

5 WIESEL IN THE CONTEXT OF NEO-HASIDISM

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IN PLACING ELIE WIESEL'S work in the context of "neo-Hasidism," I use that term in its very broadest sense.¹ Neo-Hasidism here refers to the notion that Hasidism has a message wider than the borders of the traditional hasidic community, that Jews and others who do not live the lives of Hasidim and who have no intention of doing so might still be spiritually nourished by the stories, teachings, music of Hasidism—indeed by the telling of the narrative of hasidic history itself. In addition to the role the living hasidic community has played—and continues to play, far beyond onetime expectations—in the life of the Jewish people, there is a second influence of Hasidism that is relevant to us here. That is the story of the image of Hasidism and the tremendous role it has had in the religious, artistic, and intellectual creativity of non-hasidic Jews throughout the twentieth century, reflected in literature (one need only think of Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Isaac Bashevis Singer, the two most important knowledgeably Jewish authors of the century), but also in religious thought, music, dance, theater, film, and painting. I take all of this as part of neo-Hasidism, that is to say, Hasidism for non-Hasidim.

The idea that Jews living outside the traditional hasidic world might still have something to learn from Hasidism and the mystical tradition could only have come about after the great battle between Haskalah (Western-style "Enlightenment") and Hasidism ended at the beginning of the twentieth century. This possibility of rapprochement (heralded as early as Eliezer Zweifel's *Shalom 'al Yisra'el* in 1870) happened because modern Jews thought they were witnessing the virtual collapse of Hasidism. By the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, Hasidism was very much in retreat, especially in its original heartland of Western Ukraine and Belorussia (it remained a major force in Galicia and strongest in the Carpathian region of northeastern Hungary, which is where Wiesel grew up). The reasons for this decline of Hasidism as the dominant force in Jewish religious life are complex and do not concern us here, but they include such socioeconomic factors as urbanization, industrialization, and emigration, along with

the concomitant rise of Socialist, Zionist, and other secularizing ideologies, both Jewish nationalist and assimilationist.

Hasidism in the Ukraine, where it all began, lay almost wholly within the hands of two great dynasties, the Twerskys and the Friedmans, descendants, respectively, of R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1730–97)² and Dov Baer, the maggid of Miedzyrzec (1704–72), through R. Yisrael of Ruzhin (1796–1851).³ These hasidic courts flourished into the 1870s or '80s, the lifetimes of the grandchildren of the Chernobyler and the children of the Ruzhiner. After that they began to break up, their leadership fragmenting into too many competing subdynasties, which led to frequent bickering and competition for dwindling audiences. The families no longer produced leaders of note, neither original thinkers nor impressive charismatics.⁴ To see this decline portrayed you have to look no further than Shalom Aleichem's classic *Tevye der Milchiger*, better known to American Jews as *Fiddler on the Roof*, where the father, though never formally described as anyone's *hasid*, is clearly a Ukrainian Jew of the hasidic type, brimming with wise *pshetlekh* that are half-mocking imitations of hasidic readings of verses, while his daughters are running off with anarchists, socialists, and even sons of Gentile peasants. By the century's closing decade it became possible for secular historians (S. M. Dubnov in their lead) to take a nonpolemical interest in Hasidism as something that already belonged to the past. Shortly afterward, writers, artists, and musicians began to take up the imaginative re-creation of Hasidism that was to exercise such a tremendous hold on the Jewish artistic imagination throughout the twentieth century.

The term "neo-Hasidism" has been the subject of a fine recent book by Nicham Ross, originally a dissertation at Ben Gurion University.⁵ It was first used regarding literary compositions, especially those of Y. L. Peretz and others in his circle. The term *ha-Hasidut ha-hadashah* was sometimes used interchangeably with *ha-Hasidut ha-sifrutit*, "literary Hasidism," or Hasidism as re-created in literature. Indeed it was understood by both enthusiasts and critics that Peretz, for one, was not interested in mere nostalgic re-creation of bygone days, but wanted to use his old/new hasidic tales as a platform for a Jewish national revival featuring his own values.⁶ This positive appropriation of Hasidism transcended the emerging lines between Hebrew and Yiddish literature (as did Peretz) and on the Hebrew side is especially associated with Michah Josef Berdiczewsky and others, as discussed in full detail by Ross.

