

# Judaism in Extremis

## *The Messiah of Bratslav*

Hyam Maccoby

**H**ASIDISM, a movement of Jewish religious revival that swept Eastern Europe in the 18th century, and that had a profound effect on the entire religious culture of the Jews in the modern period, has had a curious intellectual history. When it first made its appearance it aroused the opposition of many established rabbinical figures, who vilified it for its tendencies toward undisciplined fervor and neglect of talmudic learning. In the 19th century it came under attack by rationalist historians and reformers for its dangerous and backward-looking reliance on mystical doctrine and its encouragement of folkish superstition.

In our own time, however, Hasidism seems to have become respectable and even modish. Not only have the practices and devotional rituals of the Hasidim attracted many young Jews, who see in them a kind of Jewish counterculture, but something that is called the hasidic outlook on life (as evidenced especially in stories of wonder-working *rebbe*s and their pious followers) has been celebrated as a joyous alternative to the aridity of the Jewish intellectual tradition. The recent appearance of a number of books about one of the most fascinating figures in the history of Hasidism, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, offers an opportunity to put this view to the test.

THE origins of Hasidism have been variously explained, and there is some truth in all the explanations, which add up to a picture of almost unbearable social, political, and religious tension. For about a hundred years, in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the Ukraine was a bone of contention between Poland and Russia. Popular Cossack leaders rebelling against Polish rule signaled each revolt by massacres of Jews. The disputed areas were partitioned time after time. The Jewish population, which had previously experienced a period of stability, became desperate from the danger and uncertainty.

---

HYAM MACCOBY teaches at the Leo Baeck College in London and is the author of *Revolution in Judea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance*, which will be brought out in this country by Taplinger in October. His article, "Gospel and Midrash," appeared in our April issue.

With the weakening of the Jewish system of communal rule after the Chmielnicky massacres (1648-49) and again after the Haidamack massacres (especially 1768), the despairing population turned to the *baalei-shem* (Masters of the Name) for guidance in place of the rabbis. These *baalei shem* were originally an itinerant class of faith healers and fortune tellers that existed before the rise of Hasidism as a folkish adjunct to rationalistic rabbinic leadership.

But this is only part of the story. There is the important background of the mid-17th-century debacle surrounding the false messianic figure of Sabbatai Zevi, which caused widespread demoralization. We have to take into account, also, the existence of figures similar to the hasidic masters in the ecstatic Christian evangelist cults that arose in the same period in the districts where Hasidism began, Podolia and Volhynia. The extent of the debt of Hasidism to these contemporary movements has only begun to be explored. And in addition, we have to consider the rise of ecstatic movements throughout the Western world in this period, for example, the Shakers of America, who prayed and danced with the same convulsive movements that characterized hasidic prayer. Was there some common factor that lay behind these various religious phenomena—perhaps a sense of insecurity traceable to the scientific and industrial revolutions?

Against the historical background, the personality of each of the extraordinary figures who rose to eminence as charismatic leaders is of the utmost psychological and sociological interest. What kind of person could ride the crest of chaos, living and leading not by a set of established values and rules, expertly interpreted, but by the light of inspiration and creativity? There is good reason to believe that the first generation of hasidic masters, at least, had genuine paranormal powers and experiences, for which they were able to find a vocabulary in the received terminology of the Kabbalah. But even more interesting are the second- and third-generation figures who no longer possessed the charismatic gifts in such abundance, but had to act somehow as if they did. Here we come across the problem of the institutionalization of a

charismatic group, parallel to the problem encountered in the early Christian ecstatic sects once the ecstasy had subsided. (Indeed, it could be argued that this is the central problem of Christianity itself.)

