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The mystic sect of Chassidism, 1932.

THE MYSTIC SECT OF CHASSIDIM

BY

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER
THE TEMPLE

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Judaism, my friends, is not one thing. It is many things. It is prophecy. It is law. It is nationalism. It is mysticism. Judaism has a program of religious and moral idealism which we call prophecy. It has its technique for realizing its program which we call Torah, - the Law. It has its philosophy of Jewish survival which we call nationalism. It also has its shrines of the inner life which we call mysticism.

In the classic periods of our history all of these four tendencies appeared harmoniously. When one or the other of these tendencies gained supremacy and grounded out the other, then a degree of decadence in Jewish life set in. When we speak of decadence in culture or civilization we mean just this: subordination of the whole to a part of the whole; the over-refinement, the over-specialization on one tendency or on one mood or on one effort, to the exclusion and in a sense to the destruction of the harmony of the whole.

Just as Israel had its prophets, its rabbis and its philosophers and poets, so did Israel also have its mystics. And mysticism in Jewish thought is not alien, but a quality quite native to the spiritual soil of Israel. In some of the Books of the Bible already, particularly in the Book of Psalms we find a religious intimacy which has all the ear-marks of the profoundest kind of religious mysticism.

In other portions of the Bible, like the Book of Daniel for example, with its esoteric way of speaking, its cryptic, secretive way of writing; in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, which treats of the Heavenly Chariot, you have already the beginning of what later was called theosophy, - religious metaphysics, if you will. The religious science concerns the nature of the universe between the time of the Bible and the time of the Talmud.

We have other Jewish writings known as apocalyptic writings which have even a greater stamp of mysticism. In the Talmud and the Midrashim we have what we call the lore, as in the Halacha we have if not a systematic Jewish philosophy, then certainly the elements of what later developed into Cabbala and Jewish history.

In Philo we have the representation of what we call Hellenic Judaism. With the Jewish philosopher Philo we again find this mystic strain. There we find the ^{Platonic} ~~Masonic~~ theory of ideas. So that we now have Judaism composed not merely of law, but already composed of a vast amount of mystic, of the ~~illogical~~, the non-logical and non-rational, the emotional element.

Later on, in the period of the Geonim, we find mysticism developing among our people. In that period we find

In the Spanish-Jewish period we find not only philosophers like Maimonides, in a sense endowed mystics, we also find great mystics like Jehuda Halevi. With the decline in the Spanish-Jewish period Jewish mysticism surges to the surface and finds its most perfect expression in the greatest Jewish text-book, the Sohar. The Sohar means life and human nature. A term very popular with mystics.

In the sixteenth century, we find another center of Jewish mysticism in Palestine, in the city of Safed, producing the great Jewish mystics

In the eighteenth century we find that same tendency towards the mystic expression in the great movement known as Chassidism.

In speaking of Chassidism it might be well to define the term mysticism a little more clearly. It is a rather difficult subject.

There are in Jewish mysticism, three kinds of mysticism. The first is perhaps the simplest of the three. This form of mysticism is simply the religious sentiment raised to the Nth degree, - faith tipped with fire, if you will. It is a faith so profound that it expresses itself in ecstasy, enthusiasm and triumph. The difference between the faith of a mystic and the faith of the average man is the difference between the flame of a candle and the fire of a volcano. It is a difference in temperature.

To the mystic, God is so real. The spiritual realities of life are so real, that the physical realities and the physical world becomes unreal. For the mystic, the physical world is sort of an obstacle in his path toward the goal of his life. For the mystic there is but one great reality in the world and that is the all-pervasive God, the All-Soul.

His soul is part of that All-Soul. He is spark of that Eternal fire. Between his soul and the Divine Soul there stands unfortunately so many walls, so many barriers in his mundane existence which separate him from his God, so much which is veiled and hiding the illumination of the Divine-Soul. And to the mystic the greatest thing is to break his way through these separating walls to reach the source of his being which is God.

And the way of doing that, the way of meeting that Thing is the way of self-purification, self-purgation, self-discipline, suppression of the appetites, self-abnegation from the interests and concerns of every-day life and concentration through meditation and solitude, and concentration upon the quest of Godliness. And the mystic is convinced that some day, if his quest is passionate enough and single-hearted enough, that some day the face will be revealed and the Divine Spirit will call unto his soul and then for the first time he will know real peace. For the first time he will know unity with the universe. For the first time he will know security. And then he will need nothing in the world, no book to guide him, no tradition to tell him what to do. He will then have God as his river, his sea, his guide.

I read you that beautiful phrase from Psalm 137 -
or is it 73, "What have I in Heaven but Thee, and beside Thee
I desire none upon earth."

This is a rough outline very inadequately expressed
of the spiritual mysticism which we find throughout the literature
of our Bible and which we find in this movement of Chassidism.

There are two other kinds of mysticism. One is
theosophy. Theosophy is primitive science, folk science, if you
will. The attempt to understand the nature of the universe, how
the universe came to be, how the material world developed or
evolved out of the spiritual essence of the world which is God.
What is the relation between the Creator and his creation?
These are the guiding, the leading interests of Cabbala, of
Jewish theosophy. And to answer these questions, the medieval
Cabbalist went not into a scientific laboratory, but he went
to the Bible because the Bible contains all the truth.

He needed to find only the key to the Bible, to
open the secret door which would give him the answers to these
questions. Below the surface of the Biblical phrase or
sentence, the apparent meaning, there are hidden the ^{esoteric} historic

meanings; the interpretation which was known in each generation by two or three great masters and which was handed down from master to disciple. This is Cabbala. Cabballa means the secret tradition, the secret interpretation of the Bible which yields the knowledge of what is before and what is behind and what is to come; knowledge concerning the nature of things and of God.

That theosophy expresses itself most fully in the Book of the Sohar and all of its later commentaries. This is the second type.

The third type which is more practical and less speculative than the second type was known as (Hebrew) "the speculative type." The third type (Hebrew) is a product of the sixteenth century. Jewish life was well broken up in Europe. From Spain the Jews were exiled and scattered through the Mediterranean world. Jewry was entering its darkest period and the mind of Israel no longer was concerned with fine-spun speculations concerning the beginning of the universe. Its great concern was not redemption - (Hebrew) but to save themselves from the torments of exile, to be restored to the peace and security of its own national life.

The Messianic motive now becomes dominant in

in Jewish life. The whole of Cabbala becomes an eager pathetic system of voicing that type of prayer which will hasten the coming of the Messiah and we have Cabballa which has to do with charms, amulets, which demand asceticism, superstition on the part of the people, self denial of the joys and pleasures of life in order to atone for the sins of the people who are responsible for this calamity, and in order to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

And the third type of Mysticism led to two of the most tragic Messianic movements in Israel, that of Sabatai Sevi and Jacob ~~Franks~~. And the third type of Cabbala lost its meaning in Jewish life.

In the eighteenth century a new form of mysticism arose in Israel. The mysticism of the Chassidim which had something of all three of these forms of mysticism; something of the theosophy, something of the superstition and something of the practical Cabbala and a great deal of that spiritual religious intensity, that religious poetry of which I spoke as being the first form of mysticism.

Chassidism arose in Eastern Europe among the less cultured and less educated sections of Jewry. It arose among

the humble folks. In the middle of the eighteenth century when Western European Jewry through Moses Mendelssohn, was already reaching out for modern thought, Eastern Jewry was still steeped in medievalism in every sense of the word.

Its founder was a simple man, not a great scholar, but a man of the people, at times an assistant to a teacher in the Chadar, at another time a farmer, but evidently a man who possessed the rare thing which we call spiritual personality so powerful that it set in motion a tremendous movement, whose ways have reached down to our present day.

Israel Baalshem, Israel's mastery of the name of God, he was even called (Hebrew) of the holy Baalshem, was the founder of this movement (Hebrew) the movement of the pietists. What was it? Well, it was largely a reaction first to this asceticism, to this spiritual dejection which had burdened Jewish life up to that time, especially in the third type of Cabballa of which I spoke. The massacres of the Jews in Lithuania which destroyed and massacred tens of thousands of Jewish people, a calamity which cast a pall over the whole intellectual and spiritual life of Jewry. This Chassidic movement was in a way

a reaction to that depression, that loss of morale of the people; and secondly it was a reaction against the tyranny of learning, the predominance of legalism in Jewish religion as against sentiment, emotionalism.

Chassidism reasserted faith in life and the joy of living. God could not be worshipped in sadness. (Hebrew) "Worship the Lord in joy." The Shachna does not rest upon man when he is depressed, only when he is exalted. It is on the tip-toe of living that the great inspiration comes to his life.

One of the Chassidic leaders is reported to have seen a man on the great Holy Day beating his breast and his body shaken with sobs, uttering that tragic lament (Hebrew) "For a man, his origin is the dust and his end is the dust." This Rabbi tapped the man on his shoulder and said "Why are you crying? If you had been made of gold and now became dirt you would have something to cry about. But why so much of sadness in your life?"

The Chassidim brought back the song to Jewish life. "Melody and song lead the heart to God." Another said: "All creation resolves itself into ~~XXXX~~ melody, even faith in God is a form of melody." They taught the masses to sing and to dance.

The dance has always been in ancient days identified with religion. The great religious emotion expressed itself in the rhythm of the dance. King David danced before the Ark in religious ecstasy.

The Chassidic movement brought the dance back into the lives of the people. Not the secular dance, but the dance of religious ecstasy. In other words, they taught the people that God who loved man also loved his joy and laughter. It was as if they had rolled back the clouds of gloom which had overcast the nation.

The second one was that they returned the people back to nature. In the dark ghetto lanes God's world had been crowded out. The Jew knew only his dark dwellings and dark, dirty streets, the pages of a book. That's all his eyes saw. God's world of trees, rivers, grass, the song of the birds, (Hebrew) that had somehow been lost in the tragic centuries of exile.

The child from his earliest infancy was brought into the Chadar, then to the Yeshiva and his life was spent within the walls of houses, walls within the covers of books. The leaders

of the Yeshiva like Nachman von Bratzlaw, one of the most religious spirits in Israel, were people who loved the outdoors, who spent their hours and days and months of meditation in the forest, whose eyes were opened to the Divinity present in nature and who taught their followers the Godliness of God's world.

Chassidism brought ^{color} back into Jewish life. For without the color of the physical world, without the song of nature, a people could not create poetry.

And then Chassidism was a reaction against the tyranny of learning. Emphasis in Jewish life in those days and for centuries up to those days was placed upon learning, upon sharpening of the intellect, upon proficiency in the dialectics of the Talmud. A new aristocracy developed in Israel, a rather domineering and exclusive aristocracy of learning. The unlettered Jewish man, the poor peasant and the working man who had no chance or time to study felt himself excluded from the just and righteous. The unlettered man was disdained.

Chassidism was a revolt from this. "Learning was good but piety was better." "To know the Talmud was desirable,

but to know how to live, to know how to find the deep meanings of life through prayer and piety and the exalted performance of religious mandates, that's much more desirable and much more important."

Chassidim thereby re-enthroned in Jewish religious life emotions and intuition and the mystic yearning, the impassioned outreaching for God as against the cold austere intellectualism of rabbinism. Furthermore and as a result against this revolt, against the tyranny of learning, it restored the common man to his lost dignity. It placed within the reach of the common man who could not study, / who did not have the opportunity of spending his early days in an academy of Talmudic study, it put within his reach nevertheless perfection and happiness by telling him that within the limitations of his life, in spite of his unlettered self, he may yet attain the highest degree of religious perfection if only he would purify his soul, reach out for the joy of kinship with God and do his duties to his fellowmen with joy, with eagerness. Judaism was restored to the masses.

