

# Hasidism and Transpersonal Psychology: A Rich Jewish Tradition Of Spiritual Growth

By K'Vod Wieder

It's been a precious gift to allow Judaism to provide deep meaning to my life, and to let its practice expand my soul. Up until the last few years, I was never able to relate to Judaism. It has always been a part of me, but has always felt like more of a burden than anything else. When I first opened to the transpersonal--a sense of myself as part of something greater and interconnected with all life, I found maps and systems to describe these states of consciousness in Eastern philosophies and psychologies. Judaism didn't seem to apply so I pushed it farther away. As I began to grow into my own sense of God, and became somewhat secure in my own relationship to spirituality through Yoga and meditation, I began to be acquainted with the Jewish mystical tradition and currently find full spiritual expression through this path.

When I'm referring to Jewish Mystical Tradition, I'm referring to the strands of Kabbalah and Hasidism. These two great expressions developed out of the needs and hopes of the Jewish people in the middle ages. Jews were exiled from their homeland, dispersed among often hostile peoples and faiths purporting to supersede Judaism, and repeatedly facing the spiritual dangers of despair and internal disintegration alongside the actual physical threats emanating from their neighbors.

These experiences of exile and oppression were the background to encourage the Jews to infuse their predicament with meaning and transcend their suffering through the development of Kabbalah and later, Hasidism. The Kabbalah was an elaborate mystical,

mythological, and practical system that transmuted and transvalued Jewish religious ideas and ritual; making them serve a grand vision of historical and spiritual redemption. Hasidism, developing in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, absorbed the teachings of the Kabbalah and combined them with spontaneous religious fervor to create an unparalleled communal mysticism and ethos.

The Kabbalah dealt philosophically with the "psychological" dimension of human existence, and Hasidism launched this system into full blown communal practice. Hasidism's psychological perspective on the meaning and politics of human beings is transpersonal by the acknowledgment of the unity of all life, and the wealth of spiritual practices provided that enable us to realize our true nature as part of that unity.

Jonathan Woocher (1979) organizes Hasidism's relationship to transpersonal psychology into four key dimensions of its life and thought: the mystical symbolization of existence as "exile" and estrangement; Hasidism's vision and prescription of a path to restoration and reunification; the image of fulfilled human existence embodied in Hasidic teaching; and the Hasidic understanding of the "therapeutic" roles of genuine leadership and community.

The Hasidic experience of existence can be said to be an experience of "exile" physically from one's homeland and spiritually from the intimate connection with God to which one aspired. With the development of the ego, we experience ourselves as separate from the universe and are living primarily in a state of

exile from the awareness of our true connection. The Hasid was able to take the experience of physical exile and diaspora deeper to an experience of spiritual exile fundamental to all human beings. Beyond even the national exile of the Jewish people and the exile of the human soul from its divine root, Jewish mystics envisioned a deeper more cosmic exile of all of the "holy sparks" of the Divine Creative Light scattered throughout the universe and trapped in "shells" which prevent their reunification with their source (Scholem, 1961; Buber, 1960).

On a personal level, "exile" or separation is accompanied by and held in place by the experience of isolation. When we had hurtful experiences of any degree in our early years of life and were not able to heal them because of the apparent lack of available help at the time, we stored the experience of isolation and separation along with the hurtful experience.

However, while Hasidism acknowledges individual biographical painful experience as an explanation of "exile" and separation, it suggests that the condition of exile was one shared by all, one which transcended the categories of inner personal experience and social historical life, and one which could be brought to an end "when all domains of existence and all creatures, as bearers of the exiled "holy sparks", were redeemed from the power of separation and disharmony" (Woocher, 1979). This concept of cosmic redemption is similar to the Buddhist belief of "none of us are free until all of us are free."

Hasidism's path to overcoming our separateness and reuniting the dispersed "holy sparks" with the Divine Creative light can best be described by the process of tikkun (restoration or correction). Rabbi Isaac Luria introduced this concept of tikkun in the sixteenth century and taught that this work was done not only through prayer, ritual, and mystical meditations, but through observance of any commandments of the Torah, which brings awareness to action in every sphere of life. When we dedicate our every action to God, we release the trapped "holy sparks" and

experience *devekut*--loving attachment to God. To adhere to God is to realize our interconnectedness with all life.

