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THE HASIDIC STORY

Introduction

There are many kinds of Hasidic stories. There are the tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, which go on for pages and which are extremely complex in their story-within-a-story structure and in their ambiguous symbolism. There are miracle stories. There are short sayings and beautiful parables. There are even Hasidic reworkings of the Boccaccio stories. And then there are the short, incisive, instructive stories that have become so well-known through the efforts of religious teachers and preachers. This is not the place to examine systematically all the genres of the Hasidic story. Nor is it the place to consider the complex processes by which a Hasidic story is created, modified in oral transmission, and canonized. The problems of tradition-formation, literary form-analysis, and historical verification are not of concern to us here. We shall examine, however, several of the short instructive stories, and our question will be: What makes these stories special? "Hasidic?" For that purpose, several stories are presented with commentary, and several are presented only with guiding questions. The conclusion attempts an answer and, to test the hypothesis, presents guidelines on how to write a "Hasidic" story. If the reader develops the analytic skill, she/he will be able to write such a story.

Forgotten, Completely Forgotten

TEXT*

There was great excitement in Strelisk. Hasidim danced in the streets. Rabbi Mendel, the rebbe of Kossov, had arrived to spend a day with his

*From A. J. Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, pp. 77–79.

brother-in-law, Rabbi Uri the Seraph, the rebbe of Strelisk. It was well known that to these two *zaddikim*—saintly men—the gates of heaven were open. The rebbe of Kossov held the key to the celestial Treasury of Sustenance, and whoever received his blessing no longer had to worry about the necessities of life. The Seraph, on the other hand, held the key to the Treasury of Saintliness. As a result, the Hasidim or adherents of the rebbe of Kossov were all well-to-do, some of them even wealthy, while the Hasidim of the Seraph were very saintly, but extremely poor. But a happy folk they were—the Hasidim of the Seraph. They were thrilled to live in his presence and reveled in the joys and ecstasies of prayer and the service of God. Three times a day they would wage the great battle of prayer into which they would throw themselves with undaunted courage, as if they aimed to storm the hidden fortresses of heaven. And when the battle was over, they were exhausted and amazed at the wonder of having survived.

The rebbe of Kossov, the distinguished guest, was shocked at the sight of the extreme poverty in which the Hasidim of the Seraph lived. He had heard of their indigence, but what he saw—the emaciated bodies, the tattered clothes—surpassed his imagination. Angrily he turned to his brother-in-law: "Why do you permit this?" "Believe me, I am not to blame. They do not really feel any want," answered the latter in apology.

This answer did not satisfy the rebbe of Kossov. Late at night, after the great celebration for the honored guest was over and the songs and dances came to an end, he let it be known that all Hasidim of the Seraph should come to see him.

"What, for example, would be your most cherished desire?" he asked them. The Hasidim were embarrassed. Their most cherished desire, of course, was to attain perfect saintliness, to be able to say at least one prayer in the same spirit as their rebbe. But who would even dare to dream of such unattainable aims? So the rebbe of Kossov became specific: "What about sustenance?" This came as a surprise. Yes, they agreed, it would be a good thing not to be in want. They thought of their wives, of dowries for their grown-up daughters. "Listen," the rebbe of Kossov announced, "tomorrow during the morning service whatever you pray for will be fulfilled."

It was a night full of excitement. They spent restless hours repeating to themselves and fixing in their minds the desire for sustenance, lest they forget to pray for it. Here was a chance that might never occur again.

Early next morning the Seraph appeared in the synagogue, roaring like a lion, "Adon Olam—Eternal Lord," and the Hasidim joined in the vehement encounter. Their songs all but tore the world apart, and they almost lost their souls on the way to heaven, in complete oblivion of the theme they had rehearsed the previous night. . . .

After the service, gradually recovering from their exhaustion, they realized to their dismay: "Ah, ah! Forgotten, completely forgotten!"

COMMENT

This tale, related by the late A. J. Heschel in *The Earth Is the Lord's*, was told to him by one of his ancestors. It is an exceptionally beautiful story and deserves close examination.

What does it tell us about the Zaddikim, Rabbi Mendel of Kossov and Rabbi Uri, the Seraph, of Strelisk, and about Zaddikim in general? The story tells us, first, that there are many kinds of genuine spiritual leadership. There is Rabbi Mendel of Kossov, who sees the poverty of his people and is upset by it. How can a Jew worship God when his family is hungry and ill-clad? This rabbi, then, "uses his contacts" to help his followers: He prays for them. He calls God's blessings down upon them. He urges them to employ one another. He urges them to give charity, and so on. Rabbi Mendel of Kossov shoulders the burdens of the physical existence of his people. This is not easy. Rather, it is a very difficult thing to do—to accept responsibility for the well-being of other people. Rabbi Mendel is one type of Zaddik, one archetype of the true spiritual leader.

Then there is Rabbi Uri the Seraph. The seraphim are the fiery angels of heaven, and Rabbi Uri's spirituality was so intense that he was afire with it. This, too, is spiritual leadership: to have such an intense relationship with God that onlookers are swept up in the fervor; to have such a passion for God that bystanders and devotees are lifted out of themselves along with the leader. This passion for God is not an easy thing to achieve, for in some basic way, we are all afraid of the spiritual in us. We are not really afraid of God's punishment, because we know that He is merciful and we do not really believe that we are so bad. But to look Him straight in the Face, to stand clear-headed and open-hearted in His presence, is another matter. Somewhere at the periphery of our awareness is an inkling of what true saintliness, true holiness, true spirituality is like, but we are afraid of it. Nor is this state of saintliness easy to sustain, even if we achieve some small measure of it. One must ever again confront one's fears, one's weaknesses. One must ever again say, "My strength, my energy, my being belong to God. I can do *anything*, in *His* service." One must be prepared to roar like a lion the words "Adon Olam," and to truly assert, with the full weight of one's mind and being, "Lord of the Universe." Rabbi Uri the Seraph, the tale lets us know, had looked deeply—into himself. He had confronted his fears and conquered them. He could roar like a lion the words "Adon Olam." How weak and anemic

in comparison is contemporary man's assertion of that phrase! Rabbi Uri, too, is a type of Zaddik, an archetype of the true spiritual leader.

The tale tells us not only about Zaddikim, spiritual leaders, but also about Hasidim, followers of spiritual leaders. The followers of the Rabbi of Kossov are well off, and I should think that they are also pious and observant Jews. They probably study. They certainly give charity to support those who do study, as well as to other good causes. They are good Jews, even very good Jews. And then there are the followers of Rabbi Uri the Seraph. I would guess that they spend four to five hours a day "storming the hidden fortresses of heaven." They don't work a ten-, twelve-, or eighteen-hour day. Their families are ill-fed and ill-clad. Yet what is their most cherished desire? "To be able to say one prayer in the same spirit as their rebbe." To once have his trust in God, to once have his burning love for God; once—to stand only once—in the true presence of God with a mind uncluttered by the mundane, with a heart not weighed down by the tasks and responsibilities and fears of this world; to reach out and touch God, just once.

There is a similar story told of the Hasidim of the Seer of Lublin (*Souls on Fire,* p. 137):

One of them was asked: "Since you [disciples] were so many and so powerful, and had a Master of such outstanding talent, why could you not make the Messiah come?" And the disciple replied, unsmiling: "The question is a valid one, but you see, in Lublin we lived in such ecstasy, we hardly felt the hardship of the exile."

Where is reality? What is *truly* real? The hardship of the exile and the bringing of the Messiah, or the ecstasy of the soul which transcends even the exile? This-worldly concern combined with piety of the Rebbe of Kossov and his Hasidim, or the fiery passion for God Who is Himself all-consuming fire? What is one's most cherished desire? To sustain, to continue the physical existence of the people, without which there is no spirit, or to reach out for the Ultimate and pay the price? Is it the body or is it the soul—if one must choose? And beware of the answer which is the easier way out.

What You Are Doing, You Are Doing Well

TEXT*

In a dream, the Baal Shem glimpsed his future neighbor in paradise. Upon awakening, he decided to pay him a visit. He found a robust and earthy

*From E. Wiesel, *Souls on Fire,* pp. 27–28.

man. How well he disguises himself, thought the Baal Shem, and asked to be sheltered for a few days.

The Besht was convinced his host was leading a double life; that he was getting up at night to accomplish God knows what worthy deeds. Wrong: the man slept deeply until the next morning, when he rose early, hastily said his prayers and gulped down a copious breakfast. At lunch he ate even more, and three times as much at dinner. And so it went for several days.

Let us wait for Shabbat, thought the Baal Shem. Perhaps his saintliness coincides with that of the seventh day. Wrong again: his host ate and slept even more than during the week. Unable to contain himself any longer, the Baal Shem spoke to him: "When I came here, I had a question to ask you. I shall not ask it. But now I have another: why do you eat so much?"

"I'll tell you," answered the man. "It has to do with my father. Who was a good Jew, gentle and frail, aspiring only to please the Lord; nothing else interested him. Neither money nor honors, not even health. He lived only for and by the Torah. One day he was on his way to services when he was grabbed by bandits who tied him to a tree and ordered him to kiss a cross. He refused, of course. They beat him mercilessly; still he refused. They then poured kerosene over him and set him on fire. And because my father was so weak and thin, he burned only a moment; almost as soon as he was lit, he was burned out. And I, who saw him, who saw it all, swore that if ever I was put to the same test, I would not let them get away so easily. I would show them that a Jew does not go out like a miserable skinny candle. No. When I burn, I shall burn so long that they will burst with anger. That is why I eat so much; all my energy, all my passion is devoted to eating. Not that I am hungry, you understand . . ." "Yes, I understand," said the Baal Shem, smiling. "Go on, continue; you must. What you are doing, you are doing well."

