



# Inviting the Demons In

A Hasidic Approach to Suffering,  
Conflict, and Human Failings

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THE HUMAN RESPONSE TO SUFFERING AND adversity is one of the fundamental questions of religion. How is the practitioner of a spiritual path to react to the trials and tribulations of life? In particular, how does the practitioner respond to those forces which seem to oppose her on her path? Whether caused by natural forces, human conflict, or inner turmoil and failings, the practitioner must have some way to overcome these forces of opposition if she is to reach her goal, a goal described in Hasidism as *devekut*, or cleaving to God. Hasidism offers a distinctive approach to this problem, an approach which counsels the practitioner that rather than battling to overcome these forces of opposition, these demons, the path of wisdom is to invite the demons in.

This path begins with the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, who conveyed the following teaching:

A parable of a king who ruled the world and sent one of his servants to test the provinces [by acting] as if he was rebelling against his lord: Some of the provinces made war against him [the servant] and mastered him. Some of the provinces joined with him [the servant]. And in one province there were wise men who detected that this was the will of the king.

The moral is clear. There are people who war against the *yetzer ha-ra* [evil inclination], which presents itself as if it is a servant rebelling against its lord who entices people to flout the will of the

Creator, blessed by He, the King of the world. And they stand against it until they master their *yetzer* through the enormity of their battle and great mortifications. And there are people who detect that that it [the *yetzer*] does the will of the Creator and within it is clothed one of the holy names of the seventy-two holy names.<sup>1</sup>

The *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil urge, can be battled against or it can be seen as an aspect of divine will, containing one of the sacred names of God. Though an understanding of the positive aspects of the *yetzer ha-ra* is ancient in Judaism, in Hasidism there is a concerted effort to harness its power in concrete ways. The *yetzer ha-ra*, and all the dangerous emotions and drives with which it is associated, can, according to Hasidism, be harnessed as a path to God.<sup>2</sup> The demons of the soul can be tamed and yoked to spiritual growth.

And this is not only true of the demons of the soul.<sup>3</sup> A story is told of the Baal Shem Tov, known by his acronym, the Besht, who was hired by an *arrendator*, a Jewish lease holder in Eastern Europe, as a *melamed* (teacher) for his children.

... the *arrendator* who accepted him as a *melamed* told him that he had only one house for him, but it was thought to be inhabited by impure spirits. The Besht said that he would live in it. The Besht assigned the attic to the demons, God forbid, and when they [the demons] laughed, he scolded them and they became silent.<sup>4</sup>

The Besht, a well-known magus and spiritual healer, does not banish or harm the demons he encounters in his dwelling, but simply assigns them their proper place in the attic, a place where they will not come into contact with vulnerable humans, and scolds them like children when they act up. Why does the Besht present such a tolerant attitude to these demons, and what does Hasidism have to teach us about the demons we all encounter?

Every spiritual practice must confront the demons of the soul. Every spiritual adept must be trained in some way to encounter the suffering of life. Terror, fear, anger, hatred, self-doubt, desire, jealousy, pride, and shame are

unavoidable aspects, unavoidable demons, of any true path of transformation. Pain, and often the pain of our own failings, is an inevitable component of the human condition. How then is one to confront and transcend these demons? How is one to overcome the pain and human failings which act as stumbling blocks to self-transformation and self-transcendence?

The Besht, and the Hasidic movement he spawned, present a unique answer to this question, founded on a notion of what we might call — borrowing a phrase popularized by author Tara Brach — “radical acceptance.” For Hasidism, demons are overcome precisely through their embrace, transformation is achieved through acceptance, and transcendence comes through earthly embodied presence. We go beyond the self by returning to it, by embracing it in its fullness with all its blemishes, failures, and shame. Yet to do so wisely, in a way which transforms, requires a certain consciousness, a certain quality of attention, which begins with the fundamental Hasidic insight of the divinity of all being.

## The Divinity of All Being

One of the essential foundations of the Hasidic path is the divinity of all being, the panentheistic claim that all reality and all experience are a manifestation of the divine which is nonetheless beyond the reality in which it manifests. The Besht conveys this teaching in a famous parable:

There once was a wise and great king who built imaginary walls and towers and gates, and commanded the people to come to him through the gates and towers, and instructed that royal treasures be distributed at each and every gate. And there were some people who came to one gate and took the money and went away while others etc.,<sup>5</sup> until his son and beloved made efforts to go specifically to his father the king. Then he saw that there was no partition separating him from his father for it was all a hallucination.

And the moral is clear... And I heard from my teacher of blessed memory, when a person knows that the blessed God fills all the earth with his glory and every action and thought is from Him, with this thought “all workers of iniquity are scattered.” (Ps. 92:10) Therefore all the angels and palaces, everything is created and made, as it were, from His blessed essence, “like a snail whose garment is part of itself [*mineih ubeih*]” (GEN. RABBAH VILNA 21:5) and with this awareness,

and through this “all workers of iniquity are scattered,” for there is no barrier separating between a person and God.<sup>6</sup>

The palace, that is the world, is originally experienced as separate from the King-God. This separation, however, is ultimately only an illusion. Yet the illusion does not mean that reality does not exist (a possible initial reading). Rather it means that reality is in fact divine, for “everything is created and made, as it were, from His blessed essence.” Our failure is not that we perceive an illusion, but that we illusorily judge what we perceive as being separate from the divine, distinct and independent. In fact, the Besht teaches, the walls of the castle are the King’s self, his “blessed essence.”

This awareness itself, according to the Besht, acts to dispels suffering. That is the meaning of “all the workers of iniquity are scattered,” a phrase the Besht uses repeatedly to indicate the removal of demonic forces, of suffering, evil, and vice. But how precisely does this removal work? In part, no doubt it is simply the joy and ecstasy of the realization of divine presence which serves to dispel doubts and pain. Yet in part it is also the acceptance engendered by the consciousness of the divinity of all being, of the doubts and pain as aspects of the divine, which leads to the scattering of these forces of evil.

## Victory Through Surrender

A natural tendency, and one reinforced by prior Jewish tradition, would be to teach spiritual practitioners to overcome the demonic — their vices and failure and their pain and suffering — through opposition and struggle. Impulses such as pride and anger would be defeated and cast out. Practitioners would, as the Besht describes this path above, “stand against it [the evil inclination, *yetzer hara*] until they master their *yetzer* through the greatness of their battle and great mortifications.” The Besht, however, teaches precisely the opposite. Through acting improperly, in thought, word, or deed, “enemies” are created. That is, according to the Besht, our failings cause forces of opposition to arise, whether as actual persons with whom we are in conflict or as harmful emotions or desires which assail us. When they do, the Besht explains, they must be healed:

It is the case that “enemies” which come to him through the blemish [he has caused] in speech must be healed [*le-taknam*] in order to elevate them through the speech of prayer. And if not, if [he] rejects them, more haters are made through thickness and

corporeality...Therefore [a person] must pray on behalf of his enemies, to heal them and elevate them....”<sup>7</sup>

The attempt to reject and cast out these “enemies,” the Besht teaches, only feeds and multiplies the demonic forces. The energy of opposition or resistance fuels that which one is trying to overcome. The effort to reject fear, for instance, sustains it, for the act of resistance precisely partakes in the psychic disposition which is the nature of fear, namely, the rejection and attempted avoidance of some pain or unpleasantness. Rather, these enemies, human and psychic, must be met with compassion and acceptance. In this way they can be healed and elevated, that is, returned to and reconnected with their source in the divine.

Consider fear or anxiety, perhaps of an expected confrontation with someone in authority over you, perhaps of some upcoming challenge and the possibility of failure, or any situation you can imagine. You may be bound by that anxiety, nervous and ill at ease as you fantasize and obsess about the possible consequences of this confrontation. You could meet the anxiety with anger, beating down the fear with anger’s force, but creating through that anger, in the Besht’s parlance, another set of “enemies.” Or you could turn to the fear and welcome it in. How is this accomplished? Initially, as the Besht suggests, we might counter our opposition by praying for the wellbeing of those enemies. But this cannot be effective if we are merely mouthing the words through our fear and resistance. Rather, we must somehow leave aside our resistance and truly welcome the fear in.

The Besht does not give specific instructions, though they must include somehow both a letting go of our opposition to the enemies, and an ability to feel compassion and care towards them. I want therefore to explore, from my own experience and time and in my own idiom, how these teachings might be put into practice. How can you turn to the fear and welcome it in? You can do this first physically, consciously relaxing the muscular tension which accompanies fear. This in turn can allow you to begin a similar process on a psychic level.

The psychic process is subtle: a relaxing and opening of the mind, parallel to the relaxing and opening of the body. When the fear arises, rather than shrinking back from it, ignoring it, or violently overcoming it, one just tries to relax into it, allowing the mind to drop any particular response or

action and just be present with the fear. This process can be helped by expressing your intention, your *kavvanah*, such as by saying to the fear, quite literally, "Welcome, come in, have a seat." Similarly it can be helped by directing love and compassion towards the fear and the situation, for instance, by imagining yourself cradling your fear like a child. One can also, as the Besht suggests, attempt to send compassion and well-wishes to the source of the fear which allows an open acceptance of the fear and its source.

In my experience, there are a number of important consequences to allowing the fear in instead of pushing it away. First, accepting the fear enables one to actually consider

it, to look at it mindfully. No longer overwhelmed by forces of fantasy (the illusion of the castle) and avoidance (the opposition to "enemies") which both act to stop actual consideration of the fear itself and its root, the fear's actual texture and nature can be seen. The fear can be seen more clearly and realistically because resistance to the fear — fear of the fear — no longer causes it to spiral out of control. Second, no longer trapped in the fear, but able to consider it and hold it in one's mind, one is no longer constrained to act out of that fear, but is able to make a considered decision. Reasonable concerns about the encounter can now be considered more rationally.

Both these factors lead to the lessening of the fear and its healing as the Besht describes. Third, and in a way difficult to explain, by no longer resisting the fear, the fear itself lessens, as the Besht describes. Observing the fear and welcoming it in, rather than fueling it, cuts off the source of its power, the resistance which creates new "enemies." Indeed, one of the central insights of this technique, as the quote from the Besht begins, is that our psychic pain is the product of our own actions and reactions, both internal and external. No longer fighting the enemies, they scatter. Fear embraced loses its power.

That, in my own experience, is the nature of these forces. Fear, accepted and embraced, is fear no longer, but at most a realistic concern with some future event, freed from the oppressive bind and weight of anxiety. In embracing one's

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fear, anger, desire or other “unwanted” emotions, a certain space is created, a space which allows one to step outside the normal reaction of opposition which entraps one in the logic of that emotion. It is a space created by the shock of non-opposition, by the way that non-opposition deprives the emotion of its sustenance, and by the way the unexpected reversal allows the conscious investigation and cultivation of a different attitude. The Besht then calls for a fundamental reversal in our natural dispositions. He calls on us to embrace that from which we would flee, and to love that which we would hate, both in ourselves and others.

Note that for Hasidism, all unwanted or negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, depression, and jealousy are aspects of the *yetzer ha-ra*. As such, though we might understand these emotions as different in important ways, they understand them as all susceptible to the same basic technique of embrace and transformation. However, just as embracing the fear means dropping one’s resistance to it and being mindfully aware of it but not actually becoming more fearful or acting on the fear, so too embracing one’s jealousy, covetousness, or anger means a mindful awareness and acceptance of those emotions, not an actual involvement in them or acting on them. Indeed, it is understood that embracing these emotions is precisely the most effective way to enable one *not* to act on and fuel these emotions.

Similarly, in a discussion of the meaning of the Lurianic notion of “sweetening the forces of judgment [*dinim*] at their roots,” the Besht teaches that this is accomplished through accepting pain with joy, for “through accepting [pain] with joy, pain [*ts.r.h*] is transformed into willed acceptance [*r.ts.h*].”<sup>8</sup> Here, the Hebrew word for pain *tsarah*, made of the letters *ts.r.h*, is transformed into the Hebrew word for willed acceptance, *ratsah*, made of the same letters in a different order, *r.ts.h*. The Besht’s interpretation is based on the Kabbalistic idea of the linguistic nature of reality and the theurgical power of the person who knows how to manipulate the divine letters. The cosmos, according to the Kabbalah, is created through and animated by the letters of the Hebrew alphabet which emanate from the divine. The shape and structure of reality is determined by the manner in which the letters are combined into words. One who is able to manipulate and rearrange these letters is able to transform the nature of existence. The Besht’s psychological transformation of this metaphysical teaching is that the willing acceptance of pain performs a mystical rearrangement of the letters of pain [*ts.r.h*],



transforming it into something which, precisely because it is no longer opposed but embraced and even willed [*r.ts.h*], is no longer pain. In that way, *din* is “truly made into *hesed*,”<sup>9</sup> judgment is transformed into compassion.

