

# Teachings of the Hasidic Masters

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Title page of *Kedushat Levi* by Levi Yizhak of Berdichev, Lemberg, 1858.

The history of the Hasidic movement tells one of the great success stories in the history of religion. Within a period of fifty years following the death of the movement's first central figure, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (1700–60), his little band of followers in the Ukraine had spread out to conquer the hearts of what was probably a majority of Jewry in the old Russo-Polish empire. We would search Jewish history in vain for another phenomenon of religious transformation that succeeded in so rapid and yet so long-lasting a manner. It took the rabbinic movement hundreds of years to win the allegiance of the Jewish people, while the Sabbatian movement of the seventeenth century, though spreading like wildfire, essentially petered out a few years after it had come into being. Other major currents in Jewish spiritual history, including both medieval rationalism and early Kabbalah, were primarily literary and intellectual movements. Hasidism, in one or another of its forms, dominated Jewish religious life in Russia, Poland, and parts of neighboring Hungary and Romania throughout the nineteenth century. It continues to play a major role in Judaism today, both through the survival of the Hasidic communities themselves and through its influence, however transformed, on even the most thoroughly modern of Jewish religious thinkers.

The keys to an understanding of the movement's rapid spread lie in the profound vision and charismatic personalities of its leaders, on the one hand, and on the people's deeply felt need for such a revival on the other. The Ba'al Shem Tov and his followers told, in semi-

pantheistic fashion, of a God who was present and directly accessible throughout His universe, of a world in which even the seemingly most irretrievable evil was capable of (indeed longing for) redemption, and of an essential role that each Jew had to play in the joyous transformation of matter into spirit, of mundane into holy. It did so while remaining entirely faithful to the deep-seated traditions of rabbinic Judaism, using the very texts and institutions of the normative tradition to effect a revolutionary and yet inherently conservative revival. The leaders of this delicately balanced transformation were, perforce, both men of authentic religious vision and masters of integration, able to interpret their own mystical and devotional experiences in terms derived from the received body of traditional symbols. It was largely because of this latter skill that the faithful Jewish masses recognized and accepted the wandering Hasidic preacher as their own, hearing a message that was entirely familiar in language and form, while still fresh and invigorating in content and in the person of its bearer.

For a Jewry that had lived through a long period of political and social decline, that faced new and feared oppression at the hands of its recently acquired Russian masters, and that had of late suffered its own inner spiritual turmoils as well, Hasidism was able to provide the answers it sought. If liberation in the political sense was impossible—and this included messianic adventurism—the vision of a spiritualized reality would allow for an inner freedom, even while the physical shackles remained unbroken. If the old social tensions of the Jewish community added to the burden of oppression—the oligarchy of the wealthy and learned poised against an increasingly restive, though hardly politicized, mass of Jewry—Hasidism spoke for a spiritual democratization of sorts, one in which the readily accessible virtues of piety and enthusiasm surpassed those of classical erudition and family status. To be sure, a new elite was proclaimed almost from the movement's beginning: it was through the true *zaddik* (literally "righteous person," used in the Hasidic context to mean the spiritual leader, or *rebbe*, of a particular Hasidic group) and devotion to him, as well as through following his teachings, that this inward redemption could be achieved. In this it may be said that Hasidism, like many a revolution, bore within it the seeds of its own decline. But the Hasidic holy man, with the mysterious yet kindly mien drawn for him by the leading figures of the movement's early days, played a positive and crucial role in the uplifting of spirits that lay at the very core of Hasidism's message.

### THE LITERATURE OF HASIDISM

It was primarily orally rather than by the written work that Hasidism was first spread. The Maggid (Preacher) Dov Baer of Miedzyrzec (Mezritch), the Ba'al Shem Tov's successor, and most of his followers were *preachers*, some wandering from town to town and others appointed by a specific community to a regular preaching office. It was in lengthy homilies delivered in the synagogue or at the Sabbath table, in which strands of earlier tradition were skillfully rewoven to highlight elements of Hasidic teaching, that a theology of Hasidism began to develop. As the fame of these preachers, along with healers and other sorts of holy men (and occasionally women) associated with them, began to spread, wise sayings were attributed to them, snippets of their teachings were excerpted and retold in their names, and tales of their powers, often including elements of the miraculous, began to be told among the folk. All the later genres of Hasidic literature, including homilies (Hebrew: *derashot*; Yiddish: *drosches*), aphorisms (*peshatim*; *pshetlekh*), and tales (*sippurim*; *mayses*), had their origins in the spoken word.

Of these genres, it was the homilies that first made the transition from the spoken medium to that of print. Beginning with the *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, by a disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, in 1780, volumes of collected teachings of individual Hasidic masters began to appear, published by often obscure printing houses that dotted the little towns of Byelorussia and the Ukraine. By the turn of the nineteenth century, works by Dov Baer and most of his disciples, in addition to several other leading figures of the movement, had already been compiled and published. This tradition of editing and printing originally oral homilies flourished especially in the early decades of that century; but continues within Hasidic circles right down to our own day.

In most cases it was the sons or disciples of the authors who prepared such works for publication, rather than the masters themselves. While the homilies were usually delivered without notes (spontaneity was considered a great virtue in such preaching) and on days when note taking by the hearers would have been forbidden by halakhic restrictions, faithful disciples went home after the Sabbath or festival on which the master had spoken and composed written synopses of the *derashot* their masters had preached. These notebooks formed the basis, sometimes in conjunction with the masters' own written notes, of the literary works of Hasidism. By their very nature, it should be realized, such literary recreations of oral homilies contain a degree of artifice: they are

brief and often much more formal than the rather chatty vernacular in which the masters spoke. Most important, they are *translations*, abbreviated Hebrew renditions of sermons preached in Yiddish. It was unthinkable in the East European milieu that the sacred tongue be used for any sort of oral performance other than liturgy, and the Hebrew preserved was of a purely literary character. When it came to recording the holy teachings of the masters, however, it was equally unthinkable that any vessel short of Hebrew, the classical and sacred language of Jewry, be employed. Since the masters generally wove their homilies around a series of quotations from the Bible and other classical sources, the first task in the literary reconstruction of the homily would be an outlining of the various sources quoted. Once these quotations had been listed, the writer would reestablish the link between them, highlighting the theological or devotional motifs that were brought out in the course of these associations. In some cases the resulting volume was a collection of rather short, almost aphoristic comments on individual biblical verses, while in others the homilies were preserved in a more complete form, resulting in long homiletical essays in which the verse at hand served merely as a point of departure.

The collected homilies of individual masters were joined late in the eighteenth century by several anonymous or misattributed volumes of assorted bits of Hasidic wisdom. Such works as *Zava'at Rivash* (the purported testament of the Ba'al Shem Tov), *Keter Shem Tov*, (The Crown of the Good Name) and *Likkutim Yekarim* (Precious Selections), enjoyed great popularity and contributed much to the spread of Hasidic ideas. By means of brief comments on passages from the Bible or rabbinic literature, they tended to highlight the devotional focus which was so important to the Hasidic world view, and often offered practical advice on such matters as concentration in prayer, the uplifting of evil thoughts, and the maintaining of a devotional posture even while engaged in worldly pursuits. These collections are thematically related to the literature of *hanhagot*, lists of the personal practices of individual masters. Such lists also began to appear in print toward the turn of the nineteenth century, often as addenda to the published collections of the masters' homilies. A classic example of this type of list, frequently reprinted and widely revered in Hasidic circles, is the *Tsetl Katan* by Rabbi Elimelech of Lezajsk.

The genre of Hasidic literature best known in modern times, that of the tale, was in fact the last to appear in print. While *Shivhei ha-Besht*, the hagiographical life of the Ba'al Shem Tov, appeared in 1815, the heyday of publication for the tales was the period between 1864 and the

First World War, when hundreds of such collections were brought to light. The tales were in many cases printed in Yiddish rather than Hebrew, intended for a popular audience that did not have the degree of Hebrew education that was assumed among readers of the homilies and teachings. This audience included women as well as men, and (at least later) non-Hasidic as well as Hasidic Jews. Some of the tales' editors were in fact not *hasidim*, but publicists of a more modern sort who sought either literary fame or financial gain by collecting and publishing tales that were then widespread in oral form among the folk.

There has been much discussion in recent years as to the value of these tales for an authentic understanding of the Hasidic movement. Though the tales will not be the main object of our attention here, some discussion of their place in Hasidism is essential. The debate as to the tales' value was best expressed in a series of exchanges between Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, certainly two of the most profound readers of this literature in the twentieth century. Buber, the philosopher/theologian, saw the tales as preserving the very essence of Hasidism. They reflected "life," actual moments of real human encounter in the life with God, rather than the mere disembodied "teachings" to be found in the theoretical literature. Never mind the fact that they were published late and in popular form; the true spirit of Hasidism could only have been recorded orally, and it is to these oral traditions of the masters' lives that one must first turn to encounter Hasidism. Scholem, ever the critical historian, was concerned not only with the lateness of the published tales, but with the fact that they portrayed a somewhat different picture of Hasidism than did the homilies, which were clearly early and authentic. The theoretical writings pointed to a more mystical theology, one that denied all reality other than the singular existence of God. The tales tended more toward a humanization of God, an anthropopathy, while the homilies veered closer to the edge of pantheism. While both genres glorified the virtues of simplicity, the homilies presented a Hasidism deeply rooted in the traditional sources and life patterns of Judaism, while the tales (especially as reread by Buber) offered an almost peasant-like life of religious exuberance in the presence of God in each moment. Scholem was suspicious of the portrayal offered in the tale literature as a latter-day romanticization of Hasidism, one that was conveniently well suited to Buber's own religious philosophy and relatively "appealing" to the Western audiences, both Jewish and Christian, for whom Buber was writing.

