

On the Origins of the Chassidic Movement – A Critique

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

Yaffa Eliach is a historian known primarily for studies on the holocaust and her popular work *Hasidic Tales of The Holocaust*. Therein she portrays unique accounts that serve as a window into the Hasidic reaction to pain and suffering.¹

While she is well known as a historian of the holocaust and has received various awards and honors for her work in that field, she is less acclaimed as an authority on Hasidic tradition and thought.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding that Hasidic origins and tradition fall out of her regular purview, in 1968 she authored a paper entitled “The Russian Dissenting Sects and Their Influence on Israel Baal Shem Tov, Founder of Hassidism.”²

In this work she suggests that the founder of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi Yisroel Baal Shem Tov, knowingly and intentionally studied the works of Christian mystics, hid these heretical works from prying eyes and built his movement upon them.

Indeed, she suggests that the origins of various practices of the new movement had their root in the peculiar customs of the Raskolnik Christian sect that splintered off from the Russian Orthodox Church in the mid-17th century.

In this short article, we will deal with certain aspects of her claim. We will endeavor to demonstrate the mediocrity of her sources, the inferiority of her research and the absurdity of her conclusions. In fact, her work reads like the outlandish ravings of a conspiracy theorist, rather than the product of serious historical research.³

From the outset it is important to mention that she authored this work at the beginning of her career—well before she completed her doctorate in 1973 and before she had even finished her MA in 1969.

One can only hope that further in her career, after receiving greater academic training, she relied on stronger research before postulating outlandish theories or arriving at wild conclusions.

¹ See comments by Chaim Potock *Hasidic Tales of The Holocaust*, Oxford University Press (1982) Pg. 278.

² Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, Vol. 36 (1968), pp. 57-83

³ Indeed, Alisa Zilbershtein, *The comparative analyses of Jewish and Russian mystical religious movements of XVII-XVIII centuries*. (Paideia 2011-2012) Pg. 1 points out concerning Eliach’s study, that: “These studies were harshly dismissed by most of the scholars.” Indeed Gershon Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, Pg. 362 note 37 “ungraciously dismisses the above approach suggesting a contact between the Besht and Russian Sectarism” as quoted in Eliach’s own doctoral dissertation, *Jewish Hasidism, Russian Sectarism, Non-Conformists in the Ukraine, 1700-1750*, (Yaffa Eliach, 1973 NYU).

While ordinarily it is pointless to bring up a study that seems to be all but forgotten, I feel it is important to critique this, as I have seen mention of it on the internet, as if its speculations are conclusive.

Most curiously, I have noticed individuals who usually see things critically and clear headedly, becoming suddenly incapable of viewing this article objectively. It seems to me that this reflects on their preconceived biases, in that sadly, they readily accept any article that sheds a negative light on Chassidism—and indeed on much of “traditional” Jewish practice in general.

Raskolniks and Russia

Yaffa Eliach begins her paper with a commentary on a theory postulated by Jacob Katz concerning the socio-economic upheaval that, in his opinion, gave rise to the Chassidic movement.⁴ She opines that his theory does not go far enough, saying:⁵

“However, a close examination of the historical data and geography related to the birth of Hassidism suggests that Professor Katz' thesis must be modified even more radically than he admits. For while he feels that "any explanation of that phenomenon [of the rise of Hassidism] must focus [exclusively] on changes within the Jewish community," it seems clear that Hassidism resulted from the direct personal contact of the Besht with Raskolniks.

She begins her theory with the certitude that the Besht had “direct personal contact...with Raskolniks” who, according to her, greatly influenced his thinking. However, almost immediately she runs into major problems in trying to prove her claim.

In order to prove that the Besht had any interaction with the Raskolniks, she must first establish a Russian connection altogether. However, being that the Besht founded his movement in Podolia, Ukraine and he himself was born in Okopy, Ukraine, close to the Polish border and the Ottoman Empire, this presents an initial gap in her theory from the outset.

Being that the Ukraine was predominantly Catholic and the Raskolniks were a Russian Orthodox sect of “Old Believers” that clung to church tradition and were averse to reform, it is highly unlikely that a significant number of Raskolniks resided in the Ukraine during the Baal Shem Tov’s formative years.

However, in her desire to build the “Raskolnik Connection” she heaps speculation upon speculation and builds her entire theory on a tapestry of assumptions that begin with an analysis of Shichei Ha-Besht.⁶

⁴ Masoret U'mashber (Tradition and Crisis) [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1958), pp. 266-267.

