Aspects of Hasidic Life in Eastern Europe Before World War II

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Hasidism, the great revivalist and mystical movement in Jewish religion, arose in eastern Europe during the first part of the eighteenth century. The Jews had never fully recovered from the devastating aftereffects of the Chmielnitski massacres of 1648-1649; furthermore, the spiritual confusion resulting from the apostasy of the pseudo-Messiah, Shabbetai Zevi (1626-1676) was still present. In a milieu combining Polish political instability, religious hatred, and economic deterioration, the Jewish masses needed hope and a new approach to rally and inspire them. Some of this was found in the movement and beliefs of the Baal Shem Tov.

Little is known about the early life of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (c. 1700-1760), also known as the Baal Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name"), or Besht. Hasidic tradition tells us that he came from a poor and pious family and was orphaned at an early age. According to *Shivhei ha-Besht*, the earliest collection of stories about the Besht, his father's last words were ". . . my beloved son, remember this all your life: God is with you; you should therefore fear nothing."[1] These words made a firm impression on the young boy. His life's work was devoted to spreading the message of God's real presence in the world, and the consequent banishment of all fears, spiritual as well as material.

The Besht's message was simple and, in the context of the history of Jewish ethical thought, not particularly new. He emphasized the power of faith in God, the need for joyful enthusiasm in prayer, the performance of *mitzvot* (meritorious deeds), and the importance of love and good fellowship. One must ask what the Besht's originality and creative influence was. Part of the answer may be inferred from a story that describes the Besht's first encounter with a skeptical and hostile talmudic scholar and preacher, Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezhirich (1710-1772), known as the "Mezhiricher Maggid" (preacher), who later succeeded the Besht as head of the Hasidic movement. The Besht won over Dov Baer as his student by challenging him to interpret a certain mystical text. Dov Baer read the text in question, interpreting it in a formally correct but cold and detached manner. When the Besht recited the text, ". . . the house was filled with light, fire raged around it, and they saw with their own eyes the angels whose names were mentioned in the text." The Besht turned to the *maggid* and said, "The interpretation you gave is correct, but your study lacks soul...." Dov Baer, we are told, immediately cancelled his travel plans and "remained with the Besht, who taught him sciences great and profound."[2]

Leaving aside the supernatural elements of the story, a central point is clearly discernible: The Besht was able to attract mature rabbinic scholars to Hasidism because he could breathe fresh spirit

into the dry words of ancient texts. This is precisely what he did with Judaism as a whole—penetrating traditional forms and rigid patterns, not to reject them but to make them glow with renewed human enthusiasm. One must always guard against performing religious acts reflexively and automatically, the Besht taught. Only by investing one's very self into one's words and actions could they be charged with life and inner power.

The generative core of the Besht's teachings is the emphasis on divine immanence—on God's presence in all creation and His accessibility to human beings. God may seem far from us, but this is only because we allow the material world to sustain the illusion of God's hiddenness. This point is brought out in the famous parable of the castle:

> There was once a very wise king. By employing optical illusion he made walls, towers, and gates, and commanded that he should be reached by way of the gates and towers. He further commanded that at each and every gate should be disbursed the treasures of the king. There were some individuals who went as far as the first gate, took money and turned back. Others [advanced further but then found some treasure and turned back.] Finally his son, his beloved, resolved firmly to reach his father the king. Then he saw that there is no partition separating him and his father, because all [the walls, towers, and gates] were merely illusion.[3]

Or, as the Besht's student Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye (d. 1782) explained:

> . . . the whole earth is full of His glory; every movement and thought comes from Him, also all the angels and heavenly chambers—all these are created and made, as it were, from His very essence, like the snail whose garment is actually part of its body. [With this knowledge], there is no separation between the person and Him. . . .[4]

A related notion is that the secular and the sacred are not distinct domains. The profane has sparks of holiness; the secular can and must be sanctified. The eastern European Jew, socially isolated by walls of hatred and oppression, and by the self-imposed restraints of asceticism and exclusive devotion to study, was made to feel at home in the world of nature, and saw in its beauty a manifestation of the divine. Music, dance, and storytelling became expressions of religious creativity.

