I. Introduction

One of the most significant contributions of the Hasidic movement to Jewish culture is its vast and rich literary tradition. Over the past two and a half centuries, Hasidic writers have produced thousands of books many of which have had great influence both within the movement and beyond it. In addition to their value as creative works of religious literature in their own right, these works also provide insight into Hasidic history, ideology and culture. However, much about the origins and development of this tradition remains obscure. How and when did the Hasidic literary tradition begin? What is its exact relationship to the Hasidic movement? In what sense can we even speak of Hasidic literature as a distinct literary tradition? How do we define the Hasidic literary corpus and what are the criteria by which to include or exclude a given work from it?

The designation of a given body of texts as a distinct literary tradition generally implies the recognition of some shared elements and thus serves to facilitate our understanding of these texts by highlighting certain historical connections or common thematic or stylistic features. This is presumably also the case when we speak about Hasidic literature but what exactly is distinctive in either the form or content of Hasidic texts that can be used to tie them to each other is not entirely obvious.

While it is of course reasonable to assume that there is some relation between Hasidic literature and the Hasidic movement, determining what exactly is this relation is complicated by the fact that the Hasidic movement itself is not easy to define, especially in its formative period.
The Hasidic movement can be traced to small loosely connected groups of pietists, which were known as Hasidim, from out of which a larger, mass, pietistic revivalist movement gradually emerged. There was thus no clear founding figure, inaugural moment or institutionalized membership that might serve to mark it as a distinct and coherent movement. While Israel Baal Shem Tov, the Besht (d.1760), the person traditionally viewed as the founder of Hasidism, was undoubtedly an important influence, Hasidism as a mass movement emerged some time after his death and it was shaped by many other personalities and factors.\(^1\) Thus, if we cannot assume a direct correspondence between the social movement known as Hasidism and the literary tradition associated with it then it would not suffice to simply define a Hasidic work as one that was composed within the Hasidic movement.

Attempting to base a definition of Hasidic literature on considerations of the form and content of the works themselves, is similarly problematic. In term of form, it is difficult to make the case that Hasidic literature represents something new or unique. Scholars have generally categorized Hasidic literature as a type of musar, or moralizing, literature and distinguished a number of different genres or subgenres within it including: drush, or homiletical works; hanhagot or lists of practical directives; tales by and about Hasidic figures; and letters containing teachings or advice.\(^2\) Since all of these genres or subgenres predate the Hasidic movement, they cannot, on their own, serve to define Hasidic literature.

As for content, while most scholars do seem to agree that works of Hasidic literature contain a number of new and distinctive ideas, there is still much disagreement about what exactly

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\(^2\) See, for example, Isaiah Tishbi and Joseph Dan, “Torat ha-hasidut ve-sifruta,” *Ha-entziklopedya ha-ivrit* (Tel Aviv, 1965), 17: 769-822 and Zeev Gries, *Sefer sofer ve-sipur be-reshit ha-hasidut* (Tel Aviv, 1992), 21-3.
these are. Even more problematic for the attempt to use considerations of content as the basis for a definition of Hasidic literature is the fact that the Hasidic movement never had a single identifiable ideology. Different Hasidic groups could and did teach very different ideas, to the point that this sometimes led to outright conflict. Indeed, some have argued that the only innovative aspect of Hasidism and the single factor uniting its various sects is the social role of the `zaddik`, the Hasidic leader who guides his followers in religious worship, rather than any particular ideology.³

Ultimately an adequate definition of Hasidic literature, that is, one that is both useful and accurate, would need to take into account its nature as a complex and dynamic literary tradition intertwined with an equally complex and dynamic historical movement. I believe such a more nuanced account of Hasidic literature would benefit from a greater awareness of its nature as a particular literary tradition and, in what follows, I will propose two complementary approaches that might aid us in exploring this point. The first is externally focused and highlights the personal ties of the authors of Hasidic works and their indebtedness to the works of their predecessors while the second is internally focused and traces the continuities and divergences within Hasidic literature by means of a structural analysis of Hasidic discourse itself. It will be argued that rather than a single tradition, Hasidic literature in fact encompasses a variety of traditions, each with its own set of personal ties, ideological commitments and intertextual relationships.

