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THE HASIDIC MOVEMENT

THAT music is woven into the texture of being is the glad conviction of Catholic philosophers and poets. Thus St. Augustine saw music, its number, measure, and movement, as God's minister in making the world. And for Richard Crashaw, to *be* was to sing: "All Things that Are, . . . Are Musical."[1]

Similarly, for the masters of Hasidism[2]—the mystical movement that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries swept the Jewish communities of eastern Europe—the world was filled with music, with beauty. For them creation was God's garment which hid and yet revealed Him. Therefore the true Hasid, the man of piety whose heart is open to God, hears the heavens declare the glory of the Lord, hears the earth, the seas, and whatever moves in them, praise Him (see Ps 18:2; 68:35). Like Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the founder of the Hasidic movement, his great-grandson Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav is said to have understood the language of birds and trees:

> When man is deemed worthy to understand the music of the herbs—each herb singing its song to God, never needing to be prompted from without—how delightful is their singing! It is good indeed to serve God in their midst, walking in solitude across the fields among the plants of the earth, and there in truthfulness to pour out one's words before God. Then all the words of the field enter and strengthen your own words. With every breath you drink in the air of paradise, and when you return home, your eyes see the world anew.[3]

1. St. Augustine, *De Musica,* VI, xvii, 57–59 (PL 32:1191–1194); Richard Crashaw, "To the Name above Every Name, the Name of Jesus," *The Verse in English of Richard Crashaw* (New York: Grove, 1949), p. 149.

2. An excellent descriptive list of the sources on Hasidism, of its devotional, dogmatic, polemic, and interpretative literature, is given by Simon Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1931), I, 273–312.

3. See Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman,* trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Horizon, 1956), pp. 24–25.

To Rabbi Nahman the murmur of the brook was a lullaby, the voices of birds a choir, the rustling of leaves a sisterly song accompanying the prayer of man. He heard the nightly stirrings of the forest, the roaring of lions, the yowling of panthers, the cooing of wood pigeons, the cry of the deer, not as chaotic sounds but as a symphony of gratitude.[4]

Rabbi Nahman's perception, remarkable though it was, did not stop here; it went deeper. As all creation resolved itself in melody, so melody was for him the essence of thought, the very nature of wisdom. "Faith in God," he said, "has its own melody, the most important of melodies, affecting all others." In one of his tales, called "The Seven Beggars," he mused that a heart was given to the world and to everything in the world, a heart yearning after the fountain of things, crying for it without cease; and that this fountain, which is outside of time, is given life in time by the heart of the world. Each day was the heart's gift to the fountain, each day sprang from the deeds of goodness and the works of love. These works of men formed a melody of grace, and from this melody time was and is ever born afresh. Time, then, according to him, is the fruit of song, of that song which is the heart's ceaseless longing. Indeed, the whole of creation groans and eagerly awaits its redemption (cf. Rom 8:19). For, as an ancient Jewish legend has it, when God divided the lower from the upper waters, the lower waters lamented: "Woe unto us, we have not been found worthy to dwell in the presence of God, and praise him together with our companions." And ever since, they have been weeping and wanting to be with their king.[5]

It is the sin of man which makes creation sigh, the sin of him who forgets his and the world's origin, who thinks of himself and the world as autonomous, independent of the Creator. But when man, like an instrument, is ready to the hand of God, God's spirit rests on him, and he and the world are in tune with the divine. Music, a fruit of man's repentance, of his true turning to God, is in Hasidic eyes also its seed. Rabbi Naftali of Roptchitz was wont to say: "Song is of sacred origin, it flows from the heavenly concert hall; thus one

4. See *ibid.,* pp. 141–142, 106.

5. See Samuel A. Horodezky, *Leaders of Hassidism* (London: "Hasefer," 1928), pp. 96–97; Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman,* pp. 161–163; Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews,* trans. Henrietta Szold, I (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1942), 15.

can enter from the world of melody, *olam ha-nigun,* into the world of repentance, *olam ha-teshubah.* Since through Adam's sin sparks of song fell into the hands of unclean powers, it is the task of the zaddik, the just and tested man, to redeem them and lift them to their origin."[6]

Of many rabbis it is said that, aflame with longing for God, they were lost in song. On the Days of Awe, for instance, Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg often became so absorbed in their mysteries that he sang new and wondrous melodies which he had never heard and no other human ear had ever heard. Nor did he know what he was singing, for he was bound to the world above.[7] So mighty did Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz consider the power of music that he once exclaimed: "Lord of the world, if I could sing, I would not let you remain up above, I would harry you with my song until you came down and stayed here with us."[8] One midnight, Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol arose from his couch, ran up and down his room, repeating endlessly: "My God, I love you! But what can I do for you? I have no strength." Then he bethought himself: "Why, I can whistle! So I shall whistle, my Creator, for your glory!" Those who overheard him fled, lest they be consumed by such fire of holiness.[9]

Because the Hasidic world is one of music, it is also one of dancing. Rabbi Nahman thought that the man who is able to hear the song of which heaven and earth are full, is purified and inspired to a new life, especially if he gives himself to dancing, for then its rhythm brings the whole body and every part of it into complete harmony with that melody.[10]

He must have been a late eyewitness who could so vividly describe Hasidic dancing:

It often occurs that a party of Chassidim are seated round a table on the Sabbath or on the occasion of some festival. Their faces are glum and long, and their cheeks sunken, and their eyes are full of sadness.

6. See Paul P. Levertoff, *Die religiöse Denkweise der Chassidim* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1918), pp. 34, 142; *Love and the Messianic Age* (London: Episcopal Hebrew Christian Church Publications, n.d.), p. 12; Chajim Bloch, *Priester der Liebe* (Vienna: Amalthea, 1930), p. 196.

7. See Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters,* trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1947), pp. 182–183; Bloch, *op. cit.,* p. 100.

8. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 125.

9. See *ibid.,* p. 246; Bloch, *op. cit.,* p. 88.

10. See Horodezky, *op. cit.,* p. 97.

Their lips are slightly twitching, their backs are bent and their legs seem barely strong enough to support them. Each is overshadowed by his anxieties, personal and national, and these seem to pervade the atmosphere. Then, as if from nowhere, in the midst of a conversation on everyday matters, a slight humming may be heard. Soon the melody which arises seems to permeate everybody. There is indeed the echo of a sob in it at first, but this is soon transformed to a hopeful chant; lamentation is turned to joy, despair to hope, which becomes faith, then trust, and then enthusiasm. Feet are raised, normal attitudes assumed, bodies grow erect, hands are joined and a dance begun. The women who are watching are happy and excited, and each follows the movements of her husband. . . . They are very far from the worries of the outside world. The pace of the dance grows faster and faster, coattails fly in the air, and feet seem never to touch the earth. Their hearts seem to bask in a sun of love, everything is holy, good and beautiful and they seem to be new men in body and soul.[11]

Brotherhood was the summit of their dancing. Together they sought to move closer to God. With a childlike simplicity, they took each other by the hand and danced in a circle, while they hummed or sang a fast, wordless melody. Every so often they loosened their grip, and by the clapping of hands aroused their joy and sped their rhythm. Suddenly one of the dancers might turn his face upward and burst into prayer, or the dancers might all sing in unison:

Tate ziser, helf!
Tate ziser, daj!
Tate derbarmdigker!
daj, daj, daj—daj, daj, daj![12]

This ecstatic little song recalls the upsurge of love that made Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev sing his *Dudele:*

Lord of the world, Lord of the world!
Lord of the world, Lord of the world,
I shall sing you a song of you:
You, you, you!

11. I. Wassilevsky, *Chassidism* (Blackburn: Geo. Toulmin and Sons, 1916), pp. 26–27.

12. Torsten Ysander, *Studien zum B'eštschen Hasidismus* (Uppsala: A.–B. Lundequistska, 1933), pp. 221–223. A translation must needs lose the intimacy and childlike character of this prayer. Still, here is an attempt: "Sweet Father, help! Sweet Father, give! Merciful Father, give, give, give—give, give, give!"

Where can I find you?
Where can I miss you?
You, you, you!

Where I wander—you.
Where I ponder—you.
Only you, you again, always you!
You, you, you!

When I am gladdened—you.
When I am saddened—you.
You, you, you!

East, you; West, you;
North, you; South, you.
You, you, you!

The sky, there you are.
The earth, there you are.
You above, you below.
Only you, you again, always you!

Where I tend, where I wend,
You! [13]

This "Song of You" is almost a sum of Hasidic life and thought, proclaiming, as it does, the belief that God is everywhere and thus always near; that He must be loved with body and soul; that He must be served with joy; and that a heavy, brooding heart shuts the gates of heaven, while gladness and chanting open them.

THE BACKGROUND

IN ORDER to understand the impact of the Hasidic movement on Jewish life in eastern Europe at the turn of the seventeenth century, something needs to be known of its historical background. This is not to say that the social, political, or even the intellectual and religious conditions of those days account for its birth, but they do explain the eagerness with which so many Jews received its message, as

13. A partial text of the *Dudele* is found in Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 212.

well as the fierceness with which others resisted it.[14] While the conditions of those days did not produce the beauty of Hasidic thought, they did lead to some of its preoccupations and shortcomings.

POLES, JEWS, AND UKRAINIANS

In the fourteenth century many German Jews were forced to flee from those bands of malcontents who proudly called themselves *Judenschläger,* "Jew beaters," and from the persecutions that followed on the Black Death. They were welcomed into Poland. Casimir the Great saw in them a means to stimulate trade and industry, a means, as he himself put it, "to increase the revenues of our treasury." [15] Though freedom and oppression often followed one another, the fifteenth century saw the Jews securely settled in Poland under the protection of her kings, so that western Jews came to look upon her as a haven and migrated there in ever greater numbers. They were allowed to form almost a state within the state: to develop an autonomous life, to organize a kind of self-government, and to manage their own affairs unhindered by Polish authorities. The embodiment of this relative independence was the *ḳahal,* the community and its council. While the elders of the council—responsible as they were for order and discipline and for the payment of taxes levied on the communities by the state—had civil and, to some extent, criminal jurisdiction over their fellow Jews, the rabbis watched over the integrity of the religious life. Together they supervised all religious, welfare, and educational institutions. So tight was the whole organization that the individual councils were subject to provincial synods, and these in turn to a central synod which was empowered to issue decrees, binding upon the whole of Polish Jewry.

Economically, too, Jews enjoyed a privileged, though precarious, position. True, the guilds strongly opposed Jewish activity in craft and

14. Martin Buber, in his *Die Chassidische Botschaft* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1952), pp. 66–67, aptly remarks: "The opinion that religious movements emerge ever anew from social conditions is an error, impoverishing the world of the spirit. Social conditions do influence a movement's sphere of action, for only under certain social conditions can a new thing break through; it springs, however, from the contacts and conflicts in the bosom of religion itself. Economic development is a fertilizer, no more; the seminal powers are of the spirit alone." Cf. Martin Buber, *Hasidism,* trans. Carlyle Witton-Davies and others (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), pp. 35–36.

15. Simon Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes,* V (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1927), 453.

trade, but the nobility largely depended on Jews for the management of their estates, which in each case comprised not only vast lands but several villages. Often living far away from his Ukrainian estate, the Polish nobleman had to leave it in the hands of a tenant or supervisor, who made the peasants till the soil like serfs and pay tribute for the use of pastures or mills. Many of these tenants were Jews, and so were the men who rented and ran the mills and dairies, who had control of rivers, bridges, and fishing rights, who acquired licenses for the distilling and retailing of spirits. Thus the economic structure of Polish society made Jews buffers between landlords and peasants, between masters and servants, and, since the masters were Catholic Poles and the servants Orthodox Ukrainians, also between Poles and Ukrainians, between Catholics and Orthodox. What was worse, it turned them into tools of exploitation; still worse, it almost invited them to become exploiters themselves.

Nothing illuminates the servile state of the Ukrainian peasants so much as the fact that every birth, every marriage among them served the landowners as an excuse to tax them; to insure payment, they are said to have turned over the keys of Orthodox churches to their Jewish managers, so that a priest who wished to perform a baptism or assist at a marriage had to ask the manager to unlock the church.[16] This was an utterly degrading situation; what made it unbearable was the fact that Jewish tax farmers did not always resist the temptation to enrich themselves; often they usurped juridical functions and other rights not their own. For a long time, it seems, Jews were little aware of living on a volcano; finally the volcano erupted, and the innocent no less than the guilty, the poor no less than the powerful, were its victims.

WAR AND PERSECUTION

When in the first half of the seventeenth century the Polish borderlands to the east were attacked by the Tartars, the Ukrainians organized their own defense units, the Cossacks. The peasants looked upon this national guard with pride and expected from it not only protection from the Tartars but, above all, delivery from servitude

16. The historicity of this custom, reported by a Ukrainian chronicler and mentioned in some Cossack songs, has been called in question by several scholars. Cf. *ibid.*, VII (1928), 21, n. 1.

to Poles and Jews. As a matter of fact, their desire for revenge was directed far more against the Jewish tax farmers than against the Polish landlords. In the 1630s there occurred the first peasant insurrection, in which several synagogues were destroyed and two hundred Jews slain. Brief though the insurrection was, it was the omen of a greater terror to come. In 1648 Bogdan Chmielnicki, the hetman of the Cossacks, called for a holy war against Poles and "the cursed breed of Jews."[17] This time the uprising spread all over the Ukraine, which then included the provinces of Volhynia and Podolia, leaving no village or city untouched. Jews were the main sufferers; by the thousands men were killed, women violated, children thrown into wells, infants stabbed at their mothers' breasts or pierced by lances, then roasted and given to their mothers to eat. Typical of the fury of the Cossacks and of all the Ukrainian peasant warriors is this episode: Coming upon a stout Jewish tenant, they slit open his belly, cut out the fat, stuffed it into his mouth, and sneered: "Here you have the fat which you accumulated by the toil of our hands." Then they pulled off strips of skin from his back and said: "This is for the straps with which you had us lashed for our loafing."[18]

Jewish families who were not killed in this massacre were driven by panic from one place to another. Many fled to the Tartars who, though they had made common cause with the Cossacks, now protected the Jews and sold them as slaves to the Turks. While there were Poles who betrayed their Jewish fellow-sufferers, there was, among others, the heroic Prince Jeremias Vishnioviecki who, in the words of a Jewish chronicler, guarded them "like a merciful father."[19] Still, the horror of these years left an indelible mark on the memory of Jews: Fear and insecurity remained their constant companions. All

17. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), V, 7.

18. Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte,* VII, 43, n. 2. The same Jewish chronicler who relates these horrors goes on to mention that the Cossacks dealt in no less cruel a manner with Poles, particularly with priests. (See *ibid.*, p. 23.) In his encyclical "Invicti Athletae Christi" of May 16, 1957, Pius XII has hailed the martyrdom of St. Andrew Bobola, who in May 1657 was killed by the Cossacks because he refused to forswear his faith. His torture was one of the most brutal ever recorded in the Church's history. His body was scorched with torches, his throat pierced, his tongue pulled out with pincers, his nose and lips were torn from his face. As a final mockery, his torturers cut a chasuble from the flesh of his chest and back.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

in all, about three hundred Jewish communities were razed and a large part of the Ukraine remained for some time closed territory to Jews. Even the peace concluded between Casimir V and Chmielnicki in November 1648 brought only a short cessation of hostilities, as did the treaties of 1649 and 1651.

After a brief breathing spell, the Cossacks moved again in 1654, this time allied with the Muscovites. To the battle cry: "For Russism and Orthodoxy," they swept over White Russia, conquering city after city, killing or expelling the Jews who lived there. Only a year later, the Swedes invaded Poland, pushing into her very heart and occupying most of the land. They were the only warring power who showed themselves friendly toward the Jews; no wonder, then, that the Jews responded to this friendliness, only to pay heavily for it later. Often the deeply humiliated Polish armies turned mercilessly against them, so that in the end even those Jewish settlements that in the insurrection of 1648 had come off unscathed, felt the horrors of war and persecution.

