

Great Controversies



**A Changing World
1500's - 1700's**

**Chassidim and
Misnagdim**

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Great Controversies in Jewish History

Chassidim and Misnagdim

Rabbi Yechezkel Freundlich

Historical Background to the Chassidic Revolution

- A. 1700s was another unpleasant decade for the Jews
 - a. Shabbatai Tzvi, Frankist, Emden-Eyebishutz, destroyed Ukrainian communities
- B. Russian Czars
 - a. Expanded westward, had open anti-Semitic policies of extermination (forbidden to live in Mother Russia), inherited millions of unwanted Jews in Poland and Ukraine
- C. Vices of autonomous government
 - a. Jews originally invited to Poland in 1300s and enjoyed great autonomy (Vaad of the 4 Lands) and protection (Po Lin)
 - i. Did not guarantee fairness, lack of corruption, equality amongst the classes
 - ii. Great discontent and resentment of rabbinic leadership, lay (i.e. wealthy) leadership, built up over 300 years
- D. Explosion of Kabbalah into the world of the masses
 - a. World of mysticism, angels and devils, amulets, blessings, curses
- E. Spiritual impoverishment of the masses
 - a. Socio and economic forces kept serious scholarship to the elite

Chassidus was a revolution – a Spiritual Revival - against the upper class and the elite scholars. It shifted the focus of Jewish Life from scholarship to enthusiasm in Jewish Living and Prayer, created a bridge elevating the mundane to sublime, infusing life with fervor and emotion, a yearning to cling to G-d in Joy, Love and brotherhood. It eliminated the gap between the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlettered, who together under the guidance of the Holy Rebbe, soared to spiritual heights

- F. Enlightenment
 - a. a cultural movement of intellectuals beginning in late 17th- and 18th-century Europe emphasizing reason and individualism rather than tradition. Its purpose was to reform society using reason, to challenge ideas grounded in tradition and faith, and to advance knowledge through the scientific method

Origins of the Chassidic Movement

- A. Founded by Baal Shem Tov (born c. 1700-1760), great mystery men in the Jewish world.
 - a. We know very little about him, wrote and permitted nothing to be written down, tremendous legends
 - i. Miracle worker, Healed sick through prayer, insight into the workings of heaven

- b. Reported on mystical Rosh Hashanah (1746) that Moshiach would come after his teachings have been revealed and spread throughout the world
- B. Basic Principles: (nothing new; different emphasis)
 - a. Omnipresence and Immanence of G-d
 - i. "the whole earth is full of His Glory" (Isaiah 6:3)
 - ii. "There is no place void of Him" (Zohar)
 - iii. Since G-d permeates all existence, there is G-dliness I all that exists; the sacred and the secular are bridged.

Where is G-d? Wherever you let Him in!

R' Menachem Mendel of Kotsk

- b. Devekus
 - i. Man's ultimate goal in life: attachment or communion with the Divine, elevating entrapped sparks of holiness and exerting great influence on heavenly spheres
- c. The Tzaddik
 - i. Through his successful devekus, serves as a conduit to elevate the regular Jew in levels of connection
- d. Religious Piety
 - i. Devotion to G-d through heartfelt prayer, religious ecstasy, hitlahavut (enthusiasm), and maintain joyful disposition at all times
 - 1. NOT necessarily through Torah study or scholarship, asceticism, or an attitude of constant Fear of Sin

In the teachings of the Chassidic masters, one comes across a new way of approaching G-d and the spiritual. Neither Kabbalah nor philosophy, but experience is the proper way to approach G-d. "Serve G-d with gladness" (Psalms 100:2). "Taste and see that G-d is good!" (Psalms 34:10)

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Chassidic Masters*, pg5

The Vilna Goan and the Resistance of the Establishment (Misnagdim)

- A. Chassidus enormously popular: by 1780s over 200,000 adherents
- B. As in most revolutions, response was strong, and with tremendous intensity
 - a. Ideological grounds and for the Sake of Heaven
- C. Rav Eliyahu of Vilna - The Vilna Goan (1720-1793)
 - a. Genius of geniuses, also mastered kabbalah and secular wisdom
 - b. Primacy of Torah Study and Purity of Torah
 - i. Independent of time and place (unlike mitzvos)
 - ii. Eternal (unlike temporal nature of prayer)
 - iii. Life sustaining and the only way to eradicate bad character traits
- D. Issued a series of Bans, signed by dozens of leading Rabbis, excommunicating Chassidim, banning and burning their books, and declaring them "not Jewish"
- E. Russian Government was brought in by both sides

- a. Chaos; shuls were vandalized, fights broke out, polemics written on both sides

Perceived (and Real) Infractions of the Chassidic Movement

- A. Sabbatian Similarities
 - a. Moshiach talk, anti-establishment, itinerant preachers (instead of local Rabbi), unchallenged power of a charismatic tzaddik, emphasis on Kabbalah
- B. Dangerously close to Pantheism
 - a. "the whole earth is filled with His Glory"
 - i. GRA understand as providence not immanence. Viewed chassidim as heretics and literally burned their books
 - ii. Chassidim: no such thing as evil; only divine sparks encased in shells desperate for redemption
 - 1. Only the tzaddik could descend to redeem the individual from his lowly state. Similar to Sabbatean thought and bitterly opposed by the GRA.
- C. Improprieties in Prayer
 - a. Chassidim clapped, jumped, whirled twisted, shrieked, sang and danced. They did not keep to halachic "times." Worse, sources depicted erotic experience between G-d and His people.
 - b. Changed nussach to sefard/AR"Y (Kabbalistically aligned)
 - c. Viewed as childish at best, inappropriate forms of "standing before the King", and at worst, idolatrous
- D. Perversion of Priorities
 - a. GRA: Talmud Torah is the pinnacle, preeminent occupation, not a subordinate role as "another" manifestation of Jewish Life. All study of mussar and ethics was to reach consistent study, not as an end unto itself taking away from study of Talmud
 - b. Prioritization of prayer, devekut

Who won?

- A. They both won and they both lost
- B. Because of the vehement protests and accusations, the fringe radical element was silenced and Chassidim mainstreamed.
 - a. Torah study was later re-established by a counter-revolution with Chassidus
- C. Misnagdim were deeply impacted
 - a. "lively" attitude towards many things including davening
 - b. Mussar movement brought ethical study and character development to the forefront