

Neo-Hasidism and Our Theological Struggles

Arthur Green

Hasidism, the mystical revival movement that captured the hearts of East European Jewry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is a richly textured and highly variegated religious phenomenon. Its early years constituted a period of tremendous spiritual and literary creativity, out of which emerged a new reading of the entire prior Jewish tradition, producing a movement wholly traditionalist in form yet radically innovative in the realm of the religious imagination.

Surely one of the great success stories in the history of Judaism, Hasidism has remained a highly influential force in the Jewish community for two hundred years. While its own continuation, despite the ravages of urbanization, emigration to the West, and finally the Holocaust, is nothing less than remarkable, perhaps Hasidism's greatest influence has come about through the impression it has made upon countless Jews who stand far outside the sphere of the hasidic community itself. Beginning with the turn of this century and the end of its great battle with *haskalah*, Hasidism has been rediscovered by a myriad of Jews in search of some aspect of the prior tradition which they could call their own. Peretz, Agnon, and Singer in the literary world, Buber and Heschel among theologians are the names that immediately come to mind, but there have been a great many others as well. Insofar as these writers and intellectuals see elements of Hasidism as central to their program for the ongoing life of Jewry they may be characterized as neo-hasidic, believers in an "essential spirit" or in certain teachings of Hasidism which they seek to promulgate in the non-hasidic world.

Since neo-Hasidism is chiefly an intellectual and religious tendency, never converted into institutions or defined as a movement, it is natural that each thinker within this barely defined group will choose his or her own selections from the vast legacy of Hasidism, these often overlapping but little with that which others have chosen to emphasize. Some will emerge with a highly halakhic vision of what Hasidism teaches (Hillel Zeitlin, for example), while others (notably Buber) will allow that *halakhah* be set aside nearly altogether. Some will seek out the profound mystical theology of *HaBaD*, others the simple peasant-like tales of the Ukrainian masters, and so forth. Suffice it to say, then, that the following ruminations are entirely my own: some thoughts that a student of Hasidism, also vitally concerned with issues of the Jewish future, has had concerning the value of the materials he studies. Gershom Scholem quotes the hasidic master Rabbi Pinhas of Korzec as having thanked God for having created him only in the period after the Zohar was known in the

world, "for the Zohar kept me a Jew". I have no hesitation in offering the same debt of gratitude to the hasidic masters.

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Hasidism is perhaps the most God-centered Judaism that has yet existed. Its very beginning point lies in the overwhelming experience of the all-pervasive presence of God. The Ba'al Shem Tov and his immediate circle never tire of insisting that the divine is everywhere, even — and perhaps especially — where we least expect to find it. This insight, received and conveyed by the first hasidic generation in ecstatic form, converted such earlier immanentist formulations as "The whole earth is full of His glory" or "There is no place devoid of Him" into enthusiastic watchwords. The brief aphorisms characteristic of early hasidic thought constantly drive this point home: there is no place, no hour, no person or object which does not serve to garb His presence. Perhaps the most radical expression of this reality, stripped of all traditionalist niceties is the claim by an early Lubavitch disciple — some four generations into the movement's history — that *alts iz got*, "all is God". This formulation (culled from a private letter not intended for publication) is what lies behind such more typical and guarded Hebrew expressions as "the life of God is garbed in all things" or the reading of such innocently theistic phrases as "there is none beside Him" to mean "there is **nothing** beside Him".

This monism, first applied to devotional and mental states, emerged from the Ba'al Shem 'Tov's insistence that there is no thought in the human mind which is not a thought of God. In relieving the burden of guilt his followers felt for having "wayward" or distracting thoughts, especially when at prayer, he stood firm in teaching that there are no distractions, since the very thought that distracts is itself a thought of God, no less holy in potential than pious concentration on the words of prayer. When stripped of its corporeal or even debased garments, the distraction may lead to yet higher prayer than would have been possible without it.

In the school of Mezritch, the second center of Hasidism, this devotional insight is developed into a mystical metaphysic; non-duality becomes a claim about the universe as well as about the mind. Dov Baer of Mezritch used earlier Kabbalistic terminology to construct a theology out of his own master's enthusiastic but fragmentary teachings. The *sefirot*, seen by the Kabbalists as stages in the emanation of divinity and as way-stations in the mystical ascent to God, are used by Dov Baer in a new way. The first of the ten *sefirot*, by the hasidic count, is *hokhmah* or divine wisdom. This beginning or primal point contains within it, in

potential, all reality that is ever to exist as completely unformed prime "matter". As such, *hokhmah* is called by the Kabbalists *ayin*, "nothing", for it contains no definition. The last of the ten rungs is *malkhut*, "kingdom", or *shekhinah*, God's presence. Unlike any prior Kabbalistic system, Dov Baer fully identifies *shekhinah* with the presence of divinity in this world, recovering the older pre-Kabbalistic usage of that term. *Shekhinah* is the fullness that plays opposite the primal emptiness of *hokhmah*; it is the realized world, the divine energy fully extended into all its worldly garb, a garb which is in no way separable from the divine "body" itself. Thus *shekhinah* may appropriately be called *yesh*, for it is identical with all of "being" as it is.