In the course of eight years not one but several hurricanes had swept over the land, and in their wake many Jewish homes were left in shambles, while others stood empty and deserted. Several hundred thousand Jews had met with a sudden and cruel end. In the eastern Ukraine not a single Jew survived; in Volhynia and Podolia only one tenth of the once flourishing Jewish population was left; many of the once large Jewish communities were represented only by a few members; and the proud political structure of former days had collapsed. "Not since the downfall of its kingdom has Israel seen such calamity," wrote an Italian rabbi. Seeing in the sufferings of the Jews of Poland the birth pangs of the messianic days, he exclaimed: "These are the heralds of the approaching Messiah, at the brink of our graves they announce our redemption." [20] Another writer ended his lament with the plea: "When, O God, will the hour of the last miracles arrive? Do you not see that your sons and daughters have fallen into the hands of an alien people? Make us worthy, then, of your mighty deeds, as you did in the days of our going forth from Egypt!" [21] Soon the answer to this and many similar prayers seemed to come from the Turkish city of Smyrna.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

FALSE REDEEMERS

All over Europe, wherever Jews lived, the exciting news was heard that in Smyrna the Messiah had appeared in the person of Sabbatai Zevi, and that his might would be revealed before long. Born in 1626, Sabbatai had, by the time he was fifteen, acquired considerable talmudic learning; not satisfied, he turned to the mysticism of the Kabbalah, and began an ascetic life. Frequently he fasted, took the ritual bath of immersion, and spent many hours in fervent prayer. In his raptures he dreamed that he was chosen to do the work of the Messiah. His friends, with whom he shared his secrets, found it hard to withstand the charm of their leader, tall, dark-haired, with eyes that seemed to see another world, with a voice whose speech and song stirred their deepest longings. Whenever he sang of Zion, their hearts were filled with nostalgia for the Holy City. Shortly after he heard of the calamity that had befallen the Jews of Poland, Sabbatai Zevi was no longer content to dream; the religious enthusiast became a political adventurer who promised to act and thus change Israel's lot.

Soon the kingdom of the Messiah would be manifest to all, one of his "prophets" wrote, for Sabbatai would take the crown from the Sultan's head, put it on his own, and make the Sultan follow him like a slave. For a while he would be withdrawn from Israel's eyes, but after that would enter Jerusalem, mounted on a horse, to show his full might. Then God would send a temple of gold and precious stones from heaven, and all the dead would rise. Though on various occasions Sabbatai Zevi was audacious enough to utter publicly the ineffable name of God, to claim that he was singularly married to God's daughter, the Torah, and to let his followers change a day of fasting into a day of feasting, and thus to incur the anger of rabbis, the people far and near received him with eagerness.

When on New Year's Day of 1665 Sabbatai Zevi declared himself to be the true redeemer, the Jews of Smyrna shouted: "Long live our king, the Messiah!" To prepare themselves for what they thought would be the messianic age, men and women, young and old, did penance by praying and fasting, by bathing in ice-cold water, by mortifying themselves in every way. But when they felt their sins had been wiped away, they gave themselves to unrestrained joy, cele-

brating feast after feast in honor of their king. They marched through the city, with Sabbatai Zevi at the head of their procession, singing aloud: "The right hand of the Lord is exalted, the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly" (Ps 117:16). As in Smyrna, so in other cities there was dancing and jubilation at the news that the Messiah had come. In Poland the humble and dejected Jews suddenly raised their heads in pride; some even left their homes, stopped all work, in the expectation that before long the Messiah would transport them to Jerusalem on a cloud. But all this excitement was to come to a dismal end.

Bold though he was in speech, Sabbatai Zevi lacked the genius and daring of a true adventurer. It seems that he would have been well satisfied to keep on promising the advent of messianic glory, to enjoy pomp and adulation, and to hope that somehow a miracle would fulfill his pledges. But the stir he had created forced him to act. After having "divided" the entire world among those close to him, he embarked in 1666 on a trip to Constantinople, finally to dethrone the Sultan. When he set foot on Turkish soil, however, the authorities, informed of his arrival by the alarmed Jews of Turkey, arrested him. Asked who he was, he timidly answered: "I am only a *ḥakam,* a 'learned man,' from Jerusalem, sent to collect alms for the poor of Palestine." [22] He was sent to prison. There he continued to live like a prince and to receive thousands of visitors.

When denounced for keeping court in prison, Sabbatai was brought before Mohammed IV. Having been told by the Sultan's physician that unless he embraced Islam he would be driven through the streets as a rebel and scourged with burning torches, Sabbatai Zevi, as soon as he crossed the threshold of the Sultan's chamber, cast off his Jewish headdress and put on the turban and the green mantle of a Moslem. It happened on September 14, 1666—a black and fateful day in the history of Judaism.

At first many of his followers would not believe the news of his apostasy. Later, not without a twist, they declared that as the youthful Moses was obliged to live for a time at Pharaoh's court not as an Israelite but, to all appearance, as an Egyptian, so Sabbatai Zevi, in order to prepare unhindered the deliverance of his people, had to stay

22. *Ibid.,* p. 66.

among the unbelievers, "outwardly evil, but inwardly good." [23] There were those who held that by the "martyrdom" of his temporary apostasy he would redeem the people from their sins. Even after it became clear that his apostasy had been final, for he died as a Moslem, some of his followers clung to their hopes.

Sabbataianism thus lingered on, till it received new impetus from Jacob Frank, who in the 1750s, under the guise of mysticism, preached release from all bonds: "I have come to free the world from all laws and statutes now in force. I must destroy the whole of them, then the Good God will reveal Himself." [24] He rejected the Talmud as a book of error and blasphemy—though what he really seems to have been protesting against was its discipline. He taught a trinity consisting of the infinite God, of Sabbatai Zevi reincarnated in himself, and of the divine indwelling, the Shekinah, so frequently mentioned in the Zohar as the heavenly mistress. The cult in her honor often led to drunken revels and orgies. According to Sabbataian doctrine man had to pass through the gates of fornication in order to enter the halls of holiness.[25] When the rabbis pronounced a ban upon the Frankists and excluded them from the Jewish community, the Frankists sought the help of Catholic bishops, pretending to be "almost Christians." [26]

Though the Frankists were viewed with suspicion by most bishops, a thousand or more of them became Catholics. Frank himself was baptized in the Polish capital, with great splendor and, as he had requested, with the king as his godfather. The conversion of Frank and his followers was hardly sincere, for among their tenets was not only the article: "The cross is the sign of the holy Trinity and the seal of the Saviour," but also the patently false thesis: "The Talmud teaches that the blood of Christians is indispensable [for Jewish worship], so that all who cling to the Talmud are forced to use this

23. *Ibid.,* p. 80; Graetz, *op. cit.,* p. 158.

24. Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte,* VII, 209. As the lives of Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank are a travesty of the true messianic idea, so is the impertinence of Frank the very opposite of Jesus' humility, who says: "I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). Martin Buber has rightly drawn attention to the fact that the concept underlying Frank's assertion is a gnostic one, for it implies that the Creator of the world, the God who revealed Himself in the Old Testament, is not the hidden God of goodness. (See *Chassidische Botschaft,* p. 55; *Hasidism,* p. 25.)

25. See Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte,* VII, 196–197.

26. See Graetz, *op. cit.,* p. 279.

blood."[27] What the Frankists really seem to have looked for was not the grace of Christ but freedom from persecution. When it became clear that Frank still considered himself the Messiah, he was imprisoned in the fortress of Czestochowa and held there for thirteen years. During this time he tried in vain to take himself and his followers into the Russian Orthodox Church. Finally freed by a Russian general, he settled after some wanderings in Germany, bought a castle near Frankfurt am Main, and died there in 1791 as the self-styled Duke of Offenbach. Begun like a revolution that was to shake the earth, the Sabbataian movement ended like a third-rate farce, leaving behind a legacy of despair.

PENITENTS, RABBIS, AND MIRACLE MEN

The Sabbataians were not the only ones who "pressed for the end." There were others who sought to hasten the coming of the Messiah by the severest mortifications, men who denied themselves speech, food, or sleep, who prayed for hours until their eyes grew weak and their voices gave out. Only self-imposed penance, they thought, could bring about the days of glory. They rolled in the snow, fasted daily for six years, avoiding for their evening meals anything that came from a living creature, wandered continuously, never staying in one place for more than a day. By these and similar efforts the penitents of those days hoped to defeat that multitude of evil spirits which, in their opinion, guarded the Messiah and prevented his coming.[28] But it was not only the few penitents who saw evil spirits at work; belief in them was quite common among the Jews of Poland in the latter part of the seventeenth century.

It affected all classes of Jews, learned and simple alike. The atmosphere of the ghetto became thick with fancied spirits and demons. The Jew felt himself haunted by ghosts and apparitions at every step. They possessed him; they tormented him; they surrounded him on all sides without rest or surcease. They tortured his body; they twisted his soul;

27. Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte,* VII, 205. The Frankist thesis was not only false, for it contradicted Jewish law and tradition which forbid the eating of blood; it was also criminal for it helped those who then, not unsuccessfully, spread the accusation that Jews used Christian blood for the preparation of *mazzah,* the unleavened bread of the Passover.

28. See Salomon Maimon, *An Autobiography,* ed. Moses Hadas, trans. J. Clark Murray (New York: Schocken, 1947), pp. 44–45.

they racked the little ones in their cradles; they troubled the student at his books. They were a terror-driven people facing a ghost world.[29]

The dread of evil spirits was fostered by a popular religious literature whose appeal was largely to fear, the fear of sin and of its penalty:

> O man, if you only knew how many demons there are thirsting for your heart's blood, you would not hesitate to abandon yourself, body and soul, to your Creator, blessed be He!
>
> You must know that the whole universe is filled with banished souls who can find no rest. . . . All trees are peopled with numberless souls, many thousands of them hover above fields and waters. . . . Because they did no penance for their sins and kept others from doing penance, they are condemned to wander about on earth and in the air . . . till they find a just man to whom is given the power to comfort and redeem fallen souls.
>
> The lower part of hell holds myriads of men; and the greater the number of arriving sinners, the more its borders expand. Within there are numberless torture chambers for the various kinds of evildoers. Its flames are sixty times stronger than those on earth; coals are piled up like mountains, and out of an abyss there gush forth streams of pitch and sulphur. Manifold are the devils who do their work there; they are ugly to look at, of weird shape. . . . It is their duty to torture the sinful body in various ways: Some gibbet and strangle the body; others beat and throttle it; again others tie and blind it, all according to the gravity of sins committed.[30]

When in this world of fear the common people sought peace, they met with little understanding on the part of their rabbis, who prized above everything the almost continuous study of the Talmud. What engaged most of them were problems like the ritual of the ancient Temple, which had no bearing on the lives of the Jews in seventeenth-century Poland, or the minutiae of the laws regulating the orthodox way, which only added to the already heavy burden of cobblers, tailors, mule drivers, water carriers, and all the others who lived by the toil of their hands. Concerned with the when and how of putting on the prayer shawl and the phylacteries, the when and how

29. Jacob S. Minkin, *The Romance of Hassidism* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1955), p. 51.

30. From *Kab ha-Yashar,* "The Just Measure," chaps. 1 and 5, and *Shebet Musar,* "The Rod of Discipline," chap. 26, as quoted by Simon Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 61–63.

of prayers, the right time of beginning and ending the morning, noon, and evening devotions, the rabbis left the people's hearts empty. Their many regulations on the sanctification of the Sabbath frequently made this day of joy a day of vexation. Their tightening of the dietary laws made it harder still to keep them. Their sermons, often mere displays of learning, jugglings of talmudic and other texts, gave no warmth or inspiration; rather did they widen the gap between the men living with and for their tomes and the many village Jews, unlettered but eager for the word of God.[31]

Small wonder, then, that the people turned to men who, because of their knowledge of the Kabbalah and its alleged mystical secrets, were believed able to cast out evil spirits. They wandered through all the cities and villages where Jews lived, to cure the sick of body and of soul by exorcism, magic incantation, amulet or medicine. To perform their "cures," they would wear white robes, put on the prayer shawl and the phylacteries, use black candles, the ram's horn, or other sacred objects. They would, above all, shift and shuffle the letters of the name Yahweh—to Jews the ineffable name of God—which supposedly gave them power over the world of demons and earned them the title *Baale Shem,* "Masters of the Name." Their influence was considerable; no doubt, they often brought comfort to the harassed, but at the same time deepened their bewilderment.[32]

THE FOUNDER

IT WAS into this age, filled with the bitterness of exile, an age which saw the cruelty of enemies, the deceit of false redeemers, the decay of religious life, that the founder of the Hasidic movement was born.

HIS LIFE

Neither the time nor the place of the birth of Israel ben Eliezer is certain; he was born around 1700, probably in the village of Okup, near the then Polish-Turkish border.[33] When as a small child he lost

31. See *ibid.,* pp. 48–51.

32. *Ibid.,* pp. 59–60; Minkin, *op. cit.,* pp. 52–53.

33. A Hasidic legend tells that the child was born untouched by Adam's sin or, to use the language of Hasidism, which assumes the pre-existence of all souls, that he was among those who fled before the fall and thus did not eat with Adam of the tree of knowledge. (See Horodezky, *op. cit.,* p. 7; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 35.) The legend is interesting because it implies belief in a kind of original sin, a belief usually declared alien to Jewish thought. Yet the Talmud clearly refers to the evil consequences of the first sin. To the question why idolaters are lustful, the Talmud answers: "Because they did not stand at Mount Sinai. For when the serpent came upon Eve, he injected a lust into her: [as for] the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness departed; the idolaters, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness did not depart." (Shab. 145b–146a; cf. *The Babylonian Talmud,* ed. I. Epstein, London: Soncino, 1935–48, *Shabbath,* II, 738.) But even the Israelites did not retain their immunity; when they worshipped the golden calf, evil—whose dominion, according to Jewish tradition, had been broken at Sinai—became mighty again. To soften the impact of the talmudic teaching on the work of the serpent, the commentator of the Soncino edition cites another talmudic passage where God is said to have created the evil passions but also the Torah as their antidote, and adds: "Thus [the first] passage does not teach the doctrine of 'Original Sin,' which Judaism rejects" (*ibid.,* n. 8). There can be no doubt that rabbinical and modern Judaism reject this doctrine, but can there be doubt that once it was part of Jewish tradition? (Cf. footnote 82.)

his parents, legend relates, the only thing the father could leave to him was the gift of trust; it is said that his father parted with these words: "My dear son, remember all your life that the Lord, blessed be He, is with you, and you will be afraid of nothing."[34] The leaders of the community sent the orphan to the *ḥeder,* that he might there receive the education befitting a Jewish boy. The *ḥeder* was far from being an ideal school. It was a small hut, not very clean, its air heavy; the children were scattered all over, some sitting on benches, others on the bare ground; the teacher and his assistants ruled like despots, often applying the whip to the point of bleeding; the lessons were monotonous, designed for adults rather than children; and there was no time for play.[35] Few, if any, Jewish boys found this school, with its noise and confinement, to their liking. The young Israel rebelled. Often he would flee to the forest, remaining there all day, delighting in the trees and animals, moving about without the least fear, indeed enjoying the solitude. When he was found, his tutors would bring him back with sharp reprimands, but as soon as he could, he would return to his wooded retreat. In the end, the men who took care of him thought their efforts wasted and left him to his own devices.

At the age of twelve, in order to earn a livelihood, Israel became a teacher's helper whose duty it was to gather the little ones, bring them to school, and take them home again. Soon the small town saw a change in its dull life. No longer would the boys walk the streets with their faces pale and their heads hanging down. Their new

34. Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 79; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 36.

35. *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* VI, 314–315, gives a brief history of the *ḥeder.*

guardian would lead them through the streets, shouting merrily and singing with joy, and bring them home by way of meadows and woods, where they picked flowers and branches. Together with him they prayed: "Amen, let His great Name be blessed forever and in all eternity." [36]

A few years later, the community made Israel caretaker of its synagogue. His duties were many, but he would go about them rather sleepily, for he would stay up all night and, while the synagogue was empty and he unobserved, pore over books. The books he studied, however, were not the volumes of the Talmud but the so-called practical Kabbalah, which in his day, because of its use by the Sabbataians, was forbidden lore. Most likely it was a wandering Kabbalist who initiated him into this secret knowledge. Years later he left his native village and went to Brody in East Galicia, where he became a school teacher. He never dealt harshly with his children; his gentle, unassuming ways made him so well liked that many adults came to him as the arbiter of their everyday disputes.

One day, when he tried to settle a lawsuit in which the father of Rabbi Gershon of Brody was involved, the rabbi's father was so impressed by Israel that he offered him his daughter in marriage. Israel, now about twenty years old, accepted, but soon after, the father died. When some time later Israel demanded the fulfillment of the marriage contract, Rabbi Gershon, appalled by the disgrace this unlearned peasant would bring upon his family, urged his sister to disregard her father's will. But all his efforts to shake her sense of obedience were in vain. He then sought to educate his brother-in-law, again to no avail. Later he made him his coachman, but Israel proved to be so poor a driver that he almost killed himself and his brother-in-law. By now completely disgusted with a man whom he considered inept and adrift, Rabbi Gershon insisted that his sister and her husband leave the town.

The two settled in a village near the Carpathian Mountains, whose majestic peaks invited Israel to return to the solitude of his childhood days. Among these untouched giants, where nature retains the freshness of its beginning, where its Creator's presence is inescapably felt, Israel built himself a hut, there to meditate, fast, bathe, pray, and sing. When the stone walls echoed his songs, it seemed like a

36. Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 36.

divine answer to his heart's cry. In this mountain wilderness, he learned, or rather relearned, the message he was later to preach to his people. Except for the Sabbaths, which he celebrated, always robed in white, with his wife in the village, Israel spent seven years in his hermitage. Finally, Rabbi Gershon relented and bought a tavern for his sister and her husband. Israel, however, turned its management over to his wife, while he left for the quiet woods and meadows nearby, again to study the Kabbalah and to lose himself in prayer.

