

Antinomianism In Hasidism

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Abstract— Hasidism, the eighteenth century Jewish spiritual revivalist movement, was barraged with theological attacks from emergence. One of the critiques of the movement, which has remained prevalent in modernity, is Hasidism's de-emphasis on Judaism's commandments. There are few factors which justify this reputation, and its historical proximity to Sabbateanism, combined with its focus on mystic theology, likely lead the contemporaneous rabbinic leadership to take precautionary measures against the fledgling movement. Rabbi Elijah, one of the most influential eighteenth-century European rabbis, also came out heavily against the movement, sealing its fate as the "antinomian" Jewish movement for the next 200 years.

Hasidism is a Jewish religious movement that began in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, specifically in the areas that are now Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. Its origins can be traced to the teachings of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer —known as the Baal Shem Tov, the "Master of the Good Name" or, by the acronym, Besht— who emphasized the importance of serving God with joy and sincerity in everyday life. Hasidism quickly gained popularity among the Jewish masses due to its accessibility and emphasis on spirituality over scholarly learning. Hasidic beliefs are centered around the idea of *devekut*, or cleaving to God, through prayer, meditation, and acts of loving-kindness. The movement also places great emphasis on the role of the *tzaddik*, or holy leader, who serves as an intermediary between his followers and God.

As the Hasidic movement developed beyond the Baal Shem Tov, its adherents self-organized into numerous independent sects. At the core of these sects is the *tzaddik*, which is a position that is usually inherited hereditarily. While the rabbi was central to almost every medieval Jewish community, his role was to function as an expert in religious law.¹ The

¹ Zollman, Joellyn. "What Were Shtetls?" My Jewish Learning, February 7, 2018. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shtetl-in-jewish-history-and-memory/>.

tzaddik, on the other hand, was the center of his followers' lives and they worshiped through him.² His followers would ask him advice on every matter of their lives, ascribe him miracle-working capabilities, and obey his every request.³ The *tzaddik* was primarily known for his charisma and spirituality, rather than knowledge of ralmudic law, as rabbis were.⁴

It is difficult to make generalizations about Hasidism because of its loose nature as a movement. Each *tzaddik* is independent, and they are grouped together because of their similar beliefs and general theology. However, specific customs and views differ widely between Hasidic groups, and the movements do not have any inter-hierarchical structure between them.

For instance, Satmar Hasidim believe in a separatist lifestyle and also oppose the state of Israel.⁵ On the other hand, outreach is a vital part of modern Lubavitch Hasidism.⁶ There is no one ideology that permeates all of Hasidism; even the centrality of the *tzaddik* differs between sects.

Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries, Hasidism and their non-Hasidic opponents, known as the Mitnagdim (“Misnagdim”), literally the “opponents,”⁷ would be bitterly at odds, frequently excommunicating each other. The conflict would not end until the 1912 Agudah Israel conference, when they agreed to pool their energies against more secular Jewish sects.⁸

From its inception, one of the most profound accusations of Hasidism was it being an antinomian movement. The term “antinomianism” was coined by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century as a defensive term against those who accused Lutherans of rejecting religious prerogatives other than faith in Christ.⁹ The term literally means *anti* (against) *nomos* (law) in ancient Greek.¹⁰ Although the actual term was coined during the Renaissance, the Judeo-Christian accusation of rejecting religious, social,

² “A Life Apart: Hasidism in America -- the Origins of Hasidism.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed March 24, 2023. https://www.pbs.org/alifeapart/intro_6.html.

³ Shochet, Elijah Judah. “Hasidism and the Rebbe/Tzaddik: The Power and Peril of Charismatic Leadership .” *Hakirah* 7 (2009): 51–67.

⁴ *Ibid*, 60-64

⁵ “Satmar Hasidic Dynasty.” YIVO. Accessed March 22, 2023. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/satmar_hasidic_dynasty.

⁶ h “Lubavitch Hasidism.” YIVO. Accessed March 22, 2023. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/lubavitch_hasidism.

⁷ The term Mitnagdim was crafted to paint the clergy who opposed Hasidic communities in an antagonistic, rather than constructive, light.

