The Return to Nothingness: Hassidism and Philosophy (02.01.22)

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**Introduction**

Hassidism [חסידות], the Jewish religious movement which emerged in East Europe in the mid-eighteenth century, is still a vital force more than two and a half centuries later. During this period of time, Hassidism has exerted a decisive influence not only on the religious lives of millions of Jews, but also on the formation of modern Hebrew letters, culture, and music. The historical circumstances around the activity of the two founders of the movement, R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (acronym: the *Besht*) of Międzybóż (1700?-1760), and R. Dov Ber Friedman, the Great *Maggid* of Mezhrich (1710?-1772), are still shrouded in fog, though recent scholarly literature has made important headway in establishing historical facts.[[1]](#endnote-1) Hassidism was strongly opposed to the competing Jewish Enlightenment movement, the *Haskalah*, accusing members of *Haskalah* of having developed shame about their Jewish identity and of internalizing anti-Jewish stereotypes and prejudices. For this reason, it has been quite common among intellectual historians to assume that “with the exclusion of only a small number of exceptions” Hassidism was essentially opposed to the study of philosophy (Brown, forthcoming, \*3). Arguably, the story is much more nuanced, and while most lay Hassidism usually avoided the study of philosophy, the intellectual leadership frequently engaged in this study and at times developed philosophical and theological positions that were far bolder than what one would find among the bourgeoisie of the German-Jewish *Haskalah*.

A proper and comprehensive study of the relationship between Hassidism and philosophy would require a volume of its own. In the limited space of this chapter, I shall focus on two crucial issues within the broader topic of Hassidism and philosophy. In the first part, I will study the Hassidic reception of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, widely perceived as the greatest work of Jewish philosophy, a work that was equally admired and derided as heretical from its very early dissemination in the late twelfth century. Against the common prejudice among scholars, I will show that throughout its history, numerous Hassidic leaders engaged in the study of the *Guide*, admired the book, and quoted it approvingly as an authoritative rabbinic source. In the second part of this chapter, I will move from the Hassidic reception of Maimonides’ philosophy to what I would argue is perhaps the most significant Jewish contribution to modern Western philosophy: the notion of *acosmism*, according to which only God truly and fully exists. I will show that through the mediation of Salomon Maimon (1753-1800) this bold notion was adopted from the school of the Maggid of Mezhrich and introduced into the systems of German Idealism. In my brief conclusion, I will attempt to provide a preliminary answer to the question of what allowed Hassidic masters to develop rather bold philosophical and theological views in spite of the conservative appearance of the movement.

**§Part I: The Hassidic Reception of the *Guide of the Perplexed***

Yaʿakov Emden (1697-1776) was one of the more extraordinary rabbinic figures of the mid-eighteenth century. A man of letters, versed in several European languages, and having a keen interest in contemporary science, Emden is commonly considered as one of the harbingers of the *Haskalah*. One might thus be surprised to read Emden’s verdict on Maimonides’ magisterial work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*:

I do not deny speaking ill of the *Guide of Perplexed* – which I believe was never composed by the Maimonides, the author the Code of whom we so pride ourselves (or perhaps there were two people named ‘Maimonides’? though even the *Book of Knowledge* [in the Code] contains some of the erroneous opinions of the *Guide of the Perplexed*)… I cannot conceive how could such a misshape come out of the hands of this great Jewish man, great in Torah and deeds, as the famous Rabbi Moses. For this book is replete with smirch. It is truly opposed to Torah and faith, more than anyone could imagine (Schacter 1984, 45).

Emden does not mince words in his condemnation of the *Guide*, and indeed he was not unique. We have solid textual evidence of a significant body of medieval and early modern rabbinic authorities who deemed the book heretical and unworthy of inclusion in the rabbinic canon. Given this unequivocal rejection of the book by Emden – the person whom Moses Mendelssohn, the leader of the Berlin *Haskalah*, considered as his own rabbi – one would expect the leaders of the emerging Hassidic movement, a movement of deep religious piety, to adopt a similar stance toward the *Guide*. But nothing of this sort transpired.

