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Tales of Baal Shem Tov, 1989.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN BRUCE SHEWITZ CALLED YESTERDAY MORNING & TOLD ME WE'D HAVE TO POSTPONE THE MUSICAL PROGRAM WE HAD INTENDED FOR THIS MORNING BECAUSE HE HAD THE FLU AND WASN'T UP TO A ~~WORK~~ THE FULL PROGRAM, I BEGAN TO THINK ABOUT WHAT I'D SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT THIS MORNING.

I DECIDED TO TALK WITH YOU ABOUT THE FOUNDER OF HASIDISM, ISRAEL BAAL SHEM TOV. THOUGH HIS MODERN-DAY DISCIPLES ARE AMONG THE MOST FUNDAMENTALIST OF THE "BLACK-HAT" ORTHODOX AND A TROUBLESOME GROUP WITHIN ISRAEL, THE BAAL SHEM HAD AN ORIGINAL MIND AND IS CREDITED WITH MANY VALUABLE INSIGHTS.



TALES OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV

ISRAEL, BAAL SHEM TOV, THE FOUNDER OF HASIDISM, THE MOVEMENT OF RELIGIOUS REVIVAL, ECSTASY, AND ENTHUSIASM WHICH WARMED THE LIVES OF MANY OF OUR FATHERS IN EASTERN EUROPE IN THE 18TH & 19TH CENTURIES, THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE REFUSED TO WRITE DOWN HIS TEACHINGS.

HE FELT THAT WISDOM & COUNSEL HAD MEANING ONLY IN A PARTICULAR CONTEXT, THAT PHILOSOPHY OR WISDOM SET IN COLD TYPE LOST NOT ONLY SPECIFICITY BUT IMMEDIACY. ~~THE SPIRIT IN WHICH IT WAS SAID~~ REDUCE WISDOM TO TYPE AND IT IS BLED OF LIFE.

WHEN WE LOOK BACK ON THOSE MEN & WOMEN WHOSE SPIRITUAL PERSONALITIES HAVE MOST DEEPLY IMPRESSED MANKIND, IT'S INTERESTING THAT SO MANY SHARED THE BAAL SHEM'S CONVICTION AND REFUSED TO SET DOWN THEIR TEACHINGS: GAUTAMA, THE BUDDHA: ZOROASTER, THE GREAT FOUNDER OF PERSIAN DUALISM: AND JESUS: ARE CASES IN POINT, MEN WHO REFUSED TO SET DOWN THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM LEST IT BE DISTORTED. SO OF ALL THESE MEN WE HAVE ONLY LEGENDS ABOUT THEIR ACTIONS & THEIR TEACHINGS.

I RECENTLY RE-READ A LITTLE BOOK CALLED SHIVELEI HA BESHT,
THE PRAISE OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV. IT WAS COMPILED IN THE YEAR
1814, FIFTY-FOUR YEARS AFTER THE BAAL SHEM'S DEATH, OF THE
LEGENDS, FOLKLORE, AND BITS OF BIOGRAPHY WHICH HAD BEEN PASSED
DOWN FROM CITY TO CITY AND FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION AMONG
THE DISCIPLES ABOUT THEIR MASTER. I FOUND AMONG THESE STORIES
THIS LITTLE VIGNETTE.

A DEMON CARRYING A BOOK UNDER HIS ARM APPEARED TO THE BAAL SHEM.
THE BAAL SHEM WAS SURPRISED AND ASKED: "WHAT IS THIS BOOK?"
THE DEMON ANSWERED: "IT IS YOUR OWN SAYINGS." SO THE BAAL SHEM
LEARNED THAT ONE OF HIS DISCIPLES WAS KEEPING A JOURNAL OF HIS
TEACHINGS. HE SUMMONED ALL OF THEM: "WHICH OF YOU IS KEEPING
A DIARY OF MY SAYINGS?" THE DIARY WAS BROUGHT. THE MAN WHO
HAD BEGUN THE JOURNAL HAD THOUGHT HE WAS PERFORMING AN ACT OF
REVERENCE FOR HIS MASTER. WHEN THE BAAL SHEM HAD READ THE BOOK,
HE SAID: "THERE'S NOTHING HERE THAT'S MINE."

