Hasidism without Romanticism

Mendel Piekarz's Path in the Study of Hasidism

When I first read one of Mendel Piekarz's books (I believe it was *Biyemei tsemiḥat haḥasidut*), I imagined the author as a slight, stooped-over, grave-countenanced, elderly man, sitting in a tiny, dimly lit room, its tall walls lined floor to ceiling with yellowing first editions of Musar and Drush books, while, pencil in hand, he assiduously underlined key phrases. Many years later, I met Piekarz in person at his home in Jerusalem; it was our only meeting. I was surprised to find out how close my imaginary figment had been to reality. Almost every detail was accurate, except for his countenance: Piekarz was pleasant and soft-spoken; not grave at all.

Dr Piekarz was one of the greatest scholars of hasidism of the latter generation and, it should be added, one of its most unusual scholars.[1] He was born in 1922 in the town of Pułtusk in Poland (the province of Warsaw), studied at *ḥeder* and in yeshivas, and was an alumnus, among other institutions, of the radical Musar yeshiva of Novhardok. At a certain phase in his life, he abandoned religious observance and adopted a secular-Zionist-socialist world view. During the Second World War, he fled to the Soviet Union, and later returned to Poland. He immigrated to Palestine on the *Exodus* (1947), served in the army, and until 1954 was a member of Hashomer Hatsa'ir's kibbutz Gal On. In 1954, he took up the study of Yiddish and Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University. His outstanding teachers were Dov Sadan and Isaiah Tishby.

In 1958 Piekarz began to work at Yad Vashem, and in this capacity he published comprehensive bibliographies on the reflection of the Holocaust in the Hebrew-language press and in Hebrew literature. He simultaneously continued his university studies in the field that interested him above all—hasidism. His master's thesis was on Bratslav (Breslov) hasidism—a topic that continued to interest him through-out his life. His first book, *Ḥasidut braslav: perakim beḥayei meḥolelah uvikhetaveiha* ('Bratslav Hasidism: Chapters in the Life of its Creator and of its

[1] The biographical survey in this chapter is based mostly on the instructive essay by David Assaf, in his blog 'Oneg Shabat': <http://onegshabbat.blogspot.com/2011/08/blog-post_24.html>.

Writings'), was published by the Bialik Institute in 1972.[2] From this point onwards, he published many of his books with the same publishing house.

In the early 1970s Piekarz began to work on his doctoral dissertation, 'Theological Trends in the Drush and Musar Books in Eastern Europe during the Emergence and Early Spread of Hasidism'.[3] Simultaneously, he devoted himself to creating an edition of Joseph Weiss's personal collection of works on Bratslav hasidism.[4] At that time, Piekarz, who was already recognized as a scholar of this hasidic group, did not limit himself to standard editing, but also critically annotated and supplemented Weiss's articles. Some scholars were taken aback by this approach, but Piekarz received a warm and complimentary letter of approval from the supreme authority on matters concerning kabbalah and hasidism—Gershom Scholem.

Scholem continued to encourage Piekarz, even when the latter disagreed with him. In his doctoral thesis, Piekarz sought to prove that some of the ideas promoted by hasidism had already been developed in the Drush and Musar literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He was referring, *inter alia*, to the radical notions of *averah lishmah* (sin for Heaven's sake) and *averah tsorekh teshuvah* (a sin required for repenting). Scholem thought that these ideas had originated in Sabbatianism, while Piekarz criticized that view and argued that no link could be found between the persons who promoted these ideas at that time and the Sabbatian movement and its offshoots. Before completing his work, Piekarz published some of his findings in articles in the journal *Molad*.[5] Scholem, who received one of the articles that criticized his view, wrote a fascinating letter to Piekarz in which he defends his opinion but expresses deep appreciation for Piekarz and for his research, and wishes him success on his thesis. The thesis was indeed completed the following year (1977), and a year later it was published by the Bialik Institute under the title *Biyemei tsemiḥat haḥasidut* ('The Beginning of Hasidism').[6]

Piekarz worked at Yad Vashem until retirement. During all those years, although he was not affiliated with any university or research institute that enabled him to pursue his study of hasidism, he consistently published books and numerous articles on this topic. He also published critical reviews of others' research.

