

ISSUE #29  
2016

# UNDERSTANDING HASIDIC JEWS

PART ONE: THE CHALLENGE;  
GENERAL OBSERVATIONS



BY  
MICHAEL D. ELDRIDGE

AN OLIVE PRESS  
RESEARCH PAPER

Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – an occasional paper featuring articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

Articles are contributed by CMJ staff (past and present), also by Trustees, Representatives, CMJ Supporters or by interested parties.

Articles do not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint on a particular issue but may be published on the premise that they allow a pertinent understanding to be added to any particular debate.



Telephone: 01623 883960

E-mail: [enquiries@cmj.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@cmj.org.uk)

Eagle Lodge, Hexgreave Hall Business Park, Farnsfield, Notts NG22 8LS

# UNDERSTANDING HASIDIC JEWS

## PART ONE: THE CHALLENGE; GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

### **Note on Transliterations and Place-names**

There are different systems in use for the transliteration of Hebrew words. In quotations I faithfully copy the transliteration made by the translator in question. Otherwise I follow the transliterations used in the text of Norman Lamm's *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*.

Hasidism arose mainly in Poland and what is now part of the Ukraine, and many of the towns of origin have both German and Polish forms of their names. Where the German form of the name associated with its first zaddik is the one familiar to English readers, I use it in preference to the Polish name: thus R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, not *Miedzyrzecz*, and R. Nachman of Bratslav, not *Braclaw* or *Breslov*.

# UNDERSTANDING HASIDIC JEWS

## EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING ESSENTIAL TO MISSION

It would be very advisable for the missionary students at Stansted Park, to read the Hebrew manuscript (No. 3) containing the principles of Israel Baal Shem, the Jewish sectarian. There is, in that sectarian's principles, much tendency to Christianity. Rabbi Mendel was struck with amazement, when he found me acquainted with the principles of Israel Baal Shem, for this sect is very numerous in Poland: and I am persuaded that those Jews in Poland who receive so readily the New Testament must be of the sect called the Hasidim.<sup>1</sup>

This advice comes from Joseph Wolff, writing in his journal about 1822. He was one of CMJ's pioneer evangelists. Stansted Park was CMJ's training college at that time. This journal entry is significant in two respects:

1. Wolff was one of the earliest to recognise important affinities between Hasidism and the Christian faith, and,
2. He saw the need for a respectful and empathetic understanding of those with a very different faith and world view.

The importance of having an empathetic understanding of those of another faith, if the good news about Jesus is to be effectively shared with them, has received new emphasis in recent times now that most Western countries have become multi-cultural and multi-faith. Steve Hollinghurst, the Church Army's Researcher in Evangelism, explains what he sees as the desired approach in speaking to people of other faiths thus:

*...I think it is in sharing what we truly believe and hearing honestly the beliefs of others that we show real respect for those beliefs. If I respect those I am sharing with, I will seek to offer insights I think they may benefit from and challenge any of their ideas or practices I struggle with, and hope they will do the same.<sup>2</sup>*

Such an approach is hardly new. In Acts 17:22-31 Paul is shown as one who to the Greeks has become as a Greek (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). He is sufficiently familiar with Stoicism, one of the dominant religious philosophies of the Greco-Roman world, to be able to quote from their poets and thinkers, thus speaking in the language and world-view of his hearers. But 'the one in whom we live and move and have our being' Paul now shows to be the personal God who has made Himself known to humankind through Jesus Christ, not the impersonal, pantheistic god of the Stoics of whom every creature and thing, including human beings, is a part of one whole.

This two-part paper aims to help Christian believers 'hear honestly and show real respect for', though not necessarily agree with, the beliefs of Hasidic Jews. It is hoped that it will be of some use to those who seek to make contact with Hasidic Jews and to those who live in or near to their districts.

But the paper is also addressed to all who share Paul's 'heart's desire and prayer that they [the Jewish people] may be saved' (Romans 10:1). The Hasidic Jews belong to closed societies: they are very hard to reach; yet more than other religious Jews they have a faith that in certain key respects is similar to that of followers of Jesus. My hope is that, with increasing awareness and understanding of this important section of the Jewish people, many will find themselves having a great burden for Hasidic Jews and will become engaged in persistent prayer, prayer that already in His providence God intends to answer in due time.

## WHY THE EMPHASIS ON HASIDIC JEWS?

But surely, it may be asked, are not Hasidic Jews only a small element of the Jewish people as a whole? Why pay particular attention to them?

The simple answer is that in the United Kingdom (and the position is similar in Israel and the United States) the number of Jews who are Hasidic Jews is rapidly increasing as a proportion of the total. In fact it is expected on current trends that by 2031 some 50 per cent of Jewish children and 30 per cent of Jewish young adults will be *Haredi* (literally, those who 'tremble' before God).<sup>3</sup> On this basis the majority of 'self-defining Jews' (those calling themselves Jews by religion in the national census) will be *Haredi* before the end of the century.<sup>4</sup>

(The term 'Haredi' is broader than 'Hasidic' since it includes the 'Lithuanian' Jews who were originally opposed to Hasidism: Hasidic Jews are approximately 90 per cent of all *Haredi* Jews.)

