INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS HASSIDUTHER?

Several years ago, we visited Williamsburg after not having been there for almost a decade. We had some trouble with our car, and were directed to a local service station. Much to our surprise, the auto mechanic who serviced our car was a Hassidic Jew, complete with the traditional flowing beard and peyoth. The only thing missing was the long frock coat—it had been replaced by the fatigues of the auto mechanic.

On the way home, the question stuck in my mind: How did the two worlds fit together—that of the auto mechanic and that of the Hassid? We usually think of a person utterly dedicated to God as a member of the clergy—or at the very least, a person of learning and dignity. But an auto mechanic? How could the fatigues be reconciled with the beard and peyoth?

The answer to this question takes us back almost three hundred years to the time of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism. Eastern European Jewry had been decimated by persecutions and massacres, as well as by a number of heresies that had sprung up, almost as a direct result. Very much like today, many people were disillusioned and alienated, not finding much meaning in Judaism as it was taught and practiced. While the outward practice of Judaism might have been stronger than it is today, the core was rapidly deteriorating.

Into this world was born Israel, son of Eliezer and Sarah, known to all as the Baal Shem Tov—Master of the Good Name. Throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century, his teachings spread like a holy fire, encompassing much of Eastern Europe. By the early 1800’s, the Hassidim virtually dominated this area, and they remained a prime force until this community was destroyed by Hitler and Stalin.

With the twilight of Eastern European Jewry, Hassidism rapidly spread to both Israel and the United States. With a birthrate often leading to families of ten or more, and an educational system that virtually guarantees the loyalty of each ensuing generation, the growth of post war Hassidism has been phenomenal. Some estimates give the total
number at over a half million. The sight of Hassidim has become common in areas such as New York, where no politician can avoid a visit to the important Hassidic courts. There are many thinkers who feel that Hassidism may once again become the dominant force in Judaism within a generation or two.

But what was it in the teachings of Hassidism that had such power? What did the Baal Shem Tov innovate that makes his teachings as relevant today as they were 200 years ago? What is it that attracts so many modern young intellectuals to the ranks of Hassidut, where they claim to find new insight and meaning in life?

As we read the selections in this book, we shall see that many basic Hassidic concepts were drawn from the earlier Kabbalistic works. Both the Zohar and the works of the Ari (Rabbi Yitzchok Luria of Safed: 1534-1572) are quoted widely and used to back up important points. Still, while only a small selected few were involved in the Kabbalah, Hassidism became a major mass movement, with its teachings encompassing entire communities.

In many ways, Hassidism was a logical extension of the Kabbalah—but with an important difference. While Kabbalah brought man to God, Hassidism brought God to man. Kabbalah raised the initiate to the upper worlds, offering him a glimpse of the Holy Domain, along with its angels, emanations, vessels and luminations. Hassidism, on the other hand, did just the opposite. It brought the Heavenly Domain down to man, showing him the type of life and dedication that it predicated. The Biblical lesson, "Know Him in all your ways," became a watchword of the Hassidic world (Proverbs 3:6).

An important dichotomy in traditional Jewish thought has been that of transcendence and imminence. On one side, we look at God as being absolutely transcendent, far away from man and impossible to reach. On the other side, however, we also see God as being imminent—ultimately near and available to all who call upon Him.

This dichotomy appears in many of our prayers. In one well-known prayer, we address God as "Our Father, our King." We see God as being close like a Father, yet we also visualize Him as being distant like an imperial monarch. In our blessings, we speak of God as the "King of the universe," but in the same breath, we also call Him "our God."

One of the clearest expressions of this is found in the Kedushah, our imitation of the song of the angels. We first repeat the verse, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is filled with His glory"
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(Isaiah 6:3). Here we are speaking of the imminence of God, saying that He fills all creation. The second part of the Kedushah, however, consists of the verse, "Blessed is God's glory from His place" (Ezekiel 3:12). Here we are speaking of a transcendent God, where even the highest celestial beings cannot comprehend His place.

The fact that we speak of God as being both transcendent and imminent, however, does not imply any element of duality in God Himself. We perceive this dichotomy only because of our own imperfect understanding. God Himself is an absolute Unity.

The important question is which of these two aspects should be stressed—and it is here that we can perceive the major contribution of Hassidism. Prior to the advent of Hassiduth, the major stress had been placed on the transcendence of God. God was a remote, awesome figure, who could only be approached with the greatest difficulty. If a person wanted to gain a degree of closeness to God, he could only do so through fasting, self-mortification, and total separation from everything worldly. This was especially stressed in many of the older Kabbalistic teachings, and the individuals who were able to follow this discipline were very few indeed.