The fact is that a very wide range of materials is included in the literature of Hasidic tales; rather little work has yet been done in sorting

out the various types of tale and in distinguishing the value, both historical and literary, of one collection over another. There are wonder tales of miraculous healings, the slaying of mythical beasts, and the battle between goodly sages and evil wizards, many of which had been current long before Hasidism and were simply adapted to the names and outer trappings of the new movement. At the other extreme are incidents from the lives of various masters, occasionally verifiable through the earlier sources, but often embellished in the telling. There are parables told by the early masters, along with events in their lives that were used by later generations as moral *exempla*. A special subgenre are the tales told by Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, where well-known East European folk motifs are reweaved to create symbolic fictions around the theme of the longing for redemption. There is of course a moral or didactic point to many of the Hasidic tales, if only the general one of illustrating how the masters lived a life of holiness and religious awareness. This is not to deny that the tales also served as a form of literary entertainment in a small-town society not far removed from that world where storytelling in the tribe or clan was the chief form of entertainment, a way of passing on the group's tradition, and a repository of the collective wisdom and values that that tradition had to offer its adherents.

Many of the tale collections were published in cheaply printed chapbooks intended for reasonable sale and mostly local distribution; some of these, because of decaying paper, have now become great bibliographic rarities. Others were published with greater fanfare and in more substantial editions, including such later collections as *Zekhut Yisra'el* by David Berger of Bucharest and *Si'ah Sarfey Kodesh* by Yo'etz Kaddish Rakatz. These latter collections, edited by and for the *hasidim* themselves, are a far cry from the wonder tales of the 1860s; here the intended audience, even of the tales, is assumed to have a degree of education and traditional sophistication.

Our choice of the theoretical and homiletic writings over the tales for explication here does not indicate total agreement with Scholem in his devaluation of the Hasidic tales. The tales are quite widely available to the English reader, and in most cases, their meaning is rather readily comprehensible. The homilies, on the other hand, are almost unknown outside of Hasidic and scholarly circles. It is these that are in need of "rescue" and presentation to the broader reading public.

For the *hasidim* themselves, it has always been clear that the homiletic/theological sources are the pride of Hasidic literature. These are truly *sforim*, sacred volumes, distinguished by the nuance of Yiddish speech from the tale collections, which are merely *bikhelekh* (booklets).

In the more intellectual Hasidic circles, notably *HaBaD* (Lubavitch), but also those descending from such other schools as Zydachow, Sanz, and Bratslav, the writings of the early masters are avidly studied and discussed. Among the relatively few Polish *hasidim* (as distinct from the Russian, Galician, and Hungarian) who survived the holocaust, a similar status has been conferred upon a number of later Hasidic authors; there it is the writings of Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger (*Sefat Emet*), Yehudah Leib Eiger of Posen, and Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin that are most revered. Once Hasidic leadership began to follow the pattern of dynastic succession, it became natural, of course, to give a place of primacy to the writings of one's own rebbe's ancestors. Thus *Sefat Emet* is chiefly studied by Gerer *hasidim*, *Tanya* by Lubavitchers, and so forth. Often neglected by latter-day Hasidic readers are those classics of the movement by authors whose lines did not survive, or who did not, even from the first, initiate a pattern of dynastic succession. Among these are the *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef* (though the neglect of this is surely in part due as well to its inherent difficulty), *Or ha-Me'ir* by Wolf of Zbarsz, the works of Benjamin of Zalozhtsy, and many others. *Hasidim* will still know of and want to own books like these (a rabbinic and Hasidic library is the pride of any true *hasid's* home), but there is not much evidence that they are widely read. Interestingly, it is precisely these otherwise neglected volumes that have been at the center of nearly all the academic research on the history and teachings of Hasidism.

#### WHAT THE TEXTS ASSUME

To introduce the reader to the theoretical literature of Hasidism, three selections are offered below. The passages selected have been chosen in order to display a range within Hasidic theological writings and differ widely from one another in style and tone. The first is from one of the homiletic classics, *Kedushat Levi* by Levi Yizhak of Berdichev. The second is a page—it can hardly be called a single passage—from the anonymous *Likkutim Yekarim*, demonstrating the aphoristic style of the more popular works. Third is a selection from the *Sefat Emet*, as an example of those later Hasidic writings that still maintain vibrancy of tone and originality of content.

Before we turn to the texts themselves, some questions on the assumptions that underlie these sources must be treated. Only by understanding and allowing ourselves, however temporarily, to identify with their authors' presuppositions, will the texts themselves be comprehen-

sible. The task that lies before us as readers is a complex one, and it seems best to lay out the requirements in advance. In studying Hasidic sources as moderns, rather than as *hasidim*, we are engaged in a three- or four-step process, each portion of which must be kept quite distinct from the others if our reading is to be successful. First we must try to become *hasidim* or, if that sounds overly pretentious, to enter into the intellectual and religious world for which the authors of these texts were writing. Some of the specific literary assumptions of this world will be discussed below. But beyond the particulars, we should recall that hearing Torah from the master's lips is a religious act of great intensity; the rapt devotion and deeply personal involvement of the audience is as much a part of the Hasidic *derashah* as is the technique of biblical interpretation. If we cannot entirely *become* such an audience, we must at least be attentive to this aspect of the setting in which our homily was first spoken.

In this first stage of understanding, our reading of the text will be much like that offered within the Hasidic community. The *rebbe* is speaking about such-and-such a verse, he brings the following passages from Midrash or Gemara to bear on it, quotes further from here or there, and winds up with a new reading of the verse before him. It is important on this level to follow the text closely, seeing in its seemingly unrelated sections (we speak here of the longer homilies) the emergence of a thread of argument, one that can eventually be brought to bear upon the text at hand. It is always important to ask, as we reach the end of such a selection, how the author has read the original verse. Much of the Hasidic hearer or reader's joy in this genre is a pure appreciation of homiletic ingenuity. There is a love of the virtuoso performance to be felt here, not unlike that of the East European Jew in hearing a great *hazan* (cantor) render some favorite part of the liturgy. There is also a deeper sense, however, in which the living quality of Torah is renewed as the text shows itself capable of bearing yet a new rung of interpretation.

Returning to our own modern sensibilities, we are now ready to add a second level to our reading of the text. Here we confront the text as historians and as phenomenologists of religion, addressing to the text a series of questions that would not readily occur to the latter-day Hasidic reader. First, we seek to know all we can about the historical circumstances in which the teaching was offered. Homilies, after all, often seek to use the tradition to focus on an issue of current importance to the preacher and his congregation. Unlike modern sermons, however, the Hasidic homily never makes direct mention of such matters, and they must be surmised from circumstantial evidence. The original hearers, of course, knew full well what the preacher had in mind; it is only

the later pious reader who tends to ignore such situating of the text. A homily preached in Poland in 1810, dealing with the theme of legitimate and illegitimate kingship, clearly has something to do with Napoléon and his meteoric rise to power. A text from the 1770s that speaks of evildoers and their wicked words must be seen against the background of the anti-Hasidic persecutions of that decade, even if a specific association cannot be proven. To offer a more contemporary example, a homily delivered by the Lubavitcher *rebbe* in New York in 1947, speaking of how the *yeshivot* established by Jacob's sons in Egypt allowed for Jewish survival until the redemption by Moses, clearly must be viewed as part of his campaign, just getting under way at that time, to establish Lubavitcher educational institutions in every corner of this new Egypt—though even so holy and upright a goal would not be mentioned openly in the context of a *derashah*.

It is only in a minority of cases that we are able to offer such concrete suggestions as to the historical setting of the Hasidic teaching. Homilies by their very nature are in part ephemera, and the situation to which they are addressed dies with the memory of their hearers. But where specific historical details are lost to us, the general setting of the Ukrainian *shtetl*, a sense of distinguishing one district from another, one decade from another, and most important, when possible, the personality and style of one preacher from another, are all part of the historian's task.

Following on the heels of historical questions are those of phenomenology. Once we have understood the text as best we can in its own terms and have clarified the historical setting in which it was born, we are ready to ask what sort of religious vision or understanding of the world is suggested by the preacher's words. We may ask in what sense his teaching may be considered mystical (immediately involving questions of definition and comparison), what notions of prayer proceed from his words, how he views the relationship between sacred and profane, and so forth. In a popular sense these may be called "philosophical" questions that emerge from the text; contemporary students of religion are especially interested in examining the ways these questions are treated in cross-cultural terms; and have developed certain categories helpful to such understanding.

Finally, the reader may wish to be addressed by the text in a personal way. This aspect of reading the Hasidic sources is entirely legitimate; indeed it is the most appropriate sort of reading, given the intentions of the authors. Since such an understanding is quite subjective and individual, we have avoided engaging in it here, except for the final

paragraph of our essay. It should be emphasized, however, that such a contemporary personal reading must not be confused either with the first level of understanding (for we are surely not *hasidim* of the early nineteenth century) or with the attempt at phenomenological analysis.

Hasidism stands on the very border between the postmedieval and modern periods in Jewish history. Its dates give it the appearance of modernity; if we identify the heyday of Hasidism as the century beginning with 1760, it will be hard to deny that the movement flourished within that time frame generally seen as belonging to the modern era. There are also specific ways in which Hasidism as a social and religious phenomenon may be viewed as at least a harbinger of modernity. The fact that it emerged as a reaction to the breakdown of the long-standing sociopolitical order of East European Jewry has been noted; and there is no doubt that part of its success was as a new form of social organization, the charismatic community around the *zaddik* replacing the weakened normative *kehillah* (community organization). From a religious point of view, there is also something remarkably modern about the attention Hasidism gives to the inner life and unique spiritual tasks of each individual, a fact that has done much to make it attractive to Buber and other twentieth-century theologians. Hasidism's rejection, or at least neutralization, of the complex edifice of kabbalistic theosophy also has a certain ring of modernity about it, insofar as it renders the devotional core of its message accessible to the reader who approaches it without initiation into these obscurities.

