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UNDERSTANDING HASIDIC JEWS

PART 2: ORIGINS; DISTINCTIVE BELIEFS



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PART TWO: ORIGINS; DISTINCTIVE BELIEFS

HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

A king once had a daughter who was good, pleasant, beautiful and perfect. He married her to a royal prince, and clothed, crowned and bejeweled her, giving her much money.

Is it possible for the king to ever leave his daughter? You will agree that it is not. Is it possible for him to be with her constantly? You will also agree that it is not. What can he then do? He can place a window between the two, and whenever the father needs the daughter, or the daughter needs the father, they can come together through the window. Bahir, section 54.

This little story has more than one layer of meaning. On one level it illustrates the natural longing of God as Father to have communication with that part of divinity which He has placed within every human being: compare Genesis 3:8-9. But the story is also intended to illustrate the mysteries of the inner nature of the Infinite God and his relations with the finite world He has created. In its setting the story is used to illustrate one of the concepts of the Kabbalah (tradition) that has been handed down within the mystical stream of Judaism. The Daughter represents the lowest *sefirah* (emanation), *Malkhut* (kingship) who gives birth to all creation while the King, *Hokhmah* (wisdom), who is almost the highest *sefirah*, must divorce himself from creation yet still be intimately connected with it; hence the 'window'. The window also stands for the soul through which human beings have access to God.

The story is found in the *Bahir* (Brightness), one of the most ancient Kabbalah texts. This short text was first put into writing and made available to a small circle of mystics in Provence around 1176 AD, but the traditional attribution of authorship to R. Nehunia ben haKana, a Talmudic mystic and sage of the 1st century AD is not altogether implausible. As Jehuda Liebes has shown, the separating out of

the different attributes of the One God into virtually distinct entities that is so characteristic of Kabbalah goes back to the Talmud, in particular the story told in various forms of the struggle that takes place between Strict Justice and Mercy as God deals with His people.¹

Liebes has also traced back the basic Kabbalah ‘myth’ or creation story to syncretistic Jewish/Orphic groups in Egypt in the second century BC.² The elements of this story include the idea of a Creator God as without limit, the *Ein-Sof* of the Kabbalah; the concept of *tzimtzum*, that is, the divine self-contraction that allowed a finite creation to emerge from a timeless and limitless God; and ‘the breaking of the shells’ that ensued from that self-contraction and resulted in the *kelipot* (shells/ vessels) and the *sitra ahara* (the other side), that is, in alien or evil elements opposed to the infinite God.

It is impossible to understand the Hasidic movement that emerged in the 18th century without some appreciation of the mystic stream within Judaism and the Kabbalah, the main vehicle of its expression. But here it is worth repeating Gershom Scholem’s warning:

It is a dangerous task to summarize in a few chapters [let alone in a few paragraphs!] a religious movement covering many centuries.³

JEWISH MYSTICISM

Mysticism has been defined in various ways; a good definition, which Scholem adopts, is that mysticism refers to,

the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence. It is religion in its most acute, intense and living stage.⁴

Within Protestant Christianity it is perhaps fair to say that the mystical element of religion is encountered only by exception rather than as a norm. But in our time there has been a growing interest in the ‘spirituality’ of other forms of Christianity; hence the popularity of a book such as Gerard Hughes’ *God of Surprises*; and the growing interest in different forms of meditative prayer, including, for example, the Temple model of worship set out in Mark Stibbe’s *Drawing Near to God*.

There is more than one form of Jewish mysticism; they are often intertwined. One form involves adoration of God and contemplation of His attributes; this includes the desire to attain the obliteration of self-consciousness and union with God that is familiar to us from certain forms of Christian mysticism: Moshe Idel calls this 'ecstatic mysticism'.⁵ Perhaps Paul's being caught up into the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12: 2-4) is an example of this type.⁶

Closely related to this form of Jewish mysticism is 'mystical theurgy': this involves intense prayer directed at bringing about a change within God Himself but with consequential effects upon human beings, such as imploring God to let His Mercy override His Stern Judgement in relation to His people who are still in exile. Scholem describes this kind of prayer as,

*a mystical action which has an influence on the spheres through which the mystic moves in his Kawwanah [prayer with concentration and intention] ... Since Kawwanah is of a spiritual nature, it can achieve something in the spiritual world.*⁷

Both the 'mystical ecstasy' and the 'mystical theurgy' forms of Jewish mysticism require great preparation, in particular the cultivation of *devekut* by the *zaddik*, that is, constant prayer and awareness of God. Of the spiritual practices required, the most important are weeping and the cultivation of 'the ascent of the soul'. Certain (to Christians, problematic) psychological 'techniques' were also used to attain a paranormal state of consciousness. These include visualizing the respective colours of the *sefirot* (the attributes of God) and the 'combination of letters'. This latter practice consists of orally repeating combinations of the Hebrew letters of the various Divine names.⁸

