

“True Knowledge and Wisdom”: On Orthodox Historiography

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It is customary to think that, for the past 170 years, those Jews who have written about history in general and about Jewish history in particular have done so in a clearly modern manner. “History” is taken to mean research in the spirit and style of historical writing as developed in Central and Western Europe. Indeed, it is considered axiomatic that Jewish historiography is a product of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* of Central Europe, steeped in the influence of German philosophy and grounded in the legacy of the Haskalah, on the one hand, and of romanticism, on the other. After Isaac Marcus Jost began to publish his *History of the Jews* in 1820, the historian Heinrich Graetz lauded him for having laid down the indispensable foundations for Jewish historiography, “namely the time and the place”;¹ and Reuven Michael, the author of an intellectual biography of Jost, added that,

in constructing the framework and in investigating the sources, Jost can be considered to be the founder of Jewish historiography. It is true . . . that many attempts had been made since the beginning of the modern era, especially during the Haskalah, in the field of writing history; however, in giving a consecutive description of the different eras, there was no one who preceded Jost.²

Jost’s monumental enterprise had indeed been preceded since the earliest days of the Haskalah by more modest attempts to approach Jewish history from a “European” perspective: as far back as the last decades of the eighteenth century, a gap had begun to emerge between the traditional forms of historical writing and a new type of historiography unfamiliar to pious Jews.³ This is not to say that the chronicles of the previous centuries suddenly disappeared with the appearance of the new Haskalah literature. New editions of such time-honored works as *Jossipon*, *Zemah david* or *Sheerit yisrael*, in the Hebrew original or in Yiddish translation, were still in widespread circulation throughout the Ashkenazic diaspora in the nineteenth century—and among those who spent considerable time in their youth studying these works was the Lithuanian *maskil*, Mordecai Aaron Guenzburg, who contributed significantly to the dissemination of modern historical information that he translated from German into Hebrew.⁴ There was also Abraham Trebitsch’s chronicle,

cle, *Korot ha’itim* (1801), a continuation of the history of the Jewish people from the point where *Sheerit yisrael* had ended, which was reprinted in Lvov in the middle of the century. The lines demarcating the borders between this type of work and those of the first *maskilim* were not always clearly defined, just as the *maskilim* themselves were at first barely distinguishable from other members of Jewish society. It is true that the works of the *maskilim* on Jewish history had clear goals, but these same goals were often to be found in other, more conservative works as well. Furthermore, the Haskalah writers initially approached the traditional society, and even sought legitimation within it, through the use of the same type of language and concepts.⁵

However, from that time early in the nineteenth century when history began to be regarded as a value in itself—as one of the ways of redefining the nature of Jewish existence—it was increasingly difficult to reconcile the new historiography with the old. As it became ever more obvious to pious Jews that historical study in the spirit of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* involved the criticism of sacred texts and was often permeated with a vehement anti-rabbinism, so these historiographic works came to be perceived as one more facet of the innovative menace against which the Orthodox response was formulated.

It is the aim of this article to analyze the particular type of historical work that was created in the modern period, which differs from strictly traditional models and yet is regarded by its authors and readers as being part and parcel of traditional Jewish writing: the historiography of Orthodox (or, more precisely, ultra-Orthodox) Judaism. This historiography generally emerged as part of the Orthodox response to the challenge posed by the radical changes transforming much of the Jewish world and, more particularly, as a conscious reaction against the new historiography created by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

Of course, it can be argued that works of the kind written by Orthodox authors are not really history at all. Certainly, they do not often meet the criteria demanded by modern scholarship. Many of the books written by authors in the Orthodox camp are very different from what is usually considered historical research—in terms of content, argumentation and reasoning, and even form. Nonetheless, the works in this category should be considered a branch, as different and as apart as it may be, of Jewish historiography in the modern era. For one thing, the Orthodox writing of history has increased markedly in the second half of the twentieth century; in the past few years alone, dozens of “in-house” books and hundreds of articles describing the history and ideas of various camps within Orthodoxy have been published. Even more significant, however, is the fact that a number of the views propounded by Orthodox authors have found their place into the present-day public debate on religion and society, and have even been adopted by academic historians.

It is enough to mention, as a characteristic example, the place of Orthodox literature in the geographical and historical research of the Old Yishuv—the Jewish community in Palestine that predated the arrival of the Zionists in the country. Scholars gleaned many ideas and a considerable amount of information from works such as *Mosad hayesod*, a book dealing with the history of the “Perushim,” an Ashkenazic community founded by followers of the Vilna Gaon. The author of

Mosad hayesod stated specifically that his goal was to publish “the historical truth, which sheds much light on the sanctification of God: how long can we remain silent as famous ‘historians’ run amock with regard to the Old Yishuv, publishing misleading information full of lies?”⁶ Even though this work contains assertions that cannot withstand the test of historical criticism and that have a clearly ideological bent, they have nonetheless been incorporated into academic studies as proven historical facts.⁷

At the same time, it cannot be denied that Orthodox works constitute a vital source of information for the study of the pious Jews over the past few centuries. It is impossible, for example, to write any serious work today on Polish Hasidism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without exhaustive use of the literature created by the Orthodox.⁸ Of course, in order to utilize such sources it is essential to understand both the style and the underlying motives of these historians; but those who decry the historical value of Orthodox works cannot simply dismiss them with scorn. The significant presence of Orthodoxy in the Jewish world today likewise requires those scholars who are not members of its community to have at least an acquaintance with its historiography.