The first three Hassidic books to be printed – *Toldot Ya’akov Yoseph* (1780), *Ben Porat Yoseph* (1781), and *Tzofnat Pa’aneakh* (1782) – each contain several references to Maimonides’ *Guide* and *Book of Science*. All three refer to the *Guide* as an authoritative rabbinic text. The author of all three books – R. Ya’akov Yoseph ha-Kohen of Polnoye (1695?-1781) – was one of the closest disciples of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and his references and discussions of passages from *Guide* contain no trace of criticism of the work. For all we can tell, for R. Ya’akov Yoseph ha-Kohen of Polnoye, both the *Guide* and *Sefer ha-Madda* are part and parcel of the rabbinic canon.

Another prominent disciple of the Besht, R. Pinhas Shapiro of Koretz (1726-1791), is said to have told his son that the *Guide* instils in a person reverence toward God [יראת ה׳] (Shapira 1930, 86). According to one source, Pinhas of Koretz argued that if one wonders whether the *Guide* might make a person a pious Jew [גוטער יוד], he could point out *himself* as that person who became a pious Jew by virtue of the *Guide* (Shapira 1926, 13). A third source attests that Pinhas of Koritz studied the *Guide* “a thousand times” (Shapira 1936, 48). R. Pinha’s contemporary, R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1730-1797), as well as later Hassidic masters, such as R. Yitzhak of Skvira (1812-1885), portrayed Pinhas of Koriz as a “divine philosopher [פילוסוף אלוקי]” (Shapira 1936, 48 and Shapira 1926, 13). R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, who was himself a disciple of the Besht, addresses the *Guide*’s discussion of divine foreknowledge in his own writings, and on another occasion quotes approvingly a passage from *Guide* III 52 (Dienstag 1964, 313).

As we turn our attention to the circle of the Maggid of Mezhrich, we encounter a source suggesting that when the time would come for the disciples of the Maggid to enter his study hall, “they [would] have been already thoroughly learned in the *Guide*” (Shneorson 2019, 244). Though the source is relatively late, the existence of such a tradition is significant and attests that at least by the end of the nineteenth century, a major Hassidic leader – R. Sholom Dubber Shneorson of Lubavich (1860-1920) – found it important to stress that the Maggid’s disciples were versed in the *Guide*.

R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730-1788), one of the senior disciples of the Maggid, discusses the *Guide* and even defends it from objections raised by Nahmanides (Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk 2007, 18 and 40). Similarly, R. Boruch of Kossov (1720?-1781), another disciple of the Maggid and an important Kabbalist in his own right, frequently quoted the *Guide* (see, for example, Boruch of Kossov 1854, 12) and developed discourses on classical philosophical topics (such as the distinction between essence and existence (1854), 14). Other Hassidic masters in the circle of the Maggid who cite the *Guide* as an authoritative rabbinic text include Shlomo of Lutsk (?-1813), Shneor Zalman of Liadi (1745?-1812), Avraham of Kalisk (1741-1810), and Israel of Kozhnitz (1736-1814) (see Dienstag, 1964, 313-320).

The overall picture of the Hassidic reception of the *Guide* did not change much in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hassidic masters of a vast variety of schools and orientations studied the *Guide*, though they were fully aware of its religious audacity. The *Guide* was considered a challenging, indeed even dangerous text, but these features did not stop the Hassidic elite from studying the book. The Kotzker Rebbe, R. Menahem Mendel Morgenstern (1787-1859), an unbending and demanding radical who secluded himself in a small room for the last twenty years of his life, is quoted as saying that the book is a “*Guide* for those who are learned and versed in rabbinic letters, and *Perplexing* for the unlearned” (Morgenstern 1961, 100). The much more mainstream Hassidic leader, R. Israel Friedman of Ruzhin (1796-1850), is reported to have regretted giving an approbation to the printing of one of the works of R. Ya’akov Emden once he learned of Emden’s harsh condemnation of the *Guide* (Horodetzky 1923, III 104).