This primal pair, potential and actual or nothingness and being, are the essential dyad of hasidic mysticism. The realization of their oneness, the realization that *yesh* is *ayin* and *ayin* is *yesh*, is the essential goal of mystical awareness. The two are held together by the eight other *sefirot*, the mediating stages in the process of emanation. For Dov Baer, however, these mediating stages are essentially psychologized; they are the human qualities employed in the realization that *hokhmah* and *malkhut* are one, or in the pursuit of the religious life which emerges from that insight. Sometimes these stages are epitomized by the single quality of *da'at* or awareness, containing also the Biblical sense of intimate knowing, as that which joins together the two poles and reveals their oneness. By the power of unifying awareness, the "empty" and "full" stages in the progressive self-manifestation of divinity are revealed to be aspects of a single one.

This highly abstract panentheism seems to leave little room for the personalist religious metaphors that so characterize traditional Jewish theology. What is the place of "Father" or "King" if the religious task is one of cultivating a mystical awareness of the ultimate identity of being and nothingness? The fact is, however, that Hasidism provides room for the most highly theistic religious language, often expressed in terms of intimate endearment, to exist side by side with these rather non-theistic formulations. While there are occasional hints, here as in earlier Kabbalah, that such personal imagery is human projection onto the universe, mostly the paradox remains unresolved; the devotee is offered the option of returning from abstraction to seek consolation in the warm and familiar figures of a safer and better-known Jewish theology. The personalistic imagery of Jewish devotion was deeply ingrained in the folk mentality of Jewry long before Hasidism — or even Kabbalah or philosophy — came onto the scene. Surely Hasidism, in its attempt to appeal to the popular imagination, was hardly interested in fighting religious philosophy's ancient battles against the anthropomor-

phic deity, even if its own mystical elite did by far outgrow such thinking.

Let us pause here to ask what this complex of pre-modern mystical ideas has to say to us as moderns (or perhaps post-moderns), and particularly as Jews struggling with the specific intellectual legacy of Reconstructionism. Clearly the focus of Hasidism is quite different, as are its language and intellectual antecedents, from our usual ways of thinking. This is a Judaism in which religious language is ultimately serious, one where both Torah and Israel (or "peoplehood" and its "sancta") will clearly play a secondary and instrumental role. On the other hand, the concept of God offered by Hasidism is a highly sophisticated one; the educated *hasid* is not simply praying to a projected father-figure who will reward him for his good behavior, and he cannot be dismissed as such. His religion contains a profound shift in the way we view the universe: to see all being as the cloak of divinity and the uplifting presence of the One as discoverable everywhere is to add a transforming poetic perspective to our vision, one that may leave no corner of our life untouched. Interestingly, this perspective shares with Reconstructionism not only the transcendence of conventional theism, but a sense that the divinity we seek is a quality present throughout being rather than a Being who is other than the world. While distant in its poetics, some aspects of hasidic theology may be closer to Reconstructionism than we had suspected in actual content.

The presence of this non-theistic religious language at the heart of a traditional Jewish piety has yet to be taken seriously in modern Jewish thought. The influence of existentialism on the theology of the earlier twentieth century made personalistic language seem attractive, though used in a highly subjective manner. Even such figures as Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, so steeped in the study of Hasidism, mostly ignored its abstract theological language, favoring the Biblical metaphors of personal relationship between God and Israel (now universalized as "man"). In recent decades only have the historical researches of Israeli scholars begun to render these hasidic materials accessible, and the influence of mysticism, especially of contemplative Buddhist and Hindu origin, on the intellectual life of the West, has created an atmosphere in which such non-personalist terminology is of increased interest. The "death-of-God" movement, while itself short-lived, served to underscore the fact that God as "Father" or "King", the essential personal metaphors preserved in later Jewish theology, describes a religious reality no longer known by many contemporary seekers. The feminist critique of religious language in the 1970's also pointed up the inadequacy of these terms, not only because they are masculine in gender but because they represent

a quality of patronizing authority toward the individual that no longer seems acceptable.

A turn to the language of mystical or panentheistic abstraction is attractive in a number of ways. It allows one to view religious awareness as an added or deepened perception of the world, one that complements rather than contradicts our ordinary and "profane" perception. It seems to be nurtured by an openness to a more profound rung of human consciousness rather than needing the "leap of faith" requisite for theism. The theology that would emerge from such a re-appropriated Hasidism could be characterized as belonging to religious "naturalism", in that it entails no literal belief in a deity that is willful or active in human affairs. On the other hand, it is a naturalism deeply tempered by a sense of the transcendent, an openness to the profundities of inner experience, and a humility about the limits of human knowledge.

As in traditional Hasidism, there should be room for such mystical abstraction to co-exist with the more ancient religious language of Judaism. Our modern awareness of the strong projection element in our personal metaphors for God should not be incapacitating: our need to call out as humans to the infinite may at times require that we picture it as human. At the same time, God as King takes its place as one metaphor among many, each called forth by varying needs within that most complex of human activities, the stretching forth toward the mystery both within and beyond.

