

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hasidim and Mitnaggedim

“*ANSHEI SHLOMEINU* [i.e. the *hasidim*] do not appreciate the great kindness that the Gaon [of Vilna] did for us when he opposed us... for were it not for the controversy, then there would have been cause to worry...for the ecstatic fervor and uplifted spirit inherent in the new movement...would have ultimately resulted in the scorching of the Talmud by the fire of Kabbalah, and the hidden Torah would have diminished the image of the revealed Torah.”¹

The author of the above is none other than R. Menaḥem Mendel of Lubavitch, the third Rebbe of the Chabad Hasidic dynasty. It is, indeed, a striking assertion and humble admission from a most prominent *hasidic* leader that had *hasidism* not encountered such violent opposition at its inception, its excesses quite possibly would have magnified with time, and the movement would have been derailed from the mainstream and the tradition. The GRA, therefore, helped to provide the necessary “breaks” and corrections that the *hasidic* movement needed in order to survive.

The “evolution” of *hasidism* also saw a number of *hasidic* rabbis becoming objects of criticism and

scorn among their own colleagues for precisely the same offenses for which the *mitnaggedim* had condemned them earlier—exaggerated gesticulations during prayer, ostentatious flaunting of white clothing, laxity in praying at the proper hours, and excessive preoccupation with amassing material wealth at the expense of their followers. Even the *hasidic* emphasis upon joy became moderated and modified. Instead of the coarser earthly joys of the body found in the feasting and imbibing characteristic of the *tzaddik’s* table, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi spoke of a deeper, spiritual joy of the soul.²

Such was the courageous and healthy state of self-criticism among certain early *hasidic* leaders.

As for the *mitnaggedic* camp...R. Yisrael Salanter exemplified the ultimate in self-criticism...witness the bon mot ascribed to him that whereas the Reform movement set out to reform Judaism, his intent was to seek to reform Jews! Indeed, this became his life mission, with some of his harshest critiques addressed to himself. R. Yisrael proceeded to find much at fault in the *mitnaggedic* “Litvish” world of Vilna and Kovno, bemoaning the lack of ethical sensitivity among

¹ Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, *Mekor Barukh* 2:619, cited in Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah’s Sake*, New York, 1989.

² *Likkutei Amarim* Vol. 14. pp. 19b-20b. See also Chaps. 15, 16, 30, 42, trans. in Mindel, pp. 90, 91, 94. Cited in E. J. Schochet, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, New Jersey, London, 1994.

many Jews otherwise punctilious in their ritual observances. (In current parlance, those choosing to be stringent in “Glatt Kosher” and negligent in the area of “Glatt Yosher.”)

The elders of the great *mussar yeshivot* of Lithuania were certainly not guilty of idealizing the character traits of their *talmidim*. On the contrary, they were relentlessly unsparing in their critiques of disciples (Novaradok) and insistent upon the sacred responsibility of each and every individual to develop his full G-d-given potential for greatness and goodness (Slobodka).

These thoughts came to mind after reading R. Gedalia Aharon Rabinowitz’s scholarly essay on the *hasidic-mitnaggedic* dispute in the fall 2007 issue of *Hakirah*.

It is only natural that we feel a need to defend and to justify our own respective side in the dispute, and thus, we engage in apologetics when we feel our “side” has been criticized. In truth, there is much to praise and defend in both today’s *hasidic* and *mitnaggedic* worlds. Who could possibly have predicted a half-century ago the vibrancy of orthodox life today to be found in both the *hasidic* court and *mitnaggedic* yeshiva?

However, is there not much to be concerned about?

True, quantity-wise the rightly esteemed Lakewood Yeshiva of today boasts a student body over fifteen times the size of that of early 20th century Slobodka! Quality-wise however, is there any comparison? Were he alive today,

what would R. Salanter have to say about the so-called spiritual and moral values pervading some segments of the contemporary yeshiva world? *Frumkeit* does not necessarily denote *ehrblichkeit*, *zisskeit* or *gutkeit*.

As for the *hasidic* camp (even overlooking trappings of ostentatiousness, pomp and ceremony), the traditional image of the *hasidic rebbe/ tzadik* was that of a mystically empowered, charismatically gifted leader, endowed with the power to uplift his followers and connect them with the higher realms. He was envisioned to be no less than the conduit enabling the *hasid* to achieve *devekut*. Are there not in such an exalted profile the seeds for abuse, misuse and misinterpretation?

Hakirah has performed a valuable service in revisiting the saga of the GRA’s dispute with the *hasidic* movement. The truths of history ought not be suppressed or ignored. Much can be learned from the perceptions and apprehensions (not to mention misperceptions and misapprehensions) of both sides. Arguably, the saga has contemporary applications.

However, might one suggest that perhaps the best way to discuss the matter is as follows: Let us have forthright analyses from *Besht* followers as to the shortcomings of contemporary *hasidism* and a corresponding honest evaluation from GRA followers as to the problems within today’s *mitnaggedic* world? The issues are serious enough to merit honest and critical self-analysis rather than apologetics and

cheerleading for our respective “teams.”

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Emunat Ḥakhamim

Thank you for translating and printing a wonderful and concise explanation by Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch *shbt”a* of what “*emunat ḥakhamim*” is and is not. As I have faith that Rabbi Rabinovitch’s words are wise and worth delving into and understanding, and as he mentioned only one category (*divrei reshut*) to which *emunat ḥakhamim* does not apply, I would like to ask him what his understanding is of those *talmidei ḥakhamim* who say that *emunat ḥakhamim* translates into believing that every word of *Ḥazal*, even *aggadot* and scientific pronouncements which affect halakhic activities, are to be taken literally.

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Editor’s Note:

Rabbi Rabinovitch replied to us that the sources are well known on this issue and that there is really no

need for an original reply. Some of the sources are:

ראה פיהמ"ש להרמב"ם הקדמה לפרק חלק. במהדורת הרב קאפה עמ' קלו, במהדורת הרב שילת עמ' קלג.
ראה גם "מאמר על אודות דרשות חז"ל" לרבינו אברהם בן הרמב"ם הנדפס בראש ספר עין יעקב דפוס וילנא.
וראה גם יד פשוטה הלכות דעות פתיחה לפרק רביעי.

Handshaking

I would like to commend *Hakirah* for publishing the exchange between Aaron Sonnenschein and Yehuda Henkin on the halakhic issue of shaking hands between men and women. Their articles, and the editors’ note about the decision to print the Sonnenschein piece are a fascinating window into the halakhic, sociological and political currents in contemporary Orthodoxy, and could be studied, with great value, from that perspective alone. Obviously, the content is worthy of study on its own.

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