

heretics who must be expelled from the Jewish people? How did they reconcile themselves to the fact that among those who signed the writ of excommunication issued in Brod were the scholars of the *kloiz* (house of study), renowned as Torah scholars, expert in Halakhah and Kabbalah, and pious in their conduct? Moreover, how did they explain the fact that the man who led the struggle against them was none other than Rabbi Eliyahu, ha-Gaon he-Hasid of Vilna, who was regarded as the greatest sage of his generation?

RABBI MENAHEM MENDEL OF VITEBSK:
A CALL FOR PEACE

In the month of Shevat 5538 (winter 1778), several months after reaching the land of Israel at the head of a "caravan" of Hasidim, and about six years after the outbreak of the struggle against Hasidism, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk sent an epistle from Safed to "the Ministers, Sages, and Judges of the States of Volhynia and Lithuania, and Russia." This epistle, as far as we know, was the first public call by a Hasidic leader for reconciliation between the warring camps.² These are its main points:

1. The Hasidim rejected all accusations leveled by the Mitnagdim against them and declared loyalty to the values of the tradition.³
2. They were willing to forgive the Mitnagdim for the wrongs they had done to the Hasidim during the persecutions, and they called for a new chapter in relations between the two camps.⁴
3. They recognized the authority of the community leaders to whom the letter was addressed, that is to say, the traditional establishment, and called for these leaders to recognize the righteousness of the Hasidim and to live in peace with them.⁵

Rabbi Menahem Mendel might have been satisfied with these declarations. However, he includes an important statement in the letter, alluding to the role played by the Vilna Gaon in the outbreak of the struggle:

4 The Vilna Gaon and the Mitnagdim as Seen by the Hasidim

The organized struggle against Hasidism, which began in Vilna in 5532 (1772), continued for about thirty years. During that time the Hasidim were the objects of persecution and oppression. Community leaders who took part in the campaign against Hasidism passed ordinances that led to the social ostracism of the Hasidim, interfered with their sources of livelihood, prohibited people from eating meat that they had slaughtered, and prevented them from holding prayers in the manner they wished. It is easy to imagine the suffering and humiliation of the Hasidim in the areas where they were persecuted.¹ How did they respond?

In discussing the response of the Hasidim, I do not refer specifically to the actions they took, but primarily to their response on the cognitive level. How did they explain to themselves the fact that the leaders of important communities, including rabbis and *dayyanim*, viewed them as

This has been my way from the start, before arriving in the Land of Israel I also yearned and desired for unity and unanimity. But what can I do? For between us was an orator who "testified lies" [Proverbs 14:5] and spoke falsehoods against us and "plotted evil plots" [Psalms 141:4] . . . and "were they wise, they would think on this" [Deuteronomy 31:32], that they had borne false witness against us. . . . For what can they do? Since one may judge only what one's eyes see and what one's ears hear, and the onus is on the witnesses.⁶

With these apparently obscure words Rabbi Menahem Mendel refers to a certain event well known to the recipients of his epistle: the journey to Vilna he made with Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady in the winter of 5532, a few months before the organized struggle against Hasidism began. As noted in chapter 3, the two leaders of Hasidism in White Russia had wished to meet with the Gaon to dispel various rumors that had reached his ears. However, the Gaon was resolved not to receive these Hasidim, and they were forced to return home empty-handed.⁷

Mention of this event amounts to a rather severe accusation against the camp of Mitnagdim, and especially against their leader. For their part the Hasidim had endeavored to prevent the outbreak of the dispute, but their overture had been rejected. Along with that accusation, Rabbi Menahem Mendel also offers an explanation of the Gaon's behavior: false witnesses had leveled severe accusations against the Hasidim, and the Gaon trusted them. This explanation does not completely absolve the Gaon, "and 'were they wise, they would think on this,' that they had borne false witness against us." Nevertheless, "one may judge only what one's eyes see and what one's ears hear, and the onus is on the witnesses."

During the same year that Rabbi Menahem Mendel addressed the leaders of the Polish communities, he wrote an additional epistle addressed to the community leaders of Vilna.⁸ In this epistle, he again claims that the Hasidim are meticulous in the observance of Jewish law, with all its strictures and minutiae. Thus all the accusations that the Mitnagdim leveled against them were groundless. Rabbi Menahem Mendel does admit that there were some Hasidim whose behavior was wild,⁹ but these were the youthful actions of a minority and there was no reason to draw general conclusions from their behavior.

In the second epistle Rabbi Menahem Mendel again refers to the failed

visit he had made to Vilna together with Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady. He hints that had the Vilna Gaon been willing to lend an attentive ear, the controversy might have been avoided. But the Gaon was not to be held responsible, at least not solely. Again Rabbi Menahem Mendel repeats the argument that the Gaon had been deceived by false witnesses, "'according to whom every lawsuit and case of assault is judged' [Deuteronomy 21:5] and by them 'was poured the soul blood of the innocent poor'" (Jeremiah 2:34).¹⁰

One must look into the repeated claim that the Gaon and the community leaders who joined the battle against Hasidism had been misled by false witnesses. By advancing this claim, Rabbi Menahem Mendel apparently wished to bridge the gap between the argument that the Hasidim had been persecuted though they had done nothing wrong, and acknowledgement of the authority of the leaders of the Mitnagdim, acknowledgement implied in the very act of addressing them. At first glance, willingness to absolve the leaders of the Mitnagdim from the accusation of unjustified persecution seems to be a tactical measure required by reality. When all is said and done, those who wish to put an end to persecution must acknowledge the authority of those who instigate it, in accordance with the Halakhic axiom that "the mouth that forbade is the mouth that must permit."

However, Rabbi Menahem Mendel's claim appears to have a deeper motivation: if the Hasidim were declared heretics, they would have to be expelled from the Jewish community. Apprehension regarding such an eventuality certainly worried the Hasidic leaders greatly. The Sabbatean trauma—and especially its Frankist manifestation, which was close in time and place—influenced not only the Mitnagdim but also the Hasidim. While the former suspected that Hasidism was a Sabbatean-style sect, the latter feared they might meet a fate like the Sabbateans. The effort made by the Hasidic leaders to gain recognition as an integral part of the Jewish people is understandable against the background of this fear. This effort necessarily entailed recognition of the authority of the community leaders who contested them and, above all, the authority of the Vilna Gaon.

Placing most of the blame on false witnesses probably also played an important role in the inner world of the Hasidim. Certainly they were

disturbed by the question of how they, whose entire lives were colored by the aspiration and effort to draw close to God, could have been seen by their opponents as deviants and heretics. How could it be explained that an exalted person such as the Gaon had made such a grave error about them? In other words, what was the explanation for the dreadful gap between their self-image and their image in the eyes of their opponents? The necessary conclusion was that the Gaon had acted innocently, and that false witnesses had led him astray. If he had known the facts as they were, he certainly would not have decreed that the Hasidim were heretics, nor would he have led the community of Vilna in the struggle against them.

RABBI SHNEUR ZALMAN OF LYADY:
DEFENSE OF THE VILNA GAON

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady was the Hasidic leader who stood at the front during the struggle with the Mitnagdim. As noted, he accompanied his mentor and friend, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, in the abortive voyage of reconciliation to Vilna in the winter of 5532. After Rabbi Menahem Mendel emigrated to the land of Israel in 5537, Rabbi Shneur Zalman took his place as leader of the Hasidim in White Russia.¹¹ Since that region was one of the main arenas of the struggle against Hasidism, Rabbi Shneur Zalman remained involved in the controversy with the Mitnagdim. He was also involved because the Hasidim living in Lithuania, including Vilna, were his followers.¹² Indeed Rabbi Shneur Zalman himself was the object of persecution by the Mitnagdim. He was arrested and interrogated twice because his enemies informed against him to the authorities.¹³

In light of all this, there is reason to ask once again: How did Rabbi Shneur Zalman understand the struggle waged by the Mitnagdim against the Hasidim? How did he explain to himself and his followers the fact that the man regarded as the greatest scholar of the generation had ruled that the Hasidim were heretics? How did he seek to clear Hasidism of the grave accusations leveled against it by the Mitnagdim? I shall draw

answers to these questions from the letters of Rabbi Shneur Zalman. Some of these letters were sent to the leaders of the Mitnagdim, while others were sent to his followers, and they reflect various stages in the development of the conflict.

In the month of Kislev 5547 (1787) a proclamation was issued in Vilna calling for the renewal of the struggle against the Hasidim. Among other things the proclamation called for a great convention in Shklov on the New Moon of Tevet in order to develop a strategy for the war against the Hasidim. The convention was indeed held, and in its wake regulations were published calling for the breakup of Hasidic minyanim and for the isolation and ostracism of the Hasidim. Following the publication of these regulations, Rabbi Shneur Zalman wrote an epistle to the leaders of the community of Mohilev, asking them not to implement those regulations in the area under their authority.¹⁴

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's arguments were intended to invalidate the regulations. To accomplish this he employed the Halakhic principle that a court may not condemn anyone in absentia or without giving the accused an opportunity to defend himself. He maintains that this principle was universally acknowledged and accepted in monetary suits, hence all the more reason it should apply "in our case, which is truly a capital case." Furthermore, the authors of the regulations relied on false witnesses and ignored a multitude of reliable witnesses, neighbors of Hasidim prepared to testify that they were free of any transgression.¹⁵

After denying the validity of the procedures used by the authors of the regulations, Rabbi Shneur Zalman addresses the question of the authority on which they depended:

For they do not build on their opinion unless it depends on that of others, and they are named the elders of the generation. And the elders, it is heard, hang from a great tree, ha-Gaon he-Hasid, our teacher Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, for it is widely known that he is unique in his generation. And truly he is a sole authority. . . . But a single person does not outweigh the majority who are with us, comrades and disciples of the holy rabbi, the *maggid meisharim*, our teacher Rabbi Duber, may he rest in peace, of Mezhirech. For who is greater for us than the great Rabbi Eliezer, that if all the Sages of Israel were in one pan [of a balance], he

would outweigh them all [*Avot* 2:8]. But nevertheless they voted against him and carried the vote.¹⁶

Rabbi Shneur Zalman was forced to deal with the issue of the Gaon's authority because the leaders of the Mitnagdim continually appealed to that authority, whenever objections were raised to their claims. In that matter as well, Rabbi Shneur Zalman advanced a Halakhic argument. He did not deny the view of the Mitnagdim that the Gaon was unique in his generation. However, against the opinion that one must obey the greatest authority of the generation without reservation, he advanced the principle of majority rule. True, the Gaon was unique in his generation, but he was still a single man, whereas the *maggid* of Mezhirech and the other Hasidic leaders were the majority. Altogether, the position that Rabbi Shneur Zalman took regarding the Gaon was ambivalent: he recognized his extraordinary personal merit, but he also denied his authority as a sole Halakhic arbiter. It would not be too much to say that there is a good deal of irony in the fact that the leaders of the Mitnagdim constantly had recourse to the Gaon's charisma, whereas the Hasidic leader based his argument on Halakhic principles.

As noted, the role played by the Gaon at the start of the campaign against Hasidism and the motivations that guided him occupied a considerable part of the letter sent by Rabbi Shneur Zalman to his Hasidim in Vilna in 5557 (1797). In the month of Tishrei of that year, the Gaon's call to do battle against the Hasidim was published once again.¹⁷ Rabbi Shneur Zalman's Hasidim in Vilna were apprehensive and implored their rabbi to come to Vilna and bring the conflict to an end, either by holding a debate with the leaders of the Mitnagdim or by referring the case to arbitrators agreed on by both sides. In his letter of response, Rabbi Shneur Zalman explained that in the existing circumstances there was no possibility of resolving the controversy.¹⁸

To support this claim, he tells them about his first failed effort at reconciliation: the visit to Vilna in the company of his teacher and comrade, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, in the winter of 5532. As noted, Rabbi Menahem Mendel also alluded to that event in his letters. It was apparently no coincidence that both men repeatedly told about that failed effort at reconciliation with the Gaon. Recounting the story implies

that the rigid position taken by the Gaon at that time determined the entire course of subsequent events. Had the Gaon not refused stubbornly to receive the emissaries of Hasidism, perhaps things would have turned out differently.

Later in his epistle, Rabbi Shneur Zalman tells his Hasidim that, after the failed visit to Vilna, the Hasidic leaders traveled to Shklov to take part in the controversy initiated by the Mitnagdim there. When the Mitnagdim realized that they could not refute the arguments of the Hasidim, "they came with a strong arm and hung themselves from the great tree of ha-Gaon he-Hasid, may his light burn brightly." Thus the failure to appease the Mitnagdim in Shklov was also connected to the Gaon's authority. Rabbi Shneur Zalman further explains to his Hasidim that, not only had the Gaon prevented dialogue and reconciliation in the past, but until he changed his mind there was no hope for reconciliation and accommodation. Even if the arbitrators ruled that the Hasidim were right, their decision would have no weight, for "as you have heard, no one in the state of Lithuania would have the audacity not to subordinate his own opinion to that of ha-Gaon he-Hasid."¹⁹

The constant repetition of the statement that the Gaon was the one who had prevented and continued to prevent any possibility of reconciliation between the Hasidim and their opponents reflects recognition of the exceptional force of his authority. At the same time it constitutes a severe accusation. However, that is just one side of the coin. On the other side, quite surprisingly, is the effort to defend the Gaon and explain why he refused to receive the Hasidic leaders who sought an audience with him in the winter of 5532.²⁰

As described in chapter 3, it all began with rumors that had reached the Gaon regarding the deviant conduct of the Hasidim. Among other things, they were accused of contempt for Torah scholars and wild behavior during prayers that culminated in the practice of doing headstands. The Gaon regarded the people from whom he received information as reliable witnesses whose word was not to be doubted. At that stage further information came to him: the "well-known intermediary," whose identity is unknown to us, told him of a Hasidic interpretation of a passage in the Zohar. The Gaon regarded that interpretation as "heresy and Epicureanism." Hence, when Rabbi Menahem Mendel and Rabbi

Shneur Zalman wanted to meet with him, he refused to receive them. In sum, the Gaon was to be exonerated. He acted as he did not arbitrarily but on the basis of testimony that appeared reliable to him.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's response to the Gaon is marked by the ambivalence we found in the attitude of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk. On the one hand, he regards him as bearing general responsibility for the persecution of the Hasidim, since everyone took their authority from him. On the other hand, he exonerates him and explains that he acted innocently. How can one understand Rabbi Shneur Zalman's effort to explain the inner logic of the Gaon's position to his Hasidim? Why did he make such an effort to defend the man who was most responsible for their suffering?

The explanation lies in a combination of pragmatic considerations and deep spiritual motivations. As an astute public leader, Rabbi Shneur Zalman understood that a blow to the prestige and authority of the Gaon would not only fail to reconcile the Mitnagdim with Hasidism but also was liable to deepen the rift. Recognizing the Gaon's authority and exonerating him were intended to prevent exacerbation of the conflict. On a deeper, spiritual level, Rabbi Shneur Zalman probably felt a need to defend the Gaon for another reason: he aspired to clear Hasidism of the taint of heresy that had been cast on it by the greatest scholar of the generation. How could he accept the fact that an exalted personage such as the Gaon had erred so deeply regarding the nature of the Hasidim and Hasidism? The only escape from this severe difficulty was the explanation that the Gaon had been misled by people he trusted and who had given him false information.

THE *MAGGID* OF MEZHIRECH:
THE STRATEGY OF RESTRAINT

Another letter sent by Rabbi Shneur Zalman to his followers in Vilna, also written in 5557 (1797), is of great interest.²¹ This letter, too, responds to the distress of the Hasidim of Vilna following the renewal of the persecutions. It shows an effort to apply the path taken by the *maggid* of

Mezhirech when the conflict broke out in 5532 to the renewal of the persecutions. This letter therefore provides important information about the response of the Hasidic leaders when the conflict first broke out. Rabbi Shneur Zalman tells his Hasidim that, following publication of the Mitnagdic book *Zemir 'Aritsim Veharvot Tsurim* and its circulation in many communities, a wave of persecutions broke out, causing great suffering to the Hasidic leaders: "Truly it could not be believed if it were told: the greatness of the humiliations and torments done then to the famous Zaddikim of Volhynia, until they could not sit in their homes, and all of them came to take refuge beneath the wing of our great and lamented rabbi in the community of Rovna, may his memory be blessed, to consult and make a plan about what was to be done."²²

It was known from another letter of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's that the Hasidic leaders gathered for an emergency meeting in the home of the *maggid* Dov Ber.²³ However, in the present letter, which was published only recently, Rabbi Shneur Zalman chose to describe the response of the *maggid* to the first persecutions against the Hasidim: "There were then many ways to do something and contradict and overturn their thought, and to write doubly and triply bitter things against them, . . . and to print them and send them among Jacob [i.e., among the Jews] and in many other ways. But our great rabbi of holy and blessed memory did not choose to do any act against them, just all the power of Israel was in their mouth, to cry out to the Lord who frustrates the plans of the cunning, that their hands might not be resourceful."²⁴

Thus we find that various responses were considered during the conference held by the Hasidic leaders. Among other things they raised the possibility of publishing and circulating polemical writings against the Mitnagdim. They also considered other ways of struggling, which are not stated explicitly, though they were apparently belligerent. They might even have considered issuing proclamations of excommunication against the persecutors of Hasidism.²⁵ However, the *maggid* of Mezhirech, who was then regarded as the chief leader of Hasidism, decided by virtue of his authority that the path of restraint should be taken. Most likely the *maggid* believed that an aggressive response might deepen the rift between the Hasidim and their opponents and cause them to drive

the Hasidim out of the Jewish people. One way or another, it may be stated that the strategy of restraint, exemplified by both Rabbi Menahem Mendel and Rabbi Shneur Zalman, originated in the course laid out by the *maggid* of Mezhirech at the outbreak of the controversy.

Later in this epistle, when he wishes to apply the instructions given by the *maggid* of Mezhirech in 5532 to the situation in 5557 (1797), Rabbi Shneur Zalman mentions the reward the Hasidim gained by virtue of their restraint:

[What is described in] the verses "because of your tribulations to benefit you in the end" [Deuteronomy 8:16], "and your beginnings will be in grief and your end will greatly flourish" [Job 8:15], [is exactly what happened to us,] as our eyes, and not those of a stranger, have seen, for afterward they multiplied to thousands and scores of thousands of our comrades in every country, and seeing the exaggerated lies that were told against us, in fortifying themselves and arousing the world against us in a great noise and trumpet blast, and in this they awakened those slumbering in the vanities of the age to rouse from their slumber and see that the light is good, and to distinguish between truth and lying, . . . which would not have been the case had they not been suffering then and accepted torments with love; and had they provoked strife and controversy certainly thousands and scores of thousands would have been prevented, perish the thought, from seeing the truth; . . . and God did justice for us so that in that day to sustain a great multitude in true life.²⁶

In retrospect, from a distance of twenty-five years, Rabbi Shneur Zalman finds a causal connection between the strategy adopted by the Hasidic leaders at the outbreak of the controversy and the vast expansion of Hasidism during the intervening years. The sharp disparity between the vociferous aggression that characterized the struggle of the Mitnagdim and the restrained response of the Hasidim is what aroused "thousands and scores of thousands" to understand the truth of Hasidism and join its ranks. Since this is the proper interpretation of previous events, the lesson to be drawn from it regarding the challenge before the Hasidim at that time is, according to Rabbi Shneur Zalman, as clear as day: "Behold now also the duty is incumbent on us to be silent and suffer and accept torments with love, because they are truly like birth pangs, and I am as-

sured that the Lord has decreed for us that when the pangs and labor pains soon cease, God willing, thousands and scores of thousands will be born and be led to the Lord to serve Him[,] . . . and that will be your consolation."²⁷

This was the consolation of the persecuted, that many joined them and thus confirmed the correctness of their path. Moreover, comparison of the persecutions to birth pangs, and the statement that "God did justice for us," shed new light on the phenomenon of opposition. Had it not been for the vociferous and mendacious attacks of the Mitnagdim on the Hasidim, perhaps the multitude "slumbering in the vanities of the age" would have remained immersed in sleep. Thus the phenomenon of opposition, with all its horrors and injuries, is "justice" done for them, for it hastened the strengthening and expansion of Hasidism. This appears to be the first attempt to propose a dialectical interpretation of the phenomenon of opposition and to view it in a positive light. Naturally, such a view was possible only from the standpoint of the late 1790s, when Hasidism had proven its resilience and vitality despite persecution since the early 1770s.

AFTER THE VILNA GAON'S DEATH: "NOT TO SPEAK ILL AFTER THE BIER OF A TORAH SCHOLAR"

The Vilna Gaon died during the intermediate days of Succot in 5558 (1797). A rumor spread among the Mitnagdim that the Hasidim were happy and rejoicing at the death of their venerated leader. Consequently the heads of the Vilna community initiated a new wave of persecutions against the Hasidim, fiercer than its predecessors. Things went so far that the persecuted Hasidim in Vilna addressed the Gentile authorities and involved them in the controversy.²⁸ Even then, the Mitnagdim showed no restraint. In May 1798 a letter defaming the Hasidim and their leader Rabbi Shneur Zalman was sent to the authorities. They arrested Rabbi Shneur Zalman in the following September, interrogated him, and released him in November, the Hebrew month of Kislev 5559.²⁹ Upon his release from prison, Rabbi Shneur Zalman wrote to his followers:

Here is the announcement of a grave matter of controversy and unjustified hatred. Therefore it is worthy for the whole community whose heart has been touched with awe of God, and who fears for His word, to be very careful of being a cause or a cause of a cause of damage, . . . for therein also last year, after the passing of his honor the Gaon of blessed memory of Vilna, I wrote a dreadful warning to all of our faction not to speak ill after the bier of a Torah scholar, not a hint of reproach or the hint of a hint, without any permission in the world. But this time now, in the hard times we are undergoing, perhaps it might be suspected that the reins were loosed, perish the thought, because many people lean on the great tree, none other than his honor ha-Gaon he-Hasid of blessed memory. Therefore I have come again with a double and redoubled warning to our entire faction, near and far, in every place of their dwelling, without anyone giving permission to himself, to open mouth or tongue against the honor of the Torah, the honor of ha-Gaon he-Hasid of blessed memory. For it is clearly known to us that he was not responsible, perish the thought, for acting greatly against us, and all the days of his life the obstacle and error did not proceed from the ruler, perish the thought.³⁰

Thus it turns out that, soon after the death of the Gaon, Rabbi Shneur Zalman warned his Hasidim not to dishonor his memory. Now, after his release from prison, he hastened to warn them again about the same thing. He knew that his Hasidim felt strong resentment against the Gaon. He probably was apprehensive lest those feelings might grow stronger and harsher because of his imprisonment. With his request to restrain such feelings, Rabbi Shneur Zalman argues that it was not the Gaon who had called for addressing the authorities. He repeats that statement in more general terms: "All the days of his life the obstacle and error did not proceed from the ruler, perish the thought." It is somewhat ironic that the degeneration of the struggle against the Hasidim to the level of informing against them to the authorities made it possible for Rabbi Shneur Zalman to say something to the credit of the Gaon. True, the Gaon had initiated and led the struggle against the Hasidim; however, he had never supported an appeal to the authorities.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Shneur Zalman's attitude toward the Gaon was far more complex than it appears. The very year that he wrote to his followers in favor of the Gaon, he wrote in a rather different spirit to Rabbi Phinehas Horowitz, the rabbi of Frankfurt am Main: "Please pardon me

for burdening you with words relating to you all the tribulations I underwent from our adversaries in Vilna, who follow the opinion of their famous rabbi, who permitted the shedding of our blood like water in 5532."³¹ It is easy to explain the disparity between the two letters. The first was sent to his followers to warn them not to dishonor the memory of the Gaon. The second was a personal appeal to a rabbi known for his affinity with Hasidism. Thus Rabbi Shneur Zalman did not hesitate to express his anger against the Gaon directly and explicitly for having permitted the persecution of the Hasidim.

Conciliatory tones toward the Mitnagdim, with the Gaon chief among them, are audible in a letter that Rabbi Shneur Zalman wrote to the scholars of the Vilna community several years later. These scholars had addressed Rabbi Shneur Zalman and warned him regarding the use of polished knives by Hasidic slaughterers in the Vilna area. Wishing to mollify the rabbis of Vilna, Rabbi Shneur Zalman refers to the words of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, uttered at the time of his visit to White Russia in 5563 (1803): "For he said in the name of his revered teacher ha-Gaon he-Hasid of blessed memory, that there was no prohibition at all against slaughter with polished knives according to the law as studied in the Gemara and the *posqim*." Rabbi Shneur Zalman goes on to explain that the prohibition against polished knives issued by the Mitnagdim in 5532 was motivated by "removal," that is to say, a social sanction, "like the other removals and decrees that were issued by error by the ruler in 5532 as though against an actual heretic: . . . everything according to the rumor, from men regarded as fit and dependable by His Honorable Torah."³² The argument is repeated, that the Gaon acted innocently and was misled by witnesses whom he trusted. However, at that point Rabbi Shneur Zalman is able to go much further in clearing the Gaon of guilt

In the fullness of years, after the passing of ha-Gaon he-Hasid of blessed memory, the merit of his Torah stood by him and by all those who gathered in his shadow, to shed no more blood in vain [and] with the revelation to all eyes the truth was known clearly, that there is no hint of heresy among us, not a hint of a hint. Therefore, the tribes were permitted to mingle, and they have always intermarried with us. Likewise the remaining ostracisms and decrees were rescinded, both the lenient and severe ones of 5532, which were an error and misinformation in the eyes

of the community. And of this it has been said, who can understand errors and clear me of hidden sins? [Ps. 19:13] And a person does not understand the words of Torah unless he has failed in them. And greater than that we have found an erroneous instruction even in the Great *Sanhedrin* in the Chamber of Hewn Stone . . . as it is written, "and the whole community of the Children of Israel shall be forgiven, for the whole nation is in error."³³

The picture painted here is one of reconciliation between the warring camps. After it was clear to everyone that the suspicion of heresy that the Mitnagdim had cast on the Hasidim was groundless, the war against them came to an end. Not only were the "ostracisms and decrees" rescinded, but relations of brotherhood and cooperation began to be knit between the camps. This new structure of arrangements developed "in the fullness of years, after the passing of ha-Gaon he-Hasid." Most likely the Gaon's death was among the principal factors in stopping the war against the Hasidim. However, quite surprisingly, Rabbi Shneur Zalman attributes the improvement in relations to the positive influence of the Gaon: through the merit of his Torah, as it were, his disciples would "shed no more blood in vain." Yet it had been the Vilna Gaon who had "permitted the shedding of our blood like water" and led the campaign against the Hasidim. He was the one who had locked his door before the emissaries of Hasidism who sought to propitiate him in 5532, and he had thwarted any possibility of reconciliation in the succeeding decades.