In the introduction to *Zikhron ya'akov*, a history of the Jews of Russia and Poland written by Yaakov Halevi Lipschitz of Kovno, the author's son—Notte Lipschitz—describes the nature of his father's historiographical work in the following words:

For more than fifty years he counterattacked, never putting down his sharp pen nor ceasing to engage in battle against those writers who violated the covenant of our forefathers. By virtue of his phenomenal love of the truth, he remained completely fearless in the debate against the so-called ‘religious reformers’ . . . placing himself at the head of those fighters who defended that which is sacred to Israel. His sagacious articles were always perfectly on target as they stripped the mask from those ‘innovative’ sects and parties whose way is not that of the Torah. . . . Ignoring his own personal life and the financial losses to himself and his sons, he fought like a lion and preserved whatever could be preserved from those who would trample upon the heads of the Holy People. . . . He was indeed like a perfect cistern that does not lose a drop of water—recalling everything he had seen and heard from the giants of the spirit and the leaders of the previous generation, who themselves had been eyewitnesses to those events and ventures; he took all of his memories of the events and deeds of our nation's history from the year 5600 [1840] to 5682 [1922], gathered and arranged them in a book, and organized the material into a complete work of history that encompasses the life of the Jewish people over such a range of eras, including the struggles of the different parties within our nation, and the persecution and pressure both internal and external. . . . The advantage of this over other historical works (with a few exceptions) is that some history books have been written on the basis of conjecture, or have based their conclusions on earlier articles in books and in memoirs, even if the events there described had never actually occurred. Their authors did not properly understand the various causes and effects; they did not differentiate between those actively involved and those passively affected in different events and affairs that involved the Jewish people; and indeed they turned dark into light, and light into dark. There have also been many cases in which initiatives and deeds were distorted so that the reader could see no more than their reflected image, but in no way a live, clear and true picture.⁹

In these words, Notte Lipschitz expressed a basic principle in the writing of Orthodox history: history is inseparable from the defensive struggle against the new movements within Jewish society. Indeed, unlike conventional historical works, those of Orthodoxy rely on response, rebuttal and struggle. After all, the “new” trends that advocated reform of the Jewish world, from the Haskalah to Zionism and Jewish socialism, formulated novel interpretations of Jewish history that were (and are) in direct contradiction to the beliefs, views and values of the traditionalists. Whereas, prior to the modern era, history had no special significance in and of itself in Jewish society, it now became necessary to recruit historiographical weapons in defense of that society and its values. And who could be more suited to write such a defensive history, rebutting the heretic interpretations of the past, than someone (like Yaakov Halevi Lipschitz) who had been actively involved in public service? It is no surprise, then, that Orthodox historiography first appeared at the same time as the other Orthodox reactions to radical change in Jewish society.

Yaakov Halevi Lipschitz began his career as advocate in the struggle against the Haskalah movement in Lithuania at the end of the 1860s, becoming most active in his battle against modern nationalism in the last decades of the century.¹⁰ He published vehement polemical articles against the Haskalah, and he was very much involved in the religious and social controversies in which the East European Orthodox reaction to modernism was formulated. In his words:

I am somebody who has witnessed the affliction of our people in the modern era since the year 5620 [1860]—from the time that the power of the *maskilim* increased as they drew closer to the governmental authorities, and as many of the uneducated members of the masses, upon whom the *maskilim* had a great influence with their secular views, were drawn away from the path of the Torah and its commandments. . . . So it was that in the 1870s, a number of the great sages realized that it was now essential and obligatory for Orthodoxy to create an Orthodox press. . . . Ever since then I have not put down the author's inkwell and, together with the distinguished great rabbinic sages, I have stood in the literary battle against the *maskilim*—who have come to undermine all the foundations of our religion, may Heaven help us.¹¹

Lipschitz adds that, so far as his personal life story is concerned, he is well suited to this type of writing, for he was born in “the Old World,” as opposed to the “New World” (the latter referring to the period following the Crimean War), and he still remembered the era that preceded the assault of the innovators upon the walls of Jewish tradition. This unmediated familiarity with the world of the past, defined by Jacob Katz as “the traditional society” before the “crisis,” sharpened the response of those of the older generation, who perceived that the younger religious Jews were not fully aware of the vast changes that had already transformed Jewish society. Only one who had lived through the transition could be truly sensitive to the amount of destruction wrought by the modern trends. Paradoxically, Lipschitz exposed the substantive difference between the “traditional,” as opposed to “Orthodox,” perceptions—a difference that is denied by those Orthodox Jews who describe themselves as transmitting the chain of tradition in totally unaltered form.

On the surface, the new approach of which the author of *Zikhron ya'akov* speaks appears to have been no more than tactical and political: while the Orthodox

adopted—from their opponents—new methods of organization, writing and publicity, their entire spiritual world remained the same. On a deeper level, however, the reaction to change became in and of itself a fundamental principle; and this in turn signaled a major shift in spiritual focus. The hostile values of the Haskalah and modern nationalism thereby dictated the direction of Orthodox thought; penetrated it; and were internalized by it, either directly or dialectically. This development embraced *inter alia*, of course, Orthodox historiography. From an auxiliary handmaiden to Torah study, a branch of literature that was at best tolerated and was clearly considered to be secondary within the spiritual world of traditional Jewish society,¹² it was elevated to the level of “true and wise knowledge of past eras and times”—its primary aim being the total negation of modernizing and academic historical writing.¹³ The fact that the Orthodox author was so aware of the way in which the *maskilim*, the disciples of Wissenschaft des Judentums and the nationalist historians viewed the past represented a novel phenomenon unprecedented both in its significance and in its vehement expression. And more than this: the new view of history, which differed so sharply from the traditional conceptions of the Jewish people and its past, was also internalized by Orthodoxy, becoming an integral part of its worldview. The long-established and hence legitimate uses of history by the traditional Jewish society were not cast aside, but history now served to accentuate the crisis and offer a defense. And the Orthodox camp felt that it had no choice but to adopt both the methods and forms employed in the historical literature of the opposition.