All of this becomes secondary to us, however, as we approach the task of reading Hasidic literature. The fact is that here Hasidism is dressed in its most classical garb, and forms a late chapter in the ongoing literary creativity of medieval and postmedieval Jewry. The essential assumptions of Hasidic literature are those shared by Jewry throughout its classical period, stretching from Talmudic times down into the nineteenth century, but held by relatively few Jews, including those labeled as Orthodox, in our own day. First among these is the absolute and literal veracity of Scripture; that is, for the Hasidic author a point can be made in a final and authoritative way by reference to a biblical verse. Even more important are the principles of homiletic license in reading Scripture, as articulated by the early rabbis. Much of Hasidic literature is loosely midrashic in form (see Chapter Three), weaving together an array of verses from various books and sections of the Bible that seem, on the literal face of things, to have nothing to do with one another. The same approach is now applied to the rabbinic writings themselves, as

well as to the basic interpretive and theological works of medieval Judaism. Thus, a single Hasidic homily may, after departing from a biblical verse as interpreted by Rashi (see Chapter Four), proceed to draw into its net one or several statements from rabbinic *aggadah*, a passage from Maimonides, a fragment from the liturgy, a comment by Tosafot on a Talmudic phrase, a text from the Zohar, and a passage from the writings attributed to Isaac Luria. All of these are interpreted harmonically, for all are assumed to point to the same single truth. They were, as Scripture itself is made to say, "all given by a single shepherd"; all of them derive ultimately from the revelation of God's word at Mount Sinai. The harmonization of such diverse sources is the very stuff of which Hasidic and other late Jewish homiletics is made. It is thus crucial for the reader to understand just why each reference is incorporated into the homily, how it is being read, and what place it has in the final tour de force by which the original verse at hand is to be interpreted.

The highly traditionalist form this literature takes should not serve to mask the true intention of such exercises. The fact is that Hasidism is engaged in a calculated creative *misreading* or reinterpretation of the entire received and accepted body of previous Jewish tradition. From within the juxtaposition of prior sources there begins to emerge a pattern of distinctively Hasidic foci in its presentation of classical Judaism. Sometimes these take the form of specific ideas, such as the raising of wayward thoughts or the service of God through corporeal things. Elsewhere they are promulgated by subtleties of emphasis, by seemingly flippant plays of language, or by sometimes startling parables told apparently by way of illustrative example.

Coupled with this set of assumptions concerning the prior literary sources of Judaism goes a series of assumptions about the wording of those sources and the language in which they are written. Since the entire biblical corpus is the revealed word of God, it may be assumed that He in His infinite wisdom counted carefully each word, its spelling as preserved in the Masoretic text, its numerical equivalent (for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet also has a numerical value), and the possible implications of reversing or otherwise rearranging its letters. This attitude toward the text, inherited by the Hasidic authors from the midrashic and kabbalistic traditions, allows for a freedom and playfulness that in no way diminish the seriousness of their endeavor or their reverence for the text that becomes so seemingly malleable in their hands. On the contrary, such homiletic reinterpretation is seen as the fulfillment of religious duty; such readings are the primary form of Torah study as practiced in the early Hasidic world.

As might be predicted for a popular movement of mystical piety within postmedieval Jewry, the three elements of the literary tradition that served as chief objects for this effort of reinterpretation were the Pentateuch, the aggadic teachings of the early rabbis, and the Zohar. While the influence of many other texts and genres can be felt within Hasidic literature, none approaches the centrality of these three as a *recognized literary source*. A few words on each of these as they are treated in Hasidic circles, with special emphasis on the Zohar and the treatment of kabbalistic themes in early Hasidism, is essential to any understanding of the texts before us.

The written Torah stands at the base of that great inverted pyramid known as the Jewish exegetical tradition. Always the best-known book, along with the prayerbook, even among relatively unlettered Jews, the entirety of its text is kept freshly in mind through the annual cycle of synagogue reading. From earliest rabbinic times, the weekly reading formed the basis for most of Jewish homiletics. To this Hasidism is no exception; the vast majority of the published volumes of Hasidic teaching follow the weekly cycles of the public reading. As is natural for homiletic literature (as distinct from scriptural exegesis), it is most often the opening verses of a section that will serve as the basis for a preacher's thoughts. Only incidentally will the homily shed light on the meaning of the verse with which it opens. The purpose is rather the opposite: for the verse of Scripture to shed light on some other issue which is the chief object of the homilist's concern. In Hasidism this issue will frequently be a devotional one: the technique of "raising sparks," the problem of distracting thoughts during prayer, the transference of inner (and cosmic) darkness into light, and so forth. The nature of the Hasidic authors' concerns, combined with the penchant for discussing them chiefly in this homiletical context, often leads them to an extreme spiritualization of the biblical text, one that some will be surprised to find within so traditionalist a Jewry. Thus the ark of Noah (thanks to a fortuitous play on words) becomes the word of prayer, the descent into Egypt becomes the exile of the soul, the tabernacle in the wilderness becomes the holy place within the heart, and all the rest. While this in no way sacrifices their belief in either the external authority or the historical accuracy of the biblical text, it is quite clear that the chief object of the Hasidic preachers' concern is an eternal message of the struggle for spiritual attainment, a Torah that applies "in every time and to every person," as their frequent admonitions would have it.

The basic store of rabbinic teachings to which most Hasidic works refer is a rather limited one. Bits of exegesis quoted in Rashi's universally

known commentary to the Torah, aggadic statements collected in certain well-worn pages of the Babylonian Talmud, and the basic midrashic collections (Rabbah and Tanhuma) on the Torah cycle would supply the seeker with by far the larger part of them. Of course no homilist was perforce restricted to these, and the greater his knowledge the wider his range of potential sources of inspiration. The very first printed book of Hasidism, the *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*, shows a particularly broad range of rabbinic erudition. Most of the authors, however, restricted themselves to those sources mentioned, perhaps not only out of their own limitations but out of those of their anticipated hearers. A homiletic point made by a new and forceful stringing together of sources familiar to the listener's ear is potentially of greater power than one that has to turn to prooftexts that the listener has never heard before. Since most of the homilies were intended, first orally and then in writing, to have a broad-based popular appeal, it was best to remain close to the Rashi passages that much of the audience was sure to remember from study in childhood.

Hasidism remained, throughout its history, deeply faithful to the authority of rabbinic law, *halakhah*. Whatever flirtations it may have had with radical spiritualization of the commandments, in fact its enemies could find only the most minuscule legal objections to Hasidic behavior when they sought to describe it in bans and letters of denunciation. But while the life-style of the Hasidic community remained totally within the law, halakhic sources provide but little of the inspiration for the movement's thought. Essentially there is no reason why an originally legal text of the Talmud could not provide a departure point for the spiritual homily just as well as could *aggadah*. Most of the early leaders seemed to eschew such a mixing of realms, however, perhaps out of deference to a certain disdain Hasidism had originally felt toward the ivory-tower legal learning of the contemporary rabbinic world. This lack is particularly noted when the writings of the Maggid's circle are compared with those of some of the late nineteenth-century figures we have mentioned; the later works are filled with typically Hasidic comments on those legal portions of the Talmud that form the bread and butter of a traditional rabbinic education.

The use of kabbalistic materials in Hasidism is particularly problematic. (See Chapter Six for more on Kabbalah itself.) Like any group of latter-day pious Jews inclined toward mysticism, the Hasidic authors greatly revere the Zohar, which they hold to be the second-century composition of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. Numerous phases of the Zohar's Aramaic had crept into the Hebrew sacred vocabulary by the time

of Hasidism, and in many of the homilies one can see that the author had prepared his words by looking into the Zohar text (or at least the opening paragraphs of it) for the particular Sabbath on which he was speaking. It is said of Rabbi Pinhas of Korets that he thanked God for having created him in that era when the Zohar was already known to the world, "for the Zohar has kept me a Jew." Both the kabbalistic system of the Zohar, in its rudimentary outlines, and the religious *ethos* of the Zohar had a great influence on all of Hasidic theology.

The *content* of kabbalistic teaching, however, underwent drastic change as it entered into Hasidism. The Maggid and his school, despite their own intellectuality, had little use for the latter-day Lurianic Kabbalah as they had received it, with its baroque overgrowth of heavenly realms and meditative techniques of access to them. Their rejection of cold and distant rabbinic erudition as a value had its parallel in the rejection of an arcane and inaccessible kabbalism: both were equally alien to the simple nearness of God that the Ba'al Shem Tov and those around him had known. To a certain extent this rejection applied to the theoretical concerns of the Zohar as well; the emphasis that the work places on an esoteric theosophy and cosmogony could hardly find a comfortable home in a popular movement of religious enthusiasm. There is a single-mindedness about the devotional focus in which Hasidism views the religious life that does not permit such "idle" speculation. Where the constant striving for nearness to God is the only legitimate value, even extended discussion of His nature and deeds, when lacking that devotional focus, may be depicted as distraction.

We are now ready to allow the Hasidic authors to speak for themselves. Each text will be preceded by a brief discussion of the author and/or the volume from which it is drawn. The text will then be presented in sections, interrupted by our own explication, as though it were being taught in a classroom. Some readers may choose to read the text in its entirety before turning to the discussion, and the format in which the texts are printed will allow for that option. Particularly in the first and longest passage, however, since the argument is a complex one, we recommend following the section-by-section approach as we have presented it.

#### LEVI YIZHAK OF BERDICHEV: ON INTERPRETATION

Levi Yizhak of Berdichev (c. 1740–1810) is one of the best-known and most widely revered figures in the history of Hasidism. A favorite

of later Jewish folklore, his personality and deeds (at least as recorded in legend) perhaps did more to create and popularize the image of the Hasidic master than those of any other single figure save the Ba'al Shem Tov himself. A powerful but gentle and loving leader, he was especially known for his concern for the lives of ordinary Jews and a habit, retold in many a later tale, of defending them before God. He served as rabbi (in the normative halakhic, as well as the Hasidic, sense) of Berdichev, an important town in the Ukraine, from 1785 until his death. In this position he was able to do much for the spread of Hasidic influence, and history records that he was an important political figure in the life of Ukrainian Jewry during that time.

Less widely known is Levi Yizhak's contribution to the spread and development of Hasidic ideas. A major disciple of the Miedzyrzec school, he was able to dress the Maggid's often difficult mystical thoughts in popular and accessible homiletic garb. His collected teachings, *Kedushat Levi*, first published in 1811, is regarded as a classic of Hasidic literature. Less an original work of theory than a popularization of his master's teachings, the work still contains a good deal of homiletic ingenuity and many a daring formulation of the radically spiritualized vision of Judaism that lay at the heart of Hasidic teaching. Its frequent reprinting and wide distribution, despite the fact that there was no later Berdichev "dynasty" to assure such publication, bear witness to the fact that the work served as a source of inspiration to many a reader, both within the Hasidic camp and beyond.

