

**NOT CONCERNED WITH THE MYSTERIES OF HEAVEN
BUT
WITH YOUR LIFE AND MINE**

A Paper
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One of the most vital aspects of the hasidic movement is that the hasidim tell one another stories about their leaders, their “zaddikim.” Great things had happened, the hasidim had been present, they had seen them, and so they felt called upon to relate and bear witness to them. The words used to describe these experiences were more than mere words; they transmitted what had happened to coming generations, and with such actuality that the words in themselves became events. And since they serve to perpetuate holy events, they bear the consecration of holy deeds (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. v).

A few years ago, Prairie Group studied the topic of *Midrash*. I had the privilege of delivering a paper to open our discussions. My intention was to define the biblical tradition as a continuously unfolding interpretative process and to link the midrashic methods to that tradition. In that paper, I stressed the importance – even the pre-eminence – of the word over the graphic or sculptured image as an expression of religious values. All words in both the biblical and the midrashic traditions – save God expressed as the Tetragrammaton – were available for use to tell stories, elicit meaning and indicate a path of righteous living and religiosity. Hasidic story-telling is a continuation of the scriptural and midrashic tradition – not in content, but in intent – of bringing the words and deeds of the past to life in the present for pondering, for teaching, for healing, as The Eternal Voice:

The Rabbi of Ger said;
Concerning the voice over Sinai, the Scriptures say that “it went on no more” [(Dt 5:22)], and the Targumim take this to mean that it went on uninterruptedly. And the voice does indeed speak today as it did long ago. But now as then it requires preparation to hear it. As it is written: “Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice” [(Ex 19:5)]. Whenever we hear it, that “Now” has arrived (Buber, *Tales . . . Later Masters*, pg. 309).

The voice is the medium of stories and stories are the foundation of religious traditions. They are real in the imagination, even though they may not be real in history. Frequently, the stories are written decades after the founding event. Often, the stories are told before they are written down. The stories of Israel ben Eliezer (c. 1700-1760) published in

1814 as *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* followed the biographical events and teachings by fifty-five years. Simon Dubnow remarks on this event as not being too unlike the writing of the Gospels, saying,

. . . the first gospels of Jesus Christ appeared two generations after his death. The process of gestation for both mythic biographies was the same, despite the seventeen hundred years that separate them (pp. 25-26).

As the years spread between the respective deaths and the subsequent stories, the telling of the tales began to expand into legendary dimensions, away from the initial historical realities of the events and personalities. As each story was told and re-told, “it was transmitted from one teller to the next among the group of true believers, [becoming] embellished and exaggerated” (Dubnow, pg. 26). The embellishments are certainly plausible, given the personalities of the individual storytellers. A part of each one undoubtedly introduced a unique and specific element to the original story. As to exaggeration, I’m not convinced the growth of the stories was that seemingly suspect. It seems to me that for both the Gospels and the Hasidic stories, what can be charged as “exaggeration” was actually a re-casting of the tale in order to address the immediate concerns facing the true believers. The oral tales that did not make it into each respective canon became non-essential for the well being of the true believers. The stories that were retained were the ones that truly spoke to them.

Diarmuid O’Murchu suggests these types of stories have an archetypal and primordial significance. His specific reference is to the Gospels, but they apply to the Hasidic stories as well;

They are not just ordinary stories; in fact, there is no such thing as an “ordinary” story. Their original context and impact is one of a newly emerging culture engaging with an established, orthodox one and confronting it . . . (pg. 115).

Historically, this is true of the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe. It is also true that the stories with which we are dealing are not at all “ordinary.” Reading and studying for this paper has been an extraordinary adventure for me. This adventure has renewed my visits with the words of many Jewish theologians and historians. Delving into “words” brings to mind the caution of not forgetting the original meaning of *Word*: the Aramaic for “word,” *dabhar* means “creative energy.” May our venture be creative and energetic.

I welcome the opportunity to serve the Prairie Group with this paper. The task set before me by the Planning Committee is three-fold:

- What is the appeal of Hasidic stories?
- What is the content of Hasidic stories?
- What is the character of Hasidic stories?

I shall approach the task by reversing the order. First, the character.

TAKING GOD'S WORD INTO THE HEART:

In the first place, to state the obvious, the character of Hasidic stories varies with the subject matter. Second, the character depends upon one's willingness to accept the voice of Martin Buber (1878-1965) as our contemporary authority. And third, the character intrinsically depends upon the preceding events in European and Eastern Mediterranean Jewish history. In this third case, I am speaking of the rise of the false messiah Sabbatai Sevi (1626-1676) in 1665 and his sudden and devastating apostasy in the following year. The other-worldly nature of Sabbatai Sevi's messianic fervor coupled the yearning for political freedom of Israel with the Kabbalist redemption of *tikkun*, of "mending," by the mystical re-gathering of the scattered divine sparks to God and the bringing of the world and humanity to wholeness. "When God is reunited with [God's] indwelling Presence, [the] *Shekhinah*, the whole of creation will be reunited into a unity of a life lived in the one Presence" (Vermes, pg. 13). This Kabbalist messianic impulse of restoring Israel from exile included the re-establishment of each person's wholeness by redemption from sin and separation from God through the messiah. However, Sabbatai Sevi's betrayal by converting to Islam destroyed the holistic vision of the messiah for the people. Because of this, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) notes the original Kabbalist seeking of the spiritual and the material as a unity dissolved. He says;

The drama of redemption was no longer acted out on one stage only or, to put it differently, the two stages were no longer congruent. As the chasm between the two spheres widened, believers had to opt for the one or the other. The choice was ineluctable . . . (*Sabbatai*, pg. 793).

The standard reaction among believers in Europe and the Middle East was severe disappointment. The "messiah's apostasy plainly and conclusively proved that they had all been mistaken" (Scholem, *Sabbatai*, pg. 695). However, in spite of the disappointment, long-standing latent desires for a reality based upon a spiritual world rather than the material world was paradoxically reinforced. Various rationalizations undertook to explain the phenomenon. In this way, the Sabbatian movement did not give up. Failure was transformed into triumph. Sabbatai Sevi's actions were rationalized into "the paradoxical assumption that the messiah's apostasy was a mystery and – appearances notwithstanding – an essentially positive event" (Scholem, *Sabbatai*, pg. 793). Even the Baal Shem Tov is reported to have said "that he [Sabbatai Sevi] had a spark of holiness, but Samael [the Prince of Evil] caught him in his net" (quoted in Scholem, *Sabbatai*, fn 13, pg. 695; also Ben-Amos, pp. 86-87; Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 78 & *Origin*, pg. 39). The dualism promoted by the Sabbatians allowed for the complete depreciation of the visible and outer reality of the world. The result was a separation of soul and body. To a great extent, the characteristic story of the *hasidim* intends to bring together the soul and body, to reunite the spiritual and the material, to break through the dichotomy suffered by the tragedy of the Sabbatian event.

In this regard, the Hasidic stories deal with the very real connections of the soul, the spirit, with the material world. Through this connection, the intention is to create a

“perfect” human, to use Buber’s term. But, Pamela Vermes cautions that perfect was not to be without a fault;

When he wrote that he had “perceived the idea of the perfect man,” he did not intend to give the impression that he had found in Hasidism and its holy men sinless paragons, perfectly humble, perfectly charitable, perfectly good. He meant that he had found that by living in a certain way, the Hasidic teachers had managed to achieve and propagate an integrity which allowed a person to become all of one piece, to become perfectly human (pg. 10).

Being “perfectly human” is a paramount desire by the *hasidim* – “the devout,” or “those who keep the faith with the covenant” (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 2) – and the *zaddikim* – “the righteous,” or “those who stood the test of time,” or “the proven” (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 1). Instead of a trust in a single messiah, the focus upon each person means the full participation of every person willing to seek out a relationship with God and all of creation. Yet, the hope of a messiah was not weakened. The hope was transformed from an event at the end of time to all events in time. As Buber points out, the Hasidic movement “kindled both its simple and intellectual followers to joy in the world as it is, in life as it is, in every hour of life in this world, as that hour is . . . (Tales . . . Early Masters, pg. 3). Redemption is not eschatological, but always present and incumbent upon each person to cause it to be present. And yet, there is more. Due to the disillusion of putting one’s faith and redemption in a single individual, a renewed emphasis upon community is promoted by the *zaddikim*. The hope for the messiah is posited within the community of believers, a “sturdy living in tune with all the things of this earth, and a give-and-take community with one’s fellowmen” (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 20).

The essential characteristic of Hasidic stories is one of relationship. This is the primary and fundamental basis of Hasidism. Through the teachings of the *zaddikim*, the

. . . sparks of God are inherent in all things and creatures, in all concepts and urges, sparks which desire us to redeem them and, linked with this teaching, the affirmation of the soul-body entity of man, provided he is able to turn all his stirrings toward God (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 29).

The “stirrings” are toward God, and not a messiah nor the *zaddikim* – at least initially. In the earliest moments of the movement, the *hasid* looked upon the *zaddik* as a teacher, as a fellow human being. The bodily nearness to the *zaddik* nurtured the senses unconsciously. In the words of Buber;

The fact that the hasid looks at the zaddik perfects his sense of sight, his listening to him, his sense of hearing. Not the teachings of the zaddik but his existence constitute his effectiveness; and not so much the circumstances that he is present on extraordinary occasions as that he is there in the ordinary course of days, unemphatic, undeliberate, unconscious; not that he is there as an intellectual leader but as the complete human being with his whole worldly life in which the com-

pleteness of the human being is tested. As a zaddik once said: “I learned the Torah from the limbs of my teacher” (*Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 6).

The character of the stories show how the *zaddik* expresses his teachings. The expression is either deliberate or accidental. The expressions are through action with others. These actions are symbolic, supplemented with utterances which help to interpret the actions (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. ix). So, the characteristic story is told in the context of a living community, grounded in the relationship between the *zaddik* and the *hasidim*. As Robert Wood expressed it;

Cultural rootedness in a people built the foundations for Hasidic mysticism; the culmination occurred in the unfolding of the soul in ecstasy (as explicitly distinguished from the emptying of the soul which appeared in the writings of other mystics); and the fruit followed as a kind of by-product, informing the present life of the community the way the soul informs the body (pg. 10).

This “cultural rootedness” in the community rather than in a messiah became the hallmark of Hasidism, and a characteristic of their stories.

Gershom Scholem is specific about the radical nature of Hasidic mysticism. He says (where *devekut* means in the mystical sense “a close and most intimate communion with God”);

The novel element is the radical character given to *devekut* by this change. Hasidic *devekut* is no longer an extreme ideal [as with the *Kabbalah* and Sabbatians], to be realized by some rare and sublime spirits at the end of the path. It is no longer the last rung in the ladder of ascent, as in Kabbalism, but the first. Everything begins with man’s decision to cleave to God. *Devekut* is a starting point and not the end. Everyone is able to realize it instantaneously. All he has to do is to take his monotheistic faith seriously. It is, therefore, small wonder that the Baal Shem identifies *emunah* (faith) and *devekut* (*Messianic*, pp. 208-209).

Giving greater dignity to the simple folk through action and story removes the spiritual connection with God as the realm only for the elite. “Now . . . *devekut* was no longer considered a final stage for the few, but a demand on anybody who hearkened to the voice” (*Messianic*, pg. 215). The character of the stories brings this point home. There is “the possibility of a social meaning of communion with God.” While one is doing business as a shopkeeper, innkeeper, artisan or farmer, “it is possible to continue the contemplative attitude by binding oneself to the spiritual core of the matter” (Scholem, *Messianic*, pg. 216). As Buber put it, in discarding the unfruitful “exaltation of pseudo-messianic movements” concerned with the end of time, Hasidism is “opposed to this salvational confusion [with] a hallowing of the everyday in which the demonic is overcome through being transformed” (*Hasidism*, pg. 27). The intention is to eliminate the elitism that led so many Jews down the dead-end of messianism. Instead of the character of the stories relying upon the coming of the messiah, the need is to by-pass those yearnings and to live the day to the fullest. Instead of an ideological base, the stories illustrate an in-

stantaneous view of life: not for profit nor fame, but for what is called “Torah for its own sake.” In the words of Abraham Heschel (1907-1972), the learning of the Hasidim

. . . was essentially nonutilitarian, almost free of direct pragmatic designs, an aesthetic experience He who studied for the purpose of receiving a rabbinical diploma was the object of ridicule. In the eyes of these people, knowledge was not a means for achieving power, but a way of clinging to the source of all reality. In the eyes of Hasidim, study for the sake of acquiring scholarship was considered a desecration (pg. 59).

Aside from an explicit anti-intellectualism as the character of some of the stories, the desire is to share in the process of reaching for, and serving, God “even through idle talk or story telling!” (Scholem, *Messianic*, pg. 220). “All the stories and traditions pertaining to R. Israel Baalshem Tov bear witness to this” (Weiss, pg. 58).

The second feature of the character of the stories depends upon our bias or desire to hold Martin Buber’s interpretation as the “correct” one. Through a lifetime of dedicated study, translation and publication, Buber became closely identified with the Hasidic phenomenon. Yet, his work did not go unchallenged. Pamela Vermes illustrates this with the comment, “It should be made clear that certain scholarly objections have been raised against Buber’s formulation of the [Hasidic] movement” (pg. 10). These criticisms assert his view is unhistorical and romantic. Chaim Potok, in his forward to the combined two volumes of Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim*, indicates some of the criticism. Potok notes that he turns “a blind eye to its charlatanism, obscurantism, internecine quarrels, its heavy freight of folk superstition and pietistic excesses, its zaddik worship, its vulgarized and attenuated reading of Lurianic Kabbalah” (pg. xii). Perhaps no dispute of Buber’s approach is stronger than the arguments offered by Gershom Scholem in 1921 and thereafter. Scholem credits Buber with much. After Buber’s death, he wrote;

Buber was a great listener. Many voices pressed toward him, among them ones which had become entirely incomprehensible to the generations before him, voices whose call moved him deeply What moved him in the Hasidic world for many long years was its mysticism Buber was the first Jewish thinker . . . who saw in mysticism a basic trait and continuing strain in Judaism (quoted in Friedman, pg. 146).

Yet, as Maurice Friedman points out, in expressing his gratification after Buber’s publication of the Hasidic tales, Scholem “questioned whether Buber’s emphasis upon deschematizing the mystery was not a one-sided presentation of Hasidic teaching,” ignoring the strong dependence upon *Kabbalah* (pg. 121). Buber himself acknowledges the limits he placed upon his work;

As far as the tradition of Judaism is concerned: a few of its great expressions, beginning with the biblical and ending with the Hasidic, together constitute the strongest witness for the primacy of the dialogical that is known to me *I have not been able to accept either the Bible or Hasidism as a whole; in one and*

in the other I had to and I have to distinguish between *that which had become evident to me out of my experience as truth* and that which had not become evident to me in this manner (quoted in Kohanski, pp. 134-135; emphasis added).

He was interested in making Hasidic life visible, as simultaneously a reality and a teaching. In order to do this, in his view certain aspects of the Hasidic tradition needed to be pushed into the background. After his initial translations of the Hasidic stories at the beginning of the 20th-century, he changed his point of view. His later interpretations of the 1920s sought out the “real world” aspects of the teachings, diminishing the secretive mystical and magical elements. In his words, “in the measure that the teaching became the commentary of this life, it had to adapt itself . . . [to avoid being] understood as removing the worldly character of things or spiritualizing the world” (*Hasidism*, pg. 34). This selectivity was an issue Scholem could not relinquish over the decades.

In Scholem’s book, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, he devotes an entire chapter to criticizing Buber’s Hasidic views (“Martin Buber’s Interpretation of Hasidism,” pp. 228-250). He acknowledges Buber’s contribution;

When an author of such stature and such subtlety set down with untiring seriousness what to him seemed the very soul of Hasidism, it was bound to make a deep impression on our age. In one sense or another we are all his disciples. In fact most of us, when we speak about Hasidism, probably think primarily in terms of the concepts that have become familiar through Buber’s philosophical interpretation (pp. 229-230).

The “what to him *seemed* the very soul of Hasidism” as a “philosophical *interpretation*” was the very kernel of the issue for Scholem. In acknowledging the power of Buber’s passion to persuade most to see Hasidism as he saw it, Scholem was struggling in an uphill battle to call us back to those aspects of the movement which Buber chose to ignore. I say “uphill” for two reasons. First, because the medieval superstitions that abound in the original tales have little to do with most contemporary lives and are easily dismissed. Second, because of Buber’s wide appeal beyond the confines of Jewish interests and concerns, a position not shared by Scholem.

