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HASIDIC PRAYER AND THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH IMAGINATION

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The questions...

• In which ways might hasidic teachings about prayer be useful for contemporary Jewish religious consciousness?
• Is ‘hasidic prayer’ a distinct category of prayer?
• Can it help inform ‘conventional’ prayer?
BOOKS ON HASIDIC PRAYER

• Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s “Gate of Unity and Faith” (Tanya Part 2)
• Rabbi Dov Ber’s “Tract on Ecstasy”, translated by Louis Jacobs
• Rabbi Dov Ber’s “Tract on Contemplation”
• Rabbi Natan Sternhartz – Selected Prayers
• Louis Jacobs Hasidic Prayer
What is ‘hasidic prayer’?

Is Prayer a request to G-d, … or a mystical process, or a personal cleaving to the Divine?

1. Prayer as Request
2. Prayer representing the Temple service
4. Hasidic prayer: a sense of personal connection with the Divine
PATHS OF HASIDIC PRAYER

• Devekut, cleaving to G-d
• Contemplation, inducing inspired states of consciousness
• The sense of direct personal communication with the Divine
• Introspection
• Visualization
• Melody
• Love of one’s fellow as a key component of prayer
DEVEKUT – CLEAVING TO G-D

- Ecstatic Prayer: “All my bones declare: o G-d, Who is like You..?” (Psalms 35:10)

- Yearning Prayer: “My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and parched land, without water” (Psalms 63:2)
The hasidic theme of *Devekut* ‘cleaving’ to the Divine

- The individual seeks to cleave to the Infinite, to ‘dissolve’ in the Infinite
- The individual seeks to merge with the Divine process which takes place during prayer:
  “For the sake of the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Shechinah, to unite the Name *yud-kay* with *vav-kay* in a perfect union in the name of all Israel”
RADIANCE IN THE LETTERS

From the ‘Sacred Letter’ of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (d.1760):

“...in every letter there are worlds, and souls, and G-dliness, and they rise, and connect, and are unified, and then the letters connect and are unified and become a word, and they join in a true unity with the Divine, and you should include your soul with them at every step..”
Chabad Contemplative Prayer

- The person prepares for prayer by studying inspiring teachings about the relationship of the Divine with the world…
- ..or of the Divine with the individual
- Then the morning prayer becomes a journey combining love, awe, introspection, discovery… “living all one’s life at every moment”
Prayerbook with Chabad Chassidic Teachings for Contemplation (first published 1816)
Rabbi Shalom Dovber Schneersohn’s

“Tract on Prayer”

(c.1900)
TWO MODES OF CONTEMPLATION

**UPPER UNITY**
SHEMA YISRAEL…
there is **only** the Divine

**LOWER UNITY**
BARUKH SHEM…
(second line of the Shema)
it has a subtlety

the **world** expresses the Divine
HITBODEDUT
‘lonely meditation’

• This is an intense mystical practice taught by Rabbi Nahman of Braslav

..to go alone at night to a place which is lonely during the day, and there, in one’s own language, to speak directly to G-d...

Contemporary challenge: to find this ‘direct communication’ in the text of the prayers: ‘blessed art Thou...’
Kotsk Introspection

• Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk (1787-1859) presented the ideal of the personal search for Truth

• ‘a few words, sincerely..’

• Memory of the Kotsker Hasid in Wyshkov, c.1890
Meditating on the Temple

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piasezcno Rebbe (1889-1943) taught a path of meditating on the Temple structure during prayer, advancing towards the Holy of Holies.

The ‘Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto’
THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM

THE MODEL OF THE TEMPLE IN THE HOLYLAND HOTEL, JERUSALEM
Chaya Sima Michaelover
The Meditation system sent to Chaya Sima by R. Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn (1880-1950)
Melody in hasidic prayer

• ‘Nusakh’ – traditional Chazanut

Chazanut as ecstasy…

• Personal melody in hasidic prayer, drawn from the wellspring of hasidic niggunim, or created/adapted by the individual
Love of one’s fellow

• “It is correct to say before prayer: behold I accept on myself the positive command of ‘love your neighbour as yourself’

From the Lurianic Prayerbook, as in introduction to Mah Tovu, the beginning of the prayers.

This injunction is included in the Kitzur Shulhan Arukh.
Zalman Kleinman “Shabbos Afternoon”
Spiritual Prayer in a Modern Context

- Preparation – study of relevant texts and teachings
- A few moments of thought…
- The quest for “A few words said sincerely..”
- Appreciating Nusakh
- Personal Melody
- Visualization
- Love of G-d
- Love of one’s fellow