These are the conclusions of a report published on 15 October 2015 by the Institute of Jewish Policy Research (IJPR) entitled *Strictly Orthodox rising: What the demography of British Jews tells us about the future of the community*. It relies mainly on census results and birthrate trends among Haredi women, currently about 7 children per woman as against 1.93 for British women as a whole and 3.25 for British Moslem women.

In short, on current trends, in the coming decades Hasidic Jews seem set to become a major part, if not the majority, among self-defining Jews.

## SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Before considering the particular religious beliefs of Hasidic Jews, their distinctive religious practices and their 'spirituality', it will be valuable to consider their general way of life in the communities to which they belong. As these are closed communities keeping interaction with the wider society around them to a minimum, it is difficult for outsiders to look inside their social life.

A good piece of journalistic research was carried out in 2011 by Mick Brown of the *Daily Telegraph*. His article 'Inside the Private World of London's Ultra-orthodox Jews'<sup>5</sup> deals mainly with the community at Stamford Hill in London, the largest of the *Haredi* communities in Europe; there are smaller communities in Salford (Manchester), Gateshead and Antwerp.

The general impression is that despite their constant struggle to shut out the modern world with its attendant evils – the commercialization of sex, false values regarding celebrity, fame, riches, and so on – the Hasidic Jews form close-knit but generally happy communities, relatively free from the social evils that characterize the society around them such as family breakdown, alcohol and drug addiction, violent crime etc.

However, they are also a very poor, struggling section of the population. Part of the problem lies with their very high birthrate, but another root cause is what outsiders would see as a disproportionate concentration on the religious content of their education e.g. Torah and Talmud studies. Most of the children go to private Jewish schools and in a typical school week only about 6 to 7 hours may be spent on secular subjects such as English, Mathematics and General Knowledge. The result is that very few boys will obtain GCSEs and almost none will get A levels. Girls by contrast tend to gain better qualifications and may for example become teachers or midwives.

So, very few young men acquire the technical skills or qualifications to enable them to obtain skilled jobs apart from being a rabbi. The position is exacerbated by the tendency for some men to continue their religious studies part-time at *kollel* (school for married men) well into adult life; in fact about 20 per cent of them continue such studies into middle age and beyond.

Inevitably the economic and financial strains on these communities will increasingly take their toll, but a still greater threat is the invasion of the outside world with its

different values and outlook, particularly through access to the internet. It remains to be seen whether a large falling away, particularly of the younger generation, is in prospect.<sup>6</sup>

## OUTWARD RELATIONS

The Daily Telegraph article tends to lump all the *Haredi* communities together, but in fact there are noteworthy differences between them, not only in dress – the different dynastic groups often continue with the dress that was current in the part of Poland, Ukraine etc. from where they originated in the 18th century – but also in the theological slant of their particular group, and in their attitude to the wider society in which they live.<sup>7</sup> For example the Chabad/Lubavitch group always strive to maintain good relations with the powers that be. This is most noticeable in Russia where President Putin has treated the group with particular favour,<sup>8</sup> and in the United States where the group has maintained close personal relationships with every President since Gerald Ford who in 1975 became the first American president to attend a major Chabad event.<sup>9</sup> By contrast most other Hasidic groups have as little as possible to do with the secular powers.

There are sharp differences between how each group regards the state of Israel. Most of the Hasidic groups were initially opposed to Zionism and the creation of the state of Israel. This is because one of the foundation principles of Rabbinic Judaism, following the disastrous consequences of the successive revolts against Rome, was to shun any form of political or military intervention in secular affairs but rather during the long exile to honour and pray for the authorities in those states where the Jews lived (see Jeremiah 29:7). In the Talmud, in the passage concerning the Three Oaths, Jews are specifically forbidden ‘to go up [generally taken as meaning ‘to migrate en masse’] to their land before redemption’ or ‘to rebel against gentile nations’ (Ketubot 1.11a).<sup>10</sup> The Satmar, one of the largest Hasidic groups, still vigorously maintain this position, and consider the creation of the state of Israel as a sinful attempt to force God’s hand prior to the coming of Messiah who will indeed restore Israel. By contrast the Chabad/Lubavitch group, while strongly opposing secular Zionism, nevertheless supports the retention of the occupied territories.<sup>11</sup>

## UNEXPECTED RESONANCES

The very strict Torah observance and extreme social conservatism of the Hasidic groups may initially cast them as an incomprehensible, alien people, most difficult to relate to or communicate with. Yet further acquaintance may bring some surprises,

Much of the more accessible and popular teaching of these groups comes from tales about the founder of Hasidism (R. Israel ben Eliezer known as the Baal Shem Tov or the Besht for short) and the notable Hasidic *zaddikim* of the 18th and early 19th centuries<sup>12</sup>. Regardless of their historical value, these tales<sup>13</sup> are intended to set forth the attitudes and patterns of behaviour that their readers, that is, Hasidic Jews, are being urged to emulate. I now give brief summaries of a few of these tales. I leave it to the reader to make connections with the New Testament.