[2] M. Piekarz, *Ḥasidut braslav: perakim beḥayei meḥolelah uvikhetaveiha* (Jerusalem, 1972); id., *Ḥasidut braslav: perakim beḥayei meḥolelah, bikhetaveiha uvisefiḥeiha*, 2nd, expanded, edn. (Jerusalem, 1996).

[3] M. Piekarz, 'Megamot ra'ayoniyot besifrei derush umusar bemizraḥ eiropah biyemei tsemiḥat haḥasidut vereshit hitpashetutah', doctoral thesis (Hebrew Univ. of Jerusalem, 1977).

[4] J. Weiss, *Meḥkarim baḥasidut braslav*, ed. M. Piekarz (Jerusalem, 1975).

[5] M. Piekarz, 'Avot haḥasidut beḥibur shel darshan lita'i, 5541 [1781] (r. aharon ben r. yeshayah kregloshker)', *Molad*, NS, 4 (1971), 298–303; id., 'Radikalizm dati biyemei hitpashetut haḥasidut: torat "kaf remiyah" bekhitvei eli'ezer lipman mibrodi', *Molad*, NS, 6 (1975), 412–37; id., 'Hate'udah harishonah bidefus letorat haḥasidut: shenei ma'amarim me'et hamagid mimezerich bishenat 5538 [1778]', *Molad*, NS, 7, (1975), 183–6.

[6] M. Piekarz, *Biyemei tsemiḥat haḥasidut: megamot ra'ayoniyot besifrei derush umusar* (Jerusalem, 1978).

From the beginning of the 1980s Piekarz began to turn gradually to the study of later hasidism, and many view these researches as his most significant contribution. Focusing chiefly on the perception of the *tsadik* and of his authority, his research during this phase dealt mainly with the transformation that hasidism underwent from a radical movement with daring messages to a conservative and 'heteronomous' movement. The pinnacle of this research phase is his book *Ḥasidut polin* ('Polish Hasidism').[7] Even before publication, Piekarz provoked a sharp controversy because of an article he had written about Rabbi Aharon of Belz's escape from Budapest to the Land of Israel, and about the farewell sermon by his brother, Rabbi Mordecai (the father of the current Belzer Rebbe), in which, in the name of the rebbe, he promised peace and tranquillity to the Jews of Hungary.[8] Rabbi Nathan Urtner, who described the rebbe's flight and published the sermon in a censored version, without the 'problematic' passage, responded to Piekarz,[9] and Piekarz continued this discussion in his book.[10] Some time later, Esther Farbstein also addressed this issue, and noted that at the time of the rebbe's escape from Hungary, the Nazis had not yet invaded the country, and that the invasion, which occurred shortly after, came as an utter surprise. Therefore, she concludes, the sermon was censored not because of moral discomfiture at the actual act of escaping, but rather because it exposed the fact that the rebbe had erred.[11]

In his later years Piekarz suffered a stroke, from which he recovered. He passed away on 21 August 2011, at the age of 89.

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Piekarz wrote a series of important books on the history of hasidism. Although he was also a Holocaust scholar, he will no doubt be remembered as the scholar of a movement that he did not like, to say the least. He covered nearly the entire corpus of literature this movement produced, from its inception to the Holocaust, in almost every region in which it flourished (with the exception of Hungarian hasidism, which has been almost entirely ignored by scholarship). This fact should not be taken for granted: the founding generation of researchers of hasidism was interested almost exclusively in early hasidism—the first three generations, and until 1815 especially.[12] These scholars viewed this era of the movement as its time of ascendancy, innovation, and bold religious radicalism, while the following period

[7] M. Piekarz, *Ḥasidut polin bein shetei hamilḥamot uvigezerot 700–705 [1939–1945] ('hasho'ah')* (Jerusalem, 1990).