When, at the age of thirty-six, he thought his time of preparation ended, he traveled around the country like other healers, curing people, exorcising evil spirits, writing out amulets, and predicting the future. But unlike many other healers, he cared not only for the bodies but also for the souls of the sick, and showed such kindliness that the people, knowing that here was more than one of the ordinary *Baale Shem,* called him *Baal Shem Tov,* "Master of the Good Name." [37] Though he never entirely ceased working as a healer, he more and more extended help to others by giving his entire self to God. Often, it is said, he would pray so fervently that his own ardor inflamed the people around him. In his presence, simple folk would no longer feel disdained; new meaning, new dignity would come to their lives; they would realize that they were dear to God and that they, too, were called to be close to Him. In ever greater numbers they flocked to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, who in every way, in dress, speech, and manner, was like one of them, and many disciples gathered around him, so that he was forced to give up his residence in Tluste. He moved to Mezbizh in Podolia, a small town close to the borders of Poland, the Ukraine, and Lithuania. It remained the capital of the Hasidic movement to the very death of its founder, around 1760.

As the Baal Shem Tov felt his last hour approaching, he first asked a *minyan,* the quorum of ten required by Jewish tradition for communal worship, to pray with him. Then, with the prayer book in his hand, he said: "I want to busy myself with God for a bit more." Some time later he turned to the disciples gathered around him with

37. "Kindly master," "man of goodness," might be a simpler rendering of the title given to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, in whom the people saw one they could trust because of his closeness to God. (See Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 86; Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 12–13.)

these arresting words: "Now I know for what I was created." Sitting up in bed, he spoke to them of his belief that the soul, having parted from the earth, mounts from world to world, each purer and more beautiful than the other, from the lower to the upper paradise, indeed to the very tree of life; and he expounded the verse from the Book of Esther: "Then the maiden came unto the king" (2:13). Stretching out on his bed, he begged his disciples to pray: "And let the graciousness of the Lord our God be upon us." Again and again, he sat up and whispered, trying to fill his soul with fervor for its meeting with its Creator. Finally, he had himself covered with a sheet, but his whisper could still be heard: "My God, Lord of all worlds!" His last words were: "Let not the foot of pride overtake me" (Ps 35:12).[38]

HIS MESSAGE

An ancient Jewish commentary on the Book of Exodus asks: "Why did God choose a bush of thorns from which to speak to Moses?" and answers: "To teach that no place is devoid of God's presence, not even a thorn-bush."[39] The whole Jewish mystical tradition holds that there is no place, no thing, from which God is absent.[40] Long

38. See Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 83–84.

39. Ex. R. 2:5; cf. *Midrash Rabbah,* ed. H. Freedman and M. Simon (London: Soncino, 1939), III, 53.

40. In the course of the centuries, Jewish mystical teaching on God's omnipresence was expressed in various ways. For Rabbi Jose ben Ḥalafta of the second century A.D. the universe, far from being God's home, had its home in God: "The Lord is the place of His world, but His world is not His place" (Gen. R. 68:9; cf. *Midrash Rabbah,* Soncino ed., II, 621). For the Kabbalists God was not only the abode of the world, not only the source of all there is, the fountain of all existence—He so penetrated all things that what appeared separate to the physical eye, the mystical eye saw as one. "Everything is linked with everything else down to the lowest ring on the chain," wrote Moses de Leon of the thirteenth century, "and the true essence of God is above as well as below, in the heavens and on the earth, and nothing exists outside Him. And this is what the sages mean when they say: When God gave the Torah to Israel, He opened the seven Heavens to them, and they saw that nothing was there in reality but His Glory; He opened the seven worlds to them and they saw that nothing was there but His Glory; He opened the seven abysses before their eyes, and they saw that nothing was there but His Glory." His contemporary Joseph Giḳatila went even further: "He fills everything and He *is* everything." (Both sayings quoted in Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism,* New York: Schocken, 1946, pp. 222–223.) These and other kabbalistic sayings sound very much like pantheism. I say "sound," for though the Kabbalists often saw the world absorbed in God, they continued, with a faithfulness wholly illogical, to address Him as "You." However much they strained their images, they held fast to the belief in a personal God. (See *ibid.,* pp. 216–217.)

before, Isaiah had the seraphim in heaven marvel at God's omnipresence; he had them shout with joy, one to the other, that the glory of Him, the thrice Holy, fills the earth (see 6:3). Thus Rabbi Israel had read that God is everywhere and that whatever *is,* is in Him, but he had also experienced God's nearness in his mountain hermitage and wooded retreat, and so made it the mainstay of his teaching.

The Creator abides in His creation; He envelops it as the air envelops the earth; or, in a different image, nature is, as it were, God's mantle and, like a royal mantle, bespeaks *and* conceals His glory. Hence it is the task of the Hasid to penetrate the sensible world till he sees the world of the spirit. Once his vision has reached this world, his life becomes one of trust and strength. In the *Testament of the Baal Shem,* a collection of sayings attributed to Rabbi Israel and published after his death, we read:

Man should always be mindful that every thing in this world is replete with the Creator, blessed be He, and that all that is done in this world by virtue of human thought, comes from His providence, blessed be He.

Man should always be mindful that the whole earth abounds with the honor of its Maker, and that His glory is ever near; that He is, as it were, finer than the finest matter[41] and that He is the Master of all that happens in this world, and that He can fulfill whatever I desire, and that man can therefore do no better than rely exclusively on Him, blessed be He.

Man should always be mindful, and believe with the whole strength of his faith, that the glory of God is close to him and guards him, and that the Creator's eye looks into his own, and his into that of the Creator.[42]

Once man has learned to perceive the divine Countenance, through the veil of things, the dangers of this world no longer frighten him, and its pleasures lose their fascination:

When man sees something of which he is afraid, he should say to himself: Why should I be fearful of anything, whether it is a man as I am, or whether it is an animal, or even a ferocious beast, since His

41. A literal translation would read: "the thinnest of the thin." The meaning is obviously that, like the air, God penetrates all things.

42. Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 94–95.

name is hidden in this thing? It is in fear of Him that I should tremble!

When a man sees a beautiful woman, he should think: Whence is her beauty? Were she to die now, she would no longer have this beautiful face. Hence it comes from the divine power at work in her. It is this power which gives beauty and color to her cheeks. But if the divine power is the root of beauty, why should I let myself be drawn by something that is merely a part, when it is so much better for me to nestle to the root of all the worlds? [43]

In this clinging, and in it alone, is man's peace. As long as his heart nestles to the Godhead, evil cannot undo him; on the contrary, the sight of it urges the just man to greater devotion. Thus, to the Baal Shem evil often seems no more than the "throne" of the good, the "lever of virtue," a steppingstone to greater purity.[44] Never

43. *Ibid.,* p. 95.

44. To clarify the Hasidic notion of evil as the carrier of good, something must be said about its kabbalistic background. According to the theosophic doctrine of medieval Jewish mysticism, God's hidden, innermost being is without attributes; only in His creative activity do His attributes appear, of which the Kabbalists count ten: crown or will, wisdom, intellect, mercy or grace, power or sternness, compassion, lasting endurance, majesty, foundation (of divine activity), and kingdom. ("Kingdom" is usually pictured as the Shekinah or as the archetype of the community of Israel.) The working of these attributes or spheres of divine manifestation, *sefirot,* is conceived as a process within the Godhead breaking through the enclosure of its hidden Self. Like the successive layers of a tree, the *sefirot* are thought of as stages through which the divine life flows to and fro. When the first worlds were created, the Zohar maintains, power alone was at work. But no finite world can persist unless there is harmony of power and mercy: stern judgment tempered by grace, the "feminine" balanced by the "masculine." Hence those first worlds were destroyed. Later Kabbalists developed the notion of earlier worlds that had perished because of the prevalence of sternness into the speculation of the "shattered vessels." The first being that emanated from the fullness of divine life was *adam ḳadmon,* the primordial or heavenly man, the exemplar of everything that is above and below. From this primordial man the undifferentiated light burst forth. When, however, the light began to divide and the world of confusion arose, it became necessary to gather the now isolated lights and house them in special "bowls" so that the variety of finite creatures could come into existence and take their assigned place in the hierarchy of beings and forms. The vessels destined for the higher *sefirot* gave shelter to their lights, but those of the lower *sefirot* could not bear the impact of light, and broke. Through the "breaking of vessels," *shevirat ha-kelim,* divine sparks fell into the physical world, and so did the fragments of darkness or hard "shells," *kelipot.* Thus the *sefirot* were freed of the evil shells with which they had been mixed up, while the powers of evil gained separate existence. Evil, then, was to the later Kabbalists the result of a cleansing process within the divine manifestations—a waste product of "creation." Unavoidable though the "breaking of vessels" was, if finite creatures were to exist, this "necessary accident" was later upheld by man's freedom that led to his fall. As he is free to sin, so man has the power to free the divine sparks from their imprisonment in this world of limitation, return them to their infinite source, and thus help restore the original harmony—a reintegration the later Kabbalists call *tikkun.* (For a fuller treatment, see Scholem, *op. cit.,* particularly pp. 207–215, 265–268, on which this synopsis is based.)

This speculation is undoubtedly a sophisticated attempt to solve the problem of evil. But since its authors, in their transcendental flights, turn the sovereign Maker of the universe into an Emanator not altogether free, subject to an inner crisis and outer unfolding; since in line with the Gnostics they confuse finitude with darkness, conceive the multiplicity of creatures as a catastrophe, the effect of the shattered vessels of light; since they root evil "somewhere in the mystery of God" (Scholem), and consider it a necessary concomitant of the life process of the divine manifestations, they subvert the biblical proclamation that God created the world in freedom and that He made His manifold work good. Indeed, they imperil the prophetic message of the thrice holy God who abhors sin. How far the Baal Shem, from his youth nourished by kabbalistic teachings, realized this peril is open to question. In any case, his message—in contrast to that of Sabbatai Zevi—was largely saved from the logical consequence of the kabbalistic notions he held.

must a man lose courage, never fall from hope, never despair, never give up a fellow man as lost. When a father complained that his son had become estranged from God and asked what he should do, the Baal Shem replied: "Love him more." [45] On another occasion he made a rich Jew, who deluded himself that all was well with him, realize that the hardness of his heart had once caused a beggar's death. Weeping, the rich man fell on his knees, confessed his sin, and begged: "What shall I do to purify the soul that I have corrupted?" Rabbi Israel answered: "Go and see in every poor man on the way a child of the beggar whom you have struck dead. Give as much as you can of your goods and of your help. And let your soul inundate the gift with love!" [46]

Since God is all in all, man is commanded to serve Him. Without *avodah,* the service the heart renders to Him, man is nothing. Learning may bring him closer to God, but only in and through prayer is he fully man, can he become one with Him.

Through his prayer and through his study [of divine things] man brings strength to all the worlds, and even the angels are nourished by his prayers.[47] . . . For man is a ladder, placed on earth and touching

45. See Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal-Shem,* trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper, 1955), pp. 46–47.

46. *Ibid.,* p. 171.

47. This, no doubt, gives man more than his due. Here and elsewhere the Baal Shem leaves the biblical tradition which tells of angels bringing strength and comfort to men but never of men sustaining angels. Buber interprets the Baal Shem's thought in these words: "A true man is more important than an angel, for an angel 'stands still' but man 'goes forward': he progresses, pierces, ascends, and thus accomplishes the decisive movement of the world's renewal." (*Chassidische*

heaven, so that his whole bearing, all his doing and speaking, leave traces in the higher world.[48]

Prayer unites the divine sparks in all things with their Source.[49] It is a bridge that takes man from the plains of this world to the mountain which is the Most High. More than that, the true worshipper acts as the emissary of God's presence, the Shekinah; still greater, God makes in him His abode. When a worshipper recites with all his heart the opening verse of the Eighteen Benedictions: "O Lord, open thou my lips!" the Shekinah enters his voice and speaks through him.[50] On the other hand, the prayer of a man who seeks nothing but his own satisfaction has no worth and bears no fruit. Unless a man shakes off all that is earthly and strips himself of all that is his own, his words do not reach heaven, for as the Baal Shem was wont to stress: "There is no room for God in him who is full of himself." [51] With the freedom characteristic of Hasidic imagery, he said that the bride about to be led to the altar decorates herself, but when the time has come to greet her husband in the oneness of the flesh, she discards all personal adornments so that she may be altogether close to him.[52] In like manner, man must cast off selfishness if he is truly to approach his Lord.

The Hasid must, therefore, pray with *kawanah,* with holy intent, with great feeling, with complete absorption. Once the Baal Shem stopped at the threshold of a synagogue, refusing to go in, for he felt it crowded with teachings and prayers from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling, with words without devotion, love, or compassion—with words that had no wings.[53] Apart from an unrepented life which lies like a heavy cloud between the praying man and heaven, there is no greater enemy to prayer than routine. No matter how often a prayer is said, it must always be said with the freshness of a new beginning. "The first time a thing occurs in nature, it is called a

Botschaft, pp. 110–111; cf. *Hasidism,* p. 77.) No doubt, it is man's glory that he can change for the better and, in changing himself, change the world. But all his change is for the sake of unchanging perfection.

48. Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 97.

49. See footnote 44.

50. See Bloch, *op. cit.,* p. 26; Louis I. Newman, *The Hasidic Anthology* (New York: Scribner, 1938), pp. 336–337.

51. See Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 71–72.

52. See Minkin, *op. cit.,* p. 91.

53. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 73.

miracle; later, it becomes natural and no attention is paid to it," the Baal Shem remarked. And he added: "Let your worship and your service be a fresh miracle every day." [54]

Greater than attaining high rungs in the service of God is simple faith—making oneself a vessel for Him. A man's busy life in the market place may cause him almost to forget that there is a Maker of the world, but if at the time of the afternoon prayer he remembers Him, regrets with all his heart that he has spent his day with vain matters and runs into a corner to pray there, God, the Baal Shem taught, "holds him dear, very dear, and his prayer pierces the firmament." [55] A villager used to come year after year to Rabbi Israel's house of prayer to spend the Days of Awe there. He had a son who was so dull-witted that he could not learn the letters of the alphabet, let alone understand the meaning of the words of prayer. For a long time the father left him at home, but when the boy had become thirteen, he took him along for fear that otherwise he might eat something on the Day of Atonement. The boy brought with him a little whistle which he liked to blow in the fields where he tended sheep. For hours he sat silent; finally wishing to express his fervor, he begged his father to let him play on his whistle. The father, greatly perturbed, held his hand over the boy's pocket to keep him from using it. But at the beginning of the Neïla prayer—the concluding service on the Day of Atonement spoken at sunset while the gates of justice and mercy are thought to close—the boy could no longer suppress his ecstasy; quickly he snatched the whistle from his pocket and blew it with all his might. The congregation stood startled and bewildered, but Rabbi Israel declared happily: "God's wrath is dispelled from the face of the earth." [56]

To serve the Lord perfectly, the Hasid must serve Him with *debeḳut,* with complete attachment. Since it is man's noblest duty to become one with God, the Hasid must burn with the desire to be submerged in Him; to cleave to Him not only at the hour of worship, but always.[57] In *debeḳut* the heart silently cries to God. Often

54. Newman, *op. cit.,* pp. 336–337.

55. Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 69. See also Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 111.

56. See Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 69–70; *Legend,* pp. 30–31; Chajim Bloch, *Die Gemeinde der Chassidim* (Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1920), pp. 79–80.