Bringing the awareness of God to our every action bloomed within Judaism in the eighteenth century through the life of the Baal Shem Tov--the founder of Hasidism. He taught that dedicating our life to awareness of our connection and gathering up the dispersed "holy sparks" was intimately tied to the individual's effort to bring their whole physical spiritual being into a unity of intention and action (Scholem, 1961). This unity of personal being, this *kavannah* is seen in Hasidic teaching as the unifying force for the cosmos as a whole. *Kavannah* or intentionality is a directing of consciousness to one-pointed concentration on the divine. *Kavannah* comes from God and points towards God, and is the way to awaken the *neshamah* or soul.

Probably no activity better epitomizes the hasidic quest for unification than does prayer. Prayer or *davennen* is the powerful cultivation of *kavannah*. Rabbi Zalman Schachter Schalomi defines *davennen* as "living the liturgical life in the presence of God." In directing the creative power of the word to God, *davennen* constituted for Hasidism one's supreme effort to unify one's own soul, to unite it with the souls of one's fellow beings, and to raise all of these souls to God. Prayer is therapeutic in the deepest sense; it transports the individual to a higher level of unification in his/her existence (Woocher, 1979).

Alongside prayer, Hasidism saw song and dance as paths of cultivating *kavannah* and uniting one's being with God. Melodies and movement can transport us to states of consciousness that transcends words. "Whether wild and joyous or tender and sad, the Hasidic song and dance can help one to infuse one's entire being with and unite a whole community around an utterance of one's deepest sensibility." (Jacobs, 1973)

While prayer, song, and dance are all powerful transpersonal experiences in themselves, Hasidic leaders emphasized that *kavannah* is not just about prayer, but about

learning to savor the present moment as an encounter with the divine presence in our lives. (Hoffman, 1987) The Baal Shem Tov's central message was that the myriad facets of everyday life are all avenues towards divine and ecstatic experience. In its image of fulfilled existence, Hasidism envisioned a life embodying psychological wholeness, inter-human community, and intimacy with the Absolute. In Hasidism, a life of *hitlahavut* or ecstasy is not about physical retreat from the world, but just the opposite, for the life of ecstasy is also the life of service in the world. One can serve in whatever one does--in prayer, work, recreation, family life—through *kavannah*, directed consciousness toward God.

Even though every area of our lives is part of our spiritual practice within Hasidism, human relationships are considered crucial elements of lives to be infused with *kavannah*. In the sixteenth century, Rabbi Issac Luria taught that the raising of "holy sparks" are achieved in a powerful way through our families. Marital and familial relationships are regarded as reflecting very real ties to past lifetimes on earth, and essential to the cosmic process of "tikkun." (Hoffman, 1987) For hundreds of years, exalted texts like the Zohar have related that each person's parents, spouses, children, friends, and other intimates are central to his or her own purpose on this plane of existence. Jewish mysticism teaches that there are no accidents or coincidences in important relationships.

The realism of Hasidism's great teachers enabled them to realize that infusing awareness and *kavannah* into our everyday lives is a difficult task for people living in a society of chaos, pressures, and delusions of life. Therefore, Hasidism provided a helper for the common folk in the person of a "zaddik" or "rebbe", the leader and heart of the Hasidic community. The ideal zaddik or transpersonal therapist served as a healer for the whole person, for the soul and the body, and penetrated deeply into the awareness of the unity of all life. "He concentrated not on esoteric learning, but on the substance of

everyday life--its griefs, despairs and cares, and its joys. His goal was to help each Hasid walk independently toward God, to aid all in realizing the ecstasy and unification that had been achieved." (Buber 1947/1961) Not all Hasidic leaders lived up to this high ideal, but many did constitute graphic illustrations of what the process of genuine healing can be.

The zaddik heals through what Martin Buber (1960) calls the "psycho-synthetic" method, confronting the other's divided soul with his own unified being and pulling the other's soul with him until it too becomes whole and can once again protect the unity and health of the body. To those who came to him for help, the zaddik is a penetrating and concerned mirror, understanding their deepest needs and desires even when these are unspoken. (Woocher, 1979) The zaddik and his Hasidim constitute a "therapeutic" community by combining concern for each individual, mutual support, serving and teaching leadership, and a guiding vision of universal redemptive possibilities--the re-uniting of "holy-sparks" with the Divine Creative Light. The Hasidic communal ideal rests on a faith in the power of simplicity, joy, and the encounter with a counselor and healer who embodied wholeness and intimacy with people and God, to affect unification embracing all the dimensions of human life. In this ideal, it seems as if the Jewish mystical quest for unification--for redemption from the many "exiles" that plague the person--reached its highest realization. The mystical dream becomes a daily work in which each new step towards psychological, social, and spiritual unification provides a taste of the ultimate unity.

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