

Hasidism and the Rebbe/Tzaddik: The Power and Peril of Charismatic Leadership

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1. Origins and Outcomes

Every movement and ideology in the Jewish experience seeks to justify and authenticate its existence on the basis of its “legitimate origins.”

Modern (centrist?) orthodoxy’s legitimacy is frequently affirmed by virtue of its placement on the *Torah-Derech Eretz* or *Torah U’Madda* continuum, following in the footsteps of renowned Western European rabbinic exemplars. After the Hungarian Revolution, Jewish emigrants from that country justified establishing their own educational institutions on the grounds that students should be exposed to the “Torah True” path of Satmar and Munkacz rather than the “liberalized” Lithuanian style of Vilna and Kovno.

For many decades, the Conservative Movement sought to define itself as an authentic *halakhic* movement by selectively citing more liberal teachings and *teshuvot* from traditional sources.

This phenomenon ought not come as a surprise. Even the spokesmen and the followers of Shabbetai Zevi put forth great effort to authenticate his messianic identity by appealing to traditional, eschatological sources.

In truth, quoting an ancient view and using it as a modern movement’s mantra is not all that difficult a task. Our tradition is a broad one and diverse views are articulated on many issues in

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traditional sources. Minority voices are faithfully recorded in our sacred texts, and many an esoteric comment has been preserved for subsequent generations to study.

Two great works on Jewish ethics, *Hovot haLevavot* and *Mesillat Yesharim*, stand in interesting contrast to one another—to a great degree because of the deep Kabbalistic motifs of the latter that are lacking in the former. Yet, each is undeniably “authentic” to our tradition in spite of differences in emphases.

Of course, not everyone is correct, nor is it possible to substantiate every view on the basis of halakhic and aggadic sources. Obviously, there are limits, and indeed, there should be. However, a persuasive case can be made for considering multiple (and at times seemingly conflicting) precedents and divergent views on many an issue. “*Eilu v’Eilu...*”

While incarcerated by the Russian authorities in 1798 and interrogated about the nature of Hasidism, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi was asked to explain the reason that the Hasidim prayed excessively and, thereby, lost time from the study of Torah. He replied: “There are souls more inclined and related to Torah, and there are souls more inclined and related to prayer. This distinction we find already in the Talmud... Today, too, those who follow the Gaon of Vilna are souls innately related more to Torah, and those who follow the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples are souls innately related more to prayer.”¹ Granted, R. Shneur Zalman’s response is somewhat self-serving; however, it is also an acknowledgement of the diversity of thought on the subject of the supremacy of study over prayer.

Therefore, the tendency to seek to authenticate the Hasidic movement on the basis of the legitimacy of its roots in traditional sources is not all that difficult a task. The roots are clearly there; the precedents are fairly obvious.

The challenge is not one of “origins,” but one of “outcomes.” The concerns surrounding the legitimacy of Hasidism’s conception and birth are misguided. Instead the qualities that have come to characterize its development and maturity should be subject to careful scrutiny.

¹ A. C. Glitzenstein, *The Arrest and Liberation of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi*, trans. J. I. Schochet (Brooklyn, 1964), pp. 48-49.

There is no doubt as to the successful survival, indeed the triumph of Hasidism. The language of the anti-Hasidic edicts of the latter decades of the 18th century is vitriolic in calling for the destruction of Hasidism.² However, these edicts proved ineffective in crushing the new movement. Hasidism triumphed in numbers and power and emerged, not as a “sect” nor as an aberrational fringe movement as its adversaries styled it, but as a significant part of the religious “establishment.”

An etymological irony emerges. Although the Hasidic movement was actually the “protestant movement,” a minority group challenging the established religious hierarchy and its socio-religious priorities, it was the establishment majority that came to bear the “protestant label” of “*Mitnagdim*,” in their opposition to the pious ones, the Hasidim.

The outcome is clearly a success story for Hasidism. The world-wide, victorious presence of several thousand Lubavitch emissaries has given a distinctive Chabad appearance to many a Jewish community. In numerous locales Chabad is the only religious Jewish presence extant. Decades ago R. Chaim Kreiswirth purportedly quipped that the only two “entities” to be found world-wide are Coca Cola and Chabad.

The more insular Satmar sect boasts even greater numbers than Lubavitch, and with its substantial wealth has built not only institutions but entire communities.