We are handicapped in studying these matters by the dearth of firsthand materials. The mass of hasidic writings are mostly in the form of impersonal teachings which convey only a theoretical understanding of events and personalities, and hagiographical writings by later disciples, full of legendary as well as authentic material. There is, however, one exception, and that is Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1811), a third-generation master in whom we can discern in detail all the struggles, self-doubts, and soaring expectations of a highly gifted successor-figure in a charismatic movement at a period of waning inspiration. For him, ample materials exist for a full psychological study. The materials consist of his frank communications to his chief disciple Nathan, who acted as his reliable Boswell; of his own theoretical writings, which can be read as psychological documents; and, above all, of his stories, in which he molded his deepest thoughts and doubts into artistic form. In a new work, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*,\* Arthur Green has mastered all these materials and produced from them a notable study, combining respect for Nahman as a thinker and theoretician with sympathy for him as a tortured but brave and sincere personality. Green gives due acknowledgment to previous scholarly works on Nahman (particularly that of Joseph Weiss), but essentially his solutions of the main biographical problems are his own, and are likely to stand the test of time.

Nahman, from the exceptional promise of his earliest years, was expected both by himself and by others to be a figure of the highest significance. This meant that he was expected not merely to be a brilliant scholar and a wise man, as in non-hasidic circles, but to be a seer and an ecstatic, with direct access to the higher spheres and the ability to guide, out of his esoteric knowledge, a growing community of devoted followers. This is what it meant to be "a successful *zaddik*, or "Righteous One," with his own following of Hasidim and his own special territory, marked by a place name—as in the Koznitzer *rebbe*, the Lubliner *rebbe*, and so on. (It was one of the differences between a non-hasidic rabbi and a hasidic one that the former waited to be called by a local community, while the latter created his own place in a hitherto unclaimed territory.)

One of the first indications that Nahman was not going to conform to type was his deliberate flouting of the unspoken territorial rule: he began his career as a *zaddik* by moving into the territory of Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Shpola, known as the Shpola *zeide*, or Grandfather. This led to some very undignified explosions of anger on the part

of the highly respected Shpola *zeide*, and also made Nahman, despite his impeccable family credentials, *persona non grata* with almost all the other *zaddikim*. But Nahman's move (as Green explains it) was not merely a breach of etiquette; it was an expression of his whole attitude toward the Hasidism of his day. He was utterly opposed to the comfortable popular sect into which Hasidism had developed, and was prepared to set the hasidic world into turmoil rather than respect the boundaries and spheres of influence that had made the career of the *zaddik* into a recognizable professional pattern. More than that: despite his lack of overt success as a *zaddik*, he soon reached the point of declaring himself to be the only authentic *zaddik* of his generation, or at least the one who overshadowed all other aspirants. And he even made claims for himself that brought upon him the accusation of neo-Sabbatianism. In fact, as Green conclusively shows, he should be regarded as another in a long line of Jewish messiah-figures.

NAHMAN'S soaring claims did not arise out of a confidence in his own spiritual powers. On the contrary, Nahman was haunted from childhood by a sense of his distance from God and his uneasy mastery of spiritual gifts. In consequence, he developed a religious philosophy in which distance from God became part of the human condition—a distance that was not transcended by the *zaddik* but rather was experienced by him more agonizingly than by anyone else. The most moving expression of this is in his parable of the Heart and the Well, found in his last story, the "Tale of the Seven Beggars": the Heart at one end of the world yearns for the Well that it can see at the other end, but as soon as it moves in the direction of the Well it loses sight of it and has to move back to regain the view by which it sustains its life.

In more theosophical terms, Nahman based his system of thought on the idea of the Void that came into existence when God contracted Himself in order to make room for the Creation (the doctrine of *tzimtzum*, or "contraction," found in the kabbalistic thought of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the "Ari"). It is this Void, or absence of God, that is encountered at every stage of the spiritual ascent. The absence of God is thus not an illusion, but a cosmic reality that is an indispensable part of the spiritual process. Green shows how this doctrine developed from Nahman's psychological experience of manic-depressive moods, which, in the manner of artistic genius, he projected onto the cosmos; or to put it more sympathetically, and probably more truly, he had the gift of extracting from his own inner experience and suffering something of universal import.

Actually, the psychological approach is not so

\* University of Alabama Press, 395 pp., \$27.00.

enlightening here as the sociological approach, on which Green does not lay quite so much stress. Nahman was fighting against the institutionalization of the charismatic movement to which he belonged. He experienced in himself the diminution of charismatic gifts inevitable at this stage, but refused the various solutions adopted by contemporary hasidic leaders: the paternalistic role typified by the Shpola *zeide*; the administrative role typified by Nahman's uncle, Baruch of Mezbizh (Medzhibozh); and the role of a theoretician, of which the best exemplar is perhaps Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the founder of Habad, or Lubavich, Hasidism. Somehow the mystical drive of the early hasidic leaders had to be kept up, and if Nahman did not feel in himself their manic ardor, this was because his own elected mission was to battle against the Void, which their effervescent cheerfulness had enabled them to ignore.