⁵ Eliach, *ibid* Pg.

⁶ Interestingly she writes in footnote 21: “The major historians of Hassidism rely on Shivchei HaBesht as source material for the early period of the Besht's Hassidism.” This though is completely false as from Dubnov and on the authenticity of the work has been questioned as expressed below. At most what historians bring is the anecdotal evidence expressed through the stories.

Shivchei Ha-Besht

The first place she turns to is the book, *Shivchei HaBesht*.⁷ On the one hand she admits that all academic scholarship considers it to be hagiography, and states that it is, “A collection of Hassidic tales and legends.” On the other hand, this does not at all deter her from resorting to the minute details of the book to reconstruct an account of the Baal Shem Tov’s life.⁸

Indeed, not only has academic scholarship questioned the veracity of the accounts in this work, but traditional Chassidic Rebbes and scholars as well, have questioned its authenticity.⁹

Concerning the accuracy of Shivchei HaBesht one is reminded of the well known statement of Rabbi Shlomo, the Radmosker Rebbe that, “Whoever believes the stories in Shivchei HaBesht is an idiot, but whoever denies them is a heretic.”

His point is that surely, the Holy Baal Shem Tov was capable of doing any of the miracles recounted in Shivchei HaBesht, but whether he actually did is anyone’s guess. While one can perhaps glean historical data from the generalities of these stories, it is somewhat imprudent to build far-reaching theories upon the minute details of these stories.

Notwithstanding the dubious veracity of its stories, she spins her theory around an episode recorded in Shivchei HaBesht that allegedly occurred regarding the Baal Shem Tov’s father.

Translating from Shivchei HaBesht:¹⁰

“Rabbi M. Eliezer, the Besht's father, lived in the province of Wallachia near the border. He and his wife were old. Once pillagers came to the town and captured him. His wife fled to another town; as a result of her poverty she [was forced] to become a midwife and this was her means of livelihood. They took him to a far-away province, a place where there were no Jews, and sold him there. He served his master faithfully, was well-liked by him and was appointed supervisor of the household. He asked his master for permission to rest on the Sabbath and the request was granted. After many years he wanted to flee in order to save himself. It was revealed to him in a dream that he should not be impatient,

⁷ Printed by Dov Baer ben Shmuel haShochet, 1814 in Kapust.

⁸ For academic scholarship concerning the accuracy of the work see Avraham Rubenstein, *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (Jerusalem 1991). Emanuel Etkes, *Sefer Shivchei Ha-Besht Kamakor Histori*, Merkaz Zalman Shazar (Jerusalem 2000) Pg. 217-265, and many other works.

⁹ See Shem HaGedolim HaChadash (R. Ahahon Valdine) who writes that the author did a disservice to the Besht by printing inauthentic stories—thus causing a reader to doubt authentic ones as well. See as well Likutei Halachot, Pesach 7:3 from R. Nachman of Breslav who expressed that although in general the stories are true, details may not be. Additionally, in the work *Ohr Pnei Yitzchak* (pg. 56) the author expresses an account in the name of the Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak of Gur that the stories are untrue. While Chabad Rebbe’s have indeed praised the work, it seems possible that it because they believed all the stories *may* have taken place, *not* that they actually did. For further discussion see Yehoshua Mundshain, *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (Jerusalem 1982) pg. 53ff.

¹⁰ The translations of Shivchei Ha-Besht are from Eilach unless otherwise expressed.

as he had yet to stay in this province. And it came to pass that his master had dealings with the king's minister and advisor and he gave him R. Eliezer as a gift.”

Based on this dubious legend—in which she admits that there are other accounts of Eliezer’s life—she inserts fanciful speculations in an attempt to establish a “Russian connection”. As Jews were forbidden to live in parts of Russia at the time, she assumes that the country he must have been kidnapped to was Russia. In truth, there is no foundation for this theory, because during the Khmelnytsky Uprising, Jews who were sold into slavery were often sent to Turkey and various other destinations.¹¹ One can easily assume that Eliezer made his way to some other country. Indeed, from the alleged fame that Eliezer received and that Eliezer is not mentioned in Russian history, it is doubtful that Eliezer was ever kidnapped to Russia.

From an account of a sea battle in Shivchei Ha-Besht,¹² she makes the wild assumption that the king mentioned in the story must have been Peter the Great (1689-1725) who waged a battle on the river Don. However, in addition to the discrepancy between a sea battle and a river battle and the fact that sea battles were quite common in that era, it is an incredible leap of logic to equate the two and assume that they were one and the same battle!