### THE JUDGEMENT OF THE MESSIAH

A young man leaves his wife and family to follow the Great Maggid (R. Israel Dov Ber of Mezeritch) although he has already promised his father-in-law that he would not quit the home. The father-in-law then gets the *rav* of the town to declare that the broken promise was cause for divorce. The young man is then cut off, has nothing to live on, falls ill and dies.

The story then envisages what will happen when Messiah comes. The young man says, 'I just had to go to the rabbi (the Great Maggid)'. The tale continues:

*In the end the Messiah will pronounce judgement. To the father-in-law he will say, 'You took the rav's word as your authority and so you are justified.' And to the rav he will say, 'You took the law as your authority and so you are justified.' And then he will add, 'But I have come for those who are not justified'*  
(*Tales of the Hasidim, Book 2, p. 57*).

### Good works always flawed

R. Moshe Teitelbaum recalls a dream he had in his youth.

*I said to myself, 'God be thanked, I have been doing the right thing all through the year! I have studied right and prayed right, so I do not have to be afraid.'* And

*then my dreams showed me all my good works. I looked and looked: they were torn, ragged and ruined! (Book 2, p. 189).*

## **Do with me according to your will**

R. Bunam is asked why in Psalm 51 David has hardly finished saying, ‘I have sinned’ when he was told ‘The Lord has put away thy sin.’ He replied,

*What David said was, ‘I have sinned against the Lord’ and what he meant was, ‘Do with me according to your will and I shall accept it with love, for you, O Lord, are just.’ But when we say, ‘We have sinned’, we think it is fitting for God to forgive us... and we think that now God has forgiven us, it is fitting that he favour us with all manner of good things’ (Book 2, p. 257).*

## **Denying self**

Rabbi Yitzhak said,

*In order to really live, a man must give himself to death. But when he has done so, he discovers that he is not to die – but to live (Book 2, p. 291).*

## **Love of the poor**

The Rabbi of Zans once said,

*I love the poor. And do you know why? It is because God loves them. Many of the stories illustrate the practical expression of such love (Book 2, p. 210).*

## **Associating with sinners**

The Baal Shem said,

*I let sinners come close to me if they are not proud. I keep the scholars and sinless away from me if they are proud ...*

*The lowest of the low you can think of, is dearer to me than your only son is to you (Book 1, pp. 71-72).*

The Rabbi of Apt once came to a city in which two men competed for the privilege of giving him lodging. One was a man of ill repute known for his womanizing; the other observed all the rules with pious exactness. The rabbi chose to stay with the womanizer (Book 2, p. 112).

### **Not to seek the righteous**

A man who had done something wrong and was suffering the consequences was rebuffed by one rabbi but then came to Rabbi Yaakov Zevi. The latter said,

*You must be helped. We must not be set on seeking the righteous, but on imploring mercy for sinners (Book 2, p. 235).*

### **A tax collector changes**

Heaven once revealed to Rabbi Zusya that he was to go to a certain village and guide a tax collector on the true way. He went there and found the man selling vodka. He tried to make him stop and say a prayer but the man became more and more impatient. Rebuffed the rabbi caught sight of an old wagon wheel lying on the ground and put it against his body. Instantly it became the Chariot of Heaven and gave out a delicious warmth.

When the tax collector saw the blissful smile on Rabbi Zusya's lips, he experienced the truth about life in one small second, and already, with faltering feet and full of amazement at himself, he stood on the true way (Book 1, p. 248).

### **Love the key to keeping the Law**

Disciples asked the maggid [teacher] about how our father Abraham had kept all the laws, seeing they had not yet been given to him. He replied,

*All that is needful is to love God. If you are about to do something and you think it might lessen your love, then you will know it is sin. If you are about to do something and you think it will increase your love, you will know that your will is in keeping with the will of God. That is what Abraham did (Book 1, p.149).*

## **Pray for your enemies**

Rabbi Mikhal gave this command to his sons:

*Pray for your enemies that all may be well with them. And should you think this is not serving God, rest assured that more than all prayers, this is, indeed, the service of God (Book 1, p. 156).*

## **Pray for the wicked**

Rabbi Pinhas said: *We should also pray for the wicked among the peoples of the world; we should love them too (Book 1, p. 130).*

## **Sending rain on the righteous and the unrighteous**

R. Nahum of Tchernobil had given money to a poor man who complained he had no money to marry off his daughter. The man then went off to an inn and began to drink vodka and got drunk. The Hasidim (the rabbi's disciples) then brought the rest of the money back to him and told him how his confidence had been abused. The rabbi cried out angrily,