On the ideological/philosophical side, neo-Hasidism is of course most associated with the works of Martin Buber. Buber began publishing his famous re-creations of hasidic tales as early as 1906.⁷ But at almost the same time he began writing essays that used Hasidism as an expression of his own religious values, some of which authentically derived from early hasidic sources, but which were presented with an overlay of the romantic youth-culture mysticism widely popular in middle Europe of his day. As Buber's own ideology shifted from mysticism to dialogic thinking in the post-World War I years,⁸ he took Hasidism along with him, as it were, reshaping his reading of it to emphasize its interpersonal and communitarian aspects.

For Buber it was very clear that the legacy of hasidic tales—preserved for a long time by oral tradition and printed only quite late,⁹ even in Buber’s own day—stood at the very heart of Hasidism. This was partly because the tales were textually and linguistically more accessible to him, unlike the rather abstruse hasidic sermons, as has been pointed out by Scholem and others. But it also related to Buber’s highly existential reading of Hasidism as configured entirely around human relationships: the deep soul-bonds between rebbe and disciple and among brothers in the same hasidic circle, the fellowship of Hasidim around a rebbe’s table. The printed teachings as we have them are of necessity abstracted, distilled out of special moments of communion and spiritual counseling offered to a particular disciple at a particular time. These are thus watered down and sometimes even misleading, Buber would argue, when presented in the conventional Hebrew anonymous third person and shared as teachings that could befit anyone at any time.

But Buber was by no means the only thinker of his generation to have recourse to Hasidism in search of a Jewish religious language that might address a younger generation. As Avraham Shapira has shown, Aaron David Gordon (1856–1922), the most important intellectual of the Zionist back-to-the-land movement, was much influenced by his own hasidic background and the affectionate appropriation of some of the movement’s key terminology.¹⁰ Throughout the interwar period, there were various attempts, in both Poland and Eretz Yisrael, to universalize and update some of Hasidism’s essential religious insights. The figure most associated with these attempts in Eastern Europe was author-publicist-journalist Hillel Zeitlin (1871–1942),¹¹ well-known martyr of the Warsaw ghetto. Zeitlin, coming from a Chabad family, had become well-versed in Western philosophy, especially that of nineteenth-century Romanticism, and he turned primarily to the teachings of Hasidism in his quest for an authentically Jewish philosophical language. There were others as well, both in Poland and in Eretz Yisrael. Among these is the highly prolific but now largely forgotten figure of Eliezer Steinman (1892–1970), who published nine volumes of *Be’er ha-Hasidut*, drawing on both tales and teachings in an attempt to make Hasidism live again for the modern Hebrew reader. Another particularly poignant figure to be mentioned here is Jiri Langer (1894–1942), whose *Nine Gates to the Hasidic Mysteries*, written and first published in Czech, brought the hasidic narrative to the eyes of another group of Western readers. We used to quip about Buber that before he invited his Western reader-guests into the *shtetl* he had a cleanup crew come in and remove such spiritual eyesores as superstition, too much miracle working, disdain for Gentiles, and other things that might offend the Western taste. Langer, who had for a while prior to the First World War repented of his Western ways and become a Belzer Hasid, gave us a fuller, and indeed more traditionally pious, rendering of the same tradition.

Enter Wiesel. The first two things that need to be noted are place and time. Wiesel comes from Sighet in northeastern Hungary, where Hasidism remained a powerful force right down to the 1940s. This mountainous region at the ethnic meeting place