The passage we have chosen from *Kedushat Levi* deals with the question of interpretation itself, and the role of the Hasidic master in the ongoing revelation of God's word. As such, it is one of those passages that deals directly with the assumptions that underlie all Hasidic homilies. Though seeming at first to meander, the text presents a sustained argument for the participation of the *zaddik* in the revelatory process. Such texts have a legitimating role in Hasidism, seeking justification in traditional religious language for the rather daring innovations in their readings of the sources. In the course of his homily, Levi Yizhak will address various other issues of importance to Hasidic thought: the levels of religious consciousness, the nature of miracles, and so forth. These briefer discussions, while not always germane to the final point of the homily, are important in their own right, and here, as frequently, contain insights of great profundity.

We now turn to the text, taken from the *Kedushat Levi* on *Yitro*, the Torah portion that includes the revelation at Mount Sinai.



I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD WHO TOOK YOU OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT (Exod. 20.2). Nahmanides asks why the verse did not say: "I am the One who created heaven and earth." Here is the solution that appears to us.

A basic principle in the service of our blessed Creator is that we Israelites are obliged to have faith in two Torahs, the written and the oral. Both "were given by a single shepherd" (Eccles. 11.12). He handed the written Torah to us by Moses, His faithful servant, engraved on the tablets in black fire on white fire. The Oral Torah was given to Moses in the form of commentary, including "what every faithful student was ever to find anew" (Jer. Talmud Peah 2.6). This is to say that the oral Torah was so given that whatever the righteous (*zaddikim*) of a particular generation say would indeed come to pass. This was the great power that the blessed Creator gave to us, out of love for His chosen folk Israel. According to their will, as derived from Torah, all the worlds were to be conducted. Of this the sages said: "God issues a decree but the *zaddik* cancels it" (Mo'ed Qatan 16b). This refers to those who serve their Creator, blessed be His name, aware that He is master and ruler.

The homily opens, after stating an initial and well-known question, by articulating a basic and universally accepted tenet of Jewish faith, one that even the most cautious listener could not find objectionable. But within a line or two of deft interpretation, Levi Yizhak has given this idea a very characteristically Hasidic cast, one that in fact goes to the heart of many an objection to Hasidism. The Talmud's claim that Moses' revelation contained all that any faithful student was ever to discover is used here to justify the notion that the Torah *must* in fact be reinterpreted by each generation. Each generation has its own history and questions; it is these that must be found by the leaders of that generation as they study the Torah. Here the "Oral Torah" is no longer the classic collection of early interpretations and legal codes that comprise rabbinic literature, but rather a process that needs continual renewal, a constant reshaping of Torah so that it be appropriate to the issues facing each community in its own time.

The identity of those leaders who are given the task of making the Oral Torah is also here presented in specifically Hasidic fashion. Rather than the *scholars*, it is the *zaddikim* who are to declare the Torah's meaning in each time. It is by virtue of their personal righteousness and closeness to God that such leaders claim their authority, rather than by

their mastery of the traditional sources. Here Levi Yizhak ties the ongoing reinterpretation of the oral law to a rabbinic reference that is taken entirely out of context and originally had nothing to do with oral tradition and its development. "God issues a decree but the *zaddik* cancels it" is a fragment of *aggadah* usually associated with powers of intercession and miraculous healings. Now it is taken much further; the "decree" is the Torah itself, and indeed reality itself, which of necessity becomes whatever the *zaddik* declares it to be! As the Torah mirrors the changing cosmic situation, the cosmos itself is moved by the will of the *zaddikim* as they interpret the Torah.

Aware of the dangers lurking in the misuse of such an approach, Levi Yizhak quickly adds a line to define the sort of *zaddik* he has in mind for such broad powers in the shaping of Torah. Such a person must be one who operates with full awareness that God alone is master and ruler. Only humility can protect the *zaddik* from degenerating into a magician, one who worships his own powers rather than those of God. The homily continues:

The rabbis said that when the Torah was given God appeared to Israel as an old man, while at the Exodus He had the appearance of a youth (Mekhilta Shirta 4). The point is that there are two aspects to the service of the Creator. Some serve Him because He is master and ruler, paying no attention to the blessings or rewards that God may shower upon them. All such benefits and pleasures are as nought to them, compared with the true joy of serving their blessed Creator. Here I am serving the great and glorious King, who has myriads of servants and countless realms of glory. Such a one is said to be serving God with the "greater mind" or an expanded consciousness.

Others serve the blessed Creator because of the great bounty that is bestowed upon them. This is called the "lesser mind," a service of God with a small degree of consciousness.

At the Exodus, Israel beheld the great miracles and wonders that God had wrought for them, the ten plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the destruction of the Egyptians. Then they served God with the lesser mind; this is the meaning of "He had the appearance of a youth," the consciousness of a child. But as they stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, "the poison passed out of them" and they thought nothing of worldly pleasures, but only of God's service. Then they worshipped Him as Lord and Master, with the greater mind. And so at Sinai He appeared to them as an elder, signifying that mature consciousness.

This is also why the letter *tet* does not appear in the commandments as they were engraved on the first tablets. *Tet* stands for *tovot*, goodly rewards, and when those first tablets were given the souls of Israel were so clear and pure that they would have wholly disregarded any such *tovot*, thinking only of the joy of His service, may He be blessed and exalted for all eternity. That was a moment of greater mind.

Here again a well-known rabbinic motif is taken far from its original meaning. The two appearances of God, say the early rabbis, teach that though He may appear in multiple forms, a single deity underlies them all. The youth at the sea and the elder at Sinai demonstrate that God will choose a form of manifestation appropriate to the needs of those to whom He is revealed. Now the motifs of youth and elder are made to serve a Hasidic purpose: they stand for two devotional states that are commonly found among worshipers. This transference of earlier theological statements into categories of religious psychology is again quite typical of Hasidic writings. The focus in Hasidism is on practical matters of devotion, rather than on grand theological truths. Never mind how God appeared to Israel, says Levi Yizhak. Think rather of how you appear before Him.

The idea that true service of God should be offered without thought of reward has a long history in Jewish sources, going back to the maxim of Antigonus of Socho in the Talmudic *Pirke Avot* ("Do not be like a servant who serves the master in order to receive a reward . . ."). This notion is much emphasized in the theoretical literature of Hasidism, especially of the circle around the Maggid. Its specific address was probably within the community of Hasidic listeners, as a warning against those who came to the *zaddikim* in search of personal blessings or earthly rewards. The fact is that the Hasidic leaders did claim the power to affect this realm, but the most spiritual among them sought the sort of disciples who would not approach them with such thoughts in mind.

The reference to the "first tablets" is to those that were fashioned and given by God, but then broken by Moses as he came down the mountain and was greeted by the worship of the Golden Calf. The Talmud claims (*Shabbat* 146a) that the poison put into Eve by the primordial snake was carried through all of her descendants until Sinai, but that Israel was purified of this original taint as its people prepared themselves to receive God's word. At the moment of that first revelation they were returned to the state of purity originally intended in God's creation. Immediately after the revelation, however—for such is the human condition—those same Israelites prevailed upon Aaron to fashion the

Golden Calf. Functionally it may be said that the sin of the calf, that of idolatry, takes on the role of "original sin" in Jewish moralistic literature. After the calf was destroyed, Moses returned to God and received a second set of tablets, these fashioned, however, by human hands. Later writers associate the version of the Ten Commandments presented in Exodus 20 with the first tablets, while that in Deuteronomy 5 is taken to be the revised text of the second version. It is to this tradition that Levi Yizhak makes reference; indeed the *tet* is absent from the Exodus version, but appears twice, as the wording is only slightly revised, in Deuteronomy.

The theme of "greater" and "lesser" states of mind in the service of God is an important one in Hasidic literature, not always associated with the question of reward. The terms *mohin de-gadlut* and *mohin de-katnut* are derived from Lurianic Kabbalah, where they serve to designate alternating modes in the ongoing life of the *sefirot* within God. These terms too are now psychologized, and in Hasidism they refer to a person's worship in an ordinary ("lesser") state of mind as opposed to true contemplative prayer and the state of either detachment or rapture it requires. Frequent use is made of these terms in the literature of prayer instruction; some of which we shall see in our next selection.

We should stop here to take note that our teaching thus far has two sections, one on the role of *zaddikim* in the making of Oral Torah, the other on the greater and lesser mind at the Exodus and at Sinai. The connection between these sections and the relevance of either of them to the initial question (Why did the revelation not begin with "I am the Lord who created heaven and earth?") have not been made clear. Levi Yizhak continues:

We know that whoever serves God with the greater mind has no fear of events that may befall him. Seem as he may to be in trouble, in his mind and heart he remains unperturbed, trusting firmly that he will come to no harm. Only from without is his distress apparent. The one who serves with lesser mind, however, does indeed feel all the fears and stresses of those events that surround him; his mind and heart too dwell in fear. Since he is subject to external forces, they overpower him and he comes under their domain. This is what King David meant when he said in the Egyptian Hallel (*Ps.* 118.10-11) "All the nations have surrounded me; by the name of the Lord I will cut them down. They beset me (*sabuni*), they surround me (*sevavuni*); by the name of the Lord I will cut them down." Why the repetition? And what does he add by *sevavuni*

in the second verse? The path we have set out should help us to understand these verses. King David said "All the nations"—this refers to those events brought about by the nations. "Have surrounded me"—they encircled me only from without, but in my mind I had no fear, knowing that God would destroy them and save me from their clutches. This is "by the name of God I will cut them down." King David's constant mode of service was that of the greater mind. He too, however, would sometimes fall from his rung and worship in a lesser state. When that happened, the events that passed really would cause him fear. When that happened, he said, the doings of the nations "beset me" and "surround me," they enter right into me, since I have fallen from my rung. I felt their surrounding in my very mind, as fear fell upon me. Even then, though, "by the name of the Lord I will cut them down"—I still trust in divine goodness to cut off all those who rise up against me, delivering me from *ZaRaH*, trouble, to *RaZaH*, desire.

Continuing on his earlier theme, here Levi Yizhak underscores the unperturbability of that religious consciousness designated as *gadlut*. The one who serves in such a way not only has transcended thought of reward, but has completely overcome any sense of vulnerability to the tragedies of this life, including especially the persecution of Jews at the hands of their oppressors, a situation never far from the daily experience of those who heard this homily. The greater mind is so detached from any investment in life in this world that he is able to put his unquestioning trust in God, knowing that the One to whom he is so devoted will never abandon him.

