

# THE WAY OF MAN according to the teachings of Hasidism

**Martin Buber**

**About the Author:** *Martin Buber was born in Vienna in 1878, studied philosophy and the history of art at the University of Vienna and of Berlin. From 1923 to 1933 Buber taught Jewish philosophy of religion and later the history of religions at the University of Frankfurt. In 1938 Buber left Germany to make his home in Palestine, and from that year through 1951 he served as professor of social philosophy at The Hebrew University, Jerusalem. In 1951 he was awarded the Goethe Prize of the University of Hamburg and in 1953 the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade.*

*Martin Buber is best known for his recreation of Hasidism, (in Hebrew *hasidut*, i.e., originally, "allegiance" and then, "piety") the popular mystical movement that swept through the communities of East European Jewry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a young man, Buber went through a period of uncreative intellectuality and spiritual confusion until he heard a saying by the founder of Hasidism. "The words flashed toward me"*

## Excerpt I Heart-Searching

Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the rabbi of northern White Russia (died 1813) was put in jail in Petersburg, because the *mitnagdim* (*adversaries of hasidism*) had denounced his principles and his way of living to the government. He was awaiting trial when the chief of the gendarmes entered his cell. The majestic and quiet face of the rabbi, who was so deep in meditation that he did not at first notice his visitor, suggested to the chief, a thoughtful person, what manner of man he had before him. He began to converse with his prisoner and brought up a number of questions which had occurred to him in reading the Scriptures. Finally he asked: "How are we to understand that God, the all-knowing said to Adam: 'Where art thou?'"

"Do you believe," answered the rabbi, "that the Scriptures are eternal and that every era, every generation and every man is included in them?" "I believe this," said the other.

"Well then," said the *zaddik* (*so the leaders of the Hasidic communities are called*), "in every era, God calls to every man: 'Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?' God says something like this: 'You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?'" When the chief of the gendarmes heard his age mentioned, he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the rabbi's shoulder, and cried: "Bravo!" But his heart trembled.

## Excerpt II

The Baal-Shem (Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, Jewish mystic and healer from Poland, and who is regarded as the founder of Hasidic Judaism.) teaches that no encounter with a

being or a thing in the course of our life lacks a hidden significance. The people we live with or meet with, the animals that help us with our farm work, the soil, we till, the materials we shape, the tools we use, they all contain a mysterious spiritual substance which depends on us for helping it toward its pure form, its perfection. If we neglect this spiritual substance sent across our path, if we think only in terms of momentary purposes, without developing a genuine relationship to the beings and things in whose life we ought to take part, as they in ours, then we shall ourselves be debarred from true, fulfilled existence. It is my conviction that this doctrine is essentially true. The highest culture of the soul remains basically arid and barren unless, day by day, waters of life pour forth into the soul from those little encounters to which we give their due; the most formidable power is intrinsically powerless unless it maintains a secret covenant with these contacts, both humble and helpful, with strange, and yet near, being.