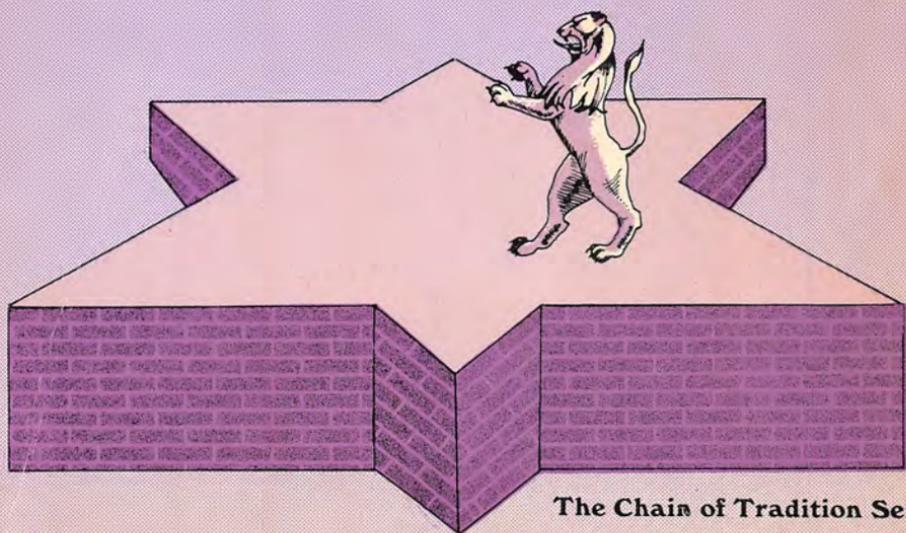


# HASIDIC THOUGHT

LOUIS JACOBS



The Chain of Tradition Series

Volume V

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**Volume V: Hasidic Thought**

# Hasidic thought

BY LOUIS JACOBS

**Behrman House, Inc.**

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**for my granddaughter, Ziva**

## **Acknowledgments**

*Between manuscript and bound book, there is much need for talent, acuity, and devotion. Both Morrison David Bial and Mrs. Gerry Gould have shown this and both the author and the publisher wish to acknowledge such.*

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*Introduction, ix*

- |          |  |           |
|----------|--|-----------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>The Baal Shem Tov</b><br><i>How the Maggid was converted</i><br><i>What is the role of the zaddik?</i><br><i>What is real and what is an illusion?</i>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>2</b> | <b>Jacob Joseph Katz of Pulnoyye</b><br><i>For its own sake</i><br><i>What can one learn from the clown?</i><br><i>How can religious sincerity be achieved?</i>  | <b>12</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>Phinehas Shapiro of Koretz</b><br><i>Illuminations</i><br><i>Should Jews wear non-Jewish garb?</i><br><i>Should prayer be silent?</i><br><i>How can pride be overcome?</i>  | <b>21</b> |
| <b>4</b> | <b>Meir Margoliouth of Ostrog</b><br><i>Attachment to the holy letters</i>   | <b>29</b> |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Aryeh Leib, the Mokhiaḥ of Pulnoyye</b><br><i>The cloven hoof</i><br><i>The vanity of scholars</i>  | <b>36</b> |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Moses Ḥayyim Ephraim of Sudlikov</b><br><i>When all seems dark</i><br><i>Why was the Baal Shem Tov so important?</i><br><i>What happens on Judgment Day?</i>  | <b>43</b> |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Baruch of Meziboz</b><br><i>Hints in Scripture</i><br><i>External versus internal piety</i><br><i>How can God be served when man eats and drinks?</i><br><i>A playful comment</i><br><i>What is the role of the zaddik?</i> | <b>51</b> |