II. Personal and Literary Networks

The earliest reference to writings specifically identified as Hasidic is found in the book *Zemir oritzim ve-harvot tzurim*, a collection of anti-Hasidic documents first published in the

summer of 1772 in response to a fierce controversy that had broken out between the Jewish communal leaders of Vilna and a group of Hasidim residing in that city. Among the steps taken by Vilna communal officials to stop the spread of this growing movement was to confiscate and burn the writings they found in the possession of the Hasidism. While we do not know the exact identity of these writings, they were most likely related to an anonymous corpus of writings that had been circulating for some years already among various pietistic groups in eastern Europe. Based on evidence furnished by printed collections and the surviving manuscripts related to this corpus, we know that much of its earliest layer is composed of transcriptions of the oral discourses of Dov Ber, the Magid of Mezeritsh (d.1772). Another important text included in this early layer is a series of pietistic practices and directives, part of which was later printed under the title *Darkei yeshrim*. Parts of this corpus appears to have circulated widely in the 1760s and we find evidence that it was available not only in Podolia and Volhynia but in Lithuania and the northeastern regions of Poland as well. It is significant that some of the earliest quotations from this corpus to appear in print are found in works written by pietistically inclined individuals who, however, were not directly involved in the emerging social movement.

Both the discourses of the Magid and the collection of pietistic directives quote the Besht a number of times and, indeed, he is the only contemporary ever mentioned in this earliest layer

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5 For a more elaborate description and analysis of this corpus see Elly Moseson, “From Spoken Word to the Discourse of the Academy: Reading the Sources for the Teachings of the Besht” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2017), 210-379.

6 *Darkei yesharim* (Zhitomir, 1805).


8 In addition to the two works cited in the preceding note, we may add the works *Amud ha-avodah* (Chernovitz, 1854) by Barukh of Kosiv and *Hidushei nishmat zevi* (Lemberg, 1883) by Zevi Hirsh of Galina both of which were apparently composed in the 1760s. On the first of these see Piekarz, ibid, 55-58 and Moseson, ibid, 286-288. I hope to elaborate on the second one elsewhere.
of the corpus. Hasidic writing thus emerged out of an oral tradition in which the ideas of certain
groups of pietists, and those of the Besht in particular, were already circulating. However, the
degree to which they were viewed in this early period as reflecting a particular novel and distinct
worldview, doctrine or tradition is difficult to gauge. Such ongoing oral transmission through
personal contact and the delivery of Hasidic sermons in particular continued as the movement grew
and these occasions were undoubtedly instrumental in attracting new adherents. Nevertheless, it
seems rather likely that the appearance of a recorded body of traditions that could be owned,
shared, read and reflected upon not only contributed to this process of growth but also was crucial
for the development of a sense of coherence, unity and purpose to the nascent movement.

The emergence of Hasidic literature as an ongoing literary tradition is reflected in the
subsequent layers of the early Hasidic corpus. Already during the lifetime of the Magid, some of
his own disciples were delivering sermons to disciples of their own and these were similarly
transcribed and gradually incorporated, alongside other types of compositions and usually
anonymously, into the existing corpus. Not only do the Magid’s disciples explicitly quote him and
other members of his circle in their writings and sermons but they also appear to have read and
been influenced by the existing written corpus into which some of their own writings were
subsequently absorbed. It would seem that there developed in the Maggid’s circle, and perhaps
under his influence, a paradigmatic form of discourse, with a particular style and relatively limited
stock of themes, that his disciples quickly learned to imitate, both in their own sermons and in their
written works as well. In other words, we have the emergence in manuscript of a distinct literary
tradition that accumulated material over time, with each layer responding to earlier ones, and all
of them explicitly or implicitly related to each other through various internal and external
connections.
The printing, beginning in the 1780s, of parts of this corpus in various collections as well as of other writings connected to the growing Hasidic movement, especially those of Jacob Joseph of Polnoye (d.c.1783), expanded the influence and reach of this emerging literary tradition. The ensuing decades saw a remarkable number of new works that not only drew on the ongoing oral tradition but also explicitly quoted and engaged with the earlier printed works. It is significant to note that contrary to popular perception, most of these early Hasidic works were not merely transcriptions of oral discourses of Hasidic leaders undertaken by disciples but were in fact composed as written works by the authors themselves. The appearance of such a large number of books directly quoting their immediate predecessors points to the development of a broad readership for such works and vibrant literary engagement with them in a remarkably short time. This growing body of works can be taken to comprise a distinct literary tradition, a conclusion buttressed by the evidence of the emergence in the early nineteenth century of an awareness by both Hasidim and non-Hasidism of something like a Hasidic cannon.9

