

## What's All the Fuss About? Chassidut and Its Opponents

### I. Elijah of Vilna

#### 1. Elijah of Vilna's Commentary to Mishlei 13:12

Hope deferred makes the heart sick; but desire fulfilled is a tree of life.	תוֹחֵלַח מִמְשָׁכָה, מִתּוֹלָה-לֵב; וְעֵץ חַיִּים, תִּפְאֶרֶת בְּאֵהוּ.
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Our rabbis have interpreted this verse as referring to deep devotion in prayer. They said "What is its cure [i.e. for unanswered prayers]? The study of Torah." This is because prayer is only concerned with matters of this world, and is therefore temporary. But Torah study is the path to eternal life and the world to come. It can happen that God will not provide man with his requests in this world, even if he prays intensely, such that he only has heartache. Thus, they advised that its cure is the study of Torah, which bestows eternal life; and through Torah study, man will most certainly attain his requests and desires. For this reason they call the Torah "A tree of life."

#### 2. Elijah of Vilna's Commentary to Mishlei 4:4

And he taught me, and said to me: 'Let your heart hold fast to my words, keep my commandments, and live;	וַיְהִי-כֵן--וַיֹּאמֶר לִי, יִתְמַךְ-דְּבָרֵי לִבִּי; שְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתַי וְחַיָּה.
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The Torah is like bread, upon which man's heart feeds and is needed constantly, like bread; therefore, "You shall meditate on upon them day and night" (Yehoshua 1:8) But the mitzvot are like a confection, which is good periodically and in the proper time, like a confection which one eats from time to time.

#### 3. Elijah of Vilna's Commentary to Sefer Yetzirah

What is the concept of covenant [*brit*]? It is similar to one who loves another but is unable to embrace him. Because of this situation, the [lover] gives the beloved something that expresses his feelings for his beloved. This gift keeps them connected and bound together. And even though he is not present, all of his thoughts are placed in this object. This is what is meant by the term "*brit*," for it is a promise based on this object that he will not "leave" his beloved. This metaphor also explains what is meant by "he cut" [a covenant]. He "cut" a part of himself and gave it to the beloved. The concept of covenant is based on this form of dependence. And all the philosophers and rabbinic exegetes who followed in these philosophers footsteps were mistaken. For He is beyond comprehension. Thus, Torah and circumcision are mediating bodies that exist between God and the children of Israel. For it is impossible for one to comprehend God independently.

## II. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov and His Circle

### 1. R. Kalonymous Kalman Epstein, *Maor V'Shemesh (Light and Sun)*

There is no doubt that a man who studies the Torah for its own sake can attain to great sanctity, provided always that he studies for its own sake and attaches all his vitality, spirit and soul to the letters of the Torah. For all that, the only way he can attain to real fear and love of God, to the longing for the worship of God, and to comprehension of His divinity, is through prayer offered with self-sacrifice and burning enthusiasm. All this is well known and is stated in all the holy books.

### 2. Magid of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav le- Ya'akov, (It Was Said to Jacob)*

And this is because the end desired is that prior to prayer he must cast off corporeality, which is characterized by finitude and limit, and enter into the aspect of Nothingness, which is without end. For man must direct all the wishes of his heart toward the Creator alone, and not do anything, or [even] half a thing from his own self; and this is impossible unless he enter into the attribute of Nothingness, that is, [to know] that he does not exist at all, and then he will not turn to any thing of the world at all, seeing as how he does not exist at all.

### 3. Magid of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav le- Ya'akov, (It Was Said to Jacob)*

Prayer is like intercourse with the Divine Presence. At the beginning of intercourse there are motions, and similarly, there is motion in prayer. Later, one can stand without motion, attached to the Divine Presence with a powerful bond. As a result of the motions alone, one can attain great motivation.

### 4. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, *Tzava'at Harivash (Testament of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov)*

Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov said that, when a person is drowning and thrashes about to save himself, people certainly will not make fun of his motions. Similarly, when a person makes motions during prayer, one should not laugh at him. He is saving himself from drowning in the waters of insolence, which are the husks coming to prevent him from concentrating on his prayers.

### 5. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, *Tzava'at Harivash (Testament of Israel Ba'al Shem Tov)*

When one studies, he should rest a bit every now and then, in order to attach himself to Him. Even though it is impossible to attach oneself to God during the time of study, nevertheless study one must, for the Torah "polishes" one's soul, and "it is a tree of life for them that lay hold of it" [Mishlei 3:18]. And if one did not study, he would be distracted from his attachment [to Him]. One should, however, recognize that just as one cannot maintain a state of attachment [to Him] when he is asleep or when he senses a drop in his spiritual alertness, so too he may feel an even more severe interruption during his Torah studies. Nevertheless, one ought to reflect every so often on the state of his attachment to the blessed Creator.