Indeed, he it was who had been elected to fight the true battle, for which the early leaders had only prepared the way. The doctrine of transmigration of souls (*gilgul*), which the Hasidim inherited from Lurianic Kabbalah, enabled Nahman to cast himself without megalomania in a mighty role. He could feel in himself the "roots" of past great souls (including Simeon bar Yohai, Isaac Luria, and the founder of Hasidism himself, the Baal Shem Tov) and also future great souls, especially the Messiah ben Joseph and the Messiah ben David—even though he was not quite sure whether these potentialities would flower in himself. At any rate, he felt he had to try. The impetus of the hasidic movement could not be allowed to peter out into genial shamanism, comforting to the common folk and lucrative for their (on the whole) decent witch doctors.

This is what led Nahman to embark on the messianic "option." The whole affair is shrouded in mystery, because his was not an open bid for messianic leadership of the Jewish people like that of Sabbatai Zevi, but a mystical *tikkun* ("rectification"), carried out after long preparation by Nahman and his chosen disciples, in an effort to conquer the forces of evil and so bring an end to exile. This type of messianic effort was not previously unknown in the hasidic movement. It was rumored, indeed, that the Baal Shem Tov himself had planned such a *tikkun* but had been warned by a heavenly voice that the time was not yet ripe. It was also known that such an attempt was fraught with great danger if it should fail. But unlike the Baal Shem, who had not succeeded in carrying out his intended voyage to the Holy Land—essential for anyone preparing the great *tikkun*—Nahman had accomplished this pilgrimage, if with great trials and tribulations, and so was further along the path.

We would know more about Nahman's messianic attempt if the secret book of the Bratslav

Hasidim (the *Megillat Setarim*) were available for study. But even without this, Green has been able to gather enough circumstantial clues to come to a convincing conclusion. The messianic year was to be 1806—a year which in Hebrew numerology is equivalent to Messiah ben Joseph, the role in which Nahman chiefly saw himself.

Nahman's great magical attempt to bring about the messianic era failed. Even worse, the year that was to see the advent of the messiah saw nothing but tragedy. Both his beloved wife and his talented son, in whom he placed great messianic hopes, died. After 1806, Nahman's messianic activity ceased. He blamed himself for his family tragedies. The cosmic danger inherent in messianic attempts had struck down his wife and son. Not long after, he himself became fatally ill, and in 1811 he died. He never ceased, however, to regard himself as the *zaddik ha-dor*, the major figure of his generation. Nor did he cease to regard himself as the bearer of the soul of Messiah ben Joseph, though his messianic hour would come in a later incarnation. His followers too preserved their faith in his eventual coming. They appointed no successor to him when he died. He was no ordinary *zaddik*, founding a dynasty, but a unique figure who would come again and fulfill his role of battling against the Void. To this day, the Bratslav Hasidim have no *rebbe*, and are therefore known as the "dead Hasidim."

GERSHOM SCHOLEM has argued that Hasidism, as a movement, turned away from active messianism because of the disillusionment of Sabbatianism and the frightening antinomian energies that movement released. Yet as the case of Nahman shows, the potentiality for messianism remained. And this was not a messianism of the talmudic kind, involving a rectification of earthly life alone, the ending of the era of the sword and the inauguration of the reign of God on earth, an era of peace and knowledge. Ever since the Kabbalah had extended the scope of the "rectification" to the universe as a whole, the messiah had become a cosmic figure, comparable in significance to the messiah of Christianity. And this expansion of the role of the messiah went together with a deepening dualism. The cosmic messiah was needed because there was something wrong not just with man but with the whole universe. The trouble began not with the sin of Adam, or even earlier with the rebellion of Satan, but earlier still, with the "breaking of the vessels" during the course of the Creation.

There was thus in Hasidism, out of its Lurianic and Sabbatian inheritance, a great consciousness of the reality of evil, which had to be exorcised by mystical or magical means. God Himself, to some extent, was helplessly in the grip of Evil, and needed the *zaddik* to break the spell. On this point, a well-known disagreement between Ger-

shom Scholem and Martin Buber about the temper of Hasidism is highly illuminating.\* Buber was convinced that Hasidism sees ultimate value in the world as it is, and that its endeavor is always to invest ordinary life with sanctity. Scholem, on the contrary, has argued that Hasidism is otherworldly in emphasis, and that its aim is to *rescue* every detail of ordinary life from its involvement in evil; ordinary life has value not because it is itself divine, but because it contains trapped within it "sparks" of the divine which require to be released. There is no question that Scholem is right. Buber's ideal of "normal mysticism" is much more to be found in talmudic Judaism than in Hasidism. The cheerfulness of the Talmud is without strain, while that of Hasidism is a brave reaction to a desperate world.

In Nahman's thought, these tendencies are brought to a high pitch of intensity. One often feels in reading his sayings and writings that he is more a Christian than a Jewish thinker. In Hasidism as a whole, the tendency to dualism is softened by the comfortable device of leaving the encounter with evil to the *zaddik*. There is a bargain, reminiscent of Roman Catholicism, between the *zaddik* and his flock, by which they can continue their ordinary lives in the assurance that the enemy is being taken care of. Nahman, however, was not interested in such bargains. He is unique among the *zaddikim* in his concern for the spiritual education of his followers, who were expected to pursue his own path. To this end, he developed the device of confession to him by his followers, from which the Bratslav Hasidim acquired the name of "*viduiniks*" (confessors). And he himself is a confessional writer and talker, laying bare his own spiritual and moral struggles with unexampled frankness, so that his followers cannot set a comforting gap between their own lives and his.

**A** N EXAMPLE of Nahman's entrenched dualism is his attitude to sex. Though he was naturally a sensual man, he made extraordinary efforts to rid himself of all sexual feeling. In the end, he declared that he had succeeded. He announced (as reported by Nathan), "Copulation is difficult for the true *zaddik*. Not only does he have no desire for it at all, but he experiences real suffering in the act, suffering such as the infant undergoes when he is circumcised." Characteristically, Nahman goes on to say that this conquering of sex can be achieved by "every man." There is here an extraordinary development from the sexual attitudes of the Talmud. The Zohar had raised the prestige of sex to an unprecedented level, by locating sexual activity in the Godhead itself; but this eventually had the effect of making religious sex such an awesome mystery that it became dissociated from actual sex. We see in the confessional writings of Joseph Caro (author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, but also a kabbal-

ist) an intermediate pre-hasidic stage in which sexual activity has become a mystical act, fraught with danger if wrongly conducted. In Nahman, the full stance of sexual asceticism has been reached, in which God's sexual activity is completely dissociated from human sexual feeling, which is evil (as in Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs). Yet even Nahman is prevented by the last residues of Jewish pro-sexual attitudes from becoming a celibate. Instead, he engages in sexual intercourse, but as a painful duty.†

In order to justify their own doctrines and practices, including in the area of sex, the Hasidim—who never admitted any discontinuity between themselves and Talmud—sometimes had to resort to ingenious interpretations of talmudic passages, wrenching them out of their plain meaning. Green does not always seem aware that this distortion of meaning is going on. For example, when Nahman represents the rabbis as saying that "one should engage in sex as though forced by a demon," he is relying on a hasidic interpretation of a passage about Rabbi Eliezer which, in the original context, refers rather to single-minded concentration on the sexual act. Again, when Nahman advises the study of anatomy as a way of making the female body seem repulsive, he is actually building on a midrashic legend about Adam that has no anti-sexual connotation. What Nahman made of the explicitly pro-sexual passages of the Talmud (for example, the description of the sexual zest of Rav, Berakhot 62a), it is hard to conjecture.

