

A RENAISSANCE OF PIETY

THE TEACHINGS OF HASIDISM AND THE SHIFTING PARADIGM

HASIDIC TRADITION¹ has it that the Jewish people were completely exhausted and faint, left without energy, after being ravaged by the external catastrophe of Chmielnicki² and his hordes, and the internal catastrophe brought about by the failed Messiahs, Shabbetai Tzvi and Jacob Frank.³ The well of inspiration had dried up and with it all direct contact with the Almighty. Coupled with this poverty of the spirit, the Torah intelligentsia had drawn a serious distinction between themselves and those on a lower level of intellectual attainment. Thus it is commonly said, "Israel would not have had the strength to survive and live up to the days of the Messiah had not God taken some of the light of the Messiah and focused it in the soul of the Ba'al Shem Tov, whom He sent to succor Israel."

Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, the holy master and teacher, through whom the lifeline to the firsthand experiences of Torah realities was reestablished, was born in 1698 (5458 on the Hebrew calendar), lived sixty-two years, and passed on the first day of Shavuot in the year 1760 (5520). He left no books, though there are some letters of his extant.⁴ His influence, then, was immediate. The change he brought about in his environment and in the people around him was direct and seminal. His life and teaching brought about an explosion of

spirituality that was ultimately to dot the map of Eastern Europe; towns in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, Russia, Lithuania, and Latvia would become synonymous with the “who’s who” of the Hasidic world. Who would have even noticed little towns like Medzibozh, Bratzlav, and Lubavitch, had they not become identified with important leaders of the Hasidic movement?

What was it that marked the teaching of the Ba’al Shem Tov? Perhaps more than anything else, it was the quality of *mamash*, “so-beingness,” with which he approached the central issues of Judaism. The whole world is *truly* filled with God’s glory, and everyone can *truly* approach that God. What good is there in believing in a deity of whom one can only say, “God once created this world and has since then been deaf, dumb, and blind to us”? Every leaf driven by the wind rolls through the grass by specific design of God who creates it. For the Ba’al Shem Tov, there are no accidents. A tinker asking for things to mend is the voice of Providence asking humankind to repent. Fervor in the “heart afire” views God even behind the apparent eclipse, whereas a bitter detachment turns even the most fluid water of revelation into hard, frozen objects of idolatry. The poor can truly pray to God Who Is Poor.

The fervor of preaching was not enough for the Ba’al Shem Tov. Many before him had talked of what was needed but never managed to show how achieving it could be done. The Ba’al Shem Tov, in a conscious ascent to the high celestial regions, visiting the mansions of the Messiah, asked the Messiah, “When will my master come?” to which the Messiah replied, “In this you will know; when your teachings are published and become manifest in the world and your sources spread outward, and that which I have taught you, and which you have attained, when even they will be able to effect such unifications and such ascendances as you do.”⁵ This, then, was the mission of the Ba’al Shem Tov, to make the innermost wellsprings available to those on the “outside.” Like God’s promise to Abraham: “*Ufaratzta*—And you will burst forth westward, eastward, to the north, and to the south.” The Messiah’s promise to the Ba’al Shem Tov became a rallying cry of the Hasidim.

There is no way to fully estimate the impact of the Ba’al Shem Tov. There is no Jewish institution today, no matter how deviant from the norms of Judaism, that can claim to have been unaffected by Hasidism. The Ba’al Shem Tov was a genius in generating *pure joy*, *pure will*. As he said to one who came to attack him and remained as a disciple, “It is not that you cannot believe; it is that you do not *will* to believe.” This is the legacy of the Ba’al Shem Tov and Hasidism.

Hasidism and Existentialism

The Hasidic writings of Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel⁶ have led some people to wonder if there is a connection between Hasidism and existentialism. The answer to that question depends on when it is raised. If it was asked in 1951 or 1952, you would have gotten a resounding yes from all sides. That was when existentialism was most influential. And one of the statements that the existentialists were making then was that *existence* is prior to *essence*. In other words, it isn't "I think, therefore I am," but rather "I am, therefore I think." This emphasis makes a difference.

The other factor is that a certain and increasing amount of consciousness, awareness, had set in. It is a strange phenomenon, because living in the middle of it, you don't notice it so much. In this sense, we are like the frog in the kettle. If you take a frog and you drop it in hot water, it jumps out right away. If you put cold water in the kettle, and you heat it up slowly, it'll keep on swimming in there until it's cooked. We don't notice the shifts that happen to us over time because they are almost imperceptible. It takes a certain kind of consciousness to notice the shifts. What psychedelics did, for instance, was speed up the mind so that you were able to notice the shifts more clearly. One of the shifts that happened with existentialism was a recognition of something that Jean-Paul Sartre⁷ pointed out, "I cannot take a moral holiday." With every decision that I make, I have to handle all of the repercussions of that decision. And from that predicament—the word *predicament* was very strong in existentialism—"there was no exit." Notice the connection between "no exit" and the word *nausea*, which were the titles of Sartre's books. It almost suggests that life makes you sick, that it isn't fun, and that there is no exit from that. That is the atheist existentialist position.

There were also some theistic, religious existentialists who said, "How do I know there is a God? Because I base my life on it. The fact that I decide, that I commit myself to a life with God makes God present." What was interesting about this was that it was a prelude for Peter L. Berger, a sociologist, who was saying, "While you may not have a proof from philosophy about the existence of God, God is a sociological phenomenon. The more people believe in God, the more God is present in the world." And if I take this still further, into morphogenetic fields, we are then making God great and increasing the "God-field." The more people make deposits of belief, if you will, the more the God-field grows. So the religious existentialist began in the same vein as Sartre and Camus,⁸

except that this existentialist was coming from a place that says, "My commitment to God makes God present." From there, it is but a step to the "I and Thou" of Buber.⁹

For a long while, the people who were writing the Neo-Hasidic material adopted the language of existentialism. Reconstructionists did the same. If you go into the back issues of *Reconstructionist* magazine, after Mordecai Kaplan had stopped writing for it, Milton Steinberg and Richard Rubenstein¹⁰ were also using the language of existentialism quite strongly.

Hasidism and Neo-Hasidism¹¹

When Buber and others were writing about Hasidism, there were many premature obituaries being published about the once great Hasidic movement, announcing its decay and demise. The Hasidism, once defined as a pietist reform or a revolt of the unlettered, is today usually dubbed "Ultra-Orthodox." Like many of the resurgent orthodoxies of our time, it also acquired a hyphenated *Neo*-prefixed school. Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber have often been defined as Neo-Hasidic thinkers. Buber, in particular and in large measure, is responsible for much of our present interest in Hasidism. His translations, retellings of Hasidic tales, and studies in comparative mysticism have added immeasurably to the West's familiarity with Hasidism. Buber's own development led him from his earlier "ecstatic" and "unitive" period to his later "I-Thou" period. At about the same time, Reb Shalom Dov Baer Schneersohn wrote *Kuntres HaT'fillah*, a treatise on prayer dealing with unitive contemplation. It was an era when many a Hasid and many a *yeshiva* student in Lubavitch experienced the beholding of the living God. However, Buber was likely not aware of this, never being a Hasid immersed in the type of *agape* community he later celebrated. For reasons that seemed imperative to him at the time, illustrated in his introductory essay to *Pointing the Way*, Buber changed his views to a dialogical approach, as he framed it. The unitive experience is not given to many people. We live in a world in which the monistic way seems unreal and in which the dualistic way is the real dimension of living. But the dualistic way, too, does not lend itself to a fulfilled life. Thus the step from the dualistic to the dialogical way was necessary for Buber. When Nietzsche said, "God is dead," he was of course referring to the "It" to which God had been reduced, since for Nietzsche, the living God had ceased to live among us. The infinite "It" of God is meaningless for all those who cannot attain to *unio mystica*, mystical union. Buber's insight into the God who can be met and "Thou-

ed” (addressed in the second person) is very helpful, especially when we realize how seldom one finds oneself in the relationship that is occasioned by the *primary word* (I-Thou). Suddenly, God is no longer dead: God is in hiding, eclipsed. That One “comes where He is let in.” To Buber, this saying of the Kotzker Rebbe means that God is available where humankind is ready to engage, or to be engaged, in dialogue.