A further type of Jewish mysticism is what Idel terms 'the magical-talismanic model'.⁹ This involves the mystic through his prayer or ritual actions drawing down spiritual forces into the material world, typically to effect healing. The magical element here comes through the use of the letters of divine names as if they had some intrinsic power of their own. But certain *zaddikim* regarded this practice as improper use of the divine name, as, for example R. Isaac of Drohobyz who took this matter up with the Besht, who was well known for his healing powers and his ability to see

things happening at a remote distance.¹⁰ In a similar vein, R. Nachman of Bratslav is reported to have said,

*...we must not force ourselves to visualize the ineffable Name [the Tetragrammaton] when it does not come to mind of its own accord, for that is called 'taking the princess captive.'*¹¹

The Hasidic masters were quite aware of the danger of trying to force God's will by such 'magical' means and sought to avoid it. So, we find the Seer of Lublin, who was also well known for his healing ministry, telling his disciples:

*I do not pray for anything unless I see in advance whether it is the divine will to pray for it.*¹²

The Hasidic masters were the heirs to these various different kinds of Jewish mysticism; so Scholem terms Hasidism 'the latest phase' of Jewish mysticism.¹³

Here it is important to grasp, that for the four centuries between the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal in 1492 until the beginnings of the Haskalah (the Jewish rationalistic 'enlightenment movement') at the end of the 18th century, the mystical stream was the predominant element within Judaism as a whole.

During this period the Zohar, the principal text of Kabbalah, was accorded virtual canonical status alongside the Talmud and the Hebrew Scriptures. In this period the Kabbalah of the Zohar was further developed into its most complex and sophisticated form within the mystical circle based in Safed by first, R. Cordovero and then R. Isaac Luria.

As to the dominance of the Jewish Kabbalah mysticism in this period, Scholem can go so far as to say,

*The Lurianic Kabbalah was the last religious movement in Judaism the influence of which became preponderant among all sections of the Jewish people and in every country of the diaspora, without exception.*¹⁴

This is not to say that the complex hidden knowledge of the Kabbalah became the possession of ordinary, unlearned Jews but rather that the Rabbis in the main

accepted Kabbalah as a principal component of their religious heritage. However, within Lurianic Kabbalah there was a strong underlying Messianism which together with a resurgence of apocalyptic expectations around 1665 captured popular imagination. This led to the phenomenon of Sabbatai Sevi, the mentally unbalanced Kabbalist who believed himself to be the promised Messiah and was persuaded by Nathan of Gaza to declare that conviction publicly. In the end, however, under pressure from the Sultan he renounced his Jewish faith and spent his last years as a convert to Islam. Before that, almost all the Jewish world from one end of the Diaspora to the other had acknowledged him as God's appointed Messiah only to have their hopes dashed.¹⁵

It was in the aftermath of this debacle that Hasidism emerged as a 'popular movement' in Eastern Europe, not only attracting the support of a great many Rabbis, as with the Kabbalah of the 15th to 17th centuries, but also permeating the rank and file of numerous ordinary Jews from all social levels.

THE RISE OF HASIDISM

What is the true explanation for the remarkable fact that within two or three generations the movement purportedly founded by R. Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov (the Besht) (1700 – 1760), was to become, despite fierce opposition, the predominant form of Judaism in Eastern Europe? This was a movement marked by the classic signs of religious revival –intense prayer, swaying and strange movements in prayer, shouting, singing and dancing. The movement was to generate a remarkable number of individual religious leaders of great stature and spiritual perceptiveness, and was eventually able to neutralize its opponents. The measure of its success was that by about 1830 Hasidic prayer houses had been set up in most of the Jewish towns of settlement within the old kingdom of Poland-Lithuania that had been partitioned in stages between Austria, Prussia and Russia. In some towns the Hasidic leaders by this time had gained control of appointments to the official synagogues.¹⁶

Writing in 1972, Benzion Dinur could comment,

*But despite the extensive literature of and about Hasidism, I feel that there is no adequate explanation for its astonishing success.*¹⁷

Dinur was dissatisfied by the historical explanations that had come down to him. The first serious attempt to trace the rise of Hasidism was made by the late 19th century scholar, Simon Dubnow. He subjected the tales about the Besht and his disciple, R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, to the critical analysis that was often applied to the life of Jesus: that is, by stripping out what he deemed to be purely legendary material he attempted to arrive at the historical kernel. For Dubnow the Hasidic phenomenon was essentially a response to the religious elite losing touch with ordinary Jewish people and failing to be concerned with their spiritual and material needs. Certainly one of the main criticisms made by the Besht of the religious leaders of his day was that they pursued studies mainly for the sake of honour and reputation among themselves.