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The motif of *yeridah zorekh aliyah*, "descent for the sake of ascent", provides the essential dramatic rubric for the hasidic vision of the spiritual life. It is derived from the Lurianic myth of the "breaking of the vessels", but it is used in Hasidism in a more extended metaphoric way. Just as night precedes day in the order of Creation, or as the long night of exile precedes the dawn of Israel's redemption, so do times of darkness alternate with those of light in the life of each individual, "for light is greater when it proceeds from the dark". Each person **must** go through periods of inner darkness (depression, doubt, temptation) in order to increase the light that emerges in the triumph over them. This is the closest Hasidism comes to offering a theodicy; the task of transforming suffering and evil into "light" — the joy of God's service — is left in human hands. The more profound the sufferings given to an individual, the higher the sparks that lie within that person's grasp to redeem, if the strength can but be found to effect that transformation. Ultimately there is nothing in the universe so irremediably evil. since all comes from God, that it

cannot be recovered for the holy. The hasidic masters admit, however, that certain types of sparks (including those found in forbidden foods, for example) may only be uplifted at the end of time.

Implicit in this entire complex of images is the notion that God has need for human help in the ongoing redemption of the universe, which is also the redemption/fulfillment of the divine Self. The sacrifice of omnipotence in such a concept, long troubling to Kabbalah's Jewish critics, should pose little difficulty to moderns who, especially in the face of the Holocaust, see little evidence of omnipotence as a divine attribute. On the contrary, a sense of human partnership with God in the redemption that both require should be an exciting model for contemporary theology. In this partnership, as we would read it today, humans are needed to take a fully active role, for it is only they who can act on the material plane. God is the source of inspiration and the ever-renewing center of strength for this ongoing struggle. In fact the separation between what is human action and what is the handiwork of God through human agency seems to be an artificial one. Even though only humanity is active in the uplifting of sparks, we are not alone in our labors.

The essential instruments we Jews have to employ in the ongoing striving toward universal redemption are our own selves, both individually and collectively, and the traditions we have evolved over many centuries of devotion to sacred living. In this we may lay proud claim to the legitimacy of our uniqueness, while setting aside all claims of literal "chosenness" or superiority. As a small but highly developed and self-conscious group within the human family, we feel that we have much to offer in the increasingly shared growth of humanity. Particularly in the area of ethical nationhood, or the subjugation of the idolatry of nationalism to the higher ideals of the sacred, we Jews may yet have some very unique and painful sparks to redeem in a way that will be paradigmatic for others as well. We pray that the sacrifices, particularly those of life itself, which the Jewish people seems called upon to make at this juncture in our collective history, may not be more than we can bear. Our survival as a distinctive national and cultural group remains vital to us; at the same time we know that such a claim dare not be proclaimed an **ultimate** one, lest it supplant that singular One which unifies and transcends all our human differences.

The tradition of which we Jews are bearers is one of the ancient systems of symbolic truth which humanity has created over countless centuries in its attempt to reach toward infinity. All such systems are worthy of preservation and creative cultivation, and all are threatened in this era of massive cultural transformation and the inevitable loss of the past that accompanies it. Hav-

ing suffered unique losses of destruction and dislocation in this century, the understandable tendency of many Jews is toward ultraconservatism: we are to serve as faithful custodians of our legacy, preserving it for the future as it was given to us from a community and place that are no more. The neo-hasidic stance, as I read it, joins with the Reconstructionist in rejecting that reading of our current task. Torah is to be treated in each age as *torat hayyim* rather than as sacred relic; as such it must grow with the age and lead the way toward a creative future. It is the living community (community taking the place of individual *zaddik* in my re-reading of Hasidism) that must engage itself in the constant Jewish task of reinterpretation, of bringing the eternal truths into the idiom of the present and in fashioning the new insights of the present into a part of the eternal truth as it will be passed on to future generations. Hasidism indeed did this in its early and most courageous days; its boldness in reshaping the tradition, as well as its deep faithfulness in matters of form and style, could be instructive for us. Above all, Hasidism undertook its re-reading out of a deep knowledge of the entire corpus of the rabbinic tradition. For us, the breadth of that corpus has increased and the depth of our knowledge has concomitantly diminished. Our task is one of learning, reverence for the past, combined with openness to growth toward a potentially very different future. It will take real courage and faith for us to accept that the divine presence will ultimately sound forth from new forms as it has from the old. It would also be foolish of us to set aside our fine old sacred instruments, with their deep resonance of holiness, if not for compellingly good cause. The better we come to know them, the more indispensable they sometimes seem. Here too there is idolatry of which to be wary — both in the slavish devotion to the old and in the uncritical embrace of the contemporary. Only our commitment to honest search, our willingness to admit mistakes, and the chiding of friends with whom we share community are there to guide us.

RAAYONOT

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Editor: Sidney H. Schwarz

Editorial Office: Church Rd. & Greenwood Ave.
Wyncote, PA 19095

Editorial Board: Ron Aigen, Richard Hirsh, Alan Morse, Steven Sager, Sandy Sasso, Elliot Skiddell, Jacob Staub

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