*I just caught hold of the tail end of this quality of God's: 'He is good and beneficial to the wicked and the good' and you want to snatch it from my hands. Take everything back at once! (Book 1, p. 173-74).*

## **Doing alms in secret**

R. Mordecai of Lekhovitz used to set aside large sums for the support of poor Jews in Israel. When a large sum had accumulated, he sent it to R. Abraham Kalisker who was the collector for such gifts with a slip of paper bearing the names of the other donors. But he did not wish anyone to know how large a contribution he himself was making so he reduced the sum attributable to him and increased proportionately the sums purportedly given by the others. When Rabbi Abraham received the list, he looked at it and shook his head, saying,

*The Rabbi of Lekhovitz has something of his own in this! (Book 2. pp. 156-57).*

## **Against making a show of fasting**

When Rabbi Naftali was young, there was a man in his city who fasted and kept vigils until he considered himself quite close to perfection. Once when that man was in the House of Study a boy grazed the man with his elbow while he was sunk in meditation. Rabbi Naftali rebuked the boy, saying, 'How dare you disturb this man! Don't you know he has been fasting for four and twenty hours?' 'Rather, from one Sabbath to the next', the ascetic corrected him. And with that, what was hidden became manifest (Book 2, pp. 196-97).

## **The mote in your own eye**

Rabbi Yitzhak recalls an episode in his youth;

*You see, in my youth my wife gave me a great deal of trouble, and though I myself put up with her as best as I could, I was sorry for the servants. So I went to my teacher, Rabbi David of Lelov, and asked him whether I should oppose my wife. All he said was, 'Why do you speak to me? Speak to yourself!' (Book 2, p. 290).*

## **The righteous should not consider himself better than the wicked**

R. Pinhas has explained that when a wicked man prays or does something to honour God, he does something that a righteous man cannot accomplish because God is watching and rejoices in him. He adds,

*That is why the righteous man should not consider himself better than the wicked (Book 1, p. 127).*

## **Against pride in zealous conduct**

The Great Maggid has instructed the two brothers, Shmelke and Pinhas, how to conduct themselves throughout the day but then gives this warning:

*And before you lie down at night, you add up everything you have done during the day. And when a man calculates his hours and sees he has not wasted a moment in idleness, when his heart beats high with pride, then – up in heaven – they take all his good works, crush them into a ball, and hurl it down into the abyss (Book 1, p. 106).*

## **Against longing to be a leader**

A man who pursued honours came to Rabbi Bunam and told him that his father had appeared to him in a dream and announced, ‘You are destined to be a leader’. The *zaddik* accepted the story in silence. Soon after the man returned and said he had the same dream again.

‘I see,’ said Rabbi Bunam, ‘that you are prepared to become a leader of men. If your father comes to you once again, answer him that you are ready to lead, but that now he should also appear to the people whom you are supposed to lead’ (Book 2, p. 254).

## **Not what goes in at the mouth**

Rabbi Bunam and his followers went on a journey, came to a village and stopped at an inn. The innkeeper was pleased to have such pious guests and invited them to have dinner with him. Rabbi Bunam went in and sat down but the others asked all sorts of questions about the meat which was to be served to them: Was the animal unblemished? What was the butcher like? How carefully had the meat been salted? At that a man dressed in rags who had been sitting behind the stove spoke up,

*O, you Hasidim, you make a big to-do about what you put into your mouths but you don't worry half as much about the purity of what comes out of your mouths!*

[Perhaps the poor man in rags puts a common criticism made by Gentiles but the end of the tale indicates Hasidic approval of his rebuke.]

Rabbi Bunam was about to reply, but the wayfarer had already disappeared – for this is Elijah’s habit. Then the rabbi understood why his teacher had sent him on this journey (Book 2, p. 229).

## **Bearing the sins of others**

Rabbi Zusya came to an inn, and on the forehead of the innkeeper saw long years of sin. When he was alone in the room assigned to him, he was overcome by a shudder

of vicarious experience and in the midst of singing psalms he cried out,

*Zusya, Zusya, you wicked man! What have you done! There is no lie that failed to tempt you, and no crime you have not committed. Zusya, foolish, erring man, what will be the end of this?*

Then he enumerated the sins of the innkeeper, giving the time and place of each as his own, and sobbed. The innkeeper had quietly followed this strange man and stood at the door and heard him. First he was seized with dull dismay, but then penitence and grace were lit within him, and he woke to God (Book 1, p. 241).

### **The Besht in the Messiah's Heavenly Palace**

This legend refers to a definite historical event when in June 1757 following a public debate in Kamenitz (Czech Republic), Archbishop Dembowski ordered all copies of the Talmud to be burned. In deep grief the Besht turned to earnest prayer.

