

SHAUL MAGID

Hasidism on the Margin:

Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism

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The Izbica/Radzin corpus of writings culminates a radical theology incipient in Polish Hasidism from the time of the Seer of Lublin, Jacob Isaac (1745–1815). The focus on individual spiritual moods and the consequent possibility of refraining from performing commandments for spiritually good reasons, as found in the Seer, reaches its apex in the radical teachings of the Izbica/Radzin Hasidism, which endorses ‘pious transgression’ of the Law. After Izbica/Radzin, one discerns in Polish Hasidism a pulling back from the edge of radicalism.

Several fine studies have appeared on the Polish Hasidic school of Izbica/Radzin, including Joseph Weiss’s essay on Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (1800–1854)¹ and Morris Faienstein’s interesting presentation of Mordecai Joseph’s life and teachings.² In this volume, Shaul Magid goes beyond previous authors in presenting a thorough analysis of the Izbica/Radzin theology, primarily through a careful reading of the writings of Gershon Henokh of Radzin (1839–1891), who was Mordecai Joseph’s grandson. With delicate care for his texts and with an admirable reverence for his Hasidic masters, Magid succeeds in producing the most thorough analysis of this movement, now experiencing a revival among various Jewish groups.

In Part One, *The Piety of Secrecy: Esotericism, Faith, and the Hasidic Construction of Origins*, Magid explicates Gershon Henokh’s program of uncovering an esoteric teaching behind both Jewish philosophy and kabbalah. Magid advances the view that Gershon Henokh was motivated by messianic expectations, in that he believed that messianic redemption required a unification of all of Jewish thought in preparation for the new world order of unity.

Jewish history knows of other programmes for somehow bringing together disparate sources of knowledge that had no messianic pretensions. These programmes include Maimonides’ efforts to reconcile philosophy with Jewish tradition, and Moshe Haim Luzatto’s version of philosophy-friendly kabbalah. An alternative reason for Gershon Henokh’s program of finding a deeper, common esoteric basis for both Jewish medieval philosophy and kabbalah might be this: in light of the successes of the Haskalah movement, Gershon Henokh was moved to find an apologetic way of emerging from what had become an outdated philosophical idiom and a Jewish literature, kabbalah, that had turned into an object of mockery and degradation. Asserting a hidden source behind them that neither of them fully understood would have served this end.

Yet Magid’s proposal seems quite plausible if we note that here Gershon Henokh is not only joining disparate disciplines, but also proposing to do so by way of a hidden teaching that is only now being referred to openly. Premonitions of a new era are in the

¹ The present-day family spells the name as *Lainer*. I follow the practice in academic writings to spell the name as *Leiner*.

² Joseph Weiss, ‘A Late Jewish Utopia of Religious Freedom’, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1985), pp. 209–48. Morris M. Faienstein, *All is in the Hands of Heaven, The Teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing, 1989).

air. We have other signs of Gershon Henokh's apparent messianic expectations. For instance, he claimed a restorative rediscovery of the lost azure colouring to be used in ritual fringes by pious Jewish men but also, as noted by Weiss, to be used in the clothing of the high priest in the yet-to-be-built Temple. His two-volume *Sidrei Tehorot* is dedicated to the explanation of the laws of purity that have application only in Temple times. There is also Gershon Henokh's noting of his lineage from King David, from whom the Messiah was supposed to come (although Magid does not claim that Gershon Henokh thought of himself as the about-to-come Messiah). Finally, in Part Two, Magid is able to convince the reader of Gershon Henokh's concentration on the 'proto-Messianic' personality and its importance for his times. All of these tend to confirm Gershon Henokh's preoccupation with messianic times and make plausible Magid's idea that Gershon Henokh's subsuming of philosophy and kabbalah under a now-to-be-revealed teaching has messianic motivation.

In Part Two, *Hasidism and the Hermeneutical Turn*, Magid provides a detailed exposition of Gershon Henokh's exegesis of the patriarchal personalities. Here we are introduced in depth to the Izbica/Radzin theme of the proto-Messianic personality who has reached a spiritual level at which he can act in violation of the Law, heeding a 'divine voice' bidding him to do so. This 'pious transgression' is 'proto-Messianic' not because such a person is destined to be the Messiah, but because such a person, in pre-Messianic times, has an experience of the order to come, including the expansion of the margins of worship of God.

