

J O N A T A N M E I R

Translated from the Hebrew by Jeffrey G. Amshalem



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The Life and Works of Michael Levi Rodkinson

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## Preface

*Literary Hasidism* is a new exploration of the complex interactions between Hasidism and the Haskalah in the nineteenth century, as well as the entry of Jewish life into modernity in Europe and the United States through the early twentieth century, as embodied by one man: Michael Levi (Frumkin) Rodkinson (1845–1904). As journalist, author, and publisher, Rodkinson's literary projects spanned numerous countries and continents. His intellectual biography will be traced in this book, informed by dozens of unpublished manuscripts and rare volumes. Hero to some and scoundrel to others, Rodkinson's life was a complex and consequential pilgrimage from Hasidism to combative Haskalah, eventually anticipating and inspiring the neo-Romantic trends of the early twentieth century. Rodkinson is not merely a marker or a case study: his writings stand between and challenge familiar genres of the literature of Hasidism and the Haskalah. Moreover, his works not only reflected but also, more importantly, invented religious realities that shaped the self-awareness of his readers and catalyzed the formulation of spiritual and community life among Jews, who took his ideas to heart in surprising ways.

In current scholarship, Rodkinson is frequently mentioned in passing as a Hasidic author or an untiring if marginal publisher, but such notions are usually based on the criticism of his opponents and not Rodkinson's own writings, which for decades lay scattered and lost to the public eye. Yet there was no intellectual trend in which Rodkinson did not take part, even if he never stayed with any one of them for long. An examination of his lifelong role as a catalyzing

agent of varied cultural phenomena, a survey of his diverse publishing activities in a number of countries, and an examination of his books themselves at respective stages will reward the reader with a new, thought-provoking, and frequently entertaining vantage point on pivotal events from the margins of the Jewish world.

Starting out as a prolific author who was among the first to publish Hasidic hagiography in the 1860s (the second stage of printing Hasidic hagiography after *Shivhei ha-Besht* [In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov]), Rodkinson quickly became a partisan of the Haskalah, lending his literary strength to religious reform, posing solutions to political antisemitism, and writing popular and widely read studies of Hasidism. His witty journalistic style, along with his founding of a newspaper with no clear ideological bent, place him among the pioneers of the nascent modern Jewish journalism. Not satisfied with his accomplishments, at the end of his days he attempted to present an English translation of the Babylonian Talmud as the basis for his envisioned reform of Judaism in America. He became an American reformer who was not part of the official Reform movement—clearing an alternative trail for Reform Judaism, a path not taken.

The changes Rodkinson underwent in his life, as well as his innovative approaches to Hebrew journalism and to the problem of modern political antisemitism (which in his eyes led necessarily to particular religious reforms), aroused fierce controversy in his own day. Some tried to describe him as an amoral and corrupt hypocrite, a man who changed his skin to match his surroundings. Due to a complete misunderstanding of the nature of Rodkinson's publishing and journalistic endeavors, which made room for a variety of literatures and gave voice to every intellectual stream of his day, his opponents painted him as a mercenary or even a modern-day Satan. This understanding has persisted even to the present day, and an arresting historical figure and the cultural trends he represented have been lost in the process.

*Literary Hasidism* aims to present a completely different picture of this colorful and prolific innovator who, if not always original or profound in his ideas, was creative and even groundbreaking in

the ways he tried to disseminate those ideas and attempted to renew Jewish society through creating new literary and journalistic forms. At the center of the book stands Rodkinson's unusual and evolving relationship with Hasidism over the course of his life, a relationship that reflected the variety within the Jewish world of his century and even presaged new trends in our own time.

*Literary Hasidism* consists of an introduction and three chapters. It opens by telling the story of Rodkinson's most notable opponents (among them Ephraim Deinard), whose stories are so much a part of Rodkinson's, and whose perspectives on him and his work have shaped his portrayal by scholars until today. The first chapter includes the first substantial biography of Rodkinson to be written, describing his work as a publisher along with the varied responses to that work. The next two chapters, turning from the chronological to the thematic, complement the biography with a systematic examination of Rodkinson's relationship to Hasidic hagiography and to Hasidism in general over the course of his life. The resulting picture is meant to provide a different perspective on one of the central phenomena in Hasidic printing in those years: the appearance of hagiography as an established genre. The second chapter focuses on Rodkinson's publication in his early years, in which he published collections of Hasidic hagiographies, and recounts the reception of these "little booklets" in various communities. In the third chapter, I describe his writings on Hasidism from the mid-1870s, when his shift toward the Haskalah led him to cast Hasidism in a different light (in a positivist historical mode), until his final days in America, when he was already far from both of those ideological worlds. The book closes with observations on Rodkinson's influence on the writers of the neo-Hasidic movement who sprang up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A Hebrew version of this work appeared in 2012, as *Shivhei Rodkinson: Michael Levi Rodkinson and Hasidism* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 248 pages). In this English translation, new materials are presented, particularly from the Archives of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the last chapter has been expanded.