Furthermore, there are additional discrepancies that undermine this “Russian connection”. According to the story in Shivchei Ha-Besht,¹³ “The King went with his soldiers in boats to fight over the possession of a region.” When Eliezer’s advice won the war, “they shaved him, changed his clothes and brought him before the king in a small boat.”¹⁴ As a reward Eliezer was awarded the daughter of the minister as a wife, though eventually she sends him back to his land.

It is interesting to note that the historical battle of Peter the Great was not led by him at all. He was quite distant from the fighting. Instead, the battle was led by Franz Lefort. This throws an additional wrench into Yaffa Eliach’s attempt to equate the two stories.

Additionally, Peter the Great was a tremendous anti-Semite, having once stated: “I prefer to see in our midst nations professing Mohammedanism and paganism rather than Jews. They are rogues and cheats. It is my endeavor to eradicate evil, not to multiply it.”¹⁵ It is highly doubtful then that he would award an un-converted Jew the hand of marriage of the daughter of one of his ministers.

Additionally, there is the problem of dating. This historical battle on the river Don took place in the summer of 1696, whereas the Baal Shem Tov was born two years later, in the summer of 1698.

¹¹ See Encyclopedia Judaica, Khmelnitzki. Indeed, seeing the slavery of Jews is what awaked the messianic fervor in Shabatai Tzvi.

¹² Shivchei Ha-Besht, p. 42.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ While she assumes that this means that they shaved his beard, attempting through this to prove that this was indeed Peter who disliked beards, there is no reason to assume so. The literal translation is that they gave him a haircut and in all probability is borrowed from the story of Yosef and Pharaoh.

¹⁵ Levitats, Isaac (1943). *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1772-1844*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 20–21.

Though technically it could have been possible, nonetheless it seems rather farfetched to believe that in such a short period of time Eliezer was granted his freedom, made the long and arduous journey home, re-united with his wife and sired a child nine months later.

Even if this account were true—though it certainly is doubtful at best, it only connects the Baal Shem Tov's father to Russia, rather than the Baal Shem Tov himself. It would need to be further assumed that this incident profoundly affected the son, who was orphaned of both parents at the young age of five.

Adam Baal Shem and Adam Zernikov

According to Shivchei HaBesht, the initiation of the Baal Shem Tov into the world of kabbalistic literature began with the following account:¹⁶

“There was once a man named Rabbi Adam from whom the Besht received his writings. [Rabbi Adam] once came to a cave and found manuscripts there dealing with the secrets of the Torah.... He asked that he be answered in a dream as to whom he should give the manuscripts. And he was answered that he should give them to Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer from the city of Akop. Before his death he instructed his only son: "I have in my possession manuscripts containing secrets of the Torah but I am not worthy of them. Search out one city - its name is Akop - and find there a man called Yisrael ben Eliezer, who is about 14 years old. Give him the manuscripts, for they belong to the essence of his soul - and if you will be worthy of studying with him, that too would be good." After the death of our teacher Rabbi Adam, his only son, an outstanding scholar of the highest character, took a cart and horses and went from town to town until he came to Akop and he stayed with one of the good people of the town, who asked him from whence he came and to where he was going, for it seemed that he was not there to collect money. He answered: "My late father was a well-known saintly man. Before his death he commanded me to take a wife from Akop and I must fulfill his command." Immediately the city was in an uproar, arranging several matches. He married into the family of a well-to-do man, for he was well-liked by all who saw him. After the wedding, he began to seek the object of his search but was able to find only Yisrael, the caretaker of the Beit HaMidrash. His keen insight revealed to him that his appearance may be deceiving and it is possible that this is the man whom he was seeking.”

Based on this, Yaffa Eliach literally builds “Castles in the air” by postulating that Adam Baal Shem, whose manuscripts influenced the Baal Shem Tov, was none other than Adam Zernikov, a Christian priest—allegedly—of the Raskolnik cult.

Further, she makes the wild assumption that Adam Zernikov, just happened to be on the above mentioned boat with Eliezer, influencing him to such a degree that Eliezer allowed his only son to learn from this priest.

She speculates that it was Eliezer, rather than the prophetic dream in the story, who told Adam (Zernikov) about his son. She states, “It is more likely, however, that he got this information from Eliezer.” However, as pointed out above, this would be impossible, since the Baal Shem Tov was

¹⁶ Shivchei HaBesht, pp. 44, 45.

not born until two years later! Certainly Eliezer could not tell him about a child that was yet to be conceived!

