

DORSHEY RESHUMOT: Rhetoric, Textuality, Talmudic Casuistry and Social Status in Eastern European Homiletic Literature

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My doctoral dissertation, completed under the guidance of Professor Zeev Gries and with the generous support of the Jewish Galicia and Bukovina Organization, analyzes the Jewish homiletic literature of Eastern Europe, and especially of Galicia, from the sixteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

My research relates to two main topics:

1. The homiletic literature in Eastern Europe: the editorial methods involved in printing manuscripts of sermons, homiletics as a living phenomenon, sermons as aesthetic works, and the social implications of this literature.
2. The Hasidic leaders, or *Zaddikim*, who functioned as communal rabbis in Galicia beginning at the end of the eighteenth century: their connection to the spread of Hasidism in Galicia, Bessarabia, and Bukovina, and to the struggles of some “enlightened” Jews, or *maskilim*, against the Hasidic movement.

As I specify below, the methods and contents of my research are important for understanding several cultural, theological, and social phenomena in Galicia at the turn of the eighteenth century.

Over the course of my work, I surveyed the literary genres that compose Jewish homiletical literature. Particularly, I drew on a range of oral and manuscript testimonies from several periods in order to describe the structure of the public sermon in Eastern Europe. I discussed the formal connections between the homiletics of the synagogue and the *pilpul* (erudite Talmudic argumentation) of the study house (*beit midrash*), and the social implications thereof. By shifting attention away from the conceptual, philosophical, theological, and ethical aspects of homiletical literature, and towards the aesthetic and rhetorical elements of these sermons, I was able to reveal new sides of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe. Focusing on rhetorics and aesthetics better clarifies the status of homiletics by contextualizing the positions of the communal rabbi and the rabbinic elite in the Jewish community. Rabbinic homilies served to define the boundaries of communal discourse and, to a degree, to exclude of those who do not partake in such discourse.

Such questions, of course, relate to the social and cultural revolutions which affected European society in general over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including traditional Jewish society. Aside from the spread of “enlightenment” (or *Haskalah*) movements among the Jewish people, traditional Jewish society also underwent changes in its communal structure and its social values. In this connection, I analyzed the changes in public sermons, including those of the first Hasidic leaders, through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. I showed that public sermons at the beginning of the Hasidic movement preserved traditional homiletical forms and rhetoric, as well as traditional social values and fields of discourse. Additionally, my study of changes in homiletic style allowed me to address the question of the spread and influence of Hasidism in Galicia at the turn of the 18th century. My conclusions differ from those common in

previous scholarship; I showed that the spread of Hasidic identity in Galicia did not compete against the communal establishment. I described several Hasidic talmudists who served in traditional roles as communal rabbis. They saw their public roles as *Zaddikim* as consisting in leading local communities, rendering halachic rulings on ritual and monetary cases, and delivering ethical messages. Rabbinic *Zaddikim* had played these roles in Galicia even before the Haskalah; therefore, the phenomenon should not be seen as a reaction, a decline, or as an instance of insularity in face of the maskilic threat, as many historians have argued. My research also softens the frequent caricatures of Galician Hasidic rabbis, often superficially described as lacking meaningful Torah scholarship. As opposed to the image of the *Zaddik* as a popular holy-man, the many new findings presented in my research allow a redefinition of the Hasidic leadership in Galicia. Previous definitions of popular “*Zaddikism*” in Galicia have been tinged by an Orientalism which maligned not only Hasidic leaders, but Galician Jewish society in general.