[8] M. Piekarz, 'Gezerot polin umenuḥah veshalvah liyehudei hungaryah biderashah ḥasidit belza'it beyanuar 1944 bebudapest', *Kivunim*, 11 (1981), 115–19.

[9] Rabbi N. Urtner, 'Al derashah ḥasidit belza'it', *Kivunim*, 14 (1982), 145–9.

[10] Piekarz, *Ḥasidut polin*, 424–34.

[11] E. Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust*, trans. D. Stern, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 2007), i. 67–153.

[12] D. Assaf, *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*, trans. D. Louvish (Stanford, Calif., 2002), 8–11.

was viewed as one of decline, atrophy, and decadence.[13] Therefore, they took for granted that the period of the movement's emergence was worthy of study, while the later period was uninteresting. If any interest was evinced in the established rebbes from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the focus was on those figures, such as Rabbi Mordecai Yosef of Izbica, who in the view of these scholars preserved the movement's essential vitality, its audacity and originality. By way of contrast, contemporary hasidic scholarship is more prudent in its approach: it continues to pay attention to the first stage, but also extends its gaze to the later generations. It does so with a less judgemental cast of mind, sometimes emphasizing the fact that it was during the movement's later period that it consolidated and achieved most of its public influence. Piekarz was a fierce supporter of the 'decadence thesis', and in this respect, he was essentially a member of the 'old school' of research. However, his view of later hasidism as decadent did not prevent him from studying it. On the contrary, he devoted long years of labour to its study.

Why did Piekarz choose to study this supposedly 'uninteresting' period? Characteristically, this scholar did not provide a personal account of his motives and theoretical concerns, and scarcely engaged in questions of an abstract nature. However, it seems one can easily conjecture what his response to this question might have been: on the contrary—it is precisely the processes of decline and decadence that are interesting; and, just as it is interesting to understand how leaders justify a revolutionary change, so it is interesting to see how they justify the conservative reaction which retreats from the earlier transformation. The leaders of later hasidism, in his view, were not interesting as theologians or spiritual figures, but rather as 'advocates who resent that name, and for the most part even wily spokesmen for their prejudices' (to use Nietzsche's phrase),[14] and as leaders who influenced their flocks of followers. And so he spent many years poring over hundreds of books by the hasidic leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, great and small, and with extraordinary assiduity collected countless sources that to his mind indicated the trends that were characteristic of later hasidism, and which gained in strength over time: 'a retreat to the heteronomous foundations of religion', 'vulgar tsadikism', opposition to innovation, and sanctification of Galut (exile).[15]

But Piekarz also had another veiled motive—an ideological one. He shared the conviction that the trends exemplified by the hasidic rebbes were responsible for the passive attitude and anti-Zionist positions of the pre-Holocaust era. The combination of a conservative outlook and hasidic optimism encouraged, even in the midst of the genocidal process, an attitude of acquiescence, which sought to find

[13] M. M. Buber, *Or haganuz* (Jerusalem, 1977), 35; R. Mahler, *Haḥasidut vehahaskalah* (Merhavia, 1961), 9; id., 'Maḥaloket sants-sadigurah: shetei shitot baḥasidut hashoka'at', in *Proceedings of the Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, ii (Jerusalem, 1969), 223–5; Piekarz, *Ḥasidut polin*, 50, 181.

[14] F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, 1989), pt. i, aphorism 5.