A good case could be made that Orthodox Judaism has become “hasidized” if not “shtiebelized.” Hasidic halakhic emphases and stringencies, Hasidic *minbagim* and social conventions have become de rigueur in many Litvish circles. In many respects Satmar and Munkacz appear to have eclipsed Vilna and Kovno.

However, at what price has this victory been achieved? Is it possible that the undeniable strengths of Hasidism that contributed mightily to its triumph also embodied substantial weaknesses, if not dangers? Specifically, the issue that must be addressed is the single

² Mordecai Wilensky, *Hasidim uMitnagdim*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 24-25.

A. Ben Ezra, “LeToledot Hitnagdut haGra leHasidut,” *Tarbiz* 46 (1977), pp. 133-140.

most distinctive characteristic of the Hasidic movement—the persona of the Rebbe/Tzadik.

From a socio-psychological perspective it is simple to explain the formidable role played by the Rebbe/Tzadik in the expansion of Hasidism. Although much diversification came to exist from one Hasidic court to another, the common denominator was that all Hasidim had a Rebbe who was far more than a “teacher” in keeping with the traditional sense of the word “Rabbi.” The Hasidic Rebbe served in many capacities: he was a group facilitator; a master of melody, song, and dance; a counselor; a psychologist; as well as a charismatic personality. Most importantly, he was perceived as a conduit to the upper spheres, as a cosmic facilitator, as a man unlike other men in whom divine powers were vested.

There is undeniably great power in such a conception; however, there may also be great peril.

In the interest of objectivity, my own voice will be muted in the ensuing pages. The voices prominently heard will be exclusively Hasidic voices, the voices of Hasidic masters and their followers as they testify in their own words to the exalted role of the Rebbe/Tzaddik.

2. The Rebbe/Tzaddik: A Qualitative Different Persona

Hasidic expositors portrayed the Rebbe/Tzaddik as a qualitatively different sort of human being, incomparable to normal mortals. We find R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye dividing the Jewish people into two distinct categories: the *anshei homer* (the people of *matter*) and the *anshei tzurah* (the people of *form*). He explains this division as follows:

Man is created out of form and matter, which are two opposites, matter tending toward material domination [*kelippot*] and form yearning for spiritual things... the masses are called “people of the earth,” because their concern is with earthly, material things, and so they are “matter.” The *tzaddikim*, who engage in Torah and prayer, are “form.”³

³ Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (Jerusalem, 1966), “Introduction,” “Bereshit,” “Ki Tissa,” “Mishpatim.” The terms *homer*

R. Jacob Joseph cites the Baal Shem Tov in declaring, “the people who are called Jacob, they are the body, and the perfect faithful of Israel, who are called Israel, they are the soul.”⁴ He further elaborates on this vital differentiation:

The common people are in the category of *katnut* [lit. “smallness,” i.e., constricted spiritual consciousness]: while the *tzaddikim* are in the category of *gadlut* [lit. “greatness,” i.e., expanded spiritual consciousness]. When the common people join themselves to the *tzaddikim*, they also experience the mystery of *gadlut*.⁵

The Tzaddik is gifted with *Ruah haKodesh* (the Holy Spirit),⁶ and is empowered with remarkable supernatural gifts. He is capable of reading the thoughts of others,⁷ and can at a glance observe happenings all over the world and foretell the future.⁸

R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s son, R. Dov Ber, recounts his father’s words spoken to him on one Rosh Hashanah: “Today I saw in my prayer that there was a great change for the better... and that was what was written in heaven above.”⁹

An interesting practical ramification of the exalted role of the Rebbe/Tzaddik is seen reflected in Hasidic leniencies vis-à-vis the halakhic guidelines for the proper time for prayer. It was taught that since the Tzaddik “is above space and above time,” he is not bound by halakhic restrictions as to the appropriate hour for prayer.¹⁰

and *tzurah* have a long history in philosophical and mystical thought, denoting the qualities of physicality and spirituality.

⁴ Ibid., “Shmot.”

⁵ Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Zofnat Pane’ab* (New York, 1954), p. 37b

⁶ Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *Noam Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 1978), “Vayeshev.”

⁷ Ibid., “Behaalotkha.”

⁸ Numerous examples of such powers are to be found in *Shivhei haBesht*, Dov Baer b. Samuel. Ed. Horodetsky (Berlin, 1922). Trans. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome Mintz, in *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Bloomington, London, 1970).

⁹ Mordecai Teitelbaum, *HaRav miLadi uMifletet Habad* (Warsaw, 1914), p. 243.

¹⁰ Aaron Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, Trans. S. Himelstein (Hoboken, N. J., 1992), p. 140. Elijah Judah Schochet *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna* (New Jersey, London, 1994), pp. 92-93.

3. The Rebbe/Tzaddik: A Cosmic Facilitator

The distinctiveness of the Rebbe/Tzaddik is most apparent in his power to be a “cosmic facilitator.” It is put in the strongest possible terms: “He (the Tzaddik) alters G-d’s will because he has become one unity with Him, blessed be He.”¹¹

In *Shivbei haBesht*, the Hasidic compilation portraying the greatness of the Baal Shem Tov, the following composite description of the founder of Hasidism appears.

The BESHT’s birth was heralded by the prophet Elijah,¹² and his parents were close to one hundred years of age when he was born.¹³ The BESHT was a reincarnation of the renowned philosopher and exegete Saadiah Gaon,¹⁴ and his soul was derived from the soul of King David.¹⁵ His son, Hersheleh, was “born by the word” because the BESHT claimed not to have slept with his wife for a period of fourteen years,¹⁶ and the BESHT told Hersheleh that he had the power to endow his son with the holy soul of Adam.¹⁷

The BESHT received communications from the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,¹⁸ was able to perceive angels,¹⁹ visited the palace of King David,²⁰ and ascended to the heavenly palace of the Messiah²¹ where he was told that redemption would come to Israel if the BESHT opened the “gate.”²² The BESHT’s Torah teachings, like G-d’s revelation to Israel at Mount Sinai, were revealed amidst thunder and lightning.²³

¹¹ Or haEmet, p.12a. Cited in M. Weiss “The Saddik-Altering the Divine Will” *Studies in Eastern European Mysticism* (Oxford, 1985), p. 193.

¹² *Shivbei haBesht*, no. 3, p. 11.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., no. 82, pp. 106-107.

¹⁵ Ibid., no. 228, p. 234.

¹⁶ Ibid., no. 249, p. 258.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., no. 171, pp. 186-187.

¹⁹ Ibid., no. 191, p. 198.

²⁰ Ibid., no. 190, p. 198.

²¹ Ibid., no. 41, pp. 54–58.

²² Ibid., no. 42, p. 58.

²³ Ibid., no. 62, pp. 83-84.

The BESHT envisioned not that he would die the death of a mortal consigned to burial in the earth, but rather that he would ascend to the heavens in a storm like the prophet Elijah.²⁴ The BESHT predicted a second coming for himself after his death in the event the Messiah had not yet appeared.²⁵

The miraculous feats the BESHT performed during his lifetime were legion. He possessed the power to make himself invisible,²⁶ to walk on water,²⁷ to read people's thoughts,²⁸ to understand the speech of birds and animals,²⁹ and to determine a man's sin by taking his pulse.³⁰ The BESHT was credited with being able to predict the future,³¹ to foretell the birth of children,³² and to bring about the birth of male children.³³ He was depicted as curing the ill,³⁴ resurrecting the dead,³⁵ communicating with the dead,³⁶ exorcising demons,³⁷ and combating Satan.³⁸ The BESHT was able to bring about the death of the wicked,³⁹ and to preserve the righteous by triumphing over the Angel of Death.⁴⁰ He was able to annul severe decrees meted out to the dead,⁴¹ and redeem and elevate souls into heaven.⁴²

The key to the BESHT's powers stemmed from his ability for ecstatic prayer that enabled him to perform all manner of miracles

²⁴ Ibid., no. 146, p. 169.

²⁵ Ibid., no. 147, pp. 169–178.

²⁶ Ibid., no. 180, p. 193.

²⁷ Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudilkov, *Degel Mahane Ephraim*, "Vayishlach."

²⁸ *Shivbei haBesht*, nos. 228, 235, pp. 234–235, 241–242.

²⁹ Ibid., no. 237, pp. 242–245.

³⁰ Ibid., no. 245, pp. 253–254.

³¹ Ibid., nos. 211, 213, 223, 45, pp. 211–213, 215–217, 224–225, 59–60.

³² Ibid., nos. 211, 204, 223, 224, pp. 212–213, 205–206, 224–229.

³³ Ibid., no. 107, pp. 132–133.

³⁴ Ibid., nos. 212, 225, 232, pp. 213–215, 229–230, 238–240.

³⁵ Ibid., nos. 105, 244, pp. 129–131, 252.

³⁶ Ibid., no. 100, pp. 124–126.

³⁷ Ibid., nos. 162, 84, 20, 23, pp. 180–181, 107–108, 34–35, 37.

³⁸ Ibid., nos. 34, 4, pp. 52–53, 11–13.

³⁹ Ibid., no. 63, pp. 84–85.

⁴⁰ Ibid., no. 91, p. 116.

⁴¹ Ibid., no. 166, pp. 183–184.

⁴² Ibid., nos. 137, 46, 12, pp. 161–163, 60–61, 24–26.

from allowing the barren to conceive,⁴³ to causing rain to fall,⁴⁴ to annulling unfavorable divine decrees.⁴⁵ The BESHT even declared that “anyone who wants his prayer to ascend to heaven should pray word for word with me.”⁴⁶ The quintessential image of the BESHT was that of a master of theurgy—a practitioner of powerful magic for religious purposes. By virtue of these powers the BESHT became in the eyes of his followers a cosmic facilitator.

Not surprisingly, Messianism appears as a powerful theme in Hasidic thought. For example, in describing the ascension of his soul to heaven on Rosh Hashanah, 1749, the Baal Shem Tov relates that he was able to annul an evil decree against Israel. The BESHT continues:

Then I asked the Messiah when he would come. He replied, “When your teachings have been revealed in the world and become famous, when the springs of your teachings have spread everywhere, including what I have taught you, and when others are able to do *yibudim* and ascensions as you do—then all the evil powers will perish, and then it will be a time of divine good will and the time of redemption.”⁴⁷

The BESHT thus clearly asserted that the messianic advent was contingent upon the acceptance and application of his own doctrines and the attainment by others of the mystical theurgic powers possessed by the BESHT.

Following in the footsteps of the Baal Shem Tov and basking in his sacred aura, the Rebbe/Tzaddik of later generations was likewise endowed by his followers with the power to be a cosmic facilitator.

Thus, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk declares that the Tzaddik “has the ability to do everything, and even to cause the Messiah to come to a worthy generation.”⁴⁸ R. Elimelekh stated that were he to be granted a two-year respite from all controversy, he would be able

⁴³ Ibid., no. 59, pp. 76–78.

⁴⁴ Ibid., no. 21, pp. 35–36.

⁴⁵ Ibid., no. 137, pp. 161–163.

⁴⁶ Ibid., no. 185, pp. 195–196.

⁴⁷ Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, *Ben Porat Yosef* (New York, 1954) Appendix. *Keter Shem Tov*, ed. Kehot (Brooklyn, 1972) vol. 1, pp. 2a–b. Trans. J. Dan, *The Teachings of Hasidism* (New York, 1983), pp. 96–98.

⁴⁸ *Noam Elimelekh*, “Vayishlach,” “Mishpatim.”

to bring about the advent of the Messiah and the redemption of Israel.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the Rebbe/Tzaddik of every era was deemed to be the potential Messiah himself,⁵⁰ and many Hasidim believed that a messianic spark was vested within their respective Rebbe/Tzaddik.⁵¹ The earthly powers of the Rebbe/Tzaddik appear to have been limitless. “The Tzaddik sustains the entire world.”⁵² R. Elimelekh of Lizensk declares, “The Tzaddik alone, through his holy deeds can accomplish everything,”⁵³ and “The Tzaddik decrees, and G-d, blessed be He, fulfills.”⁵⁴ R. Moses of Kozienice states the matter thus: “Whatever G-d does, it is also within the capacity of the Tzaddik to do.”⁵⁵

It is quite possible that some Hasidic masters were speaking metaphorically and did not intend for all such utterances to be taken literally; however, among the masses there is evidence that these statements were perceived as literally true. Many a Hasid had more than **reverence** for the Rebbe/Tzaddik, he had full **faith** in him and attributed to him the power to determine all earthly events, macro and micro, from the outcome of the Napoleonic Wars⁵⁶ to mundane daily occurrences in the life of the Hasid.

The Rebbe/Tzaddik was perceived as endowed with the power to channel blessings from on high to his followers. His *bracha* had the magical, theurgic power to alleviate pain and cure illness,⁵⁷ and some Hasidim purportedly engaged non-Jews to travel to the Tzaddik on

⁴⁹ *Taamei haMinbagim* (Lemberg, 1909), vol. 2, p. 12b. Cited in Wertheimer, *Halakhot*, p. 34, n. 130.

⁵⁰ Nachman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Mubaran* (Brooklyn, 1974), I, 64.

⁵¹ Wertheimer, p. 28, n. 57.

⁵² Dov Baer of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav leYaakov* ed. Schatz-Uffenheimer (Jerusalem, 1976), #142.

⁵³ *Noam Elimelekh*, “Vayeshhev.”

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, “Miketz.”

⁵⁵ Moses of Kozienice, *Beer Moshe*, (New York, 1964), “Vayeshhev.”

⁵⁶ See for example Mayer Hayyim Heilman, *Beit Rebbe* (Berdichev, 1902-1903), ch. 22. Matityahu Guttman, *MiGedolei haHasidut* (Tel Aviv, 1953), 3-4, p. 31 on R. Mendel of Rimonov and the Napoleonic Wars, Simon Dubnow, *History of Hasidism* (Cincinnati, 1970), p. 176 on the King of Austria and R. Leib Sarah's.

⁵⁷ Nachman of Bratslav, *Sefer haMidot* (Moghilef, 1811), “Tzaddik,” p. 127.

the Sabbath so that they could beseech him to pray on behalf of the ill.⁵⁸

The common Hasidic practice of placing *kvitlach* at the Rebbe/Tzaddik's tomb is, therefore, quite understandable. The *kvitel* frequently took the form of a piece of paper detailing the needs and requests of the petitioner and listing the names of those in need of the Rebbe/Tzaddik's blessing. It was often accompanied by a "*pidyon*" (lit. redemption) given as a gift to the Rebbe/Tzaddik. The *pidyon* was perceived as possessing redemptive powers and later became known as a "*Pidyon Hanefesh*," for it was believed to be efficacious in redeeming the soul of the donor.

Many Hasidic customs reflect similar beliefs. The Rebbe's *Tish* was frequently characterized by Hasidim enthusiastically partaking of *shirayim*, the Rebbe/Tzaddik's leftover food. Hasidim believed that such edibles contain magical power as they had been touched and sanctified by the Rebbe/Tzaddik. *Shirayim* were believed to be a *segula* for the ill, and the verse "He will bless your bread"⁵⁹ was interpreted to mean that as a result of eating sanctified food "I (G-d) will remove all disease from your midst."⁶⁰

As the name Baal Shem Tov attests, the founder of Hasidism was renowned among his followers for the efficacy of cures that he was able to achieve by means of his *kemeyot* (amulets). Not surprisingly, later generations of Hasidic Tzaddikim made a practice of distributing *shemirots* and *segulot* to their followers in the belief that these objects would protect their possessor against illness and misfortune.

Likewise, *nigunim* and storytelling—usually stories recounting the miraculous deeds of Tzaddikim—became standard Hasidic practice at the *tish* in the belief that melody and storytelling similarly possess magical powers.

Many more examples could be cited, but it is obvious that Hasidism strikingly redefined the traditional image of the "Rabbi," the teacher of Torah, into the "Rebbe," the cosmic facilitator.

⁵⁸ Abraham Sperling, *Sefer Taamei haMinhagim* (Jerusalem, 1982) III, p. 45 citing *Lev Sameah*.

⁵⁹ Exodus 23:25.

⁶⁰ Kalonymous Kalman HaLevi Epstein, *Meor va'Shemesh*, (Jerusalem, 2006), "Mishpatim."

4. *Hitkasbrut*: The Rebbe/Tzaddik as an Intermediary

One hesitates to use the word “intermediary” in describing a Jew. It is a phrase seemingly inappropriate, if not antithetical, to our conception of normative traditional Judaism. The holiest human being remains just that—a human being.

However, an essential teaching of Hasidism revolves around the act of *hitkasbrut*, i.e. binding oneself to the Rebbe/Tzaddik, a human being who is clearly more than merely human. Indeed, R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye cites the Baal Shem Tov as emphasizing the necessity for the Hasid to bind himself to the Rebbe/Tzaddik⁶¹ in order to be elevated to the level that allows the individual to bind himself with G-d.

This process is effected by means of transmitting *kavanot* and prayers to the Tzaddik so that they may be elevated to the divine realms.

It is only to be expected that R. Yaakov Yosef would make such an affirmation. As noted earlier, he equates the masses of people to the “body” and exceptional individuals to the “soul,” and declares that “the *kavanot* of the prayers are only for exceptional people and not for average people.” He therefore affirms that “there is no life in the body unless it clings to the soul, and then the soul keeps the body alive.”⁶² Hence the necessity of attaching one’s prayers to the Rebbe/Tzaddik so that they may be properly elevated. After all, is it possible to actually achieve *devekut* with the ineffable divinity? Only by clinging to G-d’s exemplar on earth can one aspire to achieve a modicum of attachment with G-d.⁶³

This concept is, of course, not the invention of Hasidism. All were undoubtedly familiar with Rashi’s commentary to the phrase *Uledavka bo* (...and to cleave unto Him).⁶⁴ “Is it possible to speak thusly? Is He not a consuming fire? Rather, cleave to His disciples and to the wise, and I will credit you as though you cleave to Him.”

⁶¹ *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, “Mishpatim.”

⁶² *Ibid.*, “Yitro.”

⁶³ Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likkutei Amarim (Tanya)* (Vilna, 1937), ch. 2.

⁶⁴ Deuteronomy 11:22.

However, it would appear that Hasidism expanded and concretized this concept of *devekut* in ways that enhanced the alleged powers of the Rebbe/Tzaddik and accentuated the dependency of Hasidim upon him.

Hasidism affirmed the necessity of a physical relationship between Hasid and Rebbe/Tzaddik by emphasizing the need for frequent visitations. It was declared to be a sacred obligation for the Hasid to appear before the Rebbe/Tzaddik on a regular basis. True, the Talmud enjoined visitations to one's Rabbi on the Sabbath and festivals.⁶⁵ But in Hasidic circles such visitations took on a special import. The Baal Shem Tov declared that traveling to the Tzaddik is in the category of *nishma*,⁶⁶ and promises that whoever merits spending the Sabbath with him and partaking of his food will be granted the elixir of life.⁶⁷

Nor was the study of Torah deemed to be an indispensable part of such visitations. R. Nahman of Bratslav proclaimed that "those people who travel to a Tzaddik, even if they do not hear Torah from him, receive a reward for their travel."⁶⁸ R. Uri of Strelisk emphasized in the strongest possible terms that it is incumbent upon a Hasid to travel to his Rebbe "even if it means a trip of thousands of miles. He is permitted to miss prayer and Torah study for this purpose, because a single statement by a true Tzaddik rectifies the soul more than all the *mitzvot*."⁶⁹

Such visits were not without practical benefit for both Hasid and Rebbe/Tzaddik. Appearing before the Rebbe/Tzaddik presented the Hasid with the opportunity to bestow upon his mentor the aforementioned *pidyon*. Bestowing financial support upon the Rebbe/Tzaddik was a *mitzva* of the first magnitude. In the words of R. Nahman of Bratslav ...supporting a Tzaddik is the equivalent of partaking in the sacred rites in the *Beit haMikdash*.⁷⁰

Some of the opulence associated with the life style of certain Hasidic masters (Elimelech of Lizhensk, Barukh of Meziboz, Hayyim

⁶⁵ Rosh haShana, 16b.

⁶⁶ *Shivbei haBESHT*, II, 32.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶⁸ *Sefer haMidot*, "Tzaddik," p. 24. Cited by Wertheim, p.238.

⁶⁹ Wertheim, p. 238.

⁷⁰ Nachman of Bratslav, *Sefer haMitzvot*, (Jerusalem, 1978) "Zedaka," p. 46.

Heikel of Amdur, Israel of Rizin, among others) was a direct result of impressive donations of *pidyonim* on the part of their followers. It is interesting to read critiques leveled against such wealthy leaders by *mitnagdim* (as well as some Hasidim) and the justifications offered by the beneficiaries of these gifts. A frequently offered rationale for the acceptance of *pidyonim* was that the donor derived far greater benefit than the recipient. In other words, the value of the *pidyon* was eclipsed by the value of the blessings resulting from its transmission to the Rebbe/Tzaddik. *Hitkashrut* stands alone as the ultimate gift of importance received by the Hasid. As R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye phrased it, "...if you believe that the Tzaddik is the shepherd of Israel it is as if you believe in G-d."⁷¹

The intermediary role of the Rebbe/Tzaddik was manifest in other ways as well. It was not uncommon for some Hasidim, notably those of the school of R. Nachman of Bratslav, to confess their sins before their leader and depend upon his powers to elevate their sinful thoughts, thereby purifying them. Another striking aspect of the Rebbe/Tzaddik's power as intermediary is seen in the doctrine of the "descent of the Tzaddik." It was believed that the Rebbe/Tzaddik commits the ultimate act of self-sacrifice and the strongest manifestation of his powers when he actually "descends to the doors of Gehinnom to bring up the souls of the wicked... it is possible for one to ascend with him only if he too joins himself to the Tzaddik, for he who does not wish to join himself to him surely will not ascend with him."⁷²

Here, too, we are not encountering a radically new idea. The *Zohar* already taught that "the Tzaddikim go down to Gehinnom, to the sinners who are in Sheol, to bring them up from there,"⁷³ and this concept was intimately associated with Shabbetai Zevi. However, the Hasidic emphasis upon this theme served to popularize and concretize it as a normative concept in Jewish eschatological thought.

As to the uncomfortable, alien-sounding term "intermediary," none other than R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye taught that the Tzaddik does indeed stand between G-d and the people "just as

⁷¹ *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, "Tzav," "Kedoshim," "Ekev."

⁷² *Noam Elimelekh*, "Balak," *Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, "Hukkat."

⁷³ *Zohar III*, (Vilna, 1911), "Pinhas," p. 220b.

Moses was the intermediary between Israel and the Holy One Blessed be He.”⁷⁴

5. Afterthoughts

Such is the portrait of the Rebbe/Tzaddik as it emerges from primary Hasidic sources. Needless to say, our summary constitutes a limited and incomplete portrait. It is not comprehensive. However, it is illustrative of both the power and the peril inherent in the Hasidic model of leadership.

Undeniably, there is great power in this portrait. There is charisma here and the potential for inspirational ecstasy; there is intimacy and bonding and the security that emanates from directly encountering the immediacy of a faith experience via a divine intermediary. The success of Hasidism is due, in no small degree, to its captivating model of leadership.

Yet there is also peril here with the dangers attendant in espousing a charismatic leadership. There is the potential for aberrational thinking, gullibility, and a contagion of messianic fervor. In the words of a splendid essay recently appearing in the pages of *Hakirah*, ours is “a sad state that we witness where, when difficult times are upon us, instead of self-reflection and *teshuvah* people turn to miracle working ‘Mekubalim,’ Rebbes, and Gedolim. As the community’s economic well-being has grown, the new phenomenon of traveling to Uman, Meron, Lisensk, and other such places has become fashionable. The proliferation of Tehillim Clubs, pamphlets that promise protection by ‘Gedolim,’ prayer in return for contribution to *tzedakah* organizations and other such talisman type of behaviors have become mainstream and accepted, nay encouraged.”⁷⁵ The unmistakable influence of Hasidism is evident in the phenomena here described.

Furthermore, there is the potential for an emotional mindset that could lead to negligence in the assumption of responsibility for one’s personal behavior. It is instructive to consider the contrast drawn by Immanuel Etkes between Hasidism and the Musar Movement. The

⁷⁴ *Zafnat Paneah*, Ben Porat Yosef, Intro.

⁷⁵ David Guttmann, “Avodah Zarah as Falsehood—Denial of Reality and Rejection of Science,” *Hakirah*, Vol. 6, Summer, 2008, p. 138, n. 40.

mystically empowered Hasidic master uplifted his followers, connecting them with the higher realms and functioning as the conduit toward the attainment of *deveikut*. Within the Musar Movement, in contrast, the spiritual leader is first and foremost a teacher. True, he sets personal examples and seeks to inspire. However, in the final analysis, his disciples stand alone, drawing on their own resources to master their urges and perfect their behaviors.⁷⁶

If I may be permitted to quote from my own work, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna*, “There is no question that for the downtrodden masses Hasidism presented a far more appealing approach to religion than the traditional, textual, scholarly approach. There is also no question that Hasidism succeeded in redefining the term *am ha-aretz* (which previously had referred derogatorily to one who could not or would not adhere to Israel’s sacred texts) to signify a *Hasid*—one that adheres to a sacred man. This redefinition was likewise based upon a new prioritization that clearly benefited those so redefined: lower-status, non-scholarly individuals were now accepted into respectable religious society. What may have lain at the core of the GRA’s concern with and protest against Hasidism was the fear that Hasidism might, at the same time, redefine and jeopardize the essence of Judaism itself by undermining the integrity of its traditional character as a religion devoted to the study of sacred texts in its adoration of the sacred man. While it may have yielded fewer emotional highs and soaringly ecstatic moments of inspiration than did Hasidism, and promise no immediate gratification, mainstream Judaism’s traditional character and approach were both solid and proven, and provide secure foundations and sturdy ladders upon which to gradually ascend to higher levels of religious development.”⁷⁷