Despite this sense of a unified tradition, we can discern differences among particular works even in this early period of Hasidic literary productivity and there is some justification for differentiating between at least two primary sub-traditions, one stemming from the disciples of the Magid of Mezritsh and the other from circles connected to other disciples of the Besht, such as Judah Leib, the Mohi’ah of Polnoye, Jacob Joseph of Polnoye, and Pinhas of Koretz. Although there was significant overlap between these different circles (it would be anachronistic to view these circles as distinct “courts” such as were instituted in a later period), the people and works

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9 See, for example, the titles mentioned by David of Makov and Israel Loebel in Wilensky, Hasidim u-mitnagdim, Vol. 2., 58-9, 70-8, 328-30; Joseph Perl’s Megale temirin (Vienna, 1819), 55a; and from the Hasidic side see the prayer book Seder avodah u-moreh derekh (Slavuta, 1821) which, while also including several earlier and one contemporary pietistic work in its commentary, was clearly intended to reflect the Hasidic cannon as it existed at that date.
quoted and the thematic concerns of their respective literary productions appear to reflect differing social networks and ideological commitments.

However, it was only with the turn of the nineteenth century that we begin to see the development of much more clearly distinct literary traditions. Over time, certain social and ideological patterns coalesced into increasingly independent institutions such as the various Hasidic courts as well as into distinct literary traditions. While often overlapping, the social and the literary did not entirely coincide and they developed at a rhythm and pace that frequently followed different trajectories. While a number of the distinct literary traditions that developed in this period, such as Habad and Breslav, are well known to scholars, others have received much less attention.

The Habad tradition is not only one of the most distinctive of all Hasidic literary traditions but also one of the best researched. This is due to a number of factors, including its early organizational success, the literary proclivities of many of its leaders, its unique ideology, which, among other things, explicitly demanded intensive study of Hasidic literature. It also garnered considerable interest on the part of modern scholars because of its highly intellectualized form of discourse. Nevertheless, the emergence and development of this literary tradition as a distinct tradition remains a relatively neglected area of research.

Shneur Zalman of Liadi (d.1812), the founder of the Habad movement, appears to have begun his public career in the 1780s. While we possess several letters that appear to date to this decade his extraordinary literary career began in earnest in the early 1790s. His discourses began to be systematically transcribed by his disciples from around the year 1793 and over the next

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twenty years these transcriptions grew into a voluminous body of literature. It was around that same year that Shneur Zalman also composed his *magnum opus*, *Sefer shel benanim*, also know as *Lekutei amarim tanya* (or *Tanya*, in short). This remarkable book was the first Hasidic work to have been composed as a systematic exposition of Hasidic ideas rather than in the usual sermonic form of earlier Hasidic literature. A revised version of this work was eventually printed in 1796 and quickly became a classic work that was read not just among Shneur Zalman’s followers but across the general Hasidic population as well. The innovative character of this work, however, was not limited to its expository form, and some Hasidic leaders, foremost among them his former colleague Abraham of Kalisk (d.1810), criticized the ideology it presented and it tried to restrict its circulation. This controversy, however, had little effect on the popularity of the work. It was reprinted a number of times soon after and it has remained the foundational text of Habad ideology ever since.