57. Gershom Scholem defines *debeḳut* as "a perpetual being-with-God, an intimate union and conformity of the human and the divine will." (*Op. cit.,* p. 123.)

weariness or distraction loosens the heart's cleaving; whenever this happens, God permits it so that a man who thus slips from his rung may afterwards climb the higher.[58]

It is to be deemed a high degree of service if a man ever knows that he is with the Creator, blessed be He, and that He surrounds him on all sides. As it is written: "Happy is the man unto whom the Lord counteth not iniquity" (Ps 31:2), that is, happy the man who considers it a sin if even for a second his heart does not hold fast to the Name, blessed be He. So deeply should man be united with God that he would not have to reflect at all times that he is with Him, blessed be He. Rather should he see his Creator, blessed be He, with the eye of his mind.[59]

A disciple once asked the Baal Shem why it was that one who clings to God and knows Him to be close, at times feels as if He were far away and the soul not at all held by Him. Rabbi Israel answered that a father who teaches his little son to walk stands in front of the son, holding out his hands, so that the boy cannot fall as he moves toward him. The moment, however, the boy is near his father, the father retreats a little, spreading his arms apart, and he does so over and over that his son may learn to walk.[60]

Man is meant for bliss, and to it the Hasid is led by *hitlahabut,* "being aflame." This burning ecstasy, of which Buber has said that "the world is no longer its place: it is the place of the world," [61] is God's awesome gift to those who serve Him without ceasing. It is the foretaste of paradise; indeed, unless man has felt rapture on earth, he will not feel it there either. To increase the ardor of their souls, the Hasidim used to sway to and fro or swing their arms as if to fence off alien thoughts, even to thrash about like men drowning, as if to extricate themselves from the waters of wickedness, from evil elements and the evil urge. Conversation steeped in the wisdom of Torah is good, but better still is silence, for in silence man can meditate more fully on the greatness of the Blessed One and so weld his soul to Him. When a man serves God with the grace of fervor, he rises, according

58. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 199–203.
59. *Ibid.,* p. 203.
60. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 65.
61. Buber, *Legend,* p. 17. In giving *hitlahabut* first place in his portrayal of the Hasidic soul (see *ibid.,* pp. 17–50), Buber has, it seems to me, somehow upset the structure of Hasidic life.

to the Baal Shem, above the seraphim and the thrones; all becomes spirit; his thinking, feeling, and doing are freed from the scatter of this world; time and space are forgotten, and so are life and death—he has touched eternal life.[62]

"The world is full of enormous lights and mysteries, but alas! man shuts them from himself with one small hand," the Baal Shem complained.[63] That man be granted to understand the divine mysteries, that he serve God as he ought, he must serve Him in humility, in fear, in love, and in joy. He must never forget his dignity as God's beloved creature, but if he remembers who created him, and that all he is and owns is God's gift, he will think himself small. There is no room for claim or calculation in the true relationship between the Hasid and his God; nor is there for vanity which crowds out God's presence and immures the heart. Never does, never can, the infinite God plant His holiness in a man who thinks well of himself and sets himself above others. But *shiflut,* "humility," dearer to God than all great works, draws down His glory.[64]

If a man serves Him, blessed be He, every second, he has no time to be proud or to take pleasure in conceit. . . . He should regard himself so little as if he did not exist at all. . . . For what would it profit him to be esteemed in the eyes of men?

At times one has to show pride to men for the sake of the Creator's glory . . . but in such moments one must be very much on guard not to forget one's own nothingness. One ought to speak in one's heart: In truth, I am altogether nothing, and the pride which I show is for the honor of the Creator, blessed be He. For myself I need no honor, no pride, for I am a worm, and not a man. . . .

Before one speaks with another man, one should first unite oneself in thought with the Creator, blessed be He. The soul of one's companion, too, is bound to the Creator, for every man lives only by His stream, [a stream] which is poured into everything which is created. And he should remember to speak his words only before the Creator, blessed be He, in order to please Him.[65]

"Whatever is in me, everything, new and old, for you alone!" the Baal Shem once exclaimed.[66] Such is the way of the humble man who

62. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 209–221.
63. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 74.
64. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 240–241; Buber, *Legend,* pp. 41–50.
65. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 240–242.
66. Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 51.

seeks but God. He has nothing to offer Him, no Torah, no alms, no good works; like a beggar, with empty hands, he knocks at God's door. Knowing that all his accomplishments are as nothing, he does not live by nature or by right, rather does he live and pray in the realm of grace. It is from the moon that man must learn humility, for she diminishes in order to grow. The Baal Shem went so far as to say that when a man addresses God as "Thou," God becomes a "He" and draws away, but when in boundless awe man calls Him "He," God draws near.[67]

Thus man must approach his Creator in fear, *yir'ah,* and in love, *ahabah.* It is said that Rabbi Israel once told his body: "I am surprised, body, that you have not crumbled to bits for fear of your Maker!" For every Friday noon, as the Sabbath was approaching, his heart began to beat so loudly that those around him could hear it.[68] The fear he preached was, of course, not the dread of the dangers that surround man day by day, but awe, the sense of holiness, which prepares and clears the soul for its union with God.

When a man wishes to pray, he should be first in fear, for fear is the door through which he must pass in order to stand before Him, blessed be He. In his heart he should say: On whom shall I lean? On Him who with His word created all the worlds, sustains them and permits them to be. And he should meditate on His grandeur and majesty. Then he will enter the upper world.[69]

Never must man stop at the door of fear, rather must he "serve the Blessed Name with fear *and* joy, two inseparable friends. For fear without joy is black bitterness." [70] On the other hand, if there were no fear, love would become something altogether natural, would lose its vigor and singularity. When, however, love is joined to fear and fear to love, man feels at once the closeness and the distance of the divine, and does not slacken. For the Baal Shem love is more than a feeling. It is the road that leads toward union with God, and also the very end of this road; it is being taken into the bosom of the Godhead. Whoever abandons himself to God in love wins redemption for himself

67. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 242–247.
68. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 50.
69. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* p. 171.
70. See *ibid.*

and contributes to the redemption of the whole world. Not only does he lose himself in God, but he also brings God into the world; through his surrender, God's name is hallowed and His love is spread; all that is not love is cleansed and absorbed into the one well of love; even the body is purified and raised so as to become an organ of the Shekinah. All in all, what is not done in fear and in love counts for nothing in the eyes of God.[71]

To love God truly, the Baal Shem held, is to rejoice. Time and again, his *Testament* repeats that man must always live in *simhah,* "joy," and that it is his duty to cast off his cares and to let his heart be glad in God. While obedience to God's will transports the soul to intimate communion with the upper world and so begets gladness, the evil urge, whose roots are in the earth and in the lower world, brings about sadness.[72] When the evil urge wishes to disturb a man because he has transgressed one of the small traditional regulations, and thus to hinder him in his service, he should say:

You want to cause me grief in His service. I, on the contrary, wish to serve Him with joy, for it is a great rule that my intent in serving God is not toward myself but toward His pleasure, blessed be He. Hence, even if I should not watch that regulation of which you speak, the Creator will not be angry with me. After all, the reason I do not watch it, is that I do not want to be hindered in serving Him, blessed be He. How could I stop, even for a second, serving Him? This, too, is a great rule in the service of the Creator, blessed be He, that one should as far as possible guard oneself against grief. To weep is altogether detrimental—man must serve Him with joy; but if one weeps for joy, then weeping is very good.[73]

Still, sadness is unavoidable in the life of man, but all sadness, even the sorrow over one's sin, must never be more than a herald of joy.[74] Once a Hasid asked the Baal Shem how many days he would have to fast to receive forgiveness for his sin. The Baal Shem replied that he would not turn away the wrath of the Almighty through fasting, but only through joy, and told him to go and recite some of the Psalms with inner rapture, and then his sins would be wiped

71. See *ibid.,* pp. 164–176.
72. See *ibid.,* pp. 188–190.
73. *Ibid.,* pp. 194–195.
74. See *ibid.,* pp. 195–196.

away.[75] When the Kabbalists wished to explain the meaning of *teshubah,* "repentance," they took its consonants as if they were the initial letters of other words and made them read: *ta'anit, sak, v'efer, bekiyah, hesped,* that is, fasting, sackcloth and ashes, weeping, mourning. Rabbi Israel, too, saw *teshubah* as the initial letters of words, but his interpretation was different. He read: *tamim,* "thou shalt be wholehearted with the Lord thy God" (Deut 16:13); *shiviti,* "I have set the Lord always before me" (Ps 15:8); *v'ahabti,* "thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart" (Deut 6:5); *bekol,* "in all thy ways acknowledge Him"; *hikon,* "prepare to meet thy God, O Israel" (Am 4:12).[76]

Here was clearly a new spirit. Not that joy in God had been unknown to Jewish tradition, but never before had it been preached so emphatically. Never before had a rabbi declared, as did Rabbi Israel, that the prayer of exuberant joy was undoubtedly more welcome to Him, blessed be He, than the prayer of grief and tears, and then gone on to explain his saying by a parable like this: "When a poor man with much weeping begs a favor of the king, he is given a crumb. But when a great man comes and, while cheerfully praising the king, asks for a favor, the king presents him with a magnificent gift, as is given to great lords."[77]

It was the Baal Shem's passionate conviction that the divine presence does not hover over gloom, but over joy in the commandments; that worry and gloom are rather the roots of all the powers of evil.[78] Untiringly he proclaimed that as darkness flees from light, so evil thoughts flee from joy, that there is no surer victory over sin than gladness of heart. When two people wrestle and wish to throw each other to the ground, he liked to say, it is the sluggard who will soon be defeated. So it is with the evil urge: Sluggishness, the result of a troubled and heavy heart, cannot vanquish the evil urge; rather is it driven away by that alacrity which comes from joy and from a heart open and pure.[79] So much is delight the core of Hasidic piety that a Hasidic text can say: "Believe in the light of the countenance of the

75. See Chajim Bloch, "The Role of Joy in Hasidism," *The S.A.J. Review,* VIII, 34 (May 1929), p. 7.
76. See *ibid.*
77. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* p. 197.
78. See Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 58–59.
79. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* p. 198.

living God . . . for He is perfectly good. Let us therefore rejoice in Him always. Whoever is sad, defies the love of God."[80]

The quintessence of the Baal Shem's message may be found in this story: Once some learned men asked him to show them the way of service, the deeds necessary to partake of eternal life. "In former times," they added, "there were pious men who used to fast from one Sabbath to another, who severely castigated themselves. Your disciples, however, say that it is sinful to afflict one's body. What do you say?" Rabbi Israel answered: "I have come into this world to show my Jewish people a new way: how to love God, Israel and the Torah in joy and without self-torment."[81] This statement, however, must not be seen as a condemnation of ascetic discipline, but only as a plea for a wise and moderate use of mortification. It must be read against the background of the Baal Shem's *Testament,* which carries words like these:

> I shall torment myself because I have caused God and His Shekinah pain. To ease their pain, I shall inflict pain on myself. Woe is me! What are my torments against the pain which I have caused Him for so many years! There is nothing else that I wish to ask than that by His great grace He may regard my torments and thus ease the pain of the Shekinah.
>
> I shall torment myself in order to serve the Name, blessed be He, in truth and with all my heart, in fear and in love, so that through me may be accomplished His *yiḥud.*[82] Hence I shall torment myself in order

80. Levertoff, *Denkweise,* p. 21; cf. *Love and the Messianic Age,* p. 33.
81. Levertoff, *Denkweise,* p. 93; also Ysander, *op. cit.,* p. 294. A slightly different version is given by Bloch, "The Role of Joy in Hasidism," *op. cit.,* p. 7; *Priester,* pp. 36–37. It is therefore puzzling to read in Buber's *Chassidische Botschaft,* p. 46: *Nirgends hören wir aus seinem Munde Worte von der Art jener, die uns bei den "Messiassen," von der reinsten bis zur unreinsten Ausprägung, von Jesus bis zu Jakob Frank, immer wieder begegnen: "Ich bin gekommen, um. . . ."* "Nowhere do we hear [the Baal Shem] say words of the kind we hear the 'Messiahs' utter, from the purest to the impurest, from Jesus to Jacob Frank: 'I have come in order to. . . .'" This sentence is missing from the English translation (see *Hasidism,* p. 16). I wonder whether this was an oversight on the part of the translators or a deliberate omission demanded by the author.
82. According to the Kabbalist tradition which the Baal Shem inherited, *yiḥud* is the unification of God and His Shekinah. Originally all things were in unison, man was immediately linked with God. "In the beginning of creation, the core of the Shekhinah was in the lower regions," wrote Joseph Gikatila. "And because the Shekhinah was below, heaven and earth were one and in perfect harmony. The well springs and the channels through which everything in the higher regions flows into the lower were still active, complete and unhindered, and thus God filled everything from above to below. But when Adam came and sinned, the order of

to make myself a sacrifice for Him. Woe is me, who am I and what is my life that I should wish to bring as a sacrifice to Him, the Creator of all the worlds, my fat, my blood, my body, my fire and my spirit, my being and my soul! All the worlds were made by His words, and all things are nothing compared to Him, and I am dust, a worm, a little worm, having nothing [which entitles me] to entreat Him, only His great grace that He may give me more strength to make many sacrifices for His sake.[83]

The image of the man would be incomplete, and his message of joy gravely misrepresented, were I not to tell of the grief that at times beset his heart. He is reported to have said: "The people have a proverb: 'With truth you make your way through the whole world.' The proverb is right," he added, "with truth one can indeed make one's way through the whole world, for nowhere is truth allowed to enter, rather is it chased from one place to another." And he sighed heavily.[84]

THE MASTERS

LONG before he died, the Baal Shem had chosen one of his disciples, Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch, to succeed him. For twelve years the Great Maggid, as he was known since he had once been famous as a wandering preacher, led the Hasidic movement. But a movement governed by men who considered their authority entirely charismatic, who felt that they had responded to an immediate call from above—or, as they put it, to the summons of Elijah—was not easily held together. Early in its history, it fell apart into separate communities, each gathered in brotherliness around a zaddik, but one often detached

things was turned into disorder, and the heavenly channels were broken." (Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 231.) At first Adam was a spiritual being, but through his fall his ethereal shape was changed to a body, "born from the pollution of all matter by the poison of sin." Not only was the flow of the heavenly stream disturbed, not only was man "condemned" to a corporeal existence, the Shekinah went into exile. She, the queen, the bride and daughter of God, the mother of everyone in Israel, whose home is in the fullness of light, had to wander into far lands. But it is given to man somehow to mend the brokenness of creation, to bind together the lower and the upper worlds, to reunite God's indwelling with His absolute perfection, and he can do so by the keeping of the commandments, by good works, and by prayer. Only when the exile of the Shekinah will have been ended, will redemption be accomplished, the Kabbalists held; then God will be one, and His name one, in every way and forever. (See *ibid.*, pp. 229–232.)

83. See Ysander, *op. cit.*, pp. 289, 288.

84. See Bloch, *Priester*, p. 68.

from, if not hostile to, the next. Thus Hasidism came to be dominated by its masters, the zaddikim. On the one hand, the role of the zaddik was a logical development of the kind of authority the Baal Shem had thought to be his—he, the great zaddik, was the ideal origin of that "institution" and the exemplar of all the leaders after him. On the other hand, zaddikism carried within itself the germ of disintegration. It cannot be the purpose of so brief a study to discuss the many trends and at times conflicting schools of thought, to trace the varied history of Hasidism—how it flowered and then withered; but to give at least an approximate picture, I have to discuss the role attributed to the zaddikim and relate some of the tales told about them.

THE ROLE OF THE ZADDIK

How was man, asks Martin Buber, in particular the "simple man," with whom the Hasidic movement was primarily concerned, to arrive at a life of fervent joy? How was he in the hours of temptation to turn the evil urge into a passion for good, how in his daily life to tie this world to the world on high, how to become increasingly aware of the divine sparks hidden in all things, how to bring the light of holy intent to his many cares and doings? How was he to direct his soul toward the divine end, how to keep this goal in sight amidst peril and pressure, disappointments and disillusions, and how to recover the unity of his soul once it was lost? The Hasid needed counsel; he had to be lifted and redeemed so as not to be drowned in the worries, griefs, and despairs of life, Buber answers. He needed a helper for both body and soul, for earthly and heavenly matters, and this helper was the zaddik.

Buber goes on to describe the zaddik as one who taught his Hasidim to conduct their affairs in such wise that their souls would remain free; who time and again took them by the hand and guided them until they were able to venture on alone. It was the zaddik's duty to help his Hasid commune with God, yet without ever taking His place; to strengthen him in the hour of doubt, not by forcing truth on him but by showing him how to conquer and reconquer it for himself. As a teacher of divine service, of the way of prayer, the zaddik instructed by joining his own prayer to that of his disciple, thus lending him courage, added strength—wings. So fervently would the zaddik pray for his follower that he gave all of himself. Yet never would he

permit the soul of his disciple to rely so wholly on him that all independent *kawanah* was relinquished, for no man's life is fulfilled unless he himself strives for God and stretches out toward Him. Such was, according to Buber, the bold and humble function of the zaddik as the Baal Shem and his great successors saw him.[85]

Many Hasidic texts, however, go much further. In the most extreme terms they speak of the zaddik as one who is wholly light, all spirit, all wisdom; one who brings purity to all things, even the lowest; whose touch gives everything, great and small, a spiritual imprint. His, then, is the ability to link the lower to the upper worlds. God reveals Himself through him, he is even thought to be the vicar of His glory. Like God, he can work miracles in heaven and on earth. Indeed, he is at times said to have power over God, by his fervor to be able to alter God's decrees and to draw down His favor.[86] Without hesitation, Hasidic texts see in him the fountain of all that is spiritually vital, the force which moves and sustains all things. "Heart of the world," its "foundation," "the channel through which flows the divine stream that carries life to the entire world and to all creatures" —these are among his designations.[87]

There can be no doubt that here and elsewhere the Hasidic vocabulary is excessive, indeed dangerous, but one must not forget that the men who speak in these texts are not balanced thinkers; rather are they men of fervor, drunk with the knowledge that God has chosen man to be His partner, and that much is given to him who fully surrenders to God. Moreover, the dazzling light in which the zaddik is seen, and the hyperbolic language with which he is praised, attempt to make up for what had been wanting in the centuries of exile. Ever since the destruction of the Temple, rabbinical Judaism had tried to suppress some elements of the Jewish tradition that brought it close to Christian thought, and it was against this deprivation that Hasidism rebelled.