⁸ “Hasidim And Mitnagdim.” Orthodox Judaism. Accessed March 21, 2023. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hasidim-and-mitnagdim>.

⁹ Graebner, Augustus Lawrence (1899). "Antinomianism". *Lutheran Cyclopedia*. New York, NY: Scribner. p. 18. ISBN 978-0-79055056-5.

¹⁰ “Antinomianism Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed February 1st, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antinomianism>.

and moral norms predates the Middle Ages. Early Christian sects were accused by Jews of rejecting the Mosaic Law,¹¹ and fourth century Christians persecuted the Gnostics for their rejection of the Old Testament in its entirety.¹²

We will tailor our discussion to the specific accusations leveled against eighteenth and nineteenth century Hasids by their contemporaries. The first written polemic was the *Zemir 'aritsim ve-ḥarvot tsurim* published under the Rabbi Elijah, or Vilna Gaon, in 1772. The respect the Lithuanian and European Jewish communities had for him cannot be overstated. Although he occupied no official position, his word was almost law. There is a long-standing norm that sages from later eras cannot disagree with sages from earlier ones; they must back an a priori opinion.¹³ R. Elijah broke with this tradition and offered unique positions that disagreed with talmudic sages. To this day, his opinion on the timing of prayer still holds sway in religious communities. His word was essentially law in the eyes of his rabbinic peers.

R. Elijah's influence on both his contemporary Lithuanian peers and the future of Judaism cannot be overstated. He changed the way Torah was studied in Lithuania and shifted the focus to an intellectual, text-based way of ruling on ritual law. The major *halakhic* work of the nineteenth century, the *Mishnah Brura*, a commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, follows the *Biur HaGra*, one of R. Elijah's posthumous works, in almost every case.¹⁴

In examining *Zemir 'aritsim ve-ḥarvot tsurim*, the Vilna community's pamphlet, R. Elijah's eminent position in the community must be accounted for. Though he was not listed formally as an author, he almost certainly was heavily involved in this packet's authorship and publication:

¹¹ "Antinomianism". *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New advent.

¹² Already this history of the term "antinomianism" and its philosophical basis reveals the relativity of its definition and how it is applied. Martin Luther, the term's progenitor, was himself an antinomist from a Jewish perspective, as he denied the binding nature of the Old Testament laws. Ironically, the word is, at its core, a Christian concept which lacks defined meaning when pasted into Judaism's distinct history.

The nineteenth century confounds the term even further with the rapid progression of the Reform movement, which rejected the parts of the Torah it deemed unethical. However, while there is massive amounts of literature written in opposition to Reform Judaism and its philosophical and practical tenets, the term "antinomian" is an anachronism to the Reform-Orthodox debates of this era. Indeed, the first proofs in support of Reform ideology stemmed from traditional rabbinic sources and were argued in context of the halakhic corpus.

A separate essay could be written on the history of antinomianism and its various inaccuracies and meanings it has carried as baggage throughout history. For our purposes, it suffices to establish the word in context of intra-Jewish interaction is distinctly twentieth and twenty-first century and has been backdated as a convenient catch-all term for the loosening of legal and social norms.

¹³ Kellner, Menachem Marc (1996), *Maimonides on the "Decline of the Generations" and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority*, New York: State University of New York Press, ISBN 0791429229

¹⁴ "A Publication of the Orthodox Union." *Jewish Action*. Accessed March 28, 2023. <https://jewishaction.com/tribute/incomparable-gaon-vilna/>.

