The Penitential System of Hasidei Ashkenaz and the Problem of Cultural Boundaries

Talya Fishman

Rice University

The greatest impact of Hasidut Ashkenaz on Jewish culture at large has arguably been in the realm of penitential theory and practice; the ascetic behaviors and acts of self-mortification documented in the writings of twelfth and thirteenth century Rhineland pietists left their mark not only on non-pietist Ashkenazi culture but also on the Jewish subcultures of France, Provence, Spain, and Safed.


Hasidut Ashkenaz over the last thirty years (with one notable exception) have abandoned this line of inquiry, arguing instead that pietistic penitential practices are rooted in the ancient Jewish past. Tannaitic sources are replete with accounts of asceticism (some motivated by the impulse to atone and others by the desire to prophylactically stave off future calamity), and Sefer Hasidim (SH), a collection of exempla and tales to guide the pietist (composed before 1225), self-consciously traces some of the extreme penances it prescribes to practices recorded in earlier Jewish literature. The treatise pointedly links the penance of voluntary exile (in which the penitent abandons home and family) to the wandering of Cain and to rabbinic legends about the atonement of Judah, and it holds up Nahum of Gamzu and Yakim of Tzerorot as paragons of self-mortification for the pietist to admire and emulate.

Sefer Hasidim's portrait of the atonement of Adam self-consciously sets forth the pedigree of one of the pietists' more bizarre penances, pointedly rooting it in sacred history. Conflating disparate rabbinic traditions (one of them dating only from the eighth century Pirkei

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6 There are two recensions of Sefer Hasidim. J.H. Wistinetzki edited the Parma edition, which was published (with an introduction by A. Freimann) in Berlin, 1891. R. Margaliyot edited the Bologna edition, which was published in Jerusalem, 1900. References in this paper (SH) are to the Parma edition.
8 Baer himself observed that medieval pietists consciously modeled themselves on the hasidim rishonim mentioned in classical rabbinic sources.
9 SH 38, BT, Ber. 56a. And see the discussion of exile’s effect on atonement in San. 37b.
10 SH 18. On Nahum of Gamzu, see *BT*, Ta’an. 21a; on Yakim of Tzerorot, who subjected himself to the four death penalties, see *BR* 65:27, p. 742 in the Theodor-Albeck edition.