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Hasidic mysticism as an activism

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Abstract: **In her important work, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, the late Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer depicted early eighteenth-century Hasidism as a movement with pronounced 'quietist tendencies'. In this paper I raise several difficulties with this thesis. These follow from social-activist features of early Hasidism as well as from a selection from the writings of leading early Hasidic masters. I conclude that a major stream of thought in early Hasidim was not quietist in tendency. Finally, I compare the intentions of the masters I cite to some non-quietist themes in Eastern mystical thought.**

Few religious movements have been portrayed in such opposite ways as has the Jewish movement of Hasidism. Martin Buber pictured Hasidism as non-mystical and, '[o]pen to the world, pious toward the world, in love with the world'.[1] The Hasidim wished to 'redeem' the world by an 'I–Thou' relationship with it. On the other hand, the Israeli scholar of *kabbalah*, Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer, found in Hasidism a mystical 'tendency', as she puts it, of 'indifference towards the world, society, and the self', and of 'disinterest in the world and in the question of its redemption'.[2] Schatz-Uffenheimer acknowledges a conflicting value, in the Hasidic notion of *avodah be-gashmiut*, or 'corporeal service'. This involved seeing all of one's actions, and not just the formal commandments, as service of God. In Schatz-Uffenheimer's view, the Hasidim *devised* corporeal service in order to restrain their tendencies to world-withdrawal.

Buber and Schatz-Uffenheimer seem to have shared a belief in Albert Schweitzer's statement that '[a]ll mysticism is unsatisfying, because it denies the world and life'.[3] Thus Buber, to preserve the world-affirming nature of Hasidism, wrongly suppressed its mystical character. Schatz-Uffenheimer, conversely, saw correctly that Hasidim was a mystical movement, and, for that reason, was moved to excessive diligence in accentuating its world-denying character.

I have published a critical study of Buber's account of early Hasidism in which I argued that his non-mystical portrayal was not faithful to early Hasidism.[4] Here

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my focus will be on Schatz-Uffenheimer. I wish to introduce an important, mainstream Hasidic counter to her thesis that Hasidism displayed 'quietist' tendencies of inaction toward the world and that corporeal service was *therefore* a conflicting motif in Hasidic practice. This alternative may be called 'Hasidic mysticism as an activism'. Since this stream of early Hasidism existed, and was hardly peripheral, we may conclude that the characterization of early Hasidism as dominated by quietist tendencies must be severely qualified, at the least. While I do not draw the conclusion that *all* of early Hasidism attests to an anti-quietist ethos, I will have shown that what was reasonably *the* mainstream of that early movement was indeed not describable in the terms of Schatz-Uffenheimer.

The Schatz-Uffenheimer thesis

In her important work, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*, Schatz-Uffenheimer compares Hasidim to Christian quietism of the seventeenth century, especially in the thought of the Spaniard, Miguel de Molinos (1640–1697). The argument is not that Christian quietism had a decisive influence, or any direct historical influence at all, on Hasidism. Rather, Schatz-Uffenheimer means to highlight the quietist tendencies of early Hasidism by comparing it to earlier Christian quietism. So, the argument is for a phenomenological comparison.

Schatz-Uffenheimer characterizes Christian quietism as declaring that:

> The only human act that may be identified with the Divine will is that of total self-annihilation …. Therefore, one can no longer speak of a voluntaristic outlook within the quietistic framework: God does not desire any particular thing from man – neither good nor evil, neither the performance of certain actions nor the refraining from others.

The seventeenth-century Spanish quietists, like the sixteenth-century *alumbrados*, or 'illuminationists' were lax in performing the sacraments, on the grounds, roughly, that if God wanted them to perform the sacraments, God would have to see to it that they did! Now, Schatz-Uffenheimer does not ascribe such extreme quietism to the Hasidim, since, unlike the Christian quietists, the Hasidim were most faithful to religious practice: Hasidism, she writes, '[was] expressed in an attitude of human indifference towards the world, society and the self, which yet … is not indifferent towards His commandments'.