In his writings, Lipschitz displayed an awareness of the works produced by the other side, even though those works would appear, at first glance, to have been forbidden reading, and he even recommended that they be subjected to critical scrutiny in order to learn the historical truth “from the confessions of those who are themselves directly involved.”¹⁴ Quoting the *maskilim*, he sought to reveal their errors and failures. In his polemics with two Haskalah authors, Yehudah Leib Gordon and Moshe Leib Lilienblum, he demonstrated an erudite knowledge of their works.¹⁵ Lipschitz even noted that in his youth the satirical anti-hasidic writings of Yosef Perl were popular reading in those circles of Torah scholars to which he belonged.¹⁶ In this respect, though, Lipschitz remains an exception. For the most part, Orthodox authors zealously refrain from making any acknowledgment of the fact that they have consulted books or articles produced by the opposition. Although willing enough at times to draw upon such “blasphemous” works, the Orthodox historians do so without indicating their sources. The more typical feature of this type of literature, however, is its failure to make any reference whatsoever to non-Orthodox research—though one can tell, by reading between the lines, that the author is fully aware of everything written in the particular field.¹⁷ Non-Orthodox historians are not only to be treated as dangerous and contradicted, they are also to be dismissed from memory and consigned to oblivion. Thus the Orthodox writer of history has to steer between the need to react to innovative historical interpretations opposed to the values of Jewish tradition and his desire to ignore everything written in an alien spirit. The end product represents a new phenomenon, though the traditionalists themselves do not admit to this.

Notte Lipschitz wrote of his father:

Those reminiscences serve as a defense of our fathers and cleanse past generations from the filthy, lying statements of the reformers, which fill their hearts and their petty literature.¹⁸

Orthodox historical literature is thus meant to reveal the truth of the traditional society that had been concealed by “modern” writers. In other words, it seeks to create an alternative history. True, many of the Orthodox works base themselves on conventional historiography; but the ultimate goal is to present an improved and alternative version of the past.

Orthodox authors set out to expose the subjective character of modern research in order to reveal its ideological and political biases. In fact, according to them, there is only one version, that of the Orthodox world, which is objective.¹⁹ The picture of the past painted by Graetz, Dubnow and others in their camp is fundamentally distorted. It is skewed by the hostility toward traditional society, and even contains an element of libel; it is false by its very nature, partially because of its authors’ ignorance of the real facts; and as the creation of heretics and infidels, it is bound to misrepresent the nature of the Orthodox world. In contrast, those who shape the Orthodox view of the past love the object of their research and wish to defend it; their writing is true, for they are men of truth who enjoy the support of the great Torah sages of the generation and its religious leaders, and they have become familiar with the facts through their environment and experience—their world is the internal world of Judaism.

The writings of Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, the Rebbe of the Habad (Lubavich) hasidim during the tumultuous era of the revolutions in Russia and the European Holocaust, are a clear example of the link between modern research and the molding of the Orthodox past. Rabbi Joseph Isaac continued a long historiographical tradition in the Habad movement. However, unlike previous works such as *Shivhei HaBesht* or the collections of hasidic letters that were sent from Palestine to Eastern Europe (which were all published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), Schneersohn’s historical writings are suffused with a militantly Orthodox spirit.²⁰ Having been involved in various battles against the innovative movements of the twentieth century, Schneersohn gave a comprehensive historical picture of Jewish society in Eastern Europe in the course of writing the biographies of his predecessors at the head of the Habad movement. Much of his output was published in separate pamphlets, which were either printed or typewritten for distribution among the hasidim. Close scrutiny reveals that they were written with special attention to the research done by non-Orthodox historians; and a number of items that had become accepted as axiomatic in historical research were here internalized and represented from an Orthodox perspective.

An example is the *Admor “HaZemah Zedek” utenu’at hahaskalah (The Zemah Zedek and the Haskalah Movement)*, a biographical booklet on Menahem Mendel Schneersohn (also known as the Zemah Zedek, he was the third in the Lubavich rabbinic dynasty) that focuses on the historical era of the 1840s, when the Russian government attempted to force the Jews of Russia to study secular subjects and the

Russian language. This pamphlet is replete with footnotes, almost all from Habad publications—with others, unattributed, based on non-Orthodox scholarly research).²¹ What is fascinating here is that this work, which a number of modern-day scholars have considered to be a collection of historical materials gleaned from the internal sources of the Habad movement,²² relies to a considerable extent on the articles of historians whom the author attempts to rebut. A comparison of Schneersohn's pamphlet with an article by the historian Saul Ginsburg shows that certain details and even some of the footnotes were taken from Ginsburg's article, without any reference being made to that fact. This employment of material from the opposing camp, without indicating the source, was put to excellent polemical use when Schneersohn took several facts out of Ginsburg's article, added some archival information taken from printed sources and inserted them into an opposing context. It appears that critical historical research was viewed by Schneersohn as a direct continuation of the attacks leveled by the *maskilim* against the values of the traditional Jewish society and of the false accusations they had made to the Russian governmental authorities against the *Zemah Zedek*.