COMMENT

This tale is related by Elie Wiesel in *Souls on Fire,* and it, too, is a beautiful tale deserving close attention.

What does the tale tell us about Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement? It tells us, actually, a great deal. First, that for him, unlike modern man, life was one continuum, and hence a dream is real and yields real knowledge. A dream is not a compartment of life devoid of significance except perhaps in a psychoanalyst's office. The Baal Shem Tov did not ask for the dream. It was sent. And it was accepted for that which it was—a sent message, concerning some true reality. We also learn about the Baal Shem Tov that he suffered from stereotypes, as do all men. In the story, he cannot believe that the man and his actions are one. He assumes that the man leads a double life,

learn computer data-processing in order to help organize the affairs of the Yeshiva and related community. This Hasid had always shown an interest in mathematics, so he was the logical one to send. He continued his regular studies at the Yeshiva in addition to his computer work.

All continued smoothly until, one day, his fellow Yeshiva-mates noticed some strange actions on the part of the Hasid. They noticed he was spending more and more time at the computer lab and less and less time at their daily Torah-study. He would wander through the halls murmuring strange things that the others did not understand—ISAM, VMOS, SNOBOL—almost as if he were speaking another language. Or for no apparent reason he would break out with, "Why the format must be wrong!" And continue with his calculations. In his room at night, he would pace back and forth trying to debug his programs. "But I'm so close," he often exclaimed, in apparent agony.

When asked by one of his friends who was concerned over his neglected study and wandering concentration, the Hasid hastened to reply that he wasn't neglecting his study, but rather, redirecting its form.

Word soon came to the Rebbe of the apparent transformation of the young Hasid. He called the Hasid into his study and told him: "Your friends say that you are engrossed in some sort of project, and the teachers complain that you have missed classes and do not seem to be preparing as thoroughly as you used to. Tell me, what is taking up so much of your attention? Are you overloaded with work from your computer class?"

"Oh no," the Hasid replied. "The projects in class are not overwhelming. Everything fits into place quite logically and I haven't had much trouble doing the work required for class."

"The truth is," the Hasid continued hesitantly, "I've been working on my own separate project. I want to use the computer as my link to God."

The Rebbe seemed slightly surprised at this statement but nodded with interest and asked the Hasid to explain how he was planning to make this link.

"Well," the Hasid began slowly, "the computer has such amazing capacities. It can store an immense amount of knowledge, and direct and redirect all this knowledge into different patterns, depending upon the program. With a single codeword to the computer, one can prompt a whole memory that can be translated into thousands of uses. Now, when I pray to God, He doesn't always seem to be listening, and I have come to the conclusion that something is wrong with what I am doing—not with my Kavvana itself, perhaps with the order of the Kavvanot. I think it might be a matter of the proper combination, or combinations. I am trying, therefore, to arrange a program that would put my requests and my praise in such a combination, or mixture of combinations, that God would not dare refuse my prayers."

After this explanation the Rebbe was silent for a moment. He sat back, stroked his beard, and then looked at the Hasid and explained gently:

"My son, that is not the task. Man's expression to God is not quantitative, nor is it a mere rearrangement of bits of information. You cannot relate to God in this manner. God cannot be approached through a computer but only through *lev ha-adam*, the heart of every man. The Way to God cannot be found so easily or systematically. It is, rather, through the whole-hearted effort of man's Kavvana that He can be reached."

QUESTIONS

What is the Rebbe's message? What would its implications be for such learned mystical traditions as the Zoharic-Lurianic system? What might the ritual implications be? If learnedness is not the center of Jewish spirituality, what, then, is the center? If "organizing" spirituality is not important, then what is the role of ritual? of mental intention? Do you know a parallel story?

The Rebbe and the Gambler

TEXT*

The story is told that one day, one of the Rebbe's most devout disciples came in appearing drunk, penniless, and ecstatic. The Rebbe asked, "Can you explain to me why you are standing in my presence in such a state?" The disciple answered, "Yes, Rebbe, I have just returned from a village far from this place, in a distant land, where I saw a strange light. And you must go to confirm that which I have spoken. The village is named Malkhut and it is not on any map that I have ever seen. The trip was long, arduous, and confusing for me, but the old man said that you would know how to get there if only I told you the name of the place. The man talked in circles and riddles which I could not understand most of the time. He even said that the trip there would be shorter for you somehow . . . and he would not tell me his name."

In the twinkling of an eye, the Rebbe found himself in the distant, mist-shrouded village of Malkhut. He seemed to be deliberately planted on the doorstep of a very ancient house. The Rebbe knocked on the door, and an old, congenial-looking man appeared, betraying a smile. "I have been expecting you, Rebbe!" The Rebbe then asked the old man his name, and the man replied jestfully, "In this place I have many names, but for you I have the name of a great gambling man—Jacob is my name. Come and spend Shabbat with me, for you are just in time, as a Rebbe should be!" So the Rebbe spent what seemed to be an uneventful, almost

*As told by W. Belcher.

overly peaceful Sabbath. As the time passed, the Rebbe grew puzzled as to how he had gotten to the village in the first place. He was generally unimpressed with that which he saw, as the old man never spoke to him except during the prayers. The Rebbe was planning an inconspicuous exit at the end of the Sabbath, and as he was about to quietly leave, the old man Jacob suddenly roared, "Tonight you will find out why you came here! We are going to a very special place in the village!"

That night the old man Jacob walked to the synagogue. The Rebbe remained expressionless and unmoved until they walked through the door of the House of Study. There lay before them a great casino packed with all the men of the village. There was only one game being played, as the Rebbe would soon find out. The old man Jacob gathered all of the men together and began to shuffle and to deal out what appeared to be a most unusual deck of cards. The men played for half the night as the Rebbe sternly watched, many of them gambling away all of their money and possessions. They also drank, and their increasingly drunken behavior also offended him.

Suddenly, an almost overwhelming idea illuminated the Rebbe's consciousness. "At last I know what the old man meant. The reason that I have been sent here is to rid these men of this wicked, drunken gambling. I will arrive at the root of this problem by watching them play several hands. I will then see what it is that obsesses them about this game and will show them that the power behind the cards is no match for the power of the Creator Who made all things!" "Perhaps these cards are enchanted," he marveled, looking at the intensity of each player in the seemingly spellbound assembly. There was not a soul in the House of Study who was not totally absorbed in the game. Every drunken player's entranced gaze was mindlessly riveted to the cards which he held.

Resolute in the great task which impatiently awaited him, the Rebbe, with great reluctance, wistfully cast his eyes upon the wretched cards. At that very instant, with lightning-quick suddeness, the old man Jacob, the dealer, sprang from his seat. "Aha, Rebbe!" he said glowingly. "Only just now do I perceive that you finally manifest the desire to learn this highly esoteric game which is so drunken with meaning! As a Rebbe, you are already painfully aware that 'Desire is the beginning of Illumination.' You desire, so I shall illuminate!!!" he roared.

"This game of poker represents the life of the Jews before God. God is the dealer Who, before Creation, had all that He could possibly want. But God decided that there should be more, so He gambled and He created man. To each man, He deals out a hand. One man may be truly fortunate and may receive a glorious five-card royal flush. He is like a king, an aristocrat, or a learned scholar or rabbi who holds a high station in life due to the extraordinary gift that God has dealt out to him. Another man may

be blessed with a full house—and children are such a blessing from God! Another may receive a five-card regular flush, which means that while he is not as legendary or famous as those men of 'royalty,' he does have some gift which makes him a sought-after person in his lower station of life. Another man may receive a five-card straight, which is a collection of many varied good gifts that make him a lesser, but still respected, person. He is a 'Jack of all trades, but a master of none.'

"But Rebbe," old Jacob lamented, "as you know, not all men are fortunate enough to get these excellent hands. This is a part of the gamble of Creation. Not all men are equally blessed. Thus, some receive three or four of a kind—a single gift that lacks the sought-after divine spark that would light the torch of its full creative potential, giving it completeness in activity. Yet others receive a 'bum hand'—a mixture which is of no consequence. This man may be best off if he chooses to discard what little he has so that he may pick up new 'sparks' from the left-over cards in the deck that may give his menial, rugged existence a new start.

"But every man, Rebbe, must play the game. Every man," explained the old man Jacob with great pathos in his eyes, "must receive, must evaluate, and must commit his heart, his soul, and his might (that is, his wealth) to the great gamble of Creation. Every man must pay the dealer His due. So Rebbe!" roared old Jacob, "why do you not join the rest of my people and gamble . . . or did you not know? You have been playing in this particular poker game all of your life since the day you were born!"

The Rebbe, almost overwhelmed with ecstasy, blurted out his response, "Old Jacob, what an illumination has come to me this night! What? . . . I see that my cards are already arranged in my hand. . . . This game must not be delayed any longer . . . I must pay the dealer immediately!"

The next morning, the Rebbe was bewildered to find himself in the midst of his own synagogue, fervently lost in the depths of a prayer that he could not recall afterwards. His appearance was that of a man who was drunk, penniless, and ecstatic . . .

QUESTIONS

What is the significance of the name of the village? Why is the "unseen dealer" a good image for God, even though it borders on the disrespectful? Is poker a better game to illustrate the point than, say, gin-rummy? Why?