

## *The Baal Shem Tov's Expanded View of Hashgahah Pratit and Its Impact on the Minds and Hearts of the Jewish People<sup>1</sup>*

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### Introduction

Virtually all of contemporary Orthodox Jewry believes that *hashgahah pratit* (Divine Providence) affects the entirety of Creation and every occurrence including the most minor details, and this belief is manifest in their daily lives. Yet Orthodox Jews are generally not aware that this doctrine, so common today, only became dominant starting in the eighteenth century, nor are they familiar with its rather complex history since that time. We will argue that prior to the advent of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (c. 1700–1760) and the proliferation of the Ḥasidic movement, *hashgahah pratit* was not nearly as integral a part of Jewish thought as it is today. Based on Talmudic sources, the Baal Shem Tov expanded the definition of *hashgahah pratit* to include God's providence over every minor detail of Creation and every minor happening. This new interpretation and the new emphasis on *hashgahah pratit* in general spread rapidly with the growth of Ḥasidism starting in the mid-eighteenth century, particularly through its emphasis in Ḥasidic stories. Large parts of Eastern European Jewry, particularly Ḥasidim, began to experience *hashgahah pratit* as a daily presence. Beginning in the 1870s, a countercurrent to traditional ideals began to seep into the consciousness of traditional Jewry. The ideas of modernity, including a historical consciousness, were becoming the norm even

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among Orthodox Jewry, ultimately causing the emotional intensity of the belief in *hashgahah pratit* to diminish—but not the intellectual belief. Interestingly, since the proliferation of the Hareidi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) press in the early 1980s and as a result of Hasidic influences, the intellectual belief in the Baal Shem Tov's interpretation of *hashgahah pratit* has been growing exponentially, although the intense feeling of *hashgahah pratit* as a daily presence is no longer there due to the influence of modernity. We will look at translations of the Midrashic literature and the Jewish autobiographical genre as examples that illustrate these changes. We will also discuss an outstanding example of *hashgahah pratit* in the life of someone who lived his youth in the window of time after the rise of Hasidism but before the dawn of modernity, yet the advent of modernity did not affect his consciousness. We are referring to Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn (1848–1930), a Hasidic *shobet* who wrote an autobiography to point out the *hashgahah pratit* in his life as a proof of God's existence.<sup>2</sup> Through this discussion, we hope to make readers more familiar with the history of this important facet of Orthodox Jewish life, as well as to draw attention to the work of the Baal Shem Tov and his followers in disseminating it.

### **The Baal Shem Tov's Expanded Interpretation of *Hashgahah Pratit***

The classic early Jewish philosophers, writing from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, discuss *hashgahah pratit* (Divine Providence) and offer divergent views as to its exact nature. Although a comprehensive discussion of the subject would overstep the bounds of this article, *hashgahah pratit* can be summarized as God's knowing, engaging in, and supervising every aspect of human life. In traditional Judaism, *hashgahah pratit* is a benevolent providence, for God is considered to be the essence of goodness; He desires to do good and no evil emanates from Him. The belief in *hashgahah pratit* is by definition more specific than the general belief that God directs the world through the laws of nature. Everything He does is ultimately good, and humankind is rewarded or punished for their actions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn, *Mayn Lebens-Geshikhte: Farshidenartige Pasirung'n un Epizod'n fun a Yosem* (Petah-Tikvah: Ha-Teḥiyah, 1928–1929).

<sup>3</sup> The term *hashgahah pratit* used here differs from its use by a number of historians, who use it as one of the defining characteristics of Hareidi (AKA ultra-Orthodox) historiography. These historians use this term merely when referring to an allusion of the influence of a higher power on the Jewish People in Hareidi works

*Hashgahah pratit* is no mere philosophical issue. Its effect on those who believe in it can be tangible. A deeply ingrained belief in *hashgahah pratit* enables one to live more in the moment; it allows no room for brooding about the past or being anxious about the future, for these are realms over which man has no control. For the believer in this concept, there is no serendipity, happenstance, and accidental occurrences, and nothing occurs by mistake because all is Divinely orchestrated.

The classical Jewish philosophers maintain that God manifests His providence in two distinct ways: 1) a general *hashgahah pratit* through which God cares for animals, plants, and inanimate objects; and 2) a specific *hashgahah pratit* through which God knowingly engages in supervising every aspect of human life. These philosophers posit that *hashgahah pratit* over animals and plants is non-specific; God concerns Himself, so to speak, merely with individual species of animals and plants but not with each member of the species. God's involvement in matters relating to human beings is specific to each and every individual, or, according to some opinions, only to those leading a pious intellectual life.<sup>4</sup> The upshot of this philosophy is that it allows for a random element in nature, while only humankind receives individual Divine care.

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov was a deeply spiritual leader who is said to have breathed new life into the Jewish nation and renewed Jewish fervor in the observance of Judaism. This increased fervor was the result of the Baal Shem Tov's emphasis on sincere prayer, serving God with joy, an unlimited love of all Jews, and an absolute and implicit belief in *hashgahah pratit*. His interpretation of *hashgahah pratit*, however, differs from the interpretation of the classical Jewish philosophers and is directly related to the fundamentals of Hasidism in thought and in practice. Although the Baal Shem Tov's teachings were met with strong opposition from much of the traditional Jewish world, the effects of his teachings transformed traditional Judaism in Eastern and Central Europe, and his influence continues to be felt today.

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of history. See, for example, Nahum Karlinsky, "The Dawn of Hasidic-Haredi Historiography," *Modern Judaism*, 27(1) (2007): 20–46; Kimmy Caplan, "Innovating the Past: The Emerging Sphere of the 'Torah-True Historian' in America," *Studies in Contemporary Judaism*, 21 (2005): 270–287.

<sup>4</sup> Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:17–18), limits specific *hashgahah pratit* to human beings and believes that it is only extended to individuals who lead intellectual and pious lives. Gersonides, in his *Wars of the Lord* (Part IV), discusses the question at length and arrives at a similar conclusion.