Dinur himself took up this lead and explained the rise of Hasidism in terms of social opposition to the degeneration and corruption of the traditional leadership in the Jewish *kahal* of each town or city where Jews had settled. From hints in the *mussar* literature (preachers' sermons rebuking social and moral evils) and the Hasidic tales, Dinur built up a picture of a powerful and oppressive Jewish elite comprising rich merchants and holders of government leases bearing down on ordinary and poverty-stricken Jews such as sub-tenant farmers and tavern-keepers, schoolteachers, meat-slaughterers, with even some rabbis and scholars being forced to beg for gifts. The Hasidic movement by contrast set up a new communal leadership seeking to defend sub-tenants and those burdened by debt, and increasingly to appoint the 'lower clergy' (cantors, preachers, meat-slaughters) and sometimes, even Rabbis.¹⁸

In effect Dinur rejected 'religious' explanations such as that put forward by Gershom Scholem in his very influential *Major Trends*. For Scholem Hasidism, which he saw as 'a typical revivalist movement', was a response to the failure of Sabbatai Sevi; it was 'an attempt to preserve those elements of Kabbalism which were capable of evoking a popular response but stripped of their Messianic flavor'.¹⁹

NEW HISTORICAL SOURCES

Until quite recently only Jewish sources had been available for the study of Hasidism, that is, the writings of the Hasidim themselves, their orthodox opponents, the Mitnaggedim, and those of the Maskilim, the leaders of the new Jewish Enlightenment. A new dimension opened up in 1978 when for the first time since the beginning of World War II foreign academics were allowed access to the Polish archival collections. Moshe Rosman, a young Jewish academic working on a project exploring relations between the Jews in Poland and the Polish magnates was given permission to examine the records of the Czartoryski family who in the 18th century owned the town of Miedzyboz (in Podolia, now part of the Ukraine) which the Besht had made his home.²⁰ Rosman was soon to find the Besht's name in the tax rolls. He first appears in 1742 being described as *Balsem w domu kahalskim* (the Ba'al Shem in the Kahal house). Because this house was the property of the synagogue, it was tax-exempt. So the last entry, for 1760, the year the Besht died, describes him as *Balszam Doctor liber* (the Ba'al Shem, the Doctor, exempt). The entries not only showed that the Besht actually existed but that he was recognized by the authorities as a healer and was part of the official synagogue establishment. From other records of the town he appears not to have been a social activist or have been seen as a threat by the *kahal*. The records also show that the town was quite prosperous and attracted Jewish incomers from neighboring districts.

Rosman went public about the significance of Polish records for the study of Hasidism in an essay in 1987,²¹ and in 1996²² he published a full study based on Polish archives, as well as the Hasidic material, attempting to piece together the life of the Besht. Among other things this study explored the role of a Ba'al Shem before the Besht, and drew attention to the presence of Hasidic mystics in Polish Jewry immediately before the Besht came on the scene.

Meanwhile in an important paper presented in 1988²³, Ada Rapoport-Albert systematically demolished the long-held presumptions that the Besht founded Hasidism – there were other respected co-leaders alongside him; that he appointed R. Dov Ber as his successor as head of the movement – the great Maggid was a leader among equals but did not exert any centralized authority; and that the emergence of a number of local Hasidic communities each controlled by its own *zaddik* was

a break-up of central authority – the autonomy of the local community under its leader was there from the start.

It will therefore be apparent that our understanding of the origins of the Hasidic movement which emerged about the middle of the 18th century, has recently undergone major enlargement and revision as a result of the access now gained to the Polish sources.

A new attempt to account for the rise of the Hasidic movement that uses both the Polish and Jewish materials is Glenn Dynner's *Men of Silk* published in 2006.²⁴ This study concentrates on Central Poland which following the successive dismemberments of Poland-Lithuania became the Duchy of Warsaw under Napoleon and after his overthrow the 'Congress Kingdom', a constitutional monarchy subservient to the Tsar of Russia. Dynner takes a sociological approach like Dinur before him but finds through analysis of the Polish records that the leading *zaddikim* in the period up to 1830 were all from the Rabbinic elite with the exception of the Besht and R. Dov Ber, who had more humble origins. In fact the Hasidic leaders strove to maintain good relations with the wealthy Jewish merchants and leading Jewish families like the Landaus, the Shapiros and the Rapoport, often by marrying into such families on the principle of *yibhus* – maintaining and improving family lineage. Through the power and prestige of the Sonnenberg-Bergson family, in particular, who became patrons and followers of the Hasidim, the *zaddikim* were able to obtain protection and support in high places.

Dynner, like Dinur before him, saw the Hasidic movement as identifying with and supporting lower levels of Jewish society not represented by the traditional Jewish establishment, but for Dynner 'the tour de force of the Polish *zaddikim* was their achievement of grassroots support despite their elitist orientation.'²⁵

This sociological analysis appears convincing up to a point. However, because Dynner is seeking to counter the importance often attached to the purely religious or spiritual factors behind the rise of Hasidism, he downplays their role. But in his conclusion, he acknowledges this other dimension by citing one of the Besht's illustrations in which he compared an outside observer of Hasidism to 'a deaf man who happens upon a group of blissfully dancing Jews. Unable to hear the music, the man assumes that the dancers are complete lunatics.'²⁶ In fact, as earlier scholars, especially Gershom Scholem, observed, the rise of Hasidism was in a real sense a

spiritual revival or renewal within Judaism. Dynner himself is, in places, at a loss to explain what is happening in sociological terms alone. So, for example, he wonders why wealthy Jewish patrons meekly accepted the Seer of Lublin's far from flattering estimation of them,²⁷ and cannot explain why Temerel, Berek Bergson's widow, was so exceedingly generous and zealous in her support of the Hasidic cause.²⁸

For many a Christian it may be difficult to conceive of a spiritual revival or regeneration taking place in a non-Christian setting. Yet our God is concerned with all the nations of the world and often prepares for the extension of His kingdom by bringing about shifts and changes within the prevailing culture and religion of a people whom He is already preparing to reach.²⁹ The regeneration of Judaism through the Hasidic movement should be an encouragement to us to pray for the Hasidic Jews of our day. But, in order to be able to understand and relate to such Jews, we must also consider how Jewish mysticism was modified and adapted in the course of drawing in a broader body of adherents.

THE BROADER REACH OF HASIDISM

A preliminary question that must first be addressed is: just to which Jews did Hasidism extend the mystical stream of Judaism? Here it is important to appreciate that Hasidism is not a monolithic religious system, although there is a pervading core of beliefs. So on this question and others there are different emphases and nuances. One strong line of thought is summarized by Dinur thus:

[T]he Hasidim stood apart from the masses [this means the bulk of ordinary Jews] and wished to be distinguished from them. Their aim was to elevate the masses to a higher spiritual plateau, one that was within their reach, but not to require each and every one of them to be a Hasid.³⁰

This view is supported by the analogy that was made at an early stage of the movement by R. Yaakov Yosef of Polennoye who was the first to publish an account of the teachings of the Besht. In this analogy the *zaddik* and the Jews whom he serves are compared respectively to form and matter or alternatively the soul and the body:

The zaddikim are the form, and the masses of the people are the matter, the bodily. The purpose of this division is that the zaddik should bring the masses to repentance ... 31

On the other hand, R. Nachman of Bratslav could speak of there being something of the *zaddik* in the ordinary but devout Jew. In urging his followers not to be above accepting the admonition of friends, he comments:

*You should also discuss religious matters with your friend. Because every single Jew possesses a unique good point which is not found in any other, and from which his friend can receive inspiration.*³²

It should also be borne in mind that the writings of the great *zaddikim* such as Schneur Zalman's *Tanya* and Nachman of Bratslav's *Likkutey Moharan* are not addressed to fellow-*zaddikim* but to their followers, albeit somewhat scholarly ones, which is why the latter work was simplified for more ordinary folk as the *Likutey Etzot/ Advice*.

Thus it seems fair to say that, while the *zaddik* has a special mediatorial, almost redemptive, role in Hasidism (see further below), the Hasidic leaders were concerned to spread downwards as much of their religious practice as their followers at various levels were able to adopt. Their followers ranged from close disciples to educated lay people such as wealthy merchants, but also to artisans having little time and energy left over from earning their living.

MODIFICATION AND ADAPTATION IN REACHING THE COMMON FOLK

The immanence of God and Providence

As noted already, the creation story of the Kabbalah is in part intended to deal with the problem: how can an infinite God who has created a finite, material world be both outside that world (transcendent) and yet at work within His Creation (immanent)? The form of Kabbalah adopted by the Hasidim put a greater emphasis on the immanence of God than is found in Lurianic Kabbalah. The teachings of the Hasidic masters in this area are complex and have their own individual slants but fairly representative is Nachman of Bratslav's declaration:

*It is necessary to know that 'the whole earth is full of His glory' (Isaiah 6:3), and that 'there is no place empty of Him' and that He fills all the worlds and surrounds all the worlds.*³³

From this broad principle Nachman goes on to claim that something of God may be found in all material things and in all pagan languages because without God's vitality they would have no life or existence. The same applies to the great city of Rome, that is, a highly secular or pagan society. The practical point Nachman is making is that the devout Jew can still serve God while immersed in a seemingly alien environment.

Another consequence of God's intimate involvement in His world is that even when someone commits a sin, 'His blessed providence is present even there ... the Holy One is surely present – but in great hiddenness and concealment.'³⁴ But because nothing happens apart from God, 'we have to bear everything with patience, in the faith that it is all for our good. "Everything that God does He does for good."³⁵ The teaching here is essentially that of Genesis 45:5, 50:20 and Romans 8:28.³⁶

Thus the emphasis on God's providence is clearly relevant to the presence of evil and suffering in the world. Norman Lamm relates how one of the Hasidic leaders who ministered in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust gave weekly talks which 'sound like a catalogue of Hasidic thinking on evil in the first generations of the movement'. Lamm adds that 'the movement's remarkable growth in the postwar world' owes something to its capacity to deal with 'the most troubling of questions for those of its adherents who did not lose their faith'.³⁷

Metempsychosis

Metempsychosis is the idea that individual Jewish souls have had previous existences in the lives of Jews of old. In Lurianic Kabbalah this doctrine received some prominence, but it rarely surfaces in the Hasidic writings so that a Hasidic understanding of the doctrine is not properly spelt out.

It would seem the general understanding is that a soul may pass through many reincarnations, God's intention being to put right the faults caused by previous transgressions but that a truly righteous person might escape reincarnation altogether.³⁸ This is brought out in one of the Tales where the Maggid of Zlotchov comes across a man who had died a short while ago. "What are you doing here?" he

asked. ‘The Rabbi knows’ said the dead man ‘that in this night souls are incarnated anew. I am such a soul.’”

The man goes on to relate that before his death he had thought over his life and found:

I had always acted in just the right way. Because of this my heart swelled with satisfaction and in the midst of this feeling I died. So, now they have sent me back into the world to atone for my pride.

The story ends with the note that at the time, a son was born to the Maggid. ‘His name was Rabbi Wolf. He was very humble’ (*Tales*, Book 1, p. 158).

It should be stressed, however, that in Hasidism the idea of souls having a previous existence does not lessen each individual’s accountability to God for the way they live their life. For example, Nachman of Bratslav can write of,

*the great Day of Judgement when each individual will be brought to judgement for every detail of every action in his life.*³⁹

In another place, he speaks of those who are found wanting thus:

*The pity one should have for the souls in the World to Come is unimaginable. Because there are souls which are left literally naked. They cry out bitterly but there is no one to take pity...*⁴⁰

Cleaving to God

A pre-eminent characteristic of Hasidism is the obligation to strive for *devekut* (“dedication”, traditionally “clinging on” to God) at all times, including the times of ‘walking, sleeping or rising’ or of profane conversations with one’s fellowman’. In Hasidism, as opposed to the forms of Jewish mysticism which preceded it, this concept of worship ‘assumes a totality of scope which it had rarely entertained before’.⁴¹

Previously *devekut* was conceived of as the high point of the mystic’s ascent to God, but now it becomes a commandment binding on everyone. While *devekut* in the

sense of making ‘ascents through all the worlds’ and ‘achieving unification’ is the preserve of the *zaddik*, the importance of deep and constant prayer was laid upon every Hasidic Jew. So R. Nachman urges his followers,

Our very life-force comes through prayer. You must pray with all your strength... ⁴²

But clearly constant communion with God is difficult for the ordinary person whose life is taken up with everyday occupations. R. Nachman of Kosov, an associate of the Besht, who was also a merchant, explained the injunction ‘I have set the Lord always before me’ (Psalm 16:8) in this way. Just as the merchant may find that dwelling on business affairs sometimes interrupts his prayers, so the opposite can be the case: while actually engaged in business, through a division of consciousness the merchant may continue in contemplation of God.⁴³ Hence the importance attached to ‘worship through corporeality’ (see Part One).

The Hasidic teachers were well aware it is not possible to maintain a high state of devotion at all times and therefore they resorted to the rhythm of *gadlut* and *katnut* which they adapted from traditional Kabbalistic theosophy. *Gadlut* now refers to a high state of communion with God, and *katnut* to a lower one in which *devekut* is a struggle, for example because of melancholy, sadness or distracting thoughts. A descent into *katnut* is to be expected from time to time and provides the opportunity to climb back, as the French phrase has it, *reculer pour mieux sauter*⁴⁴.

Redemption through acts of Torah

To a Christian, the concept that fulfilment of the commands of the Law hastens the coming of Messiah is deeply problematic as it makes God’s plan for ultimate redemption of His creation ultimately dependent on human actions. The idea belongs to normative Rabbinic Judaism where it is stated in Sanhedrin 96b, that ‘redemption depends on repentance and good deeds’. In the Hasidic Tales, R. Heshel expresses the same thought:

And so whoever leads a good life today is worthy in the eyes of God and redemption depends on him (Tales, Book 2, p. 116).

In Lurianic Kabbalah the process of *tikkun* (restoration) is formulated in terms of the pious Jew, especially the mystic, through ascent of the soul and fulfilment of

commands, effecting a release of the sparks trapped in the *kelipot* ('vessels' remaining over from the 'breaking of the shells'). On this basis 'the appearance of the Messiah is nothing but the consummation of the continuous process of Restoration or *Tikkun*'.⁴⁵ But, in conjunction with apocalyptic expectations, it was but a short step to take a particular Jewish mystic, such as Sabbatai Sevi, as the one final one, that is, the Messiah, to complete the redemptive process.

Scholem claimed that when Hasidism took over these ideas it neutralized their implicit Messianic expectation, and that seems to be correct. The absence of a perfect *zaddik* is seen as one reason for the delay of the final redemption: 'Were there but one [true] *zaddik*, he could save the whole world from exile.'⁴⁶ But another reason is that the Besht related in the authentic version⁴⁷ of the famous letter to his brother-in-law, the 'Holy Epistle', that in an ascent of the soul he had a vision in which he entered the palace of the Messiah and asked him, 'When will the master come?' The reply is that it will be 'Once your Torah will have spread throughout the world.'⁴⁸ In short, only after a lengthy process of dissemination of the Hasidic teachings.

The role of the *zaddik*

The extension of a form of Jewish mysticism to the ordinary Jew made by the Hasidic movement beginning in the 18th century resulted in a considerable enhancement of the role of the *zaddik*. Previously the Jewish mystic, though greatly respected, will only have had a small circle of disciples. But with the growth of Hasidism under R. Dov Ber and his associates, who were themselves soon to become founders of the great Hasidic dynasties having their own 'Courts', the *zaddik* had a pastoral and leadership role both in his own town and often much further afield. The *zaddik* made himself available to everyone who came to him for prayer and to receive advice on spiritual and practical matters, such as business and family problems. The visitor was expected to make a gift of money to the *zaddik* so that in some cases the *zaddik* could afford luxuries such as silk clothing, riding in a carriage, and so on, but often the money received was used mainly for charitable purposes such as helping those in debt, while the *zaddik* himself lived quite modestly.