We also have an edifying tale about R. Hayim Halberstam of Sanz (1797-1876), a notable scholar and the founder of the Sanz Hassidic community. After his marriage at the age of thirteen, R. Hayim was living at the house of his father-in-law – himself an important rabbinic scholar – who kept a copy of the *Guide* locked in a box. Once, when his father-in-law went to sleep, the young R. Hayim opened the box and began studying the *Guide*. Soon, his father-in-law woke up, took the book from R. Hayim, locked the box, and hid the key. A few days later, just after his father-in-law had left on a trip, R. Hayim searched for the key, opened the box, and returned to his study of the *Guide*. As it happened, his father-in-law returned to pick up an item he had forgot. Having discovered R. Hayim bending over the copy of the *Guide*, the father-in-law smiled: “I see that you are truly keen on studying the *Moreh*. Wait a week till I return home, and we shall study it together from beginning to end.” Locking up the book once again, the father-in-law went back on the road. A week later, they began studying the *Guide* cover to cover (Walden 1923, 6. Cf. Dienstag 1964, 325). To understand the *Guide*, you need the key – but the key is not sufficient: you need a teacher.

The study of the *Guide* was mostly restricted to the Hassidic elite. Sometimes we find Hassidic masters specially appointing sacred times to study the *Guide*. Thus, we learn that both R. Tzadok ha-Kohen of Lublin (1823-1900) and R. Hayim of Sanz used to study the *Guide* on no other day than Yom Kippur (Dienstag 1964, 325). Similarly, we have the testimony of an old Karliner Hassid who was versed in the rabbinic writings of Maimonides and approached his *rebbe*, asking whether it would be proper for him learn the *Guide*. “It is proper” – the Hassid was told – “but only on Shabbat, and only a page each time” (Shor 2021, 128).

R. Yoel Teitelbaum (1887-1970), the leader of the Satmar Hassidic community and the stern gatekeeper of twentieth-century anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodoxy, discussed Maimonides’ philosophical works very frequently in his masterly *Vayoel Moishe*. R. Yoilish addresses the *Guide* no less than five times in this work (Teitelbaum 1981, 12, 43, 111, 341, and 347), and his attitude toward the book is consistently reverential, expressing not even the slightest doubt about the authoritative rank of the *Guide* in his eyes.

Let me stress again that for many Hassidic masters the study of the *Guide* was a challenge (due to its daring assertions), and some described themselves as physically trembling before they opened the book. But they studied it nonetheless and considered it “one of the foundational books of Jewish thought” (Dienstag 1964, 308). Let me also stress that studying the *Guide* did not necessarily entail agreement with each view expressed in the book. In this sense, we can perhaps portray the attitude of many Hassidic masters toward the *Guide* as combining admiration, wonder, and criticism, an attitude which is quite proper toward a serious philosophical work.

The attitude of R. Nahman of Breslav (1772-1810) toward the *Guide* is hardly an exception in this context. Although R. Nahman strongly advised his followers to stick to the path of innocent faith and prohibited them from studying the *Guide*, there is no doubt that he himself studied the book closely. This not only is evident from various teachings and expressions that seem to betray the influence of the *Guide*, but it is also explicitly confirmed by his semi-official hagiography, *Hayey Muharan* (Sternharz 2005, 232 (§412)). In *Peulat ha-Tzadik*, a collection of teachings and stories about R. Nahman, he is quoted as saying that the limit of a person’s legitimate inquiry is relative to the rank and strength of the person’s intellect. Those with a more restricted intellect should stick to simple faith, while those with a stronger intellect (in which group he clearly included himself) are allowed to ascend as high as befits their rank (Shik 2004, 651-2 (§977)).

