

Changes in the Homiletic Rhetoric used by Local Rabbinate in Eastern Europe
during the Nineteenth Century/ Warsaw, 28.06.2016

The Talmud sages taught us that a guest must first of all praise his lodgings and I too would like to begin by thanking these conference organizers for the opportunity to speak at this esteemed event. I would also like to thank the Jewish Galicia and Bukovina Association which supports my current research and the department of Jewish Thought at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, in which I am presently completing my PhD research under the supervision of Prof. Zeev Gries.

When we want to discern the social, cultural and ideological characters of various societies, we listen to the rhetoric used in a number of different creative areas, such as: literature and the cinema. We also pay attention to the rules of dialogue in the public sphere, reflected in official speeches given by political leaders, and the public rules of etiquette which are expressed in the hierarchy of a society's values.

We have no audio-visual or non-religious literary records from the wide spectrum of Eastern European Jewish society that existed before the processes of secularization took hold in the nineteenth century. However we do possess a massive treasure trove of homiletic literature, including no small number of homilies (that is, sermons) given at public events at which official preaching was customary. Through the course of this talk I would like to describe briefly the structure and rhetoric of these homilies, given by hasidim and non-hasidim alike from the 16th to the mid-19th centuries. Following this outlines I will discuss the social and cultural meanings of my findings and, finally, we will see how during the nineteenth century, and mainly towards the end of this period, the rhetoric altered as part of the cultural changes that Jewish religious society underwent at this time. Unfortunately, I will not be able to present here today all my findings or discuss the methods of textual and philological analysis required by such a study, and will only mention briefly a limited number of findings and conclusions. (The homiletic literature is also made up of many other elements. However in the framework of today's talk I will not be able to discuss them or the distinction between the various levels of the text)

However before beginning to analyze the homilies and their structure, I would like to provide some background pertaining to scholars' methodological assumptions and perceptions regarding Hasidism up to the present day, on the one hand and on the other concerning the study of Jewish homilies. Until the end of the nineteenth century most religious Jews in Galicia and Poland identified with the Hasidic movement in some way: this ranged from enthusiastic participation in the hasidic court, praying with the special Hasidic version (Nusach Sefard), to feelings of sympathy towards some of the Hasidic leaders (Tzadikim) or their ideas. From the outset of the twentieth century scholars tried to characterize the factors and motivations that led to the success of the Hasidic movement, and discern the social and religious changes brought about by it. Those scholars inclined towards social history sought to depict social revolution as the heart of the change: this was expressed in the rebellion of the Hasidic leadership, together with the masses, against the rotten rabbinical establishment which ruled high-handedly over the communities. At the same time, researchers of Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) sought to demonstrate that new interpretations of Kabbalistic ideas became popular and these were in fact responsible for the turning point in the structure of the leadership and dissemination of the movement. Despite the dispute between these two schools, they agree on at least two matters: first - the Hasidic leadership directly addressed the masses, the less educated and simple public. The Hasidic leaders were not members of the scholarly elite and commonly aimed to offer popular interpretations of Kabbalah or halakah. The second point on which scholars agree is that homiletic literature is the main source for understanding the social and cultural processes that led to the growth of Hasidism.

However, Jewish homiletics, and Jewish homiletic literature in general have received relatively little scholarly attention. In particular the homiletic literature of Polish Jewry has not been studied at all. Although the important research by Mark Saperstein regarding Jewish homiletics has laid down a number of important methodological foundations, upon which my research also relies. He claims that Jewish homiletics in Poland over the generations was discernibly unmethodical, lacking in structure or order.

In contrast to this, at the beginning of the nineteenth century Rabbi Shmuel Landa, editing the book of homilies addressed by his father Rabbi Yehezkel Landa, known as "Hanoda beYehudah", explains the style of Jewish homiletics:

All the Rabbis that taught in the Yeshivot would explain to their students the ways of the Mishnah and Talmud, and indeed the paragraphs of halakha [laws] about which they reached conclusions based on the debates in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud. And they would arrange their words in the style of a sequence of rhetorical questions and answers that present the range of sources as a pleasant progression. And even though every source can be explained independently without connecting between them, despite this the Rabbis endeavored to link the various sources like a flowing and gushing stream, [moving] from one source to the second using pilpul, until they linked them one to another like sheets that are sewn together to become a tent. And the students would give these pilpul creations different names. If the composition is made up of pilpulim about a number of different topics connected to one another with different introductions they would call it a "drasha" (homily) and if they are all about one Talmudic topic [sugiya], with thorough study of the stages of the sugiya, this they called a "hiluk", and in both cases the desired aim is to please the students and that they should consider the speaker wise. For this is the hobby of the Yeshiva students: to endow the study with the literary structure of a pleasant pilpul.¹