Shneur Zalman’s earliest literary contributions were included, often anonymously, within the broader circulating corpus of Hasidic writings following the general pattern we noted earlier regarding other disciples of the Magid. Eventually, however, Shneur Zalman’s writings and the transcriptions of his discourses developed into a new and distinct corpus that in effect supplanted the earlier one, at least among his followers. Evidence that this might have been the result of a conscious attempt by Shneur Zalman to develop an alternate literature, one that would serve his own particular vision for the development of the movement, can be found in a series of ordinances

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11 The earliest extant dated discourse is from 1793. See, *Ma'amarei admor ha-zaken ha-kitzarim* (Brooklyn, 1981), 611 (first unnumbered footnote).

12 See the remarks in ibid, 190 (footnote) and 599 (#6).

13 Manuscripts related to the earlier corpus that contain letters or discourses of Shneur Zalman include National Library of Israel, Ms. Heb. 8° 4088, Ms. Heb. 8° 1467; Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Ms. C 59; New York Public Library, Ms. Heb. 32; Russian State Library, Ms. 182:353, Ms. 182:125, Ms. 182:31, Ms. 182:205 and Ms. 182:284. It is significant to note that an alternative title of the book *Tanya* itself was *Likute amarim*, a title that was also widely used to refer to various collections related to this corpus and indeed it was the alternate and better known title of the very first printed collection, the book *Magid devarav le-ya'akov*. 
he issued, probably sometime in the 1790s.\textsuperscript{14} According to this missive all young visitors to his court “must bring with them the writings and transcripts (ha’atakot) of words of Hasidism, both new and old” and declare under oath that they have summited all such writings in their possession, and furthermore they must identify, again under oath, anyone else who they knew was also in possession of such writings, whether they be “from the old people or the new or even if they are not of our people at all.”\textsuperscript{15} Although the stated reason for this was in order to edit the text and correct the “many great errors” that had accumulated in the manuscripts due to extensive copying, the severe inquisitorial tenor of the ordinances suggests that something more than the elimination of textual errors lay behind it.

The development of Habad literature as a distinct tradition is further reflected in the particular intertextuality it exhibits. Direct and indirect quotation of, or reference to, earlier works within the tradition and their continuous elaboration over many generations of authors is a characteristic feature of Habad discourse. However, from its inception, this intertextuality was limited to texts within the Habad tradition itself and it is extremely rare to find quotations of, or references to, works composed in other Hasidic circles.\textsuperscript{16} In other words, the scope of Habad literature was entirely self-circumscribed, a fact that clearly marks it as its own distinct literary tradition.

While the distinctiveness of Habad ideology and the nature and size of its literary output make it an extreme example of an independent Hasidic literary tradition, it is not at all unique and we can discern many other similarly distinct traditions in the history of Hasidism. Another well-

\textsuperscript{14} This text can be found in \textit{Igrot kodesh} (Brooklyn, 1987), 103-5 and for its likely dating see, 440-1.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Igrot kodesh}, 104-5.
\textsuperscript{16} Although Shneur Zalman occasionally quotes the Besht and the Maggid (as do some of his successors), I have been unable to find even a single unambiguous citation from the early Maggid’s discourses in the entirety of his voluminous writings (most of the few citations that can be found in the texts can be shown to be references inserted by transcribers, copyists or editors).
research example is the Breslav literary corpus, which similarly displays a unique ideology and a self-circumscribed intertextuality that distinguishes it as an independent literary tradition with its own unique form of discourse.

