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Charismatic Leader, Charismatic Book: Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya* and His Leadership

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Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *Tanya* has become an iconic book, published in facsimile editions in towns and cities all over the world as an act of piety and talismanic protection. Its chapters have been divided into lectionary readings to be studied as a canonical text on a fixed schedule. Beginning students in Chabad houses are sometimes given *Tanya* as a gift; in its pages they receive their initial exposure to kabbalistic-Hassidic ideas and terminology, indeed to Judaism itself as understood by Chabad Hassidism.

But the original goal of *Tanya* was very different, and its initial publication was a response to the needs of a different social setting.

Tanya's appearance in 1796 reflects the transition of Hassidism from its early period, when a small group of devotees surrounded charismatic illuminates, to a larger movement with a defined social structure and a self-conscious identity vis-à-vis the wider Jewish world. In this second phase, which emerged after 1772, the movement was organized around masters, or *tzaddikim*, each of whom held sway in a relatively well defined geographical area, enjoying the allegiance and veneration of passionate followers, known as *hasidim*.¹ Each *tzaddik* was known for a certain style of teaching and sacred service, whose elements formed a unique spiritual signature. It is around this time that we see the emergence of Hassidic courts, supported by donations from followers. And it is shortly after this time that we first observe the phenomenon of dynastic succession, with a *tzaddik* founding a hereditary line.

Among the most successful courts was that of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, whose following was so large that rules were instituted to regulate and restrict access to the court and the master.² In this context, the publication of *Likkutei Amarim*, or *Tanya*,³ in 1796, plays a key role in the ascendancy of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi and the rise of Chabad Hassidism, and in shaping the communal structure of Chabad.

Likkutei Amarim / *Tanya* is one of very few works of early Hassidism that was actually written by the nominal author and brought to publication in the author's lifetime and under his direction. It is also one of very few works of early Hassidism that, rather than conveying its ideas in the form of occasional homilies linked to Biblical texts or the festival cycle, presents a sustained exposition and makes a highly structured argument.⁴ While the special character of *Tanya* has long been recognized, the compositional strategies and the developmental unfolding of the book have not been sufficiently grasped.

The importance of the book in Rabbi Shneur Zalman's Chabad Hassidism is asserted in the *hakdamat ha-melaket*, the "compiler's foreword" to *Tanya*. Rabbi Shneur Zalman announces his intention to have the book replace personal audiences:

I have, therefore, recorded all the replies to all the questions, to be preserved as a sign-post and to serve as a visual reminder for each and every person, so that he will no longer press for admission to private conference with me. For in these [writings] he will find peace for his soul and true counsel on every matter that he finds difficult in the service of God. His heart will thus be firmly secured in the Lord, Who completes everything for us.⁵

The assertion of absolute comprehensiveness is surely striking, especially in light of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's acknowledgment, just prior to this statement in the foreword, that a universal written response to personal religious questions is a theoretical impossibility. In its self-confidence and self-assurance of total coverage of a domain of analysis, this foreword is reminiscent of Maimonides' introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, with the added feature that the author announces his intention that any questions about the advice in *Tanya* be referred to a network of disciples who will explicate its teaching. In this way, the book would serve as a resource that would largely replace person-to-person contact with the master, since "time no longer permits of replying to everyone individually and in detail on his particular problem."

The foreword does not tell us what questions Rabbi Shneur Zalman's *hassidim* addressed to him, but to judge by *Tanya* itself, they apparently were prompted by the gradual erosion of the illumination that had characterized Hassidism's earliest period, when religious exuberance reigned by virtue of partaking in a new and vital religious dispensation.⁶ During the formative years, religious devotion seemed to come effortlessly and without resistance, in an intense glow of new discovery and excitement. By the 1790s, as the movement spread and the number of followers increased dramatically, routinization had set in, with all its vexing obstacles to the religious life. In early Hassidism it had seemed as if human nature had been born again; its motto could have been (to borrow from William Wordsworth) "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young

was very heaven!" By the 1790s, however, despite (or perhaps because of) the geographic spread and numerical growth of the movement, the glow and buoyancy of the early days were receding. It was this that impelled large numbers of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's followers to seek out their master, to express their puzzlement at the gradual attenuation of exuberant spirituality, and to register their dismay at the return of the daily struggle with temptation.