In other words, Chassidism was a democratic movement. The leaders were all humble people and appealed to humble folks. The sermons and preachments of the Chassidic Rabbis were altogether unlike those with which the Rabbis regaled their listeners twice a year on the holy days. The Chassidic Rabbi spoke to his people

of their own needs, their own problems. And they understood him and they loved him. Many and many a story is told to illustrate this democratic sentiment of Chassidism, this love of the common man.

The story is told of the Jew who stood in his prayer shawl one morning outside of the Synagogue and was oiling the wheels of his wagon and one of these aristocratic rabbinic scholars passed by and said: "even in the ~~XXXX~~ midst of prayer, when he should be praying, he is doing his nasty work of oiling his wheels." And the Chassidic Rabbi passed by and said: "Great God, isn't it wonderful, even in the midst of his nasty work, that man is praying."

That gives you the picture.

Another story tells of a Chassidic Rabbi saying: "How can the angels compare with these, my people? There is no trick in being an angel for they have nothing to do. They don't have to provide clothing and food for their children. Let those angels come down here and see how long they will stay."

The Chassidim came down to the level of the people's lives, they understood their tragedies, their desperate struggles to gain a little joy in the world.

One Rabbi was quoted as saying: "A friend of his

had his store robbed one night and he came to the Rabbi saying: 'Last night a thief broke into my store and took half of my goods.' And the Rabbi sympathised with him. The next day the man came again and said, 'the thief broke into my store again and took the other half of my goods.' And the Rabbi said "I sympathise with you a great deal, but think of the thief, two nights now he has gone without sleep." The thief, the outcast, the humblest of the humble, all came in for understanding and compassion by these leaders of this hope movement, - Chassidism. It was a reaction against the tyranny of learning and the tyranny of wealth. They spoke for the poor people and out of the heart of the poor people.

You find in Chassidism a hostility for the rich, like in the Christian church. One Rabbi said: "the rich are always in debt." Not referring of course, to 1932, but, they are slaves to their desires, slaves to others. And there is that perfectly fine story which Ansky incorporated in his play "The Dybbuk," the uncharitable man who came to the Rabbi who took him by the hand and led him to the window and said "look out, what do you see?" The man said, "I see people." Then the Rabbi led him to the mirror and said, "what do you see here?" And the man said, "I see myself." And the Rabbi said: "The window is plain glass, this is glass too, but it has a little silver on the back of it; when you look through the window you can see other people, here where there is a little silver, you can see only yourself."

Chassidism did one other marvelous thing. It restored personality to the position of authority in Jewish life. The Jews never made much of personality. The Jews, as a rule, are not hero-worshippers and while that is desirable, there is a great loss in Jewish life because of the absence of the worship or the adoration of personality. Because Chassidism was a mass movement, it soon produced its heroes. The Zaddik was the hero, the guide, the shepherd of the flock, the miracle-worker, the man to whom almost every Chassidic man brought his stories, his troubles, his problems. The Zaddik was almost worshipped, as nearly as any human being can be worshipped in Judaism, for Judaism prohibits the worship of any one, but God. Of course, this was soon abused. After a while the Zaddikim were corrupted by the very adoration of their followers, by the wealth which their followers poured into their laps. After awhile Zaddik cults arose, many of which were hostile to one another. But at first Chassidism re-introduced into Jewish life glowing, vibrant, colorful, personalities around whom the people could build legends and in whom they could find solace, comfort and pride.

I haven't the time to go into great detail about the philosophy of Chassidism. They have no well worked out philosophy. The closest to a philosophy was the one worked out by Shneur Salomon of Ladi. But broadly it may be said that Chassidism was a sort of a

Jewish pantheism. It was a contradistinction to the pantheism of Spinoza.