Another, lesser known, tradition is the corpus of writings preserving the teachings of Pinhas of Koretz and his disciples. This corpus contains at least two primary layers. The first, focusing on the teachings of Pinhas himself, apparently began to be recorded in the 1780s and continued at least until his death in 1791, while the second, preserving teachings and traditions transmitted by his disciples, apparently continued to be written into the 1830s. In other words, the composition of this corpus spanned about a half a century and it exhibits numerous intertextual references and quotations, including later references to earlier figures and to earlier layers of the corpus itself. While it is somewhat less circumscribed in who its quotes than the Habad or Breslav traditions, it nevertheless represents a distinct tradition transmitted and elaborated over generations. This corpus remained in manuscript for a long time before any of it was printed and continued to be copied throughout the nineteenth century, a fact that might well reflect its nature as a particular localized tradition.

An even lesser known example is a group of writings composed by the many disciples of Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin. Jacob Isaac himself authored a number of works and he had, in addition, an enormous influence on a generation of rabbinic scholars in Poland. A number of his disciples founded Hasidic courts and dynasties of their own and in the case of some of these, like Zevi Hirsh of Zidichov, new literary traditions as well. Other disciples of Jacob Isaac, however,

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17 The most comprehensive printed collection to date is the book *Imrei pinhas ha-shalem* (Bnei Brak, 2003). Unfortunately, however, the editor chose not to maintain the distinction among the two primary layers they are reflected in the manuscripts and some of the earlier printed collections. For a description of the printed collections and many of the extant manuscripts see ibid, vol. II, 524-544.

18 It should be noted that the corpus was known to and read by various figures even outside the Koretz tradition (most famously, perhaps, by Tzevi Elimelekh of Dinov), an interest that was likely a consequence of Pinhas’s reputation as a disciple of the Besht and as a founding father of the Hasidic movement.
like Yom Tov Netel of Chechov, Itamar of Konskovola, Mordekhai of Drohobych and David Lida of Vislitz did not function as Hasidic leaders but still produced literary works.\(^{19}\) We thus possess a corpus of writings by individuals who considered themselves Jacob Isaac’s disciples, and who quote him and follow his ideology and style of discourse in their own works.

Another body of texts that can be viewed as comprising a distinct literary tradition is the one associated with the Hasidic school of Peshischa. While many of the founders of the Peshischa school did not compose works themselves others did, as did many of the later leaders of the different sects of this school. Thus, while figures like Simha Bunim of Peshischa and his disciples Menahm Mendel of Kotzk and Isaac of Vurka did not produce any works, others, like Alexander Ziskind of Polotsk and Jacob Aryeh of Radzymin, did.\(^{20}\) In subsequent generations, books were composed, for example, by several of the descendants of Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, as well as by Yerahmiel Israel Isaac of Alexander and Samuel of Sochatchov among many others.\(^{21}\) Within the school of Peshischa itself, we may discern a number of distinct sub-school, the best known of which is perhaps the school of Izhbitza-Radzin, with their own distinctive literature that has been extensively study by modern scholars.

Many additional examples can be cited but these should suffice to make the point that what has hitherto been labeled Hasidic literature in fact comprises numerous distinct literary traditions each with its own unique patterns of intertextuality as well as a particular network of relations to figures and developments within the Hasidic movement. They also often exhibit their own

\(^{19}\) Their works are, respectively, *Tehor ra’ayonim* (Warsaw 1900), *Mishmeret itamar* (Warsaw, 1870), *Ma’amor mordekhai* (Lemberg, 1877), and *Migdal david* (Piotrkow, 1893).

\(^{20}\) Alexander Ziskind’s works are *Yakar me-paz* (Warsaw, 1932), *Torat kohen* (Warsaw, 1939) and those of Jacob Aryeh are *Divrei aviv* (Warsaw, 1929) and *Bikurei aviv* (Piotrkow, 1936).

\(^{21}\) The works of some of Menahem Mendel’s descendants include *Midrash moshe* (Warsaw, 1931), *Ateret zevi* (Warsaw, 1934) and the collections *She’erit yizhak* (1989) and *She’erit yisrael* (Tel Aviv, 1989). Yerahmiel Israel Isaac’s work is *Yismah yisrael* (Lodz, 1911) while that of Samuel of Sochatchov is *Sheem me-shmuel* (Warsaw/Piotrkow, 1927-1934).
characteristic kinds of discourses including specific doctrines, themes and hermeneutic styles that can serve as an independent or complementary avenue of analysis in the attempt to delineate and trace the formations and development of these distinct traditions.

