

CAN THE DEATH OF IDEOLOGY SPELL THE REBIRTH OF HASIDISM?

by Mayer Schiller

Introduction

The Hasidic movement has in recent decades often been a subject of study by a host of scholars, philosophers and popular analysts. We have witnessed the rise and fall in popularity of everything from Martin Buber's personalist-existential portrayal of Hasidism to Gershon Scholem's doctrinal-mystical understanding of its essence. Today, once again, outside interest in the movement is growing due in no small measure to Elie Wiesel's rapid succession of volumes claiming to depict the lives and ideals of some of its illustrious leaders.

This fascination has not and is not limited to those inclined toward a somewhat sophisticated literary deciphering of Hasidism. Popular magazines, fictional works, documentaries and dramatic motion pictures have all been devoted to satisfying the desire of the public at large to come to grips with a somewhat strange and perhaps not a trifle guilt awakening phenomenon.

Some Hasidic groups, such as the Lubavitcher and Broslaver movements, have actively sought to help those interested in understanding them. Others seem forebodingly harsh and have achieved a certain degree of notoriety for their apparently fearsome antagonism to those unequal to their particular definitions of "heresy" and "faith." By and large, though, the above mentioned two tendencies do not represent the norm. Most Hasidim today are quite content to merely pursue their own communal goals free of any outside influences. They ask only to be left alone in order to do so.

Yet, the amazingly rapid growth of their communities, their ability to survive and prosper in the face of all sociological dogmas about minority



cultures in secular-capitalist societies and probably more than anything else the strutting, boisterous, detached confidence of their insular camaraderie, leave other Jews interested and often agitated. What began in the rural areas of the Ukraine has survived the overthrow of the *ancien regime* and Europe's abandonment of traditional faith, morality and culture. As the rest of the continent chose between individualist and communal division of capital, Hasidism remained indifferent. As the upheaval of World War I and the cataclysm of World War II shook mankind and *Klal Yisrael* to its core, Hasidism survived and lived to prosper in a new land, America, where levity and trendy hedonism seemed to be the only pervasive motifs of an otherwise diverse "nation."

What is the reason for this amazing tale of spiritual survival? To what extent are the forces unleashed by the original Hasidic leaders still fermenting in the hearts of Hasidim today and, most importantly, if we are to pursue these questions for other than purposes of private fascination, what, if anything, do the teachings of Hasidism have to say to those who will always be on the

outside of the insular Hasidic communities?

The Hasidim themselves claim that the Baal Shem Tov who began the movement was a unique Divine messenger come to this world with teachings specifically suited for our age. They further assert that his teaching is relevant to each and every one of us and as the Chernobler Maggid often said, "Whenever a Jew gives a thought to repentance even in the furthest German city it has all been brought about by the power of the Baal Shem Tov."

Unlike secular historians who view Hasidic genesis as some sort of natural response to poverty, persecution, or the alienation of the "ignorant masses," Hasidim themselves see the coming of the Baal Shem as a supra-historical event, bringing with it unique teachings never before expounded. They will grant that the greatness of the Baal Shem and the early masters of the movement was such that he made Judaism relevant for some simple folk who might previously have been excluded from its consolations, but they would deny with a vehemence that this was the cause or the essence of Hasidism. That essence they see as extraordinarily profound and uniquely Divine, capable of challenging and inspiring the greatest saints and scholars. It was a deep and demanding spiritual renaissance rather than merely a compromise for the masses or a pragmatic response to pogroms and poverty.

The record would seem to substantiate the claims of the Hasidim on these points. Each *sefer* of the early masters of the movement reveals either wide-ranging Torah scholarship such as the *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, cryptic mastery of Kabbalah such as any work by the

Groisser Maggid or profound understanding of the Jews' relationship with God such as *Bait Abaron*. The list, however, is endless for the explosion of spiritual activity and teaching which took place in the century following the Baal Shem was perhaps never equalled before or after in Jewish history ... and indeed, many of the teachers and teachings of that period would seem relevant to twentieth century America.

The Teachings of the Baal Shem

Simply stated, the Baal Shem sought to create a Jewish renaissance by providing a more potent injection of the Divine into both the practice of Judaism and the totality of the cosmos. Passionately based upon such familiar Zoharic statements as "there is no place devoid of Him" and "Torah and *mitzvot* without love and fear of God cannot ascend on High," it was a teaching capable of bringing comfort, exaltation and enthusiasm to all Jews ranging from the unlearned yet pious, to the greatest scholars and mystics.

God is everywhere, the Baal Shem taught. He absolutely and totally transcends all of existence. As Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Ladi, the author of the *Tanya*, a basic Hasidic work of the late seventeen hundreds, noted, "The phrase, 'He who renews constantly in His goodness the act of creation' and 'You bring life into everything' are to be understood quite literally." In other words, God is constantly re-entering and re-creating the world. God is close by ... in and around all.

Yet, this God is not an obscure deity. "You, You only You," sang Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev. He is a loving, concerned, compassionate God whose involvement with his creatures' lives reaches oft unfathomable levels. The Chernobler Maggid Rabbi Motel quotes the Baal Shem as having said, "Often, a Jew becomes so absorbed in his workday activities that he almost forgets that



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there is a God in the world. As the sun begins to set, he recalls that he has not yet uttered the afternoon prayers. Quickly, he runs into an alleyway, and heaving a bitter sigh over his day long estrangement from the Creator, recites his prayers. At that moment, even though he barely pays attention to the meaning of the words, his prayer splits the Heavens and comes before God's Throne of Glory."