Anatole France said of ^{Spinoza} ~~Israel's~~ God, "God is perfect so long as He does nothing." That is contrary to Chassidic thought. They believed that God is always doing, living, ~~preaching~~. Chassidism obtained "God filled the universe" (Hebrew) "There is no place where God is not, even in evil." All creation is expression of Him, a spark of Him and yearns for Him as for its home. God is to be worshipped in simplicity of faith without subtleties.

"The essence of Judaism is to worship God without any subtleties" to worship God in enthusiasm, in ecstasy and in love of His creation and his fellowmen and in humility.

There are two words which Chassidim used very often. One is "catching fire" spontaneous combustion. (Hebrew) "Faith through fire." The other is (Hebrew) "humility."

Of humility one Rabbi said: "I think more of the wicked man who knows that he is wicked than of the righteous man who knows that he is righteous."

Chassidism knew three great loves,- the love of God, the love of Israel and the love of Palestine. The love of God, the unquestioning love, the love of the good and the beauty in Israel, of the whole people.

One Rabbi, looking over his congregation on the

holy day of Yom Kippur turned his eyes heavenward and said:
"Good Lord, you must forgive the sins of these people, they
are so good. They are even better than their ancestors were.
For when their ancestors came to the Synagogue on Yom Kippur
and said (Hebrew) "we have sinned, we have lied, we have stolen,"
they really weren't telling the truth because they did not do those
things. But when these people assembled here say "we have sinned,
we have lied, we have stolen" they really weren't lying. They were
telling the truth. You should certainly forgive them their sins
and their transgressions."

And they loved Palestine. No expression was too
extreme. No simile or metaphore too extreme for them to express
their love for that country. That's their Shekinah, - the holy
spirit. Only in Palestine can man attain to the highest degree
of perfection and so seventeen years after the death of Baalshem,
in 1760 a group of thirty Chassidim led by some of the great Rabbis
actually migrated to Palestine and settled there.

Chassidism naturally developed and attained great
Many
position. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ were opposed to it however and before long
the whole of Europe was divided into two classes, the Chassidic
and the Rabbinic, those who were opposed. On the other hand Rabbinism
applied criticism to their mode of living and naturally evoked
hostility. And the great Elijah of Vilna, the outstanding Rabbi
of his day twice was excommunicated. Chassidism's great leader was
twice imprisoned because of slanders and for formal charges made against

him by the governor.

Chassidism soon had its own Synagogue, its own community life and its own prayer book. For years a terrific conflict raged in almost every city where Jews lived. But the Movement spread like wild fire among the masses.

Then a decline set in for various reasons. First because the Movement did not have a clearly thought-out, intellectual basis; because a new day was knocking at the doors of the ghetto; and because it failed to produce leaders. And then again, because of the corruption and decadence which set in and many of its leaders became pure grafters. Even to this day there are hundreds of thousands of Chassidim living in Poland, Galicia, Roumania, Hungary and Austria. Some of them in the United States and in England.

What has Chassidism to say to us Jews of the twentieth century? There is in that Movement much which we can borrow with profit to ourselves. There is first of all that fine religious ardor and enthusiasm without which no religion can carry on, that lift which we miss in our own faith.

There is the mystic element in Chassidism which we may take over with profit to ourselves; that reason is not sufficient guide in life, that the intellect is inadequate to see a man through all the difficulties of the world; to look through the heart of the visible to the heart of the invisible; that which means joy, faith and hope, that which is at the heart of Chassidism may still be of great value and profit to us in our own day.

1. Just as Israel - It is Prophecy. In our Golden Ages -
classic - decadence -

2. Just as Israel had its prophets - and mysticism
authentic - not alien -

(a) In some books of Bible - Prophets - intimacy, Ezekiel
cryptic, symbolic, esoteric.

(b) In Lit. between Bible & Talmud.

(c) In Talmud - & Midrashim - embedded in Agada -

(d) Hellenic situation. Philo - wherein -

(e) Geonic Period - 500-600

(f) Spanish J. Period - 13-14c - 500-600

(g) 16c. - Safed - Cordoba

(h) 18c - Hasidism



3. Three Kinds

(1) Rel. sentiment raised to Nth power -

Faith tipped with fire.