The Baal Shem Tov extended specific *hashgahah pratit* to every occurrence and to all of creation; we shall refer to this interpretation as absolute *hashgahah pratit*.<sup>5</sup> One of the foremost students of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Pinḥas Shapiro of Korets, taught that a person ought to believe that even a strand of straw lying on the ground is there by Heavenly decree and even its exact orientation on the ground is by *hashgahah pratit*.<sup>6</sup> A second-generation disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (1733–1788), writes in *Pri ha-Aretz* (Torah portion *Bo*) that it is difficult for the wicked to believe in a *hashgahah pratit* where no one’s finger jams, no blade of grass is uprooted, and no rock is thrown about until the designated time and place for that event has arrived, as it states, “The place where the tree rests, there it will be.”<sup>7</sup>

The doctrine of absolute *hashgahah pratit* thus replaced the earlier notion of general Divine Providence with a vision of a universe controlled by God in every detail. Louis Jacobs, a noted theologian, writes: “Because God’s presence is all-pervasive, Ḥasidim refuse to accept Maimonides’ view that there is only *hashgahah pratit* for species.”<sup>8</sup> According to the Baal Shem Tov, not only is the fate of each species Divinely ordained, but each and every detail in all species and everything in the natural world occurs with the direct knowledge and providence of God. Every aspect of life is orchestrated by God for an immediate purpose. A strong belief in *hashgahah pratit* seems to be the natural result of one of the basic ideas of Ḥasidism, for Ḥasidic teachings elaborate the myriad ways in which this world is intrinsically connected to a higher spiritual realm.<sup>9</sup> Hence, a Ḥasid

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<sup>5</sup> The terminologies of “absolute” and “partial” *hashgahah pratit* are borrowed from Gross, *The Paths of Providence: Does God Control Everything?* (Jerusalem: Targum Press, 2015), pp. 250–280. In Orthodox Jewish circles, absolute *hashgahah pratit* is usually referred to as individual or specific *hashgahah pratit*—or simply as *hashgahah pratit*.

According to the Baal Shem Tov, every detail in nature concerning every species occurs with God’s direct knowledge and providence. For a discussion of how the belief in *hashgahah pratit* does not contradict man’s ability to choose freely, see Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Likutei Siḥot, helek 5* (Brooklyn, Kehot Publication Society, 1972), pp. 63–67.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Pinḥas Shapiro, *Imre Pinḥas: ha-Shalem* (Ramat Gan: Mishor, 1988), p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> Lamentations 11:3.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Their Heads in Heaven: Unfamiliar Aspects of Ḥasidism* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Noson Gurary, *Chasidim: Its Development, Theology and Practice* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1997), pp. 93–122.

tends to see all aspects of the physical, mundane world as a reflection of a higher realm, giving any and every event meaning and purpose.<sup>10</sup> A consciousness centered on *hashgahah pratit* constitutes a distinctive part of the Hasidic experience. As Louis Jacobs has noted:

As a corollary of Hasidic pantheism (more correctly, panentheism) is the understanding in its most extreme form of the doctrine of divine providence. The medieval thinkers limited special providence to the human species and allowed only general providence so far as the rest of creation is concerned. It is purely by chance that this spider catches that fly, that this ox survives, the other dies. For the Hasidim there is nothing random in a universe that is God's "garment." No stone lies where it does, no leaf falls from the tree, unless it has been so arranged by divine wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

Avraham Yaakov Finkel concurs: "A chasid recognizes Hashgahah (Divine Providence) in everything that happens. Nothing occurs by chance; the most trivial incident is predetermined from Above."<sup>12</sup>

According to Rabbi Nochum Grunwald, a noted Hasidic scholar, the Hasidic emphasis on *hashgahah pratit* does not emerge as much in formal exposition or theology as it does in Hasidic storytelling.<sup>13</sup> Storytelling is a characteristic feature of Hasidim; the Baal Shem Tov himself taught that relating tales of *tzaddikim* (righteous Jews) is as praiseworthy as meditating on the mysteries of the Divine Chariot.<sup>14</sup> Although Hasidic stories often have a miraculous element to them, their underlying motif is that God

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the Baal Shem Tov's expanded view of *hashgahah pratit*, see *Led by God's Hand: The Baal Shem Tov's Interpretation of the Concept of Hashgachah Peratis, Based on the Works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem M. Schneerson*, trans. by Elyahu Touger (Brooklyn: Sichos in English, 1998); Gurary, Chasidim, pp. 139–157; Rabbi Nochum Grunwald, "Hashgahah pratit al-pi shitat ha-Baal Shem Tov," *Mayanotekha*, No. 23, Kislev 5710 (November–December 2009) (<http://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/12930> accessed February 27, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Louis Jacobs, "Hasidism, basic ideas of," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, v. 7 (1972), p. 1404.

<sup>12</sup> Avraham Yaakov Finkel, *Contemporary Sages: The Great Chasidic Masters of the Twentieth Century* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994), p. xxii.

<sup>13</sup> Private correspondence with Rabbi Nochum Grunwald, who is the editor-in-chief of *Heikhal ha-Besht*, an in-depth journal of Hasidic thought and scholarship.

<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Elyahu Hayim Carlebach, ed., *Shinhei ha-Baal Shem Tov* (Jerusalem: Mekhon Zekher Naftali, 1990), p. 233. The Divine Chariot is a part of visions described in the Book of Ezekiel (1:1–28), and many deep Kabbalistic concepts are based on it. See Iser Kliger, *Tiyul Ba-parde's be-Perek Ein Dorshin* (Israel, 1989), pp. 309–325. [Otzar HaHochma Online, <https://tablet.otzar.org>—accessed February 27, 2023].

controls the world in all its detail. Stories of *hashgahah pratit* remind the believer that the particulars of life are orchestrated from On High and serve to strengthen a person's faith and religious resolve. As Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson (1902–1994), the future Lubavitcher Rebbe, wrote in 1932: “[Ḥasidic stories] elevate the soul and create a desire to rise, if even slightly, above the mundane. These stories have the power to transform even the simplest of souls and elevate individuals who are in a state of spiritual decline.”<sup>15</sup>

In Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn's autobiography (see more below), he includes the following Ḥasidic story, a prime example of how *hashgahah pratit* is emphasized in Ḥasidic stories. Shortly before leaving Tsarist Russia in 1913, Goldenshteyn attempted to raise funds to build a new *mikveh* in his town in the Crimea from a wealthy, cantankerous Jew named Kizilshteyn, who had lived for decades as an apostate to Christianity. Kizilshteyn had Goldenshteyn chased out of his home, but Goldenshteyn later returned and was allowed entry. While there, Goldenshteyn explained to Kizilshteyn that he could not be angry with him for his inhospitality because it happened by *hashgahah pratit*, and he told the following Ḥasidic story to illustrate his point. Shortly before the Baal Shem Tov's death, he blessed one of his disciples, whom other versions of this story call Ya'akov, that after his death he should support himself by traveling around telling stories he knew about the Baal Shem Tov. After two or three years of eking out a living in this manner, Ya'akov heard that a wealthy Jew who lived far away paid handsomely for every story he was told about the Baal Shem Tov. Upon finally arriving at the wealthy man's home, he was unable to recall even one story during his entire three-week stay. As he was leaving in shame, he suddenly remembered a single story and ran back to tell him that once the Baal Shem Tov and some of his disciples, including Ya'akov, traveled to a distant town where a cardinal was planning to deliver an anti-Semitic sermon in public. The Jews in town had barricaded themselves inside their homes, fearful that the sermon would incite the masses to murder them all. But the Baal Shem Tov was unafraid and sent Ya'akov to tell the cardinal to come see him at once. Though the cardinal at first sent him away, he acceded the second time and followed Ya'akov to see the Baal Shem Tov. The two met in private for a short while and then each went his own way. With that, Ya'akov ended his story, for that was all that he remembered. Overjoyed, the wealthy Jew said that he had been waiting to hear that very story, since it was his own story, and offered to support Ya'akov and his family forever.