Another area in which Nahman departs from normative Judaism in the direction of Christianity is in his elevation of "faith" into a central virtue. As Green points out, there is a qualitative difference between Nahman's attitude and that of previous Jewish thinkers, such as Judah Halevi, who also stressed faith against reason. They meant by this only that belief in God should rest on histori-

\* See Gershom Scholem, "Martin Buber's Hasidism: A Critique," COMMENTARY, October 1961 and Martin Buber, "Interpreting Hasidism," COMMENTARY, September 1963.

† This dissociation is far from evident in Nahman's stories, which are full of romantic sexual themes, and may seem to be quite normal folktales from this point of view. The female figure in the stories, usually a princess, is the goal of the hero's yearning and the object of his quest. This princess always symbolizes the *Shekhinah* (divine presence), however, never an earthly ideal. Hasidism, in its beginnings, did allow women to acquire some power on the earthly level. There were even some female *zaddikim*, or at least charismatics, including Nahman's own mother. But this partial breakthrough of a feminine principle was soon arrested, as the outlines of the cruel goddess of mythology (Cybele, Kali) began to appear. (Green sees her reappearance in the casually ruthless princess of Nahman's story, "The King and the Emperor.") The emergence of this frightening aspect into the light of day in a movement of popular mysticism (in which the sexual union of the Heavenly Father and Mother become openly involved in every prayer in the liturgy) had the effect of eroding the anti-asceticism and life-affirming qualities of talmudic Judaism.

cal rather than ratiocinative or logical grounds, that it was in His historical dealings with His people that God was revealed rather than in "proofs" based on Aristotle. This was not a departure from reason, but rather a preference for empirical over a-priori reasoning. Nahman, on the other hand, is closer to Tertullian's demand for absolute faith: *credo quia impossibile*. Nahman distrusted all discursive or systematic thinking, even including that of the Kabbalah. He demanded the leap of faith, in the face of God's apparent absence, which indeed he made the very ground of faith. In this insistence on the "absurdity" of faith, he was a precursor of existentialism; but he was also very much in line with Christian thinkers, from Paul onward, who made the act of faith into a kind of mystical initiation or rebirth. Nahman even demanded this faith from his followers as an act of identification with himself as their *zaddik*, by which his own role became similar to that of Jesus in the Church. Thus, paradoxically, while he narrowed the gap between himself and his disciples by his demand that they follow his own path rather than simply relying on his intervention, he at the same time widened the gap by his tremendous claims for his cosmic role. This explains the great awe felt for him even by his most immediate disciples, despite his confidential relationship with them.

AT THE end of his life, Nahman became sure that his main target was modernity in the shape of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, and, characteristically, he moved to a place where the Haskalah was strong, Uman, in order to combat this new manifestation of the Void. But his typical ambivalence toward the Void made him seem at times sympathetic toward modernism; it is with good reason that Green compares him with William Blake and Franz Kafka. The comparison is particularly apt because of the artistic compulsion that led him to express himself in his most haunting writings, his *Tales*, which will undoubtedly become accepted as an important contribution to world literature.

A new translation of the thirteen canonical tales by Arnold J. Band is far truer to the originals than Martin Buber's literary translation into German, retaining the simplicity and artless garrulousness of Nahman's Yiddish style.\* Band's exegeses are most helpful, and, together with Green's biography, form an indispensable introduction to Nahman's lifework. (It should be remembered that there are many tales of Nahman outside this canonical collection, including the famous story of the mad prince who thought he was a turkey, retold by Elie Wiesel in his *Souls on Fire*.)

The stories in the present collection are not of equal value. Some of the earlier ones are hesitant and sometimes lapse into a crude kind of propaganda; here Nahman is feeling his way toward his

own unique form of expression. The debt to non-Jewish folk motifs is obvious, but the amalgam is new and strange. Nahman is raising the "sparks" of divinity that he has found in non-Jewish folk culture, like the Hasidim who Judaized Gentile folk tunes into a new and characteristic music. There is an enlargement and a freedom symbolized by the feeling for nature that pervades Nahman's stories and that entered Hasidism with the tales told about the Baal Shem himself. In the final tales, especially "The Master of Prayer" and "The Seven Beggars," Nahman has found himself. The history of the universe has become a romantic, sad, but exhilarating tale.

