Initially a movement largely of the poor and uneducated, Chassidism introduced Kabbalah and spirituality into everyday life.

By Rabbi Ken Spiro

The Chassidic movement – the movement of the “pious ones” or Chassidut in Hebrew – was founded in the 18th century in Eastern Europe by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, who became known as the Ba’al Shem Tov, which means “Master of the Good Name.”

The Ba’al Shem Tov (who was also known as the Besht) was born in 1698 in Okup, in Podolia province (of what is now Ukraine) near the Dniester River. He was a poor orphan child who worked in the Carpathian Mountains as a laborer. During this time he studied with a secret society of Jewish mystics, the Nestarim, and he eventually became a revered rabbi. He traveled from community to community, developing a reputation, wherever he went, as a spiritual holy man and mystical healer, and attracting a huge following. His teachings revolutionized the demoralized, persecuted Jews of Eastern Europe.
After the pogroms and massacres (which we detailed in class #49), large parts of Eastern European Jewry had slipped into dire poverty. In addition to the tremendous physical destruction, the huge disappointment caused by the false messiah Shabbetai Tzvi, left much of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe in a collective state of deep depression. One of the victims of this situation was Jewish scholarship, with only an elite few studying in yeshivas while the rest eked out a meager living. As a result of the decrease in scholarship, Jewish religious life suffered – with the average Jew not connecting, neither intellectually nor spiritually with God. And this is what the Ba’al Shem Tov sought to change.

His teachings (he left no writings) brought about a whole movement which emphasized the idea of bringing God into all aspects of one’s life – through a process called devekut or “clinging to God” – particularly through intense prayer and joyous singing. The following parable illustrates the way that the Ba’al Shem Tov and the early Chassidic masters viewed what was missing in Jewish life:

An apprentice blacksmith, after he had learned his trade from the master, made a list for himself of how he must go about his craft. How he should pump the bellows, secure the anvil, and wield the hammer. He omitted nothing. When he went to work at the king’s palace, however, he discovered to his dismay that he could not perform his duties, and he was dismissed. He had forgotten to note one thing – perhaps because it was so obvious – that first he must ignite a spark to kindle the fire. He had to return to the master, who reminded him of the first principle which he had forgotten.¹

Besides teaching how to turn on the fire of love for God, the Ba’al Shem Tov also taught that even the deeds of the simplest Jew, if performed correctly and sincerely, were equal to those of the greatest scholars.

The Chassidic brand of fervent spirituality caught on very rapidly – among the simple Jews in particular. Soon, thousands upon thousands of Jews were drawn to the Chassidic movement.

**Chassidic Dynasties**

When the Ba’al Shem Tov died in 1760, he was succeeded by Rabbi Dov Ber (1704-1772), known as the Maggid of Mezritch, who further developed many of the Chassidic movement’s philosophies. Incidentally, the great psychologist Carl G. Jung, nearing his death, said that all of his advances in psychology were preempted by Rabbi Dov Ber. This says a lot about the Maggid’s insights into human nature.2

Rabbi Dov Ber’s disciples went off to develop particular streams within the Chassidic movement and to found their own dynasties. There were many significant personalities in this group,3 but we will mention the two whose sects are the most well-known today due to the outreach work they do:

- Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, (1745-1812) was known as the Alter Rebbe and the Ba’al HaTanya. He wrote the famous work, the *Tanya*, and founded the Lubavitch Chassidic sect, better known as Chabad – which is an acronym for *chochmah*, (“wisdom”), *binah* ("understanding") and *da’at* (“knowledge.”) According to Kabbalah, these are the three highest intellectual channels of Divine energy, and the name hints at how much the sect’s teachings are steeped in Kabbalah.

- Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1811) was the great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov. He was a gifted story-teller and is perhaps best known for his allegorical tales of beggars and princes through which he tried to teach deep truths to simple people. He founded the Breslover sect of Chassidism.

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Chassidic sects have names like Kotzk, Sanz, Belz, Satmar, Gur, Skvar. These were all names of communities in places like Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, where these sects were founded. When they moved away, they took their names with them. So today in Israel there is Kiryat Sanz, Kiryat Belz, etc. In New York there is the New Square sect, which was the Skvar sect, whose original name became anglicized to Square.

The movement had a huge impact in spiritually revitalizing the Jewish world. It kept a lot of Jews Jewish and put a lot of joy back into Judaism.

Writes Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in *Chassidic Masters*:

> Chassidism uplifted the masses, but it would be wrong to suppose that its teachings were designed solely as a kind of spiritual medicine, necessary when one is ill, but of no value for the healthy. An important teaching of Chassidism is that its insights are important to the spiritual well-being of every Jew. Although its masters aimed much of their energies at helping poor, illiterate Jews, it would be incorrect to say that this was the main characteristic of Chassidism, since the movement also brought new vision and depth to the entire body of Jewish thought.4

### The Opposition

As it spread, Chassidism also attracted tremendous opposition from those more traditionally and intellectually-minded rabbis, the majority of whom were against the new movement.

The major opponent was Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman (1720-1797), known as the Vilna Gaon and also as the Gra (acronym for the Gaon Rabbi Elijah).

The Vilna Gaon was a brilliant scholar who made an enormous impact on Jewish learning. A person of wide-ranging interests and author of some 70

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4 *Chassidic Masters*, p. 4.
books on various subjects, the Vilna Gaon seemed to excel in every aspect of scholarship. He knew Jewish law, Kabbalah, mathematics, astronomy, physics, anatomy. He barely slept; he just cat-napped four times a day for one hour, and the rest of the time he studied. Whenever he got tired, he stuck his feet in a bucket of cold water to wake himself up. He never wanted to waste a minute. Although he never made it to Israel, he sent many of his students to live there.

What worried the Vilna Gaon was not so much the Kabbalistic aspects of Chassidism (after all, he himself had studied Kabbalah), but the potential for producing another false messiah (like Shabbetai Tzvi whose story we covered in the previous class). The Vilna Gaon also objected to the Chassidic concept that God is “in all things” as too close to pantheism or to the idea that everything was equally holy. He was also concerned about the concept of the Rebbe (as the leader of each Chassidic sect was called) as it made each community extremely dependent on one person; he also believed that the Chassidic teaching that an individual is elevated spiritually through attachment to a holy leader was an idolatrous idea.

Another significant concern of the Vilna Gaon was de-intellectualization of Torah. The Chassidic movement was largely a movement of simple, uneducated Jews, and he worried that Jewish scholarship was going to be replaced by singing and dancing. A religion that was a synthesis of heart and mind would become all heart and no mind.

Finally, the Vilna Gaon and other rabbis strongly objected to the fact that the Chassidic movement had changed the text of some of the prayers; as this was a serious break with tradition, it was considered wholly unacceptable.

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5 Pantheism is the doctrine identifying the Deity with the various forces and workings of nature.
The Vilna Gaon was so strongly opposed to the Chassidic movement that he and others like him came to be called *Mitnagdim*, which means “those who are against.” In April of 1772, the *Mitnagdim* tried to excommunicate the Chassidim, but the ban did not stick. The following is an excerpt from their excommunication decree:

*Our brethren, sons of Israel... as you know, new people have appeared, unimagined by our forefathers... and their ways are different from other children of Israel in their liturgy... they behave in a crazed manner and say that their thoughts wander in all worlds... And they belittle the study of the Torah, and repeatedly claim that one should not study much, nor deeply regret ones’ transgressions... Therefore, we have come to inform our brethren, Children of Israel, from near and far... and to sound to them the voice of excommunication and banishment... until they themselves repent completely...*6

While the creation of the Chassidic movement did initially cause a split in the Jewish world, it did not lead to a real separation. Many of the fears of the *Mitnagdim* never materialized; for example, Chassidic sects today are quite intellectual and scholarship-minded with their own yeshivas where the Talmud is studied intensely.

In hindsight, we see that the Chassidic movement contributed significantly to the revitalization of Eastern European Jewry. It kept a lot of people connected to Judaism who could well have been lost because they didn’t have the time, money or opportunity to study. (At the same time, the pressure brought by the opponents of Chassidism acted as a brake in keeping it from going too far.) As a result of the Chassidic contribution, Judaism became stronger and more ready to face the assault from a new secular movement in the Western world called “The Enlightenment.”

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