

LOUIS JACOBS

SEEKER
OF
UNITY

The life and works of
Aaron of Starosselje

SEEKER
OF
UNITY

By the same author

Principles of the Jewish Faith: an analytical study

We Have Reason to Believe

Jewish Values

Jewish Prayer

A Guide to Yom Kippur

A Guide to Rosh Ha-shanah

Tract on Ecstasy

Translated from the Hebrew of Doh Baer of Lübvitch

The Palm Tree of Deborah

Translated from the Hebrew of Moses Cordovero

Studies in Talmudic Logic and Methodology

SEEKER OF UNITY

The Life and Works of Aaron of Starosselje

by LOUIS JACOBS

Valentine, Mitchell · London

First Published by
Valentine, Mitchell & Co. Ltd.,
18 Cursitor Street, London, E.C.4.

© Louis Jacobs 1966

Printed and bound in England by
W. & J. Mackay & Co. Ltd., Chatham, Kent

CONTENTS

PREFACE		9
Chapter		
1	Rabbi Aaron's Life and Works	11
2	The Ten <i>Sephiroth</i>	27
3	<i>Tzimtzum</i>	49
4	<i>Habad</i>	64
5	Rabbi Aaron's Method	77
6	' <i>En Soph</i> and the Universe	90
7	Man's Worship	113
8	Rabbi Aaron's Scriptural Exegesis	140
9	Summary	152
APPENDIX	<i>A Letter of Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Epstein of Homel</i>	159
Index		165

'Our master and teacher, the "Middle Rabbi", may his soul rest in Eden, used to say that whenever he recited the words: "Guard the seekers of Thy unity as the apple of Thine eye," he had in mind, in particular, his friend, the holy Rabbi Aaron.'

H. M. Hielmann: *Beth Rabbi*, Berditchev, 1903, Part I, p. 134

Dedicated to the memory of
BERTHA PREVEZER

בילא רבקה בת ישראל יצחק

beloved sister of Louis J. Mintz

PREFACE

The subject of this study, Rabbi Aaron ben Moses Ha-Levi Horowitz of Starosselje (1766-1828), is a little-known contemplative and Hasidic master, whose thought is of much interest to students of mysticism and religion in general. It has not been possible to avoid the use of the technical terms which abound in his work, but every effort has been made to explain these and keep them to a minimum.

It would have been futile to attempt to understand the thought of an unconventional but orthodox Kabbalist without reference to his Kabbalistic antecedents. To these, Chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the present work are devoted. Chapter 1 is a largely biographical introduction, and Chapter 5 discusses Rabbi Aaron's general approach. Rabbi Aaron's works are three in number: *Sha'are Ha-Yihud We-Ha-'Emunah* (his philosophy of religion), *Sha'are 'Abhodah* (his understanding of the meaning of worship) and *'Abhodath Ha-Levi* (his commentaries on the Pentateuch). Chapter 6 deals mainly with the first of these works, Chapter 7 with the second and Chapter 8 with the third. Chapter 9 is an attempted brief summary of Rabbi Aaron's philosophy and a consideration of its significance.

In describing Rabbi Aaron's views it has been necessary to essay the difficult task of extracting, by the use of paraphrase, the kernel of his thought from the intricacies of his Kabbalistic terminology. But, whenever possible, Rabbi Aaron has been allowed to speak for himself through direct quotation from his work in translation. The scheme of transliteration of the Hebrew is the standard one except for words better known in different form, e.g. *Kabbalah* not *Qabbalah*.

CHAPTER ONE

Rabbi Aaron's Life and Works

Students of Jewish mysticism have noted that, with very few exceptions, its exponents and devotees have described the *unio mystica* in such a way that the world and the self still retain their identity and are never absorbed by the divine. However, to some extent in Hasidism in general and in *Habad* Hasidism in particular, the view finds expression that 'all is in God'.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God.*

This view has not infrequently been called pantheistic, but the term is far too imprecise when used for the philosophy of mystics who, because they are Theists, refuse to equate the universe with God as a thorough-going pantheism does. Historically considered, *pantheism* is the doctrine that God is immanent only. He is the universe and the universe is He. *Deism*, on the other hand, holds that God is transcendent only. He is apart from the universe. Conventional *theism* holds that God is both transcendent and immanent. He is other than the universe and yet is in the universe. A new term is required for that mystical philosophy of theism which holds that while God is *more* than the universe, more than a name given to the totality of things, the universe is in Him. There are, in fact, two terms which have been suggested to convey this thought. These are *panentheism*¹ ('all is in God') and *acosmism*.² These terms, too, are not as precise as one would wish and they require certain qualifications in the absence of a better terminology, but we shall use them in this work for the philosophy to which we have referred. Prominent among Jewish panentheists or acosmists is the subject of this study, Aaron ben Moses Ha-Levi Horowitz.

