

In order to bring the intellectual biographies of hasidic thinkers out of the realm of hagiography and into the domain of history, biographical details have to be set in a multiplicity of contexts.⁸ Previous works on Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica have largely viewed the Izbica tradition as an extension of the Przysucha–Kotsk (Kock) tradition from which it emerged. When speaking specifically about Mordecai Joseph Leiner, this is largely correct. However, Gershon Henoch represents a shift in this hasidic community, shared by his contemporary Rabbi Zaddok Hacoheh Rabinowitz of Lublin among others, whereby the hasidic master began to engage with the broader intellectual environment. Although these masters were unique individuals in their own right, they were also products of a changing Poland, an environment which was being inundated with modern ideas and technology. Gershon Henoch could not have educated himself so widely in modern languages and natural sciences, for example, if he had not been the product of a Poland where cultural persecution was abating and economic barriers against Jews were being removed. His concern with unifying diverse traditions of Jewish learning was equally a response to trends in the wider Jewish world outside his hasidic community. Setting Gershon Henoch in these contexts—the secular history of Congress Poland and the wider intellectual history of contemporary Polish Jewry—enables us to achieve a new appreciation of nineteenth-century hasidism.

Rabbi Gershon Henoch is particularly interesting because of the way his thought combined messianic and mystical strains with a sophisticated understanding of science and medicine. He is best known for his discovery and advocacy of a species he claimed was the *hilazon*, or 'tint-fish', for making the blue dye called *tekkhelet* described in Numbers 15: 38 as the colour of one of the ritual fringes worn on the corners of garments, and especially of prayer-shawls.⁹ However, his work on reinstating this ancient lost custom is not distinct from his other literary projects; all his efforts were driven by an underlying messianic impulse founded on his family's tradition that his grandfather had initiated the beginning of the messianic era. Before developing these points further, two issues need to be addressed. First, briefly to survey the political and ideological changes that were taking place in the Kingdom and which affected its hasidic communities in the mid-nineteenth century. Second, to consider more closely the split between Rabbi Menahem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotsk and Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica in 1830, which resulted in the birth of Izbicer hasidism.

⁸ On this see Ada Rapoport-Albert, 'Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism', in A. Rapoport-Albert and S. Zipperstein (eds.), *Essays in Jewish Historiography* (Atlanta, Ga., 1991) 119–59.

⁹ See Rabbi Isaac Heroz, *The Royal Blue Thread and the Biblical Blue: Argaman and Tekhelet* (Jerusalem 1987), esp 114–19. Cf. Rabbi Zvi Cohen, *Tsitsit vetekhelet* (1993), ch. 21.