

Revealer Revealed

BY DAVID ASSAF AND DAVID BIALE

Megaleh Temirin

by Joseph Perl, edited by Jonatan Meir

Hasidot Meduma

by Jonatan Meir

Mossad Bialik, three-volume set, \$88.71

Earlier this year, an email announcement of a publication made its rounds among scholars of Jewish studies. Written in the flowery Hebrew of the Eastern European Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), the advertisement proclaimed that the work would “reveal all secrets.” The parody of genuine announcements of this type from the 19th century was dead-on, but the joke went beyond the mannered maskilic prose style: The work that would “reveal all secrets” was a three-volume magnum opus containing a scholarly edition of a book itself entitled *Revealer of Secrets* (*Megaleh Temirin*), plus copious notes, background sources, and a whole volume of commentaries. And since *Megaleh Temirin* is a parody of Hasidic literature, the email was thus a parody of a parody.

The author of the email was Jonatan Meir, a scholar of 19th-century Hebrew literature from Ben-Gurion University who has devoted much of his scholarly career to “revealing the secrets” of Joseph Perl (1773–1839), a *maskil* (enlightener) from Tarnopol in Eastern Galicia (Ternopil in modern-day Ukraine). Perl was best known during his lifetime for establishing a modern synagogue and a modern school that educated both boys and girls in secular as well as religious subjects, a model for the implementation of *Haskalah* ideology. He was a moderate *maskil* who favored incremental reforms and, like other *maskilim* of his day, remained a traditional Jew in terms of his personal practice. But Perl was also a crusader—one might even call him an obsessed crusader—against Hasidism, which he regarded nothing short of demonic. The remnants of his personal archive, not examined critically until the 1930s, are a treasure trove of information on early 19th-century Hasidism, since Perl compulsively collected every scrap of information on the movement whose existence he regarded as a threat to the modernization of the Jews.

Why Perl was so obsessed with Hasidism remains an unanswered question. His family was not Hasidic, but some later *Haskalah* writers claimed that he was a Hasid himself in his youth, who only came to embrace the Enlightenment in his late twenties under the influence of Mendel Lefin (1749–1826), one of the earliest Galician *maskilim*. It is unclear whether there is any truth to this story, and many of the legends about Perl seem more motivated by ideology than history. If true, though, it would suggest that Perl wanted to atone for the sins of his youth. What we can say with certainty is that Perl only took up his pen against Hasidism following the publication

of *Shivhei ha-Besht* (the hagiographical collection of stories about Israel Baal Shem Tov, the putative founder of Hasidism, who died in 1760) and *Sippurei Ma'asiyot* (The Tales of Rabbi Nachman), the remarkable allegorical stories told by Nachman of Bratslav, the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson.

By the time these two classics of Hasidic literature were published in 1814–1815, Hasidism had been on the scene for more than a half a century. Although Hasidic tradition—accepted and unwittingly promoted by Perl—claimed that the Baal Shem Tov (or Besht) had founded the movement, historians including Moshe Rosman and Immanuel Etkes have argued convincingly that the Besht never set out to create Hasidism. He was a *baal shem*, a kind of shaman employed by his community of Medzhibodzh to write kabbalistic amulets. A loose community of associates and admirers, notably Yaakov Yosef of Polonne and Dov Ber of Mezeritch, collected and reinterpreted his sayings. Dov Ber was the first to

lived), central Poland, and White Russia.

When Perl took up his cudgel against Hasidism around 1816, the two or three generations of “founders” had passed from the scene, and Hasidism had developed a fairly well-defined identity as a movement of rebbes or *tzaddikim* (charismatic leaders) and Hasidim (the term means “pious” but now came to mean the follower of a *tzaddik*). As the founders of Hasidic branches such as Chabad, Chernobyl, and others died, succession passed to their sons (or, in some cases, favorite students). The dynastic principle came to characterize Hasidism in the 19th century and beyond.

The rebbe's court was an increasingly central institution, with *tzaddikim* often attracting followers from far and wide. Pilgrimage to the court was the high point in a Hasid's religious life. Some of these courts—most notably that of Israel of Ruzhin—styled themselves as royal, borrowing the ostentatious trappings of the nobility: sumptuous houses, fine furnishings, and armies of retainers. These courts were the objects of much fascination, attracting not only Hasidim but also non-Hasidic Jews and Gentiles. “*Tzaddikism*,” with all that it entailed as a social institution, became one of the predominant characteristics of Hasidism and one that attracted Perl's special ire.

As to its teachings, early Hasidism cannot be reduced to one doctrine. It appears that the Baal Shem Tov taught a religion of joy, as opposed to the asceticism of other pietists (often called “pre-Besht Hasidim”) of his time. The early Hasidic teachers emphasized the importance of *devekut*, ecstatic communion with God. But there were diverse ideas of what this communion meant theologically. Did one lose one's identity in God? Did one transcend the material world or rather render it holy? Different rebbes gave different answers.

Perl was not interested in Hasidic theology, since he believed that the movement was a deviant sect whose leaders were corrupt, money-grubbing charlatans who defrauded their benighted followers, justified all manner of immorality, and taught hatred of the Gentile authorities. The first work that he wrote anonymously, in German (he was fluent in German, as well as Yiddish and Hebrew), was entitled *Über das Wesen der Sekte Chassidim aus ihren eigenen Schriften gezogen* (On the Essence of the Hasidic Sect, Drawn from Their Own Writings). The “essence” of Hasidism here has nothing to do with its theological doctrines but rather their assault on the Hasidic version of Judaism that Perl wanted to advance. Perl seems to have composed this work around 1816 and sent it to the Austrian censors (Tarnopol was now part of the Habsburg Empire) who apparently did not permit its publication. It was published for the first time in 1937, with Perl's authorship established a few years later on the basis of a document found in his archive.

Über das Wesen may be seen as the first in a



Engraving of Joseph Perl wearing medals awarded for his educational activities by Tsar Alexander I, 1816. (Courtesy of YIVO.)

create a kind of court, which lasted until he died in 1772. Although, as Ada Rapoport-Albert has proven, Dov Ber also did not consciously organize his disciples into a movement, after his death, figures such as Elimelech of Lizhensk and Schneur Zalman of Liadi joined other associates of the Besht to spread the new doctrine—and their own interpretations of it—to new regions. As a result of their efforts, a religious and social phenomenon that had been limited to Podolia and Volhynia, provinces of southeastern Poland, now found adherents in Galicia (where Perl

series of at least four other extensive petitions that Perl composed in the following years to the Austrian and Russian authorities to investigate Hasidism as a “sect” and therefore, according to the law, undeserving of the protections that the regime afforded Judaism. The last of these missives, from 1838, accused Israel Friedman, the Rebbe of Ruzhin, of ordering the murder of two Jewish informers, a charge that resulted in his arrest, although

not in reality. This kind of self-referential writing recurs in Perl’s third book on Hasidism, *Bochen Tzaddik* (1838), where the Hasidim are threatened by another book, clearly in this case *Megaleh Temirin*.

Thus, Perl’s battles with Hasidism seem to have been carried on mainly in his own mind and in the pages of his writings. In one of the many insightful interpretive essays that make up volume three of his trilogy, Meir shrewdly labels Perl’s object an

19th-century historians Peter Beer and Isaac Marcus Jost, when they wrote about Hasidism). Perl also uses complicated numerology (*gematria*) to create fake names for not only his fictional *tzaddikim* but also for himself as author. In the second of his three volumes, Meir includes a *midrash shemot*, a deciphering of these coded names to identify them with actual figures. Thus, Perl’s book, far from “revealing secrets,” actually requires decoding itself.

Here is an example from the third letter of how the satire works (in Dov Taylor’s translation):

From its title page to its rabbinic approbation to its painstakingly accurate citation of actual Hasidic texts, the book looks on the face of it as if it might actually be Hasidic.

From Reb Zelig Letitchiver To Reb Zaynvl Verkhievker

I am amazed you *still* didn’t get a hold of the *bukh*! I already wrote you the matter is very urgent and still you didn’t do nothing. Maybe, G-d forbid!, you’re being lazy about this matter, so I’m telling you this is no trifle. I heard the *bukh* is making an impression on all the noblemen who read it and they want to translate it into Polish. All the lords reading it are roaring with laughter at our people and at the *tsadikim*.

Today I bumped into Councilman Glakhav’s agent and he told me yesterday there were several officials by his gentile for tea. Among them were many who had read the *bukh* and they were discussing this *bukh* the whole time. Some of them made a mockery and laughingstock of the agent and said that *he’s* a *khosed* too.

One asked him if he knew the reason why the Jews sway during the *Tfile* prayer, and the agent said, “I don’t know.” The nobleman said to him, “I’ll tell you the reason—because the *Tfile* is like intercourse. That’s what’s written in the book *Likutey Yekorim*.” And another asked him if it’s true that the justice of gentiles is husks and that your *rebe* goes to gentile justice so as to extract holy justice from among the husks. And the third asked him if he too speaks with them only so as to extract the holy sparks from them so that they should be left empty, and so on.

formal charges were never filed. Labeling Hasidism a sect was a strategy of *maskilim* and other opponents of Hasidism, one that has even persisted to this day. But the Austrians, like their counterparts in Congress Poland and Russia, consistently rejected the claim that Hasidism was a sect and instead affirmed, on the basis of their own investigations, that it was simply a kind of “fraternity” within the Jewish community. Hasidic prayer quorums (*minyanim*) and their prayer houses (*shtieblach*) were no more sectarian than those of various other groups in local communities.

Perl’s attempt to enlist the authorities in his campaign was thus an abject failure, but one that won him notoriety as an “informer,” the worst of pejoratives in the traditional Jewish vocabulary. At the same time that his political efforts failed to ban Hasidism (in this regard, the Haskalah was utterly ineffectual), he turned to a different field of combat. If the authorities wouldn’t listen, he would turn to his fellow Jews. And so it was that three years after composing his German treatise, in 1819, he published—again anonymously—his great Hebrew epistolary novel, *Megaleh Temirin*.

The book purports to relate the escapades of Hasidim who attempt to get a hold of and destroy a *bukh* with magical properties that has been written to defame them in the eyes of the Gentile authorities. In light of Perl’s German text, it was not hard for scholars to establish that the *bukh* (the German/Yiddish designation is deliberate on Perl’s part to distinguish it from a *sefer*, that is a holy book) was none other than Perl himself, in the guise of his German book, that sends the Hasidim of *Megaleh Temirin* into a panic. In the recent translation of Dov Taylor:

But when I began to read your letter . . . I saw in it the news you bring me of a *treyf* travesty that was recently published against our Faithful and against the real *tsadikim*, and that this *bukh* was sent from Galicia to the prince of your community to read! . . . it’s full of wickedness, deceit and mockery aimed at the *tsadikim* and real *rebesh!* . . . we got to see about doing something with regard to the *bukh* . . . you should do whatever you can to get hold of this *bukh* so that we can know what’s written there and so we’ll know the name of the *bukh*, so as to direct our Faithful to buy the *bukh* and burn it up and wipe it out, and also to find out who the author is so as to take revenge against him.

Perl thus fabricates his persecutors, in writing if

“imagined Hasidism” and writes of him inhabiting a “utopia of books.” He means that Perl—in this sense no different from generations of Jewish writers—inhabited a world where books argued with books and the real world became confused with the discursive



First edition of *Megaleh Temirin* by Joseph Perl. Published in Vienna, 1819.

world. Perl seems to have imagined that the way to defeat Hasidism was to write a devastating critique of it. However, the form of his critique was anything but straightforward.

Megaleh Temirin is a brilliant satire, a parody of what he presents as the Hasidic epistolary genre (although some Hasidic texts are in the form of “holy letters,” the letters in Perl’s book are of a type he largely invented). From its title page to its rabbinic approbation to its painstakingly accurate citation of actual Hasidic texts, the book looks on the face of it as if it might actually be Hasidic. Indeed, Meir, as meticulous about his sources as Perl, has provided detailed notes showing which Hasidic texts Perl quotes. (Perl seems to have assembled a library containing every Hasidic work, published and unpublished, up to that time.)

