

P738

# Hasidism

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חסידות

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**H**asidism, the mystical revival movement that swept through eastern Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth century, is a major and largely untapped source of theological language and ideas. While there are many presentations of Hasidism for the modern reader, most such treatments avoid the intricacies of Hasidic theology. The few historians who have examined these matters have not discussed their viability for a contemporary theology of Judaism. The discussion here will suggest two areas in which Hasidic thought merits further consideration: the unity of God, including questions of monism or panentheism, and the drama of spiritual ascent and descent in "the redeeming of sparks." These topics by no means exhaust the valuable theological materials to be found scattered through Hasidic literature; the treatment of them will, it is hoped, provide a model for the reexamination of others as well. These include extensive reflections on mystical notions of revelation, religious language, prophecy and charisma, and leadership and community.

The *fons et origo* of Hasidism lies in the overwhelming experience of the

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all-pervasive presence of God. The founding personality of Hasidism, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, and his immediate circle never tired of insisting that the divine is everywhere, even—and perhaps especially—where we least expect to find it. This insight, received and conveyed in ecstatic form by the first Hasidic generation, converted such earlier immanentist formulations as "the whole earth is full of His glory" or "there is no place devoid of Him" into enthusiastic watchwords. The brief aphorisms characteristic of early Hasidic thought constantly drive this point home: there is no place, no hour, no person or object that does not serve to garb God's presence. Perhaps the most radical expression of this reality, stripped of all traditional niceties, is the claim—made by a disciple of Dov Baer of Lubavich some four generations into the movement's history—that *altes tz'gol*, "all is God." This formulation, culled from a private letter not intended for publication, is what lies behind more typical and guarded expressions such as "the life of God is garbed in all things," or the reading of such innocently theistic phrases as "there is none beside Him" to mean "there is nothing beside Him."

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

In the school of Mezhirech, the center of Hasidism in the generation following the death of the Ba'al Shem Tov, this devotional insight is developed into a mystical metaphysic; nonduality becomes a claim about the universe as well as about the mind. Dov Baer of Mezhirech used earlier kabbalistic terminology to construct a theology out of his own master's enthusiastic but fragmentary teachings. The *sefirot*, stages in the emanation of divinity and way stations in the mystical ascent to God, are used by Dov Baer in a new way. The first of the ten *sefirot*, by the Hasidic ordering, is *hokhmah*, or divine wisdom. This beginning or primal point contains virtually all reality that is ever to exist as completely unformed prime "matter." As such, *hokhmah* is called by the kabbalists *gyn* (nothing), for it contains no definition. The last of the ten *sefirot* is *malhut* (kingdom), or *Shekhinah* (God's presence). Unlike any prior kabbalist, Dov Baer fully identifies *Shekhinah* with the presence of divinity in this world, recovering the older prekabbalistic

usage of that term. *Shekhinah* is the fullness that plays opposite the primal emptiness of *hokhmah*; it is the realized world, the divine energy fully extended into all its worldly garb, a garb that is in no way separable from the divine "body" itself. Thus *Shekhinah* may appropriately be called *yesh* (that which is), for it is identical with all of being as it is.

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

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

It is in Habad (an acronym derived from the names of the three highest *sefirot*) Hasidism, particularly in the teachings of its founder Shneur Zalman of Lyady, and his disciple Aaron of Starosielce, that the cosmic implications of the Mezhirech doctrine are most fully drawn forth. Habad is a theo-

logical system in which God alone has real existence and all else is illusion. For Dov Baer truth lay in the meeting of *hokhmah* and *malchut*; it is not certain whether he thought that the world as it is should be viewed as illusion or whether both partners in the primal pair represent equally valid manifestations of reality. His disciples vary in their reports of this all-important issue. Shneur Zalman falls clearly within the former camp, demanding of his own followers that they see through the falsehood of this world in order to realize the single divine truth. Here another kabbalistic term is reused, in this case the Lurianic idea of *zimzum*, that is, the self-contraction of the infinite God that preceded the creation of "primal" space.

*Zimzum* in Lurianic kabbalah had been used to explain how the non-God, and especially evil, could come to exist in a divinely ordained universe. As God absents himself from primal space, allowing for the creation of the other, the primal roots of the demonic take hold in the vacuum brought about by the divine withdrawal. The Hasidic authors, however, viewed the problem of God's all-pervasive presence and the existence of the non-God again in purely psychological terms: how can the human mind with its individual self-consciousness exist in the world where "all is God"? *Zimzum*, they thus teach, is that gift of illusion by which we are permitted to view ourselves as individuals. It is only from our human point of view that there has been a *zimzum*, a reduction of the divine presence within creation so that the non-God might exist. From God's point of view there has been no *zimzum*, there can be no non-God, and the existence of the world is illusory. The task here is the systematic training of the human mind to see the world as God does, to become aware that none exists but the One itself.