[15] Piekarz, *Ḥasidut polin*, 50, 121; M. Piekarz, *Hahanhagah haḥasidit: samkhut ve'emunat tsadikim be'aspaklaryat sifrutah shel haḥasidut* (Jerusalem, 1979), *passim*.

even in extreme suffering signs of light and good and the seeds of an imminent redemption. Piekarz, who did not experience the death camps himself but lost many of his loved ones in the Holocaust, wished to show how some of the failures of the hasidic leadership were rooted in the world view that they had cultivated. His great book (and to some, his most important work) *Ḥasidut polin* is oriented to such views. No reader of this work can escape the impression that its first chapters, which survey in great detail the ideological process that Polish hasidism underwent from the end of the nineteenth century until the Holocaust, are nothing but a rich body of evidence leading to the guilty verdict of the book's final chapters—a verdict which, so Piekarz believed, was shared even by some members of the hasidic movement itself.[16] Indeed, Piekarz continued the battle of secular Zionism against the ultra-Orthodox establishment, and promoted the old thesis that claimed that the Holocaust was proof of the accuracy of the Zionist prognosis and of the failure of exilic outlooks. Such claims, which are broached now and again even in contemporary discussions, are marred by factual imprecision and sometimes also by lack of intellectual integrity, but this issue cannot be elaborated here. The main point is that for Piekarz, such claims emerged from a profound and poignant sensibility that found expression in his unique style of scholarship.

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If later hasidism was perceived by Piekarz as 'decadent', we might expect him to have viewed early hasidism as a fresh breath of air, as did most of his predecessors who supported the decadence thesis. But this was not the case. Piekarz did indeed describe early hasidism with less of a judgemental tone, but with it too he refused to fall in love. His comprehensive study *Biyemei tsemiḥat haḥasidut* aimed to demonstrate that the early hasidic teachers had scarcely innovated a thing, and that most of their ideas were already widespread among *darshanim* and Musar thinkers, mostly forgotten and overlooked preachers who were active in eastern Europe on the eve of the Ba'al Shem Tov's appearance. He considers the Torah teachings of the early *tsadikim*—like those of the rebbes of later hasidism—as full of contradictions and hyperbole. Even in one of his most important and famous articles, that on the concept of *devekut*, Piekarz seeks to extinguish his readers' enthusiasm with a dose of cold water.[17] While Gershom Scholem argued that the concept of *devekut*—mystical communion with God—was the chief innovation of hasidism in the field of Jewish mysticism, Piekarz, with typical meticulousness, attempted to show that this was not the case: first, the concept had been developed long before the Besht, and second, even in early hasidism, this concept was replete with non-mystical

[16] In his opinion, that is the way one should understand the responses of R. Klonimus Kalman of Piaseczno, the Rebbetzin of Stropkov, and R. Isachar Shlomo Teichthal: Piekarz, *Ḥasidut polin*, 373–424.

[17] M. Piekarz, 'Haḥasidut—tenuah ḥevratit-datit bire'i hadevekut', *Da'at*, 25 (1990), 127–47; English version, M. Piekarz, 'Hasidism as a Socio-Religious Movement on the Evidence of *Devekut*', in A. Rapoport-Albert (ed.), *Hasidism Reappraised* (Oxford, 1996), 225–48.

connotations, alongside the mystical ones to which Scholem had drawn attention. Instead, Piekarz viewed the theory of the *tsadik* as hasidism's main innovation—the theory that in his opinion (shared also by a number of his predecessors) was also the root of the movement's decadence in later generations, especially after the succession of leadership began to follow a dynastic principle.

And yet, the heritability of leadership was not the only bane of hasidism. Bratslav hasidism, which did not follow a dynastic principle, underwent, according to Piekarz, its own processes of decadence. Indeed, Piekarz had written his master's thesis about this movement, and this was also the topic of his first book and of the collection of Joseph Weiss's research papers that he edited. However, while Weiss focused on the existential wrestling in Rabbi Nahman's thought and on his theology, Piekarz focused more on the question of Nahman's perception of himself and of his role as a *tsadik*, on the messianic aspects of this conception, as well as on the paths of concealment and transmission of Bratslav literature. Weiss evinced empathy for Nahman's entangled soul, while Piekarz was much more detached in his approach. He appreciated Weiss's engagement and identification, but cautioned against 'all sorts of fashionable writings' that pinched out 'fragments and shreds in order to stitch them together with trendy psychological and mystical threads'.[18]