The Hassidic restriction of the study of the *Guide* to a small elite was hardly an innovation. Indeed, in his introduction to the *Guide,* Maimonides stresses that his aim is to aid a “single virtuous man” rather than “ten thousand ignoramuses” (Maimonides 1963, I 16). Thus, the common Hassidic attitude toward the *Guide* fit the intentions of its author quite closely.

There are two chapters in the *Guide* which attracted Hassidic masters the most. These are chapters 51 and 52 of part three of the *Guide*, which begin the climactic conclusion of the work. The chapters, known since medieval times under the title “The Regime of the Solitary [פרקי הנהגת המתבודד]” have strong Sufi undertones (see Harvey, 1991). These are chapters which combine extreme religious devotion with extreme rationalism. Two of the stunning rationalist assertions in these chapters are Maimonides’ sharp criticism of those who “frequently mention God” and claim to have faith in him, without having true intellectual apprehension of God (*Guide* III 51| Maimonides 1963, II 620), and the depiction of the *intellect*, at the beginning of chapter 52, in terms that were traditionally reserved only for God: “the great king who always accompanies man” and in the presence of which one should be utterly submissive (Maimonides 1963, II 52). Many of the medieval rabbinic readers of the *Guide* were highly critical of these chapters, especially due to the famous Palace Parable which opens chapter 51, in which Maimonides suggests that rabbinic scholars who have no knowledge of philosophy are inferior, in true divine worship, to the philosophers. Thus, Shem Tov ben Yoseph Ibn Shem Tov (?-1493), in his canonical *Guide* commentary, quotes “many of the sages who said that this chapter was not written by the Master, and if he did write it, it should be shelved, or better: burned” (Maimonides 1960, III 64).

Unlike the medieval “sages,” the Hassidic masters were highly enthusiastic about these chapters, and over the past two centuries there have been numerous Hassidic editions of the “Guiding Chapters for the Secluded Person,” frequently bound together with *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* (“the Holy Epistle”) by R. Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, another highly esteemed Hassidic text (for some of these editions, see Liberman 1980, 60-61).

R. Avraham Weinberg (1804-1883), the founder of the Slonim Hassidic school, thought so highly of these chapters that in his major book, *Yesod ha-Avoda* (Weibnerg 1892, 58-60), he includes a lengthy quote which contains the second half of *Guide* III 51, and the entirety of *Guide* III 52.

What did the Hassidim find so exciting in *Guide* III 51-2? Most probably it was the ideal of complete devotion to, and constant contemplation of, God, even when one is engaged, as one must be, in worldly affairs. But there was perhaps another, closely related, issue. In his 1792-1793 *Autobiography*, Salomon Maimon provides us with a lengthy and intriguing discussion of early Hassidism. Maimon’s portrayal of Hassidism is based on his own experience attending the court of the Maggid around 1770, when Maimon considered joining the movement (or, more probably, attempted to become one of the leaders of the movement). Another interesting feature of Maimon’s *Autobiography* is his decision to open the second part of the book with no less than ten chapters which systematically summarize the entire *Guide of the Perplexed*.

In the *Autobiography*’s summary of *Guide* III 51, Maimon stresses Maimonides’ assertion that true religious worship consists of “directing one’s thought toward God alone” and in “abstracting one’s thought from all things and directing them exclusively toward the Highest Being” (Maimon 2018, 187-8). Notably, Maimon’s portrayal of Hassidic worship, in the very same work, is highly reminiscent of his summary of *Guide* III 51:

The Hassidic worship consisted of a self-overcoming [*Entkörperung*]: *withdrawing their thoughts from all things except God*, even their own individual selves, and merging with God [*und in vereinigung mit Gott*]. This, they believed, produced a sort of self-suppression [*Selbstverläugnung*]. They would ascribe any actions they performed in that state to God, not to themselves.