of Hungary, Romania, and Carpatho-Ruthenia was less affected by modernization than most other parts of East-Central Europe. The particular quality of Hasidism as practiced in schools like those of Munkacs (Mukacevo) and Szatmar (Satu-Mare) was fiercer, more militant, than Hasidism in Poland had ever been. In this region Hasidism had first been introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century, the period of the movement's strongest stance against Haskalah. Hungarian Hasidism, as it came to be known, gave in much less readily to the increasing pressures of modern life. It is worthy of note that photographer Roman Vishniac's famous documentation of what he called *Polish Jews* is actually largely photos of Carpatho-Ruthenian Jews, taken in the 1930s in that area where Hasidism, and with it the old Jewish way of life, still most strongly prevailed. Wiesel came from a family typical of Sighet or Szatmar in the interwar period: his parents quite westernized but his grandfather still a Hasid of the old school. He speaks movingly of his grandfather as the original source of his attraction to Hasidism and the one who first told him the hasidic tales. In this sense Wiesel is very much an *eynekl* (grandchild), moving back over one generation in search of a piety that belonged to the grandparent's generation, a phenomenon known among American Jews as well.¹² It is also interesting to note, given where he comes from, that individuals and dynasties closest to home, Belz, Viznitz, Munkacs, and Szatmar, play no role in *Souls on Fire*, *Four Hasidic Masters*, or *Somewhere a Master*, Wiesel's important contributions to the retelling of hasidic tales. Perhaps these were too close, the clay feet of the local practitioners too obvious. Perhaps also the fierce anti-Zionism of the Hungarian rebbes, their absolute insistence until the very end that their followers stay close to home and not emigrate, did not leave Wiesel with entirely positive feelings toward them. While I recall one very moving account of a personal meeting with the Wizhnitser rebbe after the war, neither he, Wiesel's grandfather's rebbe, nor others of his line, is part of Wiesel's central hasidic narratives. The rebbe in *The Gates of the Forest*, probably Wiesel's most important invocation of Hasidism as a living phenomenon, is certainly the late Lubavitcher, Menahem Mendel Schneerson, again someone far from "home."

The time of his writing is the other key factor. Wiesel offers the first significant retelling of the story of Hasidism after the Holocaust, after the hasidic "empire" in Eastern Europe had gone up in smoke. He tells the tales without innocence, without naïvete. Here he stands in sharpest contrast to Langer, who tried to don the mantle of Belzer Hasid, or to Shlomo Carlebach, who tried so hard to dress his narratives in an exaggerated mantle of previous generations' simple faith. That is not Wiesel. The Holocaust is always there. Sometimes it is the background of a chosen tale, like that of the Hasid who ate and ate, making himself fatter so that he would take longer to burn. Elsewhere it comes back in italicized passages, comments and counterpoints to the narrative that the author interjects. But these, despite their sometimes "unbelieving" content, do not weaken or undercut the tales. On the contrary, they lend to them a new depth, a profound poignancy. The reader is always aware of the narrator's identity,

where he has been, what he has seen, and the fact that he is telling these tales and finding meaning in them nevertheless. Some of that “nevertheless” becomes contagious to the reader. One is reminded of poet Aaron Zeitlin’s quest for God: *afile nokh ale tfiles, afile nokh ale alifes* (“even after all the prayers; even after all the ‘evens’”). Wiesel’s work is not that of Yaffa Eliach,¹³ treating Hasidism as it existed in the hour of the Holocaust. His are the old tales retold, but with the shadow of how they appear after 1945 never far in the background.

But there is another aspect to the time and place of Wiesel’s writing. He is not only postwar, but educated and significantly formed in postwar France. Reading his hasidic tales one is struck by the attention paid to the human situation in its broadest and most profound sense, as refracted through the tales as a prism. Some of this is created by the Holocaust shadow I have just mentioned, but I also think it fair to say that these are hasidic tales told by someone who has read—and lived—the existential struggle as depicted by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. There is a subtle but important difference in tone between Wiesel’s existential setting of the tales and Buber’s. Buber is still attracted to and impressed by piety in a way that Wiesel cannot be without a certain questioning edge. One has a sense that it is French secular existentialism, not that of Kierkegaard, Rosenzweig, or Buber, that has most touched his soul. This is clearly seen in his choice to write on the four hasidic masters and their struggles with melancholy. Hasidic faith has much to do, in Wiesel’s telling, with personal struggle and with the inner life of the lone—and essentially lonely—individual. The human pathos of the individual, including his torment over matters of faith, is right at the center of Wiesel’s concern. He has no desire to paper over that conflict; on the contrary, he sets the spotlight right on it, not on any comforting resolution. Nor does Wiesel have much interest in hasidic community that so attracted Buber. One has a sense that Wiesel’s own lonely postwar years of personal quest and struggle, in that Parisian intellectual milieu, are present in the lives of the hasidic masters as he presents them. He loves them because they struggle for faith, because they stare defiantly into the face of meaninglessness, not because they have “answers” to the great questions of life.