AS I READ THIS VIGNETTE, I WAS REMINDED OF THOSE MOMENTS WHEN SOMEONE SPOKE TO ME WORDS WHICH MADE A DEEP IMPRESSION AND CHANGED THE DIRECTION OF MY LIFE. I HAVE TRIED ONCE OR TWICE TO REPEAT THEIR TEACHING TO SOMEONE ELSE, BUT EVEN AS I DID, I FOUND THEM COMMONPLACE, ALMOST BANAL. THEIR MEANING WAS IN THE MOMENT. THEIR MEANING WAS IN MY NEED. THERE WAS NOTHING UNUSUAL ABOUT THEIR WISDOM. WHAT WAS NEW WAS MY NEED FOR THOSE PARTICULAR WORDS.

HASIDISM MAKES MUCH USE OF STORY-TELLING, BECAUSE THROUGH STORY-TELLING MAN CAN RECREATE THE SITUATION IN WHICH THE APPROPRIATE WORD IS SPOKEN AT THE APPROPRIATE MOMENT. WE CAN QUICKLY SKETCH IN THE PLAYERS, SUGGEST THE MOOD: MELANCHOLY, JOY, FEAR, TREMBLING. IMAGINING THE STORY WE CAN RE-CREATE THE MOMENT IN WHICH A MASTER, A GURU, A TEACHER, SPOKE, AND WE CAN INDICATE THE IMPACT HIS WORDS HAD.

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF WISDOM.

ONE IS ANALYTIC/AND SEEKS TO REDUCE EVERYTHING TO SIMPLE, EXPLICIT EQUATIONS. THAT'S THE WISDOM WHICH DEALS WITH SCIENCE.

THE OTHER WISDOM IS MORE FLEXIBLE. IT DEALS IN PARADOX, IN DEPTH, IN DEGREES OF UNCERTAINTY. THAT'S THE WISDOM WHICH DEALS WITH THE RELATIONSHIPS OF MEN TO MEN. IN HUMAN AFFAIRS, THERE ARE NO FIXED LAWS, ONLY MOMENTS. EACH PERSON, BEING UNIQUE, REQUIRES A PARTICULAR UNDERSTANDING AT A PARTICULAR MOMENT.

MARTIN BUBER, THE FIRST WESTERN ~~THINKER~~ THINKER TO POPULARIZE THE HASIDIM, DESCRIBED HASIDISM AS A WAY OF MEETING RATHER THAN A WAY OF MEANING. HE MEANT THAT RE-TELLING THE LEGENDS OF THE MASTER, RATHER THAN LAYING BARE THE REASONING OF THE MASTER, SUGGESTED THE WAY TO ~~TRUTH~~ TRUTH. HASIDISM TRIED TO EXPLAIN HOW MEN COULD RELATE IN LOVE, IN FRIENDSHIP, DEEPLY TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING OR TO GOD.

TO THE HASIDIM, STORIES ARE HEALING. HOW DOES A STORY HEAL? IT HEALS WHEN WE CAN SEE OURSELVES IN ~~A~~^{THE} STORY, WHEN WE CAN APPRECIATE THE WISDOM OF A MOTHER SPEAKING TO HER CHILD, OF A TEACHER SPEAKING TO A PUPIL, AND RELATE IT TO AN IMMEDIATE NEED IN OUR OWN LIVES.

TODAY, WE THINK OF STORIES LARGELY AS ENTERTAINMENT, AS A WAY TO PASS AN IDLE MOMENT, TO OCCUPY OUR MINDS WHEN WE WANT TO CLEAR THEM OF THE TENSIONS OF THE DAY. YET STORIES CAN GIVE US STRENGTH AND INSIGHT. STRANGE, THE POWER THAT EXISTS IN A STORY.

THE HASIDIM TELL OF THE BAAL SHEM THAT WHENEVER HIS PEOPLE WERE BEING PERSECUTED, HE WOULD GO TO A PARTICULAR PLACE IN THE FOREST, WHERE HE WOULD LIGHT A FIRE IN A PARTICULAR MANNER AND RECITE A PARTICULAR FORMULA OF PRAYER. THEN THE EVIL WHICH THREATENED THE PEOPLE WOULD BE AVERTED.

