

Introduction

Hasidism, the Hasidic Homily, and Kalonymus Kalman Epstein

THIS BOOK IS A journey through another book that was first printed in 1842 and was afterward reprinted numerous times. It includes material from homilies delivered by Kalonymus Kalman haLevi Epstein who lived in Kraków, Poland and was first printed some nineteen years after his death in 1823. The literal meaning of the title of the book, *Ma'or va-shemesh*, would translate into English as “Light (or Luminary) and Sun.”

Words expressing light are prominent in Hasidism and in the older tradition of Kabbalah in which it has its roots. The central literary masterpiece of medieval Kabbalah is the Zohar, the title-word meaning “radiance” or “brilliant light.” Light is a metaphor for the Divine and also for the Torah, grasped as a manifestation of the light of the Divine. The readings of verses from the Torah comprising *Ma'or va-shemesh* grew out of a conception that viewed the very letters of the Torah-text as forms reflecting a Light that itself transcends the more limited meaning of the words they comprise. It is in that sense that this collection of passages from *Ma'or va-shemesh*, along with its running commentary, is entitled “Letters of Light,” which would approximate the actual sense of the original Hebrew title.

The preacher, whose words we will meet, came, quite early in life, to identify with a stream of Jewish religious life known as Hasidism. The word *hasid*, a word with a long history, can perhaps best be translated for practical purposes as “pietist,” and the term “Hasidism” came to refer specifically to a pietistic stream that emerged in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. Historians view it as a transmutation of an earlier pietism, highly ascetic in nature, which was significantly transformed by

the teachings attributed to the Baal Shem Tov (Israel ben Eliezer, d. 1760, known as the *Besht*) and which parted from that older asceticism in favor of an emphasis and even a requirement of serving God in joy.

Though the *Besht* did not write any books, he succeeded in gathering around him a circle of associates and followers. During the decade following his death, the *Maggid*, Dov Baer of Mezherich (d. 1772), went far to develop and crystallize a worldview based upon teachings ascribed to the *Besht*, as Hasidism began gradually to draw an increasingly larger following among Jews in certain areas of Eastern Europe. Though Hasidism emerged within the world of Jewish tradition as it had developed over many centuries, based upon talmudic law and learning, it took exception to the attitude that regarded talmudic study *in itself* as the supreme value in Jewish religious life. Hasidism evolved in a direction that came to express itself in a different type of religious leadership, that of the *tzaddik* or the *rebbe*, a holy man touched by spiritual illumination, rather than the traditional *rav* devoted primarily to study and known for his legal decisions.

Allowing for a considerably broader frame-of-reference, one might grasp Hasidism as an example within Jewish tradition of an inclination and ideological bent that is present also in the history of other religious traditions. Those traditions, too, experienced a temperamental split as some followers were drawn more to emotional experience than to intellectual formulations and creedal statements and sought attunement to a deeper level of the self. Sufism, in Islam, and medieval Christian mysticism are pronounced examples, and one might mention also the pietistic revolt that emerged within German Protestantism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹ And though Kalonymus Kalman haLevi Epstein of Kraków, like other Hasidic masters, was firmly and deeply rooted in the world of traditional Jewish texts and practices, certain tendencies evident in his homilies might well suggest an affinity with voices within other traditions that related to their own very different roots in terms of some of the same general inclinations.

Ma'or va-shemesh is just one example of a type of literature that voiced the teachings associated with Hasidism. Beginning in 1780, just two decades following the death of the Baal Shem Tov, a stream of books began to appear containing homilies or homiletical notes of the teachers of Hasidism. With rare exception, the Hasidic worldview and its ideas

1. See Stoffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*.

and themes were communicated principally in the form of sermonic discussions on the weekly Torah-portions, in itself a highly traditional form, even while the content of those same homilies might suggest, in various ways, a radically innovative understanding of the tradition.²

As a written statement of oral presentations the printed homilies might comprise an imperfect record of the sermonic discussions themselves; in addition, such texts were not the most widely printed and disseminated within the population influenced by Hasidism and, in terms of Hasidism's growth, were likely less significant than legendary traditions of a very different character.³ The homily-texts, nevertheless, serve as the indispensable key to our understanding the religious thought of the Hasidic stream during its earlier period. Taken together, the Hasidic homily-texts might be approached as a highly creative reading of the Torah (the Pentateuch), the basic Jewish sacred text which is read in the synagogue and is also studied and discussed in more informal settings, especially on the Shabbat on which any particular Torah-portion is read.