The structure of *Tanya* deserves some comment. The book begins with a presentation of several early rabbinic texts, whose juxtaposition reveals (in good pilpulistic fashion) an apparent contradiction. In order to resolve the contradiction, the author proceeds to reconfigure the standard moral categorization of *tzaddik* and *rasha* ("righteous" and "wicked"), terms that go back to the Bible. By the time he has finished his exegetical reshaping, the entire moral landscape has changed; the spiritual topography has shifted, and no boundary marker has been left untouched. It takes fourteen chapters for this seismic shift to work itself out, and when it does, the average reader might be forgiven if he forgets the questions that had launched the exploration back in Chapter 1. But the author has not: he returns to the issues he raised fourteen chapters before and, by his lights, resolves them decisively. Ancillary questions are treated in the following chapters until the *Sefer Shel Beinonim*, or "Book of Intermediate Individuals," *Tanya*'s first section, concludes. The entire effect is one of total mastery, total control; the reader feels he has been led lovingly, knowingly, firmly through a transformative journey by a leader who foresaw the outcome with total clarity from the outset. This is a *tour de force* that compels the reader by the power of argument, but even more by the power of the mind, which advances it.⁷ One is hard pressed to think of another Hassidic work anywhere that presents such a sustained, cogently set out argument as *Sefer Shel Beinonim*, with its long development arch cresting to a conclusion that is both triumphant and inevitable. Since its appearance, readers from all camps—Hassidic, maskilic, and academic—have expressed admiration for the style of *Tanya* no less than its substance.

It is hardly an accident that *Tanya* begins with a Talmudic passage on the administration of an oath. According to a *beraita*

cited in *Niddah* 30b, every individual is given an oath before birth, adjuring him to “be righteous and not wicked; and even if the whole world tells you that you are righteous, regard yourself as if you were wicked.” The fact that the author chooses this passage to open his work makes clear that his essential theme is duty, the obligation of the individual to fulfill his responsibility. The *hassid* is enjoined to act as a *tzaddik* acts that is, with perfect rectitude, in complete conformity with the dictates of the Torah and the 613 commandments. He may be mistaken by others for a *tzaddik*, a Hassidic saint, but inside he knows that he still struggles with temptation; hence the need for the oath, suggesting resolute commitment and unwavering attentiveness. The fact that the individual is under oath raises the stakes of the religious life, in that failure or even a simple misstep is not simply wrong, but is a violation of a solemn pledge. And the fact that an oath is required underscores the reality that the average person is in constant danger of succumbing to temptation and needs the oath to bind him to his mission.

The question arises, Of all the topics in the religious life in general and Hassidism in particular, why did Rabbi Shneur Zalman consider the redefinition of *tzaddik/rasha* to be of such crucial importance as to devote his seminal work on Hassidism, the only one to be published in his lifetime, to it? Why the need to develop and amplify the category of *beinoni* (a term that does not appear in the Bible and does not play a central role in most Talmudic presentations of religious typology) to such a degree? And why the need to make the category of *tzaddik* virtually impossible to attain? Before *Tanya*, the *tzaddik* was commonly understood to be an individual in whom virtue dominates over vice, whose good deeds outweigh his sins. But for *Tanya*, to have any sins at all consigns one to the category of *rasha*, wicked. To be a *tzaddik*, one must not only be free of sin, but free of any temptation to sin, to be so bathed in divine grace and light that one is drawn unceasingly to the good. *Tanya* explicitly teaches that the category of *tzaddik* is virtually unattainable by one's own effort.⁸

The answer to these questions appears to be that the primary goal of *Tanya* is to explain to the devotee that he is not a *tzaddik* and

should surrender hopes of becoming one. The stratification of the Hassidic world and the emergence of a clear hierarchy, which were ongoing at this time, were given a powerful justification by the appearance of *Tanya*. The category of *beinoni* is completely revised. No longer is the *beinoni* a person whose virtues and demerits are roughly in balance. Rather, the *beinoni* is a person who knows temptation but never succumbs to it. The *beinoni* is thus in constant struggle, and that is a good thing, for God delights in the victory of good over evil, and merit accrues to the individual from his unceasing victory over baser urges.⁹

Images of struggle and conquest occur frequently in *Tanya*. The *hassid* is a warrior in constant battle against the evil inclination.¹⁰ The body is called a “small city,” over which the divine soul and the animal soul fight. To be sure, there are respite moments, when, in an intense effort of concentration, the *beinoni* cultivates a state of God-consciousness, but these are achieved during recitation of the *Shema* and the *Amidah*, after which the essence of the animal soul and its propensities returns. The respite moments serve to maximize the spiritual possibilities available to the *beinoni*, while at the same time they keep the distinction between the *beinoni* and the *tzaddik* sharp and clear, since only for the *tzaddik* is the suffusion of being with God-consciousness permanent and unceasing.