But for Buber, there is no *conversation* in this dialogue. There is only a confrontation. God does not say “do this” or “do that,” “become this” or “become that.” The dialogue is wordless. It is possible that Buber was afraid that the “word” would become “flesh,” leaving only a nondialogical *halakha*, or law. This seems to be the point in his correspondence with his friend, the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. “God is not a lawgiver, and therefore the law has no universal validity for me.” However, the problems encountered in the unitive decidedly remain in the dialogical realm, though humans very seldom live in the dialogical universe. The objective, “Itty” universe awaits us. Buber gave not bread but stones to the one who lives in the “Itty” world. True, the model of meeting others is always in Buber’s mind. One can confront the other by yielding to that one’s “It” the inherence of an unconditioned “Thou.” But a person can do only one thing at a time. When facing the “It” of another, one can yield that person a “Thou.” When facing the “It” of God, one cannot yield God a “Thou.” We become so absorbed in the process of conceptualizing God’s “It” that we cannot meet “It” as “Thou.” Yet is not God notorious for *not* providing us with an “It”? “Take heed, for ye saw no image.”

The scholastics had it better. Man is actual and potential. The actual in Man is yielded to the person; the potential in Man is confronted as an “It.” But God, being pure actuality, is granted self-existence, *aseity* of being. Thus the One is not eclipsed but can be met. Man, in this case, does not have to project *and* meet at the same time. And so *das Zwischenmenschliche* (the interhuman), despite its attraction, cannot really serve as the only good model for the relationship between us and God. Buber’s reduction of one Hasidic idea into a miniature system was not Hasidism. The latter is organic, having been created by the striving of more than *one*. It is rich with many coordinates. The Kotzker Rebbe would say, “If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I *am* I, and you *are* you. But if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am *not* I, and you are *not* you.” And this is only one of the infinite coordinates of God. Buber felt that he had to reject the “gnostic” coordinates, as he argues against Jung, but in Hasidism, there is room for the Immanent (*M’malleh Kol Almin*) as well as the Transcendent (*Sovev Kol Almin*) in the shadow of the Infinite (*Ain Sof*).

Abraham Joshua Heschel corrected this in some measure. He added the coordinates of time-space. God, *YHVH*, numerically equivalent to twenty-six, becomes Time in the twenty-six hours of the Sabbath (the Sabbath begins earlier and ends later than the ordinary day). God is incarnated in the twenty-six hours of the Sabbath of Sabbaths, Yom Kippur. Then God is available. Whoever enters the “palace of Time” from the world of space is in God. The time of prayer each day is a miniature Sabbath, where the Father and the child can meet in the intimacy of the private domain. Admittedly, Heschel goes beyond Buber. Heschel employs many Hebrew terms and allows conceptually Jewish associations to be formed. Furthermore, Heschel adds an everyday coordinate, in terms of a “*God-me*” relationship. God is the center of the universe, yet to every human it is her or his own *I*. However—and this is the great contribution of Heschel—in the moment of “radical amazement,” I discover that I am only a *me*. Thus do I become aware that God, the Ground of All and the Center of All, deigns to be and see *me*. This is so because I have availed myself of the opportunity of “making myself visible to God.” By intending to be seen, by praying, I make myself visible to God. This begets the emotional response of respect (*Yir’ah*). It is a looking-back, being startled by an awareness that I am being seen: retrospect. From this moment on, I find myself in a *situation*. This mode of thinking is altogether different. The human being is obligated when in the situational predicament of being seen. This is not true for the mere conceptual assent to the *idea* of being seen.

In Heschel’s thinking, there is room for coordinates like “faith,” “prayer” (liturgical and spontaneous), “revelation,” and *halakha* that I am “responsible for” and “answerable to.” God *sees* me, and I am amazed. God, the only *real* Center and pronominal Subject, reveals and decrees, and I (not as a subject but as the object of God) cannot help but reply, “*Na’aseh V’Nishma*” (“I shall do and I shall obey”), and begin to act. “My problem is not whether my soul has attained salvation. My problem is what is the next *mitzvah* that God wants me to do.” Having been seen, my *me* is hooked, committed. Yet where can my *me* commune with the One? I can meet God whenever God becomes a *Thou* in time, and my *me* becomes an *I*. Then God can tell me what God demands of *me*. This is revelation. I can make my splintered self visible to God, and God can mend and fulfill it. This is prayer. Prayer and revelation go hand in hand, depending on whether at this moment I am praying *out* (praying myself out to God) in petition or praying God in to me, in the revelation of liturgy or the revelation of Torah. Heschel is not afraid that the word will become flesh. He wants it to become incarnate, not in *space*, but in *time*.

However, for the Hasid, Heschel, once a Hasid too, is self-limiting. He has incorporated only such traditional coordinates as he needs. There are still difficulties in store for those who want to proceed from his system and become what the God to Whom *they* have made themselves visible wants them to be. Heschel may have recovered for us “the question to which the Torah is the answer.” Nevertheless, now that we know that “the Torah is God’s anthropology, not our theology,” now that we know *what God would have us become*, we still need competent direction and guidance. In short, the Hasid says, “We need a Rebbe.”

We cannot become Hasidim from Buber and Heschel. As wife implies husband, and as child implies father, so the term *Hasid*, in its traditional context, implies a living and continuous relationship with a Rebbe. In Hasidic parlance, one is *a Rebbe’s a Hasid* (a Rebbe’s Hasid) as one might be in Yiddish *a tatten’s a kind* (a father’s child). And one cannot claim exemption from this relationship by pointing to the example of the Bratzlaver Hasidim, despite the fact that their Rebbe, Reb Nachman, entered the Supersubstantial roughly two hundred years ago. He is *still* their Rebbe, and to his Hasidim it matters little whether he is on this plane or not. Bratzlaver Hasidim are certain that he presides over their prayer, seated in his chair, the very same one in which he sat while in the flesh. Yet there are those who claim to be Hasidim though they have no Rebbe. The traditional Hasid, paraphrasing Theodor Gaster, would say, “If a Hellenist is not a Greek and a Judaist is not a Jew, then a Hasidist is not a Hasid, and a Neo-Hasid is only a Hasidist.”