What is the meaning of the statement that, by virtue of the Gaon's Torah, those following in his footsteps had ceased to persecute the Hasidim? This apparently means that heaven favored the Gaon by having his disciples cease from persecuting the Hasidim, by virtue of his Torah. In reading these words, one wonders whether they are a sincere expression of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's feelings, or whether they are courteous phrases intended to placate the leaders of Vilna. It is difficult to provide an unequivocal answer to these questions. Most likely, as the reconciled situation blurred memories of the persecution, making them a picture of a rapidly receding past, Rabbi Shneur Zalman was able to develop a more positive view of the Gaon. However, it is doubtful that even with the passage of years he was capable of changing his ambivalent attitude

toward the Gaon into an entirely positive one. Even if he was truly convinced that by virtue of the Gaon's Torah his admirers had ceased from persecuting the Hasidim in vain after his death, he could not have forgotten that by virtue of that Torah the Gaon was able to lead the struggle against Hasidism as long as he remained alive.

In the letter cited here, Rabbi Shneur Zalman repeats the familiar claim that the Gaon and the leaders of Vilna acted in error. However, whereas in earlier statements he had been satisfied with stating that they acted innocently, in this epistle he adds Bible quotations and authoritative sources intended to show that that error is a common and legitimate phenomenon. Thus the opposition to Hasidism was also a legitimate phenomenon, though erroneous. With these words Rabbi Shneur Zalman plots the course for a train of thought that was to be prominent in Habad historiography in following generations.

MAZREF HA'AVODAH: OPPOSITION
TO HASIDISM AS A LEGITIMATE ERROR
GUIDED BY THE HANDS OF HEAVEN

Another link in the chain of the reactions of Habad Hasidism to the phenomenon of opposition is found in the book *Mazref Ha'avodah* (Purifier of Worship), first published in Koenigsberg in 5618 (1858). This work claims to describe "a debate that took place seventy-two years earlier between the two great rabbis of the generation, one from the sect of Hasidim and the other from the sect of Mitnagdim." The author, who hid behind a fictitious identity, was Ya'aqov Qidner, a Habad Hasid who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century.³⁴

This work is an effort to present a systematic and well-argued answer to the criticism of Hasidism prevalent among Mitnagdim during the first decades of the nineteenth century. The author appears to have been particularly interested in influencing Torah scholars, as can be seen from the detailed, erudite discussion justifying the Hasidic custom of using the version of the prayer book attributed to the ARI (Rabbi Isaac Luria).³⁵ Another expression of this concern is found in his effort to respond to the

criticism leveled against Hasidism by Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin in his book *Nefesh Ha-ḥayyim* (The Soul of Life).³⁶

During the "debate" the Mitnaged raises various questions and doubts about the path of the Hasidim. In so doing he also raises the issue of the position taken by the Gaon against Hasidism:

For it is known and renowned among all the Jews from our rabbi, the great and true Gaon, the rabbi of all the people of the diaspora, his honor of holy name, our teacher Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, whose grasp of the revealed and the esoteric was as one of our great ancient Sages, and the greatness of his asceticism and his piety is known and famous to all . . . and from his holy mouth we have heard explicitly about your sect: that they are like the sect of Shabbetai Zevi may his name be blotted out; and also he explicitly forbade us to marry them and forbade us to consult their books, like the books of heretics, perish the thought. . . . And also their wine and bread is totally forbidden and especially their ritual slaughter is that of a heretic. And ha-Gaon he-Hasid also did not want to look in the face of any one of the sect; . . . and once one of their rabbis came to Vilna to argue with him, and he did not want to admit him into his presence.³⁷

The description of the attitude of the Gaon was not meant to remind the reader of forgotten things. Following those words, the Mitnaged challenges the Hasid: how did he have the temerity to thrust his head in among the tall mountains, that is to say, the Gaon, on the one hand, and the Hasidic leaders, on the other, and to decide in favor of the latter against the stand of the Gaon? Underlying this challenge was the Gaon's authority. That authority, whose power permitted the persecution of the Hasidim, is here presented as a reason for rejecting their way.

The author of *Mazref Ha'avodah*, who was well acquainted with Mitnagdim, apparently believed that the Gaon's stand toward Hasidism continued to influence the Mitnagdim during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that the Gaon's struggle against Hasidism occupied a significant place in the collective memory of both Mitnagdim and Hasidim. As for his authority, it had not declined with the passage of time but had grown stronger. Thus it is no surprise that the author is not sparing with the words he places in the mouth of the Mitnaged in veneration of the Gaon's authority.

The Hasid responds to the Mitnaged's challenge:

My friend, take the beam from between your eyes and straighten yourself out, because who permitted you to marry our daughters? For it is known and renowned to everyone that all the magnates of the sect of Mitnagdim marry with our daughters. And even the family of the Gaon of blessed memory. Please tell me, my friend, who permitted you to eat of our slaughter, for the whole sect of Mitnagdim eats of our slaughter. . . . Thus after these true words whoever has a brain in his head will understand the thing correctly, . . . that in this matter you are not at all wary of the words of the Gaon.³⁸

Farther on, the Hasid explains that by ignoring the prohibitions and restrictions against contact with the Hasidim, the Mitnagdim acknowledge that the Gaon erred in what he said about the nature and character of the Hasidim. To make it easier for the Mitnaged to swallow such a coarse statement, the Hasid refers to the controversy between Rabbi Yakov Emden and Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeschuetz. It was known that, in Emden's opinion, Eybeschuetz was a Sabbatean and it was forbidden to read his books. Nevertheless, the Hasid states, no one heeded that prohibition anymore because it was clear to everyone that Emden was mistaken. Similarly, no one heeded the prohibitions imposed by the Gaon on contact with Hasidim, because everyone knew that his position was erroneous. Moreover, the entire controversy between Emden and Eybeschuetz occurred as a cautionary example to be recalled in the future, permitting the opponents of Hasidism to recognize the Gaon's error.³⁹

The example of Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin is an important component of the evidence presented by the author of *Mazref Ha'avodah*. Rabbi Ḥayyim was regarded as the Gaon's greatest disciple and the heir to his position as leader of the Mitnagdim in Lithuania. Thus Rabbi Ḥayyim's authority counterbalances, at least to a degree, the position taken by the Gaon. Here the Hasid describes Rabbi Ḥayyim's attitude toward the Hasidim:

I used to sit and study in the [yeshiva of] Volozhin with the true Gaon Rabbi Ḥayyim, and it is known to all that he was the chosen disciple of the Gaon of blessed memory, and I was among his associates and I saw the greatness of his fear and awe in remembering the holy name of his

rabbi the Vilna Gaon; . . . and nevertheless regarding the warnings of the aforementioned Gaon about our sect, I realized that he gave no place at all to his words, . . . and I saw that several Hasidim were sitting in his yeshiva. And he also brought them close with all sorts of attractions, . . . and I also saw several travelers from the sect of Hasidim [who were passing] through Volozhin, and his highness Rabbi Hayyim the aforementioned Gaon kept them until the sabbath. And they celebrated the sabbath with him in great honor. And once the Hasid Rabbi Yisrael Yafe, the printer from the community of Kapost came, and he detained him until the sabbath and he celebrated the sabbath with him with great honor like one of the great rabbis; and during the meal he implored him to say some of those elevated words to him, that he had heard from his holy rabbi of Lyady, and he preached before him and it was viewed very well by him. And once again I saw more than the rest that his only son who was dear to him, our master Rabbi Isaac, he has in hand all the books of our rabbis . . . and he studies them and reads them with depth of mind.⁴⁰

Rabbi Hayyim's friendly attitude toward the Hasidim who studied in his yeshiva and were guests in his home, the interest he showed in the teachings of their rabbis, and that fact that his son owned Hasidic books and studied them—all of these clearly prove that the Mitnagdim had some authority for ignoring the prohibitions imposed by the Gaon on contact with Hasidim.⁴¹

The argument that the Gaon's position regarding Hasidism was based on error is not new. As noted, this was the opinion of both Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady. Both of them absolved the Gaon of malicious intention because he had been misled by false witnesses. Rabbi Shneur Zalman took a further step and presented evidence that even the Sages of the *Sanhedrin* were liable to err. Hence the error of a communal leader was a legitimate occurrence. However, the author of *Mazref Ha'avodah* is not content with these explanations and seeks to endow the Gaon's error with a theological dimension:

And if it may seem wonderful why God did this to us by placing in the heart of ha-Gaon he-Hasid of blessed memory invalid opinions to condemn wholehearted believers as heretics, perish the thought, I shall explain to you that there is no reason to raise that question at all. For we have found that when the ARI of blessed memory was revealed, there

stood against him the holy Gaon Rabbi Solomon Luria of blessed memory, and he wanted to ban the ARI of blessed memory; . . . and this was also the case at the time of the revelation of the pure and bright holy light of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the holy rabbi our teacher Dov Ber of Mezhirech, there was prepared against them the aforementioned rabbi, the Gaon, to conceal their path and their way in sanctity. And one should not wonder why God did that. For it is known and famous in books that every pure and bright light cannot be revealed in this crude and murky world except by slight hiding and concealing. . . . And when God shined his bright light to create worlds He had to hide it so that the recipients could receive.⁴²

We find that the Gaon's opposition to Hasidism was not simply a human error, but the product of the precise planning of divine providence. The Kabbalistic principle that every manifestation of divine light must be accompanied by an obscuration and concealment also applies to the revelation of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Hence the Gaon's opposition was a concealment necessitated by the abundance of light. This surprising explanation of the Gaon's struggle against Hasidism is a kind of "sweetening of judgments," for the severe persecution of the Hasidim was "sweetened" and its sting removed. The bans, the humiliations, and the bodily and economic injury to the Hasidim took place only to conceal the strength of the divine light that broke through with the revelation of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the *maggid* of Mezhirech. Thus it was possible to maintain both the honor and authority of the Gaon, and the righteousness and honor of Hasidism. This harmonious explanation, which can also be described as the mystification of the struggle between the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim leaves no doubt as to which of the two warring camps received the divine light and which of them served as a veil meant to conceal it.

The effort of the author of *Mazref Ha'avodah* to make sense of the opposition to Hasidism led by the Gaon expresses a viewpoint typical in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In the beginning of the century the organized struggle against Hasidism came to an end. The cessation of the persecution can be attributed to a number of factors: the Gaon's death, recognition by the Russian authorities of the right of the Hasidim to hold separate minyanim, and increasing recognition that the Hasidim were not heretics.⁴³ In the early nineteenth century a new system of rela

tions between the two camps began to take shape. These relations were complex and were expressed in coexistence and a certain degree of cooperation on the social and interpersonal level and, at the same time, in competition and confrontation on the spiritual and religious level. In other words, the Mitnagdim stopped accusing the Hasidim of heresy and acknowledged their right to exist within the Jewish people. Nevertheless they retained the opinion that the Hasidic manner of worshiping God was erroneous.

Mazref Ha'avodah was thus intended to present a convincing reply to the allegations and objections leveled against Hasidim and Hasidism. The author sought to lead his readers to the conclusion that Hasidism is not merely a phenomenon that must be tolerated retrospectively, but that it was, from the start, the preferable way of worshiping God. In his effort to instill this recognition in his readers, the author saw fit to refer to the Gaon's war against Hasidism. Being familiar with the state of mind of the Mitnagdim, especially in learned circles, Ya'aqov Qidner understood that even at this stage it was not possible to ignore the monumental figure on whom the Mitnagdim had leaned since the beginning of the struggle. The Gaon's enormous authority and the living memory of his campaign against Hasidism were obstacles in the path of anyone who wanted to change the Mitnagdim's attitude toward Hasidism. Therefore it was imperative to find a proper and convincing explanation of the Gaon's attitude toward Hasidism—an explanation that would not impair, perish the thought, his honor and authority—in order to change the tolerant, lukewarm, yet somewhat tense attitude of the Mitnagdim into acknowledgement of the virtue and correctness of Hasidism.

BEIT RABI—A CONTROVERSY FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN

So far we have dealt with the response of the Hasidim to the phenomenon of opposition in two periods: at the very time of the organized struggle against Hasidism, which is to say, the last three decades of the eighteenth century; and when persecution gave way to coexistence com-

bined with a spiritual and cultural confrontation, or the first decades of the nineteenth century. However, the question of the character and meaning of opposition to Hasidism continued to preoccupy the Hasidim in the second half of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century. As a matter of course, because of the distance in time from the dramatic events of the late eighteenth century, the response to opposition became a matter of perception and interpretation of the past. The two principal channels of expression through which the Hasidim formed their picture of past opposition are hagiographic literature and historical writing. Below I shall concentrate on three examples of Habad historiography.

Hayyim Meir Heilmann's book *Beit Rabi* was published in Berditchev in 5562 (1902). The book is devoted to the history of the rebbes of Habad from Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady to those of the late nineteenth century. In the introduction to his book, Heilmann claims that he is making available to his readers a faithful and documented history of Habad Hasidism. In his opinion his version is preferable both to irresponsible hagiographic literature and the distorted historiography of the Haskala school. To support this claim, Heilmann points to the multitude of reliable sources presented in his book and the lack of contradiction among the facts mentioned in it.

Heilmann claims that, along with these virtues, his book has another important feature: "All the letters presented here are not propagandic with insults and abuse; they do not revile those opposed to them, rather they find virtue in them; . . . and we copied hardly any malicious letters from major Mitnagdim."⁴⁴ The first part of this citation refers to the epistles of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady. By virtue of the moderate and restrained tone that characterizes them, these letters are worthy to be cited in a balanced and responsible historical study. The writings of the opponents of Hasidism, by contrast, are flooded with "insults and abuse," and therefore they are not worthy of inclusion. This statement is one of many indications of the author's personal affinity with Hasidism. In his presentation of the confrontation between the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim his leanings are evident.

Heilmann was a Habad Hasid who had been exposed to the influence of modern historiography and had even adopted some of its features.

Nevertheless, he cannot be viewed as a critical historian. Along with his aspiration to reveal the historical truth, Heilmann also displays deep commitment to the values and needs of two social circles to which he was attached: Habad Hasidism in particular and Haredi society in general.⁴⁵ This dual commitment influenced both the description of opposition to Hasidism and its interpretation. The connection to Habad Hasidism is expressed in acceptance of the version of events that Rabbi Shneur Zalman presents in his epistles. The attachment to the values and needs of Haredi society is expressed in an apologetic interpretation that presents the dispute as "a controversy for the sake of heaven."

Heilmann begins by warning the reader, "Do not be hasty in your opinion to judge harshly the rabbis who disagreed with our rabbi and spoke erroneously against them. Know well that the dissenting rabbis were great and very profound in Torah and *yira*, and all their actions were not ill-intentioned, perish the thought, to oppose the truth. Only from God did a cause come to turn them back."⁴⁶ To strengthen his claim that the leaders of the Mitnagdim acted in innocence, Heilmann suggests two explanations for the persecution of the Hasidim. First, at the time of the growth of Hasidism there were still secret Sabbateans in the Polish hinterland. Since the Sabbateans pretended to be pious Kabbalists, the Mitnagdim mistakenly thought that the new Hasidim were also Sabbateans. Second, the leaders of the Mitnagdim were misled by false witnesses who appeared to be fit witnesses.

The latter explanation is familiar from the epistles of Rabbi Menahem Mendel and of Rabbi Shneur Zalman. By contrast, the statement that the Frankist episode and the shock it left among the Jews lay in the background of the struggle against Hasidism sounds like an entirely historical explanation. However, Heilmann does not seek merely to propose a reasonable explanation of past events. His views have the no-less-significant function of attempting to shape the reader's attitude toward those events. Therefore he distinguishes between false witnesses who acted with malice and who deserved condemnation and the leaders of the Mitnagdim, who, even if they erred, had the sake of heaven in their intentions. In the light of this distinction he again warns, "But the righteous rabbis, at one with God and His Torah like the Vilna Gaon and [the author of] *Hanod'a Beyehuda* of blessed memory and those like them,

heaven forfend that ill might be thought of them and that they might be spoken badly of."⁴⁷

The repeated claim that the Gaon and the leaders of the Mitnagdim acted in innocence justified the demand not to offend their honor. However, this is an argument of legalistic and restricted character, leaving in its wake questions and doubts. In the end, why were the innocent Hasidim persecuted? Was it possible to dismiss the long and cruel campaign waged against them as a regrettable error and nothing more? Was it perhaps possible to reveal a hidden and deep reason that would give meaning to the persecution of the Hasidim?

Indeed, Heilmann goes on to suggest an interpretation of the struggle of the Mitnagdim against Hasidism: "But in truth they were all righteous and holy and pure, and the holy spirit appeared in their house of study and their controversy was for the sake of heaven and not a simple controversy, but rather [one that dealt] with high and exalted things that stand at the height of the world; and also at the time of the controversy their hatred was not complete."⁴⁸ In defining the war against the Hasidim as a "controversy . . . for the sake of heaven," Heilmann seeks to give it a decent and respectable character.⁴⁹ And if this is not sufficient he veils the meaning of the controversy in clouds of mystery: these were "high and exalted things that stand at the height of the world." Unquestionably, those great men who disagreed with one another had hidden reasons beyond our understanding. Heilmann also argues that the controversy between the Mitnagdim and the Hasidim was not at all an abnormal phenomenon. As noted, this argument exists in *Mazref Ha'avodah*. However, Heilmann expands its scope and mentions a series of great men who were persecuted for no good reason and whom everyone, after a while, acknowledged were righteous. Among them were Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeschutz, the ARI, and Maimonides. Controversies of the kind also took place at the time of the Sages of the Talmud, and such was the controversy between Saul and King David. Thus, controversy is a familiar and legitimate phenomenon from time immemorial. However, in his generation, Heilmann adds, the controversy received particular significance: "Now in the footsteps of the messiah . . . Satan knows and sees that his end is near, etc., and therefore when a new light shines in the world he is fearful lest perhaps because of this his day will come sooner

And therefore he confuses the world and increases controversy among the Jews so as to prolong by that the time of exile, perish the thought. And this, too, is caused by God so as not to do away with choice so that it will be free, etc."⁵⁰

Here we have an effort to reveal the metaphysical meaning of the struggle against Hasidism. In the background stands the Lurianic conception of the messianic redemption. According to this conception, redemption depends on completion of the process of *tiqun* (repair), which means increasing the powers of sanctity over those of the *sitra ahra* (the forces of evil).⁵¹ The appearance of Hasidism, as Heilmann interprets it, is a "new light" that advances the messianic process. By contrast, the controversy against Hasidism is the product of the ruses of the forces of impurity, which endeavor to delay redemption. Clearly, to present those who disagree with Hasidism as tools of Satan is no great compliment. However, Heilmann softens the barb somewhat by explaining that even the initiative of Satan is governed by divine providence. The latter allows Satan to arouse controversy in order to permit "free choice." What is the nature of this free choice? Heilmann must be referring to a choice between the worthy path of the Hasidim and the erroneous way of the Mitnagdim.

This position reflects Heilmann's ambivalent attitude toward the leaders of the Mitnagdim. He spares no words in emphasizing their innocence and integrity; however, the explanation he offers regarding the meaning of the controversy leaves no doubt about the superiority of the Hasidim over their persecutors. This ambivalent position also appears in the principle that Heilmann states at the conclusion of his discussion of this matter: "In all the controversies that were among great [rabbis], when one was right in his judgment, nevertheless the worth of the opponent is not diminished, and his honor remains in its place. But this, too, you will find, tried and true, that in every controversy among the great [rabbis], the persecuted one was on a special level, and his persecutors did not attain the height of his eminence."⁵² Thus the honor of the Gaon and the other rabbis of the Mitnagdim was unimpaired, but the persecuted Hasidim were on a higher level.

As noted, Heilmann's position was shaped by his relationship to two

circles of identity and commitment: the Habad circle and the Haredi circle. Heilmann does try to be faithful to the facts, as shown by the many sources he includes in his book. Nevertheless, the letters of Rabbi Shneur Zalman are his main source. He ignores the writs of excommunication issued by the Mitnagdim under the pretext that they contain insults and abuse. Indeed, Heilmann systematically embraces Rabbi Shneur Zalman's version, according to which the Gaon played a critical role in leading the struggle against the Hasidim but did so in good faith. Heilmann also follows Rabbi Shneur Zalman in the effort to justify the Gaon and the other leaders of the Mitnagdim, but his arguments are different.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century the processes of secularization among the Jews of Russia intensified. Correspondingly, the value of cooperation between Hasidim and Mitnagdim increased, for both groups remained faithful to the values of the tradition and came to its defense. Alongside the traditional division between Hasidim and Mitnagdim, the Haredi identity took shape as a shared framework bridging the gaps between them, at least to some extent. From this point of view, it was important to overcome the harsh residue of the struggle between the Mitnagdim and the Hasidim remaining in the collective memory. Consequently, Heilmann tends to emphasize the legitimacy of the phenomenon of controversy by use of an apologetic interpretation. He presents the effort to expel the Hasidim from the Jewish people and the manifestations of hatred, persecution, and excommunication in a soft light as a "controversy for the sake of heaven" based on significant metaphysical grounds.

THE REBBE, RABBI JOSEPH ISAAC: THE VICTORY OF THE HASIDIM IN THE MINSK DEBATE

Another important chapter in Habad historiography is found in the writings of the rebbe Joseph Isaac Schneersohn (1880–1950), the leader of Habad Hasidim between the two world wars and during the Holocaust. Scholars who have discussed this historical writing have commented that portraying the past was an extremely important factor in the spiritual

struggles in which Rabbi Joseph Isaac was involved, and that this gave rise to their decidedly anachronistic character. Furthermore, they are characterized by a strange mixture of historical fact and imaginary descriptions that have nothing at all to do with historical sources and are inconsistent with what is known to us about the period under discussion. In sum, Rabbi Joseph Isaac's historical writing is largely arbitrary and partisan.⁵³

How did this man describe the phenomenon of opposition to Hasidism? How did he explain to his readers the vexing events that took place in the last decades of the eighteenth century? The reader of Rabbi Joseph Isaac's writings will be surprised to discover that the story of the struggle waged by the Mitnagdim against the Hasidim is barely present in his "history" of Hasidism. In his article "The Fathers of Hasidism," he describes the first three decades of the Hasidic movement but does not discuss the persecution of the Hasidim in itself. This matter is mentioned incidentally when he describes the response of the Hasidim to the persecutions:

The situation at that time demanded that at the head of the leadership should stand a man with the spirit in him to speak clearly with the Mitnagdim and not to fear the excommunications and the proclamations against the Hasidim, which were then issued by the Mitnagdim, and for that reason it was decided then to choose a leadership committee with a general organizer . . . with the power and authority to act on his own and to give orders to all the centers as he should find necessary for the good of the cause. And that holy band chose—at a general assembly—his honor and holiness our venerable rabbi to be the general and authorized organizer.⁵⁴

Rabbi Joseph Isaac goes on to say that in his capacity of "general organizer," Rabbi Shneur Zalman spent about three years in travels. Among other places, he visited Shklov, Minsk, and Vilna, cities known to be centers of opposition to Hasidim. In those cities he endeavored to gain the sympathy of young scholars. He debated Torah matters with them until they appreciated his greatness and became his followers. This sophisticated propaganda activity was sometimes clandestine. Thus, for example, while he was in Vilna Rabbi Shneur Zalman concealed his identity for some time. He wandered from one house of study to another and

debated with all the great Torah scholars. But he did not meet with the Gaon, for he feared lest his identity be revealed.

Rabbi Joseph Isaac does not wish to mention the very phenomenon of opposition to Hasidism. The motives of the Mitnagdim, their means of struggle, the suffering they caused the Hasidim—all these matters are ignored. Even Rabbi Shneur Zalman's terms of imprisonment are not worthy of mention. Instead, he wishes to inculcate the following message in the reader: Rabbi Shneur Zalman stood head and shoulders above the other disciples of the *maggid* of Mezhirech, both as a Torah scholar and as a leader and organizer. For that reason the disciples of the *maggid* chose him as a leader in that emergency period of excommunications and persecutions. Indeed, he succeeded marvelously in drawing masses of young Torah scholars into the ranks of Hasidism.

As noted, Rabbi Joseph Isaac's story abounds with imaginary descriptions. There is no doubt that Rabbi Shneur Zalman was an impressive Torah scholar, and that he was a charismatic leader and talented organizer. However, there is no basis for the statement that the disciples of the *maggid* chose him as a "general organizer," that is to say, an overall leader of the Hasidic movement. Also, the story that he wandered for years among the houses of study of Vilna, Shklov, and Minsk and won souls for Hasidism by demonstrating his great Torah scholarship appears to be imaginary. Naturally it is not impossible that young Torah scholars were drawn to him because of his great erudition. However, the words of Rabbi Shneur Zalman himself show that the message that Hasidism sought to impart to the community was that of a new way of worshipping God, to which prayer in particular was central.⁵⁵

From the account presented above, it appears that Rabbi Shneur Zalman fought the Mitnagdim with their own weapon—Torah scholarship. This message arises even more strongly from the episode known as the Minsk Debate. An account of this episode is included in a type-written manuscript by Rabbi Joseph Isaac, published with a comprehensive commentary by Rachel Elior.⁵⁶

Here is the essence of the episode: in the winter of 5542 (1782) Rabbi Shneur Zalman decided to initiate a debate with the Mitnagdim. To that end he adopted a strategy: eight young Torah scholars from among the Hasidim were charged with the task of waging a propaganda campaign

among the Mitnagdim. They pretended to be Mitnagdim and circulated among communities of Mitnagdim, giving sermons on fear of heaven. At the same time they attacked the dissident sect and explained to their listeners that it was necessary to hold a debate with it. Their plan was successful, and from various communities calls for a debate against the Hasidim reached the leaders of the Mitnagdim in Shklov and Vilna. Disagreement emerged among the leaders of the Mitnagdim in those two centers. The men of Vilna supported holding the debate, but those of Shklov opposed it. The Gaon decided between them, declaring that no debate against the Hasidim should be initiated, "but if the sect should demand it, then we are obliged according to Torah law to respond to them."