In this way, *Tanya* is carefully crafted to exploit the tension between control and empowerment. The book makes it clear that the *tzaddik* is a different order of being than the *hassid*. Maximalist demands are placed upon the *beinoni/hassid*, who is expected to behave in thought, word, and deed like a *tzaddik*, but who yet is told that there is little if any possibility that he might ever become a *tzaddik*. This framework empowers the *hassid* to become a warrior for Hassidism, but essentially precludes any aspiration on the part of the *hassid* to become a leader himself.

The reconfiguration of the meaning of *tzaddik* / *beinoni* / *rasha* that *Tanya* effects, creates a new spiritual landscape, one unlike what is found in the writings of contemporary Hassidic masters. For Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the *tzaddik* is another order of existence, absolutely separated by nature from the average individual. This spiritual

topography is not to be found in the writings of R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, for example, where there is no indication that the *tzaddik* is set off metaphysically from the average individual. Even a work like R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk's *Noam Elimelekh*, with its powerful presentation of the role of the *tzaddik*, makes it clear that the *tzaddik* is not beyond struggle.¹¹

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's desire to distinguish the *tzaddik* from the *beinoni*, whose destiny is perpetual struggle, is so strong, that he asserts that a key passage in the *Shema*, "that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you go astray,"¹² does not refer to the *tzaddik*. Rabbinic tradition understands this verse as an admonition to resist the temptations of heresy and sexual sin. But since the *tzaddik* has no temptation at all, this verse cannot refer to him.¹³

The message of *Tanya* is sober yet reassuring: the initial era of Hassidism, the era of boundless illumination and spiritual exuberance, is over. The animal nature has reasserted itself, as we should have known it would, but there is essential, valuable work to do. That work can be done as long as the *hassid* remains faithful to his task and condition as *beinoni*, faithful to the oath he took before he was born. In sum, we are arguing that *Tanya* must be understood as a period piece, a response to a movement's transition from youth to maturity. Rabbi Shneur Zalman wrote a book that would make clear the division of labor that would prevail in Hassidism's mature phase, defining and patrolling its internal boundaries.

Part II of *Likkutei Amarim*—*Tanya*, called *Shaar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah* ("The Gate of Unity and Faith"), is a clear exposition of early Hassidism's acosmic theology.¹⁴ As Naftali Loewenthal and others have pointed out, Rabbi Shneur Zalman's original intention was apparently to place *Shaar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah* before Part I, an arrangement that would have given further emphasis to the acosmic view. As we have it, *Tanya*'s main thrust lies more with the struggle and conquest of Part I than with the vision of unity of Part II.¹⁵ As it stands, Part II serves to buttress the *Sefer Shel Beinonim*, reminding the *hassid* that God is everywhere, thus emboldening him to act with courage and confidence in every circumstance and location. The

total effect is not one of mystical ecstasy, but motivation to action.¹⁶ The potent rhetorical strategy of *Tanya*, simultaneously augmenting the poles of control and empowerment, coupled with the mystical theology of God-in-all-places and God-in-all things (but downplaying ecstatic illumination) provokes the reader into action and fosters a posture of fearlessness and militancy.

The appearance of *Tanya* evoked comments from other leaders in the world of Hassidism, notably R. Avraham Kalisker, who wrote a sharply critical letter to Rabbi Shneur Zalman in 1797, shortly after the appearance of *Tanya*.¹⁷ Here I must respectfully differ from the approach of Naftali Loewenthal in his *Communicating the Infinite*.¹⁸ In Loewenthal's view, the essential innovation of Rabbi Shneur Zalman is his development of a systematic method of presentation of esoteric ideas. Loewenthal writes that "R. Avraham Kalisker criticized the idea of making esoteric teachings available to the ordinary members of the Hassidic fraternity.... In R. Avraham's view the attempt manifested by the *Tanya* methodically to communicate these teachings was dangerous."

I would present R. Avraham's objections a bit differently. The project of *Tanya* was dangerous because it was a retrograde movement from the teachings of the Besht and the Maggid, as R. Avraham saw them. In his view, the words of the Maggid were moments of illumination, epiphanies that could not be encased in a structure of systematic thought without doing violence to their essential character. For R. Avraham Kalisker, the concern is not so much with the promulgation of esoteric teachings, but rather with the assumption that such promulgation is possible.