Eventually Piekarz turned to investigate the later manifestations of the movement and of its messianic spirit, in his article about the new Bratslav in Israel of the 1960s.[19] This study was apparently his only research project that extended to post-Holocaust hasidism—and one of the first studies ever that turned its attention to this topic. Piekarz also regarded the later Bratslav movement, that of the 'Bratslavizers and Nahmanizers' ('hamitbraslavim vehamitnaḥmanim'),[20] as decadent in comparison with that of its founder (although he was not especially enamoured of the figure of Rabbi Nahman, either). It would seem, therefore, that the slide into decadence was not, in his view, intrinsically tied to the existence of a living, high-born *tsadik*.

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One of the outstanding forebears of the 'decadence thesis' was Martin Buber.[21] Piekarz, as has been noted, adopted this thesis, and similarly viewed the heritability of the office of rebbe as the mother of all evil, but his approach to hasidism was very different from that of Buber. Buber took a nostalgic view of early hasidism, as a movement with a profound religious message of dialogue with God, a message that he hoped to enliven in ways that were compatible with modern times. Piekarz had no such religious yearnings, and frequently regarded this kind of nostalgic view of

[18] Piekarz, *Ḥasidut braslav* (1996), 6.

[19] M. Piekarz, 'Misipurei ḥasidut braslav', *Da'at*, 8 (1982), 95–108; repr. as 'Hamifneh betoledoteiha shel hameshiḥiut haḥasidit habraslavit', in T. Baras (ed.), *Meshiḥiyut ve'eskhatologyah* (Jerusalem, 1984), 325–44. See also his *Ḥasidut braslav* (1996), 199–218.

[20] Piekarz, *Ḥasidut braslav* (1996), 199.

[21] Buber, *Or haganuz*, 35.

hasidism as romantic whimsy that utterly misconstrued and missed the true spirit of the movement.

In truth, the decadence thesis is itself no less at fault for its romantic valorization of whatever is prior, young, rebellious, and daring. The premise that anyone who abandons the young spirit of daring rebellion and turns to the path of institutionalization or to a reactive traditionalism is necessarily 'decadent' and 'in decline' is in itself a romantic notion, at least in a certain respect. This romantic outlook ignores the fact that great religious movements are not designed only to be a platform for youthful adventures of innovative youngsters, or to inflame the imagination of modern intellectuals who glorify antinomian boldness. Such movements are meant chiefly to provide a responsible and supportive framework for the lives of individuals and communities, and in the present case—also to serve as a framework for the preservation of traditional values, in the face of challenges to tradition. The romantic expects a religious movement to be all *Sturm und Drang*, devotion and enthusiasm, and is disillusioned when these elements are on the wane. Therefore, by adopting the decadence thesis, Piekarz betrays the same expectation and disappointment, proving that he too was affected by the same romantic spirit that he castigated.

The decadence thesis is coloured, undoubtedly, by tendentious value judgements. What early students of hasidism, including Piekarz, viewed as 'decadence', could by the same token have been regarded *sine ira* as processes of routinization of charisma, in Max Weber's terms.[22] According to Weber and his followers, such processes are typical of innovative religious movements. Weber himself remarked upon the instability of charismatic authority[23] and the fact that it is appropriate mostly for the revolutionary phases of religious movements.[24] He even noted the connection between heritability and institutionalization, remarking that

> As soon as charismatic domination loses its personal foundation and the acutely emotional faith which distinguishes it from the traditional mold of everyday life, its alliance with tradition is the most obvious and often the only alternative . . . In such an alliance, the essence of charisma appears to be definitely abandoned, and this is indeed true insofar as its eminently revolutionary character is concerned . . . In this function, which is alien to its essence, charisma becomes a part of everyday life.[25]

[22] M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich, trans. E. Fischoff et al., 2 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978), i. 246–54, ii. 1121–3; R. Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York, 1962), 301–7. On the possibility of acquiring a type of impersonal 'family charisma', see ibid. 308–14. For the application of this theory to hasidism, see the illuminating article by S. Sharot, 'Hasidism and the Routinization of Charisma', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 19/4 (1980), 325–36; for an online version of the same, see <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1386127?seq=9>. [23] Weber, *Economy and Society*, ii. 1114. [24] Ibid. 1115–17.