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<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Reshimot: Ḥoveret 138* (Brooklyn: Lahak Hanochos, Inc., 1994), p. 11.

The host explained that he was born and raised a Jew in Poland, but he set out on a bad course in life and had apostatized. He became a rabid anti-Semite and rose through the ranks of the Church, becoming a cardinal. One night his grandfather along with his teacher the Baal Shem Tov appeared to him in a dream and demanded that he return to Judaism. He was reluctant to do so, but they appeared once again with the same demand, to which he agreed. Shortly afterwards, he was surprised by the arrival of the Baal Shem in his city. At their meeting, the Baal Shem Tov gave him instructions for carrying out his repentance. When he asked how he would know when his repentance had been accepted, the Baal Shem Tov replied, "When someone tells you your own story." Upon seeing that Ya'akov could not remember a single story, the wealthy man knew that his repentance was not yet complete and did much soul searching. Once he finally heard Ya'akov relate the story of his meeting with the Baal Shem Tov, he knew that God had truly accepted his repentance.<sup>16</sup> The remarkable series of events in the story indicate that each and every aspect was Divinely planned, which in turn reminds us that God perfectly orchestrates every aspect of Creation. Even Goldenshteyn's relating this story to Kizilshteyn was by *hashgahah pratit*, since Kizilshteyn interjected that he too had initially been motivated to return to Judaism because of a dream.

### **The Dissemination of the Baal Shem Tov's Interpretation of *Hashgahah Pratit***

Contemporary Hasidim believe, apparently with justification, that the Baal Shem Tov's view of *hashgahah pratit* has been accepted by all of traditional Jewry. Though this belief is generally circulated orally, and rarely makes its way to print, in *Imrot Teborot* it states that Rabbi Chai Yitzchok Twersky, the Rachmastrivker Rebbe in Boro Park, heard from his father-in-law, Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef Twersky (1899–1969), the previous Skverer Rebbe, that the Baal Shem Tov's interpretation of *hashgahah pratit* has been accepted by all of Orthodox Jewry and that this is not open to dispute.<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Baal Shem Tov's teachings were already recognized as crucial, impacting multiple aspects of Jewish experience. In his seminal work, *Tanya* (3:25), first published in 1796, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi (1745–1812), distinguished disciple of Rabbi Dov-Ber of Mezritsh, the successor of the Baal Shem Tov, connects two teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. He explains that the Baal Shem

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<sup>16</sup> Goldenshteyn, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, ch. 29.

<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Chai Yitzchok Twersky, *Imrot Teborot: Shemot* (Brooklyn, 2013), p. 121.

Tov's teaching regarding *hashgahah pratit* and his teaching regarding continuous creation (the idea that Creation needs the constant input of the Creator to exist) are two sides of the same coin. Significantly, these are the only two teachings of the Baal Shem Tov in *Tanya* that are explicitly cited in his name.<sup>18</sup> Though the concept of continuous creation was first mentioned in *Midrash Tebillim*,<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Shneur Zalman cites it in the name of the Baal Shem Tov since this concept was expounded and popularized by him.<sup>20</sup>

In 1800, when Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi was falsely accused by the opponents of Hasidism of subversive ideas and was arrested by order of the Prosecutor General of Russia, he was required to respond to nineteen accusations leveled against himself and the Hasidic movement, including the charge that certain beliefs and opinions of the Baal Shem Tov contradicted traditional Judaism. Rabbi Shneur Zalman prefaces his written defense to charges three and four with an explanation of the Baal Shem Tov's interpretation of *hashgahah pratit*, linking it to the concept of G-d's continuous creation.<sup>21</sup> Both Gurary and Gross observe that the concept of continuous creation is conceptually identical with the belief in absolute *hashgahah pratit*.<sup>22</sup> This demonstrates how central these ideas had become in the belief system of the Hasidim.

According to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin (1749–1821), the most influential disciple of the *Gaon* of Vilna and the author of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, which is considered to be the “theoretical foundation of the Lithuanian Yeshivah movement,” Hasidism influenced “most of the Jewish world.”<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Gross comments that one direct outcome of Rabbi Hayyim's philosophical teachings is that the belief in *hashgahah pratit* was

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<sup>18</sup> For further explanation on the concept of continuous creation, see *Shiurim be-sefer ha-Tanya* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1994), pp. 1715–1716.

<sup>19</sup> *Midrash Tebillim* (also known as *Sokher Tor*) on Psalms 119:36.

<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Yoel Kahan, *Sha'ar ha-Yizud ve-ha-Emunah im Perush, Beur ha-Peshat ve-Iyunim, perek 1–6* (Jerusalem: Torat Habad li-vene ha-yeshivot, 2011), pp. 60–65.

<sup>21</sup> Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, *Iggerot Kodesh* (Brooklyn: Otzar HaChassidim, 2012), pp. 272–273.

<sup>22</sup> See Gurary, *Chasidism*, pp. 140–141; Gross, *The Paths of Providence*, p. 97.

<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his Contemporaries* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1989), p. 73. See also p. 94 fn. 66 on the section of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (4:2), where this quotation appears.



greatly expanded to include every aspect of the world, which as we have shown was one of the fundamental teachings of the Baal Shem Tov.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Gross, *The Paths of Providence*, p. 241. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin did not follow the Gaon of Vilna's anti-Hasidic policies. According to a reliable Hasidic source, Rabbi Hayyim hosted traveling Hasidim in his home, including outstanding disciples of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, one of the early proponents of Hasidic thought (see below for details) and often asked them to repeat his Hasidic teachings, which pleased him greatly. Rabbi Hayyim's only son Yitzhak had all of the works of the Rebbes of Chabad and included many ideas taken from them in his sermons to the students of the yeshivah in Volozhin. Once, after hearing his son deliver one of these sermons, Rabbi Hayyim expressed his great pleasure and commented that his son was a great preacher (Hayyim Meir Heilman, *Beit Rebbi* [Berdichev: H.Y. Sheftil, 1902], v. 1, p. 10).

