



Space and spirit: on boundaries, hierarchies and leadership in Hasidism



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 October 2015

Received in revised form

1 April 2016

Accepted 15 April 2016

Keywords:

Hasidism
Religious leadership
Centre and periphery
Eastern Europe
Jews

ABSTRACT

This article examines spatial aspects of Hasidism, arguably one of the most important socio-religious movements in modern Eastern Europe. More specifically, it focuses on the relationship between religious leaders in their courts and their followers in towns scattered across Eastern Europe. The article starts with the argument that in the wake of the exponential growth of Hasidism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it developed an innovative institution of *shtiblekh*, or Hasidic prayer halls. These prayer halls, often far from the court, became the basic structure for the influence of Hasidism. Their number and geographical distribution allow us to establish the internal boundaries of Hasidism and the Hasidic groups' internal hierarchy. Most importantly, the article argues that the size of the group and the spatial distribution of their *shtiblekh* were closely correlated with the type of religious leadership employed by this group: from distant charismatic leadership at the great dominant courts through many intermediate forms down to small ephemeral groupings with intense, intimate relations of close charismatic leadership.

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In the growing field of the geography of religion the distribution of religious centres – either holy places, pilgrimage sites, shrines or centres of leadership – has always been one of the central objects of reflection.¹ This traditional interest has been augmented by the more recent spatial turn in the study of religion and, quite independently, by the rise of the multidisciplinary field of leadership studies, for which distance is an important factor in leader-follower relationships.² Despite this combined interest, it seems that the spatial aspects of religious leadership and its connection between

the centre and the periphery continue to have been rather insufficiently examined, particularly in their historical aspects.³

One of the reasons for this comes from the fact that the recent burst in geographical research on religion places its emphases in significantly different areas, especially the politics and poetics of space, migration conflicts, the rise of religious radicalism, or the blurred boundaries between secular and sacred, but not traditional studies of religious leadership.⁴ Another reason is the problematic nature of primary sources for the historical geography of religion in general and the relationship between centre and periphery in particular. Scholars do use historical materials allowing for analysis of the spatial aspects of religions, but these are usually either macro-scale aggregated survey data on major world religions, which do not allow for any more precise picture, or micro studies of individual cases. Despite exponential growth of geotemporal databases, few of them find application in meso-scale research on the historical geography of religion. On the other hand, when more specific micro-scale materials are explored, this usually involves discussion of individual cases of the process of diffusion, emergence

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¹ Overviews of the major concepts of the distribution of religious centres can be found prominently in every classic textbook of the geography of religion, see D.E. Sopher, *Geography of Religions*, Englewood, 1967, chapter 5; C.C. Park, *Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion*, London, 1994, 56–92, 245–285; R.W. Stump, *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*, London, 2008, 33–107.

² On the spatial turn in the study of religion see K. Knott, Religion, space and place: the spatial turn in research on religion, *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 1 (2010) 29–43; K. Knott, Spatial theory and the study of religion, *Religion Compass* 2 (2008) 1102–1116; T.A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Cambridge and London, 2008. For the spatial aspects of leadership studies see M.C. Bligh and R.E. Riggio (Eds), *Exploring Distance in Leader-Follower Relationships*, New York, 2013; S. Henderson Callahan (Ed.), *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, Los Angeles, 2013.

³ See C. Brace, A.R. Bailey and D.C. Harvey, Religion, place and space: a framework for investigating historical geographies of religious identities and communities, *Progress in Human Geography* 30 (2006) 30.