Unfortunately, we are in possession of very few biographical details regarding Aaron ben Moses.³ There is hardly any reliable direct information about his character, his physique and bodily health, the impact he had on others during his lifetime,

his relationship as a Hasidic master to his followers and the members of other Hasidic groups. The few incontestable facts we do have can be briefly summarized. He was born in the year 1766 in Orsha in the district of Mohilev, and died in Starosselje in the same district on the 30th of September in the year 1828. He was a direct descendant of the famous German Kabbalist, Isaiah Horowitz (c. 1555–c. 1630), author of *Shene Luḥoth Ha-Berith* (the *Holy Shelah*). Aaron received instruction in both Talmudic learning and the *Kabbalah*, winning recognition for his mastery in these fields. In his youth Aaron became a disciple of Rabbi Schneor Zalman of Liady (1747–1813), the founder of *Habad* Hasidism. Aaron states that he sat at Schneor Zalman's feet for a period of thirty years and he is, indeed, generally considered to be the favourite and most distinguished pupil of the master. He further claims that his is the authoritative exposition of Schneor Zalman's thought. How far this claim is justified and the extent of Aaron's originality will, it is hoped, become clearer in the course of our study of his ideas.

For a considerable period Aaron and Dobh Baer, Schneor Zalman's son, studied together as devoted friends and companions. Dobh Baer used to say that whenever he recited the words of the mystical prayer: 'Guard the seekers of Thy unity as the apple of Thine eye', he had Aaron in mind in particular. The name is certainly appropriate for a man whose life was dedicated to the theme of God's unity. It was frequently applied to him; the letters forming the verse of the prayer were, for instance, used by the publishers to denote the year in which his books were published. The unity of God is the central theme of all his meditation. The whole of his published work is an attempt to uncover the full implications of the traditional Jewish belief that God is one.

In the course of time a serious quarrel appears to have broken out between Aaron and Dobh Baer.⁴ The full details of the controversy are not available, but, apart from the natural rivalry which seems to have developed between son and eventual successor of the master and favourite pupil, there is good warrant for the opinion that the two men differed in their conception of the role of ecstasy in the mystical life. Dobh Baer was exceedingly strict in his rejection of the slightest trace of sham emotion during divine worship; he interpreted in severely in-

tellectual fashion his father's teaching regarding the supreme virtue of the contemplative life. Certainly, profound reflection on the theme of God's unity and uniqueness results in a stirring of heart as well as of mind. Dobh Baer did not attempt to decry religious emotion or mystical ecstasy as such. But he never failed to point out to his followers the psychological and religious objections to the spurious emotions engendered in the process of contemplation. To wallow in emotional religiosity was for him the antithesis of all his father's teaching concerning the need for overcoming the self in divine worship.

Aaron did not disagree with Dobh Baer's contention, but he differed from him both in matters of emphasis and in a more tolerant attitude towards the unauthentic type of ecstasy. While Dobh Baer is said to have recited his prayers in complete stillness and immobility, the reports narrate that Aaron's prayers were of a frightening intensity, an outpouring of religious fervour and enthusiasm expressing itself in a mighty roar as the prayers were pronounced.⁵ We shall have occasion to examine the theoretical differences between the two modes of worship in the course of our investigation. For the present it is sufficient to note that the differences were acute enough to compel Aaron to set up a rival Hasidic 'court' in Starosselje after Schneor Zalman's death and Dobh Baer's succession to the leadership of the *Habad* group. From the year 1813 until his death Aaron's followers were known as Starosseljer *Hasidim* in opposition to Dobh Baer's followers the Lübvitcher *Hasidim* (after the town Lübvitch in which Dobh Baer settled soon after his father's death). Both groups claimed to be the authentic interpreters of *Habad* theory and practice.

At Dobh Baer's death his son-in-law (and nephew), Menahem Mendel, was proclaimed as his successor in Lübvitch, and report has it that Aaron was pleased that a descendant of the master (Menahem Mendel was a son of Schneor Zalman's daughter) would occupy his throne. Aaron died some ten months after Dobh Baer. Some of his followers then changed their allegiance to Lübvitch; others accepted Aaron's son, Hayyim Raphael, as their master in Starosselje. After a few years, when Hayyim Raphael died without leaving a successor in the Starosselje 'line', some of the diehards among the Starosseljer *Hasidim* preferred to remain without a master rather than

be led by a 'stranger'. But the majority of them became followers of Menahem Mendel in Lübvitch or of other Russian masters.⁶