- 8 Nahman of Bratslav** 57  
*Why are hindrances essential?*  
*Why should good men be persecuted?*  
*Why should one force himself to rejoice?*  
*What are the virtues of solitude?*  
*Should one plan for the morrow?*
- 9 Dov Baer, the Maggid of Meseritch** 66  
*God is in all*  
*The role of the zaddik*  
*How can man influence the Divine?*  
*How is God like a father?*  
*Rules for saints*
- 10 Abraham ben Dov Baer, the "Angel"** 82  
*The man too good to be a leader*
- 11 Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl** 87  
*How can God's mercy and His justice be reconciled?*  
*What are the virtues of humility?*
- 12 Menaḥem Mendel of Vitebsk** 94  
*How can man attach himself to God?*  
*The zaddik is not a miracle worker*
- 13 Elimelech of Lizensk** 100  
*How can men have the Holy Spirit in an unholy age?*  
*How can false modesty be avoided?*  
*Rules for saints*
- 14 Zeev Wolf of Zhitomer** 108  
*A critique of zaddikism of the wrong kind*
- 15 Levi Yitzḥak of Berditchev** 115  
*How to serve God without thought of self*  
*What is true humility?*  
*Can man have an influence on the Divine?*
- 16 Shneur Zalman of Liady** 122  
*How can man rejoice in the Lord?*  
*How can Schadenfreude be avoided?*  
*What is the extent of man's generosity?*
- 17 Israel Hapstein, the Maggid of Koznitz and his son,  
Moses Eliakim Beriah** 134  
*How can man overcome the evil in his nature?*  
*What is the meaning of "the fear of God"?*  
*Can a man lose himself in God?*  
*Self-annihilation*

- 18 Jacob Isaac, the "Seer" of Lublin** 143  
*For the sake of Heaven*  
*A critique of spiritual aristocracy*  
*Rules for saints*
- 19 Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh** 149  
*How should man worship God?*  
*How can man be humble?*
- 20 Ḥayyim Ḥaikel of Amdur** 155  
*How can man love God?*  
*How can man overcome his ego?*  
*How can man provide a home for God?*  
*A critique of Ḥasidic frivolity*
- 21 Ḥayyim Tyrer of Tchernowitz** 161  
*The holiest hour of the Sabbath*  
*Why is prayer called "the service of the heart"?*  
*Gazing into Heaven*  
*The dedication of a new house*
- 22 Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt** 170  
*Reclaiming the "holy sparks"*
- 23 Moses Sofer of Przeworsk** 174  
*What did Moses look like?*  
*What is the true aim of Torah study?*
- 24 Moses Teitelbaum of Ujhely and his great-grandson,  
Ḥananiah Yom Tov Lipa** 178  
*Which type of pride is legitimate?*  
*Belief in reincarnation*  
*What is woman's role in Judaism?*  
*Why did Isaac Luria die young?*  
*Beyond time*
- 25 Zevi Elimelech Spira of Dynow** 185  
*Why do we blow the shofar on Rosh Ha-Shanah?*  
*How far can human reasoning take us?*
- 26 Israel Friedmann of Ruzhyn** 191  
*How can a sinner dare to pray?*  
*How do we walk life's tightrope?*  
*Can prayer be confined to special times?*  
*Music versus fasting*  
*Will it be hard to be a good Jew?*
- 27 Menahem Mendel of Kotzk** 196  
*Why the outburst of scientific achievement in the 1800's?*  
*The role of righteous indignation*  
*Which type of worship is false?*

*Should we care what others think?  
God helps those who help themselves  
Aphorisms*

- 28 Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica** 201  
*How can man know his specific duty in life?  
What should a man do when his faith weakens?  
The importance of obstacles  
How can we conquer fear?  
The spiritual dangers of religion*
- 29 Solomon Rabinowich of Radomsk** 206  
*How important is sincerity?  
How can men be holy outside the Holy Land?*
- 30 Hayyim Halberstam of Zanz** 210  
*Is it possible even today for holy men to be inspired?  
What is the way to truth?  
Is it true that religious people are bound to be poor?*
- 31 Yitzhak Isaac Judah Jehiel Safrin of Komarno** 216  
*Are unworthy motives ever admissible?  
How can one learn from all men?  
How can man honor God?  
The harm of losing one's temper*
- 32 Judah Leib Eger of Lublin** 223  
*The fragrance of a healthy conscience  
A good and sweet year  
Rejoicing on Sukkot*
- 33 Zadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin** 227  
*Never yield to despair  
Opposition to secular learning*
- 34 Judah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger** 234  
*The supernatural  
How can man learn to follow his conscience?  
How can Jewish particularism be reconciled with  
universalism?*
- 35 Aaron Rokeah of Belz** 239  
*How the Belzer Rebbe rebuked his followers  
Finding good in every Jew  
Should one's own family come first?  
Kindness to animals  
The holiness of the Belzer Rebbe*
- Chart of the Hasidic Masters** 245