In addition to the collection of Arnold J. Band, we also have now a compilation by Adin Steinsaltz which contains six of the thirteen canonical tales.† The translation into English is by various hands and is attractively and authentically done. The chief point, however, is the commentary by Rabbi Steinsaltz, an Israeli talmudist of great popularity and influence. This is indeed the commentary of a teacher, eclectic and geared to the exposition of Hasidism as a present-day phenomenon. Often the exegesis is both ingenious and convincing, as in the story of "The Burgher and the Pauper," where an elaborate allegory of the Exodus from Egypt is revealed. Yet it can hardly be said that Steinsaltz conveys the special essence of Nahman, whose stories are made here to seem rather ordinary vehicles of moral and kabbalistic messages. The individual pathos of Nahman the man, and the tragic historical dilemma out of which Hasidism appeared, and which Nahman strove to keep before him, are soothed away into a pedagogic blandness. No hint appears of the special and rather shocking doctrines of Bratslav Hasidism: the messianic role of Nahman, the tragic gamble of his attempt to bring about the End, his theology of absence, or his vision of the world as a pit covered with a sky of dung.

THAT vision occurs in Nahman's last and possibly most famous story, "The Seven Beggars," and it provides as good a path as any into the meaning of his life and thought. The story describes a wedding feast. The bride and groom are both beggars. The scene is reminiscent of a painting by Breughel. All the beggars, determined to make the feast a success, have supplied the food by cadging leftovers. They have constructed a banquet hall by digging a huge pit and covering it with "beams and earth and rubbish" (the original Yiddish says not rubbish but excrement, *mist*). In these surroundings a joyous feast takes place for seven days. The chief guests

\* *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, Paulist Press, 340 pp., \$6.95.

† *Beggars and Prayers: Adin Steinsaltz Retells the Tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, Basic Books, 186 pp., \$8.95.

are seven beggars, all hideously handicapped, who entertain the others day by day with mystic discourses and stories, and magical wedding gifts.

The commentaries that have grown up around the story duly explain the symbolic significance of these curious doings. The seven beggars are seven great prophets of Israel. Each of their handicaps (as the story itself notes) is really a great quality of power. Thus the blind beggar is not really blind, but sees into mysteries far beyond this world. The stuttering beggar really has the gift of transcendent eloquence: he is none other than Moses. The seventh beggar, who has no feet, is the Messiah ben David, who will dance on the seventh day. But the story deliberately ends before his day arrives. The messianic culmination of the beggars' feast is left to the yearning imagination of Nahman's audience.

But why is the feast given such a sordid setting? Why are the seven great leaders so brutally caricatured? The commentators, of course, have much to say about this. Steinsaltz, in his pious way, says that beggars really means "seekers." Band, more scientific and academic, says that the "shabby pit" symbolizes "the world of illusion" which we take for reality. Such interpretations are in line with the official exegesis of Bratslav Hasidism, deriving from Rabbi Nahman's chief disciple, Nathan of Nemirov. It is very probable that Nahman himself had such allegorical meanings in mind.

Nevertheless, in reading such interpretations, one cannot help feeling them inadequate. They tend to dissolve the grotesque atmosphere of the story into a bland and bloodless allegory. There is a great deal more here than can be reached by a schematic interpretation. These stories, written (as Green explains) out of a deep psychological need, at a time of personal despair and grief and the loss of messianic hope, are the cry of a Jew of a particular epoch struggling under the weight of individual and communal catastrophe, and therefore tell us much about the stresses that underlie that equivocal movement, Hasidism itself.

The story of the seven beggars expresses a sense of humiliation and degradation. Such a story could never have arisen at a time when the morale and dignity of the Jewish people were high. It is not really "this world," or mankind as a whole, that is symbolized by the ragged concourse keeping up its spirits under a canopy of dung, but the Jewish people, reduced to the status of parasitic beggars, maimed and tawdry but sustained by the camaraderie of the gutter and by mad dreams of power. The desperate humor, the wild contrast of depths and heights, the lyrical yearning emerging from a setting of squalor, make this extraordinary story a statement of Judaism *in extremis*.