The Besht's intercessions are described in this way. At some point the Besht finds his prayers are blocked: 'When we started to accompany the prayers, one angel came and closed the door, and he put a lock on the gate.' The Besht then turns to his spiritual teacher, Ahijah the prophet of Shiloh. The story continues:

*I began to complain to my rabbi, 'Why have you forsaken me at such a troubled time?'*

*And he answered, 'I do not know what to do for you, but you and I will go to the palace of the Messiah. Perhaps there will be some help there.' With a great outcry I went to the palace of the Messiah. When our righteous Messiah saw me from afar, he said to me, 'Don't shout.' He gave me two holy letters of the alphabet (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, pp. 56-57).*

The Messiah is seen here as a pre-existent heavenly being although, as generally in Jewish thinking, he is still to come at the end of the present age when he will restore all things.

## A Different Thought World

In spite of these similarities, however, it should not be thought that the main, though certainly very important, difference between Hasidic Judaism and the testimony of the New Testament is that Hasidic Jews still expect Messiah to come, while the New Testament declares that Messiah Jesus has already come and through the Holy Spirit is active in the world in bringing in the Kingdom of Heaven.

That is of course a major point of departure, but there are also important divergences between the thought worlds out of which these convictions arise.

The references in the last story to the two holy letters that the Messiah gives the Besht at once alerts us to having entered a different world, a world of mysticism and in a sense magical practices which will be foreign territory to most Christian readers. Although the *Tales* are intended for a relatively unsophisticated readership, every so often there are allusions to this different world. For example, there are sometimes references to the *sefirot* or ten emanations of God (an important element in the thought of the Kabbalah), while the *Zohar*, which enshrines such thought is sometimes quoted.<sup>14</sup> There are also instances of belief in a certain form of reincarnation of souls, and of the idea that the fulfilment of a mitzvah (command of the Law) hastens the coming of Messiah.

## THE HASIDIC WAY OF LIFE

The thought world out of which the Hasidic movement arose in the 18th century is difficult for an outsider to penetrate, but any presentation of Hasidism that sidesteps that thought world is one-sided and ultimately misleading. Which is why in Part 2 I will look at the origins and religious ideas of the Hasidim. For the present, however, it will be valuable to examine the way of life to which a Hasid aspires. This approach, I believe, is appropriate for, as Martin Buber observed,

*...Hasidism in the first instance does not signify a category of teaching, but one of living...*<sup>15</sup>

So what marks out the Hasidic way of life? In this outline, I refer mainly to the *Tales*, a few of which we have briefly looked at. That is because as Buber points out, it is the legends about the notable *zaddikim*, rather than the theoretical, philosophical

literature, which transmits the reality of the Hasidic way of life, but it will also be found that the practical advice distilled from R. Nachman of Bratslav's *Likutey Moharan* by R. Nathan with R. Nachman's approval,<sup>16</sup> corroborates as well as expands the outline given here.

### **The individual's purpose in life**

Marlyn Vinig is an unusual Jewish Israeli. Known as 'an icon in the Hasidic world', she is a 'penitent' who has become a member of the Belz Hasidic group. She is also a lecturer in film studies, a film critic and a poet. In an interview with Ayelett Shavi of Ha'aretz she is asked, 'Do you want to leave an imprint?' She replies,

*It is my obligation. God gave me so many tools and gifts. If I do not make use of them, I will feel I did not fulfil my part in this world.*<sup>17</sup>

A Christian believer could echo her words. Another concept very familiar to the Christian is that of becoming the person God intends me to be. A story about Rabbi Zusya recounts that before his death he said,

*In the coming world they will not ask me, 'Why were you not Moses?' they will ask, 'Why were you not Zusya?' (Tales, Book 1, p. 251).*

But whereas some thoughtful Christians might also express their main purpose in life as 'to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever',<sup>18</sup> the Hasidic equivalent is 'to cleave to God'.

### **Cleaving to God (*devekut*)**

This is one of the most important and distinctive features of Hasidism. The basic idea of cleaving to God stems from the biblical command in Deuteronomy 10:20, '...to Him you shall hold fast' (see also Deuteronomy 11:22, 13:4, 30:20). The Hebrew verb here is d-v-k, a word indicating as in older English 'cleaving to' or 'adhering to'.

Since God is 'a devouring fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24) how is it possible to cleave to Him? Various answers were given in the course of the history of Judaism: one being to imitate God's ways, for example, by visiting the sick, consoling the mourner, clothing the naked, and so on; another was to become engrossed in Torah study.

But it is in the mystical stream of Judaism that a literal interpretation was pursued, the ‘cleaving’ here taking the form of mystical contemplation of the *sefirot* or the attributes/emanations of God.

