

Book I

HASIDISM AND MODERN MAN

I

It is more than fifty years since I began to acquaint the West with that religious movement known as Hasidism, which arose in the eighteenth century but extends into our time. If today, reporting and clarifying, I wish to speak of that work as a whole, this is not—I think I can say this with confidence—for the sake of my personal work. In performing this work I never had anything else in mind than an honest artisan has when he carries out a commission to the best of his ability. I speak, rather, for the sake of that to which my work wished and wishes to point. Much in it has at times been misunderstood and needs clarification.

Commission, I said—but is this comparison permissible? Was there someone who commissions? No, that there certainly was not; no one told me that he needed what I then made. And yet, it has also not been a literary project. There was something that commanded me, yes, which even took hold of me as an instrument at its disposal. What was that? Perhaps just Hasidism itself? It certainly was not this. Hasidism wishes to work exclusively within the boundaries of Jewish tradition and to concern no one outside of them. It was—so I might even

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venture to express it—something that hid itself in Hasidism and would, or rather should, go out into the world. To help it do this I was not unsuited.

Now I was still at that time, to be sure, an immature man; the so-called *Zeitgeist* still had power over me. To my readiness to make an adequate testimony to the great reality of faith disclosed to me through books and men was joined something of the widespread tendency of that time to display the contents of foreign religions to readers who wavered between desire for information and sheer curiosity. Besides, I did not yet know how to hold in check my inner inclination to transform poetically the narrative material. I did not, to be sure, bring in any alien motifs; still I did not listen attentively enough to the crude and ungainly but living folk-tone which could be heard from this material. At work in me here, too, was a natural reaction against the attitude of most Jewish historians of the nineteenth century toward Hasidism, in which they found nothing but wild superstition. The need, in the face of this misunderstanding, to point out the purity and loftiness of Hasidism led me to pay all too little attention to its popular vitality. Thus I can today to some extent still affirm these early attempts as a piece of work; as fulfillment of the task placed upon me, however, they have long since ceased to satisfy me. The representation of the Hasidic teaching that I gave in them was essentially faithful; but where I retold the legendary tradition, I still did so just as the Western author that I was.

Only in the course of the decade that followed the first publications did my authorship become a service, even though its independence could naturally only grow, and not lessen.

In the year before the first World War, the approach of the first stage of a catastrophe in the most exact sense of the term became evident to me. At that time, I gradually began to realize what later, after the end of the War, fulminated within me to

certainly: that the human spirit is either bound to existence or, even though it be of the most astonishing caliber, it is nothing before the decisive judgment. Note well, this was no question of a philosophical conviction; it was not a question of what is usually described as existentialism. It was a question, rather, of the claim of existence itself, which had grown irresistible. The realization that at that time grew in me, that of human life as the possibility of a dialogue with being, was only the intellectual expression of just this certainty or just this claim.

At the same time, but in a special osmosis with it, my relationship to Hasidism was ever more basically transformed. To be sure, I knew from the beginning that Hasidism was not a teaching which was realized by its adherents in this or that measure, but a way of life, to which the teaching provided the indispensable commentary. But now it became overpoweringly clear that this life was involved in a mysterious manner in the task that had claimed me. I could not become a Hasid. It would have been an impermissible masquerading had I taken on the Hasidic manner of life—I who had a wholly other relation to Jewish tradition, since I must distinguish in my innermost being between what is commanded me and what is not commanded me. It was necessary, rather, to take into my own existence as much as I actually could of what had been truly exemplified for me there, that is to say, of the realization of that dialogue with being whose possibility my thought had shown me. I say, to be sure, “task,” and I say, “It needed to be done.” But in truth there was never anything like an intention or a project—it happened only as it happened.

That is what I sought to indicate when in the spring of 1924 in the Foreword to one of my Hasidic books¹ I wrote: “Since

1 Martin Buber, *Der Grosse Maggid und Seine Nachfolge* (Frankfurt; Rütten und Loening, 1924).

I began my work on Hasidic literature, I have done this work for the sake of the teaching and the way. But at that time I believed that one might relate to them merely as an observer. Since then I have realized that the teaching is there that one may learn it and the way that one may walk on it. The deeper I realized this, so much the more this work, against which my life measured and ventured itself, became for me question, suffering, and also even consolation.”