The traditional world of the Hasid has many other coordinates, all of which define his Hasid-ing and his Rebbe’s Rebbe-ing. The cosmology and psychology of the Hasid’s world are larger than those of either Buber or Heschel. Its morals and ethics embrace the unconscious.

God is both Person and Nonperson for the Hasid. God becomes Person by emanating the world of *Atzilut*, in which God assumes intellect and emotions in order to become known to Man. God is Absolute and unrelating Infinite (*Ain Sof*) before the Contraction (*Tzimtzum*) of God’s Light. *Before* is not a temporal but a *present-eternal* state. God’s Light is and is not identical with the *Ain Sof*, just as the sunlight is and is not identical with the sun. In the lower worlds, in “creation,” God’s Presence is the *Shekhinah*. Here on earth, the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Spouse, Who is our Divine Mother, is in Exile, just as in the world of *Atzilut* our Divine Father is in Exile. The *Shekhinah* is held prisoner in innumerable little sparks, awaiting redemption at our hand. Whenever a *minyán* is convened where She is, “She radiates so powerfully that an angel, even from the highest of angelic hierarchies, would be annihilated.”

This is the world where the deistic truth is learned: “There is none comparable to Thee, O Lord our God, in this world.” In the spiritual universes of Creation, Formation, and Function, the theistic truth is made manifest: “There is none beside Thee, O our King, in the life of the world to come.” The truth of pantheism waits for the days of the Messiah to be demonstrated: “Nothing but Thou exists, O our Redeemer, in the days of the Messiah.” Then the level of *Atzilut*, in which God, as Person, is each human’s attainment, will be made manifest, fulfilling God as the water covers the sea. The final Parousia of the Impersonal Infinite is to be demonstrated at the resurrection of the dead: “There is none like Thee, O our Savior, at the resurrection of the dead.”

All of these are equally true for the traditional Hasid, depending on the level of attainment. Hasidim see themselves reincarnated again and again. If they are to progress, they need the help and the guidance of a Rebbe. The Rebbe knows the purpose of the Hasid’s present incarnation, as well as the levels and rungs, the advances and setbacks experienced in previous ones.

For the Hasid, there is no point in arguing whether the Way of Torah is greater than the Way of Service (*Avodah*) or the Way of Deeds of Lovingkindness (*Gemillut Chasadim*). This depends entirely on the root of the Hasid’s soul. We say, “Our God and God of our parents” because we, in our lives, must make living contact with the God whom our parents served, that this God be both the God of tradition and the God of personal experience to us. Then we say “God of Abraham,” because this God is the God of those who are rooted to the right, those who serve God with deeds of lovingkindness. We say, “God of Isaac,” because this God is also the God of those who serve God through prayer and sacrifice, rooted to the left, in service (*Avodah*). We say, “God of Jacob,” because this God is also the God of those who serve God with Torah, being rooted in the middle. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were pure archetypes. Therefore, one cannot divorce oneself from any of these ways of serving. Only a Rebbe can establish the exact balance of Torah, service, and deeds of lovingkindness for each of the Rebbe’s Hasidim.

Thus does Hasidism meet the problem of the usual incompatibility of religious intensity and tolerance. Without this approach, the intense adherence to one way would be heresy to the others. Hasidism teaches that there is integration (*hitkallut*) in the present order of the world (*tikkun*). The former order of chaos (*tohu*) carried the seeds of its own destruction, causing the “shattering of the vessels” when various objects collided with one another in their one-sidedness.

Out of the junk pile of chaos, God fashioned Man's animal soul. It can be of the "sheep," "ass," or "goat" variety. Hasidim cannot choose their own way unless they know the root of that other part of their being. Only a Rebbe can prescribe the way for them. No book can be written about such things. Reb Levi Yitzhak said long ago that the Rebbe of the generation is the "Tractate of the Love and Awe of God."

Hasidim would insist that neither Buber nor Heschel could replace the Rebbe. They could lead a prospective Hasid to one or another Rebbe, preaching one or another way. But without a Rebbe, the *becoming* of the Hasid would be frustrated. The "world" has no know-how; it cannot show the Hasid the way. When Hasidism first appeared, it found a Jew fettered by discipline, unable to become one with her or his inner destiny. The Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples began to free the devout, in accord with the realities of the Divine Soul, Animal Soul, and Conscious Soul. Under their direction, an overdisciplined Hasid bloomed into spontaneity. But it is nonsense to say that Hasidism cast *all* control aside. One need only glance at the middle chapters of Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi's *Tanya* or Reb Elimelech's *Tzettel Katan* to see that Hasidism taught the undisciplined how to gain control of themselves. The Maggid of Mezritch first taught his disciples "to discipline the horses so that they will know that they *are* horses" and then "to discipline the horses so that they will no longer *be* horses."

Techniques of prayer must be learned. Hasidism realized that it was not enough to say what one ought to do; it had to show one how to do it. Prayer, during the weekday, is a laboratory for the refinement of the animal and the rational soul. On the Sabbath, it is the laboratory for a soul's absorption in God. The ultimate, for the Hasid, is not "Heaven" or the "World to Come." The ultimate is to be absorbed in the Being of God. Under the Rebbe's guidance, Hasidim practice so that they might become virtuosos in their own field. In prayer, they not only pray to God but make *God* whole, for the sake of bringing about the union of the Holy One, blessed be that One, and the *Shekhinah*. Thus, as Reb Pinchas of Koretz said, "God *is* prayer."

Hasidism insisted on the need for *halakha*, since *halakha* served the most vital function of disciplining Man's will. In the mystical literature of the East, the solution to the problem of ridding oneself of the limiting self-will, which keeps God out, is sought in the realization that God alone exists, and nothing else has real existence. When the human identifies with the great Self of the Infinite, the human too is That. Hasidism holds that some humans can achieve the great realization this way. However, this

way is barred to most of us. Some in the Western tradition have believed that it comes through mortification and consequent *apatheia*, for when there is no feeling of self, there is no will. Another way, counseled by Saint Augustine, is to “love God and do what you like.” Hasidism says that this approach, too, is not given to many. Not everyone has mortified all desires by fasting, and not everyone is able to love God like a perfect *Tzaddik*. Most of us are somewhere between righteousness and wickedness, as the Chabad Hasidim say. Therefore, Moses implored God to give God’s Self to Humankind in God’s Will, construed in the leather of the *t’fillin* and the wool of the *tzitzit*. God acceded and clothes Himself in the *mitzvot*, which have now become the “limbs of the King.” Individuals who shift to a *mitzvah*-centered life have no will of their own. Thus is the problem solved for those who are neither righteous nor wicked. Yet they must constantly attune themselves to be capable of fulfilling the Will and of understanding the Mind. The Hasid sees God’s Will and Wisdom in Torah. First he surrenders his will to the Rebbe. He gives the Rebbe “power of attorney” over himself, vowing obedience to the Rebbe. The Rebbe soon transfers this obedience to God.

So there is an essential difference for the traditional Hasid between the teachings on Hasidism in Buber and Heschel and that of the living tradition. While Neo-Hasidism might be able to bring the Jew to the verge of accepting the yoke of God’s kingdom, it cannot make the Jew capable of accepting the yoke of *mitzvot* and of continuing to function and develop. For spiritual direction, the Hasid must seek out the Rebbe. And each of the Rebbes has received a “double portion” from her or his predecessor, as Elisha did from Elijah. In the years since the assumption of the Ba’al Shem Tov, they are said to have acquired considerable experience in this area. So for the traditional Hasid, any talk of “decadence” or “decay” in the tradition is an egregious misrepresentation.