Even were one to disregard these Hasidic traditions, the influence of Hasidism is apparent in Rabbi Hayyim's work, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (published posthumously in 1824 in Vilna). Rabbi Nochum Grunwald ["Nefesh be-Ruah Hasidut: Hashpa'ot Hasidiyut be-Sifrei 'Nefesh ha-Hayyim' ve-'Ruah Hayyim,'" *Heikhal ha-Besht* 5 (2004): 25-47] notes that even a casual perusal of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* shows that it was written as a response to the Hasidic movement; Rabbi Hayyim cites some ideas and sections from Hasidic works in order to reject them forcefully. Nonetheless, other sections with which he agrees are copied almost verbatim, though without citing their sources; the *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* even uses some of the exact language used by Rabbi Shneur Zalman in the *Tanya*, language not used in any works pre-dating the *Tanya*. Rabbi Grunwald also demonstrates that one of the concepts in *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* taken from the *Tanya* was the Baal Shem Tov's widely disseminated teaching of God's continuous creation of the world. Yehoshua Mondshine ["Od al Rashmehem shel Sifre Hasidut be-Shmuotav shel Rav H. mi-Volozhin..." *Heikhal ha-Besht* 30 (2010): 52-55] documents that certain concepts taught by Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin were direct quotations from the first published Hasidic work, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef* (Korets: 1780) by Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoe (1695–1781). In his encyclopedic work on the Torah, Rabbi Menachem M. Kasher (*Humasb Torah Shelemah* [New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Soc., 1954] v. 8, p. 249) writes that anyone who studies part three of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* in depth will plainly notice that the author had studied the *Tanya* and had practically completely accepted Rabbi Shneur Zalman's approach, and that *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* includes the same language as the *Tanya* except that he added sources to explain his methodology. In his analysis of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, Lamm (*Torah Lishmah*, p. 63) comments that the end of part one and the beginning of part two of *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* are "striking" in their similarities to the end of part one and the beginning of part two of the *Tanya*.

Regardless of these statements, there is no question that Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin was solidly rooted in the non-Hasidic camp. He did not have difficulties with Hasidic teachings on a conceptual level; his main objection was to its practical application.

In his monograph on the historical development of *hashgahah pratit* in Judaism, Chaim Gross, a non-Hasidic, Orthodox Jew, also acknowledges the influence of Hasidism in this realm: “And, because Chassidus had become such a powerful religious force in the European communities, it was only a matter of time before the new emphasis on... absolute hashgacha was adopted in non-Chassidic circles as well.”<sup>25</sup> Gross refers to this shift from the belief in partial *hashgahah pratit* of the classic Jewish philosophers to absolute *hashgahah pratit* as the “eighteenth century revolution.”<sup>26</sup> The Baal Shem Tov’s expanded interpretation of *hashgahah pratit* is an extremely comforting idea which was easy for Jews of all walks of life to relate to and it spread extremely rapidly along with Hasidism throughout Eastern Europe. Additionally, the non-Hasidic scholar Rabbi H. Norman Strickman writes, “The Chasidic movement stresses God’s providence over all of creation, man and beast.” After citing three quotations regard-

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<sup>25</sup> Gross, *The Paths of Providence*, p. 233. The writings of Rabbi Eliyahu, the *Gaon* of Vilna, who was the foremost leader of the non-Hasidim in historical Lithuania in the past few centuries, also made a couple of brief statements regarding *hashgahah pratit* that explicitly place animals under God’s specific providence. See Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz, *Hashgachah Pratis: An Exploration of Divine Providence and Free Will* (Jerusalem: Targum Press Book, 2012), pp. 80–81. Leibowitz adds there in a footnote, “Does his expansive view also include plants and inanimate objects? Some suggest that in his other writings, the Vilna Gaon hints that he understands that all created things, even plants and inanimate objects, are governed by specific *hashgahah pratit*.” Nonetheless, the Gaon of Vilna is not known for having an original interpretation of *hashgahah pratit* nor have his students and followers propagated these statements.

See also Rabbi Yitzchok Stroh, *Toldot Sefer ha-Tanya: Ketivato, Hadpasato, Hitpash-tuto* (Brooklyn: Heichal Menachem, 2016), pp. 101–103. There he points out that the Musar movement, served as a bridge to Hasidic concepts since some of the students of Musar-oriented yeshivot gravitated towards Hasidic philosophy, specifically Rabbi Yosef Leib Bloch (1860–1930) of Telz, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian (1876–1970), and Rabbi Eliezer Eliyahu Dessler (1892–1953).

<sup>26</sup> Gross, *The Paths of Providence*, pp. 221–249, 276. On p. 260, Gross states that this revolution occurred some 250 years ago (ca. 1765). In the *Tanya* (3:25), Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi mentions the concept of God’s continuous creation of the world (which is conceptually identical with the belief in absolute *hashgahah pratit*) in the Baal Shem Tov’s name since this concept was expounded and popularized by him (Kahan, *Sha’ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah im Perush, Beur ha-Pshat ve-Iyunim, perek* 1–6, pp. 60–65). Hence, this revolution apparently occurred during the lifetime of the Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1700–1760).

ing *hashgahah pratit* from the writings of early Hasidic leaders, he concludes, “The above, with some variations, is the commonly accepted view among Orthodox Jews. It is the one taught in [all] *yeshivot*.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus, through a variety of paths, including the proliferation of Hasidic stories and the spread of Hasidic concepts among the most prestigious non-Hasidic rabbis, the heightened Hasidic belief in absolute *hashgahah pratit* spread throughout Eastern-European Jewry. As Haym Soloveitchik writes regarding the Jews who were raised in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern Europe:

God’s palpable presence and direct, natural involvement in daily life—and I emphasize both “direct” and “daily”—His immediate responsibility for everyday events, *was* a fact of life in the East European *shtetl*... As all that occurs is an immediate consequence of His will, events have a purpose and occur because of that purpose.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, although in all probability deep God-centered consciousness existed before the mid-eighteenth century, it became greatly intensified with the advent of Hasidism.

### ***Hashgahah Pratit* and Popular Midrashic Literature**

There is a Jewish literary genre in which there has been a change in the emphasis of *hashgahah pratit*, namely in popular compilations of Midrashic literature on the *Humash* (Five Books of Moses). The Jewish literature which flourished from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, before the dawn of Hasidic stories, is referred to as Old Yiddish Literature and includes Yiddish narratives such as *Ze’enah u-Re’enah* and works of *Musar*. Old Yiddish Literature makes little mention of *hashgahah pratit*, but instead these works concentrate on the doctrine of Divine reward and punishment; acquiring virtues; morality and values; and basic halakhic obligations. Nonetheless, by the second half of the nineteenth century, Old Yiddish Literature was in decline, with only *Ze’enah u-Re’enah*, some prayer books such as *Korban Minḥab*, and some stories staying in print until the twentieth century among Orthodox Jewry. *Ze’enah u-Re’enah*, written by Ya’akov ben Yitzḥak Ashkenazi of Janow, is “far more than simply an amplified translation of the Torah, it is rather a *vade mecum* to the entire

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<sup>27</sup> Rabbi H. Norman Strickman, “Ibn Ezra: ‘The All Knows Every Part via the All,’” *Hakirah: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought*, 30 (Summer 2021): 240.

