

# Jesus and the Baal Shem Tov: Similar Roles but Different Outcomes

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**Abstract** Jesus of Nazareth was the founder of Christianity while the Baal Shem Tov of Miedzyboz was the founder of Hasidism. There are striking similarities in the environment in which each proselytized, in the anti-ascetic message each presented, and how their message evolved after their deaths. This article will identify the reasons why ascetic behavior came to dominate Christian but not Hasidic thought and how this contrast might explain why immigrant Jews and not Irish Catholics came to dominate vaudeville at the beginning of the twentieth century.

**Keywords** Asceticism · Popular culture · Religion

Jesus of Nazareth was the inspiration for Christianity, while the Baal Shem Tov of Medzhybizh was the inspiration for modern Hasidism. There are striking similarities in the environment in which each proselytized, in the anti-ascetic message each presented, and in how their messages evolved after their deaths. This article will identify the reasons why ascetic behavior came to dominate early Christian thought—but not Hasidic thought—and how this contrast may explain why immigrant Jews and not Irish Catholics came to dominate vaudeville at the beginning of the twentieth century.

## A Bleak Environment

At the beginning of the Common Era, Jewish communities were also victimized by oppressive rulers. Under Roman rule, the Galilee that was home to Jesus faced a severe social and economic crisis. The region may have briefly experienced relative

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prosperity when the Romans built Sepphoris and Tiberius. However, Jesus' ministry came after these projects were virtually completed (Edwards 1992).

The subsequent economic contraction caused Galilean small landholders to be victimized by a "tightening noose of institutionalized injustices such as double taxation, heavy indebtedness, and loss of land." Peasant families "fell ever more heavily into debt under the steady economic pressures of double taxation" (Sanders 1993: 430). The wealthy lent such families money that they could not repay, charged very high rates of interest, and then foreclosed on the property, so that estates became larger and larger, forcing more and more people off the land. This "rising indebtedness" and a "declining peasantry" further fractured the socio-economic infrastructure (Horsley 1987: 29–30).

During the 17th century, Ashkenazi Jewry experienced devastation. The peasant rebellion against Polish sovereignty in the mid-1600s, led by Bogdan Khmelnytsky, destroyed some seven hundred Ukrainian communities. It caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews, more than had been killed during both the Crusades and the Black Death (Dresner 1960). For the next century, Ukrainian dissidents fighting against continued foreign rule periodically perpetrated pogroms. In addition, the declining power of the Polish state caused economic hardships for much of Polish Jewry (Etkes 2005).

## Turn Toward Ascetic Behavior

Ascetic behavior was part of the religious landscape during Jesus' time. One important foundation was the behavior expected of individuals when they were in the presence of God. In preparation for the giving of the Laws, God said this to Moses:

Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down, in the sight of all people on Mount Sinai. ... And Moses said to the people, "Be ready for the third day: Do not go near a woman" (Exodus 19:11–15).

However, for Moses, the command was stronger. If God desired the Israelites to abstain from sexual relations in preparation for their one-time encounter with the Almighty, how much more so should Moses abstain from sexual intimacy at all times! At any moment, he was expected to be ready to accept God's direct commands (Tuchman and Rapaport 2008).

This understanding—that whenever interacting with God, one must abstain from sexual relations—was applied broadly. It became one of the requirements for the priestly class when they made sacrificial offerings to God. It became standard for warriors when they went into battle, and it sometimes was thought to be beneficial when "trouble loomed" and one sought heavenly intervention. Indeed, Talmudic scholar Louis Finkelstein (1962: 216) described the author of the Book of Esther (also known as the Megillah, which tells the story of Purim) as a ritualist from the patrician class "to whom fasting, sackcloth and ashes are essential when trouble looms."

Ascetic behavior was important to the 1st-century Qumran community, which preached, “He will refine for himself the human frame, by rooting out the spirit of falsehood from the bounds of the flesh” (Brown 1988:37–38). Uta Ranke-Heinemann (1990: 18) described another ascetic group, the Essenes, who claimed, “Jews from birth ...turn away from the joys of life as if from an evil thing and embrace continence as a virtue.” The Essenes believed that “whoever renounces marriage is neglecting an essential task in life, namely the begetting of offspring.” However, they rejected sexual intimacy during pregnancy, “which goes to show that they do not marry for reasons of lust, but for the blessings of children.”

Most closely associated with Jesus’ ministry was John the Baptist. He lived an ascetic lifestyle in the desert: “Now John himself wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey” (Matthew 3:4).

Fast forward to 1942, when the traumatic Spanish expulsion of Sephardi Jews reawakened ascetic impulses that had been mostly dormant within the Jewish community. In Palestine, Jewish mystic Isaac Luria turned toward kabbalistic practices. He developed religious rituals to highlight the losses experienced (Fine 1984). After the Ukrainian pogroms, Lurianic views gained adherents among the Eastern European religious elite. Buttressed by the legacy of the German pietists (Marcus 1981), asceticism complemented a deeply pessimistic worldview in which joyfully accepting suffering, both physical and mental, was central to religious perfection. It was essential to withstand all physical pleasures in order to surmount all obstacles that this world perversely presented and to attain the beatitude of the next.

In Eastern Europe, influential treatises began to stress unremitting gloom, pessimism, and oppressive piety. According to author Roman Foxbrunner (1993: 25), Sukkot would be ignored because its joyfulness “was incompatible with the central themes—weeping, worrying, self-mortification, and despondency. Every possible occasion for critical self-scrutiny accompanied by sorrowful self-mortification is exhaustively expatiated upon. Fasting on Mondays and Wednesdays was advocated. Even the Sabbath was to be, for the truly devout, a day of tearful mourning—despite clear halakhic statements to the contrary.”