There was in fact a basis for this suspicion: the vicious charges made by the Vilna *maskilim* against the *Zemah Zedek* in the 1840s and then reported by them to the Russian authorities, as he battled attempts by the government to force the Russian Jews to receive a secular education, were published at the time in Jost's newspaper, the *Israelitische Annalen*.²³ For his part, Jost in his own historical works did not hesitate to include the most violent charges—again emanating from his allies in Eastern Europe—against the hasidim. The accusations of the Vilna *maskilim* were likewise quoted by Rabbi Joseph Isaac, who viewed them as part and parcel of the continuous onslaught by the *maskilim* against the Habad leader of the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴ But it was obvious to the modern-day reader, to whom his pamphlet was addressed, that these issues were of direct contemporary relevance; the struggle between true Judaism and its enemies was as fierce in the latter half of the twentieth century as in the days of Jost and the *maskilim*. Thus it was with great relish that Joseph Isaac Schneersohn could quote a letter published in the *Israelitische Annalen*, which described the members of the traditional Jewish society in Eastern Europe as “old-fashioned believers in superstition, their leader being the head of the hasidim, Rabbi [Menahem Mendel] Schneersohn, who is engaged in doing everything possible to foil the merciful plans of the king meant for the Jews' benefit.”²⁵ The implication was clear: the *maskilim* and their present-day heirs were traitors to the Jewish people, which had every reason to put its trust in the rabbis. Or as it was put in one nineteenth-century source quoted by Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn,

The rabbis are the ones who have the greatest knowledge of the Torah, being extremely learned wise men of exceptional personal qualities. They enjoy great influence in their communities, are much respected and admired by all segments of the Jewish people, and especially by the hasidim. The hasidim are mostly in business or in the crafts and fill the synagogues and *batei midrash* three times a day for prayer; they form groups that arise early to recite the Psalms, to study the Mishnah, Talmud, Aggadah and *Shulhan arukh*; and they send their children, without exception, to study in the *hadarim* and in the *yeshivot*. Their young married men are supported by their fathers-in-law and exert

themselves in studying the Torah in the synagogues and *batei midrash*. In every corner to which [I] turned, regardless of whether it was a large or small city or a village, [I] found Torah, the fear of heaven, and piety.²⁶

This idealized description of the Jews of Russia before it was infected by the Haskalah, modern nationalism and social radicalism was constantly reproduced in the works of Rabbi Joseph Isaac. However, what is remarkable here is that the above quotation was taken from a work written not by a hasid, but by a Lithuanian *maskil* enamored of German historiography, Mordecai Aaron Guenzburg, who—as mentioned in Schneerson's pamphlet—traveled to Lubavich and studied the lives of the hasidim in the towns of White Russia.²⁷ Guenzburg prepared a detailed memorandum (whose existence is unconfirmed by any source other than Habad) for the Shoharei Or Vehaskalah (Light and Enlightenment Committee) of the Russian *maskilim*, in which he allegedly attested to the spiritual power and moral strength of hasidism. Coming as it did from a vehement opponent of the traditional society, such testimony was obviously of first-rate apologetic value: here was a man who had opted for the literature of Europe and foreign historical works over the absolute values of Judaism—and even he was forced to appreciate the light of hasidism! Guenzburg thus becomes one of the “external” witnesses, so numerous in the Orthodox historiography, who, even though they belong to an inauthentic and hostile camp, can be brought in to bolster the positive image of the traditional society.

The alleged meeting between Guenzburg and the Lubavicher Rebbe, which again originates exclusively from the Habad movement (it is even possible that the narrator was really referring to a meeting with a different Vilna *maskil*, Shmuel Yosef Fuenn)²⁸ was embellished in Schneersohn's pamphlet, utilizing a common motif in the hagiographical literature. The leader of the “good side” and the head of the “bad side” argue, and the defeat of the latter—which can, of course, be anticipated—illustrates the victory of the correct values. It is interesting that, even though Lilienthal himself traveled throughout White Russia, came to Lubavich, met the Rebbe and actually noted this down for posterity in his memoirs, the Habad narrator spends a great deal of time on the visit by Guenzburg while dismissing the visit by Lilienthal in a few short lines.²⁹ This transformation of the Vilna *maskil* Guenzburg into the major villain in the Russian government's attempt to force the Jews to study secular subjects, and his subsequent confession regarding the power and superiority of hasidism over the Haskalah, finds no corroboration in the non-Orthodox historical works. But it is in keeping with the perception of the struggle of the *maskilim* against the traditional world as an ongoing process, one that began in the days of Moses Mendelssohn and the Berlin Haskalah in the mid-eighteenth century and that has had an unbroken history right down to the present day.

In Schneersohn's booklet, Guenzburg confronts the Rebbe and argues with him about “the necessity of the Haskalah method for the continued existence of the Jews in the diaspora,”³⁰ just as his predecessor, Shimon “the heretic” of Vilna, had argued with Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady in the previous generation.³¹ He too, like the legendary Shimon, is able to appreciate the greatness of the Rebbe and the value of hasidic thought, because he himself is a learned man. However, even though (according to the pamphlet) Lilienthal was the grandson of the same Shimon

the “heretic,” he is not seen as fit to provide such an endorsement of the traditional way of life because he himself is a “German”—the term of opprobrium reserved for total freethinkers.