The difference between the two is one of perspective and intention. Buber sees the stories as speaking to the current era. He dismisses the magical dimensions of the stories in favor of the breaking in of the lived hour. He therefore edits, or rather, interprets, each story. “Thus,” he says,

. . . from the numerous legends transmitted about almost every zaddik, I had to choose those which gave the best account of the character and the way of a certain zaddik, and then arrange them to give the pattern of his life (*Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. x).

His choices and patterning avoids the crudeness that persists in the stories. He finds “the inner tempo of the hasidim . . . too impassioned, too violent . . .” to suit his view of their

contribution. He maintains they “never shaped their legend into a precious vessel; . . . it remained unformed.” He asserts, with this comment;

But due to the holy element with which it is informed, the life of the zaddikim and the hasidism’s rapturous joy therein, it is precious metal, though all too often not pure, but weighted with dross (*Tales . . . Early Masters*, pp. vi-vii).

It is the “holy element” that informed Buber’s search.

Scholem sees these same stories in a different context. Rather than philosophical or theological, his interest is historical. The depth and breadth of his remarkable, nearly single-handed, scholarly understanding of Jewish mysticism, began with Ezekiel and Daniel. The subsequent messianic urges flowing from that mysticism over the centuries, brought him to the conclusion that the Hasidic movement is but a phase within a larger context of Jewish life and mystery. His historical sensibilities wants to document Hasidism as a part of a continuum, particularly that of the *Kabbalah*. His charge against Buber is the disconnection of the movement from that continuum. Because of this scholarly perspective, he takes issue with Buber’s “interpretations,” noting that

. . . many authors who have written about him . . . have not in the least been aware that Buber’s work is an interpretation and that there might be a problem in relating the interpretation to the phenomenon itself (*Messianic*, pg. 230).

That “phenomenon itself” is deeply rooted in the *Kabbalah*, according to Scholem. His charges against Buber stems from avoiding those values Scholem deems to be deeply held by the Hasidic movement. His specific charge: “Although he still recognizes the strong links between the two phenomena, he was concerned with establishing and maintaining an essential distinction between them” (*Messianic*, pg. 231). Scholem does agree with Buber on the matter of Kabbalist gnosticism not being transmitted into the creative element of Hasidism, by transferring the “basic [gnostic] meaning from the sphere of divine mysteries to the world of man and his encounter with God” (*Messianic*, pg. 232). This transference gave Buber the license to ignore it entirely, according to Scholem. Furthermore, he cites there are two means of attention toward the Hasidic movement. The one element he charges Buber overlooked is the body of “sermons and lectures, commentaries on biblical texts, and tractates on the prayers and on other objects of religious life.” This legacy he says contradicts Buber’s assertions that the Hasidic movement was entirely a “lay mysticism.” He contends this legacy is a mystical continuation of the *Kabbalah*. By focusing only upon the second means of attention, the stories, Buber missed the completeness of the Hasidic movement. Scholem does admit that in time the telling of the “stories of the saints [became] just as productive on the spiritual level as the study of divine mysteries” (*Messianic*, pg. 233). This admission is the very point of Buber’s departure and his separation with Scholem. In sum, Scholem wanted to keep the Hasidic tradition within its historical context, while Buber wanted to bring that tradition forward into the present era. The two views proved to be irreconcilable.

There are other issues raised by Scholem against Buber that are not germane to this paper. This is not the place to pursue the comments by Rudolph Bultmann (1884-

1976) concerning the nature of interpretation as “posing questions to a text.” Bultmann asserts, according to Kepnes, “that the questions an interpreter asks indicate the type of hermeneutic position he or she takes” (pg. 32). This certainly helps to explain the positions taken by both Buber and Scholem. Suffice it to say, Scholem’s doubt cast upon the authority of Buber’s work did little to dispel its power. At the risk of being an apologist on behalf of Buber, there is much about the 18th-century for both Jew and non-Jew to be re-evaluated and re-claimed in order to be relevant to the world today. Buber chose to characterize the Hasidic stories as a voice to be reckoned with today, of taking God’s word into the heart, fulfilling the appeal of Jeremiah of writing the Covenant upon the human heart (Jer 40:32). Buber speaks to this in the tale, titled “Knowledge”;

The Baal Shem said: When I reach a high rung of knowledge, I know that not a single letter of the teachings is within me, and that I have not taken a single step in the service of God (*Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 52)

This shows an effort to obtain an intentional act intrinsically from the heart as opposed from the outside by knowledge of laws and rules for conduct.

Whereas Scholem takes to the stories as an object, an historical event as an end in itself, Buber is drawn to them as a subject, a means to the end of a personal seeking and a searching. Buber’s “interpretations” did preserve the mythical and epic character of the stories. These re-aligned proportions helps to focus our view away from the obscure and historical character of the stories. Otherwise, our attempts to understand, even to appreciate the stories in their original form may well escape our attention. We do owe much to Martin Buber. Through his devoted interpretation of the character of the stories, he not only opened the stories to us, he also placed a different emphasis that altered them from their inception. Vermes defines this alteration:

The Hasidic way begins with relation between man and God. For the sake of that relation, the spiritual path leads to a life of redemptive worship in the world. This in turn conduces to the fulfillment in man of the attributes accredited to God of unity and holiness, and thereby to the evolution of the unified human being and of the society and world of which he is a part. Buber’s way, set out in particular in *I and Thou*, turns the Hasidic process on its head. It starts with the development of relation between the individual and the people, creatures and things around him. It moves on *by this means* to the unification and realization of the person. And it ends with the growth of the ability to enter into what Buber terms “perfect relation,” one that supersedes and embraces all other relation – relation, in other words, with what we know as God . . . (pg. 12).

The magical and pietistic elements of the 18th- and early 19th-century Hasidic stories are turned around by Buber in order to address “the claims of existence itself” needed for the 20th-century (*Hasidism*, pg. 24). Perhaps for some of us it is our specific spiritual and religious journey that causes us to want to read the Hasidic stories as Buber re-tells them, rather than hearing them as Scholem would want us to.

The third issue concerning the character of the stories reveals that each tale varies according to its topic and intent. These tales are “a product of religious imagination, a literary-spiritual creation, like the kabbala, the aggada, the apocalyptic literature, or prophecy” (Dinur, pg. 91). The focus is upon the *zaddikim*, and their relationship to the *hasidim*. But the *zaddik* is often depicted in the stories as an ideal type, rather than “in accordance with reality” (Dinur, pg. 92). According to Benzion Dinur,

. . . the religious value of a story about a zaddik and his saintly deeds lies in the telling itself, regardless of any connection to historical reality or to actual events. For by telling such stories one “brings goodness into the world”; one who “speaks about the grace of God awakens it on high” . . . (pg. 93).

Dinur suggests the stories fall into three typologies. The first is the *zaddikim* influencing the “divine sphere” by telling stories. “Stories fulfill a certain function under certain circumstances, and that is the reason they are told.” A second type is propaganda, as an “intentional artifice” through exaggeration. By glorifying the actions of the *zaddik*, the faith of the *hasidim* is reinforced, allowing for tales to be told with teachings and ideas in a literary form that otherwise could not be conveyed. These types of tales will be ahistorical because they will “bare witness mainly to themselves.” The third type is historical, but each is a “transparent vehicle for a lesson or preaching” (pp. 93-94).

The chief characteristic of the stories is releasing the individual from exile – a person’s exile from within the self, a person’s exile from the community, and a person’s exile from God. Ben-Amos and Mintz suggest the stories have a liturgical role and can serve “as sanctified biographies” (pg. xxiii). Joseph Weiss underscores the liturgical element;

One can safely say that the very intimate Sabbath afternoon gathering was the birthplace of all Hasidic teaching and literature. The entire written product of Hasidism, with its short literary units and repetitious oral style, is patently conditioned by this origin (pg. 33).

Elie Wiesel contends the character of the stories contain these basic elements;

The fervent waiting, the longing for redemption; the erratic wanderings over untraveled roads; The link between man and his Creator, between the individual act and its repercussions in the celestial spheres; the importance of ordinary words; the accent on fervor and on friendship too; the concept of miracles performed by man for man (pg. 5).

If this is the case in general terms, what are the specific characteristics of the stories as typologies? As a corollary, which version of the story, that of Yofeh’s of 1814 or Buber’s of the 1920s, imparts differing characteristics, content and appeal and which are in concert with each other? Due to the prevalence, the power and passion of Buber’s work, I have not utilized the interpretations of Elie Wiesel in his book *Souls on Fire* nor those fragments in Annie Dillard’s *For the Time Being* in the discussions below. My intention

is to compare the original stories, translated and edited by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, titled *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, with those contained in the two volume set, *Tales of the Hasidim*, each sub-titled *Early Masters* and *Later Masters* respectively, and as told by Buber. Page numbers refer to the Buber edition, and story numbers are for the Ben-Amos and Mintz publication.