While emphasizing this value of detachment, it is no small part of Levi Yizhak's intent here to remind the hearer that even so noble a soul as King David, author of the Psalms, underwent moments when that state of higher awareness seemed to depart from him. Much of Hasidism's success was due to its realistic understanding of the vicissitudes of human spirituality, and its willingness to accept the "lesser mind" too as a realm of legitimate service. It undoubtedly consoled many a hearer to know that even the spiritual giants of old had experienced "falls" or moments of fear and insecurity much like their own. Levi Yizhak and most of his colleagues insisted that even the *zaddik* himself had such moments, and the knowledge of how to maintain faith in the face of them was an essential part of their practical counsel. That is the force of the Psalm verse as read in this passage: even when David fell into the

lesser state he remained confident that "by the name of the Lord I will cut them down."

The "external forces" to which the person in a lesser state of mind may fall prey are deserving of some comment. The Hebrew term *hizonim* is a richly ambiguous one. It refers to those things "outside" the proper purview of the religious mindset; "distractions" might properly translate one aspect of the term. In kabbalistic literature, however, *hizonim* takes on the very specific meaning of *demonic* forces, those that dwell "outside" the realm of holiness, standing arrayed against God in the great cosmic struggle of good and evil. The people Israel, and especially the righteous among them, are aligned with God in this struggle, while the nations of the world are the agents of these demonic powers, doing their bidding most particularly in their persecution of God's chosen and beloved people. This mythic and dualistic picture of reality, both cosmic and political, was very much a part of the Hasidic world view, and of course seemed to be constantly reaffirmed by the behavior and attitudes of those East European Christians in whose midst the Hasidic communities were destined to live. Thus Levi Yizhak has no trouble here in identifying David's outcry against "the nations" (*goyim*) with the evils that befall his own flock as they are distracted from religious concentration in its most total form. We will see further discussion of Israel and the nations as we go on in this text.

That is why the authorities decided that the Sabbath before Passover should be designated as *Shabbat ha-Gadol*, the "great" Sabbath. This refers to the great miracle that took place preceding that first Passover in Egypt. On the tenth of the month they set aside their lambs and tied them to the bedposts. When the Egyptians asked them what these lambs were for, they replied "to be slaughtered for the Passover, as God has commanded us." The Egyptians became enraged at this (literally: their teeth were set on edge) slaughter of what they considered to be a god.

Now why should this be called the "great" miracle of Egypt? Were there no miracles greater than this one? How about the splitting of the Red Sea and all the others? Were not all those wonders, wrought by God for His people Israel, greater than this? But here we are taught that Israel at that time was serving God in the greater mind. Whoever serves Him in that state has no fears of whatever may befall him, as we have taught above. That is why they designated this as the "great" miracle, the

miracle of the "greater" mind. The miracle was that they had no fear of the Egyptians, even though they were about to slaughter their gods. Now too we understand that on the tenth of the month they were able to take these lambs, tie them to the beds, and tell the Egyptians that they were going to offer sacrifices. Just a while earlier they had said: "Can we slaughter that which is sacred to the Egyptians before their very eyes and not be stoned by them?" (Exod. 8.22). Note that the text says "before their eyes"; they were afraid of the Egyptians, who were always keeping close watch on them. But now that they entered the state of greater mind, as we have explained, they no longer paid any attention to the Egyptians watching them. They had no more fear of anything, and the rule and might of Egypt were not considered. Perhaps this is why, in fact, God commanded them to set aside the lambs on the tenth day, to bring them into this state of greater mind.

Here we have a religious assertion of considerable profundity. What is truly the great miracle of the Exodus from Egypt? The fact that God can bring plagues, destroy enemies, or even split the sea should cause no great wonder to the person of real faith. Knowing securely that He is Creator and Ruler, the fact that He can, if need be, change the course of nature will constitute no great surprise. But the change that took place in the hearts and minds of Israel—that is truly miraculous. How did the cowardly and fearful slave masses gain the courage to prepare for their liberation, and to do so publicly at that? Herein lies the greater miracle, and its approximate anniversary (Passover is on the fifteenth of Nisan, so *Shabbat ha-Gadol* is the Sabbath closest to the tenth) is indeed worthy of celebration!

Of course this miracle is so important to Levi Yizhak because of its contemporary and twofold message. Do not sit about and wait for miracles, he says to the often wonder-seeking Hasidic public. The true miracle is the turn to *gadlut*, the wholehearted dedication to God that must take place within you; this is the miracle toward which your attention should be focused, rather than on the tricks that some masters can perform for you. No less important here is the not-so-subtly promised reward (despite his prior admonitions) for this *gadlut*: he who directs his mind in this manner will no longer feel afraid of the nations. The message, delivered in Berdichev in the closing years of the eighteenth century, could not have been clearer.

Now we can understand why Scripture, in recounting the words of Jethro to Moses, said "Blessed is the Lord who saved

you from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh, who saved the people from under the hand of Egypt. Now I know that the Lord is great . . ." (Exod. 18.10–11). The language seems redundant; there were not two redemptions here, but only one. And why does he say "Now I know that the Lord is great"? It is as we have said: he who serves God with the greater mind no longer fears the events that befall him, and is no longer subject to the "other side." On the contrary, he overcomes these forces. This is what Jethro meant to say. "Blessed is the Lord who saved you from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh" refers to the great miracle by which they were delivered from their troubles. But "who saved the people from under the hand of Egypt" shows that God, in powerful love for His devoted ones while they were yet in Egypt, granted to them a higher consciousness, so that they could serve Him with the "greater mind." This brought them forth from "under the hand of Egypt"; they no longer submitted to them and no longer feared them. Thus "now I know that the Lord is great" refers to their service in this greater mind.

Here the theme he has already developed is tied to another section of the day's Torah reading, the account of Jethro's conversion. Rather than expounding a new idea, he has clarified and enriched his claim that Israel, while yet in Egypt, attained an inner liberation that preceded its physical deliverance on Passover itself. Though he does not say so directly, the impression is clear that this inner transformation, carrying with it a new strength and willingness to defy the Egyptians, was a necessary precondition for the actual liberation. One does not have to stretch the imagination too far to hear in this ordering of priorities echoes of the discussions among Zionist thinkers, only a century later, about how an inner transformation of the Jewish people, including a new sense of pride in their identity, would have to precede their political liberation.

Now Levi Yizhak is ready to tie together the seemingly diverse themes that make up this homily, and he returns to his opening comments on the *zaddik*'s powers in the face of divine decree and the relationship of these powers to the ongoing revelation of Torah. At this point an identity of *zaddik* and "he who serves with greater mind" is assumed, showing that by *zaddik* Levi Yizhak here has in mind not only the institutionalized Hasidic leader, but in fact every Jew who attains that rung of service.

Now we have already explained that whoever serves God with the greater mind conducts all the world and brings the flow of blessing into them all. When God issues a decree, he has the power in his hands to nullify it, to "sweeten" the forces of judgement from *ZaRaH* to *RaZaH*, transforming trouble into the desired state. This was the sages' intent when they said that the word *'aNoKHiY* [the "I" of "I am the Lord your God"] is an abbreviation for *'ana Nafshai Katvit Yahavit*, "I Myself have written and given it." The soul (*nefesh*) is the will, as in "If it is with your soul" (Gen. 23.8). This is "I Myself have written" —referring to the written Torah. "And given" refers to the Oral Torah, for I have given My will to you. You have leave to interpret according to your will, and by your will all the worlds will be conducted. And do not think that God feels woe at this sense of being "defeated"; on the contrary, it is a source of pleasure and joy to Him. Thus the rabbis said: "What was God doing? Smiling and saying "My children have defeated me." (Baba Meziyah 59b). They also said that "God's temperament is not like that of flesh and blood. A person, if you best him, is saddened, but God is happy when He is bested" (Pesachim 119a). Now the word *ne'imah* refers to sweetness, and the rabbis also interpreted *'aNoKHi Y* as *'amirah Ne'imah Ketivah Yahivah*, "sweet speech, written and given," as though to say: "It is sweet to Me that I have handed My will over to My people Israel, so that all the worlds be conducted by their will. I derive the same pleasure from this that a father finds when his son defeats him."

The interpretive function of the *zaddik*, it is now made fully clear, goes far beyond mere homiletic license. The Torah is a portrayal of reality, that of the upper divine cosmos as well as the lower world. As the *zaddik* interprets the Torah and changes God's "decree," he actually partakes of God's cosmic rule, bringing about the flow of that divine blessing that is the source of all life. This notion, deeply embedded in the kabbalistic ideas that are a central part of Hasidism's heritage from earlier generations, is here stated with unmitigated boldness. God is author of the Written Torah, but the Oral Torah, which is the actual rule by which the universe (cosmic as well as halakhic) is ruled, has been handed over to Israel.

There is something in this notion, as stated thus far, that could almost be reminiscent of deism, an ideology contemporary with early Hasidism, as it happens, but far removed in space and cultural context. God sets the world in motion, establishes the rule of natural law, and

abandons it to the wisdom and folly of human conduct. Here God authors and delivers the "ground rules" of the Written Torah, allowing all further development to rest in the hands of His people and the righteous in their midst. Levi Yizhak seems to sense the problem in this diminution of divine power when he asks whether God Himself might not feel troubled by the lessening of control over His creation. His answer is again classically Hasidic: God loves and trusts the righteous; He feels toward them as a father toward his children, a love and pleasure undiminished by any tinge of jealousy or regret. The service of the *zaddikim* brings Him joy, a gift to which He responds, quite naturally as a parent, by bestowing something of His own upon them. The king can only rejoice as he sees his chosen child learn to take up the reins of his kingdom.

The Talmudic passages that Levi Yizhak quotes, while important in their own right, are here extended far beyond their original intention. The first and best known of these quotations ("What was God doing? Smiling and saying 'My children have defeated me'"), was written as a postscript to the Talmud's account of a famous debate among the early sages. Rabbi Eliezer seeks to prove his point in a halakhic argument by miraculous signs and finally by a voice from heaven. His opponent Rabbi Joshua, however, has the majority of the sages on his side in the debate. Finally it is made clear that "the Torah is not in heaven," and that the majority opinion is that which will rule. Of this God says, "My children have defeated Me." The other passages are of similar force, referring to the independence of the sages and their deliberative processes in determining the law. The cosmological implications here attributed to these sayings are the product of later kabbalistic thought. The Talmud sees God's authority as legislator handed over to the sages of Israel; the Hasidic master, reading the same sources, sees in them the giving of cosmic rule to Israel's righteous.