The booklet, in sum, is a mixture of legend and reality, actual events taken from historical works and archives alongside irrational and supernatural motifs, with the main theme being a defense of the Jewish society against its enemies both from within and without. The actual events are well known, but they are sometimes played down almost to the extent of disappearing, while in other cases they are emphasized and made into key developments. Lilienthal, for example, who acted to improve the lot of Russian Jewry, is totally unacceptable, whereas Sir Moses Montefiore, who traveled to Russia in similar circumstances and whose religious conduct and Jewish knowledge were not on what would have been considered an acceptable level for the Jews of Eastern Europe, is depicted as “the saintly minister” who is scrupulous in his observance of the commandments.³² The primary factor is whether the individual has been granted legitimation in terms of Orthodox thought patterns. Once a historical figure has achieved such legitimation, he can be divorced from his real context and “purified”—or, conversely, the stress can be laid (if necessary) on the shortcomings of a given individual, weighing him down with sin.

Orthodoxy is a multifaceted religiosocial phenomenon. It contains various groups that are far removed from one another, and what divides them is often greater than what they have in common. It is very difficult to compare the positions and views of German neo-Orthodoxy—which was open to the currents of the time and to German culture—with those of Hungarian Orthodoxy, which rejected any outside cultural influences. One should also remember that a major segment of Orthodox society only began to deal with historical documentation and to produce works of the type discussed here in the period after the Second World War, when the remnants of East European Jewry were uprooted from their ancient birthplace and transplanted to the West or to Israel. Such are among the varied and complex factors that have determined the extent to which “secular” historical research has influenced the different kinds of Orthodox historiography, whose authors can be divided into a number of discrete categories.

First, there are the works of history produced by the Torah scholars, as best exemplified, for example, by Yaakov Halevi Lipschitz—in the main, individuals linked to the Lithuanian yeshivot or to the Orthodox circles in Hungary. Many of the works in this group are detailed biographies of rabbis, which are sometimes combined with descriptions of religious, social and political life. Such publications fall somewhere between hagiographical works, like the hasidic *Shivhei haBesht*, and scholarly biographies based on written sources and verified reminiscences. One of the earliest works of this kind was *Aliyot Eliyahu* by Rabbi Yehoshua Heshel Levin, published in Vilna in 1856. Unlike the hasidic hagiographic works, this volume does not deal with any supernatural powers of its hero, nor does it contain any miracles or wonders. (It is also not written in the militantly Orthodox tone used in the biographies of a later era.) Lipschitz, too, wrote a book of this type in which he immortalized the memory of his revered teacher, Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor.³³

Those belonging to this school of historiography believe themselves to be carry-

ing on the tradition from one generation to another. Thus, for example, Dov Eliach notes in his recent biography of Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin that “relating the history of the great sages of Israel and writing this down is nothing new. Such an undertaking and analysis is considered to be in the category of ‘serving the sages’”—and he gives examples of this type of author, including the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin, Yaakov Lipschitz, and Yehoshua Heshel Levin.³⁴ What the works of such Torah scholars have in common, according to Hayim Ozer Grodzinski, is that their aim is to present “the history of the Jewish people in holiness . . . the real truth as it was and the [Jewish] religion on its pedestal.” In other words, they are all engaged in the uncompromising struggle against those who “tipped events sideways, attempting to impart concepts, traits and interpretations to the different eras based on their own predilections, casting down those on high and raising up those who were debased.”³⁵ However, whenever an author thus places any given rabbi or any specific group at the center, he is bound to adopt a fixed viewpoint; he must focus on the marvelous character traits of the specific individual and by the same token downplay the part played by others in those same events, even if the others, too, are members of the fold.

In the second category is the hasidic literature, an example being the aforementioned booklets by the Lubavich Rebbe. Even in the nineteenth century the Habad movement was exceptional in its awareness of history, and its hasidim were actively engaged in safeguarding traditions and publishing various collections of letters. The tradition of Habad historiography divides into two branches. Starting in the nineteenth century, there began to appear works of an Orthodox character on the Habad hasidim, which nonetheless displayed something of the critical spirit characteristic of academic historiography. This tradition has been continued up to the present day by Chaim Lieberman and Yehoshua Mondschein, for example.³⁶ But parallel to such works there has coexisted a hagiographical tendency of the type developed by Joseph Isaac Schneersohn and his disciples. Since the Second World War, there has been an upsurge of hasidic publication, and the output has kept increasing in quantity. Various hasidic groups have assembled historical material related to their own groups and have published documents and articles. There is also an interest in the history of hasidism in general. Thus, for example, a magazine has been appearing entitled *Naḥalat zevi*, described as “a forum for hasidic thought and history,” in which readers are asked to gather material on the history of hasidism, very much as Simon Dubnow had appealed to the readers of the Jewish press in Eastern Europe in the 1890s:

We turn with a loving appeal to those who esteem Torah and hasidism—to those who write, to those who have in their archives, or who know where are to be found, hasidic Torah materials or documentation related to hasidic thought or its history, or articles, letters and documents, along with events and stories in writing or orally—to do us the kindness of sending these to us or informing us of them, so that we will be able to include them, with God’s help, in the coming issues, with the aid of Heaven.³⁷

However, whereas Dubnow asked for the bricks and mortar to build a structure of national Jewish awareness, the gatherers of material for this Orthodox hasidic journal seek “to hasten thereby the great and awesome day of the coming of God

with the advent of our righteous Messiah." Indeed, hasidic society has come a long way since the mid-nineteenth century, a period about which a contemporary historian has stated:

Historical writing, whether autobiographical or scholarly, was not regarded as a suitable enterprise for the learned, and even the traditional genre of chronicle writing was not actively encouraged in Eastern European intellectual and literary society. This eschewal of historiography resulted not only in the lack of histories written from the traditionalist perspective but also in the loss of contemporary letters and other unpublished sources. Archive-keeping, like the rest of the historian's craft, was abandoned to the non-believers.³⁸

Third, reference should be made to the literature of the Old Yishuv. Representative of this category is the previously mentioned *Mosad hayesod*, one of the better-known products of a large-scale Orthodox publishing enterprise that developed in reaction to the Zionist settlement in Palestine. As is customary with Orthodox writers, the accounts of the non-Zionist Yishuv range from those with a tendency to ignore totally everything that has happened in the country since 1881, to those at the other pole, which claim that members of the pre-Zionist community and their successors represent the true Zionists. In the latter category are works that attribute paramilitary inclinations to prominent families among the first immigrants to Eretz Israel at the beginning of the nineteenth century, crediting them anachronistically with involvement both in various settlement ventures and with political and social ideas that appear later. As opposed to this are works that simply ignore the existence of the state of Israel and of the New Yishuv created in the country over the last century. The reader can learn of the changes that took place in the country only from the fact that the names of new settlements are included among those places into which Orthodox society has reached, or from the references to the opposition of modern institutions and public bodies to Orthodox (*haredi*) activity.³⁹

A somewhat humorous example of such evasiveness is found in a book that deals with the history of the Habad hasidim in Eretz Israel. A photograph of the Habad synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem, reproduced to show a stone memorial plaque in honor of the philanthropist Eliyahu David Sasson, depicts a reading of the Torah in which the president of the state of Israel, Zalman Shazar, took part. The caption of the photograph states: "In the background, the stone memorial. Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin ascends to the Torah—next to him is Shazar."⁴⁰ As the editor of the book needed a photograph of the stone tablet and as the most suitable one happened to include the president of the Zionist entity, he could not totally ignore his presence in the photograph. The uneducated reader would never learn that, inside the territory with which the book deals for 287 pages, a modern Jewish state has been created.

Similarly, in the literature dealing with the history of the Old Yishuv, one can differentiate between the hasidic writers and the non-hasidic Torah scholars, and sometimes the dispute between these two trends as to who was first to settle in the Holy Land is conducted as if the Zionists had never existed. Thus, for example, a hasidic work attempts to prove that the hasidim came to Palestine first, such that "all the immigration thereafter and the development of the Yishuv and the building of

the country up to our generation was based upon the infrastructure they established in holiness and purity."⁴¹ Paradoxically, the book answers the claim made in *Mosad hayesod* (as a reaction to Zionist works) with its own assertion that the hasidim—not the *mitnagdim*—were the first to settle in the Holy Land. However, the hasidic author does not concern himself with what the New Yishuv accomplished in the country, summing up the great changes that took place as follows: "Again the Land of Israel became the largest center in the entire Jewish world of Torah and fear of God." It was through this, adds the author, that the divine presence—the Shekhinah—again returned to the country, the way for it having been paved by the first hasidic immigrants.⁴²

One of the characteristics of Orthodox historiography is the open and unequivocal declaration of its extrahistorical positions. Whether such a statement is a blistering attack on the writer's *maskilic* or Zionist opponent, or whether it takes the form of the writer's thundering silence, the reader cannot possibly err in the interpretation of history championed by the author. One should not, therefore, be surprised that this genre cannot be divorced from the process of politicization that the Orthodox Jewish society has undergone in recent decades. In this context, the writing of history is meant to serve, *inter alia*, as a guide for a multifaceted society that discovered historiography somewhat belatedly, but has since adopted it as another tool in its struggle for survival in a changing and threatening world.

Notes

1. See Reuven Michael, *I. M. Jost: avi hahistoriyografiyah hayehudit hamodernit* (Jerusalem: 1983), 73, quoted from Heinrich Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden* vol. 11 (Leipzig: 1870), 413.

2. *Ibid.*

3. For a detailed discussion of the writing of Jewish history among the first *maskilim*, see Shmuel Feiner, "'Historiyah' ve 'dimuyim historiyim' 1782–1820" (M.A. thesis, The Hebrew University, 1984).

4. Israel Bartal, "Mordecai Aaron Guenzburg: A Lithuanian *Maskil* Faces Modernity," in *From East and West: Jews in a Changing Europe, 1750–1870*, ed. Francis Malino and David Sorkin (Oxford: 1990), 128–129. On Guenzburg's contribution to the dissemination of historical knowledge among East European Jews, see Shmuel Feiner, "'Mardut hazorfatim' ve'herut hayehudim': hamahapekha hazorfatit bitmunat he'avar shel hahaskalah hayehudit bemizrah eiropah," in *Hamahapekha hazorfatit verishumah*, ed. Richard (Yerahmiel) Cohen (Jerusalem: 1991), 223–229; Shmuel Feiner, "Hahaskalah beyahasah lahistoriyah: hakarat he'avar vetifkudav bitnu'at hahaskalah hayehudit, 1782–1882" (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University, 1990), 127–139.

5. On the attitude and independent stance of East European *maskilim* with regard to traditional values, see Immanuel Etkes, introduction, "Te'udah beyisrael: bein temurah lemasoret," in Yitzhak Baer Levinsohn's *Te'udah beyisrael* (photocopy of the Vilna and Horodna edition of 1828 (Jerusalem: 1988), 3–19; Immanuel Etkes, "Lesheelat mevasrei hahaskalah bemizrah eiropah," *Tarbiz* 37 (1988), 95–114; Yisrael Bartal, "Bedor shel temurot: Yosef Perl," Part 10 in the Open University Series, *Yehudim be'idan shel temurot* (Tel-Aviv: 1978), 16–21.