Their worship was made up, then, of a kind of speculative prayer, requiring no particular time or set of formulations… during these services they practiced the aforementioned self-overcoming, *immersing themselves so profoundly in the idea of divine perfection that they lost touch with all else*, even their own bodies, to the point where, according to their own accounts, their bodies would be completely insensible (Maimon 2018, 91-2| Maimon 1792-3, I 221-2. Italics added).

The Hassidic notion of self-annihilation in God intrigued Maimon immensely, and he considered it the single most important principle of Hassidism (Maimon 2018, 97 and 107). The second part of this chapter will be dedicated to this notion, and its transformation and introduction into German Idealism by Maimon.

**§Part II: Acosmism**

At the time of his visit to the Maggid’s court in Mezhrich, Maimon was about seventeen years old. Many members of the Maggid’s circle were at roughly that age as well. This was a company of young and enthusiastic would-be scholars. Notably, Maimon describes the Hassidim as *Aufklärer* (Enlighteners) (Maimon 2018, 91), thereby marking a clear gulf between his perception of the Hassidim and that of the other *maskilim* (for whom the Hassidim would be clear-cut forces of darkness). Maimon himself had an ambivalent attitude toward the movement.

Maimon repeatedly stresses the centrality of the Hassidic principle of self-annihilation in God. Thus, at the beginning of his discussion of Hassidism, he writes:

[For the hassidim] true divine worship was a matter of performing devotional exercises with all one’s strength—and of self-annihilation before God. They maintained that *man achieves his highest perfection only by regarding himself as an organ of God, rather than as a Being that exists and acts for itself* (Maimon 2018, 86| Maimon 1792-3, I 208. Italics added).

Maimon fully concurred with the Hassidim’s view of themselves as merely organs of God, having no independent being of themselves. However, he added, they are not *entitled* to such a noble philosophical view:

They know nothing of natural science and have no knowledge of psychology, *yet are vain enough to regard themselves as an organ of the divinity—which, of course, they are*, but only to the degree they have achieved perfection. And so they indulge in the worst excesses, chalking them up to service to God. For them, every bizarre thought is a divine inspiration, every raw urge a divine call to action (2018, 87| Maimon 1792-3, I 210-11. Italics added).

To illustrate the impropriety of the Hassidim’s ambition to regard themselves as mere organs of God (despite the veracity of this claim), Maimon provides the following portrayal of their daily habits:

Because members of the sect went around idly smoking their pipes all day, some rather simple ones were asked what they thought about the whole time. They answered, “about God!” *This answer would have been satisfying if, in fact, the men in question had been striving ceaselessly to extend their knowledge of the divine perfections through an adequate knowledge of nature. But this couldn’t possibly have been the case, since they had limited knowledge of natural science.* And so, directing their actions toward an object that was fruitless (given their capacities) could only be unnatural. Moreover, they could only be justified in ascribing their actions to God if their actions followed from an accurate understanding of God. If their actions followed from an incomplete understanding, they would actually be engaging in excessive behavior performed in God’s name. Unfortunately, the latter has proven to be the case (2018, 92-3| Maimon 1792-3, I 223-4. Italics added).

For Maimon, the Hassidic notion of self-annihilation in God and of seeing oneself as a mere organ of the divinity, having no independent existence of oneself, was a deep philosophical discovery. As we shall shortly see, Maimon identified this view with Spinoza’s philosophy and its denial of the substantiality of the human mind. Still, Maimon protested: *they* cannot be Spinozists, since they have no proper scientific and philosophical knowledge.

Maimon was highly impressed by the ingenuity of Hassidic teachings, especially those which addressed the need to break the boundaries of the self in order to submerge in God. Here is one of these teachings, a homily on 2 Kings 3:15:

‘As the player (musician) played, the spirit of God came to him’ (2 Kings 3:15). The Hassidic masters interpret this verse as follows: As long as a person considers himself as an independent agent, he will not be able to receive the effect of the Holy Spirit. For that end, he must act as merely an instrument. Thus, the meaning of the passage is: When the player [המנגן]—that is, the servant of God—becomes identical to the instrument [כלי נגן], then God’s Spirit will come upon him (Maimon, 2018, 94-5| Maimon 1792-3, 228-9).

