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Elijah Judah Schochet
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#1716483 in Books Jason Aronson, Inc. 1993-07-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 1.02 x 6.27 x 9.241, 1.25 #File Name: 1568211252257 pages | File size: 30.Mb

Elijah Judah Schochet : The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The background to the disagreement By joel schnur I have found this book to be the most informative on the historical background regarding the fight between the Misnagdim and Chasidim. I highly recommend it to all. 8 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Excellent insight into the history of the Hasidic sect By A Customer Today the Hasidic movement is associated with mainstream Orthodox Judaism and is accepted around the world. This book takes us back to a time where the Hasidic movement was considered to be a threat to the future of Judaism. It is shown that the main opponent was the renowned Gaon of Vilna, a scholar of incredible genius, well versed in Talmudic and Kabbalistic teachings. His main concerns were that the Hasidic movement was guilty of sexual impropriety, heresy, breaching certain Halakhic teachings and numerous other offenses. The book details the alleged violations that the Hasidim were accused of. With regards to these improprieties, the author does not discount the possibility that the Gaon may not have had adequate contact with the Hasidim themselves, and that certain infractions may have been exaggerated, fabricated or at the very least were not representative of the general population of the sect. When one reads about the origin of some of the customs, rituals and beliefs of the Hasidic movement, it is amazing that it is still widely respected and accepted. Some of its contemporaries (including the founder: the Baal Shem Tov) initiated and taught some incredibly peculiar principles and practices when it came to prayer, granting divine status to the "Tzaddik" and their emphasis on consumption of

alcohol and frivolity. Granted that the movement was initially targeted at the less educated masses, it does not excuse some of the more unorthodox and sometimes barbaric practices that it advocated. The author has gone to great lengths to provide a very fair and unbiased view of the conflict between the Gaon and the Hasidim, and presents a very enjoyable walk through Jewish history. Thoroughly recommended! 8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

an interesting look back at the not-so-good old days
By Michael Lewyn
If your Jewish learning is limited to the sanitized history taught in Hebrew school, you might think all Jews got along swimmingly until the past 100 years or so. In fact, intra-Jewish dissension was sometimes far uglier than it is today. This book discusses one such situation: the relationship between the founders of Hasidism and other Eastern European Jews. In the spring of 1772, a rabbinic court in Vilna, Lithuania (one of Eastern Europe's more influential Jewish communities) ordered that Hasidic books were to be burned near the entrance of the Great Synagogue of Vilna. Later that year, the Gaon of Vilna (arguably the greatest Torah scholar of his time) and the rabbinical court of Vilna issued an edict ordering Lithuanian Jews "to extirpate, to destroy, to outlaw, and to excommunicate" the Hasidim (p. 11). In 1781, the Vilna elders issued a second ban, ordering that "one may not associate with them or speak with them" and that any Hasidim "must remove their residence from our community" (p. 13). Numerous other communities excommunicated Hasidim, and banned numerous practices then common among Hasidim (such as wearing white). The Gaon suggested that these bans were inadequate, asserting: "If I were in my power I would have dealt with them as the prophet Elijah dealt with the prophets of Baal!" [i.e. kill them] (p. 10). Another town's leadership ordered that "All possible measures are to be adopted to put an end to the prayer meetings" (p. 21) of Hasidim and that "Careful watch is to be maintained that no one should study their literature" (Id.) This book seeks to answer the question: why were the Gaon of Vilna and other rabbinic leaders so hostile to the early Hasidim? To be sure, the rabbinic establishment may have been misinformed, or may have learned about isolated instances of aberrant behavior by Hasidim. But there were real differences between the Hasidim and their opponents (commonly known as the Mitnagdim, or "opponents"). To name a few: *Some Hasids treated their rebbes as infallible, or as supernatural prophet-like figures; some Hasidic rebbes financially exploited their followers much as some religious leaders do today. The Hasids' focus on charismatic leadership was especially upsetting to 18th century Jews, because in recent memory, false Messiahs such as Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank had captivated the imaginations of some Jews. The Mitnagdim worried that the Hasids' obsession with charismatic leadership could lead to another false Messiah movement, if not to actual idolatry. *Some early Hasids deemphasized Torah and Talmudic scholarship in favor not only of deeds, but also in favor of prayer, devotional literature, and mystical literature. Mitnagdim believed that most Jews should focus on "the fundamentals of the Talmud" (p. 54)- or to (over)simplify, that Hasids were dumbing down Judaism. *Hasidim emphasized inner states (joy as opposed to melancholy, for example) as opposed to external behavior. Mitnagdim worried that this emphasis could lead to a lax attitude towards halakha (Jewish law). This book is sympathetic to the Mitnagdic point of view. But the author points out that the Mitnagdim, despite their rationalism, were hardly modern liberals. In 18th century Eastern Europe, Jewish communities were self-governing and highly coercive. For example, one visitor to the Vilna Gaon opined (in the author's words) "that Rashi [a medieval Torah commentator] did not always expound biblical texts according to their plain meaning, and that the midrashic expositors did not always follow grammatical rules in their Biblical exegesis" (p. 197). The visitor was not only berated by his host, but was shortly thereafter given the following treatment by the community (in his own words): "on account of defaming the sages of old I was condemned to forty strokes . . . I was then led to the threshold of the synagogue and my neck was enclosed within the iron rings attached to the wall, so as thus to expose me to the people, with a piece of paper on my head bearing the words: `This man has been punished for scoffing at the words of our holy teachers' . . . they spat nearly into my face, so that the spittle really flowed in streams." (p. 197). To sum up: the Mitnagdim believed that the Hasidic movement had cult-like tendencies; the Hasids believed that the Mitnagdim were grim, joyless and oppressive. But there was a happy ending to this dispute: In the 19th century, the Hasids moved towards the Mitnagdic point of view in a variety of ways- most notably by endorsing higher levels of halakhic stringency and a renewed emphasis on Torah scholarship. As a result, bitter Hasidic/Mitnagdic rivalry is a thing of the past.

Although Hasidic Jews are today associated with mainstream Orthodoxy, Hasidism, during the year of its genesis, was bitterly opposed and indicted with bans of excommunication by the Jewish establishment. In *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, Elijah Judah Schochet analyzes the conflict centering on the Hasidic movement in the eighteenth century and the role played by the leader of the opposition, Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna. The reasons Hasidism was challenged are of value not only vis-a-vis historical curiosity but in terms of the nature of traditional Judaism, its religious priorities, and the perceived dangers inherent in the Hasidic style of rabbinic leadership. Tzaddikim were singularly authorized to descend into sin's domain to emancipate the sinner in cases of vice and iniquity, and these actions were viewed by the mitnagdim, or opponents, as "a dangerous flirtation with the notion of 'sin.'" Schochet embarks on a fascinating foray into the misconceptions held by the opponents of the Hasidim that fueled the tension between the two. Rabbi Elijah, known as the Gaon of Vilna, who was the outstanding rabbinic scholar of his time, emerged from his cloistered existence to confront and battle these seemingly ostensible threats

from within the hasidic movement. However, there is no record of his having personally encountered hasidic Jews. Why, then, was he so disturbed by Hasidism? What threats did he perceive the movement posed? Did the excommunication of the hasidim by the Gaon of Vilna really occur? In *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, Schochet attempts to unravel the mystery underlying Rabbi Elijah and his campaign against the hasidic movement. Some aspects of the controversy between Hasidism and the mitnagdim still linger today, and Rabbi Schochet's effort to explicate the eighteenth-century dilemma and its contenders allows the reader a more privileged glance at past tensions as well as an understanding of the players in today's drama