In writing about Adam (Baal Shem), she begins with a theory postulated by Gershom Scholem that this was not a real name.¹⁷

She quotes:

“The name Rabbi Adam, which was exceedingly unusual among Jews of that period, seemed to prove that the so-called Rabbi was in reality a legendary figure and I am personally inclined to the view that the whole story of his literary heritage was a figment of the imagination.”

Instead, Scholem assumed that these manuscripts of Adam Baal Shem were in reality the writings of a Rabbi Hershel Tzoref of Vilna, who died in 1700.¹⁸

While indeed Adam is not a standard Ashkenazic name,¹⁹ Chana Shamruk has already pointed out that during the 17th century there was a kabbalist named Adam living in the city of Prague.²⁰ Now, even if one does not accept her theory that the kabbalist of Prague is the author of the Besht's manuscripts, it demonstrates that this name was indeed extant during this period.²¹

Scholem uses to claim that the manuscripts were actually the work of Rabbi Tzoref, Eliach however, takes it into the realm of the absurd by claiming that the writings were of Christian origin.

She writes:²²

“It is quite possible that the "king's adviser" to whom Eliezer was given, was the adviser to the Hetman of Baturin and that Adam thus met Eliezer. Adam, himself a foreigner (a Prussian, born in Koenigsberg in 1652), might well have taken an interest in Eliezer, who spoke Yiddish, a dialect of German... It is more likely, however, that he got this information from Eliezer...It is at least possible that the Besht kept his manuscripts secret because they were in fact not Jewish sources but rather Raskol literature. If that is the case, the years

¹⁷ G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism Pg. 331. *Chapters in Sabbatian Research*, Zion, חוברת א טבת תש"א, Vol. pp. 85-100. See as well Ch. Shmeruk, *Tales About R'Adam Baal Shem in the Versions of Shivkhei Ha'besht*, Zion, Vol. / 1963), pp. 86-105.

¹⁸ Mundshein, *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (Jerusalem 1982) pg. 58ff. has already demonstrated the multiple issues that arise from equating the two texts—one that the Besht saw only as an old man and desired to make copies of and the other that he already had when he was 14 and hid. See as well Margolijot that points out that there is no reason to assume a connection as why would one only assume that the Besht had one text in his possession. Why should the mention of one kabbalistic text prove that this is the other?

¹⁹ See Sefer Chassidim _____

²⁰ שמרוק, חנא. הסיפורים על ר' אדם בעל שם וגילגוליהם בנוסחאות ספר "שבחי הבעש"ט". ציון כח (תשכ"ג), עמ' 105-86

²¹ For more theories as to the identity of this individual see Avraham Rubenstein, ועל על רבו של הבעש"ט ועל הכתבים שמהם למד הבעש"ט, תרביץ מח (תשל"ט), עמ' 146-158 and Reuven Margolijot who postulate additional theories—each less farfetched than what is expressed here.

²² Pg. 68.

of isolation could be viewed as a period during which the Besht formulated his views and worked the Raskolnik ideas and customs into a Judaic framework.”

However, this theory is replete with numerous problems:

- A) There is no reason to assume the fanciful theory that Adam Zernikov ever met the Baal Shem Tov’s father, or that he and Adam Baal Shem are one and the same person. Indeed, other than the fact that both shared the name Adam, there is absolutely nothing that ties these two men together. The assumption that Eliezer took part in a battle on the river Don, based upon the assumption that he was kidnapped to Russia, based upon the assumption that Adam Zernikov was also a participant in the battle and met him there, is nothing but conjecture based on conjecture based on conjecture.
- B) Though the name Adam may not have been common, it is quite a leap of logic to assume that it therefore was the Christian priest Adam Zernikov. Not only is the evidence flimsy, it is non-existent! This is akin to assuming that if someone in the last century knew someone by the name of Dwight, it must have been President Dwight D. Eisenhower, because it is an uncommon name.
- C) Even if we were to accept the theory that Eliezer was involved in the battle on the river Don, it would still be impossible for him to tell Adam Zernikov about a son that was yet to be born. As we pointed out, the Baal Shem Tov was born two years later. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that Eliezer kept a correspondence with a former captor, especially at a time when correspondence in general was very difficult!
- D) There is no reason to believe that Adam Zernikov was connected in any way to the Raskolniks. That a Lutheran by birth, who was educated in the great western Universities of Koenigsberg, Oxford, Paris, Milan, and Venice,²³ would somehow become a writer and proponent of a breakaway Russian Orthodox cult obsessed with keeping the Old beliefs and rituals of Russian Orthodoxy, is rather incredulous to say the least.
- E) In her assumption she assumes that Adam Zerkinov had a daughter who married Eliezer and a son who was send to learn with the young Besht. However, there is no historical data to back this assumption.²⁴
- F) At that time the Raskolniks were an illegal, persecuted, fringe group that separated from the Russian public with their peculiar customs. It is doubtful that were Adam to have been a Raskolnik—or one of particular religiosity—that he would have been appointed to an important position in the Russian navy.

