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Jewish Women:
The Hidden Dimension

Chassidic Stories
*Yiddish Literature
or Jewish Authenticity?*

Coming Into Being
*Cause and Effect or
Something from Nothing*

Dialogue
*Jewish Mothers
on Moral Education*

Wellsprings

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On the cover: Esther in a moment of reflection, with Ahashverosh and Haman in the background. Cover and all drawings in this issue are ink or gouache on paper by Anthony Dubovsky, Copyright©. No artwork may be reproduced without permission from the artist.

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The Philosopher, The Writer, And The Chassidic Story

Tzivia Emmer

Who doesn't love a story? A Jewish, Chassidic story especially — one that enters the heart like an arrow of truth and wisdom. There are stories of *tzaddikim* and of simple Jews of another era, stories that show the workings of Divine Providence in everyday life, stories that illuminate an abstract concept or a verse in the Torah, and stories that show the value of certain character traits like kindness and charity. Some stories contain little more than a play on words or a flash of wit. In the classic Chassidic tales we find traces of the vanished world of Eastern European Jewry, glimpsed across the chasm of time and destruction that separates us from that world.

"Through telling stories of *tzaddikim*,"* says Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, "one draws down the light of the Moshiach into This World, and repels from it all manner of darkness and tribulations."

Chassidim are fond of saying that relating stories about the Baal Shem Tov on Saturday night is beneficial for one's livelihood — but that the aforesaid statement contains three errors: first, not only the Baal Shem Tov but any *tzaddik*; second, not only on Satur-

day night but at any time; and third, that it is good not only for matters of livelihood but for any worthwhile aspect of life.

Our Sages asked why the Torah, usually so sparing of words, devotes a long and repetitious segment to the activities of Abraham's servant Eliezer in acquiring a wife for Abraham's son, Isaac. The Talmud answers that the conversation of the patriarch's servants is loftier than the Torah as studied by their sons. Reb Shlomo of Radomsk wrote: "This is so because the conversation — the story-telling — of the servants of the patriarchs *becomes* the Torah of the sons." Tales of *tzaddikim* and authentic Jewish stories deepen our appreciation of Torah and sustain faith.

Chassidic stories are less a literary form than a part of life. They serve to enliven the classroom lecture, the Shabbat table, the discussion of serious topics, a children's party. New stories complement the old; a rich oral tradition continues to grow even as more of the oral tradition is recorded and now translated into English.

But stories must be authentic. Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, a formidable Torah scholar of recent times, notes in the introduction to his *Sippurei Chassidim al*

haMoadim (English version: *A Treasury of Chassidic Tales on the Festivals*, translated by Uri Kaploun and published by Mesorah Publications, Ltd.) that he has "neither adapted [the stories] to suit his taste nor tampered with the facts as related, whether in content or in style."

Not so with many of the stories in books that we may encounter in a bookstore or the public library, where a word, a phrase or a nuance can easily distort the entirety. I remember reading stories by Martin Buber and coming away from them wondering what they meant. Like food sculpture in a museum they looked quite good — but you couldn't bring them home and eat them. Why didn't they nourish my soul? Even worse, there were Jewish folktales and novels filled with superstition and madness. Was this indeed Jewish culture? There was a taste of something Jewish, but nothing to inspire belief or impel further inquiry. Stories outside authentic Judaic tradition often contain traps for the unwary and subtle forms of spiritual sabotage, even when they are called "Chassidic."

The Chametz on the Shelf

"Looking back over the seder he had just completed, Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

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* *Tzaddikim* - pl. *righteous ones*

noted with satisfaction that he had succeeded in suffusing each of its successive stages with the light of kabbalistic meditation — that he had indeed done justice to each of the mystical *kavanos* at their respective moments.

But at that moment a voice from heaven intimated to him: “Be not proud of the manner in which you conducted your seder. In this town there lives a Jew called Chaim the Porter: his seder is loftier than yours.”

So begins a popular story about one of the best-loved personalities of Jewish history — Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, defender of the people Israel, arguer with G-d, the Rov who always in his abundant love for his people found something good to say about everyone, even the biggest sinner. The Berditchever, as he is called, is the central figure in many Chassidic stories.