Out of these transformations the work has taken shape in the special form in which I have now for the most part retold the crude and shapeless traditional material. It is, in my opinion, a valid form of literature, which I call legendary anecdote. It has not developed out of literary presuppositions on the path of literary attempts, but out of the simple necessity to create a verbal expression adequate to an overpowering objective reality. It was the reality of the exemplary lives, of the lives reported as exemplary, of a great series of leaders of Hasidic communities. They were not reported in connected biography, but just in a tremendous series of instances, limited events in which something was at times spoken, not seldom, however, only done, only lived. Yet even the dumb happening spoke—it told the exemplary. And, indeed, it did not tell it didactically; no “moral” was attached to the event, but it spoke, even as a life-event speaks, and if a saying was included, its effect too was like that of a life-event. But since the whole was handed down in crude formlessness, the new teller was obliged to reconstruct the pure event, nothing less but also nothing more. Thus grew the form of the legendary anecdote. They are called anecdotes because each one of them communicates an event complete in itself, and legendary because at the base of them lies the stammering of inspired witnesses who witnessed to what befell them, to what they comprehended as well as to what was incomprehensible to them; for the legitimately in-

spired has an honest memory that can nonetheless outstrip all imagination.

This form has enabled me to portray the Hasidic life in such a way that it becomes visible as at once reality and teaching. Even where I had to let theory speak, I could relate it back to the life.

But I became more and more aware of a fact that has become of utmost significance to me: that the kernel of this life is capable of working on men even today, when most of the powers of the Hasidic community itself have been given over to decay or destruction, and it is just on the present-day West that it is capable of working in an especial manner. After the rise and decline of that life in the Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian ghettos, this kernel has entered into a contemporaneity, which is still, to be sure, only reminiscent, only an indication in the spirit, but even so can accomplish something in this manifestation that was basically foreign to the reality of that time. From here comes an answer to the crisis of Western man that has become fully manifest in our age. It is a partial answer only, not an ideological one, however, but one stemming directly out of reality and permeated by it. That life arose once as the reply of the primal Jewish faith to the utterly unfruitful exaltation of the pseudo-messianic movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which confounded redemption and liberation, even as they confounded the divine and the human. It opposed to this salvational confusion a hallowing of the everyday in which the demonic was overcome through being transformed.

II

What is of greatest importance 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.

This separation has formed a part of the foundations of every religion. Everywhere the sacred is removed and set apart from the fullness of the things, properties, and actions belonging to the universal, and the sacred now forms in its totality a self-contained holiness outside of which the diffused profane must pitch its tent.

The consequence of this separation in the history of man is a twofold one. Religion is thereby assured a firm province whose untouchableness is ever again guaranteed it by the representatives of the state and of society, not, for the most part, without compensation. But at the same time the adherents of religion are thereby enabled to allow the essential application of their relation of faith to fulfill itself within this province alone without the sacred being given a corresponding power in the rest of life, and particularly in its public sphere.

In Judaism the border between the two realms appears at first glance to be drawn with utmost sharpness. To one coming from the outside, the great mass of rituals appears like something existing for itself. Moreover, even from within much testifies to the sharpness of this separation: thus the invocation of God spoken at the end of the Sabbath as that which separates the sacred from the profane. One need only note how many everyday actions are introduced by a blessing, however, to recognize how deep the hallowing reaches here into what is in itself unsanctified. One not only blesses God every morning on awakening because he has allowed one to awaken, but also when one begins to use a new house or piece of clothing or tool because one has been preserved in life to this hour. Thus the simple fact of continued earthly existence is here sanctified at each occasion that offers itself and thereby also this occasion itself. The concept is progressively formed, however, that the separation between the realms is only a provisional one. The commands of the religious law, accordingly, only delimit the sphere

which is already claimed for hallowing, the sphere in which the preparation and education for every action's becoming holy takes place. In the messianic world all shall be holy. In Hasidism this tendency reaches a highly realistic consummation. The profane is now regarded only as a preliminary stage of the holy; it is the not-yet-hallowed. But human life is destined to be hallowed in all its natural, that is, its created structure. "God dwells where one lets Him in," says a Hasidic saying; the hallowing of man means this letting in. Basically the holy in our world is nothing other than what is open to transcendence, as the profane is nothing other than what at first is closed off from it, and hallowing is the event of opening out.