### III. Hasidim and Mitnagdim and the Crisis of the Fork and the Knife

Sarah Foner, "My Childhood Days or a Look at the City of Dvinsk" translated by Morris Rosenthal in *A Women's Voice: Sarah Foner, Hebrew Author of the Haskalah* (Wilbraham M.A.: Dailey International Publishers, 2001), 19

The Mitnagdim brought a judge to the city [Dvinsk]... They also brought a butcher and established their own slaughterhouse for meat... In every house, in every study hall and in every store and street, nothing was heard besides, 'Mitnagid and Hasid, Hasid and Mitnagid.' At First the women made mistakes since they didn't know which butcher shop was Mitnagid and which was Hasidic and so they mixed up the products. Then there were great problems such as when a man came home from work and sat down to eat and while eating asked his wife where she got the meat. She told him [from the Hasid] Yitzchak Fagin's butcher shop. He cried out loudly. 'Oy, Oy you have fed me unclean meat...' A day did not pass that the kitchen utensils were rendered unclean

### IV. Social Debates: Hasidic Shabbat versus a Mitnagdic Shabbat

<p>Yechezkel Kotik's (1847-1921) childhood in the Hasidic town of Kamenetz-Litovsk, Idem., <i>Mah Sheraiti: Zichronot shel Yechezkel Kotik</i>, translated by David Assaf (Tel Aviv: The Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, 1998) Chapter Four.</p>	<p>Ephraim Deinard (1846-1893), <i>Childhood in Lithuania Zamut District, Zichronot Bat Ami</i> (St. Louis: 1904) 1:86-87</p>
<p>My father's household manners were Hasidic. He prayed in a Hasidic shteibel and on Friday night all different kinds of people—all Hasidim—would come to his home and sit at his table. There, they would eat and dance until the middle of the middle of the night. A few hours later they would return for lunch. They would eat kugel and drink wine, sing, and dance until mid day. Following the afternoon prayers they would partake in the</p>	<p>One who came home from the synagogue would sing zemirot praising God...He would take a Bible and test his child if he knew what he had been taught that week and command him to follow God's torah. He would kiss the Bible and put it back in its place. After finishing his dinner he would study a book and fall asleep on his bed. Before sunrise he would awake and go to the House of study. There he would find friends and confidants that had already arrived...All of them would be seated around a table and in the middle there was a teacher, who was also a householder (<i>ahad mi-balei habatim</i>). He would offer a discourse on the Talmud, Mishnah or Ein Yakov. There would be a book open in front of every person—each of whom was listening, investigating, interpreting or asking questions—so that he could explain to them that which was not clear. Next to them was a table filled with people who were not learned (<i>lo yaveinu be-</i></p>

third meal of the day. They brought a big salted fish from his father's home with a number of bottles of wine. They ate and drank until evening prayers. After the Sabbath the Hasidim returned to eat barley soup with meat, alcohol, of course, was drunk in abundance. They sang and danced through the night...when they left to go home before dawn they woke up all the neighbors."

*sefer*). The latter recited psalms...and they did not care if some clown made fun of them. For they believed that saying psalms was rewarded in the world to come with the same weight as someone who studied torah...They would go home and eat and have an afternoon sleep, for it was a mitzvah to sleep on the sabbath. When they awoke they once again went to the beit midrash to recite psalms and afterward they went to hear a local or a visiting preacher (*Maggid*). The *Lomdim*, however, did not feel the need to hear the words of wisdom or folklore from the local preacher because at anytime they could locate what he said in a book. For he could not tell them anything they did not know already.... At around 2-3 o'clock in the afternoon one could see multitudes streaming to "the house of God." The Beit Midrash was filled with people. Around every table people sat studying. Next to one table there sat a group of *Lomdim* (learners) studying the final tractate of the Talmud preparing to finish all of the Tractates with happiness and celebration. In an other corner sat others who had finished studying the six orders of the Mishnah...and at another table there was someone teaching the *Hayye Adam*. And then suddenly, upon hearing the call of the afternoon prayers, everyone shut their books... Following the afternoon prayers everyone once again opened their books and continued to study and some went to eat the third meal, to fulfill the obligation of eating three meals on the Sabbath. After the evening prayers everyone went back to their homes to make *havdalah* (the blessing marking the completion of the Sabbath). They would sing songs and would escort "the special guest" who now left them for the week. Their hearts were certain, however, that next Friday before dark she would come back at the appointed hour as listed on the black and white fixed calendar *Defus Vilna* [printed by the Romm Press of Vilna].