What is most outrageous is that she uses spurious anecdotal statements, heavily supplemented with pure speculation to postulate her bizarre theory, that—G-d forbid—the Holy Baal Shem Tov was knowingly influenced by Christian texts, at the same time ignoring the numerous accounts in Shivchei HaBesht about how he saved Jews from conversion into Christianity.

²³ A. Zernikov, *De Processine Spiritus Sancti A Suo Patre*. Biography and Russian trans. by Mislavski (Kiev, 1774).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Postulating that the Baal Shem Tov was a charlatan who studied Christian texts, without a shred of tangible evidence to support it, is the greatest kind of libel. This argument would not hold up in any court and certainly not in the court of history and scholarship.

Such a theory could only carry weight if she were to show remarkable similarity between the writings of Adam Zernikov and the secret texts in the possession of the Baal Shem Tov, or similarities between Raskolnik writings in general and the texts of the Baal Shem Tov.

However, this endeavor is in the realm of the impossible, since we are talking about hidden texts that we have no access to. The entire notion of connecting two 17th century texts that are no longer extant, based solely on flimsy speculation without a shred of real evidence is ludicrous and appalling at best.

While there is an attempt in her thesis to show some correlation between Chassidic and Raskolnik practices, she fails dismally in showing any kind of correlation whatsoever between the tenets of Hassidic and Raskolnik thought.²⁵

Aware of the fact that she cannot find any connection between the hidden texts in the possession of the Baal Shem Tov and Raskolnik texts, the author curiously uses this very fact in an attempt to boost her theory. She writes: ²⁶

“At that time, however, there existed Raskol literature which was to be kept in strict secrecy... The tenth of the Twelve Commandments of the Khlysty Sect - one of the Raskol groups - was: ‘Keep these rules secret, reveal them not even to father or mother, and even if men scourge thee with whip or burn thee with fire, bear it. So doing, the True shall after the pattern of the old martyrs win heaven, and on earth spiritual satisfaction.’²⁷ It is at least possible that the Besht kept his manuscripts secret because they were in fact not Jewish sources, but rather Raskol literature.”

In doing so, she abandons the most obvious reason the Baal Shem Tov kept the texts hidden - They were secret **Kabbalistic** texts - and instead suggests the bizarre theory that they were Christian texts!

Concerning the hypothesis that they were kabbalistic texts, she offhandedly dismisses this notion saying:²⁸

“We are never told the exact nature of these writings, but it is doubtful that they were Kabbalists works, since such works would not demand this secrecy, for in that period, even after the period of Shabtai Tsvi, Kabbalistic study was popular.”

However, here she is clearly mistaken, since in recounting the story of the secret texts of Rabbi Adam, Shivchei HaBesht *clearly* tells us the *exact* nature of these texts.

²⁵ See _____

²⁶ pg. 70

²⁷ F. C. Conybeare, op. cit., p. 358.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Concerning the secretive study by the Baal and the son of Adam of these manuscripts, the Shivchei HaBesht tells us:²⁹ “When they entered their secluded dwelling they studied Talmud, Jewish Law and these holy texts. These holy texts consisted of **Theoretical (G-dly) Kaballah and Practical Kaballah.**”

Not only does the author of the Shivchei HaBesht tell us the exact nature of these writings, he alludes to the reason that they were studied in secret—they contained Practical Kaballah! For although certain Kaballistic texts were indeed not hidden at the time, nonetheless, the study of Practical Kaballah was considered to be dangerous—especially after the Shabtai Tsvi debacle! They therefore remained within the secret domain of the select few.

That she relies on the fact that these texts were studied in secret to establish that they were Christian texts, when the obvious reason is openly stated in the book she uses as her primary source, exhibits the worst kind of scholarship.