The story continues:

“Reb Levi Yitzchak turned to address the Chassidim who had completed their seder at home and had come to observe how the *tzaddik* conducted the final stages of his seder.

“Do any of you know Reb Chaim the Porter?” he asked.

One of them knew him, but did not know where he lived.

“If it were possible to call him here I would be most pleased,” said the *tzaddik*.

The Chassidim immediately fanned out over all the streets of Berditchev until they found his dilapidated cottage.

His wife opened the door gingerly and asked: “Why do you need my husband? He’s in there snoring, dead drunk.”

The Chassidim ignored her, walked straight in, succeeded in waking him up, and just about hauled the burly fellow on their shoulders to the home of the *tzaddik*.

Reb Levi Yitzchak offered him a chair, and said: “My dear Reb Chaim! Did you recite *Avadim Hayinu* on *Shabbos HaGadol*?”

“Yes,” blinked the porter.

“Did you search your cottage for *chametz* last night?” asked the *tzaddik*.

“Yes,” said the simple fellow.

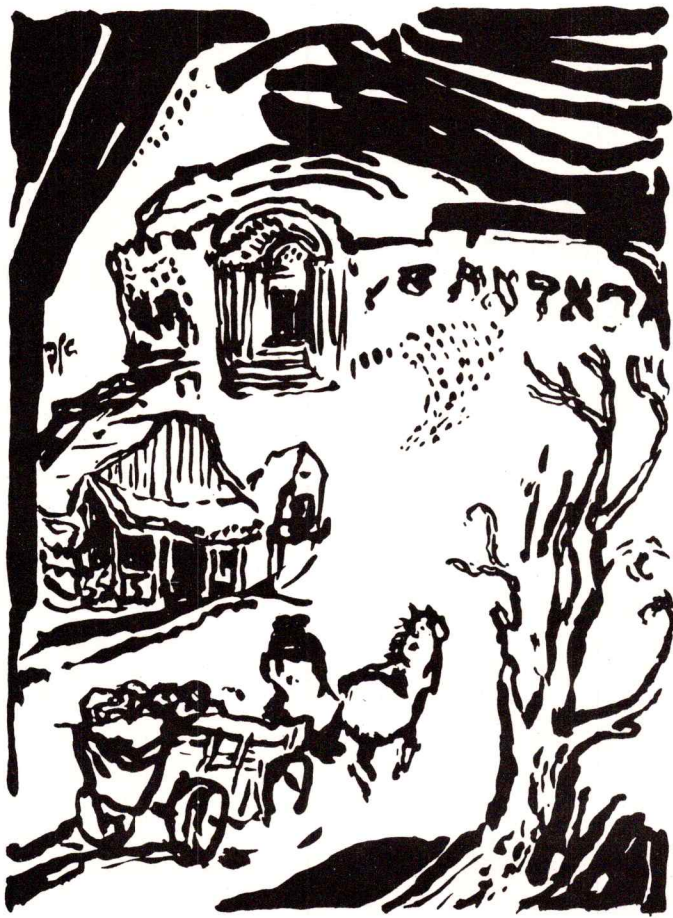
Reb Levi Yitzchak had one more question: “And did you conduct the seder tonight?”

Flushed and flustered, the poor man unburdened himself: “Rebbe, I’ll tell you the truth. I heard that a man’s not allowed to drink vodka for eight days on end. So this morning I drank enough to last me for eight days. So of course I was sleepy, and I went to bed. When it was night-time my wife wakes me up and she starts nagging me. You know how. She starts saying like this: ‘Chaim,’ she says, ‘why don’t you make a seder like all the other Jews?’

“So I said to her, I said: ‘What do you want from me? I’m an ignoramus, and my father before me was an ignoramus. I haven’t got a clue what it’s all about. The only thing I know is this — that our fathers were in exile amongst the gypsies. But we’ve got a G-d, you see, who took us out of there and made us free. And now we’re all in exile again. But G-d will bring us out again, for sure!’ Then I saw that on the table there were matzah and wine and eggs, so I ate the matzah and the eggs, and I drank up the wine. And then I was so exhausted that I had to go back to sleep.”

The *tzaddik* told the Chassidim that they could now take the porter home. After they had left he said: “Heaven was exceedingly pleased with this man’s words, because he said them with all this heart, without any ulterior motives. His sincerity was unblemished — for he knows nothing more than what he said.”

