

Heschel's Transformative Hasidism: Hasidic Way of Learning

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual audacity, p. 156 (to school principals)

May I say to you personally that this has been my major challenge, ever since I began working on my dissertation; that is: How to maintain a Jewish way of thinking? ... Since that day I consider this to be my major effort...

We live in a very strange situation today... We are essentially trained in a non-Jewish world... We are inclined to think in non-Jewish terms. I am not discouraging exposure to non-Jewish world. I am merely indicating that it is not biblical thinking. It is not rabbinic thinking. It is not Hasidic thinking. It is non-Jewish thinking. A non-Jewish philosophy is fine. But we would also like to have in our thinking a Jewish view of things.

A Passion for Truth, p. 55

Hasidism is falsely reproached for having disparaged the value of Torah study. It merely belittled the view that studying Torah was enough. The Baal Shem Tov restored and strengthened an old Jewish percept whereby learning without awe was of questionable value.

A Passion for Truth, p. 63

Torah study is a way of coming upon the presence of God, the Baal Shem taught. A man learning Torah should feel like a son who receives a letter from his father and is most anxious to know what he has to say to him. The letter is precious to him upon every rereading, as if his father stood there beside him.

"I" (anokhi), the first word of the Ten Commandments, consists of four letters in Hebrew and forms an acrostic for the words "I give Myself in written form," it is said in the Talmud. God has given Himself in the words, and man must learn how to encounter Him.

A Passion for Truth, p. 63-64

Persuaded that one should be capable of learning more from people than from books, the Baal Shem sought to add a personality dimension to the study of the Talmud, a great part of whose contents consists of views of sages cited by name. He urged students to seek communion with the sages as well as comprehension of their ideas. Thus, it was maintained that, while learning "Abbaye said" or "Rava said," one should see Abbaye and Rava (as well as understand their utterances). One had to live with them, to enter their minds and souls, not just grasp their thoughts.

***The Prophets*, pp. XIII-XVII**

Prophecy is not simply the application of timeless standards to particular human situations, but rather an interpretation of a particular moment in history, a divine understanding of a human situation. Prophecy, then, may be described as exegesis of existence from a divine perspective...

Understanding prophecy is an understanding of an understanding rather than an understanding of knowledge; it is exegesis of exegesis. It involves sharing the perspective from which the original understanding is done...

The spirit of such exegesis makes it incongruous for our inquiry to take refuge in the personal question (however vital): What do the prophets mean to us? The only sensible way of asking the personal question is to be guided by another, more audacious question: What do the prophets mean to God? All other questions are absurd unless this one question is meaningful. For prophecy is a sham unless it is experienced as a word of God swooping down on man and converting him into a prophet...

Pure reflection may be sufficient for the clarification of what the prophet's consciousness asserts – but not for what his existence involves. For such understanding it is not enough to have the prophets in mind; we must think as if we were inside their minds. For them to be alive and present to us we must think, not about, but in the prophets, with their concern and their heart. Their existence involves us. Unless their concern strikes us, pains us, exalts us, we do not really sense it. Such involvement requires accord, receptivity, hearing, sheer surrender to their impact.... Thought is like touch, comprehending by being comprehended.

Kotzk, "Introduction" (translated from Yiddish)

Anyone who researches Hasidism only on the basis of literary sources and doesn't draw from its oral Torah is relying on artificial material and overlooks genuine, living springs. Hasidism cannot be researched without oral Torah and *Shimush Talmidei Chachamim* [living with sages and learning from their behavior]... Hasidic literature is a translated literature, and the translations are not always successful. In order to understand Hasidism one must learn how to hear and to stand among people who are *living* Hasidism.