It is impossible to calculate the numerical strength of Aaron's followers during his lifetime. It is certain that they had conventicles of their own in some of the Jewishly inhabited towns of White Russia, since the letters of spiritual guidance and appeals for funds on behalf of the Hasidic settlement in Palestine which Aaron sent to them have been collected and published. However, only two towns are mentioned by name in this correspondence, Slonim and Vitebsk. After the pattern of Hasidic masters, Aaron delivered discourses on Hasidic themes to the *Hasidim* assembled in Starosselje on Sabbaths and festivals. Some of these were written down by his disciples and submitted to him for approval. These, together with autograph notes of the Rabbi, form the bulk of the posthumously published '*Abhodath Ha-Levi* ('The Levite's Worship'). From the title-pages of the two volumes of this work we learn that Aaron had two sons, the above-mentioned Hayyim Raphael and Michael David, as well as a daughter. Her son, Nahman Isaac Jacobson of Shklov, made himself responsible for the publication of the second volume.

After Schneor Zalman, the founder of the movement, Aaron is justly considered as belonging to the five great exponents of *Habad* Hasidism, the others being Schneor Zalman's son, Dobh Baer (1774-1828), and grandson, Menahem Mendel (c. 1790-1866), both of Lübvitch, Yitzhak Isaac Ha-Levi Epstein of Homel (1780-1857), and Hillel ben Meir Ha-Levi of Parits (1795-1864). The last two teachers were faithful followers of the first two, unlike Aaron, who, as we have seen, set up a rival 'court' of his own. The inevitable result has been that, for all the respect paid to Aaron's memory in the later *Habad* movement, his writings do not enjoy the same authority as these of the other teachers. Aaron's works are in no way the spiritual fare of the later *Habad Hasidim*.

The objective student of *Habad* thought can recognize that in some ways Aaron's writings are unconventional, and this endows them with a special significance. While many of his ideas are undoubtedly those of Schneor Zalman there is sufficient originality in his thought, if only in the radical conclusions he draws from the doctrine of his master, to justify a separate study

of it, though this cannot be undertaken in isolation from the views of Schneor Zalman. In the following pages we shall try to examine in detail Aaron's thought, noting its indebtedness to Schneor Zalman as well as its original elements, and comparing it with the thought of the other *Habad* teachers.

Aaron's main work was published in two complementary parts (actually two volumes of the same work) called respectively *Sha'are Ha-Yihud Wa-'Emunah* ('Gates of Unity and Faith'), Shklov, 1820, and *Sha'are 'Abhodah* ('Gates of Divine Worship') Shklov, 1821 (abbreviated here as *SYE* and *SA*). These two massive volumes, running into hundreds of closely printed pages, are each divided into five sections ('Gates') and subdivided into chapters. They form the clearest and most systematic treatment of *panentheism* or *acosmism* in Jewish literature, distinguished by a lucid style, a genius for ordering the extremely difficult material in an almost mathematical progression, profundity of thought, and considerable originality in ideas and presentation. As Aaron observes in his Introductions, the works are to be read as a sustained commentary to Schneor Zalman's classic, *Liqqute 'Amarim* or *Tanya*. The latter was first published in Slavita in 1796 in two parts: (1) *Sepher Shel Benonim* ('Book of the Average Men') dealing with Schneor Zalman's views on human psychology in its relation to the divine; (2) *Sha'ar Ha-Yihud We-Ha-'Emunah* ('Gate of Unity and Faith') dealing with the theme of divine unity. In the Shklov edition of 1806 a further part, *'Iggereth Ha-Teshubhah* ('Letter on Repentance'), was added, and a fourth part, *'Iggereth Ha-Qodesh* ('The Holy Letter'), containing selections from Schneor Zalman's letters, was added in a later Shklov edition of 1814. The whole work was subsequently printed many times (the edition used in this investigation is the accurate Vilna edition, 1930) and became known, after its opening word in Hebrew, as the *Tanya*. The little book speedily became a sacred text for the *Habad Hasidim*. To this day many of the members of the sect always carry it in the bag containing their prayer shawl.

Aaron planned his work to correspond to Schneor Zalman's book, to which it is a commentary. Thus, the first volume (*SYE*) is an extended commentary to the *second* part of the *Tanya* (bearing virtually the same title), while the bulk of the second volume (*SA*. Gates I-IV inclusive) is a commentary to

the *first* part of the *Tanya*. (The reversal of the order is to be explained on the basis of a more logical presentation of the material—the discussion of God's unity logically precedes the discussion of divine worship.) The fifth and final Gate of Aaron's second volume is a commentary to the third part of the *Tanya* and is, in fact, called 'The Door of Repentance' (*Pethah Ha-Teshubhah*). Though Aaron's work is in the nature of a commentary to the *Tanya*, it is not presented as such in a direct fashion, but as an independent discussion of Kabbalistic and Hasidic themes. These two volumes were never reprinted, probably because there was little demand for them by the *Habad Hasidim*, who preferred to study the more 'official' books of the teachers mentioned earlier. However, Gate III of the second volume, subtitled *Sha'ar Ha-Tephillah* ('Gate of Prayer'), was printed separately as a manual of devotion in Miskolc in 1940, together with Aaron's Introduction to the second volume.

