



# Prayer is Our Identity:

## Spiritual Values in Hasidic Wisdom

*Hasidic wisdom is the attitude of piety transformed into a style of life through genuine and profound spiritual experiences. Hasidism is a spiritual movement within Judaism, founded by Baal Shem Tov (1700–1760). Its wisdom stories were collected by Martin BUBER just before the near-total elimination of this culture in the Shoa.*

*The Hasidim has been convinced that the spiritual power the righteous obtain is such that all peoples and nations thriving for redemption can profit from it, not only their own nation, religion and spiritual movement.*

*Indeed, the spiritual significance of Hasidism goes far beyond the borders of Judaism: it is now part of the global wisdom of humanity, to be humbly approached by all searching for the closeness and blessing of God.*

### Life-Giving Stories

In Hasidic *magical realism*, we are immersed in the world of aphorisms, metaphors, analogies, symbolic tales, miracles, secrets, paradoxes and contradictions; bitter and bitter-sweet humour, an unrestricted and rampant mystical life, reaching many times even delirium and ecstasy.

The sharing of a Hasidic story with others is in itself an event, which indeed has the dignity of a holy act. One might hope that a text dealing with Hasidic stories has also the same kind of dignity.

These Hasidic stories have a holy essence, a sparkle of wisdom in them, which continues its being through the retelling of these stories, jokes, anecdotes and spiritual riddles, again and again.

The way a story is told is such that it may help and assist people in their everyday spiritual lives, making moral and ethical decisions, and opting for a general betterment in holiness and wholeness.

There can be different subgenres discerned within this mythology. A *short story* depicts a destiny; an *anecdote* fills with light a whole life; while a *legendary anecdote* sheds light onto the point and meaning of human life in a highly condensed form.

One of the subgenres of these sagas is the *dialogical parable*: in these the master, when asked, provides a much broader answer than was expected from her or him by the inquiring disciple.

Or in yet another subgenre, the yarner's aim is to *scandalize* her or his listeners by the primitivism or profanity of the stories, in order to stir up their shortcomings and to call forth their reflection or surrender.

Both the participants of these events, and the people who make them present by sharing them with others, are filled with the *Spirit*: their whole being in the world is spiritual and pneumatic.

The righteous live in a spontaneous and genial improvisation, appropriation, application, concretisation and explication of the Holy Scriptures. The stories of their deeds and thoughts ignite the Divine spark in the souls of all who ever happen to make contact with them.

The Hasidic legendary circle is a mythology of wisdom impetuses, a history of spiritual effects, which have ever made an impact on one of their participants. It is expected from the listener, reader and receiver to open herself or himself up for a similar cathartic experience as those who are depicted in the story.

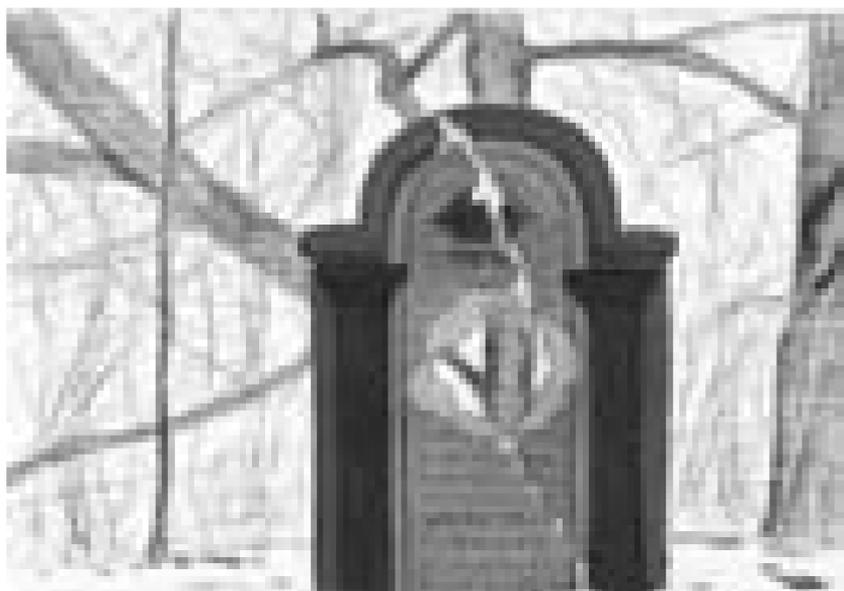
## Tradition and Community

The righteous, when encountering ideas similar, adaptable and compatible with those of their own, manage to fill them with their own vitality and to ensure their rootedness in the *Tradition*.

