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There has been a renewed interest in Hasidic works of interpretation of late, especially in circles that I frequent around the orbit of Art Green’s “neo-Hasidic” rabbinical school, Hebrew College. Just as there was an “inward turn” towards the self in the Hasidic understanding of Torah and rabbinic sources (perhaps in reaction to the elitism and ossification of spiritual life in Jewish communities over the course of the 19th century), so too there is a renewal of psychological and existential interpretations of Torah today. This study, *Hasidic Commentary on the Torah* by Ora Wiskind-Elper, lends us a broader perspective that “inward turn;” an in-depth study of selected works of Hasidic exegesis, spanning the inception of the movement with the Ba’al Shem Tov (R. Israel ben Eliezer, 1700-1760), to the ‘Warsaw ghetto Rebbe,’ R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (1889-1943). This is not an historical study of a social movement, as the recent collection of essays, *Hasidism, A New History*, by David Biale et. al. (Princeton University Press 2018). Rather, this book engages in a careful literary study of selected *derashot* (sermons). These *derashot*, delivered orally in Yiddish by the Rebbe to his disciples, were later recorded in Hebrew, often by one of the Rebbe’s disciples, and eventually published as a collection of commentaries on the Torah. Selections in this book draw from the *Me’or Einayim*, the * Mei hashilo’ah, Sefat Emet*, and *Kedushat Levi*. Wiskind-Elper’s eloquent translation of these homilies is accompanied by a lucid literary analysis, taking seriously the Hasidic self-understanding of interpretation as ‘ongoing revelation’ (5). While she discusses the historical context of each of these works, the book is a conscious attempt to give an insider’s view of the Hasidic literary legacy, against the grain of dry, overly historicized academic scholarship. In this erudite study, Wiskind-Elper conveys her comprehensive understanding of a broad range of Hasidic works and the academic scholarship surrounding them. She draws upon literary theory—Hans-Georg Gadamer, Mikhail Bakhtin and Paul Ricoeur, to name a few—as well as
contemporary scholars and academics, engaged in Hasidic commentary, such as Aviva Zornberg, Nehemia Polen, and Arthur Green.

After granting us an overview of the movement in the introduction, the author explores selected Hasidic teachings in the first chapter, “Dimensions of Collective Self-Understanding”—the Holy Epistle of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and selections from Toledot Ya’akov Yosef (by R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye), as well as others. These teachings are radically understood, in their own terms, as part of an ongoing process of Revelation from Sinai. The Rebbe (or tsadik) is depicted as a liminal figure, one who crosses the threshold between heaven and earth like the mythic figure Hermes. In addition to an eloquent translation and elucidation of each dershah, Wiskind-Elper provides notes that trace the biblical verses and rabbinic sources (from Midrash and Talmud). She unpacks pivotal concepts in these teachings: the role of the tsaddik as an intercessor, the two Torahs (the written and the oral), and the theurgic power of the derashah (especially in the teachings of R. Levi Isaac of Berdichev, author of the Kedushat Levi). The Second chapter, “Modes of Reading,” explores both the inner workings of the derashah as an interpretive enterprise and its impact upon the disciples (and later readers), conceived as “the secret of redemption.” The author understands this empowerment of the Rebbe as a transformation of the esoteric notion of tikun in Kabbalah (the ‘repair’ of the world). “From a tsaddik or rebbe, ordinary folk as well as Torah scholars received the inspiration they needed and guidance on their path. Conversely as well, it was only through relationship with them that the tsadik could fulfill his purpose as a leader of the Jewish nation” (91). The Rebbe as a charismatic figure deploys his derashot theurgically as a populist call to action and return (teshuvah), and a source for tikun of the world.

In the third chapter, “Responses to a Shifting Landscape,” Wiskind-Elper turns to selected teachings of the late 19th and 20th century, composed in reaction to increasing secularism, Zionism and the rising tide of Anti-Semitism. This is the most powerful chapter in the book, contending with contemporary historians who characterize the Hasidic movement in this period, with its opulent court structure and its inherited leadership, as “having entered its terminal phase of degeneracy… now a fossilized spirituality, uninspired and obscurantist” (113).
In her analysis of the ‘inward turn’ in the teachings of R. Judah Leib Alter of Ger (the Sefat Emet), for example, even a modern secular reader will find much resonance. Concepts such as hanequdah hapenimit (the inner point), take on new dimensions through the prism of psychoanalysis and cultural theory. However, her reading of the derashah by R. Moses Kahlenberg (1942), “Deep Blue Sky and Yellow Stars,” is the most profound piece in this volume. Delivered in response to the decree that all Jews in France must wear a yellow star while interned in the La Lande camp, the Rebbe expounds on the meaning of Jewish distinctiveness, consciously appropriating the ignominious symbol of the Jewish star as an injunction “to rouse Jews to self-awareness” (158). In her lyrical study of the derashot by R. Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro, the Warsaw Ghetto Rebbe, entitled “Song of Dust and Ashes,” the author resounds with theological depth. She understands the Piaseczner’s thought in the light of the “seemingly irreconcilable dialectics” of history—“on the one hand, the vision of an evolutionary…process moving in rising levels of perfection, a cumulative revelation; against it, ongoing stages of descent and degeneration taking place relentlessly on the ground” (173-74). And, indeed, while R. Kalonymous died in the Trawniki labor camp in Lublin, he left his luminous work, the Esh Kodesh buried in the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto for future generations to read—so that we might struggle with the meaning of Jewish destiny in wake of the Holocaust.

Through these studies of selected Hasidic readings, Wiskind-Elper arouses our desire to engage with these texts on a deeper level, and to reflect on our own modern sensibilities as we encounter the classic sources of Torah and Midrash. As a professor and teacher of texts, I only wish the book included a thorough index of primary sources and an addendum with the original Hebrew texts (as Arthur Green’s 2013 Speaking Torah does); I would then be able to use these teachings more effectively in my classes. The work ends with a beautiful musing by Piaseczner Rebbe on the value of great books. Wiskind-Elper comments:

Books worth reading, the Rebbe of Piaseczno says, are those written by a me  aber—an author in whom heaven meets earth, who can draw vision down into the shadows, whose words show the way to worlds beyond. Readers worthy of such books are those who bring their questions and their search over the threshold of the open page. What stands to be gained, the Rebbe suggests, is a glimpse of something from above, of ‘knowing what is wanted of you’. That manner of knowing is a redemptive moment of repair and healing… The tsadik, the author, mediates it. He
conveys it, always by indirection, in the Torah he learns and teaches. Real presence, even now, can be found written in the books. (191)

This book inspires such ‘real presence’ of the divine; in its deeply loving engagement with these Hasidic works.