Chassidic practices

Realizing the poor quality of her reasoning she writes that the way to establish a Raskolnik/Chassidic connection is through examining the practices of the Chassidim. She states:³⁰

“However, it is not so much the secrecy linked with both the Besht's and Raskolnik's writings that lead us to suspect that the manuscripts were of a non-Jewish nature; it is rather the nature of the criticism heaped upon the Besht and his followers by the great Jewish scholars of that period.”

She goes on to mention various practices of Chassidim that seem—to her—to resemble Raskolnik ones. However, Louis Jacobs has already pointed out that the examples she brings are circumstantial and do not express any great similarity whatsoever.

He wrote:³¹

“For this thesis to be really convincing it is necessary to show strong resemblances between the ideas propagated by the Russian dissenters and those found in early Hasidism, but this the author does not do at all (though in a footnote she promises to do so in a forthcoming work, to the appearance of which we look forward eagerly).

To establish this connection, she brings from another source that she agrees is questionable, and quotes from the work *Shever Poshim*. She writes in a footnote:³²

“A number of people - including Dubnow - doubt the authenticity of this ban, claiming that, at best, it was written by extremist scholars in the community and not by the community leaders. It should be noted, however, that the doubt is raised by R. Mindel

²⁹ Pg. 40

³⁰ Pg. 71

³¹ *Hasidism*, published in “Judaism”, Summer 1969.

³² Footnote 51

Biber who says that the traditions of the Ostraha community do not include such an account.”

However, notwithstanding that she is aware that these are doubtful sources, she brings an excerpt from an excommunication printed in the work *Shever Poshim*:³³

“And he here revealed his shame that he ate and drank and got drunk on the Yartzeit - all his words are worthless... He is dressed in white... He shall be called impure until God takes his revenge. Thus, we, learned in the Torah, in all strictness excommunicate this evil, vile above-mentioned man, Israel - may his name be blotted out.”

She additionally quotes the later ban by the Gaonim of Vilna:³⁴

“Our brethren Israel ... do you not know that newcomers, unknown to our ancestors, have arrived, organizing a suspicious [HaShudim, a pun on Hassidim] sect., .forming private cliques. Their ways are different from Jewry with respect to the liturgy... they yell improper foreign sounds during the Amidah, behaving in a mad fashion, saying that their thoughts are wandering in many worlds.... They do away with the study of Torah; they always maintain that one may limit his studies and not be too upset regarding his sins... All their days are holidays... As they say their forged prayers they display different voices, and the entire city is in an uproar... They behaved like wheels, topsy turvy ... This is only one of thousands of their ugly ways ... The above-mentioned suspect confessed before us...and thank God that their sins were revealed to us in our camp, they confessed after a very thorough investigation... [The ban is then pronounced.]”

She desires to point out that the various points mentioned in this ban of a) wearing white on holidays, b) gesticulating in prayer and c) song and dance - have their source in Raskolnik culture.

Now, though she makes it seem that *Shever Poshim* only mentions these specific accusations, in actuality the work is replete with libelous accusations of various outright sins that the Chassidim are supposedly guilty of.³⁵

Shever Poshim is a work that is replete with outright slander, however we will deal with these particular claims as these were widespread things expressed about chassidim irrespective of *Shever Poshim*.

We will attempt to demonstrate how each of these customs have Judaic sources and/or differ considerably from the Raskolniks.

Additionally while she focuses on incidental similarities she forgets to point out the considerable differences in thought and approach of the Raskolniks and the early Chassidim. For example among the “Old Believers” there was a practice of self-immolation,³⁶ which is the diametric

³³ Manuscript 23

³⁴ Zmir Aritzim VeCharvot Tzurim, pp. 22-25.

³⁵ The work is replete with outright lies as demonstrated by Yehoshua Mondschein, כרם, סילוף דברי חסידות, 158 עמ' ואילך. Vol. 4 No. 1 5752

³⁶ Apology of the Old Belief. An outsider's view: the Old Belief through the eyes of non-Old Believers, Moscow, 2006 (in Russian)

opposite of the Chassidic practice of caring for one's body.³⁷ They clearly were of a completely different mindset.³⁸

It is important to point out that Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, when imprisoned, discussed with the Russian authorities as to how Chassidism is dramatically different than the Raskolniks³⁹—and that Chassidism to Judaism is not akin to Russian Orthodoxy and Raskolniks.⁴⁰

It is clear from the outcome of the trial that the Russian government did not see any correlation to the Raskolniks. If the Russian government—who intimately knew the Raskolniks—understood that Chassidism cannot be seen as a fringe group, it is clear that this theory should not be rehashed based on anecdotal similarities.⁴¹

Dressing in white

Concerning the practice of dressing in white on holidays, she expresses that this is a Raskolnik custom, saying:⁴²

“They assembled in a brilliantly lighted meeting hall, dressed in long white shirts and having lighted candles in their hands. After the usual reading and singing, the sectarians began ritual dances, which included jumping, running, and whirling after the fashion of Moslem dervishes or ‘holy rollers.’”

