Hasidim and Mitnaggedim: Not a World Apart

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During its initial stages, Hasidism, a mystical pietistic movement which emerged during the last decades of the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, stirred great controversy.¹ This movement confronted the vehement opposition of many traditional Jews, including some of the leading rabbinic authorities of the day.² These opponents engaged in various activities against the nascent movement, ranging from oral condemnations, the composition of vituperative written critiques, to promulgations of bans. The most famous of these bans were issued by rabbinic and communal leaders in Vilna and Brody in 1772 and again in 1781. These and other decrees issued by individuals often labelled as mitnaggedim, or “opponents”, prohibited Jews from engaging in various economic activities with the new hasidim, residing with them, and even marrying members of this “sect”.

Although some scholars use the term mitnaggedim to designate only those individuals who used political means to oppose Hasidism, I, like others, use the term more broadly to refer to Ashkenazic (Eastern and Central European) Jews with wide


influence who opposed Hasidism publicly. In fact, the use of the term *mitnaggedim* is accompanied by various problems. Who had the authority to bestow this title, which only begins to take on meaning in response to the phenomenon it opposes? The *basidim*? Their opponents? Or is it rather primarily to be understood as a term used retrospectively by historians to describe certain types of opponents to Hasidism, and if so which types?

Until now, most of the scholarship on eighteenth-century non-hasidic culture has been limited to centres into which Hasidism penetrated, like Vilna and Shklov. Consequently, scholars have tended to characterize as *mitnaggedim* primarily the rabbinic opponents to Hasidism in these places, in particular Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797) and his disciples. By neglecting many of the most important centres of eighteenth-century European Jewry, including Prague and Frankfurt, these scholars have ignored the varied forms of opposition to Hasidism that developed in these locales. Furthermore, because of this narrow focus, these scholars have also overlooked the diverse landscape of eighteenth-century rabbinic culture, and neglected the distinct opposition to Hasidism of various influential Ashkenazic rabbinic figures, such as Jacob Emden (1697–1776) of Altona, Joseph Steinhardt (1720–1776) of Fuert and Ezekiel Landau (1713–1793) of Prague.

The case of Ezekiel Landau, the Chief Rabbi of Prague from 1754 to 1793 and a vociferous opponent of Hasidism, is particularly instructive because it challenges the neat dichotomous categories of *hasidim* and *mitnaggedim* that have generally been applied to eighteenth-century Ashkenazic rabbinic culture. These categories, whether the term *mitnaggedim* is narrowly or broadly defined, fail to address the multifaceted reality of eighteenth-century Prague Jewish culture, the role of mysticism in this society, and the nature of Prague rabbis’ fierce opposition to the new pietistic movement.

Notwithstanding this severe opposition, my article highlights the complexity of the confrontation by uncovering the striking similarity between many kabbalistic tenets espoused by Landau, a leading non-hasidic rabbinic authority, and numerous kabbalistic doctrines central to the hasidic movement. This study also investigates the personal interactions between several prominent hasidic figures and Landau, who was born in 1713 in Poland and educated there, before becoming Chief Rabbi of Prague. The Eastern European education of the eminent Prague leader and its influence on his thought has been almost entirely ignored in the scholarship on Landau and his era. During the late eighteenth century, Landau and Prague Jewry more generally were predominantly influenced not by the West, as often assumed, but by Eastern European

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3See, for example, Dubnow, *Toldot Ha-hasidut*, p. 3. Dubnow defines this term extremely broadly. He uses it to describe traditional Jews who did not become *basidim*.

4On the use of this term in a few nineteenth-century texts, see Eliezer Ben Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* s.v. “*mitnagged*”.

5There are relatively few works addressing eighteenth-century non-hasidic rabbinic culture in general and leaders who opposed Hasidism in particular. Still, there are several important books on the religious and social background of various *mitnaggedim*, especially Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna and his disciples. See Immanuel Etkes, *Yahid be-Doro* (Jerusalem, 1998); Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mitnagdim* (Baltimore and London, 1997); Yosef Avivi, *Kabalat ha-Gera* (Jerusalem, 1993); Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (Holoken, 1989); Ben-Zion Katz, *Rabanut, basidut, bashalat* (Tel Aviv, 1956).

6Further studies will have to investigate whether similar phenomena existed in other centers of opposition to Hasidism.