We have in this story several themes common in Chassidic lore: the *tzaddik* in his mystical meditations, the ever-watchful and responsive Chassidim, the value of humility, the simple man whose sincerity pierces the heavens.



A nearly-identical story is found in *Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters* by Martin Buber. There are several differences in the wording and details of the story. Concerning Rabbi Levi Yitzchak himself, in Rabbi Zevin's version, he "notes the level of his seder with satisfaction," while in Buber's version, Levi Yitzchak sits in his room, "joyful and proud." A small difference, barely discernible, but Buber's effect is to distance us. When Chaim the Porter is brought to the *tzaddik*, Buber's Levi Yitzchak asks, "Rabbi Chaim, dear heart, what mystic intention was in your mind when you gathered what is leavened?" Astonished at the porter's simple answer, the *tzaddik* continues, "And what consecration did you think upon in the burning of it?"

Note the very different questions asked by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in *Sippurei Chassidim*. We are not led to the conclusion that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak — *zaddik* and all that, but so lost in his own holy world that he does not have the critical faculties that we have. Further reinforcing the point, Buber's story lacks the framing element through which Rabbi Levi Yitzchak comments upon the meaning of the event. Surely the *tzaddik* understands its significance far better than we do, and the story becomes a lesson that he teaches.

Even more significant is another detail of Buber's story: Chaim the Porter reveals that he has forgotten to burn his chametz altogether. It is all still lying on the shelf.

Possession of *chametz* during Passover is a serious transgression of Jewish Law. The fact that the porter drank up eight-days' worth of the forbidden vodka is testimony not only to his propensity to imbibe but also to the sheer weight of the Passover laws, felt even by the simple man. There is no *chametz* on the shelf in *Sippurei Chassidim*, nor would there be. It is a symbol of the erroneous notion that Chassidism, in stressing enthusiasm and sincerity in the service of G-d, thereby somehow negated the impor-

□

The modern reader is in danger of taking the caricature for the reality

tance of careful observance of the commandments.

The power of the mitzvah itself, the holy deed, runs as a theme throughout the entire body of Chassidic lore. In contrast to this is the idea that Jewish Law as it relates to physical performance represented a desiccated and dead religion of outward forms, while the Chassidic movement represented only joy, release from dry learning and dry performance. If Chassidism represented joy, it was joy in the mitzvah itself; if it was a release from dry learning it was a release allowing for a new depth of learning.

The Baal Shem Tov showed the value of the simple, unlearned Jew at a time when the disruptions of persecution and poverty had left the majority of the population bereft of a Torah education. But the Baal Shem Tov had an inner circle of disciples who numbered among them some of the greatest Torah scholars of the age. These disciples too had to learn the value of the simple, sincere, G-d-fearing person. The myth that the Baal Shem Tov himself was of such ilk is one that persists to our time. It is a myth which allows the twentieth century observer to admire the 'fervor' and holy innocence of the *tzaddikim* and Chassidim of a bygone age and at the same time remain curiously untouched and as distant as ever from Judaism.

The *tzaddikim* of the stories are meticulous and knowledgeable in the observance of the Code of Jewish Law —

were they otherwise they would be charlatans and fakes — as indeed Shabbetai Zvi, the false messiah, proved to be. In one story the Baal Shem Tov senses an invalid mezuzah on the doorpost as soon as he walks into a room. The mezuzah must be written according to physically precise specifications as well as with the proper concentration in order to fulfill its spiritual function.

The role of the mitzvah itself is never overshadowed, in authentic Chassidic stories, by mystical contemplation or miracles. Many stories attest to a caution, as in the case of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak in the seder story, about getting carried away with the notion of Kabbalistic meditations. Not that such meditations were not — are not — a reality. It is precisely because of their power that the stories present a kind of antidote.

In the story, "Not on Purpose," when the blowing of the shofar prevents the sinking of a ship in a storm, Reb Simchah Bunem of Pshischah warns his disciples not to think that the *tzaddik* in this story blew the shofar in order to supernaturally calm the storm. Rather, his desire was to perform the mitzvah of blowing the shofar once more before his death. "And so holy a man was he, that the mitzvah saved them all."