Beyond its role as a vehicle of communication on the part of the teacher and preacher, the Hasidic homily reveals how the Torah-text lived within the consciousness of the Hasidic Masters and what they heard or overheard in it. Not only the meaning, but the very texture of the Torah-text underwent transformation in the Hasidic homily. Even as they utilized traditions of interpretation inherited from much earlier periods, the Hasidic Masters and teachers would expound a passage or verse from the Torah in the light of their own specific complex of values, revolving largely around the importance of *p'nimi'ut*—the innerness and depth-dimension of the self, of a holy deed, of the Torah or of any particular legislation included in the Torah, and of existence itself.

In expounding the text of the Torah, the Hasidic preacher tended to grasp the more ultimate setting and reference of any particular passage from the Torah to be the Jew's inner life as it confronts both the complexity of the human make-up and the unique soulfulness present at the deepest level of a person's psyche. Hasidism defies definition; it is many things that might even contradict one another and must be studied in relation to an entire complex of historical and social factors and inherited

2. Dan, *Sifrut ha-musar v'had'rush*, 267.

3. Gries, *Sefer, sofer vesippur*, 27–30, 47–68; *The Book in the Jewish World 1700–1900*, 85–87.

ideas, but central to the homily-literature of its teachers is this core theme and quality of *innerness* and *interiority*.⁴

In the Hasidic homily, what in the Torah-text itself would appear to relate to what is out there in the objective world is frequently read as an allusion to what occurs within the self. While a passage from the Torah might convey details of a particular type of institution or cultic or judicial practice, the Hasidic homilist overheard in the same text a call for *inner* transformation, for a happening and drama that transpires within a person's own inner self. And furthermore, any passage from the Torah, irrespective of subject-matter, when sifted through the interpretative process of the Hasidic homily, tends to acquire a devotional character. This "character-change" in the texture of the Torah-text suggests an implicit understanding, to the homilist's mind, that the tone of his homily reflects the real and more ultimate character of the Torah itself which addresses a person's inner life and the need to serve and worship God in the most comprehensive sense. Though often bypassing the textual context of any particular passage in the Torah, the Hasidic homilist read even single words or phrases as keys that open the listener or reader to introspective insight, reading such elements as existential comments upon human life, emotions, conflicts, and growth in spiritual awareness.

What the text of the Torah would seem to present as a record of the past is read in the Hasidic homily more commonly as an allusion to states of mind and to changes within the self, with the result that specific moments in the "sacred history" recounted in the Torah become archetypal events that might radiate any person's life at any time. Words which, in the Torah-text, have a precise context in the life of a particular individual or even in the historical experience of the people of Israel are read by the homilist in a way to apply to every person at any time. One might express that tendency in the claim that the Hasidic homily aspired to read the Torah in the present (or "ever-present") tense, as a narrative that is constantly occurring.⁵

Already in *Toldot Ya 'akov Yosef*, the very first printed Hasidic book, Ya 'akov Yosef, the preacher of Polonnoye, repeatedly insisted that the true meaning of any element in the Torah must have validity and relevance concerning all persons and all times. The most relevant meaning of a verse—the homilist assumed—is one that applies to *all* time, not

4. See Margolin, *Mikdash 'adam*.

5. Wineman, "How the Hasidic Masters Read the Torah."

exclusively to a single point-of-time in the past or limited to a specific occasion during the course of the year. In this light, Kalonymus Kalman, like others, explained that though something in the Torah-text may have been occasioned by a one-time happening or circumstance, it nevertheless contains a message that is not time-bound but rather speaks to all persons and to all of time. And accordingly, for example, the Kraków master, like some others, would interpret *matza* (unleavened bread associated with the exodus from Egypt) and manna (the wondrous food that descended for the Israelites during their wanderings in the wilderness) as having a meaning quite independent of the larger biblical narrative in which they appear in the Torah.