In the month of Iyyar, Rabbi Shneur Zalman announced that he invited everyone who disagreed with the ways of the Hasidim to come to Minsk, "and he was prepared to answer everything with proofs from the Talmud and Halakhic authorities." The Gaon took up the challenge and ordered that Torah scholars be sent to Minsk to take part in the debate. Meanwhile hundreds of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's followers also arrived in Minsk, and on the sabbath he taught them Torah as was his wont. Mitnagdim were also among the listeners, trying to find fault with the words of the Hasidic leader. However, Rabbi Shneur Zalman's Torah teachings amazed all those present, including the Mitnagdim. The impression left by the Hasidic leader on the residents of Minsk was so deep that, at the time of the third sabbath meal, the synagogue where he was teaching was not large enough to hold the masses of people who thronged its doors.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman addressed the rabbinical court of Minsk, the body in charge of running the debate, making the following request: since he was unable to respond to all the masses of Mitnagdim who had gathered in the city, let those who debated with him be only those capable of responding properly to questions he would ask them about passages in the Talmud. The rabbinical court acceded to this demand, with one caveat: the senior Mitnagdim would examine Rabbi Shneur Zalman about passages from the Talmud before he examined them. Before the debate the leaders of the Mitnagdim removed the ban under which they had placed the Hasidim in 5532. Moreover, they decreed that the day of the debate should be a day of fasting. Finally they determined which

of them should be examined by Rabbi Shneur Zalman and what questions they would pose to him.

It is easy to guess that Rabbi Shneur Zalman astounded his examiner and they were filled with wonder "at the depth of his intelligence, the power of his memory, and his erudition." However, when their turn came to answer his questions, they were struck dumb and asked to postpone the continuation of the debate until the following day. News of the development spread rapidly throughout the city, and the Mitnagdim were flustered. The next day the leaders of the Mitnagdim held a consultation. Nevertheless, they were unable to answer the question that Rabbi Shneur Zalman had posed to them. Hence they changed the strategy and demanded that he should respond to their objections and complaints regarding the ways of the Hasidim. Rabbi Shneur Zalman demanded that they fulfill their part of the bargain and answer his questions. An uproar broke out, and the debate came to an end. Many of the scholars among the Mitnagdim who witnessed the debate were deeply impressed by the great Torah knowledge of the Hasidic leader and became his followers. Rabbi Shneur Zalman's victory was complete.⁵⁷

This is the story of the Minsk Debate as recounted by Rabbi Joseph Isaac. Rachel Elijor, who published this document, devotes a detailed discussion to the question of its historical reliability. In addition to general reservations regarding Rabbi Joseph Isaac's historical writings, Elijor raises three weighty considerations that cast doubt on the story.⁵⁸ First, no support for it is found in other sources, either of the Hasidim or the Mitnagdim. Second, there is a contradiction between the account of the Minsk Debate and the well-known fact that the Gaon condemned all contact with the Hasidim. Finally, in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's epistle of 555 (1797) to his followers in Vilna, in which he describes the course of confrontations with Mitnagdim since 5532, there is no mention of the Minsk Debate.⁵⁹

Strangely, despite these arguments against it, Elijor tends not to deny the historical authenticity of the Minsk Debate. She bases her estimation on the fact that Rabbi Joseph Isaac attributes the story to a family tradition that came down to him from his ancestors. She also claims that "most of the people mentioned in the account of the Minsk Debate can be identified

tified historically, and most of the facts can be reconciled." Therefore she concludes her discussion with the statement "There is no reason to doubt either the veracity of this account, including its historical details, or the likelihood that such a debate could have taken place. Perhaps the publication of this document will lead to confirmation of this episode by another source."⁶⁰

As far as I know, no confirmation of this episode has been found in any other source whatsoever, and I greatly doubt that it will ever be found. As noted, Elijah himself points out three considerations that cast doubt on the reliability of this story, and they seem sufficient. Furthermore, it is difficult to believe the story because some of its elements seem imaginary and inconsistent with the concepts of the period: for example, mention of the Hasidic Torah students who disguised themselves as Mitnagdim and attracted audiences with their sermons; the agreement of the Mitnagdim that the debate would open with a battle of brains based on passages of the Talmud; the failure of all the great scholars among the Mitnagdim, including the students of the Gaon, to answer the questions of Rabbi Shneur Zalman; and the astonishing fact that Rabbi Shneur Zalman waived a golden opportunity to respond to arguments of the Mitnagdim against the ways of Hasidism.⁶¹

On the basis of its contents, structure, and character, the story of the Minsk Debate appears to be hagiography intended to answer an ideological and psychological need of those who told and heard it. Not only did the persecuted Hasidim emerge from darkness into great light, and not only did Rabbi Shneur Zalman win the hearts of his listeners and beholders, but he also vanquished the Mitnagdim with their own weapon—great Torah learning. There could be no more miraculous ending to the Hasidic leader's victory march than his sweeping masses of students from the houses of study of the Mitnagdim into his court.

In a certain sense this story compensates the Hasidic collective memory for two other debates, one that took place and one that did not. The first is the Shklov Debate, which was held in the winter of 5532. As noted, from the Hasidic point of view this was a traumatic event. The Hasidim were unpersuasive in their responses to the accusations leveled against them by the leaders of the Shklov community. For that reason the rabbis of Shklov wrote to the Gaon that the Hasidim were heretics, and the

Gaon adopted their position. Moreover, after their failure to justify the ways of the Hasidim, the Hasidim who took part in that debate were exposed to injurious behavior on the part of the leaders of Shklov. Rabbi Shneur Zalman's letters show that the harsh memory of the failure in Shklov remained with him for decades.⁶²

The debate that did not take place is mentioned in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's epistle of 5557 (1797) to his followers in Vilna.⁶³ As mentioned above, the Hasidim feared the renewal of the persecutions and asked their rabbi to come to Vilna and debate with the Gaon or his representatives and, in that way, bring an end to the controversy. Rabbi Shneur Zalman responded that there was no chance of implementing such a plan, because the Gaon was firm in his refusal to acknowledge that the Hasidim were right or to permit reconciliation with them. In this epistle as well, Rabbi Shneur Zalman mentions the failed debate in Shklov. According to him, it would not be difficult to respond to the challenges of the Mitnagdim, and they had made adequate responses in Shklov, but the Mitnagdim were unwilling to listen.

Thus the debate in Shklov was an utter failure, and the debate that the Hasidim of Vilna wished to hold never took place. Against the background of these disappointments, the miraculous outcome of the Minsk Debate stands out as a glorious victory for the Hasidim, emotional compensation to the collective memory for past suffering. Furthermore, this story also constitutes a statement regarding the status of Habad Hasidim within Haredi society during the first half of the twentieth century. Rabbi Shneur Zalman's proven greatness and wisdom in knowledge of Torah were the spiritual dowry by means of which Rabbi Joseph Isaac sought to strengthen the position of Habad Hasidism over and above other groups of Hasidism and against Lithuanian Torah scholarship.

THE REBBE JOSEPH ISAAC ON HASIDIM,
MITNAGDIM, AND MASKILIM

Rabbi Joseph Isaac's historical accounts with the opponents of Hasidism were not settled by proving Rabbi Shneur Zalman's greatness as a Torah scholar. Another argument, whose polemical sting was far greater, was

the failure of the Mitnagdim in the struggle against Haskalah.⁶⁴ In this matter as well, Rabbi Joseph Isaac offered his readers detailed and colorful accounts containing a mixture of reality and imagination. We shall examine his main points here.

Following the abolition of the Council of the Four Lands in Poland (1764), the senior rabbis decided to place the yoke of community leadership on the shoulders of exceptional individuals. The Gaon was chosen to lead the community of Vilna, though he did not wish to do so: "he was forced to accept the crown of guiding the community." The Gaon not only possessed genius in Torah studies, he also loved the sciences. Furthermore, he believed that science was a vital means for understanding the Torah. Therefore, not only did he himself toil to acquire scientific knowledge, but he also ordered his disciples to translate portions of the Gentiles' books into the holy tongue so that general knowledge would increase among the Jews.

"In the greatness of his righteousness and innocence," the Gaon underestimated the danger entailed in the acquisition of secular knowledge. Consequently he unwittingly caused the penetration of Berlin Haskalah within Vilna. This is how it happened: the Gaon and his associates regretted the lack of a Yiddish translation of the Torah with the addition of "an easily understood explanation . . . accessible to all." When news came to them that in Berlin "there was an erudite scholar of Torah, scrupulous in [keeping] the commandments, who had translated the Pentateuch into the German tongue in clear language," they sent five choice students to this scholar, named Mendelssohn, so they could get to know him. The students remained in Berlin for a long time. They copied pages of Mendelssohn's translation of the Torah and brought them back to the associates of the Gaon in Vilna. These recommended the work to the Gaon, "and with his permission Torah scholars were assigned to make several dozen copies of it and distribute them among people familiar with books, so they would set times to teach it in public before the multitude."

This innocent initiative had disastrous results: "dozens of Torah scholars with excellent talents in the houses of study of Vilna, Shklov, Slutzk, Brisk, and Minsk [began] to drag their legs to Berlin and to study the Ger-

man language and the science of medicine and the science of engineering." Thus the Haskalah of Berlin penetrated the bastions of Torah in Lithuania. While the Gaon and his associates, in their great innocence, were introducing choice young scholars of Lithuania to Haskalah, the Hasidic leaders knew what lay before them and were properly cautious. This should not be surprising to us, for the Ba'al Shem Tov himself issued a timely warning on this subject. As early as 5503 (1743) the Ba'al Shem Tov gathered his greatest disciples and told them that in one of the cities of Germany there was a scribe named Rabbi Menahem, who was "God-fearing and a great scholar." That man had a talented son, and his father studied Torah with him. But that Rabbi Menahem did not believe in Kabbalah, and he spoke disdainfully to his son about the Holy Zohar. Those words had a bad influence on the lad's faith. When the publication of latter's commentary became widely known, the Hasidic leaders quickly forbade study of that work. To strengthen that prohibition, they also forbade the study of grammar and insisted that the Pentateuch must be studied only with Rashi's commentary.⁶⁵

As noted, Rabbi Joseph Isaac's account is a strange mixture of historical fact with imaginary events. Certain aspects of this topic have been examined above, in the discussion of the Gaon and Haskalah.⁶⁶ Here, I shall briefly present the main points. The Gaon believed that knowledge of the sciences should be acquired as an auxiliary for Torah study. This position was adopted by several of his disciples and the idea persisted among a small segment of Torah scholars in Lithuania after his death. However, the claim that the Gaon worked to disseminate Mendelssohn's "commentary" in Lithuania is groundless. Similarly, there is no basis to the claim that the Haskalah movement arose in Lithuania in direct connection with the Gaon. When the first signs of Haskalah arose in eastern Europe, during the first decades of the nineteenth century, there was a clear difference between the response of the Mitnagdim and that of the Hasidim. While the Mitnagdim were ready to support a balanced and controlled mixture of Torah and secular knowledge, the Hasidic leaders objected to this phenomenon absolutely.⁶⁷

These historical facts apparently nourished Rabbi Joseph Isaac's claim that the Gaon and his disciples were to be blamed for the penetration of

Haskalah into Lithuania. However, when he set about proving this severe accusation, he treated the facts with freedom. A prime example of this fanciful presentation of the facts is his dating of the struggle between the maskilim and the Hasidim in eastern Europe several decades too early. He says, "The maskilim waged an aggressive war" against the Hasidim from the mid-1760s! Habad Hasidim were thus stricken doubly: "for they suffered on the one hand from the maskilim and on the other from the Mitnagdim." From here it is not a long step to present both of these enemies of Hasidism as interconnected: "The reader's hair will stand on end when he reads the literature of the maskilim and the literature of the Mitnagdim, which was mainly written by maskilim who hate the Jewish religion and deny the sanctity of the Torah and the Creator."⁶⁸

In sum, the anachronistic projection of the struggle between maskilim and those faithful to the tradition in eastern Europe back to the latter decades of the eighteenth century enabled Rabbi Joseph Isaac to ignore the true struggle that took place in those years: the war of the Mitnagdim against the Hasidim. Thus he is able to exempt the Gaon from the judgment of history for his groundless persecution of the Hasidim, but at the same time he blames him for the penetration of Haskalah into Russia, a sin of which he was not guilty. The advantage that Rabbi Joseph Isaac gains by presenting this picture of the past was double: he clears Hasidism of the accusation of heresy that the Gaon had cast on it, and he fortifies the status of the Hasidim as leaders in the struggle against Haskalah. This picture of the past suits Rabbi Joseph Isaac's position as a fierce opponent of any compromise with modernity.⁶⁹

YEHOSHUA MONDSHINE: A PLOT OF THE *PARNASIM*
AND THE WEAKNESS OF THE VILNA GAON

Recently an author identified with Habad Hasidism has addressed the question of opposition to Hasidism once again. The man in question is Yehoshua Mondshine, an important scholar and prolific writer who has contributed greatly to the study of Hasidism both by publishing important documents and by clarifying textual and bibliographical problems.

