



The Links between the Partitions of Poland and the Immigrations of Hassidim to the Holy Land (1764-1795)

Avraham Avish Shor/ "Ad Hena": The Institute for the Rabbinic Heritage of Galician and Bukovinian Jewry
(RGB), Herzog Academic Collage

Rabbi Pinehas of Korets and his circle; the connection between Hassidism and the government of Poland and the partitions of the country; and the immigration of Hassidim to the Land of Israel between the years 1764-1795

Researchers of history and Hassidism have paid insufficient attention to the attitude of the Hassidic masters toward the political systems of the gentile authorities in Eastern Europe, and their involvement in such matters. These "political" issues would appear to have nothing to do with Hassidism and its leaders. However, I will demonstrate the dynamic involvement of great Hassidic rabbis in these affairs, which included metaphysical discussions as well as internal disputes that continued throughout the years during which the partitions of Poland dragged on. The disagreements centered around a question that was on the agenda of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe: Which nation should emerge victorious in the war – Poland or Russia? This question led to further, secondary inquiries, concerning the plans of the respective countries for the Jews, and the appropriate attitude of Jews to the gentile government: is segregation preferable, due to the dangers of drawing too close, or is it better to integrate within governmental or municipal systems?

I will argue that there is a connection between the expansion of the Russian Empire and the first organized immigrations of Hassidim to the Land of Israel. Various theories have been put forwards with regard to the motive for these early ascents of Hassidim to Israel. Researchers have focused mainly on the reasons for the immigration of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and his Hassidic disciples from White Russia in 1777. In contrast, there has been virtually no discussion on the incentives for the immigration of Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka and his party from Galicia in 1764, or Rabbi Yaakov Shimshon of Shipitovka and those who accompanied him, from Volyn and Galicia in 1796. None of the suggestions regarding the immigration of 1777 connect all three of these voyages. In the discussion below I will propose that the expansion of the Russian government into these lands, and the gradual partition of Poland, were together major causes of these first Hassidic immigrations. My contention is that this was a central motivation for



the departure of Hassidim from those lands – their fundamental loathing of the Russian government. One advantage of this assumption is that it draws a common thread between all three immigrations.

I will refer to political, military, and governmental processes, which occurred concomitantly with the expansion of Russia into Poland in the first half of the eighteenth century. These are linked chronologically and geographically to contemporary Hassidic communal life throughout Poland, and these features become more fully integrated in light of further analysis of the information available from Hassidic sources. All these factors combine to reinforce the thesis at the heart of this talk. A considerable part of the discussion will focus on Rabbi Pinehas of Korets, who filled an important role in the political conversation of Hassidism in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The attitude of the Hassidic masters towards sovereignty and government

Eastern Europe of the second half of the eighteenth century was characterized by territorial changes. Over the course of a mere few years the geopolitical map of Europe was drastically transformed. These revolutions affected the people living in those countries, especially its Jews, who were passed from the control of one government to another. Unlike the conventional stereotype, the fathers of Hassidism did refer to contemporary questions of sovereignty and political authority, and they showed interest in and cared about governmental systems in Eastern Europe.

The views for and against Russian expansion in Poland

Throughout the entire process of the expansion of Russia and the breakup of Poland until its partition there was an ongoing debate between the great Hassidic masters over whether to support Poland or Russia. Rabbi Pinehas of Korets was one of the leading voices of those who rejected the Russian czar. He condemned the spread of Russia into Poland, as he considered Russia the source of impurity and a kingdom of evil and falsehood. Yet while Rabbi Pinehas of Korets saw Russian control over Poland as a negative process, at the same time he maintained that it was one of the signs of the redemption and the footsteps of the Messiah, “a time of deliverance.”



This stance was opposed by younger Zaddikim [Hassidic spiritual leaders] of the courtyard of the Maggid of Mezritch, the most prominent of whom were Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady and Rabbi Mordechai of Neshchiz, who both spoke out in favor of the Russian czar. Rabbi Shneur Zalman went even further in his support of the czar, when he voluntarily offered practical assistance, according to various traditions, in the czar's war effort against Napoleon.

The immigration of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov in 1764 – “The First Wave”

In 1764, Rabbi Pinehas of Korets immediately detected, with apprehension, the start of the Russian conquest, and the dying of Poland, and he realized that none of the Zaddikim of his generation had sufficient spiritual authority to prevent the initial partition of Poland.

At this stage Rabbi Pinehas of Korets hinted that the 1764 journey to Israel of a group of disciples of the Baal Shem Tov from Galicia, including amongst others Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Peremyshlyny and Rabbi Fridel of Brody, and headed by Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka, was linked to the Russian conquest.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1768–74

As a result of Turkish support of rebellious Polish nobles during the struggle between the nobility and King Stanisław Poniatowski, the first Russo-Turkish War was held in 1768–1774, between the Ottoman and Russian Empires.