The faithful are seeking the *meaning* of the phenomena. Their firm endeavour is aimed at tracing back the teachings and insights to their cores and origins. At the same time, the righteous attempt to strike root in their final destination, as well.

Divine revelation tends to institutionalise and turn into a mere habit, so the role of the faithful in this respect is to revitalise it from time to time, from generation to generation, by their *charisma*.

Even the most respected divine commandments can by some people be turned into an idol or superstition. Therefore, God is to be approached as God, in God's own way, not in our own ways.



Those who are touched by this spirituality and decide to join the *community* are appealed to die to their old life and to resurge to new life. These people are not afraid to appear either pathetic, or lunatic, or even ridiculous to the outside world.

Interestingly, a master from time to time can pretend to lift the authority and validity of the Tradition from above the community, in order to create occasionally a new and open possibility for their choice and decision. This procedure refines the sense of responsibility and confirms the commitment and engagement of the community.

In overemphasized individualism, even though wisdom still can be cherished in a way, holiness is unable to ripen and to be held fast. So we build the temple (church) of love with each other as living stones.

Therefore, the logic of *unity* in the community is the following: one must wash away everything from oneself which can divide or separate one from the others; then one must be united with the community; and finally, all these open the way towards unity with God.

As a unique relationship within the community, a *marriage* lived in

a holy way embodies, embeds, entails and configures the relationship of Eve and Adam in the Paradise before the tragedy of the fall.

## Kenotic Dialogue

Another significant element in these enlightening texts is that they are born out of an *encounter*, and in that way also Martin BUBER could see in them the fulfilment of his own philosophical thinking on the realisation of the Self through *I and Thou*, encounters and *dialogue*.

An enormous emphasis is laid on the insight that the relationship between God and the human must be mutual and reciprocal: dialogue must take place among I and Thou; and Thou and I; and furthermore from both sides again.

One cannot say “I” about oneself in a proper sense, since “I” can only refer to the one God. So, when preparing for the vocation, first one has to hide, and only afterwards, when one is ready to go out to teach, should one reveal oneself and the message entrusted to her or him.

Human relationships are based on mutual giving and receiving, in mutual interconnectedness, on the psychosomatic as well as on the spiritual (pneumatic) level. The role of the master is to ignite the spark of the disciple’s heart and soul, which is already there before their encounter and dialogue.

*Silence* and solitude are vessels filled with an invisible essence: whoever approaches them with openness can have a sip of them. One’s silence and solitude can be as much a means of reconciliation as a mute scream from somewhere deep down.

The master offers herself or himself fully as a pot and an earthen vessel to God, detaching and emptying out herself or himself in a kenotic way, and in this way re-transforming Something back into Nothing, in order to be fully at the disposal of God.

## Praying in the Sight of God

God, the Great Pedagogue, not only limited Godself in the process of creation, but also continues to limit Godself, in order to be useful for God’s beloved children, humankind, who are always to be raised and educated.

Prayer can be a visionary exaltation, a meditation, contemplation

or concentration, but faith is generally purer than vision. In prayer, externals and formalities are avoided: our dialogue with God is like an insightful conversation with a friend.

The emotions towards God and the style of our relationship can be so intimate that the praying person uses even tender and affectionate confessions of love, or the invocation: *Daddy (Abba)*.

Notwithstanding, before prayer, one has to prepare oneself for death, since in prayer one offers oneself fully as a *sacrifice*. The noble and sublime soul lifts up the ordinary souls and sanctifies the objects around her or him.

When once a master was hit and killed by a bullet while praying, it was considered a most beautiful way of dying, since the person can continue her or his prayer in the other world as well, bridging the gap between the two worlds.

The other great master prayed with such fervency and strength that despite his scraggly figure, he was considered a great military leader, even a spiritual warlord by the others.

