



The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna

Elijah Judah Schochet

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Although hasidic Jews are today associated with mainstream Orthodoxy, Hasidism, during the year of its genesis, was bitterly opposed and indicted with bans of excommunication by the Jewish establishment. In *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, Elijah Judah Schochet analyzes the conflict centering on the hasidic movement in the eighteenth century and the role played by the leader of the opposition, Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna. The reasons Hasidism was challenged are of value not only vis-a-vis historical curiosity but in terms of the nature of traditional Judaism, its religious priorities, and the perceived dangers inherent in the hasidic style of rabbinic leadership. Tzaddikim were singularly authorized to descend into sin's domain to emancipate the sinner in cases of vice and iniquity, and these actions were viewed by the mitnagdim, or opponents, as "a dangerous flirtation with the notion of 'sin.'" Schochet embarks on a fascinating foray into the misconceptions held by the opponents of the hasidim that fueled the tension between the two. Rabbi Elijah, known as the Gaon of Vilna, who was the outstanding rabbinic scholar of his time, emerged from his cloistered existence to confront and battle these seemingly ostensible threats from within the hasidic movement. However, there is no record of his having personally encountered hasidic Jews. Why, then, was he so disturbed by Hasidism? What threats did he perceive the movement posed? Did the excommunication of the hasidim by the Gaon of Vilna really occur? In *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, Schochet attempts to unravel the mystery underlying Rabbi Elijah and his campaign against the hasidic movement. Some aspects of the controversy between Hasidism and the mitnagdim still linger today, and Rabbi Schochet's effort to explicate the eighteenth-century dilemma and its contenders allows the reader a more privileged glance at past tensions as well as an understanding of the players in today's drama

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