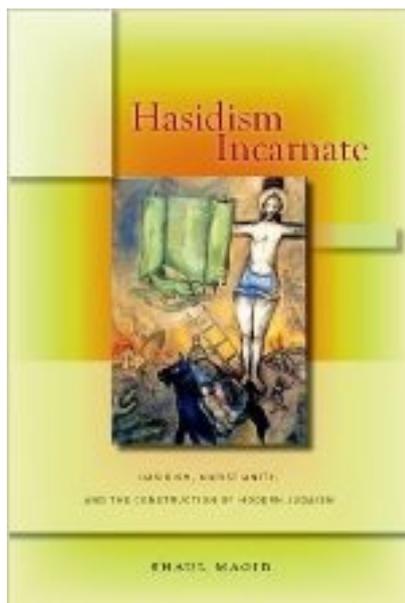


## Crossovers: The Hasidic Master and the Jewish Jesus

30.09.2015 | Adi Mahalel

**Shaul Magid: *Hasidism Incarnate: Hasidism, Christianity, and the Construction of Modern Judaism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$65.00 (cloth)**



"The essence of Christianity is but the negation of the right of Judaism to exist.... The figure of Jesus is the figure of the universal enemy of Judaism, the eliminator and destructor of Jewish law [*torat yisrael*]. Thus, this figure was abhorred and despised in the eyes of many Jews with Jewish consciousness throughout the generations, and I share this despise and abomination" (Yeshayahu Leibowitz).<sup>[1]</sup>

Leibowitz was a twentieth-century Jewish philosopher, a strict rationalist who rejected Kabbalah and any sign of mysticism in Judaism as idol worship. His words reflect a common Jewish attitude toward the Christian religion. In the postscript to his book *Hasidism Incarnate*, Shaul Magid quotes Leo Strauss, who, similar to Leibowitz, defined Judaism as "the anti-Christian principle pure and simple" (p. 171). However, in contrast to those views, writes Magid, Hasidism "presents a Judaism that subverts the categorical difference between Judaism and Christianity" (p. 174). How does Hasidism subvert these differences? According to Magid, it has to do with its "exploration of divine embodiment that crosses over to the incarnational" (p. 176).

While, contrary to common perception, various Jewish notions of incarnational thinking can be traced throughout history, this phenomenon distinguished itself in Hasidism "when the *zaddik*, or righteous master, as *axis mundi* [center of the world], supplanted the fetishization of the Book, which had become the centerpiece of classical Rabbinic Judaism." Magid explains this development through the historical context that produced the Hasidic movement in eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. Although operating in the Christian world, Hasidic masters "knew very little about Christianity," which partially explains why they were "not working under a Christian gaze" and thus free to think outside of it, unlike many Jewish thinkers and theologians in western Europe (p. 4). Free from the "Christian gaze," a phrase that Magid repeats throughout the book, the Hasidic masters relied heavily on kabbalistic medieval sources. These texts had "adapted

Christian motifs in order to polemicize against Christianity," but the Hasidic readers in the modern period were unaware of the original context of these motifs. The result was "a Jewish theology colored by incarnational thinking" (p. 5).

Throughout the book's six chapters, Magid works on proving these main points. The first chapter gives an overview of Christian tropes as divinization and incarnation in Hasidic literature. He cites *Sha'arei Gan Eden* (1803), a kabbalistic text by Ya'akov Koppel Lifshitz of Mezritch, which influenced the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov. In Koppel's text, Moses is presented as both human and divine, reflecting a common conception of biblical characters in early Hasidic works. The first Hasidic text to appear in print, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* (1780) by Jacob Joseph, contains the notion of "superhuman potential." Magid thus gives an array of examples regarding the divine/human nexus in Hasidism, and asks in conclusion "whether Hasidism is an illustration of a modern Judaism emerging without the apologetic agenda of its Western counterpart" (p. 27). The latter agenda, dominated by the Maimonidean matrix, sought to prove how categorically different the two religions were.