The mode of interpretation permeating the classical Hasidic homily-texts presumes that the surface-level of the Torah comprises a garment of the Torah's deeper, inner character. Every letter in that garment is significant, even while the Torah, in its present form with which we are familiar, is a translation of that inner and more sublime state of the Torah to our own level of being in order to accommodate the nature of our own physical and finite reality, a theme of significance repeatedly brought out in *Ma'or va-shemesh*. That radical recognition, echoing some much older sources, echoes in the way the Hasidic homilists tend to go beyond the surface meaning (*p'shat*) as they read the text of the Torah as a network of allusions and overtones suggesting a deeper and more inner meaning. The Hasidic homily sought to understand the garment in the light of that more sublime core.⁶

Hasidism emerged in the small towns and villages of the Ukraine and Podolia, spreading afterward to other areas of Eastern Europe. Only closer to the onset of the nineteenth-century did Hasidism begin to make inroads in Poland. Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, who came to Kraków at a rather tender age, became a central figure in Hasidism's emergence in Kraków, the second largest city in Poland.

The young Kalonymus Kalman once went to hear Elimelekh of Lyzhansk (d. 1772) when the latter was speaking in Kraków and was much moved by the words of that noted Hasidic master, himself a student of the Maggid, Dov Baer of Mezherich. In the homilies collected in *Ma'or va-shemesh*, Kalonymus Kalman frequently refers to statements of Elimelekh. Identifying himself as a follower of Elimelekh, he would have had to stand his ground against the leadership of the local community at

6. Note *S'fat 'emet*, IV, 3b (*B'midbar*).

a time when the conflict between the followers of Hasidism and their Opponents often resulted in various accusations and counter-accusations which were sometimes brought to the governmental authorities. At that time Kraków Jewry, which continued to live in the shadow of the memory of the reknown sixteenth-century rabbinic scholar, Moses Isserles, was not hospitable to efforts to introduce Hasidism in that city. In 1785 for example, the rabbinate in Kraków proclaimed a ban on adherents of Hasidism, and a dozen years later a similar ban was proclaimed there against reading Hasidic texts.⁷

While Kalonymus drew a following, only after his death did those followers succeed in establishing their own synagogue in the city, and he never established a Hasidic dynasty that would continue after him. Neither he nor his sons succeeded in building any kind of enduring movement that looked to Kalonymus Kalman as its forebearer. His real legacy is that collection of homilies that outlived him. In referring to him in this work as one of the Hasidic Masters, the term does not connote any official position of leadership in a Hasidic community (a *tzaddik*) but rather an exponent of Hasidic teaching.

Even when touching upon complex topics in his homilies, Kalonymus Kalman tended to speak in rather simple terms. And he employed a conversational tone, a trait that may have accounted for the popularity of that collection of his homilies. Together with that simplicity, however, the reader cannot but appreciate the artistry involved in the preacher's reading a sacred text often clearly against its very grain to derive a startling, unexpected interpretation. Far from reiterating the obvious, he tended to draw from a biblical verse some insight exceedingly remote from what would appear to be conveyed in the source itself. That art of transformation with all its subtleties, along with the preacher's occasional ability to unearth a precious note of paradox in earlier texts and teachings, assigns to the collection of his homilies a place among significant Jewish literary texts.

Upon analysis, the most memorable homilies of Kalonymus Kalman Epstein reveal aspects of an anatomy of the Hasidic homily in which a biblical passage or law is severed from some significant aspect of its own context. That context might be the larger narrative to which it belongs or a detail clearly intrinsic to the biblical passage. And when a verse or narrative-fragment or law is severed from its more obvious context, the homilist connects it to a different context. That new context might be a

7. Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania*, 180, 196.

specific value or theme found in Jewish tradition or in Hasidic teaching or a more unexpected theme. The reader can note that kind of substitution of a new context in the more impressive and striking homilies in *Ma'or va-shemesh*, homilies in which the preacher emerges as a true artist. And the artistry of Kalonymus Kalman is revealed most clearly when the master substitutes a significantly more sublime context for what appears as a rather prosaic passage from the Torah.