6. Eliezer Horowitz (ed.), *Mosad hayesod: tamzit mitokh toledot va'ad hakelali kenestet yisrael yerushalayim, bo kelulim ikarei hatoledot shel hayishuv hayashan beerez yisrael* (Jerusalem: 1957), 8–9.

7. See, for example, Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, *'Ir berei tekufah: yerushalayim haḥadashah bereshitah* (Jerusalem: 1979), 145–177. The claim that the founders of the first neighborhoods of Jerusalem aspired to agricultural work, as argued in Orthodox writing about the Old Yishuv, appears here and in similar writings; cf. Haim Peles, “Yaḥasam shel benei hayishuv hayashan lehiyashvut beerez yisrael bameah hatesh'a 'esreh,” in *Zion* 31, no. 3–4 (1976), 148–162; Yisrael Bartal, “Tokhniyot hahityashvut mimei masa'o hasheni shel Montifiore leerez yisrael (1839),” *Shalem* 2 (1976), 280 (n. 205); Arye Morgenstern, *Meshihiyut vishuv erez yisrael* (Jerusalem: 1985), 172–196. For an extreme example of the way in which *Mosad Hayesod* and similar works penetrated present-day scholarship, see Jeff Halper, *Between Redemption and Revival: The Jewish Yishuv of Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century* (Boulder: 1992), esp. 37–51. This work constructs an anthropological theory on the basis of Orthodox historical sources. For a critique of Halper, see the review by Israel Bartal in *Studies in Zionism* 14, no. 2 (1993), 113–117. For a critical and corrective approach to the factual material—albeit not to the issues of principle—in this literature, see Arye Morgenstern's recent article, “Shetei mesorot 'al reshit 'aliyat talmidei haGra,” *Shalem* 6 (1992), 195–222. The public interest aroused by this literature made itself evident in a debate that took place in the wake of Morgenstern's article on the pages of the daily *HaZofeh* in 1990; on this dispute, see Binyamin Rivlin, *Zekher av* (Jerusalem: 1992), 32–36.

8. For a critical historical survey of Polish Hasidism that demonstrates an awareness of the special nature of Orthodox writing, see David Assaf, “Hasidut Polin bameah hatesh'a 'esreh: mazav hamehkar usekirah bibliyografit,” in *Zadikim veanshei ma'aseh: mehkarim bahasidut Polin*, ed. Shmuel Ettinger *et al.* (Jerusalem: forthcoming); see also David Assaf, “R. Yisrael miruzhin umekomo betoledot haḥasidut bemaḥazit harishonah shel hameah hatesh'a 'esreh” (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University, 1992), 5–12. Mendel Piekartz made thorough use of the Orthodox literature in this field in his *Hasidut polin bein shetei hamilhamot ubegezeirot 5700–5705* (“*Hashoah*”) (Jerusalem: 1991).

9. Yaakov Halevi Lipschitz, *Zikhron ya'akov: historiyyah yehudit berusiyyah ufolin (1923–1930)*, (2nd ed., Bnei Brak: 1968), vol. 1, iii–iv. For a discussion of this work as a prime example of Orthodox historiography, see Yisrael Bartal, “*Zikhron ya'akov* lerabi Ya'akov Lipschitz: historiografiyyah ortodoksit?” in *Milet: Mehkarei hauniversitah hapetuḥah betoledot yisrael vetarbuto* 2 (Tel-Aviv: 1984), 409–414.

10. On Lipschitz' public opposition to the Haskalah and Zionism, see Yosef Salmon, *Dat veziyonut: imutim rishonim* (Jerusalem: 1990), 151–153.

11. Lipschitz, *Zikhron ya'akov*, vol. 1, xxxiv.

12. Feiner, “Hahaskalah beyahasah lehistoriyyah,” 8–12.

13. Lipschitz, *Zikhron ya'akov*, vol. 1, xxxvi.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Salmon, *Dat veziyonut*, 163 (n. 5, 6). For a more general discussion of the conflict between the Orthodox and the *maskilim*, see Gideon Katznelson, *Hamilhamah hasifrutit bein haḥaredim vehamaskilim* (Tel-Aviv: 1954).

16. Lipschitz, *Zikhron ya'akov*, vol. 2, 50; Bartal, “*Zikhron ya'akov* lerabi Ya'akov Lipschitz,” 413.

17. The tendency to use, while not citing, works by non-Orthodox historians is a common one among Orthodox writers, although it is possible to discern differences between the various camps in the frequency and extent of this practice. See, for example, a recent work by a “Lithuanian” *mitnaged*, Dov Eliach, *Avi hayeshivot: maran rabenu Hayim mivlozhin* (Jerusalem: 1991). According to its title page, the book deals with “the life and works of our holy rabbi, light of the world, rabbi and light of Israel, Rabbi Hayim of Volozhin, of blessed memory, leader of the Vilna Gaon's disciples and the founder of the Volozhin yeshivah, the first of all *yeshivot*.” However, a reader would be hard pressed to find mention in this volume of any of the extensive historiographic research available on R. Hayim and the Volozhin yeshivah. Cf. Immanuel Etkes, *R. Yisrael Salanter vereshitah shel tenu'at hamusar* (Jerusalem: 1982), 41–66 and the detailed bibliography therein. The book recently appeared in an English version, *Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: The Torah of Truth* (Philadelphia: 1993).