As above, the strategy the Besht teaches is a psychological reversal of the normal reaction to pain and opposition. By uprooting one’s normal psychological reaction and instead responding with joy, acceptance, and beneficence, the pain, opposition, or distraction disappears. Opposing or rejecting these forces, on the other hand, only strengthens and sustains them. These forces of evil then are only evil insofar as they are seen as such. This suffering is a product, in fact, of the opposition to it. When the appropriate epistemological and dispositional shift is made in the practitioner’s view of and relation to these forces, their dark nature disappears and they are transformed into aspects of divine love, into *hesed*. Their nature, like the walls of the castle above, seems to depend entirely on the disposition of the practitioner. Indeed, at least in the case of the “haters” described above and “strange thoughts” which we will discuss below, as these dark forces are a product of distortions within the practitioner, it is clear that these kinds of “evil” depend entirely on the practitioner’s relationship to them. They are then entirely susceptible to transformations in that relationship. The Besht thus presents an outlook and practice which sees every aspect of reality as a manifestation of the divine. The walls of the castle, as we saw above, are only an illusion.<sup>10</sup>

## Your Darkness is Your Treasure

This notion of the embrace of human failings and evil is applied in particular in Hasidism to the practice of prayer and the phenomenon of alien thoughts (*machshavot zarot*). When one is praying, one is meant to focus exclusively on God and the words of the prayer. But what should one do when, despite one’s best efforts, extraneous thoughts arise during prayer — thoughts, for example, of greed, anger, sexual desire, or anxiety? One common response is to reject and push away such thoughts and return one’s concentration to the prayer and God.<sup>11</sup> Hasidism, however, teaches a different approach, as R. Moshe Hayyim Ephraim of Sudytkow, the grandson of the Besht, demonstrates. In a profound meditation on God’s instructions to Noah to “put the entrance to the ark in its side” (GEN. 6:16), he plays on the dual meaning of the Hebrew term *teivah* as both “ark” and “word:”

And so it is in prayer, that sometimes alien thoughts come to a person to hide the light of Torah and worship from him, God forbid. But one who is wise, his eyes in his head, will understand that there is great light covered and hidden within that darkness for “there is no place empty of Him” (ZOHAR III:242)...

And this one can say is hinted at in the verse here, according to the Besht’s explanation that “ark” [*teivah*] hints at the word “word” [*milah*] which is called *teivah*. As it is written, “Make an opening for daylight in the ark [*teivah*],” and he said that one should enlighten the word [*teivah*] which comes out of your mouth, and he expanded on this. And this is what is said in the verse here: if you see that sometimes the light is covered and is not seen or recognized at all, and you don’t know what to do to open the covering and reveal the light, concerning this it is said “the entrance to the ark.” ... That is, in that darkness itself there is certainly a great light, it is only that it is hidden, as mentioned above. And “It is not in the heavens... neither is it beyond the sea... the thing is very close to you, in your mouth...” (DEUT. 30:12-14), and understand.<sup>12</sup>

R. Moshe Hayyim Ephraim of Sudytkow teaches in this passage that the distracting thoughts which come to one during prayer in fact have divinity hidden with them, for “there is no place empty of Him.” Rather than rejecting

these thoughts which would deprive the worshiper of the divine light within them, he must invite them in and so uncover their divine essence. The idea that the “entrance to the ark [*teivah*] is in its side” means that in the words [*teivah*] of prayer and thought, the opening to divinity is precisely found “in its side,” that is,

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in the darkness of one’s alien thoughts and desires, for “in that darkness itself there is certainly a great light.”

In this way, what seemed at best a distraction and at worst an aspect of the forces of evil becomes our richness, our treasure, the very means by which we are able to approach the divine. Elsewhere, in interpreting the

verse, "...have no fear of the people of the country for they are our bread..." (NUM. 14:9), R. Moshe Hayyim Ephraim of Sudylkow explains that "the external fear is only in order to bring us to internal fear or awe which is the Shekhinah."<sup>13</sup> The phrase, "for they are our bread," is read as meaning that fear is literally our bread, our spiritual fuel which leads us to divine awe. This is not to say, as the texts make clear, that jealousy and fear, for instance, are simply embraced and cherished, any more than fear was embraced or cultivated in the teachings of the Besht. Rather, these negative emotions are welcomed in, held in the consciousness of the practitioner without resistance, and then turned to good.

