

# GOD IN HASSIDUT

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## INTRODUCTION

*Leit atar panuy minei u-melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo.*

These two statements, which mean, “There is no place vacant from Him”<sup>1</sup> and “The whole world is filled with His glory” provide a starting point for observing how God reveals Himself and functions within Hassidic thought. This God is an immanent God, a God who dwells within the world and is always present and accessible to all.

It is impossible to speak of the Hassidic conception of God without taking into consideration the divine tradition Hassidism inherited from its predecessors, particularly from kabbalah. To ignore that inheritance would be like talking about a person without taking into consideration that they were born into a particular family and underwent a particular upbringing and education. The dictum of *Massechet Avot* (Ethics of our Fathers), “Know where you come from and where are you going to” pertains to the realm of thought just as much as to the life of any individual - even if the place one is “going to” may turn out to be dramatically different from the place of origin. This is particularly true of the relationship between Hassidut and the Lurianic kabbalah created by Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (the “Ari”) in sixteenth-century Tzfat.

In the Lurianic understanding of creation a catastrophe occurred in the Divine realm – one which manifested in the shattering of the divine vessels that contained God’s light. This led to the falling of the shards of these vessels, which subsequently actualized in the material/physical world we experience today. The residue of the light that the shards held is our means of experiencing the Divine in this world. For the Lurianic mystic, creation was a disaster that needs to be set right, and hence the mission of one’s life is to elevate these shards back to their supernal source. The completion of such a mission would lead to the obliteration of the physical world and the restoration of the primordial Divine universe.

Yet the Hassidic God has a very different account of the events of creation. The teachings of the founder of the Hassidic movement, Rabbi Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov (known as the Besht)<sup>2</sup> as evolved in the Beit Midrash of his student and successor, the Maggid of Mezritch<sup>3</sup> present a God yearning for revelation and relationship. For this God, the “shattering of the vessels” was not a regrettable mistake, but, rather, an intentional act. The fracture which took place at creation was deliberately intended by the Divine, in order to enable His manifestation. The broken shards, which are embedded in the core of all that is visible to the human eye, are both the source of the immanent God and the means to encounter the Divine in every aspect of the human experience.

The ramifications of this reinterpretation are multi-faceted and inform the very foundations of Hassidic thought. In this essay we will focus on some specific areas in which the Hassidic God reveals himself differently to the way which was previously perceived.

## ABANDONMENT OF THE “NEUTRAL ZONE”

The Rabbinic tradition divides our lives between the religious/devotional and the mundane. In fact, the reality is three-fold – there is a realm of *mitzvah* (whether a negative or positive commandment) and a realm of *aveirah* (all transgressions). Between these two is a ‘neutral zone’ – all that which is neither an explicit mitzvah nor an explicit aveirah. In the pre-Hassidic world it was clear that God actively resided in the first tier, was impartial to the middle one, and was removed from the third.

<sup>1</sup> In this essay, God will be referred to using the masculine singular pronoun. However, this should not stand in the way of our shared understanding that God transcends gender definitions.

<sup>2</sup> The acronym ‘Besht’ means ‘Master of the Good Name’. The Besht lived from 1700-1760.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Dov Ber, d. 1772, also known as Ha-Maggid Ha-Gadol – The Great Preacher.



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In the fourth chapter of his pivotal work, the *Tanya*, Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi<sup>4</sup> likens the observance of mitzvot to hugging a king. The only way a king can reveal himself to the masses is by virtue of leaving his palace completely garmented. But it is clear to all that when a person hugs the king, their interest is not in the king's garments, nor even in the king's body. Their arms may sense the fabric of the king's robes, or even perceive the king's heartbeat, but it is really the essence of the king, rather than the king's physical body, that the person wants to touch.

Reb Shneur Zalman would ask of us no less when addressing the mitzvot. The mitzvot are the King's garments, the means by which God reveals Himself to us. They are necessary in order for us to be able to embrace the Almighty. We are asked to embrace the King, while never letting go of the vision that it is the King's essence, cloaked by the garments/mitzvot, which we actually yearn for. Hence, we adhere to the mitzvot while continuing to aspire to ascend to that which surpasses the boundaries of the human experience. For the God of the Hassidim, then, the mitzvot are a temporary necessity brought about by the limitations of the human condition.