However, when he examines a historical issue such as the one under discussion here, he identifies clearly with the Hasidic trend to which he is connected. This identification distorts his critical sense to such a degree that one may view Mondshine's historical writing as another example of Habad historiography.

Mondshine presents his view of the motives that underlay opposition to Hasidism in a chapter of his *Kerem Habad*.⁷⁰ That chapter is preceded by three chapters that also deal with opposition to Hasidism. In the first of these, Mondshine argues against the claim of the Mitnagdim that the Hasidim introduced changes in ritual. His counterclaim is that the Gaon himself, in his rulings and customs, deviated from accepted practice. Later in this chapter Mondshine responds to the argument that the Hasidim neglected Torah study. In this matter as well, he points an accusatory finger at the Gaon: whereas Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady forbade secular study, even for someone who had studied all of Torah, the Vilna Gaon encouraged his students to acquire secular knowledge.⁷¹ In the second of these chapters Mondshine presents examples showing that the Mitnagdim distorted and mangled Hasidic texts they cited in their works.⁷²

The third of these chapters is extremely important to our discussion. It is devoted to the struggle waged between the *kahal* and the rabbi in Vilna.⁷³ Mondshine presents many documents in order to prove that, in their struggle against the rabbi, the *parnasim* of Vilna acted with malice and did not eschew improper means for advancing their goals. In the author's words, "Judicial and administrative injustice became the norm in the congregation of Vilna."⁷⁴ This statement is meant to bolster his proposed account of opposition to Hasidism. His main point is that the struggle against Hasidism was not driven by religious motives and was not led by the Gaon. Those who initiated and led the persecution of the Hasidim were the corrupt *parnasim* of Vilna, who had political motives. The Gaon was nothing but a tool in the hands of those *parnasim*.

Mondshine's point of departure is the assumption that it is inconceivable that Hasidism should have been persecuted for religious reasons, for, to the best of his knowledge, there was no justification for such persecution. To strengthen this assumption he presents quotations from the

epistle of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, who complains bitterly about the ways of the Mitnagdim.⁷⁵ Since opposition to Hasidism cannot be explained on religious grounds, one is constrained to concede that this opposition was politically motivated.

Here is Mondshine's account of the events: Following the decision of the Polish monarchy in 1764 to abolish the Council of the Four Lands, community organization was weakened. In such circumstances the leadership tended "to repress any effort to rebel." Indeed, Mondshine concedes, "I would not define the Hasidim as an 'opposition' in the sense of proposing an alternative to the existing organization. . . . However, the consolidation of a group within the community had in itself always been objectionable to the community administration."⁷⁶ For that reason the *parnasim* of Vilna decided to meet the danger and fight the new movement. To that end they hatched a plot "to cast suspicion on the Hasidim of seceding from the community" and to present them as a "sect." To ensure the success of this scheme, the *parnasim* needed a Torah authority who would serve them as a fig leaf. This function was assigned to the Gaon. Since he lived in isolation, cloistered in his house, it was easy to mislead him with false witnesses.

The reader may be surprised to hear that the Gaon was such a naive man and so isolated that he could become a tool in the hands of the *parnasim*. Was he not aware of the terrible injustice being done to the Hasidim? Mondshine anticipates these questions by pointing to the Gaon's silence in the face of the dreadful injustices committed by the *parnasim* in their struggle with the rabbi. He explains that silence by stating that "the Vilna Gaon was isolated and shut up in his room, and he did not know what was happening in the city." If one insists that he must have known something, Mondshine replies: the Gaon benefited from generous financial support from the community, and he was afraid that if he confronted those who supported him, that support would cease.⁷⁷

To bolster the picture he painted, Mondshine relies on the epistles of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, who repeatedly state that the Gaon acted under the influence of false witnesses. Mondshine interprets Rabbi Shneur Zalman's statement that the Mitnagdim rely on the Gaon's authority in the following manner: "The

[Hebrew] expression [used by Rabbi Shneur Zalman] 'hanging from a great tree,' which appears again and again in the writings of our venerable rabbi, proves that in his opinion there was no justification and no proof in attributing the harsh persecutions to the Vilna Gaon's opinion. That is merely an excuse."⁷⁸

Mondshine summarizes the motives for the struggle against Hasidism with the following words: "We regard those events as a secular-political struggle, waged by the *parnasim* of the *kahal* in 5532 [1772], in their efforts to strengthen their rule at any cost, feeling that the ground was about to be swept from under their feet." Consequently, the Gaon was not the one who initiated and led the struggle against Hasidism. The *parnasim* were the ones who did so, and "they flaunted the Vilna Gaon and his signature, using him as an effective weapon."⁷⁹

BETWEEN HASIDIC HISTORIOGRAPHY AND CRITICAL RESEARCH

Another characteristic of Mondshine's historical writing is his tendency to challenge scholars connected with the academy. As one who stands on the border of the academic world, contributing to it and drawing from it, he occasionally lashes out against a publication of which he does not approve. He is mainly concerned with studies in the field of Hasidism, in which he is an expert and personally involved.⁸⁰ Indeed, the chapter on opposition to Hasidism, surveyed above, was written as a polemical response to an article of my own. In that article I tried to show that the Gaon was the one who initiated and led the struggle against Hasidism, and that his motivations were decidedly religious.⁸¹ Mondshine rejected the reconstruction of events that I proposed, both by proposing an alternative account and by challenging the evidence on which I depended.

Obviously an academic scholar is liable to err, and a historian associated with Hasidism can be correct.⁸² Thus Mondshine's connection with Hasidism is not in itself evidence relevant to the truth of his account of events. In other words, only after his claims have been examined on their own merits may the tendentiousness of his writing be taken into account.

The question is whether the picture painted by Mondshine regarding the motives of the opposition to Hasidism can withstand criticism. Did he use valid arguments to refute the account presented in my article? This is not the place for a detailed discussion. Those interested may read my article and Mondshine's criticism and decide for themselves. However, it is impossible to let the matter pass with no further comment.

Let us begin with the *parnasim* of the Vilna community and their motives. The struggle between the community and the rabbi in Vilna is beyond the scope of this discussion. Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept the claim that a gang of corrupt *parnasim* stood at the head of the most important Jewish community in Lithuania. However, even if we assume for the sake of the argument that Mondshine is right about this, it is still surprising that such a vigorous and powerful *kahal* should have seen fit to hatch a plot against Hasidism. The view that Hasidism challenged the community establishment has long since been rejected.⁸³ Mondshine himself concedes that Hasidism did not constitute opposition to the community administration. Why, then, would the *kahal* perjure itself and deceive the greatest rabbi of the generation?

We cannot determine the exact number of Jews in Vilna who were drawn to Hasidism during the first years of its expansion. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that in 5532, the year when the struggle broke out, their number exceeded a few dozen households.⁸⁴ Could it be that a few dozen men who prayed in a separate minyan and recited Psalm 136 before the blessing "Blessed be He who spoke and the world came into being" constituted a threat to the community administration? Furthermore, the first community to declare that the Hasidim were heretics was Shklov. Only after the Sages of Shklov wrote about this matter to the Gaon did he adopt their position, and only then did the community of Vilna begin the campaign against the Hasidim.⁸⁵ How does this fact square with the claim that the *parnasim* of Vilna hatched a plot? It must also be asked whether the leaders of the other communities who joined in the war against Hasidism were also evil and corrupt.

There is yet another problem: when relating to the phenomenon of opposition in their letters, why did the Hasidic leaders not state or even hint that the source of the evil was the band of corrupt *parnasim* of Vilna?

Rabbi Shneur Zalman repeatedly argued, as noted, that the Gaon led the struggle by force of his authority, and that the Mitnagdim depended on that authority. Unquestionably, if Rabbi Shneur Zalman had known that the Gaon was not hostile to Hasidism, and that he was merely a stalking horse for the conspiracies of the *parnasim*, he would have said so. Could it be that Rabbi Shneur Zalman did not know what Mondshine knows?

Furthermore, nothing in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's letters supports Mondshine's account. Indeed, they contain evidence that clearly contradicts it. Here is one example: in the epistle in which he debates Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk, Rabbi Shneur Zalman mentions that the *maggid* of Mezhirech was angry at him because he and the members of his band used "to mock Torah scholars and revile them, etc., and to stand with their head down and their feet up, etc., in the streets of Kalisk." Rabbi Shneur Zalman goes on to write that at the time of the Shklov Debate in the winter of 5532, Rabbi Abraham offered no response to these accusations. Following the debate, the sages of Shklov wrote to the Gaon, "so that they made it enter his heart to condemn [us] as rebels, perish the thought, and as Epicureans who revile Torah scholars."⁸⁶

Here we have explicit testimony from Rabbi Shneur Zalman himself regarding the correct sequence of events: the Mitnagdim found severe flaws in the religious behavior of the Hasidim of Kalisk; these accusations had a basis in fact; following the failure of the Hasidic leader to justify these deviant phenomena, the sages of Shklov addressed the Gaon; in the wake of their action and under its influence, and on the basis of decidedly religious considerations, the Gaon determined that the Hasidim were heretics and that they must be persecuted. Here we have neither corrupt *parnasim* nor perjurious witnesses, nor do we have an old man shut up in his room who does not know right from left. We have instead an outstanding example of a radical group of Hasidim whose aberrant behavior was interpreted by the sages of Shklov and by the Gaon as severe religious deviance.⁸⁷

Here is another example: as noted, Rabbi Shneur Zalman sought to explain the Gaon's motives to his Hasidim. Among other things, he told them that a rumor had reached the Gaon regarding a Hasidic interpretation of a passage in the Zohar, and that that interpretation was viewed as

deviant. Although Rabbi Shneur Zalman argued that the version of the interpretation sent to the Gaon was incorrect, it is clear from his words that the Gaon acted on his own initiative and from religious considerations. Moreover, his later remarks make it clear that there was a difference of opinion between the Gaon and the Hasidim regarding the understanding of Kabbalistic ideas. As Rabbi Shneur Zalman writes: "In any case it did not occur [to the Gaon] that perhaps the word of God was with them according to Elijah [the Prophet] of blessed memory, to strip away the corporeality that is in the Holy Zohar in a manner that is hidden and beyond his understanding."⁸⁸ That is to say, the Gaon found it difficult to believe that the Hasidim had received a revelation from Elijah the Prophet, according to which they had interpreted the Zohar in a manner different from his own. This might refer to the way in which the Hasidim understood the Kabbalistic principle "There is no place vacant of Him."⁸⁹ In any event, this was certainly a theological controversy. Furthermore, later in that letter Rabbi Shneur Zalman mentions the controversy between the Gaon and Hasidim regarding the degree of sanctity of the ARI's Kabbalah: the Gaon "does not believe in the Kabbalah of the ARI of blessed memory in general, that it is all from the mouth of Elijah [the Prophet] of blessed memory . . . and that there is any obligation to believe in it"; whereas the Hasidim believe that the entire Kabbalah of the ARI is, in fact, from the mouth of Elijah the Prophet.⁹⁰ Here we have explicit testimony that the tension between the Gaon and the Hasidim derived at least in part from a controversy regarding Kabbalah.

All the polemical writings against the Hasidim that were sent from Vilna and Brod in 5532 revolve around matters of religious conduct.⁹¹ Is it conceivable that all the arguments included in these writings are merely a mask for a struggle whose motives were political? For these arguments, or at least the greater part of them, relate to well-known facts. Can it be denied that the Hasidim changed the wording of the prayers and established separate minyanim of their own? Is there any doubt that the Hasidim adopted an enthusiastic style of prayer expressed in abrupt movements and raising of the voice? One could go on listing the innovations introduced by the Hasidim in divine worship that aroused the ire of the Mitnagdim. However, Mondshine finds it difficult to agree that these changes were the cause that justified persecution of the Hasidim.

By contrast, the critical historian must understand the minds of all the parties involved in the conflict. The picture that emerges from that effort is of course more complex: the Hasidim believed that, because they preferred the ARI's version of the prayer book to the traditional Ashkenazic version, their prayers were more effective. By contrast, the Mitnagdim regarded the Hasidim as people who "changed the version established by the Sages" and claimed a high authority of which they were unworthy. What the Hasidim regarded as enthusiastic prayer that broke through the firmament appeared to the Mitnagdim as frenzied prayer, and so on.