<sup>28</sup> Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition*, 28(4) (Summer 1994): 101.

Midrashic world. Between 1622 and 1900 it was reprinted no less than 173 times... and its cumulative impact on the religious outlook and spirituality of East European Jewry was incalculable.”<sup>29</sup> Though still in print, *Ze’enah u-Re’enah* is no longer widely used since the 1950s, whether in Yiddish or in English translation.<sup>30</sup> In its stead, English- and Yiddish-speaking Orthodox Jews use Rabbi Moshe Weissman’s *The Midrash Says*, which was first published in English in five volumes corresponding to the Five Books of Moses between 1980 and 1985.<sup>31</sup> Though many Orthodox Jewish households possess a copy of *The Midrash Says*, its influence on Orthodox Jewry today pales in comparison to the former influence of *Ze’enah u-Re’enah*, which was read religiously by women in the traditional Jewish home of Eastern Europe. In 1998, another English reworking of the originally Midrashic literature on the beginning of Exodus until the crossing of the Red Sea was compiled by Rabbi Yosef Deutsch, which he called *Let My Nation Go*.<sup>32</sup> This book gained such popularity that Rabbi Deutsch has continued to write similar compilations on other sections and books of the Hebrew scriptures, all similarly titled. Below are comparisons of passages from *Ze’enah u-Re’enah*, *The Midrash Says*, and *Let My Nation Go*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 129 fn. 101. The *Midrashim* (pl. of *Midrash*) are an ancient Jewish traditional commentary on part of the Hebrew scriptures, the earliest dating from the second century CE, although much of their content is older.

<sup>30</sup> The English translation is titled *Tz’ena u-R’ena: The Classic Anthology of Torah Lore and Midrashic Commentary*, trans. by Miriam Stark Zakon (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1983).

<sup>31</sup> Rabbi Moshe Weissman, *The Midrash Says: The Narrative of the Weekly Torah-Portion in the Perspective of our Sages, Selected and Adapted from the Talmud and the Midrash* (Brooklyn: Benei Yakov Publications, 1980–1985). Subsequently, a five-volume version for young readers was published: *The Little Midrash Says: A Digest of the Weekly Torah-Portion Based on Rashi, Rishonim, and Midrashim* (Brooklyn: Benei Yakov Publications, 1986). It was also translated into Yiddish in five volumes under the title *Der Medresh Dertseylt far Yugnt* (Brooklyn: Benei Yakov Publications, 1989–1993).

<sup>32</sup> Rabbi Yosef Deutsch, *Let My Nation Go: The Story of the Exodus of the Jewish Nation from Egyptian Bondage: A Compilation of Talmudic and Midrashic Sources* (Nanuet, New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> For quotations from *Ze’enah u-Re’enah*, the author of this article used Faierstein’s critical translation of the 1711 Amsterdam edition (*Ze’enah u-Re’enah: A Critical Translation into English*, translated by Morris M. Faierstein [Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2017]). Faierstein found it to be essentially identical with the first known published edition of *Ze’enah u-Re’enah* in 1622. (In examining several nineteenth-century editions published in Eastern Europe, the author of this article found the content of the quoted passages below to be virtually identical with the 1711 edition.)

These comparisons show the increasing emphasis on the doctrine of *hashgahah pratit* as we move from early to recent Midrashic texts.

The first passages to be examined concern Exodus 1:15–21, where the population of the Hebrews increased tremendously despite Pharaoh's efforts to decrease their numbers by ordering the midwives to murder their infant boys:

- *Ze'enah u-Re'enah* (pp. 375–376): The king said to the Israelite midwives that they should secretly kill the Israelite children, when they will have male children... Pharaoh had them called and said to them. Why did you allow the children to live?
- *The Midrash Says: The Book of Sh'mos* (1980:8–10): The Egyptians were mystified. How could it be that the Jewish nation continued to grow and flourish? *K'lal Yisrael* [the Jewish nation] says to Hashem [God], "See what insidious plots the nations contrive against us!" "Let them plan," Hashem answers. "No plan ever comes to fruition unless I permit it. Pharaoh decreed to wipe out the Jewish nation. I, however, ordained otherwise. Consequently, the more they were tortured, the more they increased and multiplied..." He therefore looked for agents to murder Jewish babies secretly. He decided to call for the Jewish midwives whom he would order to carry out this gruesome mission... Pharaoh soon discovered that no babies were being killed.
- *Let My Nation Go* (1998:63–64): Pharaoh angrily summoned the midwives to appear before him. "You have disobeyed me!" he thundered at them. "You have ignored my commands and kept the Jewish boys alive"... The great number of Jewish births that had so shocked Pharaoh was not coincidental but the result of a special act of Divine providence. "What good is Pharaoh's decree," Hashem declared, "if I have not given My consent? I will show Pharaoh that his will cannot supersede My will in determining the destiny of the Jewish people."

Note that *Let My Nation Go* specifically mentions *hashgahah pratit*, while it is only implicit in *The Midrash Says*. Meanwhile, *hashgahah pratit* does not even appear implicitly in *Ze'enah u-Re'enah*.

The second group of passages under examination concerns Exodus 3:15–21 concerning Moses' arrival in Midian after fleeing Egypt. There he encounters Jethro and his daughters, including Zipporah who would become his wife:

- *Ze'enah u-Re'enah* (p. 381): Jethro gave his daughter as a wife to Moses and she was called *Zipporah*.

- *The Midrash Says: The Book of Sh'mos* (1980:30–31): When Moshe later withdrew to the garden behind Yisro's house to thank Hashem for having sustained him and kept him alive, he noticed a sapphire rod sticking out of the ground. He removed it and brought it to Yisro to find out whose it was. "If you were able to move this staff, you must be its rightful owner!" exclaimed Yisro. "Know then that according to astrological calculations, it is very special; I therefore took it from the Egyptian court after the death of Yosaif, to whom it originally belonged. The stars predict that the owner of this rod will redeem the Jews from Egypt. No one else was ever able to pull it out of the earth." The staff which Moshe pulled from the ground in Yisro's garden had been fashioned by Hashem Himself who had then given it to Adam... When Moshe was seventy-seven years old, he married her [Jethro's daughter]."
- *Let My Nation Go* (1998:106–107): "Let me tell you a story, Moshe," said Yisro. "On the sixth day of Creation, a certain staff was created and given to Adam for safekeeping. When Adam left Gan Eden, he took this staff with him.... It was then passed down from generation to generation until it came into the possession of Yaakov. When Yaakov [Jacob] came to Egypt, he gave the staff to his son Yosef [Joseph]. When Yosef died, Pharaoh took the staff and put it into his treasure house among all his other valuables. You know the story of my flight from Egypt. Well, I also had my eye on that staff, and when I left... the staff came along with me. I planted the staff in my garden.... Over the years, many young men have come to ask for my daughter Tziporah's hand in marriage.... I always tell these young men to try and pull the staff from the ground...." The attempts by all the others had failed, because Tziporah was destined to be married to Moshe. Moshe, however, pulled the tree-staff from the ground with the greatest of ease—to Yisro's great amazement. Moshe lifted the staff in his hands although it weighed 40 *saab* (approx. 800 pounds). He took a closer look at it and realized its extraordinary significance. Engraved into the ancient wood were the Name of Hashem and the Hebrew letters... [that were] an acronym of the ten plagues that Moshe was destined to bring upon the Egyptians. Clearly, no one but he could have drawn it from the ground.

