Rebellion is at the root of chasidism.

If that sounds a little far-fetched, an Israeli scholar pointed out that while the insular group is often thought of as being out of touch with the modern world, its members are trendsetters because of their ability to continually transform their practices in response to modernity.

This dynamic has provided a model for other movements and has dramatically changed the way modern Jews practice religion, said Dr. Uriel Gellman, a professor of Jewish history in the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel.

“As a cultural entity it [chasidism] still has power in Jewish life,” Gellman told more than 100 gathered March 4 at the fifth annual Polish-Jewish studies workshop held at Rutgers University’s Douglass College Center in New Brunswick.

Gellman is one of eight international scholars who collaborated on writing “Hasidism: A New History,” recently published by Princeton University Press. He had been scheduled to appear at the program, sponsored by the university’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, with coauthor, Marcin Wodzinski — a Jewish history professor at Poland’s University of Wroclaw — who took sick.

The idea of redefining focus and practice while maintaining a connection to Judaism — a concept pioneered by chasidism — set a pattern that has influenced other Jewish movements’ reaction to modernity from Zionism to secularism to other streams that differ from traditional Orthodoxy, noted Gellman, who also said that the chasidic movement continues to evolve.

He said while many authorities think the golden age of chasidism was in the early 19th century, in reality, “that was the first golden age.”

A second golden age began after World War II, said Gellman, that reshaped the movement so much that it is undergoing an even greater renaissance right now with diverse groups expanding their presence and evolving their practices, from Chabad, which openly engages with the broader Jewish community, to the insular Satmar.

“It’s an important movement and to understand its history is to understand modern Jewish history, especially in Eastern Europe, and the different trends in Judaism,” said Gellman, adding the collaboration of disparate scholars with backgrounds in social and religious history who produced his book have provided the first complete history and social impact of the movement up to the present time.

“Chasidism came about out of crisis in the late 18th century,” said Gellman, as the Jewish communities in Lithuania and Poland faced social and financial upheaval on two fronts. The government limited Jewish rights and levied taxes on the community. From within, rabbis quibbled and high-level Jewish learning was exclusive for select students.

Out of this crisis came a group of scholars who were in open rebellion against the status quo of the Jewish community, which would lead to the chasidic movement, said Gellman.

“It was an important mass movement,” said Gellman. “It was a rebellion going against the elite, the intellectuals, and rabbis of the Jewish community in Poland.”
Ironically, he said the person credited with founding the chasidic movement, Israel Ben Eliezer — also known as the Baal Shem Tov — was a member of that elite.

“He had a job; he was a mystic, a kabbalist,” said Gellman of Ben Eliezer, who died in 1760. “He was a shaman, a popular healer. He had new mystical ideas.”

The groundwork for the movement was laid in the latter part of the 18th century by a small group of rebel kabbalists who followed Ben Eliezer, but Gellman said the movement did not really gain political and religious influence until after his death.

As it began to spread geographically and demographically, and its teachings were written down, followers needed someone to cite as their founder so, “They looked back and created a founder: the Baal Shem Tov,” said Gellman.

Today, most chasidim live in the United States and Israel — “places where chasidism has never been” until after World War II — and now this once “mystical, radical” movement against what was then traditional Orthodoxy continues to transform itself as a “radical alternative” to the secular world, said Gellman.

“There are now more chasidim living in the New York area than ever lived in Galicia in Poland,” once a centralized location for the movement, he said.

“Chasidism has shaped modern Jewish history,” said Gellman. “In a paradoxical way the movement showed how to face challenges and when challenged how it was able to recreate itself.”

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