Hasidism and Jewish Renewal¹²

That is where I stood in 1960, when I wrote that critique of Neo-Hasidism. I was still a Lubavitcher Hasid and in the mood of apologetics and restoration. Eventually, I graduated that position and evolved a “renewal” perspective. You see, Hasidism used to be on the “growing edge” of the Jewish tradition. It was a radical movement attempting to vitalize its relationship with God. Conservatives want to be in the center where things are safe, but as with a tree, the center is dead matter. The livingness of the tree is on the outer edge. Hasidism used to be on this vital edge. But over time and in reaction to various historical cir-

cumstances, Hasidism has opted for the centrist position of safety and preservation.

Jewish Renewal differs from Restoration, which seeks to hold on to a dying or former paradigm. People in Jewish Renewal do not want to abandon sacred or cherished traditions or toss them out along with outworn cosmologies. We are now privy to information that floods us with wonder at the view of a wider and ever more complex cosmos, and we do not want to pawn our minds for the price of staying wedded to our tradition. Still, we look to fill our spiritual needs as experienced in the present with a maximum of tradition. To make this happen, we have to retrofit our spiritual technology to the demands of our era. We are sensitive to feminism, human potential, ecology, and whole-earth thinking.

Hasidism, though, is an eminently usable model for Jewish Renewal. Hasidism, with profound vitality, took a *sui generis* approach to Judaism without throwing anything out. For Jewish Renewal, the basic model of a “spiritual leader” is the Hasidic Rebbe. Yet it is traditional to think of a Rebbe as a *Tzaddik*—a saint. Knowing that we are not saints, in what way can we speak of the Rebbe as our leadership model? How do we dare even to apply the word *Tzaddik* to ourselves? Reb Shneur Zalman, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, has priced *Tzaddik Gamur* (“the complete *Tzaddik*”) out of our market. For the “complete *Tzaddik*” is one who doesn’t have a shred of *yetzer ha’ra* (evil inclination, negative impulse) left. With great, great austerity, the complete *Tzaddik* killed the *yetzer ha’ra* in herself or himself. Who can even get close to this kind of a situation? And if that is what a *Tzaddik* is, if that is what a Rebbe is, then, who among us is a Rebbe?

But thank God this same Reb Shneur Zalman wrote a *sefer*, namely the *Tanya*, the first part of which he called *Sefer Shel HaBeynonim*, “The Book of the People In-Between.” In the *Tanya*, he made a very important statement, that from the point of view of behavior, the *Beynoni* and the *Tzaddik* are on the same floor.

On the outer level, you cannot see a difference between a *Beynoni* and a *Tzaddik*. Whereas a *Tzaddik* is by nature totally good, a *Beynoni*, with great struggle and control, manages to control all thoughts, words, and deeds in such a way that she or he doesn’t slip for one moment to become an instrument of the energy system of evil, in Hebrew, *k’lipah*. And when somebody asked Reb Shneur Zalman, “Well, what are you?” he would quote Rav: “I’m a *Beynoni*.” The Talmud (*Rosh HaShanah* 16b) makes a similar point in the name of Rav, who also claims to be a *Beynoni*. The sages say to Rav, “If you are a *Beynoni*, *lo shavik mar chayya l’chol b’riyah*—you don’t leave any space for any of us!”

In other words, if these saints see themselves as average, what does that make of us who are truly average? What is it we can really say of ourselves?

According to *Tanya*, we are at best *reshayim sh'aynam gemurim*; we are people who are not altogether wicked. That is the best thing that can be said for us. This means that even in behavior, we are very far from being in the halakhic black. So if that is the case, the question comes again: What right have we got to aspire to Rebbe-hood?

There is this wonderful story about a man who came to the Kotzker Rebbe and said to him, "Rebbe, my father came in my dream and told me I should become a Rebbe." The Kotzker laughed, and the man said, "What's the joke?" And the Kotzker answered, "If your father had come to three hundred other people and told them that you were to be their Rebbe, I would take it a little more seriously. That you have had a dream to be a Rebbe, I don't take too seriously." All of us can laugh out of that space, with that attitude. But here is what the teaching means: first the Divine flow, then the community, and then—only then—the focus point, the Rebbe. The Rebbe results from the Divine flowing into the world, working through a community that, in a sense, makes for itself a Rebbe. Without the community, there is no Rebbe. We must use Rebbe in this sense. It is not that we elevate ourselves to sainthood or raise ourselves above others. Rather, we are asked by the community to be their Rebbe because they see in us something they need.

Long ago, I wrote that *Hasid* is a relationship word, like *mother-father* or *son-daughter*. Just as you can't be a *son* without a *mother* or a *father*, you can't be a *Hasid* without a *Rebbe*. So if somebody says, "I'm a Hasid," I want to know "Who is your Rebbe?" Because "*ain melekh b'lo am*—there is no king without a people." It's impossible to have one without the other, without having the support of that.

Reb Moishe Kabriner once talked to a Hasid who said, "Reb Moishe, I know all about you—warts included—from way back. What do I have to believe about you so I could be a Hasid and you could be the Rebbe?" He said, "All you have to believe is that I'm a *kletzel becher fun dir*, meaning that I'm—like the height of a tree stump—that I'm that much higher than you. That's all you need to believe." Because if you don't believe some of that, it won't flow "down" to you. The *Hashpa'ah*, the flow of Divine inspiration, won't come down.

You must not think that I'm advocating the continuance of hierarchy. Hierarchy is like a pyramid. It has a point on top and has all this mass of structure below. We are suffering from hierarchies and being choked by hierarchies. In a hierarchy, the one who is on top refuses to listen to the one who is on the bottom, despite the fact that there are many more on

the bottom than on the top. What is the alternative? One alternative is to conclude that “everybody is equal”—but if everybody is equal, there is no flow; there is stagnation. Alan Watts used to call the *Tao* “the water-course way.” Look how the water flows: *m'makom gavo'ah l'makom namuch*—it flows downward. Now, if you understand how this goes, there has to be a certain amount of raising up so that the wisdom can flow down. Inside of me, I feel what the *Gemara* says: “More than the calf wants to suck, the cow wants to give the milk.” Especially at this time in my life, I feel it's so important to upload the files of my life's experience on other people, so the pressure here is great. On your side, the longing for the knowledge is great. Do you understand how we are in this wonderful relationship with each other? And it is not like that flat land of democracy.

So what is it? Not hierarchy, not democracy. I call it “organismic.” I'd like you to hear that because I think that this is the foundation of the new Rebbe-work. The kidneys have to do the work of the kidneys, the lungs have to do the work of the lungs, the brain has to do the work of the brain, the spine has to do the work of the spine, and the heel has to do the work of the heel, and so on. This doesn't mean that my toe doesn't have access to my head. Step on my toe and you'll see! We are connected. We are organically connected.

To think about such issues, people always use models that make sense out of their life experience. So we are thinking of being organically connected, in other words, we think of the next paradigm in which Gaia brings us the organic model, the organismic model. Earth is alive; we are part of that; there are organs; cells make up organs; organs make up an organism. Organisms make up a social organism with other organisms all within the environment—that's how it goes. So the model is an organismic model, which is a lot better than either the hierarchical model or the flat one.

So we have people who are *reshayim sh'aynam gemurim*, “not altogether wicked,” who have been called to do this Rebbe-work, who don't have all the tools that are necessary, but who, *b'chemlat HaShem*, “through the merciful grace of Providence,” are picking up “breathing” and “postures” and “spiritual direction” from all kinds of places!

We get what we need, not necessarily through our tradition, but from other places, to make up for the pieces that we lost. And we also get ingredients, not only for the past, but those that are necessary for the future. These have to do with transformational psychology, with the brain-mind technology that's now coming down, which has to do with the expansion of consciousness so that we could get into larger and larger possibilities,

which have to do with creating local area networks of people who work in dyads and triads and so on, so they can mesh their minds and work together. So I've come to understand that the Rebbe of the future is not going to be "the Rebbe" we knew in the past. For some time, the Rebbe will serve as a Rebbe, and when that's done, the person will have dinner and go see a movie and not necessarily be a Rebbe.

When we are playing—yes, playing—Hasid and Rebbe, something good happens. I like the idea of play, and I don't want you to think of it as "mere play." By "playing," we make sure we don't get stuck thinking that we always are that Rebbe. We understand that these are temporary roles that we assume for the benefit of that mutuality that we try to create.

I like to use the following example. I'm addressing an audience and I'm thinking, "What am I going to say next?" And the audience is wondering, "What is he going to say next?" During this time, the audience is feeding me a certain kind of energy. That's so important. The notion that I am speaking in the active form and that you are merely passive is wrong. You are very active. Your active listening creates in me the will to continue. If there were a conspiracy in which all of you decided to shut your minds against what I had to say, in two minutes my energy would be gone. I would be totally disconcerted. I wouldn't know what I'm doing. How can I teach if I don't have your attention? You're paying into the process by giving me your attention. I don't yet know what the group mind will want to reveal. And I've dedicated myself for at least the time we are going to be doing this together to be a *keli*, a vessel, for that to come through. If you would withdraw your energy, I would run away. I wouldn't have anything to do here. I'm here only because you help me with your energy. This is a very important point.

I want to make it clear that although we are not *Tzaddikim* and we are not Rebbes, we *may be* called to *function* as Rebbes. We recognize that this is not a permanent degree that we get for ourselves. Rather, this is an intermittent function that we allow ourselves, that we submit to, in order to be able to have access to regions that the normal consciousness doesn't have access to. If we want to live healthy as a people and as a religion, we can't do it unless we have some people who are the conduits of that energy. That is some small part of what Jewish Renewal has gleaned from Hasidism—models.

Renewal is not new. It has been going on from the beginning. Anything that is alive renews itself constantly. But there is also the teaching in Judaism that nothing has changed since Sinai. That is the architectural point of view. Many of the orthodox Hasidim insist that nothing has changed, and a lot of their energy has gone into rebuilding, to transplant-

ing, the *shtetl* in a new environment since the Holocaust. But what is so interesting is that they didn't rebuild it; they improved on it, in one sense. Because if you have ever seen pictures from the *shtetl*, it is sort of funny to say, some of the *streimels* (fur hats) in the *shtetl* were pretty ratty. You look at the *streimels* today, and they are beautiful and nicely shaped. So they didn't have it as good in Warsaw as they have it now in Brooklyn.

My sense is that Jewish Renewal is basically an *avant-garde* of something that is going to happen later on anyway. When Reconstructionism first arrived on the scene, there were lots of people saying, "We don't want to hear it. We are against it. It is new; we don't want to have anything to do with it." But today, even in Orthodox settings, they are having bat mitzvahs, which Mordecai Kaplan first inaugurated in Reconstructionism for his own daughters. And it is similar with Jewish Renewal. You go to the Holy Wall in Jerusalem, and you will see people wearing the "rainbow *tallit*" I designed who have no idea where it came from. And if they had an idea, they might not wear it. Or they'll be singing Reb Shlomo Carlebach's melodies without knowing that this unconventional holy man wrote them.

Paradigm Shift¹³

In the teachings of the Hasidic masters given in this book, readers will encounter many ideas that will seem more than slightly out of step with today's thinking. More than that, some of the ideas will be offensive to modern sensibilities: the body is low, the earth is a kind of a prison in which we have to suffer and from which we must be liberated, Jews are superior, and women are somehow impure. And next to the teachings of joy that so characterize Hasidism, you might wonder, "What is going on here?" So it is time to talk a little about paradigm shift.

How you understand the universe and yourself when you are a child differs greatly from how you understand it when you have grown up. What you needed to understand in very simple terms when you were a child, you can handle the complexities of when you grow up. You can handle more paradox. You don't have to see things in black and white. I remember when I first looked at a computer terminal—it was dark and the letters were green or amber. Later on, the whole thing flipped when Apple showed that you could have a white background and black letters, and now they are in color. But my computer had a problem when it came to color. I wanted my screen to show over two hundred colors. But it just couldn't handle it. It could only handle sixteen. So your mind has to be ready to see complex things.

Think about how our conception of the universe has changed. We used to have the notion of polytheism, that there are many gods, because we couldn't imagine how the thunder god and the sun god could be the same god. So we separated them all out and put them into a hierarchy, because we couldn't quite see their unity, the complexity of one god containing all of these possibilities. Most of these gods were zoomorphic, meaning they looked like animals. Think of Ganesha, the elephant; Hanuman, the monkey; Sekhmet, the lioness; Anubis, the dog; and Nandi, the bull. And what did you feed those animal-gods? Human beings. Thus the big Minotaur needed to have a virgin every year to eat.¹⁴

After a while there was a switch. People were ready to say there is one God. And what did this God look like? Like us, anthropomorphic—in human form. God was seen as Michelangelo has it in his Sistine Chapel ceiling: an old man with a beard, touching the finger of the first human being. So what does this God like for sacrifices? A sheep in the morning, a sheep at night, as the Bible describes how the sacrifices had to be offered. And where is this anthropomorphic God? Far away: “My thoughts are not your thoughts”; we human beings were nothing in comparison. Sometimes this God would break in on us and come down. As the Bible has it, “And God descended on Mount Sinai.” And it is very hard to meet God, because the very presence of God will kill you. “Watch out about the mountain,” “Nobody sees My face and lives; you can see my back.” And it may seem amusing now, but this was very real in the experience of the people of that time. God was seen as wholly other, completely different. And that “wholly other” notion of God was known as deism.¹⁵ In other words, God is different and moves in and out in the universe. And if you wanted to go and find God, where would you go? You'd go to a holy place. A holy place was sort of impregnated with God-presence because God was in space.¹⁶

It was Abraham who took us from polytheism to deism. Remember, he meets this great being called Melchizedek (*Malki Tzedek*), the king of Salem, and he does a ritual with bread and wine with him. And it is written that Melchizedek “*vehu kohen l'El Elyon*,” that Melchizedek was a priest to God most high. At one point, we didn't quite understand what this meant. But now that we've found the Ugaritic tablets,¹⁷ the tablets of the Canaanite religion, we begin to understand it a little bit better. *El* was the head of the Canaanite pantheon and was depicted as a bull, and *Ba'al*, his son, was depicted as a calf, and that is where the golden calf comes in. Abraham, in breaking the idols of his day, says none of these forms are God. Then he says, “We are made in the image of God”; therefore, God looks like a person. Later on, Maimonides¹⁸ and others would interpret

this and make it more spiritual, but if you read the biblical account of that time, it seems as if God spoke and appeared. Even to Moses, God says, “If you want to see Me, go hide yourself in the rock, and I will cover you, and you will see my back and not my face.” And it happened just like that at that particular place and that particular time. So God was very much understood in deistic terms. Later on, with the prophet Isaiah, we move a little bit higher. And slowly the transition was made to theism.