Here a misunderstanding must be avoided. One readily ascribes to Judaism a "religious activism" which does not know the reality of grace and pursues vain self-hallowing or self-salvation. In reality, in Judaism the relation between man's action and God's grace is guarded as a mystery, even as that between human freedom and God's all-knowing, a mystery which is ultimately identical with that of the relation between God and man. Man cannot take himself in hand, so to speak, in order to hallow himself: he is never in his own hand. But there is something that he has retained as a creature, something that is given over just to him and expected just from him; it is called the beginning. A saying explains the opening word of the Hebrew Bible, the word *b'reshit*, "In the beginning," in this fashion: the world was created for the sake of the beginning, for the sake of making a beginning, for the sake of the human beginning-ever-afew. The fact of creation means an ever renewed situation of choice. Hallowing is an event which commences in the depths of man, there where choosing, deciding, beginning takes place. The man who thus begins enters into the hallowing. But he can only do this if he begins just as man and presumes to no superhuman holiness.

The true hallowing of a man is the hallowing of the human in him. Therefore the Biblical command, "Holy men shall you be unto me" has received Hasidic interpretation thus: "*Humanly* holy shall you be unto me."

In life, as Hasidism understands and proclaims it, there is, accordingly, no essential distinction between sacred and profane spaces, between sacred and profane times, between sacred and profane actions, between sacred and profane conversations. At each place, in each hour, in each act, in each speech the holy can blossom forth. As an example that rises to symbolic heights, I cite the story of Rabbi Shmelke's sleep. In order that his study in the holy books should not suffer too long interruption, Rabbi Shmelke used to sleep in no other way than sitting, his head on his arm; but between his fingers he held a burning candle that awakened him as soon as the flame touched his hand. When Rabbi Elimelech visited him and recognized the still imprisoned might of his holiness, he carefully prepared for him a couch and induced him with much persuasion to stretch himself out on it for a while. Then he shut and darkened the window. Rabbi Shmelke only awoke when it was already broad daylight. He noticed how long he had slept, but it did not bother him; for he felt an unknown, sun-like clarity. He went into the prayer house and prayed before the community, as was his custom. To the community, however, it appeared as if they had never before heard him, so did the might of his holiness compel and liberate all. When he sang the song of the Red Sea, they had to pull up their caftans in order that the waves rearing up to the right and the left should not wet them.

Here the anti-ascetic character of Hasidic teaching also finds expression. No mortification of the urges is needed, for all natural life can be hallowed: one can live it with holy intention. The Hasidic teaching likes to explain this intention in con-

nection with the kabbalistic myth of the holy sparks. With the “breaking of the world-vessels,” which in the era before creation could not withstand the creative overflow, sparks have fallen into all things and are now imprisoned in them until ever again a man uses a thing in holiness and thus liberates the sparks that it conceals. “All that man possesses,” says the founder of Hasidism, the Baal-Shem, “conceals sparks which belong to the root of his soul and wish to be elevated by him to their origin.” And he says further, “Therefore one should have mercy on his tools and all his possessions; one should have mercy on the holy sparks.” Even in food there dwell holy sparks, and eating can be holier than fasting; the latter is only the preparation for hallowing, the former can be hallowing itself.

What Hasidism here expresses mythically is a central knowledge that is communicable only in images, not in concepts. But it is by no means exclusively bound to this one mythical tradition. The same teaching is expressed in a wholly different, Biblically-based image: “Every creature, plant and animal offers itself to man, but by man all is offered to God. When man with all his limbs purifies and hallows himself to an offering, he purifies and hallows the creature.” Here the concept becomes still clearer that man is commissioned and summoned as a cosmic mediator to awaken a holy reality in things through holy contact with them.