Now the question with which the homily began may finally be answered, as the whole is brought to an integrated conclusion. Levi Yizhak opened his talk, we will recall, by quoting Nahmanides' question as to why the Ten Commandments begin with "I am the Lord thy God who took thee out of the Land of Egypt" and not "who created heaven and earth."

This is why God made mention of the Exodus from Egypt rather than the creation of heaven and earth. Mention of creation would only show that He is the First of all firsts, and that the world was created. But by saying "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt" He showed His

love for His people Israel and taught them to serve Him with fire in their hearts. He brought His chosen folk out of Egypt in love, giving them the power and ability to sweeten the judgment forces, to turn woe to desire, and to rule all the worlds. In this way they are truly the children of God, and this should bring them to true rapture in His service.

This is why He continues "You shall have no other god beside Me." "Beside Me" seems to have no meaning. But following our way it will make sense. "My love for you is so great that I have called you My children. This means that I dwell right in your midst, for My love cleaves to My children and I dwell chiefly among them. When you make an idol, then, God forbid, it is indeed, as it were, right beside Me."

The homily turns out to reveal Levi Yizhak at his most passionate, bearing testimony to the infinite love of God and the intimacy with Him that only those who know themselves to be God's children can conceive. God remains at your side always; He is with you no matter what you do. His commandment, then, turns into a heartfelt plea: since I am with you in any case, do not place idols at My side.

#### COUNSEL FOR THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

The homiletical literature of Hasidism was augmented, as we have said, by a number of anonymous aphoristic collections of teachings attributed to the masters, first published in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Here the reader did not have to follow a complex thread of homiletic argument to get the point. These collections spoke directly to the matter at hand; they taught how to pray, gave advice on concentration, and emphasized such basic Hasidic virtues as simplicity, humility, and wholeness.

Our selection is the opening page of *Likkutim Yekarim*, first published in Lvov in 1792. The title page claims that the teachings are those of four major figures in the early history of Hasidism: the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Maggid of Miedzyrzec, Menahem Mendel of Premyslany and Yehiel Michel of Zloczov. The latter two were important leaders of Hasidism in the Ukraine in the generation of and immediately following the Ba'al Shem Tov; neither was particularly associated with the Maggid's school. Menahem Mendel of Premyslany (b. 1728) migrated to the Holy Land in 1764 and founded the Hasidic community in Erez Israel, along with Nahman of Horodenka and a group of followers. Yehiel

Michel (1731–86), also a younger contemporary of the Ba'al Shem Tov, was a well-known preacher and the father of five sons, each of whom served as leader of a considerable Hasidic following in the next generation, and many of whose disciples were probably the original intended audience for this volume.

The fact is, however, that all the teachings in *Likkutim Yekarim* should be regarded as anonymous. With occasional exceptions the individual masters are not mentioned again in the volume, and many of the teachings found here have their parallels in other such collections composed about the same time. The ideology of the volume, underlying its devotional instructions, sometimes reflects the rather intellectual orientation of the Maggid, but much of it is so general as to be attributable to almost any of the early Hasidic teachers. The text begins:

"The man Moses was more exceedingly humble than any person on the face of the earth." (Num.12.3)

This refers to two levels, one in which a person's thought is entirely above, even [when involved] in lower matters, since he is entirely separated from the corporeal, and another in which he is not so fully separated from matter.

This is the meaning of "Moses Moses" (Exod. 3.4), where the cantillation does not indicate a pause between them, while "Jacob, Jacob" (Gen. 46.2) is interrupted by a pause. There exist Moses above and Moses below, Jacob above and Jacob below. Moses has no pause, for he is all one, both above and below; he is so removed from matter that even when dealing with corporeal things (and certainly when dealing with matters of spirit!) he is entirely turned upward. Still he held fast to the quality of Humility, even when at his most spiritual, considering himself more lowly than "any person on the face of the earth," even than those whose thoughts were entirely directed toward earth.

Above & below.  
Moses in the  
B.H.  
↓ Humility

The virtue of humility, though an important one in the moralistic thought of Judaism in every period, is particularly underscored in the literature of Hasidism. This probably has to do with the very special burden the Hasidic master faced with regard to questions of humility and pride. Surrounded by an adulating mass, reputed capable of doing wonders, and even, as we have seen, of changing the will of heaven and "conducting all the worlds," it was no easy task for the *rebbe* to maintain an honest perspective on his own powers and worth. The example of

Moses, the greatest master of all time and yet the most humble man on earth, is frequently and sharply called to mind.

The notion that each person has both an upper and lower self which are to be kept in tune with one another has a long kabbalistic history. Here it is used chiefly in a moral sense; even when engaged in "lower" pursuits, the spiritual self must remain dominant. The service of God is not to be interrupted when one engages in the earthly matters that are required for the sustenance of life in this world. Hasidism teaches that each moment and each object contain a unique spark of holiness that calls forth for redemption; and its popular message differs from most prior spiritual counsel in that it insists on the integration of the self and the unity of all being. Rather than turning away from the things of this world, the *hasid* is taught that the person of true spirit can live in the world while yet remaining "above" in the true focus of his attention. The text proceeds, without relation to what has come before:

To live in the world below while keeping focus on the above

Know that each word is a complete form. You must say it with all your strength, or else it will be like one lacking a limb.

Prayer

Say it with all your strength

It is an act of divine grace that a person remains alive after prayer. It would be natural to die because so much strength is lost, for the one who prays puts all his strength into the prayer, in the intensity of his concentration.

Here begins a series of brief instructions on concentration in prayer, the center of contemplative life as it is practiced in Hasidism. The whole self must be present in each word of prayer, and the intensity demanded of the one who prays is uncompromised, even to the point of would-be death. Here we see Hasidism at its most serious, a far cry from the popular and jolly face it is often given in modern portrayals.

Not necessary to be perfect. Intention behind it. Kabbalah is about

Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov said: A person who is reading the Torah and sees the lights in its letters, even though he does not chant the text according to its proper notations, shows such great love and rapture in his reading that God, blessed be He, is not strict with him about this matter. This is true even if he does not pronounce the words themselves properly. This may be compared to a child, greatly beloved by his father. He asks something of his father, and even though he does not speak properly, his father derives pleasure from his words. One who speaks words of Torah lovingly receives the love of God; He is not concerned with whether the words are properly recited. Thus the rabbis said on "His banner (*diglo*) over me is love"

(Cant. 2.4) "his stammering (*liglugo*) over me is love (Cant. Rabbah 2.13).

Seriousness of personal emotional demand is not to be confused with learned elitism. "The Merciful One demands the heart," as the Talmud says (and as the Hasidic masters were fond of quoting), not details of proper diction. It should be recalled, however, that this seemingly lax attitude with regard to precision in performance stopped short when it came to that which was required by the canon of *halakhah* itself. Whatever tendencies it may have had toward a total spiritualization of Judaism, Hasidism struggled hard—and successfully—at remaining within the normative traditions from which it emerged.

Crying is very bad. It is in joy that a person is supposed to serve God. Only tears that flow from joy and attachment to God are beneficial.

When a person performs the commandments by rote they are dry; you have to fulfill each precept with heart and desire.

A person should train himself to recite even the hymns of prayer in a low voice, crying out in a whisper. Speak the words, whether in prayer or study, with all your strength, as Scripture says "All my bones shall say 'O Lord, who is like You' " (Ps. 35.10). But the shout that comes from true attachment should be a whisper.

The counsel to pray quietly, or to "shout in a whisper," may be a reaction to criticism that was leveled against Hasidism in its early days. The bans against the movement spoke of strange noises and wild animal-like shouts that could be heard in the first Hasidic prayer houses. This counsel of quiet prayer was not universally accepted among the *hasidim*, and even today there are groups (especially the Karlin-Stolin tradition, but others as well) that are marked by loud and seemingly boisterous styles of prayer.

Every person can reach the rung of Moses in self-purification. Perhaps not precisely that of Moses, for "Moses went up to the Lord" (Exod. 19.3) in the world of *'azilut*, but a rung like Moses' can be attained. If your soul is from *malkhut* of *'asiyah*, the lowest rung in the lowest world, you might reach the rung of Moses by ascending to the highest (*'azilut*) within *'asiyah*, and the same if your soul is of another world.

around the rungs of your capacity

Here the editor returns to the example of Moses. You may long to emulate the greatest of men, he tells the reader. Indeed you can do so,

but this does not mean that you will become Moses; each person can achieve high degrees of self-purification, but within the bounds of his own soul's nature. 'Asiyah and 'azilut (along with *beri'ah* in the following passage) refer to the kabbalistic doctrine of four worlds. Each human soul is rooted in one of those worlds, and it cannot reach higher than its origins will allow. A fully realized soul from 'asiyah, the lowest world, may reach the highest rung within 'asiyah, but no higher. Do not strive for that which is beyond your grasp, as a well-known Hasidic admonition would have it. We are here reminded of a famous quip attributed to Rabbi Zusya of Anipolye: "When I reach the true world," he said, "they will not ask me why I wasn't Moses. They will ask me why I wasn't Zusya."

Sometimes a person feels that he has reached a certain level, and makes himself happy over this. He should rather humble himself, and think that perhaps he has only reached the bottom of 'asiyah, or maybe 'azilut of 'asiyah. There are, however, some *zaddikim* who have attained to *beri'ah* and 'azilut.

Be humble and do not rush to rejoice over your spiritual attainments. Know, however, that the highest rungs are not utterly beyond human grasp.

You have to go step by step in prayer, not using up all your strength right at the beginning. Begin slowly, and when you reach the middle of the service attach yourself to God in a more intense way. Then you should be able to say all the words of prayer, even at a quickened pace.

Even if you can not attain a sense of attachment to God as you begin your prayers, say the words with concentration and strengthen yourself bit by bit. Then God, blessed be He, will help you to pray with great attachment.