In the middle of...prayer, interject obnoxious alien [i.e. Yiddish] words in a loud voice, conduct themselves like madmen, and explain their behavior by saying that in their thoughts they soar in the most far-off worlds... The study of Torah is neglected by them entirely and they...emphasize that one should devote oneself as little as possible to learning and not grieve too much over a sin committed... Every day is for them a holiday... When they pray according to falsified texts they raise such a din that the walls quake... And they turn over like wheels, with the head below and the legs above... Therefore, do we now declare...the people shall robe themselves in the raiment of zeal...for the Lord of Hosts, to extirpate, destroy, outlaw and ex-communicate them.¹⁵

Notably, the focus is on the dignity that is lost through Hasidic worship and not on the laws and customs of Hasidism's customs itself; the document leads with an assertion of madmen-like conduct and not with disdain for the changes that Hasidic leaders incorporated. The document's thesis is on the nonchalance and not the nonobservance of Hasidim

The early Mitnagdim, including the Vilna Gaon, excommunicated and isolated them for the opposite reason. One of the earliest accusations against Hasidism was their adoption of separate enclaves for their communities which was necessitated by the religious stringencies they accepted. For instance, observant Jews only eat meat that has been slaughtered through the through the ritual process called *shkhita* ritual. Hasidim mandated a stricter version of this custom in which a special knife had to be used to complete the slaughter.¹⁶ While the Mitnagdim held that this form of slaughter was kosher, Hasidim who adopted the stringency could no longer eat in the homes of Mitnagdim, which divided existing religious communities.

The Mitnagdim hinged their polemics on the communal distance that Hasidic practices created.¹⁷ This was not because they divided the community by introducing practices that would require the community to separate from them, as would be the case if Hasidim introduced leniencies. In reality, the Hasidic movement simply created additional laws that operated within the communal norms. In the *shkhita* example, the normative custom is to allow a range of knives, which include the knife that Hasidic tradition demands. Hasidim simply require this knife specifically, but all agree that it is permissible.

¹⁵“A Life Apart: Hasidism in America -- Hasidism in Europe- A Campaign Against the Hasidim.” PBS. Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed March 16, 2023. https://www.pbs.org/alifeapart/intro_7.html#:~:text=A%20campaign%20against%20the%20Hasidim,1781%2C%201784%2C%20and%201796.

¹⁶ Wertheim, Law and Custom 1992.

¹⁷ cf. Wilensky, Hasidic-Mitnaggedic Polemics 1991

The other major accusation against the movement levied by the Mitnagdim was the lack of value they placed on the learning of Torah. The cornerstone of the Jewish communities of eighteenth century Eastern Europe was the *yeshiva*, a place where men could focus solely on learning the Talmud. Jewish community leaders, who wielded enormous religious and *de facto* political influence, were educated in these very schools.

As the Baal Shem Tov taught a religious approach which stressed worshiping God through everyday life,¹⁸ Hasidim became known within European Jewry for their spiritual fervor during meals, prayer services, and work.¹⁹ This passionate fervor was manifest through spontaneous dancing, shouting, and ethical business conduct.²⁰ The role of Torah study, which was prized as the highest form of worship under the preeminent *yeshiva* system, was not specifically deemphasized. Every moment and interaction was considered an equal opportunity to serve God. Although this did not expressly lower the status of Torah learning, it flattened the hierarchy of religious expression and created a system in which one's worship of God could be complete without individual learning.

On the whole, it is misleading to construe rabbinic protests against the Baal Shem Tov and his successors as being primarily about the nature of religious practice. Rather, it is apparent from their phraseology and content that R' Elijah and his contemporaries were chiefly concerned with how Hasidic communities would interfere with the existing religious communes and sources of authority, and not with individual changes to practice.

The label of antinomianism is ill-matched with the controversial tenets of Hasidism that were polemicized, and makes more sense given its historical context. The Hasidic movement began in the wake of two messianic movements— the Sabbatean and Frankist movements, spearheaded by Sabbatai Tzvi and Jacob Frank, respectively— and contemporaneous rabbinical figures were wary of any novel movements which challenged the status quo. In the seventeenth century, Sabbatai Tzvi, a student of Kabbalah and mysticism, declared himself the messiah and amassed hundreds of thousands of followers. He was initially observant of Jewish halakha, but after declaring himself the messiah, he created a blessing called *mattir issurim*— literally translating to “the permitter of forbidden [acts]”²¹— and publicly ate a piece of pork.²² He amassed a large following, including many prominent rabbis, and eventually converted to

¹⁸ Biale, David. *Hasidism: A New History*. Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020.