We could challenge this interpretation by asking Reb Shneur Zalman about the King's intimate relationships. There will be those who will only see the king in formal garb, but some will see him in informal attire as well. His queen and his personal servant may even see him naked. I believe we could present to Reb Shneur Zalman the possibility of the servant of God, perhaps the mystic, aspiring to encounter the King beyond the veil of garments/mitzvot. Cleaving to the King (*d'vekut*) and the union of the King and Queen (*yichud*) could be perceived as transcending the realm of mitzvah.

Another re-formulation of the 'neutral zone' is found in the teachings of Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev<sup>5</sup> in his monumental work, the *Kedushat Levi*. He states that according to the halakhah, a sefer Torah (Torah scroll), must be complete in order to be able to fulfill the obligation of reading from a sefer Torah. There can be no words missing, not even a letter or part of a letter. Reb Levi Yitzchak asks, why is it if two letters are stuck together the Torah scroll is also rendered incomplete?

He answers by explaining that there is the Torah of the black letters and the Torah of the white spaces. Currently we live a reality dictated by the Torah of the black letters, but time will come when we will actually read and live the Torah of the white spaces. If two letters are stuck together though, that Torah is incomplete! Yes, we should adhere to the Torah of the black letters, but simultaneously we have an obligation to maintain the integrity and wholeness of the Torah of the white spaces. By doing so, and by not crowding the words, letters or spaces, we hold on to the vision of the time to come. While there are those who choose to limit their current religious life to the Torah of the black letters, Reb Levi Yitzchak would beg of you to embrace the Torah of the white letters as well.

We are now able to see another reading which sanctifies that which is perceived as "other" – neither mitzvah nor aveirah. If God resides in all, there is no space that is vacant of His presence. It follows, then, that God is present in all three realms simultaneously and equally! This might be understood to mean that there is no difference between the three realms, which could be perceived as an invitation to enter into the realm of sin. Nonetheless, the Hassidic movement *has* maintained its adherence to halakhah throughout the generations. Perhaps this is why Reb Shneur Zalman did not take the next step posed to him by our challenge. Instead, the Hassidic movement used this understanding as a means to sanctify things which have no apparent halakhic status rather than abandoning the halakhic endeavor.

The abandonment of the neutral zone – the gap between mitzvah and aveirah - operates to transform everyday living itself into a religious act based on one axiom – the power of the human mind and intention. God is available and present in any moment. The Besht is quoted as saying, "A person is where their mind is." Therefore if a person's consciousness is aligned to being in the presence of God, indeed that moment is transformed into a holy moment!

<sup>4</sup> The founder of Chabad. He died in 1812.

<sup>5</sup> d. 1809. Reb Levi Yitzchak allows us to observe the fusion of a Hassidic master (a non-geographic charismatic leader) and a local rabbi (a geographic rabbinic leader). He will at times embrace halakhic paradigms to embrace spiritual questions.

<sup>6</sup> The Seer of Lublin, known as the 'Chozeh'. He died in 1815.

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## DEMOCRATIZATION

This principle also lends itself to the notion of democratization. God is no longer the inheritance of the learned, pious and scholarly. Rather, since God dwells equally in all, God belongs equally *to* all. The center of religious life shifts out of the Bet Midrash – particularly, away from the pages of the traditional Jewish texts – and is placed instead with the masses who go to work every day and engage in the mundane. God becomes a partner in *all* human actions, no longer in only the designated religious ones. God no longer exclusively dwells in the midst of the Torah scholars. It is in the stories of the wood-choppers, the water-carriers and the social outcasts who are engaged in unknown acts of lovingkindness (*hesed*) that our new heroes are created. They are now the ones who befriend the Almighty and represent His will on earth.