A person cannot pray properly unless light surrounds him from all sides. He should be able to feel that light.

These three (originally separate) statements are almost a study in contrasts within the array of prayer instructions to be found in early Hasidic writings. The first two are practical guides, and reflect the realistic problems of the worshiper who strives to pray with intensity but cannot always achieve such prayer. One of the strengths of Hasidism was the ability of the masters to understand and react sympathetically to the simple but devoted folk, and to instruct them at their own level in the life of prayer. The final statement addresses *true* prayer, or inward

devotion at its highest. Perhaps the speaker is trying to warn disciples who feel they have reached those heights, challenging them to feel the light of God's presence surrounding them as they pray.

When you hand over all your thoughts to the blessed Creator, He will put into your mind that which you have to do. "Cast your burden upon the Lord" (Ps. 55.23). When you then long for some pious quality, surely it will be because you need that thing. It is God who has sent the thought to you.

Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov said: When you are in a state of attachment to God and some thought comes into your mind, surely it will be a true one. This is a small measure of the Holy Spirit.

He also said: If you have studied Torah on a certain day, and afterwards some matter comes up that requires a decision, the very matter you have been studying will teach you how to act. Only if you are constantly attached to God will He instruct you through your studies. If you walk crookedly with God, however, He will treat you in the same way. Then He will not bring your way those garments or foods containing sparks that need to be redeemed by the root of your soul.

The quality of trust or *bittahon* is a central value to the religious world view of the *hasid*. One who casts his burdens upon the Lord can be assured that He will provide, not only in the material sense, but in guiding the *hasid's* footsteps as he goes along the devotional path. It is interesting that Torah study is here presented as the chief vehicle for such guidance. Contrary to popular opinion, Hasidism did not denigrate the study of Torah "for its own sake." Rather it sought to rescue the study of God's word from being a dry, academic pursuit, seeing it rather as an essentially charismatic activity. Since Torah, in its broadest sense, is the living word of God, what better channel could there be than study through which God might speak to us about those issues that affect our daily life?

But it is not only prayer and study, the essential acts of devotion, through which God calls out to the *hasid*. Each object that one encounters, even in the material world, is said to contain sparks of fallen divine light that cry out for redemption, bits of divinity that long to be restored to their source. An essential part of the *hasid's* trust is that God will bring within his reach those particular things that can be redeemed by him alone, belonging as they do to the unique root of his own soul. This will



happen, the speaker warns us, only if trust is total and the seeker acts in unmitigated good faith.

When you want to be alone in prayer, at least one companion should be present. A person who is completely alone is in danger. The two should be in the same room, but then each can address himself to God in solitary prayer.

Sometimes a person who has attained true attachment can be alone with God even in a house where other people are present.

*Hitbodedut* or "aloneness with God" has a long history in the devotional literature of Judaism. Sometimes it refers to silent meditation, at others to private prayer or outcry. The counsel offered here, to have another person present when engaged in such activity, is not universally held by the Hasidic masters—some explicitly call for complete self-isolation. The warning offered may have to do either with the dangers of distraction or with those of an overintensity that could threaten one's ability to return—or both.

Sometimes you fall from your rung because of yourself; God knows that you are in need of such a fall. At other times it is the people around you who cause you to fall. Such descent is for the sake of ascent, to reach a still higher rung. Thus Scripture says: "He will lead us over death" (Ps. 48.15). "Abram went down into Egypt" (Gen. 12.10) and "Abram rose up from Egypt" (Gen. 13.1). Abraham here refers to the soul, and Egypt to the "shells."

Returning to a realistic psychology of devotion, we find the text dealing with those states of "fall" that periodically plague anyone who strives for higher spiritual attainment. Continue in your trust, the reader is told; God knows that you need this alternating rhythm of rise and fall in order to reach those rungs you seek. "Descent for the sake of ascent" is a major theme in the literature of Hasidism; the *zaddik* must go down in order to be further uplifted and in order to uplift those around him.

The allegorical reading of Abram's descent into Egypt, adopted from the Zohar (I, 122b) is taken as scriptural evidence of the need for such falls. In order to rise to the heights of devotion exemplified by his act at Mount Moriah, the patriarch first had to encounter the greatest depths. Similarly, as we are frequently told in Hasidic homilies, Israel had to endure Egyptian bondage, in that place of the thickest "shells"

that hide God's light, before they could arrive at the heights of their encounter at Mount Sinai.

#### RETURNING TO GOD:

#### A PASSAGE FROM THE SEFAT EMET

Yehudah Leib Alter (1847–1905), the rabbi of Ger (Gora Kalwaria), was one of the leading figures in Polish Jewry during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Heading a dynasty founded by his grandfather, Yizhak Meir of Ger, his followers numbered in the tens, perhaps even hundreds of thousands. The collection of his teachings, entitled *Sefat Emet*, is the best known work of later Polish Hasidism; and is still studied avidly by the Gerer *hasidim*, currently centered in Jerusalem.

The Hasidism of Ger is historically and ideologically rooted in the traditions of the Przysucha and especially the Kotsk schools. These were characterized by a renewed respect for Talmudic learning (both Yizhak Meir and Yehudah Leib were well-known halakhic scholars), a strong sense of political/social awareness, and a relentless search for truth. The *Sefat Emet*, while written in traditional homiletic style, is marked by a constant search for the essentials of Jewish spiritual teaching: the innermost core of what it means to be a Jew, the essence of Torah, the purpose of existence itself. Yehudah Leib had a profound understanding of sacred time and the meaning of religious life as a reenactment of mythical paradigms. While educated wholly from within the classics of the Jewish tradition, and speaking in a style deeply rooted in those sources, there is much that is strikingly modern in the content of his teachings.

The homily offered here was delivered on Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath of Repentance, in 1881 (*Sefat Emet* is one of the few Hasidic works in which the individual homilies are dated). The year 1881, it should be recalled, was a fateful one in the history of Russian Jewry. Alexander III had just acceded to the throne, and the spring of that year had been marked by the first large-scale pogroms against Jews in over a century. While the outrages had taken place in the Ukraine, some distance from the central Polish Gerer "kingdom," word had certainly traveled, and those who listened to Yizhak Meir during that holy-day season surely had the events of the year behind them in mind. It was those same pogroms, of course, that were an important factor in stimu-

lating both large-scale emigration of Russian Jews to England and America and the proto-Zionist BILU movement, establishing the first new Jewish settlements in Erez Israel.

The teaching speaks of the nature of *teshuvah* (return, i.e., repentance) and the place of Israel's return to God in the cosmic scheme. Readers familiar with the thought of Abraham Isaac Kook may notice a certain similarity in the notion of *teshuvah*, though the styles of these two writers differ vastly from one another.

The preacher takes as his point of departure a well-known passage from Pirke Avot (5.1): "The world was created by ten utterances. What does this teach? Surely it could have been created by one! It was so done in order that the wicked be punished for destroying a world created by ten, and that the righteous be rewarded for preserving such a world." The ten utterances to which the text refers are the ten times when God says: "Let there be" in the course of Creation. The Talmud, commenting on this passage (Megillah 21b), notes that there are but nine such occurrences, not ten, in the text of Genesis, and suggests that "In the Beginning" itself is also an utterance of God. In midrashic literature a parallel is often cited between these ten utterances and the Ten Commandments, while in later kabbalistic writings it is widely understood that these utterances are the ten *Sefirot* (discussed in Chapter Six), and the passage is taken as a Talmudic source for the kabbalistic doctrine.

The ten days of *teshuvah* are the ten utterances by which the world was created. Rosh Hashanah is parallel to "In the Beginning," as the Talmud says " 'In the Beginning' too is an utterance." This one includes them all, and that is why they asked if Creation could not have taken place through a single utterance. This is the statement of Oneness, that which entered God's mind before Creation. This also is the state of the future, after all has been redeemed.

The first of the ten utterances, according to the kabbalistic reading, is parallel to *Keter*, the highest of the ten emanations within God. Since all the lower *Sefirot*, detailing the process of divine flow and the aspects of God's self, are derived from *Keter*, this aspect of divinity may be said to include them all, an absolute state of Oneness that precedes the first movement toward Creation. In many kabbalistic writings *Keter* is identified with *ein sof* itself, the hidden Godhead that remains beyond all Creation. Thus "in the beginning" is separated from the conclusion of that first verse in Scripture; it is taken as a description of the state that existed before "God created heaven and earth."

The absolute unity of God is a state that is interrupted only temporarily by Creation and the events, including all of history, that follow. In the end, after Israel has completed the work of redemption, that unity will be restored, and the separate existence of the world will cease to be. This idea of an ultimate restoration of Oneness is an often unstated assumption of Jewish theology, most of which tends to concentrate on the this-worldly redemption associated with the Messiah. The reader will recognize this idea most readily from its statement in the well-known liturgical hymn *Adon 'Olam*: "Lord of the universe who ruled before any creature came to be. . . . And after all is finished, He shall rule in awe, alone . . ."

This is also why the rabbis said that "At first it entered God's mind to create the world through the aspect of judgment. When He saw that the world would not survive, He added to it the aspect of compassion." (Genesis Rabbah 12.15) Until the sin of Adam He was ready to create the world by a single utterance. But due to the mixing [of good and evil], the quality of compassion was brought in and the world was created with ten utterances, in order to make for reward and punishment, as the Mishnah says. In fact it was the wicked who were to emerge from Adam who brought about the sin. The righteous, and the children of Israel who are called "Your people are all righteous" (Isa. 60.21), are the ones who arouse the power of Oneness. That is what the rabbis meant when they said that Israel too entered God's mind before He created the world (Gen. Rabbah 1.4).

Here the preacher expostules on a number of rabbinic dicta about Creation; it is especially clear in this passage that the teaching is preserved in extremely abbreviated form. Creation through *middat ha-din*, the aspect of judgment, was God's original intent. This is associated with Creation through a single utterance: the complexities of sin, evil, and the need for forgiveness were not part of the original divine plan. If all was to exist in a state of oneness, there could be no thought of alienation between God and His creature. The creation of man, with his freedom and ability to choose evil over good, caused a change in this plan. The force of divine compassion and forgiveness would have to exist if evil was to be overcome and the original harmony restored. Thus Israel, personifying the righteous power in the world, also needed to exist in God's mind before the Creation would be complete: it is they who arouse His mercies over all His creatures and allow the work of restoration to begin.