IT is out of this Judaism that Hasidism sprang, and in order to understand a "late" figure like Nahman, striving to regain the

original spirit of the movement, we need to appreciate just how deep that sense of degradation went, and just how great was the revolution that Hasidism proposed in Jewish religious life. An upheaval had taken place, in which the whole Jewish notion of leadership was subverted, and the reins of power (over earth, heaven, and hell) were handed over to extravagant charismatics, in whom an uncharitable observer might only have discerned fortune tellers and quacks. The age-old system of the rabbinate, according to which the layman retained a high status vis-à-vis the rabbi, whom he felt at liberty to criticize, gave way over large areas to a system in which the layman progressed to a childlike status of spiritual dependence on a figure who was almost worshipped as a god. In this movement, a section of the Jews reverted to shamanism, a system that they had not known since the time of the biblical prophets—and even *they* had never been given the communal powers arrogated to the hasidic *rebbe*s, including the power of hereditary rule, by which the *rebbe*s combined the roles of prophet and king in a way for which the nearest parallels may be found in savage tribal sects.

There has been an attempt recently to diminish the strangeness of the hasidic revolution by arguing that shamanism has indeed a history in Judaism, that the rabbis of the Talmud were themselves shamanistic figures. This is based on a complete misunderstanding of the facts. It is true that many miracle-stories are told about the talmudic rabbis, but their *teachings* are never validated by such stories. When Rabbi Eliezer, on a famous occasion, tried to win a point by performing miracles and calling on a voice from heaven, he was told in no uncertain terms that such methods were inadmissible in rabbinical argument. Another rabbi, Yohanan ben Dahabai, who tried to validate an illiberal view of sexual practice by saying that he got it from the ministering angels, received short shrift from the Sages, with whom ministering angels evidently cut no ice (Nedarim 20b). It is true that a heavenly voice once gave general support to the House of Hillel, but that did not absolve them from having to go through the process of voting whenever they found themselves in disagreement with the House of Shammai—and they did not always win.

Nor should the close attendance of talmudic disciples on their masters be confused with the mystical discipleship of Hasidim. A hasidic disciple once declared, "I did not go to the *rebbe* to learn Torah from him, but to see how he fastened his shoelaces." Talmudic disciples followed their masters into the bedroom and the lavatory—not, however, in order to absorb ineffabilities, but in order to find out how the law instructed them to behave.

The discontinuity between Hasidism and talmudic Judaism ought to be the starting point of

any study of a hasidic theme. My mild complaint about the three books here under discussion is that each in its different way underplays this discontinuity. Steinsaltz especially takes for granted the claim of Hasidism itself that its link with previous Judaism is unbroken. In interpreting Rabbi Nahman's tales, he quotes indiscriminately from the Talmud, from the Zohar, from Lurianic Kabbalah, and from hasidic literature, as if these all form a continuum. To be sure, the idea of an illusory continuum goes back to the Zohar itself, a 13th-century work that portrays a mishnaic rabbi, Simeon ben Yohai, as a kabbalistic seer, which he certainly was not.

But the Zohar, though it portrays Simeon ben Yohai in his esoteric aspect, does not deny his primary identity as a halakhic rabbi. He is a mystic to his chosen disciples, but not to the community at large. By contrast, when it is said of Hasidism that it was a movement that "brought Kabbalah to the masses," it is falsely suggested that what was involved was only the democratization of a privilege that (like the vote, say) had previously been restricted to the few. In fact, the idea that Kabbalah could become a basis for community living rather than an exercise of isolated spirits—an exercise quite apart from their lives as rational beings—was a fundamental change in the philosophy of Judaism. It meant a demotion of the status of ordinary living and it made hasidic Judaism, in essence, more like Buddhism or ascetic Christianity than like the Jewish norm. And it also meant a demotion of the status of the ordinary man, since mystical gifts (like musical genius) belong only to the few.

This, of course, is the opposite of what is usually claimed for Hasidism: the primacy of the intellect in normative Judaism is held to exclude the unlearned, while Hasidism admits them to the communion of the Hasidim centered on the *zaddik*. But which is easier, to become a rabbi, or to become a zaddik? The stages of the intellect are open to the understanding of all, but the *zaddik* is a phenomenon; so much so, that by a strange irony, the office of *zaddik*, unlike that of rabbi, becomes hereditary. For since the *zaddik* is a different kind of animal from the ordinary, his rule soon develops into that of a superhuman breed. Nothing could be further from the spirit of the Talmud, which states explicitly that Torah cannot be inherited (Nedarim 81a).