The Besht was not afraid of using mundane tools to arouse a spiritual ecstasy. If a morose heart could be made joyous by a joke, a prank, or even a shot of whiskey, then so much the better. The inner intensity of prayer was often sustained by wild gesticulations and by swaying to and fro (known in Yiddish as *shoklen*). Concentration in study and prayer was also maintained by a meditative focusing on the

letters that comprised the words of the text. The point was to deflect attention away from the content in favor of perceiving the letters as pure spiritual forms serving as "vessels" for the flux of divine energy.[5]

One is struck by the earthiness of the stories about the Besht. He is often depicted as smoking a pipe or talking about horses. He heartily embraced the folk traditions of his people, healing with amulets and herbs as well as with prayer. He had a large mass following but was able to inspire an intellectual elite. He was a wonder-working folk hero—and also a teacher of esoteric doctrines to a devoted circle of religious sophisticates. Indeed, the transcendence of dualities, and the unification of disparate elements in the community's social and religious life, were key elements of his vision. They were the true test of the authentic teacher, the clear indication that his teachings came from the divine source of unity and not the fragmented "world of separation."[6]

The emphasis on unity was perhaps the key to the movement's success. Initially some Jewish communal and religious authorities opposed the Hasidim, suspecting that their emphasis on divine immanence and *devekut* (communion with God) might develop into a full-fledged antinomian heresy. The polemical literature of the Mitnaggedim (opponents of Hasidism) was emotional and vituperative.[7]

The early opposition to Hasidism came primarily from religious traditionalists, who saw Hasidic innovations as deviations from established customs. To them, the Hasidic adoption of a different liturgical rite, their ecstatic devotion, and their supposed neglect of the study of Torah threatened the continuity of religious life. Opposition also surfaced from the Jewish proponents of European Enlightenment, the Maskilim, who saw in Hasidism an anachronistic return to medieval superstition. The Maskilim valued critical rationalism and sober intellectual thought. The great nineteenth-century Jewish historian, Heinrich Graetz, lost his objectivity on the subject of Hasidism, characterizing it as "an unclear and irrational dream which to this day does its deeds in darkness." By mid-nineteenth century the Hasidin and Mitnaggedim had made peace with each other. They came to recognize that their real enemies were the Maskilim, who in their exteme manifestations opposed any form of traditional religious expression. Certain Hasidic leaders even acknowledged that the early opposition of the Mitnaggedim was good for the movement, in that it checked tendencies towards religious anarchy.

At the center of the Hasidic society was the *rebbe*, or master, also known as the *ẓaddik* (righteous one). The *rebbe* was their leader, teacher, emissary to God, and God's emissary to them. The *ẓaddik* was the channel through which both material and spiritual blessings flowed from heaven. The *ẓaddik* was prepared to risk all—his life, even his share in Heaven—for his people.[8] Opponents of Hasidism criticized the notion of the *ẓaddik* as the intermediary between God and the people. For the Hasidim, however, the *ẓaddik* became their guide even in matters of the world. Hasidim turned to their *rebbe* for

advice in choosing a marriage partner, initiating a business venture, or purchasing a new home. Hasidim believed that their *rebbe*'s sagacity emerged from paranormal powers of clairvoyance; for others, it was primarily a matter of astute judgment sharpened by years of experience in dealing with the problems of his flock.

In any event, the Hasid felt a new infusion of energy and confidence when he received the blessing of his master. Hasidim would travel for weeks, sometimes by foot, to be with their master for a Sabbath or holiday. During the long and often arduous journey, the individual Hasid might meet others who, like himself, were traveling to visit their master. Their shared "pilgrimage" would be spent reciting Hasidic stories, anticipating the spiritual glories they would behold, and preparing themselves for the few moments when they might be granted a private audience with their master. Each individual wanted to make the most of the time he would spend alone with his master, and would mentally rehearse his every word. Of course, the meeting almost never went as planned; it would often seem to the Hasid that the *rebbe* penetrated to the core of his concerns rather than their superficial aspects, uncovering layers of which the Hasid was totally unaware.[9] The interview might conclude with the *rebbe* giving the Hasid a spiritual direction which the Hasid would attempt to implement in his daily life, for months or years, until the next time he might be privileged to visit with his master.

