

The History of Hasidim

In this course, we will examine the history of Hassidism from its beginning in 1736 to the present. We will look at the history, beliefs, and practices of the Hassidim through two perspectives: (1) certifiable scholarly research of historians, archaeologists, and sociologists, and (2) folklore, stories, and oral history which are the soul of Hassidism -- the driving forces that lead Hassidim to separate themselves from society, dress like their ancestors, and pray in their own esoteric way.

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba'al Shem Tov (Besht), is recognized as the founder of Hassidism. Unlike other Kabbalists of his time, the Besht held that life should not be tedium and struggle, but that G-d is most pleased when his people bring joy into their prayers and into their everyday lives. The Besht's rejection of fasting and mortification of the flesh influenced men from distant villages to leave their homes and families to travel to the Ba'al Shem Tov and study with him. As the Besht's fame grew, legends about his teachings and his life, some plausible others preposterous, began to grow and spread.

Some historians believed that the Ba'al Shem Tov and all the stories about him were myth. However, recent irrefutable evidence, i.e. tax records, letters written by the Besht to his followers, and the identification of his gravesite, clearly establish his existence.

The most significant of the Ba'al Shem Tov's followers was Dov Ber of Mezritch --called the Maggid (teacher). It was the Maggid who organized his master's teachings into a system of beliefs and practices. The Maggid's followers spread Hassidism throughout Eastern Europe.

The history of several of the Rabbis who made a substantial impact on Hassidism, along with their writings and their legends, some verified others improbable, will be discussed. Many of the present Hassidic dynasties, their customs, their beliefs, and their interactions with each other and with the secular world, will also be presented for questions and discussion.

Leader: GH Friedlander, a retired psychologist, began his interest in Hasidim under the guidance of Reb Shlomo. He was a member of a Hasidic congregation for over a decade and has studied Hasidism for more than forty years.

Mondays: 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., 8 weeks: September 24 through November 12

Location: Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville