

Hasidism And Prayer^{*}

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The Hasidic movement founded by Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Ba'al Shem Tov ('Master of the Good Name') half way through the eighteenth century, was developed by a galaxy of tsaddikim ('saints', 'masters') in Poland, Russia, Hungary and Lithuania. It is not a homogeneous movement, so that it is precarious to speak of the Hasidic attitude as if all the adherents of Hasidism shared a common viewpoint. Nevertheless, with regard to prayer, upon which the Hasidim placed the greatest emphasis, elevating it above all other Jewish values, it is possible to discern certain basic ideas held by all the famous Hasidic leaders. The statements about Jewish prayer in the classical sources of Bible, Talmud, the mediaeval Jewish philosophers and the Kabbalah (the Jewish mystical system of theosophical thought) were all placed under tribute by the Hasidim and vitally transformed in an attempt to fashion prayer into a potent instrument for bringing man closer to God.

Hasidic legend tells of the Hasidic tsaddik Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk (1717–1787) that before he began to say his prayers he would place his watch on the little desk at which he prayed to remind him, when in danger of being lost to eternity, that it was his duty to return to the world of time. Similar tales are told of other Hasidic masters saying farewell to their family before setting out for the synagogue, conscious as they were that the soul, leaping in ecstasy during prayer, could so easily soar aloft in rapture to leave the body and forsake the spiritual darkness of this life. In the same vein a disciple of Elimelech, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Epstein of Cracow (d. 1823) writes in his book *Ma'or va-Shemesh (Light and Sun)*, a work very popular among the Hasidim:

The way of the tsaddikim who walk in the path of the Lord is well known. They occupy themselves mightily in the study of the Torah or in prayer with such powerful burning enthusiasm, as they experience the fragrance and sweetness of God, blessed be he, that it would take but little for them to become annihilated out of existence in their great longing to become attached to God's divinity, as they ascend from heavenly hall to heavenly hall and from spiritual world to spiritual world. There they proceed until they reach that high place in which comprehension is impossible, except in the manner that one smells something fragrant, and this, too, only by way of negation, since that which is there cannot be grasped by thought at all.

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As they apprehend this, so great becomes their longing to attach themselves to his divinity, blessed be he, that they have no desire to return to the lowly world of the body. Yet, since the One on high, who caused all worlds to be emanated from himself, wishes for that tsaddik to worship him in this world, he shows the tsaddik that the whole earth is full of his glory and that even in this world he can experience something of this sweetness and fragrance. The tsaddik then becomes willing to return, desiring to live in this world, now that he appreciates that even here he is capable of experiencing God's sweet divinity.

In the above there is expressed an idea behind the thought of all branches of Hasidism, an idea applied especially to the life of prayer. This is the Hasidic doctrine, resembling ideas found among the mystics of world religions other than Judaism, of 'self-annihilation'. In its Hasidic version the doctrine runs that beneath and beyond the multiplicity and divisions of things and events in the material universe, indeed, in all spiritual worlds as well, there is only the divine unity. This alone constitutes true reality. All the rest is no doubt real enough so far as creatures are concerned, but from God's point of view, as it were, neither the universe nor the creatures who inhabit the universe enjoy true existence. The Hasidic philosophy has frequently been called 'pantheistic'. A more accurate name would be 'panentheistic', i.e. the doctrine that all is in God and that nothing exists apart from him, or, in the way some of the Hasidic masters prefer to put it, 'all is embraced by his blessed unity.'

Granted such a view of the universe in its relation to God, the special task of man, in another Hasidic metaphor, is to strip away the veils behind which God is concealed to see only the divine vitality infusing all. Especially at the time of prayer the Hasid is expected to lose himself in wonder at the glory and majesty of God, so that for the Hasidim all prayer is essentially an exercise in self-transcendence.

Prayer of Petition

The doctrine gave rise to a problem that was exceedingly acute for the Hasidim. The standard Jewish liturgy which the Hasidim, as Orthodox Jews, were bound to follow, contains, in addition to prayers of adoration, prayers of petition. The Hasidim were not bothered by the philosophical difficulty in the whole idea of petitionary prayer—does God need to be reminded to satisfy our needs? For them the more profound problem was that petitionary prayer, by its nature calling man's attention to the ego and its requirements, whether spiritual or material, seems to defeat the true aim of all prayer, the losing of self before the effulgence of the divine glory. How can the Hasid use his prayers to attain to self-annihilation when the very prayers themselves act as a barrier by interposing the clamor of the self begging to be sated? How can a man sincerely ask that he be granted health or wisdom or riches or forgiveness when the life of prayer, as understood by Hasidism, demands nothing less than the total abandonment of the 'I'?

Despite Buber, Hasidism teaches the exact opposite of the 'I and Thou' relationship. The ideal is only reached when there is no 'I' only 'Thou'.

The Hasidic solution is that petitionary prayer is not at all for the sake of man but ultimately for the sake of God. The Hasid asks for his needs to be satisfied not for himself but because it is God's desire that his grace should flow through all creation, since it belongs to the essential nature of the All-good to benefit his creatures. The Divine Presence, the *Shekhinah*, is lacking whenever man suffers, and the Hasid's prayer for his needs and those of others to be satisfied is really for the lack of the *Shekhinah* to be no more. This explains why in the mystical ascent of the soul in prayer as practised by some of the Hasidic masters, including the Ba'al Shem Tov himself, the words of the prayers are eventually forgotten entirely. Having served their purpose of bringing the worshipper face to face with his God, the liturgical ladder can be pushed aside as no longer relevant. It also goes a long way towards explaining why the early Hasidim, at times other than those of the statutory prayers, engaged in a quietistic waiting on the spirit, so much so that the accusation was made of them by their rabbinic opponents that they were influenced by the practices of Christian groups like the Quakers.

Preparation for Prayer

Because of this high significance of prayer in the Hasidic scheme it was emphatically not a matter to be embarked upon lightly. The Mishnah, compiled some fifteen hundred years before the rise of Hasidism, tells of the 'Saints of old' (the term used of these is, in fact, *hasidim*) who used to wait in a spirit of preparedness for one hour before their prayers 'in order to attune their hearts to the Omnipresent'. The latter-day Hasidim took the example of these saints seriously. Preparations for prayer became so important that some of the Hasidic teachers went so far as to teach that they were more significant than the prayers themselves. In addition to observing the ancient rules about cleansing the body of its waste products before prayer with a scrupulousness far in excess of what the law demands, the Hasidim engaged before their prayers in prolonged contemplation on the divine. As an aid to concentration for this purpose, some of the Hasidim, to the scandal of their rabbinic opponents, would smoke a pipe before the service began. The result of all this stress on preparation was that it was not unknown for the Hasidim to disregard the rules concerning the proper times of prayer. When rebuked for his failure to observe the rules, one of the Hasidic masters retorted that neither he nor his opponents prayed in the proper time, for while he did pray it was not at the proper time, and while the non-Hasidic Jews did observe the rules of the proper times what they offered at these times was not really prayer at all. Far better prayer without time than time without prayer. A further rationale for the Hasidic custom was later advanced. This was that the Hasid in his prayers was transported to a world beyond time and his prayers could not consequently be governed by time. Spontaneity was held to be more important than observance of the formal rules. For the same reason it was not unusual for the Hasidim to interject Yiddish words meaning 'sweet Father' and the like into their prayers, a practice

strictly forbidden by the Codes. A tsaddik observed that the rules regarding prayer in the Codes can be likened to protocol in the palace of a king. There are times when people can be admitted to have an audience with the king and times when the king must not be disturbed even by the most noble in the land. But the young prince can enter to throw himself on his father's mercy at any time, and the king will never insist on protocol so far as his beloved child is concerned.

In order to assist devotion, and especially in order to drive out alien thoughts (or, in some versions of early Hasidism, to sublimate these), the Hasidim were fond of rapid bodily movements during their prayers, running to and fro, tossing the head backwards and forwards, banging the wall with the hands, and, in the more grotesque forms practised by the followers of Rabbi Hayyim Haikel of Amdur (d. 1787), turning somersaults during their prayers as a token of complete self-abandonment. When the Hasidic master Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (d. 1859) was asked how he could justify the Hasidic practice of moving about during prayer since the Talmud states distinctly that man's feet have to be placed together at the time of prayer, he gave the typical reply that the Talmud has to be understood figuratively and the meaning is that man must be totally involved at the time of prayer, not having one leg in heaven and the other in hell. With the exception of the silent prayer, the Hasidim preferred, too, loud mouthings of the words of the prayers, shouting aloud the praises of the Lord. Melody was especially cultivated, but this was not the formal melodies of the sophisticated and cultured composer of religious hymnology but an outpouring of the spirit in uncontrived rapture. In a letter that has been preserved from the pen of Elimelech of Lizensk's son, the claim is made that some of the tsaddikim had neither any ear for music nor any voice to speak of, and yet during their prayers the sweetest sounds were to be heard issuing from their mouths, of which they themselves were completely unaware. The Ba'al Shem Tov is reported as saying that the Hasid should never be ashamed to perform violent movements and to shout aloud during his prayers any more than a man in danger of drowning in a swiftly flowing river is ashamed to call for help and wave his arms about in order to save himself. In another illustration attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov, only the deaf fail to dance in joy when sweet music is played. Those who have ears to hear cannot help lifting their feet to dance to the music.

Hitlahavut

The spirit of enthusiasm in which prayer is to be offered is known in Hasidic teaching as *hitlahavut*, from *lahav*, 'a flame', i.e. the soul of the worshipper is to be on fire for God. It is said that Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev (d. 1809), after leading the congregation in prayer during the Day of Atonement, would cry out: 'My heart is on fire!' Of his disciple Rabbi Israel of Koznitz it is said that he had such a sick and emaciated body that he had to be carried in a chair from his house to the synagogue, but as soon as he entered the portals of the house of God he would cry out: 'How full of awe is this place!' (Gen. 28:17), and he would then leap to the prayer-desk 'as if he were flying through the air'. In spite

of his ill health, when he recited the verse ‘sing unto the Lord a new song’ (Ps. 149:1), his weakness would leave him and he would sing in joy ‘like a little girl’. This teacher used to say that in all the world there is no greater delight than a prayer recited as it should be.

Although the Hasidic teachings on prayer were generally intended to apply even to the ordinary Hasidim, there is a realistic thrust in Hasidic thought which recognizes that the higher reaches of prayer are only possible for holy men who are masters of prayer. It is for this reason that special significance is attached to the prayers of the tsaddik. He is capable of offering prayer as it should ideally be offered, and his followers can raise themselves by associating themselves with him as he prays. It was this particular doctrine of the tsaddik as an intermediary between God and man that was a source of offence to the opponents of Hasidism who held strongly that it belongs to the essence of the Jewish approach that a man approaches his Maker directly and requires no others to intercede for him. At times the vehement accusation was hurled at the Hasidim that their reverence for the tsaddik and their reliance on his prayers bordered on the idolatrous, though it should be noted that the Hasid never prays to the tsaddik, and would consider such a notion blasphemous in the extreme.

In a remarkable defence of the tsaddik’s prayers, the late Hasidic master Rabbi Solomon of Radomsk (d. 1866) writes:

Behold, there are two types of tsaddikim called ‘great lights’, each of them great in his generation. It is true that in the generation that preceded ours there were great tsaddikim who illumined the world with their righteousness, such as the tsaddikim and the prophets of ancient times. To them was dominion given and the power in heaven and earth to issue decrees, and it came to pass, light being shed on all their ways. Nowadays, in these generations, although the tsaddikim are not comparable to the earlier ones, yet a man must not despair to declare, God forbid, that we must now grope about like a blind man in the dark... This is why Scripture says: ‘And God made the two great lights’ (Gen. 1:16), hinting at the two types of tsaddikim, those of earlier times and those of later. ‘The greater light to rule the day’, these are the tsaddikim of former generations who had the power to nullify all decrees against the children of Israel. ‘And the lesser light’, referring to the tsaddik of this generation, ‘to rule the night’, in the bitter exile which is like night. He, too, has the power of prayer as in former ages. God speaks well both of the early ones and the later ones, for he has eternal paths reaching from heaven by means of which he can be seen on earth.

Mechanical prayer was particularly offensive to the Hasidim. The sincere prayer of the simple man is preferable to the prayer of the sage if feeling and inwardness is lacking. Adapting a saying of the Kabbalah, the Hasidim taught that prayer needs wings, the wings of the love and fear of God, otherwise it could never ascend heavenwards. The Ba’al Shem Tov, Hasidic legend has it, once refused to enter a synagogue because, he said, there was no room there so full was the building of prayers. When asked to explain, he said that true and sincere prayer does not remain below in the synagogue but flies upwards. In a well-known tale the Ba’al Shem Tov praises a poor, ignorant shepherd boy

who knew no Hebrew and was therefore unable to recite the prayers but who, in his love, played his flute in praise of God. By fear in this context the Hasidim do not mean the fear of punishment. Hell-fire preaching, for instance, is singularly absent from Hasidic sermonizing. By fear the Hasidim understood the tremendous sense of awe man should experience when he realizes that he is in God's presence, Rudolf Otto's experience of the numinous. The Hasidim teach that both love and fear are essential; love because where there is fear alone there is no joy though there may be fascination, and fear because where is love alone prayer can degenerate into pure sentimentality and is in any event too superficial, too familiar, too easy-going for the devout. Love causes the fierce outpouring of prayer with intense joy. Fear is required to remind the Hasid that however near he is he is still far away or, paradoxically, that he can only be near when he knows how far away he really is. One of the most renowned Hasidic teachers, Rabbi Hayyim of Tchernowitz (d. 1813), describes on the basis of this thought why, in the traditional liturgy, the afternoon prayer, recited as the Sabbath reaches its culmination, is shorter by far than the other prayers of the Sabbath. The other prayers of the holy day express man's love for God, but as the Sabbath reaches its highest point, as man makes himself ready in the words of Rabbi Hayyim to place the crown on the head of the king, he is so stricken with holy dread that he cannot utter a word. He would be unable to pray at all at that awesome moment but God endows him with the power to speak, and then in the midst of his fear he can utter a few words, at least, in perfect joy and delight.

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