

Foreword

Arthur Green

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev is one of the most beloved folk heroes of Jewish tradition. He is best known for his love of ordinary people and his willingness to find holiness in all their deeds, even in their moral foibles. The tales about him repeatedly depict him arguing with God in defense of Jews, both individually and collectively. More than any other figure in the Jewish literary imagination, his life demonstrates the inseparable bond between love of God and love of humanity.

But Levi Yitzhak is also a real historical figure. He was among the leading disciples of Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch (1704–1772) and played a key role in the spread of the Hasidic movement. Persecuted and driven from several communal posts because of his then-controversial Hasidic faith, he finally became rabbi of Berdichev, one of the largest Jewish communities in the Ukraine, where he served from 1785 until his death in 1811. His book *Kedushat Levi*, published immediately after his death, is considered one of the great classics of Hasidic literature.

Like almost all of early Hasidic writings, *Kedushat Levi* is a collection of homilies following the weekly Torah portion and the holiday cycle. (One portion of it, that on Purim and Hanukkah, was published by Levi Yitzhak in 1798.) These homilies were first delivered orally in Yiddish, the only spoken language of Eastern European Jews. When prepared for publication, however, they were rendered into abbreviated Hebrew versions. Publication in the holy tongue, the literary language of the educated, was considered more respectable. Because of their summary nature, the texts are sometimes difficult to understand, the power of their original delivery lost in the course of abbreviation and rough translation. It is almost as if they reach us in dehydrated form and we have to add the liquid warmth of our own understanding to bring them back to full strength.

That is precisely what Jonathan Slater has sought to do in this collection. He has filtered a selected group of *Kedushat Levi* teachings through his own religious experience and inner life, making them

accessible to a new generation of seekers. Each of the original oral teachings behind this volume was offered in a particular context, perhaps stimulated by the need or life situation of a specific disciple or member of Levi Yitzhak's community. All that has been lost to us in the course of transcription and the passage of generations. But Slater has not allowed that to make him give up. He addresses to the Hasidic sources precisely the question that these texts themselves constantly address to the Torah itself: How is this teaching relevant to us, living in our own time?

The teachings of Hasidism are extraordinarily rich and creative in exposition of prior Jewish texts, beginning with the Torah. They clearly attest to a deep faith and call constantly for personal spiritual openness and awareness of the divine presence throughout our lives. The cultivation of that awareness, *da'at*, and the attachment to God that results from it, *devekut*, constitute the heart of the Hasidic message. But the sources are not so strong in telling us precisely *how* to go about attaining these states. Surely both the life of the commandments and the study of Torah were seen as ways to enter God's service. Intense prayer, both liturgical and private, were also a part of the traditional spiritual "toolbox." But Slater correctly intuits that these are not enough, especially for the contemporary reader. Well known as a practitioner and teacher of meditation, he accompanies each text with questions for personal thought as well as devotional exercises, building bridges between texts that many today would find obscure and the widely popular practice of mindfulness meditation.

This book is made for contemplative practice, not for quick reading. You have before you the work of a contemporary mystical seeker reflecting on the teachings of a profound preacher of two hundred years ago. But that preacher himself was drawing on a rich array of prior sources. In entering the world of this book, you are invited to add another link to that great chain, allowing the wisdom of Jewish mystical teachings to enter your heart, leading you from the "sources to the great Source of all." That wisdom will be changed and renewed as it comes through you, just as it has been changed in coming through Jonathan Slater and in coming through Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev. But be prepared: as you make these teachings your own, they will seek to change and remake you as well. Only in allowing that to happen will you begin to understand the very important volume you have before you.

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Deepening Mindfulness,

Practicing Compassion and

Enriching Our Lives through the Wisdom of

R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev's *Kedushat Levi*

RABBI JONATHAN P. SLATER, DMin

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For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

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