If I may be permitted two final thoughts:

1. In connection with alleged financial scandals involving a prominent Hasidic community, the following sardonic anecdote was

⁷⁶ Immanuel Etkis, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Musar Movement* (Phila., Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 321-322.

⁷⁷ Schochet, pp. 213-214.

circulated on the internet. It is illustrative of the power/peril aspect of Hasidic leadership.

Many years ago, I heard a *vort* from a Chassidic acquaintance. *Shomrah nafshi kei chasid ani* (Tehillim 86:2) Guard my soul for I am a chasid. The last word should be translated as “devout,” but it could be homiletically taken to refer to a member of a Chassidic group. One of the rebbes was puzzled by the verse. “I understand that a Litvak would need *shmirah*, but why a chasid? A chasid has a beard, *payes*, a *gartel*, long white socks. These certainly guard and protect him. A *litvak* needs *shmirah* much more.

He answered his own question. “A Litvak, if he falters, goes to the *beis medrash* the next day, and opens a *Mishnah Brurah*. In it, he sees proof positive of his misdeed, and he feels contrite. That contrition is the beginning of his repentance. He doesn’t need any extra help. A chasid, however, who sins looks around and discovers that his rebbe is guilty of the same crime!”

The author of this thought was the Spinka Rebbe.⁷⁸

2. If there is a grain of truth in the preceding thought, there is surely a bushel full of veracity and profundity in the following exposition by Rabbi Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna. In his commentary to *Mishlei* the GRA calls the readers’ attention to the following statement: “Torah is to the soul of man what rain is to the soil (of the earth).”

At first glance, the general analogy of Torah to rain appears to be clear and appropriate; just as rain sustains life so does the Torah sustain Jewish life, and without it there would be no Jewish survival. It is also clearly understood to signify that the soul of man needs Torah to thrive, just as the soil needs rain. However, the GRA’s intent here is to focus on a more subtle point—just as rain causes to sprout forth whatever has been planted in the soil, be it nourishing plants or poisonous weeds, so does Torah cause to spring forth whatever has been planted in the soul of man. If man’s soul is noble, then Torah study will enhance his nobility, and he will profess even nobler thoughts and perform even nobler deeds. However, a bitter,

⁷⁸ Yitzhak Adlerstein, “Silver Lining of the Los Angeles Scandal Cloud” Internet communication 1/18/2008.

ignoble, uncultivated soul may yield even greater bitterness and ignobility as a result of Torah study.⁷⁹

The GRA did not intend to imply by this analogy that the Torah is a “value-neutral” document. What he was affirming, however, was that Torah values affect every type of soul just as rain affects every type of soil; what the specific effect will be is contingent on the nature of the soul and the nature of the soil, respectively. A soul must be properly prepared for the study of Torah no less than soil must be properly prepared for the rain, so that both will yield nourishing and life-giving fruits.

In conclusion, it is not difficult to envision dangers and the potential for abuse inherent in the Hasidic model of “the veneration of the sacred man.” However, the Vilna Gaon (the quintessential *mitnaged*) calls our attention to a peril also extant in the study of “sacred texts.” One must be spiritually and ethically attuned to Torah study for it to be beneficial, otherwise one’s Torah encounter may be aberrational. (After all, common parlance declares that the devil, too, is capable of citing scripture for his own benefit!) There may be power and peril inherent in the study of Torah as well, for the divine word is subject to interpretation by the fallible human mind and the (occasionally) deceitful human heart. Both the Hasid’s dependence on the personal mediation of the Rebbe/Tzaddik in achieving *deveikut* and the *mitnaged*’s reliance on textual mediation by a sensitive mind and soul are not without danger. ❧

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⁷⁹ R. Elijah, Gaon of Vilna, *Sefer Mishlei im Beur HaGRA*, Ed. Moses Phillip (Petah Tikvah, 1985) 19:9, 24:31, 25:4, 6:8.