A foreshadowing of the Hasidic approach is found in Nachmanides (the Rambam) (1194 – 1270) who commented on Deuteronomy 11:22:

*Included in ‘deveikut’ is remembering God and loving Him constantly, your thoughts never leaving Him when you walk, when you lie down, when you rise, so much so that when you talk with others, it is only with your mouth and tongue that you talk, but your heart is not in it, for your heart is in the presence of God.*

Among the mystic contemplatives close to the time of the Besht, R. Nachman Kossover espoused the view that *deveikut* should be practised in the course of one’s everyday activities but separately and not as part of them. But it was a new departure when the Besht advocated the constant uplifting of the soul to God alongside and as part of the carrying out of ordinary activities so that they intertwine with each other. Cleaving to God in this way then became possible for a much wider category of devout Jews, namely those who of necessity had to spend much of their time in everyday work.<sup>19</sup>

The key element in the *deveikut* of a Hasidic Jew is constantly to offer oneself up to God. R. Mikhal of Zlotchov interpreted the verse ‘I stood between the Lord and you’ (Deuteronomy 5:5) as follows:

*The ‘I’ stands between God and us. When a man says ‘I’ and encroaches on the word of his Maker, he puts a wall between himself and God, But he who offers his ‘I’ – there is nothing between him and his Maker (Tales, Book 1, p. 149).*

R. Schneur Zalman of Liady (founder of the Lubavitch dynasty) expressed the call to *deveikut* in these terms:

*[It] is fitting that a man should relinquish and set aside all he possesses, both spiritually and physically, and renounce everything in order to cleave to Him, blessed be He, with attachment, desire and longing, without any hindrance, within or without, neither of body, nor soul, nor money nor wife and children.<sup>20</sup>*

This offering of oneself to God may take different forms: it may be through prayer or through a special kind of Torah study, or, particularly for those who have to spend much time in business or secular employment, through ‘worship through corporeality’.

### **Worship through corporeality**

An instance of everyday living being offered up to God is provided by the following story. A disciple of Rabbi Shmelke complained to his master about ‘alien thoughts’ troubling him at prayer. He was told to go to Rabbi Abraham Hayyim, who at that time was still an innkeeper, and to observe him. The disciple saw how each day Rabbi Abraham prayed and worked but saw nothing unusual in him. It was only in the evening after all the customers had left and in the early morning before they arrived that the disciple did not know how Rabbi Abraham busied himself. So he asked him about this. The rabbi told him that he washed the dishes at night and again in the morning because dust had settled on them in the night, explaining,

*My most important occupation is to clean the dishes properly, so that not the slightest trace of food is left, and to clean and dry the pots and pans, so that they do not rust.*

Reporting back to Rabbi Shmelke, the disciple was told, ‘Now you know what you need to know.’<sup>21</sup>

### **Prayer with concentration/intention (*kavvanah*)**

A distinctive element of Hasidic prayer is the stress placed on *kavvanah* (concentration) or focusing one’s attention so that the supplicant really intends what the words say. For this reason it was the practice of the early Hasidim to spend much time in silent prayer prior to beginning the Jewish liturgical services so that the worshippers’ hearts were prepared and they could then pray the familiar words with real meaning. In practice this resulted in the set times for the liturgical prayers not being adhered to, one of the causes of offence to the Mitnaggedim, the conservative opponents of the Hasidic movement as it gained ground.

A story will illustrate. Once the Baal Shem Tov stopped on the threshold of an empty House of Prayer and refused to go in. ‘I cannot go in’ he said: ‘it is crowded with

teachings and prayers from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling. How could there be room for me?’ And when he saw that those around him were staring at him and did not know what he meant, he added,

*The words from the lips of those whose teaching and praying does not come from the hearts lifted to heaven cannot rise, but fill the house from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling (Book 1, p. 73).*

As well as participating in the set services, the *zaddik’s* followers were urged to set aside a special time each day for personal prayer. R. Nachman of Bratslav recommended setting apart at least one hour each day at a specified time, ‘in seclusion in some room, or in the field’. Such prayer was to be from the heart and in their ordinary language (Yiddish) for,

*in Yiddish one is able to express oneself fully, giving voice before God to everything that is on one’s heart, whether remorse or repentance over the past, or request and beseeching to merit henceforth coming truly closer to God, or the likes, each person according to his needs.’<sup>22</sup>*

## **Torah study**

The Hasidic movement was born at a time when the leading rabbis were perceived as a learned elite, overly given to academic study and prone to pride over intellectual achievement. There can be several reasons for studying Torah, in particular simply to know what to do or not do, or to grasp the whole corpus in order to become a teacher of Torah, essentially academic study, or perhaps to gain a certain kind of intellectual pleasure, or in fact to study Torah *for its own sake* (Hebrew *lishmah*) an essentially devotional form of study.