Aaron's manuscript notes of his sermons on mystical lore, together with the notes of his disciples, approved by him, were, as stated earlier, published posthumously by his sons and grandsons under the title '*Abhodath Ha-Levi*'. The first volume, containing sermons on the first three books of the Pentateuch and on the festivals as well as Aaron's letters to his followers,⁸ was published by his sons in Lemberg, in 1862. The second volume, published in Warsaw in 1866 by Aaron's grandson, contains sermons on the last two books of the Pentateuch and on the festivals. The title is that of the publishers, not of Aaron himself. The fact that the work consists of disconnected homiletic material is very evident. It has none of the order and system for which the earlier work of Aaron is notable, and there is a good deal of repetition. There are, however, many references to the earlier work and some new light is thrown on Aaron's ideas. (The book is here abbreviated as *AH*.)

A Passover *Haggadah* has been published (*Sod Qedoshim*, Königsberg, 1866, Warsaw, 1866) with Commentaries by Schneor Zalman and Aaron, but a careful examination of this reveals that these are not fresh commentaries at all, but selections on Passover themes from other works of the two teachers. All the comments attributed to Aaron are from his '*Abhodath Ha-Levi*'.⁹

It is surely not without significance that, in defiance of the established Rabbinic custom of his day, Aaron published his 'Gates' without the approbation of distinguished Rabbis. Did he fear that such approbation would not be forthcoming either because of the unconventionality of his views or because Rabbis might have been reluctant in appearing to favour him against Doh Baer? Aaron's own explanation is far from convincing: 'Behold, the whole of this work is founded on the holy book of my holy master and teacher, may his soul rest in Eden, known as "The Gate of Unity and Faith", to explain its mysteries and secrets. On the fine gold of his foundations have I built it. Even though there will be found numerous matters and additional ideas not found in his holy book, but these are arranged on the pattern of his holy book and the principles he laid down in it, albeit time prevented him from completing the work in accordance with his holy will and intention. It is for this reason that I have called my work: "The Gates of Unity and Faith", the name of his above-mentioned work.

'Let not the reader be surprised that I have only mentioned his holy book a few times, for I have relied on the Talmudic statement that R. Jacob b. Idi apologised to R. Johanan on behalf of the latter's disciple, R. Eleazar, who gave a decision without mentioning R. Johanan's name: "Everyone knows that whatever R. Eleazar thy disciple expounds is his master's doctrine."¹⁰ I apply this to my humble self. Of all the matters explained in this work there is none which I have not heard and received from his holy mouth. In all our country my constant discipleship with his splendid holiness is known and that I have received doctrine from no other teacher. This is my excuse for failing to turn to the distinguished teachers of the age, the sublime holy ones, to entreat them to issue an approbation to this book.

'Everything found in the book is entirely in accord with his words and holy doctrine. His holy words require no additional support since he was approved and ordained by his holy master, may his soul rest in Eden, and since his greatness, fame and praise are known to many and the earth is full of his praises. Consequently, on this I rely that all the great ones of the generation will certainly grant their approval and offer no objection, God forfend.'¹¹

Without doubt Aaron sincerely believed that he was no more than a purveyor of his teacher's thoughts, a mere middleman in the world of the spirit. It must be emphasized that all the Kabbalists believed in transmission from master to disciple as the only legitimate means of acquiring the esoteric divine wisdom. In this very Introduction, Aaron is at pains to point out at length that purely human speculation has no place in Kabbalistic doctrine and that the validity of his teaching on the divine mysteries derives ultimately, like that of all authentic Kabbalists, from the direct knowledge imparted by Elijah, or by means of the Holy Spirit, to the earlier Kabbalists, by whom it was handed down.