By my count, the stories in the two volumes by Buber and those in the Ben-Amos and Mintz edition total to 1,488 tales! The task of collecting all of these stories for purposes of evaluating their character and content, not to mention appeal, is daunting, to say the least. After all, as Dame Helen Gardner once said, “The point of wide reading is absorption not citation.” But, the task is to both absorb and to cite. So, how to absorb and how to cite? In the first place, begin to write this paper early enough in order to be as thorough as possible: second, to take the time to read and absorb: and third, to determine a selective way of presenting and citing the subject matter. My decision is to limit this paper to the stories of the *zaddikim* of the first three generations, as contained in Buber’s *Early Masters* volume as well as all of the stories in the Ben-Amos and Mintz edition. I justify this on the basis that the later generations changed the relationship between *zaddikim* and *hasidim* significantly away from the inception of the movement. This reduces the story count to 866. Grace is relativized. What a relief!

To begin, concerning only the original tales, some stories have the character of echoing biblical and talmudic tales in order to give a high station to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the “Master of the Good Name,” the *Baal Shem Tov*, the acronymic *Besht*, or applied as well to his followers. We first encounter this echo in the opening tales about the *Besht*’s father, Rabbi Eliezer (#1, #1a & #2). The character of these stories is a parallel found in that of Joseph (Gen 37:18-36; 39 – 41), sold into slavery, but because of wits and wisdom, valuable to the court of his captors. In the tale, “The Birth of the Besht” (#3), we see a repeat of the Sarah and Abraham theme (Gen 21: 1-8): that of divine favor bestowed with a birth of an only child at an old age because of a proven piety. The *Besht* is endowed with impeccable wisdom (#8), similar to that of the legendary King Solomon (1st Kgs 3:16-28). There is also the sign of a shining brow (#14, #15, #31 & #114), bestowing the *Besht* and a few of his followers (#202) with the singular prophetic connection to the divine held for Moses (Ex 34:29-35). In the tale about his underworld journey to Israel (#11), it ends with the *Besht* being turned back by the flaming sword that guarded Eden (Gen 3:24). The ability to cause rain through prayer (#21) reflects Elijah’s ability of bringing the rain (1st Kgs 18:41-46) and that of some Talmudic sages. The resuscitation of a child (#105 & #244) is another reflection of Elijah (1st Kgs 17:17-24). The most salient feature is the ability of the *zaddik* to defy a divine edict and intercede on behalf of a person or people (#12 & #137). This characteristic is drawn from Abraham’s negotiating with God over the fate of Sodom (Gen 18:22-33) and the same with Moses mitigating God’s wrath upon the Israelites (Ex 32:7-14).

Secondly, the character of some of the original stories establishes the powers of the *zaddik*, whether it is those of the *Besht* or one of his disciples. The powers of the *Besht* resided in his knowledge that God was with him, as his dying father promised (#3). His powers also derived from his receipt of the secret manuscripts of Rabbi Adam,

“handed down from Abraham” according to Buber, or found in a cave (#7). The *Besht* was not to reveal his secret powers for 22 years, until he was 36 (#20 & #22). Yet, he uses them in various ways before that time: to defeat a werewolf (#4); to call down the Prince of Torah (#7); to exorcise evil spirits from a woman (#20). When his powers are recognized, he works wonders. In some cases, his powers are recognized by nature: mountains move to support his steps while he is meditating or in ecstasy (#9); rain is caused by his prayers (#21); and a covered cave is opened and closed by his word (#16). In other instances, he uses amulets to protect people and places from evil spirits (#187). He can foretell a person’s death (#24, #63, #120 & #181). The *Besht*’s ardor in prayer brings on spells of severe trembling, as a sign of his devotion (#34-37 & #39). His trembling is imparted to others and things that touch him, or are in his presence, while he is in this state of ecstasy. He can detect defects in liturgical and ritual items without close examination (#93, #94 & #186). He possesses great healing powers, as told in ten of the tales, often in conflict with doctors, medicine men and rabbis. He can see events in the future, know of items and people long distances away (#50, #56, #69, #70 & #127). In the story titled “The Delayed Homecoming” (#33), the cause of this power is revealed by the *Besht*; since “with the light which the Holy One . . . created during the six days of creation, one could see from one end of the world to the other.” By his cleaving to God, and insights gained from the *Zohar*, he sees the whole world. The character of “The *Besht* in the Messiah’s Heavenly Palace” (#41) is the clearest in its relation to the *Zohar* and *Kabbalah*. This tale is a mixture of historical fact with nearly gnostic mystical imagery.

Deception comes on hot and heavy as a characteristic of many stories. Part of this trend comes from the secretive Kabbalist roots still prevalent in the early movement. Rabbi Adam’s son keeps his real mission to Okopy (Okup) secret, even from the *Besht* (#7). Buber omits this portion of the story. The *Besht* studies secretly, deceiving all in the *beth ha-midrash* and the synagogue (#4). He deceptively uses his powers frequently. His betrothal to his wife is deceptive (#8), as is his true identity and ability to learn (#8 & #13). Even after he is revealed as the *Besht*, he still insists that those who became acquainted with his powers keep them secret (#14).

Dreams or visions are a characteristic of a number of stories. Rabbi Pinhas (d. 1791) explains these proto-Jungian events as “a secretion of our thoughts and, through them, our thought is purified” (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 134). In the Ben-Amos and Mintz edition, 21 stories contain visions and dreams as a means of insightful communication and understanding. Dreams occur fewer times in Buber’s stories (8 tales, 4 having to do with the *Besht*). In regards to Buber’s omission of dreams, instead he utilizes a sudden conversion toward understanding a personal encounter with a *zaddik*. This may mean that his interest is in revelation through encounter with others rather than through an individual inward insight. The dreams in the text are sometimes a means of moving the story forward. In other cases, the dream is for reasons of conveying an idea or a lesson as its sole purpose.

There are several stories that include some form of reincarnation. One character of some of the stories is the sudden interruption of a ritual service, or even a long delay in

starting the service. The character of these stories tell of the spontaneity of the *zaddik*, knowing that either the joy or sorrow that interrupted the service is accepted by God, even if it is a source of consternation to those wishing for a strict observance. At the same time, the flaws in the *zaddik*'s character are often revealed.

Animosities toward non-Jews are clear in many instances. There is a reference to a "gentile sorcerer" (#4), another to the idols of the gentiles (#21), and another referring to an inept doctor as a Catholic "priest" (#26). Others include: fears of conversion, usually to Christianity (#65 & #243); polemical images of Jesus (#66 & #243); magical destruction of a church (#86), a manor house (#143) and a whole town (#50); reference to a gentile woman as a "witch" (#98); a conniving priest (#125, #126 & #235); refusal to eat a turnip grown in a gentile cemetery (#189); death caused by a house formerly occupied by gentiles (#192); refusal to heal a man because a gentile sorcerer first attempted it (#197); a gentile is the instrument of divine punishment (#172); cutting a gentile in two with a sword in a dream, thereby restoring order (with echoes of the myth of *Marduk* splitting *Tiamat*) (#209); and refusal to sleep on a bed in which sex had previously occurred with a gentile woman (#221).

To illustrate the anti-gentile type of story, as a specific instance, in the tale, "Rabbi Adam and the King's Banquet" (#5), there is the portion concerning the Jew-hater. Buber avoids this part of the tale entirely. In the story, Rabbi Adam offers each of his guests a wish, which is revealed as each one puts a hand in a pocket. The Jew-hater asks as well, and

Rabbi Adam told him: "Put your hand into your pocket." When he put his hand in his pocket, he dirtied his hand and took it out filthy with human dung He washed his hand with water, but it did not do any good, and he appealed for mercy to Rabbi Adam. Rabbi Adam said to him: "If you swear never to be a Jew-hater it will be all right. If not, your hands will be filthy all your life." He swore, and Rabbi Adam told him: "There is only one remedy for you – a Jew must urinate on your hands. You will wash in it and this will help you." And so it happened (pg. 14).

For a group of people suffering death, abuse, humiliations and indignities at the hands of a majority population, this story is a knee-slapper. We can be quite assured that the references to "human dung" and "urination" in this translation have been "cleaned up" for a more genteel audience. This story, those that refer to a man's "accidental sexual emissions" (#209, #239 & #246 which are not accidental at all) and others that have sexual images or innuendos (#51 & #95) are the ones Buber refers to as being "too impassioned, too violent," "unformed," and "weighted with dross." The earthy character reflects the times and the people. The stories also reflect the trials and pains of a people overlooked by the intellectual changes occurring in Western Europe at the same time. It can also be said the character is clearly in defiance of the intellectual and scholarly aspects of the rabbinic tradition. Either in the guise or garment of a mystical piety, the realities of Jewish life are explicated through story and tale.

The character of many stories retain elements from *Kabbalah*, but with an entirely different emphasis. Here, it seems Buber and Scholem agree. In sum, the Hasidic story is a replacement of the no longer extant *midrashim*, medieval scholasticism that no longer spoke to the people, of the paucity of reliable rabbinic leadership, and a distrustful messianism. Story telling became the path toward religious values. The medium became the primary vehicle for teaching and redemption. “God for Hasidism is the Speaker, the Lord of the Voice.” Perhaps Buber understood this continuation of the evolving interpretive process better than anyone else. The character of his re-telling of each story is grounded in a larger conceptual framework than that of the Hasidic tradition. The character of all the stories reflects a genuine sense of the sacred in everyday events. Through the word, there is a continuous expression “through the most unexpected channels” of love, of commands, of interdictions, of consolation and of guidance (Vermes, pg. 15).

THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE WHOLE OF LIFE:

The content of Hasidic stories is for purposes of demonstrating a way of life. The teachings are the indispensable commentary which, at their core, reveals a “concept of a life of fervor, of exalted joy” (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 2). The tales are from “a world of legendary reality” (Buber, *Tales . . . Early Masters*, pg. 1). Therefore, in many instances, one must suspend contemporary rational and cognitive processes in order to enter into the realities of the tales. In large measure, Buber has eased us into the content of the stories with his versions. Not only are those elements that he deems to be crude eliminated, he also tempers the medieval starkness of the original tales. From the perspective of the 20th-century, he “laid emphasis on what he . . . took to be truly Hasidic, and let fall whatever he discovered of superstition, magic and bigotry, of which there was also ample evidence and which he felt inappropriate to authentic religiousness” (Vermes, pg. 11).

A few times non-Jews are given human characteristics rather than stereotypes in the original stories. In the tale “Elijah the Prophet Reveals Himself to the Besht” (#29), gentiles are helpful and concerned for the well being of the *Besht* and his wife. In another incident, a gentile returns the *Besht*’s stolen horse, although it isn’t known if the rider was the thief (#30). Concern for the well being of gentiles is shown in “The Court in Heaven” (#90). In the story “Rabbi Motel” (#150) there is generosity extended to the Haidamaks, hostile Ukrainian bands, by the Rabbi, although he did receive considerable financial gain for the deed. In another instance, gentiles save a drowning *hasid* (#220). All the stories dealing with the non-Jews indicate what social anthropologists refer to as a community of believers with high boundaries. Buber, in his re-tellings, gives the stories a universal quality, smoothing out the cultural distinctions, diminishing the historical, and focusing upon the messages.

A most disturbing content in the original stories is that of retribution, either as reward or punishment. The rewards include entrance into heaven (#92, #96, #152 #190), the resuscitation of a child for generous hospitality (#105 & #244), and a child is born to a childless couple (#222 & #224). In one case, a child is born to a childless couple, but

will be blind (#170). Sometimes the *Besht* will attempt to intercede and mitigate a punishment on behalf of the condemned. Usually, he is the perpetrator of the punishment. Examples include; transference of an ailment or disability of a pious person to someone who is deemed unworthy by the *Besht* (#232); an ailment is cured, then reinstated by the *Besht* because the recipient is not worthy (#231); an ailment is imposed because of a transgression (#58, #136, #155 & #170); reincarnation as a punishment (#12, #108 & 250); excommunication due to a transgression (#56, #116 & #209), among others. These may be considered lesser than the death caused as the final punishment (#29, #67, #182 & #183). By today's standards, these actions are difficult to justify. Perhaps given the need to keep the community bound together under adverse conditions, the powers of the *zaddik* becomes the glue. If the community believes the *zaddik* can look past the material boundaries and into the spiritual, then each member must behave in order to avoid the punishing powers of the *zaddik*. Another aspect is the urgency felt by the *Besht* to collect the scattered divine sparks, so he attempts to demonstrate what befalls those who do not pursue their tasks with *devekut*. In any case, Buber chose to discard these elements from the content of the stories he told.

In the "Index of Motifs" at the end of the Ben-Amos and Mintz edition, there are 20 content themes identified (pp. 290-305). Nearly one-half of the 251 stories contains magic of one sort or another. The stories also contain mythologies, superstitions, deceptions, marvels, tests, foretelling the future and obedience, among others. Not that much different than the stories in the *Tanakh*, when you get right down to it! In the Ben Amos and Mintz edition, two-thirds of the stories are directed to the life of the *Besht*. But it is difficult "to discern the historical nature of the *Besht* through the opaque glass of Hasidic legend" (Dubnow, pg. 45). Joseph Weiss points out the "vast majority of stories" are about the *Besht* travelling to those whom he is serving; "he appears traveling in a cart, staying in inns or at the home of admirers, etc. The typical situation of the Baalshem in the legend is away from home . . ." (pg. 19). The content of other stories refers to the powers of the *Besht*. When his powers are finally revealed, Buber follows the original quite closely. There are several instances where Buber smooths out the rough and cryptic nature of the original tale. He aims his re-telling to a larger audience. And he does gloss on a few occasions when he perceives a story to be too crude. In addition, in Buber's assessment, there is a grouping of stories that he calls "Teaching in Answers."

Enough *about* the stories. What *of* the stories? Comparing the original stories and Buber's re-casting of them, on the whole, there are not too many differences. Usually the difference is in organization and syntax. As a case of organization, the 4th original story is broken into four separate tales by Buber ("The *Besht*'s Education and Youth" = "His Father's Words" and "Vain Attempts" [pg. 36], "The First Fight" [pp. 36-37] and the first paragraph of "Conjuring" [pp. 37-39]). As mentioned above, Buber drastically changed the 5th original story, "Rabbi Adam and the King's Banquet." In his re-casting of this tale, it is the continuation of his "Conjuring." Not only are there substantial omissions, but the introduction of Rabbi Adam by Buber is expanded. This is done in order to explain who a *Baal Shem* is and what is his role to an uninitiated audience. This portion of the original story is then melded with the 7th tale, "The Secret Manuscripts and Rabbi Adam's Son" to complete Buber's tale, "Conjuring." The deceptive means that Rabbi

Adam's son uses to cover up his mission in this story are omitted by Buber. Typically, as to syntax, Buber omits the abundant minutiae which overburdens each tale. Buber closely adheres to story #8, "The Besht's Marriage," re-titled "His Marriage" (pp. 39-41). He omits that the *Besht's* future wife is a divorcee, implying the probable lower station of the bridegroom. He also adds the first paragraph of the 14th story, "The Besht Reveals Himself," as the end of the marriage tale.

The opening of the original story #9, "The Besht and the Robbers," is used as an isolated tale, titled by Buber "The Helpful Mountain" (pg. 41). The continuation of the 9th story is titled by Buber "With Robbers" (pp. 41-42), and he adds the 11th story, "The Besht's Journey to the Holy Land," to close his tale. Buber's version of how the *Besht* finally reveals his powers is a recombination of two tales. The opening of his "The Baal Shem Reveals Himself" (pp. 46-48) is a prelude summing up the *Besht's* previous occupations. He then combines "The Besht Reveals Himself" (#14) and "The Besht Reveals Himself to the Sect of the Great Hasidim" (#15). Again, Buber follows the original sequence, with a smoother narrative form. He then omits any mention of the following 18 original stories, all of which contain magical elements.

In the re-telling of the tales "Trembling" (pp. 49-50) collected into three parts, Buber calls upon the five original stories, each a version of "The Besht's Trembling Prayer" (nos. 34-37 and #39), indicating how the *Besht's* devotion is contagious, affecting other persons and objects around him. There is no substantial deviation from the originating text. From this point in the sequencing of the original stories, Buber's selection is random, interspersing them with the tales in his volume from sources other than those included in the 1814 edition.

The story titled "The Generosity of the Besht" (#162) is related by Buber in all its essentials. He titled it "The Money That Stayed in the House" (pg. 51). The content has to do with the "generosity" of the *Besht* at the sacrifice of his wife's sense of financial well being. Therefore, Buber's title is ironic, since the money never stayed in the house. The wife of the *Besht* is also involved in the next story taken from the original collection. Buber retains the original title, "The Dance of the Hasidim" (#61 and pp. 52-53), and stays with the text. The *Besht's* wife is concerned about their limited supply of wine during the merriment and celebration of the *hasidim* in their home. She relates this to her husband, who is ensconced in his study, telling her to dismiss the gathering. Her apprehension is relieved when she is overtaken by the contagious ecstasy. The story is about abundance in the midst of scarcity. Buber omits the final lines, with the wife answering her husband's question, "Did you tell them to go?" with, "You should have told them yourself."

"Praying in the Field" (pg. 65) by Buber is a shortened version of "The Hasid Who Prayed in the Field" (#219), with a peculiar twist, departing from the original. Buber is reluctant to tell why the *hasid* was delayed in his travels, keeping him from being with the *Besht* for *Yom Kippur*. Actually, he fell asleep, and didn't wake until the beginning of the Sabbath, thereby preventing him from travelling. Buber is very vague by say-

ing he missed his opportunity because he “was forced to interrupt his journey for something or other.” The ending is altered. In the original;

When he arrived, the Besht made fun of him. The reason was that in his prayers the man had had to elevate the prayers of the people in the fields. He had been forced to do that by heaven (pg. 221).

In Buber’s version, he closes with this;

. . . the Baal Shem received him with particular happiness and cordiality. “Your praying,” he said, “lifted up all the prayers which were lying stored in that field” (pg. 65).

There is a nagging sense that Buber is trying to mitigate the failings of both men in the story. Why he should do this is not known to me, unless he is using other sources.

The story “Writing Down the Besht’s Torah” (#159) is followed closely in Buber’s “Writing Down” (pg. 66) except for the ending. This story is one to which most who teach can relate. A *hasid* is secretly taking notes of the *Besht*’s teachings. A demon reveals them to the *zaddik*, and he admonishes his following. After perusing the notes, the *Besht* reports, “There is not even a single word here that is mine” (pg. 179) or, “In all this, there is not a single word I said” paraphrased by Buber. Then Buber adds a moral: “You are not listening for the sake of Heaven, and so the power of evil used you for its sheath, and your ears heard what I did not say.” Oh, if we could only say that to an inattentively critical attendee after one of our sermons!

And speaking of sermons, in Buber’s story “The Sermon” (pg. 67), patterned after “The Besht’s Sermon” (#83), the *zaddik*’s sudden outburst about his loneliness in his calling and his quest for truth, interrupting his preaching, has a note of pathos. Although his reference is to the Kabbalist secrets he possesses, perhaps we can relate to that note of loneliness and isolation in our own ministries.

The two tales of the “Hose Maker” (#87 and pp. 68-69) are virtually identical. Of all the stories, this one speaks to the very heart of Hasidism. It is an encounter between a maker of woolen socks and the *Besht*, ostensibly for a transaction. But the *Besht*, earlier seeing the hose maker earnestly walking to synagogue for prayer, wondered how the man worked as well. He finds the hose maker’s devotion never ends. He prays while he works, and works while he prays. The *Besht* tells his followers this man is the foundation of the movement.

“The Besht and Sabbatai Sevi” (#66) appears as “The Temptation” (pg. 78) by Buber. The two are nearly identical. The story is about the false messiah tempting the *Besht* to become one as well. The *Besht* refuses and hurls him “to the very bottom of the nether world,” according the Buber. The original refers to hell specifically, saying the false messiah “landed on the same pallet with Jesus,” clearly indicating two of a kind. Buber eliminates such polemics in all of his re-tellings.

The death of the founding *zaddik* is told in a similar manner in both versions. The introductory paragraph in the story “The Besht’s Death” (#247) is eliminated by Buber’s “Of the Baal Shem’s Death” (pp. 83-84). Also omitted are the appearances of a dead soul standing before the *Besht* and of the Angel of Death, and references to the specific illness causing his demise (diarrhea) and the details of that ordeal, as well as the stopping of two clocks at the time of his death. Buber adds some details not present in the original tale.

With the death of the *Besht*, the only remaining stories concurrent in both sets of tales have to do with the wife of Rabbi Abraham, and Rabbi Jacob Joseph. The story concerning the latter is found in three original tales; “Rabbi Jacob Joseph Recognizes the Greatness of the Besht” (#47), “Rabbi Jacob Joseph is Expelled from Shargorod (#48), and “The Ascetic Fasting of Rabbi Jacob Joseph” (#49). These three tales, along with other sources, are folded into a long story by Buber, titled “The Story Teller” (pp. 56-59). The intention of Buber’s tale is to show how the *zaddik* taught through story.

Buber’s story titled “The Other Dream” (pg. 117) is a fragment from the original story, “The Wife of Rabbi Abraham” (#75). The text is virtually the same, with Buber’s version shorter, less in detail, and ending with the same purpose: that of the wife’s forgiveness of the Rabbi in her dream after his death. The difference is the reason for asking for forgiveness. In Buber’s version, it is because Rabbi Abraham “lived apart from her.” In the original, the reason is more explicit: “. . . because I maintained extreme abstinence” (pg. 98).

The extent to which Buber alters a story can be seen in comparing his tale titled “Sanctified” (pg. 117) with the ending portion of the original “The Wife of Rabbi Abraham” (#75). In Buber’s version of the story we experience this;

Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn told:

A few years after the death of Rabbi Abraham, the Angel, his widow . . . received an offer of marriage from the great *zaddik* Rabbi Nahum of Tchernobil. But the Angel appeared to him in a dream and looked at him threateningly. So he let her be

Buber doesn’t let us know just what that threat was. But the original tale is more specific in the considerably longer story;

. . . Many years later, the wife of the great rabbi, our teacher, Menahem of Chernobyl, died, and he wanted to take the widow of Rabbi Abraham as his wife [After consulting with the widow’s son, he asked the son to proceed on his behalf.] On [the son’s] way . . . [he] had a dream in which he saw a large, beautiful decorated hall. His father, [the Angel] . . . was standing at the door of the hall, with his two hands stretched to the roof, crying out in a loud voice: “Who is he who dares to enter into my hall?” He awoke and realized the seriousness of the matter, and he returned home in peace (pg. 99).

The “seriousness of the matter” is that the deceased Angel considered his widow to remain as his wife. The sexual imagery is clear, which Buber chose to gloss over, as well as removing the son from the tale.

Perhaps this and other glosses are a matter of re-casting the stories as a “subject-subject” relationship, rather than that of the “subject-object” indicated in this and other tales. One can clearly see Buber’s emerging “I-You” theology interceding into the original content of the stories. A comparison of the tales re-told by him does give just such a clue. As far as I can tell, of the 251 tales in the Ben Amos and Mintz edition, Buber re-tells one-tenth of them in his own versions. Of the 25, all but three are concerned with the *Besht*. A comparison reveals that Buber re-tells the stories in a manner that brings the tales within the human dimension as an expression of the divine presence. Magic and marvels are no longer in the realm of the divine. As Wiesel points out, “miracles [are] performed by [person] for [person].”

The human dimension is best revealed in those stories Buber called “Teaching in Answers.” One such story is titled by Buber “Where Are You?” (pg. 268). The Rav Shneur Zalman (d. 1813) is imprisoned in Petersburg. The head jailer visits him, impressed with his piety but not certain of his authenticity, and asks,

“How are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: ‘Where art thou?’ [(Gen 3:9)]” “Do you believe,” answered the rav, “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, “in every era, God calls to every man: ‘Where are you in your world?’”

This tale is linked to a number of talmudic stories which pits a Roman or other non-Jew against a Sage in order to reveal, and revel in, a scriptural or doctrinal “inconsistency.” In the first place, the *zaddik* treats the non-Jew jailer with respect in providing an honest response to his question. Secondly, the answer in the form of a question offers a different plane of reality than the originating question. Instead of merely seeing the question in the biblical text as a matter of placement, it is transformed into a matter of condition. The desire to learn something specific becomes a universal matter of effect. The effect is one of accountability, in facing the question “Where are you?” squarely, even if at times we try to avoid hearing it. In Buber’s estimation, “For the Voice does not come in a thunderstorm which threatens man’s very existence; it is a ‘still small voice’ [(1st Kgs 19:12)], and easy to drown” (*Hasidism*, pp. 131-134). Another form of “Teaching by Answers,” is in the story, titled “The Way” (pg. 313);

Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz once said to his teacher, the rabbi of Lublin: “Show me one general way to the service of God.” The zaddik replied: “It is impossible to tell men what way they should take. For one way to serve God is through the teachings, another through prayer, another through fasting, and still another through eating. Everyone should carefully observe what way his heart draws him to, and then choose this way with all his strength.”