Schatz-Uffenheimer bases her claim of quietist tendencies primarily on two sorts of texts, one in praise of mystical *bitul ha-yesh* or self-dissolution, and the other rejecting self-interest in prayer. I cannot possibly do justice here to the richness of Schatz-Uffenheimer's argumentation. I must make do with just three representative examples of how Schatz-Uffenheimer argues her position.

(1) Schatz-Uffenheimer quotes from the eighteenth-century Hasidic work, *Liqqutei Yiqarim* that '[a] person must bring his thought insofar as possible to the

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level of fear which leads to modesty, [in order] to come to the quality of nothingness'. On this, Schatz-Uffenheimer comments: 'The expression, ''to [come] to nothingness'', bears here an ethical meaning associated with the acosmic assumption, implying total resignation from everything connected with the world' (76).

(2) Schatz-Uffenheimer cites a quotation on prayer from *Shemu-ah Tovah*, by the eighteenth-century master, Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740–1810), which says, 'The end desired is that prior to prayer he must cast off corporeality … and enter into the aspect of nothingness. He will [then] not turn to any thing of the world at all.' Schatz-Uffenheimer compares this passage to one by the fourteenth-century *Hesychast* quietist, Callistus, that uses similar language, and she sees in this passage a 'denying [of] the world and its goodness' (77).

(3) Schatz-Uffenheimer quotes from Hayyim Hakyl of Amdur, an eighteenth-century figure, who says that, 'You shall isolate yourself with your Creator, as if you had already died to the world, and there is no one there but you and the Creator, may He be blessed.' On this, Schatz-Uffenheimer comments, 'A man who has ''died to the world'' … is disinterested in the world and in the question of its redemption. His dominant social characteristic is the quality of equanimity' (78).

In sum, Schatz-Uffenheimer sees Hasidism as attracted to 'total resignation from everything connected with the world, which is filled with naught and nothingness' (76). This striving for a 'passive life', however, 'exists in constant tension', indeed in 'constant vacillation', with the fulfillment of the commandments and *avodah be-gashmiyut* or 'corporeal service' of God.

Response to the Schatz-Uffenheimer thesis

There are three problems with the Schatz-Uffenheimer overall portrayal of Hasidism as being pulled toward quietism. The first is that the great Hasidic leaders were conspicuously activists in their lives, in ways that people with real quietist tendencies would not be. The Hasidic masters attracted many followers and brought about the spread of Hasidism to the masses of eastern European Jewry in a relatively short period of time. Many of them were *zadikim*, spiritual leaders, with responsibility for the masses of their followers. These were men who married and had families and who were often deeply involved in communal affairs.

The second problem is that Schatz-Uffenheimer leaves us with a central incoherence in the heart of Hasidism: between a deep indifference to action in the world, and a massive exception for the performance of the commandments and *avodah be-gashmiut*, or 'corporeal service'. While such a severe dislocation at the very core of Hasidim may have existed for some Hasidim, we should expect to find others who were able to combine mysticism and

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activism into a more integral whole. Schatz-Uffenheimer ignores such a possibility.

A third problem is Schatz-Uffenheimer's implicit sweeping assumption that mystical passivity in Hasidism was meant to be an enduring consciousness *outside* of mystical prayer, implying inactivity and social disassociation. There is ample evidence that some Hasidic masters, including some of the central, dominant ones, never thought of mystical passivity in that way. Rather, for them, *bitul ha-yesh and hitpashtut mi-gashmiut*, mystical self-dissolution and passing into non-corporeality, enabled a return to the world with an altered activist consciousness.

I want to quote three representative early Hasidic texts that testify to a deep consistency between Hasidic mysticism and activism. These texts faithfully represent a mainstream Hasidic ethos, insufficiently credited by Schatz-Uffenheimer.

My first text illustrates that the ideal of self-dissolution contains an *inherent* obligation of a return to the world. The passage is by the eighteenth-century, prominent Hasidic master, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyadi (1745–1812), who wrote as follows in his work, *Liqqutei* Torah:

> It is not the intended purpose of the negation and self-annihilation that one should remain like this with the annihilation of his soul within the body …. But the main purpose is that after the self-annihilation one then draw down from above to below a revealing of the light of the Infinite below …. When a person is only in '*his* soul', that is when he ascends from below to above, in the mode of 'Who will ascend the mountain of God' (Psalms 24), which is the prayer-mode, and afterward does not occupy himself with Torah and the performance of the commandments so as to draw down the light of the Infinite to below, that is called, 'His soul is to no avail'.[5]

This form of Hasidic mystical self-dissolution is not an end in itself, but is aimed at the bestowing of the Light of the Infinite upon the world. Thus, its mode of world-*dis*engagement is consistent with world engagement in one's ongoing consciousness. Schatz-Uffenheimer calls the writings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, 'anti-spiritualism', but does not give sufficient weight to its being a mysticism designed to turn back into the world. This text well illustrates Rachel Elior's observation that 'the *zaddik* embodies simultaneously both withdrawal from and expansion into the world'.[6]

My second passage is by Rabbi Elimelech of Lezansk (1717–1787), an eighteenth-century luminary of Hasidism. In it we see the element of social responsibility in the turn to the world by a saintly spiritual leader, or *zadik*:

> When the *zadik* is strongly bonded to the Creator his consciousness is withdrawn from people and then he cannot help people with their needs, for then he is not in this world at all. Therefore, from time to time the *zadik* must relinquish his bonding with God to serve the needs of people, to pray for them, and to help them with his actions or his money or any possible way. The *zadik* does a great deed when from

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> time to time he leaves off from bonding with God, for that is God's will. And this is what it says [Numbers 13.17–18], 'Ascend the mountain, and see how the land is', meaning: 'see what is needed in the land'.[7]

In this text, the duty of social responsibility is built in from the start to the call to mystical bonding with God. Indeed, we may infer that the purpose of the mystical ascent is to be better actively engaged in the world. This follows from the Rabbi's quoting of the verse in Numbers referring to Moses' ascent of the mountain *in order* to reach a point of view from which he could see the true needs of the land. Just so, the mystic ascends to a place from which he can then know how best to serve the 'land,' that is, the non-mystics.

My third text illustrates the essentially social nature of early Hasidic mysticism and is from Rabbi Klonimus Kalman Epstein (1751–1827) of Krakow, who lived mainly in the eighteenth century, in his work *Me-or V'Shemesh*:

> A person cannot reach the higher holiness unless he attaches himself to those who serve God in truth, and participates with them in prayer, Torah study, and the performance of commandments. If a person will wish to separate himself from the community and serve God in isolation it will be impossible for him to attain to the highest holiness, and he will even stray from most of the essentials of the Torah. [Thus did our sages teach]: 'It says (Leviticus 19.2): 'You shall be holy'. Now you might think that your holiness is like [God's], so it says ''for I the Lord your God am holy'', meaning that my holiness is higher than yours'. This means that a person might want to engage in contemplation in isolation thinking that in this way he will reach the highest holiness. [So he is told] that such holiness is for God alone who is one and unique. However, if a person wishes to draw God's holiness down onto him, this is impossible except in a community in which all serve God united together.[8]

In an unusual inversion of the traditional theme of *imitatio dei*, this Hasidic Rabbi declares that only God's holiness is of one who is set apart. Human holiness is radically different, to be achieved and maintained only in community. The highest holiness is not to be achieved in solitude. This social conception of mysticism is thus antithetical to the quietism that Schatz-Uffenheimer attributes to eighteenth-century Hasidic mysticism.

From these three texts, and many others like them, by these authors and by others from the mainstream of Hasidic literature, I conclude that in the mainstream of Hasidism there existed an activist engagement in the world and in society in complete harmony with its mystical quest.