¹⁹ “Hasidism.” YIVO. Accessed March 27, 2023. https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Hasidism/Everyday_Life.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "SHABBETHAI ZEVI B. MORDECAI", by Kaufmann Kohler and Henry Malter, *Jewish Encyclopedia*

²² Gershon Scholem, Shabtai Tzvi

Islam.²³ Jacob Frank— who claimed to be a reincarnation of Sabbatai Tzvi²⁴— had a very similar arc and was eventually baptized; his claim of messianism coincided with the beginnings of organized Hasidic sects.

Both of these movements sprung out of Kabbalah and other forms of Jewish mysticism, aspects of the Jewish tradition which are heavily emphasized in Hasidic teachings. From early in his public career Sabbatai Tzvi had taken on practices such as fasting for days at a time, public displays of ecstasy including joyous singing and dancing, and was known to give out charms and blessings.²⁵ Hundreds of thousands of Jews had been given false hope and communities had been shattered with division. Hasidism's ecstatic dancing, connection to mysticism, and focus on an individual leader could not have gone unnoticed by early eighteenth century rabbis, many of whom remembered the aftermath of the Sabbatean movement.

The compulsion to group early Hasidim with Sabbateans may have sprung up from the inability of contemporary religious figures to stop Sabbatai Tzvi from gaining influence. A comparison to Christianity, and specifically the Catholic Church, is apropos here in explaining the divide between Hasidism and Mitnagdim in the eighteenth century. The Church has suffered several intense schisms throughout the past two millennia, many of which happened over a very short period of time. Such schisms are made possible because of the hierarchical nature of the Church.

For example, the Great Schism of 1054 had numerous theological and political underpinnings but was chiefly precipitated by the excommunications²⁶ of the Bishop of Rome and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.²⁷ These schisms may seem like a weakness in Church structure, but they are a direct result of a built-in ability to excise "heretical" views.

Judaism was and is a much more democratized religion. Each rabbi maintained religious authority over his own settlement, but often had little power to back up their authority. While there were rabbis who were widely respected and whose authority, such as R. Elijah, there was no central authority which decided disputes between two feuding rabbis. The two

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jacob Frank, Polish religious leader". Encyclopedia Britannica.

²⁵ Biale, David. *Hasidism: A New History*. Princeton University Press, 2020.

²⁶ Cross, Frank Leslie; Livingstone, Elizabeth A. (2005). "Great Schism". *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford: University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-280290-3.

²⁷ While the reason behind this split is outside of the scope of this essay, the disputes between the eastern and western clergy chiefly lay in the source of primary authority of the church. In the western view, the Bishop of Rome, or the Pope, had supreme authority over all other church leaders, was infallible, and was God's representative on Earth. The eastern clergy argued that the church was led by a pentarchy, composed of five patriarchs, and the Bishop of Rome was a single, equal member of that structure.

strongest weapons of the medieval rabbi were responsa²⁸ and excommunication.

If a local rabbi did not know the answer to a question by a community member, they would often write to a different rabbi who would publish answers to a host of questions in texts known as responsa. This system was informal, and the authority of a responsum was based solely on how much weight their peers gave their answers.

As this system evolved, many responsa were published not as a result of a question but as a way for a rabbi to assert their opinion. Their theme shifted from being solely religious to bordering on political. For instance, in Mosheh Segal of Kraków's responsa to Moses Isserlis, the *Rama*, he discusses the social ramifications of the early Sabbatean movement and asked for Rabbi Isserlis' opinion on the messianic fervor.²⁹ Through a well-circulated responsa, a distinguished rabbi could shape the opinions of communities thousands of miles away.

The responsa was an intellectual document designed to influence other rabbis and Jews opinions, but had little potency in a rabbi's local community. Excommunication served as the most immediate source of rabbinic power in medieval Europe. Excommunication is a religious instrument introduced in the Talmud, though it almost certainly has earlier roots. The Babylonian Talmud defines twenty four sins for which *cherem*, or excommunication, is warranted.³⁰

Those who are put into *cherem* are immediately placed on the outskirts of society; other Jews are forbidden to come within six feet of them, speak to them, or provide them with anything but the bare necessities they need to survive.³¹ As most medieval rabbis had no power to enforce this ban, they relied on their social standing to influence the community and other rabbis to obey the ban. If used by an influential rabbi, the enormous pressure wrought by social isolation could quickly cause a recalcitrant to confirm.

