

# The Hasidic Sage

Benjamin Ish Shalom

*Dr. Benjamin Ish Shalom is Rector of the Beit Morasha of Jerusalem, a center for advanced Jewish Studies. He is also a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.*

While the study of Torah is of prime importance in the religious life of Judaism, it is also true that in the Talmudic literature there are other ideals which emphasize not the intellectual value but the moral value; not the *chokmah*, but the moral effort of man and his yearning for the nearness of God. These ideas were presented in the characters of the *Tsadik* “the righteous” and the *Hasid* “the pious”. In the Talmudic literature there is a distinction between these two types. The *Tsadik* is the person who fulfills the *mitzvot*, the commandments of the Torah. He is the man who has in his pocket more positive deeds than sins. *Tsadik* is almost a juridical concept which means justice, balance, acceptance of the law, acceptance of the norm. The *Hasid*, on the other hand, is not the balanced type. He is a person who aspires to a very high spiritual level and strives for it in a very radical and extreme way.

In the *Kabbala*, which are Jewish mystical writings and the source for hasidism, the concept of *tsadik* is understood in a different way; The legal element of the *Tsadik* is removed and the *Tsadik* is made a symbol of the Divine Sphere.

*Tsadik* has been described as a cosmic power and understood as the foundation of the world and the source of all souls. A *Tsadik* who, in the Hebraic thought, would represent loyalty to the law and conformism, was understood in the *Kabbala* as one who brings peace and harmony among the different elements of the cosmos. The *Tsadik* has been described as a pipe, through which the divine powers pass and give life to the world.

The concept of *Torah* has also been changed in the *Kabbala*. *Torah* is no longer just a holy book revealed from heaven, but a system of metaphysical principles which are the foundation of the world. These conceptions are based on a Platonic and Talmudic idea of the pre-existence of the *Torah*. According to this idea, God created the world in accordance

with the Torah; therefore, in the Kabbala, Torah is also understood as one of the Divine Spheres, or to be more exact, as two different spheres; the oral and the written. Torah is understood also as the whole corpus of God's names, a symbolic system which represents the infinite powers of God.

Hasidic thought expresses a significant change in attitude towards all these concepts. Hasidism no longer emphasises the metaphysical meaning of concepts of Torah and Hasid because it concentrates on man and his internal spiritual world. In the light of this it would be right to characterize Kabbalistic thought as mystical theology and Hasidic thought as mystical anthropology. In fact, I have to say that most of all, Hasidism is characterized by being not so much a theory as a popular movement.

The development of the Hasidic movement is dependent on the personality of the Hasidic saint. This is something entirely new. Personality takes the place of doctrine. The opinions particular to the exalted individual are less important than his character. Learning of the Torah and knowledge of the Torah no longer occupy the most important place in the scale of religious values. A tale is told of one of the Hasidim who said that he was going to the 'Magid of Mezorik', one of the most important leaders of Hasidism, not to learn Torah from him, but to watch him tie his bootlace. Of course, this story is not to be taken literally, but it expresses a very typically Hasidic conception of what a religious leader is. Another leader of Hasidism, Rabbi Menachim Mendel of Holtz said: "I became a Hasid because in my town there was an old man who told stories. He told what he knew and I heard what I needed." As we see, the new ideal of religious leader, the Tsadik, differs from the traditional ideal of Rabbinic Judaism, the Talmud Hakam, mainly in that he himself has become Torah. It is no longer his knowledge but his life which lends religious value to his personality. He is the living incarnation of the Torah. This attitude which considered the Tsadik as a medium of revelation and religious authority was influenced by Cabbalistic motives, but basically raised, not from a mystical theory, but from a religious experience.

The appearing of the Tsadik as a spiritual leader of mystical and prophetic powers raised a very sharp conflict with the traditional rabbinic leadership. In his followers eyes, the Tsadik, in his behaviour and way of life, fulfills the role of teacher and educator, father and consultant, and also as a mediator between God and man, who would facilitate the spiritual elevation of the Hasid. The Tsadik is a representative of God in the world, enabling the Hasid to have a religious experience of nearness to God.

One of the most important things concerning the place of the Tsalik and his role in hasidism relates to the paradoxical character of his status. The Tsalik is an exalted person of superior character who, on the one hand, lives in a very spiritual dimension without any connections and interest in reality; but on the other hand, as a real spiritual leader, he is acting to elevate his followers and even all his relations to a very high spiritual level. The Tsalik is not concerned just for the salvation of his own soul, but goes out to the street, to the market, to the very materialistic reality in order to elevate it to the highest degree of spirituality. He himself takes part in this reality by simple stories, simple speeches and deeds, and by his contemplative activity he raises all these speeches, simple deeds and stories to the level of pure spirituality. The Tsalik who is involved in the real life of his generation is a model for imitation for his followers; by being a living Torah, every deed and speech of his becomes a normative model for his followers.

There is another Hasidic tale that expressed what I have just said. When Rabbi Levi Isaac of the Dichev came back from his first journey to Rabbi Smelchi of Nicholsburg, after having gone there in spite of his father-in-law's objection, the old man was very angry and asked: "What lesson have you learned by him?" He answered: "I have learned the lesson that there is a creator of the world". The old man called one of the servants and asked him: "Do you know that there is a creator of the world?" "Yes" answered the servant. "Sure", shouted Rabbi Levi Isaac, "everybody says it, but do they also learn the lesson of it".