The same basic thought attains expression, not in such traditional form but in a wholly personal way, in the conversation which has been preserved for us of a great *zaddik* with his son. He asks the son, “With what do you pray?” The son understands the meaning of the question to be, On what meditation do you base your prayer? He replies, “Everything of great stature shall bow before Thee.” Then he asks the father, “And with what do you pray?” “With the floor,” answers the father, “and

with the bench.” This is no metaphor; the word “with” is now meant quite directly: in praying the rabbi joins himself to the floor on which he stands and the bench on which he sits—they, the things that are, to be sure, made by human hand, yet like all things have their origin in God, help him to pray. And he helps them pray, indeed; he raises them, the wooden floor and the wooden bench, to origin, to their origin, he “elevates” them.

But this “elevation” is by no means to be understood as removing the worldly character of things or spiritualizing the world, although something of this is to be found in Hasidic doctrine. The life of which I speak, the exemplary life, has proved itself stronger than the thought, and in the measure that the teaching became the commentary of this life, it had to adapt itself to it. What is ultimately in question here finds naive yet true expression in another narrative. It is told of a zaddik that one once spoke before him of the great misery of the human race. Sunk in grief, he listened. Then he raised his head. “Let us,” he cried, “draw God into the world, and all will be stilled.” One must not understand this bold speech as if a presumptuous “activism” comes to words in it. It stems rather from the same spirit as that saying which we have already quoted, “God dwells where one lets Him in.” God wants—that is the meaning of it—to dwell in the world, but only when the world wants to let Him in. Let us, the Hasidic rabbi says to the world, prepare for God a dwelling-place into which He desires to enter; when it is prepared by us, by the world of its own will—we let God in. The hallowing of the world will be this letting-in. But grace wants to help the world to hallow itself.

None of this presupposes, however, that God does not dwell in His creation. That would indeed contradict that verse of the Scriptures in which it is said of God, He makes His dwelling “with them in the midst of their uncleanness,” a verse

which does not speak, to be sure, of a permanent dwelling—that would be described otherwise—but just of a temporary residing. Also the post-Biblical conception of the Shekina, later given manifold mythical development by the mystics and intimately familiar to Hasidism, the conception of the divine “indwelling,” a hypostasis or emanation that joins itself to the human race exiled from Paradise, or to Israel driven out of its land, and wanders with it over the earth—it too means only the divine participation in the destiny of His sinful and suffering creation: the work of the “stilling” of this suffering, of which the Hasidic tale speaks, is no longer of a historical nature. Here, as ever again in Hasidism, the eschatological conception breaks into the lived hour and permeates it.

We must, therefore, distinguish within Hasidic life and Hasidic teaching between two kinds of “letting God in.” This distinction can be clarified through looking once more at two different sayings.

The one is attached to the conception of the Shekina. The verse of the Psalm, “A stranger am I on the earth, do not conceal from me your commandment,” was expounded thus by a zaddik: “You are, like me, a stranger on the earth and your indwelling has no resting place: So do not withdraw yourself from me, but disclose to me your commandment so that I can become your friend.” God helps with His nearness the man who wants to hallow himself and his world.

In order to understand correctly what manner of existence is meant here, we will do well to place another saying of the same zaddik by its side: “The sparks which fell down from the primal creation into the covering shells and were transformed into stones, plants, and animals, they all ascend to their source through the consecration of the pious who works on them in holiness, uses them in holiness, consumes them in holiness.” Thus is the man created who calls himself a stranger on earth.

The second saying stems from a later zaddik. It runs, "The peoples of the earth also believe that there are two worlds; 'in that world,' they say. The difference is this: they understand the two worlds to be removed and cut off from each other. But Israel believes that the two worlds are one in their ground and that they shall become one in their reality."

Only the two sayings taken together give us the basic content of Hasidic faith.

III

The central example of the Hasidic overcoming of the distance between the sacred and the profane points to an explanation of what is to be understood by the fact that Hasidism has its word to speak in the crisis of Western man.

This crisis was already recognized by Kierkegaard a hundred years ago as an unprecedented shaking of the foundations of man as man. But it is only in our generation that we have seriously begun to occupy ourselves with the fact that in this crisis something begins to be decided that is bound up in the closest manner with a decision about ourselves.