The "homily", "pilpul" and "hiluk" are all types of rhetorical art intended to fascinate Yeshiva students and present to them a range of sources in a structure and order that will appeal to them. Not only is the content important but also the manner in which it is imparted. Indeed, this extract seeks to explain and justify the significant investment in style and form, perhaps at the expense of the content. As you certainly noticed in Landa's words, there is no clear distinction between "homily" and "pilpul", although we would ostensibly expect a homily to be suited for the widest possible shared camp among the general public and not to use

¹ דורש לציון, פראג 1827, הקדמה מבן המחבר, דף ב ע"ב.

techniques found in the community's institutions of higher learning, the study houses. Yet indeed, the literary findings and testimonies available to us demonstrate that the preachers tended to dedicate extensive sections of their homilies to complex halakhic and Talmudic discussions.

Rabbi Shmuel Landa highlights the artistic and rhetorical role of the oral sermon. Indeed, a comprehensive examination of the homiletic texts both published and in manuscript form, that were penned by figures raised and active in the Kingdom of Poland over various periods, certainly reveals that they employ a range of artistic means. One of the most common techniques was the use of numbers to structure the progression of the homily, including those homilies and pilpulim when the preacher began by posing a designated number of questions in succession. For example, Rabbi Avraham Rappaport of Krakow and Lvov, who lived at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, began his Bar Mitzvah sermon with 13 questions concerning the verses in the weekly Torah portion: these of course corresponded to his age and were interwoven with another central idea connected to the number 13 in Rabbinic literature. This is also true of the homilies by Rabbi David Shlomo Eybschutz, who was Rabbi of communities in Galicia and Soroca at the turn of the nineteenth century. The clearest example in Eybschutz's sermons is when he organizes the rhetorical questions in the following manner: Four questions regarding Rabbinic midrashim, three questions on Biblical verses, two questions concerning mishnayot and one question about a sage's adage.

Embellishing the progression of the homily or pilpul with numbers of course gave order to the mixture of sources and allowed the listeners to follow the development of the idea and remember it. This is only one example of the use of artistic means. Many preachers were accustomed to organizing their homilies using chiasmic structures, with direct correspondence, and repeated the opening of the sermon at its conclusion.

The immense investment in presentation of course came at the expense of the content and instruction of the less-learned public in halakhic and moral details. The content of the sermons and the artistic and rhetorical means by which they were organized mainly addressed the learned population of the community. And indeed, a recurring criticism of the institution of the homily which appears from

the beginning of the 17th until the 19th centuries is that it almost completely ignored the less-learned portions of the community and mainly addressed the intellectual elite. However it is also important to note that for the most part, these criticisms were raised by preachers whose writings were full of the same complex pilpulim that they censured, and who admitted that they were unable to change the rules of the dialogue and the cultural and social codes from which they resulted.

There are a number of testimonies from various periods concerning the actual occurrence of the homily from a social perspective, however in the time that remains to me today I would like to focus on testimonies from the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, mainly from Hasidic circles.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonoy, whose books "Toldot Yaakov Yosef" and "Ben Porat Yosef" were the first printed Hasidic homiletic works, describes the manner by which he seeks to reach the heart of the general public:

I heard [it said] in the name of the Rabbi Gershon of Kitov "Hear, ye deaf, and look, ye blind, that ye may see" (Isaiah 42:18), the question is: if he is deaf how can he hear? And if he is blind how can he see?... The blind those are the masses that look at the scholar to see. If the scholar approves then he too will incline his ear to listen as the educated, and if not, then he will not do so etc.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef explains that in order to reach the masses he addresses the Torah scholars and impresses them with his complex words of casuistry. The public observes the educated to discern their reactions and facial expressions. If the Torah scholars in the community demonstrate satisfaction and interest in the preacher's words of pilpul, then the masses will also listen to him. This social perception is undoubtedly not unique to Rabbi Yaakov Yosef. Indeed, he brings these words in the name of Rabbi Gershon of Kitov who was one of the patriarchs of the Hasidic movement and the brother in law of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, who is considered the founder of Hasidism. The exact same words were also repeated generations later at more mature stages of the Hasidic phenomenon, in the writings of Hasidic leaders from a range of streams. I would like to present one further example: *Megilat setarim* by Rabbi Nachman of Breslav. This work is one