## A Demeaned Working Class

At the beginning of the 18th century, Eastern European Jewish communities privileged the well-to-do and demeaned the uneducated working class. The toiling classes struggled from meal to meal and did not have the luxury of Talmudic study for either themselves or their male offspring. By contrast, the well-to-do could provide resources for their sons’ Jewish religious education and, sometimes, their daughters’ secular education. The gap between the two social classes grew with the working classes burdened not only by their lack of material resources, but also by their lack of communal respect.

Similarly, at the beginning of the Common Era, Jewish farmers in the Galilee were harassed by the Pharisees because they did not give their sons the expected

religious training. These peasants, labeled *am ha'aretz*, were considered second-class Jews because of their religious ignorance and their unwillingness to follow all the laws of ritual purity that the Pharisees increasingly demanded of ordinary Jews. A century later, when the rabbinic sages reorganized the Jewish community, they claimed that those who were ignorant of the law would have no place in the world to come (Sanders 2001).

## Inspirational Leadership Arises

Jesus may very well have been a woodworker in the urban construction projects in Sepphoris and Tiberias that preceded his ministry. There, he may have witnessed firsthand the gap between the wealthy and the displaced peasantry. This could have been the basis of his parables about Lazarus and day laborers.

Jesus began his religious phase with adherence to the ascetic behavior common to the renewal movement. He became a follower of John the Baptist and then went into the desert for 40 days, where “he ate nothing” (Luke 4:2). However, Jesus soon rejected this approach. He understood the human spirit and the need to bring joy into the lives of the *amha'aretz*. Neither the asceticism associated with John the Baptist, nor the rigorous application of the law stressed by the Pharisees and observed by Jesus, would bring joy into people’s lives. Indeed, Luke (7:32–34) repeats the seventh saying of the Lost Sayings Gospel Q: “The Son of Man came eating and drinking ... a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’ rejection of asceticism is also found in the Gospel According to Mark. When Jesus rejected voluntary fasting for his followers, he was admonished by the Pharisees: “Why did the disciples of John and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (Mark 2:18). His decision to let his disciples pluck grain on the Sabbath rather than remaining hungry (Mark 2:24) also indicated that the voluntary neglect of bodily needs was not part of his program.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Jesus rejected the notion that immorality is related to eating habits:

Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him... [By contrast,] out of the heart of men proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murder ... All of these evil things come from within and defile man (Mark 7:18–23).

Many biblical scholars (Crossan 1991: 260; Funk 1993: 203; Robinson 2001: 33) believe that Jesus rejected ascetic behavior. However, since all renewal groups rejected sumptuous consumption, some judged that this restraint reflected an ascetic

<sup>1</sup> Known as the Lost Sayings Gospel Q or the Lost Gospel Q, this lost book is thought to have provided the origin for many of Jesus’ sayings that are now found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. For Q sayings, see *Editorial Board* (2001).

<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ attitude may well have reflected the Jewish legal principle of *pikuachnefesh*—that one must do whatever one can to preserve one’s life. See Maimonides’ interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:9 in *Mishneh Torah Halakhot Rotzeach* 11:4, as well as permission to break the fast on Yom Kippur if one has “ravenous hunger” in *Talmudb Yoma* 83a.

impulse (Simon 2010). In particular, ethics scholar Stephen Patterson (1999: 57) claimed that Jesus supported “natural” asceticism:

Unnatural asceticism ...assaults the body with pain and privation ...Natural asceticism, on the other hand, reduces life to its simplest form—plain clothing, basic shelter, moderate fasting, drinking only water, sexual abstinence—to reaffirm creation’s basic goodness and adequacy.

Ascetic behavior is thought by some to be found in the Gospel According to Matthew (19.2): “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor” and the early 2nd century Christian manual, *The Didache*, (6.2) which advised Christians, “If you can bear the whole yoke of the Lord, you will be perfect, but if you cannot, do what you can.”<sup>3</sup>

Any ascetic inference, however, is undercut by Q Saying 10: “And if you enter a town and they receive you, eat what is set before you” (Mack 2003: 76). Intellectual historian James Robinson (1997: 236) noted the consistency of this saying with Jesus’ willingness to accept “invitations to dine with prosperous hosts capable of throwing a sumptuous banquet.” Moreover, even Thiessen admitted that, given the deep poverty experienced by many of the Christian apostles, it should not be surprising that they would lead a stark lifestyle.

Most important, for many of Jesus’ early followers, restraints on sumptuous living did not reflect an ascetic impulse, but rather the long tradition of contempt for the lifestyle of the wealthy. Finkelstein (1978: 187) claimed that these traditions derived from the Judean highland settlers. Long after attaining power, the common Israelite rejected “wearing ornaments of gold and silver, to ride on horses and to possess chariots.” Though many forgot their purist doctrines, others “continued to abstain from the gold and silver nose rings which were the pride of the Canaanite patricians and, for centuries, insisted on retaining the characteristic long, uncut hair, which was the mark of their highland peasantry.”

Condemnations of the lifestyle of the wealth-owning class are found in the exhortations of Jewish prophets and chroniclers. Amos (2:6, 3:10) railed against the wealthy: “[They] sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes. ... For they know not to do right, saith the Lord, who store up violence and robbery in their palaces.” Elsewhere, Amos (4:1) cried out, “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’”

One of the Qumran scrolls, the 1st-century-BCE Zadokite Fragments (now known as the Damascus Document), denounced gluttony as one of the sins of the rich and their priestly supporters (Schiffman 1998). The 2nd-century-BCE Jewish scribe Ben Sira (Chapter 13:18–19), captured the gulf between the rich and poor:

How should there be peace between hyena and dog? How should there be peace between rich and poor?  
Wild asses of the wilderness are food for the lion:  
So the poor are the prey of the rich.

<sup>3</sup> *The Didache*, the earliest extant manuscript that sets out the governing principles of the Christian movement: guidelines for personal behavior and church structure.

During the 1st century of the Common Era (CE), Israel had large class divisions. Owners lived in lavish mansions, and the fertile plains were divided into large estates tilled by slaves. In terms almost identical to those of Ben Sira, Jesus captured this gulf in his Lazarus parable. In the Gospel According to Luke (16.19–31), we find a rich man “clothed in purple and fine linen [who] fared sumptuously every day.” The beggar Lazarus, who was “full of sores,” lay at the gate of the rich man, fighting with wild dogs for “the crumbs [that] fell from the rich man’s table.” And a number of Q sayings (38, 51, and 61) chastise the rich when they focus on wealth accumulation.

In this environment, it is quite understandable that religious movements, including the Pharisees and the Jesus ministry, would place constraints on their consumption behaviors. The rabbinic text *Avotde-Rabbi Natan I* (Chapter 5, 13b), recorded the contempt the Pharisees had for luxury. In *Antiquities*, Josephus claimed that they “live meanly and despise delicacies in diet.” The most revered Pharisaic leader, Hillel (*Avot* 2:7), demeaned luxurious lifestyles: “The more flesh, the more worms; the more property, the more anxiety.” Finkelstein (1978: 186) noted that rabbinic literature preserved a taunt the Pharisees received from the Sadducees, “The Pharisees are bound by tradition to deny themselves the pleasures of this world; yet, in the future world, they will also have nothing.”

Similar to the way in which Jesus was at first a follower of the ascetic John the Baptist, the Baal Shem Tov, known as the Besht, began his religious journey by following ascetic kabbalistic practices. For 7 years, he led a life of solitude in the Carpathian Mountains, living apart from his wife for much of the time. After abandoning his solitary life in 1740, the Besht moved to the town of Medzhybizh, providing advice to Jewish families in need and communing with God on their behalf. Medzhybizh was located in Podolia, the most prosperous region in Poland, and a region free from the lingering effects of Jewish “persecutions that had dissipated within one or two generations” (Rosman 1996: 62).

The Besht also began to foster a new outlook for the Hasidim that attracted a following. He sought to bring God to the common Jew so that over the next decade, he came to forcefully reject and to denigrate ascetic behavior. The Besht reasoned that if the whole world is full of God’s glory (*Isaiah* 6:13), the pious kabbalists were wrong in thinking that one had to turn one’s back on the pleasures of the world. He mandated the enjoyment of material pleasures as a means of spiritual elevation. Indeed, the Besht believed that the soul cannot rejoice in the spiritual until the material has rejoiced in the corporeal.

Like others, historian Moshe Rosman agrees that the distinguishing feature of the Besht’s philosophy was his anti-ascetic message to the common Hasid. However, it is not clear that he forcefully opposed ascetic practices by the Hasidic elite. Indeed, Rosman (1996: 132) presented a 1756 letter in which the Besht’s brother-in-law, Abraham Gershonof Kitov, still referred to the Besht as a “Hasid and ascetic.” Thus, it may not be so surprising that some of his followers would maintain personal ascetic practices while at the same time promoting anti-ascetic practices to the common Hasid.

## Paul and the Maggid

The most important followers of the Besht did not adhere to a rejection of ascetic behavior. Neither Paul of Tarsus, who was most responsible for the growth of Christianity, nor Dov Baer, known as the Maggid of Mezeritch, who was most responsible for the early growth of modern Hasidism, did so. Both were firmly wedded to ascetic practices.

The Lost Sayings Gospel Q demonstrates that the early movement of Jesus' followers had a singular focus on his ethical sayings (Mack 2003). However, soon thereafter there was a shift in emphasis to a death-and-resurrection narrative that had much in common with mystery narratives in pagan religions (Smith 1990). This new emphasis is dominantly associated with Paul. Here, however, we will concentrate on another of Paul's innovations: his response to *porneia*, his term for the sexual degradation he had witnessed throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul was raised and proselytized in the Hellenist world where, unlike the situation in Palestine, sexual decadence was an issue in everyday life. In the dense urbanized Roman Empire, sex was a most basic and readily available commodity. Girls stalked the streets and brothels were visible everywhere. The defining feature of prostitution was the pervasive presence of enslaved women. Together with poor women, they populated the lower rungs of the sex trade.

The brothels in which they worked were often exceedingly dirty and poorly ventilated. The low price of a sexual exchange was stunning. The most common price in a neighborhood brothel seemed to have been "about the price of a loaf of bread." Fellatio cost even less. As a result, women had to service 15 to 20 men per day just to net a subsistence wage. In this environment of overwork, classics specialist Kyle Harper (2013: 49) reported, "the prostitute's body became, little by little, 'like a corpse.'" This environment deeply colored Paul's view of sex. He claimed that "when we were in the flesh, the sinful desires ... were active in the members of our body to bear fruit for death" (Romans 7: 5). Just like the Stoics, Paul believed that a sufficiently strong-willed person could and should eliminate sexual desires.<sup>4</sup>

Not only did Paul condemn sexual relations outside of marriage, but he also called for the rejection of all sexual relations: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (I Corinthians 7:1). And he offered himself as that ideal: "For I wish that all men were even as I myself ... [and] say to the unmarried and to the widows, it is good for them to remain as I am" (I Corinthians 7: 7–8). Even so, Paul believed that marriage was a bulwark against illicit sexual activities: "But if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn" (I Corinthians 7: 2, 8).