In theological terms the role of the *zaddik* was also greatly enhanced. As noted above (under 'Cleaving to God'), R. Jaakov Josef urged the common people to cleave to their *zaddik* as the appropriate way for them to fulfil the command in Deuteronomy 10:20. One reason for cleaving to the *zaddik* was that the *zaddik* through his own

devekut could bring about change, for example, ‘annul harsh decrees which the Holy One ordains ... In this manner does the *zaddik*, have power to bring life to the sick.’⁴⁹ The perceived power of the *zaddik* lay in his ability to make heavenly ascents and assist God’s Mercy to prevail over His Stern Judgment.

In some instances the *zaddik’s* role and his powers are described as those of an intermediary or redeemer. Thus the *zaddik* is expected to bestow shefa (grace or mercy) on people who are not worthy. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk wrote,

*Thus, when the zaddik bestows shefa, he is like one who does a favor (hesed) to the whole world, for he receives this grace from above, and distributes it to all below. But the source of this grace is the blessed Creator.*⁵⁰

Schneur Zalman can also write about the relationship between the *zaddik* and the one who attaches himself to him in redemptive terms:

*He who cleaves to a scholar of the Torah [in this context, the zaddik] is deemed by the Torah as if he had become attached to the very Shechinah (Divine Presence).*⁵¹

Occasionally the redemptive role of the *zaddik* is expressed in terms of making atonement as when R. Nachman claims:

*The true Tzaddikim atone for sins, as it is written: “but the wise man will bring atonement” (Proverbs 16:14).*⁵²

And again,

*There are certain Tzaddikim who take afflictions upon themselves of their own accord for the sake of the Jewish people.*⁵³

Connected to this redemptive role is the doctrine of ‘the descent of the *zaddik*’. On a simple level this refers to the need for the *zaddik* to associate with ordinary people, indulge in ‘idle words’ though in this case they are no longer idle because their purpose is to bring the *zaddik* down to the people’s level, but of course not to

participate in evil speech or actions but to raise the people to a higher level. This self-lowering also extends to making proselytes. So, R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk can write:

*In exile, even if the zaddik possesses great sanctity, he can descend from his level somewhat, and achieve a limited degree of correspondence with the proselyte who wishes to convert.*⁵⁴

In a few instances the *zaddik* is given a near-divine status. So R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch asserts:

*Who declares God as king God makes him king over all the universes; God decrees and he cancels the decree ... and the righteous create worlds.*⁵⁵

R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk later elaborates the point by writing that because the *zaddik* can create new heavens, God's decrees can be cancelled for 'they are not included in those newly created worlds.'⁵⁶

It will be readily appreciated that the *zaddik* in Hasidic thinking has certain Messianic characteristics. The Jewish scholar, Shaul Magid, in his recent book *Hasidism Incarnate* (2015) has drawn attention to what he sees as a striking parallel between certain Hasidic thinking and the Christian understanding of the *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Christ which finds expression in Philippians 2:6-11. In Kabbalistic thought the *zaddik* (and also the Messiah) is sometimes seen as equivalent to the lowest *sefirah*, *Malkhut*. A Kabbalistic writer, R. Yaakov Koppel (d. 1740), in his influential *Sha'arei Gan Eden*, argued that *Malkhut* represents at the same time both the emptying of the Godhead and the receiving of His undiluted fullness (Magid compares this with Colossians 1:19). Magid summarizes this teaching:

*Thus, the one who embodies malkhut (zaddik/messiah) can descend into the nether-world to gather the fallen sparks and not be susceptible to defilement because he embodies eyn sof [the infinite and transcendent God] as opposed to the divine lights of emanation that were all ruptured in the 'shattering of the vessels.'*⁵⁷

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The purpose of this paper has been to provide some information about Hasidic Jews and their thinking, so those trying to share the good news about Jesus with them will have some understanding of where they are coming from.

Another important aim has been to stimulate prayer for this significant section of self-defining Jews. Here it cannot be accidental that the Hasidic movement, which developed ‘largely outside Christian gaze’ in Eastern Europe and thus not in conscious differentiation from Christianity,⁵⁸ and which in a sense can be seen as a spiritual renewal, should have some marked affinities with the Christian faith. This fact should be an encouragement to pray, notwithstanding the great difficulties that are encountered in trying to reach Hasidic Jews.

As to our responsibility to pray, we have Paul’s example in Romans 10:1. We who have direct access to God our Father, through the mediation of Jesus Christ are rather like the *zaddik* who in Hasidic thought has the power to bring down *shefa* (grace or divine favour) on the people.

The appropriate approach to Hasidic Jews can only be discovered as and when the Lord gives opportunities and experience is gained, I will simply share the following thoughts from having sought a greater understanding of this kind of Jew.