An individual person could be excommunicated, but rabbis with enough influence could even forbid an action on penalty of excommunication. This type of ban required the community of the wayward Jew to be loyal to the authority of the foreign rabbi, but could result in an excommunication even without a formal feud with a particular rabbi. The edict of Rabbenu Gershom, which penalizes those who take more than one wife—an action that is permissible biblically—with excommunication.³²

²⁸ A responsa is structured as an answer to a religious query by a specific rabbi.

²⁹ "Sabbatianism." YIVO. Accessed March 27, 2023. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sabbatianism>.

³⁰ Berakhot 19b.

³¹ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah*, 228

³² *Cherem D'Rabbeinu Gershom*

These two methods of power have obvious limitations. As each rabbi was connected only through written communication and had no formal ties, faraway rabbis often had to make a decision about how to react to their own community based on imperfect information. They could receive numerous responsa and excommunication proclamations from rabbis, known and unknown, and could not be expected to make a quick, unified response.

This limitation in the rabbinic methodology towards opposition served to empower the Sabbatean and Frankist movements. Before the Sabbateans and Frankists became publicly antinomian and rejected mainstream commandments, they were near impossible to differentiate from the Jewish hoi polloi. They were simply Jews who followed a specific rabbi. Only once they converted or self-identified as a distinct group—meaning, they considered themselves distinct from other Jews—could they be considered separate and dealt with as an outsider group by the rabbinic community. Alarmed rabbis could write responsa against Sabbatean theology and excommunicate particular leaders, but in the absence of detailed markers on the practitioners of Sabbateanism or Frankism there was little they could do to stop its spread. Until his conversion, support for Sabbatai Tzvi was well established throughout Europe.³³

A prayer was recited in the Rema Synagogue in Poland which spelled out Tzvi's name in 1666, and the communal record book for the Isaac Synagogue in 1672 declares that year the year of the messiah.³⁴ Sabbatai Tzvi's name is mentioned in many contemporaneous responsa to influential rabbis, asking about their opinion on the potential messiah.

David Biale, in his book *Hasidim: A New History*, argues that rabbinical authorities sought to rectify their response to the Sabbatean movement by encouraging the followers of Hasidic leaders to self-identify as a single group. In this way, the rabbinic tools of excision would be more effective. They embraced the nickname Mitnagdim and referred to the Hasidim as *mit-hasidism*. The polemics that were published had the dual aim of attacking the Hasidim and their practices, but—and equally as importantly—providing the catalysts for Hasidim to form their own group identity.³⁵ In this way, the excommunications and responsa issued by prominent rabbis would be more effective.

Many of the tactics used against Hasidim were refined versions of those used prior against the Sabbateans. Sabbatai Tzvi was excommunicated in Jerusalem in 1651, years before he declared his antinomian views,

³³ Ibid., 86.

³⁴ "Sabbatianism." YIVO. Accessed March 26, 2023. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sabbatianism>.

³⁵ Biale, 86-95

because of his heretical theology.³⁶ Only a decade and a half later, in 1666, were all of his followers formally excommunicated by the rabbis of Constantinople—over a year and a half after he declared himself the messiah.³⁷ Jerusalem renewed their ban, but nearly half of their rabbinical council disagreed with enforcing the excommunication.³⁸ At this point, stories about Sabbatai Tzvi had spread all over Europe and small regional bans could not contain his influence. Additionally, the bans were geared towards punishing Sabbatai himself and did not isolate his nonvocal supporters.

It is not coincidental that Hasidism and Sabbateanism sprung up less than sixty years apart. The optimism of kabbalism and the spiritual rejuvenation provided by a singular godlike figure likely struck a chord within the European Jews. Perhaps this dynamic even extended to the entire western populace; after all, America's First Great Awakening coincided with the early eighteenth century as well. Movements which emphasized spirituality spread quickly in this time period. However, specifically within a Jewish context, Hasidism struck a different chord with the rabbinic leadership. They recognized many of the same attributes that, in hindsight, had marked the rise of Sabbatai Tzvi. Hasidim suffered an almost automatic association with the antinomian Sabbateans, and it is probable that R. Elijah and his contemporaries feared that Hasidic leaders would follow the same path as Sabbatai Tzvi or Jacob Frank.