Firstly, it is important to point out that the actual text of the above mentioned ban, is not accusing Rabbi Yisroel of wearing white. Rather, this is a poetic condemnation - that though “he wears white, his actual actions are black.”⁴³

However, though she is indeed correct in asserting that the accusation is against wearing white, as this was a well-known custom, we have no reason to assume that the custom of wearing white on holidays by Chassidic Rebbes mimics Christian custom, since this was already an age-old kabbalistic tradition.

³⁷ Ohr Torah (Kehot) Hosafot # 194 “אז א קליינע לענעלע אין גוף גורם א גרויסע לאך אין דער נשמה” A small hole in the body causes a great hole in the soul.

³⁸ Funnily enough she attempts to compare the Beshts tradition of giving charity to the Raskolniks—as if to say that giving charity is not a Jewish tradition!

³⁹ The accusation being that just as Raskolniks were a fringe religion illegal in Russia, so to Chassidism, a fringe group should not be permitted in Russia. It is important to point out that even the mitnagdim did not say that they were *similar* in *practice* to the Raskolniks, but that they were similarly a fringe group.

⁴⁰ אגרות קודש אדמו"ר הזקן, האמצעי, הצמח צדק - חלק ב עמ' נה

⁴¹ See however, Emanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi: The Origins of Habad Hasidism* (Brandeis 2015) pg. 188. There he brings an account from Senator Derzhavin where he states that “The Hasidim are a sect of Heretics (Raskolniki). However, from the context there it is clear that he means the literal translation of the word which means “schism” and he was saying that they were a separatist group from the general body of the Jewish religion as expressed above. However, it is troubling to rely on anything of that report as he also quotes there that “a few educated Jews told me this sect was like the Illuminati.”

⁴² pg. 73

⁴³ See Chassidim Umitnagdim, 103. See however the ban of the community of Brodi that as well accesses chassidim of dressing in white on Shabbos. Chassidim Umitnagdim, *Shever Poshim*, Manuscript 24.

Indeed, she even admits that in Vilna itself there were kabbalists who practiced this custom.⁴⁴ Concerning this widespread practice, it is brought in Pri Etz Chaim that this was the custom of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the Arizal of blessed memory. It states there:⁴⁵

“One must wear white clothing on every Shabbat. Therefore one should at least wear four white garments.”

Indeed, not only is this a kabbalistic custom but is expressed in the Talmud as well:⁴⁶

This was the practice of R. Judah b. Il'ai: On the eve of the Sabbath a basin filled with hot water was brought to him, and he washed his face, hands, and feet, and he wrapped himself and sat in fringed linen robes, and was like an angel of the Lord of Hosts.

Rashi, the foremost Jewish commentator explains that he would wrap himself in white clothing to be like the angels.⁴⁷

Clearly, the chassidim garnered their practices from kabbalistic works and the Talmud, rather than the practices of the Raskolniks. Undoubtedly, this was a Jewish custom long before the invention of the Raskolmik movement.

Gesticulating in prayer

Concerning gesticulating during prayer, this too is incorrect, because the Baal Shem Tov actually stated not to make gesticulations during prayer. It states in Kesser Shem Tov:⁴⁸

“The secret of (Avot 4:20) “Do not look at the vessel but what it contains,” is that the main aspect of anything is its spirituality...So too in prayer: He should pray to G-d in a manner that his service is not recognizable. Rather, the depth of his soul is aflame and he quietly screams...His service should be internal rather than recognizable in his limbs.”

Although in general Chassidim discouraged any outward display of gesticulation,⁴⁹ there were times that exceptions were made, as stated in Kesser Shem Tov:⁵⁰

“When someone is drowning in a river he makes many movements in order to escape the raging waters. The people who see him in such a situation will obviously not laugh at him. So too, if one prays and makes movements one should not laugh (at him), because the individual is attempting to escape the waters of extraneous thoughts that distract him from prayer.”

⁴⁴ See Pg. 73, footnote 54.