The condition for having God’s Spirit is the dissolution of the ego and its imaginary independence, so that a person recognizes that he is nothing but an organ of God. This teaching has both metaphysical and moral dimensions, and indeed immediately after the Player-Instrument homily just cited, Maimon quotes another teaching by a Hassidic emissary, proving the vanity of honor and the fostering of the ego:

“Now listen,” the stranger went on, “to the interpretation of this passage from the Mishna: ‘The honor of your neighbor should be as dear to you as your own.’ Our teachers explain the passage as follows: Clearly, no one enjoys honoring himself—that would be ridiculous. But it would be just as ridiculous to make too much of the honors that others confer upon us, since such honors do nothing to increase our inner worth. Thus, the passage says, in effect: The honor of your neighbor (the honor your neighbor shows you) should not be any dearer to you than your own (the honor you show yourself).” (Maimon 2018, 95| Maimon 1792-3, 229-30).

The Hassidic practice of estrangement toward honor captivated Maimon, and despite his criticism of Hassidic excess, he still considered their “principle of self-annihilation,” if understood correctly, to be “the true foundation of self-activity [*Grundlage zur Selbsttätigkeit*].” This principle, claimed Maimon, “clears the way to a free mode of activity… and is the only way moral and aesthetic feeling can be achieved and perfected” (Maimon 2018, 107| Maimon 1792-3, 258).

Over the past few decades, academic scholarship on Hassidism has been successful in documenting each and every Hassidic teaching cited by Maimon in the writings of the Maggid and his disciples (see Weiss (1947); Weiss (1956); Assaf (2006); and Melamed (2010), 80 n. 20). The Hassidic “principle of self-annihilation” or ביטול היש (literally: the Cancellation of Being) has been meticulously documented in the writings of the Maggid and his disciples by Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer (1980, 26-31). In these early Hassidic sources, ‘*Ayin* [אין]’ was an abbreviation for the old Kabbalistic notion of *Einsof* [אינסוף] (the infinite, the most sublime aspect of God in the Kabbalah), but it also carried the literal Hebrew meaning of *Ayin* as *nothingness*. Thus, within Hassidic thought, ‘*Ayin’* (nothingness) came to denote the most sublime aspect of God, and achieving the *madreiga* (rank) of nothingness became the exalted ultimate end of Hassidic spiritual practice.

Let me provide one illustration of these teachings which can be found in a collection of homiletic sayings ascribed to the Maggid. The following passage attempts to explain the intention one should have at the recitation of the *Shema* prayer (“Hear O Israel, God is our Lord, God is One”): “The intention of ‘One’ in the recitation of the *Shema* is that there is none but God whose glory fills the earth, and the chief intention is that a person should think of himself as nothingness and null [אין ואפס]… so that nothing exists in the world but God, and the chief intention in ‘One’ should be that God fills the earth, and there is nothing empty from Him, may He be blessed” (Segal (1865), 12b. My translation). Similar statements can be found occasionally in some earlier kabalistic texts, but in Hassidism, acosmism – as the view would be named by Maimon – became the movement’s call to arms and its very foundational idea.

The view of God as the only thing which truly exists also appears frequently in Maimon’s kabbalistic treatise *Ma’ase Livnat ha-Sapir* [Heb.: *The Work of a Sapphire Stone*], which is one of the sections of Maimon’s still unpublished manuscript, *Hesheq Shelomo* (Heb.: *Solomon’s Desire*). In one of these passages in *Livnat ha-Sapir*, Maimon argues that God is the cause of the world, according to all four Aristotelian causes (including the material cause, a view which Maimon would later identify with Spinozism. See Melamed (2004), 79-87). He then writes:

You have seen how God relates to the world according to the four aforementioned causes. From now on, we cannot imagine any existence other than His, may He be blessed [אי אפשר שנדמה שום מציאות זולתו], neither essential nor accidental existence. And this is the secret of the true unity, i.e., that only God, may He be blessed exists, and nothing but him has any existence at all [שהשם יתברך לבדו נמצא, ואין לזולתו מציאות כלל] (Maimon (unpublished), 139. My translation).