The first way in which this is accomplished is by turning a particular desire from an unworthy to a worthy object. As R. Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezhiroch, a disciple of the Besht and Hasidim's most prominent leader in the second generation, explains:

...his soul ascends to all the worlds to which it is required to ascend and they examine him in each world whether he is fitting to ascend. If not, they thrust him out. Sometimes they send him a foreign thought because they are shoving him away. And if he is a sage [*hakham*] he is able, in that very thought, to connect himself to a greater degree to God. For the thought is the letters which are the limbs of the Shekhinah, it is only that they fell from the power of the shattering, and the permutation of the letters became evil in the *kelipot* [shells]. [This is] like a person who mixes disparate delicacies together. Each one is good on its own, but when mixed together they are disgusting and very bad, so too it also became bad. And when he understands the matter of the thought: if it is desire it fell from the world of love, if it is evil fear [*yirah*] it fell from the world of awe [*yirah*], if it is pride it is from the world of splendor, and so too in other things, they all fell from the seven days of the building [*sheva y'mai ha-binyan*, the lower seven sefirot]. And when he connects them to God in love of the Creator and awe of the creator he returns them to their root, and so too in the rest of the attributes. Each thought, according to the attribute from which it fell, he connects it to that attribute and the *kelipot* fall from it and the permutation becomes good.<sup>14</sup>

That is, one connects the particular emotion to its sefirotic root and redirects it towards God. So, for instance, if sexual desire arises during prayer, the instruction is to drop the object of that desire and direct this passion towards God. If fear arises during prayer, the instruction is to drop the object of the fear and its accompanying anxiety and instead to direct the trembling and terror of awe towards God. This technique, as the Besht points out, is not always possible, depending on the nature of the emotion and the individual nature of the practitioner, but it should be attempted, the Besht teaches, whenever one sees a way to turn the negative emotion to the divine.<sup>15</sup> In each case, the particular object of the emotion is discarded and attention is brought to the bare experience, the raw texture of the emotional state. That accepting attention, in particular combined here with the dropping of the specific emotional object, loosens the obsessive power of the emotional state. That is, the emotion of desire is still present in its raw state, but mindfully considered and without a particular object, it no longer overwhelms the practitioner. It no longer invades and controls the practitioner but is now controlled by him. The desire is now present as a kind of raw psychic energy which can then be turned in a positive direction, to love and desire for the divine, for communion, for personal transformation.

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This kind of psychic redirection uses the power of passion for spiritual benefit. Indeed, R. Zadok ha-Kohen, tells us that "Every person has a special passion. In that thing in which his passion and desire is most ardent, he is a receptacle to receive God's blessing. He returns it to God with all his heart, recognizing that God placed the passion in him."<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, R. Zadok is pointing out that the stronger one's desire, the more powerful the passion one can turn towards the divine. Like fire, the power of the passion can burn if utilized improperly but can warm and energize when redirected towards the divine. Burning desire for a woman, the Hasidim believe, can become burning desire for God. Similarly, we might imagine the special passion to which R. Zadok refers points to a particular ability or focus of that person, a focus which may have been misdirected but can now be

utilized in a positive way. Someone whose desire for food is unhealthy may be able to turn that passion into an awakened practice in the service of God, eating in a focused and mindful way in order to free the divine sparks latent in the food.

Yet we might also understand the way this passion makes the person “a receptacle to receive God’s blessing” differently. That is, perhaps it is the very difficulty of the passion and our struggle with it

which makes one open to the divine in that place. It is often where we struggle most, where we fail most, and where we are most hurt and vulnerable that, when we are able to hold that place in an accepting awareness, we are granted the greatest insights into our selves and others. It is where we are ripped wide open that God is able to enter. Thus for Hasidism, precisely in the place of our greatest desire, and potentially our greatest failing, lies also our greatest strength.