⁴⁵ Pri Etz Chaim, Shar HaShabat Ch. 4, Shar HaKolel 63a

⁴⁶ Shabbos 25b

⁴⁷ Kiddushin 72a

⁴⁸ #226

⁴⁹ שבילים במחשבת החסידות עמ' קכ

⁵⁰ #215

Contrary to the custom of the Raskolniks, making sounds or movements was not a suggested practice, but only when a person is attempting to overcome distraction.

This custom has as well Judaic roots in the story of Chana as expressed in the Talmud and its commentators, Berachos 31a-b about Chana gesturing like a drunk when she was in the midst of her prayer.⁵¹

Chassidic song

While the custom of Chassidic song differed from the usual style of singing of the period and no one has denied that many of the songs had gentile origin, the manner of singing differed from the Raskolniks and very doubtfully had any origin in their practices.

Rather, Chassidic song was the opposite of their style of singing. Indeed one of the Raskolnik contentions against the reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church was that while the Russian Orthodox Church used polyphonic singing, the Raskolniks practiced only monodic, unison singing.⁵²

Chassidim themselves saw their song as a reintroduction of the forgotten Jewish practice of the Levite's singing in prayer—as expressed in numerous works—rather than adopted from foreign sources.⁵³

Conclusions

Towards the end of her paper, Eliach writes:⁵⁴

“The striking similarities plus the battles waged by the Jewish scholars of that period who felt that they were fighting something foreign to Judaism, leave little doubt that the Besht's Hassidism was directly influenced by these Raskol groups.”

The fallaciousness of this statement is twofold:

Firstly, she has failed to demonstrate any “striking similarities” between the two groups. Whatever similarities in practice she has concocted are purely anecdotal and incidental at best. Moreover, the connection she fabricated that the Baal Shem Tov and his father personally met Raskolniks are merely flights of fancy, pieced together by conjecture and distortion.⁵⁵

⁵¹ See as well Tehillim 35:10 that expresses that all ones limbs should pray to G-d. Indeed, in Shever Poshim, (quoted in Chassidim Umitnagdum *ibid*) it expresses that the mitnagdum themselves quoted this as the source for Chassidic gesticulation.

⁵² Apology of the Old Belief. An outsider's view: the Old Belief through the eyes of non-Old Believers, Moscow, 2006 (in Russian)

⁵³ See *Heichal HaNeginna*, Kehot (2007).

⁵⁴ Pg. 82

⁵⁵ For example the story brought on page 80 of the Besht meeting a man covered in wounds as scales, she expresses that this must have been a Raskolnik, although the Besht himself said it was Moshiach and follows though the Talmud (Sanhedrin 88b) describes him as such and (Sanhedrin 88a) expresses that he

Moreover, the second part of her argument, that because “Jewish scholars of that period...felt they were fighting something foreign to Judaism,” this somehow proves that indeed “Hassidism was directly influenced by these Raskol groups” is a particularly outrageous leap into the absurd!

Essentially, she makes the preposterous claim that because there was controversy; this somehow means the opponents of Chassidism were correct. She makes it seem as if **all** Jewish scholars saw foreign influences, but she ignores the fact that there were a myriad of world-class Talmudic scholars within the Chassidic camp that felt otherwise.⁵⁶

What is clear is that the sources that she builds her “Castles in the air” with are of doubtful import. To use *Shivchei HaBesht* or *Shever Poshim* as if they are accurate accounts of history is a curious course of action for a person who purports to be a scholar of history.⁵⁷

Additionally, her so-called evidence is so far-fetched that she must concoct theories out of thin air to support them.

It is sad that because her article was published, people quote it without honestly and critically examining it. It is our fervent hope that this short article will put the veracity of this work to bed, once and for all.

is a bandaged beggar sitting amongst the poor of the non-Jews. Clearly expressed there is that there is a Moshiach in each generation who sits amongst the gentiles. This is contrary to her theory that expresses that if he visited this individual he *must* have been a Raskolnik priest. This a wild libelous unfounded accusation.

⁵⁶ Rabbi DovBer the primary student of the Besht was known as a Talmudic genius as well as many other students.

⁵⁷ Additionally on page 83 she quotes Mevor Baruch (New York: 1954), vol. 3, p. 1237 (Hebrew, p. 619a). to show that the third Chabad Rebbe has agreed with this theory. However, anyone who has read the work can see that it is pure fantasy. See Yehoshua Mundshein, "מקור ברוך" – מקור הכזבים – "יד באלול, תשס"ו