Neo-hasidism in the United States has become something of a religious movement. Most responsible for this are two one-time followers of the Lubavitcher rebbe who broke with him in the 1960s and set out to create something very different from what he had in mind for American Jewry. Of course I refer to Shlomo Carlebach and to my friend and mentor Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who first introduced me to Elie Wiesel, probably in 1964. Both Schachter and Carlebach articulated a Judaism in which tales and teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, or R. Nachman, Levi-Yitzhak, and others would have a more central place than the study of Talmud or strict attention to halachic detail. This was to be a joyous, celebratory form of *Yiddishkeit*, one in which borders and restrictions—those between men’s and women’s realms, between Jew and Gentile, between old customs and new innovations, had little place. Schachter, always much more

self-aware than Carlebach, understood well what he was doing. His Bnai Or—later Pnai Or—and Aleph movements reflect the influence of 1960s new-age religion, of Christian and Buddhist monasticism, of the rediscovered Dead Sea Scrolls (Zalman himself tells me that this was important to him), but also of a revival of Hasidism attempted by Hillel Zeitlin in the 1920s, his call to create a new spiritual Yavneh, one that never came to be in Poland but was discovered and avidly read by the young Schachter.¹⁴ Zeitlin's vision of Jewish rebirth around the banner of a renewed Hasidism, lost in the ashes of Poland, came about here, despite many changes, in the Jewish Renewal and Havurah movements.

Wiesel took no part in all this. His new Hasidism was indeed a *hasidut sifrutit*, one that existed chiefly in the pages of his books and in his multiple lecture series on hasidic masters. One had a sense that both authenticity and ambivalence kept Wiesel far from participating in the creation of a religious movement. He knew what a real hasidic *shtetl* looked, sounded, and felt like. Even in the years when he could not yet attend it regularly, it could not be replaced for him by something so very American and transformed as what Schachter or Carlebach was legitimating.

But in this there lies a certain irony. Both Zalman and Shlomo, in breaking with their rebbe, did so in part because they themselves were ready for *rebbistve*, seeking the independence to be masters themselves of a neo-hasidic alternative to what existed in Lubavitch. In this, the moment of their break is not unlike things that took place in Lublin and Przysucha, which Wiesel describes so vividly. These two would-be rebbes struggled hard and created, each in his own way, an important niche within the Jewish community. Their influence on the creative survival of Judaism as a whole has been tremendous, even if they did so from the side, as it were, of the larger North American Jewish community. But there is only one person, since the death of our teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, who has been something of a rebbe-figure for American Jewry as a whole. That of course is Elie Wiesel, a man who never sought that role but was cast into it.

It was almost inevitable, given the centrality of the Shoah in American Jewish consciousness, the power of his own writings, and the dramatic figure that he quite naturally cuts, that Wiesel would have such a role. While a true modesty made him seek to deny it to some degree, I think it fair to look back and to say that he has used it well. Wiesel has helped American—even world—Jewry to do two important things, neither of which directly concerns his re-creation of Hasidism, but both of which come from his reluctant role as rebbe. And maybe, just maybe, something of the hasidic spirit is present in both of them.

First, he took a lead in the universalizing of the Holocaust survivors' message. He understood—and here he surely learned from Heschel—that we Jews as victims had something urgent to say about Biafra, Vietnam, Rwanda, Bosnia, and all the rest. "Never again!" was not just about Jews, but about humanity. This reading of the tradition already was that of most American Jews, though not universally shared by the ac-

tual survivors. But to hear it from Wiesel, one who had been there, who himself represented Holocaust memory, was tremendously important. He came to understand the question of post-Holocaust Jewry's moral capital and how to use it wisely. (In these days, when that moral capital has been so terribly squandered by two countries we love, we urgently need to relearn those lessons.)

