

Class 17 – In Depth: Chassidut
Rabbi Moshe Davis

Class Outline

- **Review**
- **The Appeal of Chassidut**
- **The Reaction to Chassidut**

I. Review

By the end of the Rishonim period, the Jewish community had changed in many significant ways (rise of communal rabbi, splits in communities, new ways of thinking), all of which made the Jewish world susceptible to the European Enlightenment. The European Enlightenment had a major impact on Jewish practice, and three broad reactions resulted: Those who assimilated their Jewish identity into the broader European Enlightenment (Mendelssohn), those who accommodated the ideas and values of the European Enlightenment into their Jewish worldview (Hirsch), and those who isolated themselves from the Enlightened world (Chatam Sofer).

II. The Appeal of Chassidut

The Mud of a Jew

Sichos Chaim, p. 37, by Rabbi Chaim Meir Yechiel of Maglitzia

Once, when Rabbi Israel of Rizhin was traveling, he came to a certain town where he stayed in the house of a very wealthy person. The rooms of this wealthy person were extremely well appointed. In particular, the floor was polished and beautifully constructed. When the news spread throughout the town that the Rizhiner had come, men, women and children gathered from all corners of the town. This great crowd brought a great deal of mud into the house, and the wealthy man was very angry at them. When the Rizhiner heard this, he called the wealthy man and told him, "I shall tell you a wondrous story. But hear me well." This is the story:

Once there was a Jew who lived in a village. He was very crushed and poor, God have mercy. This Jew had six children and an old mother and father who lived with him, as well as his wife. It was close to Pesach time, and this poor person didn't have anything. In particular, he needed matzos for all of Pesach. The Jew was very upset, for all his attempts had brought him nothing, and he had absolutely no idea how to earn some gold coins. As Pesach came closer, he had the idea of trying again to travel into town, where perhaps Hashem would have mercy on him and give him some business to earn some gold coins. And so he went to the town, and he had some good fortune and earned six gold coins. And as can be well-understood, the joy of this Jew was beyond imagination. The Jew went and bought flour, and he brought the flour to the baker. The baker told him to wait for him to first bake the matzos for the wealthy men. The poor man waited for them. The baking of their matzos lasted until nightfall; and only then did the baker take his flour and bake his matzos.

“Now the poor man didn’t know what to do. He was very afraid to go home with the matzos, because the road was treacherous with pits of water and mud, and he feared that he might fall into one of the holes. But the idea of remaining in the town until morning was very hard for him, because he knew that his family was hungry and in the dark, because they didn’t even have a candle. Finally, he decided to return home. And so he trusted in Hashem and traveled homewards. On the way, the wagon fell into a pit of water and mud. The Jew toiled by the sweat of his brow for a very long time to upright the wagon and the horse, but in vain. And he cried a great deal in the bitterness of his soul.

Meanwhile, a wealthy person was passing by with his servant, not far from where the Jew had fallen. When the wealthy man heard a man crying out, he sent his servant to investigate. The servant returned, saying that a Jew had been cast into the mud with his horse and wagon. The wealthy man hurried to the muddy pit and commanded his servant to extricate the poor man and this wagon from the filth. And so he did. When the wealthy man saw that the poor man’s soul had almost expired from the cold and weariness, he quickly gave him vodka and cake and put him on the wagon. Then he accompanied the poor man home, fearing that he might again fall into one of the many holes on that road. When the wealthy man came to the poor man’s house and saw the darkness and the terrible poverty, he was filled with compassion. He opened his purse and gave the poor man 600 red coins, telling him, “First of all, celebrate Pesach generously. And then build yourself a decent house with the rest of the money.” After this, the wealthy man returned to his home.

At this point, the Rizhiner said again, “Hear me well.” And then he continued. After this, not many days passed, and the wealthy man passed away. As is usual, he was brought before the heavenly court. They began to ask him, “Did you engage in business honestly?” But before he could answer the first question, he was surrounded on every side by destructive angels. One cried out, “I was created from such and such a sin,” and another cried out, “I was created from such and such a sin.” And there were thousands of them. And as can be understood, he was sentenced to Gehinnom. But before the decree was sealed, an angel appeared before the heavenly court and cried out, “How is it possible to sentence him to Gehinnom? This man saved the lives of ten Jews. And the Torah states that whoever maintains one Jewish soul is considered as though he had maintained an entire world.” The heavenly court replied, “So defend him, by all means.” The defending angel said, “Take the sins and put them on one side of a scale, and place the mitzvah on the other side of the scale.” The heavenly court did so, and found that the side with the sins outweighed the mitzvah by a great deal. The defending angel went and brought the poor man, his wife, their children and his father and mother, and placed them on the side of the scale of the mitzvah. But still, they did not outweigh the sins. When the defending angel saw this, he went and gathered all the mud and filth into which the Jew had fallen, together with the wagon and the horse. And he placed them on the scale on the side of the mitzvah. Then this mitzvah outweighed the sins.”

When the Rizhiner concluded the story, he said to the wealthy man with whom he was staying, “Do you hear, my son? Sometimes even the mud of a Jew saves one from the judgment of Gehinnom. Therefore, for the sake of God, do not despise the mud of Jews.”

Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, pg. 341-344

Gershom Scholem

There is much truth in Buber's remark in the first of his Hasidic books that Hasidism represents, "Kabbalism turned Ethos", but a further ingredient was needed to make Hasidism what it was... What gave Hasidism its peculiar note was primarily the foundation of a religious community on the basis of a paradox common to the history of such movements, as the sociology of religious groupings has shown. Briefly, the originality of Hasidism lies in the fact that mystics who had attained their spiritual aim – who, in Kabbalistic parlance, had discovered the secret of true Devekuth – turned to the people, with their mystical knowledge, their "Kabbalism become Ethos", and, instead of cherishing as a mystery the most personal of all experiences, undertook to teach its secret to all men of good will.

To sum up: the following points are of importance for a characterization of the Hasidic movement:

1. A burst of original religious enthusiasm in a revivalist movement which drew its strength from the people.
2. The relation of the true illuminate, who becomes a popular leader and the center of the community, to the believers whose life centers round his religious personality. This paradoxical relations led to the growth of Zaddikism
3. The mystical ideology of the movement is derived from the Kabbalistic heritage, but its ideas are popularized, with an inevitable tendency towards terminological inexactitude.
4. The original contribution of Hasidism to religious thought is bound up with its interpretation of the values of personal and individual existence. General ideas become individual ethical values.

The whole development centers round personality of the Hasidic saint; this is something entirely new. Personality takes the place of doctrine, what is lost in rationality by this change is gained in efficacy. The opinions particular to the exalted individual are less important than his character, and mere learning, knowledge of the Torah, no longer occupies the most important place in the scale of religious values. A tale is told of a famous saint who said: "I did not go to the 'Maggid' of Meseritz to learn Torah from him but to watch him tie his boot-laces."

...The new ideal of the religious leader, the Zaddik, differs from the traditional ideal of rabbinical Judaism, the Talmid Hakham or student of the Torah, mainly in that he himself "has become Torah." It is no longer his knowledge but his life which lends a religious value to his personality. He is the living incarnation of the Torah.

III. Reactions to Chassidut

Immanuel Etkes

Gaon of Vilna : The Man and His Image pg. 80-81

And when our rabbi and teacher Mendel of Minsk was here last winter with the true Gaon, the man of God, our master and rabbi, Rabbi Eliyahu the Hasid, may his candle be bright, he did not see the face of the Gaon all that winter long. 18 He [the Gaon] said that he had a commentary on a passage in the Zohar composed by their sect, in which there was heresy. . . . And when the writings

arrived from Shklov here in the holy congregation of Vilna, then the Gaon said: The holy congregation of Shklov is right, and as for the aforementioned sect, they are heretics and must be brought low.

Additional information that supplements and clarifies the picture is found in a passage from the letter of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady: We went to the Gaon he-Hasid, may his candle burn brightly, to his house to debate with him and to remove his complaints from us, while I was there with the Hasid rabbi our late teacher Rabbi Mendel Horosener of blessed memory, and the Gaon closed his door before us twice. And when the great people of the city spoke to him, [saying]: Rabbi, the famous rabbi of theirs has come to debate with his venerable, holy Torah, and when he is defeated, certainly thereafter there will be peace upon Israel, he put them off with delays. And when they began to implore him greatly, he left and went away and traveled from the city, remaining there until our departure from the city. Afterward in our country we traveled to the holy congregation of Shklov also to debate, and we did not succeed. And they did something to us that was not right, they broke their word and the promise they had given us at first not to do anything to us. Only when they saw that they had nothing to respond to our words did they come with a strong arm and suspend themselves from a high tree, ha-Gaon he-Hasid.

Allen Nadler

The Faith of the Mitnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture, pg 11

Letter of the GRA issued to rabbinic leadership of Belorussian and Podolian communities in fall of 1796: Into your ears I cry: Woe unto he who says to his father, —what have you begotten? and to his mother —what have you brought forth to birth? a generation whose children curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers; who have sinned greatly against them by turning their backs to them. Their stubborn hearts insist on rejecting good and choosing evil, transgressing the Torah and changing its laws...In the Torah of Moses they have established a new covenant, working out their evil schemes with the masses in the House of the Lord...interpreting the Torah falsely while claiming that their way is precious in the eyes of God...They call themselves Hasidim - that is an abomination! How they have deceived this generation, uttering these words on high: —These are they gods, O Israel: every stick and stone. They interpret the Torah incorrectly regarding the verse —Blessed be the name of the glory of God from his dwelling place (Ez 3:12) and also regarding the verse: —...and You give life to everything (Neh 9:6).