The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture

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Recommended Citation
Frieden, Ken, "The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture" (1999). Religion. 64.
https://surface.syr.edu/rel/64

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Nadler counters the current popularizations of Hasidism and Jewish mysticism with a learned study of how the other half lived and thought. This is a much needed intellectual history of the Mithnagdim, the opponents of the charismatic Hasidic leaders. We cannot properly understand the rise of Hasidism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries unless we recognize the prior traditions of mainstream rabbinic culture. Nadler focuses on the Mithnagdic views represented by R. Elijah ben Solomon (the Gaon of Vilna) and R. Pinchas of Ploets. He corrects a common misconception by showing, for example, that the Gaon of Vilna was well versed in Kabbalah. At the same time, he discusses the ascetic tendencies among the Mithnagdic leaders. Ultimately, Nadler confirms the familiar view that the Mithnagdim emphasized Talmud study, whereas the Hasidim placed greater emphasis on fervent prayer. Hasidism was thus able to include uneducated Jews in a broader community in which "prayer, and not Talmud study, became the central vehicle for the attainment of knowledge of God."

In contrast, the Mithnagdim took a narrower approach, as when R. Pinchas "insisted that the rabbis must constitute and maintain themselves as a scholarly elite."

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In this engaging volume, Fram makes a significant contribution to the growing use of responsa literature as historical sources. To be sure, scholars have been using responsa for many years, but one need only compare the writings of I. Epstein, who used responsa to illuminate Jewish life in Spain, with Fram's volume to see the strides that have been made. Throughout, Fram uses general historical sources, including Polish-language material, to provide a context for the developments he describes. He discusses a whole range of legal issues and illustrates how the Polish rabbis, including such greats as Solomon Lorin, Moses Isserles, and Joel Sirkes, dealt with conflicts between the sources of Jewish law and common practice. He illustrates how common practice often won out over the written sources, forcing the rabbis to come to terms with, and justify, the practices of the masses. In this fashion, new directions in Jewish law were charted.

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A revision and translation of the 1989 French publication hailed as a historiographic breakthrough in applying the methods of P. Ariès to European Jewry. For the most part Goldberg successfully merges the concerns of the Annales school, comparative history of religions, traditional Jewish historiography, and Jewish "counterhistory" as advocated by G. Scholem and others. Goldberg illuminates Jewish death rites by considering death along with attitudes and practices related to illness, by acknowledging that Jewish customs were influenced by developments in Catholic and Protestant settings, and by showing that mysticism, intertwined with rabbinic Judaism, had a profound impact on death rites. Jews were not averse to trying "unkosher" remedies and enjoining Christian healers. A fascinating lens through which to examine not only the universe of death, but the life of Prague Jewry. An excellent complement to the popular exhibition and catalogue, "The Precious Legacy" (ed. David Altschuler, 1983), in which the "Cycle of Burial Society Paintings" and "Burial Society Implements" were striking artifacts.

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Being born in the Sudan to its chief rabbi, and having been involved in economic and Jewish communal affairs there, enabled Malka to acquire much inside oral and written information about the Jews of the Sudan in modern times. He describes the Jewish community that existed until the early 1960s and was established following the defeat of the Mahdi's revolt by British-Egyptian forces in 1898. Malka provides numerous details about Jewish families and individuals, social and cultural organizations of the community, and its contacts with Jewish communities outside the Sudan in the Middle East, Europe, and America. Relations with the authorities are dealt with, as is Malka's own life story in the Sudan and following his emigration. Numerous photographs add to the immediacy of the description. Malka's book adds much, in a very personal and lively manner, to our knowledge of this little-studied Jewish community.

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