This story of freedom of choice begins by defining the accepted and historical ways the tradition has been handed down. Even though these may be considered concrete examples, the emphasis is upon not copying, but finding one's own path to the divine. In another example of this typology, there is the story titled "Imitation of the Fathers" (pg. 147; also *Ten*, pg. 49);

The maggid of Zlotchov was asked by one of his disciples: "In the book of Elijah we read: 'Everyone in Israel is in duty bound to say: When will my work approach the works of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' How are we to understand this? How could we ever venture to think that we could do what our fathers could?"

The rabbi expounded: "Just as our fathers invented new ways of serving, each a new service according to his own character: one the service of love, the other that of stern justice, the third that of beauty, so each one of us in his own way shall devise something new in the light of the teachings and of service, and do what has not yet been done.

This story, along with "Themselves" (pg. 48), not only affirms one's freedom, but also one's uniqueness. The gifts one has to offer the world in the name of defining the sacred rests within the abilities of that person, and not in the standards set by predecessors. As Buber comments, "Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique" (*Hasidism*, pg. 139). This admonition to seek out one's uniqueness is further shown in the short tale, "The Query of Queries" (pg. 251);

Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

Belief in an afterlife is not necessary to obtain the essence of this tale. Here, the answer is in one's life. Diversity in human character and qualities are recognized to be the norm rather than the exception. The *zaddikim* were intent upon urging their *hasidim* to recognize their gifts to themselves, to their community and to God.

Other stories contain the methods of the *zaddik* in encounters with disciples and *hasidim*. One such tale is titled "Patchwork" (pg. 316);

A hasid of the rabbi of Lublin once fasted from one sabbath to the next. On Friday afternoon he began to suffer such cruel thirst that he thought he would die. He saw a well, went up to it, and prepared to drink. But instantly he realized that because of the one brief hour he had still to endure, he was about to destroy the work of the entire week. He did not drink and went away from the well. Then he was touched by a feeling of pride for having passed this difficult test. When he became aware of it, he said to himself: "Better I go and drink than let my heart fall prey to pride." He went back to the well, but just as he was going to bend down to draw water, he noticed that his thirst had disappeared. When the sabbath

had begun, he entered his teacher's house. "Patchwork!" the rabbi called to him, as he crossed the threshold.

Frequently, tales such as this are compared to the methods of a Zen master. Each tradition aims at uplifting the novice. Yet, there is a difference. Buber makes the distinction as "the line of inner illumination and the line of revelation, that of the moment beyond time and that of historical time" (*Origin*, pg. 239). The essence of Zen is emptying in order to reach a sublime state in meditation for sudden and spontaneous illumination, "a mysticism of the human person, a mysticism outside of history, no longer bound to any unique event." In contrast, Hasidic stories focus on filling in order to reach a sublime state through action in the cause of seeking cleavage to God. "The elemental dialogue has not become a monologue, the dialogue of God and man has not become a conversation of man with his soul" (Buber, *Origin*, pg. 236). When the "Seer" of Lublin (d. 1815) barks out "patchwork," he is notifying the *hasid* that he is not approaching his discipline through fasting with wholeness. The opposite of "patchwork" is "all of one piece." The venture begins from a position of wholeness, and does not end with such a state.

Buber's search for the "dialogue with being" moved him to where he believed the stories pointed. He saw the direction toward relationship, that of "a meeting between two persons" (Kepnes, pg. 20). Subsequently, his re-telling of the stories omits as a content the magical events and the incidents of reincarnation. Instead, he focuses upon the ecstatic joy that is mystically recognized by nature, the world and the *hasidim*. In the words of Pamela Vermes;

Hasidism was to be a sanctification of the whole of life, in which the presence of its adherents with whatever was the vis-à-vis of the moment would enable them to distinguish and satisfy the needs of people, beasts and things, and conduce to their fulfillment by assisting them to become more fully what they are intended to be (pg. 16).

The *Besht* founded a movement through story that revealed that "everything was at one and the same time both nature and divine, physical and metaphysical, simple reality and 'miracle of God'" (Dubnow, pg. 34).

TO FOLLOW JUSTICE WITH JUSTICE, NOT WITH UNRIGHTEOUSNESS:

The appeal of Hasidic stories for many is difficult to maintain when kept in the context of the 18th-century communities and values. To a great extent, the appeal of the stories depends upon the nature of the audience, and to whom the stories are addressed. For this reason, the issue of appeal may be entirely personal and subjective, if not cultural. In the original context, to see the *Besht* and other *zaddikim* as real human beings is difficult. This may or may not be appealing. If the legendary nature has the greatest appeal, the *zaddikim* float in the mind and heart as if painted by Marc Chagall (1887-1985). If their humanness is essential to the appeal, then their legendary make-up escapes us.

This is the problem of proclaiming a person to be a saint. In the words of James Veitch, in reference to Saul of Tarsus:

Once granted this status it is extremely difficult to treat these persons normally. Saints are human, in a sense more human than the rest of us. But they are less than divine, in-between sorts of creatures, lower than angels and yet high enough to speak on behalf of Almighty God. It follows that what a saint says must be accepted at face value. It must be taken on trust and be believed. For if saints stand closer to God than the rest of us, then it is inconceivable that they would ever stretch the truth or tell a lie (pg. 3).

Yet, Wiesel says one of the characteristics of the Hasidic story is that “it may well . . . not be true” (pg. 5). Much needs to be suspended in the contemporary mind in order to receive the appeal hidden in the original stories. The lingering medieval habits of arranged marriages, of a world open only to men, of magical images of werewolves, sorcerers, demons and the like as Satan personified are difficult to accept even as metaphors. The rampant folk superstitions can even dissuade us from being drawn to the stories. Yet, along with Buber’s accounting, there is the possibility of a number of appeals for us at the end of the 20th-century.

Wiesel does identify “one of the appealing characteristics of Hasidism: everything is offered, yet everything remains to be done. Though powers may be given by God, it is for man to take them from Him” (pg. 25). The stories do reveal this aspect. According to Scholem, unlike *Kabbalah*, there is “an element . . . which has given prominence by the Baal Shem, and even more by his followers . . . to the combination of earthly action and *devekut*” (*Messianic*, pg. 205). Scholem goes on to say, with what he calls a “minor spirituality,”;

. . . man should devote himself to external action or worldly talk, but even then the true Hasid will be meditating on the spiritual side of what seems to be a purely material undertaking. Nobody may notice it, yet he transforms the lowest forms of activity into something of a higher order (*Messianic*, pg. 221).

In the story, “The Besht’s *Devekut*” (#104), the original devotion of the *Besht* was such that

. . . he could not communicate with people. His words lacked order. His well-known rabbi had taught him to recite each day the chapter of *Happy are they that are upright in the way* and other special psalms. He revealed to him wisdom by which he could talk with people and continue his devotion. He used to recite these psalms every day (Ben-Amos, pg. 129).

Weiss contends that the *Besht* “was not interested mainly in the pure metaphysical form of the principle that God and not man is agent in human actions, but rather in its practical, i.e., moralistic, application” (pg. 75). He goes on to assert that the *zaddikim*, according to the Great Maggid (d. 1772), “convert the Divine attribute of justice [*Middath ha-Din*] to

that of mercy” (pg. 191). This is the purpose of the stories, as begun by the *Beshit*; to “synthesize the contemplative ideal with the action performed at the very same time . . .” (pg. 57). With this kind of active devotion, justice would potentially prevail.

For Buber, the primary appeal is that

. . . in Hasidism, today as then, is the powerful tendency, preserved in personal as well as in communal existence, to overcome the fundamental separation between the sacred and the profane (*Hasidism*, pg. 28).

This is not necessarily an idealistic merger, nor is it pantheism. What it does denote is the possibility of the secular, or profane, to become holy, or sacred, through preparation, awareness and action, as the stories illustrate. In theistic terms, this is “the immanence of God in every” creature, what we would call today “panentheism” – “all Being *in* God, but not all Being God” (Scholem, *Messianic*, pg. 223). The holy is possible because we are always beginning. We have ever renewed choices for renewal. Most of these stories have at their core mercy for the transgressor. For this reason, in Hasidism the separation of spaces, of actions, of times, of conversations into either sacred or profane do not exist. Instead, in each of these instances, the sacred always has the possibility of blossoming forth. Within the profane, the sacred is always a potentiality due to the possibility of immanence. One appeal is this integration.

