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Review Essay:

QUESTIONS AND CARTOGRAPHY: RECENT TRENDS IN HASIDIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

Marcin Wodzinski, *Historical Atlas of Hasidism*, cartography by Waldemar Spallek (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 265 pages.

Marcin Wodzinski, *Hasidism: Key Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 336 pages.

Recent academic publications in the field of Hasidic scholarship have highlighted an intriguing divergence in approaches – that of “Jewish Thought” (for our purposes equivalent to the field of Jewish “intellectual history”) and that of social history. Let me begin with a short anecdote: A number of years ago, I was speaking with Prof. Marcin Wodzinski of the University of Wrocław, Poland, author of the recent tomes *Historical Atlas of Hasidism* and *Hasidism: Key Questions*, and one of the team of authors of the massive *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018). He asked my opinion as to how a typical Hasid would have chosen his *rebbe* from the many available in 19th or early-20th-century Eastern Europe. To me, coming from the field of Jewish Thought, the answer was obvious: The Hasid would choose his *rebbe* based upon which teachings, as expressed through written works or oral discourses, he found the most inspiring. In other words, the one to whose *shoresh neshama* he belonged. Marcin’s response was an eye-opener. He dismissed my idea as quaint and contended that he could prove that the decision was based upon a much more practical consideration – accessibility. It basically came down to the question of which *tsaddik* was easier to reach by railroad! Sensing my skepticism, Marcin explained that he had studied thousands of *kvitlach* (petitionary notes) that Hasidim brought to their *rebbe*s. In Europe it was customary to note,

in addition to the name and request of the petitioner, also his town of origin. Thus, one can literally map the trajectory of the Hasid to his *rebbe*, taking note of the train tracks as well! Of course this may not tell the entire story, but it is a good example of a line of reasoning that scholars of intellectual history would probably never entertain.

The above methodological point is one of many that receive graphic illustration in Wodzinski's *Atlas* and detailed analysis in his *Key Questions*. As the *Atlas* is, in a sense, a stunning visual representation of many of the ideas discussed in *Key Questions*, I will first focus on the latter work and then turn my attention to the *Atlas* as a kind of supplementary tool, even though it certainly stands on its own as well. Prior to assessing Wodzinski's contribution, it is worthwhile to provide a bit of context.

Recent years have seen a virtual explosion in publications analyzing Hasidism from the vantage point of social history. In addition to the works we are analyzing and the aforementioned *New History*, it is important at least to mention some of the others (most of which were authored by participants in the *New History* project). Among these are Uriel Gellman's monograph on the Seer of Lublin, *The Emergence of Hasidism in Poland*; Benjamin Brown's *Like a Ship on Storm Sea: The Story of Karlin Hasidism* (both Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2018); Samuel Heilman's *Who Will Lead Us: The Story of Five Hasidic Dynasties in America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); and several works on the history of Habad Hasidism.

In these works, we find both a new approach to research and something of a return to well-tread paths. For example, the authors of *A New History* see themselves as continuing the approach of the early 20th century historian Simon Dubnow, who first published his comprehensive *History of Hasidism* in 1930. Dubnow, however, only discussed the first few generations of the movement (before what scholars of past generations famously termed its "degeneration"), and since his time no one has attempted a comprehensive history of the movement from the Baal Shem Tov until our own time, which is exactly what *A New History* attempts to do, albeit in a somewhat popular style. The works on the Seer and Karlin, in addition to providing rich historical background on their respective subjects, also point to a lacuna in intellectual history, as neither of these central Hasidic figures/schools has yet received proper treatment from the perspective of Jewish Thought.

In *Key Questions*, Wodzinski presents us with a highly reflective and methodical application of the tools of social history to Hasidism, primarily in its "golden era" of the 19th century. In doing so, he challenges not only many of the methodological prejudices of the intellectual historian, but

also many basic assumptions about Hasidism in general. The book, as its title suggests, is arranged around seven key historical-sociological questions regarding Hasidism. Before turning to them, Wodzinski lays out his methodological concerns and considerations in the introduction. According to his diagnosis, the predominant study of Hasidism suffers from five “cardinal sins”: elitism, chronological limitations, limitations of source material, a focus on intellectual history, and essentialism. By “elitism” Wodzinski refers to the almost exclusive focus upon “high rabbinical culture,” i.e. on the *tsaddikim*, at the expense of the rank and file members of the movement, the Hasidim themselves. The chronological issue was hinted at above – he claims that 80% of the research until today has focused upon only 20% of early Hasidic history.

Regarding source material, he indicates the almost exclusive use of internal Hasidic sources (sermons and stories – this is an indictment of the opposing methodologies of both Buber and Scholem), to which some historians have added polemical literature. All have ignored to some degree or another rich archival material, including memoirs, diaries, *kvitlach*, Jewish communal records, and even government financial and police reports, as well as “*yizkor books*,” All of these play a central role in Wodzinski’s research. The focus on intellectual history is interwoven with elitism, i.e. the focus on what *tsaddikim* said or wrote, and not on the actual lives of their followers. Lastly, essentialism refers to creating or accepting an a priori definition of the phenomenon of Hasidism that then prejudices the researcher who needs to interpret his sources in a way that fits that definition.

Wodzinski’s goal is to provide a corrective to the above via several methodological turns: first, to study the Hasidim themselves, as opposed to their leaders; second, to look beyond the early 1800s, extending the study through the 19th century and on to the cataclysmic period of and following the First World War; third, the already self-evident broadening of source material; and last, a multidisciplinary approach that focuses not only upon intellectual history, but on social history as well, together with the sociology of religion, gender studies, demography, geography, and economic history.

Utilizing these varied tools and documents, Wodzinski examines seven “key questions” regarding Hasidic history, and in doing so undercuts several widely accepted stereotypes about the movement. Among them is the basic definition of Hasidism, based upon his revision of the common assumption that Hasidism is a “sect.” In his view the movement does not fit the sociological criteria for this definition; instead he proposes that we view it as a religious “confraternity,” which is a much more fluid and porous community than a “sect.” This has direct implications for the next

chapter that deals with the role of women in the movement. For example, within a sect, marrying out is strictly forbidden; however, Hasidic men often married women from non-Hasidic families. The opposite was not the case, for in the 19th century women did not perceive themselves – nor did others perceive them – as *Hasidot*; rather they were identified as the daughters or wives of Hasidim. Chapter Three examines the leadership role of the *tsaddik* as it was perceived by his followers. It is here that Wodzinski engages in his detailed analysis of *kvitlach*.

Chapters Four and Five deal, respectively, with demographics and geography, opening up issues regarding the alleged Hasidic “conquest” of Eastern Europe and its boundaries, including the crucial question of why Hasidism was incapable of penetrating into certain areas such as much of Lithuania and Germany. Chapter Seven examines the economic situation of Hasidim in the 19th century and surprises us by demonstrating that, contrary to its image in the popular imagination, the movement was not made up primarily of the poor. In fact, the socioeconomic status of the average Hasid was higher than the general Jewish population and Hasidim gravitated toward the merchant class, with relatively few of its members supporting themselves as workers or artisans.

The final chapter challenges the preconceived notion that it was the Holocaust that indicated the end of Hasidism’s golden era. This seems almost self-evident to us, explains Wodzinski, because in the Jewish collective memory the Holocaust completely overshadows any prior destruction. However, he demonstrates, it was actually the massive catastrophe of the First World War and its aftermath that completely uprooted the traditional society of Hasidism. Widespread death and the complete destruction of whole communities, urbanization, and rampant poverty, combined with the surging power of various modern and secular movements, served to completely undermine the institutions of Hasidism, leading to massive defections, especially among the young. While the movement did fight back, in doing so it sowed the seeds of Hasidism as we know it today, which is in many ways closer to the definition of a “sect” than its predecessor.

Unlike *Key Questions*, Wodzinski and Spallek’s *Atlas*, while including text, is more of an eye-opening visual delight than a good read, although it is that as well. Also unlike the former work, the *Atlas* is not arranged topically, but rather chronologically, From “Emergence” (18th century) and “Expansion” (19th century) through “World Wars, Interbellum, the Holocaust” and “Survival and Rebirth.” Thus the parameters covered here begin earlier, and continue later, than *Key Questions*, giving a fuller historical overview. Along the way there are also chapters dealing with specific topics, including dynasties, courts, *shtiblekh* (small Hasidic prayer rooms),

and the New World. All of the above, while discussed in text and illustrated with close to one hundred pictures and documents, does not constitute the true *biddush* of the work, which is of course its stunning cartography, including over seventy maps and several detailed statistical tables.

The maps, clearly the centerpiece of the work, vividly illustrate diverse phenomena, including Hasidic settlement in the Land of Israel, the expansion of Hasidic leadership by periods, major dynasties and their growth, the socioeconomic status of Hasidic groups, Hasidic prayer halls, the territorial affiliation of *shtetlekh* by groups, Hasidic synagogues in the United States in 1900, Hasidic *yeshivot* in interwar Poland, and escape routes for *tzaddikim* during the Holocaust.

In terms of contemporary Hasidic society, we have, inter alia, maps of settlement by country, the geographic spread of *tsaddikim* by both county and city, Habad centers worldwide, and pilgrimage sites to graves. The maps are very detailed and present us with much more information than just a flat geographic representation. For example, the map of Habad centers has two layers, 1999 and 2016, graphically expressing the dramatic growth of the movement over the last twenty years. Similarly, the maps of contemporary pilgrimage sites not only picture where they are located but also the number of pilgrims who visit on the *yartseit* of the local *tsaddik*. Thus, one is immediately struck by the massive numbers of pilgrims who arrive annually in Uman, with Lizensk a distant second and Belz, Sanz, and Krakow (the Rema) far behind in third place. Surprisingly Mezibuzh (the Besht), Annipoli (the Magid), and Hidich (Ba'al Ha-Tanya) barely make it on the map. The examples that one could bring are endless; however, this is a book that has to be seen to be appreciated.

Returning to the methodological observations that we opened with, it is important to point out that in the past there were scholars who attempted to combine both the historical and the “Jewish Thought” approaches to Hasidism. Gershom Scholem, for example, authored path-finding articles on both *Dveikut* (1949) and on the *Historical Figure of the Baal Shem Tov* (1960). Scholem’s student Joseph Weiss, too, wove both genres together and both Jacob Katz¹ and Joseph Dan² saw this as one of Weiss’ primary contributions to Hasidic research. None of this is to suggest that it has been a smooth fit, and I have been present at several vocal exchanges between scholars of the two opposing fields. It thus seems

¹ Jacob Katz, “Joseph G. Weiss: A Personal Appraisal,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rappaport Albert (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1996), 3-9.

² Joseph Dan, “Joseph Weiss Today,” in *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism and Hasidism*, 2nd Edition, ed. David Goldstein (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), x-xx.

to me that when Dan wrote some twenty years ago, “This separation of disciplines is now long forgotten, and today scholars from both fields cooperate,”³ he may have spoken too soon. Nonetheless, there is growing appreciation for the need for an interdisciplinary approach, as evidenced by the words of Moshe Idel (the leading representative of the school of Jewish Thought) in praise of *Key Questions*, “Unlike the more conceptually-oriented approach, which prefers to focus on spiritual life...this book offers a fresh approach to neglected aspects such as economics...history... and the self-identity of both men and women in Hasidism.”⁴

As one who comes from the field of Jewish Thought, but who shares a passion for history as well, I welcome a more integrated approach to Hasidic studies. We “philosophers” need a constant reality check to our theories, and the allegedly “dry facts” provided by historians is exactly where we need to look. On the other hand, if the historians would delve more deeply into the philological studies of Hasidic texts, I believe their historical studies would be enriched as well. If both schools would learn to make wise use of all of the available source material, we would all benefit.

³ Ibid.

⁴ In his blurb on the back of the jacket cover of *Key Questions*.