

Key concepts



The Hasidic movement has its roots in a powerful religious movement beginning in Poland, that swept through the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe in the 18th century. Its founder was Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov. After an unusual childhood, he became an itinerant preacher and healer. However, he did not conform to the normal pattern of Hasidic behaviour. Instead of withdrawing from the world he urged participation, teaching that one did not have to be a Jewish scholar to live in the presence of God. He placed great value upon devekut and talked about being ‘attached’ to God with a heart that is on fire. Under the Baal Shem Tov’s charismatic leadership a great revival took place, and the new Hasidic movement was characterised by extreme intensity of belief and joy in worship.

The movement was opposed by the Mitnagdim who denounced it as heretical. They considered its anti-intellectualism as a threat and were further appalled by the rapturous behaviour witnessed during worship. In 1772, the Vilna Gaon issued a ban of excommunication against the Hasidim. Nevertheless, it was eventually granted recognition in Russia and Austria.

Prayer is considered to be the focal point around which one’s whole day is centred and should be said with kavvanah. Hasidic prayer is characterised by great joy demonstrated by dancing, violent movements of the body, turning cartwheels and trembling; wordless melodies (nigunim) are also sung. The Hasidim also adapted the liturgy and took on a new prayer rite in order to accompany the more practical application of Kabbalistic concepts and ideas that had become part of the daily ritual of Hasidic Jews. Hasidic Jews aim to live pious lives with rigid obedience to the mitzvot at all times.

The rebbe (tzaddik) became established as the new kind of leader for the community: a man who is considered to have attained the highest level of devekut, and who is a figure of absolute authority and power. He acts as a spiritual guide or mentor, and his rulings on religious matters are definitive.

Key quotes



‘For him (Baal Shem Tov) to be a Hasid meant to utilise one’s connection to the divine for the good of the entire community; the people Israel became his client.’ (Satlow)

‘God loves all Jews without distinction; the greatest Torah genius and scholar and the most simple Jew are loved equally by God.’ (Baal Shem Tov)

‘The path to God for the Hasid did not run through long and arduous training in the Talmud but through his own heart.’ (Satlow)

‘The Besht used to say: Do not laugh at a man who gestures as he prays fervently. He gestures in order to keep himself from distracting thoughts which intrude upon him and threaten to drown his prayer. You would not laugh at a drowning man who gestures in the water in order to save himself.’ (Aaron of Apt)

‘Everything must be done for the sake of Heaven.’ (The Kotzker Rebbe)

Key words

Hasid	Baal Shem Tov	Besht	devekut
Mitnagdim	kavvanah	nigunim	Kabbalah
tzaddik			

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

Whether Hasidism contributed to the survival of Judaism.

The survival of Judaism has not come about due to one isolated event or as the result of one particular group within it. Hasidism made a significant contribution to the survival of Judaism at a time when its decline seemed inevitable in Europe. Without Hasidism, the Reform movement would never have been given a chance to do what it did in reinterpreting the terms of the covenant to fit a more modern lifestyle.

The extent to which Hasidism divides Judaism.

Was it ever the aim of Hasidism to bring about a deliberate divide within the Jewish faith? Reactionary forces which bring about division are not necessarily to be viewed as negative occurrences. The need for the Jewish faith to change in the light of historic circumstances is all part of a natural evolutionary process, and Hasidism is no different.