The ethical teaching as found, for example, in the *Tales* or R. Nachman’s *Advice*, is, as we have seen, very close to that of Jesus and Paul. Often I have been humbled and convicted by the Hasidic writings on such matters as: singlehearted devotion to God; the importance of praying without ceasing; being joyful at all times; doing good works only ‘for the sake of heaven’; the need to slay every form of self-assertion and boasting, and to avoid any ‘show’ before men; the desire to associate with the poor and lowly. Here we share so much with the Hasidic Jews and should indeed hold them in great respect.

Certain preconceptions Christians may have about Jews in general do not apply to Hasidic Jews. There is no question here of doing good works to earn God’s favour. The point is specifically addressed by the Maggid of Zlotchov who being questioned

about whether we should serve God like servants who only serve on condition they receive wages replies,

It is true that whoever does a commandment for the sake of gain, even if it be gain in the coming world, gets nothing, for all he wanted to do was to serve himself. But he who does a commandment out of the true fear and love of God, his doing shines out into the world and draws an abundance of blessings down upon it (Tales, Book 1, p. 148).

Again, R. Nachman of Bratslav stressed,

Never feel that you are entitled to a reward for anything. All the good deeds we do are sent to us by God. At times God may help a person in a certain way, or he may achieve a certain spiritual success. But he should not think this is a reward for his Torah study, prayers, good deeds or anything else.⁵⁹

Where, however, Christians cannot be at one with Hasidic Jews is over how God can forgive sin. As in Rabbinic Judaism generally, there is the belief that God can forgive simply because He is good and merciful and has made a covenant with His people, Israel, and the only condition for forgiveness is true repentance on the part of the sinner. There is no appreciation that ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins’ and that only the blood of Jesus, the wholly innocent ‘Lamb of God’ shed on the Cross is sufficient to take away our sins (Hebrews 9:22; John 1:29).

What is also lacking is an appreciation of how the promise of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon all God’s people from the least to the greatest, made in Joel 2:28-29 was fulfilled at Pentecost, and is available today to anyone who surrenders their life to Jesus. While R. Nachman could speak about the *zaddik* who ‘has attained the level of *Ruach haKodesh*, the Holy Spirit’,⁶⁰ the gift of the Holy Spirit to ordinary people was regarded as an exceptional occurrence, as when a disciple of the Seer of Lublin reported that the Seer had four hundred disciples who went by the name of ‘village people’ (clearly they considered themselves lower than the ‘great disciples’) who ‘had – every one of them! – the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (*Tales*, Book 1, p. 308).

Of course the teachings of the Kabbalah take us into strange territory which the Christian cannot accept as common ground. This is principally because the attempt to go beyond what the Scriptures say about creation, for example, in Genesis 1

and 2 and Proverbs 8:23-31, intrudes into 'the secret things that belong to the Lord our God' (Deuteronomy 29:29). But it should be borne in mind that in Hasidism the concepts and world-picture of Kabbalah often have a more figurative than an existential meaning. With Schneur Zalman in particular 'the ten *sefirot* are internalized and become a template for character traits'.⁶¹ Scholem summarizes this tendency thus,

*...the distinctive feature of the new school is found in the fact that the secrets of the divine realm are presented in the guise of mystical psychology. It is by descending into the depths of his own self that man wanders through all the dimensions of the world.*⁶²

Where, more than anywhere else, the Christian can find correspondences with the beliefs of Hasidic Jews and so be able to build upon them, is in their conceptions regarding the true *zaddik* or righteous one; Jesus is indeed 'the one true *zaddik* who can save the whole world from exile'. Through cleaving to Jesus, the believer is 'attached to the very *Shekinah* (Divine Presence)' and through His intercessions, He brings down grace and strength to those who place their trust in Him (Hebrews 7:25). It is Jesus who has made true atonement for sin, having 'appeared once for all ... to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Hebrews 9:26). It is Jesus who has descended into the nether-world and has overcome the Evil One (John 16:33). And it is Jesus who emptied Himself in dying on the Cross (Philippians 2:7-8) 'so that He might have "first place in everything". For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Colossians 1:8-19). May He indeed have 'first place in everything', in our own hearts, but also in those of the Hasidic Jews for whom He also died!

A SHORT READING LIST

Full bibliographical details of the works cited have been given in the endnotes, but because it is no easy matter to try to enter into the thought-world of another religion, the following suggestions are made to those who from a low starting point want to get a better understanding of Hasidism.

A good short guide that is now out of print, but obtainable second-hand from Internet suppliers is Aryeh Rubinstein: *Hasidism* (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1975). For an overview and for setting Hasidism in the context of Jewish mysticism

generally, see Gershom Scholem's classic: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946; re-issued 1995). For more up-to-date treatments of particular historical topics, see Gershon Hundert (ed.), *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present* (New York: New York UP, 1991). The best historical account to date is Glenn Dynner: *Men of Silk: the Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2006).

For an understanding of the beliefs and practices of Hasidic Jews, the most accessible sources are Martin Buber: *Tales of the Hasidim, Books 1 and 2* in one volume, (New York: Schocken Books, 1947; reissued 1991), and R. Nachman: *Advice* (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 2nd edn, 2015). For a detailed treatment of particular topics, see Norman Lamm: *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (New York: Yeshiva UP, 1999).