## MIRACLES

The God of the Hassidim also challenges us to address the realm of miracles. In Martin Buber's novel 'Gog and Magog' he describes how in the courtyard of the Rebbe of Lublin<sup>6</sup> miracles would roll under the table! The world does not progress in a linear manner. Nor, for that matter, does reality. Time is not linear. God, as manifested in the Hassidic teachings, is not limited to what the eye can see or the mind can perceive. Our consciousness is what on the one hand determines the scope of our experience of the Divine. Nonetheless, it does not limit the possibilities of the Divine to reveal Himself in the world. God has a will that needs to be actualized in the world. It is our choice whether or not to align ourselves with it.

## A PERSONAL GOD

For the majority of the Hassidic Masters, God is a personal God. He has an individual and unique will in regard to each and every individual. Every person was planted in the world to fulfill a specific mission. In the same manner that God has multiple names and each one of these names is a prism in which God reveals Himself, we would have to say that every person is a manifestation of God, embodying a uniqueness which cannot in any way be replicated. One might ask, "Is this a mission that is affixed from the moment of conception?" and would have to answer, "Yes, this is what I was sent into the world to do." One might ask, "Can one's mission change throughout their lifetime?" and for that, too, one could answer "Yes".

I have heard (following the Hassidic tradition, in which teachings were transmitted orally long before they were printed) a Hassidic teaching from my Teacher and Rebbe, in the name of the Komarno Rebbe<sup>7</sup>. The Komarno Rebbe is known for his mystical and Kabbalistic teachings. He left us with 16 books, among them a commentary on the Zohar and a journal of his mystical dreams. He asks, 'Why is it that it is so hard for people to know what it is that they were sent to the world to do?'

To this he replies:

"It is taught that at Mount Sinai there were 600,000 core souls. As history unraveled, chips of these core souls descended into the world. In the past every Jew's soul was a chip of one of these core souls. It used to be that the soul of each separate individual would be constituted from a single chip, and their soul would be required to actualize one single mission in the world. As we progress towards the end of time, souls are sent down into the world as configurations of multiple 'soul-splinters', no longer one distinguishable chip."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Yitzhak Isaac Safran of Komarno. He died in 1874.

<sup>8</sup> Note that he does not read the verse as being about 600,000 males over the age of twenty, which is its literal meaning in Torah.

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This would explain why some people are drawn simultaneously in multiple directions, each seemingly a viable Divine-oriented calling. It may be that in different chapters of our life different “soul-splinters” will take prevalence and dictate our daily life and decisions. Our life choices will continuously be perceived as Godly, though, if they are a representation of our aspiration to serve the Divine.

## DARKNESS

There is one more realm where the God of the Hassidim is often perceived to reside – the realm of the Darkness. This is often described in terms of *Mitzrayim* (“Egypt”), as a metaphor for a contracted consciousness.

For a moment we need to return to our Lurianic heritage. According to the Kabbalah of the Ari, in order for the world to be created God had to vacate Himself from Himself in order to create a “*chalal panuy*” (a vacant space) so that Creation could occur. The Hassidic masters have understood this model in two different ways. The first says that the world was originally all God, and He vacated Himself into Himself, hence creating a space where He was not. Into that space, a world manifested.<sup>9</sup> This is my understanding of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov’s<sup>10</sup> reading of creation.

Rabbi Nachman’s reading suggests a deep theological depression and darkness. If God created the world in a space that He vacated of Himself this means that our primordial memory of God is one of absence! Rebbe Nachman is continuously wrestling with a paradox: his desire is to encounter a Divine entity that needs to remove Himself in order to reveal Himself! For Rebbe Nachman, darkness, absence and abandonment are true states, preconditions of human reality in the world.

If we wish to embrace this paradigm, we need to remember that the darkness and abandonment are precisely the states which ultimately enable God to manifest in the world. They are enabling factors of a greater good. An interesting metaphor to make this paradigm more concrete is to think of a dance. The dynamic of an ecstatic dance is that there is a moment where both feet are in mid air, a moment that creates a vacant space between the dancer and the dance floor. In that moment, the void is what defines the dance. In this understanding of the ‘chalal panuy’, then, God danced the world into existence.