III. The Structure of a Hasidic Discourse

Another way to differentiate between different schools and sub-traditions within Hasidic literature would be to do so by tracing intertextual relationships that go beyond explicit references or citations. Hasidic discourse exhibits a number of characteristics that can serve as the basis for tracing such intertextual relations among various works. Indeed, we can differentiate three distinct structural components that are characteristic not only of Hasidic works but of much of traditional Jewish discourse in general. These three components are what might be called the informative, the interpretive and the figurative. 22 Briefly put, the informative refers to the basic message of the sermon, discourse or passage which, especially in Hasidic literature, generally aims to establish some type of normative behavior or convey some type of belief. While this component is not always expressly formulated in a given text, it is typically stated as such, however briefly, at some point (or points) in the text.

The interpretive component refers to the particular hermeneutic employed in the text. As a tradition deeply intertwined with, and continually reflecting upon, a sacred cannon, Jewish forms of discourse are highly interpretive. Indeed, the midrashic impulse is characteristic and arguably

22 The three structural elements differentiated here bear a certain similarity to the three “hermeneutical moments” (deconstructive, reconstructive and metaconstructive) that Shaul Magid has traced in the discourses of Nahman of Breslav, though he describes them as the elements of a chronological sequences that characterizes Nahman’s discourses rather than as structural features of Hasidic discourse in general. Of particular relevance is his delineation of what he calls the practical “how-to units” of a Hasidic text, which corresponds in part to the structural element we have termed the informative. See his “Associative Midrash: Reflections on a Hermeneutical Theory in Likkutei MoHaRan,” in idem ed. God’s Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 15-66, and especially 28-31 and 40-43.
definitive of traditional Jewish discourse in general, where it serves various purposes and employs a vast range of hermeneutic strategies. In the case of Hasidic literature, as in other similar literary forms based on drush, the interpretive element is a framing device and generally serves to anchor the message in canonical texts. There are a number of possible factors behind this impulse toward hermeneutically connecting novel discourse to the past, including generic convention, the desire to lend one’s ideas the authority of tradition or a belief in the power of the sacred text to ground and inspire.

The figurative component refers to the poetic dimension of the text, broadly construed, and includes all images, figures and tropes as well as the full range of rhetorical and poetic devices it might employ. This figurative dimension has been least explored in the case of Hasidic literature but I believe it may prove the most fruitful in the attempt to define and understand the nature and significance of this literary tradition and to trace its various developments and sub-traditions.

These three components cannot be absolutely differentiated from each other and they each incorporate aspects of the other two. Thus, part, or all, of the message may be expressed by the hermeneutic or figurative components; the interpretation itself may serve as the message or employ figurative elements; while the figurative may similarly comprise the message or draw on hermeneutic strategies. Nevertheless, it is useful to distinguish them as they each play distinct roles in the economy of the text and generally reflect different motivations. Indeed, the differences among these three components are reflected in their respective temporal orientations: the message is future oriented, as its aim is to shape the beliefs and behaviors of its audience; the hermeneutic component is oriented toward the past as it aims to interpret inherited texts and traditions; and the figurative dimension, inasmuch as it reflects the worldview of its author, is continually voiced and heard in the present.
Each one of these three components can be used to trace influences, continuities and ruptures among Hasidic works. We might thus trace the continuities and modifications of the various messages found in Hasidic works over generations of authors and this might serve as a means of grouping them into specific traditions. Indeed, this has hitherto been the most popular method used to differentiate different Hasidic ideologies, school and traditions. We might also focus on the hermeneutics of Hasidic works and relate them to each other based on shared interpretive goals and strategies. While it is difficult to pinpoint anything entirely novel in Hasidic hermeneutics, there are still sets of goals and strategies that characterize the hermeneutics of specific schools or traditions and these can play a role in distinguishing them from each other. Finally, the figurative elements in Hasidic discourse, and specific patterns of such elements, can similarly be used to trace continuities and influences among various Hasidic works. Indeed, inasmuch as the figurative dimension of the text reflects the particular worldviews of its author, it is likely to prove the most useful and insightful of the three for better defining and differentiating the various Hasidic literary traditions and the figural worlds they aimed to construct and convey.23