To married couples, he preached, "That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor. Not in the passion of lust, even as the Gentiles which know not God" (I Thessalonians 4: 4–5). Indeed, reflecting on the coming apocalypse, Paul gave this counsel to the Corinthians: "But this I say to you

<sup>4</sup> For claims that Paul used Stoic language, see Abraham J. Malherbe (2000). For claims that it was likely that he spent his youth in Taurus, see E.P. Sanders (2001: 8).

brethren, the time is short, so that from now on, even those who have wives should behave as if they had none” (I Corinthians 7: 29).

The Maggid had adopted Lurianic prescriptions of strict fasts and severe self-mortification. Chabad scholar Rabbi Jacob Immanuel Schochet (1978) documented that the Maggid continued with these ascetic practices even after studying with the Besht.<sup>5</sup> The Maggid did embrace “joyous singing and dancing” (Rosman, 2002: 562). However, like Paul, the Maggid promoted passionless sex among married couples: “Even during intercourse, one should ignore the physical in favor of the spiritual. ... One should love one’s wife the way in which one loves one’s *tefillin*, for one loves them [as an instrument] for fulfilling the commandments of God” (Biale 1992: 134, 136).<sup>6</sup>

The first followers of Jesus favored neither Paul nor the Maggid. Paul was in fundamental conflict with the first apostles, and he was initially hounded out of Antioch when these disagreements arose. Almost all of the senior disciples of the Besht did not accept the Maggid as his successor.<sup>7</sup> Pinhas of Korzec vigorously questioned the Maggid’s interpretation of Hasidism and his way of conduct.<sup>8</sup> He was particularly upset by the way the Maggid separated himself from the ordinary Hasid. According to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1985: 19), Pinhas exclaimed, “Of what benefit to them is the Maggid of Mezeritch since he has excluded himself for so many years.”<sup>9</sup> Jewish historian Ada Rapoport-Albert (1995: 91) noted that Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, as well as Pinhas “and some of the other intimates of the Besht by implication... did not accept the leadership of the Maggid and did not join his circle after the death of the Besht.”

## The Struggle against Asceticism

After Paul’s death, there were attempts to limit if not to eliminate the privileging of ascetic behavior within Christian communities. This rejection was most explicit in the Pastoral Letters that, though attributed to Paul, were almost certainly written at the beginning of the 2nd century. I Timothy proclaimed that teachings forbidding

<sup>5</sup> The Maggid hoped that, after his death, the Hasidic leadership would pass to his son, called “the Angel,” who was reputed to be an extreme ascetic (Rapoport-Albert 1997).

<sup>6</sup> This bedroom behavior reflected the Maggid’s view on corporality. Author Ron Margolin (2005: vi-vii) pointed out, “In his teachings, the Maggid seeks to contract corporality by means of direct intension so that Divinity may pervade all human life, including thought, which he also perceives as material.”

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Jacob Immanuel Schochet (1978: 65) noted and dismissed a 1758 letter from the Besht to the Maggid that stated, “You have taken for yourself a different way which, despite its [inherent] goodness, is not agreeable to me. ... Come back to me and if possible explain to me so that I may understand.” Author Naftali Loewenthal (1990: 30) muted the split by claiming that, while not becoming one of his disciples, Jacob Joseph “conceded” that the Maggid was the new leader of the Hasidic movement.

<sup>8</sup> Heschel (1985: 12) noted, “Under the influence of the Besht, R. Pinhas abandoned the ways of self-mortification which he had followed from his youth and taught that one can worship heaven through eating.”

<sup>9</sup> Moshe Rosman (1996: 133) pointed out that the Besht, somewhat like the group around the Maggid, believed in the central role of the religious elite in providing “the spiritual victories” for “the regular people who went about their mundane lives.”



marriage and demanding abstinence from certain foods came from “deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (4:1–3). The book also instructed, “No longer drink only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (5:23). Though Paul preferred sexual continence, he did not insist that Christians choose it. By contrast, the Pastoral Letters required bishops to be married and to be judged on the manner in which they governed their household.

These efforts, however, were unsuccessful in stemming the tide against privileging ascetic behavior. For one thing, Paul’s letters had a monopoly until the first gospels were written. Just as important, he and his followers were proselytizing in the Roman Empire among a populace that may have been familiar with the death and resurrection motif, but that were quite distant from Jesus’ Galilean ministry. Thus, it was understandable that Jesus’ ministry would be moved to the distant background and that any anti-ascetic message could be minimized if not ignored.

This growing primacy of Paul’s authentic letters and the ascetic views he articulated was typified by the 2nd-century Christian leader Marcion of Sinope. He believed that salvation would be achieved not by improving the world, but by escaping it altogether; for this reason, celibacy played a central role in his teachings. Summarizing Marcion’s thinking, the historian Peter Brown (1988: 89) wrote this:

[O]nly by demanding that men and women renounce the marriages that had previously held them together, and even by dissolving the ties that bound children to their parents, could true Christians come together in a freely chosen communion, undetermined by pre-existing family bonds, loyalties, and habits.

A similar movement called Encratism developed under the leadership of Tatian. Like Marcion, Tatian had been a Christian teacher in Rome at mid-century and was a disciple of Justin Martyr. Upon Justin Martyr’s death, Tatian left Rome and eventually established a school in Mesopotamia. He forbade marriage and counseled abstinence from meat. In a lost writing, *On Perfection*, Tatian described matrimony as a symbol of the tying of the flesh to the perishable world, calling it an invention of the devil. “To gain the Spirit of God,” he wrote, “humans must ... abandon married intercourse, the most decisive obstacle to the indwelling of the Spirit” (Brown 1988: 92).