Most of *Hesheq Shelomo* was written before Maimon left Lithuania for Germany around 1777, and thus the passage above likely dates from a few years after Maimon’s visit to the court of the Maggid.

When Maimon finally arrived in Berlin and joined Moses Mendelsohn’s circle, he did not disguise his admiration of Spinoza’s philosophy. On one occasion, he tells us, he was struggling in his poor German to explain Spinoza’s system “and more specifically [the view] that objects are manifestations of a single substance” to one of the local *maskilim*. “My God,” his interlocutor interrupted, “You and I are different people, aren’t we? Don’t each of have *his own existence*?” (Maimon 2018, 195-6|Maimon 1792-3, II 162). To the astonishment of his friend, Maimon’s answer was pointedly negative.

In the first book of his *Autobiography*, Maimon addresses the accusation of atheism that was commonly aimed at Spinoza throughout the eighteenth century. It is on this occasion that Maimon coins the term ‘acosmism [*Akosmismus*]’ as a moniker for the assertion that nothing but God exists.

In Spinoza’s system unity is real; variety, though, is merely ideal. In the atheistic system, precisely the opposite is the case. Variety is real, grounded in the nature of the things themselves, while the unity one sees in the order and laws of nature is merely accidental, according to this system…

*It is hard to fathom how Spinoza’s system could have been made out to be atheistic, since the two systems are diametrically opposed. The atheist system denies the existence of God; Spinoza’s denies the existence of the* world*. Thus, it should really be called* acosmic.

Leibniz’s system occupies the middle ground between these two. Here all specific phenomena are drawn into an immediate relation with specific causes. But the different effects are conceived of as belonging together within a single system, while the cause of the connections among the variety of things is sought in a Being that is outside the system (Maimon 2018, 63-4| Maimon 1792-3, I 154-5. Italics added).

In the last paragraph, Maimon presents Leibniz’s philosophy as a certain unstable compromise between Spinozism and atheism (in other texts, Maimon would argue that when pressed for consistency the Leibnizian-Wolffian view must resort to that of Spinoza (Maimon 2018, 197| Maimon 1792-3, II 166. Cf. Melamed 2004). Doubtless, Maimon’s friends in Berlin who were among the German-Jewish Enlightenment bourgeoisie would not have been thrilled to find their hero Leibniz (and thus, by implication, Mendelssohn) described as *more atheist* than Spinoza.

Maimon’s reading of Spinoza as a radical religious thinker initiated a significant change in the perception of Spinoza, the philosopher whose name was synonymous with atheism throughout the eighteenth century. By 1795, Novalis would refer to Spinoza as a “God intoxicated man” (von Hardenberg 1960–1988, III 651, n. 562), and a quarter of a century later, Hegel would adopt from Maimon the view not only of Spinoza as an acosmist but also of Spinoza’s philosophy as diametrically opposed to atheism and of the Leibnizian-Wolffian popular view as a cheap compromise between the two poles. Compare the following passage from Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* with the last quote from Maimon’s *Autobiography*.

