Let us begin by considering a remarkable historical phenomenon. Hasidism originated in eastern Europe in the second third of the eighteenth century, crystallized and flourished there from the turn of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth, and continues to flourish to the present day, despite the tremendous challenges associated with the confrontation with modernity in the twentieth century and the murder of a large part of the hasidic world in the Holocaust. There are significant hasidic communities today in Europe, Israel, North America, South America, and Australia. No other movement in modern Jewish history has managed to sustain itself over three centuries in such a variety of historical and linguistic locales and contexts, and in such different social, cultural, and existential circumstances. One is bound to ask why this should be so. But to answer this question one has to start from the beginning.

2 | R. Aryeh Kaplan (New York, 1934-1983), *The Chassidic Masters and Their Teachings*, p. 4

“The earlier Kabbalah tried to bring man into heaven. The main idea of Chasidus was to bring heaven into man.”


“Happiness at happy times shines bright and clear, but the joy wrestled from the abyss of despair can transform the world... It wasn’t as though the Baal Shem Tov introduced joy to Judaism... but for the Baal Shem Tov, joy was more than a detail of Jewish life; it was a path of its own - the key and central path... and perhaps most fascinating, the Baal Shem Tov understood joy as a device to repair the world, as a key to redemption.

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1 Elior writes that although “the various hasidic communities differed in their way of life, social identity, and spiritual orientation... they were bound together by a shared consciousness of spiritual renewal, mystical insight, and charismatic leadership... they also produced an impressively distinctive body of literature.” She further posits that “the search for common denominators unifying the various hasidic groups yields four factors: (1) A relationship to the Ba’al Shem Tov. Direct and indirect identification with the spiritual legacy of Israel Ba’al Shem Tov, who is universally regarded as the founder of hasidism, and with his disciples and their disciples as bearers, interpreters, and disseminators of his teaching...” (Elior, p. 2)
...The joy of Chasidism, then, is not a naive joy, nor the dizzy, unbridled enthusiasm of a crazed fanatic. It is joy with a purpose - because we see what is broken, therefore we search for the key to heal it. And the twist of that key is the sincere joy within our hearts.

4 | R. David Cohen (ha-Rav ha-Nazir; Jerusalem, 1887-1972), Kol ha-Nevu’ah p. 126

The primary message of the Hasidic idea, founded by R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, is that the infinite creator, blessed be He, fills the entire universe as well as encompassing it, within, and that there is no place devoid of His presence, even the lowliest matters - Divinity is in everything, sustaining it, and all things are filled with the lifeforce of the Creator, blessed be He. The Besht relies upon R. Sa’adiah Gaon.

5 | Martin Buber, The Legend of the Baal Shem (trans. Maurice Friedman), Author’s introduction to 1907 German ed.

And suddenly, among the village Jews of Poland and Little Russia, there arose a movement in which mysticism and saga flowed together into a single stream. Mysticism became the possession of the people and at the same time assimilated into itself the whole narrative armour of the saga. And in the dark, despised East, among simple, unlearned villagers, the throne was prepared for the child of a thousand years.

The legend is the myth of I and Thou, of the caller and the called, the finite which enters into the infinite and the infinite which has need of the finite.

The legend of the Baal-Shem is not the history of a man but the history of a calling. It does not tell of a destiny but of a vocation. Its end is already contained in its beginning, and a new beginning in its end.

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2 "Given the importance assigned to reincarnation in the Besht’s cultural environment, it is not surprising that he saw fit to discover how he himself had previously been incarnated. We learn about this from the testimony of R. Alexander the Shochet, who served as the Besht’s ‘scribe’ for several years... 'I heard from my father in law of blessed memory that the Besht said of himself, that he is the reincarnation of R. Saadiah Gaon [Iraq, 882-942]. And I told this to the Rabbi of our community. And that Rabbi said he knew that the Besht used to studiously pore over books by said R. Saadiah Gaon." (Etkes, p. 50). The Lubavitcher Rebbe spoke often about R. Saadiah Gaon, writing once (Igrot Kodesh vol. 1, p. 101):

3 ב mogelijkות של התפשטות לכל קבוצות על-פי שונים replay, במקסיקו נתיב חומת ספור...

4 [Igrot Kodesh vol. 1, p. 101]. The Lubavitcher Rebbe spoke often about R. Saadiah Gaon, writing once (Igrot Kodesh vol. 1, p. 101):

5 The legend is the myth of I and Thou, of the caller and the called, the finite which enters into the infinite and the infinite which has need of the finite.