In the view of R. Avraham, the communal structure that *Tanya* fostered was problematic in two respects: in its aspect of control, and in its aspect of empowerment. In the aspect of empowerment, it enabled an ever-widening circle of followers of uncertain spiritual attainments to believe they could be teachers and transmitters of authentic Hassidic teachings. For R. Avraham, only someone who had already attained a sublime spiritual state could be safely empowered to promulgate the teachings. On the other hand, at the pole of control, R. Avraham's view was that here Rabbi Shneur Zalman had

narrowed the domain of the *tzaddik* nearly to the vanishing point it was a set that appeared to have room only for a single exemplar. Here we must recall R. Avraham's emphasis on *dibbuk haveirim*, where a small circle of initiates shares spiritual insights with one other, and help one another along the path, but with little or no emphasis on the role of a *tzaddik* as a singular figure.¹⁹

For R. Avraham Kalisker, then, the pole of empowerment in *Tanya* spread the dimensions of the circle much too broadly, while the emphasis on control restricted the inner circle much too narrowly. R. Avraham Kalisker's vision of the Hassidic community was much smaller than that of Rabbi Shneur Zalman's, but it was a vision of community without walls, without formal structure, without (in his view) unnecessary theoretical scaffolding, without rigid demarcation lines and that did not *a priori* exclude anyone from joining its most inner circle. Kalisker's opposition to *Tanya* was not a reflex reaction to the promulgation of *esoterica*, but a principled affirmation of what he saw as the essential contribution of the Hassidism of his teachers to Jewish spirituality, and which was in danger of being eroded by a theoretical systemization that paralleled the imposition of a stratified and regimented social structure.

Ha-sayyif ve-ha-sefer yardu kerukhim min ha-shamayyim, "the sword and the book came down together from heaven."²⁰ In the case of *Tanya*, the book was a sword; a powerful weapon that every individual *hassid* could wield against his own animal nature and employ to great effect in the task of moral and spiritual growth. *Tanya* also was and is a potent weapon that the Chabad movement could employ to overcome opposition within the world of Hassidism, on the part of the *Mitnagdim*, the capricious turns of tsarist policy, the winds of Haskalah, secularism and modernity, as well as the cruel, relentless, and naked power of the Stalinist Soviet regime. Of all the Jewish traditional movements and institutions in tsarist Russia and the Leninist-Stalinist onslaught that followed, Chabad Hassidism was arguably the one that stood up best to the terrors, holding ground where it seemed impossible to do so. And in the much more benign times of the post-World War II period, Chabad has grasped the opportunities for external growth and expansion,

creating a network of outposts staffed by devotees who subordinate their personal comfort and even their spiritual growth in favor of the urgent needs of the movement.

As the foundational work of this religious movement, *Tanya* achieved enormous success and has been of inestimable influence. It must be recalled, however, that the initial purpose of *Tanya* was not the promulgation of mystical doctrines, much less the teaching of mystical techniques or practices, but the stratification and regimentation of the Hassidic community and the assignment of appropriate roles. The strictures of R. Avraham Kalisker might alert us to possibility that *Tanya's* success may have been achieved at some cost to the original vision of Hassidism, and that both the control and the empowerment may not be entirely consistent with the social vision and unstructured illuminations of the movement's earliest leaders.

NOTES

1. See Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hassidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change," in *Hassidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London: Littman Library, 1996), pp. 6–140.
 2. See Immanuel Etkes, "The Rise of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady as a Hassidic Leader," *Tarbiz* 54:3 (1985): 429–439. Etkes states that Rabbi Shneur Zalman emerged as the principal leader of White Russian *hassidim* only after 1789, about a year after the death of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk in 1788 (Etkes, p. 439). See also idem, "Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady as a Hassidic Leader," *Zion* 50 (1985): 321–353, where Etkes presents his analysis of the "Liozna Regulations," which severely limited visits to the master and gave priority to newcomers over veteran *hassidim*.
 3. The name *Tanya* is a popular designation that simply reproduces the first word of the work. It does not appear on the title page of the first edition (Slavuta, 1796), which gives the name as *Likkutei Amarim* ("Collected Discourses"); see Naftali Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Chabad School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 47. See also *Likkutei Amarim: First Versions* (New York: Kehot, 1981).
- Loewenthal's discussion of *Tanya* is significantly augmented in his essay "Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi's *Kitzur Likkutei Amarim* British Library Or 10456," in *Studies in Jewish Manuscripts*, ed. Joseph Dan and Klaus Herrmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), pp. 89–137. Loewenthal notes that the manuscript he is analyzing "preceded the printed book" (p. 114), and that its title is *Kitzur Likkutei Amarim* ("Abridgement of Collected Discourses"), but he does not address the significance of this title

(which also appears in other early manuscripts). It is puzzling that a work not yet published is called an "abridgement." I hope to address this in a subsequent essay.