Modern thinkers have undertaken to give a causal explanation of the crisis through various partial aspects: Marx through the radical "alienation" of man caused by the economic and technical revolutions, and the psychoanalysts through individual or even collective neuroses. But no one of these attempts at explanation nor all of them together can yield an adequate understanding of what concerns us. We must take the injured wholeness of man upon us as a life burden in order to press beyond all that is merely symptomatic, and grasp the true sickness through which those motifs receive the force to work as they have worked. Those who, instead of this, contemplate the cruel problematic as a subject of unsurpassable interest, who

know how to describe and even perhaps to praise it, contribute, at times with the highest gifts, to the massive decisionlessness whose true name is the decision for nothing.

An especially threatening trait of the crisis is the secularized form of the radical separation between the sacred and the profane. The sacred has become in many cases a concept empty of reality, now of merely historical and ethnological significance. But its character of detachment has found an heir. One no longer knows the holy face to face; but one believes that 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 can now enjoy it without having to fear awkward consequences. One has ideas, one just has them and displays them to one's own satisfaction and occasionally also to that of others. One seems to take them with grim seriousness; but that must be the end of it. One enthrones them on golden thrones to which their limbs are chained. No false piety has ever attained this concentrated degree of inauthenticity.

Only now has one basically got rid of the holy and the command of hallowing.

Over against all this behavior of present-day man, Hasidism sets the simple truth that the wretchedness of our world is grounded in its resistance to the entrance of the holy into lived life. The spirit was not spun in the brain; it has been from all eternity, and life can receive it into human reality. A life that does not seek to realize what the living person, in the ground of his self-awareness, understands or glimpses as the right is not merely unworthy of the spirit; it is also unworthy of life.

Especially important within the secularized division between the above and the below is the sickening of our contact with things and beings. The thinking of the age knows how to

speak about things and beings in an illuminating fashion, but the great insight that our relations to things and beings form the marrow of our existence seems to have become alien to life. The Hasidic teaching of the holy intercourse with all existing beings opposes this corrosion of the living power of meeting as the progressive evasion of man before the meeting with God in the world.

IV

I have not converted the message of Hasidism into solid concepts; I was concerned to preserve its mythical as well as its epic essence. I cannot concur with the postulate of the hour—to demythologize religion. For myth is not the subsequent clothing of a truth of faith; it is the unarbitrary testimony of the image-making vision and the image-making memory, and the conceptual cannot be refined out of it. No sermonic teaching can replace the myth; but there can certainly be sermonic teachings that are able to renew it through bearing it uninjured into the present. In order that this may be possible, where myth has taken on a gnostic nature, i.e., where it has been employed to represent the mystery of transcendent being as knowable, it must, of course, be freed from this nature, this unnatural state, and restored to its original condition. Such restoration and renewal was accomplished by Hasidism with the myths permeated by gnosis that it took over from the Kabbala. My transmitting of the Hasidic message is no speculative theology; where myth is here perceivable, it is one that has entered into the lived life of seven generations, as whose late-born interpreter I function.

In this form I have sought, in a lifelong work, to introduce the Hasidic life-teaching to present-day Western man. It has often been suggested to me that I should liberate this teaching

from its “confessional limitations,” as people like to put it, and proclaim it as an unfettered teaching of mankind. Taking such a “universal” path would have been for me pure arbitrariness. In order to speak to the world what I have heard, I am not bound to step into the street. I may remain standing in the door of my ancestral house: here too the word that it uttered does not go astray.

The Hasidic word says that the worlds can fulfill their destiny of becoming one through man’s life becoming one. But how can that be understood? Is then a completed unity of living thinkable anywhere else than in the transcendence itself? Israel’s confession of the oneness of God says, indeed, not merely that outside of Him there is no God, but also that He alone is unity. Here the interpreter must enter in. If man can become “humanly holy,” i.e., become holy as man, in the measure and in the manner of man, and, indeed, as it is written, “to Me,” i.e., in the face of God, then he, the individual man, can also—in the measure of his personal ability and in the manner of his personal possibility—become one in the sight of God. Man cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human; he can approach Him through becoming human. To become human is what he, this individual man, has been created for. This, so it seems to me, is the eternal core of Hasidic life and of Hasidic teaching.