18. Lipschitz, *Zikhron ya'akov*, vol. 1, xxxviii.

19. Bartal, “*Zikhron ya'akov* lerabi Ya'akov Lipschitz,” 409–410.

20. A detailed analysis of the historiographic writings of Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn is found in Ada Rapoport-Albert's article “Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writings of History in Hasidism,” in *Essays in Jewish History*, Beiheft 27 of *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* (1988), 119–159.

21. Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, *Admor “HaZemah Zedek” utenu'at hahaskalah* (New York: 1973). An English version of this book was published as “*Tzemach Tzedek*” and the *Haskala Movement* (New York: 1962). On this work, see Yisrael Bartal, “‘Shimon hakofer’: perek bahistoriografiyyah ortodoksit,” in *Keminhag ashkenaz ufolin: sefer yovel leChone Shmeruk*, ed. Yisrael Bartal, Chava Turniansky and Ezra Mendelsohn (Jerusalem: 1993), 243–268.

22. See, for example, Rachel Elior's article, “Vikuaḥ minsk,” *Mehkarei yerushalayim bamahshevet yisrael* 4 (1982), 179–235; Immanuel Etkes, “HaGrah vehahaskalah: tadmrit umeziut,” in *Perakim betoledot hahevrah hayehudit bimei habeinayim uve'et haḥadashah, mukdashim leprofesor Ya'akov Katz*, ed. Yosef Salmon and Immanuel Etkes (Jerusalem: 1980), 192–217; Immanuel Etkes, “Parashat 'hahaskalah meta'am' vehatemurah bema'amad tenu'at hahaskalah berusiyyah,” *Zion* 33 (1978), 264–313; and Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia, 1825–1855* (Philadelphia: 1983), 78–81 and 150–152.

23. Thus, for example, Schneersohn in his pamphlet quotes from reports of the Russian police on the *Zemah Zedek* in order to demonstrate how much the authorities admired his integrity and greatness, whereas Ginzburg quotes passages from these same sources that denigrate him. See Ginzburg's article “Menahem Mendel Lubavicher un di regirung” in his *Historische verk*, vol. 1 (New York: 1937), 63–74; also see Bartal, “‘Shimon hakofer,’” 252–255.

24. Schneersohn, *Admor HaZemah Zedek utenu'at hahaskalah*, 14–16.

25. Quoted in Ginzburg, “Menahem Mendel Lubavicher,” 15.

26. Schneersohn, *Admor HaZemah Zedek utenu'at hahaskalah*, 12.

27. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

28. Shmuel Yosef Fuenn, “Dor vedorshav,” which appeared in installments in the journal *Hakarmel* (1879–1880). A description of Fuenn's meeting with the Lubavicher Rebbe in 1835 appears in a new edition of Fuenn's memoirs, in Shmuel Feiner, *Mehaskalah lohemet lehaskalah meshameret: mivhar mikhtavei r. Shmuel Yosef Feunn in the publications (Kuntresim)* of the Dinur Institute no. 78–79 (Jerusalem: 1993), 80–84.

29. Schneersohn, *Admor HaZemah Zedek utenu'at hahaskalah*, 24.

30. *Ibid.*, 5.

31. *Ibid.*, 6.

32. See Israel Bartal, “Moses Montefiore: Nationalist Before his Time or Belated Shtadlan?” *Studies in Zionism* 11, no. 2 (1990), 111–125.

33. Yaakov Lipschitz, *Sefer toledot yizhak*, (Warsaw: 1897).

34. Eliach, *Avi hayeshivot*, 13.

35. R. Hayim Ozer Grodzinski, from his *haskamah* (rabbinical imprimatur) to the book *Dor yesharim* (1908).

36. A collection of articles by Chaim Lieberman was published as *Ohel RaHeL*, 2 vols. (New York: 1980–1981). Yehoshua Mondschein has published research on the history of Hasidism; among his most prominent work is his edition of *Shivhei haBesht*, for which he provided an extensive introduction (Jerusalem: 1982). He also published new material on the life of Shneur Zalman of Lyady in two volumes of *Kerem ḥabad*, no. 4 (1992), recently uncovered in Russia.

37. *Naḥalat zevi* 2 (1990), 2.

38. Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I*, 135–136.

39. Shalom Dober Levin (comp. and ed.), *Toledot ḥabad beerez hakodesh beshanim 1777–1950* (New York: 1988), 235.

40. *Ibid.*, 202.

41. Aharon Suraski, *Yesod hama'aleh: divrei hayamim lishuv haḥasidim beerez yisrael* (Bnei Brak: 1991), 12.

42. *Ibid.* Cf. David Assaf, "'Kevod Elokim haster davar': perek nosaf bahistoriografyah haortodoksit shel haḥasidut beerez yisrael" *Cathedra* 68 (Summer 1993), 57–66. It is in this context, finally, that brief reference should be made to the "Zionization" of the pre-Zionist Yishuv, a trend fostered by some members of the religious (modern Orthodox, as opposed to ultra-Orthodox) Zionist world. Here the aspiration has manifested itself to prove the importance of the continuity linking what occurred in Palestine before 1881 to what occurred thereafter. Historiographic arguments of this type have exerted major influence on academic historiography in recent years. Thus, Orthodox historical works encompass a wide range, from vehement uncompromising anti-Zionism to an ultra-Zionism whose assumption is that both the students of the Vilna Gaon and the hasidism of the Ba'al Shem Tov were Zionists before the Zionist movement. See, for example, Horowitz (ed.), *Mosad hayesod*.

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