⁴ For a general overview of recent developments, see the two most recent decennial reports by L. Kong, Mapping 'new' geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity, *Progress in Human Geography* 25 (2001) 211–233; L. Kong, Global shifts, theoretical shifts: changing geographies of religion, *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (2010) 755–776.

of pilgrimage sites or politics of religious places, but not general leader-follower and centre-periphery correlations.⁵ Meso-scale studies, in both a social/institutional and spatial sense, i.e. studies combining in-depth analyses of religious structures far below the global level of world religions with large resources on trans-local religious phenomena, are still a desideratum.⁶

I argue that sources for such analyses, even if hard to find, do exist, or rather they could and should be generated from a variety of indirect resources. While it might look like a Sisyphean task to comb through thousands of multi-language volumes in search of dispersed, sporadic and hard-to-process narrative data, I argue that these materials, once aggregated, are invaluable for a quantitative analysis of historical forms of spatial relationship between religious centres and their peripheries.

In this article I take the case of leader-follower spatial correlations in pre-Holocaust Hasidism (from Hebrew *hasid*, 'pious'), one of the most important religious and social movements to have developed in Eastern Europe, and without a doubt the most significant phenomenon forming the religious, social and cultural life of the Jewish population in modern Eastern Europe.⁷ Hasidism seems to be an ideal object for this kind of analysis. One of the most frequently tackled issues in research into Hasidism has always been the forms of its leadership. The *tsadik* ('the righteous', in Hebrew), the charismatic leader of a Hasidic community is indeed a central point, an *axis mundi* both of Hasidic ideology, as well as of the social organization of the movement which was focused on pilgrimages to the *tsadik* at his court, of contemplation on his work, and on retelling miraculous stories from his life.⁸ For these reasons the *tsadik* – as a splendid illustration of charismatic leadership – has also been an interesting case for sociologists without any special interest in Hasidism.⁹ Less attention has been devoted to the decentralized nature of Hasidic leadership, to the division of

Hasidism into a great many groups under the wing of a great many rival *tsadikim*, as well as to the rise of dynasties in which the dominant mechanism for the succession of leadership became biological inheritance through a son, sons or sons-in-law.¹⁰

One of the least studied aspects of Hasidic leadership has been the non-ideological aspect of the relationship between the *tsadik* and his followers, as well as the influence that this relationship exerted on the religious life of the Hasidim outside the *tsadik's* court.¹¹ The question is all the more relevant in that the expansion of the small mystical circle of early Hasidism into a mass movement meant that from the late eighteenth century up to the Holocaust a vast majority of the Hasidim lived a long way from their leader and visited him no more than once a year, paying him brief visits of a single day, or at most a few days. Of course visits to the court, even if infrequent, were still the high points of each Hasid's religious life. However, the popularizing of the movement meant that it was not at court, but in the hundreds of small towns inhabited by tens of thousands of Hasidim, that the fundamental institutional, social, cultural and economic developments of Hasidism took place. Living far from the *tsadik* and his court, the Hasidim had to define how their Hasidic identity expressed itself in their own home setting and how to establish an interrelation between the festive religious experience at the court and everyday religious life in their towns.¹² They had to devise how they could and should organize their religious life, which structures and institutions would be the most appropriate, and what resources would be needed to create and maintain them. Thus it is worth asking what the Hasidic forms of religious life far from the court looked like and how the Hasidic subculture developed there over the long course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³

As explained above, this article will focus on one aspect of this phenomenon, namely the spatial relationship between the *tsadik* at his court and the Hasidim in their towns. More generally, it poses the question of the possible correlation between religious life and the geographical distance between the religious centre and the periphery, both in the centre and at the periphery. The conclusions drawn from this analysis are, I believe, more broadly applicable than just to the history of Hasidism, both as an example of how to construct broad-based databases emerging from complex historical materials and as a theoretical model for such a spatial analysis in the history of religion.

So, what was the religious life of the Hasidim in their towns outside the court?

Shtetl

As many memoirs of the time attest, everyday Hasidic life was not a

⁵ See Kong, Mapping 'new' geographies, 213–218.