The acknowledgment of discontinuity between Hasidism and talmudic Judaism does not, of course, justify a hostile attitude toward Hasidism, such as was adopted in different ways by traditional leaders like the Vilna Gaon and by rationalistic historians and thinkers of the 19th century. Hasidism has to be viewed as bringing to the fore hidden resources of the Jewish psyche in a time of crisis. Yet the ideal of normal psychic health must be retained, if we are to overcome the crisis with-

out breakdown. Hasidism is not the regular pattern of Judaism. It may be that we are still in a crisis situation, which may account for the present popularity of Hasidism, but it is a pity that symptoms of crisis, such as superstitions and magical practices, should be paraded as essential Judaism, and even regarded with pride as counteracting the picture of Judaism as basically rational and therefore boring.

THE experience of the Kabbalah together with its final eruption in Hasidism has undoubtedly been an enriching one for the Jewish religious culture. In conditions of exile, Jewish rationalism was in danger of shrinking into a subtle but exclusive club; it gained from the strengthening of its ties with the cosmic center and the renewal of its universalistic stance, even at the risk of mania. This came about in two ways, or through two kinds of tension: the pressure of outside events, which became so horrendous that the only escape was into inner space; and the pressure caused by the narrowing of Jewish society itself, which made some kind of breakout necessary from an intellectual prison into the open air of passion and broad conceptions.

Yet it is noteworthy that the primacy of the emotions in Hasidism soon became itself a prison. The moral life was stifled, because every act became symbolic; nothing was ever done because of itself or for its own value, but only because of its mystical effect in the higher worlds. True prayer was also stifled, because there was no person-to-person contact with God, only a system of magic manipulations, or *kavvanot*, just as mechanical in their way as the prayers-by-rote that they were intended to supplant. True movement and change were stifled, for since every *mitzvah* and even every custom had been raised to mystical significance, there was no possibility of rational reform. Hasidism became so conservative that even the Polish garments of its founders became sacrosanct and unchangeable. An attempt to shake Judaism into life, an attempt symbolized by the leaping and shaking and dancing of the Hasidim, had as its final result a petrification of a kind that Judaism had never experienced before.

A movement that had aimed at freedom thus became paralyzed by guilt, for which an apt symbol is the asceticism of a figure like Nahman. As Freud might have explained it, the breaking of the hold of the rational self delivered the hasidic psyche into the grip of the superego, the irrational conscience whose prohibitions are much crueler than those of the rational conscience. The whole process, necessary as it may have been, demonstrated that it is after all the ego and reason that are the chief guardians of freedom and creativity.

It might be said that in this dialectical sense

the experience of Hasidism was instrumental in creating the modern psychoanalytic attempt to understand and monitor the struggle between reason and emotion. Freud, after all, was only one generation away from Hasidism. His father, Jakob Freud, was brought up in a profoundly hasidic environment, and though he broke away from it in early manhood, he must have transmitted many of its attitudes unconsciously to his son.

Freud's relationship to his disciples, unlike that found in talmudic circles, shows many similarities to the mutual spiritual searchings, combined with awed discipleship, existing in hasidic circles and particularly at Bratslav, where Nahman pioneered a system of confession having something in common with the methods of psychoanalysis.\* It was Jiri Langer, the friend of Kafka and a committed

Hasid, who first explored the connections between Freudian psychology and Jewish mysticism in his *Die Erotik der Kabbalah*. Yet Freud's researches also suggest a synthesis, foreshadowed in the rational optimism of the Talmud, and not to be found in Hasidism, by which the yearnings, compulsions, and obsessions of the unconscious mind can be reconciled with the human demand for control, awareness, and moral freedom. In the complex history of this difficult quest, the hasidic movement, and that tormented and gifted figure, Nahman of Bratslav, played a significant role.

---

\* David Aberbach, in "Freud's Jewish Problem" (COMMENTARY, June 1980), refers to Freud's debt to the role of "the Eastern European rabbi," but on the whole assigns greater weight to Freud's talmudic than to his hasidic background.