Hasidic mysticism and self-transformation

The type of Hasidic mysticism I am pointing out aims for a radical *transformation* of the self. The goal of much mystical *deveikut* or bonding to God is the uniting of the self with God's own active involvement in the world. The barrier to identification with God's activity in the world is our egocentric predicament, which creates a false consciousness of separation from God. As the founder of

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Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov said, after you have passed over all the walls and gates and towers blocking your approach to God, you will recognize that all these obstacles were an illusion.[9] The illusionary walls and gates are our false sense of selfhood. This sentiment is echoed, albeit with a different point of view, in the Zen work, *The Blue Cliff Record:* 'Before you have penetrated, it seems like a silver mountain, an iron wall. Once you have penetrated, it turns out your own self is the iron wall, the silver mountain.'[10] Thus, the task of the Hasidic master is the dissolution of the self in mystical prayer.

There then follows a return to the world and community with the effects of self-dissolution filtered through the consciousness of the ordinary. The altered consciousness of self of the Hasidic master is comparable, I believe, to the state of *wu-wei*, in Taoism, though different because of its theistic context. The Tao work, *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tsu, says (section 37) that: 'The Tao is always ''not doing''. Yet *there is nothing it doesn't do'* [my emphasis].[11] *Wu-wei* is a vigorously active 'not-doing', involving, as it does, no self-consciousness of effort. This is akin to Teresa of Avila's demand in *The Way of Perfection* 39.2 that the moral life be lived without the 'deep corruption' of self-consciousness.[12] Here is an activist-type 'dissolution' of self.

This is not a negative not-doing, rejecting life and world, for '*there is nothing it doesn't do'*. It is an active doing that keeps with the Law of Tao, with the 'flow' of nature. The Hasidim of the type I have cited saw such action theistically, as 'going with the flow' of the divine activity in the world. Just as apparently the *Tao Te Ching* was written initially for the ruler, whose activism is not in question, so the Hasidic mysticism of *bitul ha-yesh and hitpashtut mi-gashmiut*, mystical self-dissolution and passing into non-corporeality, were intended mainly for the activist saintly leaders of the Hasidic communities. As the *Tao Te Ching* says, 'If the ruler is able to embody it, everything will naturally change'.

To conclude, there need be no more 'great internal tension' between the Hasidic ideal of self-dissolution and world-activism than there was in Lao Tsu's direction to: 'Be still like a mountain and flow like a great river'. The stillness, for the Hasidim was not a quietistic rejection of the everyday, but a listening for God. And the 'flowing great river' was not an abandonment of an otherwise quietist life, but the activity of the infinitely active Divine Will, with which they strove to be bonded.[13]

Notes

1. Martin Buber *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York NY: Harper and Rowe, 1966), 174.
2. Rivkah Schatz-Uffenheimer *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
3. In Albert Schweitzer *Indian Thought and its Development*, Mrs Charles E. B. Russell (tr.) (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1936), 14.
4. See Jerome Gellman 'Buber's blunder: Buber's replies to Scholem and Schatz-Uffenheimer', *Modern Judaism*, **20** (2000), 20–40.

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5. Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Liqqutei Torah* (Brooklyn NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1984), pt 3, 96 (my translation).
6. Rachel Elior 'The paradigms of *yesh* and *ayin* in Hasidic thought', in Ada Rapaport-Albert (ed.) *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: Littman Library, 1996), 178.
7. Elimelech of Lezansk *Noam Elimelech* (Krakow: Joseph Fischer, 1896), 74b–75a (my translation).
8. Klonimus Kalman Epstein *Maor V'Shemesh* (New York NY: Yisrael Zev, 1957/8), 137b (my translation).
9. See *Keter Shem Tov* (Brooklyn NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1987), 15, section 51 (my translation).
10. See *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record, Zen Comments by Hankuin and Tenkei*, Thomas Cleary (tr.) (Boston MA and London: Shambala, 2002), section 57.
11. *Tao Te Ching*, Stan Rosenthal (tr.), at http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/taoism/ttcstan3.htm
12. See Rowan Williams *Teresa of Avila* (London: Continuum, 2003), 130.
13. My thanks to Daniel Zelinski for his comments on a draft of this paper.

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