⁶ See M. Stausberg, Exploring the meso-levels of religious mappings: European religion in regional, urban, and local contexts, *Religion* 39 (2009) 103–104. For the closest analogy to what has been suggested see R.A. Donkin, *The Cistercians: Studies in the Geography of Medieval England and Wales*, Toronto, 1978; of newer studies see L.W. Preston, Shrines and neighbourhood in early nineteenth-century Pune, India, *Journal of Historical Geography* 28 (2002) 203–215.

⁷ Furthermore, Hasidism is today one of the most significant elements of Jewish religious/cultural identity throughout the world. It is, therefore, understandable that it is one of the most intensively studied aspects of the history and culture of Jewish Eastern Europe, and now also the United States and Israel. A good and recent summary of the state of research on Hasidism is to be found in M. Rosman, Pesak dina shel ha-historiografiyah ha-isra'elit al ha-hasidut, *Zion* 74 (2009) 141–175.

⁸ For the most important studies on the role of the *tsadik* see A. Green, The Zaddiq as *axis mundi* in later Judaism, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (1977) 328–347; A. Rapoport-Albert, God and the zaddik as the two focal points of Hassidic worship, in: G.D. Hundert (Ed.), *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, New York, 1991, 299–329; G. Scholem, The righteous one, in: G. Scholem, *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, New York, 1991, 88–139; S. Dresner, *The Zaddik: The Doctrine of the Zaddik According to the Writings of Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoy*, New York, 1960. On the interrelationship between doctrine and social functions see I. Etkes, The zaddik: the interrelationship between religious doctrine and social organization, in: A. Rapoport-Albert (Ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised*, London, 1996, 159–167.

⁹ See, for example, B. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, second edition, London, 1991, 93–98. The classic typology of religious leadership is in M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Boston, 1985; on routinization of charisma see M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, Berkeley, 1968, 246–254. For an application of Weber's theory to Hasidism see C.L. Bosk, The routinization of charisma: the case of the zaddik, *Sociological Inquiry* 49 (1979) 150–167; S. Sharot, Hasidism and the routinization of charisma, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19 (1980) 325–336.

¹⁰ See especially G. Sagiv, *Ha-shoshelet: bet Chernobyl u-mekomo be-toledot ha-hasidut*, Jerusalem, 2014; G. Sagiv, *Yenuka: al tsadikim-yeladim be-hasidut*, *Zion* 76 (2011) 139–178; N. Polen, Rebbetzins, wonder-children, and the emergence of the dynastic principle in Hasidism, in: S. Katz (Ed.), *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, New York, 2007, 53–84; D. Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, Stanford, 2002, 47–66.

¹¹ For initial observations see D. Assaf and G. Sagiv, Hasidism in tsarist Russia: historical and social aspects, *Jewish History* 27 (2013) 250–252. On the relations between the *tsadik* and his followers at the court see Assaf, *The Regal Way*, 278–284; on the ideological ramifications of these relations see H. Pedaya, Lehitpathuto shel ha-degem ha-hevrati-dati-kalkali be-hasidut: ha-pidion, ha-havurah ve-ha-aliyah la-regel, in: *Dat ve-kalkalah: yahase gomelin*, Jerusalem, 1995, 311–373.

¹² This has radically changed since the Holocaust, when the vast majority of the Hasidim reside in urban enclaves next to their leaders. Still, leader-follower relations in contemporary Hasidism are not extensively researched either. For a rare study focusing on this aspect see J.J. Lewis and W. Shaffir, Tosh, between earth and moon: a Hasidic rebbe's followers and his teachings, in: D. Maoz and A. Gondos (Eds.), *From Antiquity to the Postmodern World: Contemporary Jewish Studies in Canada*, Newcastle, 2011, 139–170.

¹³ These questions have been best formulated by A. Teller, Hasidism and the challenge of geography: the Polish background to the spread of the Hasidic movement, *AJS Review* 30 (2006) 1–29. For the most recent review of the historical studies on spatial aspects of Hasidism see M. Wodziński and U. Gellman, Towards a new geography of Hasidism, *Jewish History* 26 (2013) 171–199.

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