Second, and perhaps most crucially, Wiesel has helped to allow for, and even taken a lead in, the healing of the Holocaust wound that has inevitably been taking place over the past several decades. This deep gash, a breach in our faith, in our ability to trust either God or the world, in our ability to rejoice, to let ourselves sing or dance, a wound affecting even our ability to be vulnerable enough to love, had to heal. But this could not have happened without a certain amount of *farginnen zikh*, which is not precisely translated by "forgiving ourselves." We had to let ourselves be, let nature take its healthy course, and begin to smile on life again. The fact that Wiesel was doing this, especially after his involvement with Soviet Jewry and onward through the years, was significant. It was not a case of *un az der rebbe tantzt, tantzen ale Hasidim* ("When the rebbe dances, so do the disciples," i.e., mere imitation). Wiesel was hardly one who could be imitated. But his ability to sing and dance again was an important encouragement for all the rest of us.

This takes me back to that most important hasidic moment in all the Wiesel corpus, the moment of confrontation between Gregor and the rebbe, amid the throng of singing Hasidim, near the end of *The Gates of the Forest*. "How can you sing? How can you still pray?" Gregor, obviously the Wiesel character, demands of the rebbe. To which he replies, "What do you expect of me? . . . Do you want me to stop praying and start shouting?" Wiesel learned that lesson, the lesson that one can sing rather than scream, in part surely by writing that book. In a certain sense he let himself become that rebbe, singing instead of screaming, but without betraying memory. That act, surely faithful to the spirit of the Baal Shem Tov, is Elie Wiesel's most important neo-hasidic legacy, one we could not do without.

Notes

1. Elie Wiesel's work was first described as "Neo-Hasidism" by Lothar Kahn in *Mirrors of the Jewish Mind* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1968), 176ff. He offers no particular definition of the term, however. I am thankful to Alan Rosen for this reference.

2. On the Chernobyl dynasty, see Gad Sagiv, "The Chernobyl Hasidic Dynasty: Its History and Thought from the Beginning until the End of the First World War" (doctoral diss., Tel Aviv University, 2008). On R. Menahem Nahum, see the introduction to my English translation of *Upright Practices* and *The Light of the Eyes* (on Genesis) (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

3. See David Assaf's biography, *The Regal Way* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002).

4. No significant hasidic book or treatise was authored by a member of these dynasties after R. David of Talne (d. 1882).

5. Nicham Ross, *A Beloved-Despised Tradition: Modern Jewish Identity and Neo-Hasidic Writing at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Beersheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2010).

6. Among the fiercest of these critics was Shal Ish Horowitz (1861–1922), who once referred to neo-Hasidism as *tenu't ha-bimbum*. On him see Stanley Nash, *In Search of Hebraism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

7. *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman* [The Tales of Rabbi Nachman] (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten & Loening, 1906).

8. Rivka Horwitz, *Buber's Way to I and Thou* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

9. See Joseph Dan's discussion in *Ha-Sippur ha-Hasidi* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), and especially his chapter on "Fifty Years of Silence."

10. Avraham Shapira, *The Kabbalistic and Hasidic Sources of A. D. Gordon's Thought* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996).

11. I have written briefly on Zeitlin in "Three Warsaw Mystics," in *Kolot Rabbim: The Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 1996), 1–58 (English section). My selection and translation of Zeitlin's writings, entitled *Hasidism for a New Era* (including Joel Rosenberg's translation of Zeitlin's prayers), is forthcoming from Paulist Press in the Classics of Western Spirituality series. Jonathan Meir has also published several essays in Hebrew that are of great value for understanding Zeitlin.

12. Nicham Ross (in oral conversation) has pointed out that much of the scholarly writing on Hasidism, along with a good deal of neo-hasidic fiction, has been produced by such *eyneklech*, meaning descendants of hasidic dynasties, themselves no longer pious in the old way, but still revering hasidic memory. These include Shmuel Abba Horodezky, Fishl Schneersohn (author of the wonderful and now mostly forgotten novel *Hayyim Gravitser*), Abraham Joshua Heschel, Yochanan Twersky, and Bina Malka Shapira. Of course Wiesel is a grandchild of a faithful Hasid, not a rebbe.

13. *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford, 1982).

14. See my prior comments on this in "Renewal and *Havurah*: American Movements, European Roots," in *Jewish Renaissance and Revival in America*, ed. Eitan P. Fishbane and Jonathan D. Sarna (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 145–64, as well as Schachter-Shalomi's foreword to my forthcoming selection of Zeitlin's writings mentioned above in note 11.

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