Diff. in Temperatures

It is belief profound, - enthusiasm - ecstasy, ecstasy

Flame & candle - volcanic fire

For the mystic - physical world - obstacles -

Only God's soul - all pervading - his - union

His need - to break them - harmony - unity

The Way - purgation -

Illumination - peace - river - sea - Needs no words.

"What have I in Heaven but Thee

"And beside Thee I desire none upon Earth!" Ps. 73

(2) Theosophy - Cabala - Science of Universe - Astrology - Alchemy

How world was created - Relation - חיות ודת -

The approach - laboratory experiments - Bible -

Key to Bible - secret language of letters - דת -

חיות - How Spirit becomes Matter -

(3) חיות ודת - ^{18c} Exile - no longer interested -

Redemption - what forms, prayer - because etc.

Antichrist - superstition - Messiah

- defeated - 123 mil etc

Hannukkah - compound - Temple - Antichrist

(1) Antichrist is just 1/2 of 18c - Western Eur. Jewry
Israel Booth them - Carpathian

(2) Reaction against - (1) Sp. objection

(2) Legalism

7. Restored common man to his lost dignity, Excluded -
Perfection placed within his reach - & sp. peace & happiness.
→ Democratic - authority of scholars - just but back
to masses. - 1132/33 -

Created new folk-lore - Opened sluice of popular imagination.

8. The leaders were real humble people - & appealed to humble
peoples - in their centers, Ireland & others. remnants from
18th - their sermons - and channeled them against luxury
and only of intel. authority at oil wheel at Angel, Angel Ching
- something, & only chr. hostility to the rich appears
in it. "The rich are always in debt - slaves
to their desires - slaves to their"
① minor ←

8. Restored personality to central place in J. life. - Ideas -

A man movement creates heroes. It was cracked
the 133. sp. guide - shepherd, his flock - can reach heights
the intermediary - subject to abuse! Was abused!
But too much of a man, thus the 133 was spoiled
& corrupted by admiration, pride, & wealth. But
in each way, it re-introduced into J. life, glory,
vibrant, colored, personality, around which a
multitude people could unite around, & in which
could find comfort & pride.

9. No systematic philosophy. The movement is more of Shrews
Zalman & Kadi - is already a rationalist. It is in many
ways a deft. founder, it. They left their teachers in
aphorisms, epigrams, oral teachings, & anecdotes & sermons.

10. Pantheism - but a J. Pant. - not Spinozism -

Anatole France said of Spinoza: "God is perfect so long as He does nothing." God is doing, willing, apprehending, being, causing in every action & effect with the world, was God is all - in every thing, even in Evil. all creation appears in expression, thru - a spark, light - & yearns for them, as for its home. Evil occurs by "sublimation" of a lower normal life. God reveals Himself thru nature, thru in the Torah, and thru great & good men. God is to be understood in faith & spirit, in humility, in love & mercy.

(a) of Humility - "I love the wicked who know that he is wicked" more & the righteous who know that he is righteous"

11. 3 Levi (1) for (2) Israel (3) Palestine. Pilgrimage - 300-1777 Magid - Hebrew Writings Israel Religion

12. Opposition. Rabbin & Armed - Gaon of Vilna - Excommunication libels - thats - then unprovoked - orig. these are commencement, spargen, pr. C.M. - proph. books - Messiah great Hebrew among Masses

13. Decline - (1) no strong intellectual basis - (2) no great leaders - (3) corruption & decadence - (4) evening early utopianism - obscurantists forgot of the 9 19C.

14. Its message for us. Faith linked with Order

- ✓ (1) To see the intangible behind the tangible.
- ✓ (2) To trust that reason is insufficient guide in life.
- ✓ (3) To love life - to seek progress in joy.
- ✓ (4) To believe thats of us Friend, Human -
- ✓ (5) 3 great Levi - for, Israel, Palestine