*Let My Nation Go* mentions the signs indicating that Moses was pre-ordained to marry Zipporah, which neither *The Midrash Says* nor *Ze'enab*

*u-Re'enah* mention. And both *Let My Nation Go* and *The Midrash Says* mention how the staff was destined for Moses, which is not mentioned in *Ze'enah u-Re'enah*.

These are just two of numerous examples where *hashgahah pratit* is more pronounced in *Let My Nation Go* (1998) and Rabbi Deutsch's other works, and, in turn, where it is more pronounced in *The Midrash Says* (1980) than in *Ze'enah u-Re'enah*. It is apparent that such works have been including more *Midrashim* illustrating *hashgahah pratit* and more synopses of the morals of the *Midrashim* bringing out the *hashgahah pratit* inherent in the story lines. These changes point to increase in the past few decades of the emphasis of *hashgahah pratit* in these adaptations of some basic religious texts of Orthodox Jewry. Though the authors of *Let My Nation Go* and *The Midrash Says* are not Hasidic, this change can be ultimately attributed to the influence of Hasidism on Orthodox Jewry at large.

### **The Recent Spread of the Belief in *Hashgahah Pratit***

In the last several decades, there has been an ever-increasing fervor regarding the belief and teaching of *hashgahah pratit* among Orthodox Jewry in a variety of manners. Though we have shown that the Baal Shem Tov's view of *hashgahah pratit* has influenced Orthodox Jewry as a whole, this influence is not widely acknowledged. Ironically, its current prevalence fosters the misconception that Orthodox Jewry has always strongly emphasized this unique belief. In fact, Hasidim are still among the leaders in the spread of this concept. For example, Rabbi Aryeh Leibowitz, who is not Hasidic, writes that the Baal Shem Tov's expansive view of *hashgahah pratit* has been championed by some Hasidim who have "passionately promulgated [it] in our times" through the dissemination of publications on the subject.<sup>34</sup>

An earlier example of the influence of Hasidism in spreading the awareness of *hashgahah pratit* among contemporary Orthodox Jewry is a song by Yom Tov Ehrlich (1914–1990), a prolific and popular Hasidic musical composer and musician, who was the first to record albums for Orthodox Jewish children. His albums alternated between songs and spoken word, both in Yiddish. His 1968 album "*Emunah*" includes the song "*Di bletele*" (The Little Leaf), which retells a story related by the Baal Shem Tov: *A tzaddik* (righteous man) saw a leaf falling from a tree and asked

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<sup>34</sup> Leibowitz, *Hashgahah Pratit*, p. 87.

God why the leaf had fallen.<sup>35</sup> God instructed him to turn over the leaf, which the *tzaddik* did—only to find a worm. God said that the worm had pleaded to Him to be shielded from the oppressive heat, so God had the wind blow the leaf off the tree and cover him.<sup>36</sup> This song later hit the mainstream Orthodox Jewish music market in 1992 with its inclusion on the album “*Yiddish Gems*” *Composed by R’ Yom Tov Ehrlich* by the preeminent Hasidic singer Avraham Fried, and has remained popular in its original form and in translation until today among most Orthodox Jewish circles.<sup>37</sup> The album was accompanied by a booklet including the original Yiddish lyrics and their English translations, and its table of contents states, regarding this song, “A vivid description of the Baal Shem Tov’s teaching that Divine Providence controls the destiny of everything in Creation, even a little leaf falling from a tree.” This song’s popularity has caused most Orthodox Jewish households to be familiar with this story about the *hashgahah pratit* of even a falling leaf, yet few Orthodox Jews are aware that this is a Hasidic teaching.

One of the first books entirely devoted to stories of *hashgahah pratit* was Eliyahu Levin’s *Stories of Hashgocho Protis (Divine Providence)*, published in 1986.<sup>38</sup> In 1999, Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, two Orthodox Jewish women, came out with *Small Miracles: Extraordinary Coincidences from Everyday Life*, which was the first in their series of very successful books on *hashgahah pratit* for a general readership.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, there were a variety

<sup>35</sup> Yom Tov Ehrlich, “Di Bletele,” *Emunah*, 1968, Vinyl LP.

<sup>36</sup> This story of the Baal Shem Tov was apparently first printed in Rabbi Aaron Roth’s *Shomer Emunim* (1942:62). Rabbi Roth, known as *Reb Arele* (1894–1947), was the founder of the Hasidic group called *Shomer Emunim* (Guardians of the Faith) in Jerusalem.

<sup>37</sup> Avraham Fried, “The Little Leaf (Di Bletele),” *Avraham Fried Sings “Yiddish Gems” Composed by R’ Yom Tov Ehrlich*, arranged by Yaron Gershovsky, S.M.T. Productions, 1993, track 3, CD. When a second volume was later issued, this volume was re-issued as volume I.

<sup>38</sup> Eliyahu Levin, *Stories of Hashgocho Protis (Hashgahah Pratit)* (Lakewood, New Jersey: 1986).

<sup>39</sup> Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, *Small Miracles: Extraordinary Coincidences from Everyday Life* (Hollbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corp., 1997). In his comments on a draft of an invocation which a rabbi was to deliver to the United States Senate in 1966, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), writes that it is not noticeable that “the speaker is an Orthodox rabbi (and not Conservative or Reform, God forbid)! Obviously, the point being delivered needs to be understood and acceptable by all the members of the Senate. It must obviously be a concept permissible [by halachah] to share with non-Jews.” The Rebbe then suggests that he mention the belief in *hashgahah*



of factors leading to the success of this series, including the best-selling, non-Jewish series of hundreds of books titled *Chicken Soup for the Soul* consisting of inspirational true stories about ordinary people's lives, with the first collection being printed in 1993.<sup>40</sup> Yet, as stated in the introduction of the first *Small Miracles* (1993: ix), the underlining inspiration for them was the Baal Shem Tov's teachings: "Every leaf, every blade of grass, bears God's imprint." Its success, at least in part, has practically made the publishing of stories of *hashgahah pratit* into an industry within the Orthodox Jewish world, with books, magazine columns, weekly bulletins, etc. devoted to them.