The legend of the Baal-Shem is not the history of a man but the history of a calling. It does not tell of a destiny but of a vocation. Its end is already contained in its beginning, and a new beginning in its end.
R. Kalonymus Kalanish Shapira, Hy”d (Pisacezno Rebbe; Poland, 1889-1943), Bnei Machshava Tovah, p. 7

Our goal is not new or any different from the goal of any Jewish person. For our desire and aim is to serve God, the Lord of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov. A perfect Divine service, a complete Divine service with all our our limbs, body and soul, and every fibre of our being shall not deviate from the holiness of God that rests on us, encompassing us...

Not only through prayer and Divine service alone shall we feel our closeness to God and enjoy the glow of His honor, rather we must strive to always direct our thoughts to be so strongly attached to His holiness, until we may transcend our senses, for it is not enough that the corporeal senses do not confuse and frustrate our thoughts - saying ‘you merely are perceiving the physical world around you’, but that our senses should be subdued under the thoughts of our heart, and they too shall perceive the holiness of God enshrouding all reality.

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3 “Leading figure of what may be called “philosophical neo-Hasidism” among Eastern European Jews in the pre-Holocaust era. A tireless author, journalist, and polemicist... offering a bold new vision of contemporary spiritual life grounded in his reading of Hasidic sources. Zeitlin sought to become an activist as well as a literary figure. He was especially concerned with the situation of the rootless Jewish youth. Throughout his career as a public figure, beginning shortly after World War I, he issued calls for a new organization of Jewish life. In a series of articles published in the 1920s, he sought to form an elite Jewish spiritual fraternity to be called Yavneh, which was the most fully elaborated of his attempts at intentional community.” (Green & Mayse, Introduction)
When it comes to the essence of Chassidut - and its innovation regarding the aspects of Torah revealed through it - many explanations have been given. Amongst them:

1) In the time of the Besht, the world was in a fainting fuge state, and through the revelation of the Besht and the Torah of Chassidut, the world was roused from this state.

2) "A Chassid is one who strives to go beyond the letter of The Law..."

3) "The value of Chassidut is that natural strengths become spiritual, Godly strengths." As our sainted teacher, the Ba’al ha-Tanya and Shulchan Aruch stated: "the entire matter of Chassidut is to change the nature of our traits" - not just to change the 'natural traits', but the nature of the traits.

4) The Torah of Chassidut innovated the idea that each and every person, even those who don't possess a lofty soul and have yet to refine themselves, can apprehend Godliness. Because of the fact that the Torah of Chassidut explained all the 'secret' matters within the Torah and drew them down to us by use of practical examples and parables relating to the soul and its powers - 'from mine own flesh I shall envision God' - the possibility was granted for everyone to attain such a portion in the Torah...

Nevertheless...

To the east, Du/ To the west, Du/ To the north, Du/ To the south, Du/ In front, Du/ Behind, Du/ Du, Du - ‘A Dudele’, R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740-1810)

It is a well-known fact that the emotional world of Hasidism exercised a strong fascination upon men who were primarily concerned with the spiritual regeneration of Judaism. They soon perceived that the writings of the Hasidim contained more fruitful and original ideas than those of their rationalistic opponents, the Maskilim, and that the reborn Hebrew culture could find much of value in the heritage of Hasidism. Even so restrained a critic as Ahad Haam wrote around 1900, in a critical essay on modern Hebrew literature: “To our shame we must admit that if today we want to find even a shadow of original Hebrew literature, we must turn to the literature of Hasidism; there, rather than in the literature of the Hashalah, one occasionally encounters, in addition to much that is purely fanciful, true profundity of thought which bears the mark of the original Jewish genius.”
The Besht was sorely troubled by the problems that beset the persecuted and the humiliated Jews. He had no use for the preachers who would berate the people for their sinfulness and threaten them with hellfire and brimstone. He was moved to anger on one occasion when he learned that there was a preacher in the synagogue who was “slandering the people of Israel”—that is, castigating them for their transgressions. Word of the Besht’s consternation reached those assembled at the synagogue, who promptly left before the sermon was over. The preacher asked the Besht the next day to explain why he had been so angered. The legend has it that “the Besht sprang from his seat, scattering tearsdrops from his face, and said: ‘You speak ill of the Jews! Don’t you realize that the Jew goes out every day to earn a living, and toward evening he begins to hurry because he worries about missing the time for his prayers? So he goes into a house and prays, without even knowing what he is saying, and still the angels of heaven are deeply moved by this prayer.’” 39 Another tale about the Besht relates that he performed an