Besides the private audience with the *rebbe*, the Hasid would wait for those times when his master would "say Torah," or present an original homily. The discourse would elucidate the inner significance of a classical text, disclosing its relevance to the spiritual needs of the Hasidim. Usually delivered in Yiddish (but later recorded in Hebrew), the discourse would unfold an associative train of thought, building around key words and concepts and connecting unrelated passages of sacred literature with new creative insights. Featured frequently in the Hasidic discourse, as well as in the shorter epigrams for which some masters were celebrated, was the play on words, which often hinged on a semantic or syntactic shift in the sacred text. These plays were meant to startle the listener into new perceptions of familiar passages, as well as of their own personal situations. Many masters became famous not for miraculous powers, but for the ability to "say Torah" in an engaging manner. The Hasidim were especially captivated when it was clear that the master had not prepared his homily ahead of time, but was speaking from the inspiration of the moment. At such times it was believed that the master's speech was not under his conscious control, but was being used as an instrument of the Divine Wisdom.[10]

Hasidism bridged—but did not eliminate—the gap between rich and poor, between scholar and semiliterate.[11] Wealthier Hasidim generally supported their poorer brethren, and opened their houses to travelers needing lodging. In the Hasidic community everyone had a place, and each individual was an organic part of a unified body of believers. While the role of women followed traditional patterns, it was true that women had opportunities for creative religious

expression which were unavailable elsewhere. Certain exceptional women recognized for their charismatic gifts attracted their own followers, in effect becoming independent Hasidic masters.[12]

While untutored Hasidim could not follow the learned discussions of scholars, they could—and did—participate equally in the life of prayer, the devotional recitation of psalms, the study of *Ein Ya'akov* (a collection of the homiletical passages of the Talmud), and the telling of stories of the masters. These activities were considered appropriate for even the greatest scholars. Thus, while Hasidism by no means eliminated social and class divisions, it definitely made them less sharp and divisive.

The softening of rigid lines of demarcation is evident, for example, in the laxity shown regarding fixed times for prayer. The Hasidic practice of offering afternoon prayer well after sunset scandalized the Mitnaggedim. The Hasidim replied by pointing out that while the king's ministers need an appointment to approach their monarch, the king's own children can approach him at any time. This attitude to prayer did not signify a lessening of commitment to the body of Jewish law. In fact, in most respects the Hasidim kept the Law with a vigorous enthusiasm. The Hasidic flouting of the fixed times for prayer was an attempt to enact on a symbolic level the interpenetration (though not the elimination) of separate domains, a softening of the sharp contours of the map of everyday reality. As some of their critics noted, this was closely related to the Hasidic theology of divine immanence, which lessened the perceived distance separating God and man, and undermined distinctions in general.[13]

The Hasidim also emphasized the need to transcend polar opposites even in the realm of human emotion. There must be reflective sobriety as part of greatest joy. On the other hand, even in tragedy one must search for a glimmer of light, and retain the ability to rejoice.

Psalm 126:5, which states:

> They that sow in tears
> —in joy they shall reap

was given a Hasidic twist. The verse was parsed differently, so that it read:

> They that sow in tears [and] in joy
> —they shall reap!

The Jew of eastern Europe was no stranger to tears, but Hasidism gave him the ability to mingle them with joy.

By the third generation of Hasidism—in the last decades of the eighteenth century—the movement had no central location. Disciples and descendants of the major leaders were constantly traveling to new areas carrying their message. Thus, the movement spread from its