of the secret works of Breslav Hasidism and was only recently published by Prof. Zvi Mark. In it Rabbi Nachman describes his image of the Messiah and the manner in which he will rule over the world. One of the motifs which recurs and characterizes Rabbi Nachman's perception of the Messianic rule is the institution of the homily and declaration of Talmudic pilpul. Rabbi Nachman even depicts special rooms for this purpose in the Messiah's palace. In Rabbi Nahman's words:

And he will give a homily and a pilpul.... and even those who do not understand so well will see from the elders and they will start to say Amen, amen.²

Rabbi Nachman does not expect the masses to understand the content of the Messiah's homily, and to a great extent they are considered secondary addressees. This position, as was noted, does not reflect his personal perspective or even that of the early Hasidism who adopted it, but rather the social reality in Poland and Galicia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The public dialogue occurred first and foremost among Torah scholars, and the masses that were not part of the intellectual elite were not involved in it. These findings of course challenge a number of common presumptions held by scholars and the wider public, among them the distinction between "learned "mitnagdim" and the "hasidim", with the latter ostensibly having a more folksy and simple character. [In this regard, of course, we should mention the image of the Rebbe in contrast to the "Litvak", the "mitnaged", in the well known story by Y. L. Peretz "Oib nisht nokh hekher"]

As I noted at the beginning of my paper, the artistic and rhetorical means as well as the structure and rules of ceremony for preaching a public homily were preserved over a number of centuries. During the course of my research I have examined collections of homilies from various periods, from the end of the 16th up to the mid 19th century. Among the sections that can be distinguished as public homilies, I discerned a relatively inflexible framework in those penned by Rabbi Avraham Rappaport of Krakow and Lvov, Rabbi Benyamin of Belzec and Rabbi Natan Neta Shapira of Krakow - they all lived in the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries - as well as in homilies by Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonoy, Rabbi David

² מרק, מגילת סתרים, עמ' 42, ושם הפענוח בעמ' 53, שורות 17-20.

Shlomo Eybshcutz or Rabbi Yehezkel Panet, who lived in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries. The accepted structure used by preachers in Poland was usually made up of two components. They refer to the first part of the homily as the "opening" and the second part as the "derush" (homily). Between these two sections was a stage known as "the request for permission". In many of the sections of homilies that have reached us, the preachers distinguish between the various sections by introducing them with a title: "This is my homily for the opening" or "that which I said as the homily". Here we will not discuss the differences and diverse roles of the two parts, but I would like to mention the transitional stage between the two - the request for permission. This is a poetic section in which the preacher mentions the respected and important people in the audience and asks them, as well as the remainder of the community, for permission to preach. The roots of this ancient custom lie in Talmudic literature and in the large Jewish center in Babylon which existed until the tenth century, known as the gaonic period. These sections are to be found in many homilies until the nineteenth century and particularly in manuscripts prepared by the preachers.

I opened the lecture with the words of Rabbi Shmuel Landa, the son of the Noda beYehudah, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, explaining the rhetorical and artistic nature of pilpul. Now we will turn to his relative, Rabbi Wolf Landa, who lived in Prague at the end of the 19th century and also printed a collection of homilies by his grandfather, the Noda beYehudah. Rabbi Wolf Landa mentions that he fails to discern the purpose of many portions of his grandfather's writings. Thus he writes:

And I also brought as an example and as a memory one "permission" that our Rabbi of blessed memory was accustomed to pronounce before the homily, a number of which are still found in the writings in my possession with a small change in the language in each instance, according to the time and place [...] and it seems that this was an early custom and that a vestige of this still remains to us today in the permission that we say on Simchat Torah to the Hatan Torah and Hatan Bereshit" ...³

³ דרושי הצל"ח, פתח הדבר.