In this environment, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* circulated widely. The story centered on the fictional character Thecla, who converted after hearing Paul speak. After Paul convinced her to remain a virgin, she broke her engagement. She was prosecuted and sentenced to face beasts in the arena and then to burn at the stake. Miraculously, she escaped her fate, baptized herself, and was commissioned as a teacher and evangelist by Paul. The book circulated in several languages, including Greek, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Armenian. The Syrian and Armenian churches included *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* in their early biblical canons.

Most decisive, however, were two developments: the Hellenist training of leading converts, and the changing organizational needs of the church. Converts like Tatian and Marcion enlarged the influence of dualist philosophies in Christianity: the struggle between the sinful body and the moral soul. However, the cementing of

these ascetic views reflected the role of the most influential 3rd-century Christian leaders. Christian theologian Titus Flavius Clemens, known as Clement of Alexandria, grafted Stoicism onto Christian thought, while the Greek scholar Origen Adamantius brought Platonic views into the fold.

By the middle of the 3rd century, bishops had become the undisputed organizational leaders of Christian communities. Ascetic behavior enabled them to gain spiritual leadership. This was particularly important, as they were increasingly responsible for the dispensation of penance (Rapp 2005). Indeed, Platonic views that only the chosen few—church leaders—could see the true nature of society fit well into the church’s organizational need to exclude Christian married householders from ascetic requirements.

While Paul’s writings became central to the growth of Christianity, the Maggid never wrote down his religious thoughts. Jacob Joseph’s *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (1780) was the first major Hasidic work to be broadly circulated.<sup>10</sup> He strove to bring the Besht’s teachings to a broader group within the Jewish community: rabbis, itinerant preachers, learned ritual slaughterers, and teachers. He wished to repair the bridge between the rabbinic elite and the masses. He “employed the term [*tzaddik*] rather seldom” (Green 1982: 17). Instead, Jacob Joseph emphasized the view that even the common man has a path to commune with God, rather than the traditional religious view that, according to Etkes (1997: 164), “mystical communion with God had always been regarded as the prerogative of a small minority of spiritually gifted men.”

A year later, the sayings of the Maggid were finally published. However, the book “did not include any attempt to make them ethically meaningful to the ordinary members” of the Hasidic community (Loewenthal 1990: 45). Its compiler, Shlomo Lutzker (Rosman 2009: 41) explained in the book’s introduction that he had delayed publication because the Maggid “speaks words of the highest dimension which not every brain can absorb.” Thus, unlike Jacob Joseph’s effort to bring numerous sayings of the Besht to a broad public, Lutzker’s compilation had few of those sayings and focused instead on bringing the Maggid’s teachings, as recounted by his disciples, to the religious elite (Rosman 2009, 2013).

Once a leading disciple of the Maggid, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, published *The Tanya* in 1797, an effort to bring the Besht’s inner teachings to the common Hasid, who, he believed, “possess[ed] unique spiritual potential” (Foxbrunner 1993: 37–38). Zalman advised others that God does not desire fasts: “Contriteness and humility are what fasts are supposed to accomplish and, ‘according to my masters,’ (i.e., the Besht and Maggid) these can be achieved through meditation” (Foxbrunner 1993: 132). When directed at the Hasidic elite, however, Zalman’s discourses “are distinguished by the harsh, [other-worldly] demand they impose on the disciple. He is expected to strip himself of all material desires; there is repeated reference to the ideal of ‘breaking’ one’s appetites for the physical world” (Loewenthal 1990: 68).

<sup>10</sup> As Moshe Rosman forcefully argues, published copies of *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* were “heavily edited versions of the author’s unsystematic notebooks, representing many years of haphazard jottings” (1996: 139).

This contrast between Zalman's personal ascetic practices and the behavior he promoted for the common Hasid was the pattern found among all of the Maggid's disciples. Jewish historian David Biale (1992) has documented how many of the Hasidic elite embraced the Maggid's ascetic views.<sup>11</sup> Menachem Mendel of Kotzk—the Kotzker Rebbe—was perhaps the most extreme ascetic in the whole history of Hasidism. Citing the Maggid's belief in passionless sex, he urged that “young men come to his court immediately after marriage, so that when sexual desire was at its peak, he could crush it once and for all” (Biale 1992: 130).

In their personal lives, the early Hasid elite remained strongly ascetic. However, they did not preach asceticism to the common Hasid—neither in their own work nor in the Maggid's own published sayings, for, according to Jewish philosopher and scholar Arthur Green (Green 1997: 443), “Lurianic kabbalah was revered but mostly ignored.” As a result, despite the private ascetic behaviors of many of the Hasidic elite, Beshtian Hasidism triumphed. Jewish studies scholar Allan Nadler (1999: 80–1) noted, “The Besht's emphasis on joyfully serving God with one's physical senses and his insistence that an immanent God completely pervades the created physical universe combined forcefully to eliminate any place for ascetic piety in early Hasidism.”

## Past Jewish Struggle against the Ascetic Impulse

Mournful reactions to the Spanish expulsion and the Ukrainian persecutions were similar to Jewish reactions at the beginning of the Common Era. In the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, many rabbinic sages frowned upon the enjoyment of bodily pleasures: “It is forbidden for a person to fill his mouth with levity in this world.”<sup>12</sup> Jewish studies expert Lawrence Schiffman (1991: 163–4) noted that “believing [that] the spiritual connection between Israel and God had been permanently interrupted, some rabbis mourned by abstaining from wine, meat, and joyful wedding festivities.”

Author Aharon Oppenheimer (1977: 145) gives the example of Rabbi Meir: “His advocacy of abstinence and purity led to his being given the title ‘kadosh,’ saint, a title granted to but few Sages.” Historian of religion Daniel Boyarin (1993: 47) pointed to Rabbi Eliezer, who is said to have made love to his wife “as if being forced to be a demon, uncovering an inch of her body and immediately covering it again.” He held that sex was only for procreation.