Perl’s text is so shot through with quotations from and references to Hasidic books that one might say that it was as much Hasidic as anti-Hasidic (in fact, the work served as an important source for the early

In a kind of wish fulfillment, Perl imagines that Polish noblemen have discovered his *bukh* and want to translate it into Polish! Here, he puts Hasidic doctrine in the mouths of Gentile noblemen and government officials who have learned from the *bukh* that the *Likutey Yekorim*, like several other Hasidic sources, compares the swaying in prayer to an act of sexual intercourse with the *Shekhina*. Once apprised of such lascivious Hasidic ideas, these Gentiles regard Hasidism—represented here by Jewish *arendars* (leaseholding agents)—as the butt of their humor. Hasidism, in Perl’s estimation, threatens the respectability of Judaism in the eyes of the nobility whom he wishes to cultivate so as to integrate the Jews into Austrian society. Since, of course, it is his own German *bukh*—not the Hasidic texts, which would have been inaccessible to Gentiles—that reveals the secrets of Hasidism, he more or less admits that, had his book cleared the censors, he would have been complicit in making the Jews look ridiculous.

Perl was also clearly anxious that Gentiles would

find out that the Kabbalah embraced by Hasidism regarded non-Jews as “husks” (empty shells of materiality), who might harbor stray sparks of divinity but could never possess holy souls. When Hasidim avail themselves of Gentile courts, they do so only to exorcise these sparks from what is otherwise a demonic realm. By performing such magical procedures, they intend to annihilate the Gentile husks. Here, too, Perl draws from actual Hasidic texts for the purpose of showing how dangerous Hasidism is to the relations between Jews and Gentiles. In this letter, the (presumably Jewish) reader of Perl’s Hebrew text is meant to identify with the Gentiles and to laugh both at the antics and crude ideas of the Hasidim.

Perl composed these fake letters in a kind of caricature of Hasidic Hebrew, an often ungrammatical hodgepodge mixed with Yiddish syntax that poses an almost insurmountable problem of translation. (Hasidic sermons were typically delivered in Yiddish and translated later into Hebrew or, to be precise, *loshen kodesh*, a mixture of rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic.) The only English version of *Megaleh Temirin*, which we have quoted here, demonstrates this challenge. Taylor decided to render Perl’s letters into fractured English, which hardly sounds like even a caricature of Hasidic writing, but rather like the hilarious “Yinglish” of Leo Rosten’s famous *Education of Hyman Kaplan*, which was apparently Taylor’s model. The result was not entirely successful.

In the years following the publication of *Megaleh Temirin*, stories circulated that Hasidim read the book and believed it to be genuine, so cleverly had Perl succeeded in camouflaging his text. How-

ever, these stories appear to have been fabrications by *maskilim*, which were no more historical than the claims that the Hasidim burned the book when they discovered its true intent. Both of these legends served the propaganda of the Haskalah. In reality, the Hasidim probably had little knowledge of Perl’s epistolary assault. The true audience for the book consisted of recruits to the nascent Haskalah who seem to have immediately identified both the author and his purpose. In other words, the success of Perl’s parody lay in readers quickly discerning that the letters were exaggerations of real Hasidic texts.

In fact, one might even say that Perl acted unwittingly as a shill for Hasidism, even as he sought to debunk it. Although *Shivhei ha-Besht* went through a number of editions after it was published in 1815, it seems unlikely that it was widely known when Perl published his book in 1819 and *Sippurei Ma’asiyot* (The Tales of Rabbi Nachman) was probably even less well known, since Bratslav Hasidism was a marginalized and persecuted group. By making these texts so central to his parody, Perl may have publicized them beyond the Hasidic circles for which they were intended. Indeed, Perl’s *Megaleh Temirin* is a mirror image of *Shivhei ha-Besht*, which, he claims, has the same talismanic qualities.

