seem to have originated as memorial lectures. Among these is the study by Rivka Schatz, ‘Hillel Zeitlin’s Way to Jewish Mysticism’, published in Kivvunim 3 (1979), pp. 81–91. Important information can also be found in the memorial volume Sefer Zeitlin, edited by I. Wolfsberg and Z. Harkavy and published in 1945. See further the treatment by I. Rabinowich in Ha-Tekufah 32/33 (1948), pp. 848–76, and 34/35 (1950), pp. 843–848, including a bibliography by E.R. Malachi. Vivid descriptions of life in the Zeitlin household are found in Zeitlin’s son Elkhonen’s memoir, In a Literarishn Shtub, published posthumously in Buenos Aires, 1946. See now Arthur Green, Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin, Classics of Western Spirituality, New York (Paulist Press) 2012.