original location of Podolia in the Ukraine into Lithuania, Galicia, Central Poland, and the rest of eastern Europe. Each individual master became known for a particular style and approach. For the economically oppressed and politically disenfranchised Hasidim, who were treated as aliens in the countries they resided in, personal allegiance to a master became a means of identification and enabled feelings akin to patriotic national sentiments. At times, the inevitable disagreements between different dynasties would degenerate into serious internecine feuding; more often, however, there was mutual respect, or at least peaceful coexistence.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the dramatic growth of several Hasidic dynasties and the transformation of the movement's character. Hasidism had received its initial impetus from small circles of enthusiasts, and was originally confined to rural and remote towns of eastern Europe. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, it had become a genuine mass movement, with some of the major dynasties numbering adherents in the hundreds of thousands. World War I accelerated population trends and movement to the large cities. In the years between the two world wars, Warsaw was a major center of Hasidic activity. These changes led to the appearance of a new type of Hasid. The followers of some masters included physicians, journalists, and industrialists as well as craftsmen, scholars, and laborers. Certain Hasidic groups became politically sophisticated and organized political lobbies and parties for Orthodox Jews.

In evaluating the creative achievements of eastern European Jews in the 200-year period between the onset of the Besht's public ministry (1736) and the Holocaust, it is evident that Hasidism played a major role. It inspired a veritable explosion of religious, literary, and aesthetic creativity.

The losses to Hasidism during the Holocaust were substantial. It is a remarkable phenomenon that, one generation later, Hasidism is again flourishing in Israel, the United States, and elsewhere. The Hasidim themselves no doubt see Divine Providence as responsible for their regeneration. At the same time, it seems evident that certain aspects of the Hasidic ethos were specific to the eastern European period, and it is hard to see how these might ever be fully recaptured. Nevertheless, Hasidism insists that it is possible, at least in part, to recover a lost reality by telling its story. Telling a tale, in the Hasidic view, is very different than nostalgic reminiscence or folklore transmission. It charges the values embedded in it with new potency; it invests the transmitter, the audience, and most of all the heroes of the story itself with new life.

In that spirit, we shall conclude this brief essay with a story,[14] which touches on the three central themes of Hasidism: love of one's fellow, love of God, and love of the Torah. As is quite commonly the case, the story serves as a commentary on a biblical passage; the stage is set not by artistic evocation of a mood or ambience, but by pointing out a puzzling feature of the sacred text, which the story, in parabolic fashion, then proceeds to resolve and clarify. Also, this tale exhibits a

rudimentary version of the story-within-a-story format, which often (though not here) involves many twists and concatenations of the story line. In addition, it should be noted that because of the oral character of Hasidic stories, most of them have no "canonical" form. Therefore, the same story may appear in a number of sources, with slight variation of detail; also, similar stories are often attributed to several different masters. In our case, the subject of the "outer" story is Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov (d. 1815), student of Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk; the hero of the "inner" story is . . . ah, but perhaps it is best to let the reader decide that!

One year, on the High Holiday of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), just before the sounding of the *shofar* (ram's horn), Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov went to the pulpit of the synagogue and posed the following question to his congregation: "Why does the famous passage in Leviticus (19:18), which states 'And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,' conclude with the words, 'I am the Lord'? What does the latter phrase add to the former? What does it mean in this context?"

The congregation agreed that the words "I am the Lord" seemed to be curiously unrelated to the beginning of the verse. No one could answer his question. Rabbi Mendel waited a few moments and then continued by telling a story:

> Once, in a small Russian town, two children—let us call them David and Jonathan—became fast friends. They played together, they got into trouble together, and they always helped each other out. When, one day, it became clear that the responsibilities of young adulthood would force them to move to separate towns, they decided to enter into a bond of friendship. They promised that wherever life may lead them, they would never forget the fellowship they had shared.
>
> Years later, Jonathan—who by that time had entered the world of business, and had a large family—was accused of a serious crime of a political nature, which involved the possibility of the death penalty if he were convicted. When news of the situation reached David, he traveled to the city where Jonathan was being tried, and demanded to see the prosecutor. He said, "I do not know why you are accusing my old friend Jonathan, but of one thing I am sure . . . he could not have committed that crime!" When it became clear that the prosecutor was utterly unimpressed by David's assurances regarding Jonathan's character, David found himself blurting out, "I'll tell you why I'm so sure that Jonathan is innocent—it's because I committed the crime myself!" Having a confession in hand, the prosecutor had no choice but to release Jonathan and imprison David. However, when Jonathan discovered the reason for his release from prison, he immediately reversed his own protestations of innocence and loudly declared that he was,

indeed, the guilty party after all. At this point the prosecutor threw up his hands and, because of the political nature of the accusations, decided to refer the whole matter to the central government.