The Hasidic masters put the main emphasis on this last kind of study. R. Schneur Zalman of Liady explained:

*As for the meaning of ‘for its own sake’, it is [study with the intent] to attach one’s soul to G-d through the comprehension of the Torah each one according to his intellect...<sup>23</sup>*

In similar vein, R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk urged that ‘when studying the Torah one should sense in it “the message or reprimand and chastisement demanding of him to study for its own sake and with *devekut*”’.<sup>24</sup>

One of the Hasidic rabbis defending their mode of Torah study described it thus:

*When they study Talmud they garb themselves in awe and trembling and apprehension and great reverence before God, so that their Torah glows on their faces... Thus there falls upon them a fear and great reverence of God, without end or limit; and the love of Torah and its light burns in them ceaselessly. When they emerge from their study, miracles and wonders are done for them as in earlier generations, so that they heal the diseased.*<sup>25</sup>

## Joy

Pictures of pious old men dancing with great verve are one of the most familiar images many have of Hasidic Jews. Certainly the expression of joy is very important to Hasidic Jews. As R. Nachman of Bratslav put it,

*It is a wonderful thing when people dance for joy for the sake of a mitzvah [for example on the Sabbath or at a wedding... If you drink on such occasions, your intention should be for the sake of heaven... As your joy begins to radiate, it will spread to your legs, and you will literally start to dance for joy.*<sup>26</sup>

The devout Hasidim expected and no doubt experienced great joy in drawing close to God. They were also very conscious of the positive benefits of joy and conversely the negative effects of dejection.

The Seer of Lublin gave this advice to a man who was tormented by evil desires and had become despondent over it:

*Guard yourself from despondency above all, for it is worse and more harmful than sin. When the Evil urge wakens desires in man, he is not concerned with plunging him into sin, but with plunging him into despondency by way of his sinning (Tales, Book 1, p. 315).*

In a similar situation another rabbi advised:

*But, if you pray, and learn and work in all seriousness [that is, offering yourself up to God] the evil in your impulses will vanish of itself (Book 2, p. 60).*

The Hasidic masters did, however, distinguish between a broken heart, for example on account of sin, and dejection: 'A broken heart prepares a man for the service of God, but dejection corrodes service' (Book 2, p. 263).

## **Humility**

The Hasidic masters frequently speak of their spiritual progress in terms of climbing up the rungs of a ladder. So not surprisingly the importance of humility is one of the most frequent topics of the Hasidic Tales. Some examples have already been given. The general thinking here is conveyed by some words attributed to the Besht:

*Whatever happens to a man, it should be all the same to him – whether people praise him or insult him...<sup>27</sup>*

The desire to be thought well of by fellow human beings, particularly on account of one's piety or learning or good deeds, is being challenged here. The Besht is also reported as saying:

*One should never think that he is greater than his neighbour because he serves God with greater *devekut*, for man is like all other creatures that were created for the purpose of serving God. The Besht then explains that every man and woman serves God imperfectly. By contrast the lowly worm serves God with its entire 'mind' and power.'<sup>28</sup>*

What is being attacked here is the subtle pride that occurs when a person takes credit before God for their own supposed spiritual attainments.

There is a further reason for the emphasis on the need for true humility. An essential element of *devekut* is the annihilation of the self before God. As already indicated, R. Mikhal of Zlotchov declared, *But he who offers his 'I' – there is nothing between him and his Maker* (Tales, Book 1, p. 149).

## Charity

Mick Brown in the *Daily Telegraph* article referred to on page 4 was struck by the fact that more than half of the *Haredi* community in Stamford Hill was engaged in voluntary social work of some kind. This is not altogether surprising given that the Hasidic tales are constantly giving instances of the *zaddikim*, their wives and their disciples coming to the aid of beggars, often quite undeserving ones, or others in distress. Generally this conduct is simply presented as something which is normal and to be expected: the point of the story can be quite different.<sup>29</sup>

Typical in this respect is the story about a famine in Lithuania when poor men and their families left the cities and roamed the countryside in search of food. In the village where Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn's mother lived, she ground grain and made bread for throngs of hungry people every day, but one day more people than usual came and there was not enough bread to go round. So while the oven was still hot she made some more bread. Meanwhile the hungry people complained because they had to wait, and some insolent fellows even railed and cursed. At this Rabbi Moshe's mother burst into tears. Moshe comforted her with these words:

*Do not cry, mother. Let them curse. Just do your work, and fulfil the commandment of God. If they praised you and showered blessings on you, it would not perhaps be fulfilled so well (Tales, Book 2, p.159).*

The point of the story is thus to warn against the danger of being concerned about what opinion others have of you, rather than the importance of charity which it is assumed needs no explaining.

There are, however, certain elements in the religious thought characteristic of the Hasidim that make their regard for the wellbeing of their fellow human beings quite natural. One is the belief that 'all souls are one' and that 'every soul is a part of God'. On similar lines R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev explained that the command to 'love your neighbour as yourself' has to do with the 'unity of the Creator', namely that the One God created us, and we all derive from one source. Hence we share the pain and joy of our fellow men.<sup>30</sup>

At this point it becomes clear that a fuller understanding of Hasidic Jews requires some introduction to the religious thought that underlies the way of living I have

outlined. It is in this area that we may indeed ‘have cause to struggle with and maybe want to challenge their ideas and practices’.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Missionary Journal and Memoir of the Revd. Joseph Wolff, Missionary to the Jews (London: James Duncan, 1827) vol. 1, pp. 350-51. Strictly speaking Hasidism has never been a 'sect': the Hasidic leaders have never separated themselves from mainstream Judaism. In this paper I refer to Hasidic 'groups', not 'sects'.