Of the situation after the sin it is said: "There is no righteous one in the earth who does not sin" (Eccles. 7.20), due to the mixing. This is especially true while we are in exile, among the wicked. The only counsel is *teshuvah*; it is this to which the *shofar* calls us. Each of us must seek to restore the world to what it was in the primal divine thought, or to what it was in the moment when we received the Torah, before the sin that followed.

Here the cosmic exile of humanity from Eden and the primal state of oneness is associated with the historical exile of Israel, dispersed among the wicked nations. Because Israel embodies the power of goodness, it is their return to God that makes for redemption. Following older tradition, the *Sefat Emet* notes that such redemption almost took place at the moment Israel received the Torah, had not the sin of the Golden Calf intervened and brought about the wandering in the wilderness. As we have seen in the homily of Levi Yizhak, this sin of idolatry serves to renew the original sin of Eden.

The Talmud says that all Creation took place consciously (Rosh Hashanah 11a). So it is that on each Rosh Hashanah the Creation is renewed, in accord with the consciousness and willingness of Israel to accept His blessed kingdom. They succeed in this renewal through their longing to return the world to that which it was before the sin. This is what the sages meant when they said that He "consulted the souls of the righteous" before Creation (Gen. Rabbah 8.7).

Adam repented of his sin on the same day; only afterwards does Scripture say: "God saw all that He had made, and it was very good" (Gen. 1.31). This grace was called forth by Adam's *teshuvah*. Of this the holy Sabbath was made, a return of Creation to Oneness, with no admixture of evil. Of this Scripture proclaims: "He blessed it and declared it holy" (Gen. 2.3). That is why there is no need to sound the *shofar* on the Sabbath: the Oneness is aroused of its own accord. The *shofar* sound is meant to arouse this Oneness, as Scripture says: "Make yourself two trumpets of silver . . . when the community is assembled, you shall sound them" (Num. 10.2,7). It is through *teshuvah* that the power of Oneness is awakened.

The consciousness with which all beings were created (Rashi says that each creature was asked if it wished to be created and responded

"Yes") is given over to Israel; it is their annual willingness to return to God that allows the world to be sustained. Creation can only continue to exist so long as there is hope for restoration of the primal unity. Israel's desire for *teshuvah* bears witness to that hope and it is this desire that arouses God's mercies and allows the world to be. The power of *teshuvah* is dramatically illustrated by the effect of Adam's return; only by the power aroused through his *teshuvah* could Creation have been declared "good" and could God's Sabbath have come into being. Since Sabbath is "a foretaste of the world to come," and a temporary state in which Creation is unified and evil banished, it testifies weekly that man's return to God has within it the power to restore His world.

Of this it is said: "Take words with you and return to the Lord" (Hosea 14.3). God created everything through the power of Torah, which is also called "Beginning" (Gen. Rabbah 1.1), the root of all. By many contractions all was created from it, being out of nothingness. Israel has to return all of Creation, making Nothing out of being, including everything in the Torah. This is done through the commandments that apply to all of our actions. By the proper direction of their deeds the righteous join everything back to the power of Torah—this is the essence of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* exists in both deed and thought: "Let the wicked one leave his way" applies to the weekday world, in which evil deeds must be set aside, and "the sinful man his thoughts" (Isa. 55.7) applies to the Sabbath, a higher form of *teshuvah*. Such a one may not be considered evil in his actions, but on the Sabbath he is to repent for thoughts and reflections.

Here the specifically Jewish content of Yehudah Leib's teaching becomes clearest. Until this point it is only because Israel is identified in general with "the righteous" that it is central to the process of cosmic renewal. Now that claim is made more specific: since Creation took place through Torah (the cosmic, preverbal Torah, to be sure), it is by faithfulness to the commandments of that Torah that the transformation of "being into nothingness" (a favorite formulation of the Maggid of Miedzyrzec) can come about. The return of being to God takes place by means of the Torah, just as did the original Creation. The commandments that rule the daily life of the Jew bring all things back into the domain of God's word; it is through this channel that they are restored to God Himself.

It is written: "As the rain or snow drops from heaven and returns not there, but soaks the earth and makes it bring forth vegetation, yielding seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is the word that issues from My mouth: it does not come back to Me unfulfilled, but performs what I purpose, achieves what I sent it to do" (Isa. 55.10-11). This refers to the words of Torah that God has implanted in each one of Israel; "eternal life has He planted in our midst." This too is the meaning of: "Give ear, O heavens, and I shall speak; hear O earth, the words of my mouth. May my teaching flow forth like rain, my expression like the dew" (Deut. 32.1-2). Just as rain saturates the earth, arousing the power of growth so that earth gives forth vegetation, so does that oral Torah, planted in the hearts of Israel, its soil. But the help of heaven is still required; this is the written Torah. By struggling over the words of the written Torah, the power that lies within man is aroused; man was created wholly for the purpose of working at Torah. His raising up of the words to God is the fulfillment of his mission; he returns the words to the One who has sent him. But his uplifting can take place only by the repair of all one's deeds, as they follow the words. Then they will "perform what I purpose, achieve what I sent them to do." Then they return to their source; this is the essence of *teshuvah*.

*Teshuvah* here is finally taken in a dual sense: the return of man to God, and the fulfilled restoration to Him of that word which He has sent to man for his guidance.

The convictions of the *Sefat Emet* on the role of Israel's *teshuvah* in the survival and renewal of the cosmos come to him through a long history of prior rabbinic and kabbalistic thought. While there have been many voices in the history of Judaism that have insisted upon the absolute freedom of God from any dependence on humanity (a position most often identified with Maimonides), there is an equally strong current that claims that God Himself and His universe require the merits of Israel's good deeds for their very life. The kabbalists saw this primarily in terms of ritual performance: the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* gives strength to God and leads Him to triumph over the forces of evil. The tendency in Hasidism is to make such demands upon all of Israel's actions; the entirety of human life must be directed toward God.

Though the *Sefat Emet* lived to see the beginning of the twentieth century, it is hard to imagine (without ascribing to him powers of prophecy) that he could have foreseen just how true and appropriate his

message would become for a generation only half a century removed from the end of his lifetime. Still, the present-day implication of his teaching should not be lost on the reader: the very survival of our universe depends on the collective will of humanity to accept the task of *teshuvah*.

#### WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

There is no comprehensive work on the history of Hasidism that can be recommended to the reader. The work of S. M. Dubnov (unavailable in English, in any case) is badly outdated, and nothing has yet been published to take its place. There are, however, books, articles, and sections of books on specific topics to which one could well turn for guidance.

Introductory histories of Hasidism are available in Bernard Weinryb's *The Jews of Poland* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973); in Raphael Mahler's *A History of Modern Jewry* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1971; written from a Marxist point of view); and in an essay by S. Ettinger in H. H. Ben-Sasson's *Jewish Society Through the Ages* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1971; *Journal of World History*, vol. 11). The movement's religious roots are discussed by Gershom Scholem in the final chapter of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941) and by Martin Buber in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (the most recent paperback edition is New York: Horizon, 1972).

Specific aspects of Hasidic thought are covered in an important series of essays by Joseph Weiss, published over several years in the London *Journal of Jewish Studies*, by Scholem in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971) and by Louis Jacobs in *Seeker of Unity* (New York: Basic Books, 1966) and *Hasidic Prayer* (paperback, New York: Schocken, 1973).

Individual figures in the history of Hasidism have been treated in monographs by Samuel Dresner, *The Zaddik* (paperback, New York: Schocken, 1974; on Jacob Joseph of Polonoy) and *Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev* (New York: Hartmore House, 1974) and by the present writer in *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University of Alabama, 1979; also in Schocken paperback). An important series of essays by Abraham J. Heschel on various figures in the early history

of the movement has been translated by Samuel Dresner and is soon to appear in English.

A vast critical and historical literature on Hasidism is extant in Hebrew, primarily by scholars at the Hebrew University, including the students of Gershom Scholem. The Hebrew reader is especially commended to the writings of B. Dinur, I. Tishby, R. Schatz, M. Piekartz and further studies by Scholem and Weiss. There is also an extensive quasi-critical scholarly literature on Hasidism written in Hebrew by latter-day *hasidim* and by others who are quite close to the movement. While such works are to be selected with care, much information is found there that cannot be gleaned from other sources.

As to the Hasidic sources themselves, almost none of the important homiletical or theological works of Hasidism has been translated into English. The great exception to this is the writings of the Lubavitch school, including the *Tanya* by Shne'ur Zalman of Liadi, an important systematic compendium of Hasidic ideas. HaBaD/Lubavitch works in translation, often with excellent annotation, are available through the Kehot Publishing Company in Brooklyn, associated with the Lubavitch movement.

Other Hasidic works in translation include *Upright Practices* and *The Light of the Eyes: Homilies to Genesis* by Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, which I have recently published through the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series of the Paulist Press (New York, 1982). An earlier collection, undertaken with Barry W. Holtz, is *Your Word Is Fire: The Hasidic Masters on Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). On the difficulties attending the translation of such works, see my reflections "On Translating Hasidic Homilies" in a recent issue of *Prooftexts*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter 1983).

The Hasidic tales have fared much better in translation than have the homilies. Especially recommended from the scholarly point of view are Dan Ben-Amos' rendition of *In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov* (Bloomington Ind.; Indiana University Press, 1970) and Arnold J. Band's translation of *The Tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, also in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). The tales as retold by Martin Buber are a classic in their own right; especially recommended is his major collection *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken, 1948). Other collections available include Elie Wiesel's *Souls on Fire* (New York: Random House, 1972), and, a special favorite of this reader, Jiri Langer's *Nine Gates to the Chassidic Mysteries* (New York: Behrman, 1961). Critical research on the Hasidic tale is still in its early stages. The Hebrew reader would do well in this area to consult the

studies by Joseph Dan, especially *Ha-Sippur Ha-Hasidi* (Jerusalem, 1975), and Gedalyahu Nigal. Again, for the Hebrew/Yiddish reader, the collected essays of Chaim Lieberman (*Ohel Rahel*, New York, 1980) are a great mine of information.



# BACK TO THE SOURCES

*Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*

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