As noted, Mondshine sought to refute the conclusions of my article by challenging the reliability of the sources that I used to support them. Here are his words:

A comparison of my proposed explanation to the method found in I. Etkes shows that our ways are entirely different. . . . This is because of the documents on which each approach relies; I employed historical documents that reflect factually the customs and methods used in the battle by the *kahal* of Vilna in those years, as well as the letters of the Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, using words that are not tendentious. . . . In contrast, I could not rely on the polemical writings that issued from the circles of Mitnagdim, for the tendency of all those publications—by their very nature—was only to justify their war, "to dress injustice in the cloak of justice."⁹²

My lack of objectivity is thus expressed in my use of, among other things, Mitnagdic sources. Thus, for example, Mondshine objects to the trust I placed in article six of the collection, *Zemir 'Aritsim Veharvot Tsurim*, for by virtue of its being a Mitnagdic document it cannot be trustworthy.⁹³ Arguments of this kind reflect an erroneous assumption regarding objectivity. In a controversy like the one under discussion, one does not expect the sources to be "objective." Naturally the documents of both sides reflect their point of view and are intended to serve their ends. The scholar must examine all the sources available in critical and balanced fashion and evaluate the degree of objective truth they contain. This is what I did, to the best of my ability, with respect to both Hasidic and Mitnagdic sources. Moreover, I was pleased to discover that insofar as the facts themselves were discussed, the Hasidic and Mitnagdic sources confirm and complement each other. By contrast, according to Mondshine,

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's letters are worthy of trust, whereas the writings of Mitnagdim are invalid.

Mondshine also accuses other scholars of lacking objectivity. In his opinion they treat the sources with partiality because they cast doubt on Hasidic sources while depending without reservation on Mitnagdic sources.⁹⁴ In a "personal confession" with which he concludes the chapter, Mondshine alludes to the conclusion he seeks to reach: "Like many of my predecessors, I, too, am not objective. But unlike them, I admit to this charge. I request of my readers: please try yourselves to be objective."⁹⁵ That is to say, there are no objective scholars, and there is no objective research. Just as he himself tends to identify with a certain part in the controversy, so too, in his opinion, do other scholars prefer one side or another. All that remains is for readers to judge which of the tendentious versions is more convincing.

Mondshine draws conclusions about others from his own case. As one for whom the historical controversy between Hasidim and Mitnagdim remains an issue with existential significance, it is difficult for him to imagine the psychological distance with which a critical scholar approaches the subject of his or her research. Hence he suspects me of belonging to the Mitnagdim. In point of fact, the critical scholar is also liable to err. The naive view that it is possible to deal with history with complete objectivity has long since faded away. However, there is a great difference between a scholar committed to discovery of the truth and to striving for it—aware of his or her limitations and of the relative character of historical research—and a scholar bound by religious or ideological commitment who declares that no research can be objective. That difference is conspicuous when one compares Mondshine's discussion of history to that of a critical scholar.

APOLOGETICS, HARMONIZATION, AND INTENTIONAL FORGETFULNESS

The struggle against Hasidism in general, and the role played by the Gaon in that struggle in particular, has continued to preoccupy many

and various writers from the end of the nineteenth century until the present. I refer only to writers who are not critical historians and whose concern with the subject is marked by an emotional and ideological affiliation. Some of these writers are connected with Hasidism, and others with Lithuanian Torah scholarship; some are modern orthodox, others are Haredi. What all have in common is the effort to paint a picture of the past with which they can identify.

Three principal tendencies are discernible in the works of these writers: apologetics, harmonization, and purposeful forgetfulness. I will briefly characterize these three tendencies:

1. The apologetic trend argues that the Mitnagdim, led by the Gaon, did indeed struggle against the Hasidim, but that that struggle had a positive influence on Hasidism itself. Had it not been for that struggle, the Hasidim might have strayed from the straight and narrow.
2. The harmonistic trend argues that the struggle between Hasidim and Mitnagdim was a spiritual and doctrinal struggle between two trends within Judaism. The leaders of both groups honored their opposite numbers, even learned from one another, and were positively influenced.
3. The tendency toward intentional forgetfulness seeks to ignore the struggle waged by the Gaon and the Mitnagdim against Hasidism during the last decades of the eighteenth century, either by arguing that it cannot or should not be discussed or by overlooking it completely.

Naturally this list does not exhaust the range of varied positions taken by the writers who have dealt with this topic. Nevertheless, it helps us to map the various directions in which these writers turned. Let us now survey several examples of the three trends. Since I have already noted the approach taken by writers with a Hasidic orientation, I shall devote the following discussion to authors who had an affinity with the Lithuanian school of Torah scholarship and various other types of orthodox Judaism.

A typical expression of the apologetic trend can be found in *Meqor Barukh* by Rabbi Barukh Epstein (1860–1941),⁹⁶ who also wrote the commentary on the Pentateuch known as *Torah Temima*. He belonged to a family of prominent Lithuanian Torah scholars. His father, Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal Halevi Epstein, was famous for his Halakhic work, *'Arukh Hashulhan*. The NATSIV (Naphtali Tsvi Yehuda Berlin) of Volozhin was his uncle and later became his brother-in-law. *Meqor Barukh* contains stories and traditions about the author's ancestors; passages of personal memoirs, mainly from the time of his studies in the Volozhin yeshiva; innovative interpretations of Jewish law; and philosophical and historical remarks.⁹⁷

Rabbi Barukh Epstein presents his defense of the Gaon by citing the Hasidic leader Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneersohn, the third Habad rebbe, known as Hatsemah Tsedek. The author of *Meqor Barukh* describes in detail a monthlong visit that his father had made to the court of the Hasidic leader. During that visit his father heard the following words from Hatsemah Tsedek:

I shall reveal to you in this matter what has been buried and hidden in my heart forever, . . . and I have never revealed it to anyone . . . except for my father-in-law and my grandfather-in-law, may their souls rest in peace [these are "The Old Rabbi," Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, and his son the middle rebbe]: and this is that our fellows . . . do not know and are unable to estimate the value and the great benefit and great grace that the Vilna Gaon did for us in disagreeing with us. . . . Because were it not for that controversy, there would have been reason and place to worry and fear that the new system that we paved for ourselves . . . would slowly lead us, step-by-step, forward beyond the border meant for the Torah heritage and the commandments. . . . For by virtue of the power of enthusiasm and fervor of the soul and elevation of spirit in the course of the new system that gripped the hearts of its creators in a storm, . . . in the end the talmudic spirit might have been burned in the flame of the fire of Kabbalah, and that hidden Torah would have diminished most of the figure of the manifest Torah, and the practical commandments might have been cast down in their value before the burning excitement of the secret intentions.⁹⁸

Rabbi Barukh Epstein, or if you will, the rebbe of Habad, knows nothing about the accusations lodged by the Gaon and his followers that Hasi-

dism was heretical. According to him, the error of the Hasidim was limited to violation of the delicate equilibrium between the manifest Torah and the hidden Torah, and between intention and punctilious observance of the commandments. This disequilibrium was indeed liable to end badly, but by virtue of the war that the Gaon waged against them, the Hasidim were saved from a dangerous deviation and returned to the proper balance between the various components of divine worship.

There is a great distance between the view of Rabbi Shneur Zalman—that the brutal aggressiveness of the Mitnagdim led many thousands of Jews to acknowledge the correctness of Hasidism—and the views attributed by Rabbi Barukh Epstein to the third rebbe in the Habad dynasty, namely, that the Gaon and the Mitnagdim had a good influence on Hasidism. Did Rabbi Yehiel Epstein really hear such things from the mouth of Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneersohn? It is difficult to assume that Rabbi Barukh Epstein or his father invented these things out of whole cloth. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that a Hasidic leader went so far as to express gratitude to the man who led the war against Hasidism. Most likely, Rabbi Menahem Mendel Schneersohn did speak in praise of the Gaon before his "Lithuanian" guest. However, the wording and tone of his remarks as they appear in *Meqor Barukh* reflect the point of view of the Mitnagdim. While the picture painted by Rabbi Barukh Epstein regarding the struggle between Mitnagdim and Hasidim is conciliatory and soft, the price for conciliation is exacted from the Hasidim. They are called on to admit that the Gaon did them a favor by fighting them.

A later example of the apologetic trend is found in an article on the Gaon by Yesh'ayahu Wolfsberg-Avi'ad, published in the mid-1950s.⁹⁹ Yesh'ayahu Wolfsberg-Avi'ad (1893–1957) was born in Germany and educated in the neo-orthodox spirit of *Torah 'im derekh erez*. He made a serious study of not only medicine but also history and philosophy. While still in Germany he was active in the religious Zionist movement, and he remained involved in it after moving to Palestine in 1934. Wolfsberg was prominent as a thinker who wrote about various issues in the fields of Judaism and the philosophy of history.¹⁰⁰

Wolfsberg's article on the Gaon can be called a biographical essay combining objective and detached observation with unreserved admiration. He portrays the Gaon's asceticism in vivid hues. He then goes on to

praise this asceticism, for by means of it the Gaon was capable of fulfilling his historical mission:

This ascetic feature of Rabbi Eliyahu reflected the need of the hour. Many events, currents, and movements had led to a degree of collapse in the life of the people. . . . Sabbateanism and various other messianic movements, which proclaimed false messiahs, distorted the spirit of the people in the Diaspora. The advent of Hasidism changed the approach to worship and to several fundamental problems. On the other hand, Haskalah was emerging and casting doubt on traditional faith, harming sacred values. In order to prepare the masses of Jews to continue on the traditional path, to restore the Hasidic movement to renewed respect for the study of Torah, and in order to confront Haskalah, . . . there was an immense need for the appearance of such a severe personality, exalted, concentrated without compromise, and fearless, like the Gaon.¹⁰¹

Wolfsberg does not speak at length about the danger inherent in Hasidism but contents himself with a hint that it had depreciated the study of Torah. Nevertheless, it is clear that, along with other currents, Hasidism threatened the authority and integrity of the tradition. In those circumstances, a "severe" personality, "without compromise," such as that of the Gaon, was needed to fortify Judaism.

A fine example of the trend toward harmonization can be found in *Zikhron Ya'akov* by Ya'aqov Lifschitz (1838–1921). In truth, a considerable part of Lifschitz's writing about Mitnagdim and Hasidim could be called apologetics for the Gaon and the Mitnagdim. However, in the conclusion of his discussion, he strives for balance and points out the benefits gained by both camps from their involvement in the controversy. This complicated attitude suits both Lifschitz's personal background and the public mission that he took on himself. Having grown up and been educated in the spirit of Lithuanian Torah scholarship, Lifschitz tended to identify with that faction. However, he was also an orthodox functionary who valued cooperation among the various factions of "true believing Jews" in response to the challenges of modernity. Thus his effort to present a harmonious and conciliatory picture of the controversy is understandable.¹⁰²

What impelled the Gaon and other leaders of the Mitnagdim to attack Hasidim? The detailed discussion that Lifschitz devotes to this ques-

tion is influenced almost entirely by the polemics of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin against Hasidism.¹⁰³ That is to say, we are not dealing here with a sect whose ways of worshiping God were suspect of heresy, but rather with people whose "intentions were for the sake of heaven" and whose religious aspirations were basically holy. However, in their path and in the implementation of these aspirations the Hasidim erred and deviated from the straight and narrow. Following Rabbi Hayyim, Lifschitz protests the Hasidim's criticism of the scholarly elite:

And how grave is this matter, if people who have not been educated fully in Torah . . . learn a lesson from the new Hasidism and say that the study of Torah . . . that is customary among scholars is not at all for its own sake and is worth nothing, [that] fear of punishment without fear of the Exalted One is worth nothing at all, [and that] the performing of a commandment without intention and devotion, they have no value or use at all.¹⁰⁴

Against the Hasidic criticism of Torah scholars Lifschitz presents the response of the "Rabbis and Geonim," also in the spirit of Rabbi Hayyim:

Indeed love and fear of God, and devotion to Him and study of Torah for its own sake, these are explicit positive commandments in the Torah; . . . but the essence of the commandment to study Torah is first of all the labor, the effort, and the wisdom to know it; . . . but by practicing this severity of "for its own sake" in love and devotion, as a primary obligation above all the scholars of Torah might, perish the thought, bring weakness in the study of Torah, might bring, perish the thought, ignorance and crassness.¹⁰⁵

In sum, Hasidism's excessive emphasis on the spiritual dimension of the worship of God, so much so as to deny the value of a religious act without proper intention, was erroneous and dangerous. Lifschitz attributes to the leaders of the Mitnagdim—in contrast to Hasidic radicalism, which demanded all or nothing at all—the view that elevation in divine worship is a gradual process.¹⁰⁶

These are Lifschitz's main points regarding the motivations of the Gaon and the other leaders of the Mitnagdim. It is evident that he completely ignored the true character of the struggle against the Hasidim

during the last decades of the eighteenth century, for he describes it as a spiritual and doctrinal controversy, as, during the first decades of the nineteenth century, it in fact appears to be. After defending the Gaon before the tribunal of history, Lifschitz makes way for a festival of reconciliation:

But in the end the basis and essence of the controversy between the two sides was only for the sake of heaven, . . . for in truth this very controversy brought great benefit to both sides, to Hasidism, which greatly influenced the Mitnagdim, and introduced the flow of the life of the soul for them: . . . [it influenced them] to combine thought and devotion with performing commandments, . . . and to remove some of the sadness that dwells like a heavy cloud on their faces, and to be perfectionists in enhancing the commandments; . . . and on the other hand, the mighty and vigorous opposition of the Geonim who were Mitnagdim, the proclamations and the bans and the threats that were publicized halted the excessive current, . . . and had they not employed such severe means, the enthusiasm of the Hasidim of "5530" would have gone on and burst through all boundaries and borders.¹⁰⁷