Martin Buber was the quintessential secular Jewish philosopher, his Jewishness filtered through a haze of universalism. Long ago I came upon another book of stories by Buber, entitled *The Way of Man*. As the title implies, the stories embodied spiritual concepts that would appeal to the person who was not familiar with and perhaps not even interested in Judaism. As I remember these stories, they were ostensibly about *tzaddikim* and Chassidim, but these in reality could as well have been Sufis or Buddhists — hence their appeal for anyone hoping to find in Chassidism a purely conceptual system that is easily reconciled with other religions. (Many are the conduits that

lead to Torah.) The concept here is that the “great religions of the world” contain a common core of truth and that Moses and Buddha, for example, would have more to say to one another than the rabbis would lead us to believe. But if there is any tradition having the power to negate this concept totally it is that of Chassidism itself, a movement whose spiritual giants have had the mystical appeal to strike a responsive chord in the spiritual seeker as well as the Torah knowledge that keeps the whole thing on track.

Buber was far enough from the shtetl not to have to rebel against its ethos, not far enough from it to look back with the kind of nostalgia that produces *Fiddler on the Roof*, but never close enough to love and appreciate its very particular, uniquely Jewish contribution. Writing before both the holocaust and today's Torah renaissance, he may well have thought that in recoding his Chassidic stories he was preserving the last glowing embers of a moribund flame. But the reader should be aware that they are written from a point of view far from the impulse that inspired the stories to begin with.

The *chametz* is always on the shelf.

Poisoned Spears

Very different from Buber's universalism is the body of Yiddish literature exemplified by I.L. Peretz and Sholom Aleichem. They depict the vanished world of the shtetl, its rhythms, its characters, its typical scenes, with a vividness that creates its own nostalgia. *Fiddler on the Roof*, based upon stories by Sholom Aleichem, becomes in our time, the epitome of Jewish culture in the popular mind. But although Tevye may sing about 'tradition,' what we have here is tradition

through the looking glass. The writing of Yiddish stories was in itself an act of moral and social rebellion against the traditional life of East European Jews of the shtetl. Many of the stories are parodies, bitterly ironic thrusts against traditional Jewish life.

The Yiddish writers scorned the religiosity that Martin Buber dusted off and put on the shelf of philosophy.



Although they never scorned their Jewishness, their criticism is directed against Jews whose Judaism, in their view, prevented them from grabbing hold of history and claiming their rightful place in it.

I.L. Peretz, having left the shtetl for the intellectual salons of Warsaw, both parodied and romanticized the world of the shtetl Jews. The Jews of the shtetl lived in a world whose precarious physical existence was, if we may believe the descriptions of it, merely a tattered cover. Spurned by the world, the Jews

in turn shut the world out and turned inward to a more luminous reality. This reality lay just beneath the surface, always beckoning, accessible, almost tangible, and glimpsed through the words, the prayers, the teachings, the stories of the Rebbe or his Chassidim. The Jews influenced by the *haskalah* (“enlightenment”) rebelled against that world, believing that beyond the tattered cloak lay something far better: modernism, the intellectual glories of Western culture, economic betterment.

If the Yiddish writers saw elements in Jewish life deserving of criticism, they at least knew what Jewish life was. Writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, neither they nor their audience was very far from the world they rejected. In their art, they drew of necessity from the very world they scorned with a love-hate relationship that we, a century later, can only comprehend from several removes. The modern reader is in danger of taking the caricature for the reality. We turn to Jewish literature in translation, or collections of Jewish folklore, unmindful of the fact that the very existence of this type of literature is an anomaly in the traditional life of the shtetl, an outgrowth of nineteenth century intellectual battles which we no longer need to fight. ✓

Peretz drew upon Chassidic material and consciously reworked it. In the story, “Even Higher,” he introduces a certain ‘Litvak’ (Lithuanians being of the orthodox element traditionally opposed to the Chassidim) to an often-told story about Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov. Called here the Rabbi of Nemirov, the Rebbe would go out before dawn and, disguised in peasant's clothing, chop wood for those too poor and helpless to obtain any for themselves. Peretz's Chassidim are convinced that since the rabbi disappears each morning he must go — where else? — up to heaven. The Litvak follows the Rebbe,

discovers the truth, and becomes a disciple. But when the Chassidim talk about how high the rabbi ascends in the spiritual worlds, the Litvak, presumably the alter ego of Peretz himself, whispers to himself, "Even higher..."