Rabbi Meir witnessed massive destruction during the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–135 CE. Before his very eyes, the Romans executed his illustrious teacher, Rabbi Akiba, and his father-in-law, Rabbi Hanina ben Tradyon. Thus, Rabbi Meir's ascetic behavior was motivated by a desire to honor these deaths, not by some deeper religious calling to improve his ethical behavior.

Talmud scholar Eliezer Diamond noted that fasting became increasingly popular. He traced this development not only to the need to mourn the temple's devastation,

<sup>11</sup> For a critical assessment of Biale, see Robert Cherry (2011).

<sup>12</sup> Sotah 9:12 and Tosefta Sotah 15:10-15; quoted in Friedman and Friedman (2014: 108).

but also to the cessation of three forms of temple-related rituals: the sacrificial cult, the *ma'amadot* (groups that would fast, pray, and read from the Torah while daily sacrifices were offered), and Naziritism (an ideology in which one took a vow to avoid ritual defilement). Diamond (2004: 17) rejects the view of “numerous scholars [who] do not consider it asceticism because they do not consider the motives of rabbinic fasting to be ascetic.” By contrast, Diamond considers these activities to be primary asceticism because of his “behavioral approach” and because “at least some of the rabbinic motives for fasting [were] consistent with an ascetic mind-set.” Indeed, he stated that “extreme devotion to the study and practice of Torah on the part of some of the rabbis resulted in self-denial indistinguishable behaviorally, if not motivationally, from that of the classic ascetic” (Diamond 2004: 12).

Some scholars (Fraade 1986; Satlow 2003) have characterized rabbinic asceticism as a practice of neglect when it is motivated by the desire to engage to the fullest extent possible in religious study. They point to the Mishnah Avot (6:4), which offers this dramatic statement:

Thus is the way of Torah: Bread with salt you shall eat, and a measure of water you shall drink, and on the earth you shall sleep, and a life of sorrow you will live, and in the Torah you will labor. And if you do so, “You will be happy and good [will be] with you. You will be happy”—in this world; and “good [will be] to you”—in the world to come.<sup>13</sup>

Increasingly, however, the sages began to take a firm position against ascetic practices. Rabbi Judah, the compiler of the Mishnah, understood their desire to mourn the loss of the Great Temple. However, he preached moderation:

Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the blow has fallen. But to mourn overmuch is also impossible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot endure. ... A man can prepare a full-course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two. A woman can put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two (Talmud Bava Batra 60b).

The *Sifre*, a 3rd-century Palestinian text, came down fiercely against ascetic practices. Though Moses became celibate because he was in contact with God, the *Sifre* (Koltun-Fromm 2010: 177) argued, his position was unique, in that “he spoke to God directly, and not in visions as the prophets did.” Moses’ behavior was not to be emulated. Legend has it that Rabbi Akiba’s desire to study at the end of the 1st century was so intense that he went 13 years without visiting his wife.<sup>14</sup> While, in his lifetime, Rabbi Akiba’s lifestyle was acceptable, even commendable, the *Sifre* rejected such behavior, arguing that “a balance must be struck” between family and study (Koltun-Fromm 2010: 185).

The Jewish marriage contract is very specific on the marital obligations of husbands. It prescribes that when rabbinic students are living at home, they are

<sup>13</sup> Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, as quoted in Diamond (2004: 32).

<sup>14</sup> Rather than referencing Rabbi Akiba or other rabbinic sages, Diamond instead referenced the 18th-century Talmudist the Vilna Gaon—Elijah ben Solomon Zalman.

expected to have conjugal relations every Friday night. If they are students at a distant academy, they should come home every other month. Indeed, the *ketubah* includes a story in which Rabbi Rehumi missed returning home because “he was so attracted by his subject.” When he failed to arrive, his wife “became so depressed that tears began to flow from her eyes. He was [at that moment] sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed under him and he was killed” (Ketubbah 62b: 15–17).

Diamond detailed how the Babylonian community rejected ascetic behavior. He concluded that the Babylonian community was “ambivalent or in opposition” to fasting (Diamond 2004:126). Those in Babylonian religious academies enjoyed sumptuous lifestyles and gladly availed themselves of life’s pleasures. Their most important leader, Shmuel, told his pupil Rav Huna: “If you have good food, enjoy it, because there is no pleasure in Hell, and Death does not loiter.” Rashi interpreted Shmuel’s “seize-the-day” attitude in this way: “If you have money to please yourself, don’t wait for tomorrow, because you may die and miss the pleasure” (Charney and Mayzlish 2010: 91–92).

Indeed, contempt for the sumptuous lifestyle of the wealthy, not ascetic impulses, motivated 3rd-century Palestinian sages. In particular, authors Leon Charney and Saul Mayzlish noted that the luxurious lifestyle of the Babylonian scholars drew scorn from their Palestinian counterparts, citing Rabbi Ami’s statement: “How they adorn themselves there in Babylonia, the sons of the Torah, in pleasant garments and luxurious raiment. It appears that they are not sons of the Torah” (2010: 4).

Diamond concluded that among Babylonian Jewry, “the joy of marital sex is apparently in the pleasure of sex itself” (2004: 127). This is most explicit in the passage in which the Babylonian Talmud recounted the advice that the late-3rd-century Rav Hisda gave to his daughters: “When with your husband, delay relations until his desire is great” (Shabbat 140/b). Indeed, Rashi’s commentary is explicit:

When your husband is touching you out of sexual desire, and he is holding the breasts in his one hand and with the other he reaches out to the known place— give him the breasts, so his passion will grow, and do not give him the sexual place too fast, so his desire and love will develop, and only then give it to him.