An interesting example of the growing appeal of *hashgahah pratit* comes from the autobiographical genre in the memoirs of the Holocaust survivor and Lubavitcher Hasid, Rabbi Jacob Friedrich of Antwerp. It was first published in 2018 (Ner Lamoer Publ., Spring Valley, NY) in Yiddish under the title *Aleyn oyfn front* [*Alone on the Front*] and the back cover briefly summarizes the author's tribulations, without any mention of *hashgahah pratit*. Yet in 2020 Feldheim published the expanded English translation with a title and back cover blurb emphasizing *hashgahah pratit*; the English title is *By the Hand of Hashem: To Survive and Thrive: The Miraculous Life of Rabbi Yaakov Friedrich*, and the back cover blurb includes such sentences as "But through incredible hashgacha pratis..." and "Often, he finds himself a hair's breadth away from certain death, yet his life is saved at the last minute—through Hashem's will." Being well-versed in the promotion and sales of books to the Orthodox Jewish public, Feldheim changed the title and back-cover blurb to emphasize *hashgahah pratit*, which is a popular subject matter. (This information comes from an August 9, 2022 telephone interview with Moishe Zajfman of Antwerp who was Rabbi Friedrich's former student and the principal organizer behind the printing of his autobiography.) It is interesting to note that it is extremely rare for an original Yiddish-language work published in Orthodox Jewish circles to be translated into English.

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*pratit*, which is a uniquely Orthodox Jewish concept, by adding the words "Watcheth over and guideth" and adding a prayer that this *hashgahah pratit* and guidance should be experienced at all their meetings and inform their decisions, etc. ["We Can Do Better," *A Chassidisher Derber Magazine*, 101 (March 2021), pp. 16–17].

<sup>40</sup> Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Soul* (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, Inc., 1993).

Another interesting example illustrating the popularity of stories involving *hashgahah pratit* is a notice appearing in many 2022 issues of the weekly Yiddish-language “Kol HaTzibur” newsletter distributed in the Hasidic synagogues in Monsey, New York.<sup>41</sup> The notice states “*Hashgahah pratit*—Receive \$10 per story” which was followed by a telephone number where one could leave a message including one’s submission. The ad was placed by a popular Yiddish-language telephone hotline called Kol Emuna. The banning of the internet in ultra-Orthodox communities has led to the proliferation of hotlines for news, Torah classes, and inspirational stories.

### **The Diminishing of a *Hashgahah-Pratit*-Centered Consciousness**

Based on the plethora of *hashgahah pratit* literature, one may assume that today’s Orthodox Jewish world lives a life permeated with a sense of *hashgahah pratit*. And it is true, as I have demonstrated, that the belief in God’s absolute Divine Providence has increased in recent decades. Nonetheless, I would argue that although today’s Orthodox Jew has an acute awareness of *hashgahah pratit*, it has not become part of his consciousness. This is also part of Haym Soloveitchik’s thesis in his well-known article “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” where he discusses the transformation of Orthodox Jewish society, which began at the end of the nineteenth century and continued and solidified approximately between the mid-1950s and 1970s. Until that time, Judaism followed a dual tradition: laws and mores of life as codified in rabbinic literature, on the one hand, and life the way it was lived in actuality, generation after generation, on the other. During a period of approximately one hundred years (1870–1970), a living traditional Jewish society changed into an Orthodox, text-based society. Religious conduct became a self-reflective, conscious behavior instead of being the product of social custom, as it had been. Soloveitchik continues: “What had been lost... was precisely a ‘culture.’ A way of life is not simply a habitual manner of conduct, but also, indeed above all, a coherent one. It encompasses the web of perceptions and values that determine the way the world is assessed and the posture one assumes towards it.”<sup>42</sup> Soloveitchik sees a breach in experiencing *hashgahah pratit*:

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<sup>41</sup> Back issues of the newsletter “Kol HaTzibur” can be accessed at <https://groups.google.com/g/kolhatzibur>.

<sup>42</sup> Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction,” pp. 67, 70, 96.

I think it safe to say that the perception of God as a *daily, natural* force is no longer present to a significant degree in any sector of modern Jewry, even the most religious. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that individual Divine Providence, though passionately believed as a theological principle—and I do not for a moment question the depth of that conviction—is no longer experienced as a simple reality. With the shrinkage of God's palpable hand in human affairs has come a marked loss of His immediate presence, with its primal fear and nurturing comfort. With this distancing, the religious world has been irrevocably separated from the spirituality of its fathers, indeed, from the religious mood of intimate anthropomorphism that had cut across all the religious divides of the Old World.<sup>43</sup>

Soloveitchik goes on to write that he has noticed in today's Orthodox Jewish communities, even in the most stringent yeshivot, an absence of "that primal fear of Divine judgment, simple and direct."<sup>44</sup> Hence, Jews born in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe lived at the very end of a period when many Jews still experienced *hashgahah pratit* as a daily presence, before the development of a modern historical consciousness (see below) where God's immediate presence is no longer palpably felt among the masses of Orthodox Jewry.

### ***Hashgahah Pratit* and the Jewish Autobiographical Genre**

It would appear that the changes in the place that *hashgahah pratit* occupied in the consciousness of European Jewry, described above, can be discerned in the Jewish autobiographical genre. Even though we unfortunately do not have a plethora of autobiographies upon which to base our analysis, for until the late modern period Jews produced few such works, it is nevertheless telling that in the few Jewish autobiographies written before the advent of Hasidism, such as those of Rabbi Yomtov Lipman Heller (ca. 1579–1654),<sup>45</sup> Ascher Levy of Reichshofen (1598–1635),<sup>46</sup> and Glikl of Hameln (1646–1724), we find practically no mention of *hashgahah pratit*.<sup>47</sup> We may cautiously garner support for our contention that prior to

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<sup>43</sup> Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction," pp. 101–103.

<sup>44</sup> Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction," p. 99.

<sup>45</sup> Rabbi Yomtov Lipman Heller, *Megilat Evah* (Ashdod, Israel: Mifal Moreshet ha-Tosfot Yom Tov, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Ascher Levy, *Die Memoiren des Ascher Levy aus Reichshofen* (Berlin: Louis Lamm, 1913).

<sup>47</sup> Although the term *hashgahah pratit* (literally "detailed supervision") is used among Orthodox Jews to mean Divine Providence, Glikl of Hameln uses the term *hashgahah pratyot* twice to refer to someone supervising another person. She only

the times of the Baal Shem Tov *hashgahah pratit* was not yet imbedded in the consciousness of the traditional Jew. Nineteenth-century autobiographies by *maskilim*, a major genre of the Haskalah literature, too, is virtually bereft of any mention of *hashgahah pratit*.<sup>48</sup> The same holds true for the few nineteenth-century autobiographies written by non-Ḥasidic Orthodox Jews—we find little or no references to *hashgahah pratit*.<sup>49</sup> By contrast, in the few nineteenth-century autobiographies written by Ḥasidim, the *hashgahah pratit* in their lives is emphasized.<sup>50</sup> Once again, the connec-

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uses the term once to refer to God and only as He relates to humans—not in the sense of absolute *hashgahah pratit*. (Glikl of Hamelin, *Glikl: Memoirs 1691–1719* [Hebrew], translated by Chava Turniansky, the Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, the Ben-Zion Dinur Center for Research in Jewish History [Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2006], pp. 374, 384, 422.)