## Introduction

THE HASIDIC MOVEMENT arose in Podolia and Volhynia in the first half of the eighteenth century. So rapid was the progress it made, in spite of—or because of—the fiercest opposition, that by the end of the century a large proportion of Polish and Russian Jewry had become Ḥasidic. Even today the movement numbers many thousands of adherents, and thanks to the popularizing efforts of Martin Buber and Louis I. Newman and the scholarly work of Professor Gershom Scholem and his school, it is well known in both general and academic circles. There are books enough on Ḥasidism. The excuse, if such is required, for adding another is that there has been little investigation of the actual texts of the Ḥasidic masters. So far as I am aware, none of the texts presented here has ever before been translated into English.

Historical details about practically every aspect of Ḥasidic life are readily available. (Bibliographies and much useful historical information are to be found in the numerous articles on Ḥasidism and the Ḥasidic masters in the new *Encyclopedia Judaica*, on which I have relied, mainly, in the matter of dating.) Only those historical details essential to an understanding of the texts have been supplied here. The reader is advised to read through the brief introduction to each series of texts before studying the texts themselves. The chart at the end of the book places each of the masters considered in the Ḥasidic “chain of tradition.”

The method adopted is that of the other four volumes in the Behrman House Chain of Tradition series, to which there are occasional cross-references. The text in English translation is printed in bolder type, with the explanatory notes inserted in the text in lighter type so that "he who runs may read." The titles to the various pieces in the table of contents are mine, not those of the original authors. They are intended to encourage the reader to choose, in the first instance, the topics with a special appeal for him, with, as the Ḥasidim would say, something belonging to the root of his soul. In any anthology the principle of selectivity is complicated. But I have tried to choose passages from the main books used by the Ḥasidim and those which convey something of both the flavor of Ḥasidic thought and the rich variety of Ḥasidic expression. For this reason only one or two examples have been given of movements which developed a life of their own and produced a literature of their own within Ḥasidism—the Ḥabad movement, for instance. Emphasis has been placed on texts from standard Ḥasidic books rather than on aphorisms and the like quoted in the name of Ḥasidic thinkers, with the exception of such tendencies in Ḥasidic thought as Ruzhyn, Kotzk, and Belz, which produced fascinating Ḥasidic leaders but no literature to speak of. Although a real attempt has been made to be fair to the Ḥasidic masters, it would have been inexcusable to omit from this anthology that which might be called the darker side of Ḥasidism—Moses Teitelbaum's attitude regarding women or Zadok Ha-Kohen's strong opposition to all general learning, for example. The Ḥasidim often speak of the special value of that light produced from out of the darkness, and, in any event, a round picture of what Ḥasidic thought is really like has been the aim of this book.

Most of the texts are difficult and require some study, but the effort is worthwhile if it results in a more direct appreciation of what it is that the Ḥasidic masters were trying to say and do, why they were so successful and yet met with such powerful opposition, and what there is in Ḥasidic life and thought of significance to contemporary Jewry.

## The Baal Shem Tov

### 1700-1760

*How the Maggid was converted*

*What is the role of the zaddik?*

*What is real and what is an illusion?*

*The founder of the Ḥasidic movement is known as the Baal Shem Tov, "Master of the Good Name," the "Good Name" being the sacred name of God. Israel ben Eliezer was one of a number of folkhealers who used for their cures, in addition to herbs and so forth, various divine names believed to have magical power. These men were called Baalei Shem, "Masters of the (Good) Name." (The suggestion that Israel ben Eliezer was known as the "good" Master of the Name as opposed to the other healers who were "bad," or at least "not good," is erroneous. The term good does not qualify Master, but the Name.) He is also known as Ribash (Rabbi Israel Baal Shem) and in writing in the abbreviated form the Besht (Baal Shem Tov). The great difficulty in attempting to reconstruct the life of the Baal Shem Tov is that the numerous legends concerning him cannot easily be disentangled from the historical facts. We do know, however, that he was born in Podolia (although the town of Okop, where the legends say he was born, does not exist) and that he eventually "revealed" himself, i.e., he became a master of the spiritual life, gathering around him a number of associates and disciples. It was among the members of this intimate circle that the ideas of the Baal Shem Tov were first promulgated, leading, after to his death, to the emergence of the Ḥasidic movement.*

The chief legendary biography of the Baal Shem Tov is the Shivḥey Ha-Besht (*Praises of the Baal Shem Tov*), first published in Kopyts fifty-four years after the death of the Baal Shem Tov. (This work has been translated into English by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, Indiana University Press, 1970, but while this English translation and the copious notes are useful, the book contains a number of serious errors and must be used with caution.) This legendary biography is the main source utilized by historians of Ḥasidism who try to get behind the legends to the historical facts, a task fraught with obstacles but not entirely hopeless. The main sources for the actual ideas of the Baal Shem Tov are the works of his disciple Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Pulnoyye. In these works—*Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (published both in Meziboz and Koretz in 1780), *Ben Porat Yosef* (Koretz, 1781), and *Zafenat Paneah* (Koretz, 1782)—Rabbi Jacob Joseph quotes sayings he had heard personally from the lips of the Baal Shem Tov, though the words he uses in conveying these sayings are his own, no doubt with considerable elaborations. These sayings were published in a separate anthology under the title *Keter Shem Tov* (*The Crown of the Good Name*) in Zolkiew in 1784. The following selections are from more recent editions of *Keter Shem Tov* (Jerusalem, 1968), *Toledot Yaakov Yosef* (Warsaw, 1881), and *Ben Porat Yosef* (Israel, 1971—photocopy of 1884 Pietrikow edition). It must be appreciated that the Baal Shem Tov wrote no works himself, so that in these words his ideas come to us at one stage removed. Allowing for elaboration and interpretation (as well as for changes of meaning inevitable in the translation into Hebrew of the original Yiddish in which the sayings were almost certainly first uttered), there is nonetheless little reason for doubting the basic authenticity of these sayings.

On the general problem we can do no better than to quote from Simon Dubnow's splendid history of Ḥasidism, *Toledot Ha-Ḥasidut* (Tel Aviv, 1967). Dubnow (p. 41) writes: "The historical figure of the founder of Ḥasidism appears to us shrouded in darkness, the thick darkness of wonder tales by means of which legend crowned the head of the beloved folk hero. A thick curtain, woven out of the imagination of his contemporaries and later generations, conceals the true picture of the Besht, so that it sometimes seems as if there were no such person and it is all a myth, a fictitious name used for the cause of a religious movement that took the Jewish world by storm. Nevertheless, those familiar with the literature of that period can never be guilty of the folly of denying that the Besht ever existed. Apart

*from his disciples and associates, many of his contemporaries who opposed his doctrine testify to his existence, although only a pale shadow emerges from their testimony. If we read with a critical eye even the legendary biography of the Besht we see revealed there the features of a living person influenced by his surroundings and influencing them in turn, as well as a reliable picture of the eighteenth-century Ukrainian environment." Professor Gershom Scholem has shown us how to get to the historical truth in his Hebrew essay "The Historical Baal Shem Tov" (offprint from Molad, Av-Elul, 1960). The three selections quoted here are from: (I) Keter Shem Tov, pp. 107-8; (II) Toledot Yaakov Yosef, pp. 415-16; (III) Ben Porat Yosef, p. 252.*