Our very sighs, our hopes and sufferings, are precious to a loving God, who in the touching metaphor of the *Shearit Yisrael*, gathers the last words of Talmud study uttered by the fatigued Jews of the Ukraine as they fall asleep over their Gemoras after a long day's work and cherishes them above all the other delights He has. God, transcendent yet loving.

Joy and Humility

...To be worshipped in joy and humility. In the words of Rabbi Abra-

ham of Slonim, "The Baal Shem came into the world to imbue us with humility and joy; the opposite of which are haughtiness and depression and frivolity." The Baal Shem taught humility, a sense of gratitude to the Creator, a sense of reverence towards creation and a realization that we can never be so self-satisfied with our own spiritual conditions to allow ourselves to judge our fellow man.

As the Tiferet Shelomah quotes Rabbi David of Lelov, "The era of negative reproof has passed. We can now only influence our fellows by our love." (A tradition which has been the dominant motif of the overwhelming majority of Hasidic groups to this day. One need only think of the person and teachings of the Belzer Rav, the Gerer Rebbe, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Skulener Rebbe, and all the Rebbeim of the Riziner and Cheronobel dynasties, the Slonimer and

Karliner Rebbeim and scores of others.*)"

...So, too did the Baal Shem teach joy. In fact, the *Keser Shem Tov* quotes the Baal Shem as saying, "All of my spiritual accomplishments have been reached solely through joy." Profoundly, though, the opposite of joy is seen not only as depression, but as frivolity as well. How true this rings in the contemporary West which, devoid of deep-seated civilizational commitment, lurches back and forth from empty depression to superficial levity.

The Baal Shem also taught faith. Shortly before his passing, he said, "Considering all the Divine insights I have achieved, in the end, I would put them all aside for faith. I am a simpleton and I believe." A simple faith? No, not at all. A faith which realizes that all of human experience, all of philosophical speculation and all mystical insight remain, at best, sign posts along the path towards the summit of existence, faith in God.

The Baal Shem is quoted by the Karliner hasidim as having said that, "The Hebrew letters of thought (*machshava*) and joy (*simcha*) are the same. A man need not think many thoughts but only that of joyous service to God." Although the teachings of the Baal Shem are, when examined, extraordinarily deep and expanded by his disciples over the generations, the foregoing would seem to be more than a fitting summary of its essence.

Hasidism Today

How much of the Baal Shem's legacy remains? Most major Hasidic movements, although touched to an extent by spirit, seem to be very much institutionalized. Although amazingly successful in insuring the Orthodoxy of their adherents, as well as producing large numbers of *talmidei chachomim*, the renewal of the Baal Shem based on a joyous awareness of

*Exceptions to this rule are found among scattered Galician and Hungarian basidim, removed both chronologically and geographically from the Baal Shem, hence, often ideologically as well.

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God's proximity seems a bit distant from them. There are many explanations for this, not the least of which is the stifling effect of a capitalism which has succeeded far beyond Adam Smith's wildest dreams and of a culture committed to a utilitarian reductionism that would have warmed the hearts of Bentham and Dewey. Conceivably though, the explanation is simpler. Powerful reawakenings usually run rapidly out of gas and survive, if at all, by creating *forms*, the effect of which is to kill the original spirit of creative piety.

Yet, perhaps the hasidim were right after all and “Just as the Torah is eternal so too is the Baal Shem.” Perhaps our age, wearied of systems and ideals, which now consoles itself solely with the search for greater financial security is awaiting a message profound yet simple; a message of Ultimate Meaning, Joy and Simple Faith. Perhaps in an era which has clearly gone beyond ideology, where religion is ignored due to the dulling comforts of hedonism, rather than because of rational objections, the Baal Shem's teachings may once again prove relevant. Modernism has stooped below the rational. The Baal Shem stepped above it. History, by eliminating the burden of “enlightened skepticism,” enables us all to travel a bit lighter now and conceivably find faith with a bit more ease.

This need not imply that the cultural forms of Eastern Europe must be

reincarnated in America, but merely that the spiritual teaching of the Baal Shem be re-asserted. For if anything is clear, it is that modern man, when pausing to rewind his V.C.R., realizes that he is a “fool.” It remains only for him to step from foolishness to faith.

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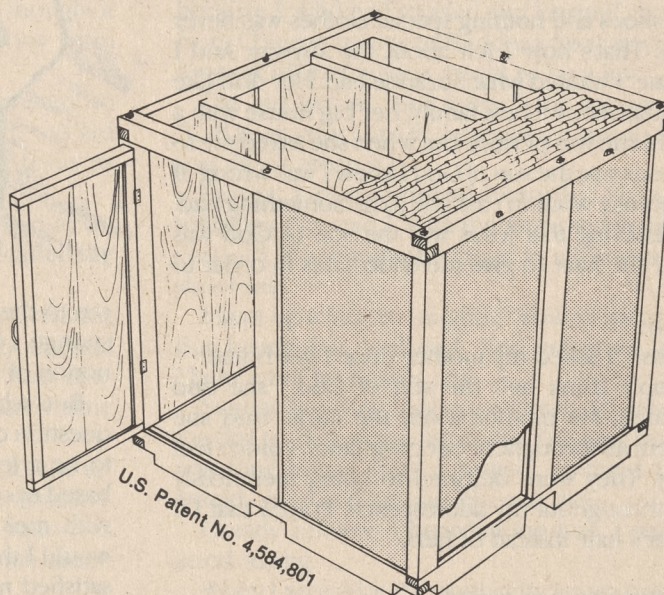
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