<sup>48</sup> The term *maskilim* here is used to refer to Jews in the Tsarist Empire who abandoned their traditional upbringing to become followers of the Haskalah and lead a secular lifestyle. The Haskalah movement waned in the 1880s and 1890s, overtaken by other cultural and political movements in Jewish society, such as Jewish socialism, various forms of Zionism, and Yiddishism.

<sup>49</sup> Examples include the autobiographies of Rabbi Elyahu David Rabinovitz-Teomim (1843–1905), *Seder Elyahu: Toldot ha-gaon Rabi Elyahu David Rabinovits-Teomim (ha-Aderet)* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1983); Rabbi Baruch Epstein (1862–1942), *Mekor Barukh: Zikbronot Yeme Hayav* (Defus Rom: Vilnius, 1928); Rabbi Meir Berlin (Bar-Ilan) (1880–1949), *Mi-Volozhin ad Yerushalayim: Zikbronot* (Tel-Aviv: Yalkut, 1939). The exception is the autobiography of Rabbi Benzion Alfes (1851–1940), *Ma'aseh Alfes: Toladah ve-Zikbronot* (Jerusalem: Beit ha-Yetomim Diskin, 1940), which frequently mentions *hashgahah pratit* (see the following footnote). Rabbi Alfes was a well-known *magid* (an Eastern-European Jewish religious itinerant preacher) and a prolific writer of religious literature, primarily in Yiddish. (It is interesting to note that Rabbi Alfes does not mention in his autobiography that his parents' surname was Zamushch-Sorezon, sometimes recorded simply as Sorezon, as indicated in extracts of metrical records found on [www.litvaksig.org](http://www.litvaksig.org). There are records of a Benzion the son of Kopl Alfes of Trakai, Lithuania, who was born ca. 1841. Perhaps Rabbi Benzion Alfes was related to him and adopted his surname.)

<sup>50</sup> Nineteenth-century Ḥasidic autobiographers who frequently mention *hashgahah pratit* are as follows: Rabbi Nathan Shternharts (1780–1844) of Nemirov, *Yemei Maharnat* (Lemberg: U.W. Salat and J.M. Nik, 1876), who was the leading disciple of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov; Pinkhes-Dov Goldenshteyn (1848–1930), *Mayn Lebens-geshikhte: Farshidenartige Pasirung'n un Epiḥod'n fun a Yosem* (Petah-Tikvah: Ha-Teḥiyah, 1928–1929); Shmuel Kofman (1855–1925), *Zikbronot* (Tel-Aviv, 1955); Refael Vilf (ca. 1857–1929), *Netivot Refael: Zikbronot shel ha-Ḥasid R. Refael Vilf... mi-ḥasidei... Rabi David Moshe me-Tshortkov* (Jerusalem, 2017).

tion between Ḥasidim and the stress on *hashgahah pratit* seems to be obvious. As we have pointed out earlier, today *hashgahah pratit* has become universal among all Orthodox Jews and is mentioned often.

I would like to call attention to a remarkable autobiography written by Pinkhes-Dov “Pinye-Ber” Goldenshteyn (1848–1930) during the window of time which existed between the period of the Baal Shem Tov and the spread of a modern historical consciousness. His Yiddish-language autobiography was published in three parts with an addendum in 1928–1929 in Petaḥ-Tikva. This work provides us with a glimpse into life as lived by an individual with a profound sense of absolute *hashgahah pratit*. Pinye-Ber was born in Tiraspol, Ukraine (near Bessarabia). His father was a Bersheder Ḥasid, while he himself became a Lubavitcher Ḥasid in his youth. He wrote his life story to show how God protected him from all harm throughout his life, from the day he was orphaned as a young boy. Wherever Pinye-Ber sees *hashgahah pratit*, he considers it a personal revelation of Godliness, a palpable encounter with God’s Divine presence, and proof of His existence. He describes it early in the narrative (ch. 2):

From such an extraordinary autobiography, one can fathom God’s wonders: how He is the Father of orphans, oversaw a forlorn child, and, in his parents’ merit, guarded their beloved son, the only survivor of all of their children. From my account one can deduce the following principles: there is a God in the world, “God does not withhold the reward of any creature,”<sup>51</sup> He protects all of His creations with His divine providence, He unceasingly safeguards all who seek His protection, and those who trust in Him are never disgraced. You yourself will be convinced of all of this upon reading how this orphan endured misery and suffering and was often in danger and mortal fear, yet God constantly guarded and protected him from every evildoing and evildoer in the world. Upon reading all of this, you will certainly say, “How great are Your works, O Lord; how very profound Your thoughts.”<sup>52</sup>

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The author of this article has prepared an annotated translation of Goldenshteyn’s work titled *The Shoḥet: A Memoir of Jewish Life in Ukraine and Crimea* (volumes 1 and 2), published in 2023 and 2025 by Touro University Press. A more extensive analysis of Goldenshteyn’s book appears in the introduction.

Regarding Rabbi Alfes’s frequent mentioning of *hashgahah pratit* (see previous footnote), he lived in Petaḥ-Tikva for about two years. He was living there when part one of Goldenshteyn’s autobiography was published, and he also knew Goldenshteyn. Perhaps Goldenshteyn’s autobiography influenced Rabbi Alfes to frequently mention the *hashgahah pratit* in his own life in his autobiography.

<sup>51</sup> Talmud (*Pesachim* 118b).

<sup>52</sup> Psalms 92:6.

Pinye-Ber mentions the concept of Divine Providence (*hashgahah pratit*) not only here but throughout his autobiography. Likewise, he concludes his book with his fervent hope “that my autobiography will affect my children and grandchildren by strengthening their trust in God so that they will go on along the right path and believe in God and Divine Providence, as their aged father has in his life.”

Pinye Ber is acutely aware of the Baal Shem Tov’s unique interpretation of *hashgahah pratit*. Early in his autobiography he writes that God’s *hashgahah pratit* affects not only every particular occurrence involving man, but “all of His creations,” which includes animals, plants, and inanimate matter.<sup>53</sup> *Hashgahah pratit* forms the bedrock of Pinye-Ber’s consciousness. Pinye-Ber’s autobiography provides an unusually clear depiction of someone experiencing his daily life through his deep belief in *hashgahah pratit* as interpreted in Hasidic thought. ❧

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<sup>53</sup> Goldenshteyn, *Mayn Lebens-Geshikhte*, ch. 2.