[25] Ibid. 1122–3. Still, even Weber, who was so aware of the deterministic necessity of this process, appears to bemoan it: 'Every charisma is on the road from a turbulently emotional life that knows no economic rationality to a slow death by the suffocation under the weight of material interests: every hour of its existence brings it nearer to this end': ibid. 1120.

One may examine the processes of institutionalization of a movement with the expectation that it may stay for ever young, rebellious, and bold, and even express feelings of rage or disappointment when it fails to meet these expectations, but such processes may also be viewed in a less judgemental manner, similar to the way that one observes the maturation of a young person. Children are more vivacious and charming than adults, but part of their charm is due to the fact that a young person is burdened with a lesser degree of responsibility. Therefore, an adult who continues to behave like a child will no longer be regarded as delightful, but rather as infantile. Such too is the fate of religious and other types of movements which are characterized by high religious tension. The process of institutionalization of such movements is none other than their process of maturation. Institutionalization of this kind can take on different forms, and in hasidism, the heritability of the office of rebbe is a case in point. There is no doubt that the dynastic principle entailed not a few unsavoury consequences, but such outcomes can be found at the margins of any strong institutionalized movement, and they do not appear to be more widespread in hasidism than elsewhere. On the contrary, it seems as though even in its later period the movement was populated by not a few figures who were far removed from any such corruption, who led deeply religious lives, and who carried the burden of public office with devotion and perseverance. But there is a more important point to be made. Institutionalization is an outcome not only of fatigue and feebleness, but also of changing needs: a movement composed chiefly of the young and newly mobilized is unlike a movement that must look after community and educational institutions and care for the livelihoods of its members, while also defending itself against perils from the outside. A movement of the first kind may indulge in leaders whose chief virtue is their capacity for ecstatic prayer and the spiritual ascent to higher worlds; a movement of the second type requires a leadership which is much more in touch with down-to-earth realities, despite the price and alongside the advantages of such earthliness. Therefore, the expectation that hasidism would for ever persevere in its childhood phase and never grow up is not only unrealistic, but also morally indefensible.

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Piekarz was a harsh critic not only of hasidism and of its leadership, but also of its scholars. He did not mince words when it came to critiquing many of his colleagues, and from time to time he wrote reviews of their books in Israeli daily newspapers. A large number of these reviews attacked what he perceived as the romanticizing of hasidism. He viewed Arthur Green's book *Tormented Master* as an attempt to portray Rabbi Nahman as a religious existentialist and thus construct him as a 'Tzaddik for the modern man'—a phrase that Green himself had used in his book,[26] and which Piekarz viewed as a key to understanding his overall approach.[27]

[26] A. Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (Woodstock, Vt., 1992), 330.

[27] Piekarz, *Ḥasidut braslav* (1996), 219–46.

The pioneering book by David Assaf on Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin, which many hasidim viewed as too critical of its subject, Piekarz criticized for being too favourable towards him, mainly because Assaf attempted to describe the rebbe's ostentatious 'regal way' not only as a personal orientation, but also as a 'path of worship', while Piekarz viewed it only as blatant megalomania and unrestrained corruption.[28]