In order to delineate these structural elements more concretely, I have chosen at random a homily from the book *Magid devarav le-ya’akov*, containing discourses attributed to the Magid of Mezritsh, to serve as the basis for a sample analysis.24 The informative element in the text of the homily is marked in bold, the hermeneutic elements are underlined and the figurative ones are italicized. As noted, the three elements overlap at times and so it rather difficult if not impossible to absolutely differentiate them graphically or even discursively. The ensuing analysis should

23 As Joshua Levinson has observed, “Culture as a whole can be viewed as a form of persuasion or rhetoric for the creation and preservation of preferred meanings, and the literary text may be understood as an intervention—an attempt to render certain stories convincing.” See Joshua Levinson, “Literary Approaches to Midrash” in Carol Bakhos ed. *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 206
24 *Magid devarav le-ya’akov* (Koretz, 1781), 36a-36b (#172).
The homily opens by quoting the biblical verse that will be the target of its interpretation
“My beloved is unto me as a cluster of henna in the vineyards of En-gedi” (Song 1:14) and then
cites the traditional view of the function of the High Priest on Yom Kippur who atoned for the
public with his confession, the success of which was marked by the turning of the crimson color
of the woolen strip tied to the horns of the scapegoat to white. This tradition is interpreted and

therefore be taken in the spirit of a heuristic exercise meant to aid in us in recognizing the distinct
roles the three elements play in the economy of the text.
given an additional layer of meaning through a series of images and metaphors; atonement is described as the lifting or carrying of the sin to its origin in the godhead where it is sweetened at its root, a process that is reflected in the image of the crimson wool turning to its original white. This complex of figures is then used to interpret another verse, “From all your sins shall ye be clean before the Lord” (Leviticus 16:30), whereby the words “before the Lord” are read hyper-literally as expressing the idea that atonement is achieved when the sin is lifted to its source in the godhead. The homily then presents the principle that distance and privation increases pleasure as a metaphor for the power of repentance and interprets two Talmudic statements – that through repentance out of love one’s sins become merits (bT Yoma 86b), and that in the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand (bT Berakhot 34b) – accordingly. The biblical verse “nor regardeth (nikar) he the rich more than (lifnei) the poor (Job 34:19), is interpreted in a similar vein as follows: the rich are not discernable (nikar) in comparison with one who was initially (lifnei) poor.

At this point, the homily references a Talmudic tale in which the the High Priest’s prayers for rain were superseded by those of Hanina ben Dosa, and interprets it as expressing the main idea of the homily, which it goes on to state directly: the power the High Priest has to alter reality by means of his prayers is limited to Yom Kippur while the saint has this ability all the time and gentiles never. This apodictically stated principle is expressed with the help of a number of images and metaphors. The difference between the ability of the Jewish saint and of gentiles is compared metaphorically to that between changing an object and merely moving it around. Additionally, the saint possess this special power by virtue of the attachment he is said to have to God who, in turn, responds out of love even to his unstated wishes, an idea that the homilist finds expressed in the verse “He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him” (Psalms, 145:19).
We then encounter the idea that the fate of Israel is directly determined by the godhead and it is to this source of all creation that the saint is connected, which the homilist derives from the Talmudic statement that there is no (ain) constellation (mazal) for the Jewish people (bT Shabbat 156b) read hyper-literally as stating that the divine nothingness (ayin) is the constellation for the Jewish people. The homilist connects this divine nothingness to divine wisdom by means of the verse “But wisdom, where (me-ayin) shall it be found (timazei)” (Job 28:12) which is interpreted as meaning that wisdom comes into existence (timazei) from nothingness (me-ayin). Wisdom, in turn, is presented as the origin of all creation by reference to the verse “In wisdom hast Thou made them all” (Psalms 104:24). Finally, the word constellation (mazal) is interpreted in light of the verse “Their boughs drip (yizal) with moisture” (Numbers 24:7) as connoting a flowing source thereby completing the interpretation of the Talmudic statement, which is now read as “the divine nothingness/wisdom is the source of Israel.” A further association is made between wisdom and eye (ayin) by means of the metaphoric designation of the sages (hakhamim) as the eyes of the people (Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:15). This final association is apparently made so as to serve in the ensuing interpretation of the opening verse of the homily, although the homilist might have also meant to add “eye of the fountain” to the cluster of images describing wisdom (and perhaps even to play on the assonance in the Hebrew words for nothingness (ayin) and eye (ayin).