One of the lost elements Hasidism thirsted for was that of media-

85. See Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 4–6.

86. The zaddik's alleged power to alter God's decrees is perhaps best illustrated by Rabbi Pinhas, who is said to have read Psalm 87:2 as: "God, Lord my help, the day is my cry, the night against thee." And he is said to have interpreted it in these words: "During the day I cry and beg God for strength to rise at night against Him, that He would turn aside His verdicts looming over men." (See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 153.)

87. See Jean de Menasce, *Quand Israël aime Dieu* (Paris: Plon, 1931), p. 165.

tion. Thus the zaddik is seen as a mediator between the Creator and His creatures: By his *avodah* and *debekut* he makes himself a road on which the divine exchange, the holy traffic of grace and prayer, can travel. So deeply felt was the need for a bond between heaven and earth that Rabbi Nahum of Tchernobil could say: "It is not fitting that the Creator, blessed be He, who is without bounds and without end, who bears no resemblance to His limited and finite creatures, communicate life to them except through the intermediacy of a mediator."[88] Hence it is the zaddik's task to lead souls to repentance: to open the hearts of sinners, to inspire them with contrition, to thrust them at the feet of Mercy, and to help them win peace. Whenever Hasidic texts speak of the zaddik as helper in the work of reconciliation, they are humble, indeed endearing.

The zaddik is likened to a physician who heals men and turns them into new creatures. Indeed, there is something priestly about him who makes the salvation of others his great concern. He intercedes for them, he even offers himself to God as a sacrifice in their stead, and is thus God's instrument for the conversion of sinners and the instrument of sinners for the reparation due God.[89] In bending down to them, the zaddik is said to lose nothing, indeed to mount higher. But woe to him who, instead of teaching the multitude, isolates himself in his ardent love of God, for he who descends will ascend, while he who fails to descend will fall.[90] Thus zaddik and people depend on one another; they belong to one another, as do soul and body. They are like the consonants and vowels of the Hebrew alphabet: Without vowels, consonants have no voice; but without consonants, the vowel signs cannot stand.[91]

On the one hand, the zaddik is declared to be subject to all the failings of men, for he is the just man of Proverbs who "falls seven times a day and rises again" (24:16); on the other, he is thought to be without error. What he does is true and good; never must a Hasid complain about him, nor question his words or works. For he himself is said to be the Law and the Commandments, and the Torah is said to be given to him that he may interpret it by his wisdom. Thus

88. *Ibid.*

89. See *ibid.,* p. 163.

90. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 7.

91. See Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters,* trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1948), p. 54.

the Hasidim were told to cling to their zaddik as children cling to their father. Again and again they were admonished to put their entire trust in him, never to waver in their loyalty to him, never to depart one iota from his words, but rather to strip themselves of their own wisdom as if they had no understanding and could receive it from none but him. They were bidden to listen to the least of his words, to watch his every gesture, to gaze at his face—in looking at him they themselves would become light. Living with him, they would learn devotion; dining with him at the Sabbath table, they would learn love. But as the Hasidim received, so they had to give. All of them, particularly the wealthy among them, had to support their master and by their gifts strengthen him in his joyous service.[92]

Convinced though they were of their role as mediators, the masters of the Hasidic movement—forgetting here the late period of a weakened spirit—were humble men. Proof of this is the lament of one and the jest of another. One night a disciple of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak of Pzhysha, called "the Yehudi," was awakened by the shuddering sigh of his master. When the disciple asked what distressed him, the Yehudi explained that he sighed at the thought of Israel's leaders of today. He reflected that after Moses there had come the judges; after the judges, the prophets; after the prophets, the men of the Great Assembly; after them, the talmudic teachers; after the teachers, the exhorters. As the false exhorters began to increase, the zaddikim appeared. Then he added: "When I think that we leaders of today are called zaddikim, 'just men,' I cannot help sighing. What is to become of the people?" [93] On the other hand, Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn called himself a boor, explaining to his astonished company that, as a rule, a man is called after his craft; one who works sheet iron, for instance, is called a sheet iron worker. "My craft," he continued, "is to work on such boorish things as eating and drinking and to turn them into something noble, so that they might heighten God's glory on earth. Hence I am a boor." [94]

92. On the role of the zaddik, see in addition to Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 4–11, Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 102–108; Horodezky, *op. cit.,* pp. 125–128; de Menasce, *op. cit.,* pp. 155–156; Minkin, *op. cit.,* pp. 124–125, 148–149.

93. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 266. For a slightly different version, see Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 232.

94. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 289.

THE TALES OF THE ZADDIKIM

It is in tales like these two that the Hasidic masters come to life. There are thousands of these tales, some trivial, others of great depth, some amusing, others sad, some expressing common sense, others the wisdom of holiness.[95] I should like to retell a few that are of rare beauty, showing the masters at their best.

"Moishe, what is that, 'God'?" Rabbi Shneur Zalman startled one of his disciples. The rabbi prodded again and again, but the disciple remained silent. "Why don't you answer?" "Because I don't know." "Do you think I do?" the rabbi rejoined. "But I have to say, for so it is, He is clearly here, and except for Him nothing is clearly here, and that is He." [96] What simpler way is there to express our dark and luminous knowledge of God!

"Where does God dwell?" Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk inquired of some learned guests. "What a question!" they replied. "Is not the world full of His glory?" Answering his own question, he said: "God dwells wherever He is permitted to enter." [97] As the Hasidic masters believed in God's omnipresence, so they believed it to be man's task to prepare a special abode in his heart for the ever-present, ever-waiting Lord. Once the grandson of Rabbi Barukh of Mezbizh was playing hide-and-seek with a friend. Having found a hiding place, he

95. To the Hasidim, storytelling was not merely an attempt to preserve the memory of the past; they thought of it as an efficacious way to make the wonders of the past present. The Hebrew writer Shmuel J. Agnon relates: "When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the 'Maggid' of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the storyteller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three." (As quoted by Scholem, *op. cit.,* pp. 349–350.)

96. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 269.

97. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 277.

waited for his playmate to discover him. But he waited in vain. When he finally left his shelter, he saw that his friend was gone—he had not looked for him at all! Crying, he ran to his grandfather, and complained: "I hid myself, but that bad Henoch didn't look for me at all!" As the rabbi heard of the broken trust, tears flowed from his eyes. "Look," he said, "that's God's complaint, too. He turned His face from us and hid Himself, that we should seek and find Him—but we do not seek Him!" [98]

It is sin and suffering that conceal God from us, but there is light in this darkness. Once a disciple of Rabbi Pinhas was disheartened because in affliction it is so difficult to keep perfect faith in God's providence. He seems to hide from the unfortunate. The disciple wondered what such a man could do to strengthen his faith, and the rabbi answered: "It ceases to be a hiding if you know it is a hiding." [99] Great though our misery is, the earth is not sad, because it is God's. When Rabbi Barukh was asked why in the invocation "Creator of remedies, awful in praises, Lord of wonders" remedies seem to take precedence over wonders, he explained that God does not wish to be acknowledged just as the Lord of miracles, but above all as the Lord of nature. For all is wonder.[100]

There is no one like God—a truth no Hasid ever doubted, though he might have forgotten it for a moment. On his way home from years of study, a disciple of the Great Maggid was passing through Karlin, where a former companion of his, Rabbi Aaron, lived. It was the dead of night, and he was eager to hear his friend recite the lamentation over Jerusalem. He rapped at the lighted window and called: "Aaron, Aaron, open up!" But the Karlin rabbi, bent over the sacred books, did not rise; he only asked: "Who is it?" "It is I," the visitor replied, certain that his voice would be recognized. There was silence, no welcome, not even another question. Again he rapped: "Aaron, why don't you let me in?" With a grave voice the rabbi countered: "Who is so bold as to say: 'It is I,' words spoken by God when He gave us the Torah amidst fire and thunder, words no son of woman may utter!" Upon this, the disciple withdrew and, instead of going

98. See Bloch, *Priester,* pp. 107–108; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 97.
99. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 122.
100. See *ibid.,* p. 93.

home, returned to his teacher, realizing how much more he had to learn.[101]

Similarly, Rabbi Mikhal of Zlotchov used to say: "The 'I,' the sense of one's own 'I,' is the only wall which separates man and God. God alone can say 'I,' and His glory rests on none but him who considers himself nothing. When a man offers his 'I' to God, the wall between him and his Maker crumbles, indeed the words of the Song of Songs apply to him: 'I am my Beloved's and His desire is toward me.'" [102]

Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz was asked for the interpretation of a talmudic passage in which Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai is recorded to have said to his son: "You and I are enough for the world." He answered with another talmudic thought on the meaning of creation: "The creature says: 'You are our God,' while the Holy One, blessed be He, answers: 'I am the Lord your God.'" And the rabbi added: "This 'You' and this 'I' are enough for the world." [103]

It was this spirit that made one Hasidic rabbi resolve: "I will not rest until I create a residence of the Shekinah within my being!" and made another, when he was a little boy, run up and down his room, whispering over and over: "No one else but You alone, no one else but You!" [104] The same simplicity of heart prompted Rabbi Israel of Koznitz, when he thought he was by himself, to speak to God not in the sacred tongue of Hebrew, but in Polish, the language of the Christian peasants. *Moj kochanku,* he would sing, "my dearest, my beloved." [105]

So dependent is man on God, his Master, that without Him he is nothing. A Hasid, complaining to Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk about his poverty, was urged: "Don't be anxious. Pray with your whole heart, and the Lord of pity will have pity on you." "But I don't know how to pray," the poor man said. With great compassion the rabbi answered: "Then you really have a great deal to be anxious about." [106]

There is no misery like a heart empty of prayer, and thus empty of

101. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 167; Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 199–200.
102. See Bloch, *Priester,* p. 76; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 149.
103. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 205.
104. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 88; *Later Masters,* p. 208.
105. See Bloch, *Priester,* p. 147; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 289.
106. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 280.

God. But to a praying heart all things are well. Once Rabbi Noah of Lekhovitz overheard one of his followers trying to recite the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith as stated by Maimonides. He could get no further than the first words: "I believe with perfect faith." However hard he tried, he had to break off, murmuring: "I don't get it. I don't get it." The rabbi approached him: "What is it that you don't understand?" "I cannot understand how it is that I say 'I believe,' but if I really believe, why do I sin? But if I do not really believe, why do I lie?" To which the rabbi replied: "When you say 'I believe,' you pray. What you are saying is: 'May I believe.'" Whereupon his follower, all afire, shouted: "That's right! That's right! May I believe, Lord of the world, may I believe!" [107] How similar is this prayer to that of the man in the Gospel: "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mk 9:23). And how clearly it tells that faith is God's gift, as it is man's consent to His word!

In the eyes of the zaddikim there was no greater foolishness than to think that man can do without grace. Rabbi Hayyim of Zans, standing at his window, beckoned a passer-by to come in. "Tell me," he asked, "if you found a purse full of gold pieces, would you return it to its rightful owner?" "Without delay, Rabbi, if I knew who he was." "Fool!" said the rabbi. Soon he called in another man, and posed the same question. "I'm not so stupid as to let such a windfall out of my hands," was his answer. "You're a scoundrel!" the rabbi exclaimed. Again he knocked at the windowpane, to test a third man. His reply was different: "Rabbi, how do I know what I would be like then? Whether I would be able to conquer the evil urge? Maybe the evil urge would overcome me, and I would take what belonged to another. But if the Holy One, blessed be He, helped me against the evil urge, then I would restore the find." "How beautiful your words are!" the Rabbi of Zans marveled. "You are truly wise." [108]

It was for the sake of such wisdom that the best among the Hasidic masters valued poverty. "How easy it is for a poor man to depend on God! What else has he to depend on?" Rabbi Moshe Leib reflected. "But how hard for a rich man! All his possessions call out to him:

107. See *ibid.*, p. 158.
108. See Bloch, *Priester,* p. 223; Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 212.

'Depend on us!'" [109] One time Rabbi Mendel visited his brother-in-law, Rabbi Uri of Strelisk. Noticing that the followers of his brother-in-law were all poor, he asked why this was so. "They have no desire for wealth," the Rabbi of Strelisk replied. While the two were at table, the host turned to one of his Hasids: "Yehezkel, since my brother-in-law and I are sitting here together, it is a good time for you to tell your heart's desire. I assure you, it will be fulfilled." Burning, the Hasid answered: "I beg the rabbi to obtain for me that, with the same devotion he does, I may say the prayer: 'Blessed be He who spoke, and the world was.'" [110]

As the true masters loved poverty, so they loved humility, poverty of heart. Even a man especially chosen by God has no reason for pride. As Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn remarked: "If it pleases a king to hang his crown on a wooden peg which happens to be on the wall, will the wooden peg boast that it was its beauty which drew the eye of the king?" [111] Rabbi Azriel Hurwitz, an opponent of Hasidism, known as "Iron Head," used to harass Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak, the famous "Seer" of Lublin. Once he asked: "How is it that so many flock to you? They don't to me, and I'm much more learned than you." The Seer answered: "I too am astonished that so many come to a man as insignificant as myself to hear God's word, when they could go to you whose learning moves mountains. Perhaps the reason is this: They come to me because I'm astonished they come. They don't come to you because you're astonished they don't come." [112]

A tale that makes the same point is told of Rabbi Abraham Yehoshua Heshel. He was to visit a certain town, and two wealthy Jews there, one haughty, the other unassuming, competed for the privilege of giving him hospitality. Their houses were equally spacious; the men were of equal standing, but the modest Hasid had once committed a great sin. As the two could not agree, the choice was left to the Rabbi of Apt. When he made the house of the second his quarters, his followers were perplexed. "According to the Talmud," he explained, "God says of the proud man, 'I and he cannot dwell together in the

109. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 92.
110. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* pp. 245–246; Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 147.
111. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 167.
112. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 312; Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 217.

world.' Now, if God, blessed be He, can't find room with him, how much less I? True, the other once committed a grievous sin, yet of such is said in the Torah that He dwells in their midst" (Lev 16:16).[113] If it is fitting for God to dwell there, how much more for me!" [114]

Obviously, a man ought not to be judged by what he was, but by what he is; not by his past, but by his present deeds. Even this rule is not enough, for God made man redeemable. Hence the real crime of a man is not the sins he commits, Rabbi Bunam of Pzhysha held, for temptation is strong and man is weak. The evil of evils is that, though he can turn to God at any moment, he does not.[115] Once a man who had done wrong and was suffering the consequences sought advice from the Rabbi of Trisk, only to be rejected; one ought to ask counsel before acting, and not after, he was told. But when he turned to Rabbi Yaakov Zevi of Parysov, the rabbi said: "You must be helped! It is not right to concentrate on the just, we must beg mercy for the sinners." And pressing a truth, as the Hasidic masters were wont to do, he continued that Abraham interceded for the just and therefore did not succeed, while Moses implored God's pardon for the iniquity of his people, and pardon was granted.[116]

Thus, to free sinners, to ransom prisoners, to defend the weak was the work of a true zaddik, for there is no greater thing than love. The wife of Rabbi Wolf of Zbarazh had a heated quarrel with her maid about a broken dish. When it could not be settled, the mistress decided to take the matter to the rabbinical court. As she was leaving, the rabbi joined her. "Where are you going?" she asked. "I am going with you to the court." "It is not fitting," she protested, "that you trouble yourself about so small a matter. I can present my own case." To this the rabbi replied: "Do you think I am going there to speak on your behalf? I am going to plead the case of your servant. She is an orphan, and who would defend her if not I?" [117]

The true zaddik walks in mercy and compassion. In the words of St. Paul, "love is the fulfillment of the Law" (Rom 13:10), and such was the mind of Rabbi Mikhal of Zlotchov. When he was asked how

113. The Rabbi of Apt was quoting freely; what was set up among the Israelites in the midst of their uncleanness was the Tent of Meeting.
114. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* pp. 225–226; Buber, *Later Masters,* pp. 111–112.
115. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 257.
116. See *ibid.,* p. 235.
117. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 260; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 159.

it was that according to the Talmud Abraham fulfilled all the laws, though they had not yet been promulgated, he answered: "All that is needed is to love God. If you are about to do something and you realize it might lessen your love, you know that it is sin. But if you realize that what you are about to do will increase your love, you know that your will is in keeping with God's will. And this was Abraham's way." [118]