It is also desirable to have some acquaintance with Schneur Zalman's *Tanya*, the one Hasidic writing that comes nearest to a work of systematic theology and which is read and respected by several Hasidic groups in addition to Chabad/Lubavitch. The latest revised, bilingual (Hebrew/English) edition was published in September 2014 and is obtainable from the Kehot Publication Society, New York.

ENDNOTES

1. Jehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Jewish Messianism* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1993) pp. 11-19.
2. Liebes, *Studies*, pp. 75-92.
3. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941) p. 3.
4. Scholem. *Major Trends*, p. 4.
5. Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1995) pp. 53-65.
6. As discussed by Moshe Idel in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) p. 89.
7. *Major Trends*, p. 276.
8. For Jewish mystical techniques, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 74-111. The *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation) a very ancient Kabbalah text, gives detailed examples of ‘the combination of letters’: see the edition annotated by Aryeh Kaplan (San Francisco: Weiser Books, revised edn, 1997).
9. *Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 65-81.
10. For details see *Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 75-77.
11. Cited in *Religious Thought*, p.157.
12. Cited in Idel, *Between Ecstasy and Magic*, p. 211.
13. *Major Trends*, the title of the last chapter.
14. *Major Trends*, pp. 285-86.
15. For a short survey of the rise and fall of Sabbatai Sevi, see OPRP Issue 9, March 2011, *Flawed Messiah*.
16. See Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) pp. 41-88.
17. Dinur, ‘The Origins of Hasidism’ reproduced in G. Hundert (ed.), *Essential Papers on Hasidism* (New York: New York UP, 1991) p. 87.
18. *Origins of Hasidism*, p. 141.
19. *Major Trends*, p. 329.
20. Rosman tells the story of his discovery in *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba’al Shem Tov* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013) new introduction, pp. xiii – xvi.
21. Reproduced in *Essential Papers*, pp. 209-25.
22. *Founder of Hasidism* was first published by University of California Press in 1996.
23. Now published in *Hasidism Reappraised* (ed. A. Rapoport-Albert) (Oxford:

- Littman library of Jewish Civilization, 1996) as ‘Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change’, pp. 76-140.
24. Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).
 25. *Men of Silk*, p. 228.
 26. *Men of Silk*, p. 227.
 27. *Men of Silk*, p. 113.
 28. *Men of Silk*, pp. 104-109.
 29. Those who have studied the rapid growth of Christianity in the first three centuries AD will recognize, among other factors, the preparation for the gospel made by the widespread dissemination of popular Stoicism, and the tendency within paganism to subsume all the pagan deities into one universal God.
 30. Dinur, ‘The Origins of Hasidism’, p. 153.
 31. Cited in *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, p. 297.
 32. Advice, ‘Chapter on ‘Tzaddik’. s. 42, p. 236.
 33. *Likkutey Moharan*, Part 1, Lesson 33.2, p. 168.
 34. R. Menehem Mendel of Vitebsk, cited in *Religious Thought*, pp. 31-32. The point is made with trembling and hesitation.
 35. Advice, p. 213. Nachman here cites Talmud, Berakhot 60b.
 36. God’s goodness made known in bad situations is one of the main themes in the film *Ushpizin* (2004) made by the Bratslav (Breslov) group (available with English subtitles on YouTube).
 37. *Religious Thought*, p. 459. I can only briefly touch here on the rich Hasidic teachings on Providence and Evil and Suffering. See further Chapters 1 and 15, *Religious Thought*.
 38. *Religious Thought*, pp. 565-66, citing R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev.
 39. Advice, p. 241.
 40. Advice, p. 255.
 41. The topic is introduced in in Part 1. The citations are from Ada Rapoport-Albert, ‘God and the Zaddik’ in *Essential Papers*, p. 300.
 42. Advice, p. 301.
 43. ‘God and the Zaddik’, p. 301.
 44. Gershom Scholem, ‘Devekut, or Communion with God’, in *Essential Papers*, pp. 291-94.
 45. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p.274.
 46. R.Elimelekh of Lizhensk, cited in *Religious Thought*, p. 522.
 47. The Bauminger version, as argued by Moshe Rosman in *Founder of Hasidism*,

- pp. 99-105.
48. Founder of Hasidism, p. 106.
 49. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk cited in Religious Thought, pp. 286.
 50. Religious Thought, p. 310.
 51. Tanya, Likkutei Amarim, Ch. 2, p. 10.
 52. Advice, p. 227.
 53. Advice, p. 242.
 54. Cited in Religious Thought, p. 527.
 55. Cited by Ada Rapoport-Albert in Essential Papers, p. 320.
 56. Cited by Ada Rapoport-Albert in Essential Papers, pp. 320-21.
 57. Shaul Magid, Hasidism Incarnate (Stanford CA: Stanford UP. 2015) p. 98.
 58. Hasidism Incarnate, p. 9.
 59. Advice, p. 299.
 60. Advice, p. 33.
 61. Religious Thought, p. 7.
 62. Major Trends, pp. 340-41. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the contribution made by Hasidism to the development of modern psychology.

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