The journal leaves unclear just what Hebrew manuscript is meant, being simply described as a 'Hebrew manuscript containing the principles of Israel Baal Shem, the Jewish sectarian'. The Hasidic literature of the time was generally printed, not copied by hand.

- 2 Steve Hollinghurst, Mission Shaped Evangelism (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010) p. 181.
- 3 Often referred to as 'ultra-orthodox' or 'strictly orthodox' as opposed to simply 'orthodox', that is, belonging to a Central Orthodox synagogue.
- 4 In the 2011 UK National Census the question about religion needed only to be answered voluntarily: some Jews may have indicated no religious affiliation. There may therefore be some undercounting in the Census figures but according to the IJPR report, Strictly Orthodox rising (see below) the undercounting is likely to be higher in the case of Haredi Jews; in that case the expected increase in the Haredi population has been underestimated.
- 5 Daily Telegraph, 25 February 2011; available on the Internet.
- 6 See Anshel Pfeffer, 'Prepare for an Earthquake in the Jewish World', Ha'aretz, 23 January 2016.
- 7 For brief sketches of the major Hasidic groups see Aryeh Rubinstein, Hasidism (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 1975) pp. 97-107.
- 8 Sue Fishkoff, The Rebbe's Army (New York: Schocken Books 2003) pp. 119-20.
- 9 Rebbe's Army, p. 193.

- 10 Many rabbis, however, consider the first two oaths have been abrogated by the Holocaust. The third oath which is laid on the gentile nations requires them 'not to oppress Israel too much'.
- 11 Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (New York: Yeshiva UP, 1999) p. 516.
- 12 'zaddik' (righteous one) was the term usually used for the leader of a Hasidic community in this period; later the term 'rebbe' (Yiddish for rabbi) became more common. With the exception of the Bratslav (Breslov) group founded by R. Nachman of Bratslav, the office of zaddik/rebbe normally passed from father to son.
- 13 The earliest collection is *Shivhei ha-Besht*, first published in 1814. The first English translation is by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, which was published in 1970 as *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*. Citations are taken from the 1993 reprint published by Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland. At a later date Martin Buber made collections between 1906 and 1924. They were published in English in two separate volumes in 1947. They were reprinted in a combined volume as *Tales of the Hasidim; Book One: The Early Masters, and Book Two: The Later Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991). Here all references are to this reprint.
- 14 The *Zohar* was probably written in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain. It is part religious romance and part biblical commentary on the Pentateuch. It is a very long work written in Aramaic. For a selection of excerpts with explanations, see Daniel C. Matt: *Zohar, Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002).
- 15 Martin Buber, *Hasidism* (New York: Philosophical Society, 1948) p. 4.
- 16 See the *Likutei Etzot* and the English translation by Avraham Greenbaum, *Advice* (Jerusalem: Breslov Research Institute, 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2015).
- 17 'I am an Icon in the Hasidic World', *Ha'aretz*, 11 July 2015.

- 18 The reply to the First Question in both the Shorter and Longer Catechisms attached to the Westminster Confession.
- 19 For the historical and theological background, see Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (New York: Yeshiva UP, 1999) pp. 133-39.
- 20 Tanya, *Likkutei Amarim: Bilingual Edition* (New York: Kehot Publication Society; rev. edn, 2014) p. 258.
- 21 Buber, *Hasidim*, p. 190. See also *Tales*, Book 1, pp. 191-92 for a slightly different version of the same tale.
- 22 R. Nachman of Bratslav, *Likutey Moharan*, Part 2, Lesson 25, p. 80. The citation is from the Bilingual edition published in Jerusalem (n. d.) by the R. Israel Dov Odesser Foundation.

The film *Ushpizin* (2004) made by the Bratslav (Breslov) group gives some fine examples of outpourings of the heart in personal prayer. The Hebrew version is available on YouTube with English subtitles.

- 23 Tanya, *Likkutei Amarim*, p. 22.
- 24 Cited in *Religious Thought*, p. 238.
- 25 Cited in *Religious Thought*, p. 221.
- 26 *Advice*, pp. 272-73.
- 27 *Religious Thought*, p. 442.
- 28 *Religious Thought*, p. 443.
- 29 The importance of charitable giving is, however, stressed explicitly in *Advice*, pp. 256-62.
- 30 *Religious Thought*, pp. 425-26.

© Michael D. Eldridge 2016

The right of Michael D. Eldridge to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright Design and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Editorial team: Michael D. Eldridge and Rev. Alex Jacob  
Concept and design: 18TWO Design  
Printed through: A-Tec, Broxbourne, England