Eventually, the Temple was destroyed, and Jews were no longer able to offer animal sacrifices. And by and large, ritual sacrifice is pretty rare nowadays, except in small pockets of the world, where they have chickens and Santeria.¹⁹ We are for the most part done with animal sacrifices, with blood sacrifices. And what do we believe about God? Before, with deism, God inhabited space. There was a special mountain, a special place, in which God had chosen to make His name dwell. You made pilgrimages to that place. It was a holy mountain, a sacred place. And that was wonderful, but what happened when the Temple was destroyed and animal sacrifices were no longer being offered? People began to say, “God is not moving in the universe. God is so vast, so infinite, to say that God is moving doesn’t make sense.” In deism, God is smaller, as it were, and moves around in the cosmos. And now we come to theism, where God is spirit separate from the cosmos. You can’t serve God in space because God is everywhere, and the Hebrew word that is being used for God sometimes is *HaMakom*, the Space, as if to say, “The whole cosmos is placed in that space, which is God.” At this time in history, there was a translator of the Bible by the name of Onkelos.²⁰ And he no longer translated things literally. He took “And God came down” and translated it as “And God manifested.” It was a way of saying that “we don’t hold with this old belief anymore. It doesn’t make sense.” And if he would have translated it literally in those times, it wouldn’t have been accessible, and the people would have rejected it. So by reinterpreting the meaning, in the new paradigm, God was Spirit. And the opposite of spirit is matter. God is not matter. God *made* matter. Matter is far away from God, because God is Spirit. Now, human beings are made up of a material body and a soul. And this was seen as the psychophysical parallelism, a world of matter parallel to a world of spirit. And God is a spirit in which matter is. There is a large universe of spirit and a smaller universe of matter. And how do we serve God when we no longer offer sacrifices? We speak words. “We pay for the bullocks with our lips,” the saying goes. And from that you get the expression “lip service.” But it isn’t merely lip service. It had to be very accurate, just as when people were discovering magic and talking about magic. The formula has to be pronounced the

right way. If you don't pronounce it the right way, you get into trouble. And where is God to be found if no longer in space spatially? You find God in time. That was a very important shift. All the many laws we used to have before, about bringing sacrifices and how to maintain the Temple, were now shifted into the Sabbath. You create a sanctuary not in space but in time.

Mircea Eliade,²¹ a great scholar of comparative religion at the University of Chicago, spoke of this as *in illo tempore* time. There is regular time, and there is a time that is *in illo tempore*, "at that time" time. When you tell a story and you say, "Once upon a time," that introduction was the introduction that first was given in Latin when they would read from the Gospels. So the priests would read, "*In illo tempore*," and then they would say, "Jesus went and did thus and such." It always began with *in illo tempore*. The calendar is made to go around with the shared experiences of people. If you live with a liturgical calendar, you live in *in illo tempore* time. Therefore, every Passover, you go out of Egypt. Every Shavuot, you receive the Torah. Every Christmas, Jesus is born. That is living in *in illo tempore* time. The birth of the Buddha gets celebrated that way also. The yearly celebrations that we have are ways in which we sanctify and mark time.

With the Temple gone, we no longer had that holy place to go to and find God. So where could we find God? In the ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur—in other words, not in space but in time. I once heard about some people who were preparing to celebrate Lent.²² "Celebrate" is perhaps not the best expression when you are talking about the penitence that they are doing. A woman was describing how her family participated in an orthodox Christian ritual in which they stood in a circle and each family member was begging forgiveness from the other. And they did this at home. She and her husband first, and then with their children. And this became very real to her. She said, "I looked at my daughter and thought about how many times I didn't treat her right, I didn't treat her as a full human being because I was busy, I was this, I was that. I had all kinds of excuses, but it wasn't right." And so she asked for the daughter's forgiveness, and the daughter again asked for her mother's forgiveness. We do something like this at a wedding, prior to going to the canopy. We ask siblings and parents and children to forgive one another so that everyone can go in with a clean slate. And why was the Christian family asking forgiveness at that time? Because it was Lent. And Lent is the preparation for Easter. If you want to have God arise, have a resurrection, as it were, arise in you, you had better prepare for it. For Jews, this happens between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.

As Jews, it is hard for us to speak of God being incarnate in the flesh, but we do speak of God being incarnate in time. And Yom Kippur is the clearest God-time that we have. There are twenty-six hours of Yom Kippur (reflecting, as noted earlier, the fact that the Divine name, *YHVH*, adds up to twenty-six). In other words, you add an hour before and an hour afterward to make Yom Kippur enriched, as it were, with extra time. So you can see how God shows up in time.

There is a famous painting showing a man standing in the middle of a field. With one hand he is leaning on a spade, with the other he has taken off his hat, and there is a church steeple at one end of the picture. The painting is called “The Angels” because a bell is ringing at a time when the angels are singing in heaven, as it were. So the guy takes his hat off in the field where he is standing in an attitude of prayer, to join with the angels in the adoration of God, because the bell was ringing. Can you imagine living in a Muslim city, and you hear the muezzin’s call,²³ “It is better to serve the Lord than to sleep! There is no God but Allah! *Allah hu akbar*, God is greater, mightier than anything else.” We used to have the equivalent of that in the *shtetl*, a guy with a wooden hammer banging on the doors—“Time to wake up for the penitential prayers!”—before the High Holidays. What you see is that the timings of this sort, bells and so forth, call people to these things. And that is another way in which God is inherent in time.

Now the first Temple was destroyed around the year 600 B.C.E., in a time known among some people as the axial age, the age “when things turned.” That was around the time when Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Zarathustra, the Buddha, Mahavira, Lao-Tzu, and Confucius were active. It was like a blip on the radar of the Global Brain, as if the Global Brain was having an “aha” moment. The big “aha” eventually disappeared, but there were some people who codified the “aha” in each situation, and religions were formed as a result.