IN THE NEXT GENERATION, THE GREAT LEADER OF HASIDISM WAS DOV BAER OF MAZERITCH. WHENEVER HIS PEOPLE WERE THREATENED BY PERSECUTION, HE WOULD GO TO A PARTICULAR PLACE IN THE FOREST AND THERE LIGHT A FIRE IN THE PARTICULAR WAY, BUT HE HAD FORGOTTEN THE FORMULA OF PRAYER. YET SOMEHOW THE POWER OF HIS PERSON WAS STILL THERE, AND THE DANGER WAS AVERTED.

IN THE THIRD GENERATION, A MAN NAMED MOSHE LEIB ARSASOV WAS THE LEADER OF THE HASIDIM. WHEN DANGER THREATENED HIS PEOPLE, HE WOULD GO TO THE PARTICULAR PLACE IN THE FOREST & WOULD SAY, "GOD, I NO LONGER KNOW HOW TO LIGHT THE FIRE, AND I NO LONGER KNOW THE WORDS OF THE PRAYER." YET, SOMEHOW, THE DANGER WAS AVERTED.

FINALLY, IN THE LAST GENERATION, ISRAEL OF RIZHYN WAS THE COMMUNITY'S LEADER. HE NO LONGER KNEW THE PLACE IN THE FOREST, OR HOW TO LIGHT THE FIRE, OR THE FORMULA OF PRAYER. HE WOULD SIT AT HOME AND CLOSE HIS EYES & CONCENTRATE ON HIS NEED: "DEAR GOD, I NO LONGER KNOW THE FORMULA, NOR THE MAGICAL WAY OF LIGHTING THE FIRE, NOR DO I KNOW THE PLACE IN THE FOREST. ALL I CAN DO IS TELL YOU THE STORY OF MY FATHERS, THE GREAT MASTERS."

THE STORY HAD POWER ENOUGH. HIS PEOPLE WERE SAVED.

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THE STORY HAD POWER ENOUGH. HIS PEOPLE WERE SAVED.

~~ANTHROPOLOGISTS HAVE NOTED THAT PRIMITIVE PEOPLES INVEST
GREAT POWER IN THEIR STORIES. THE NAVAJOS HAVE A PROVERB
THAT A GOOD STORY PROTECTS LIFE, FAMILY, AND PERSON.
HOW DOES A STORY HAVE POWER? WHEN A MAN WHO HAS CHARISMA,
SPIRITUAL POWER, ^{AND} WHO CAN ~~WITHIN~~ DRAW FROM WITHIN YOU
YOUR OWN STRENGTH, HE IS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH.~~

SOME ARE FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO COME IN CONTACT WITH A BAAL SHEM,
OR A BUDDHA, OR A JESUS, BUT MOST ARE NOT SO FORTUNATE.
WE TELL OURSELVES THERE ARE SUCH PEOPLE AND SUCH MOMENTS.
WE RECOGNIZE THAT THERE IS MORE TO MAN THAN MOST MEN LET THROUGH.
BY PARTICIPATING IN THE STORY, IN THE TRUTH OF THE ORIGINAL MOMENT,
WE EXPOSE UNEXPECTED POWERS WITHIN US WHICH GIVE US NEW CONFIDENCE
IN OURSELVES.

BUT THERE IS YET MORE TO A STORY.

ON A KIND OF PEDESTRIAN PLATEAU, WHERE WE ARE MOVED BY WHAT WE SEE AND GUIDE OURSELVES BY THE RULES OF CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, ON THE LEVEL OF COMMON SENSE, WE DON'T ALLOW OURSELVES TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY THAT LIFE MAY BE PURE CHAOS AND HAVE NO MEANING ---WE DON'T ALLOW OURSELVES TO CONSIDER THAT ALL OF OUR PLANS AND HOPES MAY BE DOOMED TO FAILURE BECAUSE WE HAVE ASCRIBED A REASONABLENESS TO LIFE WHICH IS NOT, IN FACT, THERE.

WE LIKE TO THINK OF OURSELVES AS RATIONAL AND REASONABLE BEINGS. BUT THAT'S NOT ALL THERE IS TO LIFE. THERE ARE DEPTHS AND THERE ARE HEIGHTS. THERE ARE THE DEPTHS OF PASSION AND THE HEIGHTS OF EXALTATION. FREUD HAS TAUGHT US, HAS HE NOT, THAT MOST OF WHAT WE LABEL REASON IS, IN FACT, NOT REASON AT ALL, BUT RATIONALIZATION, SELF-JUSTIFICATION...THAT MOST OF THE BASIC COMMITMENTS WE MAKE ARE THE RESULT OF PASSION, NOT OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS, THAT WE MAKE DECISIONS NOT WITH OUR MINDS, BUT WITH OUR EMOTIONS.

THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS BEQUEATHED TO THE WEST A LEGACY WHICH INSISTS THAT THE MIND CONTROLS LIFE. FOR THEM THE GREATEST MAN WAS THE PHILOSOPHER, WHO DISPASSIONATELY JUDGED WHAT HE SAW, MADE SENSE OF IT, AND GOVERNED HIS LIFE SO THAT IT MADE SENSE. PRESUMABLY, THE LIFE OF THE TRULY WISE MAN HAD NO IRRATIONALITY IN IT.

ANOTHER GROUP OF MEN, THE PROPHETS OF JUDAH AND LATER FIGURES LIKE ISRAEL BAAL SHEM TOV, INSISTED THAT LIFE IS TOO PROFOUND AND FULL OF ENERGY TO BE COMPREHENDED BY ANY LOGICAL POSTULATE. SUCH MEN ARGUED THAT ALL THAT MAN CAN DO IS TO RESPOND TO THE WORD OF GOD, TO LIFE, WITH HIS INNER BEING. OPEN YOURSELF UP, FEEL, CARE, LOVE. DON'T ANALYZE, BECAUSE ANALYSIS IS DECEIVING. THE COLD, CALCULATING WAY IS A DESTRUCTIVE WAY.

ISRAEL BAAL SHEM TOV AND HIS FOLLOWERS, THE HASIDIM,
TRIED TO DO IN TERMS OF THEIR ALMOST-MEDIEVAL WORLD
WHAT MANY OF OUR WRITERS, PAINTERS, AND MUSICIANS ARE TRYING TO DO
IN OURS--TO TEACH US NOT TO PUT TOO MUCH TRUST IN LOGIC.
SERIOUS ARTISTS HAVE TRIED TO TAKE LIGHT AND BREAK IT UP FOR US,
SO THAT WE SEE NOT THE SURFACE OF THINGS BUT THE UNEXPECTED
BLENDING OF COLOR AND SHAPE. OUR MUSICIANS HAVE TAKEN THE
FAMILIAR SCALE, WHERE THE HARMONIES ARE NEAT AND FULL, AND
BROKEN THEM OPEN FOR US. THEY'VE INSISTED ON DIS-HARMONIES
AND DISSONANT JUXTAPOSITIONS OF SOUND. AND OUR WRITERS HAVE
TAKEN LANGUAGE AND BROKEN IT APART AS IF TO SAY: IF A MAN WRITES
SOMETHING WHICH SEEMS REASONABLE, BEWARE, BECAUSE LIFE IS
FUNDAMENTALLY UNREASONABLE.

LOOK AT THE HIDDEN, THE UNCERTAIN, AT YOURSELF. YOU HAVE
MOMENTS OF CALM. YOU HAVE MOMENTS OF SELF-DISCIPLINE, AND
MOMENTS OF FEAR & TREMBLING. YOU HAVE MOMENTS WHEN ANGER WELLS UP.
YOU KNOW SOMETIMES THAT YOU SHOULD NOT LOVE SOMEONE,
BUT YOU LOVE. ~~NEVERtheless~~ NONE OF US IS MASTER OF HIS EMOTIONS.
NONE OF IS MASTER TRULY OF HIMSELF.

IN THEIR STORIES, THE BAAL SHEM AND HIS FOLLOWERS TRIED TO BREAK LIFE OPEN. THEY OFTEN USED THE SYMBOL OF A KILIPAH OR SHELL. EVERYTHING IS ENCASED. THE SPIRIT OF MAN IS ENCASED IN HIS FLESH. IF YOU BREAK IT OPEN, WHAT DO YOU FIND? LOVE. CAPACITY. SENSITIVITY.

WHY DON'T THESE QUALITIES NORMALLY EXPRESS THEMSELVES?

~~BECAUSE~~ FEAR, UNCERTAINTY, THE NEED TO SURVIVE IN THE JUNGLE HAVE LED MAN TO ENCASE HIMSELF SO THAT HE WILL NOT BE HURT TOO OFTEN OR THINK TOO DEEPLY.

