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Buber, Scholem, and the *Me'or enayim*: Another Perspective on a Great Controversy

The purpose of this essay is to reexamine a key aspect of one of the most significant and much-discussed debates in the field of modern Jewish studies: that between Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) regarding the proper interpretation of Hasidism. I hope to look at their divergent views regarding the Hasidic attitude toward the corporeal world through the lens of a particular volume of Hasidic homilies, the *Me'or enayim* (Light of the Eyes) of Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1729/1730–1787). I shall explain presently why I consider this work to be particularly appropriate for an evaluation of this subject.

Scholem first delivered his broadside against Buber in a lecture at the University College London Institute of Jewish Studies, headed by his erstwhile student Joseph Weiss. The attack was then published in the pages of *Commentary* magazine in 1961.¹ Buber responded in a short essay that

1 Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Hasidism: A Critique," *Commentary* 32, no. 4 (October 1961): 305–16. It was reprinted in his collected essays, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 228–48. For a complete discussion of the events surrounding this debate, see Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Later Years, 1945–1965* (New York: Dutton, 1983), 280–99.

appeared in English under the title “Interpreting Hasidism,”² to which Scholem replied with a brief rejoinder.³ This debate has been the subject of vigorous analysis and scholarly conversation ever since.⁴ The interest has revolved around several distinct axes, including the proper understanding of early Hasidism in its historical context, the implied question of Hasidism as a model for a contemporary Jewish spirituality, and theoretical issues in the interpretation of textual sources, including the very basic question

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- 2 Martin Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” *Commentary* 36, no. 3 (September 1963): 218–25. It was also published in German in his *Schriften zum Chassidismus* (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1963), 991–98.
- 3 This rejoinder was added as a postscript to the *Messianic Idea* reprint, pp. 248–50.
- 4 The vast literature surrounding the Buber-Scholem debate includes the following: Grete Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, trans. Noah J. Jacobs (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 287–338; David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 165–70; Michael Oppenheim, “The Meaning of Hasidut: Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49, no. 3 (September 1981): 409–23; Steven T. Katz, “Martin Buber’s Misuse of Hasidic Sources,” in *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 52–93; Louis Jacobs, “Aspects of Scholem’s Study of Hasidism,” in *Gershom Scholem*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 179–88; Laurence J. Silberstein, “Modes of Discourse in Modern Judaism: The Buber-Scholem Debate Reconsidered,” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 71, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 657–81; Maurice Friedman, “Interpreting Hasidism: The Buber-Scholem Controversy,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 33, no. 1 (January 1988): 449–67; Jon D. Levenson, “The Hermeneutical Defense of Buber’s Hasidism: A Critique and Counterstatement,” *Modern Judaism* 11, no. 3 (October 1991): 297–320; Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 32–40; Rivka Schatz, “Gershom Scholem’s Interpretation of Hasidism as an Expression of His Idealism,” in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 87–103; Moshe Idel, “Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem on Hasidism: A Critical Appraisal,” in *Hasidism Reappraised*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 389–403; Barry J. Hammer, “Resolving the Buber-Scholem Controversy in Hasidism,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 47, no. 1 (1996): 102–27; Seth Brody, “‘Open to Me the Gates of Righteousness’: The Pursuit of Holiness and Non-Duality in Early Hasidic Teaching,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 89, nos. 1–2 (July–October 1998): 3–44; and Jerome Gellman, “Buber’s Blunder: Buber’s Replies to Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer,” *Modern Judaism* 20, no. 1 (2000): 20–40. Gellman mounts a particularly venomous attack on Buber, harsher than that of Scholem, who remained respectful toward his onetime mentor throughout. As will become clear below, my conclusions are diametrically opposed to those of Gellman. See also discussions by Ron Margolin in *Mikdash adam: ha-hafnamah ha-datit ye-itsuv hayye ha-dat ha-penimiyim be-reshit ha-hasidut* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), 40–54, 428–33, and by Tsippi Kauffman in *Be-kol derakhekha da’ehu: tefisat ha-E-lohut ye-ha-avodah be-gashmiyyut be-reshit ha-hasidut* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 125–29, and *passim*.

In this essay, I have offered several excerpts from the teachings of R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl that illustrate the author's full-throated affirmation of the presence of the Divine in this world, which is encountered through physical pleasures, tastes, and joy. Rather than negating the significance of these formulations, we should see the prior doctrine of the raising of the sparks as that which the author wishes to interpret anew in the light of his worldview. His scathing critique of ascetic practices that were popular amongst many kabbalists constitutes further evidence of his position on this matter, as well as of his boldly taken role as creative interpreter of inherited traditions. The emphatic nature and sheer originality of the author's affirmations demonstrate that a spirit closer to that which Buber found in many Hasidic tales is indeed present in Hasidic "theoretical literature" as well, at least in the case of R. Menahem Nahum. Scholarship must help us to appreciate the variation and individual voices that come through in Hasidic literature. This will come about through studies that are attentive to the historical contexts, flow of thought, and nuances of expression—including the varied readings of shared conceptual terminology—of particular Hasidic preachers.⁴⁵

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