The Babylonian Talmud presents Rabbi Eliezer as an extreme figure whose views on sexual relations are vigorously rejected. In particular, the text castigated those who seek to make love while dressed. Rav Huna said, “One who says, I do not desire it unless she is in her clothing and I in mine, must divorce his wife and pay her the marriage settlement” (Boyarin 1993: 48).

In addition, synagogue preachers increasingly provided entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. Allegories, tales, expositions, and narratives done up in a wealth of rhetorical devices were an integral part of their talks. Religion specialist Oded Irshai (2002) describes how rabbis compared these sermons to the Roman theater, praising Jews who attended the former and avoided the latter.

The theatricality of Jewish services and festive celebrations troubled Christian leaders. Classicist Louis Feldman (1993) noted that Jerome complained that Jewish preachers, in a theatrical manner, roused up applause and shouting. Early church preacher John Chrysostom accused Jews of bringing into the synagogue troupes of actors and dancers. He pointed to the playing of drums, lyres, harps, and other

musical instruments, probably at weddings or Purim celebrations. In eight sermons in 387, (Chrysostom 1998: I:5, III:4) made this complaint:

The festivals of the pitiful and miserable Jews are soon to march upon us one after the other and in quick succession: the feast of Trumpets, the feast of Tabernacles, the fasts. ...I am afraid that, because of their ill-suited association and deep ignorance, some Christians may partake in the Jews' transgressions ... [When] the devil summons your wives to the feast of the Trumpets and they turn a ready ear to this call, [I fear] you will not restrain them. You let them entangle themselves in accusations of ungodliness; you let them be dragged off into licentious ways. For, as a rule, it is the harlots, the effeminate, and the whole chorus from the theater who rush to that festival.

### The Impact of these Contrasting Views of Bodily Pleasure

Nadler (1999: 85) noted that traditional Orthodox rabbis condemned Hasidim for their sacramental indulgences in food, drink, and merriment, which “transformed all of their days into festivities.” The merriment that these Jews found so troubling was rooted in the social norms already in place: the Sabbath meal and religious holidays, Jewish weddings, and the Purim play. Music and entertainment were integral to this performative behavior as evidenced by the joyous celebrations surrounding Jewish weddings, typified by the wisecracking masters of ceremonies, *badkhonim*.

The Hasidim glorified spontaneous song and dance as expressions of joy in the divine. Such activities encouraged the creation of simple lyrics in the vocabulary of the masses. Together with the impact of modernity, this joyfulness became embedded in Eastern European Jewish social life. By the mid-19th century, Jewish entertainers were performing in popular venues. The itinerant Broder singers were essentially secular *badkhonim* who appeared in wine gardens and inns, which were proliferating in Eastern Europe. They performed songs and monologues, becoming the first professional actors and producers in modern Yiddish culture.

Popular culture venues expanded between 1825 and 1875, providing the Jewish public with a group of professional singers and proto-actors performing before a knowledgeable audience. While they were partially influenced by secularization and modernization, these activities remained rooted in the traditional culture that dominated Jewish life. This is most clear when we look at the history of the Yiddish theater. The first Yiddish plays were written by members of the secular *maskilim* (“enlightened ones”) community, individuals who were antagonistic to traditional culture. As a result, there was little interest in Yiddish theater until Jewish poet/playwright Abraham Goldfaden began producing his plays more than 40 years later. Theater scholar Nahma Sandrow (1977: 60) wrote: “[I]nstead of making fun of Hasidic tradition, he makes fun of the enlightened younger generation who foolishly go overboard. These plays gave the Jewish people what they needed and were quite successful.” These were the cultural norms that Jewish immigrants brought to America at the end of the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth-century Irish Catholicism moved in a different direction. The Irish immigrants who arrived during the Great Famine or soon thereafter rarely observed formal religious obligations. In the decades immediately after their arrival, according to historian Kerby Miller (1985: 327), “at least half the Irish in New York City’s Sixth Ward, including a great majority of the unskilled laborers, hardly ever attended mass. In Ohio, one priest lamented that among the Irish railroad workers, ‘one-half are grown up to 20–25 years and never made their first communion [and] know nothing of their catechism.’” This was the Irish generation that dominated the beginnings of commercial vaudeville in the New World. After the famine, however, under the leadership of Cardinal Paul Cullen of Dublin, priests whom he had trained brought to America the religious transformation that had begun in Ireland. By 1900, three-quarters of the American church hierarchy was Irish—officers in the devotional revolution whose “mission increasingly was one of ‘immigrant uplift,’ the tenets of which were as simple as those Cullen’s Church had prescribed for the peasantry of Ireland” (Dezell 2001: 169).

Often mistakenly characterized as rooted in Jansenism, a Catholic heretical theological movement, the rigor of Cullen’s approach was dominated by Augustinian notions of sinfulness.<sup>15</sup> Miller noted: “Church teachings, as reflected in sermons and parochial school readers, commanded emigrants and their children to industry, thrift, sobriety, and self-control—habits which would not only prevent spiritual ruin but also shape good citizens and successful businessmen” (1985: 333).

The anti-pleasure view was reflected in the hostility shown to Italian immigrants when they desired to hold feasts to celebrate their patron saints. For many of the Irish American faithful, the *fiesta*, with its candles, music, and processions, harked back to the festivals in Ireland that the devotional movement had successfully eliminated. For example, as a result of persistent pressure from the Catholic hierarchy, the Donnybrook Fair, an annual event in Dublin since 1204, was gone by the 1860s (Luddy 2007). Given this hostility, Italians often had to organize their activities outside the church. For example, when the Italian community observed Saint Donatus festivities in the mid-1890s, they stored the saint’s statue in a saloon’s loft “lest the priest get hold of him,” wrote journalist/social reformer Jacob Riis (Moses 2015: 165).