The relationship between God and the finite, to which we belong, may be represented in three different ways: firstly, only the finite exists, and in this way we alone exist, but God does not exist – this is atheism; the finite is here taken absolutely, and is accordingly the substantial. Or, in the second place, God alone exists; the finite has no reality, it is only phenomena, appearance. To say, in the third place, that God exists and we also exist is a false synthetic union, an amicable compromise. It is the popular view of the matter that the one has as much substantiality as the other; God is honored and supreme, but finite things also have Being to exactly the same extent. Reason cannot remain satisfied with this “also,” with indifference like this [*Die Vernunft kann bei solchem auch, solcher Gleichgültigkeit* *nicht stehenbleiben*] . . . [According to Spinoza] There is therefore no such thing as finite reality, it has no truth whatever; *according to Spinoza what is, is God, and God alone*. Therefore, the allegation of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of the truth; with him there is too much God [*Das Gegenteil von alledem ist wahr, was die behaupten, die ihm Atheismus Schuld* *geben; bei ihm ist zu viel Gott*] (Hegel 1995, III 280-1| Hegel 1986, 162-3. Italics added).

Hegel does not mention Maimon’s name here, but given the striking similarity between the two descriptions of the three philosophical positions (atheism, acosmism, and Leibnizianism) and the fact that Hegel had a copy of Maimon’s *Lebensgeschite* in his private library, it is hard to deny Maimon’s influence. Hegel’s view of Spinoza as an acosmist appears in several other central works of his as well (see, for example, Hegel 1991, 97 and 226 (§§ 50 and 151)). Fichte too would adopt the notion of acosmism from Maimon, ultimately attaching the title to his own system (Fichte 1964, I/6 54). Thus, the German idealistic concept of “acosmism” has its roots in Hasidism and its interpretation of the *Guide*.

Before concluding, let me add two final notes. First, if we consider Maimon’s (and the Hassidic) understanding of acosmism alongside the recently introduced distinction between existence and priority monism (Schaffer 2018), it would seem that both Maimonian and Hassidic acosmism would be satisfied even by the weaker position, i.e., the assertion that there is only one *fundamental* being (i.e., priority monism). So, in this sense, acosmism seems slightly less radical than one would initially think. Second, the view that nothing but God truly exists might be seen by some as a cause for despondence if not despair. Against this, we should stress that for both Spinoza and the Hassidic masters, acosmism prompted and justified the affirmation of life, the experience of joy, and the awareness of one’s thriving qua organ, or mode, of God.

**Conclusion**

In the first half of this chapter, we studied the reception of Maimonides’ *Guide* in the writings of several Hassidic masters (for more examples of Hassidic leaders who engaged in the study of the *Guide*, see Dienstag 1964, and Sagiv, forthcoming). One can, of course, claim that each of the Hassidic authors we have studied is an “exception,” but as these “exceptions” proliferate we may begin doubting the adequacy of the generalization that Hassidism avoided, or banned, the *Guide*. A more nuanced and more precise verdict would be that in Hassidism the study of the *Guide* was restricted to the elite (in a manner that was not inconsistent with Maimonides’ own intention). Undoubtedly, the Hassidic masters thought that “Greek philosophy [חכמה יוונית]” should be subordinated to the Torah. To the extent that the *Guide* is a work of mainstream Aristotelean philosophy, they feared the book; yet they studied and admired it nonetheless.

In the second half of this chapter, we studied the development of the notion of acosmism in early Hassidic thought and its implantation in German Idealism through the writings of Salomon Maimon. At this point, one may wonder what allowed the Hassidic masters to develop teachings, such as acosmism, which were far bolder and more original than anything one could find in the writings of proponents of the *Haskalah*, the contemporaneous Jewish Enlightenment movement? In a way, it seems that it is precisely the pious credentials, the strict adherence to the religious commandments, and the conservative appearance of Hassidism which allowed its leaders to experiment with rather bold religious and metaphysical ideas such as acosmism.

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1. For an important study of the propagation of the movement by the disciples of the Besht and the Maggid, see Rapoport-Albert. “Hasidism After 1772.” For a classical study of Hassidism and its relation to earlier stages of Kabbalistic thought, see Idel, *Hasidism*. I am deeply indebted to Zach Gatenberg and Warren Zev Harvey for their most helpful criticisms and comments on earlier versions of this chapter [↑](#endnote-ref-1)