The volume, printed almost two decades after the death of Kalonymus Kalman Epstein, is structured as a continuous running commentary on the (Written) Torah as read in the synagogue over the course of a year and is composed of homilies or material from homilies, presumably delivered in a prayer-room in the residence of the preacher himself. *Ma'or va-shemesh* is a decidedly Hasidic reading of the Torah, but it also reflects the thinking of a particular person and the ongoing tensions within his own mind and consciousness.

Beyond questions of authorship and editing and beyond the preacher's literary strategies, a text of this nature reveals the master's personal understanding of the Torah itself and of its very nature and character. Throughout history and extending to the present day in any tradition, a sacred text is read in a way that mirrors something of the mind and the values, the sensitivities and inner wrestlings of the person engaged in reading it. Every example of transformation of meaning in *Ma'or va-shemesh* represents his reading the Torah in a manner consonant with the stirrings of his own soul, and in that sense *Ma'or va-shemesh* is a kind of profile of Kalonymus Kalman Epstein himself. While he drew in large measure from the literature of traditional Jewish lore, including Midrash, in his homilies—as in those of his Hasidic peers—homily itself becomes a kind of midrash as the master's pietistic and mystic values are grounded in a creative reading of the Torah and of later texts.

His sensitivities include a powerful sense of the uniqueness of each person—and even the uniqueness of every blade of grass. They include, as well, a recoiling from thinking of the Divine as an agent of punishment. Kalonymus Kalman went to great lengths, for example, to retell the biblical account of the drowning of the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds in a way that separates the fate of the Egyptians from any intentional divine, punitive action. And an emphasis on compassion and forgiveness colors even his readings of episodes in the Torah that themselves would clearly seem to exemplify judgment and wrath. In a remarkable stroke of transformation, the Kraków master, with recourse to *g'matria* (an

interpretative strategy based upon the numerical value of letters), read the command in the Torah to obliterate the very memory of Amalek, a desert tribe associated with the extremes of cruelty and inhumanity, as a code to transform egotism and arrogance into love and into a sense of the all-pervading divine Oneness.

The homilies disclose the preacher's ongoing inner tensions as he wrestled with the relationship between the innerness of the Torah and the "revealed" Torah, including both its surface-meaning and the tradition of interpretation and rabbinic law that it engendered. Similarly, he struggled, without resolution, but in highly interesting ways, with the question of the primacy of the group versus that of the individual, the values of the inner life in solitude vis-à-vis those of the community. The Kraków preacher's insights into that polarity might prefigure some very contemporary discussion and issues arising specifically in our own time.

The very title given to the collection, *Ma'or va-shemesh*, points to an emphasis upon light. Identifying the Torah and its very letters as manifestations of divine Light, Kalonymus Kalman was instinctively driven to interpret any and every element in the text of the Torah in a way that he felt expresses and exemplifies that Light. And though Kalonymus Kalman Epstein was certainly a child and product of his time, significant elements of that collection of his homilies might also suggest some more modern sensitivities and can serve as a source of spiritual illumination to those living in our own hour of time.

NOTE: In the 1877 printing of *Ma'or va-shemesh*, from which the passages in this collection were translated, the homilies generally opened with a quotation from the appropriate Torah-portion, often in very abbreviated form with the assumption that the reader would easily and immediately associate the brief quotation with its larger textual context and its link with the homily. This edition has often expanded those very brief passages or fragments for the purpose of enabling the reader to grasp the actual connection between the quotation and the homily. Such additions are generally placed in parentheses, and certain explanatory additions, quite indispensable for grasping the precise meaning of the biblical text in terms of its relevance to the homily, are placed in square brackets. And when the particular nuance in the way the homilist read a biblical verse differs from the JTS translation, the homilist's emphasis appears in parentheses within the translation.