The second chapter deals with one of the most influential and well-known Hasidic masters, Nahman of Bratslav. "Nahman viewed himself openly in opposition to a text, any text..., and suggested that 'redemption' ... could only occur when the individual witnessed fully a revealed state of *lashon ha-kodesh* [the holy tongue]—not Hebrew but the spoken language of the *zaddik*—as a performance, and act, of creation" (p. 33). Magid is correct in his interpretation of Hasidism with regard to the elevated value the movement attributed to the spoken word of the charismatic Hasidic leader. What is absent from his analysis here and begs to be explored is the relation in Hasidism to the actual spoken language of the *zaddik*, in other words Yiddish, a theme that has been explored extensively by Yiddish scholars throughout the years. Nahman is considered an innovator of modern Yiddish literature, and his book of stories appeared in a bilingual Hebrew-Yiddish format since its first edition. The lack of attention toward the theological significance bestowed by Hasidism on the Yiddish language (more than "not Hebrew"), and its relation to the practice of Christianity, is a weak point in an otherwise fascinating examination of Nahman's charismatic speech, including reaching very interesting conclusions at its end.

The third chapter deals with Hasidism's development vis-à-vis the hegemonic religion, the Eastern Orthodox Church. It argues that "Hasidic ethics was founded upon love of the (divine) other rather than law or supererogation ... similar to Eastern Orthodox Christianity" (p. 52). However, what seems to be a sensible comparative approach puts into question Magid's repeated argument regarding the lack of interest by Hasidic masters in Christianity. Rather than a Judaism "unencumbered by an external gaze" as in the West (p. 80), it might be rephrased as "unencumbered by the same external gaze" as in the West.

Koppel's *Sha'arei Gan Eden* is the focus of the fourth chapter. Magid examines kabbalistic notions reconstructed by Koppel that solidified "the connection between the *zaddik* and the messiah," echoing "the radical messianism of Sabbateanism" (pp. 82, 108). The fifth chapter crosses the terrain from Hasidic masters to neo-Hasidic scholars, when it deals with Martin Buber's Jesus compared to that of Shmuel Bornstein of Sochazev (1856-1926), a Hasidic master. Buber, who has fascinated theologians in recent years more than scholars of his main field of sociology (see Uri Ram's new book *The Return of Martin Buber: National and Social Thought in Israel from Buber to Neo-Buberism*, 2015, in Hebrew), viewed the Baal Shem Tov as a correction of Jesus who "created the conditions for the final overcoming of 'religion' and the return to an unmediated revelatory I-Thou relationship between the human and God and, by extension, the human and the world" (p. 115). Bornstein, in contrast to Buber, expressed a very negative attitude toward Jesus and presented him as a demonic figure. But for both thinkers, Jesus becomes a prominent figure for Israel. For Bornstein, he plays the role of the purifier of Israel, thus in reverse, he is key to its redemption. Bornstein and Buber shared "the idea that Jesus is a necessary part of the spiritual and historical development of the Jews" (p. 135).

The last chapter addresses twentieth-century thinkers, who operated before and after the war. Magid laments the fact that "although Hasidism began in the late eighteenth century around the time of Moses Mendelssohn..., it is rarely included in studies or courses on modern Jewish thought" (p. 140). The two thinkers from before the war, H. J. Schoeps and Leo Baeck, Magid characterizes as apologists who stressed the difference between the two religions; while the two postwar thinkers, Michael Wyschogrod and Elliot Wolfson, set to "reassess the affinities between Judaism and Christianity on theological and hermeneutical grounds" (p. 141). Magid, who identifies with the latter pair, argues, for example, that Baeck's concept of "romantic religion" applies just as much to Hasidism as it does to Christianity, but Baeck did not consider Hasidism in this regard. In the last two thinkers, Magid sees scholars who enjoyed academic freedom "not bound by communal expectations and societal needs to advocate for their own subject" (p. 168), which explains their ability to expose sameness where others saw only distinctiveness.

*Hasidism Incarnate* offers a unique exploration of sensitive subjects, stressing the affinities between two religions widely perceived as staunch adversaries. Focusing on the Hasidic strand of Judaism, a strict orthodox sect, creates for Magid the space to make provocative arguments without giving the impression that he is a proponent of the problematic "Judeo-Christian culture" school of thought. An inquiry that would further challenge the categorical distinctions between those religions and a third—Islam—without giving into romanticism, would make a valuable contribution and an important exercise of academic freedom.

---

Adi Mahalel is Visiting Assistant Professor of Yiddish Studies, University of Maryland. Dr. Adi Mahalel successfully defended his doctoral thesis in Yiddish and Hebrew Literature at Columbia University and received his degree in May 2014. Adi is also a culture columnist at the Yiddish Forward.

Source: [H-Net Reviews](#); this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).