The story seems innocent enough. There is respect for the holy deed of kindness performed by the *tzaddik*. Yet why is it that only the Litvak and the reader can see and understand the *tzaddik's* true merit? Aren't the Chassidim capable of appreciating the simple humanity in the rabbi's act? Obviously, in Peretz's view, they are not.

In other stories by Peretz, heaven becomes an unfeeling bureaucracy in which angels and devils carry out their appointed tasks with petty bureaucratic dispatch, leaking pens and all. Even the most saintly individuals are subjected to a cold and mindless heavenly justice system. We are privileged to witness the very file cabinets of hell. Kafka's *Trial* is but a step away.

In "A Pinch of Snuff," the saintly rabbi of Chelm (the mythical town created to poke fun at Torah scholars) faces challenges hurled at him by Satan and his ambitious underlings. The rabbi meets each challenge with utter rectitude, but is tricked in the end into profaning the Sabbath, while "the youthful devil, who had set out without a feather in his cap or a tooth on his neck strand, waited for the ovation to set up." The rabbi's righteousness is undone through an unwitting error committed in the pursuit of a permitted pleasure—a pinch of snuff.

A strange preoccupation with hell, magic, devils and dybbuks characterizes Yiddish writing up to our time. Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Nobel laureate whose writing spans genres as well as worlds, shares in some of his works this attraction to the bizarre. Where but in Yiddish literature do we find so much Jewish weirdness? Certainly not in Judaism itself or in authentic Jewish mysticism.

In "The Magician" Peretz once again

takes a familiar theme and adds his own peculiar details. A number of Jewish stories involve a very poor person or couple who lack money for matzoh, wine and food for the approaching Passover festival. A stranger arrives in town and asks to join them for the seder. They tell him he is welcome to share whatever they have, but that indeed



An authentic
Jewish story
has roots
deep in the rich soil
of Torah

they have little for themselves. The stranger says he will bring provisions enough for all. At some point they notice that the stranger has vanished. The couple realize that it had been Elijah the Prophet, whose task it is to travel incognito and assist certain deserving Jews in need and to teach Torah to others.

Elijah appears in many guises, often as a poor wayfarer — sometimes with repulsive characteristics designed to test the lovingkindness of the Jew who is the object of his mission. (Such was the case with a certain Reb Eliezer, the reward for whose patience and good will toward an obnoxious guest was the birth of a son who grew up to a *tzaddik*, the Baal Shem Tov.)

Here is Elijah in "The Magician": "In front of the whole community he swallowed live coals as if they were noodles. He drew all kinds of ribbons from his mouth: red, green, any color you wanted—each as long as the Exile. From a bootleg, he pulled sixteen pair of turkeys, the size of bears and lively prancing around the stage... White loaves of Sabbath-bread flock like birds

into the air and begin to do a wedding-dance beneath the ceiling. A second whistle and, in the wink of an eye, they vanish. As if they never were. No white breads, no ribbons, no turkeys! Nothing!"¹

Yes, Elijah provides a seder for a poor couple. Allusions to the Exile, to Sabbath bread, to a wedding dance provide just that scintilla of *Yiddishkeit* that makes the story sound Jewish. But the magician is a product of Peretz's imagination rather than of a Jewish sensibility. As with Peretz's angels, devils and heavenly courts, the magician is a cartoon.

Peretz wrote a verse description of the Yiddish language which could as well describe his own stories about Jewish life:

...Words that stab like
poisoned spears,
And laughter that is
full of fears,
And there is a touch of gall,
Of bitterness about it all.²

An authentic Jewish story remains true to the moral-ethical universe which characterizes both the Chassidic and the non-Chassidic Jewish approach to life. An authentic Jewish story has roots deep in the rich soil of Torah. Its universe is at once more human and more spiritual than that of I.L. Peretz, more accessible and tangibly Jewish than that of Martin Buber. We may not always understand it, but we can trust it. It is, after all, the story-telling of the servants which becomes the Torah of the sons.

1 from *Selected Stories by I.L. Peretz*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, Schocken Books, NY 1974

2 Ibid.

Missed
the
point