THE HASIDIM OFTEN SPOKE OF THE ERROR OF LABELING. LOOK AT A FOREST. WHAT DO YOU SEE? THE ORDINARY MAN SEES TREES. THE OPEN-EYED MAN SEES SPECIFIC TREES. AND IF YOU LOOK CAREFULLY AT ANY TREE, WHAT CAN YOU SEE? YOU CAN SEE ITS POWER TO GROW, ITS ABILITY TO PURIFY THE AIR, THE SUGGESTION OF THE CREATOR'S WISDOM, AND THE MIRACLE OF LIFE ITSELF.

WHEN WE BREAK OPEN THE LABELS AND THE FEARS WHICH ENCASE
US FROM THE WORLD, OUR LIFE IS BRIGHTER, GAYER, FULL OF
POSSIBILITY AND MEANING. ~~THE HASIDIM SOUGHT TO LIVE OPEN LIVES.~~
ONE WAY TO DO THAT WAS TO TELL STORIES---STORIES WHICH OFTEN
SHOCKED THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM. HASIDIC STORIES ARE FILLED WITH
DEMONS, SORCERERS, WIZARDS, ^{AND} ~~AND~~ DYBBUKS. ^{AND} ~~THEY DEAL WITH THE~~
POSSESSION OF MEN BY OTHER MEN.

WE LABEL THEIR STORIES SUPERSTITIOUS---AND THEY ARE, FOR
THEY WERE SUPERSTITIOUS FOLK---BUT THESE STORIES ARE NOT
STUPID OR IDLE. THEY WERE DESIGNED TO SUGGEST THAT WHAT APPEARS
ON THE SURFACE IS NOT THE SUM OF REALITY, THAT BELOW THE SURFACE
AND ABOVE THE SURFACE, IN MAN'S FEARS AND IN MAN'S HOPES,
IN GOD AND IN THE SATANIC WITHIN US, THERE IS ALSO A REALITY
WHICH WE MUST SOMEHOW COME TO GRIPS WITH.

LET ME TELL YOU A HASIDIC STORY.

ARIEH WAS A PRECOCIOUS LAD, THE MOST BRILLIANT YOUNG SCHOLAR IN HIS PROVINCE. HIS FAME PRECEDED HIM. WHEREVER HE WENT, PEOPLE FLOCKED TO SEE THE YOUNG GENIUS.

BUT ARIEH KNEW ABOUT LEVELS OF LEARNING HE HAD NOT YET MASTERED--NOT WHAT WAS IN BOOKS, BUT THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE, THE SECRET LANGUAGE WHICH COMMUNICATES THROUGH SILENCE. ARIEH KNEW ONLY THE BAAL SHEM TOV COULD TEACH HIM THE SECRET LANGUAGES OF LIFE. CONFIDENT THAT THE BAAL SHEM WOULD WELCOME HIM BECAUSE OF HIS PRECOCITY, ARIEH TRAVELED TO THE LITTLE TOWN WHERE THE BAAL SHEM LIVED.

THE BAAL SHEM THAT DAY WAS TEACHING HIS DISCIPLES. WHEN ARIEH ENTERED THE ROOM---EXPECTING TO BE GREETED WARMLY---NOT A HEAD TURNED TOWARD HIM. HE HAD HEARD THAT THE BAAL SHEM COULD SEE WITHOUT SEEING, & HE TOLD HIMSELF: "HE MUST KNOW I AM HERE. SURELY HE WILL MENTION MY PRESENCE." BUT NO MENTION WAS MADE. THE LESSON ENDED & THE DISCIPLES LEFT. THE BAAL SHEM WENT UP TO HIS CHAMBER. ARIEH WAS LEFT ALONE, DESPERATELY HURT. HE WOULD HAVE FLED HAD HE NOT BEEN SO DETERMINED TO LEARN WHAT THE BAAL SHEM HAD TO TEACH.

SO HE WAITED. HE HEARD PREPARATIONS BEING MADE TO TAKE THE BAAL SHEM TO ANOTHER VILLAGE. ARIEH TREMBLED: "THEY'LL LEAVE ME BEHIND." THE BAAL SHEM CAME DOWN THE STAIRS. OTHERS BROUGHT OUT HIS LUGGAGE. JUST AS THE CARRIAGE WAS ABOUT TO SET OFF, SUDDENLY ONE OF THE SERVANTS MOTIONED FOR ARIEH TO JUMP UP. SO THEY TRAVELED UNTIL THEY CAME AT DUSK TO AN INN. THE BAAL SHEM WENT UP TO HIS ROOMS. NO ONE PAID ANY ATTENTION TO ARIEH, & HE WENT TO SLEEP IN THE STRAW OF THE STABLE.

DURING THE NIGHT HE WOKE AND SAW A LIGHT IN THE WINDOW OF THE BAAL SHEM'S ROOM. ARIEH CREPT UP THE STAIRS. THE DOOR WAS OPEN, AND HE SAW THE MASTER SURROUNDED BY A HALO OF LIGHT. ARIEH WAS SO OVERWHELMED HE FELL DOWN IN A DEAD FAINT.

HE THOUGHT HE HAD HEARD THE BAAL SHEM SAY: "MY SON, I KNOW WHY YOU HAVE COME." ~~WHEN~~ WHEN THE MORNING CAME, AND THEY SET OUT AGAIN, AS THEY TRAVELED THROUGH A FOREST, THE BAAL SHEM MOTIONED ARIEH TO THE SEAT NEXT TO HIM.

"MY SON, I KNOW WHY YOU ARE HERE. YOU WANT TO LEARN THE SECRET LANGUAGES OF LIFE. DRAW CLOSE TO ME. I'LL WHISPER THIS KNOWLEDGE IN YOUR EAR, FOR YOU ARE WORTHY OF RECEIVING IT."

THEN THE BAAL SHEM SPOKE TO HIM OF THE MYSTERIES OF LIFE AND THE SECRET LANGUAGES OF THE ANIMALS AND OF NATURE. AS HESPOKE, ARIEH LISTENED TO THIS SECRET LORE, AND THROUGH HIS OTHER EAR HE BEGAN TO HEAR THE ANIMALS OF THE FOREST AND HE COULD UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY WERE SAYING. ARIEH WAS CAPTIVATED. WITH ONE EAR HE WAS LISTENING TO THE DEEPER WISDOM. WITH THE OTHER, HE LISTENED IN ON NATURE.

SUDDENLY, THE BAAL SHEM STOPPED TALKING. THE MINUTE HE STOPPED, ARIEH COULD NO LONGER UNDERSTAND THE SONGS OF THE BIRDS OR THE BRAYING OF THE ANIMALS. HE HEARD ONLY SOUNDS. ARIEH LOOKED UP, AGHAST, & THE BAAL SHEM SAID TO HIM: "MY SON, YOU'RE A GREEDY HUMAN BEING. GOD REVEALS HIS GLORY ONLY TO THOSE WHO CAN TRULY CONCENTRATE ON ONE THING."

ON ONE LEVEL, THE STORY IS SIMPLY A WONDER TALE ABOUT THE MIRACULOUS POWERS OF THE BAAL SHEM. ON ANOTHER LEVEL, IT CAN BE TRIVIALIZED INTO THE LESSON WE SO OFTEN IMPRESS ON OUR CHILDREN: "CONCENTRATE ON WHAT YOU'RE DOING. DON'T HAVE THE RADIO AND TV AND TELEPHONE GOING AND TRY TO DO YOUR SCHOOL WORK AT THE SAME TIME."

ON ANOTHER LEVEL, YOU HAVE HERE THE BASIC PHILOSOPHY OF THE WHOLE HASIDIC MOVEMENT. IF YOU CONCENTRATE LONG ENOUGH ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, OR TO ANOTHER HUMAN BEING, YOU WILL FIND DEPTHS WITHIN DEPTHS. IF YOU LIVE EXTENSIVELY, AS MOST PEOPLE LIVE, MOVING FROM EXPERIENCE TO EXPERIENCE, FROM STIMULUS TO STIMULUS, FROM SPEECH TO SPEECH, FROM CONVERSATION TO IDLE TALK TO CONVERSATION, FROM BOOK TO BOOK, FROM PAINTING TO PAINTING, YOUR LIFE CAN NEVER HAVE DEPTH. YOU WILL NEVER ~~AND~~ EXPLORE THE LAYERS OF LIVING.

CONCENTRATE ON ONE THING. THAT IS EVERYTHING.