Now what happens between these paradigms, say, when polytheism is making the transition into monotheism, which is deistic and anthropomorphic? When this is happening, the old starts to break down, and usually, a battle ensues. Can you imagine people saying, “No, no, not this kind of invisible God who looks like a human being! God is a bull, a calf!” That is why they chose the golden calf. It was the comfortable “old-time religion” of that period, sort of a throwback. When you decide to let go of the old paradigm, there is always a struggle. People who say, “We have to do it just as our parents did,” will insist and get very angry. It is a battle between two opposing points of view, different paradigms. Those who are holding onto the old are very tenacious and say, “How do you know that

you are right? We have proven material here. What do you have to support something new?" But the old point of view cannot grow anymore. So it gets shattered. And during the process of dissolution, there is a sliver of time between these clearly defined paradigms when people go back to primary experience. But the question of the "old paradigmers" was right—"How do I know what is real and what is right if I can no longer trust the words that come to me from the past?" So the "in-betweeners" answered, "Let me experience it directly!" And the people who are looking for this direct, primary knowledge were often known as the gnostics. Their point was that unless you experience something yourself, you don't know what you are talking about, because words are inadequate to describe it.

So where are we now? I'd like to say we are in the shift to the place where everything is God, pantheism. The understanding that has come from mysticism and from people on the cusp of periods moving from past to present, people talking about primary experience, is that the body and the soul cannot be separated. It shouldn't be that they should be fighting one another, that you have to get rid of one in order to get the other. We want Wholeness, a holistic understanding, now. I believe that people are moving from theism to pantheism. There are some who don't like the word *pantheism*, the idea that God is everything. They prefer the word *panentheism*, which means that God is *in* everything. I, however, don't think that the distinction is real. What was the objection that people had to pantheism, God is everything? "Are you going to tell me that the excrement of a dog is also God?" And the answer to this would be—"Yes." What is wrong with that? It is only from the human perspective that we see a difference between that and *challah*. On the submolecular level, on the atomic level, they all look the same. And if you look from a galactic perspective, what difference is there between one and the other? So if "God is everything," why are you and I here? Because we are the appearance of God in this particular form. And God likes to appear in countless forms and experience countless lives.

If you would have mentioned this point of view when theism was dominant, you might have been killed. The theists would complain, "What you are saying is that there are no differences anymore? Does that mean that everything is right, everything is kosher? Where are the differences?" And those are good questions. We are not so far advanced yet that we can explain all these things, but deep down, the deepest level of the pattern is that God is everything. So it's not that God *created* the world but that God *became* the world.

The notion that people liked in theism and even in deism was that God said, "Let there *be* . . ." —*zap!*—and it was. And from this we got the

notion that words are incredibly powerful. God created the world with words, and if we knew the right words, we could uncreate things, we could shift things. Many of the notions that came in Kabbalah and practical Kabbalah had to do with finding the formula so that you could change the pattern. Thus the word *abracadabra* (in Aramaic, *ibra k'di-bra*), “created as it was spoken.” Or take the expression “hocus pocus.” It comes from the priest holding up the wafer and saying, “*Hoc est enim corpus meum*—This is my body.” Through that act, “hocus pocus,” the wafer is no longer bread. People got the sense that words are magical and can do lots of things. And we subscribe to this belief to this very day. At a wedding, when the groom gives the bride a ring and says, “*Harey at m'quddeshet*, . . .” they are married. I give you my word; I make a promise. It is binding; there is power in the word—or at least there used to be. I tell you, we have all lost the power of the word because we have gone journalistic.²⁴ So when I say, “I stand for this,” “I give you my word,” I am trying to make the word powerful again. And it is true that if your word is empty, your prayer life doesn't feel full. And if your word is full, your prayer gets filled. That is what mantras are about.²⁵

What is the sacrifice now, if it isn't words? Now it is *time* and *energy*. The rich can't give any more than the poor where time and energy are concerned. That is the great sacrifice that we can offer. That is the one that we need to offer. So we offer energy in the service of God today.

Where may God be found, if not in space or time? In *person*, because it turns out that we are not doing so well with time today; time is not shared as much as it used to be. It has become secularized. Notice that we don't really celebrate noon when it is noon according to the sun. We do noon by clock time throughout each time zone. In other words, we have homogenized time. During my childhood in Vienna, I spent summers in a little village called Voeslau, which had its clock set five minutes later than Vienna's clock because noon came five minutes later. You see, people then really lived by the time; today, we have sort of made commodity out of it. Even time isn't working very well anymore. So what does that leave us with? We've got *person*—what happens on the inside and how much energy you devote to it. That is where we have God today. First we sought God in space, in *olam*. Then we started to look for God in time. And now we are looking for God more in person. Here is how it goes according to the traditional formula: “Seek ye the Lord where He may be found. Call upon Him, where He is near.” We found God in space, in time, and now in person—and all simultaneously also.

Now in talking about paradigm shift, I am speaking of trying to understand a history of spirit, a history of mind. And that helps me explain

these things. I can then take every writer of religious and spiritual material and acknowledge her or his great accomplishment of the time by going into that paradigm in which the individual appeared and taught. Then comes the question, "What good is such teaching today if it is obsolete?" The answer is that it is not obsolete. In ourselves, we have a primitive part that still acts as if polytheism were the truth. Do you understand? Look at the stock market; is it a "bull," or is it a "bear" today? We see those energies coming in, in that particular form. We act sometimes in the service of one or in the service of the other and not necessarily in the service of the *One*, All. When we touch a *Sefer Torah* and kiss it, what we are involved in is almost—I don't want to say idolatry, because we don't intend idolatry, but there is a tangible presence that we can hug, that we can kiss, that we can interact with. It is a very powerful thing, and that still lives in us. There also lives in us that dualism of spirit and matter. That is not finished in us yet. We have a sense that there is a difference between animal behavior—"Stop it! You're acting like an animal!"—and acting like a *mensch* and a spiritual being. We aspire to spirituality. Here again, we see that spirit living inside of us. But even all of this does not form a full reality map. So I put all these things into my reality map to understand it. And if I understand issues of *halakha* and renewal against this reality map, I can say, the good part of all these things we learned in the past is this. And when I ask myself, "What function, what process was going on?" I can find an answer.

Imagine for a moment that I am feeling guilty about something I shouldn't have done. If the Temple were standing, I would bring a sacrifice. Imagine it in terms of "Mary had a little lamb." Wherever Mary went, the lamb would go. So when Mary did something she shouldn't have done, she has to take her beloved lamb and say, "Dear God, I should have died for what I've done wrong, but I am offering you in my stead this animal that I've nurtured." Can you imagine what is going on inside Mary, seeing this animal slaughtered for what she has done and then having to eat part of it? Now, if I were to ask what is it that I need to do for my guilt today, I can learn something from the process of sacrifice then to get to the process that I have to go through today.

That is, in a way, reconstructing from the past. And that was an issue that Mordecai Kaplan and the Reconstructionists were talking about. I have to go and see what the function of a particular behavior was in the past and try to re-create that same function in the present. The reason I have spent time on this question is that it is always going to come up, and this is my thinking tool, my mind operating system (MOS). Each paradigm shift was considered heresy by the people who came before it. In

other words, they will judge that what we are doing is wrong because we don't do what they have done in the past. That is why I say from time to time that many people in religion are driving by the rear view mirror. They are superimposing the past onto the present.

On Reading Hasidic Teachings

Now, the question that is relevant to the teachings of the Hasidic masters is this: How am I to understand sources that come from the past? The answer is, I cannot deal with the sources from the past unless I go back to the mind-set, to the reality map, to the paradigm of the past. If I try to judge the paradigm of the past with my understanding of the present, I am going to find myself in trouble. That is because I will judge everything as being lesser. "Look how funny they were to believe that" or "How stupid they were!" From that point of view, I wouldn't give credit to Plato, Aristotle, Moses, or Buddha. "He didn't know about quantum mechanics?" "Moses didn't know that $e = mc^2$?" If I go and judge it in this way, I cannot possibly estimate and esteem the true contribution of these people. So I must see them in terms of the world that they occupied and the worldview that they had.

Many books have talked about the lives and personal styles of the Hasidic masters, and there are many books of the Hasidic masters' teachings. But I believe that we still need to understand *how* to learn what they were saying, to look at things through their eyes and to apply their methods. For theirs was a unique approach to God and to life. It is not possible in any short presentation to transmit the whole of the wisdom they represented. What is more reasonable is to create a primer, a tool for working with the teachings. So what is presented here is not exactly "teaching" but rather the installing of software—software that will allow you to study the material to full effect.

Hasidic wisdom will take some genuine work and contemplation, but gathering knowledge is not a linear operation. For example, look at the process of reading a book. We don't often read it in one sitting. In between reading, we may eat or make a phone call and then get back to the book. It may take two or three weeks before you are finished with the book. But in your mind, the book has become one whole thing. Your mind integrates the experience of reading the book, even if in actuality it was fragmented. In a good whodunit, you're not going to know until the very last page who did it and why. But by the time you get there, the rest of the book begins to make sense. You know exactly how you got to that place with that particular answer at the end. Likewise, reading these

teachings requires patience and an active engagement and questioning of the material. Keep the questions alive, for the answers are going to come. They may come from the environment, from your daily experience, or perhaps from your dreams.

What Francis Bacon²⁶ said in *Of Studies of Books* is also applicable to these teachings: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.” These teachings are of the latter type and require a different approach to reading. Some of the teachings will have to be unwrapped from their homiletical covers. Like a tightly rolled tortilla, before you get to the filling of it, you have to chew through some layers first. I realize that people might often like to get to the substance sooner, and they would like it to be unpacked for them, but you’ll never be able to handle a Hasidic teaching if you don’t learn to chew your way through this material. In some ways, we have been done a disservice by the encyclopedists who have given us nice, concise treatments of topics. They give the gist of the matter, and when you become accustomed to that, it is like getting perilously addictive “crack” in comparison to chewing a coca leaf. It is so distilled that you get 200-proof alcohol instead of a good wine. So it is important that you slog through it this way. You want to extract the essence from the bulk. The bulk may come from a cultural milieu very different from your own, but distilling it is an important element of your spiritual growth.

This is not a book *about* Hasidism. I don’t want to talk about Hasidism as a static thing; Hasidism is an approach. It is an approach to Judaism. That is obvious from the way in which the texts deal with certain questions about the universe and about humanity. In learning to chew the Hasidic texts, we might glean something from this approach. So while you may encounter some difficulties, this book is really about helpful perspectives. Hasidism is very practical. So we are not exactly saying what Hasidism is in the sense of describing it but are rather introducing its approach.

So before you study this material, try meditating or singing a *niggun* as preparation. Then, when you have created the proper “space,” read the selected teaching aloud. It doesn’t work well to do it silently. These teachings were originally given orally, and when they are studied out of books, they are studied out loud. You may find it agreeable to study your teaching with a partner. Every once in a while, you may find that you have to put the book down and go over the material you have just read with the tendrils of your mind. Try to get a feel for doing this.

There is a form of meditation that might best be described as “rumination.” Rumination means chewing your cud—tasting every word, reviewing every action, exploring every thought thoroughly. For example, somebody gives you a nasty look or says a nasty word to you. After you walk away, you ruminate on the situation. “What did he mean by that? Did I do something?” And notice when you ruminate, it isn’t only a mental thing; it is usually accompanied by an emotional state, a feeling. Or if you get a compliment—“Ah, that felt so good!”—you ruminate on that. Yes, it is your reasoning mind that says, “Boy, did I wait a long time for that.” Did you ever get the kind of compliment that you really felt you deserved but nobody in your family ever gave it to you? Then somebody comes and gives you that compliment, and you are almost moved to tears? Why are you moved to tears? It is like, “Oy, was I thirsty!” You felt that you so needed to get that acknowledgment, and that is like ruminating. You dwell on it, going over the thing, allowing it to arouse feelings. That is exactly what one does with these teachings.

How does one learn what one has not experienced? For those who have experienced faith or have experienced spiritual awakening, there is no need for explanation. But what about for those who haven’t? There are some things that you can’t really talk about if you haven’t experienced them. And if someone tells you that it exists, you might say, “It’s not true. It can’t be true, because I haven’t had such an experience.” So how do you teach spiritual truths in the absence of primary experience? The answer is, you tell a parable. You give an analogue. As *A* relates to *B*, *that* relates to *this* spiritual teaching. And look how often this has been done in that way—the parable of the Good Samaritan.²⁷ You know, people think of the Samaritans as “goody-goodies.” But when Jesus was telling the story, the Samaritans were seen as outcasts. There is a man on the road who is nearly dead from a beating given to him by robbers. First, a priest, a *kohen*, comes by and says, “I can’t deal with you—you might die on me, and I’ll become impure.” Another Jew comes by and also says, “I can’t deal with you.” And finally, a Samaritan arrives, someone who in that society was “a down and outer,” and he helps the man. Do you understand? Now, why is he telling this story? I don’t know whether the story is fact or not, but the lesson in it is very clear. And the lesson is in the analogue. By telling the story in that way, you say, “I get it.” Parables are like that. So in case you don’t have primary experience, parables and the imagination can help. The Hasidic tradition is well known for its use of such parables.

Still, we come to things with our own perspectives and experiences, our individual filters. What are we to do about that? This is material from a

different world, even for most Jews. And perhaps you are not even Jewish. You may come to this material from another religious tradition—Buddhism, say, or Christianity. And you might be wondering if it is possible to put aside what we believe in order to absorb this tradition in its own light. And while that is a noble intention, I say, welcome the filters. What is so bad about them? You bring something from your own experience to whatever you do. You will find the analogue to the teaching in your own tradition, in your own experience. Besides, removing your filters may not even be possible. For example, I haven't yet met anyone who has been able to put aside the filter of what it means to live in a mammal body. When I look at science fiction like *Star Trek*²⁸ and all the "exotic" characters they have, the Klingons and the Bajorans and so on, they still look like bipeds that are mammals. It must be very different to be a bird, but how can I relate to that? How would you put your mammalian perspective aside? I don't think that is possible. We can try to put these perspectives aside, but it ends up being an exercise in futility. The best thing that you can do is to have a certain kind of imaginal empathy. When you read about Reb Zushya or Reb Shneur Zalman and the encounters that they had and where they lived, exercise your imagination, and try to see them as if you were watching a movie. Out of that will come a closer connection. Still, it isn't possible to take everything that you bring to your imagination out of the picture. When I tell Zen stories, the Japanese Buddhists all end up looking like Hasidic rabbis. I just can't get rid of that completely. So don't strive too hard to get your preexisting mental images out of the way. Dig in and find the place in you that understands where these teachings were coming from, even when the thought is outdated or not so nice, and the experience will be one of profound depth.