Eventually, the case came to the attention of the czar himself. The czar called both parties into his private chambers, and demanded that they tell him the truth. Both David and Jonathan told the czar of the bond of friendship they had made long ago, and each one explained how he had confessed in order to save his fellow. Suddenly, the czar began to cry. David and Jonathan were both puzzled and frightened. After a while the czar regained his composure and said, "I am the Czar of Russia, I can have anything I want. My servants are only too eager to do my bidding. But there is one thing I do not have, and could never get by demanding it. And that is . . . a true friend. Of course I have millions of subjects, as well as many advisors and counsellors. But that is all very different than a true friend.

"Your stories have the ring of truth, and I am sure that you are both innocent. So, you are free to go. But, may I ask a favor? Could you grant me the gift which no one else can give me? Will you take me in and make me the third partner in your bond of friendship?"

Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov looked at his congregants and said, "You see, God is an all-powerful ruler. The whole universe is His. But there is one thing, in all his awesome majesty, which, as it were, He does not have—a true friend. So whenever two people really love each other, and carry out in life the full meaning of the words "And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," then God, as it were, gazes on them longingly and says, "I am the Lord—I created heaven and earth, all the angelic hosts sing my praises, but there is one thing they cannot be for me . . . a true friend. So, I ask you, will you allow Me to be the third partner in your friendship?"

Notes

1. S. A. Horodezky, ed., *Shivhei ha-Besht* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1975), p. 41. An English translation of this work, by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, was published under the title *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1970).

2. We present here the version of this story found in *Keter Shem Tov*, a collection of the Besht's teachings as found in the writings of his students, in particular Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye. The work, compiled by Aharon ben Zvi Hirsh ha-Cohen, appeared originally in 1794-1795. Most current editions are quite corrupt, with separate teachings running together in one section, and with some teachings arbitrarily divided and made to appear as separate and unrelated.

Many of these errors are corrected in the Kehot Publication Society edition (Brooklyn, 1972). In that edition, our passage appears on pp. 124-125, and is marked as no. 424.

3. *Keter Shem Tov*, p. 15, no. 51.

4. *Keter Shem Tov*, p. 15, no. 51.

5. See the discussion of J.G. Weiss, "The Kavvanoth of Prayer in Early Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 9 (1958): 163-192. For Hasidic prayer in general, see Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (New York: Schocken Brooks, 1973).

6. Cf. *Keter Shem Tov*, p. 8, nos. 22-23.

7. Cf. Mordecai Wilensky, *Hasidim u-Mitnaggedim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970).

8. Cf. Samuel H. Dresner, *The Zaddik* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

9. The material on the *rebbe* as spiritual counsellor has been extensively discussed by Zalman M. Schachter in *The Yehidut: A Study of Counselling in Hasidism*, (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Union College, 1968).

10. Cf. J.G. Weiss, "Via Passiva in Early Hasidism," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 11 (1960): 137-155; also Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Ha-Hasidut ke-Mistikah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1980), especially Chapters 8 and 9.

11. The whole issue of the social significance of Hasidism is perceptively discussed by Shmuel Ettinger, "The Hasidic Movement—Reality and Ideals," in *Jewish Society Throughout the Ages*, eds. Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson and Shmuel Ettinger (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), pp. 251-266. Ettinger emphasizes the role of Hasidism as a unifying force.

12. Material on this has been collected in Harry M. Rabinowicz, *The World of Hasidism* (Hartford, Ct.: Hartmore House, 1970), pp. 202-210.

13. For the Mitnaggedic attitude, see Hayyim Volozhiner, *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* (Vilna, 1834), especially Chapter 3. This work and its relationship to Hasidism has been discussed by Nahum (Norman) Lamm, *Torah Lishmah* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1972). See also Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt* (New York: Ktav, 1971), pp. 42-68; 212-246.

14. As recounted by Shelomo Carlebach.

For Further Reading

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