Rabbi Pinehas of Korets, who lived in the center of Volyn, spread a net over the expanse of Eastern Europe, north and south. As a native of Škłoŭ in White Russia, he was aware of Russian expansion there. Concurrently, he was updated on events in southern Ukraine by his students living there, who informed him of Russia's aggressive expansion into Turkey.

The immigration of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk and his circle in 1777 – “The Second Wave”



Due to Russian expansion in the north and south, the voyage of Hassidim from White Russia to the Land of Israel, led by Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, was conducted in the summer of 1777. The idea that the motivation for this journey to the Land of Israel was linked specifically to the nearby Russian expansion can be inferred from a Karaite, of all sources, one Joseph Kusnidi, who witnessed the sinking of one of the boats of Hassidic immigrants in the Black Sea.

The legal dimension, taxes, and the consent of the Russian and Turkish governments to ease the conditions of the immigrants to the Land of Israel

The Russo-Turkish War was concluded with the peace treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which was signed in 1774 between Russia and Turkey. The treaty included a clause that the Turkish sultan undertook to make it easier for Russian subjects or pilgrims to visit holy places in the Land of Israel, as they would be exempt from port taxes, while their security would be maintained.

Since the journey was delayed for approximately five months in the towns of Volyn (which was under Polish control), it received great publicity amongst the residents of Poland, and led to a “great awakening” on their part. Thus, many Jewish subjects of Poland joined the campaign, including a large number of paupers who were attracted by the special rights that the Ottomans granted Russian subjects immigrating to the Land of Israel.

In the late summer of 1777, Rabbi Mendel hurried on his way, as with his political acumen he was worried about the Polish reaction to the planned voyage, after some two hundred Jews had joined the campaign, because of the rights that the “Sublime Porte” gave the immigrants. Indeed, the Polish government did respond in this manner a few weeks after they left Poland. Rabbi Mendel feared that with all the delays they might miss the favorable hour and that it was better to leave quickly than risk losing the opportunity altogether.

Poland fears the departure of Hassidim to the Land of Israel



The Poles were greatly concerned that the special rights which the Ottomans had provided, as part of the peace treaty of Küçük Kaynarca with Russia, to pilgrims travelling to the Land of Israel, would cause many of Poland's Jews to leave the country for Israel.

Unlike Russia, which sought to rid itself of its Jewish subjects, who had only recently become citizens, Polish statesmen, while taking a great interest at the time in the "Jewish question," considered their potential exit not a solution but a loss to the royal treasury and the coffers of the ancient nobility, the owners of the cities and the private towns. Accordingly, the Polish government rushed to stop this trend. They did so on the communal level, by demanding that community would have to maintain the same tax targets as before, including on behalf of Jews who had departed for the Land of Israel. In the same month that the travelers reached their destination, September 1777, the authorities issued a directive limiting further departures and imposing a fine on the community.

Students of Rabbi Pinehas of Korets travel to the Land of Israel upon the second and third partitions – "The Third Wave"

After the death of Rabbi Pinehas of Korets, his disciples continued with his negative attitude toward the Russian government. With this in mind, a clear connection can be discerned between the partition of Poland and the immigration of Rabbi Pinehas's students to the Land of Israel. This event occurred at the start of winter 1794, after the second but before the third partition of Poland. At that time, the students lead a voyage of the Zaddikim of Volyn to the Land of Israel. On their way they stayed in the city of Balta, located on the main road to the port city of Galați. Balta, which symbolized the first Russian infiltration into this region, was also the residence of the students of Rabbi Pinehas.

In summary, my research points to a dynamic involvement of the early Hassidic Zaddikim, foremost amongst them Rabbi Pinehas of Korets, in all matters relating to the gentile regimes of Eastern Europe. The research shows that the Russian expansion and the piecemeal partition of Poland were major motivating factors for the immigration of the Hassidim, due to their distaste towards the Russian government. This motive was common to all three great Hassidic immigrations, the Aliyah [immigration to the Holy Land] of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk from White Russia (1777), the Aliyah of Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka and others from Galicia in 1764 (1764), and the Aliyah of Rabbi Yaakov



Shimshon of Shipitovka and others from Volyn and Galicia (1796). My research reveals for the first time the significance of the peace treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed between Russia and Turkey in 1774, in which they granted travel rights to pilgrims who wished to visit the Land of Israel, including Jews. I further highlighted the connection between the content of the treaty and the immigration of the Hassidim (1777), as the rights that they received led to a great awakening of hope for redemption throughout Poland, as hundreds of paupers in Volyn decided to participate in the journey of the Hassidim. This in turn accounts for the speedy Polish response, in the form of an order designed to limit the number of those departing, so as to stem the growing movement. On the broader scale, this clause in the treaty raises fresh insights with regard to the ways of dealing with the “Jewish question” that were practiced in the lands of Russia.