The only actual example of an antinomian custom practiced by Hasidim is the adjustment of prayer times. The Talmud prescribes a valid time to pray each of the daily prayers; this time changes seasonally but is widely accepted to be $\frac{1}{4}$ of the way into the daylight hours.³⁹ While different sects had specific customs, these rarely violated *halakha* and were usually localized to their own. However, the followers of Hasidism were nearly universally lenient with the principle of prayer times. Hasidic synagogues to this day will schedule services that begin after that time.

However, not only is this adjustment rarely mentioned in published polemics, but small modifications to rabbinic precepts have precedents in *halakhic* history. There are other instances of specific *halachot* being compromised communally with no backlash. For instance, there is a

³⁶ “Jewishencyclopedia.com.” SHABBETHAI ZEVI B. MORDECAI - JewishEncyclopedia.com. Accessed March 21, 2023. <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13480-shabbethai-zebi-b-mordecai>.

³⁷ Green, David B. “1666: All but One of Shabbetai Zvi's Devotees Get Excommunicated.” Haaretz.com. Haaretz, December 8, 2013.

³⁸ “And the Spirit of Sabbatai Zevi Moved upon the Waters - Bryn Mawr College.” Accessed March 20, 2023. https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmaur.edu/bitstream/handle/10066/8207/2012BenjaminP_thesis.pdf?sequence=1.

³⁹ Berakhot 26b.

talmudic edict against drinking alcoholic beverages with non-Jews. The Babylonian Talmud states in Avoda Zara 31b:

It has been stated: Why has beer of idolaters been forbidden? Rami b. Hama said in the name of R. Isaac: Because of [inter]marriages. R. Nahman said: Because it might have been left uncovered.⁴⁰

Implied in this passage is that the amoraic sages assume the decree against drinking with Gentiles to be obvious. In European communities, while there was no formal revocation of the law, it became the custom to be lenient and to allow Jews to drink with non-Jews.

The *Shulchan Aruch*—the premier code of Jewish law written by Rabbi Yosef Karo in sixteenth-century Safed—serves to encapsulate this point.⁴¹ The *Shulchan Aruch* and the *Rama*,⁴² the figurheads of the sephardic and askenazi communities in the early-modern period, both forbid and allow this mixed drinking with non-Jews:

Any alcoholic beverage of Gentiles, whether it be of dates or figs or of barley or of grain, or of honey, are forbidden because of intermarriage. And it is not forbidden except in the place of its sale, but if he brings the alcoholic beverage to his home, and drinks them there, it is allowed, since the essence of the decree is that perhaps he will dine with the Gentile. And the sages only forbid it when he has a set place for drinking as people are wont to do, but if he enters the house of a gentile and drinks there in a temporary manner, it is allowed. And so too one who stays overnight in the house of a gentile, it is thought of as his house, and one is allowed to send into the city to buy alcoholic beverages from the idol worshippers. Rama: And there are those who permit the alcoholic beverages of honey and grains, and it is the custom to be lenient in our countries.⁴³

Rav Isserlis is addressing the custom of Europe in the sixteenth century which was to be lenient on drinking beer and other alcoholic beverages with non-Jewish neighbors. Later authorities, such as the eighteenth century

⁴⁰ Avoda Zara 31b.

⁴¹ Rav Yosef Karo is the quintessential *posek*, or Jewish law expert, of the Middle East, and his opinion was almost always followed by the Jews of the surrounding communities.

⁴² European Jews, who are known as Ashkenazim, follow Rabbi Isserlis' ruling most of the time in *halachic* disputes.