There is no ladder to the love of God but the love of men. In Hebrew, the word for "stork" is *ḥasidah,* "the pious, the affectionate one." Yet the Mosaic law counts the stork among the unclean beasts, forbidden as food. The Rabbi of Pzhysha solved this contradiction by saying: "The stork is called *ḥasidah,* 'the affectionate one,' because it loves its own; it is counted among the unclean beasts because it loves only its own." [119]

Once Rabbi Rafael of Bershad was going away for the summer, and he invited one of his disciples to sit with him in his carriage. "I'm afraid I'll crowd you," the disciple protested. Whereupon the rabbi said with great affection: "Let us love each other more, and there will be ample space." [120] Another rabbi, Moshe Leib of Sasov, related how he owed his knowledge of the true love of men to a conversation of two peasants. "The first said: 'Tell me, Ivan, do you love me?' 'I love you very much,' answered the second. 'Do you know then, my friend, what grieves me?' 'How can I know that?' 'If you don't know what grieves me, how can you say you love me?' Hence to love," the rabbi concluded, "to love in truth, is to know the pain of the loved one." [121] On another occasion, the Rabbi of Sasov, who used to visit all the sick boys in town and nurse them, went so far as to say: "He who is not ready to suck pus from the sores of a plague-ridden child has not climbed the mountain of neighborly love halfway." [122]

Rabbi Pinhas of Koretz taught: "We must pray also for the wicked among the peoples of the earth, and we must love them too. Unless we pray like this, unless we love like this, the Messiah will not come." [123] Similarly, Rabbi Mikhal of Zlotchov commanded his sons

118. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 149.
119. See Buber, *Later Masters,* pp. 231–232.
120. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 130.
121. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 178; Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 86.
122. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 87.
123. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 130.

to pray for their enemies that all may be well with them. "Do you think," he added, "this is not to serve God? It is a service greater than all prayer." [124]

When a rich man, hostile to Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, tried to ridicule him, the rabbi suffered less from his own humiliation than from the punishment likely to fall upon the other. On the Day of Atonement, coming to the Psalm verse: "By this I know that thou delightest in me: mine enemy will not triumph over me" (40:12), he read the words over and over, but in a rendering all his own: "By this I know that thou delightest in me: my enemy will suffer no ill because of me." Then he prayed for all his opponents who tried to shame him, that the Lord of the world forgive them, and that they would not have to suffer on his account.[125]

Thus it is by love that the true Hasid is known. According to Rabbi Zevi Elimelekh of Dynov, there is a hall in heaven from which all love flows onto the earth. But man must not be content with loving, he must sanctify his love, lifting it to the highest, making one his love of man and his love of the Name. In doing so, he becomes "a priest in the sanctuary of love." [126]

With love uppermost, it is not to be wondered at that the Hasidic masters set great store by suffering. Happy in his poverty, Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal of Zlotchov was asked: "How can you keep praying every day: 'Blessed art thou . . . who providest my every want'? Surely you lack everything a man needs!" "Most likely, my want is poverty," he answered, "and with this I have been provided." [127] Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov could not see another man suffer without feeling his neighbor's pain as his own. When someone marveled that he was able to share in the miseries of so many, he said: "What do you mean 'share'? It is my own sorrow; how can I help but suffer it?" [128] Every Passover, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev protested that he did not know how to ask, and even if he did he would not dare ask, why things happened as they did; why, for instance, the people of Israel went from exile to exile. Hence he begged the Lord not to reveal to him the secret of His ways, but to show him what each event

124. See *ibid.*, p. 156.
125. See *ibid.*, pp. 189–190; Bloch, *Gemeinde*, pp. 135–136.
126. See Bloch, *Priester*, p. 7.
127. See Buber, *Early Masters*, p. 138.
128. See Buber, *Later Masters*, p. 86.

demanded of him. And he added: "It is not why I suffer that I wish to know, but only whether I suffer for your sake." [129]

Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov lost his wife and, shortly after, his daughter. Far from crushed, he prayed: "Lord of the world, you took my wife from me, but I still had my daughter and could rejoice in her. Now you have taken her from me too. Now I have no one left to rejoice in but you alone. So I shall rejoice in you." [130] It is pure joy, then, "crucified joy," that marks the true Hasid. The Rabbi of Sasov once defined him as one who is like a child, weeping and rejoicing. The man of piety weeps in the remembrance of his sins, of his baseness in offending God. But he rejoices in the thought that he was created to serve the Lord of heaven and fulfill His commandments. One or the other attitude, alone, is harmful; only in sadness and in joy can man reach the heights of piety.[131]

Among the pure joys that hail from paradise, the Hasidic masters counted a sense of humor, laughter that, like a gentle wind, thaws what is rigid.[132] Thus the Rabbi of Apt could jest against himself: "No one ever got the better of me except once—and then it was a woman." She was a respected lady who had sought his advice. No sooner had she entered than he saw her sins mirrored in her face. "Adulteress, get out of here!" he shouted. At first speechless, the woman collected herself, and said: "The Lord of the world is long-suffering with the wicked, in no haste to exact payment for their debts. To no one does He disclose their secret sins, so that they may not be ashamed to return to Him; nor does He hide His face from them. The Rabbi of Apt, however, sits there in his chair and cannot resist for a moment betraying what the Creator has covered." Thus did the Rabbi of Apt learn his lesson.[133] With the same humble humor, the Rabbi of Sasov taught a lesson to his disciples. After he had given all the money he owned to a well-known scoundrel, they gasped: "Why do you give all your money to a man like this?" "Shall I be more finicky than God, who gave it to me?" he replied.[134]

As these rabbis taught and lived, so they died. One of them sat in

129. See Buber, *Early Masters*, pp. 212–213.
130. See Buber, *Later Masters*, p. 137.
131. See Bloch, *Gemeinde*, p. 181.
132. See Buber, *Early Masters*, pp. 135, 110.
133. See Bloch, *Gemeinde*, pp. 226–227; Buber, *Later Masters*, p. 111.
134. See Bloch, *Priester*, p. 168; Buber, *Later Masters*, p. 85.

his chair, smoking his pipe. Suddenly, he took it out of his mouth. "The soul is yours, your work the body. Have mercy, O God, on that which you have made!" he said, and breathed his last.[135] Another made it his custom, during the last year of his life, to stand near the window and say to himself: "Take a look at it—the gross world!" On the morning of his last day, he put on the prayer shawl and the phylacteries. When he had finished the first benediction, he had them taken off, and rejoiced: "Today I shall be free of *ṭallit* and *tefillin.* I shall be free of the commandments. I shall be free of the world." [136] On the other hand, a Hasid could describe the passing of his master as very beautiful: "It was as if he went from one room to another." "From one room to another?" countered a rabbi who heard him. "No, from one corner of the room to another corner." [137]

As Rabbi Bunam lay on his deathbed, his wife wept bitterly. Reprovingly he turned to her: "Why do you weep? All my life has been given me merely that I might learn to die." [138] Again, when a disciple of Rabbi Elimelekh wondered why his master was cheerful as his end approached, the rabbi took the disciple's hand into his own, and said: "Why should I not rejoice, seeing that I am about to leave this world below, and enter into the higher world of eternity? Think of the words of the psalmist: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me'" (22:4).[139]

On the Great Sabbath, the Sabbath that precedes the Passover, Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn, feeling that his death was not far off, kept repeating: "Praise the Lord, O my soul! . . . I will praise the Lord while I live" (Ps 145:1–2). Earlier in his life he had been heard to say: "If I knew I had said 'Amen' just once as it ought to be said, I would have nothing to worry about." [140]

THE PIETY OF THE ZADDIKIM

Rabbi Moshe's wish to have uttered at least one perfect "Yes" to the will of God shows, as do all the great Hasidic tales, that God is the

135. See Martin Buber, *Die Chassidischen Bücher* (Hellerau: Jakob Hegner, 1928), p. 648.
136. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 223.
137. See *ibid.,* p. 302.
138. See *ibid.,* p. 268.
139. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 145.
140. See Buber, *Later Masters,* pp. 173, 172.

beginning and the end of Hasidic piety. Martin Buber, however, seems to hold a different view. He tells us that Hasidism overcame the dichotomy of life in God and life in the world—a dichotomy he calls "the original evil of all 'religion.'" Thus it was able to proclaim that "one with the world, *weltverbunden,* man stands in the immediate sight of God." [141] No doubt, to divorce the one life from the other is an evil, whether it is the divorce of the "pious" who abandon the world to the devil, or whether it is the divorce of the "impious" who would like the world to be the city of self-sufficient man. But the Hasidic message is not one of *Weltverbundenheit* but of *Gottverbundenheit.* The masters do not teach that "one with the world, man stands in the immediate sight of God"; rather do they teach that man cannot stand upright in the world unless he is one with God.

Again, "sanctification of things worldly is the central impulse of the zaddik," Buber writes. "His meal is a sacrifice, his table an altar. All his errands lead to salvation." [142] Here an essential component of the zaddik's spirituality is missing. True, for the zaddik all things of creation are good since they come from God, and they must be brought back to Him, who is the Lord and Life of the world. The zaddik's central impulse, then, is the love of God: His love for us and our love for Him. Buber himself relates the words of a zaddik who said that "the ultimate meaning of all the wisdom of the Kabbalah is to take upon oneself the yoke of God's kingdom, and the ultimate meaning of all the art of holy intent is to direct one's heart toward God." [143]

Still, for Buber Hasidic existence is above all *weltoffen, weltfromm, weltverliebt,* "open to the world, pious with the world, fond of the world." [144] "Only through a genuine converse with things and living creatures does man arrive at the true life," he maintains. "Only on this road can he share actively in the redemption of the world." [145] There is truth in this interpretation of Hasidic piety. When asked by his son how he prayed, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi answered: "With the floor and the bench." [146] Floor and bench had waited to be used, had

141. Buber, *Chassidische Botschaft,* p. 19; cf. *Hasidism,* p. 104.
142. *Ibid.,* p. 115; cf. *Hasidism,* p. 81.
143. *Ibid.,* p. 116; cf. *Hasidism,* p. 82.
144. *Ibid.,* p. 149; cf. *Hasidism,* pp. 137–138.
145. *Ibid.,* p. 91; cf. *Hasidism,* p. 58.
146. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 269.

called him to prayer. In prayer, then, taking all the world into his heart, he took also the floor on which he stood and the bench on which he sat, up to God. As rapport with inanimate creatures in their highest purpose helps the zaddik's soul ascend to God, so, indeed more so, does harmony with men. Rabbi Abraham of Stretyn was once approached by a man: "They say that you have some mysterious and very effective drugs. Give me something for the fear of God." "I don't have any drug for the fear of God," said Rabbi Abraham, "but I have one for the love of God." "That's better!" cried the other, "just give it to me." "It's the love of one's neighbor." [147]

There is truth in Buber's interpretation, but it is not the full truth. His view lacks precision; the stress on the world throws it off balance.[148] Joyful though the zaddikim were in this world, they were—dare I say it?—not of this world. They spoke of "the annihilation of self" and "the gift of stripping oneself of all that is bodily." [149] "In

147. See Buber, *Later Masters,* pp. 151–152.

148. Hand in hand with this unbalance goes Buber's interpretation of the Hasidic concept of God. For him there soared up in Hasidism "a vision of true unity and a passionate desire for wholeness." Thus "the image of God grew larger and the will to realization stronger. The borderline between God and world drawn by doctrine as well as the borderline between the holy and the profane drawn by life could no longer satisfy that new twofold vision, because both borderlines were static, immovable, timeless, because they did not concede any influence to the events of time. The image of God grown larger demanded a more dynamic, a more fluid frontier between God and world, for it implied knowledge about a power that desired to diffuse and yet to restrict itself, about a substance at once resisting and giving way." (*Chassidische Botschaft,* pp. 146–147; cf. *Hasidism,* pp. 135–136.) It is true, the thought of the Hasidic masters is often groping, their language on God's all-pervading presence not always without ambiguity, but I doubt that the masters would recognize themselves in Buber's interpretation. In any case, an image of God so misty as to make Him part of the world, and the world part of Him, breaks with biblical revelation; it reverts to pagan mythology.

149. See Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 303, 307. A striking example of exaggeration to which a simplified view of Hasidic piety leads is found in a review of several of Buber's books by Leslie A. Fiedler. In it he says: "Especially in his attitude toward sex, the Jew in America is closer to the hasid than to his Gentile neighbor. Copulation is not to him a furtive extra-marital pleasure, but the very sanctity of marriage; not for him, as for the Calvinist, forbidden on the Sabbath, but enjoined as a special grace of the day. I remember once during the war feeling the eyes of a cabin-mate on me as I was writing home to my wife. 'You must be a Jew!' he blurted out, with the air of an ingenious discovery. 'Only Jews write home *that way.* Jews are funny about their wives—take them too serious.' Behind him, unknown but effective, was the Pauline tradition of celibacy as the greatest good (it is only 'better to marry than burn'), and the sentence of St. Jerome: 'He who loves his wife passionately is an adulterer!'" (*Commentary,* VII, 2, February 1949, pp. 197–198.)

I am not concerned here with Fiedler's misunderstanding of the Christian vision of marriage for which true marital union, the "union of the flesh and of sweet love" (*Sacramentum Fuldense*) is good, indeed holy; nor am I concerned with his quoting St. Paul and St. Jerome out of context, but I think he could not have been so assured, had he known, for instance, this saying of the Great Maggid, which so closely resembles the view he imputes to the Christian: "The true Hasid ought to love his wife as he loves the *tefillin;* he ought to love her only because it is a divine commandment [to beget children] without clinging to her in his thought. It is like this: When a man goes to the fair and needs a horse for it, should he therefore love the horse? A man needs his wife in order to serve the Creator, in order to be worthy of the world to come. But if he neglects his business and clings to her in his thoughts—what is this, if not the greatest nonsense?" (Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 150–151.) More important still, Fiedler could not have set the Jewish attitude toward sex against the Christian had he kept in mind the rigid laws on marital continence contained in the talmudic treatise *Niddah.* According to them, intercourse is forbidden during menstruation and for seven days after. Even on the wedding night the bridal couple may not come together unless the required seven days since the cessation of the flow have elapsed. After their first union, the newlyweds must observe a period of abstinence of at least seven days. An even longer time of abstinence is required after childbirth. (For a brief résumé of the laws of *Niddah,* see Rivka Levi Jung, "Taharah—A Way to Married Happiness" in *The Jewish Library,* ed. Leo Jung, New York: The Jewish Library Publishing Co., 1934, III, 356–357. See also "Niddah," *Jewish Encyclopedia,* IX, 301.) Whatever their differences, the true Christian and the traditional Jewish visions of marriage are at one in this: Without mastery, without the mortification of sexual desire there can be no sanctity of marriage.

order really to live, a man must give himself to death," Rabbi Yitzhak of Vorki used to say.[150] There are numerous other sayings that will not fit easily into Buber's simplified view. Rabbi Moshe Leib, for instance, held: "Like the edge of a blade is the way in this world: netherworld on this side, netherworld on that, and the way of life between." [151] And Rabbi Bunam insisted: "Sometimes, looking at the world, it seems to me that every man is like a tree in the wilderness; that God has no one in His world but him, and that he has no one to turn to but God." [152]

The zaddikim were open to the word of God as it speaks through every creature, but they were not "at home" in this world. They wished to comfort their people, but they preached a comfort that could not be had without *teshubah,* without turning, without repentance. Thus Rabbi Shmelke thought that the Messiah would not come while the people's cry for Him was nothing more than a cry for bread; He would not come until they forgot their own needs and suffered with the Shekinah, God's glory in exile, who suffers for and

150. See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 291.

151. See *ibid.,* p. 92.

152. See *ibid.,* p. 256.

with Israel because of her sins.[153] And from the lips of the Rabbi of Lublin came these disquieting words: "When a man thinks himself wholly just with no need to strive further, justice does not know him. You must follow and follow justice, never standing still; in your own eyes, you must always be a newborn child that has not yet achieved anything—this is true justice." [154]

Buber is right, for the zaddik the table is like an altar, every meal a praise to God; for him man's least action is a means of grace, but only when it is done in His name. "Whatever a man does," Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev used to say, "he must remember that his body is something holy, and then he will be on guard against evil thoughts. He must remember that his mind is his noblest part; that it is like the Holy of Holies where the Ark and the tablets of the Law stood. But if he thinks unhallowed thoughts, he puts an idol there. Hence he must be ever mindful of Torah, live in the fear of God, and lifting his hands to work, lift them as if they were the cherubim." [155] Again, Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah, speaking of a visit to the Great Maggid, told that he had gone to him, not to hear his interpretations of Torah but to see how he took off and put on his shoes. "What are interpretations of Torah?" he asked. "In his actions, speech, and bearing—in his union with God, a man must be Torah." [156]

It is quite inadequate, then, to describe the Hasidic attitude as "open to the world, pious with the world, fond of the world." Truer and deeper is Chajim Bloch's interpretation:

> Man's highest task is to be united with God, to live in Him, to direct all actions and thoughts toward Him, and to feel Him in all things. It is to lift one's mind from things finite and imperfect to God. Whoever sees and feels the divine glory everywhere, in the smallest and the greatest; whoever desires and senses oneness with the God who fills the earth, attains his soul's perfection; he is a zaddik, a perfect man.[157]

Above all psalms, the Baal Shem favored: "Give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth forever" (106:1). This is the epitome of Hasidic piety.

153. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 185.
154. See *ibid.,* p. 314.
155. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* pp. 63–64; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 230.
156. See Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 64; Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 107.
157. Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 70.

CONFLICT AND CONCORD

THE Baal Shem meant his message to be a leaven of love permeating Jewish life, a spring of devotion renewing and unifying his people, yet it became a torrent that split the Jewish community of eastern Europe into two hostile camps. While he thought of the movement he had created as a center of inspiration, its adversaries, the *mitnagdim,* branded it—not entirely without provocation by some Hasidic extremists—as a sect.

HASIDISM AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

When the Hasidim first banded together, they did so secretly, but as their strength grew they assembled in open. They not only followed a distinct way of life, but they also had their special prayer books, their own rabbis and houses of worship, their own printing presses and ritual slaughterers. This withdrawal from the larger community was more than the leading rabbis were willing to bear: Denunciation followed on denunciation; harsh words were spoken, bitter and divisive words, and action was taken to suppress the new movement. The *mitnagdim* even appealed to the government. When opposing rabbis and heads of influential congregations sought to have the Hasidim chased from their towns, when they tried to close Hasidic houses of prayer, Rabbi Yaakov Joseph of Polnoye, a direct disciple of the Baal Shem, and the originator of Hasidic literature, answered:

> *The kings of the earth stand up,*
> *and the rulers take counsel together,*
> *against the Lord, and against His anointed:*
> *"Let us break their bands asunder,*
> *and cast away their cords from us."*
>
> (Ps 2:2–3)

For the majority of rabbinical scholars, he charged, the Torah had become but a crown to boast about; the spiritual needs of simple people had left them, Israel's appointed guardians, indifferent. By their haughtiness they had driven the people away, but when they had seen themselves abandoned, they had become angry. With anger thus ruling the land, the time was made ready for the Baal Shem's "straight and short way to the halls of the great King, Master of all," the "way

of compassion in the service of God and in all the concerns of men." But those in authority heard the new message with contempt and met it with persecution, the Rabbi of Polnoye complained; in unrestrained defense he called the enemies of the Hasidic way "Jewish devils," "wise men in the realm of evil," "pests in the vineyard of the Lord." [158]

The language of those who fought Hasidism was even more unbridled. They spoke of "the smashing of tyrants," the "rooting out of thorns and thistles that threaten the lovely vineyard of the house of Israel." [159] They spoke of the Hasidim as "those impure men who deserted the way of God and that of our fathers." [160] One of the opponents, Israel Löbel, a wandering preacher, raged against the Baal Shem as "an empty well devoid of the waters of Torah," the "most wicked of seducers." Craving for power but lacking talmudic knowledge, he announced, the Baal Shem could not hope to influence others through his insights and thus became an exorcist. To find followers, he took on the veneer of holiness, a mask of devotion, and, to keep their esteem, called them Hasidim, "men of piety." [161]

But the opposition of the *mitnagdim* did not stop at verbal taunts. Years before Israel Löbel wrote, at the end of 1771, an epidemic broke out in Vilna, taking the lives of several hundred small children. The frightened heads of the community saw in this a sign of God's wrath and began to search for its cause. Soon they thought they had discovered the culprits in the Hasidim. Between the first and the last day of Passover in 1772, a court convened and, among other things, found one of the Hasidic leaders, Rabbi Hayyim, guilty of having slandered Rabbi Elijah of Vilna. Because of his overwhelming rabbinical scholarship, Rabbi Elijah bore the title Gaon, "Excellence," [162] yet Rabbi Hayyim had dared call the Gaon's doctrine and faith "lies." For his offense against the glory of God, the Torah, and the Gaon, he was told to ask forgiveness publicly, before the Ark of the Covenant in the synagogue. When he also apologized personally to the Gaon, he heard these severe words: "I forgive you your offense

158. See Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 163–167.
159. *Ibid.,* p. 321.
160. *Ibid.,* p. 125.
161. See *ibid.,* pp. 122–123.
162. "Excellence" is a free translation. Most likely "Gaon" is an abbreviation of *ge'on ya'aḳov,* "the pride, the glory of Jacob," in Ps 46:5.

against my honor, but your sin against the honor of God and that of the Torah will hardly be forgiven you and your companions until you die." Shunned by the community, he had to leave the town.[163]

Not satisfied with this, the court started another investigation and decreed that all Hasidic books be burned at the entrance to the synagogue before the beginning of the Sabbath; that at the morning service of the Sabbath Rabbi Issar, head of the Hasidim, make a public confession as formulated by the court and be present while the beadle pronounced the excommunication of him and his followers; and that the court's decisions be made known to all the great communities in the land. Notified of the verdict, the Gaon angrily reproved the judges: "Why did you show clemency? Were it in my power, I should not have hesitated to deal with the heretics the way the prophet Elijah dealt with the prophets of baal." And he had Rabbi Issar, now his prisoner, flogged.[164]

Soon after, the same passion burst out in Galicia. There the heads of the community accused the Hasidim of introducing new rites, secluding themselves from the holy congregation, having their own services, not keeping the proper time for them, wearing white garments on Sabbaths and feasts, detesting the oral tradition, using sharp knives for the slaughter of animals, and declared:

> There were evildoers of this kind many years ago. . . . Now these transgressors have again taken root, and it is to be feared that our Torah will seem to be cut in two; that—God forbid—the name of heaven thus will be profaned among the nations and we will become the butt of their scorn and mockery. How long, then, will this snare threaten the house of Israel? Rise, you who are upright, and fight valiantly for God. May everyone who fears Him bestir himself, be zealous for the Lord of hosts, for His exalted and awesome name, close the yawning gap and expel the wicked men wherever there is the least trace of them. For surely we are faced here with heresy and godlessness. . . . Who sins in secret, is condemned by God before all the world.

Referring to all the condemnations, maledictions, and curses of the Torah, to the threat of Joshua, son of Nun, to the anathemas formulated by the men of the Great Assembly, the authorities of Brody then

163. See Dubnow, *Geschichte des Chassidismus,* I, 188–189.
164. See *ibid.,* pp. 188–191.

ordered the Hasidim to desist from all their usages under pain of the great and terrifying *ḥerem,* the ban of excommunication.[165]

Similar attacks were made in other places, but nothing could halt Hasidism's triumphant march, short-lived though it was. In 1796 passions flared up once more. When the Gaon of Vilna heard of a rumor spread by some Hasidim that he was no longer opposed to their ways, he denounced them again, even more violently than before:

> A voice calls out to them: Woe to the generation that curses its father and withholds the blessing from its mother! . . . They trespass against the Torah, they change the Law and interpret holy Scripture in a new and perverted sense. . . . The teaching that has come down to us from Moses they replace by a new covenant. . . .
>
> Satan has invaded the scattered flock of Israel and has caused confusion among them. . . . Now is the time to restore quiet, . . . to remove the stumbling block, to avenge God's Torah whose splendor those unruly men have trampled under foot. Because their works are evil, these fools must be chastised with whips and scorpions before all, that they may be brought to their senses. No one should have pity on them or befriend them, rather should they be expelled as harmful from all the tribes of Israel.[166]

There can be no doubt that the Gaon's sadness was deeply felt and that his fervor was sincere. Still, could it be that his outbursts were provoked by nothing else but the several small Hasidic deviations from traditional customs, by nothing else but the excessive language of some zaddikim and the extravagant behavior of some of their followers? The Gaon, prince of rabbinical scholars, passionately clung to a form of Judaism for which the spirit of the Law is contained by its letter. In the eyes of the Baal Shem, however, the spirit soared above the letter. One time, the Baal Shem sat at table with some of his disciples. Suddenly, overcome by a great joy, he leaped to his feet and danced with his disciples, long and fervently. A guest reproached him: "How is it that you say you feel bound by the Shulḥan Aruk[167] and yet you dance with your disciples on a day when the Shulḥan

165. See *ibid.,* pp. 196–198.
166. *Ibid.,* II, 124–125.
167. The *shulḥan aruk,* "set table," written by Joseph Caro, is the code of rabbinical Judaism for all ritual and legal questions obtaining after the destruction of the Temple. On its interesting history, see *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* article on Joseph Caro, III, 585–588.

Aruk expressly forbids it?" "I do feel bound by its precepts, indeed by every dot of it. But remember, man ranks higher than the Shulḥan Aruk, and if he is seized by the desire to abandon himself to God, then he is rid of all fetters and at that moment has reached the rung of divine freedom."[168] It was not freedom from law that the Baal Shem preached, but the freedom of love. Still, his words struck at the nerve center of rabbinical Judaism, hence the outcries against him.

One of the Baal Shem's parables goes like this: Once there lived in the same house a talmudic scholar and a simple Jewish laborer. Both rose very early in the morning. The laborer went to his toil, the scholar to the house of prayer. There the scholar prayed and studied until noontime, when he returned home, well pleased with himself for having done his duty toward God. On his way he met his neighbor, who only now, tired and exhausted, was able to go to the synagogue, quickly to say his morning prayer. The talmudic scholar looked at him with disdain. He thought of the big difference between them—he giving his life to prayer and study, the other busying himself with coarse things and being late in the performance of his religious duty. The worker, however, sighed when he saw the scholar: They had left the house at the same hour, but while he had to slave, the other could occupy himself with holy things. Weeks, months, and years passed. The talmudic scholar died, and soon after, the working man. Called before the heavenly Judge, the scholar was asked: "What did you do all your life?" "I spent my life in the study of the Talmud and in prayer. I observed all the laws to their least detail," he replied, and stood back, well satisfied. But the heavenly prosecutor intervened: "He despised his neighbor, the working man who had little time for prayer and no knowledge of the Talmud." Then the scales were brought out. On one were placed his studies and prayers, on the other his contempt. And lo, the contempt weighed more than all the complacent studies and prayers. Then a heavenly voice was heard: "The talmudic scholar has no place in paradise." When the laborer came up and was asked what he had done during his lifetime, he answered with bowed head: "All my life I spent toiling. With the sweat of my brow I had to provide for my family, and therefore I had no time to pray as I should have." But the heavenly counsel remarked: "He always looked humbly at his neighbor, the talmudic scholar, and

168. Bloch, *Priester,* p. 52.

sighed that he was not like him." And behold, a heavenly voice cried aloud: "Bring the laborer into paradise!" [169]

This parable bespoke an attitude the Gaon and all who thought like him could but condemn. They could have been less severe, but if they wished to keep rabbinical Judaism intact they had to speak out. For decades the feud went on; finally the two camps rested their arms when a new enemy appeared on the scene: Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment.[170]

HASIDISM AND THE CHURCH

The Baal Shem's story of the talmudic scholar and the laborer is in many ways like Christ's parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk 18:9–14). This kind of resemblance is not rare; wherever one looks in Hasidic literature, one is struck by a spirituality similar to that of the New Testament. I could fill page after page with instances like these: The Baal Shem was wont to pray that men might speak abusively about him—a petition which immediately brings to mind Christ's telling His disciples that they are happy when men speak all manner of evil against them (see Mt 5:11). Rabbi Nahman's counsel: "Man should seek God alone and not be constantly devising ways to satisfy his own wants" is like an echo of Christ's bidding: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be given you besides" (Mt 6:33). When Rabbi Mikhal muses: "God alone knows what would have become of me, did I not have my sufferings," one hears the answer St. Paul received in his distress, that grace was enough for him, that divine strength likes to dwell in human weakness (see 2 Cor 12:9). Again, Rabbi Hayyim's avowal: "I love the poor because God loves them" corresponds in a way to St.

169. See Horodezky, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–12.

170. Elsewhere in this essay I have spoken of the decline that followed on Hasidism's success. The charismatic leaders gave way to rulers of hereditary dynasties; some of their seats became centers of power and greed; at times the persecuted even turned into persecutors. But to say that Hasidism deteriorated is not to say that it is dead. It has exerted considerable influence on Jewish thought in general and has even been transplanted to the United States. Though its members are not many, its organization seems strong and some of its old spirit alive. (See Walter Goodman, "The Hasidim Come to Williamsburg," *Commentary,* XIX, 3, March 1955, pp. 269–274, and Herbert Weiner, "The Lubovitcher Movement," *Commentary,* XXIII, 3, March 1957, pp. 231–241, and XXIII, 4, April 1957, pp. 316–327.)

John's urging: "Let us therefore love, because God first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19).[171]

Surely in such sayings the Gospel spirit is alive, but there are also clashes, real or apparent, in doctrine and practice, between Hasidism and the Church. I call them "real or apparent" for it is not always clear in the teachings of Hasidic masters what is metaphor and what is not; it is often hard to tell whether a given doctrine is truth wearing an ill-fitting garment, or falsehood in seductive dress. Hasidism sprang up in a world filled with magic, and though it looked like an effort to shake free of the occult, it did not fully succeed.[172] Among the kabbalistic notions Hasidism inherited was a certain whisper of mystery surrounding the divine names and each of their letters. The perfect permutation and combination of these letters was to give man dominion over all the realms below and above; discovery of a secret formula supposedly contained in these names and its right use might even gain him the power to release Israel from sin and exile, and the world from all its bonds. As the Baal Shem—Master of the Good Name—is said to have worked wonders with the help of amulets, so he is reported to have driven out demons and averted physical dangers by his knowledge of the secret concealed from ordinary men and to have conveyed that secret to his son on his deathbed.[173] Manipulation of the divine names, shifting and grouping of their letters, no matter how holy the purpose, is as clearly against biblical revelation as against Catholic belief; neither of them gives to man any power with God other than supplication. The creature cannot master his Maker.

Quite apart from its magic element, Hasidism's concept of a divine-human interdependence is open to question. In one breath, the masters

171. Harald Sahlin has collected over 150 Hasidic parallels to the New Testament, and rightly calls his list just a sample. See his "Chassidische Parallelen zum Neuen Testament," *Judaica,* XII, 2 (June 1956), pp. 65–98. For the Hasidic sayings quoted, see *ibid.,* pp. 69, 71, 95, 98; Samuel A. Horodezky, *Religiöse Strömungen im Judentum* (Bern: Ernst Bircher, 1920), p. 172; Buber, *Die Chassidischen Bücher,* p. 641; *Later Masters,* p. 210.

172. While Martin Buber maintains that the magical element never touched the center of Hasidic doctrine, that it remained at the periphery, neglected, if not opposed, by the core of its message, Gershom Scholem sees a close connection between the mystical and the magical throughout the history of the Hasidic movement. (See Buber, *Chassidische Botschaft,* pp. 114, 154–155; Scholem, *op. cit.,* pp. 348–349; cf. Buber, *Hasidism,* pp. 80, 143.)

173. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* p. 99.

teach that man must become a will-less voice for the divine Majesty to speak through him, and in the next that his thoughts, words, deeds influence, indeed determine, the divine decrees. "God is your shadow," said the Baal Shem. "As a man moves, so does his shadow: If he walks upright, his shadow will be upright; if he walks stooped, his shadow will be stooped. Like shadow, like Creator. The way man behaves below, God behaves above: If he is kind, one will be kind toward him; if he is merciless, one will have no mercy toward him." [174] This may be no more than a homely figure expressing the undoubted truth that man can open or shut his heart to the divine pity. Or it may be an echo of the Psalm verse: "Toward the sincere you are sincere, but toward the crooked you are astute" (17:24). But it very much sounds as though *man* were the mover of the world, as though *he* caused God's love toward him. Buber favors the latter interpretation. Discussing the concept of *yiḥud,*[175] he says: "Man effects the unity of God, through him is accomplished the unity of becoming, the God-unity of creation. . . . [Man] is not an instrument moved, but a mover released into freedom, free, and acting in freedom; world history is not God's play but God's fate." [176] The divine unity accomplished by man, history the fate of God—this is a complete break with the biblical teaching that God alone is the Creator, that He is the Lord of history.