As the Catholic Church began to dominate the life of Irish Americans, it began to organize against vaudeville and other venues of popular culture. Irish acts, like the comic Russell Brothers, who maintained unacceptable stereotypes, were cast aside. For the church, however, it was not simply the deplorable image of the shanty Irish but, more importantly, the deplorable morality that popular culture was perceived to be embracing. The church was fearful of the increasing bawdiness of the nickelodeons and small vaudeville houses. In 1910, at the annual convention of the National Federation of Catholic Organizations, its president Edward Feeney decried “the debauchery in motion pictures. Obscene dramas that scoff at marriage

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<sup>15</sup> For an assessment of these Jansenist claims, see Robert Cherry, “Was Irish Catholicism Linked to Jansenism?” *Doctrine & Life* 64, no. 7 (September 2014): 13–28.

[and] the obscene plays have been supplemented by the immoral and pernicious motion picture show which debauches young children.”<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, alternative economic activities opened up to Irish Americans. However, there was still a stream of poor Irish immigrants coming to America. Indeed, in each of the decades between 1880 and 1910, more Irish than Eastern European Jews migrated to the United States. We might have expected many of these poor Irish immigrants to have entered vaudeville, given their English language skills and the fact that their fellow Irishmen were already situated in the industry.

These church efforts, however, made it difficult for practicing Catholics to enter or remain in vaudeville. Author Shirley Staples (1984: 89) found that “after 1900 the Irish were no longer ubiquitous in American entertainment, as they had been in the 1880s and early 1890s.” By the time the United States entered World War I, she wrote, “the ‘stage Irishman’ had all but disappeared from American theaters.”

By contrast, Jewish immigrants comprised the vanguard for the modern era. Their thirst for live entertainment was part of the social norms they had brought to America. They were not burdened with notions of Augustinian sinfulness like the Irish Catholics. Jewish audiences desired the cultural forms that permeated their 19th-century Eastern Europe experience: the quick wit of the *badkhonim*, the contemporary songs of the Broder singers, and a healthier approach to sexuality.

Jewish women were considered sexual beings, in contrast to the prevailing Victorian and Irish Catholic ideals (May 1983). The Jewish embrace of black music exemplified a certain comfort with female sexuality. In disparaging ragtime, a New England music critic Daniel Gregory Mason wrote: “Here is a rude noise which emerged from the hinterlands of boths and dives, presented in a negroid manner by Jews most often...” (Lavitt 1999: 282). It was reflected in the way Jewish female singers, including Fanny Brice and Sophie Tucker, became coon shouters: singing mournful songs about the black experience in black face. Robert Cherry (2013) contends that these attitudes help to explain why, by the second decade of the 20th century, Jewish entertainers dominated vaudeville.

## Concluding Remarks

Given the same social conditions and the similar responses of religious leaders, it is not surprising that both Jesus and the Besht sought the same solutions. Given their concerns for the oppressed working classes and the indifferent if not hostile treatment ordinary Jews were experiencing, both Jesus and the Besht strove to bring joy to Jews’ lives.

While the founders rejected ascetic behavior, this was not the case of those who later joined the movements. In particular, both Paul and the Maggid had deeply held ascetic values that they promoted. Paul’s views reflected his deep concern to combat *porneia* and raise the dignity of women. Over the next few centuries, however,

<sup>16</sup> See “Federation of Catholic Societies at New Orleans,” *The Salt Lake Herald Republican* (November 15, 1910) 1. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85058140/1910-11-15/ed-1/seq-1;words=theatres+Catholics+Catholic>. Quoted in Robert Cherry (2013).



asceticism took on a more central role, especially as important converts grafted Hellenistic anti-pleasure philosophies onto Christianity. By contrast, because the Besht's disciples chose to separate their personal ascetic behavior from their pronouncements to the common Hasid, it was the Besht's joyfulness that was transmitted to the masses.<sup>17</sup>

It also might have been easier for Judaism to purge ascetic behavior because of its differences from Christian asceticism. Unlike the growing Christian embrace of ascetic practices after Paul, Jewish abstention was not a means of self-improvement. In particular, Jewish asceticism was unlike the asceticism of Christians, "who make a point of extreme self-denial ...through which control is imposed over one's senses, actions and thoughts in order to achieve a goal higher than those provided by natural impulses" (Oppenheimer, 150–51). Indeed, rabbinic Judaism fundamentally rejected the three distinguishing characteristics of Christian asceticism: self-inflicted physical injury (except for fasting), celibacy, and the establishment of separate ascetic societies or orders (Fraade 1986: 259). Instead, it was a temporary means of grieving in response to disastrous events in the history of the Jewish people.

The anti-pleasure views that came to dominate early Christian thought were a central part of the devotional revolution that swept Ireland after the Great Famine. When bawdy and sensual presentations began to dominate vaudeville at the beginning of the 20th century, it was no longer an acceptable venue for faithful Irish Catholics, who were trained by priests imported from Ireland. By contrast, imbued with the positive view of pleasure and female sexuality that were promoted by Jewish culture, Jewish immigrants embraced the vaudeville environment, and by the end of the second decade of the 20th century, became the dominant performers and venue operators in this light theatrical entertainment.

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<sup>17</sup> *Kedushah* (holiness) was a pietist ideal for the virtuous few, encouraging married men to limit to the minimum the frequency and modes of sexual intercourse with their wives in the manner Menachem Mendel of Kotzk prescribed to his students but never advocated for the broader Gur community he had founded. In the post-World War II period, however, the fourth Gerrer Rebbe, Yisrael Alter, inaugurated the Ordinance of Holiness, which "takes this ideal to extremes by imposing it on the community as a whole, thus turning what had been an elitist practice ...into a universal norm and a banner of group identity" (B. Brown, 2013: 476).

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