The second way in which alien thoughts, or encounters with darkness, aid the practitioner is as a spur to awareness. As R. Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezhirech writes:

The principle is that all that a person sees and hears and all the occurrences which happen to him, they all come to awaken him. Whether it is something concerning love (*hesed*), fear (*yirah*), *tiferet*, *netzach*, *hod*, connection (*yesod*), or governance (*malkhut*), their principle [of operation] is in one of two ways. Either there comes to him during prayer a bad deed which he did which comes before him in his thought in order to be healed and elevated. And this is like a parable of one who looks into a mirror who sees his visage across from him, thus his deeds come to him in thought. Or letters from the shattering (*shevirah*) come. And [one] needs to discern whether they are letters from love, fear, or the other attributes. This [occurs] both during prayer and at any time. Sometimes a person is scared of some thing or creature. Everything comes to him to be raised...<sup>17</sup>

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All the occurrences of life, in all their variety, the Maggid explains, are there to awaken us. The darkness we encounter, whether in prayer or outside, is meant to bring a mirror to our face, to allow us to see the darkness inside, and so to elevate it. That is, every encounter, the shock of every alien thought, is meant to call us to pay attention, to examine from where this thought arose, to what deed or attitude of ours it is connected and how that deed can be repaired. Like physical pain, our mental suffering is a signal that something is awry and a summons to awareness, to carefully watch the content and nature of our thoughts and examine how they can be transformed. Therefore one must "always observe in his mind which quality has arisen in it...and he should raise that thought above."<sup>18</sup>

Such careful watching and observation, however, can only be accomplished through acceptance. If one rejects the thought immediately, both time and the correct mental quality are lacking for the mindful observation and understanding of the thought which has arisen. Accepting the thought and giving it space allows the observation of the thought which grants insight into one's self and mind. Such insight also allows one to see the treasure hidden in the thought, the way in which this disposition too can be reconnected to divinity and ascend on high. The technique cultivated here is then a constant practice, a constant effort to see every encounter and event as an opportunity to awaken, to see more deeply inside oneself, and to discover the hidden divine essence in every aspect of being.

## Humility and Self-Worth

The final aspect of acceptance I would like to discuss is the Hasidic approach to self-worth. Great emphasis is placed in Hasidism on humility as one of the prime qualities which must be cultivated to attain *devekut*, cleaving to divinity. Indeed, it is perhaps the central virtue, along with fear or awe, which must be achieved to reach the mystical state of *ayin* or nothingness. As R. Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezhiroch explains, "he considers himself *ayin* upon seeing and grasping the exaltedness of the blessed God. And [he considers himself *ayin*] afterwards because of [his] great humility in that he does not consider himself anything and he diminishes himself."<sup>19</sup> Yet this humility, even when it is described in strong terms, is a means of self-overcoming, not self-rejection. Hasidic humility is

tied to a deep sense of self-worth; it explicitly rejects a humility which might lead to self-deprecation. As R. Mordechai Joseph Leiner, a nineteenth century Polish Hasidic master, explains on the verse, "And they did not listen to Moshe, and some of them left it [the manna] until morning, and it bred worms, and became repulsive" (Ex. 16:20):

The matter that the manna "bred worms and became repulsive" teaches that they had unwarranted and repulsive humility, for even though they knew that the blessed God would not abandon them, yet still they worried that manna would descend to all of Israel but not to them. This is repulsive humility, for no one should see himself as worse than all the rest of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

While humility is essential, this repulsive humility, a humility which is associated with a lack of self-worth and acceptance is strongly condemned. Indeed, along with the stress on humility a deep sense of self-worth is maintained. For instance, R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, a twentieth century Polish Hasidic master who perished in the Holocaust, teaches that humans are beyond the angels in their unique ability to unify heaven and earth.<sup>21</sup> Hasidism in this sense offers a wise and tempered self-acceptance. One is to embrace oneself fully as an aspect of divine being, but that self-embrace should not translate into the reaffirmation of the illusion of the self or a sense of harmful pride.

There is a well known Hasidic saying, often attributed to R. Simhah Bunem, that one should walk about with two notes in one's pocket. On one is written, "I am but dust and ashes," and on the other, "for my sake the world was created." When a person is feeling proud, the first note is brought out to remind him of his lowliness; when excessively humble, the second is produced to remind him of his ultimate worth. The essence of Hasidic humility and the truth of the radical acceptance Hasidism teaches is that these two notes in fact express one truth, the truth we began with, that all being is Divine. As an aspect of being you are *ayin*, divine *nothingness*, dust and ashes, containing no self, no ultimate individuality or separateness. And as an aspect of being you are *ayin*, *divine nothingness*, of cosmic and uncountable value as an aspect of God for whose sake the world was created.