The Hasidic message stressed the responsibility and responsiveness of every Jew—I say "Jew" because it never looked beyond the people of Israel.[177] It therefore stressed the need for a personal experience of God's reality, but stressed it so much that it seemed to demand a special revelation for each one. The Baal Shem liked to point out that in the Eighteen Benedictions the Lord is not called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. He saw in this evidence that each of the

174. Bloch, *Gemeinde,* p. 62.
175. See footnote 82.
176. Buber, *Chassidische Botschaft,* pp. 112–113; cf. *Hasidism,* pp. 78–79.
177. This is not to say that the Hasidim were unaware of the non-Jewish world. One time the Baal Shem wanted to make a long journey and hired a Russian coachman. When they passed a wayside shrine, the driver neglected to make the sign of the cross, whereupon the Baal Shem ordered him to turn back. As soon as he arrived home, his disciples asked him why he had changed his mind. He told them what had happened, and added: "Every man must obey the precepts of his faith accurately, otherwise he cannot be trusted." (See Bloch, *Priester,* p. 51.)

patriarchs experienced God in his own way, that Isaac and Jacob did not depend on Abraham's knowledge, that they rather sought to arrive at their own knowledge of God.[178] The demand that each one grasp God's glory anew, unless it is no more than an impassioned plea for intimacy of faith, runs counter to Scripture. For it is the singular strength of biblical faith that, since God has spoken, no man need start afresh; that what God revealed to and through patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, revealed in and through Jesus, is revealed to me, and all that is required of me is to hear and to respond—respond, no doubt, with my whole being. Buber is right in pointing out that for Christianity "the decisive event has occurred and can only be 'imitated,' only be renewed in union with it, only be re-enacted." [179] But is he right when he continues that "in Judaism the decisive event exists at all times, that it occurs here and now"? Sinai *was,* God made a covenant with His people; a Jew is therefore a Jew precisely to the point that he continues to stand at the foot of God's holy mountain, that he lives out the Covenant.[180]

For all their occasional emphasis on man's power over God, the basic conviction of the Hasidic masters was: God is *the* reality; all that is real, is real only in Him. So deep was this conviction that to them everything outside Him seemed unsubstantial; the lower world, when compared to the upper, shadowy; matter a mere appearance. A Hasidic parable tells of a mighty king who built a great palace of many rooms, walls, and doors, and filled it with marvelous treasures. To this palace the king invited all the princes and noblemen of his realm. They came, but never found their way to the innermost chamber where the king himself lived. Bewildered, they asked what this meant, where the right entrance was, and how the king could be seen, since so many walls separated him from them. The king's son answered that there was no palace; that there were neither walls nor partitions, neither gates nor doors. "What seems like a palace, is open and empty, and my father the king is here before you." [181] Taken lit-

178. See *ibid.,* pp. 60–61.
179. Buber, *Chassidische Botschaft,* p. 109; cf. *Hasidism,* p. 75.
180. Buber once said as much when he declared: "Who does not remember that God led him out of Egypt, who does not await the Messiah, is no longer a true Jew." (Martin Buber, *Die Jüdische Bewegung,* Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1920, II, 124.)
181. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 134–135.

erally, this would be a denial of creation, of that first of all wonders that God *is* and yet permits creatures to *be.* But it is a parable and may therefore tell no more than God's all-pervading presence, tell no more than what Catholic philosophers call the analogy of being: that God is, and that seen in His light creatures are, and are not.

Long before the Baal Shem preached his message, the Kabbalists had been concerned with the age-old problem: If God was all in all, how could anything exist that was not God? According to the first Kabbalists of the thirteenth century, the world came into being by successive divine emanations: God left His solitude, stepped out of the "enclosure" of His infinite Being, and out of His own Self sent forth His creative power into space. Creation was thus conceived as an unfolding of the Godhead, a concept which, however much its authors may have wished to avoid it, bordered on pantheism. In the latter part of the sixteenth century, Isaac Luria contrived an answer different, subtler, more intriguing, but nonetheless alien to the message of Genesis. Only by a divine withdrawal, *zimzum,* he taught, was the world made possible. When creation was decided upon, the *En Sof,* "the infinite Being," retired into His own nature so that the divine attributes might be made manifest in other beings. "According to Luria," writes Gershom Scholem, "God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space from which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation." [182] There was, then, first His falling back upon Himself and then His unfolding in the making of the universe. Not only was it thus at the beginning, it is thus always. At all times there is this double strain, light streaming back into God and flowing out from Him; and were it not "for this perpetual tension, this ever repeated effort with which God holds Himself back, nothing in the world would exist." [183] It is no doubt true that were the divine glory to flood the world, the world could not bear it, but "shrinkage" of the Infinite is a contradictory, self-negating thought, and to speak of "tension" in God is to conceive Him after the manner of men.[184] While every image of the Creator is full of peril, one that introduces space into Him is fatal.

182. Scholem, *op. cit.,* p. 261.
183. *Ibid.*
184. *Ibid.,* pp. 260–261.

Though the Hasidic masters took over the kabbalistic concept of *zimzum,* it seems that for them it was a metaphor rather than a real occurrence in God. "That light be known" was, according to the Great Maggid, the purpose of creation. But had the Holy One not withdrawn into Himself, he taught, had He not dimmed His light, none would have been able to endure, much less accept, it. As a father conforms to the measure of his little son whom he loves, and to whom he therefore speaks of trifles, even foolish things, or as a teacher confines himself to the limited understanding of his pupil in order to help him to study, so God. His infinite light had to decrease that the world could be, and His light in it.[185] This is how the Great Maggid grappled with the mysterious coexistence of the Infinite and the finite, with the wonder of God's condescension. Probably he wished no more to be taken literally than St. Paul when, in a bold figure, he described the Incarnation as *kenosis,* God's emptying of Himself (see Phil 2:7).

Still, the Maggid's imagery does not convey the rich reality of the creative act, which is not a power leaving the depth of God's being; rather is it He Himself in His causal relationship to His creatures. For the Church, as the fruit of both Testaments, God neither expanded into space nor withdrew within Himself, when He made the world. He neither gained nor lost anything, for He is Fullness of being, the unchanging Lord. If creatures manifest His glory in various ways, this is due not to any limitation of His, but to the measure given each of them. There is no "exile of God into Himself," no "movement of recoil," no "retreat." On the contrary, when His sovereign freedom called things into being, He called them into the safekeeping of His love. In letting creatures mirror His glory, He indubitably condescended to the finite, but the Infinite He ever is. He did not, and could not, divest Himself of part of His being; rather did He, out of His inexhaustible fullness, shower His wealth and lavish His gifts upon the universe. Omnipotent love, generosity, then, are the true marks of His creation.

There is comfort in the Church's teaching on creation, for it is simple and unadorned. No one is able to say whether the zaddikim, clean of heart, would have preferred to kabbalistic exuberance so chaste a doctrine, had they known it. Like the Kabbalists, they were

185. See Horodezky, *Religiöse Strömungen,* pp. 80–81.

children of the ghetto; kabbalistic fantasies, clearly the dream world of captives, must therefore have had a special appeal to them. Rabbinical Judaism offered them no help, since it had never cared to develop theological thought. Mostly concerned with the problems of Jewish conduct according to the Law, it had not tried to sharpen the tools of the mind with which to approach the mysteries of creation or of evil; it did not search, and search till the right words were found, to express these mysteries as adequately as possible. Hence the Hasidic masters had no choice but to make the best of the kabbalistic tradition. Frequently the result was confusion. The evil urge, for instance, is, in the eyes of Rabbi Nahman, like one who runs about among men, with his hand closed, asking each of them: "What do you think I have here?" Each imagines the mysterious hand to hold what he desires most, and chases after it, but as soon as it is opened he finds it empty. One cannot better describe that sin is futility and temptation deceit. Rabbi Nahman continued, however, that there was no perfect service of God without the evil urge; that in directing his passion and ardent desire to Him, man made the evil urge his servant. The just man turned it even into a holy angel, a being of might and destiny.[186] Here man's inclination toward evil and his inner drives, still undetermined, still to be given their goal, are indiscriminately called "evil urge."

This is an almost gnostic confusion, as is the thought that evil is the "shell" of things here below.[187] Without hesitation, the masters recognized evil as the enemy,[188] but at the same time they spoke of it as the lowest rung, the weakest kind, of good. They called it "throne," bearer of the good, even "partaking of the divine." On the other hand, they realized that often by its opposition the good is heightened, much as light is loved most after darkness, and wisdom when confronted with folly.[189] No doubt, the Hasidic masters recognized the unreal reality of evil: Real in the order of conscience, it is unreal in the order of being; morally the violation of a commandment, it is metaphysically nothing but the absence of what ought to be; hostile to the will of God, it must yet serve Him, as all things must. But when, lacking the precise language of a theological tradition, the masters wished to express the puzzling nature of evil, they could not free themselves of the spell of the Kabbalah.

186. See Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman,* p. 39.

187. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* p. 275.

188. How much Hasidism considered evil as the enemy of the soul is shown by a pre-Hasidic *ordo salutis* which early Hasidic literature adopted. That the sinner may be led to the path of justice and good works, he ought, according to this rule of salvation, meditate on the abyss of sin; fear the consequences of his inner attitude; sorrow over sin and over the destruction of the divine image wrought by it; turn away from it; guard zealously against the least participation in it; flee hurriedly from sin to the fulfillment of the Commandments; reject all temptations; hold sin in contempt; be humble and afraid of falling; despise himself, and so on. (See *ibid.,* p. 284.)

The Hasidic mind was under the same spell when it contemplated the fate of a soul whose life remained unfulfilled on earth. The Baal Shem and his successors fully believed that a soul could not be united with its Creator unless it was cleansed, but this did not lead them to believe in purgatory where the soul is made holy by the fire of its sorrow over sin and its desire for God; rather, it brought them to the dreary concept of metempsychosis, the passing of the soul into another body. With the later Kabbalists they thought that a soul on its journey might enter a man at the moment of his conception or birth, and might do so repeatedly until it had made up for its omissions and fulfilled its measure of good works.[190] In addition to *gilgul,* "cycle," "wandering," they also spoke of *ibbur,* "impregnation." A weak man might need the support of stronger and more purified souls. Though already endowed with one, he might thus during his lifetime become host to one or more souls especially related to him—souls once close to his when they were still part of Adam's undivided soul. Through their journeying, then, from stage to stage and through their union with one another—a strong soul carrying a weaker one—souls are to be redeemed and the world as a whole made ready for the descent of the Messiah.[191]

Souls that are sparks of an original soul emanated from the essence

189. See Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman,* p. 13; Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 137–138; Horodezky, *Religiöse Strömungen,* p. 85.

190. Though at first sight reincarnation seems a doctrine of self-effacement, it is really one of vanity. The man who "remembers" his former incarnations is hardly ever content with having lived a life obscure and unnoticed by his fellows; he always recalls an existence of splendor and fame. Even the humble Hasidic masters did not escape this vainglory. The Rabbi of Apt, for instance, once told that he had been in this world ten times before, and every time he was some kind of dignitary, a high priest, a prince, a king, or an exilarch. (See Buber, *Later Masters,* p. 118.)

191. See Ysander, *op. cit.,* pp. 160–161; Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman,* pp. 7–8.

of God, a soul bearing another as a mother bears a child—these are philosophical absurdities, irreconcilable with the indivisible nature of the spirit. Again, the notion of souls passing through human and animal bodies wipes out individual identity, the dignity of the person, of each man, unique and unrepeatable. It is a notion of sheer promiscuity. But *gilgul* and *ibbur,* like most of the Hasidic tenets to which a Catholic objects, are really foreign to the best of Hasidic spirituality, opposed to the deepest insights of the masters. Two significant tales are told of Rabbi Zusya. Once he prayed: "Lord, I love you so much, but I do not fear you enough! Grant that I may fear you like one of your angels who tremble at your awesome name." God heard his prayer, and dread seized Zusya's innermost heart. He crawled under his bed like a little dog and howled, shaken by creature fear: "Lord, let me love you again like Zusya!" And God heard him again. The second tale relates how, shortly before his death, Rabbi Zusya said: "In the world to come, I will not be asked: 'Why were you not Moses?' I will be asked: 'Why were you not Zusya?' " [192]

I have dwelt at length, though by no means fully, on certain aspects of Hasidic theology in order to sift Hasidism's enduring message from its time-bound errors. It is, I think, of far-reaching significance that the latter are all a mixture of Neoplatonic and gnostic thought. What is lasting in Hasidism, however, is its spirituality, which is in many respects close to the Christian way. In his meekness the Baal Shem bears certain features of St. Francis de Sales, and his "straight way" resembles somewhat the way of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. The glad acceptance of poverty and suffering, the stress on joy, give the Hasidic movement a Franciscan character. The keenly felt need for redemption and the high sense of mediatorship that pervaded so much of Hasidic life are, for all their differences, akin to the Catholic spirit. So deep was the sense of mediatorship that the death of a zaddik brought no gloom to his followers: They would gather in their houses of worship not to mourn but to rejoice in their zaddik's going home; they would drink *l'hayim,* "to the life," of the departed zaddik, whose merits they hoped would be a shield for them. Here was a charity and a trust that did not stop at death's door but reached into the realm of eternity.[193]

192. See Buber, *Early Masters,* pp. 246–247, 251.
193. See Minkin, *op. cit.,* pp. 323–324; de Menasce, *op. cit.,* p. 164.

The welcome offered to death by the zaddikim was something new in orthodox life, and so was in some way the dignity accorded to woman. As the husband was called Hasid, so his wife Hasida. Like him, she would make her pilgrimage to the zaddik, telling him of her needs and asking his intercessory prayer. There was even one Hannah Rachel, who spent all day in prayer and in the study of Torah, who, like a man, wrapped herself in a prayer shawl and wound phylacteries around her arm and head. Though she twice yielded to custom and married, the Maid of Ludomir, as she was called, remained a virgin to her death.[194] What brings Hasidism closest to the Gospel is its teaching on love. Rabbi Rafael used to warn against measured behavior toward one's fellow man as a dreadful evil. To him such giving and withholding was dispensing love with scales or yardstick. But what the world needed was a superabundance of love to fill up its want.[195]

HASIDISM AND CHRIST

Before the upsurge, the welling forth of love that was the Hasidic movement, a Christian can only stand in reverence. But he is apt to ask: How was so intense a spirituality possible in people who were obviously far from Christ? The answer is simple. What was deepest in Hasidic piety was nourished by the Old Testament, and if the Old Testament moves, indeed presses, toward the New, must it not compel those who remain true to its spirit to walk toward that of the New? "Is it not reasonable to think," Jean de Menasce asks, "that the graces of love which God was able to implant in these sincere and faithful hearts, removed from Christ by an almost invincible ignorance, were so strengthened by meditation on holy Scripture that they produced the virtual image, as it were, of the reality that those see who truly acknowledge Jesus as the Redeemer?" [196] Though the Hasidim did not

194. See Horodezky, *Leaders of Hassidism,* pp. 113, 114–117.
195. See Buber, *Early Masters,* p. 130; *Chassidische Botschaft,* p. 120; cf. *Hasidism,* pp. 86–87.
196. De Menasce, *op. cit.,* pp. 150–151. In addition to the inherent power of Scripture, there is also the possibility that Hasidism absorbed Christian thoughts or ways from without. Ysander holds that though the Jewish community lived apart from its Polish Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox neighbors, an unconscious influence from them cannot be discounted. In his spiritual search and burning discontent, a Jew could well have had before his eyes the usages of another faith; unbeknown to him, they might have stimulated him to walk new ways that seemed

believe in Christ, though they knew little more than His name, they were not without Him. For there is no truth that is not from the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit; no goodness that was not wrought on the Cross, hammered out in the fire of the Passion; no love of God that was not earned by the one Heart, wounded and opened for all. There is no grace given to fallen man that is not the grace of the Saviour. It is through Him that the divine treasures come to all—to those who know and love Him, and to those who do not know Him.

Thus Hasidism unwittingly points beyond itself. The splendor of its rays is not the fullness of light. To treat partial truth as if it were the whole is not without vengeance; moreover, since the zaddikim themselves gave much thought to the rung on which they might have stood, it would be mistaken deference to assign them a place higher than they warrant. The compass of the movement they led becomes, I think, immediately manifest when one listens first to a zaddik and then to Christ. Once Rabbi Bunam was asked why God, in giving the Commandments to Israel, said: "I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt" (Ex 20:2), and why He did not say: "I am the Lord thy God, who created heaven and earth." Had God called Himself the Creator of heaven and earth, Rabbi Bunam explained, the people might have answered: "Heaven—that is too much for me." So He said: "I am the one who fished you out of the mud. Now you come here and listen to me!" [197] How different the voice of Christ: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Or: "I am the door. If anyone enter by me he shall be safe. . . . I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:9–10). The rabbi's saying is humble and full of understanding for human frailty. Christ's invitation is gentle, but at the same time majestic; compassionate, and yet divinely sovereign. Knowing man's burden, He offers relief, the highest of all. While the zaddik speaks pointed words, Christ utters the word.

to him and his followers like fresh discoveries or the fruits of private revelations. (See *op. cit.*, pp. 356–357.)

197. See Buber, *Later Masters*, p. 261.