The presence of this nontheistic religious language at the heart of a traditional Jewish piety has yet to be taken seriously in modern Jewish thought. The influence of existentialism on the theology of the earlier twentieth century made personalistic language seem attractive even when taken to the extreme. Even such figures as Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, so steeped in the study of Hasidism, mostly ignored its abstract theological language, favoring the biblical metaphors of personal relationship between God and Israel (now universalized as "man"). Only since the mid-twentieth century have the historical researches of Israeli scholars begun to render Hasidic materials accessible, and the influence of mysticism, especially that of contemplative Buddhist and Hindu origin, on the intellectual life of the West has created an atmosphere in which such non-personalistic terminology is of increased interest. The "death-of-God" movement, although short-lived, served to underscore the fact that God as "Father" or "King"—the essential personal metaphors preserved in later

Jewish theology—describes a religious reality no longer known by many contemporary seekers. In the 1970s the feminist critique of religious language also pointed up the inadequacy of these terms, not only because they are masculine in gender but because they represent a patronizing authority that no longer seems acceptable.

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

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

The motif of *yeridah zorekh aliyah* (descent for the sake of ascent) provides the essential dramatic rubric for the Hasidic vision of the spiritual life. It is derived from the Lurianic myth of the breaking of the vessels, according to which the intensity of divine light given in creation was too great for the lower worlds to bear and the vessels containing that light were smashed in transit. The human task (expanding "Israel" to "humanity") is to descend in search of these scattered bits of light and to ascend with them, restoring them to their source in God. This notion, too, has undergone drastic revision in Hasidism.

For the kabbalist, the retrieval of divine sparks was an active participation in the ongoing drama of cosmic redemption. Gershom Scholem has shown how Lurianic kabbalah shifted the focus of mystical attention to the messianic and how the Sabbatean movement was its direct outgrowth. In Sabbateanism the need to descend into the depths for the sake of redemption became a truly central motif, used first to explain the periodic bleak moods

of the would-be messiah, Shabbetai Zevi, and later to defend acts of intentional sin and even apostasy on the part of his disciples as well.

Born in circles quite close to those that produced Polish Sabbateanism, Hasidism was both at pains to dissociate itself from the hated heresy and attracted to certain of its spiritual values. The sense of the *zaddik* (literally, "the righteous one," the leader of a Hasidic community) as one who holds fast to both upper and lower worlds, himself serving as a channel through which matter is transformed into spirit, is a legacy from earlier Judaism by way of Sabbateanism. The preachers who were the first intellectuals of the Hasidic revival, themselves struggling to uplift and transform their audiences by words of inspiration, were much attracted to the paradoxical rhythm of descent for ascent's sake. Purifying the notion of any taint of intentional sin, they used it to explain how it is that the *zaddik* undergoes even a thought of temptation, or why he has to associate with sinners, even in the role of preacher. Ultimately it was used to justify the role of the Hasidic master: the mystic who comes forth and raises up the fallen spirits of those around him is greater than the one who remains closeted even with the most profound of mysteries.

As the movement developed, the motif of descent and ascent was used in a more extended metaphorical way. Just as night precedes day in the order of creation, or as the long night of exile precedes the dawn of Israel's redemption, so do times of darkness alternate with those of light in the life of each individual. "For light is greater when it proceeds from the dark." Each person must go through periods of inner darkness (depression, doubt, temptation) in order to increase the light that emerges in the triumph over them. This is the closest Hasidism comes to offering a theodicy: the task of transforming suffering and evil into "light"—the joy of God's service—is left in human hands. The more profound the sufferings given to an individual, the higher the sparks that lie within that person's grasp to redeem, if the strength can but be found to effect that transformation. Ultimately there is nothing in the universe so irremediably evil, since all comes from God, that it cannot be recovered for the holy. The Hasidic masters admit, however, that there are certain types of sparks, including those found in forbidden foods, for example, that may be uplifted only at the end of time.

Going yet a step further in the transformation of the Lurianic idea, Hasidism emphasized the notion of particular sparks that belong to each individual person. The tools that come into a person's hands, the food one eats, the places one travels are all assigned by the grace of heaven, as each contains some special spark that the individual soul alone can and must redeem. We see Hasidism as a movement that straddles the late-medi-

eval and modern periods in the history of Judaism: it reads a medieval mythic motif so as to give expression to the strikingly modern idea of the unique religious task of each individual. In a broader sense as well it may be said that the Hasidic adaptation of the sparks motif is a bridge to modernity. For the kabbalists the idea was a deeply theurgic one: when only specific ritual acts, accompanied by prescribed formulas for meditation, effect redemption, we are in the quasi-magical world of medieval esotericism. When Hasidism declares that wholeness of heart rather than esoteric knowledge allows the sparks to be redeemed, personal piety has taken the place of occultism. When we read this claim as expressing the transforming power of concentrated divine/human energy to effect healing in a damaged cosmos, we find ourselves surprisingly close to certain contemporary trends in psychology and medicine.

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

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