Hassiduth, on the other hand, emphasizes the other side of this dichotomy, namely God's imminence. A concept that is raised again and again in Hassidic thought is how God fills all creation and infuses all things. Over and over, we hear the maxims, "The whole earth is filled with His glory," "There is no place empty of Him," and "He fills all worlds." If God is so very close, He is also very easy to reach—and all that one needs is a sincere will and desire to do so. The watchword of Hassiduth may well be that of the Psalmist, "God is close to all who can upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth" (Psalms 145:18).

The gateway to God is thus opened to everyone—even the lowliest of the low. All that is asked is that a person truly desire God—with all his heart—and that he do his very best to worship and serve Him. There is no place so degraded that God cannot be found there, and no person so wicked that he does not have a spark of Truth. All that one must do is grasp onto that spark, and he can climb Jacob's ladder to the loftiest heights.

The Hassidic masters perceived that both good and evil could be found in everything. Even the strictest observance, if done for ulterior motives, contains an element of evil, even though it may be outweighed by the good. Absolute sincerity, on the other hand, is of prime impor-
tance in reaching God, and this is available to everybody. A person might have to be a scholar to observe the Law with all its minutiae, but even the most ignorant can be sincere and genuine in his longing for God.

This point is best expressed by a favorite tale among the Hassidim. An ignorant Jewish peasant boy had come to the city to attend Yom Kippur services in the great synagogue. He saw all the people fervently praying, but since he could not read, he had no way of participating in the service. Still, deep down, he yearned to express himself to God—to worship Him in some way—in any way he could. Finally, not being able to hold himself in, he took out a little whistle, and blew it with all his might. Over and over, he blew his whistle, "for the glory of God."

The shrill blasts rudely interrupted the solemn service, and the ushers were preparing to throw the young boy out. Then the rabbi ascended the pulpit and told them to let go of the boy. He said that the door had been closed in front of all his prayers, and that the congregation's service had met a solid wall. It was only the pure, sincere whistle blast of the peasant boy that had opened the door and breached the wall.

An important reflection of this attitude was the way in which Hassidim looked at Jewish Law. One of the reasons for Hassidism's success was the fact that its followers never broke the Law, and in many respects, they adhered to it even more strongly than their detractors. Still, there was a basic difference, and it is perhaps best summed up in the Hassidic maxim, "Hassidim worship God, while their opponents worship the Code of Law."

This was a very basic attitude. As we shall see, the Baal Shem Tov and his followers opposed unnecessary strictness, but at the same time, they preached absolute adherence to the codes. Still, there was a general feeling that if a person was absolutely sincere in his belief in God and Torah, the details would take care of themselves. If it was felt that strictness in a given area was important in order to achieve closeness to God, the Hassid would be strict. But in many other cases, a much more relaxed, if not lenient, attitude prevailed. Again, the emphasis was on serving God through His Law, and not in just keeping the laws for their own sake.

Another important teaching was that even the most mundane acts could be raised to the level of worship. This was not a total innovation. Indeed, it is even mentioned in the Shulchan Aruch (Prepared Table), the authoritative Code of Jewish Law (#231). But here again, the question is
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one of emphasis, and this too is best expressed by a favorite Hassidic story.

A teamster in Berdichov was saying his morning prayers, and at the same time, was greasing the wheels of his wagon. He was indeed an interesting sight, praying with his grease-covered hands, and townspeople snickered, "Look at this ignoramus. He doesn't know better than to grease his wagon wheels while he is praying." The great Rabbi Levi Yitzchok then came along and said, "Master of the universe, look at your servant, the teamster. Even while he is greasing his wagon wheels he is still praising Your great and holy Name."

And this brings us back to our auto mechanic in Williamsburg . . .

THE MASTERS

Besides its teachings, one of the most important ideas of Hassidism is the concept of the Rebbe or Tzadik. Indeed, the central personage of the Rebbe is the most dominant feature of modern Hassidism, and is the one thing that sets it apart to the greatest extent. This is a concept that we also find in the earliest Hassidic teachings.

Here again, the main idea was the elevation of the common man. If he was not strong enough or intelligent enough or learned enough to make it on his own, he could always attach himself to someone who was. The followers of a given Rebbe would form a community, where one person would strengthen the other, and what the individual could not accomplish on his own, would be done by the community as a whole. If the ignorant man could not find answers in books, he could find them in the personality of his Rebbe, and he could seek to emulate the customs of his particular court.

With the spread of Hassidism, many masters grew in stature and influence. It was not uncommon for some of the greatest masters to have hundreds of thousands of followers, and their influence among them was close to absolute. For the most part, these masters were worthy of their position, and were men of the greatest intellect, insight and spirituality. Here were true philosopher-kings, wielding great influence and at the same time building a body of thought that would serve to guide their followers.

It is for this reason that, unlike those of the earlier teachers, the teachings of the Hassidic masters have a certain universal appeal. For the