Rabbi Wolf does not understand the nature of these sections and therefore he includes as a memory the ancient custom that appears, according to his words, in all his grandfather's homilies. Even though he continued to attend the Synagogue, Rabbi Wolf was not familiar with this custom of requesting permission and so he tried to find some mention in the sections and impressions of it which remain in the prayer for the festival of Simchat Torah. Rabbi Wolf was completely unfamiliar with something that was obvious to his grandfather one hundred years earlier and was still customary at the beginning of the century. It is important to note that Rabbi Wolf was not an assimilated Jew and had not stopped attending Synagogue. He was knowledgeable in the scriptures, followed a religious way of life and so on. At the end of the nineteenth century preachers had ceased to use the style and form that had been accepted at the beginning of that century, and throughout many previous generations.

Yet not only did the structure of the homily change completely. An initial look at homiletic literature written by Hasidim from the mid nineteenth century onwards demonstrates that this literature is devoid of complex examples of pilpul and is mainly dedicated to musar (morality) and kabbalah (mysticism). The use of the pilpul rhetoric disappeared from homiletic literature and apparently lost its status in synagogue sermons. To conclude, I will bring the words of Josef Perl, one of the founding fathers of the movement opposing Hasidim, the Galician Haskalah. In his satirical work *Bohen Tzadik* Perl describes the degenerate status of pilpul and Talmudic scholarship among the sages and Hasidic tzadikim in Galicia. Thus Perl described Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apta:

Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel was also formerly not a great scholar and for proof of this see those same approbations [...] while he was in Galicia they did not describe him with the praises that it is customary to employ concerning great Rabbis and famous Torah scholars and they only attributed to him those praises which they write about the pious of the generation. And since he was accepted in Russia they began to accord to him the virtues and praises which they use for Rabbis and great and famous scholars. And the reason is evident: because here in Galicia among the Rabbis and great scholars

he was not considered great, but only among the Hasidim which at this time were few, was he the greatest among them. And upon coming to Russia, in which there are no Rabbis and scholars and the tzadikim of the sect already at this time constituted the majority, he was considered among them great in Torah [scholarship].⁴

In Perl's words, in Galicia Avraham Yehoshua Heshel was not considered an important figure because he was not considered a scholar, and only when he moved to Russia he did receive recognition and status. This was because in Russia already at this time there remained no scholars comparable to those in Galicia. However, on another occasion Perl's comments regarding Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heshel of Apta indicate that in Galicia too the preachers were not accustomed to pronouncing words of pilpul, in opposition to what had been customary in the past.

In his childhood he dealt with pilpul and would preach using this method, because he was a Rabbi in Galicia and there [...] at that time the Rabbis had to preach in public using pilpul and also [about] the bible according to the way of earlier preachers.

The value of erudition and pilpul was in decline, as was the honor of the scholars and their social status. Instead of this Rabbis and preachers increasingly addressed the general public, the uneducated in Torah. This public has been described by Prof. Gries as "the slumbering intelligentsia" which awakened with the rise of printing and increase in the dissemination of knowledge during the eighteenth century and which, at the end of this century and over the course of the following one, received the right to vote for various institutions of power. This public received a new status in the Jewish community, a status which was expressed also in the rules of dialogue and rhetoric in the public sphere of the religious establishment.

In conclusion

Today I have offered a brief look at the rhetorical and artistic characteristics of the Jewish homily in various periods in Poland. We have seen the complex and

⁴ בוחן צדיק, עמ' 69.

scholarly style which was customary until the mid-nineteenth century and which mainly addressed the intellectual elite who studied in Yeshivot, as well as the local erudites. It was sufficient to impress these people in order to impart messages and receive the support of the general public. This rhetoric was also employed by many Hasidic preachers in official public homilies given in their communities. The structure of the traditional homily and its etiquette, as well as its contents and style, changed gradually during the nineteenth century, until by the end of that century part of the religious Jewish public was completely unfamiliar with the traditional etiquette and style. And here we must emphasize that it was not new ideas that brought the Hasidic leadership to address the masses but rather forces outside of the community which led to a significant change in their leadership. The understanding that this was not a religious innovation but rather a reaction to a change in the social and intellectual status of additional layers of the population provides us with an opportunity to conduct a comparative examination alongside the processes occurring in other Polish religious communities, as well as the status of the Catholic church and the way in which it functioned in this period, when secularization was beginning to take hold in Eastern Europe. Such a comparison would, of course, hopefully be conducted in co-operation with scholars of the Church and the Polish Catholic community!

Thank you for your attention.