Lifschitz adds to the positive influence exerted by the Hasidim and Mitnagdim on each other until the differences between them are nearly effaced. He concludes his discussion of the topic with an eloquent and self-satisfied statement, one entirely imbued with reconciliation and love: "Behold, everyone who now hears about what happened before and listens to the words of truth and peace that are now uttered like the divine voice from Mount Horeb will readily confess that they embody the principle of 'love truth and peace,' and may peace be upon all of Israel."¹⁰⁸

Another author who sought to present the relations between Hasidism and its opponents in the light of reconciliation and mutual respect is Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon, though his remarks also partake of both apologetics and intentional forgetfulness. In his comprehensive work on the Gaon, Maimon chooses not to treat the topic of the struggle against Hasidism,¹⁰⁹ justifying that decision as follows:

I do not wish to return to the matter of the controversy between the Mitnagdim and the Hasidim when it first broke out. If only we could com-

pletely erase this episode from history books; for my part, it is clear that the great rabbis on both sides who led the controversy were not at all guilty of the split that was produced between Hasidim and Mitnagdim. The guilt falls mainly on a single man in that generation, Avigdor of Pinsk, who gave himself the title of rabbi. It was he who inflamed that controversy by means of false and lying accusations. He even brought the Vilna Gaon into this controversy.¹¹⁰

Like Lifschitz, Maimon, too, begins by defending the Gaon. True, he is aware of the grievous character of the controversy "when it first broke out." However, the controversy is not worthy of description, for it was based on an error. Maimon again brings forward the well-known argument that the Gaon was deceived by false information transmitted to him. His innovation at this point is the accusation against Rabbi Avigdor of Pinsk, who was active in the struggle against the Hasidim. However, his involvement in the struggle began only in the 1790s, more than two decades after the campaign against Hasidism was begun under the leadership of the Gaon.¹¹¹

As proof that the controversy was unnecessary, Maimon mentions the closeness between the Hasidim and the Gaon. Though he opposed Hasidism, "he himself behaved with great piety [*hasidut*]." Not only did the Gaon study Kabbalah extensively, but his disciples and intimates also told marvelous stories about him, like those told by the Hasidim about their rebbes. The Hasidic leaders, too, revered and honored the Gaon. Thus, for example, even Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady admitted that he was the greatest sage of the generation. Maimon concludes his discussion of this topic with his own words of praise for the Gaon: "Indeed this was the great strength of the Vilna Gaon, that he was able to unite the exoteric and the esoteric so that they would complement one another and not vie with each other; the leaders of Hasidism at that time knew and felt this, and they revered him and sanctified him as a Sage of secret doctrine, although he opposed Hasidism and their opinions."¹¹² Ironically, the Gaon himself bridged the gap between the warring camps, for he embodied and symbolized the spiritual and religious ideal with which both Mitnagdim and Hasidim could identify.

An outstanding representative of the trend toward intentional forgetfulness is Bezalel Landau (1923-96), the author of *Hagaon hehasid*

miVilna.¹¹³ Landau lived and was active within the Haredi community of Jerusalem, and during the decades before his death he was prominent as a journalist, author, and teacher. His journalistic and historical writings are marked by contemporary Haredi ideology, which is to say an uncompromising struggle against secular Jews and secularism. Naturally that struggle necessitated closing ranks and overcoming internecine controversies. Therefore, there is no reason to recall forgotten episodes that could interfere with the unity of the camp. Not surprisingly, Landau devotes an entire chapter to the Gaon's struggle against *Haskalah*,¹¹⁴ a struggle that never took place, whereas he did not devote even a single page to the Gaon's campaign against Hasidism.

In a sense Landau is following in the footsteps of Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn, who, as noted, dated the struggle against *Haskalah* several decades before it happened. Whereas the Hasidic historian accused the Gaon of inadvertently paving the way for the penetration of *Haskalah* into Lithuania, Landau portrays him as standing at the barricades and battling fiercely against *maskilim*. For both writers, *Haskalah* served as a kind of veil to conceal the war against Hasidism that took place in those years.

Landau does in fact devote one sentence to the struggle against Hasidism: "In his day the Vilna Gaon waged a vigorous ideological struggle against the Hasidic movement." However, even these words are meant only to enhance the praises of the Gaon, as we see from the rest of the sentence: "But even the great leaders of Hasidism did not challenge the Vilna Gaon's status among the Halakhic authorities who are followed by all of the House of Israel."¹¹⁵ Landau then presents words spoken or written by Hasidic leaders about the Gaon's distinction, quotations that clearly have been taken out of context. Thus, for example, Landau quotes Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady as saying that the Gaon was "unique in his generation." However, he ignores the rabbi's main point, which is that, even though the Gaon was "unique in his generation," he does not have the authority to issue Halakhic rulings against the Hasidim.

Distortion of the historical picture with respect to the relations between the Gaon and the Hasidim reaches its peak in Landau's description of the response of the Hasidim to the Gaon's death. After that event, ru-

mors were rife among the *Mitnagdim* that the Hasidim were rejoicing at their grief. As a result, persecution of Hasidim was renewed in Vilna, assuming a character of unprecedented cruelty. However, all that Landau mentions in this context is that the Gaon's passing "also made an impression among the Hasidim, with whom he had been involved in a vigorous ideological struggle."¹¹⁶

The policy of intentional forgetfulness adopted by Landau is not at all surprising. In the introduction to his book, he reveals that the original manuscript of the book included chapters "on the campaign against the Hasidic movement." Moreover, he states that regarding that topic "there is much dispute," and the chapters he wrote "could shed light on a number of obscure points."¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, he chose to suppress those chapters, apparently to enable the Gaon to assume his proper place among the great rabbis with whom the Haredi community, in all its varieties and tendencies, can identify. To that end, the Gaon had to lose his image as a zealous warrior against Hasidism. Landau set out to assist him in this task and did his work faithfully.

CONCLUSION

In the first part of this chapter I treated the response of the Hasidim to the struggle waged against them by the *Mitnagdim*. The character of the available sources constrained me to limit the discussion to the Hasidic leaders' responses, mainly that of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady. Ordinary Hasidim most probably had responses inconsistent with the position of the leaders, as is indicated by the efforts of Rabbi Shneur Zalman to restrain his followers. The Hasidic leaders, who bore heavy public responsibility, probably responded as they did on the basis of considerations of which ordinary Hasidim were not always aware. In any case, in view of the harsh persecution they underwent, it is impossible not to be impressed by the restraint and self-control exhibited by the Hasidic leaders.

The response of these leaders to opposition was characterized by a position that had been formulated at the start of the controversy, under the

inspiration of the *maggid* of Mezhirech: a strategy of restraint, meaning a conscious decision to avoid belligerent responses. Underlying this position was probably apprehension that aggressive responses might exacerbate the conflict and lead to the expulsion of the Hasidim from the Jewish people.

The strategy of restraint entailed taking an ambivalent position toward the leaders of the Mitnagdim, chiefly the Vilna Gaon. This ambivalence was expressed by rejection of all the accusations leveled against them and laying full blame for the continuation of the controversy on the leaders of the Mitnagdim. On the other hand, the Hasidim recognized the moral and religious authority of those leaders. That recognition was predicated on the repeated claim that the Gaon and the other Mitnagdic leaders had been deceived by false witnesses and were acting in good faith.

This complex position was first expressed in the letters that Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk sent to the leaders of the communities of Poland and Lithuania from the land of Israel. It persisted in the epistles of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, who repeatedly singled out the Gaon as the leader in the struggle against Hasidism by virtue of his authority, and as the one who obstructed any possibility of reconciliation. The sharpest expression of the view that the Gaon bore responsibility for the suffering of the Hasidim is found in his letter to Rabbi Phinehas Horowitz. There, Rabbi Shneur Zalman described the Gaon as the man who "permitted the shedding of our blood like water." However, along with these grave reproaches, Rabbi Shneur Zalman made a conspicuous and tireless effort to defend the Gaon and to present him as acting on the basis of legitimate considerations. The arguments justifying the Gaon became more varied as the years went by and circumstances changed. At first Rabbi Shneur Zalman repeated the claim that the Gaon had been deceived by false witnesses. In addition he made an effort to explain the Gaon's thinking on the basis of that false information. After his release from prison, Rabbi Shneur Zalman was able to praise the Gaon for not supporting the denunciation of rivals to the authorities. A few years after the Gaon's death, Rabbi Shneur Zalman attributed the cessation of persecution to the virtue of the Gaon's Torah.

The ambivalent character of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's response to op-

position was not limited to his attitude toward the Gaon. In the late 1790s Hasidism had succeeded in taking root and had even gained strength despite the persistence of the controversy, and Rabbi Shneur Zalman interpreted the struggle against Hasidism in general as a manifestation of divine grace. The vociferous attacks of the Mitnagdim on the Hasidim impelled many people to inquire into the nature of Hasidism, to realize that its way was correct, and to join its ranks. As far as I know, this was the first expression of the dialectical view to find positive aspects in the phenomenon of opposition.

Hasidic leaders' recognition of the Gaon's authority, their willingness to speak in his defense, and their respect for his honor all derived, as noted, from practical considerations. Moreover, this attitude filled a deep psychological need in the Hasidim themselves. By declaring that the Gaon acted in honest error and innocence, they removed a great stain from Hasidism: the fact that the leading scholar of his generation had regarded them as heretics.

The question of the relationship of the Gaon to Hasidism continued to trouble Hasidim even in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Seeking to influence the attitude of Mitnagdim to Hasidism, the author of *Mazref Ha'avodah* took up the issue again. He now legitimized the Gaon's unintentional error, which had been noted by the Hasidic leaders in the previous generation, by mentioning the important precedents of similar errors in earlier controversies. He also invoked the authority of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin in order to counterbalance the negative attitude of the Gaon toward Hasidism. An important argument already included in the words of Rabbi Shneur Zalman was now developed considerably: opposition to Hasidism was portrayed as a result of divine providence. It became a kind of veil meant to cover and hide the divine light that shone forth and sparkled in Hasidism.

I devoted a considerable part of this discussion to the manner in which Habad historiography has dealt with the topic of opposition to Hasidism, specifically noting the way Habad historians have depicted the past struggle between Hasidim and Mitnagdim. I focused on three prominent examples: *Beit Rabi* by Hayyim Meir Heilmann; the historical writings of Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneersohn; and a chapter from a work by Yehoshua Mondshine.

Heilmann remained faithful to the facts as they appeared in the many documents that he presented in his work, although those documents specifically express the Hasidic point of view. He blunted the barb of opposition by interpreting the controversy as being "for the sake of heaven" and claiming that secret reasons underlay it. He deepened the legitimation that his predecessors had accorded to the Gaon's error, and he added a new element, arguing that opposition was the fruit of divine providence and served a positive purpose. The Rabbi Joseph Isaac ignored the persecution of the Hasidim and transposed the struggle to the arena of talmudic scholarship. In that arena, Rabbi Shneur Zalman trounced the leaders of the Mitnagdim. Another arena in which Rabbi Joseph Isaac chose to view the rivalry between Hasidim and Mitnagdim was the struggle against Haskalah. To that end, he had to predate the penetration of Haskalah into eastern Europe by several decades. He argued that the leaders of the Mitnagdim, headed by the Vilna Gaon, paved the way for the penetration of Haskalah into Lithuania. By contrast, the Hasidim struggled against Haskalah with determination, and therefore they were victorious. Mondshine discovered, as it were, that the background of the struggle against Hasidism was a plot hatched by the corrupt *parnasim* of Vilna. The role assigned to the Gaon in this wondrous tale was to provide a fig leaf of religious authority to cover the nakedness of the *parnasim*.

Each in his own way, all three of these writers sought to avoid grappling with the harsh truths of the struggle against Hasidism. They found it especially difficult to accept the role that the Gaon played in this episode. Most authors who have dealt with this topic from an orthodox Jewish point of view have shared this difficulty in accepting the picture of the past in which the Gaon appeared as a zealous and uncompromising warrior against Hasidism. Some have overcome the difficulty by writing apologetics on his behalf, others portrayed the confrontation between the Mitnagdim and Hasidim in harmonious tones, and yet others chose to ignore the struggle against Hasidism.

So we see that, in places where the myth of the Vilna Gaon continues to play a vital role and to serve as a focus of identification, critical history is not exactly a welcome guest.

5 Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin's Response to Hasidism

In early 5563 (autumn 1802) Rabbi Ḥayyim of Volozhin published an open letter to all "lovers of Torah" in Lithuania.¹ In that letter, he described the low condition to which study of Torah had sunk and called to the public to voluntarily promote the renewed flourishing of Torah study. The direct purpose of this call was to mobilize support for the new yeshiva that Rabbi Ḥayyim had just established in Volozhin, but it was also a call for the renewal of Torah study throughout Lithuania.

Rabbi Ḥayyim's letter and the establishment of the yeshiva in Volozhin were the first salient manifestations of his new status as leader of the Mitnagdim in Lithuania. This was not an official post but rather leadership status that drew its authority and significance from his personal greatness. Rabbi Ḥayyim achieved this status because he was regarded as the leading disciple of the Vilna Gaon. Nevertheless, in this letter Rabbi