

Heschel's Transformative Hasidism: The Cossack and the Niggun

Heschel, "In Search of Exaltation" (1971)

This is to me the supreme Hasidic imperative: Don't be old. Don't be stale. See life as all doors. Some are open, some are closed. You have to know how to open them. But what is the key? The key is a song.

As was the case with the Jew in the Hasidic story who is suddenly taken by surprise. A Cossack comes to his house and says: "I hear you are a cantor. Sing me a song." The poor Jew does not understand Russian, but fortunately his wife does. "He wants you to sing a niggun, a song," she tells her husband. The Jew is frightened, but still he sings a niggun; not a sad song, but an honest one. And when he finishes the Cossack beats him up. "Why does he beat me?" he asks his wife in bewilderment. She in turn asks the Cossack, who replies that he didn't like that niggun, he wants another. The Jew sings another niggun and the Cossack doesn't like that one either. And the Jew gets another beating.

Maybe this is my life. I always try to sing a niggun. I write one book and the Cossack gives me a beating. So I try to write another. The Cossack may well be my greatest benefactor. Perhaps the Cossack can be important to America, too...

Zelizer's Biography of Heschel, p. 102-103

When one rabbi asked why he wrote so many books, Heschel related the story of a Jew who was ordered by a Cossack to sing. "Jew! I have heard it said that Jews can sing. Sing me a song!" When the Cossack offered up that any song would do, the Jewish man started singing for his life. "I didn't like that song, Jew!" the Cossack yelled. "Sing me another!" And he did. The Cossack once again complained, proceeding to beat him violently. The cycle kept repeating itself.

Taking a breath, Heschel explained to the rabbi: "I am my own Cossack. Each time I read what I have written, I say to myself, 'I didn't like that one. It wasn't good enough. Write another.' And so I write and I write and I write."

***Heychal Kotzk*, vol. 1, p. 253 (the published Hasidic version, in English translation)**

Reb Avremily [of Porisov] was deeply respected when he came to Alexander [town in Poland]. And while the Rebbe's door was closed to his followers, it was open to Reb Avremily.

On the last day of his life, Rebbe Henokh pf Alexander [1798-1870], who used to cloak his words in a veil of stories, told Reb Avremily about that Cossack who came to the Chassid and addressed him in Russian: "Gospodin" (Lord). The Chassid who did not know the language of the gentiles did not understand the words of the Cossack, but his wife who knew Russian explained to him, to her husband, that the Cossack believes that

you are a cantor and you should sing before him. As soon as the Chassid started singing, the Cossack got angry and began to beat him. The Chassid's wife added to explain to her husband, "He does not want this niggun, but a new niggun"...

And with these words, Rebbe Henokh returned his pure soul to its creator, when Reb Avremily and the Rebbe's oldest disciples stand by his bed.

Heschel, *A Passion for Truth*, p. 284-285

Reb Henokh, his disciple [of the Kotzker], loved telling piquant stories. Those who did not know him well broke into laughter. Reb Yekhiel Meyer of Gostinin remarked, however, "Henokh is lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem, and they are laughing."

When Reb Henokh lay on his deathbed, his friend Reb Avrom of Porisov came to visit him. Reb Henokh told him the following tale:

When Russia occupied Poland in 1792, few Jews knew the Russian language. Once a Cossack visited a Jewish homeowner and asked him, "Are you the *khazyayen* [the owner]?"

The Jew did not understand. His wife translated wrongly: "The Cossack says: 'Are you a cantor [a hazan]? Sing for me.'"

So the Jew began singing the chant "The Sons of the Temple."

The Cossack lost his temper and began to beat him.

So his wife explained: "He obviously doesn't like that song. He wants another one! A new song!"

With these words Reb Henokh breathed his last. Did Reb Henokh feel that the Cossack, which is to say the Lord, was angry and therefore harsh with us? Was this an admission that he had failed to understand Him? Is it at all within our power to sing the song that the Cossack wishes to hear?

The Kotzker taught his disciples that to have faith in God was no game, for the Lord could carry out His words "with destructive force." Perhaps the Almighty directs the world by means of wrath because he dislikes our way of worshipping Him with our worn-out, old tunes. Was Reb Mendl, then, in search of a new song, a new path, which he could not find?

Heschel, *Kotzk* [an addition in his Yiddish book, in English translation]

The tragedy is more profound. The wife didn't understand the Cossack's words at all. "*khazyayen*" in Russian doesn't mean cantor, but householder. The Cossack wanted to know who the householder was, but the human being avoids the question, singing a niggun instead.

"Who is the householder?"