Aaron observes:¹² 'All these matters and expositions regarding the knowledge of the root principles have been received by me from the mouth of my holy master and teacher, may his soul rest in Eden, and I have not introduced, God forbid, any new idea on the basis of purely human theorizing. All I have done is to explain them thoroughly, expounding them in a comprehensive manner, that they may be intelligible to all who understand these books, that the basic principles of unity and faith may be grasped with proper discernment and breadth of knowledge. For all the ideas stated in connection with God's unity are based on faith, which is higher than reason. Even though these are very profound intellectual topics, yet for all their intellectual depth the human mind can neither validate nor invalidate them, for they are divine ideas. Just as God Himself does not belong in any way to the category of reason and knowledge, so all which derives from Him in the worlds He has created and His unification with them cannot be assessed at all by means of reason and knowledge, for, with regard to them, all comprehension belongs in the category of the marvellous. But even though they do not belong in the category of of reason, yet they are particularly subtle and profound ideas to the extent that, in relation to divine ideas, all ideas based on human reasoning are as darkness to light and even more so. All these ideas are explained by means of weighty proofs and demonstrations, as the discerning reader will understand if he delves deeply into these expositions, and the gates of light will open unto him.' Thus, Aaron, far from claiming originality, is at pains to deny it. For, to the Kabbalist, original ideas in his

own realm, are by definition false ideas. But Aaron does, none the less, refer to his own interpretation of the ideas. He sincerely believed, so far as we can tell, that he was simply recording his master's views, which, in turn, represented the ancient Kabbalistic traditional doctrine. But is it ever possible for a man to be a mere passive agent of another's thoughts, or for him to transmit the thoughts of another without colouring them himself, however slightly? A careful study of Aaron's work demonstrates that, for all his indebtedness to Schneor Zalman, his own system possesses much originality and that, subconsciously, at least, he was sufficiently uneasy as an orthodox Kabbalist to feel obliged to apologize for it at length.

Aaron's second work, '*Abhodath Ha-Levi*, was published with approbations from four Rabbis. These are instructive, too, though not to the same extent as the absence of approbations from the earlier work. The first is from the Rabbi of Lemberg, Joseph Saul Nathanson. As the Rabbi of the town in which the first volume was published, Rabbi Nathanson was naturally approached to give his approval. Rabbi Nathanson did not belong to any Hasidic group and Lemberg was far from the scene of the *Habad* controversies. His approbation is to be seen, therefore, as no more than a formal response to the request of the publishers. (The same approbation appears, oddly enough, in the second volume published in Warsaw, together with the other three appearing in the Lemberg volume. It is as if the publishers did not bother to collect new approbations and simply printed those they managed to obtain for the first volume. Moreover, the wording in both sets of approbations is almost identical, except for the reference to the sons of the author in the first set, the grandson in the second.) Rabbi Nathanson refers to Aaron's discipleship with Schneor Zalman and to the fact that Aaron added 'many pearls of his own'!

The second approbation is that of Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac of Vitebsk and is dated 25th of Sivan 5602 = 1842. It was thus obtained twenty years before the first volume was actually published! This Rabbi, too, refers to the fact that Aaron's ideas are based on the teachings of Schneor Zalman, but that he added much of his own. A reference is also made to the work published by Aaron himself and that this had won a great reputation for its power to 'inflame hearts seeking God'.

The third approbation is dated 28th of Sivan 5622 = 1862, and is from Menahem Nahum, formerly Rabbi of Polotsk and disciple of Aaron. This Rabbi states that he was shown the work in Shklov when he passed through the town on his way to settle in Palestine. Here there is no reference to Aaron's discipleship with Schneor Zalman, but that he, Menahem Nahum, had sat at Aaron's feet for many years. He testifies that part of the manuscript he had seen was in Aaron's own hand, while the rest was copied by Aaron's disciples, who received the master's approval. The fourth approbation is by Zewi Hirsch, a Rabbinic judge (*dayan*) in Chashniki for over fifty years, and is dated 27th of Tammuz 5622 = 1862.

The approbation of Zewi Hirsch is worth quoting in part: 'It is known among the living the great holy virtue of that saint and holy man, our master and teacher, glorious is the name of his holy teaching, Rabbi Aaron Ha-Levi Horowitz, may his soul rest in Eden and may his merits shield us. Amen. He was a permanent disciple of our holy master, the divine genius, glorious is the name of his holy teaching, Rabbi Schneor Zalman, may his soul rest in Eden and may his merits shield us. Amen. He drew the water of our holy master's teaching and gave it to drink to the flocks which tremble at God's word, which he expounded Sabbath by Sabbath, month by month, and on the festivals. This was his chief purpose, to fix firmly in the heart of each the love and fear of God through the service of the Lord, namely, through prayer.

'Continually did he warn the remnant who longed to hear the words of the living God from him that their efforts and labour in prayer should be with powerful concentration in mind and heart on the meaning of the prayers. He wished them to have in mind the ideas he expounded regarding God's unity and God's attachment to the world in the higher unification and the lower, that in the heavens above and in the earth beneath there is nothing else. He wished that the essence of the idea of self-annihilation, in the category of "nothing else", should remain after prayer for the whole day, even when they were busy in attending to their bodily needs and their worldly occupations.

'It is well-known to all who were near to him how great was his attachment to God, in divine flaming fire, whenever he ex-

pounded the word of the Lord regarding the roots and foundations of the unity, as he had received them from his teacher, our holy master. Of him it can be said: "Guard the seekers (*doresh*, also 'expounders') of Thy unity as the apple of Thine eye".'

Zewi Hirsch states that he knew Aaron all his life, from the days when they were disciples of Rabbi Schneor Zalman. Afterwards, Zewi Hirsch goes on to say, he 'drank with thirst his holy words' when Aaron expounded his ideas both at home and on journeys to his followers.¹³ Zewi Hirsch concludes: 'I witnessed his great saintliness, his separation from worldly things, his carefulness in holiness and purity, and all his detailed ways of worship were not hidden from me. He wished to plant in the heart of each the love and fear of God in the ways of *Torah* and worship and God's blessed unity. May his holy merit shield us in the quality of Aaron, lover of Israel, to draw their hearts near to their Father in heaven. In reality, his holy words require the support neither of me nor of my ilk, were it not that the Rabbi's descendants entreated me to have my approbation placed on the frontispiece.'

It is worth noting that, with the exception of Rabbi Nathanson's formal approbation as the Rabbi of the town in which the first volume was published, the approbations are from Rabbis in the vicinity of Vitebsk (both Polotsk and Chashniki are in the district of Vitebsk), the town in which Aaron's son, Michael David, resided. Two of the three Rabbis were, moreover, Aaron's disciples, while the third was the Rabbi of Vitebsk. One of the approbations was obtained twenty years before the publication of the book, another from a Rabbi passing through Shklov on his way to Palestine, and still another from an aged minor Rabbinic functionary.

Surely, it is not reading too much into these facts and into the repeated protestations of Aaron's orthodoxy and saintliness that his views were still somewhat suspect as late as 1862. It is certainly highly significant that no approbations appear from the official *Habad* leaders. Menahem Mendel, Dobh Baer's successor as the leader of the sect, was alive and active until the year 1866, and it can hardly be coincidental that his approval is not given to the work, either because it was not sought, or, if sought, was not forthcoming.

The overall impression one gets from the material at our

disposal is of a mystical rebel, inspiring loyalty among his immediate followers and disciples, but viewed with distrust by the more official leaders of *Habad*, partly because of his unconventional ideas, and partly because of his opposition to Lübavitch.

A study of Aaron's views promises, therefore, to be rewarding in revealing a startling, not to say radical, interpretation of *Habad* thought on the idea of God's unity. For the purpose of such a study a considerable amount of background knowledge is essential. Aaron's system is based on the *Kabbalah*, as interpreted by his teacher, Rabbi Schneor Zalman, the founder of *Habad*. It is consequently impossible to begin to understand the system without some knowledge of Kabbalistic ideas, particularly the doctrine, developed in the *Zohar*, of the Ten *Sephiroth*, and the doctrine of Isaac Luria (1534-72) known as *Tzimtzum*. Both of these figure prominently in the work of Schneor Zalman, who, in turn, is indebted to certain earlier Hasidic teachers. Before studying Aaron's views, then, it is necessary to sketch these doctrines. The next three chapters deal with the doctrine of the *Sephiroth*, the *Tzimtzum* doctrine, and the special contribution of *Habad* thought, including the significance of the term *Habad*. The ground will then have been cleared for a more thorough investigation of Aaron's own teachings.

It hardly needs stating that the ideas we shall encounter here will be strange to modern readers. Some of them will seem repellent and have not infrequently been seen as hostile to basic Judaism. But apart from the historical value of an unbiased (it is hoped) investigation of an important period of Jewish thought, the central theme of God's unity cannot fail to be of interest to anyone concerned with religious ideas and speculation.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹The term *panentheism* originated with K. C. F. Krause (1781–1832), V. J. Macquarrie: *Twentieth Century Thought*, SCM Press 1963, p. 274 note 2. Leon Roth uses the term to describe Spinoza's thought, v. *The Legacy of Israel*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1927, p. 455. Cf. Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese: *Philosophers Speak of God*, University of Chicago Press, 1953, who use the term not to denote, that 'all is in God' but that God is in some respects infinite and in some finite.

²V. Gershom G. Scholem: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd ed., Thames and Hudson, London, 1955, p. 123: 'An excellent description of the trend towards pure pantheism, or rather acosmism, can be found in a well-known Yiddish novel, F. Schneerson's *Hayim Grawitzer*, and at least one of the famous leaders of Lithuanian Hasidism, Rabbi Aaron Halevi of Starosselje, can be classed among the acosmists. But I do maintain that such tendencies are not characteristic of Jewish mysticism.' The Rev. L. Weiwow has pointed out to me that the term *acosmism* was used by both Solomon Maimon (*Autobiography*, Murray's ed., p. 114) and Hegel (v. Benn's *History of Modern Philosophy*, p. 43) to describe Spinoza's system.

³V. H. M. Hielman: *Beth Rabbi*, Berditchev, 1903, Part I, pp. 133–5; Part II, pp. 6–11 and pp. 19–20; *JE*, Vol. I, p. 16; S. A. Horedezky in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. I, pp. 82–83; M. Teitelbaum: *Ha-Rabh Mi-Ladi*, Part I, Warsaw, 1910, Part II, Warsaw, 1913, pp. 76 and 86; E. Steinmann: *Sepher Mishnath Habad*, Vol. I, Tel-Aviv, n.d., pp. 387–91; A. Walden: *Shem Ha-Gedolim He-Hadash*, Warsaw, 1881, No. 105, p. 18; S. Dubnow: *Toledoth Ha-Hasiduth*, Tel-Aviv, 1960, pp. 262 and 391.

⁴V. Hielmann, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 134. Hielmann, who is generally reliable in preserving the family traditions of the *Habad* leaders, states that on Schneor Zalman's return to Liady after his (second) arrest in St. Petersburg, Aaron moved to Liady with his family in order to be near his master, and stayed there for eight years. However, he goes on, a few years before Schneor Zalman's death there was 'much opposition to Aaron'—*qategoria gedolah*—and 'tales were told about him to the master', from which Aaron suffered greatly, Aaron then sold his house in Liady, returning to his home town of Orsha, from which he visited Schneor Zalman from time to time.

'From that time those who had been joined became separated, that is, Aaron and our master (Dobh Baer) and, as is well-known, there were differences between them in matters of divine worship. After Schneor Zalman's death the breach widened, for the men of our fraternity became divided into two groups. One of these urged our master the "Middle Rabbi" (Dobh Baer) to fill his father's place, while the second group urged him (Aaron) to be their master. And so it was. He came to Starosselje, in the district of Mohilev, whence he spread the light of his teaching over the face of the earth by means of the holy method he had mapped out for himself, and they journeyed to him to receive instruction from his holy mouth.'

Hielmann's biography enjoys considerable authority among *Habad Hasidim* to this day, and it would appear from his rather veiled references that he is being consciously discreet. Hielmann (p. 134 note 3) remarks that once Aaron went to prostrate himself in the mausoleum erected over Schneor Zalman's grave in the town of Gadiyoch, where he was persecuted by the townsfolk who were followers of Dobh Baer. When they refused to give him the key to the mausoleum he climbed in through the window and was unable to climb out again until a smith took pity on him and broke down the door. When Dobh Baer later visited Gadiyoch he rebuked the townsfolk for their behaviour.

There is further interesting material on the controversy in Hielmann, Part II, Chap. 2, pp. 6-11. The use of this source should be approached with caution, as we have noted, particularly since it contains much pious legend, but there is no reason for doubting the basic authenticity of the account it gives of the controversy. Hielmann correctly observes that a careful examination of the works of Dobh Baer and Aaron reveals important differences between them in matters of worship, i.e. Dobh Baer frowns entirely on any sham ecstasy, while Aaron is more tolerant in this matter. Hielmann records that after Schneor Zalman's death Aaron sent letters to a number of *Hasidim* suggesting that they come to him to learn the true manner of worship. He further records (p. 7) that many argued in support of Aaron on the grounds that in early Hasidism it was generally the disciple, not the son, who succeeded the master, just as Schneor Zalman had succeeded his master, the *Maggid* of Meseritch and the *Maggid* his master the *Besht*, the founder of the movement.

A disciple of Schneor Zalman is said to have suggested to Dobh Baer that he should leave the district and discover a new field where his ideas would be considered original and fresh! As it is, Dobh Baer, who simply repeats his father's teachings, is unable to satisfy the hunger of the *Hasidim* for new ideas. But, eventually, Rabbi Phinehas of Shklov revealed that Schneor Zalman had, in his presence, promised the succession to Dobh Baer. Phinehas sent a letter to this effect to the *Hasidim*, which carried much weight.

Hielmann (pp. 9-10) quotes a letter written by Judah Laib, the brother of Schneor Zalman, rebuking Aaron for his ambitions. Judah Laib begins by protesting his friendship for Aaron, but states that he has seen to his dismay the letter Aaron had sent to the *Hasidim* from which, reading between the lines, it appears that Aaron is determined to secure compensation for the coolness Dobh Baer had shown to him during the last years of Schneor Zalman. Aaron's excuse that his sole aim is to avoid being persecuted (*nirdaph*) is ingenuous, says Judah Laib.

He recalls that Schneor Zalman had himself mentioned Aaron's complaint of persecution, but the true *Hasid* should learn to live with loneliness and rejoice in it, and that Aaron should therefore not feel aggrieved, even though his friends had forsaken him. As a result of his 'persecution complex' Aaron is very unfair to Dobh Baer and is unduly critical of the latter's capacity for leadership. Aaron should be content that everyone considers him to be Schneor Zalman's chief disciple, but they have a higher opinion

of Dobh Baer. As for Aaron's complaint that Dobh Baer's manner of worship is 'incomplete and without proper self-sacrifice' this is completely unfounded.

According to Hielmann (p. 10), Aaron was severely critical of Dobh Baer's 'Tract on Ecstasy' (*Qunteros Ha-Hithpa'aluth*) and concluded a long letter of criticism by stating that he had not yet tackled Dobh Baer's 'Tract on Contemplation' (*Qunteros Ha-Hithbonanuth*), but would find even greater faults when he got around to it. For these two works *v.* the Introduction and bibliography in my translation of the 'Tract on Ecstasy', Vallentine, Mitchell, London, 1963.

⁵ Hielmann, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 134.

⁶ Hielmann, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 135. For further details of the controversy between Aaron and Dobh Baer, *v. infra*, pp. 85-86, 115-17, 159f.

⁷ So, incorrectly, on the title-page, but Aaron himself in his Introduction, p. 14a, calls it *Sha'are Ha-Yihud We-Ha-'Emumah*.

⁸ These letters are to be found in Part II of the Lemberg volume under the heading of *Liqqutim*. Letters 1 and 2, pp. 1a-5b, are addressed to Aaron's *Hasidim* in general; Letter 3, pp. 5b-6b, to the 'House of Study of the *Hasidim*'; Letter 4, pp. 6b-8a, to the 'House of Study in Slonim'; Letters 5 and 6, pp. 8a-13a, to the *Hasidim* in general; Letter 7, pp. 13b-14b, is an appeal for funds and was sent by Aaron at the request of Schneor Zalman (*v.* Hielmann, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 134). The Letters on pp. 15b-18b are to the *Hasidim* in Vitebsk, congratulating them on establishing a house of study. From Letter 7 it follows that for a time, at least, Aaron was a trusted 'official' in the 'court' of Schneor Zalman. He appeals for an increase of funds to be sent to Schneor Zalman, because the latter's needs have increased in view of the many *Hasidim* who turn to him for help in the difficult times when it has become hard to earn a living.

It should also be noted that at the end of this section there is a lengthy sermon by Aaron preached on *Rosh Hodesh 'Elul* 5562=1802. If the date is correct and Hielmann, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 134, is to be believed that Aaron stayed in Liady for eight years after Schneor Zalman's second arrest and reprieve, this means that the sermon was preached at Liady by Aaron, even though Schneor Zalman was there as master of the group, since Schneor Zalman's second arrest took place in 1800.

⁹ E.g. the introductory comment to the 'Great Sabbath' is really the sermon printed in *AH*, Lev., pp. 1a ff.; the comment on the 'four sons', pp. 14a ff.= *AH*, *Derushim Le-Pesah*, pp. 2b ff.; the comment on the 'ten plagues', pp. 20a ff.= *AH*, *Wa-'Erah*, pp. 16a ff.; the comment on R. Jose, pp. 22a ff.= *AH*, *Derushim Le-Pesah*, pp. 36 ff.

¹⁰ *V. Jer. Talmud*, *M.Q.* III. 7.

¹¹ *SYE*, Introduction, pp. 14a-b.

NOTES

¹² *STE*, Introduction, pp. 13a–b.

¹³ Zewi Hirsch also notes that, in addition to Aaron's own manuscript, the work includes the writings of his disciples, which he checked and approved. He remarks that Aaron would certainly have wished these to be published, but he then makes this telling observation. Aaron had been heard to say that the Hasidic works '*Or Ha-Meir* and *Maor 'Enayim* are not the actual words of their reputed authors, but are their sayings as recorded by their disciples. These disciples 'certainly did not penetrate to the profound depths of their teachers' minds and yet, for all that, they printed the works, and the souls of Israel delight in them and the teachers' lips move in the grave'. *Maor 'Enayim* is by Menahem Nahum of Tchernobil, printed in Slavita, 1798, '*Or Ha-Meir* by Zeev Wolf of Zhitomer, printed in Koretz, 1798. V. the remarks of Dubnow, *op. cit.*, p. 200 and p. 203. Zewi Hirsch also refers to an Introduction printed at the end of the book. No such Introduction is, in fact, printed in either the first or the second volume.