Our prayer is to be cleansed from our desires, and we are to concentrate all the forces of our personality upon the only desire to be one with God in God's presence, the *Shekina*, here and now.

When the community prays together, the frailer prayers are lifted up by the honesty and brightness of the others. Some even deemed it their special duty to resuscitate, resuscitate and elevate the agonizing prayers in the community and in the wider world.

In our assiduous study and contemplation nothing else exists but the wisdom and knowledge we are approaching; and in our prayer nothing else exists than our self-giving service of God for others.

One is to fully devote oneself to prayer, by identifying oneself with the words, meanings and intentions of the prayer. Thus we are transfigured to an altar *coram Deo*, in the sight of God.

## Masters and Disciples

The good pedagogue illuminates trust from within, and its light brings into being the hidden treasures of her or his disciples. The master shakes the soul of her or his disciples, and keeps them in boiling and ebullience.

God's will is revealed by the *prophets*, among others, living even today among us. Their vaticinal abilities make it possible for them

to see through and within one's soul. While their visitors dwell in their aura, they feel at home in the very presence of God.

If someone really speaks, and another one really absorbs the spoken words, then only *one* single word is enough; the world can be uplifted by one single word; and one single word is enough to cleanse the world from its sins.

A possessor of the proper name (for example, the founder of the school) enjoys the trust of her or his people. This person is particularly entrusted to live fully in her or his God-relation, also on behalf of the others.

The questions of disciples are essential for the response of the master to be born. In that happening, the master serves as the epicentre of a wisdom event, where the Spirit emanates in vibrating waves.

Some emphasize that the teacher must carry the bookshelves on behalf of the whole righteous community, meaning that it is not enough to hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper (or anything else) in the other, but we should also carry a rucksack full of books on our back.

The teacher cannot and therefore should not explain the nexus and coherence of the elements of a situation, but she or he leaves it to the disciples or the community to hermeneutise, understand and interpret the totality from the fragments.

On the other hand, as in a mirror, the duty and responsibility of the disciples and the students is to find their proper and apt master: the one and probably only one who can help and assist them uniquely.

First, before accepting anyone, as in a kind of private and intimate confession, the master inquires and listens to the future disciple's repentance, spiritual struggles, temptations and challenges.

Then, the disciple turns towards her or his master with a lifelong commitment. To bring about the message to all in their service and apostolate, as an effective sign and symbol, the disciples are given a belt and a stick.

Some of the disciples can be regarded as bright commentaries to the master. Ironically, some of the masters would really need good commentaries, but unfortunately none ever gets written.

The teaching is only for those who have ears to listen. The clever can gain a lot from the teaching, almost everything they need, but the fool can end up even more foolish than before listening to it.

As the soul is for the body, so are the righteous for the world. The vocation of the righteous is to receive the fire (but not to interpret it), and to transfigure it into light (but not to traject or project it).

## Joy Makes Peace, Love Reconciles

The life the Hasidic worldview recommends to the righteous is one of *spirited joy*, sunniness and serenity, dynamism and motivation, and a soul constantly lifted up to the Divine, also by songs, cheerful dances and even childlike playfulness.

There are no valid circumstances, where this joy and happiness of the God-friendship cannot be experienced, if in deep humility, purity and cleanness, one fully gives oneself to its quest.

This kind of *blessed naïveté* challenges all forms of earthly vulpiness and fraudulency. Also, in *this* way, the devout persons bring joy to God and try to make God “happy.”

When people love one another, the presence of God, the Shekina, dwells among them. And it would be totally unworthy to one’s love, if it depended on the relations of others towards us.

In general, the duty of a righteous person is to be open and to love each living being in the world, in God’s creation. *Animals* are also to be loved, since their *anima* also originates from the Spirit of God.

Furthermore, one must love even more the hateful and evil persons, in order to complement the hiatus (vacancy) caused by them, the unstitching of love in that place of the world.

Some saints went so far as to be reluctant to regard Evil as anything other than good. Therefore, prayer for our enemies is a spiritual must: the opposite ruins the appearing buds of our rose-souls.

Certainly in Hasidism one can feel the Reign of God in action, a glimpse of that Heavenly dwelling, which is destined to be so different from how it is commonly imagined and described.

Peacemaking, healing and reconciliation are special charismas from God, received by many masters and righteous. Some even have the blessing to resolve conflicts by “just” saying a prayer in the place of the quarrel.

One school emphasizes the giving up of one’s will for the sake of the divine will. On the other hand, another school stresses the adherence to one’s own will, inasmuch it is the emanation of the divine will.

One should not reach anything without God, and also without one's own efforts and cooperation. In any way, the righteous serve as a bridge: they introduce God to the world, and they acquaint God with the world.

In an active and contemplative spiritual life, one can reach even such a coherence of one's strength and forces that each of one's senses can proxy for the functions of the other senses.

Even if our heart is broken, it is not denied by God; but at the same time the heart should be one full entity, too. The storm of the heart is to be calmed down, so that the pugnacious feelings and emotions would recognize God and God's ever-presence.

## Serving Justice in Compassion

One's life conduct is to be centred on the Absolute as its permanent source and engine. One's whole life, even one's drinking of a glass of water, is a holy act, a liturgy at its best, calling forth the presence of God on Earth.

In this sense, one gets acquainted with the value of the *hic et nunc*, the here and now: we are to be authentically and profoundly present in the given moment and in the act we are currently performing.

Our existence should be undivided (atomic) and spontaneous: it is the whole personality of the master which makes a lasting impression on all the righteous around her or him.

Though asceticism has been always present in Hasidism, its main thrust is much more the day-by-day help and dealing with people in need. The helper is to intensively identify herself or himself with the helped one, their stature and destiny.

A righteous one can serve humanity in any position. For example, one teacher worked in a little shop for decades, from where he sent many times customers to other, even smaller shops, to support the poorer storekeepers.

Even Heaven and Hell take place in the sanctuary and in the abyss of the human soul. Heaven and Earth got divided because of our failure and sin. They will reunite when people will make the world, which is entrusted to them, similar to Heaven again. As God is infinite, so is God's service.

One has to aim at order and impartial justice in human community and society; but when one reaches during this endeavour the dimension of human relationships, one immediately must *escape*

*forward* into love and dialogue, because divine justice is beyond human imagination and discernment.

In Hasidism, the faithful can perceive the interconnections of things beyond time and space; therefore their *compassion* is not limited to their context only. Through *intuition* and *empathy*, they engage in healing wounds and whole existences.

God stands beside all those who visit God in justice: but God is most of all there in the value of justice itself, not primarily in any other ways. The search for justice can only happen through justice, and never through deceit.

Judgement and pity forms one unit in God's infinite compassion. But compassion also includes suffering: if during our travelling and pilgrimage we find our neighbour in a swamp, we have to get dirty in order to help her or him out.

## Suffering and Sacrifice

As a general rule, what arrives from the right side is destined to have an opposition. To confront this opposition, a certain master in a lifelong martyrdom took upon himself the appearance of sin, in order to build trust in Satan, cheat her/him, and gain from her/him the secret of sin.

Among the grand Hasidic spiritual values we indeed notice the assumption of human *suffering*, reaching even as far as *sacrificial death* for others, including and involving their failures and sins.

Notions very close to sacrificial death are those of *conversion*, repentance, and the metanoia of the righteous, which are even possible for the sake of and *on behalf of* all one's neighbours.

In this case, the sanctity of the believer sheds light on all people around her or him, making the Shekina, the concrete presence of God dwelling in the world, plausible, possible and believable in their being, too.

Obviously, in this spiritual milieu the whole of existence is holy, from the molecules to the galaxies. God can use even the death of the just for attaining enlightenment for all those standing around her or his deathbed.

The teaching of God makes its presence in all the parts and parcels of a righteous person's spiritual and psychosomatic being. The divine spark enables us to turn every little inch inside us again in the direction of God.

*Sublimation* means making our intentions noble. In line with this idea, the pious are not asked or recommended to destroy their desires and passions, but to reconnect them to God and the Divine.

In this way, there is wisdom, teaching, knowledge and behest revealed in each phenomenon of life, but only for those who have eyes to see, and for those who have ears to listen.

**Suggested Reading**

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