Magid convincingly shows that for Gershon Henokh there is a progression from the 'non-integrated' proto-Messianic personality of Abraham to the perfected personality of Jacob. Abraham still lives in the 'doubt' of how he is to behave with his proto-Messianic insights; by contrast, Jacob lives beyond that doubt into certainty. After Jacob's death, the elements of his soul become 'fragmented and dysfunctional' (p. 50) in Jacob's descendants. Yet, the potential for proto-Messianic goings beyond the margins lies deep within the body of Israel, able to be potentiated due to Jacob's breakthrough.

Magid shows, again through richly detailed exposition, that the 'Izbicer,' Gershon Henokh's grandfather, did not have his grandson's progressive approach. Pious transgression and its psychological variants appear without any sense of an historical progression. There is no appreciable difference between Abraham and David, for example. Making this clear is a significant contribution of Magid's book.

The presentation of the notion of pious transgression is complicated by the Izbica/Radzin doctrine of 'divine determinism' of human behaviour. In the space of this review it is not possible to enter into the intricacies of this stance, a point of view that claims that in reality there is no human freedom, but only the illusion of such. Magid persuasively shows that the Izbicer, the grandfather, is more promiscuous in utilizing this doctrine than is the grandson, the Radziner.

A severe philosophical puzzle arises for the view that there is no human freedom, when joined to Gershon Henoch's teaching that one should not to *dare* act in pious transgression before one's personal spiritual development has ripened. If there is no free will, then the timing for pious transgression is determined by God and not by the person. A classic means of trying to deal with this problem is expressed in the distinction between *not* having free will 'from His point of view' and *having* free will from 'our point of view'. It is not entirely clear, however, how coherent this distinction is and to

what extent Izbica/Radzin held to it. Magid would have done well to provide us with at least some rudimentary explanation as to how the themes of divine determinism and exhortations implying free will coexist in Izbica/Radzin.

Magid provides especially absorbing in-depth interpretations of two focal texts in the writings of Mordecai Joseph: the commentaries on the *akedah* and on the sexually licentious act of Zimri. I must warn the reader of a most unfortunate typographical error in the translation of the Izbicer's comment on the *akedah* (p. 146), following which Magid goes to great length to explain why the *akedah* was *not* a test for Isaac as well as for Abraham. With the typographical error we read, "That is why the trial is also a trial for Isaac." Please insert 'not' before 'also'.

Magid explains how Gershon Henokh's historically progressive understanding of pious transgression and the subsequent fragmentation of Jacob's perfection is a moderating element on his grandfather's radical view. So is his less frequent employment of the doctrine of divine determinism. This moderating of the Izbicer is a central theme of the third part of Magid's book, 'The Law and its Discontents'.

In this third part, Magid's discussion of antinomianism is complex. Magid contrasts antinomianism with *libertinism*, the performance of immoral acts, and stresses the anti-libertinian character of much of Jewish antinomianism, in stark contrast with the movement of Shabetai Tsevi. Magid distinguishes between *soft* and *hard* antinomianism, where only the latter 'usurps the authority of the legal or moral code' (p. 215), whereas the former does not do such. Magid portrays an important difference here between the Izbicer and the Radziner. In the writings of the former, we are witness to what comes across as an utter clash between a prevailing code and the demands of the coming onset of Messianic times. In the Radziner, on the other hand, there is a fine balance between the need to stay the course with the current code, together with the need to respond to God's revealed code-breaking will. The resulting 'permeability' of the law points to its future fluidity.

The difference between the Rabbi of Izbica and his grandson might be quite different than what Magid makes it out to be, in that Magid understands the Izbicer as seriously advocating pious sinning. Mordecai Joseph's 'unstructured' treatment of pious transgression is coloured by Mordecai Joseph's repeated cautions for extreme care before deciding to act on what strikes you as God's exceptional will for you-now. The Izbicer forcefully demands the need to scrutinize yourself 'seven times seventy' times before acting on what you take to be God's will, if it should contradict the laws of the Torah. I suggest that when writing about sinning at God's behest, the Izbicer might never have envisioned anybody ('God forbid!') actually *engaging* in pious transgression. Rather, what was important to the Izbicer was that a person simply be able to *imagine* herself sinning for God. In Mordecai Joseph's mind, the person who cannot imagine the sheer *possibility* of God's wanting her to sin against the 'system', is found out to hold a primary commitment to the *system*, and not to God. In contrast, one who recognizes the sheer possibility of her sinning at God's directive will always keep in mind that God is the source and the telos of the 'system'. She will thus be nurturing an ultimate relationship to God, and not to the system itself. If I am right, then Mordecai Joseph, as opposed to Gershon Henokh in whom incipient messianism is so marked, may have written about pious transgression only as a device to deepen a classic Hasidic theme: *devekut* to God.

JEROME YEHUDA GELLMAN
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev