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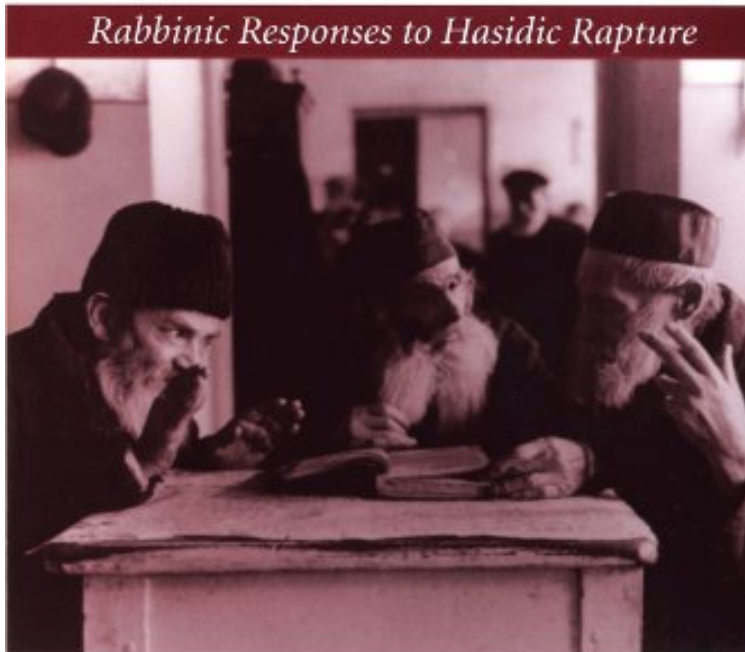
The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture (Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies)

Allan Nadler

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THE FAITH OF THE MITHNAGDIM

Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture



ALLAN NADLER

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Allan Nadler : The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture (Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture (Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A thought provoking book. You almost don't understand how ...By

CustomerA thought provoking book. You almost don't understand how the author so thoroughly confuses you. He has the ability of presenting what seems at first to be two contradictory ideas, then slowly blurs the lines very well until they seem in accord. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Right from the beginning

By Yaakov (James) Mosher
An excellent exposition and appreciation of the "other" black-clad Jews of Eastern Europe. Prof. Allan Nadler uses university-style scholarship to travel upstream Conrad-like to the heart of greatness. Finishing "The Faith of the Mithnagdim" should not be viewed as the end of something but a springboard to greater heights in study and spirituality. Mithnagdic Judaism is not for the average person, especially the contemporary American Jew. It is bound to be out of fashion and comprehension in any setting where democracy and presumption are enthroned. Rabbeinu Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, the saintly Gaon of Vilna (Vilnius, Lithuania), is the sun around which the bright stars of the Mithnagged galaxy revolve. The Gaon, known even among his adversaries by the acronym GRA - G for gaon (genius), R for Rabbeinu (teacher par excellence), A for Eliyahu (the Hebrew letter aleph begins the name Eliyahu) - is an enigma in that a man of such accomplishment is required to teach that not all are capable of understanding deep concepts thus modesty is necessary dress for every Jew. Interestingly, the GRA and his most revered student, Rabbeinu Chaim Volozhiner (father of the Lithuanian yeshiva movement), are not the main characters of this book. Rabbi Pinchus (Phineas) ben Yehudah ZT"l of Polotsk gets that honor. A scholarly maggid (traveling preacher), Rav Pinchus began most of his written works (which include Kether Torah and Rosh Hagiveah) by explaining why they needed to be written and summarizing their uniqueness. In focusing on Rav Pinchus, Rabbi Nadler is doing the same thing. Rabbi Nadler, a talmid of Rav Leib Baron, should take satisfaction from his production. The book is dedicated to the author's late grandfather, Yehezkel Zevi (Harry) ben Aharon - the neshama should have an aliyah. "The Faith of the Mithnagdim" contains more gems per page than any college press book you'll ever read. It aims squarely at deflating the unbridled optimism of Hasidism and the Enlightenment (Haskalah) - two phenomena that have gone like wildfire through the Orthodox Jewish world and Western civilization at large. The true adherents of Torah didn't go along for the ride ("Mithnagdim" means those opposed), remaining right from the beginning. Mithnagged religion is dualistic where Hasidism is monistic. Conservative Mithnagdim kept/keeps pride of place for rabbinic scholarship and positivist performance of commandments where as Hasidism tilted the field toward prayer and widespread teaching of kabbalah (mysticism). Although this populist attitude toward kabbalah has had some absurd results, such as the non-Jewish singer Madonna "learning" kabbalah (fill your bare belly on Shas and posikim first, Miss), Hasidim have proved the most immune to the cancer of the Haskalah (the so-called "Enlightenment"). Maybe we Mithnagdim need to try harder with kabbalah although the study of mussar (ethics) shouldn't suffer as a result. By the way, the GRA gives a marvelous explanation as to why Torah study beats prayer (p.56) - Torah lishmah (learning for its own sake) is unselfish communion that secures a person in this world and the after life where as petitionary prayer is aimed just at this world. Rabbi Nadler's work provides some needed ice for the readers of books like Elie Wiesel's "Souls on Fire" (which describes what happens to Hasidim after death. Ha! I'm kidding. Just a little Litvak humor there). Although the critique of Hasidism is spot-on, our author does his best work in separating the Mithnagdim from the Haskalah and showing what the Haskalah did to the Jewish and Christian worlds. Rav Pinchus began Kether Torah with strong criticism of the Haskalah (Nadler, p. 135). The maggid saw clearly how scientific/technical knowledge would come to be more valued than the goodness of Torah. Consider today's constant drumbeat for college degrees amid moral decline in business, government, and academia. Torah teaches goodness and there's no substitute. The Haskalah also sired today's materialism. It replaced religious values with the moral neutrality of economic/social "success" and "failure." It's no surprise that Jewish businessmen were the strongest supporters of Haskalah. How badly has this damaged Jewish morals and religion? It's so bad that most Jews, even many Orthodox, think perishuth (material abstinence/ascetic piety) is anathema to Judaism. It's sunk so deep that commentators to the ArtScroll Siddur on Mishnah Avos 6:4 concerning the way of Torah - "eat bread with salt...sleep on the ground...live a life of deprivation etc." - dare write "asceticism is not being advocated here." The heck it's not. Since the GRA wrote a geometry book during his trips to the toilet and he and his circle had issues with the Hasidim, the Maskilim seek to claim him. Chas v'shalom, answers Rabbi Nadler. The refutation is effected nicely through the citation of Rabbi Yisrael Loeb's Even Bohan. It even fits well with the parsha of the week as I'm writing this (Bechukosai). Mithnagged Rav Yisrael used Rav Saadia Gaon's approach in showing how the non-rational commandments (chukkim) are the Israelite nation's glory and bring all mankind closer to perfection even though no one other than G-d can say exactly how. As I complete this review on Lag B'Omer 5771 I pray that it will be joined to Rabbi Nadler's fine book and the glorious works of our Mithnagged fathers to fashion a G-dly and goodly unscrewing of the Haskalah light bulb, returning refreshing mystery to our lives.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. interesting but I wonder how representative R. Pincus is

By Michael Lewyn
This book seeks to explain the differences between the early Hasidim and their traditionalist East European opponents in the late 18th century. It is NOT intended to describe either group today; the "Litvish" Jews of 2013 would not recognize the portrait painted by Nadler, for the simple reason that even if Nadler's emphasis is right, their tradition has evolved. Nadler points out the following major differences between Hasidim and Mithnagdim: 1. Although both groups favored mysticism, Hasids tended to believe that all Jews should study mysticism. Mithnagdim believed that only a spiritual elite could comprehend mysticism, and that

unlettered Jews would misuse mysticism. (This view is certainly understandable, since 17th-century false Messiahs used mystical texts to justify their claims).² Mithnagdim were more ascetic, while Hasidim were less so. Hasidim tended to emphasize the presence of God in everything.³ More broadly, Mithnagdim tended to believe that life in this world is not particularly good, and that only the world to come is worth pursuing. Hasidim tended to value life in this world. In addition, Mithnagdim claimed that Hasidim underestimated the importance of following Jewish law and of Torah study (though it is unclear to what extent this charge was justified). I do wonder whether Nadler's focus on R. Pincus of Polotsk is justified. R. Pincus wrote that man "is filled with indignity and shame until the day when they will match him with a wife arrives; she too is a repugnant dribble, and even if he happened to have found an unusually good woman, she is never really more than a container filled with manure." It is hard for me to believe that such a grim attitude is representative of any element of Judaism.

The Faith of the Mithnagdim is the first study of the theological roots of the Mithnagdic objection to Hasidism. Allan Nadler's pioneering effort fills the void in scholarship on Mithnagdic thought and corrects the impression that there were no compelling theological alternatives to Hasidism during the period of its rapid spread across Eastern Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century. In Nadler's account, Mithnagdim emerges as a highly developed religious outlook that is essentially conservative, deeply dualistic, and profoundly pessimistic about humanity's spiritual potential all in stark contrast to Hasidism's optimism and aggressive encouragement of mysticism and religious rapture among its followers.

"Allan Nadler has performed a great service by bringing the Mithnagdim more to light. The spiritual universe that he has unearthed with erudition, imagination, and care is now more accessible to students of Jewish history and of religion in general.." (New Republic)"After reading this book, and as one who was brought up by teachers of Judaism in the Mithnagdic tradition, I found myself wondering whether Nadler's picture of Mithnagdic pessimism, otherworldliness and asceticism is really typical of that movement or only of some of its early leaders. Perhaps the answer to this will be in a forthcoming book. But whatever Nadler's future plans, this reviewer feels that he has presented us with an important, interesting, and readable work for anyone seeking a better and more balanced understanding of Judaism in the modern age." (Joshua Adler Jerusalem Post)"In many ways Nadler's work defines the model of a first-rate monograph on an important subject... It is lucidly argued and carefully drafted. The technical achievement of figuring out what is going on in difficult texts matches the intellectual achievement of framing the whole in terms that bear consequence for a wide audience interested in the history of Judaism within the history of religion work that makes a difference, indeed a huge difference." (Jacob Neusner Conservative Judaism)"In reconstructing the 'faith of the Mithnagdim,' Nadler introduces us to a remarkable universe of individuals and ideas. His pioneering reconstruction of Mithnagdic thought marks a turning point in our understanding of a crucial moment in Jewish history. From now on, anyone interested in the development of modern Judaism will have to take into account what he has done." (Jay Harris Commentary)"Nadler's work is a significant contribution to Jewish intellectual history and has wider significance in that it is also the first attempt to come to terms with thinkers who, until now, have been greatly misunderstood. It would not be surprising if Nadler's book became the impetus for much further research in this area." (Marc B. Shapiro Journal of Jewish Studies)"Nadler's book opens up a whole area of investigation in the history of Jewish religious thought. Through a close analysis of the writings of the renowned Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (the 'Vilna Gaon') and several of his disciples, Nadler totally revises our image of Mithnagdim and establishes it as an extremely important movement. He deals with a whole array of basic theological and religious issues: divine immanence, prayer, asceticism, worldliness, and enlightenment. It is required reading for anyone interested in Jewish religious thought." (David E. Fishman, Jewish Theological Seminary of America)"Nadler's book opens up a whole area of investigation in the history of Jewish religious thought. Through a close analysis of the writings of the renowned Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (the 'Vilna Gaon') and several of his disciples, Nadler totally revises our image of Mithnagdim and establishes it as an extremely important movement. He deals with a whole array of basic theological and religious issues -- divine immanence, prayer, asceticism, worldliness, and enlightenment. It is required reading for anyone interested in Jewish religious thought." -- David E. Fishman, Jewish Theological Seminary of America

About the Author Allan Nadler is the Wallerstein Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Drew University. He has written for Commentary, Modern Judaism, New Republic, and other journals.