Piekarz made minimal use of his colleagues' research. His books come across as bundles of citations and references—almost all from primary literary sources, either hasidic or darshanic. Academic scholarship is only scarcely cited, even where it might have supported Piekarz's conclusions; literature in languages other than Hebrew or Yiddish is altogether absent. Testimonies and memoirs, whose reliability he doubted,[29] were also hardly ever referenced. There is also scant discussion in his writing of the historical developments that surrounded the cited texts. More abstract analytical or theoretical models are similarly non-existent. He draws all of his generalizations or essential conclusions entirely from his own reflection on the material, by means of a spare and minimalist analysis, which often is dwarfed by the sheer mass of sources and minutiae. This manner of writing is far removed from current academic convention. A student submitting a seminar paper in such a style —not to mention a master's or doctoral thesis—would be severely condemned. But this was not the case with Piekarz. Although everyone recognized these shortcomings of his writing, the outstanding value of the research was immediately acknowledged, and his books were mostly published by the distinguished Bialik Institute press. This was not because of charity or leniency, but rather owing to the recognition that the contribution of these books was so great that they could not be passed over, despite faults of one nature or another. Moreover, it was precisely Piekarz's focused approach that endowed his work such great persuasive power, as if he were saying to the reader: such and such is my argument; here are the sources in support of it; *quod erat demonstrandum*.

All of the above characteristics made Piekarz an exceptional figure in the academic scene, to which he never completely belonged. A regular position in an academic institution was never conferred on him (he made a living as a researcher at Yad Vashem), and he also scarcely lectured at academic conferences. When he did attend a conference, he usually sat with the crowd as an auditor, and is often remembered for his vocal and acerbic remarks to the speaker. Even though a great many professors honoured him and made extensive use of his books, he himself was never awarded the title of professor, and actually did not pursue any academic career. It is hard to say whether he was pained by this, but it is clear that he was

[28] M. Piekarz, 'Lu ratsiti, yakholti letsavot la'ets la'avor mimekomo lemakom aḥer', *Haaretz Book Review*, 16 Jan. 1998 (review of Assaf's *Derekh malkhut*, the original Hebrew version of *The Regal Way*).

[29] M. Piekarz, 'Al sifrut ha'edut kemakor histori ligezerot "hapitron hasofi"', *Kivunim*, 20 (1983), 129–57.

unwilling to make any concessions just to become a part of that world. 'He was a Novhardoker,' Elhanan Reiner said to me once in conversation: 'utterly loyal to his own truth, showing no partiality to anyone, and truly disdainful of titles and honours.' There is much truth in this characterization, especially in light of the fact that in his youth Piekarz was indeed a student at the radical Musar yeshiva of Novhardok. He preserved these traits, indicative of the spirit of the Musar movement, despite having distanced himself from its religious universe.

Indeed, if at first I had imagined Piekarz as a serious person, it was chiefly because his writing was all gravity. He never took pity on his readers. His books were meant not to entertain, but to teach, and to advance science. If one wishes to learn, one must deign to delve into the minute details. The detail-oriented nature of his writing frequently leaves the reader with the sense that the forest cannot be seen for the trees. And yet, a reader who manages to complete one of Piekarz's books will find an uncommon satisfaction in having done so, as one who has completed an arduous journey, and says: it was hard, but I learned something. The gravitas of his oeuvre is first and foremost a reflection of the seriousness with which he treated the requirement to prove his argument. This too, perhaps, was an expression of the stringent ethos of a *musarnik*.

Piekarz bequeathed to the next generation a body of research marked with stylistic shortcomings and a minimum of scholarly dialogue, and sometimes coloured by ideological and emotional biases, but always replete with extraordinary, innovative knowledge (in terms of both content and research orientation) and characterized by impressive thoroughness. These positive attributes not only compensated for the shortcomings but turned them into a challenging stimulus—the challenge of ploughing through the books, despite their density, the challenge of understanding the argument, not only in its own terms, but vis-à-vis other scholarly literature, and the challenge of identifying the ideological 'bent' of the author, and neutralizing it. In this sense, Piekarz rendered himself not only as a teacher who transmits content to his students and readers, but also as a teacher who hones and exercises their critical and scholarly faculties. Beyond doubt, this scholarly oeuvre has established a place of honour for its author in the increasingly growing and flourishing body of hasidism scholarship.

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Translated from the Hebrew by Ilana Goldberg