⁴³ *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 114:1.*

Polish rabbi Abraham Danzig, the *Magen Avraham*, disliked the prevailing attitude towards social drinking, but felt powerless to protest it:

Even though now the custom is to be lenient with grain beers in the non-Jew's house, and we can't protest because there are those who are lenient, it is proper for one who is careful to distance himself from this.⁴⁴

The times of prayer and the decree against social drinking are comparable in severity. Both were commandments instituted by the rabbis, known in *halakhic* terminology as *de-rabanan*. The relaxation of each precept's stringency is also similar. While it was and continues to be commonplace for hasidic prayer services to not abide by the instituted temporal framework, many rabbinical authorities have offered *halakhic* explanations or repudiated the leniency towards prayer times altogether.⁴⁵ Aside from the isolated stringencies mentioned previously, no other *halakhic* modifications were made. Even the adjusted prayer times were not enacted officially or sanctioned by any Hasidic masters; services were simply scheduled to happen later. This stands in sharp contrast to Sabbatai Tzvi, who announced the permissibility of previously forbidden actions.

While the *Mitnagdim* may have been scared about future relaxation of *halakha*, their reaction was likely heavily influenced by fears that Hasidic sects would break off into messianism and follow in the path of Sabbatai Tzvi or Jacob Frank. On the other hand, one cannot overstate R. Elijah's individual influence on his peers. His opinion alone was enough to convince ten of his peers to burn Hasidic works and excommunicate their leaders.⁴⁶ There is little convincing written evidence of why he had a vendetta against Hasidim— he was well versed in the writings of Isaac Luria, the sixteenth century mystic, and his followers held him in such high esteem as to resemble a cult of personality— but what exists comes primarily from a Hasidic perspective.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, a contemporary of R. Elijah and the founder of the Chabad-Lubavitch dynasty, ⁴⁷ R. Mendel's efforts to convince R. Elijah to retract his statements failed.

R. Elijah's hatred of Hasidism was so strong that he found its existence in Vilna, where he lived, intolerable. Though he was backed by the vast majority of his local populace, he was not without opponents in his

⁴⁴ *Chochmat Adam* 66:14.

⁴⁵ See the letter by the R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Shaarei Halakha U'Minhag*, p. 111; the writings of R. Isaac of Skver, *Mishmeret Shalom* 9:1; and R. Tzvi Elimelech Shapira in *Derech Pikudecha Mitzva* L.T. 16, who wrote that davening late was a "sickness."

⁴⁶ Biale, 92-93.

⁴⁷ Etkes, Immanuel, and Jeffrey M. Green, 80-85. *The Gaon of Vilna the Man and His Image*. Berkeley ; Los Angeles ; London: University of California Press, 2002.

hometown of Vilna. R. Chaim of Vilna, a rabbi who was part of Vilna's rabbinical council, publicly denounced Rabbi Elijah after he stated that Karlin Hasidism, the sect that R. Chaim was affiliated with, must be uprooted.⁴⁸ When the community demanded R. Chaim's excommunication, he begged for forgiveness; R. Elijah forgave him for the insult, but said that he could never forgive him for his Hasidic views.⁴⁹

Again, while it is clear that R. Elijah vehemently disliked the Hasidic movement, he never explained the true reason behind his grudge. However, his influence was strong enough that token reasons— such as disruptiveness and degradation of prayer and Torah study— were enough to alarm his peers about a threat which felt all too familiar to the earlier messianic movements.

Hasidic practice has never been antinomian, but there is a clear recognition, both from within and outside the movement, of its different perspective on *halakha*. Though no *hasidim*— at least those who were sanctioned by their *rebbe*— disobeyed *halakha* on a permanent basis, the theology that they surrounded themselves in deemphasized the importance of an unmovable code of law and emphasized the emotional and spiritual elements of Judaism. Perhaps this shift, imperceptible and nearly indescribable for early critics of the Hasidic movement, is where the antinomian allegation stems from. The ideological similarities, combined with the grudge of the *de facto* rabbinic leader of that generation, doomed early Hasidim to be treated with suspicion and scorn.

⁴⁸ Rabbi Efreim Goldberg, "The Gaon of Vilna vs. the Chassidic Movement." Presentation to Boca Raton Synagogue

⁴⁹ Ibid.