The homilist then returns to his opening verse “My beloved is unto me as a cluster of henna in the vineyards of En-gedi” which is interpreted as encapsulating the entire message of the homily. Following earlier rabbinic traditions (bT. Sotah 47b), the word “cluster” (eshkol) is taken as an image for the saint “the man who includes all,” while the word “henna” (kofer) is related to the “golden bowls” (keforei zahav) mentioned in the bible (Ezra 1:10), which is itself taken to connote “cleaning” (see, Rashi ibid) and thus the idea of lifting to the source and bringing about the change
mentioned earlier (the word “atonement” [kippur] might also be in the background but the aim here appears to be broader than atonement for sin). The phrase “my beloved is unto me” is then taken as expressing the idea of a constant loving relationship thus making the initial clause of the verse read “the saint can bring about change at all times.” The second clause is interpreted as giving the explanation for this ability of the saint. Following an earlier rabbinic interpretation (Shemot Rabbah 5:12) “vineyard” is taken as an image for Israel, while En-gedi is read as composed of the word “eye” (ayin), which, as stated above, is associated with wisdom and, following a meaning recorded in the Talmud (bT Shabbat 67b), the word “fortune” (gad), which is thereby related to the interpretation of “constellation” (mazal) given above. In other words, the saint has the power to bring about change by virtue of Israel’s origin in the divine nothingness/wisdom, the source of all creation.

The message of the homily, its particular hermeneutic strategies and its figurative dimension can thus be differentiated from each other and considered on their own respective terms. The aim of the homily is to convey the idea that the saint has the power to alter nature. This idea is grounded in classical texts through a number of hermeneutical strategies many of which draw heavily on various kinds of imagery and figural associations. Indeed, even more than the authority of the tradition represented by the interpretation of the classical texts, it is the constellations of tropes and images that lends the homily its extraordinary rhetorical power. The saint’s supernatural power derives from the special relationship he has with god and the cosmos, a relationship moreover that is depicted through a range of concrete images, from origins and source to connection and love.

The three structural components of the homily can thus be used to relate it to other homilies from the same corpus and to those of other Hasidic literary traditions (and indeed to other traditions
as well). We might trace how the idea of the power of the saint changes or disappears or how the sets of hermeneutical strategies and concerns differ in particular traditions. We might also trace the various constellations of images used to convey ideas and interpret texts and as noted, these might well prove the most fruitful in discerning and delineating the particular worldviews developed in the different traditions.

IV. Conclusion

This article has described a range of strategies that might aid us in defining Hasidic literature and delineating its various sub-traditions. One approach proposed was to attend to the oral quotations and intertextual references and allusions as a way of meaningfully grouping particular works together. Another, complementary, approach was to differentiate the structural elements of Hasidic discourse and to use these to trace developments and patterns within and among Hasidic works and traditions. In addition to facilitating interpretation and the attainment of greater insight into the Hasidic works themselves, these strategies can also contributed to our understanding of the history of the Hasidic movement and the complex cultural configurations embodied by its rich literary traditions.