## I HOW THE MAGGID WAS CONVERTED

**I heard a certain Ḥasid tell what happened when Rabbi Dov Baer of blessed memory heard of the fame of the holy Rabbi the Baal Shem Tov; how all the people flock to him and how he achieves awesome and tremendous things by the power of his prayers. Now Rabbi Dov Baer of blessed memory was a most acute scholar, thoroughly familiar with the whole of the Talmud and all the Codes and he possessed ten measures of knowledge in the science of the Kabbalah. Astonished at the reports he had heard concerning the high rank of the Baal Shem Tov he decided that he would journey to meet him in order to put him to the test. Since Rabbi Dov Baer was very industrious in his studies, it came about, after two or three days of his journey, during which time he was unable to concentrate on his studies with the same application as in his own home, that he was sorry for having decided to go. When eventually he came to the Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory, he thought that he would hear some words of Torah from him, but instead the Baal Shem Tov told him a tale of how he had undertaken a journey of many days during which he had no bread to give to his uncircumcised coach driver and how a poor Gentile came along with a sack of loaves so that he was able to buy some bread wherewith to feed his coach driver. He told him other tales of this sort. When he came the next day the Baal Shem Tov told him of how on that journey he had no fodder to give to his horses and it happened, etc. Now all these tales related by the Baal Shem Tov contained great and marvelous wisdom if one could only**

understand it, but since Rabbi Dov Baer of blessed memory failed to appreciate this he returned to his inn, saying to his servant: "I wish to return home right away, but since it is so dark we shall stay on here until the moon shines brightly and then we shall be on our way." At midnight, just as Rabbi Dov Baer was getting ready to depart, the Baal Shem Tov sent his servant to summon him and he heeded the summons. The Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory asked him: "Are you a scholar?" and he answered in the affirmative. "So have I heard, that you are a scholar," said the Baal Shem Tov. "And do you know the science of the Kabbalah?" "Yes, I do," replied Dov Baer. The Baal Shem Tov then instructed his servant to bring a copy of the book *Etz H̄ayyim* (The Tree of Life) and the Baal Shem Tov showed Rabbi Dov Baer a passage in this book. Rabbi Dov Baer said that he would look at the passage and after doing so he expounded it to the Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory. But the Baal Shem Tov said: "You have not the slightest degree of understanding of this passage." So he looked at it again. He then said to the Baal Shem Tov: "The correct interpretation of this passage is as I have stated it, but if your honor knows of another meaning let him tell it to me and I shall judge which is more correct." Upon which the Baal Shem Tov said: "Arise!" and he rose to his feet. Now this particular text contained many names of angels and no sooner did the Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory begin to recite the text than the whole house was filled with light, and fire burned around it, and they actually saw the angels mentioned in the text. He said to Rabbi Dov Baer of blessed memory: "It is true that the meaning of the text was as you stated it to be, but your study of the text had no soul in it." On the spot Rabbi Dov Baer ordered his servant to journey home while he himself remained in the home of the Baal Shem Tov from whom he learned great and deep topics of wisdom. The H̄asid heard all this from Rabbi Dov Baer's own holy mouth, his memory be for a blessing.

*This tale is obviously legendary but may well be based on the actual events behind Rabbi Dov Baer's conversion to H̄asidism. (Rabbi Dov Baer is the Maggid of Meseritch, the great organizer and leader of H̄asidism after the death of the Baal Shem Tov.) The book Etz H̄ayyim is the famous kabbalistic work by Rabbi H̄ayyim Vital (1542–1620). It is worth noting how the narrative dwells on Rabbi Dov Baer's extreme*

reluctance to leave off his studies in order to learn from the Baal Shem Tov and how he is disappointed that all the Baal Shem Tov can do is to tell him boring tales about coachmen and horses. The point here is that the Baal Shem Tov believed—and this became an essential feature of Hasidism—that God is present in all things and in all events, so that behind what seems to be dull stories about mundane happenings there is, in the language of our story, “great and marvelous wisdom—” i.e., reflected in them is the account of those spiritual forces through which God operates, as it were, as He governs the universe. The Baal Shem Tov wishes Dov Baer to overcome his reservations but does not seek to hurry the process. It is not until Dov Baer is about to depart that he receives a summons to come to the Baal Shem Tov. It is also worth noting that Dov Baer, despite his reservations, heeds the summons, propelled by the Baal Shem Tov’s charismatic personality. This notion that “there must be something in it” seems, indeed, to have been the reason why some scholars initially hostile to Hasidism nonetheless came under the sway of the Baal Shem Tov, some of them becoming themselves devoted followers. Finally, the Baal Shem Tov wins over Dov Baer not by demonstrating his superior knowledge of the text, but by reciting it “with soul.” The idea here is that mere knowledge of the Kabbalah is no different from knowledge of any other science. It certainly involves effort and intellectual ability, but is in itself devoid of mystical fervor. A man can be a keen student of the Kabbalah and even be an expert in the science without ever having had a mystical experience, a direct apprehension of God. The aim of the Baal Shem Tov was to “see” the angels of God, not simply to know all their names or converse about them. The story claims not that the Baal Shem Tov was more learned than Dov Baer, but that scholarship is not enough and that mystical fervor and burning enthusiasm are the true aims of the religious life. The etceteras are in the original text. This is a common device in this kind of literature, generally expressing a reluctance to complete the sentence and so suggest that there are mysteries here, as if the writer or the teller of the tale is winking at his audience, hinting to them that there is more here than meets the eye.