4. See Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, p. 48.
5. Translation based on that of Nissan Mindel in the bilingual edition of *Tanya* (London: Soncino Press, 1973), p. xiv.
6. Rabbi Israel Hapstein (1737–1814), the Maggid of Kozenice, was one of the founders of Hassidism in Poland. He writes that he once saw the Baal Shem Tov in a dream and asked him why "when I began my service [in Hassidism] and entered the circle of *tzaddikim* to learn from their deeds...I felt a daily change for the good in my Torah study and prayer...but now I feel no change. It seems that each day is like the day before and the day after." See *Sefer Avodat Yisrael, Parashat Shemini*, end. This description of personal experience, when projected onto the movement as a whole, does much to explain the structural transformations of this period, to which *Tanya* was one response.
7. I am reminded here of Robert Nozick's observation in the introduction to his *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981). The older philosophical style, which Nozick calls "coercive philosophy," tries to force assent to its conclusions by the power of its arguments. This stands in contrast to Nozick's approach, which explains how certain beliefs and views are possible but without attempting to coerce, retaining wonder and puzzlement.
8. The one qualification here is the passage at the end of chap. 14, which allows that after unceasing effort, "perhaps a spirit from above might descend upon him, and he will merit something of the spirit that is rooted in some *tzaddik* that will be impregnated within him, so that he may serve God with true joy." For the doctrine of "impregnation" (*ibbur*), see Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 434 n. 73. Fine writes that *ibbur* "occurs for a temporary period of time, until the impregnated soul accomplishes its goal." If so, the ontological divide between *tzaddik* and *beinoni* in *Tanya*'s system is not really breached.
9. *Tanya*, chap. 27.
10. On the "good inclination / evil inclination," or *yetzer tov / yetzer ha-ra*, see Daniel Boyarin, "Dialectics of Desire," in *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), chap. 2. See also Jonathan Schofer, "The Redaction of Desire," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 12 (2003): 19–53.
11. One example is found in the teaching for *Parashat Emor*, which speaks of *tzaddikim* who have been sanctified from birth, and are filled with Torah and *mitzvot*, but nevertheless may experience pride and ego-involvement, and may fall quickly from their level.
12. Num. 15:39.
13. *Tanya*, chap. 27.
14. For Hassidic acosmism, see Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer, *Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hassidic Thought* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1980); Louis Jacobs,

- Seeker of Unity: The Life and Works of Aaron of Staroselye* (New York: Vallentine Mitchell, 1966); Mark Verman, "Panentheism and Acosmism in the Kabbalah," *Studia Mystica* 10 (1987): 24–37; Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Chabad Hassidism*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
15. My understanding of *Tanya* is consistent with the view articulated by Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer in "Anti-Spiritualism ba-Hassidut," *Molad* 171–172 (1962): 513–528, who argues that *Tanya* is not a popularization of the teachings of the Maggid of Mezhirech but a retreat from them. Her views have been criticized by Isaiah Tishby and Joseph Dan, who argue that the teachings of *Tanya* are exoteric, while Rabbi Shneur Zalman's esoteric theology is to be found in such works as *Torah Or* (Kopys, 1837) and *Likkutei Torah* (Zhitomir, 1848). (The views of Tishby and Dan were published in their essay on Hassidism in the *Hebrew Encyclopedia*, 17:775). Be that as it may, it remains true that *Tanya* was the only work of Hassidic teachings by Rabbi Shneur Zalman published in his lifetime. He clearly had an intense interest in the appearance of the work, and the publication project was under his direct supervision. Thus *Tanya* remains the only official, authorized text of Chabad Hassidism as a movement, as envisioned by the movement's founder.
 16. See Naftali Loewenthal, "The Apotheosis of Action in Early Chabad," *Da'at* 18 (1987); see also Arthur Green, "Hassidism: Discovery and Retreat," in *The Other Side of God*, ed. Peter. L. Berger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1981), pp. 104–130.
 17. The letter is printed in Ya'akov Barnai, ed., *Hassidic Letters from Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak ben Zvi, 1980), pp. 238–232; cf. David Zvi Hilman, *Igrot Baal ha-Tanya u-Vnei Doro* (Jerusalem: Mesorah, 1953), pp. 105–107.
 18. Loewenthal, *Communicating the Infinite*, pp. 51–52, 77–90.
 19. I am relying here on the exposition of Joseph Weiss, "Abraham Kalisker's Concept of Communion with God and Men," in *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism*, ed. David Goldstein (Oxford: Littman Library, 1985), pp. 155–169.
 20. Lev. Rabbah 35:5.

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