THE HASIDIM CONCENTRATED ON PRAYER. IT WASN'T THE WORDS THAT MEANT ^ISOMUCH TO THEM, BUT THE SPIRIT ONE MUST BRING TO PRAYER. AS THEY PRAYED WITH INCREASING INTENSITY, THEY SENSED THAT THE WORLD OPENED UP BEFORE THEM, THAT THEY WERE TRAVELING FROM THEIR SYNAGOGUES TO GOD. SOMETHING WAS REALLY HAPPENING WITHIN THEM.

LET US TRANSLATE THIS INTO OUR OWN LIVES.

WHEN WE TALK WITH ANOTHER HUMAN BEING, WITHOUT LOOKING HIM IN THE EYE, WITH ONE EAR ATTUNED TO SOME OTHER CONVERSATION, WITH PART OF OUR MIND WORRYING WHETHER SOMETHING IS BOILING IN THE KITCHEN OR WHETHER WE'RE GOING TO RECEIVE THE CALL WE'RE SO EAGERLY WAITING FOR, THE CONVERSATION INEVITABLY IS SUPERFICIAL. WE CANNOT BE CHANGED BY SUCH A MEETING. WE LEAVE AS WE HAVE COME, NONE THE BETTER FOR IT.

WE SAY ABOUT OUR CHILDREN THAT IT'S NOT HOW MUCH TIME WE
SPEND WITH THEM BUT THE QUALITY OF THE TIME WE SPEND TOGETHER.
~~WE SAY ABOUT OUR CHILDREN THAT~~ IF WE CONCENTRATE ON THEM AND ARE PATIENT
AND LISTEN, THEY ^{CAN} LEARN FROM US, AND ^{WE} ~~LEARN~~ FROM THEM ~~ABOUT~~
~~RELATIONSHIPS~~. BUT IF WE ^{ARE} ~~REMAINING~~ DISTRACTED, NO MATTER
HOW MUCH TIME WE SPEND WITH THEM, THE TIME HAS NO MEANING.
WE MAY AS WELL HAVE BEEN ELSEWHERE.

THERE ARE ^ILEVELS OF LIFE WHICH OPEN ONLY TO CONCENTRATION.
THE HASIDIC EMPHASIS WAS ON THE SINGLE MOMENT, ON THE SINGLE
MEETING, ~~ON FAITH~~, ON A SINGLE-MINDED RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

HOW THEY WOULD HAVE LAUGHED AT OUR LIVES, SO CUT UP,
APOCAPATED. WHERE ARE YOU RUNNING, YOU MODERNS? WHAT ARE YOU
SEEKING? WISDOM? ARE YOU GOING TO READ EVERY BOOK THAT HAS
EVER BEEN PUBLISHED? LISTEN TO EVERY PIECE OF MUSIC? SEE
EVERY PAINTING? DO YOU SEE WHAT YOU HAVE THE CHANCE TO SEE?
OR DOES YOUR EYE MOVE SO QUICKLY THAT IT SEES ONLY A BLUR,
YOUR EAR HEAR SO MUCH THAT IT'S ALL ^{SIMPLY} SOUND? DO YOU MOVE SO QUICKLY
~~BEYOND THE MOMENT~~ THAT NO MOMENT HAS A DEEP & PROFOUND MEANING
FOR YOU?

AS A RABBI I WOULD ADD THIS: OUR WORSHIP FAILS BECAUSE WE ARE NOT WILLING TO CONCENTRATE ON THE MOMENT OF WORSHIP.

~~IT'S BETWEEN BREAKFAST & LUNCH, BETWEEN 10:00 AND 11:00.~~

~~IT'S NOT A MOMENT IN ITSELF.~~ THE HASIDIM PRAYED FOR THREE HOURS BEFORE THEY ENTERED THE SYNAGOGUE, SO THEY MIGHT BE PROPERLY ATTUNED TO THE MOMENT. THEY HAD FREED THEIR MINDS OF THE MUNDANE, OF THE ROUTINE, OF THE COMMONPLACE, OF THE TENSIONS.

WE LACK THEIR UNCOMPLICATED LIVES, BUT WOULDN'T WE ALL BE THE WISER, WOULDN'T WE ALL BE THE BETTER, IF THOSE RELATIONSHIPS WHICH ARE SIGNIFICANT HAD A DEPTH, AN INTENSITY TO THEM--- IF WE GAVE TIME AND CARE TO THEM THAT ^{WE} DO NOT NOW GIVE, AND EXPLORED THE DEPTH, THE INTENSITY, WHICH ARE POSSIBLE IN RELATIONSHIPS?