## II WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE ZADDIK?

**I heard from my teacher [i.e., the Baal Shem Tov] an interpretation of the talmudic saying: “Yes, in connection with Moses, it (the fear of God) was a small thing.” The difficulty here is obvious. Moses was**

not speaking to himself but addressing the people of Israel. He explained it as follows. The Talmud states that the verse: "Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God" (Deuteronomy 10:20) includes scholars. The Maharsha explains this on the basis of the saying: "A boor cannot be sin-fearing" (Avot 2:5). Consequently, when a man is a scholar he attains to the fear of God. That is why the verse includes scholars. Now of Moses we find it written: "And they were afraid to come nigh him" (Exodus 34:30). Since this was so, the people had had some experience of the fear of scholars and hence could easily progress to the fear of God. This is the meaning of "Yes, in connection with Moses it was a small thing," that is to say, since they had already attained to the fear of scholars "in connection with Moses," of whom it is said, "And they were afraid to come nigh him," it was a small thing for them to progress to the fear of God since one follows from the other. And the words of a wise man's mouth are gracious.

*The talmudic saying is in tractate Berakhot 33b. Moses said: "And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee but to fear the Lord" (Deuteronomy 10:12). The Talmud asks: "Is the fear of the Lord such a small thing?", i.e., Moses states it as if it were very easy of attainment. To this the answer is given: "Yes, in connection with Moses it was a small thing." The difficulty to which our text calls attention is that Moses was not speaking to himself but to the people so that even if the fear of the Lord was an easy matter for him it was anything but an easy matter for those he was addressing. The answer given by the Baal Shem Tov refers to a comment on a passage in tractate Pesachim 22b of the Talmud by Rabbi Samuel Edels (1555-1631), author of a famous commentary to the Talmud. (This author is known as Maharsha: Morenu Ha-Rav Shemuel Edels, Our Teacher, Rabbi Samuel Edels. Edel was Rabbi Samuel's mother-in-law, who supported his college out of her own funds; hence Samuel adopted her name.) In this passage the verse "Thou shalt fear the Lord thy God" is said to include scholars, i.e., one must have respect for scholars and be in awe of them just as one is in awe of God. This is extremely puzzling. How can any human being be compared to God? Maharsha seeks to explain it by quoting from Ethics of the Fathers (Avot 2:5): "A boor cannot be sin-fearing," i.e., only a learned man can have a full appreciation of true religion. Since this is so, says Maharsha, the "fear" of scholars and respect for them leads to the fear of God and that is why the verse "And thou shalt fear the Lord"*

can be said to include scholars. Now from the verse—"And they were afraid to come nigh him,"—we see that the people were in awe of Moses (because of the mysterious shine on his face; see the verse in full). They had experienced the awe of a scholar (Moses), and once having had this kind of experience it was easy for them to fear God. Thus the Baal Shem Tov gives a novel turn to the talmudic passage. It means, he says, that to those in connection with Moses, i.e., those associated with him, the fear of God was a small (i.e., easy) thing. The Baal Shem Tov makes use of the comment of Maharsha and applies it to the original saying. Jacob Joseph concludes, as he frequently does in his works, by quoting the verse from Ecclesiastes: "The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious" (10:12). This is a common form in this literature for bestowing high praise on someone else's comment, as if to say, "Bravo"!