An alternative reading that has been posed in Hassidic teachings talks of God retracting Himself into Himself until the point of manifestation. The realm of ‘supernal ideas’ descends gradually from the most ethereal until it finally manifests as something concrete<sup>11</sup>. When embracing this reading we witness a reality in which we return to the phrases with which I opened this essay: *Leit atar panuy minei* and *melo kol ha’aretz k’vodo* – “There is no place vacant from Him” and “The whole world is filled with His glory”. God is in all places and there is nowhere, anywhere, which is void of the Divine presence. We are called upon to maximize our intellectual capacities when attempting to embrace God, even as we experience our sense of absentness. For God is never absent.

A Hassidic voice that articulates this condition of experiencing darkness, absence and abandonment in multiple sites throughout his teachings is Reb Menachem Nachum.<sup>12</sup> In the *Ma’or Einayim* (“Light of the Eyes”), which is a compilation of his teachings, primarily teachings about the Torah portions but also on sections of the Talmud, he adopts phraseology such as “Ya’akov” (versus “Yisrael”) and “Mitzrayim” (versus “Eretz Yisrael”) to suggest a state of contracted consciousness, a state in which an individual no longer feels the presence of God or can see the value of their uniqueness.

Reb Menachem Nachum’s teachings hark back to the notion of *nefila* (“falling”) which is an intrinsic part of the Lurianic understanding of creation. However, instead of the Divine shards falling into this world in order to enable God to reveal Himself, he understands the “falling” to refer to the lapse of a person’s state of God-consciousness. In this moment of darkness, when we do not experience God’s presence, what can we hold on to?

<sup>9</sup> This interpretation lends itself to a more Aristotelian understanding of creation, in which the leaps between pairs of “form” and “matter” create vacant spaces and therefore gaps in the presence of God.

<sup>10</sup> 1772 – 1810. He was the great –grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov.

<sup>11</sup> This is similar to the Neoplatonic understanding of creation

<sup>12</sup> Reb Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, also known as the ‘Chernobler Rebbe’, 1730 – 1797.



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There are two pegs that Reb Menachem Nachum offers us to hang on in these moments. The first is to have faith in the notion of *Leit atar panuy minei u-melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo*. No matter where a person is, no matter how far and distant they feel from God, God is there. Not only is God there but in the deepest depths of darkness only God can rescue us. Paradoxically it is in this most devastating state of being that one can experience the ultimate connection with God.

The second peg avails itself to us in less critical conditions. Here, Reb Menachem Nachum teaches us that there are moments that we 'fall out of grace,' so to speak, not for any mishap on our behalf but in assistance of someone else. Over and over again Reb Menachem Nachum teaches that at times we find ourselves in locations that are so foreign to us that we cannot begin to imagine why we are there. The feeling of foreignness can be geographic, psychological, intellectual or spiritual. Reb Menachem Nachum will tell us that there are Divine sparks which fell at the moment of creation which are waiting there for us to lift them up. He teaches, using a similar understanding to that of the soul clusters that we encountered in the Komarno Rebbe's teaching above, that the sparks are connected to our soul-root. This being so, we are the only ones who can descend to raise them up. In this reading our descent, which challenges us, is in fact harnessing us in the service of the Almighty, and in our falling we are doing holy work.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to remember that the Hassidic movement, with its plethora of masters and teachers, communities and traditions, shares the truth *B'chol d'rachecah da'ehu* – "in all your ways you are to know Him."<sup>13</sup> All ways are legitimate and eligible for encountering and serving God. Hassidism is not monolithic in its practice, theology or perception of the Divine. However, the movement shares a fundamental truth – the belief that cleaving to God is not only the labor of the mystic but the gift of every single yearning individual.

As told in the name of multiple Hassidic Masters, God - not only the Hassidic God, but God, as God - dwells wherever we allow Him to dwell.

*Ashrei yoshvei bey'techa!* – Blessed are all those that dwell in your Home.

<sup>13</sup> Proverbs 3:6

