

Why Should Progressive Jews be Interested in Hasidism?

Shaul Magid

“I don’t want to talk about Hasidism as a static thing. Hasidism is an approach. It is an approach to Judaism.” (Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 24)

Martin Buber

This is not the place to present the teachings of Hasidism. They can be summed up in a single sentence: God can be beheld in each thing and reached through each pure deed. But this insight is by no means to be equated with a pantheistic world view, as some have thought. In the Hasidic teaching, the whole world is only a word out of the mouth of God. Nonetheless, the least thing in the world is worthy that through it God should reveal himself to the man who truly seeks Him; for no thing can exist without a divine spark, and each person can uncover and redeem that spark at each time and through each action, even the most ordinary, if only he performs it in purity, wholly directed to God and concentrated in Him. (Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 41)

The central example of the Hasidic overcoming of the distance between the sacred and the profane points to an explanation of what is to be understood by the fact that Hasidism has its word to speak in the crisis of Western man. This crisis was already recognized by Kierkegaard a hundred years ago as an unprecedented shaking of the foundations of man as man. But it is only in our generation that we have seriously begun to occupy ourselves with the fact that in this crisis something begins to be decided that is bound up in the closest manner with a decision about ourselves... One no longer knows the holy face to fact; but one believes that one knows and cherishes its heir, the “spiritual,” without, of course, allowing it the right to determine life in any way. The spirit is hedged in and its claim on personal experience is warded off through a comprehensive apparatus; one can now enjoy it without having to fear awkward consequences. (Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 30, 31)

Man cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human; he can approach Him through becoming human. To become human is what he, this individual man, has been created for. This, so it seems to me, is the eternal core of Hasidic life and of Hasidic teaching. (Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man*, 34, 35)

Abraham Joshua Heschel

God will return to us when we shall be willing to let Him in – into our banks and factories, into our Congress and clubs, into our courts and investigating committees, into our homes and theaters. For God is everywhere or nowhere, the Father of all men or no men, concerned with everything or nothing. Only in His presence shall we learn that the glory of man is not in his will to power, but in the power of compassion. (Heschel, *Quest for God*, 150)

Piety, finally, is allegiance to the will of God. Whether that will is understood or not, it is accepted as good and holy, and is obeyed in faith...All the pious man's thoughts and plans revolve around this concern, and nothing can distract him to turn away from the way...His preoccupation with the will of God is not limited to a section of his activities, but his great desire is to place his whole life at the disposal of God. In this he finds the real meaning of life...In this way, he feels that whatever he does, he is ascending step by step a ladder leading to the ultimate. In aiding a creature, he is helping the Creator. In succoring the poor, he fulfils a concern of God. In admitting the good, he reverses the spirit of God. In loving the pure, he is drawn to Him. In promoting the right, he is directing things toward His will, in which all aims must terminate...The glory of man's devotion to the good becomes a treasure of God on earth. (Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, 294).

Arthur Green

Our contention is that Hasidism came to the threshold of a major breakthrough in religious consciousness, but one that at the same time threatened to destroy all that its Western legacy thought was required for the preservation of the religio-social order. At the edge of this abyss, it retreated into safer expressions of traditional Jewish piety. (Green, "Discovery and Retreat" in *The Heart of the Matter*, 228).

Ritual commandments are there to be fulfilled, but they are to be seen as means rather than as ends, vessels to contain the divine light that floods the soul or as concrete embodiments of the heart's inner quest. Neo-Hasidism can embrace a wide relationship to halakha, varying in accord mostly with the psychological and devotional needs of the individual. There is no absolute 'right' or "wrong" in this realm, not even a "better" or "worse." The values of neo-Hasidism as outlined here are lines that barely intersect with

those that define American Jewish “denominations.” (Green, “A Neo-Hasidic Credo” in *The Heart of the Matter*, 283).

Historical Hasidism underwent two great struggles: first against the dominant rabbinic culture, then against the *haskalah*. You might say that our situation more reflects the latter; the secularization of consciousness surely began with the enlightenment, and we continue to live in its midst. Yes but we need to go about that ongoing struggle in a manner completely different from the nineteenth-century...Our religious consciousness has to awaken from the daze of that loss (i.e. the battle against biblical criticism and Darwinism) and seek old/new paths of expression...The sense of the miraculous is not at all diminished by evolution. This wonder remains the object of our prayers. Nor is the transcendent beauty of insight into text, our special Jewish way of reading, lessened by our knowledge of human authorship. We need to allow ourselves the spiritual *freedom* to feel those things, liberating ourselves from the tyranny of our own skeptical selves (yes, tyranny exists on that side as well) that hold us back. And that freedom itself, we should recall with no small sense of irony, is a gift of modernity. (Green, “A Neo-Hasidic Credo” in *The Heart of the Matter*, 285)

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Hasidism is a movement of the spirit that arises in us as a yearning for God and the sacred, and which expresses itself through acts of lovingkindness and service to the same. Hasidism is the wiliness to make ourselves transparent to God’s grace and will, to live in the authentic Presence of God –*nokhah p’nai Ha-Shem* – as if facing God in every moment, allowing this awareness to change our behavior, to make sacred acts out of potentially profane and purely secular moments. (Schachter-Shalomi, *Foundations of the Fourth Turning of Hasidism: A Manifesto*, 1)

With the emeregcne of a global consciousness in the 20th century, perhaps best articulated...by the first images of our planet as seen from outer space, the paradigm of every known religion began to shift irrevocably. Before the dawning of this global consciousness, every religious tradition followed a more or less independent trajectory, or could at least maintain the illusion of doing so. But once the ‘shape and sharing ‘of the planet was known, all trajectories began to align, causing upheaval every religious tradition and spiritual lineage. Thus, a global consciousness is both the primary catalyst for, and the defining characteristic of, the Fourth Turning of Hasidism.

This is also the view of the Fourth Turning, which seeks to engage and examine every law and tradition, taking the needs of the time, the place, and the people into consideration, looking at the original function of the law in its original context to see how

it may be best applied today to achieve similar ends. (Schachter-Shalomi, *Foundations of the Fourth Turning of Hasidism: A Manifesto*, 11 and 16).

For the Hasid, there is no point in arguing whether the Way of Torah is greater than The Way of Service or The Deeps of Livingkindness. This depends entirely on the root of the Hasid's soul. We say "God and God of our parents," because we, in our lives, must make living contact with the God whom our parents served, that this God be both the God of tradition and the God of personal experience for us... Thus does the Hasid meet the problem of the usual incompatibility of religious intensity and tolerance. Without this approach the intense adherence to one way would be heresy to the others. Hasidism teaches that there is an integration (*hitkallut*) in the present order of the world (*tikkun*). The former order of chaos (*tohu*) carried the seeds of its own destruction, causing the "shattering of the vessels" when various objects collided with one another in their one-sidedness

Hasidism would insist that neither Buber nor Heschel could replace the Rebbe. They could lead a prospective Hasid to one or another Rebbe... but without a Rebbe, the becoming of the Hasid would be frustrated. The world has no know-how; it cannot show the Hasid the way... While neo-Hasidism might be able to bring the Jew to the verge of accepting the yoke of God's kingdom, it cannot make the Jew capable of accepting the yoke of mitzvot and continuing to function and develop. For spiritual direction, the Hasid must seek out the Rebbe. And each of the Rebbes has received a "double portion" from his or her predecessors, as Elisha did from Elijah. In the years since the assumption of the Baal Shem Tov, they are said to have acquired considerable experience in this area. So for the traditional Hasid, any talk of "decadence" or "decay" in the tradition is an egregious misrepresentation. (Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 8, 10)