These two truths which are one also capture our discussion of the Hasidic confrontation with human pain and failure. In each case the pain or

failure is accepted as a manifestation of divine being, an aspect of divinity, yet at the same time it is not falsely valued in itself but seen as an opportunity for growth, for the return to divinity, and for awareness. It is embraced with compassion as divinity in potential which must be carefully observed and softly turned so that it can serve the cause of growth and life.

This acceptance and embrace of every aspect of reality can no doubt be seen in other dimensions of Hasidism as well, in the centrality of joy, in Hasidic song and dance, in Hasidism's reaching out to every level of society and welcoming of the unlearned, and in the Hasidic doctrine of *avodah b'gashmiyut*, worship in corporeality. In all these cases life and existence are unrelentingly affirmed and in doing so, the darkness is illuminated. The demons of the soul and the demons of the world must be overcome, but they are overcome, Hasidism teaches, precisely in their embrace, through the open acceptance and awareness with which they are met in the mind and soul of the dedicated practitioner.

When, like the Besht, we welcome our demons in and mindfully give them a place to live, we may in fact experience their dissolution, not through the victory of battle, but through the victory of surrender, a victory achieved by leaving the demons no self, no fuel, on which to feed. Instead, in our acceptance, we will have created for ourselves our own fuel, the raw psychic energy to return our thoughts, minds, souls, and body to the divine, to our spiritual practice, and to the recognition of the divine in all being.

#### Notes:

- 1 *Keter Shem Tov HaShalem* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 2004), 115, p. 67. Citations are all from this edition, and are given by section and page number. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 2 The *yetzer ha-ra* will be used interchangeably in this paper with the many emotions with which it is associated, especially desire in all its forms as perhaps the primary manifestation of the *yetzer*.
- 3 In consonance with Talmudic tradition, and especially in its earlier years (and to varying degrees later on), Hasidism also believed in demons as actual entities which cause damage and endanger people's lives.
- 4 *Shivhei HaBesht*, pp. 64-66, no. 8. Translation from *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, pp. 34-35, no. 20, Alexander Shochet.
- 5 Presumably others went farther in, but in each case stopped at some particular gate to take the treasure and then left.
- 6 *Keter Shem Tov* 51b, p. 31. Trans. a combination of Etkes, *The Besht*, p. 135, and my own.



- 7 *Keter Shem Tov*, 75.
- 8 *Keter Shem Tov*, 87c, p. 51.
- 9 *Keter Shem Tov*, 87a-d.
- 10 While we are discussing here, for the most part, psychological distress, the Besht's thoroughgoing panentheism ultimately sees all reality as a manifestation of the divine, obscured and distorted at time by the shells [*kelipot*]. Yet, at the same time as the Besht teaches an embrace of one's personal suffering, he himself acted as a baal shem, a magical healer, and a leader acting to alleviate people's suffering. He also saw certain forces (such as the persecutors of Jews) as evils which needed to be overcome. How these positions can be resolved is another and lengthy discussion. Here it is sufficient to point out that the Besht advocates an embrace of not just personal suffering, but also the moral failings of personal vice, in an effort to transform them.
- 11 See Piekarz, Mendel. *The Beginning of Hasidism: Ideological Trends in Derush and Musar Literature*. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978), pp. 271-272 [Hebrew].
- 12 *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*, Noah, *u-petah*, p. 8.
- 13 *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*, Sh'lach, *od yirmoz she-shamati*, p. 180.
- 14 R. Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezhirech, *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, 29, p. 48.
- 15 *Keter Shem Tov*, 39, p. 25.
- 16 *Zidkat ha-Zaddik*, 181. Trans. Brill, *Thinking God*, p. 92.
- 17 *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, 161, pp. 258-59.
- 18 *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, 26, p. 43.
- 19 *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, 191, p. 299.
- 20 *Mei ha-Shiloach*, B'shallach, *v'lo sham'u*, p.78. Trans. Betsalel Philip Edwards, *Living Waters*, p. 139.
- 21 *Aish Kodesh*, Yitro 5702.



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