There is much more to the saying of the Baal Shem Tov as expounded by Rabbi Jacob Joseph than meets the eye. The term used in this text for scholars is the usual one found in the Talmud, namely, talmidey ḥakhamim, literally, "disciples of the wise." But in Ḥasidic thought the term generally refers not to great experts in talmudic learning or Jewish law, but to the spiritual masters of the new type who emerged as leaders of the movement. The talmudic sayings in praise of the "scholars" are all applied to the Ḥasidic saint—the zaddik. What our text is really saying, by a skillful adaptation of the earlier literature, is that it is very hard for the ordinary man to fear God, but it becomes easy for him if he associates with the zaddik. Moses becomes the prototype of the zaddik. Just as the people were led by their awe in the presence of Moses to the fear of God, so the masses can be led to the fear of God through their awe of the spiritual grandeur of the zaddik. This demonstrates, incidentally, that the doctrine of the central role of the zaddik in Ḥasidism is not, as some would have it, a later invention, but was present in the movement from its inception. The doctrine is quoted here in the name of the Baal Shem Tov himself. It was precisely this idea that man requires the zaddik as an intermediary to God that the opponents of Ḥasidism, the Mitnaggedim, found so offensive.

**I heard this parable from him. There was once a king whose practice it was to go among the poor in order to attend to their needs. One of these poor men always used to declare, "Whatever a man does, whether it be good or evil, he does only for himself." The king, furious**

at such ingratitude, ordered that poor man to be presented with a chicken stuffed with poison, and when this was given to him the poor man made the same reply. The poor man took the chicken home on the outskirts of the city and placed it there in storage. It came to pass that the king's son, tired and weary from hunting game, came to the house of the poor man and begged to be given something to eat. He was given that chicken, but the doctors who were with the prince first examined the chicken and discovered it to be poisonous. When the matter was brought before the king the poor man offered as his excuse that the king himself was responsible. The king was then obliged to admit that the poor man was in the right. The moral of this tale is obvious. And the words of a wise man's mouth are gracious.

*The moral of the tale is left without application and one can only guess at its meaning. The king is God who has created man with what the Rabbis call "the evil inclination," the propensity to sin. But when a man sins he finds some excuse by recognizing that the king who poisoned the chicken is himself ultimately responsible, i.e., after all, if God had not made man the way He did, man would not sin. Needless to say, if this is what the parable means, the Baal Shem Tov does not intend to imply that man can sin with impunity. What he appears to be saying is that he should never yield to despair and be so oppressed with feelings of guilt that he gives up trying to lead the good life. Implied, too, perhaps, is the Hasidic doctrine known as "elevating strange thoughts." This idea, found early on in Hasidism, but later played down considerably as dangerous to spiritual health, is that whenever one is afflicted by "strange thoughts," sinful thoughts, an attempt should be made to lift these thoughts to God. For instance, if a man senses in himself feelings of pride, he should say to himself that all pride has its source in God and so every sinful thought should lead him on to take pride in being God's servant and to acknowledge that God alone is to be praised. In this way the sinful thought itself becomes the vehicle for religious emotion of a higher order. The "poison" was placed there by the king for a purpose. But perhaps the real meaning of our text is again to call attention to the role of the zaddik. He is the "king's son" who is in danger by eating the poisoned chicken. The zaddik, the "king's son" who resides in the palace, is at times obliged to go to the outskirts of the city far away from his father. There is spiritual danger in the zaddik's association with ordinary and even sinful folk, but he must take the risk of being "poisoned." In the end the poor man*

comes to the king and is vindicated, and so, too, the zaddik's "descent" brings about ultimately the elevation of the masses.