A second kind of integration that may have appeal is the lack of division between the spiritual and material. That spirituality has a reality in the material – even may be borne out of the material – can have a unifying appeal. Our current over-use of the word “spirituality” as a singular objective today runs the risk of continuing, promoting, even perpetuating the spirit/matter dichotomy. As Buber warns us, a person

. . . no longer knows the holy face to face; but one believes one knows and cherishes its heir, the “spiritual,” without, of course, allowing it the right to determine life in any way. The spirit is hedged in and its claim on personal existence is warded off through a comprehensive apparatus One has ideas, one just has them and displays them to one’s own satisfaction and occasionally also to that of others (*Hasidism*, pg. 39).

At least within the context of the original stories, but more particularly the re-telling by Buber, there is a firm grounding for a spirituality. This seems to be missing in so many of our popular, unreflective religious and/or spiritual quests these days, whether that is within a Christian tradition or not. Perhaps we haven’t been able to distinguish between a truly pluralistic diversity and the merely individual personal experiences become relative. The essential appeal of the Hasidic stories is in the desire, even the need, to integrate that which has a tradition of being split apart.

The appeal for a Jew is the expansion of *Shekhinah* to “a new and intimate significance and applicability.” In Buber’s words;

If you direct the undiminished power of your fervor to God's world-destiny, if you do what you must do at this moment – no matter what it may be! – with your whole strength and with kavvanah, with holy intent, you will bring about the union between God and Shekhinah, eternity and time. You need not be a scholar or a sage to accomplish this. All that is necessary is to have a soul united within itself and indivisibly directed to its divine goal (*Tales . . . Early Masters*, pp. 3-4).

For Buber, the divine goal is the “I-You” relationship that leads to the full acceptance of the Other as intimate subject rather than manipulated object, and the mysterious insertion of God into the encounter as a presence. As Annie Dillard puts it;

A man who struggles long to pray and study Torah will be able to discover the sparks of divine light in all of creation, in each solitary bush and grain and woman and man. And when he cleaves strenuously to God for many years, he will be able to release the sparks, to unwrap and lift these particular shreds of holiness, and return them to God. This is the human task: to direct and channel the sparks' return. This task is *tikkun*, restoration (pg. 141).

This appeal in a non-Jewish context is greatly assisted by Buber's work. This is a message of empowerment to a simple person, to anyone who takes the effort to be whole through Otherness, the fullest engagement with other persons and Creation. This requires a shift away from our usual methods of seeking Wholeness as only an inner and personal quest, a quest in isolation and removal from the world. Buber's interpretation of the stories of the Hasidim opens an alternative avenue in seeking Wholeness – that of relationship with Other while being *of* and *in* the world. Our traditional attempts to find wholeness through unity – that of personal self-integration as our Enlightenment heritage suggests – doesn't work so well in the context of diversity. As Richard Sennett says, in his book *The Conscience of the Eye*;

Yet both the codes of inwardness and unity which have shaped our culture make it difficult to cope with the facts of diversity. We have trouble understanding the experience of difference as a positive human value (pg. 97).

One appeal of the Hasidic stories as Buber represents them as their essential core, rests in an unfettered spirituality of approaching the divine through the process of becoming fully human, being in intimate connection with other humans and Creation.

Through exposure to others, we might learn how to weigh what is important and what is not. We need to see differences on the streets or in other people neither as threats nor as sentimental invitations, rather as necessary visions. They are necessary for us to learn how to navigate life with balance, both individually and collectively (Sennett, pg. xiii).

Balance, then, is the quest. Restoration is the constant. To obtain this constant, Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein suggests “where the real mending of the world begins – from the inner circle of bearing witness to the devastation produced by brokenness, love and gene-

rosity become a commitment to act.” Yet, this healing is in the context of Wholeness gained through Otherness, not in Wholeness as an individual, inner and isolated pursuit. “It is the struggle of the person who, in a moment of self-evolution, becomes aware of his or her past failures and of the need for repair. It is the search for love and the need to touch and be touched in the current ocean of individualism and self-supremacy” (pg. 1).

To address evil adequately, one must be in the world. The quest to find one’s place in the world is an essential aspect of being religious. To focus upon self-serving interests generates self-righteousness, and perpetuates evil in the world. To the Hasidim, the biblical passage, “Justice, justice, shalt thou follow” (Dt 16:20), as interpreted by “holy Yehudi,” meant: “We ought to follow justice with justice, and not with unrighteousness.” Buber adds, “The use of unrighteousness as a means to a righteous end makes the end itself unrighteous; injustice as a means to justice renders justice unjust” (*Ten*, pg. 7). The appeal of the Hasidic stories is the revelation that we do not operate alone, and that we are responsible for both the evil and the justice that exist in the world.

There is perhaps another appeal. I think we are drawn to the stories as Buber relates them not only for their own sake, but as witnesses through the stories as a visible vehicle for Buber’s own flowering. So entwined was his journey with that of the Hasidic stories, that many of us can see our own religious journeys reflected in his abiding adventure. Through the stories, we can see the possible redemption of the sacred as being other than empty of reality, carrying that possibility into the 21th-century, as he saw it for the 20th-century. He saw the possibility through the stories of a real connection between the soul and the world, stories that obliterated the separation of spirit and matter.

All of these appeals rest in both the original stories and in those transmitted to us by Dillard, Wiesel and Buber. Regardless of which version, the revealing aspect of the stories are their reliance upon association and connection. As Wiesel says;

Thus it is possible for man to accept his contradictions. And to discover humility within pride, simplicity within generosity, charity within justice. There is no alternative: one must impose a meaning on what perhaps has none and draw ecstasy from nameless, faceless pain (pp. 35-36).

This acceptance resides within a community. As Buber says, “Hasidism is not a teaching, but a mode of life, a mode of life that shapes community and that is consonant with community (*Origin*, pg. 24).

Would that we, as ministers, have such tales told about us by members of our congregations when we are gone. Would that “great things . . . happened” in our ministries, that we had our witnesses. The shift from the previous pre-Hasidic generations’ emphasis upon a rabbinic scholarly role of interpreting *Torah* and Talmud toward a pastoral relationship with the *hasidim* has an appeal to which we can perhaps relate (Green, pg. 137). Our calling frequently places us in vulnerable positions. There may well be expectations by ourselves and by those whom we serve “to perpetuate holy events, [so] they bear the consecration of holy deeds,” something that we cannot fulfill. However, the

pastoral care offered by the *zaddik* is quite appealing: “not so much the circumstances that [she] is present on extraordinary occasions as that he is there in the ordinary course of days, unemphatic, undeliberate, unconscious; not that [she] is there as an intellectual leader but as the complete human being with his whole worldly life in which the completeness of the human being is tested.” This is more than a non-anxious presence, although that is part of it. It is “an integrity which allowed a person to become all of one piece, to become perfectly human.”

Perhaps the appeal is as Martin Buber identifies in the short preface to his little book of Hasidic tales, *Ten Rungs*:

How can we fulfill the meaning of our existence on earth? And so, dear reader, these pages are not concerned with the mysteries of heaven, but with your life and mine, in this hour and the next (pp.7-8).

This final appeal may be just simply in the treasures the stories contain and how we can find their meanings in our own lives. For as Buber says, “I tell once again the old stories, and if they sound new, it is because the new already lay dormant in them when they were told for the first time” (quoted in Silberstein, pg. 411). No one has pursued these riches more than Buber. He mined the precious metal from the dross which were “more than mere words; they transmitted what had happened to coming generations, and with such actuality that the words in themselves became events.” In his poem, *Hasidut*, the treasure hunt is exemplified;

- Is *Hasidut* surely to be named piety?
- I have learned to know earthly traits in it.

- So is it to be called kindness and tender-heartedness?
- Then you bind it all too much into time.

Near to heaven, near to the bustle of earth -
Therefore I translate it: love of the creature.

The Hasid loves the creature, lovingly he holds it
Fast in God, in man, in the world.

To seek love of the creature everywhere
I once set out faithfully to put it in a book.

In this book is united what I found,
A dream, a true event, a homeland.

(*Believing*, pg. 125)

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