The plot of *Megaleh Temirin* is convoluted and full of subplots and multiple characters (Meir helpfully provides a list in one of his appendices, since it’s almost impossible to keep them straight in the text, given their invented names). In the guise of defending themselves, the Hasidim of most of the 151 letters reveal their violent, lascivious, con-

niving, materialistic, and bizarre behavior. They are unable to earn an honest living and subsist on charity. They are frequently drunk on vodka. They turn smoking pipes and sitting on the toilet into religious rituals (as with other details, this has its factual basis in *Shivhei ha-Besht*). Less plausibly, one fornicates with and impregnates a non-Jewish woman who flees abroad with her father.

The characters of the book cover the gamut of Eastern European types: Beyond *tzaddikim* and Hasidim, we find *mitnagdim* (the opponents of Hasidism); a Polish nobleman; a married Jewess, Freyda, who has questionable relations with the nobleman (Freyda is worthy of mention as a surprisingly independent Jewish woman); and, of course, a *maskil* who is handsome, learned in German, and thus a stand-in for Perl. Interestingly, the *maskil* is a relatively marginal figure, since most of the action takes place around preventing the *bukh* (the real protagonist of the novel) from infecting the authorities with hatred of Hasidism.

What was the impact of Perl’s scandalous book? Since it does not appear to have become a target for the Hasidim—much to Perl’s dismay, no doubt—its primary influence was on modern Hebrew literature. The use of satire as a modern literary tool owes its origins to Perl. One can draw a line from Perl to Mendele Mokher Seforim and Sholem Aleichem. And the hugely popular Yiddish spoof on Hasidism *Dos poylisher Yingl* (The Polish Lad) by Isaac Joel Linetsky from 1867 (first printed as a book in 1873) is a hilarious extension of *Megaleh Temirin*. (It was said of Linetsky’s book that many Hasidim read it and even enjoyed the book as a joke at their expense.)

Perl’s book has been taken seriously by both literary scholars and historians for more than a century. Some, led by Baruch Kurzweil, even consider it the “first Hebrew novel,” although others reserve that compliment for Avraham Mapu’s *Ahavat Zion* (1853). Meir’s edition includes the most recent literary analysis by the distinguished literary critic Dan Miron, which appears as a 43-page epilogue to the novel’s text. Miron argues that Perl’s book is a “literary masterpiece,” meant to be read whole rather than perused in fragments, as most readers read it. He sees the book as setting up a contrast between the literary practice and ethos of Haskalah and Hasidism. For the *maskilim*, the intellectual-aesthetic pleasure of reading goes together with a philosophical view that champions a world structured by reason and law. In opposition, Perl posits the hedonism of the Hasidim. The Haskalah, in this interpretation, becomes the sober defender of the law against Hasidic antinomianism.

Beyond questions of literary merit and influence, however, Perl’s *Megaleh Temirin* played a complex—and perhaps not yet fully understood—historical role. Although certain Hasidic leaders became aware of the early Haskalah as a potential threat (Nachman of Bratslav evidently met and debated *maskilim*, and Schneur Zalman of Liadi sided with Russia against Napoleon because of his fear of emancipation), the battle between the two was not yet fully joined when Perl published his book. In fact, the book, which was identified with the hated informer Perl, contributed not incidentally to provoking the battle. Just as Perl imagined his Hasidim, so he imagined the war between Hasidism and

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Haskalah—and by imagining it, he helped bring it about. Of course, as part of the world of traditional Judaism, Hasidism was destined to come into conflict with the forces of modernity. But that it became increasingly the most “ultra-Orthodox” of the Orthodox, the most rigid defender of tradition, owes something to the particular animus between *maskilim* and Hasidim. Perl was not the first modernizer to mount an attack on Hasidism, but he was the first to do so unrelentingly and with well-honed weapons of satire.

In historical perspective, the all-out warfare between the Hasidim and *maskilim* that began with Perl was a fight over who would lead the Jews into the terra incognita of the 19th century. Hasidism had developed in 18th-century Poland at a time when rabbinic and communal leadership was under siege; the crisis of leadership became much more acute in the 19th century after the partitions of Poland and the rule of the absolutist governments in Russia and Austria. Hasidism, with its supra-communal networks and courts of rebbes, provided new forms of community and authority for many Jews in these empires. (Hasidism probably never won over a majority of the Jews of Eastern Europe, but it did command the allegiance of a large minority.) The *maskilim*, for their part, envisioned a different kind of community based on new occupations, secular education, and political integration. Hasidism, perhaps even more than other traditionalist movements, saw the Haskalah alternative as a real threat to its own innovative vision.

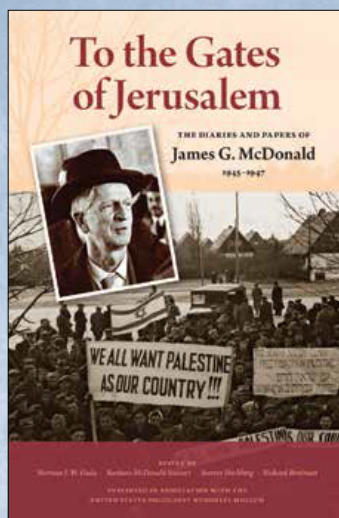
When the Jews of Eastern Europe experienced pogroms, political persecution, emigration, and impoverishment in the last decades of the 19th century, the Haskalah became discredited. But the new movements of Zionism and social revolution that took its place also aspired to provide the Jews with alternative leaders, so Hasidism now turned its rhetorical guns against them. Indeed, some of the most vociferous opposition to Zionism to this day comes from Hasidic sources. Beyond the theological arguments of this anti-Zionism, there is still a battle over political power: Who will lead the Jews in the modern world?

The weapon of satire that Perl mobilized for the beginning of this two-century-long war seems today inadequate to its intended task. To be sure, there is much in Hasidism that lends itself to satire: Thus, when extremist Hasidim protested use of the internet, they held a rally from which women were banned, but then streamed the proceedings to women . . . over the internet!

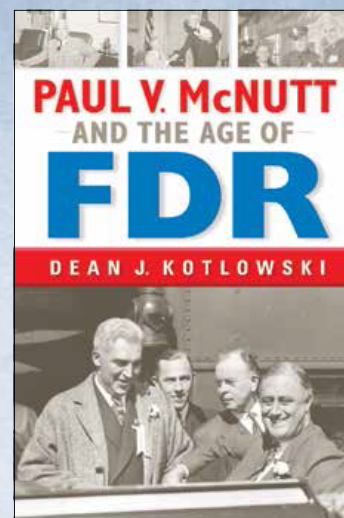
But Hasidism deserves a much more serious hearing from those who would not themselves join its ranks. As both a religious and social phenomenon, it is here to stay, a phoenix that rose miraculously from the ashes of the Shoah. And once one takes it seriously, the challenge is to imagine a world in which Hasidim and *maskilim*—or their descendants—can live together, if not in harmony, then at least in peace.

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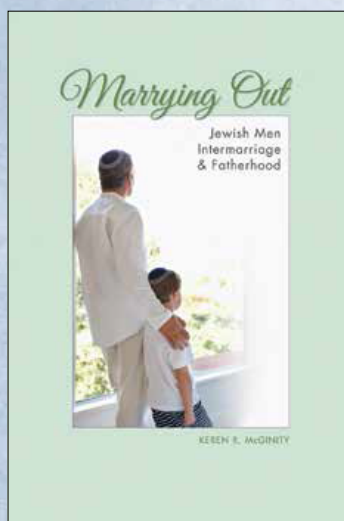
David Biale is Emanuel Ringelblum Distinguished Professor of Jewish History at the University of California, Davis. They are both members of a team completing the first comprehensive history of Hasidism.



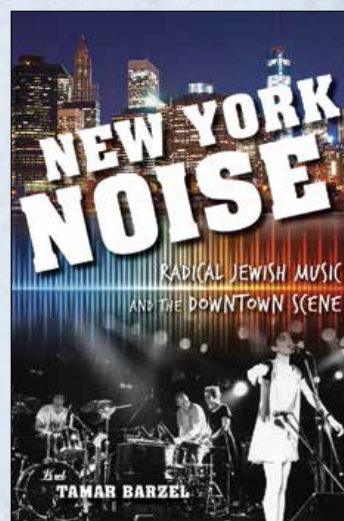
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