### III WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS ILLUSION?

**I heard this parable from my teacher. A king had three friends who, it was rumored, did not really love the king. He ordered each of them to feed a dog from the king's kennels. One of these men, being wise, used the money he should have spent on the dog's food to buy a crown for the king. The second one provided the dog with just enough to keep it alive. The third did his best to provide the dog with substantial meals. The king ordered the dog to attack the third man, but not so with regard to the one who provided the crown, etc. And the words of a wise man's mouth are gracious.**

*"Feeding the dog" probably refers to man's attention to his physical needs. Hasidism does not believe in asceticism. In the parable the king ignores completely the man who only gives the dog enough to keep it alive. Hasidism naturally disapproves of unbridled addiction to physical pleasure, since this only aggravates the problem. The dog that is too well fed is urged by the king to attack the man who feeds it. But there is no mention at all in the parable of the man who fed the dog in moderation, as we might have expected. The wise friend of the king concentrates on paying homage to the king and ignores the dog. The true Hasid, it seems to be implied, always has God in mind and neither torments nor indulges his body, but looks upon all worldly things as so many means of glorifying his Creator.*

**And I have heard from my teacher that he once said that the philosopher argues: "Since no place is empty of Him, when you deny idolatry you deny something that is from Him." My teacher explained that a man has a diaphragm. This is the mystery of: "And the veil shall divide unto you" (Exodus 26:33). Through it man pushes away the waste, etc. It is to be compared to a king who wished his son to have delight, but since this cannot be when it is permanent the king created the illusion of ten walls, etc. And the son of the king imagined, etc., but afterward it became clear to him that there is nothing evil at all.**

*This cryptic passage becomes clearer when seen in the light of further elaborations found in the works of Rabbi Jacob Joseph. The saying,*

*"No place is empty of Him" is Kabbalistic. It is used by the Ḥasidim to describe the typical Ḥasidic doctrine (best defined as panentheistic—"all is in God"; not pantheistic—"all is God") that all things are part of the Divine. This doctrine was severely attacked by the Mitnaggedim, the opponents of Ḥasidism, who pointed out the extreme dangers in the doctrine in that it would seem to follow from it that God is present in evil as well as in good and would so tend to obliterate the demarcation lines between good and evil. This is the problem raised in our text by "the philosopher." Idolatry, so strongly condemned by Judaism, must also be from God; therefore, to deny the reality of idols is to deny something that is from God. The radical Ḥasidic answer is that evil does not really exist at all, but only appears to exist. Therefore, when one denies idolatry one is not rejecting something real, but rather affirming that only God exists and that idols only have the appearance of reality.*

*Man's task in life is to see only God beneath the appearance of things. This is the "mystery" expressed by the veil which divides the holy from the unholy. This "mystery" is reflected in man in his diaphragm which divides the upper part of the body from the lower. (To this day the Ḥasidim wear a special girdle [the gartel] for prayer to divide the upper part from the lower.) Man is to be constantly engaged in rejecting the waste products, in rejecting evil as unreal and so completing the process of "division." But if evil is only an appearance, why did God create the illusion that evil is real? Is not the illusion itself something positively evil? To this the Baal Shem Tov replies with a parable. The king wishes his son to have the greatest possible delight in life, but this is only possible in the presence of the king in his palace. However, all delight that is unceasing and permanent eventually becomes no delight at all since the senses become dulled with familiarity. Some opposition, some spur, is required. In the overcoming of opposition the delight is even greater. Consequently, the king, by his magic, builds around him imaginary walls so that the king's son feels obliged to make efforts in order to penetrate these barriers to the delight of the king's presence. If the prince in his love for his father is sufficiently determined to press on regardless of the barriers, he discovers that, strangely enough, the walls dissolve into nothingness. God creates the appearance of evil, He endows this nonexistent thing with the power to capture men by the illusion that it does exist, so that man can enjoy the greater delight of coming into the presence of his Creator after the effort he has made to shatter the barriers. If man is firm in his faith, he*

*discovers that all the barriers between him and his God dissolve completely, so that, in reality, only good exists and God is everywhere with "no place empty of Him." This is one of the most typical of the Ḥasidic attitudes, and it is clear from our text that whatever special emphases and elaborations it received later, the doctrine is original with the Baal Shem Tov, although he probably developed it out of earlier Kabbalistic ideas. There has been a good deal of discussion about the sources behind Ḥasidic doctrine. Generally speaking, the contribution of Ḥasidism was not so much in producing entirely new ideas as in placing fresh emphasis on older ideas.*